

THE KINGDOM

In the court of Valentino.

BY MICHAEL SPECTER

June has never been an easy month for Valentino, the seventy-three-year-old Roman designer. But this spring was more frantic than usual. He introduced a new fragrance—V—and celebrated in New York at the end of May with a party that began at Bergdorf Goodman, continued at the Four Seasons, and ended, close to dawn, at Bungalow 8. Two days later, he was back in Rome before traveling to Milan—a city he detests—for his men's-fashion show, which was entitled "Memory of Capri" and featured models in Lycra shorts acting out reveries from his youth. After that, he returned to his villa on the Via Appia Antica for a day of rest with his six pugs—Margot, Maude, Monty, Molly, Milton, and Maggie—and then dragged himself back to Milan, where, on July 1st, the Valentino Fashion Group was listed on Italy's stock exchange. With that, Valentino became the first of his country's famous designers—before Prada, Versace, or even Armani—to see his name quoted on the bourse. Dressed formally in a dark-blue suit, white shirt, and gray silk tie, he stood at the opening bell surrounded by mannequins draped in the red dresses that have become his signature. Within half an hour, the company's stock price had risen by eight per cent. Half an hour after that, Valentino was on a plane to Paris, where he spent the weekend making final adjustments to the forty haute-couture outfits he would put on the runway at the Théâtre National de Chaillot the following week. (Haute couture remains Valentino's consuming passion, and there were still thousands of dollars' worth of jet pendants to attach, as well as scores of silk flowers to examine.)

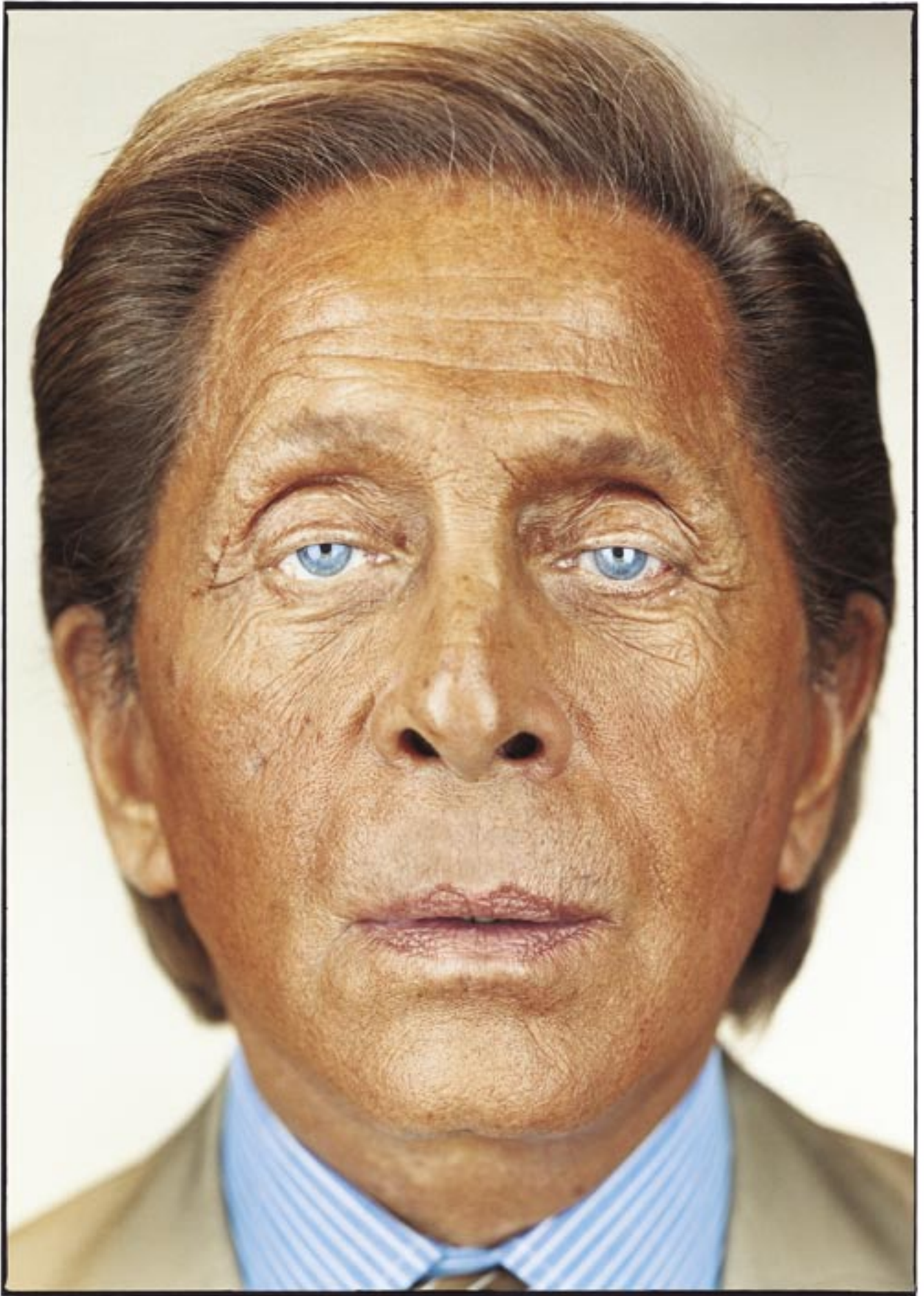
Valentino Garavani (the surname is hinted at by the monograms on his shirts and the matchbooks on his yacht) has been working this way for nearly

fifty years, since 1960, when he returned to Italy from Paris, where he had studied at the Chambre Syndicale de la Couture Parisienne and served his apprenticeship. "Why I ever thought I could go out on my own like that, God only knows," Valentino recalled recently. "But my parents gave me a little money and I started. I had no idea what I was getting into. Sometimes ignorance is a wonderful thing." Rome was in the final stretch of its postwar glory years. Fellini had just shot "La Dolce Vita," a film that could have served as an early documentary about Valentino's life. Anita Ekberg, Elizabeth Taylor (who was preparing to embark on "Cleopatra"), and Sophia Loren were all on the Via Veneto that year. Valentino opened an office on Via Condotti, then moved to an eighteenth-century palazzo fifty yards from the Spanish Steps, and he has been there ever since. Rome soon began to fade as a fashion center, and designers, seeing that the future was in factory-made clothes, moved to Milan, the industrial city. Valentino never considered leaving. Neither did his employees, many of whom have been with him for decades; some of his seamstresses remember the first dresses he turned out. These days, their daughters are pursuing more remunerative careers. The generation of designers Valentino grew up with—Yves Saint Laurent, Christian Dior, even Coco Chanel—long ago passed their ateliers on to successors. Only Valentino remains. "There is the Pope, and there is Valentino," Walter Veltroni, the mayor of Rome, told me. "In this city, I don't know who else is as famous."

