

URSULE MOLINARO

*Rumors/
Murky Haloes*

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Rumors/Murky Haloes

A man-size 16th-century ragdoll sits smiling in a corner of my background, encased in family myth & gore. Leaking sawdust. Bearing testimony to the material existence of a legendary French executioner by the name of Denis, for whom Henry VIII allegedly sent, in 1536, to have him cut off the adulterous head of Anne Boleyn. Granting her the last favor of: a French executioner. —Who became my ambiguous ancestor, thanks to the interference of a tavern owner's wife from Pau.

According to the family legend, the frail, pale-eyed Denis made his appearance in Paris around 1533 or 1534 as the official replacement of the old executioner, who had missed four necks in succession.

— Which a number of his neighbors didn't consider a sufficient reason for turning his stocky familiar figure with a wife & four as-yet-husbandless daughters out of the house behind the execution square (the present Place de l'Hotel de Ville; since 1806) in which he had officially lived for the close to fifteen years that he had been enforcing 16th-century justice, in Paris. To make room for a lithe newcomer. Who had come out of nowhere. & didn't need two rooms to live in, alone.

The tavern owner's wife had the notion that the new executioner had come from Pau. Because of a windy way he had with his "h's". Where she had come

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from, seventeen years before, when she had been eight months pregnant with her daughter.

—Where pale eyes & pale hair had been his natural apprenticeship for an outsider's profession: according to some who thought that the new executioner was the best they had ever watched. & began to affirm that he had chosen his profession out of dedication to humanity.

—Whose progress prudishly ignored the human breeding process, to focus instead on grafting fruit trees & crossing mares with asses. While the quality of people was allowed to deteriorate.

Since the beginning of the century it had in fact dropped to a doom-level of depravity, which the new executioner was hoping to curtail: Cutting off heads that had become depraved to the point of crime.

To which he did not wish to add the crime of sloppy workmanship —unlike the old executioner— meting out blunt or clumsy punishment. Which was why he kept perfecting his innate skill—Perhaps there lay an executioner on the groundfloor of our civilization, twitching like a city dog dreaming wildlife.—& practiced at home; behind drawn curtains; on the neck of a man-size ragdoll, stuffed with sawdust. Which he had brought with him from Pau, or from wherever he had come.

Whose neck he painstakingly restuffed & reseeded, after each practice decapitation.

Acquiring the reputation that was beginning to spread his name beyond the confines of Paris beyond the borders of France: That his ax had a magic touch which allowed the about-to-be-executed to lay a trusting head upon the execution block, & concentrate on salvaging his soul.

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A growing number of people began to affirm that the new executioner was a saint. —Another Saint Denis, like the undisputably saintly first Bishop of Paris. — That he had stripped his frail pale-eyed life of all the satisfactions other men lived for: living alone, without as much as the creature comfort of a housekeeper. Contenting himself with celibate tavern meals, which he ate at a table by himself, isolated behind the screen of awe which his profession & his steadily spreading fame drew around him. —Always at the same window table that looked out on the execution square. (The former Place de Greve; until 1806).

Others, who doubted the new executioner's saintly dedication to humanity — out of a distrust for anyone whose roots they could not lay bare — affirmed instead that the blasphemously named Denis lived alone because he hated people. Whose heads he enjoyed cutting off. Which was precisely why he had been appointed executioner of Paris.

—By the high-placed protector he obviously had. —At the court? In the church?— Who had obviously been trading favors: finding a niche for somebody's perverted son. —Unless the perverted son happened to be the high-placed protector's own unavowable bastard.

—With the innate thirst for getting even that bastards grew up with.

Which had inspired the adolescent executioner's favorite game: Cutting off the heads of dolls. Which he stole from a legitimate sister.

Which malicious tutors found or fashioned for him. Dolls, with faces that bore a malicious resemblance with the legitimate sister — a legitimate brother — with the disavowing protector.

Dolls whose faces were the boy-executioner's own

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creations. Which he tirelessly repainted & rearranged, to bear the features of his growing hatred of people. In preparation for cutting off their heads. (—Perhaps there lies an executioner at the bottom of creative imagination, hooded like a cobra dreaming apples.)

While anxious tutors stood & watched, apprehending the appearance of an unmistakable tutor face, under the unsettlingly skillful hands of their charge.

