FURIES

By Julie Ruocco

Translation sample by Lucinda Karter

 COINCIDENCES

“We live in a world of coincidences. When man and bullet meet, it is a coincidence.”

She didn’t know why, but Aragon’s words kept circling in her head and there was nothing she could do about it. And yet it had been ages since she’d read *Aurélien*. She stared at the cluster of bubbles that were congregating on the surface of her steaming cup of coffee. It looked like a bunch of insect eggs about to hatch.

-Bérénice are you listening to me?

She lifted her gaze to his face. He was in his fifties and despite his heft, he looked like a Greek shepherd what with his tight wad of white curls and his dark skin tone. His look was stern.

-If you’re not up for it we’ll stop everything right now and I’ll find someone else. This mission is too dangerous if you’re not completely with it.

The words woke her from her daydream and she once again heard the murmur coming from the terrace around her. She was back in Paris, in the heart of the Vth arrondissement. The steam from the espresso machine mingled with the smell of coffee and made her feel hot. She instinctively shrugged her shoulders to relax, before answering him.

-I already told you I can handle it. And we both know that it won’t be easy for you to find another niece who can do the job.

Her words stung but didn’t convinced him and he continued to stare at her with the irritated and skeptical look common in men of his age, men sure of their authority in a world that was escaping their grasp a bit more each day.

-Last time I managed to smuggle out more than we expected. Have you already forgotten the margin you made thanks to me uncle?

Her uncle turned his head towards her, his face slight askance as if he was checking to see if anyone had heard her utter a dirty word in her soft and dry voice. Bérénice continued to observe him. He now appeared as if his eyes were too puffy, and his eyelids too greasy to pass for a venerable shepherd. He looked more like a disoriented lover or a pimp with too many scruples. All around them other mismatched couples sat at waxed wooden tables: adulterers across from ageless women; fake patrons across from genuinely lost souls; and of course, thesis advisors spinning mystifying webs for their audience of desperate graduate students. She glimpsed the irony in how a passerby might hesitate between the three categories. And perhaps they wouldn’t be entirely wrong. Her father always used to say that the slightest thing could determine a destiny, and that all destinies were interchangeable.

-Watch out kid, in this line of work you’re only as good as your last take. Nowadays if you fall on your face you stay there, and believe me it doesn’t take much more than one coincidence and bang.

She didn’t blink.

-Well, we’ll see what happens this time around.

He watched her sip her bitter coffee as she stared at him with her large flat pupils. He’d never liked the look in her eyes. It wasn’t a woman’s look, nor a young man’s either for that matter. Their glimmer was too muted to reflect anything. They were more like a cat’s, or the laughing eyes of an old person, all their luminosity directed inward. Eyes that were impossible to read. Seeing them planted in a young girl’s face, even in the banal face of this brunette, always unsettled him. Or maybe he was just getting old. He let out a weary sigh and slipped an envelope across the table.

-Here you go. These are the instructions concerning what you need to track down and bring back. As far as logistics go, you know who to go to for your papers.

Bérénice put her cup back down, nodding her head. She grabbed the envelope and leaned over to kiss him on the cheek. He knew very well that this sign of affection was a bit much for both of them, but he let her do it anyways, without showing his reserve. Bérénice did this without fail. It was her way of telling him she hadn’t forgotten the first time they met. That time he had given her a kiss. She had detected a lingering odor of bygone rain and observed that his raincoat was too tight. Yes, it must have been raining that day. That was the day she had buried her father. She hadn’t realized at the time that she had just met “The Assyrian”.

He had introduced himself as an old friend of her father’s, and perhaps it wasn’t a lie. She vaguely recalled the story of his arrival in France, of the friend who had come to his rescue, and of the man she had never met who had become like a brother to him.

She had stood alone in front of the casket. Nazar, because that was his name, had said a few customary words to her. He had hugged her in his arms. Twice. Once when he arrived at the funeral home and once before he took leave of her. That’s when he had left her with the impression that if she was looking for work he could help her, that she was part of the family after all, and that he could imagine that a degree in archeology wouldn’t make it easy for her to find a job. He, however, knew people who would find it of interest. Thinking back on it, this was a line of work that could only be done among family…

 \*\*\*

She opened the door to the small art gallery. The bell chimed, the sound reverberating through the room. Bérénice had always found that the ring was anachronous to this temple of modern art. She didn’t get the chance to admire the canvases or sculptures, as she heard the click of heels, at first solemn, then hasty. They drew her to the back room. She deciphered a blue suit with a skirt a bit short for the season. The legs below it were angular. Still as thin, she thought.

-Hello Olga

Olga’s words crackled in the air.

-I already told you not to come here in the middle of the afternoon.

-I didn’t realize we were down to this level of precaution…

Olga Petrovna lifted her eyes to the sky, like the heroine of a tragedy. Her grandmother had come from Poland. To feed her children she had combed all the boutique hotels in Paris passing as a Russian duchess in the hopes of reselling counterfeit jewelry at a mark-up. Her daughter had dropped the fake accent, but had held onto the network of buyers. Olga was already the third generation, the one who had invested in contemporary art by paying a dear price for the respectable reputation of a newcomer. It was the perfect front for activities of a different nature.

-That’s our situation in a nutshell! We have to do the work of the just while taking the precautions of the criminal.

In addition to a full address book, Olga had inherited a knack for setting the stage. Bérénice took the envelope out of her pocket.

-And have you taken the necessary precautions for the next operation?

Madame Petrovna’s face vacillated between horror and indignation.

-You can say you want but it’s the small thefts of today that help build the great collections of tomorrow!

-I wasn’t talking about the transaction, just the airplane trip.

The forty-year-old blushed a little. She hesitated for a while as she searched for a folder on the crowded desk. She handed it to Bérénice.

-Here you go. In addition to the passport, we added a few Turkish books in case you get stuck there longer than expected.

Bérénice didn’t answer as she hastily grabbed the bundle. She was on her way out when she heard Olga add:

-Don’t linger around there too long, apparently the situation is getting worse by the day…

The bells jingled again as she stepped out the door. She wasn’t afraid. Over time these trips back and forth had become somewhat of a habit. Tonight she would go home to her room under the eaves, memorize the contents of the envelope and the precious objects described in it, and tomorrow she would board the plane to go fetch them. She could picture the silver and stone destinies straddling the centuries, traveling through the vagaries of time and history. Millenary jewels that had nowhere to go with their gold flowing into the hands of traffickers of antiquities and the black market. She recalled how as a student she was moved by all that scattered heritage, lost to the greed of the living. But not any longer.