

Fragrant Goddess

by Paul Park

Paul Park lives in Massachusetts with his family. His recent work has been focused on a quartet of fantasy novels: A Princess of Roumania, The Tourmaline, The White Tyger, and The Hidden World. His new story for us makes an interesting counterpoint to Albert Cowdrey's tale in this same issue.

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He was familiar with the house, of course, having seen it in photographs and once in person a dozen years before. He didn't remember it being so huge. He and Sabine had come up the walkway between these same bronze foo dogs, the male with its paw on a bronze ball. Then—still—the windows had been brown with sticky paper, opaque, as Jeremy had pointed out. No one had lived there for many years. The house had been abandoned after Arkady Ferson's death in the early 1970s. There was a suggestion he'd been murdered, a possibility that intrigued Sabine far more than Ferson's small connection with the subject of Jeremy's dissertation. Now the front door stood open and Sabine, he imagined, waited for him inside.

Or else she was watching him from the front windows or the shelter of the porch—he didn't like that idea. The stone walk was a long one. His leg hurt. As he approached, he thought she might be calculating all the ways he'd changed. He saw himself diminishing as he got bigger. He was kind of bald. He wasn't in great shape. And of course he limped. Which would she notice first?

"Boo!"

She was perched along the back of the female dog, motionless, invisible, in clear sight. Now she scrambled down, and any consolation that the years might also have treated her unkindly was already gone. In the bright sunlight she seemed radiant to him, dressed in an Indian printed smock above her knees. It fastened with a string around her neck. She hugged him, and he was aware of her smell, which came back suddenly—the same lavender perfume mixed with the same sweat. He felt her naked arms around his neck, aware also of his damp, uncomfortable suit. This was the third time he was in Seattle and he'd never seen a drop of rain—how small she was! He had forgotten.

Her face was close by his. She'd never been a beautiful woman, he remembered with surprise. Her features had always been too big for her small face. But she had always seemed beautiful—a European trick perhaps—and younger than she was. At twenty-six she'd looked like a teenager, especially at a distance. It was the language of her body—"gamine," he supposed. Now, as she separated from him and scampered barefoot up the stairs, she looked twenty-six or so.

He followed her through the line of fat white Ionic columns to the front door. He'd read a little bit about the house, knew, for example, there was a fine Tiffany window over the staircase, and the walls had been hand-painted by ... someone, some marginally famous turn-of-the-century decorative artist—he'd not been interested in any of those things until he'd had to imagine Sabine living here.

She made a little pirouette in the cavernous, dark entranceway. "I'm so excited to see you," she said, her accent still thick. When he'd first met her, she'd scarcely spoken any English. Now she was fluent, obviously, and his French was rusty. So they turned naturally to a language they'd never spoken with each other. "I can't wait to show you," she said. She ran up the double stairway to the landing and stood below the window, a floral pattern of green and crimson glass. She wore an ankle bracelet, he noticed, and the bottoms of her feet were dark.

"Tell me again how this happened," he said.

"I told you on the phone! When Scott and I first moved out here, we bought a house in Fremont—you know? But his parents were living too close by. Once we came by here and there was a real estate sign—I'd told him how I'd knocked on the door with you—do you remember? I had always remembered this place. Always I used to drive past when I had the chance, and when the sign came, Scott said it was an opportunity. But I suppose it was a gift for me—do you know Arkady Ferson also lived in Belgium? We bought it from the Lightbearers Foundation—do you like it?" she asked, as if she were talking about the dress she wore, and which she was modeling for him under the dappled light, and which he did like very much. It was blue and red and left her arms exposed. He could see the soft hair in her armpits. And she didn't have to bother with a bra or anything like that.

Once he had shared a cab with her down Fifth Avenue, thirty blocks in rush hour from the University Club to her apartment—a cold, rainy night, and they had kissed and groped each other the entire way. Her wet shirt had been unbuttoned to her waist. Why hadn't she asked him to come up? No, it

was because he had to continue on cross-town. He was meeting Joanna and her parents at some Chinese restaurant on Ninth. All the way there he'd been sniffing himself guiltily, and he was already late, and Joanna was already pissed off. "She has no idea how virtuous I am," he'd thought as he'd washed his face and hands in the cramped restaurant bathroom. The lavender smell had already dissipated, to be replaced, with any luck, by the scent of Joanna's perfume, the musk oil she used to wear in those days. Sabine had met Scott right after that.

