A Celebration of Poets

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Principal Characters
(Nutshell Version)

Alexei – A dancer
Aurora – An attorney and dealmaker
Billy – A primitive
Elizabeth – An English teacher
Geoffrey – A performance videographer
Harry – A retired professor of law
Kate – A shadow
Margaret – A psychiatrist
Mo – A gentleman farmer
Robin – A painter
Sibyl – A mystic
Teresa – A gardener

• 1995 •

Chapter 1

Brahma

If the red slayer think he slays,
Or if the slain think he is slain,
They know not well the subtle ways
I keep, and pass, and turn again.

—*Brahma,* Ralph Waldo Emerson

Imagination, still agile, vaults the low porch railing we've put our feet upon and slues silently through the sun-speckled shade, bounds down the gentle slope of soft pumice tuff, flits like a moth among the pines and pauses for a moment on a clump of bright green grass at lake's edge. It slides across the water like the shadow of a hawk, soars over the trees on the opposite shore, drifts through the gray haze of far-off mountains and melts into the indigo blue of the sky beyond.

It'll be evening soon. Venus will emerge from the purple twilight, and then a star, near the zenith, and then another, and suddenly the black sky will bristle and glister with a swarming, gem-strewn fog of tiny lights. How odd it is that everything we know about the stars belongs to the past, and yet they seem to us symbols of hope for the future.

I guess that's why, here in this gentle afternoon, I let my mind wander where it will, through the memory of our yesterdays, seeking a new dawn out there somewhere among the stars.

It was a time of innocence. Innocence of poetry, of each other, of life. Of course, we didn't think so then. We don't often consider, looking out at the future, that we will be older, wearier, and very possibly no wiser by the time it arrives. It's easier to see, looking backward, that we were different in the past. We were innocent then.

Everything in the past was simpler, happier, and more natural than it is now—so we like to think—and we're always tempted, by the slag heap of factitious knowledge we drag around with us, to believe that innocence has ended with us, to forget that tomorrow will prove us innocent once again. But wisdom will be brief. Soon we'll return to that easygoing conceit, that we know everything, that we've seen everything, that nothing under the sun is new. This is good, really, because our courage is as limited as our vision, and innocence helps us dare whatever is to come.

The unravelling of innocence began late one torpid summer afternoon when, at the request of a friend, I went to a little local coffeehouse, the Be Attitude Cafe, to conduct a meeting of the Douglas County Literary Society's Poetry Group. And as it happened, nobody else showed up.

It was a day much like today, except that after a while the sky gathered itself into a dark mass of slowly churning clouds, and fresh breezes stirred the warm air in the streets and alleyways, and then there commenced a drenching rainstorm that soothed the torpid quietness with splashing, gurgling sounds. I remember sitting there, my bare feet propped up on another chair beside my table, sipping a glass of iced tea, looking out through the big picture window streaked with hesitant silver droplets, watching the shiny asphalt run slick with water as people scurried for shelter through shimmering curtains of windblown rain, and then gazing beyond all this sudden commotion to the faraway mist-shrouded hills, and wondering if this were not, after all, the preternatural condition of poets.

In that cavernous, nearly empty room, silent but for the hollow roar of raindrops pummeling its flat, beam-spanned roof, wreathed in the pungent, commingled odors of steaming wet concrete and hot sputtering espresso, I felt vaguely ill at ease. Where was everyone else? I

had prepared myself like an initiate monk to conduct this meeting and now it appeared there would be no meeting because there were no other participants. I hadn't come to the wrong place; the group had met here for several years, even before I'd joined it, rain or shine, every two weeks, on the same day, at the same time. Doubtless I'd sometimes been insensitive to the virtue in other people's work, but I doubted I'd been sufficiently offensive to induce them all to stay at home. Certainly no one was intimidated by the quality of my own verses; indeed, the group's previous leader, Kate, had declared me her successor precisely because, she'd said, my poetry made almost everyone else's look good.

After about twenty minutes the quarreling heavens relented, the rain became a faint drizzle, and the sunlight filtered down again through the dissipating clouds. Still no one else had arrived and I knew no one would. I considered going back home, but I had come out here to do something and I was in the mood to do something. I recalled some lines from *Prufrock:*

> *Should I, among the tea and cakes and ices,*
> *Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis?*
> *But though I have wept and fasted, wept and prayed,*
> *Though I have seen my head (grown slightly bald) brought in upon a platter,*
> *I am no prophet—and here's no great matter;*
> *I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker,*
> *And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker,*
> *And, in short, I was afraid.*

Well, obviously, compared to this guy I'm just an ordinary scribbler. The moment of my greatness hasn't yet breached the surface of time's dark mind, let alone flickered, and the eternal Footman can have my coat and my shirt too for aught I care. I understand fear, but I don't do much fasting and praying over it. I've wept, too, but self-pity is against my religion. Besides, it was the idea of forcing the moment to its crisis that fascinated me.

It occurred to me then that by their wholesale absence my poetical colleagues had provided me, as the mountain had Mohammed, with an opportunity. I walked back to the serving bar and got another iced tea—a two-bagger this time. Then I went to the old oak conference table where we usually sat, put down my tea and notebooks, and set up all the chairs. I tore three sheets of paper into quarters and made a name tag for everybody: first the women—Margaret, Teresa, Elizabeth, Sibyl, Aurora and Kate; then the men—Billy, Harry, Geoffrey, Alexei and myself. I decided to arrange them around the oval table in the style commonly called "boy-girl, boy-girl," and so I did, excepting that, there being six women and only five men, Aurora's and Kate's chairs were next to one another.

Then I sat down with pen in hand and considered how I might begin to spit out all the butt-ends of their days and ways. I decided to start off by bringing each of them to the table, one after the other.

First came Margaret, cloaked in a rumpled black trenchcoat, waddling slightly, her red lips framing a broad smile, her long black hair wet from the rain, an overstuffed briefcase in one hand and a steaming cup of coffee in the other.

"She talked you into it, I see," she laughed as she took her place.

"She flattered me."

"And of course you believed her."

"Of course."

Not surprisingly, we heard Billy before we saw him, his voice mowing down all opposition as he declared to everyone within earshot of the serving bar, where the entrance to the cafe was located, that the vegetables he was carrying in a cardboard box as big as a television set were

prettier and tastier than anything from the lower forty-eight. “Hah!” he said, with a laugh that was more a shout of triumph. “They’re organic, too!”

“The Zorro of Zucchini,” I muttered to Margaret as he swaggered into the room lugging his outsized offering of early harvest, which he dropped onto the table with a thud. He was beaming.

“Take all you want,” he said grandly, speaking as if most of his audience were still in the other room. “Zucchini, cukes, spinach, radishes, broccoli, I’ve even got a few tomatoes. What do you want?”

“I want you to put them somewhere other than on the table,” said Margaret brightly, smiling at him and batting her eyes.

“I want the tomatoes,” I said as Billy hoisted up the box and set it on the floor near the wall.

“After the meeting,” Margaret said.

“Hey,” Billy laughed, “they’ll all be taken by then.”

About that time, Teresa, Elizabeth and Harry walked in together. Teresa often picked up the other two; Harry didn’t like to drive at night and Elizabeth didn’t own a car.

“Hey,” Billy shouted in greeting, shrugging off his tan leather bombardier’s jacket and shaking the rain from his tousled straw-colored curls. “Free vegetables! Take all you want.”

“Hey, Billy,” Elizabeth replied, with a look in her dark eyes that seemed to say “oh, not again, Billy” and a smile that said his irrepressible and manifestly silly ebullience appealed to her motherly instincts. Teresa fluffed her damp blonde hair and smiled first at Margaret and then at me.

“You have tomatoes already?” she asked Billy.

Oh, God, I thought, don’t get him started on that. But of course it was too late, and off he went on a rambling excursion through the theory and practice of gardening with special emphasis on the tricks and secrets only he knew, most of which he had acquired in some fanciful fashion, and of course on the outsized virtues of the only place he considered primitive enough for his sensibilities, the Alaskan bush.

Teresa looked at me as she sat down, tucking her long skirt under her. “I hope we’re not late,” she said with a smile.

I smiled back. “Not at all.”

“It’s all my fault,” Harry interjected. Harry was a retired law school professor with an impressive mane of white hair. “I wanted to show her my new book and we got, well, involved.” He arched an eyebrow. “You know.”

“Involved in the book,” Teresa said assertively.

“Yes,” Harry agreed. “In the book.”

“I’m not sure I’d hang out with this guy,” Margaret said to her.

“Me neither,” Billy laughed. “You know what Shakespeare said about lawyers.”

Elizabeth remarked that she was going to get some coffee and Teresa volunteered to accompany her. They were getting to be good friends, it seemed, and they looked good together, the tall, casual, oyster-white Scandinavian blonde and the even taller English teacher with skin the color of burnished walnut, who looked elegant even in the maroon-and-white sweatsuit she sometimes wore to the meetings.

Pretty soon Geoffrey and Sibyl drifted in, arguing about something. Actually, it was Sibyl, her hands flailing the air constantly as she walked, who was arguing. Geoffrey just kept objecting. But when they got close to the table they gave it up and made their greetings around.

“Oh, Geoffrey,” Margaret said, fishing about in her two-gallon purse, “I have something for you.”

"Wow!" Geoffrey brightened boyishly, as if he were expecting an award, and walked—pranced, really—to her side. "Well, what is it?"

"Geoffrey," said Sibyl with disdain, "you are such a child."

"Hi, Sibyl," I said, smiling skeptically. "I see you're in fine form tonight."

"Yeah," she said, her voice trailing off as she busied herself with her papers.

It turned out that Margaret had found a camera lens at a garage sale, and Geoffrey was obviously pleased. "Great!" he exclaimed. "I can use it!"

"It cost me ten bucks," she said pointedly.

"Great!" he said again.

"It's a gift," she said.

"Oh, no, I couldn't," he said, "I'll pay you, honest, as soon as I get the money. I don't have it with me right now, but..."

"It's a gift," she said again, raising a plump finger to her lips, the scarlet polish a perfect match for her lipstick. She reached out and patted his cheek, in much the same way a momentarily beneficent Mafia capo might count coup on a careless lieutenant. "Buy me lunch someday."

We all sat down then, having achieved a suitable quorum of eight, and began laying out the new poems we had brought and the various work of one another's that we had taken home from the last meeting to look over more carefully.

"I've got a great one this time," Billy announced with a laugh.

"Must've been written in Alaska," Harry quipped.

Billy laughed again, "No, it was written right here—in fact, I wrote it while I was picking these vegetables I brought..."

I looked at Harry. His glance told me he'd realized his mistake. Billy dithered on.

As Billy regaled us with vegetable trivia and everyone passed papers around the table, Alexei made a grand entrance, rushing into the room, leaping into the air, landing and dissolving at once into a most graceful and compact curlique on the floor, from which, after a moment, he spread his arms wide, like a pavonine phoenix, and slowly rose to appreciative huzzahs. With an impish smile he took a brief bow and joined us at the table.

"Can you teach me to do that?" Harry asked.

"Oh, I could teach you," Alexei said with a warmly tolerant grin, "but I think your body might resent it."

"His body would be prostate," Billy guffawed.

"Prostrate," somebody corrected him.

"Apostate," someone else said.

"Upstate."

"Probate."

"Pronate."

"Who wants to start?" I asked. Those who had composed verses for the evening usually passed written copies around to everyone and then read one or two of them aloud.

"I'll start," Geoffrey said.

Geoffrey's passion lay in capturing the visual flow of artistic performances—videotape was his métier. He had a keen interest in the way things looked. He felt that everything real must be somehow visually representable. He tried to see life through a camera's eye.

"I'll read *Vantage Point*," he said. Papers shuffled.

Afloat upon the starry bight
With only a face for a crew,
A lunar mirror shining bright,
A vantage point from which
The earth tonight is new.

