

John Tavares

## Black Swan

“Did Ned drive his wife’s Jaguar to the ferry terminal?”

“Ned took the subway and streetcar. Bailey drove her Jag to a board meeting.”

“A board meeting on Sunday?”

“An emergency board meeting.”

“Ned married money, but he’s still takes the loser cruiser.”

“I’m here. We can talk as if I’m here. I’ve always been a bus guy. Public transit works best in the big city.”

Ned first met Bailey, a lifeguard at the outdoor Olympic size swimming pool he found himself visiting shortly after he quit painting, graduated from university, and still faced uncertainty about the future and careers. Smitten with her broad shoulders, slim hips, and handsome face, he always caught her gazing at him, from the lifeguard stand rather intently, and wondered. He was never certain if she was worried about the quality of his swimming.

“I thought I’d ask to take her to lunch at a pizza restaurant near the pool, but I was shy. I thought she was too good looking.”

“That sounds like a cop out—looks are relative,” Rueben said.

When Ned realized he was becoming preoccupied, he stopped swimming laps at the outdoor pool and swam in Lake Ontario and several times he thought he came down with hypothermia. “I forgot about her for years afterwards, but I remembered her the odd time. When I hooked up with her later, she claimed she had no memory of me. I wondered how she could forget.”

“Did you ever think you might have the wrong girl?”

“Yes, but her figure and face gave her away,” he said.

“I think you got the wrong girl,” Leon suggested.

“Her looks are unmistakable: broad shoulders, slim hips.” He remembered vividly her long dark brown hair, tan skin, distinctive eyes, Eurasian, blue, and probing expression.

“Sounds like you were preoccupied,” Reuben said.

“You setting off my gaydar again—attracted to a woman with broad shoulders and slim hips,” Leon said. “I think you’ll come out of the closet some hot summer night yet. Anyway, sounds like how our Lance met his ex-wife-to-be.”

They helped Lance move out of the house, but Ned heard Lance decided to rent an apartment as part of the couple’s respite, part of a trial separation.

“Lance is getting a divorce?” Leon said.

“She suspected all along,” Reuben said.

“Why couldn’t she have accepted him the way he is?” Ned asked.

“She’s too conservative and upright, and uptight.” Leon rubbed coconut-scented suntan lotion into his soft white flesh. “She couldn’t accept reality.”

“Could she have at least put the children first?” Ned asked.

“You guys just don’t understand,” Leon said. “She was conservative, and upstanding, but jealous. She was simply not into open relationships.”

“They were married for twenty-seven years,” Ned commented. “Don’t you think she suspected?”

“Probably, but their relationships had limits, and in all fairness to her the lines,” Leon said, drawing a square in the air, “were legit. Lance simply didn’t respect boundaries any longer. Maybe he was getting naïve, soft in the head. I don’t blame the old girl for ending the farce.”

“Farce? Twenty-seven years of marriage is a farce?” Ned asked. “It seems a shame to break up a family over a gay father.”

“The proper term in this context is bisexual. Ned, not everyone is open-minded and progressive as you,” Reuben said, laughing.

“I doubt you’re even so open,” Leon said. “When it comes to relationships, talk is cheap.”

“And fidelity is priceless?” Ned asked.

“You don’t understand,” Reuben said. “You’re a strange animal, hanging out with gay guys you won’t have sex with. I don’t know why we tolerate you. I think you need time to accept your duality or ambiguity, and you may come out of the closet yet.”

“I think not,” Ned replied.

“So, you come to this beach for the topless women?”

“Most people don’t go topless or nude at this beach, anyway. I visit this beach because there’s usually no noisy children. I don’t have to worry about stage moms and bullying dads.”