He stood below her on the stair. She was smiling, and she raised her left hand to her mouth to hide her big teeth—an endearing gesture that he remembered now. Did she ever think about that taxi ride? Was she thinking about it now? He couldn't help himself: "You must be awfully rich!"

"Well, no—I don't think so. I mean yes and no—I suppose we are. We have to work, of course."

Just out of law school when she'd married him, Scott was now the head litigator for a timber company. A novice when Jeremy had known him, now he was some kind of A player, which even on the West Coast stood for something. Since the accident, of course, Jeremy no longer played.

Had he told her about the accident? He'd mentioned the divorce, he knew. And the tenure decision. When she'd met him he had already been working on his dissertation, his book on Leonardo Fioravanti. Some things hadn't changed, at least.

But it was squash that had brought them together, at the club where he'd given lessons all through graduate school. The North American Open had been in Seattle that year. During the break after the Women's C quarter-final, he and Sabine had climbed the hill to Arkady Ferson's old house. Jeremy had wondered if any of the Lightbearers still lived there. He was already out of the A draw.

Now Sabine was talking to him and he realized he wasn't listening. But he followed her from room to room. "...I leave the door unlocked and it is best I do. You know it is the Asian art museum inside the park, and many times people think this house is part of the museum. So they come right into the front hall. I don't like them to call me or ring the bell. But I keep a feather duster beside the door, and if I am downstairs I pick it up. That way they can think I am the maid, something like that. *S'il vous plaît*," she said, turning, hands on hips, knees together. "*La patronne n'est pas à la maison* . It is mostly Chinese people who come in."

He laughed and she laughed too, hiding her teeth. There was a skylight above the staircase. It filled the upper floor with brightness and shining dust motes. Jeremy wondered if the Lightbearers had ever sealed it up. Or was it only sections of the house that they'd kept dark?

"You said you had something for me."

"La, la, la. It is a surprise."

She showed him her office and her exercise room. It was lined with mirrors and filled with low-tech wooden equipment. Nothing like the machines at the racquet club, they looked like Scandinavian toys for gifted children. When he asked about them, she lay down on one to demonstrate. But then she sat up suddenly, blushing, radiant. "I should wear a different dress," she said.

Because of the mirrors. "It's beautiful," he said.

Embarrassed, she pointed toward the open window. "I like the roofs best of all. Come with me. Can you, with your leg?"

"It doesn't hurt."

"You will have to take your shoes off."

And so they climbed onto the asphalt and tar. It was like an entire country up there, with mountains and flat places, and the skylight a reflecting pool. "I spend more time here than in the house," she said—hard to believe. But on the steepest shingles there were marks of little trails, like goat paths in the Alps.

Following her, he passed a cereal bowl and an empty juice glass balanced on a ledge. He found her squatting on the ridgepole, three stories above the street. He climbed atop a dormer and stood up. He could see the whole neighborhood of mansions, gardens, and big trees. There was a tower in the park across the street. "People come here to make love," she said. "No, in the cars in that parking lot or by the curb. I don't know why. Look, you can see them—"

He saw nothing. He was watching her. "Sometimes I like to think about them, shut up in their little cars," she said.

And the taxi ride? "What about Scott?" he asked.

She laughed, hid her mouth. “I hope he has a mistress. Poor man! But you will see—tonight he is going to St. Louis for his business.”

Before Scott she had married an American in Brussels where she was from, a Wall Street type. Once in the United States, he had treated her badly. That was the time Jeremy had known her best, when he was already living with Joanna. She had used to come to lessons close to tears. Squash had started as a way of keeping hold of her first husband, who had not deserved her.

Now she squatted above Jeremy, knees apart. “What about Joanna?” she asked.

He shrugged. The subject was unavoidable. And then suddenly Joanna came back to him, an image of her face, her coarse hair and freckled skin. Her beautiful thick eyebrows, the hair on her arms and upper lip. The surprised expression on her face, when he’d seen her the last time. He looked out toward the tower in the park.

Sabine said, “Once I was up here and it started to rain. But the window slid down and I was trapped outside. So I saw a little man walking there along that street and I had to call out. I told him to go into the house and I led him upstairs with the sound of my voice—la, la, la! Isn’t that ridiculous? He was just anyone!”