Somewhere in the blue on high
There's a black-eyed bull,
A lunar shadow in the sky,
A vantage point from which
The earth today is full.

He'd barely finished when the fiery red hair and flashing ice-green eyes of Aurora, deceptively softened in beige cashmere, entered the room like a sudden dawn out of Kipling's China. Acknowledging everyone with what was not quite a smile, she sat next to the grinning Alexei, an empty chair away from me.

I always had to look at her. Something within her beckoned to my soul like a magnet calls out to iron, like gravity sings to the moon. "'Evening, counsellor," I said, passing her some papers.

"Sorry if I'm late," she smiled.

"I think," Billy said loudly to her, laughing his usual maniacal self-satisfied laugh, "you should be spanked for your tardiness."

She glanced at him derisively. "In your dreams," she said.

And speaking of dreams, at that moment through the service bar doorway came someone we'd never seen before, dressed in a saffron-yellow dashiki edged in shimmering colors, a short, effusive, roly-poly, dark-brown young man with an infectious smile, gleaming and ingenuous, that radiated across his beatific face and was reprised a thousand times in black eyes full of warmth and whimsy.

"Hi!" he said, chuckling a little, as he sauntered toward us, a mug of coffee in his hand and a sheaf of manuscript pages tucked under his arm. "I'm Robin Ecst."

"Thank God," Margaret said. A general hubbub of greetings and introductions ensued.

Well, you won't be too disappointed, I hope, when I tell you that Kate, who had snookered me into managing this unruly mob in the first place, wasn't able to join us this night. She was preoccupied with one of her innumerable projects, as was often the case. Knowing this, I gave Robin her seat.

For the rest of the meeting we sat together at the table, sipping coffee and tea and, in Sibyl's case at least, some hideous herbal concoction, reading and criticizing one another's most recent work. The critiques occasionally devolved into tedious and labyrinthine disquisitions, and this evening we repeatedly found relief in Robin's fresh perspectives.

Robin was a painter, and his approach to poetry reflected his convictions about art. For him the civilized era had ended many centuries earlier. The likes of Rubens, Titian, Raphael and Michaelangelo were the true masters of art. Almost everything since had been mere sciamachy and preening vanity. His poems and paintings, we would discover, tended to be classical in tone, treating classical subjects with classical seriousness. They were paeans to a greatness that, in his view, modern times could neither imagine nor endure.

Though his belief in the pre-eminence, and relevance, of the ancient past was received with some skepticism, Robin took it lightheartedly. Our efforts to elicit formal justifications for his unusual views were met with a shrug and a laugh. He had nothing to justify; he just saw things this way. He didn't merely love the Renaissance; he was immersed in it. It was alive in him. He also had a fair affinity for the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, which had produced a

surfeit of magnificent art, and very exceptional writing in particular. But for him the abundant fruit of this period remained inferior to the creations of the classical masters, if for no other reason than that the latter period was no longer so innocent of the world.

About nine o'clock the meeting adjourned, and afterward I sat alone again in the silence. I'd filled many pages of my notebook, but now dusk had fallen and it was too dark in the great shadowed room to write anymore. The ocher hills to the east, beyond the flat roofs and powerlines, were tinged with fading pinks and violets. I felt happy and excited. Like some latter-day Noah I had gathered my poets together and we'd prepared to embark upon our long journey across the waters of time. As I picked up my notebooks and papers I paused in metaphor to weigh the anchor and hoist the sails. Outside, a gentle breeze wafted our little ship and its unsuspecting cargo off toward the unknown horizon that receded forever under the twinkling stars.

Poetry happens perhaps when someone captures the world in distinct lines of words, wrought with intricate rhythms and rhymes, seducing images both subtle and scintillating, the whole perfused with trenchant wisdom and garnished with feathery whimsy. Happily, prose is not so laden with formal expectations, because we, my poetic friends and I, have led lives not always fulgent with magic and glory, often even mundane, and occasionally becalmed and featureless, as you will see. Moreover, the things that happened frequently escaped my understanding, or assailed me with such rapidity and force that I could barely respond to them as they flung me skyward over brilliant blue pinnacles of ecstasy or hurled me rudely down into murky chasms of black despair.

Now, though, I'm suffused with the simple, contented radiance of life here in this peaceful place. I'm at ease with it all, not just with the shining countenance of this warm, waning autumn afternoon, into which no rain will fall, but also with the myriad spirits that dance in sparkling ripples across the black surface of the lake, and with all the winsome faces that float through my memory like evanescent zephyrs sifting and sighing through the pines.

Of course, I can't attest to the literal accuracy of all the things I'm about to tell you. Some I've gleaned by inference from stories I've heard. But I've known these people for a little while, and their inner voices often whisper through their poetry secrets their lips could not speak. Maybe I've occasionally added a rhyme to a line where there wasn't one, but I think you'll find my tale conforms pretty well to the rhythms of reality. That's as much as anyone can promise, or ought to ask.

Chapter 2
Q x P

Come live with me and be my love,
And we will all the pleasures prove
That hills and valleys, dales and fields,
And all the craggy mountains yields.

—*The Passionate Shepherd to His Love,* Christopher Marlowe

Mo had cloistered himself for several years in a relaxed, harmonious, bucolic life on his acreage at Indian Creek, raising orphan calves, tending a half-acre vegetable garden, planting trees and shrubs, fixing up the house and outbuildings, always engaged in one way or another with the creek that bordered his land for more than a quarter mile.

In time, though, he found himself in want of society and short of cash, so, when the opportunity arose, he went to work as a medic at the local Red Bear Free Clinic. His experiences with the veterinary care of his calves had given him a certain primitive familiarity with the treatment of injury and disease, but that was the extent of his training in medicine. Nonetheless, the clinic's requirements were not rigorous and its clients readily trusted him. He felt especially at ease with female clients, and he soon became the male half of the weekly VD-clinic team.

Despite the fact that he had a keen appreciation of feminine charms, Mo maintained a special propriety with his female patients. He seldom acknowledged even to himself that a particular one might in other circumstances greatly appeal to his lusty proclivities. In his examining room, lying naked on his table, a woman was his patient. Period. Whatever else she might be elsewhere, that was no business of his.

The Threadbare Clinic, as the insider wags called it, accommodated as many as sixty patients a day, mostly people with little income or education. Though many seemed to be more in need of psychiatric than physical attention, the diseases of the poor and ignorant range beyond the usual maladies of the better-off, and both diagnosis and treatment were sometimes very daunting.

Besides Mo, the medical staff consisted of a doctor, three female nurses, and a man who had once been an Army medic. Mo's specific training for this work had consisted almost entirely in accompanying the doctor on rounds for about two months, seeing sometimes fifteen or twenty patients a day. The doctor, who preferred to see patients only when his nurses or medics requested his advice and assistance, regularly ensconced himself in his upstairs office, where he read and talked on the phone for most of a typical day.

The waiting room, formerly a living room in the old house from which the clinic had been converted, became crowded each morning almost as soon as the doors opened at seven. By eight, when the staff began seeing people, the entire day's schedule was usually complete. There were only three examining rooms and ordinarily there were three staff people on duty. In rotation, each staff person would pick up a manila folder from the stack of client files, read whatever history and present complaint information was available, and direct the client to a particular examining room. The examination usually consisted of a few presumably perspicacious questions and an appropriate physical inspection. If at this point a diagnosis could be ascertained, an appropriate treatment or palliative was prescribed and often administered on-site. The patient might be

scheduled for a return visit, or not, and careful notes were made describing what had been found and what, if anything, had been done about it.

Interesting things were frequently found. The clinic had many clients who believed in the efficacy of bizarre medicinal procedures, such as the use of shredded vegetables to cure infections. Several times Mo encountered clients with open streptococcal sores, large, deep and ugly, usually in the muscular tissue of legs and arms, sometimes on the face, each packed full of gruesome orange carrot shreds stained with blood and stiffened with yellow suppurative sera. The procedure here was simple: remove and discard the carrots, clean and perhaps bandage the wounds, and finally inject five cc's of penicillin into each buttock of the hapless victim. Patients typically hated the shots, but the obvious wisdom was that if a medicine needed to be in the client's body, you'd better put it in there yourself. The lives of these people were not distinguished by regularity, self-discipline or attention to detail.

The VD clinic was an experience unto itself. People who lived in especial squalor might show up with crabs or body lice, which didn't seem to really count as venereal disease. Most of the male patients presented with gonorrhea or herpes or venereal warts, and on that account weren't very interesting. The women's afflictions were more varied. In addition to the aforementioned ailments, women also contracted generalized pelvic inflammatory disease, yeast overgrowths, and bladder infections.

The women suffered another category of trouble unexampled in the men—namely, objects stuck in their vaginas. Mo had one client whose boyfriend, so the tale was told, had, during a moment of sudsy passion in the shower, slipped a large bar of soap into her which they had subsequently been unable to remove. (Served him right, Mo thought.) After lavaging her with warm water, Mo managed to extract the soap with a forceps. On another occasion the client complained of acute pelvic pain, and, having spread her vaginal walls with a duck-billed tool called a speculum, Mo discovered four progressively putrid and bloody tampons, each one jammed higher and tighter than the one before, and, as he removed them gingerly, again with a forceps for they were otherwise unreachable, she explained that she had had sex several times one evening during her last period, a fortnight or more previous, and because after each time the tampon appeared to have been, as she put it, "lost," she'd merely inserted another one.

"Well," he said, smiling as he extracted the last one, "at least you've given new nuance to the word *tampon*." And he sent her home to take a long hot bath.

One cold January afternoon, in the pale white light of winter, a lanky, freckled woman with long, blue-black hair and brilliant sapphire eyes had slowly peeled off her print dress while Mo questioned her about the persistent abdominal aching that had impelled her to seek help at the clinic.

"So it's not really painful, but just a dull throb?" he asked.

"Well," she smiled with her slightly oversized white teeth, "sometimes I get a twinge of pain."

Mo noticed her taut brown breasts and saucily protruding nipples as she raised herself up to sit on the edge of the examining table. "And this has been going on for..."

"Oh, I don't know," she said, waving her hands with a shrug, "a few days I guess."

He stood up and approached her. Her eyes and skin were clear, and although she seemed a little rawboned, she had ample muscle tone and appeared to be in generally good health. The lymph nodes beneath her jaw were imperceptible and her skin felt cool to the touch. "Okay," he said, "just lie down here and let me have a look."

She swung her long tanned legs onto the table and lay back gracefully. He noticed, under her white cotton bikini underpants, the proud hummock of her mons, and felt, with considerable surprise, the urge to touch it, kiss it, caress it. Quickly, he commanded these thoughts out of his

mind, and they retreated somewhat, but they would not go. He placed his hands on her firm abdomen and pressed gently here and there, talking with her the while, asking how it felt when he touched her here, and here, noticing the supple smoothness of her skin. His eyes were drawn repeatedly to the shadowy tump welling upward against the soft cloth which flowed over it and disappeared downward between her slightly parted thighs. He wanted to slip his hand under the elastic of her panties—after all, there might be good reason for his doing so—but he didn't. He was afraid.

"Um, the discomfort seems to follow a course along your colon," he said. "Have you been constipated at all?" When he looked at her blue eyes he felt embarrassed, as if she must see swirling in his own eyes flickering signs of the lust that writhed in his loins.

"Well, a little," she said, again smiling with those prominent teeth. "Maybe an herbal enema..."

"Well, yes, or a mild laxative..."

"You think that's all it is?" she asked, almost coyly.

He permitted himself one last long look at her nakedness, felt once again the desire to... "Yes. I'm pretty sure. Try that and see."

She raised herself up to a sitting position. "You have a gentle touch," she said.

He smiled. "Let me know if you don't feel better in a day or two," he said as she partially zipped up her dress and slipped into her sandals.

She turned and pulled her hair aside so he could raise the zipper to her collar. "I will," she replied.