— nsettlingly delicate hands, with exquisite almond-shaped nails on the fingers.—

After watching a number of executions, those who believed in the new executioner's high-born-bastard perversity began to challenge the believers in his saintliness to go inside the house behind the execution square (the one-time Place de Greve; since 1806 the Place de l'Hotel de Ville) to see how the new executioner lived alone behind drawn curtains. But even the most determined curiosity hesitated at the sight of the two dogs that had suddenly lain on either side of the new executioner's door, one early morning. Two dogs that stood tall as calves & quivering when they jumped to their feet at the sound of someone approaching.

The tavern owner's wife felt that the dogs were meant for her, when she looked across the square from the tavern window that first morning, & saw them lying outside the new executioner's house.

Where she had been the afternoon before. & had seen his practice dummy.

But she hadn't told anyone what it looked like. Not even her husband.

She had only told her husband & her daughter that the new executioner didn't want a housekeeper, after she came back from his house.

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The afternoon after his twenty-fourth execution, which the tavern owner's wife or anyone else who had watched it was not likely to forget. Because that was the first time anyone saw a head drop in the basket with a smile on the face.

Before they all grew used to the smile. & watched for it. & would have felt cheated without it.

The tavern owner's wife could not believe her eyes, at first, when she saw the smile form on the fear-congested face, in the growing morning light. When she saw the face relax the instant the ax touched the neck: as though the blade was transferring its lightning radiance to the buck-toothed mouth.

—Which used to grin into the nightmares of the tavern owner's wife & perhaps into the nightmares of other women who had been raped by the man on the execution block. Seventeen & a half years before his execution, when the tavern owner's wife had been on her way up from Pau by herself to join her husband in Paris. When she had been eight-months pregnant with her daughter. —Who had grown up to be her husband's daughter more than hers.— Which she had never told her husband, in case he said that she had asked for it.

It was because of the unbelievable smile like relief spreading over the nightmare face on the execution block that the tavern owner's wife had gone to the new executioner's house, finally. To appease her daughter, who had been crying to keep the new executioner's house since the evening he first walked into the tavern. A clammy March evening, in 1533. Or 1534. But she waited until afternoon, in case the executioner slept, after an execution.

—She thought that he must still be sleeping when he didn't answer her knock. She quietly opened his

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door, & tiptoed inside: Into a dark unfurnished room, with only thick curtains before the window. Where she paused, smiling to herself, thinking that the new executioner could certainly use a woman's hands — her daughter's — to bring a little creature comfort into his empty life. Before she tiptoed on, into the next room. Which looked less dark — unless she was getting used to the curtained twilight that was not unlike the pale morning light of executions — & had a straw bed on the floor. & one chair in the window corner.

On which the new executioner was sitting — completely motionless — still wearing his official execution robe, but without the hood. The ax gleaming on his motionless knees. — Smiling the same blissful smile she had seen come to the nightmare face early that morning.

The tavern owner's wife smiled back at the seated executioner. Timidly; respectfully asking if he could perhaps use a housekeeper.

To which the seated executioner made no reply. But continued to sit, motionless & smiling. At her, standing there, praising the qualities of her daughter. — thinking: what a frail, small-boned man he was, for a man of his profession.

Suddenly, his voice had been behind her back, thanking her politely. Nearly scaring her out of her skin.

When she spun around, she found herself face to face with another executioner. Who was standing. Not wearing his robe. & not smiling. At her, standing transfixed, looking from the unsmiling face back to the smiling face in the window corner, & back. — Making her feel like an utter fool when she realized that she had been offering her daughter's services to his practice dummy.

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When an eerie feeling crept over her, with the realization that the practice dummy looked exactly like the new executioner. Except that the dummy was smiling, & the new executioner was not.

& the tavern owner's wife asked herself what kind of man the new executioner was if he was indeed a saint to be cutting off his own head in daily practice.

—Except on days of executions. When he cut off the heads of criminals.

—To whose criminal faces he transferred the release-smile from the dummy's face.

& she continued to stand transfixed. Wondering if the new executioner would stop practicing, now that he had succeeded in transferring the smile.

Or if he would continue to practice, because he could never be sure that he could do it again. & again; every time. To every criminal face that lay before him on the execution block.

When a wave of compassion washed over her almost washing her away as she stood looking into the new executioner's polite blank face, to which he had not been able to transfer the smile.

& she wanted to kneel to the new executioner, & kiss his hands —which looked surprisingly frail, for a man of his profession; more delicate than her own; with beautiful, almond-shaped nails on the fingers— but the new executioner had placed one frail-looking hand under one of her elbows, & was steering her out.

