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ALLENDE

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The
JAPANESE
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Translated by Nick Caistor and Amanda Hopkinson



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LARK HOUSE

When Irina Bazili began working at Lark House in 2010, she was twenty-three years old but already had few illusions about life. Since the age of fifteen she had drifted from one job, one town, to another. She could not have imagined she would find a perfect niche for herself in that senior residence, or that over the next three years she would come to be as happy as in her childhood, before fate took a hand. Founded in the mid-twentieth century to offer shelter with dignity to elderly persons of slender means, for some unknown reason from the beginning it had attracted left-wing intellectuals, oddballs, and second-rate artists. Lark House had undergone many changes over the years but still charged fees in line with each resident's income, the idea being to create a certain economic and racial diversity. In practice, all the residents were white and middle class, and the only diversity was between freethinkers, spiritual searchers, social and ecological activists, nihilists, and some of the few hippies still alive in the San Francisco Bay Area.

At Irina's first interview, the director of the community, Hans Voigt, pointed out that she was too young for a job with such re-

sponsibility, but since they had a vacancy they needed to fill urgently, she could stay until they found someone more suitable. Irina thought the same could be said of him: he looked like a chubby little boy going prematurely bald, someone who was out of his depth running an establishment of this sort. As time went by, she realized that the initial impression of Voigt could be deceiving, at a certain distance and in poor light: in fact, he was fifty-four years old and had proved himself to be an excellent administrator. Irina assured him that her lack of qualifications was more than compensated for by the experience she had of dealing with old people in her native Moldova.

Her shy smile softened the director's heart. He forgot to ask her for a reference and instead began outlining her duties, which could be quickly summarized: to make life easier for the second- and third-level residents. Irina would not be working with anyone on the first level, because they lived independently as tenants in an apartment building. Nor would she be working with those on level four—the aptly named Paradise—because they were awaiting their transfer to heaven and spent most of the time dozing, and thus did not require the kind of assistance she was there to provide. Irina's duties were to accompany the residents on their visits to doctors, lawyers, and accountants; to help them with their medical and tax forms; to take them on shopping expeditions; and to perform various other tasks. Her only link with the clients in Paradise, Voigt told her, would be to plan their funerals, but for that she would receive specific instructions, because the wishes of the dying did not always coincide with those of their families. Lark House residents tended to have myriad religious beliefs, which made their funerals rather complicated ecumenical affairs.

The Japanese Lover

Voigt explained that only the domestic staff, the care and health assistants, were obliged to wear a uniform. There was however a tacit dress code for the rest of the employees; respect and good taste were the order of the day when it came to clothes. For example, he said emphatically, the T-shirt printed with Malcolm X's face that Irina was wearing was definitely inappropriate. In fact it wasn't Malcolm X but Che Guevara, but Irina didn't tell him this because she assumed that Hans Voigt would never have heard of the guerrilla leader who fifty years after his heroic exploits was still worshipped in Cuba and by a handful of radical followers in Berkeley, where she was living. The T-shirt had cost two dollars in a used clothing store, and was almost new.

"No smoking on the premises," the director warned her.

"I don't smoke or drink, sir."

"Is your health good? That's important when you're dealing with old people."

"Yes."

"Anything special I ought to know about you?"

"Well, I'm addicted to fantasy videos and novels. You know, like Tolkien, Neil Gaiman, Philip Pullman."

"What you do in your free time is your business, young lady, just as long as you stay focused at work."

"Of course. Listen, sir, if you give me a chance you'll see I know how to get along with elderly people. You won't regret it," the young woman said with feigned self-assurance.

Once the formal interview in his office was concluded, Voigt showed her around the premises, which housed some two hundred and fifty people, with an average age of eighty-five. Lark House had once been the magnificent property of a chocolate

magnate, who not only bequeathed it to the city but left a generous donation to finance its upkeep. It consisted of the main house, a pretentious mansion where the offices, communal areas, library, dining room, and workshops were situated, and a row of pleasant redwood tile buildings that fitted in well with the ten acres of grounds, which looked wild but were in fact carefully tended by a host of gardeners. The independent apartments and the buildings housing the second- and third-level residents were linked by wide, enclosed walkways, which allowed wheelchairs to circulate sheltered from the extremes of climate, but were glassed in on both sides to provide a view of nature, the best solace for the troubles of all ages. Paradise, a detached concrete building, would have looked out of place were it not for the fact it was completely overgrown with ivy. The library and games room were open day and night, the beauty salon kept flexible hours, and the workshops provided a variety of classes from painting to astrology for those who still longed for pleasant surprises in their future. The Shop of Forgotten Objects, staffed by volunteer ladies, offered for sale clothing, furniture, jewelry, and other treasures cast off by the residents, or left behind by the deceased.