But he didn't expect her to, and she never did. He was relieved to discover that his subsequent female patients aroused no more lasciviousness in him than they ever had, and he quickly put the incident far back in his mind.

Four or five months later, on a warm early summer afternoon at an outdoor concert where he found himself engaged in a long game of chess with a young video maven named Geoffrey, while both of them puffed on joints occasionally proffered by the kibitzing crowd, he met her again.

Trapped in a long slow defensive strangulation due to an early and foolish sacrifice for position that had never come to fruition, Mo was startled to find himself staring into those seductive eyes once more as she sat down crosslegged beside him and held the wet tip of a king-sized joint up to his lips. He suppressed his instinct to acknowledge his recognition of her and she seemed not to notice. He sucked on the doobie and nodded his head as he looked at her. She smiled, and he remembered that day in his examining room as if it were happening again. After he'd exhaled, she took a long, deep drag on the weed and slowly, gazing steadily into his eyes, bent her face close to his, until her puckered lips pressed lightly against his nostrils. He inhaled her mouthful of smoke through his nose, and almost instantly his mind surged with the sudden onrushing of the drug's effects. They both smiled.

She sat there quietly, a freckled nymph in the bright green grass, and as the game wore inexorably onward she gently took his hand and laid it on her bare thigh, near the cuffed edge of her short white shorts, and placed her own hand lightly on top of his. Oddly, this seemed to improve his concentration on the game although he was distinctly aware of the cool, smooth warmth of her flesh. When he had to lift his hand to move a piece or take the joint from her, afterward he returned it to her leg and she repeatedly lay her hand over his, sometimes stroking it softly. His position on the board continued to deteriorate as he struggled to find some exit from his predicament.

At one point she left to find something to drink and for a few minutes the action of the game was suspended while Geoffrey's seconds embarked on a similar search. When she returned

with a cola in a paper cup, Mo had seen what appeared to be a serendipitous trap in which, with luck, he might ensnare his opponent, and at the appropriate moment, with an air of continuing resignation, he offered a pawn as bait. Geoffrey responded. Mo let a long breath flow slowly out from his nostrils and moved again. When he placed his hand on the tan thigh this time his fingers were almost under the cuff of her shorts, but again she touched the back of his hand lightly and then lifted the cup of cool liquid to his lips. Geoffrey now elected to capitalize on his apparent good fortune, and suddenly Mo's trap closed around him. Within a few moments the complexion of the game had been irretrievably altered.

While he waited for Geoffrey and his supporters to grasp the implications of the situation, Mo's fingers slipped briefly inside her pants and brushed against the soft nap of her vulva. It felt damp. She covered his hand with her own.

"Shit!" Geoffrey whispered to himself. The crowd buzzed a little. Mo glanced at her, slyly smiling with his eyes.

Geoffrey moved again and Mo, after a decent interval, gave check. Geoffrey knitted his brow, sighed, and stared at the board for a long time. He glanced up at the sky and then looked again at the board, at the position of the pieces, at the careful game of merciless attrition he had as much as won but that was now suddenly, utterly and inexplicably lost. Mo squeezed her thigh softly. She pulled his hand slightly toward the mystic crypt he'd once not dared to touch. Geoffrey looked up at Mo and again at the board. Then, shaking his head, he reached out and lay his king on its side.

They shook hands and Geoffrey awkwardly stood up, preparing to leave. Mo declined an offer to play against another opponent and turned to the woman at his side. "My name's Mo," he said.

"Hi, Mo," she smiled. "I'm Sibyl."

Later that evening they lay naked on her bed, stoned, pacified, happy and wanton, and he stroked the silken curls over her mons and toyed with her rigid nipples as she read to him from *Through the Looking-Glass:*

"'Now! Now!' cried the Queen. 'Faster! Faster!' And they went so fast that at last they seemed to skim through the air, hardly touching the ground with their feet, till suddenly, just as Alice was getting quite exhausted, they stopped, and she found herself sitting on the ground, breathless and giddy.'"

Chapter 3

Halcyon Days

My heart is like a rainbow shell
That paddles in a halcyon sea;
My heart is gladder than all these,
Because my love is come to me.

—*A Birthday,* Christina Rosetti

Sibyl had been fourteen when she'd encountered the real world in the person of Vladimir Jernikov, the summer season's guest conductor of the Youth Symphony and Unified Chorus at Chatauqua, New York, where her parents had left her for the summer. Jernikov, a self-certified protégé of Arturo Toscanini, had professed a swooning admiration for her singing voice and even proposed to groom her himself for stardom if her debut with YSUC were a success, and, of course, if she would let him.

"Work hard, little skylark," he had told her, his hands on her small shoulders, his clear dark eyes piercing her own, his faint smile sincere and reassuring, "and you will have everything you so richly deserve."

Oh, yes, she would do it!

And she had worked arduously, spending sunny mornings with her voice coach and two or three afternoons a week at Jernikov's studio overlooking Lake Erie, reprising her most recent vocal accomplishments and practicing her big number, *Begin the Beguine,* with him accompanying her on the piano. He had selected a costume for her, a slinky snow-white sequined gown with modest padding in the bust but otherwise cut as if it had been poured over her, and one day he asked her to wear it while she sang, to lend authenticity to their rehearsal. He'd had to help her into it, as it zipped from mid-buttocks to her scapula, and afterward of course he'd had to help her out again, which he did while extolling her vocal accomplishments with unusual enthusiasm.

"Such an angelic voice, such a captivating face, such exquisite eyes," he'd gushed while she blushed, standing before him in her girlish underwear. "You know," he'd said, taking her hands in his, "when I hear you sing at your very best, as I did today, I can hardly contain myself. And when I see you in this dress, so young, so pristine, and so, well, grown-up..."

He was her benefactor, her champion, her teacher, her master, her glorifier, her source of inspiration and hope, and yet, oddly, but clearly, he had need of her. Besides, she reveled in her ability to induce ecstasy in such a great and generous man. Thus, during the week before her debut performance, when he'd seemed especially agitated and distraught, she'd happily spent the night with him, twice. Then she couldn't because her parents had arrived from France to attend the concert.

It was a disaster. The white patent heels which Jernikov had ordered didn't arrive until the evening of the concert and they proved much too big. She'd had to tuck tissue into their toes so they wouldn't slip off when she walked. She'd found them easy enough to stand in, but walking anywhere in them, even across the room, was another matter entirely.

Her entrance onstage had accordingly been awkward, and she'd almost fallen. Jernikov had looked daggers at her then. In her embarrassment she'd lost the smoky, self-confident demeanor

that had made her a believable chanteuse, and her rendition of the song was ill-focused and unconvincing—in a word, amateurish. Jernikov had applauded coldly and hadn't followed her offstage but instead launched the orchestra almost at once into the next number. The next morning he'd left on vacation and he didn't return while she and her parents were there.

"She has a voice," the voice coach had told her mother later, over the phone, "ahhhh, very much like a duck's."

And then her mother had divined the truth, which Sibyl had given up with tears but never words, not even when her father asked her directly whether Maestro Jernikov had ever done anything "improper."

"No," she had said, her voice rising in fury. "No! Never!" And then she had burst into tears, a shuddering rage of tears just before she stormed out of the room. "No! He only wanted me to sing! He loved my voice! And stop asking me about him! I hate him!"

These events had seared her soul and her subsequent silence had focused the flame on her own spiritual tissues, so that a part of her had died. On its headstone were engraved two precious pearls of wisdom: what men want, and what they will do to get it. They wanted the adoration, real or imaginary, of a woman they desired. And they would do absolutely anything to attain it.

A half-dozen years later she'd put this knowledge to good use in her relationship with another deeply disturbed genius, a one-time concert violinist almost twice her age, an emigré from Latvia in flight from the drooling inquisitors of the red faith, whom she'd persuaded to impregnate and then marry her. The two of them had joined a commune in Bucks County, next door to Andrew Wyeth's farm, where the daily menu was bean soup, fresh bread, garden vegetables and LSD.

During or shortly after his birth—nobody seemed to know exactly when or how—their son Dylan's legs had been grotesquely broken just below the knees; the soft bones were badly damaged. Believing that the medical establishment was a corruption of nature and that the spirit of nature itself would heal him, they'd decided to do nothing other than apply the usual assortment of herbal poultices. In time, the spirit of nature had indeed healed him, but now he walked with an exaggerated rolling motion, and when he ran he quickly tripped over himself. Still, he was greatly disposed to run and often, if never for long, forgot that he couldn't.

Sibyl thought that Mo's place on Indian Creek would be good for Dylan. Mo would be good for Dylan because he was a man. Dylan would acquire the male mysteries he'd never known, the violinist having departed one dark night never to return. And the idyllic setting was perfectly suited both to idle puttering, which she considered uplifting, and to her continuing quest for those elusive truths of the universe which she sought (and often found) in astral arcana and lysergic acid.

The land was really quite beautiful. All summer long the creek rolled and tumbled by, clear and bright in sun and moon, its currents awash in light. All day and night it sang its varying song, calling ducks, herons and osprey to its table, comforting beaver and an occasional otter, lulling trout and steelhead salmon sometimes within reach of a bare hand, enticing the upstream breeze after a hot summer's day to rustle the trees along the banks with its long cool fingers.

While Mo worked at the clinic Sibyl plied the dark, rich, bottomless soil, planting a few flowers here, a rich scarlet Spanish Ruby pomegranate there. Sometimes she and Dylan lay naked all through the afternoon sun, reading, listening to music, rising now and then to plunge into the icy water. Sometimes then she dropped acid and sometimes she just smoked a joint or two. On good days, which were agreeably frequent, a few friends would drop by and join in this easygoing dissolution. She and Dylan both liked having other children around.

On weekends particularly, Mo enjoyed Sibyl's social days in the sun and he occasionally shared in the acid festivities. But he had a different rhythm from Sibyl and most of her friends. He

liked to work. Not many of them had jobs. He went to the clinic five days a week, raised two dozen calves each year, was constantly in the midst of a building project of some kind. When he joined the crowd at creekside it was frequently only for a half hour or so—time enough to strip down, plunge in, splash around, share a few laughs. Then he'd be gone again, fixing a roof, mowing the grass, or just lying in his hammock under the alders, reading.

His fondness for Sybil was increasingly challenged by her persistent condemnation of the modern world and all its works. Her insistence that love could solve every woe seemed frequently coincident with her having been refused by someone from whom she wanted something, an act she naturally considered unjust mistreatment. Nobody, Mo thought, would much value the vituperative criticism she lavished on those with whom she disagreed, but she considered it merely the obligation of the enlightened, including herself, to provide guidance for the great swarm of mindless humanity, in whose midst Mo was often cast.

Sibyl believed, Mo thought, that a person of her stature (whatever that was) ought not have to work, certainly not in any ordinary menial sense. No doubt having adopted this attitude at an early age, there was much she didn't know. Likewise, she had little patience for tedious niceties such as critical examination, careful discrimination, and rational thought. The force of an idea on her mind depended almost entirely upon the circumstances of its advancement to her. If the right person said it, in the right way, it might become then and forever true. Thus her worldview was a tangled congeries of unconnected threads.

"Love is the answer to all things," she said one day.

"What does that mean?"

"It means, if everybody loved each other, we wouldn't have any of these problems in the world."

"But if you love everybody, then what can love possibly mean? It's seems even more perverse than that 'everything is everything' crap, which is utterly vacuous."

"Oh, don't start with that macho logic thing again."

"Well, I'm just trying to understand what the correlation is, if there is one, between the words and the facts."

"Words mean just what they mean."

"Do they? You say everybody should love everybody, but you heap venom and ridicule on everybody who disagrees with you. You're sure they're all wrong. You say everybody should live in peace, but your own relationship with the world is one of incessant flailing at other people."

"Well, the fact is, you're totally retarded in your evolution," she replied. "Your spiritual evolution, I mean. Your attitudes are from the Middle Ages. You can't stand anything new. You're stuck in all the same old stuff. A cockroach is more evolved than you are because it doesn't have any choice."

