

Hit Me with Your Worst Shot

A Virtual Valentine for Velvet

With a Valentine manip by Shadar

And historical inspiration from Misterdoe

By Brantley Thompson Elkins

Marian Adams had just finished some last-minute Valentine's shopping for Gig when the shooting broke out across the street in the Ellsworth Toohey Memorial Art Gallery. It was bad luck for her, but it could have been worse.

She did what any good citizen would: called in a 911 on her cell phone. If she'd been in some isolated area, she might have done more. But this was New York City; it was a zoo out there -- no way could she intervene without exposing herself.

Reactions among the other people along the street were pretty much what you'd expect -- some were running, some hitting the ground, some frozen in fear or confusion or both. Several who'd hit the ground had their cell phones out, she noted approvingly; no doubt some of those who'd run were also calling in -- once they figured they were out of range of any stray shots.

Dispatch wanted to know the address; fortunately, the museum door had a street number; anyway, it was right across Broadway from the Strand. Could she give any description? Marian hesitated, nobody else could possibly see inside through the frosted glass, but maybe she could wing it by pretending she'd noticed the gunman when he entered. So she took a chance with her tachyon vision.

None of it made any sense, but Marian breathed a sigh of relief. The shooter, a gaunt young man with a scraggly beard, didn't seem to be targeting any of the people inside – just the exhibits. She described him to the dispatcher as he continued firing into what seemed to be a random assemblage of blue beach balls, which were exploding all over the place.

Nobody else inside was making a move, even for a cell phone. Indeed, they seemed to be looking approvingly at the gunman. With her super-hearing, Marian knew the police were on their way, but nobody else did – including a fat middle-aged man who, seemingly oblivious to the situation, picked this moment to barge right into the gallery.

Startled, the gunman turned to face the intruder. Only, some of the patrons were applauding – was this all some sort of publicity stunt? Nobody had said a word yet – and then the gunman let out with, “You *shit!* You’ll *pay* for this!”

The patrons looked positively shocked. The fat man started backing towards the door as the gunman bore down on him, then turned and made a waddling dash for the street. The gunman, after letting off a shot that missed, followed him through the door, stopping outside to take careful aim. But the fat man stumbled and fell just as he pulled the trigger.

Marian felt the impact on her right breast. Just a slight tingle, yet a cause for panic: the gunman was looking right at her! She quickly turned and started walking down the street, clutching her shopping bag to her chest, hoping nobody else had noticed the hole in her jacket. Police cars peeled around the corner from 14th Street, but she didn't look at them and didn't look back to see what they did about the gunman.

Two blocks away down 12th Street, she had a bit of luck: a “Rudy 2008” button lying in the gutter. As unobtrusively as she could, she reached down for it, and pinned it to her jacket to conceal the bullet hole. People looked funny at her on the subway to the Port Authority parking garage, but they'd have looked at her a lot funnier otherwise.

She wasn't thinking about that. She was thinking about exile – exile from a world she'd come to love, from a man she'd come to love. Under the rules of engagement, Marian Adams, Arish'ka, wasn't supposed to be here. Aureans and Velorians alike might wink at the rules as a matter of course, as long as they were discreet about it. But if she were exposed, she'd be vulnerable: the enemy could threaten her by threatening Gig. That could not be allowed.

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It had all started with the hunt for the book about Alessandro de Medici.

A few weeks ago, she and Gig had been watching a DVD of *Othello*, with Orson Welles in blackface.

"They probably wouldn't allow that today," he'd remarked. "Not politically correct. Of course, for Shakespeare, making Othello a Moor was strictly a metaphor."

She'd mentioned that a few days later to her fellow librarian, Charlene Van Dunk. Gig had told her Van Dunk was an unusual name for a black woman most places, but not in North Jersey. "She's one of the Ramapo Mountain people, descendants of intermarriage between Dutch settlers and blacks from before the Revolution. Only it's not politically correct to say so. They're supposed to be an Indian tribe, never mind their names or how they look."

It came as a surprise then, when Charlene proved knowledgeable about black history – and not just in America. "Gig's good, but he's wrong about Othello," she said. "There were real-life models for him, and not just soldiers. Alessandro de Medici, for example, who was the first duke of Florence; he ended up being assassinated, which had nothing to do with him being black – it was just personal."