They lounged on a group of beach towels and blankets on Hanlan’s Point beach, drinking beer, apple cider, and vodka coolers, after they helped Lance move his belongings and appliances out of the house and

into an apartment in a condominium building downtown. Every so often one of the men amidst the parties and gatherings and groups of sun bathers, swimmers, gawkers, and revelers strolled or staggered from the beach. On foot, in tight swimsuits, underwear, or completely nude, a few explored the branches of trails winding through the sand dunes and bushes that hugged the western shore, the sandy beaches, which lined Centre Island, exploring the terrain for a quick casual encounter on the trail or in the bushes.

As a group, they regarded the beachgoers, toned, tanned, oiled, muscular, fleshy, black, white, in very colour and shade, tanned and sunburnt and pale. Most visitors to the clothing optional beach did not go naked, Ned insisted, and the nude compromised a visible minority, since most wore some form of swimsuit, underwear, board shorts, Speedos, bikinis, swimsuits, and a bewildering array of summer wear and bathing suits.

They even discussed the history of the clothing optional beach and how the beach played a large role in the gay and lesbian and transgender community. Then Leon handed Reuben his compact binoculars and pointed in the direction of the northern shore of the beach. Reuben glanced through the binoculars and spotted a shaky image of a tall statuesque woman barefoot in a long black dress, carrying high heels and a Hermes handbag, walking along the beach shoreline, between the driftwood, towels, snipes, and washed up logs.

“She is rather conservatively dressed. Looks like she just walked out of a board meeting.”

“Doesn’t she look the least bit familiar?”

“She’s got a hot body, but she’s draped in modest kind of modest business outfit.”

Bailey’s staggering gait, her scrunched shoulders, her swaying walk—her features looked familiar to these day trippers. If he had seen Bailey closeup, Ned, distracted by the sand sculpture moulded by a lean

muscular woman, would have noticed her sour expression as she muttered condemnation. Reuben glanced through the binoculars a second time and handed the pair to Ned.

“Isn’t that your wife?” Reuben asked.

Thinking he was joking, Ned glanced through the binoculars along the narrow stretch of sand lining the shoreline of the western side of the island. As soon as he spotted Bailey’s distinctive broad shoulders and lean frame, draped by her long modest black dress, set incongruently against the sandy beach and dunes, he said, “Oh, my god, it is.”

“Don’t panic. Just improvise.”

Bailey strode along the shoreline, as he glanced around for a quick escape route. Quickly realizing she would have spotted him, as he made his escape and fled, he stood his ground amidst the group of men and a few women on towels and beach blankets, clustered in a circle on the fine grey beach sand lining the shore. His friends could understand the reason he would flee and run in panic; she was a formidable woman, with a presence, but he decided to stay and confront his demons.

A tall, statuesque woman, large boned, with larger than life features, Bailey strode to their group. She was beautiful, he thought, but she diminished her own looks and appearance. He figured she deliberately camouflaged and concealed her curves and figure beneath stylish conservative and modest dresses. He didn’t understand that for Bailey looks were a distraction and maintaining appearances could be a nuisance.

Leon commented Bailey looked as if she just walked out of a board meeting, which, he later learned, was indeed the case, a board meeting of the fifth or sixth largest self storage and industrial REIT in Canada.

As a college student, Bailey worked summers at many public beaches in Toronto as part of her duties as a municipal lifeguard. Now, though, she wondered why these people weren’t at home, with their families,

or working. Why did they need to exhibit themselves and display their bodies to strangers, particularly when many didn't possess appealing physical qualities?

Bailey stood before Ned, as he sat uncomfortably shifting on the sand. He abruptly got to his feet and wiped the sand from his backside and hairy legs, defensively anticipating she might strike him with her handbag. She had this disconcerting tendency of looking directly in his eyes. No other women looked in his eyes so intently; he remembered this trait initially attracted him. He sometimes felt as if she had a portal into his mind and could peer deeply into his soul. That was how he originally ended up falling for her.

"A friend at work was showing me her Instagram. I didn't know or understand Instagram. I heard of Instagram, but she insisted on showing me—this—this social media, where millions of girls and young women take countless pictures of themselves and post these selfies on the Internet. I've never seen such selfishness and shameless narcissism and exhibitionism in my life. Here I thought the world was moving towards a better place, but now there's Instagram, where teenage girls fetishize their figures and monetize their butts!"

