

From the author of *Javascotia*

Benjamin Obler

The Exploding Fête

“Blurb of the highest quality”

—Esteemed Person



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The Exploding Fete

by

Benjamin Obler

Epigraph

If this doesn't make you free
It doesn't mean you're tied
If this doesn't take you down
It doesn't mean you're high

If this doesn't make you smile
Yeah, you don't have to cry
If this isn't making sense
It doesn't make it lies

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Part 1 - The Fete

Chapter 1

Petra Barnhouse was the first to arrive at the Winslow's fourth floor townhome on Washington Avenue. She set a pineapple torte atop the credenza and was taking off her navy blue trench coat when she heard the hostess's clacking heels.

"And is the trophy put away where I said?" Mrs. Winslow asked.

Jerome Ardizzzone walked beside her—the necessarily fastidious head of the catering staff, an extremely lean, clean-shaven man in a ultra-slim suit. "Yes, it's up in the att—"

"Ah, ah," Mrs. Winslow scolded. "Petra!" she called out, pulling together her yellow cardigan by the sash and tying a bow, as if to show that she was still afflicted with the burdens of making everything perfect even as her first guest arrived. Forcing a smile, she touched her cheek to Petra's.

Petra understood that the gathering would be large and that Mrs. Winslow's evening would be a marathon of hugs, kisses, hellos, thank yous, congratulations, and, hopefully, good-byes. "Candace, you look magnificent. Just point me to a quiet corner," Petra said.

She lowered her head as if seeking absolution. Petra prided herself on displays of mercy and expected to be appreciated for this quality. And yet it was her mercilessness that had earned Petra the nomination that brought her here tonight.

Mrs. Winslow gestured towards the massive parlor and said, “Well, by all means, dear.” She ordered Jerome to take the torte, and ran her hand over the surface of the credenza, testing for moisture.

Petra did not know whether the hostess was cruel or humane, only that she was an illustrious socialite and philanthropist. This sense of Mrs. Winslow’s high standing kept her from daring an obsequious smile. She entered the parlor in a state of somber reverence, the very first guest.

Early summer, early evening. A room as impeccable as those featured in Architectural Digest. The rich always have the finest tastes. She circled a table of lustrous wood and sat in a Louis quatorze chair, crossing her legs to make a smaller impression on the cushion, tucking her hair behind her ears, flattening the creases out of her wool skirt. The room was utterly silent behind the sturdy seals of new windows—custom-made, no doubt, replacing originals from a neo-Gothic time period—or so it seemed.

Petra Barnhouse completely embodied the supplicant air of a candidate waiting in hope of having a redemptive prize awarded to her. When the door chime rang, she sat erect and watched the foyer with twinkling openness and expectation, the visage of someone welcoming to all, letting go of any apparent selfish desires.

Hermann Donskoy stepped in, a man of stature and 76 years, hearty, ruddy as from labor or a blood condition, yet over six foot and pure gentry meat. Mrs. Winslow appeared shortly.

“Hermann Donskoy. I smell lavender,” Herman said, shaking Mrs. Winslow’s hand.

“Oh.”

“I hope it’s a synthetic candle. The real stuff will have me in a storm of sneezing.”

“Essential oils in a diffuser, I believe. Jerome?” She turned her entire torso, neck stiff as if to show some nascent inflexibility.

Jerome stood at Mrs. Winslow’s side like a aide-de-camp.

“That’s correct. Nature’s Bounty. Do you know the brand?”

“I certainly don’t,” Herman said. “You should be more mindful of people’s sensitivities. I would have thought you of all people...”

Petra, looking on from afar, turned away.

“I’m terribly sorry, Mr. Donskoy. I’m sure we can swap in some sandalwood.”

“Well, we’ll know in a matter of minutes just how potent it is. Nevertheless, I’m delighted to be here,” Donskoy grumbled.

Mrs. Winslow held a palm in the direction of the parlor, in the manner that dog handlers hold their palms on the plastic turf of the Westminster Kennel club during exhibitions.

