

RICHARD BOWES

DIANA IN THE SPRING

ASKED ONCE AT A SEMINAR at Lincoln Center to describe his job, Harry Sisk replied, "It's all about hunting. Sometimes, I'm out looking for usable properties. Other times I'm the quarry. People with ideas looking for me." Harry was Literary Manager of the Players', an off-Broadway theater company.

Late one morning last May, he set out from home with a copy of the tales of the Brothers Grimm under his arm. Harry lived in an 1870s rectory way east near Avenue C. He got the whole third floor dirt cheap when the place went co-op and had fixed it up quite nicely.

The block was stable enough. The church next door, much revamped, was an East Village community center with a health clinic and outreach services. In winter, fires burned in the vacant lot across from Harry's front windows. In summer, the air pulsed with boom box rap; mothers leaned out windows and watched their kids dodge traffic.

Down the street in an old garage, a group of locals worked a chop shop stripping and refurbishing stolen cars. As Harry always said, "I've never had any trouble. My neighbors can't figure out what I do and I make it a point not to know what they do."

That morning, Harry smiled at Rosalita and Carmen, the one pregnant, the other pushing a carriage. They had dropped out of high school to make babies. He could remember when they were in kindergarten. He nodded at their brothers, Joey, Angelo, and Miguel, who hung on the corner. But the boys gazed across the street in awe.

Around a black Camaro were several guys Harry might have identified as neighborhood dealers. They stood listening respectfully to a woman Harry had never seen before. As tall as any of them, dressed in dark slacks and a leather jacket, she leaned against the car with taut grace, as if at any moment she might leap.

Harry caught the light coffee color of her skin, the hint of a slight smile accenting the perfect line of her profile, a golden sparkle in her dark hair. At the end of the block, he looked back. But the group had dispersed and she was gone. Harry realized that his hands and feet were cold as ice.

He walked along St. Mark's Place, enjoying tourist girls in their spring dresses. At Lafayette he turned south past the Astor Place Theater where the Blue Man Group was a solid hit, past the Public which was supposed to have money troubles but where they had a couple of shows running.

The Players' down on Bond Street was dark. The marquee still advertised the last

production, a musical about sexual mores in the age of AIDS. This had aroused no great critical or popular interest and closed after its six-week subscription run. Harry avoided looking at the black cavern that was the main stage, ducked into the box office, picked up his mail and messages, then hurried to his cubbyhole upstairs.

Unread manuscripts were piled on a table. His desk was littered with grant applications. A phone rang in the box office. Down the hall, an acting class ran through exercises. None of the mail held any promise. Harry returned some phone calls.

Financially, things were tight. There had been a few dry years and as Harry's boss, the Creative Director, put it, "We need either a hit or a sucker with money." She and Harry had been an off and on item since Yale Drama School sixteen years before. The money crisis had done nothing for their relationship.

Now, the Creative Director was in England scouting play prospects that Harry had recommended. Before leaving, she had thrown out an idea. Or rather she had ordered him to come up with an idea. "A performance piece, something the workshop could do. Maybe for children but savvy enough for adults. And cheap," she had added, "just actors and lights and public domain music and old legends or something."

Which was why on that spring day Harry picked up the Grimms and scanned one more story of an enchanted prince, a poor maiden, and a magic saucepan. Then, noticing the time, he jumped up, called, "I'll be back as soon as I can," as he dashed past the box office. Taking the BMT down to Centre Street, he hurried to the rear of the State Supreme Court Building, went through the DA's entrance and rode an elevator up twelve stories to what looked like a classroom.

Tiers of busted stuffed seats and battered folding desks rose toward open windows. A week or so before, through a failure of will, Harry had been empaneled as a member of a grand jury. The luck of the draw and the mix of the community had yielded a nurse from Harlem, a cab driver from the Lower East Side, several computer programmers, a retired school teacher who lived in Stuyvesant Town, a business woman, a little man with thick glasses and red hair who never said what he did and, this being New York, a few people in the arts.

On their first day, a short, curly-haired kid well into his thirties had done a small double take, gone to the empty seat next to Harry Sisk and asked, "Okay if I sit here?" Harry looked up at the enthusiastic face and immediately identified an actor/waiter. The kid said, "My name's Bobby Vernon. And I know who you are, Mr. Sisk. You spoke at the Berghof Studio."

Harry had smiled a polite but distant smile, then noticed a young woman at the door who hesitated, looking over the available places. Her clothes were grab bag and her features too large to be really beautiful. But she had a long neck that Harry saw as swanlike and she carried copies of *Art in America* and *TV Guide*. Alone of those in the room, she held some promise of mild mystery and minor intrigue to occupy his month on the jury.