"It's a form of expression. It's about positivity, including body positivity."

"My boobs are bigger and buttocks are firmer than yours, and I'm willing to show more of my shapelier body and strike more provocative poses than you is positivity?"

Once again Ned wondered why Bailey married him, even after she told him she hated men and never wanted to be in a relationship with another man. "It's about feeling good about yourself. I'm okay and you're okay."

Bailey pointed her high heel in accusation. “You—you—still you argue.” Bailey wagged the high heel shoe she clenched like a rock in her hand. “You, and your liberal sensibilities. You, and you’re progressive politics.”

Bailey turned around and contemplated the nude forms and bikini and Speedo clad bodies on the sandy beach. Then she pivoted abruptly and hurtled the high heel at him. The polished, shiny black leather shoe with a spiked heel went flying over his shoulder. When she bent down to retrieve her shoe from the sand, his friend Leon looked at her backside. Smiling approvingly, he nodded and gave Ned a thumb’s up.

“This friend showed me pictures of her and his friends at the beach—this clothing optional beach—as if there isn’t enough perversion and exhibitionism in the world—particularly on the internet. Then I noticed you in the background with your friends. I asked about the man in the background with the Blue Jays cap and a skimpy swimsuit.”

“It was my underwear, Bailey. It was probably the fashionable underwear you bought. You threw these tight briefs at me and dumped my loose-fitting boxers in the garbage.”

“Probably because they were soiled and smelled. My friend and co-worker obviously didn’t know we were married, or maybe she did and wanted to surprise me. Anyway, she certainly did deliver a shock, especially when she mentioned you were a regular here. She saw you so much at the beach she thought you camped there or lived on the island. She even thought you were homeless.”

Bailey stood before the shoreline, contemplating the sunbathers drifting on air mattresses and the boats and yachts, with party-goers, drinkers, and loud discotheque music, before she turned around abruptly. “Is this your idea of a staycation?” Bailey gestured in the direction of the bushes near the shoreline. “Is this where you get your blow jobs and hand jobs from strange men in Speedos?”

“Whoa!”

“Is that why we haven’t been able to have children; there’s no sperm after you blow a load in the mouth of a boy toy on the trail.”

“Whoa! You know that’s not true.”

“Talk about hitting below the belt!” Reuben said.

“That’s not me, Bailey. Listen: you got entirely the wrong idea.”

Having rarely heard her speak in such a manner, Ned started to believe she was under the influence of drugs or alcohol. Unaware of the stress she experienced in the boardroom earlier that day, he thought she may have been drinking, or took excessive amounts of her anti-anxiety medication, which certainly had the effect of loosening her lips, which he usually took before speeches, lunches, conferences, and board meetings. The pill taking and drinking oftentimes resulted in her being too candid, expressing herself with too much candour, a quality the media and business reporters admired.

Ned’s friends laughed, but then she became nasty.

“Ned, I have powerful friends in the construction industry, who always obtain results and get the job done. They can hire strong men to take care of you. You know what this means, Ned. Au revoir. Adieu. Good-bye. So long.” Bailey waved her hand with the high heel shoe in a gesture of good-bye. “Separation. Divorce.”

His friends and acquaintances howled in a delight of dismay. The onlookers, wearing fashionable minimalist bathing suits and short, hip underwear, chortled, laughed, grimaced, and joked amidst the sand, sunshades, umbrellas, recliners, and lawn and lounge chairs.

“And remember you signed a prenuptial. You won’t be able to scam me.”



Ned rose from the fine dark sands, where he picnicked on the beach with his circle of friends. Trying gestures of affection and endearment, he gave her a hug and peck on the cheek, but she was too distraught for comfort or solace. From her Hermes handbag, she pulled a snub-nosed revolver, which the outgoing head of corporate security gifted her a few years ago.

