

VANESSA FARNSWORTH  
**NAPOLEON'S EYES**

ELLEN'S PIVOT IS QUICKER than thought. So is her garden cart, which is plummeting down the slope behind her house carrying a load of burbling rocks.

“Son of a bitch!”

Ellen hits the ground behind the low retaining wall. The cart vaults the wall and tears through the plate glass window not five feet behind her before crash-landing on the living-room sofa where it flips, delivering its cargo of rocks into one of the few death masks of Napoleon known to have survived the nineteenth century. Rocks and glass ricochet in all directions, but it's the thick chunk of white that comes to rest at Ellen's fingertips that disturbs her most. She picks it up, turning it over just once before identifying it as the Emperor's nose.

Ellen lifts her head. On the Uzbek rug by the fireplace, she spots a chin.

“For God's sake, Jim. What the fuck were you thinking?”

Ellen is on her knees, her eyes locked on her husband as he trips down the slope faster than his feet can carry him.

“There's an explanation for this. A really good one.”

Jim appears stymied by the destruction that he himself set in motion and this doesn't sit well with his wife.

“You're the stupidest person I've ever known.”

“That's a bit harsh.”

“Ever.”

Jim skids over the edge of the retaining wall and lands heel first on the gravel within stabbing distance of Ellen who is lamenting not having a weapon.

“Do you know what priceless is, Jim?”

“Yeah, but that's the least of my worries right now.”

Jim is surveying the debris when Ellen turns the nose towards him and frames it neatly between her fingers.

“Do you think this'll be easy to replace?”

“Thankfully, no. But it’s insured, isn’t it?”

“Only for money.”

Jim squints and approaches the gaping jaw of the crystal-toothed dragon that’d once been their living-room window. He taps a tooth and watches as it detaches and shatters on the toe of his boot. He shakes it off. Then he shakes his wife off.

“Don’t turn bitch on me now. You never liked that mask anymore than I did, so don’t bother pretending it was your favourite just so you can lay into me.”

“This isn’t about *like*.”

“No, but it should be about the whack-load of insurance money you’ll be getting for a few sad bits of smashed plaster that’d be worth zippity-do-da had they been stretched across anybody else’s face. Cheer the fuck up. You can use the cash to buy a far less gruesome masterpiece, something by Warhol or Crumb or that guy who cut his ear off. What was his name?”

“Your knowledge of art is stunning.”

Jim grips the window frame with his thumb and forefinger and gives it a good rattle. The remaining teeth jitter free, smashing against the bottom frame before scattering. He toes a few of the shards, looking for all the world as though his biggest concern is a shattered window that can easily be replaced.

“Let’s pretend for a second that you didn’t just destroy something irreplaceable. That mask was the only thing my grandmother left me and it had value just for being that.”

“With you so far.”

“I mean, fuck, Jim. What moron drags a cart to the top of a hill, loads it full of rocks then lets loose? You’re going to have to help me out on this one because I’m drawing blanks.”

Jim eases his hand through the window frame as though expecting some invisible force to block its passage. When that doesn’t happen, his foot follows his hand into the living-room, dragging the rest of his body with it. His eyes sweep the room like a searchlight scoping out fugitives. Then they sweep the window frame. His arms open wide as he traces its silhouette.

“You know, this’d be a fantastic place for a sliding door. I’m amazed I didn’t think of that before.”

Stepping once again through the frame then back-stepping into the living-room, Jim marvels at the perfection of his idea. He uses his forearm as a measuring stick and estimates the dimensions of the opening. Then,

rapping on the brief wall below the window, he puzzles over how best to remove it. Jim nods then turns to Ellen, who isn't about to hear his genius out.

"Focus, Jim. We were talking about the cart and the rocks and the reason the sliding door is now on your radar. You had a really good explanation for all this, remember? Now would be a good time to spill it."

"Nope, not walking into that one. Besides, you already know the answer, or would if you'd pull yourself out of this reactive state and fire up a brain cell."

Ellen raises an eyebrow. With Napoleon's nose as her witness, she has no idea what Jim is talking about. Her husband is confused or mistaken or just plain bluffing. Whichever it is, guessing would be futile.

"Clue me in."

"You wanted a rock garden at the base of the retaining wall, remember? Do you see any rocks down here?"