Few people have devoted more energy to the pursuit of luxury than Valentino. His homes are nearly as famous as anything he makes. There is a villa in Rome, tucked into arbors that line the

route Caesar took to the imperial city; Wideville, an estate not far from Paris with a château surrounded by a moat and flanked by low houses, some of the most lavish gardens in Europe, and its own parish church; Chalet Gifferhorn in Gstaad, a ski lodge, where Valentino likes to spend Christmas; an apartment near the Frick museum, overlooking Central Park; and one of the largest private houses in London's Holland Park, which he bought four years ago and has restored to its original nineteenth-century state (and then some). There is also the T. M. Blue One, a hundred-and-fifty-two-foot yacht with four flat-screen televisions, a full-time staff of eleven, and a selection of art ranging from Picassos to two of the four prints that Andy Warhol made, in 1974, of the designer himself. The first time we talked, Valentino was sitting on the aft deck of the yacht, about to set off into the Mediterranean. He is a short, powerfully built man with hair so tightly coiffed that from a distance it appears to have been baked in a kiln; he was shirtless, with patterned blue-and-white silk pants, and on his wrist he wore a new supersized Cartier Santos watch with a striking orange band made of alligator that went nicely with his tan. Valentino spends a lot of time in the sun. His skin, the color of melted caramel, has the texture of a lovingly preserved Etruscan ruin.

It is hard to have a conversation about Valentino, or with him, that does not eventually turn to the issue of retirement. He and Giancarlo Giammetti, his lifelong business partner and alter ego, sold the company in 1998, but they remain the central figures in the house, and recently, after having been sold again, the brand has experienced something of a renaissance. Sales have surged, and the number of new bou-



tiques is growing. Rumors persist, though, and they are never fully denied either by Valentino or by the company that now owns the house. "We don't talk about these things with him," Michele Norsa, Valentino's chief executive officer, told me when we met in Rome not long ago. "He is a man of a certain age, and this is difficult to address. He will go when he is ready."

"What would I do if I didn't do this?" Valentino said when I asked him about retirement. "I can't just suddenly do nothing. I am tired, though. Eight collections a year, the launches and appearances, drawings and meetings. I cannot let up for a second. You get up in the morning, you are in Rome. Then Milan. Then Paris. It's all details and deadlines: there are the dresses and fabrics and shoes and fragrances." Lowering his voice, he said, "There is also my life. On Monday and Tuesday, I will simply have to steal two days from my work. I have no choice. They called me from Wideville. What has happened at Wideville is hard to believe." I had no idea what he was talking about. "There has been an explosion of roses," he said. "There are thousands. Hundreds of thousands. You cannot imagine it. . . . I must go. It is not convenient. Perhaps it is not right. But this garden must be seen now. There are many things you have to do in life, but you cannot ignore the roses. When they demand to be seen, one simply has no choice but to go to them."

Valentino produces hundreds of drawings each year, his company manufactures a remarkable amount of clothing, and if he could he would stitch every dress himself. But he is also a man who has fully embraced the concept of quitting time. "I don't think you have to suffer and weep to make a dress," he told me one day in his studio in Rome, while he was fitting a black chiffon gown on a model for his Paris show. "I do my work, but when I am done I am done." No one who knows Valentino well would question for a minute his need to look at roses in France at the busiest moment in his professional year. Every object in every home, centuries' worth of possessions, has been collected largely because he could collect them; his houses are vast re-

positories of wealth, full of everything from rare porcelain dogs to eighteenth-century ironwork. The grounds, gardens, and rooms are crammed with objects: furniture, paintings, pottery, Meissen swans, and wooden ducks. Even some of the objects are filled with objects. The art alone—Picassos, Basquiats, antique vases from China, eighteenth-century French glass, the Boteros and Rothkos, Warhols and Bacons, the commodes and tapestries and breakfronts and porcelain and crystal and silver—seems as if it were assembled as scenery for a film about a modern-day Marie Antoinette. As Oprah Winfrey put it when Valentino appeared on her show last year, "You ain't seen nothing like this, honey. No one, and I mean no one, lives better than Mr. Valentino."



He likes to think she's right. "I have all these things—yachts and houses. And they say I am insane, this is not the world anymore, nobody lives this way. Maybe I did a mistake, but I want these things in my life. My eyes want to see perfection. Some people have said to me, 'You have too many houses and rooms.' But too much for whom?"

Valentino has been obsessed with glamour from the time he was a teen-ager. "My mother used to say, 'How did I produce a son who will only accept the most expensive things?' I was thirteen, fourteen, and she gave me money to go to the shoemaker, to have shoes made, and sweaters. Even then, I had to have them done my way. I didn't want what everybody else could have. I was a big dreamer, always a big dreamer. Vivien Leigh, Hedy Lamarr, Lana Turner, and Katharine Hepburn—I am a designer today because I would dream of those ladies in fox coats and lamé, coming down those grand staircases they had in the movies. That was what I thought about. That was what I wanted." He got his wish when he met Jacqueline Kennedy. His voice still drifts up an octave when he mentions her. "Jackie, walking in Central Park with little pants, big scarf, and a raincoat? All by Valentino! It was sensational." He became truly famous when her picture, in the white lace mini-dress that she wore for her 1968 wedding to Aristotle Onassis, appeared on the

cover of magazines around the world. Valentino's love of celebrated people is palpable; his eyes glisten when he talks about royalty like Princess Rosario of Bulgaria or friends like Gwyneth Paltrow. When I asked him once why dressing such people mattered so much to him, he answered, "Who should I dress? Girls in *street* malls?"