“Back off, Ned. We’re finished. I’ll have my lawyer call your lame pencil pusher or paralegal when the divorce papers are ready.”

Bailey turned around and strode, with her distinctive broad shoulders and marked stoop, back along the narrow beach and stretch of sand, past the boats, yachts, sunbathers, and swimmers, towards the water taxi, near the ferry docks.

After Bailey died, Ned was told by a friend the reason she walked with a stoop, akin to a limp. In the second year of her stint as a competitive swimmer on the varsity team, probably shortly after he first encountered her, she got into a barroom brawl with swimmers from a competing university. Then she fought with the police officers summoned to handle the call about a public disturbance. She insisted the university security guards and bar bouncers not touch or manhandle her intoxicated friend and teammate. They were too handsy with her friend for her liking. In her state of mind, clouded by alcohol, she believed they were fondling and groping her. She kept insisting they take their hands off her friend and leave her alone, but they refused to comply with her request, even though her girlfriend hadn’t instigated the fight and wasn’t even involved. She felt as if she was in control of the situation, when the police and university security guards forcefully expressed a contrary opinion.

Bailey refused to go down without a fight, which resulted in her being beaten and clubbed on the back and shoulders with a baton. She suffered injuries, which she never recovered from fully and which

ended her extracurricular activities as an elite swimmer. Ned was never able to determine the truth of the rumours; the few friends from Bailey's younger years refused to delve into details about her personal history.

"That does it," Reuben said. "I'm calling the cops."

"Don't call the cops. This is not a 911 call. This is a simple domestic dispute that can be handled amicably and amiably."

"Well, make up your mind for a change, Leon, is it amiable or amicable? You know as well as I someone is going to get hurt," Reuben said.

"Ned can handle it," Leon said.

"Wow. Ned's wife is hot, but look at her hair—it has such thickness and body and there's so much of it, but it's a tangled unkempt mess," Leon's friend said. "It looks like she was testing the aerodynamics of her hairstyle in a wind tunnel."

"Tut—tut! Show some respect!"

"She has no sense of style, and her dress is so 1898," Leon's friend added.

"She's a CEO and president," Reuben said. "And she doesn't need to be objectified."

"Ned, you should look after her."

Having packed his beach gear into his duffle bag, Ned donned his loafers, khakis, Panama hat, and button-down Oxford shirt. These wardrobe choices Bailey dictated and insisted Ned wear, after she grew disgusted with his distressed jeans, torn, tattered t-shirts, and scuffed running shoes.

Ned surmised she was in crisis, but he figured the best approach was to treat this as a routine matter, as if he brought the wrong brand of toilet paper or yoghurt or the wrong vintage of wine home, although even then he remembered how overwrought and emotional she could become at his errors.

Still, he thought he should call her medical doctor or even the police; he sensed something snapped in her psyche. She had gone beyond the usual temper tantrums and emotional breakdowns he remembered from the past.

He first met Bailey through the family office of the Black Swan Investment Group where he helped manage her investments. His firm assigned him to help disentangle her mother's chaotic estate. Her mother inherited her father's fortune—made through managing pensions funds for school boards and unions and selling group property and casualty insurance to school board employees, mainly teachers. When he recovered banks accounts and investments long forgotten and misplaced—monies Bailey believed he could have easily transferred to his own accounts—she thought he was a man with integrity. He told her he was merely doing her job. She wondered why she was still single.

When she took him for what was ostensibly a business lunch and asked him, he said he was a bit of a high school entrepreneur and earned money selling used books, records, cassette tapes, compact discs, and movies in a shop at the back of his uncle's video and pinball arcade on Queen Street West. He loved the arts and enjoyed painting, but his small business consumed so much of his time. He worked so hard in his last year of high school he landed in the hospital. Afterwards, he decided to sell his small business and drop out of high school to pursue his artistic dreams and ambitions. Instead of selling and marketing mass produced art, he decided, he'd try to create his own individual art. With the kind of lifestyle he led as an artist, he soon realized he could never have a partner of his own or a family of his own—not for love or money.

