

# Omega Minor

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p 11-19

## OPHELIA, UPON DROWNING

(A Form of Prelude)

*Im Anfang war die Tat*—In the Beginning was the Act.

And this is what concludes that act, that serpentine pas-de-deux so skillfully performed against the satin backdrop of the blackest night: A lightning bolt hurls upward in a blinding curve of pristine white, the laws of gravity suspended for a quarter-second. There is a scream of triumph as the gushing garland—that string of boundless energy—spouts into the springtime air: With a dull thud the alabaster blob flops on a silken belly, tan and taut and humid with moonlight, and in the panting silence after the victory cry the room echoes with the silent howl of half a billion mouths that never were: 23-chromosome cells thrash their tiny tails in terror on the bare and barren skin. An illicit hand sends another power surge through his penis, fiercer still than the first—then a compassionate tongue descends, its trembling tip dipping into the basin of his navel: For an instant, a sticky thread of pearls connects the woman with the Center of his Being, then she swallows—*she drinks my seed*, he thinks, *she WANTS my seed*, and the thought makes his heart swell, not with love but with misplaced pride—and then her lips slide full over his lingam and the last fruits of her labor slither down her shiny throat. And while the man’s mouth is still screaming in triumph, the gametic hordes yell out in *Todesangst*, for their worst nightmare has come true: In the woman’s churning stomach the cell membranes break open, the molecules dissolve, and the strands of code unwind, and naked lies the blueprint, the secret of who Goldfarb is—the nucleic acids adenine, cytosine, guanine, and thymine swirl around in irreparable chaos, their alchemy forever lost. Here lies a man, exulting over the demise of a world population.

In the Beginning—*beresheet*—was the Act.

And the Act was sterile. Though that didn’t make it less pleasant. Or less meaningful. It was mystical, maybe, or even magical, that act—and certainly maniacal.

“Cigarette?”

It did not occur to Goldfarb to ask the question: “Was it as good for you, ma’m, as it so clearly was for me?” Goldfarb did not need verbal affirmation. Goldfarb observes the cosmos. In Goldfarb’s presence, a woman’s body never lies. Goldfarb’s women are always satisfied. Right?

“Cigarette?”

Our mind has the technology. Let us unlock the permanence of memory and use it to our advantage.

Let's rewind time, let's force the clock to swallow its own digits. We'll choose a starting point and we'll take it—slowly—from there. Remember. It is springtime. Even though there's still a dusting of snow on the ground, the daffodils outside the *Gästehaus* wave their heavy crowns in the golden light of the lamp that hangs above the entrance. Memory's trickery rewinds the time. The young woman removes her lips from her lover's cock, a narrow thread of pearly liquid flows from her mouth onto his belly, and then that stream suddenly jumps back into his bloated glans. Watch how it swells; observe her teasing the creamy harvest back down into his balls—isn't it so much more exciting to watch in slow motion? Let us release the clock again: Behold the purple head that sways so swiftly on its heavy stalk; see how it glistens with her spit and juices; watch the little crater at the top spit out its zigzag line—out shoots the slime, the whirling weathervane, the drunken comet that climbs past the stars: In the moist cloud chamber of Donatella's room a signal lights up in silvery white, an almost perfect circle described by the tumbling ribbon of spunk, an acrobatic snake snapping at—but missing—its own tail: an ancient Greek symbol, the letter Omega, capitalized—Ω.

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*Im Anfang...*

Not every act ends with those deadly acids.

For instance.

On April 1st 1964, my father had one hell of a surprise in store for the woman who would soon become my mother. In a hotel hallway in Paris (Yes, a hallway, not a room. "Hotel Falstaff, or something like that? Or Hotel Parnasse? What was the name again, poochie-bear?" My dad mumbles an answer from behind his newspaper. He always mumbles. He hasn't even heard the question; he has given up listening to my mother a long time ago), he had let the shriveled walnuts in his scrotum take full possession of his brains: A meager load of burning hurt shot up into my mother's plumbing—that final squirt from which, nine months later, your narrator would so reluctantly be born. They'd been going at it the whole night long, my mother and my father, they'd been chewing and clawing at each other for hours, in wild abandon, in the utter nakedness only a one-night stand with a perfect stranger in a foreign land can provide, and the only reason I was conceived by one of those terminally exhausted swimmers, from those very last drops squeezed out of his aching balls, and not by a more strapping fellow from a previous batch, was that the six-pack of condoms that my dad had so gallantly purchased at the all-night pharmacy was all used up, and that my mother, convulsing in her umpteenth orgasm of the night ("I am not keeping track, *chérie*, I'm not an accountant," she had said, and the private joke was that he in fact was an accountant on a business trip for his bosses, the firm of Ofer and Dunn-Witt, importers/exporters—mostly export tonight, one might say), dizzy from the booze and the excess of raw sex, had just seconds before thrown away the towel supposed to cover her nakedness while she and her lover were on their way to the shower. She had her hand firmly planted around the root of his penis, and she had begged Mr. Andermans to please-please-*please* do it to her one more time, please baby: more, more, *more!*, and my dad had obliged, for we all know that under such circumstances—a woman's hand around his cock—a man cannot refuse.