When it comes to outfitting the regal class for special events, no other designer can compete. Valentino made the dress that Madame Bernadette Chirac wore on the day that her husband became the President of France, and the one that Farah Diba, the Iranian empress, was wearing when she fled her country, in 1979. When the American heiress Marie-Chantal Miller married Crown Prince Pavlos of Greece in London, in 1995, not only did she wear one of Valentino's dresses, made with ten types of lace; dozens in the wedding party wore Valentino as well. (His wedding dresses start at around thirty-five thousand dollars but can cost ten times as much.) "When you think about luxury or femininity, you think about Valentino," the New York socialite Susan Gutfreund told me one afternoon at a charity lunch that Valentino had sponsored for New-York-Presbyterian Hospital. "If I am out at a very important black-tie event, invariably when a man comes up and tells me how lovely I look it's always a Valentino dress. Always." This summer, Valentino was working on wedding dresses for Athina Onassis and for two minor princesses. One hot day in June, I stood in his atelier, on the Piazza Mignanelli, and watched as his team of aging seamstresses, working with magnifying glasses under klieg lights, stitched hundreds of little jewels onto several gowns. I asked Giancarlo Giammetti whether he thought this tradition could last much longer. He shook his head. "No, of course not. Why would a young woman want to sit eight hours a day with an eye loupe sewing and embroidering a pattern? And for whom, some princess in Saudi Arabia? Or the girlfriend of some international Russian thug?"

There is at least one market in the United States for gowns like these: Hollywood. Valentino puts almost as much effort into the Academy Awards each year as Harvey Weinstein does. In 2001, audiences around the world saw

Julia Roberts accept the Oscar for "Erin Brockovich" in a vintage black silk gown that he made in 1992. Jessica Lange, Sophia Loren, and Jane Fonda have all worn his dresses to accept their Oscars, and in most years at least a dozen prominent stars wear his clothes on the red carpet. Last year, for the first time, there was only one. Cate Blanchett, nominated as Best Supporting Actress for her performance as Katharine Hepburn in "The Aviator," selected a dress made of yellow silk taffeta with a burgundy sash. Stars usually ask several designers for dresses and then, under the influence of their stylists, publicists, and managers, decide what they will wear at the last moment. Carlos de Souza, Valentino's longtime spokesman, is dispatched every spring to run the Oscar operations from Valentino's Beverly Hills boutique. He promised Blanchett that no one would wear Valentino that night if she guaranteed that she would. She agreed immediately. De Souza turned everyone else down, even Valentino's favorite model, Gisele Bündchen, who was going to attend with her boyfriend, Leonardo DiCaprio. Neither Giammetti nor Valentino was pleased. "I said, 'Gisele is not an actress, for God's sake. Give a dress to Gisele,'" Giammetti told me. "And Carlos said, 'I cannot do it.' And I said, 'Yes, do it. This is insane!'" De Souza stood his ground, and the gamble paid off: Blanchett won. Michele Norsa, the company's C.E.O., was delighted. "Hundreds of millions of people watched," he said. "Even the doorman in your building, or his wife, would have been looking at that dress. It is very exclusive, but that makes it popular as well. Now, of course you will not then go out and sell a three-hundred-thousand-dollar dress." In fact, Valentino, and all other couture designers, lose money on those dresses. "But you sell the fifty-dollar bottle of perfume or the sunglasses or some shoes. And that helps give the brand a special feeling."

There are limits even to Valentino's love of celebrity. At one point, de Souza had arranged for Lindsay Lohan to attend the couture show in Paris, but while we were on the boat he informed Valentino that Lohan's stylist had cancelled. "Thank God," Valentino whispered. "She makes me so uncomfort-

able." Another day, at lunch, he was talking about the media's obsession with fame. Paris Hilton was in the news for a change. Her engagement to the scion of a Greek shipping fortune had just been announced, and I asked Valentino if he wanted to design her wedding dress. He shuddered and replied, "No. I don't like her. She is marrying the son of a friend of mine. They have billions. She is vulgar and she is not even pretty." He was silent for a moment. Then he added, dismissively, "The Hiltons. They have nothing."

People attending their first fashion show almost always react the same way: who could possibly wear that stuff? The clothes, often too narrowly cut, are unorthodox for anyone who is shorter than six feet or weighs more than a hundred pounds. Valentino's designs are an exception. He makes dresses that

are feminine, graceful, and flirty in a way that both men and women find flattering. It is a surprisingly rare quality, and one that is not particularly prized among fashion professionals. Women often have another view. "I look at that runway and I want to own every dress," the actress Rita Wilson told me after Valentino's most recent show in Paris. It was a comment that one hears repeatedly in response to the question of what makes Valentino so popular. He doesn't possess Miuccia Prada's sense that a wardrobe should challenge the mind, nor does he believe that flamboyance or pyrotechnics helps sell a suit. Nobody has ever walked out of his collections—as happened with Yves St. Laurent's influential gypsy show in 1976, or with John Galiano's bias-cut all-black collection of 1994—seeing fashion in an entirely new way.

YOUR KIDS HAVE THEIR MENU... YOU HAVE YOUR MENU...
 ISN'T IT TIME THAT YOUR PARENTS HAD THEIR MENU?





"We've been victorious in many battles, and yet helmet hair remains our fiercest foe."

In fact, Valentino remains endearingly indifferent to the idea of fashion as art. "Let us face it," he said. "Fashion is not so complex. It is about making a woman beautiful. That and nothing else. . . . The style today, the fashion, I don't always understand it. Take Galliano. He is a great artist. He can create the biggest fantasy in the world. But to wear those clothes in the street? I don't think so. Sometimes we forget: the lady makes the dress. I am not somebody who is just looking at Gisele and hoping she will wear my clothes. As a model, yes, she is my dream. But a nice, gutsy lady with lots of personality to her is my dream, too. I love a woman who eats food, who has a body, that is a woman and not a stick."