“The red Chinese,” Donskoy said, dropping into the chair beside Petra Barnhouse. It only took him a moment to turn a minuscule dial on his hearing aid, which he’d removed. Then he replaced it in his right ear, the side near to Barnhouse. “For three years, I listened to Morse code on US-Army-issued headphones, broadcast by the red Chinese. If that doesn’t mangle your hearing, I don’t know what will.”

Petra sank. Her hardships were not nearly so historical in scope. When one’s suffering is connected to history, recognition comes that much easier.

Introductions.

“I wasn’t aware they’d be confiscating our prized possessions,” Donskoy said.

“You mean the cell phones? It’s an understandable precaution.”

At the ground level, near the front gate, both Barnhouse and Donskoy's mobile phones had been taken away by a duo of thuggish looking men dressed in security black, and placed in a locking plastic pouch; in return they'd been given an electronic chip with an ID number on it.

"I have a sick wife at home. If she drops, there's no one else she can contact."

Petra, incredibly impressionable of arising opportunities and seeming downturns of fate, brightened. Here, she could engage her tact and also her helpfulness. She could begin to spread her reputation throughout the gathering. The elderly gentlemen perhaps didn't realize all the apps that people employ on the cell phones these days.

"I'm terribly sorry about your wife. But they take phones because of social media, you understand. People will try to sway the results, or be swayed."

"I don't care about that," Donskoy said with a wave of his hand.

"No, but plenty others do, and Mrs. Winslow and the foundation, cannot have a breach."

"Mmm," Donskoy groaned. "It takes very little to create controversy these days, if you ask me."

Barnhouse smiled. To be beleaguered by technological advancements didn't count for anything. Technology had advanced on us all equally, like a heedless stampede of ...mmm, bison perhaps.

The door chime rang again.

Chapter 2

The chime was nearly ceaseless now, as it should be, being just past 6.

In the kitchen, Mrs. Winslow said, “Darling, just in time,” to her daughter Joyce, who entered through the door that came directly from the underground parking garage.

“Take over door duty, will you? I have Jerome and the starters...”

“Let me take my coat off, for God’s sake,” Joyce said. Thirty-nine years old, Caucasian, a woman who served as executive director of a foundation out of familial obligation. Her true joy was marathons, kettle bell workouts, road cycling, whole foods and the raw food movement—anything strict that contributed to the intensity and extremity of life, that added an unpredictable contour to people’s presumption that, as a member of a millionaire family, she enjoyed sloth, gluttony, rich food, boozing, etc. Joyce draped her belted double-faced camelhair coat over some furniture, out of the way.

“Jerome! Jerome!” Mrs. Winslow yelled.

The room was hot and smelled of rising bread, browning pork and rosemary. Four members of the catering team shuffled around the ovens, the Viking range and the ten-by-six island topped with 1200 pounds of quartz. They bent over cutting boards, tossed the sizzling contents of pans over dancing orange flames, and uncorked bottle after bottle of Sonoma cab, decanting glugging, bloodlike quarts into carafes.

Jerome emerged from the pantry, where he had retreated to make calls and stand a chance of hearing and being heard.

“Yes?”

“Did you check the inscription, like I asked?”

“I did, I did. They got it right.”

“What about polish? Couldn’t you run over it with a cloth. I think there’s a bottle of something around here for the stainless steel. That would be okay, wouldn’t it, on brass?”

“Mrs. Winslow, it’s spotless already, I assure you. It came wrapped several times over. Bubble wrap, packing paper. You know, it was *just* made.”

“Yes, but it’s been handled. Find time to wipe it down, for me, please.”

“Of course, Mrs. Winslow.”

She began to eye a browned spinach leaf in a salad bowl.
Seeing her distraction, Jerome began to move away.

“And Jerome.”

“Yes?” He demurely spun on his heels.

She pulled him close by the elbow and turned both their backs to the staircase leading to the attic. “Be discrete, won’t you? No one must know the whereabouts, you see. This is a coveted award, and really ...shall we say, passionate people cannot be counted on to act fairly. You understand.”