Harry had given no sign that he noticed her as he removed his belongings from the desk next to his. She moved in his direction. When she sat down and he introduced himself, she gave her name as Serena. Nothing more, nothing less.

At the start, they had been told, "You don't determine guilt or innocence. A simple majority, twelve of you, is needed to decide if there's enough evidence for a trial. That's an indictment. This jury will only hear narcotics cases. 'Operation Street Sweep' is underway against the crack trade on the Upper West Side and Harlem. Mostly you will hear arresting officers, rarely will you hear defendants." That first afternoon, they indicted a dozen people.

A week later, as Harry took his seat between Serena and Bobby, the foreman, a CPA, put down his copy of the Trial of Socrates. A side door opened and a stenographer and a brisk young Asian assistant DA in a good suit entered. The Asian told them, "Members of the jury, Kent Tom here. We have a Class C Narcotics case for you today. People of New York versus Hector Turner. There will be two witnesses, both police sergeants."

The jury hardly looked up as the door opened for a pleasant black man with a gold badge on the front of his jogging suit and a gun stuck in his waistband. DA Tom asked, "Sergeant, would you describe your actions around ten P.M. on the evening of April eighth of this year?"

On Harry's left, Serena muttered, "This just isn't like television," as though that were a telling criticism. In conversation, he had learned that while Serena managed a store in Chelsea, she was a conceptual artist. "Working with images of our religious icons, that is TV. You know, Dan Rather with a crown of thorns, that kind of thing."

"...Broadway near One Hundred and Fortieth Street," testified the sergeant. "I was approached by a man I nicknamed Pie Hat, because I didn't know his name and his hat reminded me of a pizza." He grinned and a couple of the jurors laughed.

Then Bobby, who, unsurprisingly, was auditioning and waiting tables uptown, leaned over to Harry and whispered, "Are you reading the Grimms for pleasure or business?"

"A little of both."

"...didn't have no Red Dragon, but told me he had Batman which was better and cheaper," said the sergeant.

"Both those are street names for crack cocaine?" Tom asked.

"Yes sir. He took me over to a doorway on the northwest corner of Broadway and One Forty..."

"I wondered," murmured Bobby, "because Sondheim and Lapine did that in Into the Woods. And Martha Clark..." Harry smiled politely and pretended to listen to the

testimony, realizing that even a featherhead like Bobby knew this material was stale.

"...in the course of time you saw the accused whom you nicknamed Pie Hat?"

"Yes sir. As I drove down Amsterdam Avenue about an hour later I saw him in custody."

"And did you subsequently learn his real name?"

"Yes, I did. It was Hector Turner."

"Thank you, sergeant. You may wait outside. Next witness."

The arresting sergeant was a stocky white woman. Young Tom questioned her, read the chemist's report on the narcotics, then said, "I will leave you to your deliberations."

"Any discussion?" asked the foreman.

The little red-headed man, who reminded Harry of Rumpelstiltskin, said, as he often did, "If you want to railroad these defendants, go right ahead. But wake up to the fact that this is just some police scam to pile up statistics and make themselves look good. What we're doing isn't going to make any difference in how much drugs get sold."

"I got no big thing for the police," said the nurse. "But I live up where they're arresting. Anything they can do for that neighborhood is God's work."

"I think it's time to vote," said the foreman.

"This is ridiculous!" the little man said. Judging by what went on in his own neighborhood, Harry was inclined to agree but said nothing. Seventeen jurors voted to indict.

That afternoon, as he had several times before, Bobby invited Harry out for a drink. This time he consented. They sat in a little place Bobby knew about and the actor asked him, "How's the project?"

Harry shrugged, sorry he had ever mentioned it. "Still in development."

Bobby spoke fast, breathlessly. "I had an idea yesterday. Actors would love to transform themselves on stage, change before the audience's eyes. Princes become frogs. Maidens become trees. Humor and horror! Basic theater magic! All you need is a few of the right people."

Days went by. Harry sat in the jury room between Serena and Bobby, listening to accounts of the arrest of people very much like his neighbors. Some cases held variations: a shot fired, a baby found in a crack den, a thin black woman with pain-filled eyes testifying about her abduction and rape at the hands of a

dealer. But usually the cases were as alike as the prosecutors and police could make them.