Beginning late in May, Valentino rents a jet every weekend and flies wherever the T. M. Blue One happens to be docked; each summer, it works its way around the Mediterranean, usually starting with a trip to Saint-Tropez and proceeding, as whim dictates, to places like Cap d'Antibes, Ponza, and Portofino, with forays to Greece or Turkey (and, this year, to Croatia). In August, when the fashion business shuts down,

he spends the entire month at sea, because, as he explained one day, he has no alternative. "I am a prisoner. My staff in Rome, in London, in Paris, even in New York—they are all gone. I cannot go anywhere. I am stranded." The T. M. Blue One is named for his parents, Teresa and Mauro, both of whom are now dead. The boat is fitted out in mahogany and brass, with plush wool carpeting, soft white sofas, and navy-blue pillows embroidered with its insignia. There are five staterooms, two espresso machines, and, for Valentino, a fairly modest smattering of Warhols, Picassos, and artists like Robert Mapplethorpe. "This is his spartan side," de Souza told me as eight men wearing white T. M. Blue One uniforms relieved us of our bags one Saturday morning in June. "This and the chalet in Gstaad." The boat was anchored just off Porto Santo Stefano, a popular seaside village at the foot of Tuscany, about two hours from Rome. Valentino and his boyfriend, Bruce Hoeksema, had arrived the previous evening. As we came aboard, Valentino stood on the deck, dressed in silk shorts and a white cashmere sweater. Mishearing the word "spartan," he turned to de Souza and

said, "Spare. Did you say 'spare'?" He went on, "Spare, spare, what is spare? I hate that word."

Each morning, the boat's decks are swabbed by Valentino's personal navy of sailors in white jumpsuits and yellow Wellingtons. His entourage rarely varies. Giammetti is nearly always with him; his stateroom is equipped with a flat-screen television and an Ethernet plug that connects him, by satellite, to the Internet. (It's the only one on the boat; Valentino wouldn't know the Internet from a lobster net.) The other man who is almost always on the boat with Valentino is Hoeksema, a soft-spoken forty-eight-year-old American who moved to Italy twenty years ago as a model and never left. Hoeksema now owns a leather-goods factory near Florence and designs high-end handbags and jewelry, which he sells in his boutique, VBH, in a former bank opposite the Whitney Museum, on Madison Avenue. They are often joined by de Souza, a fifty-year-old Brazilian who met the designer and Giammetti at a party in Rio de Janeiro when he was a teen-ager. Soon afterward, he moved to Rome. De Souza recently shifted his base of operations to New York, where Valentino's business is expanding, but he maintains homes in Rome and Brazil and spends a large part of his life shuttling among them.

De Souza's ex-wife, Charlene Shorto, is also a member of this ensemble; she and de Souza maintain a cordial relationship, and Valentino and Giammetti are godfathers to their two sons. In one configuration or another, this group is together all the time; they travel in a pack—this summer to Bali, last year to St. Petersburg—and their holidays are often spent rock climbing in Turkey or exploring the beaches of Morocco. The previous weekend, Valentino had been host to Gwyneth Paltrow, who is a close friend of his, and her husband, the Coldplay singer Chris Martin. ("Apple is a vegan," Valentino said, his eyes wide at the notion of a fourteen-month-old child with politically inspired dietary habits.)

Valentino is not a spontaneous man; surprises displease him. "With Valentino, nothing is left to chance," Graziano de Boni, who runs the American operations for Valentino, had told me.

"Nothing." That becomes clear after ten minutes on the boat. Valentino can fuss over the consistency of a guest's *macchiato*, the temperature of his ice cream, even the number of ice cubes in a glass. "I need to know that my guests are taken care of, that the breakfast is good," he said. "I want to know which kind of bedsheets my guests have and how often they are changed. I want to know how many times my staff will approach the room." They approach constantly. Leave a shirt on your bed (dirty or clean) and it will be laundered the moment you step out of the cabin. Each morning, along with a lavish breakfast, the staff assembles some reading material. Among the magazines that I noticed were *OK!*, *Chi*, *Oggi*, *Gente*, *Hello!*, *Hola!*, *Paris Match*, *L'Uomo*, and four editions of *Vogue*. (Nobody boards the T. M. Blue One itching for a roundtable discussion of global warming.) Freshly baked muffins were set out by 7:30, with figs, berries, apples, peaches, and melon. The host likes to take breakfast alone—usually tea and toast. He is not an early riser, on land or at sea. "I often get up at six," he told me matter-of-factly. "Then I take a pill and go back to sleep."

Valentino spends much of the day sunning himself on the top deck. From time to time, small tourist boats cruise by in hopes of getting a glimpse of him; he is so famous in Italy that many people even recognize his yacht. He waves dutifully, then goes back to his couch, surrounded by several of the five pugs he travels with. (Maggie is too old to be moved.) He enjoys being on display; he is certainly not one of those rich people who are tortured by ambivalence. "When I was young, I used to go to Saint-Tropez with my friends and stay fifteen days," he told me one afternoon. "I would walk in the port and see those yachts there, and I wanted one. And I have to tell you that if I had one now I would be ashamed—they were just too small." For someone who has lived in Rome for nearly half a century, Valentino has a strong predilection for the cold. The living room on the T. M. Blue One feels like a meat locker. "You will need a cashmere," Hoeksema announced the day Carlos de Souza and I came aboard. "Cashmere" is Valentino for "sweater." There were two cashmere

blankets in my room. I needed them both, and I found myself wanting a third. The next day, I asked why the boat was so icy. "I hate it sweaty," Valentino said. "I detest wet things."

Being on time for meals is perhaps the only requirement for a guest on the T. M. Blue One. Lunch on Sunday was served at 2 P.M. Hoeksema arrived at 2:02, having just taken a shower. His shoulder-length blond hair was still wet, and Valentino was not amused. "You have fringes," he said gruffly. Hoeksema looked at the ends of his hair, shrugged, and sat down. "Upholstery has fringes," Valentino said. His eyes, blue enough to match the sea, were cold. "Tapestries have fringes. Rugs. Sometimes furniture. Not humans." Valentino dragged a hand through his own hair, which had just been blown firmly into place. "Humans do not have fringes."

Giancarlo Giammetti grew up in Rome, where his father had a small electrical-supply store. He studied architecture but was an indifferent student, and spent most of his time on the Via Veneto. ("It was always wild in Rome then," he said.) One night in 1960, he was sitting in the Café de Paris, waiting for a nearby night club to open. "Suddenly, I see this man," he recalled. "And he and his two friends came up and asked if they could sit with me. It was Valentino."

They have been together for forty-five years, and they are as close as it is possible for two men who are no longer lovers to be. "When we are not together, we talk seven times a day," Valentino told me. "Or more." The tender boat on the T. M. Blue One is called the G.G., and neither of the men would think of taking a holiday without the other. This spring, when Giammetti decided to rent part of the Four Seasons in Bali for the group to visit in July, Valentino was unenthusiastic. He told me that he wasn't going to go. De Souza laughed when I repeated that to him. "What would he do all that time without Giancarlo?" he said, and one afternoon in London, when I finally asked Valentino if he had changed his mind about the trip, he nodded slowly and said, "Apparently."