Ellen flicks her eyes towards the impressive collection strewn about her living-room. She intends to flick her eyes back almost immediately, but a pudgy rectangle of paper catches her attention. It's a notepad of the sort her husband uses to record all of his brilliant ideas and it's lying in the midst of the carnage without a scratch on it. The irony makes her want to smash a few treasures herself.

"Eyes up. Those rocks you need for your garden are currently at the top of the hill and the only way to get them down is to load them into the cart and roll them down. Only things got a little out of hand."

"A little?"

"A lot. But at least the first load's done. Two, three more and we'll have the basic structure in place. Then you can plant."

Jim gives a brisk nod to signal he's made a conversation-winning point. He turns back to the shattered window.

"But a new sliding door, that's way better than a rock garden or a cast of some dead guy's face. Surely we can agree on that."

"Based on what? Look at me and tell me you see enthusiasm."

Maybe he looks, maybe he doesn't. Ellen's thoughts are focused elsewhere. Glass and gravel crunch under her shoes as she stumbles through the dragon's gaping jaw and plucks the Emperor's chin off the grit-strewn rug. She cups it in the palm of her hand along with his nose. The last thing she wants to think about is sliding doors, but seeing as how Jim is now winging his arm back and forth in a parody of door opening, it's unavoidable.

“Stop waving your arms around like that. You’ll guide a plane into the buffet if you’re not careful. And I haven’t said yes to the door, so don’t go acting like I have.”

Ellen cycles Napoleon’s amputated features through her fingers. A nose and a chin are useless without something to tie them together. She needs to find a jaw, the lips, a forehead. Who is she kidding? What she really needs are his eyes. Without those, she’ll never be able to convince the insurance company that these tattered bits of face once belonged to the great Emperor.

Her eyes spin through the wreckage, clicking to a stop on Jim’s notepad. A diagram has been sketched across the top page in blue pencil. She twizzles her head until the angle of her eyes transforms the tangle of lines into a recognizable image. And that image is a sliding door.

“Jim, did you bomb the living-room on purpose? I won’t be mad, I just need to know in case I have to lie.”

Ellen wishes she could reel in her mind. This is the first time she’s ever thought of her husband as diabolical. Normally, she questions his ability to operate a screwdriver while the television is on. Plotting insurance fraud seems a bit beyond him, but then maybe she’s been underestimating him for the past fourteen years.

“Jim?”

“Why would I do a boneheaded thing like that?”

Jim stops winging his arm and looks at his wife, perplexed.

“For the insurance money, what else? God knows it’d pay for a lot of sliding doors. We could replace all the windows in the house with them. Hell, we could even redo the skylight with a remote-controlled slider for those clear nights when the stars are out in force.”

Jim’s face brightens, then dims when he realises Ellen isn’t being serious. She crosses the room and unloads the disembodied nose and chin into a fruit bowl that is teetering unscathed on the edge of the displaced coffee table. Jim’s face brightens again, this time with a celestial glow that can only be the product of delusion.

“I knew you’d come around. The door is genius, no? A couple of months from now, you’ll be telling everyone it was your idea. By then maybe I’ll have forgotten everything you just said about the insurance money. I’m not that calculating and you know it.”

Ellen drops to her knees and bends forward until her forehead touches the floor. She peers under the twisted wreckage of her couch, acutely aware that splintered glass is puncturing her shins.

“Maybe once I did, but I’m not sure what I know now except that any renovations will have to wait until you’ve cleaned all this shit up. And I do mean all of it. The couch needs fixing and that gaping hole needs to be covered with plastic so no porcupines can take up residence in my pyjamas. Not Napoleon though, he’s mine.”

Or part of him is anyway. Where are those damned eyes?

Wait a minute.

Chest to floor, Ellen extends her arm as far as it will go and flutters her fingers, snagging a chunk of plaster huddling beneath the far corner of the couch. She turns it over three, four times. Then she blinks. As she turns the fragment sideways, she notes that Jim’s head has joined in the rotation as though connected to the plaster by rods of unseen energy.

If only that was helpful.

“What is it?”

“A brow, I think. Maybe a cheekbone.”

Jim nods, but his belated interest in her fractured treasure isn’t about to appease Ellen. She drops the maybe-brow, maybe-cheekbone into the fruit bowl and continues her search. Window shrapnel is continuing to embed itself in her shins and soon she leaves off crawling to swab her wounds with her dusty shirt sleeve.