Jurors surreptitiously read People magazine or the sports pages of the Post while testimony was being given. Harry Sisk glanced at Variety as a young Hispanic woman DA said, "We have a Class C narcotics case today. There will be two witnesses, both police officers." They groaned. "I see this is an experienced jury. I will call the first witness."

When she did, Harry heard Bobby on one side murmur, "Oh my!" and Serena on the other say reverentially, "This one is television." Harry looked up and caught again the half smile on the perfect features. Her presence was even more powerful in this room than on his block. The brown eyes flecked with gold were beautiful and yet so hard that they seemed to reflect light.

Most of the undercover cops who testified showed the law officer beneath the disguise. Some appeared who seemed to have gone too often to the places where drugs and money change hands. This young woman showed neither the ravages of the street nor the police force as she stared unseeing through the jury.

"Do you swear that the evidence that you shall give is true?" the foreman asked.

"I do."

The DA went through the testimony slowly, calmly, sentence by sentence as if she knew better than to make sudden moves. "How many capsules did you purchase from the seller?"

"Three."

"In the course of time did you see the person who sold you the crack cocaine, Officer?"

"Yes."

Harry searched the exquisite face for a sign of mortal understanding.

"And did you learn his name?"

"Yes."

Harry looked at the badge pinned to the jacket, saw the outline of a gun in the waistband. She had the power of life and death.

The DA was asking, "Any questions from the jury? No. That's all for now. Thank you, Officer."

Harry watched as the witness rose and exited in a single, uninterrupted move.

Afterward, he and Serena stopped for espresso at an old cafe he knew in Little

Italy, a place of dark wood, tin ceilings, and, in late afternoons, a fine pearl gray light. Thinking of the one who had just testified, he was struck by the bad posture of the woman opposite him. In the last couple of weeks, he'd heard all about her problems at work and with her roommate. She hadn't shown him any of her art yet. But he knew that would be next.

He said, "You mentioned that one who testified today was like television. You meant unreal?"

"I meant more than real. If this country was actually television, all the police would look like she does. Gods today are whoever is on the tube. If Jesus came back, he'd do it on TV. The Buddha, Mohammed, Apollo the same. If she were on the tube I'd watch her. Wouldn't you?" she asked.

Then she started to tell him about a group show she hoped to be in. Harry nodded sagely, but as he did, an image began to tickle his memory.

That evening, just after ten, he walked home with a copy of Grave's Greek Myths under his arm. After dinner with an old friend, he had spent a few hours searching book stores until this caught his eye.

All seemed quiet on his block. No big job at the chop shop; salsa echoed softly inside the darkened garage. A few people sat on the front stairs of the community center. Drug activity was low. As Harry reached his door, he noticed a black Camaro across the street. The driver had a hawk nose and wore a baseball cap.

Despite the mildness of the night, a fire burned in the vacant lot beyond the car. Basic street sense should have told Harry not to look. But he gaped openly at the half dozen men and a woman outlined against the flames. Even by that light Harry recognized the undercover cop and his heart missed a beat. This felt scarier than love.

She didn't look his way. Then she spoke. Though she was too distant for Harry Sisk to hear, her words broke the quiet. As the men nodded, brakes squealed over on Avenue B, a woman yelled in Spanish, sirens wailed in the dark. By the time Harry got upstairs to his window, the lot was empty, the fire guttering, the cop, car, and driver gone.

Next day in the jury room Bobby noticed the Graves. "Oh-oh, Zeus and company. You should do that but update it. He can turn into a poodle instead of an eagle to get close to women. Any actor would sell his soul to do that."

"Cosby as Zeus," Serena said. "Bart Simpson as Pan. Oprah as Athena. Contemporary gods. I could do great sets."

Harry smiled. Something clicked in his brain.

Then Bobby asked, "Will you be auditioning?"

Harry smiled again and said, "Give me your credits."

That evening, he stood in the Players' rehearsal room and watched the workshop do Noah's Ark. Two women played each pair of animals in rum, two guys were Mr. and Mrs. Noah. Other actors were the Ark itself.

"We're on the right track," Harry told the director. Then he showed all of them a photo of Bernini's sculpture of Apollo and Daphne. Pursued by the god, she stared in open mouthed shock as her arms and hands turned into laurel branches. "Sudden, dramatic, scary," he said, "a mortal transformed by her contact with something alien." But this wasn't quite the image which tugged at Harry's memory.

That Friday, warm and drowsy, the start of the Memorial Day weekend, was the jury's final meeting. Harry sat between Serena and Bobby, skimmed a prose translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and ignored his companions.

