

FICTION

Adonis

BY JEROME CHARYN

I was 15 years old when Rosenzweig discovered me at the Frick Collection. We were standing in front of Rembrandt's *Polish Rider*, and he came up to me like Count Dracula bathed in perfume and said, "Young man, have you ever modeled before?"

Some nabob with a boutonniere was always trying to flirt with me at the Frick. But Rosenzweig was all business.

"I'm a freshman at the High School of Music and Art," I said.

He handed me his card—Rosenzweig & Co., with showrooms on Seventh Avenue—and said his chauffeur would pick me up after class.

"I wouldn't want a young gentleman such as yourself to miss a day of school, even if it might make him rich."

And then he was gone with that bloodless look of his, like a man made of whitewash. There

was a limo waiting for me after class on Monday. We rode down off St. Nicholas Terrace, away from the gargoyles of Music and Art, and into the heart

of Manhattan. Rosenzweig & Co. was the Cadillac of clothing cataloguers at the time, occupying a manufacturer's loft near the tiny synagogue for tailors at the corner of Seventh Avenue and 36th Street. It was like having an assault team on a single floor—showrooms, a printing press, photography studios, and a rat's maze of little offices where Rosenzweig's proofreaders and editors worked from dawn to dusk spitting out catalogues.

The racket was relentless; I had never seen such a hub of activity, with male and female models prancing about half-undressed. I had a terrible omen the minute after entering Rosenzweig's world of frosted glass. I recognized one of his models—Beth Bacharach, the Bronx bombshell who had dropped out of junior high last year and vanished from our streets. We assumed Beth had either been knocked up or kidnapped, and here she was on Seventh

Jerome Charyn's most recent novel is *The Secret Life of Emily Dickinson*. His study of *Joe DiMaggio* will be published next year. "Adonis" is part of a collection of stories to be called *"Bitter Bronx."*

Avenue, modeling brassieres. She couldn't have been much older than 16, but she had the dazed look of someone who was mortally wounded. She didn't even glance up when I said hello.

I should have taken Beth with me and run from Rosenzweig, but I walked right into that labyrinth and was photographed wearing a muscle tee shirt. I blame Marlon Brando. He had worn a muscle tee in *The Men*, playing a paraplegic with biceps bigger than ostrich eggs, and suddenly haberdashers all over town had tee shirts in their windows instead of bow ties. The photographer, called Gabe, stood behind his tripod with a little black cloth over his head. He couldn't stop muttering to himself.

"The cheekbones, the cheekbones—finally we have our Tartar look."

I was hired on the spot, before they had the chance to gaze into the developer. Rosenzweig and his accountant told me not to worry about working papers. I would be paid off the books, but I wasn't supposed to utter a word to my teachers at Music and Art. I would never have to skip a class, or ride the subway at night; a limo would carry me door-to-door. Of course I suffered—I was an art student who dreamt of Gauguin's tropical sun and Van Gogh's missing ear, and I had no time to paint. I had to read *Hamlet* after midnight, in the limousine, under the glare of a shivering lamp. But I had \$200 in my pocket every week—it was 1953, and we were in the middle of a recession. My father hadn't worked in years. He'd fallen into his own dark time. My kid brother was too young to shine shoes. My mother was blind in one eye and losing her sight in the other. I was our sole support.

I didn't wear as many muscle tee shirts after the Brando mania began to fade. I modeled turtlenecks, bow ties, sport coats, vinyl jackets, or whatever leapt into the national clothing craze. I never saw Beth Bacharach again, and I wondered if she was on the scrapheap of worn-down Rosenzweig models.

Needless to say, I lived in the "narrow" of a schoolbook and the blinking eye of a camera. But I did have one friend, also a freshman at

M & A. Miles Neversink. He was a runt, and I would protect him from certain seniors, who might have preyed upon Miles, except that I was tall for my age and had the Tartar cheeks of Rembrandt's Polish Rider (I would return to that portrait at the Frick whenever I had the chance, since it was like looking at some ancestor of mine, with his quiver of arrows and his riding crop).

Miles's dad, Arthur Neversink, was the most celebrated criminal lawyer in Manhattan; a menace in open court, he could flay any government witness, but he couldn't keep Frank Costello out of jail. Prosecutors were still frightened of Arthur. And policemen waved to him whenever they saw his silky white hair. There were rumors that he'd once been a taxi dancer in Hell's Kitchen and that Costello himself had sent him through law school. But I also heard that he'd grown up on the Grand Concourse, that his father had been one of the most prominent manufacturers on Seventh Avenue. I suspect he didn't need Frank Costello's largesse to finance his legal career.