Arish'ka decided not to bring up the Ramapo Mountain thing with her; it might be a sore point, from what Gig had told her – anyway, Marian Adams was supposed to be from the Midwest, and not likely to know about such things. But it was perfectly in character for her to express surprise and amazement that as

late as the 16th Century, Africans had been regarded in Europe as simply exotic rather than as an inferior race fit only for slavery.

“What’s even stranger is that historians and museums have been soft pedaling the fact that he had a black mother, even though contemporary depictions of him make it obvious,” Charlene said, bringing up a website devoted to his biography and family history that included a head shot.



ALESSANDRO DE' MEDICI

“Of course, there are also the kind of activists who don’t want to mention him because he doesn’t fit into their victimization ideology. Having a future Pope as your father, and being able to call in the Holy Roman Emperor to crush a rebellion in Florence – not to mention marrying the Emperor’s daughter -- doesn’t count. Not even if you’re later done in by a distant cousin currying favor with the revolutionaries.”

Arish’ka wondered what Charlene would make of the Tanzrobians, who in the far reaches of space were regarded pretty much as Florentines must have regarded Alessandro – or Venetians Othello. And in *The Merchant of Venice*, one of Portia’s suitors was a Moor and neither she nor anyone else in the play made a racial thing of it. Not the way they made a thing about Shylock as a Jew, anyway.

“Are there any books about this duke?” Arish’ka asked, an idea suddenly forming in her mind.

“Mostly in Italian. Alexandre Dumas wrote a play about him, and later a novel. Alessandro doesn’t come off too well: he was given to debauchery and, according to the play and accounts it was based on, even rape. Again, nothing to do with being black. Debauchery was a matter of course among the Medicis; so was tyranny -- and don’t get me started on the Borgias. Anyway, Dumas may have been black himself, but he was also a republican, and saw a parallel between Florence in the 16th Century and France in the 18th.”

Arish’ka had been studying up on Earth history since meeting Gig; they only gave you the basics at the Academy. But even George Gregory Grant couldn’t know everything, and Valentine’s was only a couple of days away....

It turned out there was a novelization of the life and death of Alessandro de Medici, but it would take too long to order one on line. Ever helpful, Charlene took a long shot and called the Strand, and she was in luck: they had a copy. Tiffany would be with her mother on Valentine’s Day, which meant that Arish’ka would have Gig all to herself.

And that was why she was in New York, across the street from the Ellsworth Toohey Memorial Art Gallery, when she got shot.

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She listened to WCBS on the way home: no mention of her, but she knew she’d have to inform Kira, just in case something broke. If anything did, it would be the end for her – and for her and Gig. She’d have to disappear without a trace, all the way back to Velor.

Arish’ka was on the verge of shaking, which would have been hell on the Subaru, so she pulled over in the Paramus shopping mall and sent the coded text message to the Earth’s Protector. The latest update on the radio, meanwhile, had it that the shooter – one Harvey Gaunt – was upset with Otis Slop, the gallery

owner, because he had supposedly promised to display Gaunt's black beach balls and then gone with the blue balls from a transgender artist who called himself Phil Dickless.

"Not that I mind what Harvey did," Dickless told an on-the-scene CBS reporter. "He was just doing to the beach balls what I'd done to my own. Like, deconstructionist art, you know? Anyway, Otis didn't mean to imply that my beach balls were any better than his. Everybody's equal; it just happened to be my turn."

None of the patrons had called the cops, as one of them had explained, because they thought it was performance art. "They should bring him back, not keep him locked up at Rikers," the patron opined.

"You can't make this stuff up," Kelly Waldron commented from the anchor desk, just before WCBS went to traffic and weather.

No problems the rest of the way up Route 17, at least. In fact, Arish'ka made such good time that Gig hadn't arrived home yet when she reached Darlington. So she let herself in, did a quick couch lift – she had gotten expert at balancing furniture – and slid the shopping bag against the wall before replacing the couch.

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"Are you out of your mind?" Gig asked a few minutes later when he came through the door.

He was staring at her chest, which he usually did, which most men usually did. But then, he was very familiar with her chest, so what...

Oh.