“Damn it, Jim. This is really fucking annoying. And it’s hardly the first time something like this has happened. Seriously, has it ever occurred to you that your brain isn’t screwed in straight?”

“With pride.”

“Well, that isn’t something to be proud of, so please stop grinning. I mean, it’s not like you’re a genius or anything. You can’t even put the toilet paper roll on the holder right. You’re an intellectual epileptic—all haywires and voids.”

Relieved of his grin, Jim staggers backwards until his ass is planted on the retaining wall, more for balance than for comfort. His voice takes on the low growl of a caged baboon.

“You’ve been in a pissy mood all day and taking it out on me is only going to make it worse. Live in the now, for Christ’s sake. You should be clear-focused on finding the rest of that smashed face, not beating me up over a minor slip-up that anyone could’ve made, you included.”

“I can do both. And we’re talking about way more than one slip-up here. A litany is more like it.”

“Litany my ass. Be specific.”

Ellen’s gasp comes out as a hiccup as she abruptly changes positions. In the corner of the room, underneath the overturned cart, she spots a stately chunk of white. She delivers the specifics to her husband as she clammers over the gardenless rocks, zeroing in on what could be the definitive feature.

“I seem to recall a certain incident last summer in which you strapped a chainsaw to a wheelchair and propelled it along the length of the hedge. You’re lucky that surgeon was able to reattach your toes.”

Jim is so excited, he springs from the wall.

“I was main-lining genius that day. If I hadn’t collided with that squirrel mid-hedge, I would’ve been well on my way to patenting a whole new hedge clipping system.”

While Jim celebrates his near triumph, Ellen stubs her toe on the granite equivalent of a softball. She snaps up the offending rock and chucks it into the fireplace where it strikes the back wall and springs out, landing within a foot of where it’d been. She scoops it up again and this time hurls it at the couch, which catches it between two cushions and refuses to let it go.

Jim chuckles.

Ellen pounces.

“In what universe? It was a dumb idea, almost as dumb as the time you decided to water-ski on the Fraser River by tying a rope to a tree and wading into the rapids with your skis on. Some guy almost drowned dragging you out, and for what? A week later you were back at it.”

Ellen crowbars her fingers under the edge of the garden cart and pulls up hard. It rises a miserly three inches, but that is all she needs to hook her toes under it and flip it onto its side.

“That would’ve been a real dream ride if I’d been able to pull clear of that whirlpool. What suction! I wouldn’t have believed swirling water could be so powerful if it hadn’t sucked me down again and again. I mean, I know that’s the case in cartoons, but then that coyote endlessly falls off cliffs in those and there he is up and scheming a second later. Totally unrealistic.”

Ellen tries to tune out Jim’s coyote logic as she scoops up the plaster fragment. This one requires no blinking or angle adjustments to aid in its identification. Without a doubt it’s a cheek and part of an ear. Her disappointment comes out as a grunt.

“God, Jim. The whole damn town thought you were a suicide until they pulled you out of the rapids and were greeted by your misplaced gasps

of triumph. And all you could say for yourself was, 'Guess I should've bent my knees'."

"Or learned to breathe water. Never did find my skis."

"Or your common sense."

Ellen juggles the ear-cheek as she waits for the next move to announce itself. A narrow swath of carpet ten feet to her left is sporting a fine dusting of white powder. A vein in her neck gives a quick pulse as it registers that some part of the mask has been pulverised. Maybe it's something incidental like a hairline or a temple. Ellen kicks a cart wheel for good luck.

"Jesus, Ellen. Chill. If you could just watch all this go by without feeling the need to emotionally connect, you'd be doing your karma a world of good. Try pretending you're Buddha for five seconds and ask yourself, how would he deal with all this?"

Buddha bounces off Ellen's brain. She picks her way back to the coffee table and feeds the cheek/ear combo into the fruit bowl. She pauses to consider where she should try searching next and her eyes land on Jim. He's excavating gravel from above the retaining wall with his fingers.

Maybe he's hunting worms.

He'd better be hunting worms.

Ellen isn't in the mood to hear he's mining for some tool he misplaced a decade ago.

"Buddha me one more time and I'll throw a rock at your head. A big one."

Ellen hoofs a rock. Then she hoofs another. There's no deep meaning behind what she's doing. She is just stressed and the rocks are there for the hoofing.

"And that's another thing. You can forget about your sliding doors. There's no way insurance is going to pay out for this debacle. We've already made three claims this year and they warned us that if we tried to file another, we'd be black-balled."