He lived in one of those Art Deco palaces on Central Park West with gangsters and Jewish millionaires who had been shunned by all the other palaces on Fifth Avenue and now formed their own incredible clique. They were the new lords of Manhattan. Much of the West Side was still a slum, but they had their golden mile across the street from the park. And there were no muggers or highwaymen along this golden mile. Not because of the police, but because Frank Costello lived in the same Art Deco palace as Arthur Neversink, lived there on his short furloughs from jail.

That building would soon become my second home. On some evenings I was driven directly from Rosenzweig's Seventh Avenue fortress to the Neversinks on Central Park West; it saved a long trip back to the Bronx. Even when I arrived well after midnight, the Neversinks weren't asleep. There were dinner parties every evening. The main attraction wasn't the mob lawyer himself, but Mrs. Neversink. Miranda.

She must have been in her mid-30s at the time. She had sultry gray eyes that seemed to beckon you onto her own private moon. Her hair was slightly unkempt. She always wore a man's shirt and slacks that had never seen an ironing board.

She was a patroness of the arts. That might not have impressed most people, but it had a magical soupçon for a boy who studied painting and lived in the shadow of Vincent Van Gogh and his avatar from Wyoming, Jackson Pollock. She had plenty of Pollocks on her walls. She'd sat with him at the Cedar Tavern, shared his little cigars, long before he was known. Miranda had given him pocket money, and Arthur had helped him out of legal scrapes, since Pollock constantly got into fights during his Cedar Tavern days, pulling women's hair, battling with bartenders, as I imagined Van Gogh would have done had he lived in the 20th century.

I never saw Pollock at the Neversinks' dinner parties. I only saw his paintings on the walls with their lashing rhythm, as if colors could cry out—I would close my eyes and crash right into those time bombs on the wall. And then Miranda would pull me right back into her own terrain. Her musk was enough to make me sick with excitement. I was crazy about her men's shirts. I wish she could have modeled them in Rosenzweig's catalogues. That Seventh Avenue Dracula would have made a killing.

Miranda cursed like a longshoreman. It didn't come from her husband's gangster clients. It was from having been the companion to a band of rogue painters—Pollock, Rothko, de Kooning, Kline—the new gangsters of American art. Her pale eyes would be puffed out whenever I returned from Rosenzweig's after midnight. She would begin to sway.

"Kid, didn't I see you somewhere?"

I was bewildered. I thought she hadn't rec-

ognized me in her alcoholic haze. "I go to school with your son," I said.

"No, no, not that," she muttered. "I've seen your face—Arthur, isn't he a handsome boy? My Adonis."

She didn't mean Joey Adonis, Costello's partner in crime, who was looking after business while Costello was in the clink. She meant that minor god who was born with such hot looks he had to spend half the year with Persephone, queen of the underworld, or he would have been seduced by every goddess in ancient Greece.

Miranda must have had Persephone's prescience. A week later I was listed in Rosenzweig's catalogue as "Adonis." I had a page to myself, posing in jockey shorts and muscle tee shirts with a brooding look. It seems Count



Dracula had a lucrative sideline as a pornographer and a pimp. He sold shots of me to wealthy war widows, that is, women who had lost their husbands during World War II. He offered me a hundred-dollar bonus if I'd have dinner with one of these war widows.

I also graduated from the photography studio to the showrooms and the salons, where I could prance around on a platform in my muscle tee shirt, under the same blinding lights. I wasn't allowed to wash up or change my clothes after these performances. Rosenzweig would slick back my hair, as if he were grooming a prize pony, and with a plum-colored velvet jacket over my muscle tee shirt, I would climb into the limo, where a war widow was waiting. There was nothing sordid about these assignments. I would have dinner with the war widows in a rear booth at a Northern Italian restaurant on Ninth Avenue. I later realized that the restaurant was owned by Frank Costello, and that these widows had lost their husbands in some gangland version of World

War II. They might hold my hand at dinner, but nothing more than that. They were all stunners in their 30s and 40s who weren't permitted to marry again, according to some unwritten rule of gangland lore. These widows "slept" in the coffins of their slain husbands.

They couldn't work, but they could go back to school. The widows were as hungry to learn as hawks. I told them about Jackson Pollock, how he lived in the dizzying uncertainty of his art, how his explosion of splotches on canvas was Pollock's own avalanche of pain.