What did she mean by this little story, told in this bright tone? He made a calculation: She must not have heard about Joanna’s death. No reason she should have. They’d never met, after all.

He turned back to look at her—smiling, squatting above him on the roof. No reason to bring up something that might cast a pall—literally, he supposed. No—figuratively. No—literally. It was not something he wanted to discuss.

He said, “After the accident I couldn’t forgive her. I thought I could, but I couldn’t. I broke my pelvis. I guess I told you.”

“She was driving?”

“Yes, but it wasn’t her fault. It was on the Merritt Parkway. There was a big rainstorm. I looked up at her from the stretcher—she was soaking wet. We’d put off having children until my job was permanent—just as well. She was always careful that way.”

“I did not wish to make you sad. So, and Fioravanti?”

Jeremy smiled. “I’m surprised you remember. That was the problem, wasn’t it? No publications. Or else not enough—no book, at least.”

Once more Sabine tried to change the subject. “I used to love to watch you play.”

And in a little bit, “It’s not so wonderful sometimes, having children. Sometimes you feel like an imposter, I suppose. I look at Sophie and think I’m not her mother.”

“I wasn’t even competing anymore,” Jeremy said. Embarrassed, he put his hand over his bald spot. “We’ve all lost something,” he said—a fatuous remark. But she smiled, wrinkled up her nose.

“*Très distingué*. But we must not let you get a sunburn for your interview! And besides, I have not shown you what I found!”

“What did you find?” In fact he was eager to know. That was why he was here, after all, not to reminisce about old happy times.

“I found it downstairs. You will see!”

She’d mentioned it on the phone when he had called. Something about Ferson and Fioravanti—his obsession. Now she hid her mouth again; her hand was dark with asphalt. She was laughing at him, he thought. Stringing him along. She didn’t move to go until a couple of minutes later—“Oh, damn! There is Sophie, home from school. She won’t like her crazy mother up here. Quick, we must get down.”

Carrying a book bag, a girl was walking down the street under the big trees. Sabine crouched out of sight, and then she slid down the shingles toward the back of the house. There she ran along the narrow lip of the roof, thirty feet above the garden, until she came to a small dormer—not the window they had climbed up through. Jeremy followed her more carefully, and by the time he dropped down into her bathroom, Sabine was already filling up a small brass tub, dipping her feet in. “Please, sit here and wash your feet. I had this made expressly. Scott thinks it is some kind of bidet. You must use a loofah and some almond soap.”

He sat beside her on the tub’s wooden rail, scrubbing first one foot, then the other. Their thighs touched. Then she slipped away, scuffing her feet along a towel on the floor, leaving dark streaks. “Sophie! Sophie!” she

called. "*Il y a quelqu'un*. ... There is someone you must meet."

* * * *

Later, at the conference hotel, lying awake past midnight, Jeremy tried to recompose the afternoon into an erotic history. He needed to calm down and get some rest. His interview was early and he needed this job—a tenure-track position at Butler College. And so he tried to imagine sexual intercourse on the burning rooftop or in the bathroom. That would have been more comfortable, spread out on those fluffy towels.

But even in his own fantasy he was disturbed by small, fleeting memories of Joanna, her hair coarse and wild as she turned, her expression of surprise as he attempted to embrace her. No, he didn't want to think about that: Back to business. He spat on his palms, got to work. Nose to the grindstone. Hand to the plow. So—the bathroom, then. But there was Sophie outside the door. When he and Sabine had gone downstairs she'd looked at him without a hint of suspicion. And then Scott had shown up, glad to see him, full of old times. Sabine had prepared a meal earlier that day, and now she just had to heat it up in the enormous kitchen. Already she seemed distracted. And she resisted when he asked her to show him the basement—that was the reason he had come, of course. Not to see how rich she was. He persisted. She refused. What was there to see? A bunch of carpeted rooms without any light fixtures. Locks on all the doors.

Scott laughed. "She's got her little temple down there. No men allowed."

Sabine dried her hands on a towel. "There is not so much from the Lightbearers' time. Some books and so."

"But you mentioned something."

"Yes, of course. Just one thing. What do you think? Here—I will walk you out."

