

Joseph Bathanti

The Gazebo

—For Suzanne

To escape the summer heat of Claire’s apartment, she and I drove to David’s, the theatre on Walnut Street in Shadyside, to see *Citizen Kane*. One of Claire’s professors at Pitt had screened it in class, and she was convinced that I should see it. I was glad to go, mainly for the air-conditioning, but I would have done anything to please her. After the movie, we walked a few paces to the Gazebo, a delicatessen Claire was enchanted with.

As I listened to Claire talk about the movie—she called it “brilliant,” “a miracle”—and maybe it was—I knew I hadn’t been paying attention. She said Kane is a guy who tries to fill up his emptiness with things, attempting to buy heart and soul with money and power, an indictment of Capitalism, a living, breathing Marxist allegory. I didn’t disagree, though I didn’t know anything about Marx, but Kane was not unlike the rest of us. He just seemed much more fortunate than most. After all, even though he issued from down-on-their-luck working stiffs, he ended up with money and power and, for a while, he was young and handsome and, who knows, maybe even fleetingly happy—way more than most of us can expect.

The people I came from—a different batch of down-on-their-luck working stiffs—did not have money or power and had little prospects for either. Their emptiness gnawed holes in them. I don’t remember much about what I contributed to this conversation about *Citizen Kane*. I might have just sat there and listened and not said a word. Kane had a heart. I liked him, I liked the movie, and you don’t have to be in college, which I wasn’t, to get *Rosebud*.

That late afternoon in the Gazebo with Claire, I wanted clarity—not parables. More than anything, I was reminded of something I knew to be absolutely *ex cathedra* true but had never really allowed myself to dwell on: everything means something else. Not only that; everybody is somebody else. It’s hard to make your way when things aren’t what they seem, and I suppose Charles Foster Kane knew that all along. Surely Orson Welles, the man who made the film, in 1941, when he was only twenty-five, just five years older than I was that very warm day, keenly understood this.

Claire was not beautiful; some would say not even pretty. She had recently cut her long brown hair. It barely covered her ears, bangs chopped to an inch of her scalp line. Eyebrows heavy and arched, thin nose with the slightest hook to it. Enormous silvery eyes, bowed

exaggerated lips. Immaculate skin—like a baby’s. She looked like Our Lady of Guadalupe, and I was pleased to be with her. I was fascinated by her willingness to say what she felt. Before my romance with Claire, I had never set foot inside the Gazebo. I had known it existed, but it wasn’t a place I would have ever entered on my own. Perhaps, I was a little intimidated by what I perceived as its high tone. But, then again, I would have never gone to see *Citizen Kane* of my own volition either.

An older woman, in a royal blue, sleeveless dress, sprinkled with giant sunflowers, walked over to our table. She wore three or four bracelets on either wrist. Her hair was dyed bright orange, and her heavily wrinkled face caked with make-up. She stood there for an awkward amount of time and stared at me. I was about to say something when she said, “You don’t know who I am. Do you?”

I smiled. “I guess not.”

“I’m Madeleine DeSantis. An old friend of your family.”

I studied her. I had no idea who she was. As far as I knew, my family had no old friends.

She smiled, a big orange lip-sticked smile. Wrinkles branched across her face like an oracle. “Joseph David DelGreco,” she whispered. “Little Joey. Joey DelGreco.”

I looked into her tiny brown eyes.

“Little Joey,” she whispered. “Look at you. You’re a grown man.”

I sat there and smiled.

“You remember me, don’t you?” Madeleine asked. She took my face in her hands. “You couldn’t forget old Madeleine.”

“Of course, I remember you, Madeleine,” I said. “It just took me a minute. How could I ever forget you? How have you been?”

Still with my face vised between her hands, Madeleine gazed at me soulfully, held me like that for a long moment, our eyes locked, tears in hers, then gave me a big kiss on the lips. From across the table, I felt Claire’s incredulity.

I stood and pulled out a chair. “Please, Madeleine, sit with us.”