"Archie was more evolved than I am," he agreed. "But only because he could type."

"Well, make jokes if you want to, and think what you will. I'm sure I don't care. But stop trying to tell me what to think. I know what works in my life."

For her part, because he neither accepted her worldview nor supported her efforts to reveal its truth to the world, she felt he'd never really accepted her. She bore this insult quietly, more or less, but his approach to life seemed more and more a hopeless and wasteful enterprise. Slowly, Indian Creek was becoming for her a rustic Edenesque prison.

Sibyl was a big-city girl, a debutante and cotillion girl. But she'd always wanted to be an outlaw's moll, a role she modeled more on a carefree Maid Marian, tripping on psychedelic mushrooms through Sherwood Forest, than on a cigar-chomping Bonnie Parker spraying blood

and buckshot over the wheatfields of Kansas. But mother to an inelegant boy and consort to a bookish and stubbornly atavistic man on a piece of anonymous dirt in the middle of no place in particular? Well, it seemed a little slow.

She felt that Dylan needed more time with boys his age and, when no one was coming to visit, she often took him to town with her for the day, especially if Mo was working at the clinic. Dylan had many friends among the children of her friends and they played all day long on their own. She didn't have to worry about his falling into the creek or getting caught up in some machinery or stumbling over a snake. She didn't have to put off having a joint or dropping an orange barrel and communing with the voices of the ancestors or devoting an afternoon to excoriating modern society in all its evil guises or divining from the confluences of planets the keys to the future she—in harmonious resonance with hyper-evolved people everywhere—advocated and desired.

She frequently went to town in search of the companionship of others who shared her views of the world, her passion for spiritual evolution, her passion for astrology and world peace and vegetarianism.

Late in summer, just before Labor Day, Sibyl decided to throw a giant party for Mo's birthday. She invited all of her acquaintances who worked in public service, as bureaucrats and volunteers, and many closer friends who, like herself, had never been gainfully employed at anything, thinking it noisome and spiritually corrosive, many members of both groups in the thrall of some offhanded mysticism, and all of his acquaintances, mostly Threadbare Clinic workers and a few broadminded local yokels, and all of their friends in common, who tended to be pot-thumping, guitar-smoking vagabonds on the back roads of life. Everyone, it seemed, showed up for this party—about three hundred people altogether. There were six birthday cakes. There were dozens of cards containing a joint or a bud or a tab of acid. "Eat this card!" one of them said.

It was a hot and sunny autumn day, and by mid-afternoon people milled through the house, ranged over the back yard, wandered along the creek, inspected the calf barn, lounged on the porch or at creekside, talking, eating, drinking, laughing. Many people from the poetry group were there.

Several food tables had been set up on the back lawn near the house. Sibyl lit up a joint as she walked over to join her friend Lucy behind a huge silver punch bowl. "Been sampling the merchandise?" she asked.

Lucy returned a wry smile. "I think some of these *guys* are the merchandise!" she joked.

"Well, it's a party, you know. You don't have to stay here and serve punch all day."

Lucy took a hit on the joint and gestured with her eyes toward Mo's sauna, which was basically just a little cedar shed with a wood stove inside. A bower of jasmine framed the doorway, and nearby stood a young man with a long face and slightly flattened nose, lips almost the color of his swarthy skin, obsidian eyes that seemed to see beyond this buzzing bustle of humanity into some other world.

"Uh-huh," Sibyl chuckled, looking at her. "I'll do this for a while, sweetie, if you want to um, explore the sauna or something. That is, if you want me to…"

But Lucy had already accepted her offer. "I may never return," she said.

"Remember, he's a man."

"Maybe he's a god."

"Even if he is, he's still a man."

Lucy grinned. "Ok, mom, I'll try to bear that in mind." Then she stopped, her face only inches from Sibyl's, and with a conspiratorial smile she asked softly, "Um, got any rubbers, mom?"

Billy was standing next in line and he was unamused by this hiatus in the process. “This is the worst service I’ve seen since Jake Houlihan went on a bartender-shooting spree in Ketchikan,” he protested.

“Stuff a rag in it, William,” Sibyl said. “You’re lucky we even let the likes of you on the premises.”

Only Sibyl ever called Billy “William,” but she frequently did because he obviously didn’t like it. Billy laughed. His laugh seemed well-suited to the outdoors. She thought he must have grown up around loud machinery, in a factory probably, or maybe his family were all partially deaf. Paul Bunyan probably talked big and loud, too.

“William,” she said grinning, ladling the punch into Billy’s outsize glass mug, already half full of whiskey, “is there anything enlightened about you?”

“Nope,” Billy said. “I’m totally in the dark. I’m a celebration of the Dark Ages. I’m even Catholic. I can’t think my way out of a paper bag, you know? I go entirely on instinct. I’m like a leopard. A ferocious and fearless hunter. Beautiful, graceful and strong. Mysterious. And for all these reasons hunted by man. And woman too. Pressed into the farthest reaches beyond civilization, my eyes aglow in the dark world. What would enlighten me? Christian virtues? Would you teach me Zen Buddhism? There’s already a jewel in my navel. Well, not in my navel, exactly. But what? Am I not, as you say, enlightened? The leopard and I are beyond enlightenment because we are beyond illusion.”

“Well, you have a fanciful self-image there,” Sibyl said, raising her palms as if in supplication for summary judgment, “but obviously you, William, are in no way free of the burden of illusion. And while some people work very hard to preserve panthers and their ecologies, I doubt very much anyone will want to preserve you in amber after the big grizzly in the sky digs you out of some rotten log.”

“Hey, whole civilizations disappear all the time,” he said. “See that guy over there? The one Lucy’s with?”

“Yeah.”

“He’s Mayan. He’s from a world nobody remembers, five hundred, maybe a thousand years ago. All that’s left of it—all anybody knows about anyway—are some pyramids, some writing stones, some rope calendars, and these people. The jungle ate everything. Why did a great civilization suddenly just evaporate? What happened to it? It’s like Atlantis, see? Maybe it *is* Atlantis. Maybe the whole west end of the Caribbean used to be above water. See, it’s like Egypt, only in Egypt we have tons of documents, hundreds of structures, but we don’t know what happened to them, either. They seem to have been buried in the sand.”

“The Mayans sacrificed children!” Sibyl looked at him fiercely. “They based their whole religion on an unspeakable evil.”

“Well, I hate to put a hot poker up your ass, on account of how you might like it,” he laughed, “but you’ve undoubtedly noticed that every society on the face of the earth sacrifices its young people on certain special occasions, the same way that some ritually kill their kings.”

“They don’t stab twelve-year-old virgins in the heart on an altar as a way of placating their gods.”

“No, we placate our gods with money and we trade a few extra years of phony childhood for a new crop of fools with heavy-breathing spending habits. Hey, seriously,” he continued, “don’t you ever wonder what happened to the Soviet Union?”

“No,” she said.

“They slaughtered a few million of their own people.”

“Okay, William, but why does this stuff interest you so much?”

"Well, actually," he said, admiring her skirts, his blue eyes dancing like ripples in a Grecian sea, "it's the suggestive swishing of all those layers of filmy modesty that really interests me."

"You mean your macho fantasy of my bare ass stretched tight against my panties like the skin of Dizzy Gillespie's cheeks."

"Well, I was saving that for later. Savoring it, you might say."

"Listen, I'm going to bend over here for you, real slow just like you like it, okay? Then you can go jack off somewhere, okay? You shouldn't wait, you know. Civilization might collapse at any time. Maybe a comet will strike this very place in ten minutes."

"Hey, fuck you, Sibyl," he said with mock anger. He grinned at her, leering, beady-eyed, daring her to take him seriously.

She leered back. "You're worse than that maggot I live with."

"Hey, thanks for the punch."

"I'll give you punch. You ain't seen nothin' yet, Cro-Magnon man."

"Well, that's what I always see with you, isn't it, despite your evocative promises of more. Which are just the teasing eyes of fourteen-year-old girls who are afraid to go all the way."

"You're disgusting," she said. She turned aside, to the cooler behind her, and slowly bent over to extract another bag of ice. Without rising, she looked back over her shoulder at him. "Well?" she demanded.

"Wriggle a little."

"Beat it, bud." She stood up again. "Go!"

As he wandered off, she smiled broadly at the tall, hazel-eyed blonde who was next in line. "Sorry," she said, shrugging her shoulders. "He must be a friend of Mo's."

"Nice party," the blonde said. "This sure is a beautiful place."

"Yes," Sibyl agreed. "It's very peaceful."

"Well…"

"Except today," Sibyl laughed, handing her a cup of punch. "I'm Sibyl."

"Oh, hi, I'm Teresa," said the blonde, smiling. "Actually, we've met before. At the group."

"Oh, I'm sorry…"

"No, I understand. It's out of context. I've only been there a few times."

"I only go when I'm stoned," Sibyl said, laughing, "which is most of the time."

"How long have you lived here?"

"Dylan and I just moved here last spring. Mo's lived here for a few years—four or five, I think."

"You know, if you want to circulate, Sibyl, I could do this for a while."

"Actually, I just got started."

"Well, I like meeting people, and you probably already know everybody."

"Yeah, I half-know maybe half of them," Sibyl said, and she handed the ladle to Teresa.

"Your flowers are gorgeous," Teresa commented. "I love the blue hydrangeas and the chocolate cosmos together."

"Thanks. The hydrangeas were here when we came here. Oh, and don't bend over for Billy."

Teresa laughed. Sibyl worked her way through the crowd and crossed the little footbridge that led to the swimming hole, which was hidden from the view of people in the yard above. She walked carefully down a steeply sloping path that emerged into the sunlight on a small sandy beach along the outer sweep of a turn in the creek's course.

Dylan and Elizabeth were hunkered down near the water's edge.

"Hi!" Sibyl said.

"Hi, Mom."

"Hiya, Sibyl," Elizabeth echoed, rising to greet her.

Sibyl hugged the slender black woman. "Hi, Liz," she whispered warmly. Then she bent over and kissed Dylan's cheek and pressed her cheek against his.

"What are you guys up to here?" she asked.

"We're building a dam," Dylan said.

"So I see."

"These are our ships," he said, plucking one out of the water-filled pool they'd dredged in the sand.

"No telling what you can make out of a piece of bark and some sticks," Elizabeth said, laughing.

"Very impressive," Sibyl said. Then, stepping to one side, she lifted up and over her head the gauzy white cotton dress, multilayered like diaphanous baklava, billowing like a wisp of cloud, a comet's tail in the warm breeze. Then, gazing tan and freckled, naked but for her sheer white panties, across the lambent surface of the creek, she asked, "Is it cold?"

Elizabeth laughed. She was clad in a royal purple sweat jacket and pants that richly complemented her coppery brown skin and the blueblack hair she wore in a long braid. Her white running shoes and socks were nearby. "Well, I put my foot in it," she said. "Up to the ankle. And I'm just now getting the feeling back."

"It's not cold, Mom," Dylan said. "I went in all the way over my head. It's warm once you get in."

Down went the panties and in she dove. A nut-brown mermaid with faint tan lines and a sleek pear-shaped butt. She surfaced with a great splash and a splutter, shaking the water from her thick, wavy black hair, shrieking with pain and delight at the icy water that enveloped her and gripped her muscles in a vise of numbness. It felt good.

"It's an experience, isn't it?" Elizabeth laughed.

"C'mon in," Sibyl encouraged her.

"Honey, I don't like being cold. That's one of those masochistic European things, you know? I like to be hot, girl, hot. Hot is good. Cold is not good."

"'Cause you're a hot mama, Aunt Liz," Dylan said, looking up, championing her.

"Yes," she said, kneeling down again to pile more rocks on their dam. "What do you think?"

"I think you're chicken," he laughed, pulling in his shoulders and feigning to duck away from her.

"I think some impudent little boy should work on his end of the dam before we wind up with no water for our fishing fleet to float in."