Back through the empty thickly curtained room. To his as-yet-dogless front door. Where he thanked her once again for her concern. With blank politeness. Assuring her that he needed no one. No one.

Which was all the tavern owner's wife told her husband & her daughter, when she returned to the tavern.

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Which made her daughter cry. Because her daughter was sure the new executioner was keeping a mistress who was keeping his house for him.

But the tavern owner was sure the new executioner was impotent. Which he wanted no housekeeper to find out.

Which made his wife wonder if women had perhaps been cruel to the new executioner. Before he came to Paris —from Pau; if he did come from Pau, where women people had seemed to be less cruel than in Paris. —If that was why he lived alone.

& her daughter cried more. Because she was sure she could cure the new executioner's impotence, if only he let her be his housekeeper.

But the tavern owner didn't want his only daughter going into the house of an impotent man. Who was trying to get even, cutting off the heads of other potent men. Who died laughing at his impotence, like the last one that morning.

& his wife began to say prayers in her head, for the new executioner, because it was occurring to her that the new executioner had killed the woman who had been cruel to him. When she mocked him when he came to love her, in his impotence.

—& that it was the woman's mocking smile he kept cutting off together with his head in daily expiation.

— Except on days of executions, when he cut off the heads of other murderers. Which he did, however, not sew back on.

— Except that the smile on his practice face was a blissful smile. Of redemption.

Lying in bed that night close to the edge of the bed she shared with her husband the tavern owner's wife found herself wondering what it might be like to

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lie with an impotent man. Quietly. In his arms; holding one of his delicate hands. Without the nozzle of potent desire pushing into her, regardless of whether she was open or not.

The next morning, the two dogs had lain on either side of the new executioner's door. & she had felt that they were meant for her, as a warning not to come offering him any more services.

Before the rumor began to circulate that: the new executioner had unnatural relationships with his dogs.

A rumor which seemed to be confirmed —No wonder!— when he took the dogs to England with him, in the spring of 1536.

When people rushed to his house. & were surprised to find his door wide open. As though he had expected them to come rushing. Making them practically fall into the first completely empty room. Where they found nothing but thick curtains in front of the window. Where they caught their step, before they strolled into the second curtained room. Where they found only a straw bed on the floor. & one chair in the window corner.

To which the tavern owner's wife had rushed ahead of the others. To get hold of the practice dummy before anyone else saw that it looked exactly like their new executioner. Like his twin, except for the smile.

But he had also taken his practice dummy with him to the court of England.

—Where he had allegedly refused to go, at first. Refusing to cut off the head of a woman. Until Anne Boleyn herself beseeched him. Sending him a miniature of herself which exposed her small slender neck. Which she trusted no one but him not to miss. Trusting no one but the French executioner not to send her running headless around the execution block. Making

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a spectacle of herself, before Henry & his new bride.

— Neither of whom nor anyone else among the watching English courtiers saw if Anne Boleyn died with a smile, because of the hair that was falling over her face. Because she had lifted her hair from her small slender neck with her twelve fingers when she laid her head on the execution block.

—When the French executioner's ax had raised itself, as though by reflex.

The executioner looked changed fatter to the tavern owner's wife, when he returned from the English court, two seasons later. With his two dogs. & —she assumed— his dummy.

— Unless he got rid of the dummy in England, when he learned to smile.

At the reddish-haired English apprentice he was bringing with him. —For whom he had perhaps traded his dummy?— Who ate with him at the window table. & smiled back at him, with long teeth. Which reminded the tavern owner's wife of the buck-toothed rapist. Which made her shudder when she accidentally touched his hand, handing him his plate. When she noticed the reddish hairs between the knuckles of the apprentice's long bony fingers. Which were lying on one of the executioner's forearms, as he talked.

—In a funny-sounding French which made the executioner smile more.

Which made the tavern owner's daughter giggle, every time he said something.

Until the rumor began to circulate that: the executioner had an unnatural relationship with the reddish-haired English apprentice. Which was not surprising: The English being what they were.

When the tavern owner's daughter began to cry:

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Because she had fallen in love with the reddish-haired English apprentice since he first walked into the tavern behind the returning fatter-looking executioner.

—Who also looked paler to the tavern owner's wife. Who thought that the food he had eaten at the English court couldn't have been very good, to have put so much weight around his middle. Making him look like a fat monk, when he stood behind the execution block in his official robe.