The fact he had a sister with fetal alcohol syndrome and alcoholic parents didn't endear family life to him, either. When he came to terms with the fact he'd never earn a living wage as an artist, he decided the time arrived for change. He took business administration at university. When he became established as a

financial advisor, he spent the next several years buying his own art from collectors and galleries. Since he was not a brand name artist his artwork was cheap. Then, every evening during the summer, he took the ferry to Centre Island and burned a canvas in a campfire on Hanlan's Point Beach at night.

One autumn afternoon when a friend asked him to join him on his yacht for an excursion to the island, he backed up a rental van and, with his amused permission, loaded the yacht with canvases. When they camped on the island that night, he burned the batches of canvases in a huge bonfire, much to the hilarity and bemusement of his yachtsman and his friend, for whom a Picasso was merely a paper place setting with soup stains in an overpriced restaurant.

After she discussed her plans with him, Bailey moved her money from the firm and put him in sole charge of her investments. She persuaded him to start his own family office, taking her as his sole client.

In any event, when Ned arrived home, after he took the ferry and subway train and then the streetcar home, he found himself in the presence of drifting dark cloud and a strong industrial odour emitted from the garage. When she opened the garage door, after he couldn't locate the remote door opener, the engine in her Jaguar was still running. The garage was filled with exhaust smoke.

After she took the tubing from the shop vac and attached the nozzle to the exhaust and the other end of the vacuum tube into the passenger window of the Jaguar, Bailey became unconscious as she slumped behind the steering wheel, with Elgar's "Nimrod the Hunter" from the *Enigma Variations* on repeat of the dash CD player. The shop vac tube fit perfectly over the exhaust tailpipe. Bailey often criticized him for taking the industrial and commercial strength shop vac, with its powerful suction, to the carpets and rugs inside the house. She thought he didn't understand finery and quality and the need to care of art objects. Cleaning house, he took the shop vac to custom and handmade carpets and rugs worth thousands and

thousands of dollars. With the powerful suction, she thought, he risked damaging the material and under skirting. She complained his idea of a good time was a cup of coffee with a book in a Starbucks. She complained his idea of a gourmet meal was a Big Mac and poutine in McDonalds. She hated the fact he regularly drank black coffee and peanut butter on whole wheat toast for breakfast and preferred milk and breakfast cereal for lunch and a can of tuna and cream of mushroom soup for dinner—the eating habits of a starving artist, he joked. The boy needs to be trained, she said. He was a hopeless case and his habits and upbringing caused her consternation and despair.

Panicked, he covered his mouth with the undershirt he pulled off and hurriedly removed the fire brick from the accelerator pedal. He threw her tall limp slender body over his shoulder and laid her on the asphalt of the driveway. He thumped her chest, interrupting the compressions to hurriedly call the emergency number. An ambulance, fire truck, and police cruiser arrived shortly thereafter. A struggle to keep her alive continued in the emergency department at Mount Sinai Hospital, but she was declared dead after midnight. The President and CEO of Canada's sixth largest self-storage and industrial real estate investment trust company, depending upon the business pages of the newspaper consulted, was deceased.

Thus began the successive line of mourners and aggrieved to their home in The Beaches. The procession of her friends, most of whom Ned never met or knew, also grew. The number and variety of Bailey's former friends from her younger life was a total surprise and even a shock. The women were comforting, nurturing, full of empathy, solace, and outright sympathy. After they showed him pictures of them together, in dreadlocks and nose, cheek, navel, and tongue piercings snorkeling, surfing, swimming on exotic beaches and visiting prime vacation destinations around the world, he finally asked them why this was a part of her life she never revealed to him.

“She didn’t like her father, so she never wanted to enter the family business. When her father died, the opportunity was too good to resist. But she thought she needed to firewall and compartmentalize her life.”

“Then why did she marry?”

“She transformed into a businesswoman, grew in success. She wanted to project a conservative image, though she had liberal beliefs.”