The party murmured along. The six birthday cakes were lit at once, shortly after sunset, which created a conflagration Mo extinguished only after great labor of huffing and puffing. As the stars emerged and the cool evening breezes waned the crowd was winnowed and the festivities gravitated toward the house.

Around midnight a gusty tropical wind began blowing up from the south, and shortly afterward an incredible lightning storm erupted. Long, sinuous strokes unzipped the sky from horizon to horizon. Thick, ponderous bolts like glowing tree trunks staggered and sluiced and shuddered into the earth. Heavy gray clouds billowed overhead in the darkness, repeatedly illuminated by flashes of ghostly light in shimmering blue and purple hues. Every few seconds

jagged spears and webs of lightning coursed wildly across the sky, sometimes two or three at a time, and the air, itself alive with torrents of warm rain and the odor of ozone, crackled and hissed and exploded with concussions that shook the ground.

Around two, when the storm had begun to subside and most of the guests had gone home, Mo fired up the sauna and when it was hot he put *Aida* on the outdoor speakers. Then he and Sibyl quietly stole away from the last remaining conversations in the kitchen and reclined naked and laughing and sweaty in the dimly-lit room, from which they repeatedly ran out and leapt into the black icy creek, in which they made love while the doomed operatic lovers flung hosannas of glorious despair from their tragic tomb and rain pounded on the roof and sudden eerie flashes of light cast dancing shadows across the landscape and thunder boomed and rumbled and echoed through the far-off hills. Love, like fire and stars, has its brightest moments near the end.

Chapter 4

Letting Go

But could youth last and love still breed,
Had joys no date nor age no need,
Then these delights my mind might move
To live with thee and be thy love.

—*The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd,* Sir Walter Raleigh

Robin Ecst had stayed over to help with the cleanup. He and Dylan had begun around seven, so by the time Sibyl and Mo arose, shortly after nine, the job was done. Sibyl assembled a breakfast of dry cereal, toast and apple juice while the men sauntered down to the creek to see if it was still there, and then the four of them sat down to eat.

"That was very sweet of you, Robin," Sibyl said, and added to Dylan, "You, too, honey."

Robin grinned. "That'll be my present to Mo," he said, "'cause I know he'd have had to do it."

"Bullshit," Sibyl declared. "I'm the one who would've done it, so it's really a gift to me. Thank you, Robin."

Mo shrugged. "I'm grateful either way," he said. "To you, too, champ."

"Robin's a painter, Mom," Dylan offered brightly.

"I know, honey."

"He's going to paint a picture of me!"

"Really? How long will that take?"

"I have to pose in one exact way for a long time."

"If it's okay with you guys," Robin interjected, smiling, leaning forward slightly and looking at both of them.

"Sure," Mo said.

"How long do you think it'll take?" Sibyl asked Robin. "And what happens to the painting afterward?"

"Well," Robin laughed, "that's hard to say. A few sittings. A few weeks maybe. But the portrait will be Dylan's to do with whatever he wants."

"Great," she said.

"Hey, Robin," Mo said, pausing momentarily to let the previous conversation die away. "Tell me something. I'm thinking about the difference between your painting and my poetry. It's art, isn't it? Well, there are a lot of other differences, too. Craft, skill, vision, that kind of stuff, but the one thing I still wouldn't have even if I had all those other things, is art. Know what I mean?"

Robin rocked back, smoothed the front of his shirt over his ample belly, and laughed softly. "Well, I really don't know about art," he said. "I don't. I mean, I try to learn about the craft and its history. But I don't usually read or talk to anybody about art, even art in painting, because I really don't know anything about it."

Robin knew more about his craft and its history than any other painter Mo had ever known. He was fascinated by history because it held so many delightful secrets. The ancients made paint from pigmented minerals, or plants, which they ground themselves and mixed with various types of oils, waxes and drying agents. So did Robin. They used egg whites to create the gesso undercoat that sealed and stiffened and lent a peculiar texture to the canvas, whether made of cotton or linen. So did Robin. They made their own brushes of animal hair and plant fibers. So did Robin. They were masterful observers and technicians of shape, color, perspective and light. So was Robin.

"The hardest thing for me," he said, "is trying to understand my feelings about significant things. I mean really getting to the icy nub of it."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm sure it's a man thing," Sibyl said.

Robin laughed. "Well, first of all, what's significant?"

"It could be anything," Mo ventured. "Some things are naturally significant. Birth, death, love, the plague. Other things, a mosquito, a moment of arrhythmia, a missed opportunity, a horseshoe nail, are usually insignificant, but sometimes everything hinges on them."

"Everything is connected," Sibyl observed.

"Sure," Mo said.

"Well," Robin continued, "the big things are familiar to everybody, so you need a pretty unusual perspective to say anything very original and profound about them. But I'm talking about when you've solved this problem and now you know what you're going to paint, but you haven't actually begun. You have to find a key to it. Sometimes it just jumps out at you. Sometimes you sneak up on it with drawings and sketches and models. As you work you begin to see what it is. It just sort of emerges. And sometimes you don't see it for a long time, and no matter what you do, you can't seem to make any progress, and then it suddenly appears. And sometimes you can't find it at all. That's what I'm talking about. Maybe that's what art is—finding the perfect metaphor that transmutes a plane structure of color and texture into a meaningful emotional experience and a sense of enhanced understanding."

"Not just a painting but any kind of human creation."

"Yes, I think so."

"So the material world is translated through the metaphor of painting into sensations and understandings?"

"Exactly."

"So you would see the *Guernica* as a metaphor for the plight of the people of Spain during the Civil War that is visually powerful enough to wring emotional responses from, and convey a sense of the hidden truth to, even viewers who are naive of the facts?"

"Especially them."

Mo pondered this for too long.

"Do you think it can go the other way?" Sibyl asked as she got up to refresh her tea. "Anyone want anything?" Nobody did.

"You mean can metaphors be found that translate feelings and thoughts into physical reality?" Robin chuckled merrily. "Sure. Paintings. Buildings. Dams. Great scrambled eggs."

"No," she protested, "I mean that if you visualize something clearly enough—you know, if you really know it in all its aspects—then you can actually will it into existence. Like world peace. Don't you think so?"

"Do I will my paintings into existence?" Robin mulled. "Well, sure, I can see how you might say that. But really I sweat them into existence, you know? I paint them into existence.

They don't always come willingly. I don't think you can make a painting, or a poem, by a sheer effort of will."

"It seems a lot like learning to make yourself have an orgasm just by thinking about it," Mo said. "If you're not in an iron lung, why would you do that? It'd be perverse. It would reduce sexual ecstasy to an exudation of fluid."

"That isn't what I meant and you know it," Sibyl complained.

"Well," said Robin, "what appears to you as will is actually some almost innate force that makes me want to paint all the time. I just love painting. It makes me feel complete, engaged, elated. There's nothing I'd rather do. Nothing. So it isn't really even willful, most of the time. It's just fun."

"I can't say that about poetry," Mo said.

"But," she protested, "world peace is just about feelings, because all it takes is for everybody to decide to live nonviolently, and feelings can be changed by an effort of will, don't you think?"

"I think that's highly debatable," Mo said. "And I think strict nonviolence is a bizarre concept, actually for the same reason that willing things into existence is bizarre."

"Why is that?" Robin asked.

"Because it denies the difference between mind and matter."

"Don't you think that on some level they're the same?"

"Well, that's the God question, isn't it?"

Robin shrugged. "Could be," he said.

"Anyway, I don't think my poetry is going to rise to the level of art," Mo said, "no matter what I do."

"But you don't know," Robin protested earnestly, "because application is a *sine qua non,* don't you think? Seems like that's what we've been saying, you in particular. You have to get obsessed. Pablo Neruda wrote five poems a day, every day. That's what I mean. If you make yourself do it by sheer willpower, fine. But if it's so much fun it blows you away, well, that's much easier."

Mo laughed. "I don't write five poems in a month," he said, getting up to take his dishes to the sink. "Unless I'm having a really bad month. Sounds like work to me. Oh, and speaking of work, where'd Kate go last night? I saw you guys come in but I never got to talk to her."

"She had a project to work on," Robin said. "Of course."

"So you need a ride home."

"I can hitch. Hey, Sibyl, thanks for breakfast."

"Nuh-uh," Mo said, "I don't think so. C'mon, Dylan, we'll take this compulsive artist back to his studio."

"Well, wait," Sibyl said. "I have to go to town later, and Dylan has to come with me so we can get some things for school. So why don't we just take Robin then?"

"I can hitch," Robin said again.

"Yeah, and I'll go to work on Monday and you'll still be standing out there," Mo demurred. Then he gestured to them with his head and walked toward the door. "We'll be back in an hour," he said to Sibyl.

"Dylan, I want you to stay here," she replied.

"Aw, mom."

Mo suppressed and then released a big sigh as he and Robin went out the door. The sky was a brilliant blue.

"Kids survive their parents," Robin said.

"Look at Sibyl," Mo rejoined.

At the end of the following week Mo drove up into the mountains for the poetry group's annual ten-day vacation retreat. Sibyl had elected to stay at home. Her friend Stephanie was having a party she wanted to attend. She gave him an envelope with her poem in it and asked him to present it on her behalf.

Mo spent most of the days fishing or sunning himself on the sand. Sometimes he went for walks in the quiet woods. In the evenings there were occasional readings and discussions. Often a smaller group of three or four would coalesce around the fireplace in the common room or out on the porch of the old hotel, talking until the wee hours.

When the time came, Mo agreed to read both his poem and Sibyl's.

"I haven't seen hers yet," he said. "But I'll do mine first. It's called *Trickster's Lament,"*

And if you sent Coyote yapping down
To wrest Takoma's spirit bride from him,
Was it a mythic soul you wished to own,
Or power over dogs who served your whim?

If Loki from Yggdrasil's grasp withdrew
The glittering steel of Fafnir's due demise,
Was it the blade of Wotan's end that you
Looked longing on, or Merlin's cousin's eyes?

If bade you wanton-eyed Prometheus
To fetch from god's own hearth the sacred fire,
Was it to know the sacred power of Zeus?
Did you to giver or the gift aspire?

O creature from my own rib ripped and wrought,
Sucked you the fruit from ignorance to wake?
Was it the blessed curse of truth you sought?
Or was it just the friendship of the snake?

There was muffled laughter and polite applause as Mo opened the envelope containing Sibyl's contribution. He scanned the work quickly. "Well, maybe you found that too personal," he said, smiling. "Sibyl's is called *Night Time.* It's a little more abstract."

My knight clad in laughter and music,
My bard rapt in passionate love,
My innocent boy on his grail-quest
My ancient of days in his grove:

How wondrous your wit in the morning,
How charming your verse in the glen,
How sweet your dear smile in the gloaming,
How wise your soft words were back then.

Then brave was your heart for the battle,
Then rhythmic your epical dance,
Then graceful your curious mettle,
Then gentle the sweep of romance.

O now you are daunted by shadows,
O poet encumbered in rhyme,
O cynical young camerado,
O all is encrusted with time.

Later on Harry remarked to Mo that while listening to these poems he'd felt as if he'd inadvertently intruded on two strangers having sex in the woods.

One rainy afternoon in mid-October, when the oncoming winter weather was making a preview appearance in the form of a two-day drizzling spell that marked the end of a long Indian Summer on Indian Creek, Mo undertook to read *The Story of Ferdinand* to Dylan, who was feeling a little down in the dumps about the fact that the teachers had made a big deal of compelling the other kids to take everybody (meaning him) into a soccer game and then nobody had ever passed him the ball.

"It doesn't matter anyway," Dylan grumbled. "I'd probably miss it, anyway."

"You probably would," Mo agreed. "And so what? Can you do rocket science? And so what? I can't either. Do you want to be a soccer player?"

"No."

"And you've never heard this story?"

"Nope."

So they lay on the floor in front of the fireplace, and Mo said, "This was my second favorite story when I was a kid."