“We have an excellent cinema club and show films three times a week in the library,” Voigt told her.

“What kind of films?” asked Irina, hoping they might contain vampires or science fiction.

“A committee chooses them, and they prefer crime movies, especially Tarantino. There’s a certain fascination with violence in here, but don’t worry, they’re well aware it’s fiction and that the actors will reappear safe and sound in other films. Let’s call it a safety

valve. Several of our guests fantasize about killing somebody, usually a family member.”

“Me too,” said Irina without hesitation.

Thinking she must be joking, Voigt laughed indulgently. He appreciated a sense of humor almost as much as he did patience among his staff.

Squirrels and an unusually large number of deer roamed freely among the ancient trees of the grounds, Voigt explained, adding that the does gave birth to and raised their young until they could fend for themselves. The grounds also served as a bird sanctuary, above all for skylarks, whose presence there had given the facility its name: Lark House. There were several cameras strategically placed to monitor the animals in their habitat and also any residents who might wander off or suffer an accident, but Lark House had no strict security measures. By day the main gates remained open, with only a couple of unarmed guards patrolling the grounds. These two retired policemen, aged seventy and seventy-four, offered more than adequate protection, since no thief in his right mind would waste time on penniless old folks.

Voigt and Irina passed a pair of women in wheelchairs, a group carrying easels and paint boxes to an open-air art class, and several residents out exercising dogs as careworn as them. The property adjoined the bay, and when the tide came in it was possible to go kayaking, which some of the residents not yet disabled by their infirmities were happy to do. This is how I would like to live, thought Irina, taking deep breaths of the sweet aroma of pines and laurels. She couldn't help comparing these pleasant surroundings to the sordid dives she had drifted through since the age of fifteen.

“Last but not least, Miss Bazili, I should mention the two

ghosts, because I'm sure that will be the first thing our Haitian staff will tell you about."

"I don't believe in ghosts, Mr. Voigt."

"Congratulations. Neither do I. The ones in Lark House are a young woman wearing a pink gauze dress, and a three-year-old child. The woman is Emily, the chocolate magnate's daughter. Poor Emily died of grief after her son drowned in the pool at the end of the 1940s. It was then that the magnate abandoned the house and created the Lark House Foundation."

"Did the boy drown in the pool you showed me?"

"Yes, but no one else has died there that I know of."

Irina soon changed her mind about ghosts, realizing that Emily and her son weren't the only resident spirits. She was to discover that many of the old folk were permanently accompanied by their dead.

Early the next morning, Irina arrived at work in her best pair of jeans and a discreet T-shirt. She quickly confirmed that the atmosphere at Lark House was relaxed without being negligent. It was more like a college than an old people's home. The food was as good as that of any reasonable Californian restaurant, and organic as far as possible. The cleaning staff did a thorough job, and the health aides and nurses were as cheerful as could be expected under the circumstances. It took her only a few days to learn the names and quirks of her colleagues and the residents in her care. The handful of Spanish and French phrases she memorized helped win over the staff, who came almost exclusively from Mexico, Guatemala, and Haiti. Although what they earned did not

correspond to the hard work they put in, very few of them went around with long faces.

“You have to spoil the grannies a bit, but always treat them with respect. The same goes for the grandpas, but you need to watch out for them, because some of them get up to mischief,” she was told by Lupita Farias, a stocky woman with the features of an Olmec statue who was head of the cleaning staff. Having worked at Lark House for thirty-two years and having access to every room, Lupita knew all the inhabitants intimately. She had learned about their lives, could see at a glance what was wrong with them, and accompanied them in their sorrows.

“Watch out for depression, Irina. That’s very common here. If you notice that somebody seems isolated or very sad, if they stay in bed or stop eating, come and find me right away, okay?”

“What do you do in those cases, Lupita?”

“It depends. I stroke them, and they always like that, because old people don’t have anyone who touches them, and I get them hooked on a TV series, because nobody wants to die before the final episode. Some of them find comfort in prayer, but there are lots of atheists here, and they don’t pray. What’s most important is not to leave them on their own. If I’m not around, go and see Cathy. She knows what to do.”

Dr. Catherine Hope, a second-level resident, had been the first person to welcome Irina on behalf of the community. At sixty-eight, she was the youngest resident. Ever since being confined to a wheelchair she had opted for the help and company that Lark House offered. She had been living there a couple of years and during that time had become the life and soul of the place.