“For one minute,” she said. “I have a table toward the back.”

I held the chair for her, slipped it under her as she sat and, as I did, she reached back and patted my hand. I sat and motioned to Claire. “Madeleine, this is Claire Raffo.”

“I’m so charmed,” Madeleine said, lurching up from her chair and across the table. Claire, in a similar move, met her, mid-table, where they bridged, then kissed and held each other.

“It’s wonderful to meet you, Madeleine,” she said. “I’ve heard so much about you.” Claire was now complicit, all in like me, playing along.

What the heck, I thought. “Claire and I are engaged.” I chanced a quick glance at Claire. She looked at me and smiled.

“Oh, my God!” Madeleine exclaimed, then kissed me, made the bridge with Claire again and kissed me another time when she sat down. “That is just the most wonderful news. But so young. You’re so young. But listen to me. It’s none of my business. When you find the right one—and I know this because I was seventeen when I married my Prince Charming—you know.” She wagged a finger. “You two know exactly what I’m talking about. Don’t you?”

Claire and I beamed. I even felt it—as if we were really getting married. I reached across the table and Claire took my hand.

“When’s the big day?” Madeleine asked.

“We’re in no rush,” Claire said. “Maybe a year or so.”

“You’re smart,” said Madeleine. “I’m so nosy, but I have to see the ring.”

Claire removed her left hand from her lap and slid it across the table to Madeleine: a slender silver band with a fake jade pebble at its crown. I had been with Claire when she bought it for a dollar at the Red Quill, a five and dime across the street.

“Oh, my God!” This time in a near shriek that occasioned glances toward our table. “That’s just gorgeous! I’m so happy for you two. God love you both. Such exciting news.” Then to me: “I know how happy your grandmother is about this.”

“She’s ecstatic,” I said without hesitation.

“How is she?” Madeleine asked. “It’s been forever, I don’t know how long, since she and I talked. She told me you’re at Bucknell, and you’re going to be a lawyer like your papa. She’s so proud. She didn’t mention the wedding.”

“Joey proposed just a week ago,” said Claire, covering like a champ, and Madeleine nodded.

I instantly liked being Joey DelGreco and had the knack for it too. I wore a white shirt, jeans and flip-flops. I was thin and strong and tan from working construction all summer. I had just seen *Citizen Kane* with my mysterious fiancé with whom I sipped coffee and ate Reuben sandwiches, latkes, and apple sauce. I was bright and handsome: I studied pre-law at Bucknell. I was Joseph David DelGreco. Little Joey—which might mean my dad was Big Joey DelGreco, a gunslinger lawyer, maybe a kingpin racketeer, who’d long ago salted away my ample inheritance.

But there was the matter of this grandmother of mine whom Madeleine had mentioned. And what the hell, really, was I doing—and Claire too—perpetuating this masquerade? My mother’s name—my real mother—was Rita Sweeney, Rita Schiaretta Sweeney. My dad—my real dad—was Travis Sweeney, whose parents had died before my

birth. My real mother's real mother was my only grandmother, and I rarely saw her, if at all. She and my mother shared an unspeakable secret that had something to do with my mother's father, Federico, after whom I was named, who perished when his cobbler shop had inexplicably burned to the ground in 1942. Rita's life—and, by extension my history, my very birthright—was a vast, labyrinthine estate, like Kane's Xanadu, a maze of triple-locked rooms to which I was forbidden entry.

But Joey DelGreco's grandmother was fine, absolutely thriving. I had just seen her Sunday, three days ago, when the whole family, as usual, dropped in on her. This is what I told Madeleine.

"Marvelous," she said. "I bet she made pizza."

"Nobody makes pizza like my grandma."

"And that divine chocolate cake with seafoam icing. A masterpiece."

I smiled and nodded.

"You look just like your grandfather, Giuseppe, a good man. You were named for him. Gone too young." Tears again appeared in her eyes.

I smiled and nodded again, then slightly bowed my head out of respect for my new dead grandfather.