“I understand.” As Event Coordinator for one of the premier outfits in the city, Jerome was very well practiced in authentically yessing. Clients like Mrs. Winslow must never feel patronized, and they never did, with Jerome at the helm. Boondoggles happen; things go wrong; sous chefs have meth addictions and flip out, leaving Brussels sprouts to burn; freezer delivery trucks have failing refrigerant systems and liver pate spoils; inexperienced servers trip—on and on. But Jerome’s face was freshly shaven, minus the soul patch; he weighed 121 pounds and looked tremendous in his slate-gray Kenneth Cole, single-breasted suit, with cloud-white oxford beneath, no tie. Looks mattered. Event Coordination was a game of impressions. The impression of infallible leadership. Modelling the

impossible: perfection. Execution of a dream. So far things were flawless, and in about four hours, he'd be smoking on the veranda, and if he had his way, clinking his flute of prosecco against that of the young and uber-hot Joyce Winslow, perhaps stealing a glance down her million dollar cleavage.

Chapter 3

In the parlor, Evonne Sorenstam-Finch was nearly in tears already, though she'd just arrived, and this made her feel disappointed in herself, because she had chastised herself so eagerly in advance, made such preparations and plans, issued declarations that she wouldn't cry, at least not right away. But she couldn't help it. Around her already were such *amazing* and worthy people, like Petra whom she'd just met, the dearest little woman, obviously a woman wronged in many ways, short-shrifted in terms of height and beauty and who knew what else, but her small saggy face revealed much disappointment, surely a life lived in the shadows of larger presences, washed this way and that by uninvited forces. Then there was this esteemed gentleman Hermann who'd selflessly deposited his life on the line in service of his country back when there were no Facebook groups where appreciation could publicly accrue and memes capture the gratitude of a nation, and it had obliterated his senses, literally, his hearing. And we all know how these heroes were welcomed home—with a shovel and, Here you go, set down your rifle, and head on down to the steel mill and shovel bitumen into the

blast furnace 45 hours a week, at the end of which we'll give you thirty dollars or so. It was all so devastating and beautiful and Evonne was just besotted with awe and humility and gratitude. She moved from person to person, shaking hands, her spine bowing into a more complete circle at each guest she met—such that she nearly forgot they were really co-candidates, fellow applicants—competition! A fact that cast Evonne into a conflicted state where her humility plummeted so low she didn't know how she would recover her own deservingness, something that the abjuring of which threatened her stability, for how many nights now, since receiving the announcement of the fete, her invitation, had she imagined being called up to Mrs. Winslow's side and standing before a throng of the worthiest people like herself, hugging Mrs. Winslow and being hugged by all the foundation's committee members, or panelists, or board members or delegates or whatever they were, one after the other, taking the podium, if there was a podium....

Evonne wore an eggshell colored linen skirt and blazer combination and wore her auburn hair tied back in a bun, which she felt was appropriately austere, the hairstyle that a person might adopt waking up in a refugee camp, where there were no showers or electricity. She was 27 years old and worked in Pittsburgh as a design

director for the advertising firm Janklow & Janklow. Having settled on a divan across the room from the others, she was saying to the man beside her, "...just the many assaults, of course, and a kind of unrelenting experience of lingering pain. That has driven me back from life. Doubt too. Doubt, I think, is the invisible factor in cases such as mine. One doubts that it is safe to participate in society. One doubts the point of trying. One doubts that justice will prevail. And then with the events of the week, this whole testimony of Mr. Kavanaugh ..." A tear barreled down her cheek.

Joseph Hector Depace was the recipient of Evonne's confidences. An apparent Caucasian of Brazilian and German descent, his body swam in an overlarge department store suit. Inexperienced at wearing a suit, he kept the blazer buttoned as he sat, and the lapels and color rode up near his ears. One thing Depace was experienced in was presenting himself as if he were ignorant of his infirmities. Thirty-six years old, with large ears, dark eyes, and short-shorn hair, graying at the temples. Listening to Sorenstam-Finch, he worked to release strain in his sinuses and brow that had taken up permanent residency there since the death of his infant daughter Gloria to S.I.D.S and the later death of his wife, Valerie, to acute thrombosis, blood clots, diabetic complications, heart

murmurs, and the hazards of surgical fistulae. His life was absurd, and his duty now was to survive it with dignity until he could lie back and close the lid on it, shielding him from the world's gaze.