“The elderly are the most entertaining people in the world,” she

eventually told Irina. “They have lived a lot, say whatever they like, and couldn’t care less about other people’s opinion. You’ll never get bored here. Our residents are well educated, and if they’re in good health they keep on learning and experimenting. This community stimulates them and they can avoid the worst scourge of old age: loneliness.”

Irina knew from newspaper reports about the progressive spirit of the Lark House residents. There was a waiting list of several years for admission, which would have been much longer if many of the candidates had not passed away before it was their turn. The old folks in the home were conclusive proof that age, despite all its limitations, does not stop one from having fun and taking part in the hubbub of life. Several of the residents who were active members of Seniors for Peace spent their Friday mornings in street protests at the aberrations and injustices in the world, especially those committed by the American empire, for which they felt responsible. These activists, among whom was an old lady aged a hundred and one, met up in the northern corner of the square opposite the police station with their canes, walkers, and wheelchairs. They held up banners against war or global warming, while the public showed their support by honking their car horns or signing petitions that these furious elders stuck under their noses. The protesters had appeared on television on more than one occasion, while the police were made to look ridiculous as they tried to disperse them with threats of tear gas that never materialized. Clearly moved, Voigt had shown Irina a plaque in the park in honor of a ninety-six-year-old musician, who had died of a seizure with his boots on in broad daylight during a 2006 protest against the war in Iraq.

The Japanese Lover

Irina had grown up in a Moldovan village that was inhabited only by old people and children. She thought of her own grandparents and, as so often in recent years, regretted having abandoned them. Lark House gave her the opportunity to give to others what she hadn't been able to give them, and she kept this in mind as she began looking after those in her care. She soon won the residents over, including several on the first level, the independent ones.

From the start, Alma Belasco had caught her attention. She stood out from the other women thanks not only to her aristocratic bearing but to the magnetic force field that seemed to separate her from the rest of humanity. Lupita insisted that the Belasco woman did not fit in at Lark House and would not last long: any day now the same chauffeur who had brought her in a Mercedes-Benz would come and take her away again. And yet the months went by and this didn't happen. Irina did no more than observe Alma Belasco from a distance, because Hans Voigt had instructed her to focus on people from the second and third levels, and not to get distracted by the independents. Besides, Irina had more than enough to do in looking after her own clients—they were not to be called patients—and learning the ins and outs of her new job. As part of her training, she had to study the videos of recent funerals: a Buddhist Jewish woman and a repentant agnostic. For her part, Alma Belasco would not have paid any attention to Irina if circumstances had not briefly turned the young woman into the most noteworthy member of the community.

FRENCHIE

In Lark House, where there was a depressing majority of women, Jacques Devine was considered the star attraction, the only heartthrob among the twenty-eight male residents. He was known as Frenchie, not because he had been born in France, but because of his exquisite manners—he held the door open for the ladies, pulled their chairs back for them, and never went around with his fly unzipped—and because he could dance, despite his fossilized spine. At the age of ninety he walked with a straight back thanks to the rods and screws that had been surgically attached to it. He still sported some of his curly head of hair and knew how to play cards, at which he cheated shamelessly. He was sound in body, apart from the usual arthritis, high blood pressure, and deafness inevitable in the winter of life, and quite lucid, although not sufficiently to recall whether he had had lunch or not. That was why he was on the second level, where he received all the help he needed. He had arrived in Lark House with his third wife, but she had only survived for a few weeks before being run over in the street by an absentminded cyclist.

Frenchie's day began early. He took a shower, shaved, and got

The Japanese Lover

dressed with the help of Jean Daniel, his Haitian aide. He would make his way across the parking lot leaning on his cane, keeping an eye out for cyclists, and continue to the corner Starbucks for the first of his five daily cups of coffee. Divorced once and twice a widower, he had never lacked lady admirers, whom he seduced with his magical charms. On one recent occasion he had calculated he had fallen in love sixty-seven times. He wrote the number down in his notebook so that he wouldn't forget it, as the faces and names of these lucky ladies were fading fast in his memory. He had several legitimate children, as well as one from a clandestine romance with someone whose name he couldn't remember, and any number of nephews and nieces, all of them ungrateful wretches who were only counting the days for him to depart this world so that they could inherit. There was talk of a small fortune amassed boldly and with few scruples. He himself admitted without the slightest hint of remorse that he had spent time in prison, where he had obtained the pirate tattoos adorning his arms, although flabby muscles, age spots, and wrinkles had blurred the images. He had also won considerable amounts speculating with the guards' savings.