Neither Valentino nor Giammetti is comfortable discussing details of his personal life. "We are from another generation," Giammetti told me one day. "So we still have that reserve about what people do in bed." He marvelled at how rarely in life "two people can understand each other and support each other as we do. Of course," he went on, "there are moments in which you cannot stand the other person for two hours, for three hours, for half a day maybe. You fight over a stupid dress or a stupid phrase that one says and that you don't like to hear. This is normal. Over all, this has been an amazing relationship between two human beings."

At sixty-seven, Giammetti remains deeply attached to his own good looks. He is trim, with deep-black eyes. His hair used to be gray, but this spring I noticed that it had become brown. ("You will understand one day, when you are old," he said.) Professionally, he and Valentino fit together like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle: Valentino knows nothing about money (apart from how to spend it), and Giammetti is one of the canniest businessmen in Europe. His office in Rome is three times the size of Valentino's. When the designer asked why that was, Giammetti said, "Look, you just have to draw. I have to intimidate people." Giammetti doesn't mince words when it comes to talking about their goals. "We knew early on we always wanted to have a certain style of life," he said. "And it's expensive." He realized that selling large amounts of luxury apparel could make them rich—but licenses could

bring in even more. As a result, Valentino became the first major designer to rent his name to perfume manufacturers, leather companies, and many other businesses. This has earned them millions. At one point, more

than a hundred companies were authorized to call themselves Valentino. In 1998, when Giammetti and Valentino sold the company to a large industrial firm for three hundred million dollars, it was a disaster. "I was on the board of directors," Giammetti said of the company, HdP, which owned the Italian book publisher Rizzoli and the *Corriere della Sera*, among others. "We were the



last interest for them.” For the first time, Valentino started losing money heavily, and there was nothing Giammetti could do but watch. In 2002, Marzotto, which was once a textile firm, purchased the company for almost a hundred million dollars less than HdP had paid.

“The company was losing fifty million dollars when we bought it three years ago,” Norsa, the Valentino C.E.O., told me. In 2004, Valentino’s sales increased by twelve per cent and the company broke even. “This year, there will be a substantial profit,” he said, pointing out that in the United States sales increased forty per cent in 2003 and fifty-three per cent last year.

The demise of haute couture has been predicted since at least the nineteen-sixties, when factory-made clothing became as common as factory-made cars, and the schedule of shows and the number of haute-couture designers have shrunk over the years. Even so, Norsa said, “we never sold so many couture dresses as we did this year. There is a new world of luxury. In the past, luxurious clothing was purchased by very sophisticated people. Now there are people who have a lot of money and need to buy very expensive things. It’s somehow different. Some of the new riches from the Middle East, from Asia, from India—they want these items and they don’t think of them as outrageously expensive, as we might in the more civilized world.”

In July, the guest list for Valentino’s Paris couture show read like a *Who’s Who* of Arabia: Princess Al Anoud Al Khalifa was there, and so were Princess Sara bin Mohamed bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, Princess Haifa Al Saud, Princess Nauf Al Saud, and Princess Firyal of Jordan, among others. (There were also Western members of the royal and the royally rich universe: Madame Margarita Latsis, Princess Clotilde de Savoie, Princess Rosario of Bulgaria, Countess Georgina Brandolini d’Adda, and Princess d’Arenberg. Madame Chirac also attended, as did at least one Rothschild, and the Marquise de Ravenel.) Until 1974, Valentino showed his work in Rome and in Florence; but in the nineteen-seventies the film industry be-

gan to die, unemployment soared, and the Red Brigades terrorized the country. Roman couture never recovered. Valentino rejected Milan and, instead, began to show his dresses in Paris. (“In Milan, on a big evening, the men wear no ties. The women play the poor girl and dress like nuns.”) His offices are on the Place Vendôme, where the windows, which are about ten feet high, look out on the Ritz and on the constant stream of people shopping at the most expensive jewelry stores in the world.

Most models are absurdly tall and freakishly thin, and couture gowns usually demand both qualities: the stitching is delicate, the fabrics—lace, taffeta, silk, panne velvet—are easy to rip. Karolina Kurkova, who has often modelled for Valentino, is one of the world’s most famously alluring women. She even has hips and an ass. For gay designers, however, such features are horrifying. Two days before the show, when Kurkova took her practice walk in a long green chiffon dress, Giammetti just shook his head, like a pitcher sloughing off a bad sign from his catcher. Kurkova didn’t notice, but Valentino did. “I use very slim models without bosoms, to be free to create,” he once said. “Sometimes, if the model has a bosom or a little big hips, it gets in the way. That is important when I create something new. Later, it can be translated for women much larger.” When I asked him about this, he shrugged. “They have to have a certain look, a special look,” he explained. “That is why I like the Brazilian girls.”

On the evening of the show, Valentino arrived at the Trocadéro two hours early. He surveyed the red silk chairs—there were several hundred—and the lighting. He seemed satisfied. A small army of young men—all identically dressed in black suits and white shirts and looking a little like Tom Cruise circa “Risky Business”—filed into the room. Valentino looked as though he had come directly from the dry cleaners. He wore a crisp white shirt with a gray tie and had on makeup, because he would have to face many television cameras. I asked him if he was nervous. “Why? Why at this point should I worry, why?” he said. “I am not a nervous, worrying man. What I make I like, and if they”—he gave a regal wave

SHOWCASE

THE CONSPIRATOR

A great fashion photograph involves layers of artifice, the most difficult to achieve being the appearance of spontaneity—the staged surprise that only professionals can pull off. Richard Avedon made spontaneity a specialty, and, no matter how orchestrated the gesture or the expression, it always had the power of conviction. From the beginning, Avedon was able to communicate through his models, not as a ventriloquist does with his dummy but like a director whose authority is tempered by affection for his actors. And he knew how to use theatricality to get at something real, even revelatory. Avedon’s rigorous approach to portraiture—“No to exquisite light, no to apparent compositions, no to the seduction of poses or narrative,” he once said—amounted to a rejection of fashion photography’s imperatives. Portraiture provided relief from fashion’s strictures, but turning regularly from one to the other kept him fresh.