The fete and the award offered Joseph little in the way of hope. His expectations were low. Only in the furthest rear alcove of his consciousness could he lay a cognitive hand on a parcel containing the remote and unlikely gift that he might be selected and arrive home yet tonight with statuary in his hands that somehow relieved the bleakness of his condition. He felt about it the same way that one feels about hitting the Mega-Millions: you know the surer thing would be to flush the ten dollar bill down the toilet. At least then you're positive of where you stand.

Joseph's stomach growled, and as he listened to Evonne—closely listened, nodding, eyes locked on hers—he also listened for the squeak of a door hinge. Coming in, he had spotted the caterers in their vests at work in the kitchen, when a very sexy woman had passed through the swinging door. Also his eye had alit on the empty heating trays and lamps in the room adjacent to the foyer, which awaited, as he did, the arrival of buckets and buckets of sumptuous cuisine. He smelled the rosemary and the pork and even the red wine. His mouth watered.

Joseph owned a little corner store in South Minneapolis—e-cigarettes and lotto tickets were the big money items. After that, his life revolved around potato chips, beef jerky, energy drinks, rolling papers and blunts. He netted about 15K a year. He'd flown to the U.S. from El Salvador in the 1960s with his wife, Glenda. Forty years they'd lived and worked here, paying taxes, but never obtaining citizenship. When Glenda became ill, they didn't have the medical coverage they needed to get proper treatment. Her emphysema and COPD advanced quickly, with many debilitating side-effects. She left the world less than a year after the diagnosis.

“You still carry much grief,” Joseph said, seeing Evonne's tear. One of the enduring—and last-remaining—assets of his life was the cultural inheritance of observational powers and truth-telling. The romance of gypsy psychics. Witchcraft, voodoo. Cultural legacy. Bloodline stuff that you couldn't set in a bin going through TSA security. His grandmother had been that way, reading tea leaves and palms, communing with ancestors in her mind. Joseph had never forgotten and would never forget the day he'd come in the house, about 8 years old, after running all the way home from the new shopping mall built in his little town. “You've stolen something!” his Grandmother correctly observed, taking one look at him.

“Mr. Depace, I don’t know that I’ll ever be free from the bonds of grief,” Evonne mused. She was enlivened to this kind of grandiloquence in this moment. Though she wasn’t southern, it was a southern-sounding litany. That charmed her. She felt elevated. Mr. Depace, pitiful though he was, had suffered mere loss of life. He was a touch brownish, which was wonderful, but his story didn’t have the complexity, the layers, that anyone with a read on the situation would expect in a recipient of an award of this caliber. Depace’s was a case of straight-up misfortune. Medical misfortune. Cells mutate. Viruses infect the system. Hardly something we can rally against. This was an age of powerful injustices. We cannot squander this opportunity. Evonne saw Mr. Depace as a kind of padding of the roster, not a true contender, and that invigorated her spirits.

Joseph and Evonne’s close conversational contact was then pruned apart, as if by a mothering chaperone looking to cool romantic fires. They both helplessly looked up and around the parlor to comprehend the general commotion that harassed the periphery of their vision and other senses. A half dozen people stood about the carpet, in shiny shoes and dresses, making introductions: a burbling of appreciative hellos and how-do-you-dos flying. A Rachmaninoff symphony had begun playing as well, from some quarter of the

townhome, and the door chime continued to strike, even while Joyce Winslow loudly welcomed the new faces emerging from behind the door, peering curiously into the room. All in all, a dozen or fifteen people occupied the space, and though the massive parlor could hold many, many more, the character of a party had suddenly been established. That electric exchange of identities. Not raucous, for the occasion was solemnly professional. But appropriately celebratory. Invitations had gone out months ago, and the peaking of so much anticipation filled the room like a heavy fume, almost as one sees fog over certain lakes and streams in the morning, when the atmospheric conditions are right. It is at times such as these that the realization is brought forward that so much more than oxygen occupies the invisible areas of a given space that we're all entitled to inhabit.

