Group Novel: Chapter 11                                                                                          Richard Forque

              In early spring of 1890, a private road was built through two miles of forest to a remote peninsula along the coast of Rhode Island. This spit of land was shaped much like a dog’s leg. It connected to the mainland at its narrowest point, which the locals called the paw. It was there that massive stone pillars were erected to support huge wrought iron gates. From the gates, the road continued following a crooked path south that terminated at the peninsula’s blunt end, the hind quarter of the dog leg.

            To the west lay the bay, a long narrow stretch of water with vertical rock walls around its perimeter. It was by technical definition a bay, though it was most assuredly not a safe harbor. The strait leading into it was narrow, shrinking to less than sixty-feet wide. At low tide, vicious rocks were visible just breaking the strait’s surface. At high tide, they were dangerously hidden. Locals that plied the waters along this coastline knew better than to try and enter it. A strong ocean current ran parallel down the coast past the mouth of the bay. This current, assisted by northern winds and tidal effects, regularly drove dangerous amounts of water through the bottleneck and into the bay only to return it again to the ocean in equally violent fashion as the tide went out.

            The four-story structure, completed in 1895, commanded an unobstructed view of the Atlantic Ocean to the east and the mainland across the bay to the west. What constituted the mansion was by any definition an architectural monstrosity. The buildings, constructed of native stone, were all massive in scale. They included a barn, utility buildings and the ten-bay carriage house, with attached servants’ quarters. The carriage house long ago became a garage and the servants’ quarters were used for storage. The Peninsula at the paw was just over a quarter of a mile wide. From there it got progressively wider until you reached the compound located on the 200-acre hind quarter.

            The Mansion was laid out as a pentagon with an open central courtyard. The building contained in excess of sixty thousand square feet of living space spread over three stories. Above the third story, rose fourth story battlements at all five corners. It was obvious the woman who built the compound was incredibly wealthy. As to her identity, that was a complete mystery. During the construction, she was rarely seen. Day to day business was handled by a stern German architect who lived on site and managed all aspects of the construction. Through the years of construction and subsequent maintenance, the Manor helped support the local economy.

            Several times a year, the woman would arrive by coach, unannounced, with a driver and manservant. She dressed completely in black, a large bonnet covering her head, her face hidden behind multiple black veils. The servant, a tall black man, always rode in the coach with her and stayed close behind her during the visits. She would spend several hours walking the grounds and surveying the construction with the architect. In time, she would return to the carriage. Once she was aboard, the driver would flick the reins and the carriage would drive into the distance.

            When she finally took up residence, a personal staff of seven accompanied her, consisting of a house manager, secretary, personal maid, cook, driver and butler. The house manager, driver, cook and butler were all responsible for hiring their own assistants or labor from the local population. Once in residence, she was reclusive, never seen in the villages. No one ever observed her leaving the compound.

            Estate workers would see her daily, walking the grounds, always shrouded in the same black garb accompanied at a discrete distance by the seventh member of her staff. No one could mistake this man for anything other than what he was, a bodyguard. At six foot five inches tall, he towered above everyone. He was always Impeccably dressed and groomed. His hand tailored Saville Row suits were artfully cut and fitted to conceal a pair of colt double action revolvers carried in shoulder holsters. His broad black face was always passive, showing no emotion. His eyes were a different story, they were intensely black and seemed to reflect no light.

             There existed In the local county museum two photographs purported to be of the woman, though there was no actual proof they were her image. In 1932, the house was abruptly vacated, and a local contractor was hired to board it up. When he arrived to survey the extent of the job, he was amazed to find the house was completely empty, devoid of anything.  There was no furniture, pictures, clothes, none of the detritus or debris that is the essence of human occupation. It was common knowledge that local staff never accessed the second and third floors. Only a small portion of the first floor was actually occupied. The photos were alleged to have been the only things the contractor found in the house.

            The first photo was of a woman in three-quarter profile sitting at a table with the Russian mystic, Madam Blavatsky. In contrast to the aging, stocky, square faced Russian, this woman was young, her pale blond hair swept up in high Gibson Girl style; a small woman with a stunning face. The second photo was of the same woman. Her stunning face was now framed by blond hair cascading loose about her shoulders. She was nude kneeling in front of an ornate incense burner, skin so white she looked sculpted of bone. Directly behind her stood an equally naked far less attractive Alastair Crowley, posed as the Vitruvian man.

            The compound, once abandon and boarded up, sat empty until 1940, when it was taken over as a coastal watch and radio relay station. After the war, it was again boarded up and it stayed that way until 1978 when Blackstone and Jefferies acquired the property. What followed was a 3-year restoration, done on both a massive and equally meticulous scale. For the second time in its history, the compound at Dog Leg Peninsula fired up stimulating the local economies.  No expense was spared. At the end of the restoration, the house was for all intents and purposes a new house posing as a grand old house. During the restoration years, it was Jefferies who occupied the property and oversaw the project.