Which wild hands were tearing off the executioner's back, one chilly early execution morning. Just as the tavern owner's wife was about to sit down at her window table, preparing herself to see yet another smile of redemption appear on yet another criminal face.

Unprepared to see her daughter's wildly tearing hands expose the shrunken-soft belly of a recently-delivered woman, in the growing morning light. A naked woman's body, with the executioner's hood over the head, that stood shivering behind the execution block, protecting milk-swollen breasts with frail-looking hands.

Before it teetered, & fell to its knees, as dozens of wild hands forced the hooded head down on the execution block. —Her daughter's hands prominent among them.— To the scanded chanting of: De—nise De—nise—

When the tavern owner's wife gagged at the realization that she had been in love with a woman, for the past two years. Or longer. Ever since the afternoon after the first smile, when she had offered her daughter's services to the dummy.

De—nise De—nise De—nise De—nise.

Gagging at the sight of her love's unknown body being put to death. Clumsily. By a shaking ax, which the wild hands were forcing into the shaking hands of the

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reddish-haired apprentice. Forcing his bony fingers with the reddish hairs closed around the handle. Raising his wildly shaking arms.

When the tavern owner's wife flew out into the square. Through the increasingly frantic scolding of: De—nise De—nise. Past her daughter's wriggling back. Propelled by the thought that the unknown body of her love had given birth to a child. Which the wild hands had perhaps overlooked, in their frenzy.

Although they had not overlooked the dogs. Whose two headless bodies lay on either side of the wide-open door.

Through which the tavern owner's wife flew. Through the curtained empty front room to the straw bed on the floor in the second room.

— Where her love had lain with the reddish-haired apprentice: Which made her wince. Where she found the naked practice dummy lying smiling on top of a recently-born male child. That was close to suffocation.

Which the tavern owner's wife took into her arms, & carried off to Pau. Together with the dummy that bore the features of her love.

Eye witness accounts of beatific smiles appearing on the faces of persons about to be executed abound since the beginnings of capital punishment. An implication of redemption, to redeem the spectacle of legislated murder.

& it is an undisputable fact that my frail, pale-eyed twin brother Dennis stole one of my ragdolls. Whose face he repainted & rearranged until it looked like me. Or like himself. —Except for its ineradicable ragdoll smile.— Before he gave it back to me: in two pieces. After he cut off the head.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

URSULE MOLINARO (1916-1999) was a prolific novelist, playwright, translator and visual artist, the author of 12 novels, two collections of short prose works, innumerable short stories for literary magazines, and dozens of translations from French, German, and Italian. She lived and wrote in French in Paris until shortly after World War II, when she came to New York in 1949 to work as a multilingual proofreader for the newly formed United Nations. Just a few years later, having realized that she would stay in the United States, she made the decision to systematically retrain herself not only to write, but to dream, think, and speak in English.

During her lifetime, Ursule Molinaro's poems and short stories appeared in a wide variety of magazines, including many prestigious names such as the *Chelsea Review* (of which she was a founding editor). In the latter part of her life she developed a method for teaching creative writing that relied wholly upon the oral and taught creative writing at several universities and in her home. She was an avid acrosticist and a self-trained artist (her paintings and collages appear on the covers of her books that are published by McPherson and Co.).

Fiction

Bastards: Footnotes to History (two stories)

The Autobiography of Cassandra, Princess & Prophetess of Troy,

<https://tinyurl.com/sd9a6sx> and for Kindle <https://tinyurl.com/sqm5wwd>

Positions with White Roses, <https://tinyurl.com/trvqfzm> and for Kin-

dle <https://tinyurl.com/raxoxna>

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Thirteen Stories, <https://tinyurl.com/s98xjo6>

A Full Moon of Women, <https://tinyurl.com/snh9zkb>

The New Moon with the Old Moon in Her Arms, <https://tinyurl.com/w938sa4>

Power Dreamers: The Jocasta Complex, (Kindle) <https://tinyurl.com/raru88g>

Demons & Divas: 3 Novels, <https://tinyurl.com/uffcotx>

Fat Skeletons

Green Lights Are Blue

Sounds of a Drunken Summer

The Borrower

Encores for a Dilettante

Sweet Cheat of Freedom, Analects of Self-Contempt

Non-fiction

The Zodiac Lovers

Life by the Numbers