Both passions meet in “Woman in the Mirror” (Abrams), the book he compiled shortly before his death, last October. To judge by the work here—made between 1945 and 2004, some of it for this magazine—the photographer was a man who loved women. His interest in them, though, wasn’t predatory; it was sympathetic, almost conspiratorial. In a 1949 picture for *Harper’s Bazaar*, he spied on the model Dorian Leigh, who was wearing a silly bunny hat as she applied eyeliner with exaggerated concentration. The image is comic and candid—a knowing glimpse at the backstage work that goes into high-stakes glamour. The mirror, like the camera lens, invites a woman to look inward, and Avedon follows her gaze doggedly, lovingly, all the way.

—Vince Aletti



of his left hand toward seats that would soon be filled by his clients—"if they like it, too, I am very pleased. Genuinely. And if not... *c'est le même prix*." De Souza shot him a reproachful look that suggested that he step down from his throne. "I am not trying to be rude or dismissive," Valentino said. "I worked on this hard. I *love* the dresses." He walked over and ran his hands across his favorite, a purple gown covered in a cascade of crystals, which he said was similar to one he had made in the eighties. "This is my *job*, not my life. There is a difference."

Giammetti, on the other hand, looked as if he were about to pass out. One of the reasons that Valentino can afford to be nonchalant is that his business partner doesn't have a nonchalant bone in his body. Valentino doesn't read the reviews of his shows. By 8 A.M. the next morning, Giammetti had not only read them but was ready to call the writers to complain. He had just quit smoking, not for the first time, for what he described as the usual reasons ("My hair was turning yellow"), but now he had to have one. "The press craves entertainment," he said glumly. "Galliano knows how to put on a show, and people have come to expect extravagance." He threw

up his hands and lit another cigarette. Gwyneth Paltrow, wearing jeans and a blue blazer, arrived, kissed both men, and then retreated to a private room to await the start of the show.

Fashion shows usually begin late, and this one was no exception. "It's Madame Chirac," Valentino said. Madame Chirac was upset because dozens of photographers were out front, eager to take her picture. "She hurt her foot," a woman from the press department in Rome explained. "She can't wear heels, and she doesn't want her picture taken in flats. She said if the photographers don't stop she will leave." The crisis eventually dissipated, Madame Chirac took her seat in the front row, and the show began. It lasted fifteen minutes. Karolina Kurkova walked down the runway three times, and no one hissed. When it was over, Valentino ducked onto the runway, one hand on his hip, and gave a tight little wave with the other. I asked him how he thought Kurkova looked. "Magical," he said. "She is magical." (The reviews were mixed, most suggesting that the designer had got a bit carried away. "Valentino is of the joyous couture school that fashion should be fun, fancy, rising up to the

summit of elegance and often way over the top," Suzy Menkes wrote the next day in the *International Herald Tribune*. "You have to admire Valentino's defiant decorative stance, even if not too many modern women still want to present their femininity as a band box gift to an attentive male.")

Afterward, Giammetti hosted a small dinner at his apartment on the Quai d'Orsay. The apartment has gorgeous views of the city, and is filled with paintings by Cy Twombly, Picasso, and Bacon, among others. (Giammetti once explained how he and Valentino got their first Picassos: "His tailor lived in Milan, and we knew him. He had a nice collection and was willing to sell some at reasonable prices.") The singer Sheryl Crow said that she was especially excited by the white satin dress that she had just seen on the runway. "I want to get married in that white dress," she announced. At the time, her boyfriend, Lance Armstrong, was in the midst of winning his seventh consecutive Tour de France. "Of course, he would need to win first," she said, laughing. "And I guess he would have to propose this season or the dress will be gone." One of the guests, the Italian artist Francesco Vezzoli, pointed to the dining room. The table had been set with a buffet, and people were starting to gravitate toward it. Several women, some of them royal, stood beneath a Warhol portrait of Lenin. "That room is almost too good to believe, isn't it?" Vezzoli said. "There they are: Warhol, Lenin, and every princess who ever bought a dress."

The following night, it was Valentino's turn to entertain. He invited nearly a hundred and fifty people to his three-hundred-acre estate, the Château de Wideville, thirty kilometres west of Paris. Valentino bought the place in 1995 and spent millions redecorating it with the help of Henri Samuel, the pre-eminent French interior designer, who died, at the age of ninety-three, after working on the house. In the sixties, it served as the home of Louise de la Vallière, Louis XIV's mistress. It's not far from Versailles. Nor is it much of a step in the direction of moderation. The gardens are among the most extensive in Europe. Mademoiselle de la

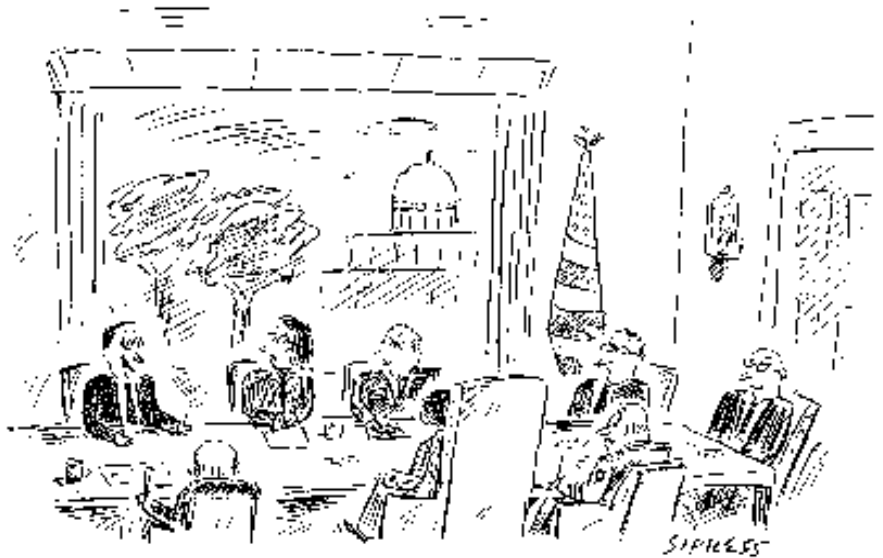


"No."