Although the attentions of several Lark House ladies left him little room for any amorous adventures, Jacques was fascinated by Irina from the first moment he saw her going around with her clipboard and pert behind. She had not a drop of Caribbean blood, which made her voluptuous backside even more of a feat of nature, he would tell everyone after his first martini of the evening, astonished that no one else had noticed it. He had spent his prime doing business between Puerto Rico and Venezuela, and it was then that he had become so keen on appreciating women from the rear. The epic buttocks of those distant days had become fixed

forever in his mind's eye. He dreamed of them, and saw them everywhere, even in such an unlikely spot as Lark House and in someone as skinny as Irina. His aimless final days were suddenly filled with this belated, all-encompassing love that wreaked havoc with his tranquil routines. Soon after they met, he showed how besotted he was with the gift of a topaz and diamond scarab, one of the few of his dead wives' jewels that had escaped his descendants' clutches. Irina refused to accept it, but her refusal sent his blood pressure shooting sky-high, so that she was forced to spend the whole night with him in the emergency ward. Hooked up to an IV drip, Jacques declared his undemanding, platonic love for her. Sighing and lamenting, he said he only wanted her company so that he could regale his eyes with her youth and beauty, hear her enchanting voice, and imagine that she loved him too, even if it was only like a father. Or even a great-grandfather.

The following evening, back at Lark House, while Jacques was enjoying his ritual martini, Irina, her eyes red rimmed and with dark circles beneath them from lack of sleep, went to find Lupita to confide the mess she was in.

"There's nothing new about that, child. We're always discovering the residents in someone else's bed. And not just the grandpas; the old women too. With so few men around, they have to make do with whatever they can find. Everybody needs company."

"With Mr. Devine it's platonic love, Lupita."

"I have no idea what that is, but if it's what I think, then don't you believe it. Frenchie has a penis implant, a plastic sausage that inflates with a pump hidden between his balls."

"What on earth are you saying, Lupita?" said Irina, laughing out loud.

The Japanese Lover

“You heard me. I swear it’s true. I haven’t seen it, but Frenchie demonstrated how it works to Jean Daniel. It’s amazing.”

The good woman told Irina what she had observed during the many years she had worked at Lark House: that in itself age doesn’t make anyone better or wiser, but only accentuates what they have always been.

“A person who is tightfisted won’t become generous with age, Irina; they only become more miserly. I’m sure Devine was a rake, and that’s why he’s a dirty old man now.”

Since she could not return the scarab brooch to her suitor, Irina took it to Hans Voigt. The director told her it was strictly forbidden to accept tips and gifts. This rule did not apply to the possessions Lark House received from dying residents, or to the donations accepted under the counter so as to allow a family member to jump the queue, but these matters were not discussed. The director took the hideous topaz insect, promising to return it to its rightful owner. In the meantime he would keep it in a drawer in his office.

A week later, Jacques presented Irina with a hundred and sixty dollars in twenty-dollar bills. This time she went straight to Lupita, who was in favor of simple solutions: she restored it to the cigar box where the beau kept his cash, certain he wouldn’t remember having taken the money out or how much was in there. This allowed Irina to solve the problem of his tips, but she could not prevent Jacques sending her passionate love letters, inviting her to dine in expensive restaurants, or using a string of pretexts to summon her to his room, where he boasted about conquests that had never happened, and finally proposed marriage. Normally so skilled in the arts of seduction, Frenchie had lapsed back

into a painful adolescent bashfulness, so that instead of making his declaration in person, he gave her a perfectly comprehensible letter, written on his computer. The envelope contained two pages full of circumlocutions, metaphors, and repetitions, which all amounted to: Irina had restored his energy and his will to live; he could offer her a wonderful lifestyle, in Florida for example, where the sun was always warm; and that when she became a widow she would have no money problems. Whichever way she looked at it, he wrote, it would be to her advantage, especially since the difference in their ages was so much in her favor. His signature looked like a scrawl made by mosquitoes. Fearing she would be sacked, Irina did not tell Voigt. Nor did she reply to the letter, hoping that it would soon slip her suitor's mind, but for once Jacques's short-term memory did not fail him. Rejuvenated by passion, he kept sending her increasingly urgent missives, while she did her best to avoid him, and prayed to Saint Parascheva for the old man to turn his attention to the dozen or so octogenarian women chasing him.