We drank wine that arrived in a cradle and cost a hundred dollars a pop, even if I was too young to drink. We ate chopped salads in silver bowls, broccoli brushed with burned olive oil, glazed carrots, goat cheese, and a hazelnut cake cut into two leaning towers, while we sipped coffee with a *tinto*—stain—of hot milk.

One of the war widows grew impulsive and kissed me on the mouth while we were in the limousine. She begged me to take off my muscle tee shirt. I did. She brushed my body with her fingers as a blind woman might have done, memorizing the details of my skin. She dug one hand under my belt and caressed the hair on my belly. Then she started to whimper.

"You mustn't think I am wicked," she said. "But it's been so long, and I have forgotten how a man feels . . . you won't tattle on me, will you, my darling Adonis? They'll lock me up for a month."

I stroked her cheek, and she leapt back like a startled deer.

"You mustn't," she said, "or I'll explode like Mr. Pollock."

Her name was Louise. I never saw her again. I hate to think that Frank Costello punished her from his federal prison in Pennsylvania. But it was all very confusing to me. I'd become a little whore for the mob; I'm fairly certain that Costello or Joey Adonis had an interest in Rosenzweig's catalogue company. But as Rosenzweig himself had predicted in front of The Polish Rider, I was getting rich.

Bankbooks leave a trail, according to Rosen-

zweig, so I kept my cash in a shoebox under my bed. In the Bronx, circa 1953, we paid our bills with money orders. And because I was busy day and night and my mother was half blind, and my father too forlorn to be much of a courier, the burden fell on my kid brother, who was nine. He had to dole out cash to the landlord and buy money orders at the savings bank. Soon he was my surrogate.

But the Adonis of Seventh Avenue was falling apart. I could wing it at school, and I didn't mind modeling under the lights, or having my own page in the catalogue. It was the monkey business in the limousine, that powerful eroticism of touch and no touch. I'd grown fond of the war widows and their sad tale of being buried alive. I gobbled up their sadness until it became mine. Miranda must have sensed my inky disposition, and she tried to pull me out of my own skin. She was having a shindig, a gala for indigent artists, and she wanted the two of us, Miles and me, to help her make and serve the hors d'oeuvres.

The shindig was set for that Saturday night, and so I feigned illness and begged off work at Rosenzweig's. I didn't want to sit in a limousine with another war widow, dine in a secret alcove at Villa — burn my lips on coffee stained with scalding milk. I spent the whole of Saturday afternoon with Miranda and Miles. First we had lunch on her balcony—smoked salmon on bread roasted in her oven—while we looked upon the greensward of Central Park, with its lake that was like a lopsided heart, and at the alien world of Fifth Avenue. We belonged to that clan of West Siders who never wore watch fobs or attended debutante balls. We had galas for indigent artists.

It was the most splendid afternoon I'd ever had, preparing hors d'oeuvres with Miranda and Miles. Miranda told me a little about her life. She had come to Manhattan with her parents from the Dominican Republic when she was 12, had lived on the Upper West Side, where she played Ping-Pong and chess, and attended Joan of Arc Junior High, which had more geniuses per square foot than any other school in America — scientists, writers, artists, musi-

cians, theologians, rabbinical scholars.

“Miranda, did you go to Music and Art?”

And suddenly there was a look on Miranda akin to Pollock, as if she were privy to a hundred little explosions under that beautiful mask of a face. Why did I think of Beth Bacharach, the bombshell who had disappeared from the Bronx? But Miranda wasn’t Beth. Miranda could recover from whatever wound she had.

“I wasn’t lucky,” she said. “My Papi died. I had to go to work. I quit high school.” Now she smiled, with only a hint of Pollock’s pain. “It was Music and Art. Where else would I have gone? A Latin bagel baby. The school had opened that year—our castle on 135th. None of the painting studios were ready. We walked around in all the debris. We had to set up our easels in the hallways. I loved it, that wonderful reek of turpentine. I left in the middle of my second year. The counselors all cried. They worried about what would happen to their bagel baby. But she survived. Look at this! A palace over Central Park. Two gorgeous boys.”

She hugged Miles and me, tousled our hair. And we helped her glaze the cupcakes; we rinsed the cherry tomatoes, chopped cucumbers for the gazpacho, put gouda and shreds of smoked salmon on the crackers, chilled the white wine. Miranda went to fix herself. And when she came back, she wasn’t wearing a man’s shirt—she was Persephone in a black dress. All the pluck had gone out of me when I saw that black silk cling to Miranda, her bared shoulders like two soft wings, while her arms moved with the dexterity of a magician’s uncoiling sticks.