"After *The Little Engine That Could."*

Mo looked at him and smiled, nodding slightly, strangely pleased that Dylan had remembered this.

"Once upon a time in Spain," he began, "there was a little bull and his name was Ferdinand."

Afterward, Mo asked Dylan what he thought this story meant.

"That you can do your own thing," Dylan said.

"Even if everybody else thinks some other thing is the thing to do."

He shrugged. "I guess so."

"Kinda lonesome sometimes, though, eh?"

"Kinda."

Later, Sibyl objected to his reading Dylan this story. "It portrays people as animals, for one thing," she said, her voice rising. "I hate that. It paints the mother as an ineffectual ninny. And it tells kids it's okay to just lie around and do nothing. The whole thing is violent and fatalistic."

"Well, she's a compassionate ninny," Mo countered. "And appreciating the beauties of nature isn't the same as doing nothing, is it? As for fatalism, well…"

"Just don't do it again, okay? He's going to have to live outside of this rural fantasy life, you know. And it's tough enough without you suggesting he doesn't."

Mo wanted to argue with her, but he didn't know how and he was tired of it. After all, she was Dylan's mother. Mo felt a deep fondness for Dylan which Sybil, for all her mothering, seemed not to. But he realized too that in the final analysis the boy was hers, not his, and that he had no intention of ever taking the only step that might change that equation.

A few weeks thereafter, Sibyl announced at supper one evening that she'd decided to become an acupuncturist. A great Chinese acupuncture theoretician and healer, with whom she wished to study, lived in Boston and was willing to be her mentor. With resolute wheedling and whining, not to mention various threats, she'd persuaded the Social Security and welfare bureaucrats to finance this course for her as a sort of career training. Mo's continued presence, she'd concluded, would be a hindrance. She'd determined they'd leave the Sunday after Thanksgiving.

"Dylan could stay here," Mo said while they were preparing the food for the Thanksgiving dinner. "If you're really planning on coming back."

"Are you kidding? And besides, I don't have any plans. I'm not making any promises like that. We may never be coming back."

"Then I want to come with you."

"I don't see how, Mo. This is a serious life choice. A spiritual commitment. I have to be totally dedicated to it. I won't have time for anything else. If we decide to stay I'll let you know. You can make up your mind then."

That Sunday morning dawned cold and dreary. Mo cooked breakfast for the three of them: buckwheat pancakes and orange juice. Eggs over easy for himself. Sibyl didn't eat eggs and didn't approve of Dylan's having them either. "You could have fried up some tofu and mushrooms," she complained.

"Yuck!" said Dylan.

"I had a weird dream last night," Mo said. "I dreamed about that night when there was all the lightning, remember that?"

"On your birthday," Dylan said.

"Yes, and I was sitting under a tree, watching the lightning and feeling the wind and listening to the thunder roll around, and all of a sudden it stopped, and there was just a small sound of the wind, far away now. I stood up, and I noticed that everything around me was flattened, the flowers, the trees, the hills, everything, just a wasteland, like Kansas, that went on for miles and miles and miles. Nothing, just all pressed down and quiet. And then I remembered you guys had been with me under the tree, and I went back to find you but you were gone."

"Well, I dreamed about Kate," Sibyl said. "She was sitting in Robin's studio. She had an aura around her head. She was crying. I asked Robin what was the matter with her. He said you'd taken her shoes because you thought she looked better in her bare feet, but that now it was winter and she needed them so she could go outside. He said you'd told her to stay there until you came back but you'd never come back. And then she just sort of dissolved."

Mo helped them pack the last of their things in her faded yellow station wagon and made Dylan a private present of Munro Leaf's little book. "You be good 'til I see you again," he said, embracing the boy. "Remember I love you."

And then they were gone. Christmas that year was bleak, dark and cold. Sibyl never returned the awkward call he made to her parents' house. There were no gifts in response to his package, not even a card in the mail.

Much later, as spring emerged in new leaves on the maples and the creek began to retreat from the roaring high water of the early snowmelt, Mo busied himself with planting and a new crop of calves. A woman at the clinic had caught his eye, a short, dark-haired nurse who made stunningly intricate oriental pottery. Sibyl was the furthest thing from his mind when she pulled into the driveway one evening in her old yellow car the color of faded daffodils.

The acupuncture venture apparently had come a cropper. The Chinese doyen had proved a fraud and a liar. Boston had been awful—crowded, dirty, and cold. Her father had refused to let them stay in his house. And she had missed Mo, and Indian Creek, and so had Dylan.

"I still love you, Mo," she said, hugging him.

"I love you, too, Sibyl," Mo replied, lightly kissing her hair. "I just don't want you anymore."

After she'd wept, and cursed his faithlessness, and slammed the car door and sped angrily away down the road again, he thought of Alice, in the looking-glass world, at the end of the chess game with the Red Queen.

"Whether she vanished into the air, or whether she ran quickly into the wood ('and she *can* run very fast!' thought Alice), there was no way of guessing, but she was gone, and Alice began to remember that she was a Pawn, and that it would soon be time for her to move."

Chapter 5

Naming Parts

To-day we have naming of parts. Yesterday,
We had daily cleaning. And to-morrow morning,
We shall have what to do after firing. But to-day,
To-day we have naming of parts. Japonica
Glistens like coral in all of the neighbouring gardens,
And to-day we have naming of parts.

—*Naming of Parts*, Henry Reed

Harry was a garrulous, comedic person, curious about things, smart, a little quick to cite his own opinion as fact, but generous and gentle. Teresa had met him at Mo's birthday party, while she was serving from that enormous silver punchbowl. "Wall, thar, little lady," he had said in his best John Wayne imitation as he sauntered up to her table, "ah don't s'pose y'all could spare a sip a' that concoction fer a dyin' man."

"No, sonny," she'd replied, "this hyar stuff's only fer cowpokes with a jangle in their spurs and a gleam in their eyes."

She'd noticed then as he laughed that his eyes squinched almost closed behind his glasses and he barely smiled, and yet the effect was decidedly mirthful. Like a leprechaun, she thought. His hair was silky smooth, straight and white, and it shimmered like an ermine peruke around his proud and craggy face. His eyes, when he wasn't laughing, were clear, bright, almost a turquoise color.

He'd hung around the punchbowl for a long time after that, helping her refill it with ice and twice making the trek to the kitchen for more of the fruit juices and spices that comprised it. "So what's the recipe?" he'd asked as she'd poured and stirred.

"Whatever I come up with," she'd said. "It tastes good, doesn't it?" And they'd sampled it and it had tasted good.

Now he'd invited her to accompany him to the arboretum for the fall show of color and, weather permitting, a picnic lunch. The weather on the appointed day was in fact graciously inviting, a warm and sunny Indian Summer's day in mid-September. She packed her basket carefully. Tablecloth, red-and-white checked, with two matching napkins, a thermos of coffee and another of chilled grapefruit juice, four dark-green plastic cups, four bologna sandwiches with Swiss cheese on whole wheat bread, a half-dozen hardboiled eggs, celery and carrot sticks, a dozen sugar cookies she'd baked for the occasion, and a container of mixed raisins, chocolate chips and peanuts for snacking.

She put on a colorful, swishy flower-print dress, pulled a bulky green sweater over it, slipped into her sandals, took up her basket and drove to the parking lot, where she found him, as agreed, standing beside his little blue sportscar, dressed in slacks and running shoes and with a jaunty tweed cap out from under which, on all sides really, his white thatch protruded proudly. With a piece of towel he was polishing the hood of the car. "I parked over there," he said, pointing to a maple tree still thick with leaves, mostly yellow, some crimson, a few still green. "But it spittled on my car." And so saying, he spit discreetly on the cloth and rubbed again for a moment at some offensive speck. "And may I say, you look mahhhh-vel-lus."

"You may, and you look very debonair yourself."

"Well, thank you. I bought this cap so I could look like Burt Lancaster, but then it occurred to me that you've probably never heard of Burt Lancaster." He laughed at this portrayal of his own foolishness.

They left the basket in her car and strolled slowly through the afternoon sun, pausing here and there in the mottled shade to drink in the autumn panorama or to examine some especially striking combination of late flowers. "Flowers seem small this time of year," she said. "They have so much work to do and so little time."

"Yes," he agreed. "They're rather like me."

"Oh, I didn't mean that." She really hadn't thought of his age before, and didn't even now think of him as an old man, despite the score of years that must have separated them.

Now and then a freshet of brisk wind would loft a splash of leaves, red, brown, green and gold—a few from the ground scurrying up to join their relatives floating in from the trees. "I've always loved this season," she said.

He inhaled deliberately, smiling his wrinkled smile a little wryly at her. "Me, too," he said.

"It reminds me of when I was a little girl."

"Uh-huh. And school. I loved school. Especially in the fall, when it seemed once again that all things were possible."

"I think it's the time when the year really begins."

"Well, happily, each year begins where the previous one left off." The sunlight flashed briefly in her hair, no, through her hair, becoming more golden in the blonde lens surrounding her head, like a halo. "And the autumn colors are most becoming to you, too, may I say."

"I mean," she said, facing him and gesturing with her hands, "the year begins with taking in the harvest and making provisions for the winter ahead. Then everything becomes still and dark and cold. We live in close proximity to one another. We celebrate, but we are quiet. We tend the hearth and hope for an early spring. Then the world turns green, and life, which has been gathering itself since the seeds were harvested last fall, bursts forth from the earth. And then we have dessert! Summertime! That's how I see it, anyway."

"Um-hm," he said, looking directly into her hazel eyes, "so autumn is the spring of life, is that it?"

"Sure," she laughed, "why not?"

"You know, your eyes are an incredible color. Like almonds dripping with honey. I've never seen such a color before. It's just breathtaking almost."

"Almost?"

"Captivating, I'm afraid."

"Oh, don't be afraid. They aren't my doing. They're just gifts. I got beautiful eyes and a big blonde brain and an interest in shy people just as a kind of dowry when they pushed me into the reeds. You have to love me for my pizza or something."

"Well, what you do with those eyes is part of your pizza."

"Maybe so," she smiled. "Maybe I don't have any control over them."

He reached out his hand, and she raised hers so he could take it. His hand was strong, big, firm and reassuring. He touched her rather gently.

"I hope I've made a new friend," he said.

She stepped toward him, smiling and placing her free hand on his shoulder, and they held each other close for a few seconds, enjoying one another's warmth and solidity, yet afraid to linger too long.

"I really like you very much," he said, his cheek pressed firmly against the top of her head so she could feel him speak.

They separated easily and she smiled at him. "Well, that's why we're here," she said. Then she added, "Because we like each other."

"I guess it's not a crime."

"Well, if it is, who cares?"

They held hands as they walked down the pathway through the trees, through the dappled shade of scaly sycamores, the deep, warm darkness beneath maples and buckeyes, the cool shadows under the firs. At length they came to a place, again in the sun, where Harry stepped off the path and bent down to scoop together a little pile of dry brown leaves.

"C'mere," he said, beckoning her to join him, hunkered downwind of his little heap of leafy tinder. "When I was a kid, on autumn afternoons people would rake their leaves into giant piles, six or eight feet across and four feet high, and set them on fire. The leaves burned for a long time, and smoldered even longer. All afternoon, and into the evening, the smoke from those fires would waft through the neighborhood, sometimes in puffs of gray, sometimes unseen, giving the whole day a fruity pungency, a fragrance so bittersweet, so glorious, and…well, here…"

He bent over the little pile and struck a match, and before the first puff of thick white smoke announced success she said, "I remember."

The two of them leaned over close to the ground while he created breaths of wind with his hand to bring the acrid, evocative smoke to their nostrils.

"Mmmm," she said.

Afterward they walked back along the path and found a table they both liked and he put his cap on it. "You think the bad guys will leave your cap alone?" she teased.

"Listen," he said as they walked back to her car for the picnic basket, "anybody who'd steal my cap can't be all bad."