The situation grew so tense it would have been impossible to hide, had an unexpected event not put an end both to Jacques and with him to Irina's dilemma. That week Frenchie had left Lark House twice in a taxi. This was very unusual for him, as he used to become very confused out in the street. One of Irina's duties was to accompany him, but on these occasions he sneaked out without saying a word about what he was doing. The second trip must have exhausted him, because when he returned to the home he was so lost and frail that the taxi driver almost had to carry him out and hand him over to the receptionist like a package.

"Whatever happened to Mr. Devine?" she asked.

“I don’t know, I wasn’t there,” came the reply.

After checking him and finding that his blood pressure was within normal limits, the duty doctor advised there was no point sending him back to the hospital, but recommended bed rest for a couple of days. However, he also told Hans Voigt that Jacques Devine was no longer in a fit mental state to remain on the second level. The time had come to transfer him to the third, where he would receive twenty-four-hour care. The next day, the director was gearing himself up to tell the old man of the change, something that always left a bitter taste in his mouth, as everyone knew that the third level was the waiting room for Paradise, from which there was no return. He was interrupted by a grief-stricken Jean Daniel, who informed him that when he went to help him get dressed he had found Jacques’s body stiff and cold on the floor. The doctor suggested an autopsy, because when he had examined him the previous day there had been nothing to suggest such a dramatic outcome, but Voigt was against the idea. Why arouse suspicions over something as natural as the death of a ninety-year-old man? An autopsy could sully Lark House’s impeccable reputation. When she heard the news, Irina could not help weeping, because in spite of herself she had come to feel affection for her pathetic Romeo. At the same time, she felt both a sense of relief that she was free of him, and shame at feeling so relieved.

Frenchie’s death united the club of his admirers in an outpouring of widows’ mourning, but they were robbed of the comfort of planning a memorial service, because his family members opted for a quick cremation. He would have soon been forgotten, even

by his admirers, had his family not raised a storm. Shortly after his ashes were scattered without any great show of emotion, the would-be heirs learned that all the old man's possessions had been bequeathed to a certain Irina Bazili. According to the brief codicil attached to the will, Irina had brought tenderness to the final days of his long life, and therefore deserved the inheritance. Jacques's lawyer explained that his client had dictated the changes by telephone, and then had come to his office on two occasions, the first to check the documents, the second to sign them and have them notarized. He had seemed quite clear about what he was doing. His descendants accused the Lark House administration of negligence regarding the old man's state of mind, and Irina Bazili, whoever she was, of willfully stealing from him. They announced their intention to contest the will, to sue the lawyer for incompetence and Lark House for damages and compensation. Hans Voigt received the horde of frustrated relatives with the outward calm and courtesy he had acquired over many years of being in charge of the institution, yet inside he was fuming. He had not expected such treachery from Irina Bazili, whom he had thought incapable of hurting a fly, but you never learn, you can never trust anyone. He took the lawyer aside and asked how much money was involved: it turned out to be a few parcels of desert in New Mexico, as well as some stocks and shares whose value had yet to be assessed. The amount of available cash was insignificant.

The director asked for twenty-four hours to find a less costly solution than going to court and summoned Irina to his office at once. He had intended to treat the matter with kid gloves, as there was no point making an enemy of this vixen, but as soon as she came in, he lost control.

"I want to know how on earth you managed to bamboozle the old man like that," he accused her.

"Who do you mean, Mr. Voigt?"

"Who do I mean? Frenchie, of course. How could this have happened right under my nose?"

"I'm sorry, I didn't mention it because I thought the problem would sort itself out."

"Oh boy, it did sort itself out, didn't it? How am I going to explain it to his family?"

"They don't need to know, Mr. Voigt. You know very well that old people fall in love, even if it shocks people outside."

"Did you sleep with Devine?"

"No! How could you suggest that!"

"Then I don't understand. Why did he name you as his sole heir?"

"What?"

To his astonishment, Voigt realized that Irina had no idea what Frenchie was planning to do, and was more surprised than anyone at the contents of the will. He was about to warn her she would find it extremely difficult to lay her hands on any of it, because his legitimate heirs would fight down to the last cent, when she announced point-blank that she didn't want a thing, because they would be ill-gotten gains and would be bound to bring her misfortune. Everybody at Lark House knew Jacques was not in his right mind, and so it would be best to sort things out quietly: surely a diagnosis of senile dementia from the doctor would be enough. Irina had to repeat this twice before the dumbfounded director could take it in.