"We've got a problem," she told him, removing the Rudy button to show the evidence. "And yes, I know Giuliani's out of the running. I just hope we're not."

Gig was quick on the uptake, and just as quick to take her in his arms.

"I love you," he said. "No matter what happens."

Arish'ka explained what had happened.

“I rather doubt anything will come of it,” Gig reassured her. “Nobody there would have known who you were. Even if you were caught on a surveillance camera, those tapes are always blurry – I can’t figure out how they ever identify *anybody* from them.”

Arish’ka’s cell phone jingled. A coded message from Kira: *Phoohey on Toohey*. Meaning, she too didn’t see much of a threat. But she hadn’t *been* there.

“Toohey?” Gig asked, looking over her shoulder.

“That’s the name of the gallery.”

“Sounds vaguely familiar. I’ll try googling it.”

While Gig was doing that, Arish’ka tried to calm herself. *Everything will be all right*, she kept repeating in her mind.

“Ellsworth Toohey, the martyred art critic,” Gig informed her a few minutes later. “Gunned down by a failed architect who’d had a thing for his niece, and said he’d ruined their lives. The guy probably did him a favor; Toohey’s career had been on the wane. But now he’s got a cult devoted to ‘enshrining the ordinary,’ as they call it.”

“That’s what the beach balls were about?”

“That’s what the Gallery’s all about. They go for things like blank canvasses in different sizes and shapes – ‘the esthetic of emptiness,’ they call it. Sometimes they get political, like when they had a bunch of sewer rats running around in a model train layout and called it ‘The Amazing Rat Race.’ But they got sued last year over a collage called ‘All the Girls I’ve Loved’ – it consisted of used condoms, and the guy had put the girls’ names on them.”

“So what happened?”

“Otis Slop made it a free speech issue, said it was all about promoting safe sex. The case died.”

Arish'ka's nipples stiffened, and she began to feel wet between the legs, thinking about sex with Gig.

Very safe, of course, and very hot.

Gig smiled at her. He could *tell*. A glance with her tachyon vision reminded her he could also swell.

"I have something for you," he said.

"I can see," she said.

"No, I mean I *have something* for you. It's under the bed. Picked it up yesterday."

Her tachyon vision shot to the bedroom, through the (very sturdy!) bed, to Gig's Valentine gift.

"Try it on," he urged her.

It didn't take long for her to shuck her street clothes and don the magenta silk kimono. Gig gazed at her with that look of tenderness and lust that always thrilled her, but there was a hint of something special in the way he looked at her tonight.

"I could have lost you, if you weren't what you are," he said suddenly, his eyes focusing on her right breast.

The smudge of lead. It was still there.

"I was in love with you before I knew. You know that. And when I found out, I didn't want it to change anything. But of course, it did. I was in love with a superwoman, and learned a lot of things about history that I'd never dreamed of, and now I'm on a first-name basis with a Protector, and she's actually listening to my advice on what to do about it and... I suppose a lot of men would want to shout it from the housetops, about making love with a goddess and trying to help save the world from invasion. Only, that's not me. I just want to keep what we have, to love you and to help you and Kira in any way I can."

Gig paused for a moment.

"And you know what's been worrying me? *What if Tiffany finds out?*"

Arish'ka didn't know what to say. She didn't see Tiffany that much. Gig's only daughter had been in a school play a few months ago, and Arish'ka had taken a seat way in the back. Gig and Jessica had been down in front where Tiffany could see them. It was a family thing, after all; she had to know her parents were still *there* for her, even if they weren't still there for each other.

Gig had told her he didn't want to talk about what had gone wrong between him and Jessica. "Leave it be," he'd said. "I have Tiffany to think about. I don't want to stir up any bad blood."

"Whatever happens, we'll work it out," Arish'ka finally said now.

Gig didn't look convinced, and she didn't press the matter. It was Valentine's Day, after all, and time for Valentine's dinner.

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Gig had told her to bring an Alsatian Gewurztraminer, to go with "something fishy." So she did. But she hadn't known that "something fishy" would be a lobster.

"It's pretty simple," he said. "Just bring the salty water to a boil, drop the critter in head first, cover the pot until the water starts boiling again, then cook until done – 13 minutes in this case, since it's a two-pound lobster. Then serve."