More, she had said.

Gimme more.

More!

More! More! MORE!

It does not bode well. What good could come from this? What good could come from the lonely last spermatozoon left after a night of terminally heavy drinking and total physical exhaustion?

Case in point: What came from that final tired cell was me.

My father is an amateur poet. Here is one of his haikus:

*First five syllables.  
Next line seven syllables.  
And then back to five.*

This poem dates from his self-declared iconoclastic period (around 1978).

There was a time, or so my mother tells me, that I worshipped the man. That I learned his poems by heart. They were not easy to find. He only managed to get them published in small mimeographed magazines, the cheap ink stained your fingers as you touched the page, so that the very act of reading destroyed the text. I have been told that as a child I recited his poems out loud before I went to bed. The rhythms lulled me to sleep and the turgid metaphors invaded my dreams, dreams full of shifting sands and winding walls and winds sweeping over moonlit plains and angels soaring over the landscape, carried away on mysterious winds—that sort of thing. More than once I woke up screaming at the top of my lungs, batting at imaginary gulls that were screeching around my head.

I would have preferred to imagine that I had been conceived in a spontaneous display of pure beauty. My mother and father as ballet dancers caught in a smooth, nimble mating dance; his magnificently gleaming lingam sliding effortlessly in and out of her luscious yoni, glistening with the glow of an eternal love that transcended everything. And then things went seriously wrong between the two of them; something happened that set them against each other for the rest of their mortal existence.

That something, I imagined, was me. If not for me, my parents would have lived a long and happy life filled with heavenly fucks in foreign beds on countless business trips. But we know how it went, in those days: You knocked up a woman, you got married, and then you turned prematurely bald. It was all my fault.

For the remainder of her life, my mother would attribute the state of uncharacteristic lewdness in which I was conceived to the bottle of champagne my dad had brought up to the room—the alcohol, she claims, had clouded her judgment. Consequently, she kept warning me against the disastrous side effects of this particular beverage. “The bubbles go straight to your head, my dear,” she told me, time after time. “The fumes fill your brain; they chase every possible thought away until all that’s left is empty buoyancy.” This would start her on one of her ever longer, ever more formulaic litany of reproaches, and those tirades in turn left my father so dejected that with each repetition he would withdraw deeper and deeper into his lonely misery. I never knew why he didn’t simply stop her; why he didn’t tell his wife what he should have told her years before, the words that would have saved his marriage, namely that it hadn’t been the bubbly alcohol that had driven him to her, not the giddy sensation of having a live oyster slide down his throat for the very first time, not just the loneliness of the hotel room that had lured him into the bar and finally into her arms—no, he had really fallen for her, instantly, in the blink of an eye—the blink of her eye—he had fallen in love with her. It wasn’t the alcohol that had so terminally intoxicated him, but her eyes and the way she had smiled at him across the hotel bar. It was as if she had been waiting for him all her life; for him and him alone rose the scent of Chanel from her cleavage in such a sultry whisper. She had put a spell on him. But when the barrage of reproaches started, he somehow never worked up the courage to tell her; the courage to tell her that he loved her. He did the decent thing: He married her and forgot that he had once loved her. She checked out the next morning, leaving nothing but the scent of Chanel on his sheets and on his raw dick. As soon as she found out she was pregnant, she called him at his company. When he showed up on her doorstep an hour later, with flowers in his hands and lips eager to kiss her, she smacked him across the face with the thorny end

of the bouquet and dragged him to the town hall. I was conceived in sin, okay, nothing you can do about that, but she was making damn sure I wouldn't be born out of wedlock.

Maybe my dad just refused to save his love. Maybe he felt the need to suffer; maybe he felt he needed to atone for those few hours of uncharacteristic abandon. For once in his life he had thrown caution to the wind, and it was only fair that he should bear the consequences of his thoughtlessness. His advice to me echoed my mom's. "Think hard, my dear boy"—such were his words—"Think before you act."