Their attempts to keep the situation quiet soon came to

naught. Everybody in Lark House heard about it, and Irina became an overnight sensation, admired by the residents but criticized by the Latino and Haitian staff, for whom it was a sin to refuse money. “Don’t spit into the sky, it’ll only fall on your face,” Lupita warned her. Irina couldn’t figure out how to translate such a cryptic proverb into her native Romanian. Impressed by the lack of self-interest of this humble immigrant from a country hard to find on a map, Voigt offered her a full-time contract with a higher salary. He also convinced Jacques’s descendants to give Irina two thousand dollars as a token of their gratitude. In the end, she never received the promised reward, but as she could not even imagine such a large sum, she soon forgot about it.

ALMA BELASCO

*T*he intrigue and commotion surrounding Jacques Devine's inheritance brought Irina to the attention of Alma Belasco, and once all the fuss had died down, she asked to see the young woman. She received Irina in her spartan apartment, seated with imperial dignity in a small apricot-colored armchair, with Neko, her tabby cat, curled in her lap.

"I need a secretary. I want you to work for me," she announced.

This was not so much an offer as an order. Since Alma barely acknowledged her whenever they passed by each other in the corridor, Irina was completely taken aback. Besides, half the residents lived modestly on their pensions, occasionally augmented thanks to help from their families, and had to strictly make do with the services provided, because even an extra meal could ruin their meager budgets. None of them could afford the luxury of a personal assistant. The specter of poverty, like that of loneliness, always hovered around them. So Irina explained that she had little free time, because after finishing her day at Lark House, she worked in a café and also went to people's houses to wash and groom their pet dogs.

“How does this dog thing work?” asked Alma.

“I’ve got a partner. His name is Tim. He works at the same café as me. He’s also a neighbor in Berkeley. He owns a van equipped with two tubs and a long hosepipe; we go to the houses where the dogs live—I mean where the dogs’ owners live; we connect the hose and wash the clients—I mean the dogs—in the yard or out on the street. We also clean their ears and trim their nails.”

“The dogs’ nails?” asked Alma, hiding her smile.

“Yes.”

“How much do you earn an hour?”

“Nine dollars in the café, and twenty-five per dog, but I split that with Tim, so I get twelve and a half dollars.”

“I’ll take you on trial at thirteen dollars an hour, for three months. If I like the way you work, I’ll raise it to fifteen. You are to work for me in the evenings, as soon as you finish your duties at Lark House, two hours a day to start with. The hours can be flexible, depending on my needs and your availability. Do we have a deal?”

“I could quit the café, Mrs. Belasco, but I can’t leave the dogs. They already know me and are expecting me.”

This was how things were left, and how a business relationship that was soon to become a friendship began.

During the first few weeks in her new job, Irina went around on tiptoe and was often at a loss, because Alma Belasco turned out to be bossy and demanding about details but vague about instructions. Soon, however, Irina lost her fear and became as indispensable to Alma as she was to Lark House in general. Irina observed Alma with the fascination of a zoologist, as if she were some kind of immortal salamander. This woman was unlike anyone she had

ever known, and very different from the old people on the second and third levels. Jealous of her independence, she was not in the least sentimental or attached to material possessions, and seemed aloof toward everyone but her grandson, Seth. She appeared so self-assured that she did not look for support either from God or in the sickly-sweet religiosity of some of the Lark House residents, who flaunted their spirituality and went around preaching ways of reaching a higher state of awareness. Alma had her feet firmly on the ground. Irina assumed her haughty attitude was a defense against other people's curiosity, and her simplicity a kind of elegance that few women could copy without appearing to have let themselves go. She wore her white, wiry hair short, and combed it through with her fingers. Her sole concessions to vanity were bright red lipstick, and a masculine fragrance of bergamot and orange blossom; wherever she went, its fresh smell covered the faint odor of disinfectant, old age, and—occasionally—marijuana that was typical of Lark House. She had a prominent nose, a proud mouth, big bones, and hands worn rough by hard work; brown eyes with heavy, dark eyebrows and violet rings beneath them gave her the look of a night owl, which even the black-framed glasses she wore failed to disguise. Her enigmatic demeanor created a sense of distance: none of the staff addressed her in the patronizing way they did the other residents, and none could boast that they really knew her, at least not until Irina Bazili managed to penetrate her private fortress.