"How do you eat it?"

"Tear it apart. That shouldn't be hard for a lady of your capabilities. Then dip each piece in lemon butter, and enjoy."

If his explanation was utilitarian, his setting was romantic: candles all over the place.

"Just don't call the fire department," he kidded. "Though I suppose you wouldn't have any trouble putting out a fire. Or starting one... in me."

Her smile could have lit up the universe as well as his soul, when she sat down to table, still wearing the kimono, still showing her non-battle non-wound.



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When Arish'ka retrieved her gift from behind the couch and presented it with a brief introduction, Gig was puzzled at first, then delighted.

Lorenzino, by Arvin Upton, the cover read.

"Who'd have thought that you'd be teaching the historian about history?" he said. "Terran history, that is! But that's what I love about you. One of the things, anyhow!"

"Lorenzino was the one who killed Alessandro," Arish'ka explained. "He wasn't a nice man. But then, neither was Alessandro, I guess – I'll have to read the book myself when you're through with it. It was a brutal time, Charlene said at the library. She was the one who found this for me."

"A brutal time... and ours isn't?"

Arish'ka was silent.

"And yet, it reminds me of the consolations of history. It's like Orson Welles said in *The Third Man*: "In Italy for 30 years under the Borgias they had warfare, terror, murder, and bloodshed, but they produced Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, and the Renaissance. In Switzerland they had brotherly love – they had 500 years of democracy and peace, and what did that produce? The cuckoo clock."

"You'll have to show me that some time."

"Indeed. But from what you say of it, your gift reminds me of other consolations. Jazz, for example. If millions of Africans hadn't been dragged into slavery, we'd never have had jazz, or the music influenced by jazz. We'd never have had Duke Ellington or Louis Armstrong or Cab Calloway or Miles Davis. We'd never have had Gershwin, we'd never have had Weill. Does that justify slavery? Of course not, and yet we have the consolation that something beautiful and good came out of something ugly and evil."

"We know something of that," Arish'ka replied. "Our ancestors, too, were dragged from their homes, taken to an alien world, turned into something that would have seemed alien to their forebears. So were

many other peoples from many other lands. And yet their descendants have lived good lives and done great things. It is those good lives and those great things that we seek to protect. Even here, where it is hardest, because people have never learned, or had a chance to learn, the lessons their distant kin on other worlds have learned.”

“So, is there consolation to be found in the terrible history of our time?”

“I don’t know.”

“I don’t know, either. No one does. But we can drink to the hope.”

Gig poured two more glasses of wine, deep golden and with an exotic taste, he’d assured her, like nothing else in the world.

“To consolation,” he offered.

“To consolation.”

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They didn’t know what the morning might bring, what the unfolding of history might bring, but they knew what the night would bring: the greatest consolation, the greatest joy of life.

Arish’ka kidded Gig about lead poisoning when he made as if he were about to lick the smudge off her breast,

“Anyway, I’m sure it tastes terrible,” she added.

“But you taste even better than the wine,” he said, as he kissed all around it.

He rubbed the lead off with his finger, then, admiring the feel of her – soft as silk to his casual touch and yet, he knew, stronger than steel beneath. He squeezed her right breast, marveling at the resilience of her Velorian flesh that gave just enough for him to dimple it but no further. Her nipple was the size of a bullet, stronger than any bullet – and yet, under gold, just rubbery enough for him to enjoy the sensation of biting it with all his might.

Arish'ka gasped and moaned at the feel of his teeth against her, at the feel of his hand on her left breast, tweaking the nipple there with his fingers. Then, keeping his hands on her breasts, squeezing and tweaking, Gig began kissing his way down her belly, swirling his tongue against her navel. The air around him was filled with the scent of honey and wildflowers as he made his way towards her cunt. His hands now roamed as well, grasping and squeezing per perfect ass as he bore down on her clit, sinking his teeth into it as she screamed with pleasure, then drinking her juice as if it were holy wine from a chalice.

"I love you," he whispered, coming up for air.

"I love you," she whispered, as she gently but irresistibly turned him on his back.

Gig's cock was aching with desire as she hovered over him, as she gave him the pleasure of seeing her take him into her slowly, inch by inch, so that he could savor the feel of her cunt as it engulfed him, just as she could savor the feel of him inside her. Velorian women, she had told him, were lined with pleasure receptors that put the Terran G-spot to shame, that could delight in every square millimeter of a cock.