I didn’t know any of Miranda’s indigent artists—I hadn’t struggled enough in any craft to call myself indigent. I couldn’t lash out with a rhythm of my own. I had none. My canvases looked like explosions of porridge. But I served Miranda’s hors d’oeuvres. Then the doorbell rang, and there was Count Dracula. He was startled to see me. And I was no less startled. But it all made sense, particularly if Frank Costello was financing the catalogue business and wanted an occasional Adonis for his war widows.

“Little one, I thought you were in the Bronx nursing a cold. And what’s your connection with Madame Neversink?”

Before I could utter a word, Miranda whisked me away.

“He’s poison,” she said. “I don’t want you to have anything to do with that guy. He’s my husband’s partner. I never invited him here.”

But how could I avoid Rosenzweig? My livelihood depended on him. We would have been on welfare without his catalogue company. And when I caught him whispering in Miranda’s ear, I teased out the connection between Rosenzweig and her. That’s where she’d gone after a year and a half at M & A—into Dracula’s catalogue. She must have modeled brassieres, like Beth, and graduated to the showrooms, which meant dinner dates with manufacturers and mobsters who muscled out other cataloguers, and a bit of syncopated prostitution under Seventh Avenue’s veil.

And that’s when Arthur entered the story, as Frank Costello’s man. It wasn’t so hard to imagine. Call it 1938, and Frank Costello is the crime lord of Manhattan, with a finger in every racket, including Rosenzweig & Co. He asks his lawyer to check things out on Seventh Avenue, Shmatahland. Arthur saunters into the showroom, expects to find a bimbo in leopard-skin slacks, and discovers Miranda instead. She’s 18 and bored to death with the whole business of modeling, of having to wrestle with mobsters in midtown hotels. And he has to make a very quick calculation. He recognizes the burn of intelligence in her eyes, and her beauty, defiant and timid at the same time. Either he grabs her away from this street of rags, or he’ll lose her to some manufacturer. He proposes on the spot.

She smiles at him. “Mr. Neversink, we haven’t even met.”

“Makes no difference,” he says.

“What if I can’t come up to your expectations?”

“Then I’ll suffer,” he says.

As a wedding present, their Uncle Frank offers them a duplex in his own West Side apart-

ment-palace. Costello has been fuming. He can't even rent a closet on Fifth Avenue. His long beak isn't welcome there. He plans to wage war against Fifth Avenue, kidnap doormen, set canopies on fire. Arthur has to talk him out of it. "They'll win, Mr. Frank."

"How?" asks the king of crime. "Arthur boy, they don't got the muscle."

"But they have something else—tradition. They have created their own invisible wall. Try to breach that wall, and your whole gang will disappear. They tolerate us, Mr. Frank, as long as we destroy our precincts. Enter theirs, and we'll all strangle to death."

"Ah," said Costello. "My Einstein, who keeps me from getting strangled."

And the king went off into his galaxy of crime, far from Fifth Avenue, while Arthur prospered and Miranda gave birth to Miles. He kept returning to Rosenzweig's showrooms, looking for whores, while Miranda gravitated to the Cedar Tavern. She ran with Pollock, became Rothko's muse. That much I would learn from Miranda. She was still in love with her errant mob lawyer, who had proposed to her before she could catch her breath and figure out who the hell he was, and she still had a fondness for Uncle Frank, who would send her a dozen roses on her birthday and continue to plan his assault on Fifth Avenue.

I slid deeper and deeper after that shindig. I didn't mind slaving for Rosenzweig and Frank Costello. I just couldn't bear the cloistered lives of those war widows. Why didn't they rebel, flee from their coffins? But there wasn't a trace of rebellion in their bones. I'd become the doll they could dine with and fondle in the back seat of a limousine. I soaked up more and more of their sadness, the suicidal indifference to their own fate. I faltered at school. I could scratch out compositions under that rattling lamp of the limo, but I was frozen in my studio classes. I couldn't paint. I'd lost my belief in Van Gogh's missing ear—it seemed like madness, not the mystery of great art.

I still had a mountain of cash under my bed. My strutting in the showroom, on Rosenzweig's little runway, had pushed us out of poverty. But I, and not Miranda, was Beth's secret accomplice. I had inherited her mortally wounded look.

And one afternoon, while I was on Rosenzweig's runway, under the sweltering lights, I heard a ruckus. I thought the cops had come to take revenge on Costello and all his enterprises for having dared to covet Fifth Avenue. But it wasn't the cops. It was Miranda in her man's shirt. She ripped out the wiring of the lamps; glass splintered on the floor; bulbs shattered. I listened to Rosenzweig rant and roar.