Vallière bore four of Louis's seventeen children at Wideville, and rarely left the estate until the King moved on to a new mistress. She then entered a Carmelite convent, where she spent the rest of her life.

It was not a good day for a party. That morning, four bombs had exploded in London, and the terrorist attacks had left fifty-six people dead. Even Valentino, who is not a political man ("I come from Italy. All they ever talk about is soccer and politics"), realized that the bombings might prevent some people from attending an event celebrating the end of a week in which seventy-five-thousand-dollar jewel-encrusted dresses had been shown, but he never considered cancelling, and neither, in the end, did many of his guests.

Valentino wanted his friends to spend some time in his garden. That proved impossible. In addition to the horrible news from London that morning, the day brought English weather—cold and wet. Late in the afternoon, he handed me an oversized umbrella and suggested that I take a walk. Despite the pouring rain, it was worth the effort. There are two hundred and eighty cherry trees on the property at Wideville, and each June they shower the landscape with pink petals. By July, they had faded, but the fields were filled with lilacs, freesia, lilies, sunflowers, impatiens, irises, wisteria, daffodils, and gardenias. Deep thickets of red, blue, pink, and yellow buds seemed to stretch to Normandy. Then there was the lavender patch: bright purple and almost the size of a football field, the effect of stumbling upon it, even on such a grim day, was psychedelic. The grounds at Wideville have enough topiary—dozens of acres that seemed to have been manicured with nail clippers—to keep twelve full-time gardeners busy throughout the year (with several more hired each summer to help out). Finally, there is what Valentino describes as the largest rose garden in the world—acres of roses in nearly every color imaginable. "I don't want to exaggerate," he said when I returned. "But do you know how many roses there are here? A million. Not tens or even hundreds of thousands. But a million."



"The key is to blame the federal government without implicating this Administration."

Michael Kelly, the discreet Irishman who has served as Valentino's chief butler for seven years, came over to brief him on the cheese situation. He had two telephones clipped to his belt, one for talking to the staff and the other for the rest of the world. "It's coming," he said as Valentino peered at his watch. It was the only time I ever saw him look anxious. It was seven-thirty. His guests were due to arrive in an hour. "It will be here in time." Valentino did not look relieved. Assembling the menus for these events is one of his great pleasures; he had selected thirty-two dishes and asked the cook from his boat to work alongside the regular chef. There would be several types of pasta, lamb, four fish dishes, a Northern Italian casserole with chicken and another with shrimp. For dessert, there were homemade ice creams, four cakes, several types of chocolate, profiteroles, and floating islands. Valentino would never be satisfied, however, without his cheese—mozzarella produced that morning and flown directly from Naples. (For Valentino, using mozzarella made anywhere other than Naples would be as likely as serving "champagne" from Italy, or "caviar" taken from salmon raised in the Pacific Northwest.) The bombings had thrown Europe's airports into chaos, however, and hun-

dreds of planes had been delayed, including the one that carried the cheese, but finally, at eight-ten, a white minivan pulled up to the moat. Valentino watched from a window in the foyer as two men in lab coats carefully removed six volleyball-size globes of mozzarella. Then, moving as if they were carrying nitroglycerin, they inched slowly toward the kitchen. As soon as they were inside, Valentino went upstairs to change.

Kelly looked relieved, but he soon had another problem on his hands: the lighting of the candles. The drive from the entrance of the estate to the chateau is almost a kilometre; Valentino had instructed his staff to place fifteen hundred votive candles, one every metre or two, along the driveway and on the lawns nearby. Precisely at eight, a dozen employees fanned out from the front door and began to light them. It wasn't easy. The candles were nestled in glass, which was supposed to protect them from the elements, but the wind kept blowing them out. For the next half hour, men in black scrambled across the lawns, lighting and relighting candles until the first car rolled toward the gate.

Kelly holds a unique position as Valentino's butler—a sort of chief operating officer in an empire of luxury. He is a tall, rangy, good-humored man who

can endure being yelled at in three languages at once; the only thing that betrays his thoughts are his eyes, which seem capable of wandering all over his face. Kelly is young, but he is nonetheless a throwback—part Stevens, the impeccable butler in “The Remains of the Day,” and part certified public accountant. At Wideville, he oversees thirty rooms and a staff that can range—as it did that night—to forty-three. “We can accommodate twenty guests staying with us comfortably for a weekend,” he said. “These days, a private house is run like a Relais & Châteaux hotel. We have plans, and budgets and computers to keep track of it all.” The requirements of his profession have evolved rapidly, as have the type of people for whom he is likely to work. “There is no more landed gentry,” he said. “These days, even the wealthy work. So they are at their country houses maybe on weekends or once in a while or rarely. But when they are here they expect everything to be the way they want it. This is all very personal for him.”

It seemed a thankless job, but Kelly didn't think so. “I have known a lot of wealthy people, and almost nobody can put this together and make it work,” he told me. “You can acquire money, but you can't necessarily learn how to live with it. Mr. Valentino knows. He enjoys life. It's a talent that people don't often have, even very rich people. . . . I can't stress that enough. He loves to live this way. And you become hooked on him, and you can't get him out of your blood.” As we were talking, somebody handed Kelly a fax. He sighed. “What is it?” I asked. “The staff from the T.M.”—Valentino's yacht. “They have run out of his Christian Constant chocolates and need me to send enough to last the summer.”

By eight-thirty, the candles were lit, the tables were arranged, and the guests had begun to arrive. Two women were assigned to hand out carefully drawn note cards with each guest's name on the front and the number of the table on the back. But a last-minute examination of the seating charts revealed a new crisis: a guest had, unaccountably, been left out. Kelly sprang into action. Both phones were off his belt and in his hands

CITY OF GLASS

*For Pablo Neruda and Matilde Urrutia
La Chascona, Santiago, Chile*

The poet's house was a city of glass:
cranberry glass, milk glass, carnival glass,
red and green goblets row after row,
black lustre of wine in bottles,
ships in bottles, zoo of bottles,
rooster, horse, monkey, fish,
heartbeat of clocks tapping against crystal,
windows illuminated by the white Andes,
observatory of glass over Santiago.

