

KENNETH VANDERBEEK

## DUPLICITY

ENTERING THE CAFÉ WITH YESTERDAY'S PAPER and no particular thought or aspiration, Ditzer suddenly awakened at the sight of a beautiful young lady at the counter who seemed to be gazing at him. In an instant his heart was marching to its rebellious beat: the manic rhythm of doubt against certainty. Of course he had looked away; when he looked again it appeared that she was flirting. Like a panther floating through grass, he sidled to the nearest available table, a high-top for four, and arranged it for two. It was as he did this that the rebellion ignited into full-scale chaos. She was gone.

Was it the same young lady, the beauty of the café, who boarded the train the next morning two stops after his? Before she could sit down the subway had regained its furious momentum and she buckled, barely regaining her balance between his legs. Ditzer thanked God for this as well as the empty seat beside him and hastened to it to avail his.

"You are real gentle man," the young lady said, smiling as she took the vacated seat.

For an interminable moment each stared into the safety net of passengers, Ditzer drawing his arms into a tight V in his lap, his hands settling over the point at which his slacks were rising, and the young lady poising herself upwardly, statuesque. As soon as they righted another toppling commuter the young lady acted.

"You can tell where I from?" she asked. "My accent is, how you say, amalgamation—of many cultures." She casually lifted a foot to Ditzer's thigh. "My father is musician. Would be hero of national symphony, but he prefer, how you say, private performances. So we come to America." She leaned close, as if they rode the train together regularly. "Oh, how I love this country! Land of opportunity, no?" Her owl eyes glistened like the sunlight that was finally finding release through the dense throng.

"Your English is very good," Ditzer stammered, suddenly concerned about his breath and praying that his ogling was not obvious.

“I learn the English in just three week!” the young lady beamed. “Even so, I must practise, practise, you know!” She blushed and looked away, then: “So what is you do in life?” Her humid breath massaged Ditzer’s ear.

Flinching, he probed for a receipt in a pants pocket, took the No. 1 pencil he always kept behind an ear like a cigarette, and began to doodle. “Um, I’m a professor,” he said.

The young lady’s hands cupped her mouth of gold. “Oh my, sexy art professor!” she cooed, gazing at his frenetic work. “Yes, more than handsome, you are also talented!”

Ditzer corrected her, saying that he actually taught philosophy—at the city university—and that right up to the time he began his doctoral work he actually had trouble choosing between it and an advanced degree in social work on account of his “love of people.” Then he smiled and said that he would rather talk about her.

“Well look at you, you quite something,” she purred. “Me, oh, I just simple folk. Like father, am humble musician.”

“Did he teach you?” Ditzer interjected.

“Oh, yes, yes,” she smiled.

Ditzer stared at the stars in her large blue eyes.

“Is only the two of us,” she continued, woefully.

“What about your mother?” Ditzer asked.

“None, don’t know, never knew.” She shrugged, but quickly coaxed the smile again. “Father, I, we live in six country before he decide we must come to America!”

“Must?”

“Is no matter,” she waved, a rogue finger landing in her cleavage. “Oh, is very nice time of year, no?” she continued, now needling the strap of a bathing suit beneath her blouse from which wet spots still bloomed like tulips. She blushed anew. “You see, I just return from big swim! Silly me, forget towel! So anyway, I go home now to practise violin. Two year ago I become number seven best virtuoso in whole country where we settle last before coming to America! Same year, I win beauty contest, like your Miss America, with performance of section of *Romeo and Juliet* by Tchaikovsky! All this time I learn two other language, German first—my father insist I sing in this to him—but English being my best! I talk too much?”

“Oh no,” said Ditzer.

“You know, I not ever mention my name! Is Clara.”

“That’s a pretty name.”

“And what you called?”

“Ditzer.”

“Zitcher. Hmm. Is German?”

“It could be. I’m not sure.”

It was after noon. As the rush of souls tapered away, the dance of light settled like a thousand tiny ballerinas into a slow waltz, such that Ditzer could finally look at her privately. She beguiled him; he had missed his own stop a dozen times over.

At home that night he discovered a phone number scratched on pink notepaper in the small of his pants pocket. To preserve the note, he reinforced it with double-sided tape and affixed it to the base of the lamp on his nightstand. Though exhausted, he gloated over the little treasure, certain that it was a hint. He imagined its beautiful giver beside him. With every sense he manifested her: he heard her gorgeous accent in the fire escape rafter each time a gust came up, felt her humid breath upon his ear and her velvet skin lightly at his fingertips, smelled the sweet essence of river water that had capped her hair, beheld her figure on the cracked walls and warped floorboards, and he tasted her in his own saliva. Finally he fell blissfully asleep, still dressed, and slept the whole night dreaming of her.

In the morning the pigeons and the garbage trucks woke him before first light, and he could still hear her voice as an epiphany in the hum of the rising city. When he got to the station he was full of anticipation. Besides having planned to take the eleven fifteen again, he also endeavoured to board the same car. His perusal found every young, slender female with long black hair, large blue eyes, and a low-neck blouse (that might betray the straps of a bathing suit). Of all the females who boarded, many possessed at least some of these characteristics, yet none were her.

A week later she found him at a midtown restaurant.

“Well, how lucky you are!” she said.

Ditzer looked up from the corner table where, for nearly an hour, he had been nursing the usual gin and tonic, pork pocket, and salad with goat cheese.

“Clara!”

“Cara,” she corrected him.