"You're a good boy," Madeleine said, as if to reward me. Then to Claire: "How about you, Honey? Are you in school?"

"I'm at Pitt, studying Psychology."

"God love you young people," she said. "So smart. Minds of your own. Nobody tells you what to do." Then back to me, nipping in to kiss me again. "I can't get over how handsome and grown up." She motioned toward me and said to Claire: "Since diapers, I've known this one. Now look at him. Look at you both. Like movie stars. Important people."

"What about you, Madeleine? How are you?" Claire asked.

Madeleine slightly lifted her hand from the table, fingers splayed in a spider, a gesture so familiar, so exquisite—that meant, in essence, *What does it matter?* "I do fine," she said. "I stay busy. I need to be in closer touch with people like Joey's grandmother."

Claire took her hand from mine, reached across the table and patted Madeleine's hand. "Come sit with us, Madeleine. There's plenty of room. Join us, please?"

"I don't want to intrude on you young people. I just had to say hello. I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw Little Joey sitting here. I shouldn't call him *Little*."

"You can call him anything you'd like, Madeleine," Claire said.

"That's absolutely true, Madeleine," I added. "We'd love for

you to sit with us.”

“You’re nice,” she said. “I’d love to. I’ll be right back. All I have is coffee.”

Madeleine nipped off, and Claire and I looked at each other and smirked.

“What in hell are you doing, Joey?” she asked.

“I don’t know. But you’re doing it too. Why’d you ask her to sit with us? How will we get out of this?”

“She’s lonesome.”

“I know.”

“I love you,” Claire said.

Claire had never said that to me before. I don’t think anyone had said that to me before. She had fallen for Joey DelGreco.

What was I doing? It was obvious Madeleine had me mixed up with someone else and, instead of stringing her along, I should have told her from the outset that I wasn’t Joey DelGreco. I was Fritz Sweeney (Claire called me, exclusively, *Frederick*, my given name, and had once told me that “No one is just a Fritz.”). But I didn’t want to part with this new persona that had been handed me by a stranger who seemed to know me from elsewhere. A better me, the me I aspired to. Madeleine—whom I liked very much, and she clearly liked me—was suddenly part of my life, or this other life of mine, as Joey DelGreco, that I had my foot in the door of and tried to imagine. Kane forgot who he was and exchanged one life for another—a kind of amnesia that surely afflicts many from time to time.

And, of course, I was having a good time, being clever and feeling important, deftly improvising an entire identity at the expense of Madeleine. Sooner or later, I’d hit a dead end, and Madeline would find me out. But I wanted to go on with the charade a little longer and see where it led. For the moment, I didn’t want to go back to being Fritz Sweeney. Claire could have halted it instantly as well, yet she had signed on without hesitation.

A future with Claire would be a maze from which I’d never emerge: navigating a life of interminable interpretation, nothing black and white, neither yes nor no, nothing settled, dead end after dead end. Claire seemed able to see into that future, but I could not. I knew she and I would never marry, or maybe I knew we should never marry. Nevertheless, as Joey DelGreco, with whom Claire was so smitten, I was prepared that night to spirit her and that buck ring off to the all-night Ordinary and disastrously declare, “Till death do us part.”

Madeleine rejoined us with her little cup of coffee and dainty saucer. I stood until she sat.

“Such a gentleman,” she said. “Such gorgeous manners. That’s what comes from the right upbringing. Our people, when they

Kestrel

came over here, had not a cent to their names, couldn't even speak the language, treated like scum. Then the Depression. Then the war. Me and your grandmother. We could tell stories. But now, look at you and this beautiful girl. Seeing you two—all the hardship and sacrifice was worth it.”

It looked like Madeleine might break down, but she took a sip of coffee, and smiled. “Listen to me, boring you two college people. Don't let your food get cold. *Mangiare*. You know what that means?”

When we nodded, she laughed uproariously.

Madeleine's hand shook as she brought the cup to her lips. Her eyes were wet.