My father was a dreamer—read his windy poems if you don't believe me. Dreamers rarely accomplish great things. His hotel stint was his only act of heroism; the only time he made a dream of his into reality. He suffered for it. Hence his advice: "Think hard, my boy. Think before you act." Later I learned there were other things he regretted. His idiot brother, for instance, who died a horrible death in a faraway land. Yet another boy who didn't think hard enough before he acted. Of course I have no brothers or sisters. My parents thought so mercilessly hard before they acted that they never even had sex again, I suspect. Of course I had a lonely childhood. I looked for solace in books and I found it. I couldn't find love at home, so I adopted it from literature. As a child, I thought it was my fault. Later, I knew it was my fault. Without me, my father would have never seen my mother again. The sheer fact of my existence transformed their one night of mindless bliss into a marriage-long dark night of the soul. By the time I started working on my dissertation (*Mood-Dependent Memory and Overshadowing: A Study in Episodic Priming*) and was finally making a living, courtesy of the National Fund for Scientific Research, their divorce was final and the marriage undone.

It has been said that the male of the species gets imprinted with the memory of the victorious spermatozoon. We are forever looking for a way out of a dark labyrinth. But me, I stumble through my small apartment and crash into chairs that stand where they have always stood. I have been told that I was named after my father's brother. It looks like I did not inherit his wanderer's spirit. The hotel story! Imagine the confusion of the young prepubescent boy who asks his mother in all the perversity of prehormonal naïveté how exactly he came into being, and then gets to hear that story. For a long time, my confusion bordered dangerously on desperation.

Fortunately, my parents spared me the most intimate details. But as soon as I reached puberty—did I mention I read way too many books?—my imagination, usually my ally, my solace, and my anchor, unhelpfully filled in the particulars. My mind projected in front of me, in vivid color, the loud and lewd events in that hotel hallway. I saw him kneeling behind her, his hands digging into her hips, his flesh pounding hard into hers. Then again I imagined how she lay nailed beneath him, her hands clutching her wet, tangled hair in some sort of Victorian despair, her head rhythmically banging against the floor, her mouth wide open, her buttocks red and raw, her pupils turned upwards in the rolling waves of ecstatic oblivion.

I read way too much. I stole this image of ecstasy out of a book, from the reproduction of a painting, *Ophelia, Upon Drowning*—W. G. Simmonds, 1910. Indeed, I allowed myself to compare the aftermath of the vulgar act that led to my conception to the aftermath of Ophelia's final, ultimate act of love—that is, to the ultimate exhaustion, the final kenosis, the fatal tragedy of a great, unnecessary, self-inflicted death. The white dress billowing under the drowned woman's shoulders looks like the open, lifeless wing of an enormous angel.

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No surprise in this novel's opening. If you read a story set in Potsdam and Berlin, you should expect a fair amount of spying, no? I admit that I witnessed the aforementioned act, my stinging eye glued to the keyhole of Donatella's room. The hot air dries my tears quickly, although it's no comfort to know that all that heat has been generated by the ardent, gymnastic, and apparently never-ending lovemaking that said eye has been witnessing.

My father and mother in their hallway—quite a number of eyes must have been spying on the exposed beauty of their intertwining bodies, with a gleam of disapproval or a hint of lust or mirth. Or jealousy perhaps.

The hallway is cold, the naked concrete hurts my knees. Mefista runs circles around me, then she gets impatient. She head-butts my thighs and presses her head against Donatella's door. Her movements make the door knock against its frame. The sound returns me to my senses. It's a familiar sound for those who live here—the hallway is drafty, the door locks are worn; every time somebody opens a door all other doors in the hallway start to rattle—but it's still probably safer for me to retreat. Mefista thinks so too. She places one paw on my knee and scratches me with apparent gusto. The claws pierce through the heavy cotton of my jeans; she knows that this short, sharp pain will get my attention. I lift her off the floor and the compact heat of her small body, the softness of her fur, her little purring engine warm my heart. She generously rubs the scent of her eye glands into my T-shirt. We cross the hallway to my room. Time to go to bed.

I'm really not to blame for this bout of voyeurism. It's not my habit to spy on my neighbors. Blame the kitty. I let her out around six, and she came back home around midnight, crying her usual two-note me-ow underneath my window. The cry was just loud enough to climb up the wall and penetrate the thin glass behind which I was working—not on a scientific article, but on my damn book. I ran downstairs as soon as I heard her. She was sitting right in front of the door, her white neck stretched proudly towards me, a freshly picked daffodil between her teeth. Mefista brings me a present every night. I fear her gifts. Sometimes it's a small animal from the woods: a little dead bird wet with cat spit, or a field mouse still quivering. Sometimes she leads me to a small puddle of vomit that glistens with tiny white bones. Once she deposited a balled-up piece of paper with hastily scribbled equations at my feet. Another time she proudly displayed—where did she get it?—a used condom. And although I'm scared of what Mefista brings, I invariably lavish praise on her and stroke her little chin. Then she follows me inside and runs up the concrete stairs, two, three steps at a time. When she gets to the landing she waits for me and then she pushes open the door of our room, happy to be home. Don't laugh, but I do think that this is love, the kind of love I learned about in my childhood books. I share my milk with her and I shake pellets of cat food into a bowl; in return, she brings me the spoils of her foraging trips and the sweet warmth of her nearness. We had just gotten to the top of the stairs, that evening in March, Mefista's flower sticking from the neck of my T-shirt, its golden trumpet tickling my throat, when I heard those rutting sounds coming from my neighbor's room. My heart sank instantly.

