

Story for performance #947
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He said it standing on the steps outside the hotel; his voice sliding easily into a somber bass tone that gave the words a certain...weight. Out on the street a persistent rain fell through the pale cast of mercury vapour lamplight. Evening traffic sizzled along the bitumen casting shimmering ribbons of yellow, red and orange across the glossy, black surface. Umbrella domes scurried along the footpath like two-legged insects.

The words fell from his glistening lips into the cold of the Berlin night. Words of bluish steam. Ghosts vanishing the moment they were sighted. He stood at midnight in the circle. Halogen glare, whirring cameras. The soft pods of microphones hanging from aluminum poles like strange fruit. Digital recorders held aloft like trophies in leather-gloved hands.

Her chocolate eyes tracked left in a sideways glance. The huddle of overcoats glowed and flashed and murmured, brighter than the marble foyer visible through the brass and beveled glass doors behind it. She spoke to the concierge in a whisper. Her shoes could have appeared in the pages of a 1930's *Vogue*. Her stockings too. She wore a black cashmere coat and velvet gloves. Her toes, tipped with mother-of-pearl, were hidden treasures buried in the black patent leather. A red cashmere beret and scarf framed her exquisite face, her black hair gathered and tucked. Her eyes lined heavy with kohl, the lids dusted with silver. Her ears studded with black pearls. Her lips a red deeper than blood. 'His shoes are new', she thought.

A black Mercedes limousine with a German flag on the bonnet purred in the drive-way of the hotel, a red carpet tumbled down the white marble steps and halted at its rear doors. A chauffeur stood at ease beside a brass bollard. 'His hair is grey', she thought. Two men in black suits scanned the area with synchronised blue eyes. A police officer in jodhpurs straddled a BMW motorcycle in front of the car, its exhaust emitting a toxic haze.

The huddle absorbed his words like a giant black and chrome sponge. She could hear the bass voice as if it were the breath of a lover in her ear. Her toes stretched inside her shoes and she shifted her weight. Someone lit a cigar nearby. The smell made her reach into her clutch bag and take out a crystal perfume atomiser. She anointed her wrists, exposing the white skin and pale blue veins to the night. The chauffeur shot her a sideways look and she glanced at the pavement.

A phone played Chopin. She reached into her pocket and unfolded the slender Prada as if she were about to check her make-up. She spoke as faintly as the rain and a smile creased her cheeks.

A man with a wolf hound alighted from a Bentley that had pulled into the drive. The concierge moved to greet him. They spoke with the familiarity of distant relatives. The man looked towards the huddle on the

steps and the concierge turned his head in the same direction. He said a few words by way of explanation as the man surveyed the limousine and the motorcycle. The dog sat quietly as they spoke.

A woman with blonde hair wearing a blue coat and glasses strolled past the limousine smoking a small cigar. She stopped to talk to the police officer on the motorcycle. The huddle rustled and groped. The sound echoed off the marble portico like the indistinct rumble of a passing train.

A thin, wiry man swept a solitary cigarette butt off the marble stairs. The blonde woman crushed the cigar beneath her sensible shoes. The woman in the red beret thought, 'He has a short black beard.' The hands of the cleaner were wrinkled and brown, his face dominated by a noble nose above which sat two charcoal eyes and a wide, intelligent brow. He moved to the blue coated woman who kicked the cigar butt in his direction as he approached. He dutifully gathered it into his dustpan and cast a sideways glance at the red beret. For a moment their eyes met as two moons circling the same planet.

The huddle broke open and the man with the bass voice emerged from the circle to stand at the top of the red carpet. Beside him was a young man with close cropped brown hair carrying an attaché. They spoke quietly, in earnest.

The woman in the red beret, the woman in the blue coat, the chauffeur, the cleaner, the concierge, the man with the dog, the men in black suits and the motorcycle cop looked at the man at the top of the red carpet. The dog licked its balls.

The chauffeur opened the rear door of the limousine. The motorcycle cop turned on a flashing blue light. The woman in the blue coat got into the limousine. The men in black suits moved to the bottom of the red carpet one facing in the opposite direction to the other. The cleaner held his broom like a spear carrier in a 1950s epic film. The dog began to bark and the concierge whispered something to the woman in the red beret as a taxi pulled in behind the limousine. The Bentley drove off and the man with the wolf hound walked around the red carpet and into the hotel lobby.

The concierge opened the door of the taxi for the woman in the red beret and she slid into the back seat, her exposed calf catching the flickering eye of the man at the top of the red carpet as he walked down the steps still talking to the man with the attaché. The cleaner reached into his uniform pocket. The men in black suits bristled. The scattered pieces of the huddle had vanished. The woman in the red beret wound down the window of the taxi. The bass voice said in German, 'We are really very close.'

A siren screamed.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Boris Kelly.