When the poet died,
they brought his coffin to the city of glass.
There was no door: the door was a thousand daggers,
beyond the door an ancient world in ruins,
glass now arrowheads, axes, pottery shards, dust.
There were no windows: fingers of air
reached for glass like a missing lover's face.
There was no zoo: the bottles were half-moons
and quarter-moons, horse and monkey
eviscerated with every clock, with every lamp.
Bootprints spun in a lunatic tango across the floor.

within thirty seconds. Giancarlo Giammetti was summoned to the dining room. As Gwyneth Paltrow, the editors of most of the world's fashion magazines, and a few princesses sipped Bellinis in the drawing room, Giammetti raced to the porch, where dinner would be served, and seized the master seating chart. “*Come faccio adesso?*” he shouted. “How could this happen? How?” Kelly tried to reassure him that he would find a solution. “No, I'll do it,” Giammetti snapped. He hovered over the circular chart silently for a few moments. He looked like Bobby Fischer trying to defend his queen from a particularly fierce attack. He toyed with shifting a princess and then a magazine editor or two. Then a rich man from Milan. Finally, he saw his moves; quickly, he banished one person from the head table—where Valentino himself was seated—and slotted in the new guest. Then he adjusted the seating for those who remained. A calligrapher—on duty for just this sort of mishap—was called to correct the errors. By the time the unfortunate man's Mercedes rolled up to the gate,

Kelly was there to greet him, and Giammetti was upstairs changing his clothes, the problem forgotten.

I met Valentino for tea a few days later in London. The city was still shaken. Service on the Underground had been restored, but only sporadically, and taxis were moving about three miles an hour. Whenever I had spoken to people about Valentino's luxurious approach to life, they had always said, “Wait till you see Holland Park.” Valentino himself, greeting me one day at his villa in Rome, had waved briefly at the majestic lawn and said, “This place is finished for me now. When you see Holland Park, you'll understand why.”

Michael Kelly answered the door. He had travelled with the pugs by minivan from Wideville after passing through veterinary control—preceding his boss by several hours—so that the dogs would be there to greet him. Valentino was going to be a few minutes late, Kelly said, and invited me to look around. The house was built in 1870 on Lord Holland's original estate. Valen-

The poet's widow said, *We will not sweep the glass.*
His wake is here. Reporters, photographers,
intellectuals, ambassadors stepped across the glass
cracking like a frozen lake, and soldiers, too,
who sacked the city of glass,
returned to speak for their general,
three days of official mourning
announced at the end of the third day.

In Chile, a river of glass bubbled, cooled,
hardened, and rose in sheets, only to crash and rise again.
One day, years later, the soldiers wheeled around
to find themselves in a city of glass.
Their rifles turned to carnival glass;
bullets dissolved, glittering, in their hands.
From the poet's zoo they heard monkeys cry;
from the poet's observatory they heard
poem after poem like a call to prayer.
The general's tongue burned with slivers
invisible to the eye. The general's tongue
was the color of cranberry glass.

—*Martín Espada*

tino bought it a few years ago, restored the Italianate façade, then essentially rebuilt the inside. My first stop was the library. It was filled nearly from floor to ceiling with books that had been beautifully bound in leather long ago: Public Statutes of the County of Warwick, from the eighteen-forties until the eighteen-sixties; lengthy histories of the Church; old copies of *Punch*. Goethe, Schiller, and Hugo were all collected in editions that were both impressive and unapproachable. There was also a row bound in white leather that turned out not to be books at all—or leather, for that matter. They were sculptural, and had been put on the shelves to house an elaborate sound system. Just as I was about to flip one of the switches, Valentino arrived.

“Just a small, small place,” he said, and smiled warmly. He was more deeply tanned than usual—as if he had been irradiated. He was wearing a light-brown suit-and-tie combination that looked like pale khaki against his skin. Our first stop was the Blue Room, where there were hundreds of

pieces of eighteenth-century porcelain—dishes, urns, bowls, glasses—all in blue and white, and arranged along intricately carved shelves that had been made to look like etched ivory. Valentino had modelled it on the Peacock Room, a dining room from a nineteenth-century town house in London that had been reinstalled at the Freer Gallery of Art, in Washington, D.C. “These I collected for a long, long time,” he said. “From Paris, New York, London. I have no place left to put a pin here.” Each room was crammed with arcana: commodes from the Pavlos palace, copper and gold Lalanne banquettes, eighteenth-century chairs from the “private collection of the Rothschilds.” There were porcelain eagles perched on mantels, and urns, vases, and bowls filled with the flowers of the day: peonies, calla lilies, freesia, orchids, and phalaenopsis.

The second floor featured an all-white living room with four Picassos and a dining room filled with Chinese screens that Valentino himself commissioned. “I am a collector,” he

said, sensing that a question—why?—might be on its way. He rested his hand on an eighteenth-century Chinese dog. “This is what I do.” He has also acquired a considerable collection of art for the house: two giant Basquiats—one red and the other blue—were built into frames on walls in the ground-floor sitting room; there were several Picassos, as well as the expected smattering of de Koonings, Hirsts, and Warhols. We walked out onto the back porch and looked at the lawn that rolled into Holland Park. “You are going to write about the wealth and the extravagance,” Valentino said. I replied that he did, after all, live in opulent surroundings. “Please,” he said, rapping his fingers on the table. “You cannot just write about the opulence of things I own. I have worked like a horse for forty-five years. I am not a showoff person. I love to have my friends enjoy my things. But it's not opulence. What do you think is opulent here? It's *elegant*.”

I decided to change the subject, and we talked once again about retirement. Giammetti had told me that slowing down was not an option for Valentino. (“He is not a designer who will say, ‘I will do just the couture and the rest I don't care,’” he had said. “He will never accept this. Never. So one day he will stop everything and be gone. There is no middle.”) I mentioned this to Valentino. He shrugged in agreement. We were sitting at a white picnic table, and he was sipping a Perrier. “Look, so much has changed,” he said. “And I have lived through it. Grunge. My God, how I hated that! But I survived. Purposeful ugliness. Can you imagine that? And now life is different. Ladies don't change four times a day. You can wear anything on top of everything.” He sounded a bit tired of it all. “My white coat costs forty-five thousand pounds. They wear it on top of jeans.”

He continued, “At some point, you do get to the end. And, when I do, I hope I will be remembered as a man who pursued beauty wherever he could. But when we are done we are done. And that will be the end of it. Finito. After all, this kind of dress is like a Ferrarri. If you ever really thought about it, you would never do it.” ♦