“And she wanted children.”

“We tried, and we tried,” Ned confessed, his teetotaler lips loosened by the wine with which they plied him, “but we could have neither.”

“She actually had a baby with her first partner.”

“What?”

“Samantha. That was the name of her daughter, but their breakup was messy. The eggs were not hers, although it was her brother’s sem—”

“Her brother’s semen?”

She nodded as she poured leftover wine into her glass.

“Her estranged brother?”

“Yes, I think he’s the reason she never mentioned it. At least I get the sense she never said anything about it to you. She could be secretive, even with her friends, and she always justified her silence, saying it was the only way to get things done.”

“You’re right—about her and her need for secrecy,” Ned said.

“Her proclivity for privacy—that’s exactly right. She justified it by saying someone would have persuaded her not to do what she was intent on. She always stubbornly considered hers always the best course of action.”

“We always joked about her immaculate conception. Anyway, her partner won sole custody.”

Surprised, he spilled wine on his lap as he rushed to the washroom and buried his face in the towel as he sobbed.

Bailey told him she was estranged from her scuba diver, parasailing brother and, accusing him of being an alcoholic and a domestic abuser never wanted to speak to him. Then he drowned in a snorkelling accident in Thailand. Ned could never understand the importance of an heir—why she was so intent of having offspring, so anxious to have children. He could never reveal to her that, against the wishes and recommendations of his family physician, he had a vasectomy. “The extremes she went to.”

“She could be mercenary, Ned. She usually knew what she wanted. She could be ruthless in attaining that goal. Sometimes she was ready to pay any price.”

“But why couldn’t she accept a little looseness, a little frivolity.”

“Business and reputation meant everything to her.”

“Don’t you think she expected loyalty?”

Afterwards, the negative media coverage and lawsuits began. At a contentious, chaotic, and argumentative board meeting that occurred just before she took the ferry to Centre Island and hiked to the beach, she lost her position as chief executive officer and president of the real estate investment trust her father founded. She was even escorted from the C-Suite by a security guard who she slapped in the face.

Then she was arrested by the police, who released her after the security guard refused to press charges. The security guard said she only called the police because of instructions she received from her supervisor.

The following week, negative news coverage started appearing in the business press. Stock in the company Bailey headed plummeted as allegations of extraordinary accounting practices were uncovered. Analysts and a former chief financial officer accused her of corporate governance misconduct, cooking the books to cover up financial practices that benefitted her personally, and revealed the extent of the company's burdensome debt.

Bailey's self-worth and self-image was wrapped around the idea of effective management and the proper stewardship of capital, so subsequent developments, Ned thought, she would have observed with keen interest. Her niece, whom neither of them had seen in years and years, inherited The Beaches house, but she let him stay in her Auntie's getaway downtown condominium until his partner's estate was settled. Her niece nonetheless made it clear, however, he was slated to receive nothing. Ned found living in Bailey's condo downtown became impossible. Former employees and shareholders picketed the entrance, since Bailey headed the real estate investment trust that owned the building. Business headlines shouted the condo building was another example of a poor stewardship, unfair corporate governance, and an underperforming investment since analysts thought she was in a conflict of interest and overpaid for the high-rise condo, after she bought the building from her father's family trust of which she was a beneficiary.

Reporters pestered Ned for comments and demanded to know the whereabouts of missing funds. He always knew Bailey to possess integrity, so he was disoriented by the allegations. He moved out of the condo after he received an eviction notice from the sheriff and the bankruptcy trustee sold the building to pay off corporate debt.



When Ned returned to the family office of Black Swan Investment Group, where he first met Bailey and had her as a client, the chief investment officer and portfolio manager didn't want to hire him since he left the firm on Bailey's account. He thought Ned was tainted by scandal—the negative publicity associated with a former client. He looked for work steadily but he remained unemployed before he found a job teaching night courses in financial mathematics to accounting students at a community college in Etobicoke.