

# DEAD DOWN EAST

By  
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## *Prologue*

*Apologies* and *compliments* are two remarkably effective devices for disarming adversaries in life and hecklers in bars. If you consider the socially adept people you know, you'll see that they use these two conversational tools frequently and with ease. I remember the first time it fully dawned on me how valuable they could be.

Angele and I had been dating for a couple of weeks. Our next planned event was scheduled for Saturday night. So, I was a bit surprised when she arrived unexpectedly at my place on Tuesday evening. I guess she decided that there was something that couldn't wait until the weekend. The moment she walked through the front door, I began to suspect what that "something" was. She had a gleam in her eyes that seared me from the inside of my nimble imagination right down to my insteps. I surmised that she was either ovulating, or she had a sudden urge for a tour of the Thorpe habitat. I began to mentally review the floor plan of the house. *Now, where is my bedroom?* I thought. *I know it was here this morning.*

Angele relieved me of that particular anxiety by leading me right to it. She emits some kind of bedroom-seeking sonar through her vocal cords. The sound is extraordinary. I'll try to describe it.

For starters, it resembles a deep hum. Angele's voice is naturally low and earthy. If she were a singer, she'd be a contralto. But this hum is very low-pitched, even below her normal register. I guess you could call it a sustained breathy murmur. Around here, it came to be known as the "Fugue for Two Bassoons in B Flat Minor," or simply "*The Fugue*." Whatever *The Fugue* is, it's capable of finding the path of least resistance to the bedroom, and it also makes standard foreplay obsolete. *The Fugue* serves as a perfect bridge from what we call "everyday life" to what I call the "Island of the Floating Spirits," which is my own personal euphemism for the afterglow when that rush of endorphins makes its way into the cerebral-spinal fluid.

On that particular Tuesday evening, with a mutual anticipation of the "Island of the Floating Spirits," *The Fugue* got us down the hallway, through the bedroom door, and onto my king size bed. That's when Angele spotted a lacy bra lying about ten feet in front of us, nestled between the side of the dresser and the baseboard.

"What is that?" she growled. *The Fugue* had suddenly stopped playing. In its place was her three-word question in a totally different register.

Instantly, I tried to recall the two devices that disarm adversaries and extract us from dicey social situations: *apologies* and *compliments*.

Unfortunately, I was a little rattled and couldn't think of either one, so I opted for the

more standard male approach: *lying*.

"That must be my sister's bra," I suggested weakly. "She dropped in from Boston yesterday on her way to Québec. She spent the night, and I let her use my bedroom. She can be forgetful at times, and she's not very tidy. She left before dawn this morning. I guess she didn't see it in the dark on her way out."

"Do you think I'm some kind of daft, Franco-Grecian bimbo?"

I couldn't get a full reading on what lurked beneath the surface of that rhetorical question, but I did catch the drift.

"From what you've told me about yourself so far," she continued, "I suspect you are an only child, and judging from your current performance, I'd say you're not very accomplished at thinking on your feet...or, in this case, ruminating on top of your bed with half your clothes scattered on the floor behind you."

She certainly has a way with the English language.

I was scrambling to apply the pair of devices known to be effective for resolving social conflict. I also wished I had used them before inventing a sibling. Granted, I was not yet adept with these social skills, but I should have tried harder. My options were limited at this stage anyway, so I decided to give them both a whirl. I began with an *apology*.

"Angele, I'm really very sorry. You're totally right. I just suddenly went brain dead. I *am* an only child. What was I thinking?"

Before she had a chance to answer *my* rhetorical question, I climbed back on the horse and answered it myself with part two of the social-mending equation, a *compliment*.

"What I was thinking was, 'You are so beautiful!' And that's really all I was thinking. It's no wonder I made up that story of having a sister. Actually, my best guess is that Jenny Boudreau intentionally left that bra there a couple weeks ago when I asked her to leave; that's when we broke up. She might have figured that the bra would act like a juju or a talisman to win me back, or maybe to keep other women from entering my life or, at the very least, my bedroom. She has a jealous streak, and I think she's into some kind of voodoo, which is why I ended our relationship. I met you for the first time a couple of days after she vacated the premises, apparently minus one brassier."

"And one other thing," I added, "I have no idea how I failed to see it lying over there for the past two weeks, but I can't afford a maid, and I've been really busy."

Unfortunately, I was starting to sound like Woody Allen in *Manhattan*, trying to keep Mariel Hemingway from going to London.

Angele looked at me for a few moments and then burst out laughing. Uncontrollably. I had to agree with her; I must have sounded like a buffoon. I managed a self-effacing smile, which slipped in rather nicely between her remarks. Finally, she said, "Jesse Thorpe, you may have some faults—and a few of them come to mind at this point—but you do have two things going for you."

*Thank God for that*, I said to myself.

"First, you *are* persistent. You're willing to fight for what you want, against long odds, even if that means creating an imaginary sibling in the heat of passion. And second, you are charming. In fact, you've charmed the shirt right off my back."

And with that she pulled her sweatshirt up and over her head, and tossed it across the room, magically landing right on top of, and completely covering, the offending undergarment by the baseboard.

I made a quick mental note to dispose of that bra as soon as it came up for air. I also

noted that Angele, herself, wasn't wearing one. I wondered if this was her standard attire—but not for long. *The Fugue* was back on the playlist! I became so mesmerized by it that I could barely decide what to do next. Winging it without a safety net, I surrendered to uncertainty and let one thing lead to another.

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Apologies and compliments are more than just handy social skills; they can pivot your fate decisively. Before lunch, Cynthia Dumais and I would be employing both of them to the hilt—not once, but twice—in a half-controlled, half-desperate, attempt to elude FBI scrutiny. It's all the more curious because the day began so peacefully...without the slightest whiff of chaos or danger.