He had to get back for the Renaissance Studies dinner. She led him out into the entranceway again. Then she picked up from the mantelpiece what looked like a spice bottle with a screw-on cap. "You see I remember what you told me all those years ago."

He took the bottle. There was some black liquid at the bottom of it, a thick black sludge. Confused, he held it up. She seemed proud of herself.

But he felt stupid. "I'd like to see the books," he said, finally. "Anything. You're sure you couldn't show me the downstairs?"

That, suddenly, was the wrong thing to say. "You're not even paying attention! 'Fragrant Goddess'—you see I remember. I kept it for you. I knew you would call one day. But you are never satisfied. Always you want more."

Now, in his hotel bed, Jeremy saw what she meant. He was unsatisfied. He wanted more.

He wanted to walk down the dark stairs into her temple, her inner sanctum, as Scott had described it. Fragrant Goddess—was she kidding him? But there was some crude Cyrillic script on the label. Something scrawled in pencil. Was this a joke she had whipped up in her kitchen, with its copper pots and pans?

If so, where had she found the recipe? What was she hiding? Some books and so—what books?

Down in the Lightbearers' labyrinth, Sabine was waiting for him in the dark. She was lying on her back before the private altar in her temple. But as Jeremy fumbled through the little rooms of his small fantasy, inevitably he found himself grabbing hold of other ghosts, old men long dead. And this was another kind of delusion: Perhaps in Ferson's library there were some undiscovered papers, some new information about Leonardo Fioravanti, the Bolognese alchemist and surgeon who had tormented Jeremy all these years.

In Naples he had discovered the cause of syphilis, the French Pox. Though spread through lechery, the root of it was cannibalism, as he determined by feeding pig meat to a pig, dog meat to a dog, hawk meat to a hawk, and watching them die of the disease. Fioravanti had the cure, though, for it and many other illnesses. Taken both internally and as a salve, his nostrums reduced fevers, knitted broken bones, cured heartsickness, took away all pain, even in hopeless cases, Jeremy thought. "Theriac" was one, made from snake's blood. "Scorpion's Oil" was another. "Fragrant Goddess" was a third, the strongest of all. It was a remedy Fioravanti had learned from a slave, a woman from the Spanish Netherlands whom he had liberated after the siege of "Africa," a town on the Tunisian coast.

To Jeremy he was a Protean, elusive figure. Because of the lies he told in print and even in his private correspondence, he seemed to represent a new phase in the history of masculine self-invention. This was

what Jeremy's book was about. And because he wanted to dramatize the social difference between doctors and empirics in the late Renaissance, Jeremy had tried (or at least lately he was trying) to alternate chapters of conventional historiography with passages of historical fiction. Theory and argument gave way to invented narrative in different sections of the book—an invented secret history of Fioravanti's life, a substitute for the actual *Secret History* the alchemist had claimed to write, which was of course lost. In these fictional passages, however, Jeremy was beginning to see caricatures of his old professors and other long-standing experts in his field. And in the main figure of the drama, a caricature of himself.

Men staggered into middle age so damaged and so hurt, so guilty, Jeremy thought, every one of them was looking for a magic balm to heal them without any need for introspection or forgiveness. In its multiple drafts, his manuscript now told the story of Jeremy's disaffection, his distrust of academic knowledge, and his embrace, Fioravanti-style, of experience, lies, and sensory information. Now the book was seven hundred pages, and even in his overheated dreams, it was impossible for Jeremy to imagine an academic press would ever touch it.

Impossible, also, to concentrate on the task at hand. Instead of Sabine in her temple, which just a few minutes before he had been decorating with embroidered pillows and silk brocades, bronze statuettes of Hindu deities and clouds of incense smoke, as well as (God help him!) mirrors and exercise equipment while she lay flat on her back on the narrow bench, skirt rucked up, knees out to the side—now it was Arkady Ferson he imagined, an old man sitting stiffly on his stool in the same room.

Arkady Ferson had lived in that house. He had haunted that basement. That had been his refuge, his own inner sanctum, away from the light. Jeremy had seen a photograph (a timed exposure?) of an old man on a stool, a white-haired old man in a dark room. Now suddenly it was obvious that in his pose and gestures he was mimicking the famous engraving of Leonardo Fioravanti from the frontispiece of the *Autobiography*—maybe there was room for Ferson in his book! Why not? Surely no discussion of empiricism was complete without trying to reproduce, as Ferson had claimed, the alchemist's results. No discussion, also, of charlatanism or fraud.

