

The Shadow of the Scorpion

Now, after the death of my second husband Aristotle Onassis, I am left alone on the Greek island of Skorpios which until recently was the private property of my late husband. And the future of the island seems to me to be about as certain as my own. I am reasonably well off so in mentioning an uncertain future I don't mean financial problems, but rather psychological ones.

My state of mind has been bothering me lately, which is not surprising for a widow whose children have grown up. I am after all reaching that difficult age for a woman when various fears and unwanted memories can suddenly become obsessive and even take on a kind of hallucinatory weirdness. I have almost resigned myself to the fact that I am suffering from hallucinations, but admitting this to myself is not easy. I often think of the Greek priests and the sweet smelling wafts of incense in the local churches (I took a deep breath of it at my husband's funeral service, which is still there, stuck in my nostrils) and yet, like a true American, I have decided to share my psychological problems not with the bearded priests, but with the smooth-shaven psychotherapists. As such, to say I am alone on the island isn't absolutely true – with me here are Doctor Mitchell and Doctor Abraham.

They are without doubt highly qualified professionals (which is reflected in the amounts I have to transfer into their accounts in return for the professional sympathy of these gentlemen) and, as Mitchell keeps telling me, my condition *is* gradually getting back to normal. He says this as he polishes the convex lenses of his glasses, behind which there hides a sensitive soul, while Dr. Abraham grimaces in silence with such arrogance that I have an involuntary desire to leave a bloody trail with my sleek claws on his bald skull. Nevertheless, it is precisely in following the advice of Dr. Abraham that I am now drafting this almost confessional note. The therapeutic role of these notes is, as they say, time-tested.

As for Mitchell, it is not so long ago that he drew attention to the fact that after my second husband's death I got into the habit of licking my hands when I am lost in thought (which happens quite often lately). I thanked him for his observation and explained to him that not only do I lick the back of my hands, but I also draw certain invisible images on them with the tip of my tongue. Mainly I try to draw the faces of a few people who have played defined roles in my life. In response Mitchell remarked that as the saliva leaves no trace behind on the skin, would it not be better to use paper or canvas and paint ('objectify'-

as he put it) the images that are haunting my imagination. The next day he came to me with a large number of paints, brushes and drawing paper and I must admit the sight of this paper sent a voluptuous shiver through me. So I started to draw, which I haven't done for a long time, in fact not since I illustrated a little book I wrote and published in my youth. It's strange, but now I can't for the life of me remember what the book was called or what it was about. Anyway, painting gives me more pleasure than writing and Mitchell is kinder than Abraham, although the latter is more senior and possibly more perceptive.

I am treating the note I'm writing as a draft of a play I conceived.

I am a business woman and I don't like to waste time, and therefore I have some plans regarding my drawings (still vague, but not totally devoid of pragmatism), namely I hope later to use them to create a collection of women's dresses. Bright shades of watercolour fill my imagination and I vividly imagine how these drawings, which on paper sometimes look too passionate, too impulsive and generally serve to expose my soul, when transferred onto gentle silk may well serve other purposes. Instead of baring the soul, they shall clothe the body, so that the awkwardness that always accompanies too sincere a confession, can turn into elegance. The good doctors encourage my ambitious, creative plans, even though I might not see them through but instead go and live in a convent in Russia. Dr Mitchell hates these jokes I make, but they bring a cold smile to the face of Dr Abraham.

But back to my play. The cast is as follows:

1. I, was born Jacqueline Bouvier, later Jacqueline Kennedy, America's former first lady, the wife and then widow of President John F. Kennedy, who was assassinated in Dallas November 22, 1963. I am also Jacqueline Onassis, wife of one of the wealthiest citizens in Europe, and now a double widow, known in my homeland as Jackie O. – the nickname (inherent in which there is a hint of the pornographic) with which I now sign my drawings.
2. John Fitzgerald Kennedy, my first husband, US President, an outstanding politician and statesman, whose blood still stains my favourite pink Chanel suit now located in a secure, climate controlled storage facility belonging to the National Archives and located in College Park (Maryland).
3. Lee Harvey Oswald, the man who, according to the findings of the Warren Commission (the official name of the Presidential Commission on the John F.

Kennedy assassination), killed my first husband with an Italian-made Mannlicher-Carcano rifle, later found on the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository in Dallas. The rifle is now stored in the National Archives building, the same one as houses my pink Chanel suit. It also contains an almost complete three-centimetre bullet with lead core and copper jacket, which was found on a hospital trolley at Parkland Memorial Hospital (Dallas) on the day of the murder. Oswald ordered this bullet by mail and paid \$24. The Warren Commission concluded that the bullet left Oswald's rifle, passed through the body of President Kennedy, and then through the body of Texas Governor John Connally. This is the so-called 'single bullet theory'.