“Are you alright, Madeleine?” Claire asked.

“Oh, I'm fine, Honey. You know . . . the old gray mare. I'll be eighty-one in April. It just creeps up on you and has no mercy.”

“You look terrific,” Claire said. “I hope I look half as good when I'm your age. But have you eaten? Have you had supper?”

“Look at me. Do I look like I'm on a diet? I eat all the time. Maybe just a little more coffee.”

“Maybe you need a little something to eat.”

“Claire's right, Madeleine. A little food will perk you up.”

“I should be treating you two kids, but after all these years, now on a fixed income, I still have to watch my pennies. But who's complaining? Every once in a while, I come in here. Reminds me of the good old days. My husband, Benny, and I came here all the time. We'd listen to jazz at the Gaslight, have a few cocktails, then stroll arm in arm across the street for corned beef sandwiches in this very room. He's gone nineteen years. March 29.”

The tears stalled in her eyes rolled down her cheeks, just the two, in unison. She dabbed at them with her napkin. I patted her shoulder. Claire hadn't touched her food. She placed half her Reuben and two latkes on an empty saucer and stationed it in front of Madeleine. “Share this with me,” she said.

“Oh, Honey, my God, I can't accept this.”

“I'll never eat all of it,” Claire assured her.

“God love you two.”

Madeleine seemed more animated, more with it suddenly. Maybe it was the food which she ate with relish. When the waiter strolled by, we ordered cheesecake and more coffee.

It was after five o'clock. Folks filtered in for beer and sandwiches. Young people with real jobs in dresses, khaki and seersucker suits; aging old-money Pittsburgh, Madeleine's age, in denim and madras wraparounds and summer jumpers, Lacoste shirts with that infantile alligator on the left breast, sockless in penny and tassel loafers.

The bar instantly packed. Waiters and waitresses peeled out the

swinging kitchen doors with trays of food. My real parents, Travis and Rita Sweeney, worked in restaurants, at least my dad did. My mother was a hostess at an almost unmentionable joint on Baum Boulevard. The sun, streaking the tables, leaned on the immense window front of the Gazebo. A beam singled out Madeleine and, for a moment, she was twenty years younger. With great pomp, she rose from the table.

“Running into you two this afternoon has been such a gift—to see you, Joey, after all these years, and your beautiful bride-to-be. And thank you for sharing your food and the cheesecake and all of it. Believe me when I say I can’t remember the last time I enjoyed myself like this.”

“Why don’t you stay another few minutes?” Claire said.

“I’m going to walk down to the corner and catch the 73 back to East Liberty. I still live in our little place on Lenora Street. It’s getting bad down there, but where am I going to go? Home is home—the house Benny and I moved into when we first married. We never had children, twice almost . . . I’m just thankful to have a roof over my head.”

Claire and I stood. We embraced Madeleine and kissed her. She dipped into her purse and produced a small heart-shaped casket with a Mother of Pearl patina, a gold cross at its center. She placed it in Claire’s hand.

“Open it,” she said.

Inside was a delicate silver rosary with tiny crystal beads. Christ’s nimbus fanned the transverse beams of the crucifix, at His feet furred *Italia*.

Claire sat back down and covered her mouth with her hands. “Madeleine,” she whispered, then she cried softly through her hand. “It’s too beautiful.”

“This is just a little something, an early wedding present. Whatever you want to call it. Congratulations, and God bless you.”

“We can’t accept this, Madeleine,” I said.

“It’s nothing. Honest to God. What am I going to do with this kind of stuff? My house is like that—what’s it called—the Sacred Heart of Jesus Store down on Liberty Avenue. And give your grandmother, your whole family, my love. Tell them old Madeline said hello. Madeleine DeSantis. And tell them *shame on me* for not being in better touch.”

“I’ll do that, Madeline,” I said.

She patted my cheek, and said, “Don’t forget me. I’ve never forgotten you.”

Then she walked out the door and disappeared into the summer evening thrall that awaited Claire and me.