"Darling, you could go to jail. Mr. Frank won't take kindly to this."

"And you," she said, "shouldn't have high school students become your whore."

I emptied out the little locker I had at Rosenzweig's, with all my schoolbooks, and then Miranda drove me uptown in her Lincoln Continental. She wasn't addicted to chauffeurs. She preferred her own saddle, she said. But she drove like a wild woman, weaving through traffic, cursing at cab drivers. She started to laugh—and cry.

"Aren't we a pair, kiddo? Two whores on the lam."

And that's when she told me about her former life at Rosenzweig & Co. The manufacturers who danced with her like drunken bears while she fell asleep in their arms, the mobster who couldn't make love until she strapped him into a corset . . .

"But Miranda, you could have worked in a linen shop."

"Kiddo, it would have come to the same thing—customers ogling me and bosses patting my derriere. I was available meat until Arthur happened along, pretending to be the big bad wolf. He swept me right out of Rosenzweig's rooms."

"The way you did with me."

"Didn't I tell you? A couple of whores on the lam."

We roared up the West Side, went into a coffee

shop on 95th, near Joan of Arc. It was one of those Manhattan sugar bowls where school kids spent half their lives. But it didn't jump at night, even with a jukebox. This sugar bowl was a somber place, with darkened booths and sinister coat hangers shaped like hatchets and bulls' horns.

"I lost my cherry in one of those booths," she said. "I was a precocious kid."

I couldn't quell my own curiosity. "Who was the culprit?"

"My art teacher at M & A. He lived across the street with his wife and three girls. He was the neighborhood Gauguin. He was going to abandon his wife and run to Mazatlán with his canvas stretcher and me . . . he's still wallowing on 95th."

Both of us had lime rickeys. You have to nurse a limey rickey along until the syrup begins to settle, and you have to sip it from a straw, or you'll never get that delicious sting. Miranda and I made out a little. It was nothing serious. She was in love with her Concourse lawyer, and I was one more Adonis who happened to be her son's best friend. But I did taste the tartness on her tongue.

She found me a job at a haberdasher's on Broadway. I was the local celebrity, because the other salesclerks recognized my picture in Rosenzweig's catalogue. But my celebrity soon wore thin as we had to compete for sales. They were sharks who could land a customer much quicker than I ever could. I borrowed from the owner, fell into debt. I stopped going to Music and Art. The haberdasher's ate up more and more of my time. And I had no limousine service. I had to ride the local in and out of the Bronx. Each stop was a kind of purgatory. Freeman Street. Simpson Street. Intervale Avenue . . .

I did have a rescuer, and oddly enough it was the king of crime—not Costello himself, but one of his custodians. Count Dracula. He entered the shop with that whitewashed complexion of his, and all the clerks began to shiver. The haberdasher's couldn't have survived without his catalogues.

He halted in front of the shop's spindly owner. "I believe this young man owes you some gelt," he said, without ever pointing to me.

"It's nothing, Mr. R., honest to God. A trifle."

"A trifle?" Rosenzweig said, tossing him a wad of cash tied with a rubber band. "Shame on you, Paulie, taking advantage of such a fine young fellow. An artist, even. He's my own discovery. I met him at the Frick."

And then Rosenzweig came to my counter, his nostrils widening, as if he meant to suck all our men's furnishings into his nose like some magnificent anteatr.

"Have you had your fill of selling cuff links? How long haven't you been to school?"

"Two weeks, Mr. Rosenzweig."

"A month," he said. "Did I ever keep you away from your books?"

He started to cry in front of the salesclerks. "Look what's become of you! You'll die here without the sunlight. We can't make do without our Adonis."

And the negotiations began. Count Dracula was all about negotiation, nothing else.

"I won't have dinner with war widows."

"All right," he said. "I'll say you're allergic to food. But you'll meet with them for 15 minutes, right in the showroom."

"Ten," I said. "Not a minute more."

I collected all my things and went out the door with Dracula. We drove down to Shmatahland in his limousine. The streets were cluttered with men and boys wheeling enormous carts of merchandise—Seventh Avenue had a hum I've heard nowhere else, the sound of human traffic spinning off the walls of buildings, bouncing up and down, until the air itself was swollen with a soft, incessant noise that entered showrooms and factories right under the roofs. I wasn't sentimental about my stay in Shmatahland. I was a high-priced prisoner of war. But there was nothing diabolic about that noise. It was the hubbub of angels, brutal and busy, but angels nonetheless. ●