(By the way, Mitchell condemns my pedantry, but Abraham approves of this recent character trait).

4. Jack Ruby, a former owner of a strip club, "Carousel", who shot Lee Harvey Oswald.

5. Marilyn Monroe – the star who died tragically and who according to popular belief was the mistress of my husband. Abraham wondered if he loved her as much as I love her.

6. Marina Oswald, a Russian girl, not devoid of that distinctive Slavic beauty, who was only 22 years old when her husband shot and killed mine.

7. Aristotle Onassis - my second husband, reminded to me by the smell of incense in my nostrils, a Greek businessman and former owner of the private island of Skorpios, a beautiful corner of the Earth that stings me with its poisonous tail. The Death of Aristotle is catharsis for those closest to him.

8. Maria Callas – the great singer and former lover of my second husband. They say she lost her voice after he left her. But it doesn't stop that lost and lovely voice tormenting me at night.

9. The Angel of Freedom. The monstrous inhuman creature, its appearance partly reminiscent of the Statue of Liberty. The Angel and I are tied by common French roots.

Such is the cast of the play that I may never write, because the desire to draw with my tongue on the back of my hands hasn't gone away - sometimes the desire becomes so overwhelming that it stops me from writing. Abraham can be tactless and even a bit vulgar: he even allowed himself the absurd assumption that I am licking some invisible stigmata on my hands, the origin of

which is connected with my Catholic faith. Foolish old man! Anyway, the hand licking doesn't prevent me from imagining in the future a staging of my play (working title "Bouquet of horror") in all its transcendent brightness. The production should be reminiscent of the aesthetics of the Broadway musical but also resurrect in the public consciousness images of the Russian seasons of early twentieth century Paris: images of Diaghilev and Nijinsky and graceful models on the catwalk wearing my phantasmagorical women's fashion collection will be interspersed with bursts of enchanting song and dance.

Besides the main actors that I've listed (they seem to mingle in a fragrant bouquet of horror which even the salty sea-breeze can't dispel), there is also a crowd of minor faces and figures, mostly creatures from ancient Greek mythology, scattered generously across the scaffolding of my temporary psychosis: the fauns, centaurs, satyrs, nymphs, dryads, tritons, naiads, Nereids, that throng the great European museums. It's harder to get away from these creatures than it is to get way from insects in summer, although if truth be told I don't especially want to be rid of them, even though their obscene, orgiastic activities unfolding in the periphery of my inner vision causes me a mixture of disgust and sexual excitement, which I should probably hide from the public, but not from my doctors.

In a nutshell, the play (I will not use the word "psychodrama", a word Mitchell tends to overuse) unfolds against the backdrop of an imaginary and mythical war between today's United States of America and Ancient Greece. Crowds of chthonic, goat-legged creatures stand-off against the suprematist shapes of America, pure and sublime in form, but whose edges are so razor sharp that when they cut the skin it takes forever to heal. The suprematist shapes mostly attack from the air, more air power than ground force. (I have fallen in love with Russian Suprematism: I sense something profoundly American in this art-form, even if we do have a difficult relationship with Russia). In the crowd, frolicking nymphs and Bacchii mingle with creatures which are half-centaur, half-Orthodox priest, burning their fragrant and intoxicating incense, their human torsos seamlessly tapering into a horse's body, glowing in the Ionian sun.

You can also see some well-known political figures lurking among the ancient and unruly mob: for example, Khrushchev and de Gaulle are satyrs with shamelessly aroused phalluses, and Castro, who appears as a castrated Faun, morosely rubbing his curly beard. Perhaps the drawings I've been doing for the

last two months on Skorprios can be seen as an early draft for the grand production of my future play. I put so much effort and diligence into these drawings!

I've always been a hard-working and diligent gal, and besides, drawing distracts me from licking my invisible stigmata, and from the strange sexual arousal, which in recent years has come over me quite suddenly - so suddenly that I probably would have tried to seduce Mitchell and Abraham, if – yes, I admit it - they weren't just a product of my inflamed imagination. There is no Mitchell and Abraham here, I'm all alone. But soon I will leave the island with the poisonous sting in its tail. I am a strong person and I will cope with my state of mind without the help of doctors but with the help of the drawings in which I see their faces.

