

Centipede

by Joe Kapitan

Five o'clock, and Madame choosing her evening legs. Elizabeth assisting. Elizabeth will continue to assist until midnight, despite the chaos, at which point the authorities will tell her such assistance is no longer necessary.

The closet where the legs are kept is not a closet whatsoever, but originally intended as the guest quarters of someone better suited for guests, or perhaps as a trophy room meant to practice thanking academies, and roughly large enough to hold three-fourths of Elizabeth's rented bungalow. Madame's estate is a zip code of these spaces - The Room for the Former Conducting of Emotional Prime-Time Interviews. The Room for Storing Previous Outpourings of Public Sympathy. The Hall of the Waist-Up Mirrors. Most are vacant now. When the last of the settlement money disappears ("Friday", agrees the team of accountants), the bankers will order the Leg Room emptied, and the realtors will do their best to fill it quickly with Lady Gaga's costume collections, and the tabloids will reacquaint America with the little orphaned paraplegic girl, the lone survivor of that 1960 Pan-Am Chesapeake crash, now all grown up, but America will just want to know how the hell two-thirds of a person could engineer the evaporation of one and a half billion dollars.

Elizabeth clears her throat, recites Madame's schedule.

Madame selects her Swimming Legs, vinyl-skinned over Styrofoam cores. Then the English Garden Legs, lavender-scented, and rubber-treaded for maneuvering amongst kneeling Mexican landscapers. She points to the Oscar Party Legs, the ones a drunken Jack Nicholson tried to violate after he won for Cuckoo's Nest, and the understated Nonprofit Fundraiser Legs she wore to Jerry Lewis Telethons, and the fake-tanned State Dinner with Reagan and Gorbachev Legs that the Secretary of State made her cover up with a long hemline, because their shade matched Gorbachev's

birthmark. She continues pointing. Elizabeth radios Martin for assistance. Martin radios others.

Madame descends the south elevator and reaches the edge of the pool that can be seen from low orbit, the largest of the turquoise moles on the aerial visage of Carmel, California, and directs her staff to deposit all legs in the water. In the distance, over at the deep end, Aurelio's crew is doing as instructed, forming a brigade to empty their jerry cans, creating undulant and planar rainbows of mower gas. They shrug. Crazy bitch, muttered in Spanish, sounds festive.

Lately, Madame nightmares the cold, and the black, riven by slicks of burning jet fuel hovering like dream campfires around the bodies of the floating motionless, entire families, her family, and the aluminum fuselage groaning as it folds inward, crushed like a linear silver insect under an enormous and invisible foot, and she, flailing one arm from atop her seat cushion, trailing mangled legs, is the desperate and mindless twitching of the segment missed.

Here, perched on the pool's rim, fingering a lighter, Madame waits for the media to descend and make viral a spectacle that no heel could possibly overlook.