All of us had broken bones to heal, fevers to bring down—Arkady Ferson, originally from St. Petersburg, had understood that much at least. He had come to Seattle in the 1950s. With his followers he had moved into the big white house and published a series of occult treatises, including two at least on Fioravanti: If illness were a symptom of divine rage, then secret

knowledge was God's grace. The adept would begin to glow like a metal vessel in the process of distilling—a metaphor that Ferson took quite literally, hence the sealed windows and the chambers without light.

So: a nut-job, obviously. A dead end. But Fioravanti, too, had been despised and hated by his peers, had died in poverty.

Jeremy didn't want to think about that. He really needed the Butler job. And so to distract himself he returned to his sexual fantasy, determined to organize it in a more efficient way: He would go to the house the next morning, after his triumphant interview. Sabine would have left the door unlocked. Scott was in St. Louis.

But Jeremy wouldn't climb the stairs or go to search for her up on the roof. He would find the basement, and he would bring a flashlight, and in a warren of little rooms he would find a hidden chamber, a closet, really, and on dusty shelves there would be a complete set of the 1609 edition of Fioravanti's works. Maybe there would even be a diary—Alexander would help him with the Russian translations....

No, no, no. In his hotel bedroom, Jeremy dried his hands on the bed sheets and turned over onto his side. "It is incredible how virtuous I am," he told himself.

Drained of his last erotic impulse, he gave himself up. In the bottom of Sabine's house, in a crystal—no, a carved, hinged, wooden case, he would find the only copy of the master's *Secret History*, hand written, never published, though referred to often in the *Autobiography*—the repository of all his alchemical wisdom.

And he would hear Sabine behind him. "What are you doing here?" And he would turn off the flashlight, leaving them in darkness. He would turn toward her, and both of them would glow with secret knowledge or nostalgia or desire. "You're beautiful," he'd say.

So many regrets. Memories like ghosts. Ah, God, he thought, suddenly sleepy—was it possible that a ghost could move through time, haunting and changing and poisoning the past?

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On the tenth of September the sea wall was broken in three places after a bombardment lasting thirteen days. Don Juan de Vega, the

Spanish viceroy of Sicily, entered the town at four o'clock. There was a slaughter, of course, of the men who'd taken refuge in the mosque.

But by the western wall, near the gardens of Aphrodisium that had given the city its name, all was quiet at the end of the afternoon. Giordano Orsini had allotted the poor neighborhoods to his men. Fires burned there overnight. The Spanish captains had reserved for themselves the mansions of the African governors and the Turkish corsairs.

The richest house in that western district belonged to Brambarac, the African commander. Don Garcia de Toledo chose this house to sleep in. But in the evening when he arrived, he was disturbed to find the roof had collapsed during the bombardment. The upper walls were broken in. Don Garcia stood between the great stone lions at the gate. He sent his men to find another house close by.

Late as usual, and unaware of this change of plans, Leonardo Fioravanti arrived after dark. He had been working in the barracks outside the city, where there was an infirmary. For three weeks since the beginning of the siege, he had spent every hour of daylight in that place, setting broken bones, irrigating gunshot wounds with quinta essenza and balsamo artificiato. Despite all efforts, many soldiers and sailors had died under his hands.

Stinking, weary, and discouraged, he came at last to the lion gate. He had walked in darkness through the deserted roads, and everything was dark. Later he would write of this campaign to say that it was worth a dozen courses in the university. He would boast of his miraculous cures. But at that moment he perceived no benefit. He stood with his hand on the stone haunch of the female lion, surveying the broken building, its black, gaping windows along the front. There were no stars or moon. Torchlight came obliquely from other houses, and the sound of muffled cries.

But in the dark building nevertheless there was a glimmer of candlelight. Maybe Don Garcia was there after all, he thought, in some undamaged section of the palace. So the surgeon persevered up the long flagged path, climbed the long stone steps. And he had been wrong to think that even the front part of the house was nothing but collapsed rubble behind a more-or-less intact façade. For when he looked through the empty door, the yawning wooden casements, he saw the first-floor

ceilings were still whole, and there was even a staircase leading nowhere. This he glimpsed in the candlelight, a single tiny flame that hesitated by the stair. Then it disappeared, but not before he had seen the imprint of a small naked foot in the dust—surely a woman’s footprint!