Alma lived with her cat in one of the independent apartments, with a minimum of furniture and personal belongings. She drove around in a tiny car, completely ignoring all traffic regulations, which she chose to regard as optional. One of Irina's duties was

to pay the parking fines that regularly arrived. Alma's upbringing meant that she was polite, but the only friends she had made at Lark House were Victor, the gardener, with whom she spent many long hours working on the raised beds where they planted vegetables and flowers, and Dr. Catherine Hope, against whom all resistance failed. Alma rented a studio in a warehouse space divided by wooden partitions that she shared with other artisans. She continued with her silk-screening, as she had done for sixty years, although she no longer sought artistic inspiration in her work, but simply to avoid dying of boredom before her time. She spent several hours a week there, assisted by Kirsten, who despite her Down syndrome was able to fulfill all her tasks. Kirsten knew the color combinations and tools that Alma used. She prepared the fabrics, kept the studio neat and tidy, and cleaned the brushes. The two women worked harmoniously together, without the need for words, intuiting each other's intentions. When Alma's hands began to shake and she could no longer grip a brush, she hired a couple of students to copy onto silk the designs she drew on paper, while her faithful helper watched them as keenly as a prison guard. Kirsten was the only person who allowed herself to greet Alma with a hug, or to interrupt her with wet kisses whenever she felt a sudden wave of tenderness.

Without ever seriously intending to, Alma had become famous for her original, brightly colored kimonos, tunics, kerchiefs, and scarves. She herself never wore them: she preferred black, white, or gray loose-fitting trousers and linen blouses that Lupita dismissed as the rags of a tramp, never once suspecting how much those rags cost. Alma's silk screens were sold in art galleries at exorbitant prices to raise funds for the Belasco Foundation. Her

The Japanese Lover

collections were inspired by her journeys around the world—animals from the Serengeti National Park, Ottoman ceramics, Ethiopian lettering, Inca hieroglyphics, Greek bas-reliefs—which she quickly renewed as soon as her rivals began to copy them. She had refused to sell her brand or to work with fashion designers; each of her original creations was reproduced in a limited edition that she closely supervised and then signed. In her heyday she'd had around fifty people working for her and had produced a considerable volume of work in a big industrial warehouse south of Market Street in San Francisco. Since she had no need to sell anything to earn her living, she had never advertised, but her name had become a watchword for exclusivity and excellence. When she turned seventy she decided to cut back on production, to the severe detriment of the Belasco Foundation, which had counted on this income.

Established in 1955 by her father-in-law, the legendary Isaac Belasco, the foundation created green spaces in at-risk neighborhoods. Although the goals of this initiative had primarily been aesthetic, ecological, and recreational, it also produced unexpected social benefits. Wherever a garden, park, or square sprang up, delinquency rates declined, as gang members and addicts who had been previously ready to kill each other for a packet of heroin or a few more inches of turf now found a common interest in looking after this corner of the city that belonged to them. In some they had painted murals, in others built sculptures and children's playground equipment; in all of them, artists and musicians gathered to entertain the public. In every generation, the Belasco Foundation had been headed by the firstborn male member of the family. This tacit rule did not change with female liberation, because

none of the daughters bothered to question it. One day the responsibility would fall on Seth, the founder's great-grandson, who could not refuse it even though he had no wish whatsoever to receive such an honor.

Alma Belasco was so accustomed to giving orders and keeping her distance, and Irina so accustomed to receiving orders and being discreet, that they would never have come to appreciate each other were it not for Seth Belasco, Alma's favorite grandson, who made it his job to pull down the barriers between them. Seth met Irina shortly after his grandmother moved to Lark House. The young woman fascinated him from the start, although he could not have said why. Despite her name, she had little in common with the East European beauties who in the previous decade had taken the men's clubs and model agencies by storm; in fact, from a distance Irina could be taken for a scruffy-looking young boy. She was so inclined to remain invisible that it took a good pair of eyes to even notice her. Her baggy clothes and knitted hat pulled down low did not exactly make her stand out. Seth was attracted by her mysterious intelligence, her impish, heart-shaped face with a deep dimple in the chin, her startled greenish eyes, her slender neck that emphasized her vulnerability, and her skin, so white it seemed to glow in the darkness. Even her childlike hands and chewed nails moved him. He felt a previously unknown and disturbing desire to protect her and shower her with affection. In the winter, Irina wore so many layers of clothes that it was impossible to judge the rest of her appearance, but several months later, when summer forced her to abandon the protective coverings, she turned out

to be well proportioned and attractive, in her own raggedy way. The knitted cap was replaced by gypsy head scarves that could not completely cover her head, so that a few locks of almost albino blond hair constantly framed her face.

