

Resurgius Excerpt 1 Book Life Prize

He was certain that he had been named by his mother, not his father. He thought of the torment of his school days. Even the progressive schools that she had sent him to were torture chambers if you bore such a name as “Serge” and had been taught to sit down like a girl when you peed.

He followed Bettina Battle and Hettie Freed into the cavernous living room, acquired a glass of Dom Pérignon with little stars rising in it, and took two of the “Rosebud” wafers topped with darling little pink vaginas—someone mentioned that they had been baked by the up-and-coming renowned feminist sculptor Judy Chicago—pregnant with Beluga, that he was offered, and from thence tried to become a wall-flower in a room full of aggressive kudzu—professional women of every size and shape.

From somewhere across the room, above the general uproar, he heard his mother’s voice, a dentist’s drill hitting metal, saying, “It makes me furious to think what these old-boy networks get away with. Look at the Masters in Augusta! No women allowed, my ass! Why, that mighty woman athlete, the great Babe Didrickson Zaharias could’ve whipped every one of those fat-assed, pot-bellied, dong-brained, male chauvinist pigs at golf or anything else. She could kick ass! It simply infuriates me. No women! They’ll rue the day!”

Along with the Champagne and cookies, Serge had somehow acquired a flyer stating the purpose of this gathering. “. . . to make the old-boy networks rue the day. . .” he read, glancingly, “. . . to pay tribute to the Great Tallulah Bankhead, our Lunar Mother of the Month, who went about naked in the Twenties, fearlessly, sweeping men underfoot like so much trash . . .”

Occasionally, the donkey-eyed head of a male feminist floated by as if on a pike, wearing an enthusiastic rictus for a smile. Like himself, these poor souls no doubt belonged to some powerhouse of a woman. Then someone started chanting “Women power! Women power!” Serge recognized the plangent voice of his Auntie Hoover, “She-Who-Must-Be-Obeded,” she who subjected Serge’s attic room, or garret, as he preferred to think of it, to random searches for any indicators of masculine mischief, such as “Playboy” magazines, jockstraps, or condoms, she who had driven him from his secret meditations, from his poetry, and out into the cruel world—a basso profundo whose notability in any crowd could only be outdone by his mother’s cry of “FURIOUS!” Her voice was even more irritating to him than Auntie Hoover’s. He could feel his heart screaming in his chest every time he heard it.

His mother, Hettie Freed, and Bettina Battle gathered around the gleaming pink piano—an extraordinary instrument, Serge now noticed, because its three carved wooden legs were those of a woman in high heels.

Hettie Freed asked for the crowd’s attention. She told them that Janet Hoover had a few words for them.

“Clear the way!” Bettina cried, making a path to the piano for Auntie Hoover. Bettina liked to be close to power—her motto was: “It’s valuable to have a wise companion, and wiser to have a valuable one”—and Auntie Hoover was a valuable companion.

Bettina had thrown her arm over Auntie Hoover’s shoulder and was reluctant to release her, but was forced to do so as Auntie Hoover, tank-like, ground her way up the piano stool and onto the piano to address the room from the mount, so to speak. She stood like a mighty Maillol, arms akimbo, and waited for the crowd to recognize her position of authority. One member of the crowd did, immediately, and shouted, “O mighty woman, empower us all!”

“At each of our monthlies we gather to pay tribute to a mighty woman of the past. Tonight we are going to honor the great actress and free spirit, the late and great Tallulah Bankhead. Hand me that poster,” Auntie Hoover ordered, and a life-sized cardboard cutout with a bracing flap was passed up to her from the crowd. She stood it next to her, stood at attention, and saluted it. It was a cutout of the naked Tallulah, done in the style of Augustus John, wearing only a string of pearls, along with other natural products of womankind.