            Blackstone, never one to roost long in any one place, was able to assuage his wanderlust by going out and becoming the public face of their growing legal business empire. He returned parodically to the property for R & R. Jefferies would outline to Blackstone where he thought the next frontier would be. In time, Blackstone recharged would pack a kit and take off pursuing the next venture.

             The second week of May 1987, Blackstone returned, motoring down the estate’s long driveway in a canary yellow Ferrari Testarossa. Jefferies heard the Ferrari’s horn, a famously obnoxious multi pitch screech from a mile away. To an uneducated ear the random short and long beeps sounded like a kid screwing around. It was actually Morse Code. The message was a simple “Don’t Shoot” repeated about every thirty seconds. Jefferies headed to the front door wishing Blackthorn would stop with goddam the horn.

            The Ferrari parked parallel with the front door and Édward crawled out of the ridiculously low car. Short and fit, he braced at mock attention, snapped a salute, spread his arms and yelled at the top of his lungs. “Mon Capitaine…you miss me?”  Cracking a huge grin, he cocked his head sideways and flashed his pale blue eyes wide while nodding his head up and down.

            Before Jefferies could respond, Edward continued, “I gotta surprise!”  Then grinning ear to ear, Edwarad high stepped like a drum major strutting around the front of the car to the passenger side. With a flourish, he opened the passenger door and assisted a small, skinny blond girl out. As Blackstone escorted her around the car, it was immediately obvious she was six or seven months pregnant. Her enormous belly on her thin frame bordered on cartoonish. In obvious discomfort, she waddled around the car chewing Charles’ ass out.  “Fuck that car. It broke my back. Where’s the bathroom…god-dam I gotta pee!” The first thought to cross Jefferies mind was. “I hope the fuck she’s legal.” It turned out she was, but just barely. The newly minted Charlotte Blackstone was six months pregnant, seven months shy of her nineteenth birthday and twenty years younger than Edward Blackstone.

             Two weeks in the isolation that was Blackstone Manor was enough for Charlotte and she went to war. Jefferies, from a distance, observed that when Charlotte was unhappy she turned into a somewhat demonic creature. April 1st, two weeks after Charlotte’s arrival at Blackstone Manor, Edward drove her off the estate in a very comfortable Toyota FJ-60 Land Cruiser; their destination was a new house in an upscale neighborhood of Providence, Rhode Island.

            Parenting, from day one, was handled by surrogates, highly paid nannies supported by assorted au pairs, cooks and housekeepers. At age 12, each child in turn matriculated and was frog marched off to elite boarding schools. This lifestyle was pure selfishness on the part of both Edward and Charlotte. Edward very shortly, went back to traveling for business. To his credit, he maintained contact with the kids by phone a couple of times a week. He would send postcards or antique objects of art from far off places. He made it a point to be available at all holidays, and school breaks. Summers were weeklong gatherings on Memorial Day, the 4th of July, a week in August and Labor Day, then it was back to school and the winter schedule.

            With Edward and Charlotte’s departure that day, Jefferies' life, for the most part, returned to the ordered existence he had known for years. In the early years, Edward and the zoo, as Jefferies referred to the growing Blackstone clan, made halfhearted attempts at creating a sense that this manor was a place where their lives were grounded. Truth of the matter was, they all hated the place and that included Edward. For a few years, they tried a family Christmas on the estate, mostly finding themselves trapped inside while the brutal Atlantic weather lashed the property.  The third year of that was enough. Thereafter, Jesus’s birth was celebrated in the Grand Bahamas, Spanish Riviera or the Seychelles Islands, any place but Blackstone Manor. The problem with Edward and Charlotte was, they were Edward and Charlotte.

            When Charlotte finally bugged out on the family, not much really changed. Then five years later Edward did his disappearing act. He did not leave for any of the reasons the children thought. He wasn’t depressed or suicidal or anything other than selfish. The partnership of Blackstone and Jefferies had become what the pair called “stupid wealthy”. The simple truth was, Blackstone had grown so bored with the entanglements of life that he decided it was time to simplify. The pair were in mutual agreement that it was time to divest their holdings, pay the taxes and stuff mass quantities of money into Swiss Banks. The game of making money had become so easy it was boring. They were also well aware that the liquidation of a highly diversified portfolio of assets; stocks, bonds, real estate, bank partnerships, and a multitude of international businesses valued in excess of ten billion dollars; took time. Five years later to be exact, Jefferies was almost done with the liquidation. Throughout the process, Blackstone had quietly acted as the front man in the field, meeting with a small army of lawyers who in turn acted as the fronts on the business deals. Virtually everything had been sold, most of which none of the kids had ever been aware existed.

            Edward Blackstone’s absence was engineered so he could observe how the kids ripened up on their own. With the exception of Ashley, most of the fruit appeared to be damaged. The two boys took after their mother in more ways than their complexions. They were selfish, self-absorbed and unfortunately like their mother, not real bright. There was an inheritance, but if they wanted it, for once in their lives they would have to work for it. The clues they had stumbled across were planted by Jefferies. The photo and the records of a land purchase had served their purpose. The zoo was on the scent.