At first, the only link Seth could establish with her was thanks to his grandmother, since none of his usual seduction techniques appeared to work. Later on, he discovered the irresistible power of writing. He told her that with his grandmother's aid he was compiling a century and a half of the history not only of the Belasco family but of San Francisco itself, from its foundation to the present day. He had been mulling over this vast saga for fifteen years: a raucous torrent of images, anecdotes, and ideas. If he could not get it all down on paper it would drown him. This was something of an exaggeration—the torrent was little more than a tiny trickle—but his description so caught Irina's imagination that Seth had no choice but to set to work. In addition to visiting his grandmother, who contributed her oral history, he began to collect information from books and the Internet, and to collect photographs and letters written at different time periods. This won him Irina's admiration, but not Alma's. She accused him of having grandiose ideas and sloppy habits, a fatal combination for a writer. If Seth had paused to reflect, he would have admitted that both the book and his grandmother were nothing more than pretexts to see Irina, this creature straight out of a Nordic saga who had materialized where least expected: in an old people's home. But however long and hard he reflected, he would have been at a loss to explain the irresistible attraction she exerted on him: her tiny orphan's bone structure and consumptive pallor were the exact opposite of his ideal woman. He usually went for the healthy, tanned, cheer-

ful girls who were so common in California and in his past. Irina showed no sign of being aware of the effect she had on him; she treated him with the casual kindness usually reserved for other people's pets. Her polite indifference, which he would once have seen as a challenge, left him in a constant state of shy paralysis.

Seth's grandmother began to dig among her memories to help her grandson with a book that, by his own admission, he had already spent ten years writing in fits and starts. No one was better qualified to aid him in this way than Alma, who had the spare time and was not yet afflicted with any signs of senile dementia. Alma took Irina with her to visit the ancestral Belasco residence at Sea Cliff, to go through her boxes that no one had touched since she had left. Her old bedroom remained under lock and key, entered only for cleaning purposes. Alma had disposed of almost all her possessions: she gave her jewelry to her daughter-in-law and granddaughter, with the exception of a diamond wedding ring reserved for Seth's future wife; her books to hospitals and schools; clothes and furs, which no one dared wear anymore in California for fear of animal-rights protesters who might launch a knife attack, to charity shops; she distributed other things to whoever wanted them, keeping only what mattered to her: letters, diaries, press cuttings, documents, and photographs. "I have to sort out all this stuff, Irina, I don't want anyone rummaging in my private life when I am really old." To begin with she tried to do it all on her own, but as she began to trust Irina she began to delegate to her. The young woman ended up in charge of everything, apart from the letters in yellow envelopes that arrived from time to time, which Alma always made vanish immediately. Irina was under strict instructions not to touch them.

The Japanese Lover

Alma doled out her memories to her grandson in a sparing manner, one by one, to keep him hanging on for as long as possible, because she was afraid that if he became bored of fluttering around Irina, the famous manuscript would be returned to a bottom drawer and she would see far less of the young man. Irina's presence was essential to the sessions with Seth, otherwise he became distracted waiting for her to appear. Alma laughed to herself when she thought how the family would react if Seth, the heir to the Belasco dynasty, were to get together with an immigrant who lived by caring for old people and washing dogs. She herself did not consider it such a bad idea, as Irina was far more intelligent than Seth's previous athletic but short-lived girlfriends; yet Irina was a rough diamond, and required polishing. Alma set herself the task of providing her with a veneer of culture, taking her to concerts and museums, lending her grown-up books to read instead of those absurdly lengthy novels about fantasy worlds and supernatural creatures that she so enjoyed, and teaching her proper manners, including how to handle cutlery at table. Irina had learned none of this from her peasant grandparents in Moldova or from her alcoholic mother in Texas, but she was quick-witted and grateful. It would be easy to refine her, and it would be a subtle way of paying her back for attracting Seth to Lark House.

THE INVISIBLE MAN

A year after she started to work for Alma Belasco, Irina began to suspect the older woman had a lover. She did not admit her suspicions to Seth until much later. At first, before Seth had lured her into the intrigue, she had never dreamed of spying on Alma. She had been drawn into Alma's private world gradually, without either of them realizing it. The idea of a lover started to take shape when Irina was sorting out the boxes Alma had brought from the house at Sea Cliff and when she examined the silver-framed photograph of a man that Alma kept in her bedroom, which she polished regularly. Apart from a smaller one of her family in the living room, there were no other photos in the apartment. This caught Irina's attention, because all the other residents at Lark House surrounded themselves with photographs to keep them company. All Alma said was that the man in the portrait was a childhood friend. On the rare occasion that Irina plucked up the courage to ask something more, Alma changed the subject. Still, Irina managed to drag out of her that his name was Ichimei Fukuda, and that he had painted the strange canvas that hung in the living room, a desolate snowy landscape beneath a gray sky, with dark one-story