And sure enough, when they returned a few minutes later, Harry's cap was undisturbed.

They spread the red-and-white checked tablecloth over the table and Teresa laid out their repast. Harry inspected the bologna sandwiches to make sure they contained lettuce and mayonnaise. He seemed pleased. "No peanut butter?" he asked.

"Do you like that? Me too! But, I didn't know, you know…"

"Yeah, it's kinda weird. Tastes good, though."

They began with a toast over the meal, hailed with grapefruit juice. "Wind at your back," he said.

"New friends," said she.

He smiled. "New friends."

"So, Harry, what do you do with yourself now that you're retired? Just live a dissolute life in the park, sniffing the flowers?"

He laughed heartily. "I think I could do it," he said. "But I like to stay busy. I read a lot. And I try to keep up with things, resource issues in particular."

"Environmental law?"

"Well, no, not explicitly. You know, there's a strange arrangement of interests over resources, between those who want to exploit them now and those who want to preserve them for the time being so they can exploit them later."

"Oh?"

"Old money benefits from the actions of preservationists, because the longer the resources are locked up, the more valuable they'll get. The *nouveau riche* benefit from the ambitions of average Joes who want to make money and spend it now. They want to extract value from

environmental capital rather than ploughing everything back into the future. It makes perfect sense, really. People have to eat today, not someday, and of course the adherents of this view enjoy a huge numerical advantage. But old money has two big strategic weapons. One, it doesn't need income. That is, it doesn't need any more income than it already has. And two, it owns the land. These eggs are fantastic, by the way."

She smiled demurely.

"Hello, you lovebirds!" The cheerful voice caught them unawares, but they knew at once who it was.

"Hi, Robin," Teresa said, grinning.

Harry turned with his hand extended to greet the smiling, sandal-clad, cherub-cheeked young painter. Robin wore a paint-stained smock, a beret and a smile as big as Christmas.

"How are you guys? I hope I'm not interrupting anything too intimate."

"No, come, sit a spell."

Robin rolled his body around and sat down, looking up at Harry with a big grin that was focused in white teeth made all the whiter by his mahogany skin but that emanated from all over his face—indeed, from his entire body. That was it. Robin smiled with his whole self.

"I was asphyxiating myself with paint," he said, "so I decided to come over and reintroduce my lungs to air as it was back in the really good really old days. Like water from a forest spring. Clear, cool, tasty, beautiful."

"Your lungs and your mind, too," Harry said.

"All of you," said Teresa.

Robin smiled his assent. "So what have you guys been up to? Or shouldn't I ask?"

"Celebrating life," Teresa said, smiling and looking at Harry, who grinned back knowingly.

"Uh-huh. Me, too. I was looking at all this color, and the way the light and shadows have drifted around as the day's gone by. There's something nostalgic about this time of year, I think."

"We were just talking about that."

"It's the colors. But not just the colors. The textures. The redness of the light. The nip in the air just before dawn. The pastels of the sky. Pink and gray instead of orange and blue. The sounds of the leaves clattering down and crunching underfoot. The smells in the air. Summer's almost over. Gotta trade the sandals for boots soon. Gotta fire up the old heater in my studio soon. But today nature is done up in its finery, making a fair spectacle of itself, saying: spend one more afternoon in this park sprayed with saturated color before I bring on the season of grays, when color becomes a tint, a tease, a hinted memory, when the world of shapes and shadows is supreme."

"Do you paint differently," Teresa asked, "when the seasons change?"

"Sure," Robin said. "Even the Mediterraneans did, and their seasons are pretty mild, or so I've heard. The paint handles differently. The light is different. The things you see are different. The comfort zones are different. Your feelings are different. Ergo…"

Harry took a piece of paper from his breast pocket and unfolded it deliberatively. Then he refolded it and put it back. "Do you think," he supposed, "it's good that we crowd more and more nature into smaller and smaller spaces?"

"You mean like here?" Robin asked. "Or generally?"

"Well, both…"

"It seems to me," Teresa said, "that if we push plants and animals to the far limits of their habitats, that's just the first step toward a place like this, which is kind of a floral zoo. I mean, a lot of these plants aren't native to this park, and some aren't native to this part of the state, or even to this region of the country. So, no, it's not good."

"It's too bad that some of the really beautiful things become extinct," Robin mused. "But that's been going on for a long time, hasn't it? Is that all bad?"

"Well, I think we should preserve what we can," Harry said.

"Up to a point," Teresa said.

"Yes," Harry said, thoughtfully, "up to a point."

"Anyway…" Robin prodded him.

"Anyway, we keep crowding all kinds of species together in new environments and with new arrangements. In the meantime, they're driven off their native soil. We like to think then that we've "preserved" them, but I'm not so sure. It seems we get more and more desperate to preserve less and less. I mean desperation kind of goes hand in hand with the loss or absence of something precious, something critical to the mission. I can't go down and pee in this creek, like boys did in years long past, because there are too many people around, and I might be peeing in someone's tap water. A minor matter, you might think, and be thankful we have a creek to look at, and that the water in it is clear and fish actually can live in it. All very true, but it seems to me something's irrevocably lost. Something ineffable, no longer tangible, but nonetheless very real. Like leaf-burning smoke. Like the mailman delivering cards and letters twice a day."

"Norman Rockwell painted autumn scenes," said Robin admiringly, "that made me smell the fragrance of leaves burning, even indoors on people's clothes. And his postmen delivered mail posted with three-cent stamps that just always made me want to tear open the envelope to see what was inside."

"Now it's junk mail."

"And you try to avoid looking at it," Teresa said.

"If we don't keep the past alive," Robin said, "it becomes blissfully extinct. It doesn't want to stay alive. It's done its job. When I study old methods of painting and old masters of the art I do it with an eye to replanting seeds in the present. The old things cannot return. But the seeds of their flowering can perhaps be known and sown, and the progeny of those seeds may live on for a very long time."

"So today you're out gathering seeds," Teresa said, smiling. "The nuts and berries and fruits of trees, the tiny seeds of asters and black-eyed Susans, gathering them into your mind's eye to keep them alive over winter."

"Yes," he said, laughing delightedly, "except I take the whole tree, and the meadow it stands in, and the hills curling off behind it, and the wash of light that shimmers over and through it, and maybe even the expression of another observer who is momentarily in its thrall."

"And after you take it, it's all still there," Harry added, laughing.

"Yes," Robin agreed, "except soon, by next spring anyway, it's all guaranteed to be gone." Then he arose, smiling, and said, "Speaking of which, I had better be going myself."

They said their goodbyes; then Harry said to her, "I think it's really important to discover everything we can about nature, and to understand its history. Because he's right, we can keep it alive if we keep gathering and replanting its seeds. And now that we're taking conscious and effective control of evolution, that's our responsibility."

"Sounds like a heavy responsibility to me, Harry," Teresa said, smiling at him. "I just like to look at the flowers."

"Mm," he said. Then, taking out of his pocket again the folded sheet of paper, he asked, "Can I read you my poem?"

She laughed, delighted, and sat down next to him, taking his arm, feeling girlish. "Is it a love poem?"

"Well, I don't know," he said. "It's called *The Moth and the Flame."*

From summer's night arose a flickering veil of Flame;
Aglow against the sky with shadows long it danced.
And presently there came, as gentle as a dove,
A fluttering Moth to ask if Flame and Moth might dance
In peace. "I do not choose," Moth said, "to die for love."
"To me, unlike yourself a living thing, the dance
Should end in sweet romance, not sudden heaps of ash."
"Oh, yes, I quite agree," said quickly brighter Flame,
"Come let us waltz the breeze; O, be a little brash,
Dear Moth, O let me kiss your silken crown.
Cool shall I be to you, politely warm but shy;
I'll speak to you of what I know, and let the heart
In empty silence go. 'Tis all I ask," said Flame,
"To feel your sweet caress." "'Tis all I ask," said Moth,
"But to survive your kiss." "And all," Flame said, "I ask
To feel the fairy hairs upon that tender skin;
To feel upon my own the aura of your grace."
"And all," Moth fluttered soft, "I ask, I beg of you,
On whom Fate presses me, is not that you should fall,
Nor suffer any ill, but only that I might
Go home in happy flight." "Of course!" said Flame. (Which then
Between the two of them departed first from pose
Or pledge I do not know.) Flame's tongue flicked through the sky
And Moth's diaphaneic wings a melted fog
Became and still was Moth, consumed in flickering light.
"Life's not a lace quadrille," said Flame, "life's not a waltz."
A cat-dance tango leapt from Flame's most inner heart.
"Light conquers all," said Flame. "Not so," Moth's echo cried,
"'Twas passion conquered me, and passion's light that died."

As they walked back toward the cars, arms around each other, across an arched footbridge that carried them over a broad creek, Harry pointed out the ordering of the treelines: "See, nearest the water's edge are willows, then back beyond high water are the alders, then back a little farther are the poplars."

And she wondered if he saw them as she did, rustling, whispering, yellow-green dancers playing on woven mats of black spiderweb basking in the smoky red afternoon sun.

Chapter 6

Mermaids' Chorus

I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach,
I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.

I do not think that they will sing to me.

—*The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,* T.S. Eliot

Teach me to hear mermaids' singing,
Or to keep off envy's stinging,
And find
What wind
Serves to advance an honest mind.

—*Song,* John Donne

Harry drove quickly and confidently over the twisting road through the coastal mountains. Teresa watched the bucolic valleys slowly turn before her eyes, the fields, the farms, the herds of Brown Swiss cattle at ease in emerald seas of green, an occasional patch of snow along the ridges, the great scars across the land where all the trees over hundreds of acres had been harvested at once.

"I went across the country at forty miles an hour one time," Teresa said.

Harry laughed. "Don't worry, I know the road."

"It's amazing what you see at forty miles an hour."

Harry slowed down a little. "I know. It's true."

"Think what you could see if we walked."

"Think of how long it would take."

"You can drive as fast as you want to, Harry. I trust you. I just think you'd enjoy seeing some of the things that go by while your whole attention is focused on driving the road."

"I love driving."

"Then drive. I'll let you know if we see any flying saucers."

They smiled at each other. Teresa had on the floral print dress again, the one she'd worn that day in the park, many months ago, when things had started up for them. It was colder this day than it had been then, but she'd picked a thin white-wool vest sweater to go over it this time. She knew by now that Harry appreciated her décolletage.

Harry appreciated a lot of things about her, not least her décolletage. She was a simple person, in a way, unassuming and shy, like himself, but she had great wit, and delightful wisdom of a sort quite different from his own. Now she'd agreed to accompany him on an overnight trip to the coast. This was a milestone; he was filled with anticipation he could barely hide. He had reserved two rooms at the Dunes' End Bay Lodge, from which one could see, on a good day, miles out into the Pacific, and on a bad day of the right sort one might brave the winds and waves of some great winter storm.

"Tell me about this place," she said.

"Where we're going?"

"M-hm."

"Well, you can walk right out the door onto the dunes, dunes that go on for miles, dunes you can get lost in for days. Or you can walk along a flat, sandy beach that arcs for miles to the north. No agates but who cares. No jellyfish either. Or you can go wading in the surf, or deep-sea diving if you want to. You can see out farther than the whale lanes and if there's a storm the rollers will be crashing at the door."

"There's not going to be a storm. These are the föhn days. A fortnight of spring. Around here, February is the cruelest month. It bringeth new crocuses, and primroses, and all kinds of unwary stuff out of the dead land. Then it lapseth back into winter until late April, or May. Or early June."

"Or never," cried Harry, and they both laughed.

"So is it kind of private?"

"This place? Well, we each have a room. We're on the fourth floor, both facing the sea, but not adjacent rooms. It's a beautiful hotel. They have a workout room and a sauna and an excellent restaurant. The rooms are spacious and comfortable."

"Wouldn't one room have been sufficient? With twin beds or something?"