Ditzer did not care about his apparent lapse in memory or the fact that her hair was lighter (a kind of espresso brown) and close-cropped like a

schoolgirl's, her eyes had turned hazel, and her English was nearly flawless. He took the adjoining seat so that she could have his.

"This is a pleasant coincidence," he said. "Do you come here often?"

"Now and then," she answered. She looked around.

"Your English is much better," he said.

"Oh—um, I mean, *is* better, no?" A hand rose toward her mouth as if these words oozed like syrup.

"How was your violin lesson?" he asked.

"Violin? Was wonderful, of course!"

"And have you been swimming lately?" Ditzer pursued, feeling suddenly empowered to nudge her blouse for the bathing-suit strap.

She flinched.

"Oh," he said, "I was just wondering—you know—the bathing suit?"

Henceforth it was he who prompted inquiries, as if their personalities had swapped. She seemed preoccupied, or perhaps merely careful, which is not uncommon on second dates. The server brought another gin and tonic for Ditzer and a glass of water for the young lady. Through smoke rings, ever floating above and around them like exotic jellyfish, Ditzer so absorbed her that he did not think to ask about how she could have perfected her English and sprouted an inch since their first meeting.

"How is your Dad?" he asked.

"You know the bastard?"

Ditzer stiffened.

"Oh, *father*," she said, with a giggle, "I thought you mean—!" She quickly proceeded to describe how Father What's-His-Name—a name too terrible to utter—had deceived his holy children (not least her own father, who had entrusted his faith in this now *former* friend from their lyceum days) and "pulled the woolen over the eyes" of a dozen married women into having "relations" with him while ostensibly helping ease their despair about impotent or abusive husbands. "No, *my* father is *good* man," she repeated in the end, "*is good*, as you say, *Dad*, ha, ha!"

As if exhausted from her assertion, she leaned into Ditzer, her bared teeth nibbling an ear to coax him to finish his "napitok," her warm sweet breath proceeding to tickle a path down his neck. Every colour of the previous week's mawkish dream was now rekindled in Ditzer, making a kaleidoscope of his dizzy mind. He ordered more drinks—she had since switched to rum and Coke—and later a snack. Ditzer normally ate at a snail's pace, but

here he tossed the eighty-two dollars onto the table as if they were papers ablaze and let Clara/Cara whisk him away.

The next day, splayed like a snow angel, he did not awaken until 2pm. Except for the certain memory of having turned his key in the door, he could not immediately recall having entered the apartment or whether she had, too. He searched for hairs and earrings but found only a couple of lint balls and a curled fingernail (his colour). He sniffed the spare pillow but could detect no scent other than his own. It was only when he fluffed the pillow that he realized her in the short strand of espresso-brown hair that dangled from the case. He leapt in ecstasy, reached for the pink note on the nightstand, and dialed. As he listened, his heart beating, there came a recording about a “non-working number.”

It was possible—quite possible, of course—that she was on her way to the train, he thought, so he dashed into the world. As it was Good Friday, many of the passengers were wearing suits of white or pastel, the men flaunting orchid corsages pinned to front pockets or lapels, the women wide-brimmed hats with flower-chains culminating in bows or overhanging ribbons, their children making messes of their hands and faces from hollow chocolate bunnies. As Ditzer two-stepped through the first train’s closing double doors, he bumped another boarder, causing his lilies to fly across the sticky floor like pitched dice.

He sat in one of the two seats across from the doors and plopped a hand upon the still vacant one, incognizant for a moment that, if fortune once again revealed the young lady, she would probably approach not from without but rather from within. As the subway accelerated, he stood up and laboured forward against its pitch and screeching wheels, the tunnel’s blazing lights flickering like sparks in his peripheral vision. Soon he believed he saw her in the next car, but when he got closer he realized that the hair was a wig—and, not surprisingly, that of a much older lady. Again he thought he saw her, but this was not her either—unless she had recently been fitted with yellow hair extensions (even so, he stared at the face).

Ditzer persisted, weaving through the flurry of commuters returning home, but compiled a failure rate comparable to their number. He finally took a seat beside a snoring businessman in the last car, at the back of the train, resigned to the futility of the search and too exhausted to duplicate it in reverse.

For weeks afterward she appeared neither on the train nor at the restau-

rant or café. Consequently every day he entered the world as if on a string, not even looking as he crossed the street on his habitual walk to the station's entrance.

Then one day he found her in the encumbered gaze of another man—who, not incidentally, had taken the seat he had once saved for her. It was she who noticed him when the train jolted. Buckling, Ditzer fell between her legs.

“Well, how lucky-lucky am I?” he stuttered.

She apologized to her beau for her “friend, um, Mr. . . .,” and the beau smiled as he twirled her long black hair. Her warm sweet breath proceeded to whisper the whole story into Ditzer's nibbled ear—about how simply terrifying his beauty was and how she had to have him.

“That's it, Cara?” Ditzer coughed.

“Cara?” she asked. “Who is Cara? I gave myself to you, wholly to you and none other, and you cannot grant me the courtesy of remembering my name?” She reached for her new man—a gesture of someone who should have worn a black glove on her hand—and pulled him to her. As she did this, Ditzer beseeched balance and, having mercifully received it, bolted from between her legs to lose himself in the morass of bodies. He had to purchase a transfer for the southbound train. The early afternoon's cloud cover was just beginning to yield to a certain light, such that the first thing Ditzer saw when he approached the transfer was the intense reflections of commuters in the windows, two of which were of the young man who had momentarily yielded on the last train and the beautiful young lady with the long black hair who had been on his arm.