A long pause occurred between cases. Jurors wondered if they were about to be dismissed. Harry was only half aware of the assistant DA, a nervous Italian kid telling them, "There's one last case we'd like you to hear. Class C narcotics."

Jurors grumbled. Then Bobby said, "It's the ice goddess again!" Harry looked up to see her staring past him and out the window as the foreman read the oath.

"Officer." The DA sounded like an intimidated kid. "I would like to direct your attention to the night of May 19 around ten P.M." Harry realized that was the date and almost the exact time when he had last seen her.

"Yes."

Harry was fascinated by her unplaceable accent. Not Spanish, almost not European.

"And you were then at St. Nicholas Avenue and a Hundred and Thirty-Third?"

"Yes."

Harry tried not to show surprise.

"You met an individual there?"

"I called him Mr. Softee." The voice was clear, the accent tantalizing. "Because he looked soft and pale." A juror started to snicker, then choked. As she spoke of going to a building and buying crack, Harry gaped. Her beauty was without flaw.

"And you turned the drugs over to your backup?"

"Yes."

"And you saw the accused again about twenty minutes after that?"

"Yes."

"In the custody of your backup?"

"Yes."

Harry knew that everything she said was a lie, and couldn't keep his eyes off her.

"Thank you very much, Officer. Please stay available in case there are questions." He sounded as if he were pleading. Again she rose, crossed the room in a single fluid move, and was gone.

The arresting officer was the hawk-nosed guy who had been at the wheel of the car that night. He even wore the same baseball cap. Harry thought he looked furtive.

When the foreman asked for the last time if there were any comments, the little man with the red hair just said, "Let's just get it over with. Those two are obviously lying."

"But the ones they are arresting need arresting," the nurse said.

Harry and the little man were the only two who didn't vote to indict. After that they were dismissed for the last time. Everyone got up very quickly and started to leave. Bobby, looking desperate, handed Harry his credits. "I'll show it to the boss," Harry promised and stuck it in his book.

That evening, he and Serena exchanged phone numbers at the cafe in Little Italy. He noticed a lurking jumpiness in her hands and eyes and knew they spelled bad nights and awkward days for anyone who made the mistake of getting too close. He made a definite but unspecific promise to go to dinner at a place she knew in Chelsea and said good-bye for the last time.

Things were humming at the theater that night. The Creative Director was back from England. She had seen the same possibilities that Harry had in one little show he recommended. With his forewarning she had managed to snatch the New York rights out from under the nose of the Manhattan Theater Club.

That evening, she watched Harry talk to the workshop. "TV is the medium of our myths," he said. "That's where the archetypes reside. Think of Roseanne Arnold as the mother goddess, Candice Bergen as Minerva, goddess of wisdom, Bart Simpson as Pan. I see gods appearing on big television screens on stage. We'll make Diana, goddess of the hunt, into a TV cop. I saw a knockout woman who could play her. Unfortunately, she actually is a cop.

"The actors laughed.



"As for the mortals," said Harry, "look at the kind of material they get." He held up the Metamorphoses and passed it around. On the cover was a photo of the image which had been tickling his memory. It showed an archaic sculpture of a man writhing in agony as antlers sprouted from the top of his head and dogs tore him apart.

He said, "That's Actaeon, a hunter who made the mistake of seeing the goddess Diana at a moment when she did not want to be seen. As punishment for something not the man's fault she transformed him into a stag and his own dogs turned on him."

The Creative Director was impressed. "Let's have dinner tomorrow," she said afterward. "It's been a while!"

That night Harry took a cab home and thought about a possible production. It would look very nice on his resume. Riding east he realized that he still had Bobby's skimpy credits in his jacket pocket. Serena's number was there too. Getting out of the cab, Harry crumpled the papers, tossed them in a trash barrel. His time on the jury hadn't been a total waste.

On the block, runners directed customers to the dealers. Down the street, guys wheeled a hot Caddy into the darkness of the garage. Lights burned in the cellar of the former church. A woman called her kids. On a boom box, CHILLIN' T stuttered his stuff. The lot across the street was dark and empty.

Harry opened the downstairs door and stepped into the hall. He saw Joey and Miguel and tried to say their names. Then he saw the knives, the dead-eyed stares, and started to back away.

On the stoop, Harry turned and yelled but not one of his neighbors looked his way. He ran but the knife boys caught him. Between two parked cars they severed a carotid artery. Falling, dying, he was aware only of gold-flecked eyes, their gaze beautiful, implacable, and unjust.