Where will I go? Before returning home, I would like to visit the Soviet Union, namely Minsk, where Oswald met Marina. I so want to see the house where they first met, where they first became intimate with each other, before they were even married. If I make it there, I will hide my pictures in that house, along with this chaotic note. And then I'll go back to the States and get on with some urgent business.

Jacqueline O, Skorprios, 1975.

At the beginning of 2016 some of my friends, who will remain nameless, got me involved in some very interesting and unusual work. They told me that recently in Minsk (Belarus) a number of drawings signed Jackie O. were found. A note, hand-written in English, was also found with the drawings, the contents of which suggest that the author of the drawings (as well as the accompanying note) is Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis (née Jacqueline Bouvier), the widow of the former president of the United States. The other strange thing about the discovery is that the folder of drawings was found in the house where Lee Harvey Oswald, future assassin of US President John F. Kennedy, once lived in the late fifties. The contents of the note suggest that the drawings were made by Jacqueline on the Greek island of Skorprios shortly after the death of her second husband Aristotle Onassis in 1975.

I was asked to take part in the work of an expert committee, established in order to investigate the question of authorship and origin of these drawings. The experts quickly came to the conclusion that the drawings were indeed made in the 1970s but as yet there is no consensus about who is the author. The Commission is continuing its investigation, but some of its members (though remaining a significant minority) do indeed suspect that Jacqueline O. might actually have created the drawings. However, it is unclear how the drawings ended up in Minsk: there is no evidence that Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis ever visited the Soviet Union.

Since the work of the expert committee is obviously going to take a long time, I personally made a proposal to copy by my own hand the drawings attributed to Jacqueline and show the copies in an exhibition in New York. Because even if the creator of the drawings was somebody who had nothing whatsoever to do with Jacqueline Kennedy-Onassis these strange images can still be of interest to the American public. Maybe as an example of how someone can mysteriously assume the persona of somebody else, or maybe as a way of reconstructing another person's neurosis about which Jacqueline's note tells us so little that we have no choice but to try recreate an image of her neurosis (or maybe a picture of her innermost thoughts and dreams) by looking at the bright, childlike images.

I am attracted to this painstaking work by memories of how at the age of fifteen I was for few months obsessed with the image of Jacqueline, as well as with the Kennedy assassination and the multiple characters associated with it, who, in the words of Jackie (or pseudo-Jackie) are woven into a "bouquet of horror." And although I belong to the skeptics who do not believe Jacqueline is responsible for the drawings, nevertheless the magic of her image does appear to have invaded the consciousness of the unknown author, as once it invaded my own.

I think I fell in love with Jackie as a teenager when I saw the photograph where she is 17 years old and dressed in a native American costume with a large swastika embroidered on its tasselled smock. I have always loved this ancient symbol of happiness, present in all the early cultures, and I am incredibly sad that this wonderful sign was appropriated by Nazism, since when it has always been associated with evil in the western hemisphere. The brave girl Jacqueline Bouvier, who challenged this stereotype of evil, fascinated me.

Redoing the drawings found in Minsk, I felt that even if Jacqueline didn't create the drawings their author was a woman anyway and probably a young girl not long out of puberty because the letter she wrote in Jacqueline's name so eagerly fantasizes about the hallucinatory side of existence that would come in the post-pubescent life which still lay ahead of her.

To be absolutely honest, in the process of copying I could not resist but add to the drawings some elements and details that I think are missing in the originals. All the originals are signed 'Jackie O.' (with the pedantic addition 'drawing by'), and on several of them below the signature there is the sign of the 'merciful heart' – a heart with a cross inside. Under this sign I tend to put my signature or initials, and the date of copying (2016), but reimagining the cross as a plus sign.

I allowed myself to rework three of the drawings onto canvas, reproducing them with acrylic paints (all the originals are done with watercolour and ink on paper). I didn't redraw all the numerous sketches of women's dresses, even though they fire my imagination with their whimsical elegance. I rather hope that someday all the dresses will be made and then flaunted by some young fashionista as Jacqueline would have wanted.

Whoever was the real author of drawings found in Minsk (according to one version they were painted by a distant relative of Marina Oswald, a student of English in Minsk, which might explain the exaggerated role assigned to the Marina in the psychodrama, whereas in reality her role was minimal), I feel the magical presence of Jacqueline here. I sense in these bright, simple paintings, which came out of nowhere, the living breath of the American Queen, as eternally young and eternally fresh as the American dream!

Pavel Pepperstein, Moscow, 2016.