Had I peeked around the corner when I went down to pick up Mefista, I might have noticed a paint-splattered ladder rising out of the bushes, propped right under a second-story window. If Mefista would have finished her tour of duty just an hour earlier, I might have observed an older gentleman scaling that ladder on the soft leather soles of a pair of fashionable black Salamander moccasins, goose grass and thorns stuck in his pant cuffs—a man with short white hair, his footwork swift and firm, the gleam of conquest in his eyes and a panther's smile on his lips, slipping inside with the assured grace of someone who had performed this particular trick a thousand times before. I would have recognized that man at once: He was one of the heroes of my childhood, the man who wrote all those popular books on dumbed-down astronomy. The man's reputation had by now sunk far from its original zenith; he was like one of those red giants he used to write about, slowly turning into a white dwarf. And yet he was apparently still scaling the heavens, on the way to his very own red-haired angel waiting for him behind the open window, ready to receive him in her slender arms and loving womb.

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Why him? Why Goldfarb? The question kept me awake all night, while Mefista dreamt of all kinds of tasty morsels, sniffing and licking her lips and twitching her legs in anticipation. In my distress, I



didn't realize that I was asking the wrong question. The real question was: why me? The lighting in the room had been sparse. Why had it been arranged so that I could get such a good look? Why had Donatella positioned herself so that I might witness every little detail through her keyhole? And why had she launched their noisy endgame at the precise moment when I arrived at the top of the stairs? Donatella was well aware of Mefista's habits; she must have heard me go down to open the front door, she must have heard Mefista's cry of triumph when she ran upstairs. It had all been a bit *too much*—Donatella's screams had sounded a little too spectacular, her body contorted just so, the timing a tad too convenient. Donatella's passion must have been staged, and not just for the benefit of her lover—the intent must have been to communicate something to me. But whatever it was that Donatella was trying to tell me, I didn't get it. I fell into the classical Hollywood trap: I was concentrating so hard on the protagonists that I neglected to pay attention to the plot and the subtext. I stored the image and the soundtrack in my memory, I retained the superficial features of the scene, but I had no clue as to the underlying Truth.

Did I say I stored the image? Stored is too weak a word. The episode got *branded* into my mind. Painfully so. Inescapably so.

Over the next few days, the memory of the event kept popping randomly into my head with cold precision and painful persistence. But something was wrong with that memory. In my mind's eye, it were indeed Goldfarb and Donatella's bodies that I saw hotly fused like flames in a furnace, but the faces bobbing on top of those bodies were not theirs—the faces I saw were my mom and dad's, as immortalized in their wedding photograph. If only my parents had concluded their lovemaking the same way Goldfarb and Donatella did, life would have been different. You would have never heard of me or my misery.

For all their falsehood, those images tortured me relentlessly. They forced themselves upon me when I shut off my computer screen at the end of the day; they awaited me in the kitchen when I came to get some butter from the fridge; they popped up when I turned on the shower. Like legendary monsters, they surfaced and resurfaced from the cool dark lakes of my memory, polluting the fresh waters of my conscious mind with their slimy scales. There they were, inflicting themselves on me even as I was fighting the howling wind and the punishing rain on my way to the *Komplex I–Neues Palais* bus stop, on my way to see the man who was waiting for me in Berlin with his stack of stories—even on that noble quest, those images intruded.

Ever since those mischievous Viennese twins, the Jew and the Christian Hindu, concocted their theories, it is impossible to consider Eros without invoking the image of Thanatos as well. Behold the dark cloud of smoke that rises from the torch in his hand. Do we not shudder to see the shadow of the butterfly he clutches in his other hand, the grotesquely flickering patterns on the walls of our cave?

So, yes: Those memories pumped cruel blood through my heart and utterly shameful blood into my sex, and so I needed some distraction, and therefore it was with great zeal that I threw myself—not yet purified by Fire—into the continued writing of *The Great Book*.

We all make our mistakes, small or big.

But enough about me.

How are *you* doing?