“Captain!” he shouted, and then drew his sword. Who was this in the ruined house of Brambarac? News of this prince had even spread to Naples, the splendor of his gardens, the richness of his tables, and the beauty of his many wives and concubines. Maybe one of these still haunted the wrecked mansion.

Though the surgeon still hovered in the doorway, his mind moved boldly through the darkness, following the flame—she might be a Christian woman from Antwerp or Ghent or Brussels, stolen from her family by El Draghut the Corsair, then sold as a slave in the disgusting bagnios of Algiers. Now she was homeless and without refuge in this city of infidels. How grateful she would be to any rescuer or protector, a girl scarcely grown (if you could judge by the size of her footprint), yet skilled in all the lecherous arts.

Shouts came from up the street. The surgeon stepped over the threshold. Sword outstretched, he shuffled into the darkness, following the place in his mind where he had seen the candle flame. Among the piles of rubble he poked his way toward the back staircase. And as he moved, he imagined he saw some light back there, an orange glow reflected from a secret source—perhaps a fire burning in an inner court. Instead, behind the broken staircase he found a wooden stair descending to the cellars.

And at the turning of the stair he saw her—just a glimpse before she disappeared. And he was mistaken to have thought she was carrying a candle. But there was a light that glowed around her and around her hands especially, a dim, orange light.

He put up his sword, slid it back into its sheath. Part of him was too weary for this adventure. In the battle on the beach, he had taken a thrust from an African knight—that was weeks ago, and yet the wound hadn’t healed. Walking downstairs was painful, and he managed it a single step at a time, descending into darkness—where was she? She had vanished ahead.

But he could hear her voice ahead of him, a little sing-song murmur

gathering him on. At the second turning he went forward like a blind man, both hands outstretched. There was a stone corridor, and a stone chamber at the end of it, and what looked like a fire burning there; he couldn't tell. The witch was waiting with her back turned. She was wrapped in strips of cloth, and there was cloth over her face and hair. The light glowed around her. Limping, he reached for the cloth around her shoulders, stripped it away. Already he understood something was wrong; when she turned toward him he let out a cry. For this was no Christian beauty from the harem of Brambarac, melting with shy gratitude for her deliverance. But she was old, older than he, thirty-one or two at least, with coarse wild hair and a spot on her dark cheek. Her eyebrows were thick and tufted, and there was hair on her upper lip. She stunk of some musky perfume, an oil smeared on her body to hide her rottenness; he wasn't fooled. Limping forward, he grasped hold of her thick neck, crushing her throat before she could make a sound or summon her familiar. He pulled her down onto the floor, pressed the weight of his body into her as she flailed and thrashed—ah, God, would it ever end?

* * * *

Jeremy started awake. Horrified, he sat up in bed.

Heart pounding, he put his hands to his face.

Once he had listened to a lecture on the science of dreams. In it, the professor had claimed that the central figure in a dream, or else the dominating sequence of events, could have no meaning. No, it was the furniture, the incidental details that were able to teach us something about ourselves. Now, awake, Jeremy saw the truth of this. In his dream-state he had grasped something his waking self had missed.

Fearfully, hesitantly, he closed his eyes again. He allowed himself to imagine the stone cellar in Brambarac's ruined palace—this time as a set devoid of actors. There was a series of stone apertures halfway up the wall. And there were bottles, old apothecary bottles with glass stoppers and hand-printed labels—oh, it was obvious. It wasn't Sabine who had mixed up some poisonous sludge as a joke to mock at him and his obsessions. Why hadn't he believed her? She had given him a bottle of Arkady Ferson's Fragrant Goddess, prepared by him and described in his 1969 treatise, the veracity of which Jeremy had always rejected out of hand.

But Ferson must have hidden some of it before he died. Naked,

Jeremy jumped out of bed and searched the wastebasket where he had dropped the bottle the previous night. He twisted open the crusted lid, smelled some of the foul liquid. Was it possible the old man had dosed himself with this? Even at the time there had been speculation he'd been poisoned, murdered by some other cult member in a squabble over the foundation's vanished funds. No one had been prosecuted for the crime.