"I don't think they put it quite like that."

"They didn't have to."

Maybe a new location is what Ellen needs.

She leaps onto the couch and rides it like a surfboard as it completes its collapse. Before she completely regains her balance, she springs onto a padded arm then launches herself towards the far wall where she lands with her foot half on a rock.

The ensuing curses draw Jim's concentration away from his mining operations. He squints his wife into focus as she clutches her damaged foot and hoots profanity. It isn't long before she's hooting other things.

"Think about how those claims would look to someone who isn't you, Jim. The grease fire you started trying to deep-fry an ice cube. The hole in the roof courtesy of your self-engineered observation deck collapsing during a meteor shower. Oh, and let's not forget the cracked foundation. I don't even know how you did that."

"Cold fusion."

"That's what you said, but I'm not buying it and neither did they."

"They sent a cheque, didn't they?"

"And a warning."

Jim shrugs while Ellen dives. She's spotted the brilliant white of shattered plaster pressed up against the far wall and she isn't willing to wait an extra five seconds to navigate the space with dignity.

Her fingers tingle as she reaches for Napoleon's death-shuttered eyes.

She could cry.

She does cry.

Then Jim springs to life.

"I've had an epiphany."

"Who hasn't?"

Ellen picks her way over to the fruit bowl where she sets the eyes down with agonising care. Only then is she willing to address Jim's epiphany.

"I'll give you cash if you say it's about the rock garden."

"I can't if it isn't. No, my epiphany is about the insurance."

"It doesn't have to be. Epiphanies can be transferred to other subjects if the need is strong enough. The need is strong enough."

"Hear me out, would you? Don't you find it a bit odd that they'd let you display such a valuable historical artefact without any special security, not even a glass case to protect it?"

"Not really."

This is true. Ellen doesn't find it odd or even interesting. But since it's the only treasure she owns, she isn't really up on the finer points of insurance coverage and sees no need to learn about them now.

"It seems a bit lax considering how much they're into it for."

"Your point?"

"It's obvious, isn't it?"



Ellen flops to the floor in front of the fruit bowl where she rubs her temples with plaster-frosted fingers, too tired to do anything else.

“Cut the drama, Jim. Just say what you’re going to say and be done with it. I’ve got a bitch of a phone call to make—one that’s not likely to go well.”

Jim is push-pulling his finger in and out of the gravel, letting loose mini-landslides with each stroke.

“Let’s bring the slope down.”

Ellen stops rubbing her forehead.

“Be serious.”

“It’s primed to go. All it’ll take is a crowbar to a couple of these support rocks and whoosh, you’ll have a house full of nature.”

“I already have a house full of nature. I don’t see the point of adding to it.”

“Just listen. Retaining walls let go all the time. The insurance company would have no choice but to pay out for something as mundane as a slope collapsing. That’s pure nature, nothing to do with anything creative either of us may have done.”

“They’ll cancel our policy.”

“Hell, they were going to do that anyway. At least this way, they’ll pay out before they cut us loose.”

“You couldn’t possibly know that.”

Ellen hears a clink, but not from Jim’s direction. She raises her head and at first is unable to locate the origin of the sound. Then she sees what it is: Napoleon’s eyes have split down the middle. Somehow surprise doesn’t seem worth the effort.

“Fuck it.”

Ellen gets to her feet and grabs the bowl of fractured plaster. She stomps towards the toothless dragon, refusing to look at Jim as she steps through its gaping jaws.

Ellen looks hard at the fruit bowl, the slope, the sky. Then she frisbees the bowl into the centre of the debris field, turning away before she can see where it lands. Napoleon’s face disperses amongst the rocks as Ellen heads for the driveway.

“I don’t care what you do next; just have it done by the time I get back. I don’t want to be a witness or an accomplice or even a conspirator, although technically I could be considered all three.”

“So, you’re alright with this?”

“No, but I’ve tried to be sane and I’ve tried to be rational and the more I think about the present situation, the less I can see a positive outcome. Do your worst and do it fast. I’ll be back in ten.”

Ellen rounds the corner of the house and gets into her car. She’ll soon be called upon to explain this debacle to someone with a clipboard and the temperament of an oil-dipped cat. And she’ll be ready thanks to caffeine and Doritos and an explanation cribbed from the pages of whatever supermarket tabloid she gets her hands on first.

Who knows? It might even fly.