Chapter 4

New to the party, and feeling the heft of the carpet beneath her feet, was the depressive Asian-American theater director Christine Wong, an extremely dignified and accomplished lesbian, who had heroically survived many severe bouts of suicidal ideation and morbid lethargy after giving her all to a production of *The Vagina Monologues* at the Charles Lerwick Playhouse in Mossley, CT. Also the graduate student Merrill Roselli, 22, a stand-out for his youthful appearance, toothy vibrancy, and the bulkiness of his argyle sweater, to which several pins and medallions were affixed, symbolizing his support of causes. When a greenhorn wishes to appear more beset by age, he dons a sweater, the heavier the better. A homosexual and former class president, Roselli's reputation was that of a stunningly erudite and eloquent speaker on issues of equality, civil rights, and the importance of representation in local government. He had organized an Occupy movement in Chicago during the summer of 2011; and throughout his college years, and continuing to the present, he had authored dozens of articles at a popular online publishing platform, articles that guided readers towards the correct attitudes and

behaviors in regards to many sensitive social situations, topics such as why it's important to be mindful of offensive adages and idioms alive in our American dialect, and why not to buy Happy Meals with giveaways of figurines that embody gender stereotypes, and how to organize a boycott of local businesses that discriminate, such as the Coloradan cake decorator famously did.

These newcomers were observed by the hulking Hermann Donskoy, who had risen from the seat beside Petra Barnhouse to mingle. Donskoy, despite his curmudgeonly bent, liked to be in the know, part of the action. Roselli was a highly problematic figure, Donskoy felt, with his exuberant activism and easy proximity, via college campus, to the all the latest concerns. The contender had arrived in the ring. Let him dance around in his boxer shorts, swiping at the air. But the threat of Roselli was dampened, Donskoy felt, by the very thing that gave him an advantage: his youth. Roselli would have a lifetime to garner awards, and surely Mrs. Winslow and the committee members recognized the importance of serving someone more distinguished upon whose door opportunity was less frequently heard knocking.

We go through life with a portfolio of diminishing enthusiasms, a great man once quoted a great man as saying. Donskoy had

experienced this diminishment directly, keenly.

“This place is huge,” Wong remarked to Donskoy, looking around.

“I’ve seen bigger. Goebbel’s summer home was twice this size, and wall to wall antiques.”

“Well, if you’re going to play that card,” Wong muttered, noticing Donskoy’s hearing aid—in the din, he wouldn’t hear. She faced him directly—which required her to look upwards—when issuing the challenge, “What’s troubling about this whole affair is the privilege, don’t you think, Mr. Donskoy?”

“Privilege?”

“Like the way history is always written by the victors. Why should the Winslows be the arbiters in this? They’re old money, whites, imperialists. Who gave them the power to ascribe value?”

“Honey, that’s the way the ball bounces,” Donskoy said, looking across the room.

Wong gasped. “I’m not your honey!” Then she blushed, and searched the others to see if anyone had overheard.

“About time,” Donskoy quipped. Though his hearing was shoddy, he knew what it looked like when a man in tux undraped a

tablecloth, to reveal a row of booze bottles atop a high counter. He headed starboard without saying excuse me.

Wong was self-described “tough as nails” though her wife Julie believed Wong took much abuse, such as the abuse she’d taken from the lead actress in *The Vagina Monologues*, leading to her post-run exhaustive stupor. This amounted to a kind of resiliency. “Yeah, a drink” Wong said, following Donskoy. He was harmless anyhow; this was the year of the woman, rightly so, and no way would the foundation select a member of the male species. She’d bet a year’s salary, a hundred and twenty thousand dollars, on it.