Jeremy resealed the bottle, studied the label. *Dushistaia Boginia*, it said in Cyrillic letters. Fragrant Goddess. Leonardo Fioravanti had told the story many times, how in Palermo in the 1580s he had cured the wife of the Governor of Sicily. In the middle of the street she had vomited up a hairy, mottled mass as big as a baby. Afterwards she'd been in perfect health.

That was after a single dose. If you read between the lines, it was obvious the elixir contained both arsenic and mercury—effective poisons, as Fioravanti himself had pointed out. The precise recipe, along with its various palliatives, he claimed to have recorded in the *Secret History*. He did not publish them in the *Autobiography*, or any of his other books. Dying in poverty in Rome, why should he bequeath to an ungrateful world the secret of these miraculous cures, discovered and refined with so much difficulty?

Why indeed? But there was no time for Jeremy to think about these things. He was already late. He showered, put on his suit, went downstairs for his interview at nine o'clock.

The search committee had a room at the conference. He knocked on the door of a sixth-floor suite in the same hotel. Besides some armchairs and the woman he was supposed to meet, there was a bed with a shiny quilt and a mountain of pillows.

Often he was good at interviews, but not this morning. He found himself distracted by a notion that was almost entirely a fantasy—was it possible that Arkady Ferson had discovered or acquired the *Secret History*, used its formulae to make a batch of Fragrant Goddess and the other cures? No, it was not possible—the manuscript had never been found. There was no reason, independent of Fioravanti's claims, to assume it had ever existed. And surely, if it had come into his possession, in Brussels or St. Petersburg, perhaps, Ferson would have boasted of it, written about it in his idiotic treatises, sold it when he was short of cash.

Still, at the same time was it credible that Ferson would have drunk the contents of the screw-top bottle if he hadn't at least thought his recipe

was genuine? But what an idiot! These ancient manuscripts, discovered at long last, always turned out to be forgeries. What had Sabine said? “Some books and so.”

Okay, so maybe Ferson had discovered something, purchased something that turned out to be a fake. Then maybe he had poisoned himself out of stupidity or else despair. Or else he had died of natural causes—that was obviously a possibility, and the screw-top bottle had been prepared as something to impress the Lightbearers, one of a long sequence of frauds: Ferson and Fioravanti were one of a kind! And if Ferson hadn't said anything about the manuscript, it was for the same reason Fioravanti had destroyed it or never written it—the desire for alchemical or secret knowledge, the conviction that secrecy was a prerequisite for holiness or truth. These men weren't professionals like Jeremy, who even now was plotting out an article on this entire subject, a publishable article that would enable him to ace his interview with Butler College, which at this exact same moment he was in the process of blowing with his disjointed and distracted answers to the most basic questions—the woman was looking at him as if he'd lost his mind. They sat in circular armchairs and she stared at him. Had she heard anything about him, any rumor of misconduct? She was attractive, too, in a sharp sort of way, her blond hair pulled back. Sensible skirt. He'd like to have her on this bed with all the pillows. Had anyone slept in it the previous night?

His interview lasted forty-five minutes. When it was over and the door had closed behind him, he scarcely remembered what he'd said. Maybe he had made self-deprecating jokes. Maybe he'd discussed his thesis, summarizing it poorly, because his mind was elsewhere and (it now occurred to him) whole sections had to be rewritten. He stood in the hallway looking at an immense potted plant, thinking that if a man were lucky, his secret history would die with him, the submerged causes and poisonous events. His autobiography would not include them, or anything else that made him special or unique. All that could be pieced together, as if by policemen or detectives searching for clues. That was true for Fioravanti, and Arkady Ferson, and Jeremy as well.

He limped along the blue carpet toward the elevator. Someone passed him, a woman hurrying toward the interview he'd just left. Doubtless she'd do better; she was younger, certainly. Just out of graduate school.

He took the elevator to the ground floor and limped out into the street. Another glorious June day. Where had everything gone wrong? People passed him and they couldn't tell. How could they know? A man in a suit: How could they tell that everything was finished, gone, done? How could

they know that it was only just a matter of time before it all fell apart, and he was punished as he deserved? Things had started out so well.