"Watch me love you," Arish'ka whispered as she began to grind against him. Gig reached up to again squeeze her magnificent breasts – breasts which didn't, which *couldn't* sag even a fraction of an inch, yet which responded eagerly to his touch. She moaned again now, her face a mask of lust; and he too moaned as she clamped on him like a velvet vise, denying him release yet driving him wild with anticipation. Clamp and relax, clamp and relax, in an accelerating rhythm, until at last she showed him mercy and he exploded inside her – this time yelling, "I love you." He knew that she could feel him shoot deep within her; she too screamed with release – and with the three most important words in the language.

And that was just the beginning...

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It was a week later that Harvey Gaunt was murdered at the Riker's lockup.

His assailant was a bearded transvestite who'd been pulled in after a demonstration at Macy's for the rights of his fellows to use the ladies' rooms. Transgender rights were the cause of the month, it seemed, and Taylor Smith had organized a group called Trans Gender Insurrectionists (TGI) for the Friday event, making sure to inform the media but not the store – or any of the women shoppers.

“We are what we feel we are,” the TGI people shouted. “Genderism’s got to go!”

“I’ve got to go,” complained one of the women. Other women made rude remarks about the group’s fashion statement, including their tasteless shoes – and the fact that several of them seemed to have trouble keeping their balance in high heels.

“Genderists!” the TGI people shouted.

About that time, the cops arrived and started hauling off the TGIs, much to the relief of the women who could now relieve themselves. Women’s rights and transgender rights advocates traded pot shots in the media for several days, after which the story was eclipsed by the latest Hollywood scandal.

Perhaps Taylor Smith was annoyed at being out of the spotlight, not to mention being incarcerated in the men’s section at Riker’s. Or maybe he really believed Gaunt was a fanatical genderist because of that business with the beach balls. Anyway, he managed to get hold of a shank, and knifed the Black Ball artist in a decidedly unladylike manner.

Gaunt had a doting mother – his father had disappeared long since – who was convinced that Otis Slop must have put Smith up to it. But nobody believed her, and there wasn’t the slightest evidence that Slop was involved. Anyway, he’d been busy setting up a multi-media show for the Toohey Gallery called “Survivor – Lower Slobbovia.” It was supposed to be a satire, but hardly anybody got the reference.

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“This isn’t how I would have wanted it to turn out,” Arish’ka said the next time she was with Gig.

“Nor I,” he said. “If I didn’t know you, if I didn’t know Kira, I’d suspect—“

“If the world knew about us, it might suspect all manner of things.”

“I don’t think Gaunt would have told anyone what he saw. He probably managed to convince himself he never saw it. It’s an article of faith among the Tooheyites that nobody’s better than anybody else. I don’t suppose they’ve ever heard of Montaigne, although I wouldn’t be surprised if their founder had.”

“Montaigne?”

“A 16th Century French scholar and essayist. Among his witticisms was, ‘Since we cannot attain to greatness, let us have our revenge by railing against it.’”

“I’ll have to share that with Charlene.”

“We might have to share more than that one of these days. You were lucky to be sighted only by Gaunt. But one of these days, somebody who shouldn’t see something, who shouldn’t know something, is going to see, and know, and tell. We have to be prepared for that.”

“Believe me, Kira and I discussed this when I first arrived, long before I knew you.”

“I’d like to discuss it with her, too, soon and at length. That business about climate technology is easy, if we handle it right, handle it subtly. The world is ready for it, and will be too grateful to wonder much why it appeared so providentially. But the rest – even the people who believe in UFOs and ancient astronauts are going to find it hard to take – harder than the non-believers, in fact. I think we’re going to have to plan for the biggest coming out party of all time.”

“Velor may not approve.”

“They’re there, and we’re here. It’s got to be done, you know. If we can convince Kira, then perhaps she can convince Velor. She can tell them it’s just a contingency, but we’ve got to be ready – *you’ve* got to be ready.”

“Shall we work on a master plan tonight? I have a lot of ideas of my own.”

“I expect tomorrow will be soon enough. Let’s to bed.”

