

Eileen Malone

PASTEUR: CODED FOR ERROR

The old clock on the even older piano chimes out the hour when it is not the hour. No matter, his mind dances to the sound in exploration. To stop the souring of wine and beer and milk he heats starting-sugar solutions to a high temperature, thinks isolating disease-free eggs from infected eggs, thinks vaccinating anthrax attacked cattle with weakened bacilli inoculating against rabies.

Today, he carefully washes grapes in a pewter bowl (ancient mixture of tin, lead, silver) of rose water that threatens to spill over. Explains to his guests disguised as nests of fireflies in trees, there's a lot of disease in this sullen room, night-breathing itself into a morning that grows wide with thoughts of what could have killed us in our sleep. In the uncertainty of a gold tasseled, magenta silk scarf thrown over the pink lampshade, he sums up the importance of eliminating germs from food.

Begins to speak of how wrong choices have to be made as frequently as right ones. How we are built to make mistakes. If we make a big enough mistake, we find ourselves on a new level, stunned, out in the clear, ready to move again into fantasies of sliced melons, jasmine crawling brass lamps, walnut stuffed dates.

Excited, he goes on about how we are coded for error and how we are at our human finest when choosing between right and wrong alternatives, and then, someone in red velvet jacket smoking a foreign cigarette vaguely familiar, enters, smiles, nods in agreement at the possibilities and probabilities of mistakes.

Completely distracted, Pasteur nods back, reaches out and drinks all the contaminated water from the bowl. As if it were clear, fresh springwater, he gulps it down, spitting bits of grape skin and twigs from his mouth.