But Fioravanti, too, had had this experience—in Naples, Venice, and Madrid, his career had followed the same trajectory. He had acquired aristocratic patrons, stunned the city with his cures. But then the doctors and professors had conspired to drive him out, ruin him—it was always the same. In Jeremy's case, it was Joanna who had broken him—quite literally on the Merritt Parkway. He'd never been the same after that. He'd taken a medical leave of absence. That was when his thesis had gone wrong, his teaching, too.

She had broken him and then abandoned him. Now she was dead. The police, when they'd come to talk to him, had been like children or like stupid undergraduates, never asking the right questions.

In the pocket of his coat, his fingers closed around Arkady Ferson's bottle. He pulled it out, examined the penciled script. Then he turned uphill toward the art museum and Sabine's house. As he climbed, he labored to put these thoughts behind him, all these ways of blaming others for his own mistakes. They were part of the secret history, which had never been recorded, or else had been destroyed, and which in any case was even less reliable than what you saw on the outside, where fraud could be challenged and ascertained.

He came into the neighborhood of prosperous houses, bigger and bigger as he climbed uphill. At the top he came to Sabine's house with its bronze guardians. He'd stopped only once, on Broadway, to buy a flashlight in a Walgreens near the Jimi Hendrix statue. Now he stood between the foot dogs with Ferson's bottle in one hand and the flashlight in the other; he limped up the steps. And the door was unlocked, and the house was in shadow, and he moved through the atrium to the stairwell at the back of the house, under the Tiffany window.

"Qui est là? Sophie, est-ce que c'est toi?" But he found the doors and climbed down into the Lightbearers' domain, where Arkady Ferson had lived out his fraudulent life, met his fraudulent end.

He switched on his flashlight, made the turning of the stair. Then he was in among the small dark rooms, some with mattresses still on the floor. This is where the Lightbearers had lived, indulged their superstitions and their mad old master. This was where Sabine had followed in their footsteps; she had always been interested in astrology and things like that. Low ceilings, cheap particleboard smelling of mildew, but even so he could

make out a scent of lavender and incense—it led him on. Sabine, of course, was behind him at the top of the stairs. “Who are you down there? I will call the police!”—who indeed? It wasn’t the first time someone had made that threat.

Small dusty objects skewered by the flashlight’s trembling beam. Where was he? What did he expect to find? Sabine was behind him. He could hear her footsteps.

And then he came to the end, a square room with a single entrance. Stone walls ahead, the foundation wall. An industrial carpet. A four-poster bed with a canopy. A bookcase. Some books and so.

Sabine was behind him. She was at the door. Brave girl—“What are you doing here? Why are you here?”

Holding up the light, he turned to look at her. He couldn’t tell if she could see his face. Maybe she thought she’d recognized him, but now she wasn’t sure. But it was possible she could see some of his secret essence, because he’d scared her. He was not what he pretended and she knew it; she looked terrified. He painted her face, stroked her body with the light. She was dressed in a white shirt and blue jeans, cowboy boots. A gold necklace. Gold earrings. Yellow hair pulled back. She squinted, held up her hand.

“You’re beautiful,” he said. Nothing else—he didn’t have to say anything else. But he came toward her, smiling, the bottle in one hand, the flashlight in the other. Her old friend; she had kissed him once. Did she remember?

The flashlight gave him an advantage and he turned it off, leaving them in darkness. Then he dropped it and the bottle too, stepped toward her with his hands held out. He saw nothing as he reached out toward her. But then he could hear her fumbling for the door. He jumped forward and she closed the door on him and closed the bolt.

The darkness made him dizzy. He fell to the floor onto his hands and knees, groping for the light. He dug his fingers into the heavy carpet. Had the Lightbearers locked Arkady Ferson in here, shut him up like an animal until he died? The flashlight had rolled away someplace, was nowhere to be found. But his hand fell on the screw-top bottle. He sat up cross-legged with the bottle in his lap.

Maybe Sabine was already calling the police. Maybe he didn’t have

much time. But he had always been a quick study. In the darkness he was already developing the skills of a blind man, whose other senses grow to compensate; his ears were ringing. His fingertips, stroking the glass bottle, picking at the lid, were perfectly sensitive to texture and to temperature. And he could smell Sabine's lavender perfume, which masked a darker, musky odor.

As he waited, it occurred to him he did see something after all, a little gathering of light in the far corner of the wall.