He had mulled over this question for a long time. He'd wanted to get only one room, and only one bed, for that matter, but he didn't know enough, not about how she felt, nor even really how he felt, if that was going to become an issue. It had seemed, in the end, presumptuous, and besides, two people could go to the same room whenever they pleased. Certainly he would want to take a look at hers. Anything could come of it. But what did he want to come of it? The wanton night he hungered for? Or the preservation of his self-respect and dignity, not to mention the honor of the lady, albeit she was his close and occasionally rowdy friend.

"I thought you might find it awkward," he said. "Suggestive. Coercive."

"Well, Harry, we're going to sleep there, aren't we?"

"Of course."

"Harry, you haven't been planning something, have you?"

"No. Well, I do consider alternative scenarios; it's one of the curses of being a lawyer."

"I've heard. So if we slept in the same room you didn't think you could restrain yourself from coming over and jumping into my bed?"

"I didn't get that far, unfortunately…"

"Oh, you figured I'd jump into your bed? Would you jump out? How did this go, Harry?" She grinned as she looked at him. She had him on the run.

"No, I just thought, you know, with undressing and everything…"

"So if you saw me in my underwear, you'd come jump my bones?"

"Well, I might be tempted…"

"So you wouldn't jump my bones?"

"Well, it would depend…"

"On what, Harry?"

"On how you reacted. And…"

"And?"

He drove for a long time in silence.

"Well," she said, "tell me how you pictured it if we got a single room."

He grinned, relieved. “I didn’t picture it, honest. I just thought that, well, if we wanted to spend the night in the same room we could, and if we didn’t then this way we didn’t have to.”

“Oh.”

When they got to the hotel it was about three in the afternoon. They had chosen to go, more or less on a mutual whim, because the weather had, for a brief few days at least, seasonally cleared and warmed up a bit and because they both loved the seashore. Now they agreed as they turned into the hotel’s driveway that they’d check in and then drive south a few miles to a spectacular promontory that jutted up just at the ocean’s edge.

Harry checked them both in and carried both overnight bags to the elevator. When the elevator doors closed they grinned at one another. “I’m really pleased that you agreed to this,” he said. “I was hoping you would.”

Teresa smiled.

They went first to his room, where they looked out over the sea, clear and still on this unusual day, and then they went to hers. He showed her the bathroom and the little pantry and the portico outside the French doors. There was no point in showing her the bed because it half-filled the principal room. And of course all those other features were entirely self-evident.

“Stop fussing, Harry,” she said, a hint of annoyance in her voice.

“Sorry,” he said. He looked at her and smiled.

“I want to change my socks,” he said. Self-consciously, he did not look down at her décolletage.

But he turned in the hallway, tall and trim and proud, smiling again at her, and she blew him a kiss, and feigned doubling over with laughter, and this time he did look.

“Meet you in the lobby in ten,” she said. “Don’t be late.”

They drove through a little fog to get to the top of the promontory but the weather 700 feet above the sea was clear. The fog extended mostly southward, and not far out to sea. At the seaward edge of the promontory was a long curved railing, some benches, a fountain and a large binoculars with which, for a quarter, you could almost focus in on the compound eye of a hermit crab scuttling across a momentary puddle on a black rock next to a thundering sea-chute a mile away.

“Why don’t they let you buy all day on this thing?” Harry complained. “Like a parking meter. Why can’t I have as much time as I want?”

“You can’t have as much time as you want at a parking meter,” she said, laughing. “And what if you kept the view all to yourself and wouldn’t share it with anyone?”

“Ever been out there? In the Pacific?”

“I’ve been to Alaska on an excursion ship. But out there, no.”

“I was once. I was just a boy. I was on a ship with about a thousand other men, and we called ourselves men then because we knew time was about to come barrelling down on top of us. We were forming up into an invasion force for the final assault, the big kahuna, against the home islands of Japan. A lot of guys were gonna die, and everybody knew it.

“I’d gotten into the Navy out of high school and sailed around the world getting ready for this—and enjoying myself at every port—and now here we were. I loved the ocean. I loved being aboard ship. It all seemed like a wonderful, fanciful game, until we steamed into the Philippine Sea. There were a thousand ships there, milling around, gathering the forces for this attack that everybody, including the Japanese, knew was coming. Everybody, except maybe us, knew where and how and when. All we knew was, it would be soon. In a matter of weeks. And we’d be going.”

"And then Hiroshima."

Harry looked far away across the ocean, across the years. "Yes."

"Do you ever want to go back?"

"Oh, I've been back, many times. To Hiroshima and to the summit of Mount Fuji. But I fly."

"And the ocean?"

"I come to look at it. To think. To reminisce, pardon my rambling on."

"I like it. It's interesting. I can't imagine it."

They both leaned against the rail, side by side, Teresa with her sweater buttoned high against the breeze. When he turned to speak to her, her hair blew against his face, feathery and cool.

"The ocean lends perspective to things," he said. "It's so huge, so extensive, it's like a giant creature. You can only contemplate it. You really can't imagine its world. You can't really imagine its scale. Standing by the ocean takes me back to ancient times. It takes me back to first principles. This both sobers me and gives me hope. I like its rhythm. I like the smell of it. I like the primitiveness of it. It makes me feel renewed, rejuvenated somehow."

The sun shone brightly and the breeze was warm, and not too brisk, and the sea rippled and sparkled and curled in white ribbons along the khaki-colored beach.

"Pounding sand," Harry said.

"What?"

"That's what the sea is doing down there. Pounding sand."

"Yes, and getting away with it."

"Turning futility into fun."

Just then the ground shook a little, but just a little, and then it was gone. "Feel that?" Harry asked.

"Yes."

"A little one. A three maybe."

"They come along."

"Yes. The face of the earth gets a new wrinkle. Just one. It's very small, very quick. Who'd notice it? But someday it's all going, the whole damn thing. We'll be off to Panama. You'll wake up one day and there'll be giant avocados growing right outside your window."

"Oh, I better stock up on mayonnaise."

"It's a theory."

"Seems kind of a radical theory, coming from you."

"Well, I have a few wild ideas."

"Well, you better suppress them," she said, eyeing him with mock suspicion. "Do you have quarters, too?"

"Sure, hind quarters, forequarters…." He dug in his pocket.

"No, you know, the little round things they put on your eyes when you die if nobody has any pennies. 'Course I suppose lawyers have to use hundred-dollar bills."

"No, lawyers have their secretaries bring pennies." He dropped three quarters into her palm and she smiled brightly.

"Thanks!" she said and turned to the binoculars, testing its sweep of motion. Then she dropped a quarter in the slot and began to scan the horizon.

"Oh, a ship. Can you see that ship 'way out there?"

He looked. He couldn't tell whether he could or not.

"Here," she said. He peered through the lenses. Sure enough, it was a ship. A freighter it looked like. Three or four hundred feet. He could see the streak where her name was painted along the bow, but he couldn't read it.

"Can you read the name on her bow?" he asked, relinquishing the eyepiece to her, keeping his hand on her upper arm as she strained to see it. Looking out again with his naked eyes he still couldn't be sure he could distinguish the ship from the myriad floating mirages that inhabit the far horizon. "Hell, I can hardly see it, even though I know where it is."

"I can't read it," she said at last. Then she swung the glasses onshore, along the beach. "Hey!" she said. "Look who's here."

He looked again through the binoculars. A woman, and her dog. He could see her clearly, a quarter-mile up the beach, walking toward them, the dog frolicking at water's edge. She looked up, probably at the nose of the promontory where they stood. To her, they were specks at best. "I think it's Kate," he said. "From the group."

"I met her once," Teresa said as she gazed through the glass. "Oh, sure, uh-huh, I do remember her. She's a friend of Sibyl's, isn't she?"

"I thought she was a friend of Mo's."

Harry took another look but Kate and her dog disappeared behind a finger of land that curved out onto the beach.

"Let's go walk on the sand for a while before dark," Teresa said.

"Tide's coming in," Harry remarked.

"Well, let's go before it floods the earth."

And as they walked by the ocean, having driven back to the hotel and now striking out northward along the bay, Teresa spoke of her own romance with the sea, a romance rich with images of Moby Dick and Masefield's tall ships, the sea as a lulling but darkly dangerous force of nature, a symbol of high adventure.

"A star to steer her by," she said. "Sometimes, when the nights are clear, the sky is flooded with stars, sparkling with stars, and I imagine myself alone on the sea, gazing up at the stars, knowing just where I am because where I am is right under all these incredible stars. I'm like a space traveller who's just crashed—unharmed, of course—to earth and she looks out at the night, and she cares not whether she's in Calcutta or Cleveland, she just wants to know where she is in the universe. I just feel like I'm floating in the blackness, just another star amidst this ocean of stars."

The sun was low now in the southwest, beginning to slip into the heavy gray air along the horizon. She looked up at the gradually fading sky, still much too bright for stars. "Still," she went on, "sometimes there are no stars. And then sometimes I feel small and lost and alone, as if I were in my sea kayak, paddling along in the fog, wondering where the hell I am."

As they approached the hotel along the dark path that wound along beneath the seaside balconies, there came a sharp ripping sound from over their heads, like a dozen playing cards slapping against the spinning spokes of a child's bicycle. Harry flinched and then looked up. Twenty feet or so above them was a clear mylar laundry bag, secured somehow to a railing, snapping like a locker-room towel, beating itself to pieces in the wind.

When they got back to their rooms they agreed they were hungry, wanted to take (separate) showers and would meet in the lounge downstairs in an hour. Harry reserved a table in the dining room for eight o'clock.

When they sat down to eat he brought his second Dewar's, neat, and she her second chablis, chilled, to the table.

"You look beautiful," he said. "Even more so in the light."

She laughed. “Gee,” she said, leaning forward and squinting at him quizzically. “I thought you were someone else. Where did that young bullfighter go?”

“You got the old bullshitter instead.”

She had on a dark green velveteen suit with an oyster-white blouse with lace trim up the front, around the collar and on the cuffs. Her blonde hair jounced slightly against her shoulders in back and fell gracefully, curved like a hand held at one’s side, down over her cheeks. Her tiger’s-eye eyes seemed endlessly deep and dangerously enchanting.

“This is very elegant,” she said. “And very kind of you.” Her fingers smoothed the hard, shiny surface of the linen tablecloth and traced the warm pattern of silver fruit on her fork. She looked up at him. “This is okay, isn’t it? With you, I mean.”

“Oh, much more than okay,” he said, smiling, grinning with the pleasure he felt. Then he seemed a bit pensive. “You know, I haven’t felt close to a woman for a long time. I find it—you, really—quite delightful. It’s really brightened my life. At the same time, it seems somehow awkward. I seem awkward. It isn’t familiar territory for me, and I feel uncomfortable thinking that, well, you know, I have feelings for you…”

She took his hand. “I have feelings for you, too, Harry.”

“It’s just,” he said, looking at her and then down at the table, into that faraway world where difficult feelings are often found, “it’s just, um, that, well, I don’t know exactly what they are. I like being your friend, we are great friends, and I don’t want to lose that. At the same time, I have, um, feelings, you know, of a different nature. I don’t know whether they’re appropriate. I don’t know whether they’re reciprocated.”

“You don’t know whether they’re appropriate even if they are reciprocated,” she laughed, squeezing his hand.

He laughed too, and the waiter appeared. Harry ordered roast beef and Teresa a Waldorf salad. They sipped their drinks and looked into each other’s eyes for clues. Harry buttered half of a buckwheat muffin.

“I beg your pardon,” an unfamiliar voice said suddenly. A man dressed in black, with a clerical collar, was standing beside their table. When they looked up, startled, he smiled pleasantly. “I really have no business disturbing your dinner,” he said. “I hope you don’t mind. I’ll be very brief. Oh, excuse me, my name is Father Malcolm. Actually, I’m not a priest. Not a Catholic priest, anyway.”

“Are you planning to come to some palpable point?” Harry inquired.

“Yes, excuse me for being so longwinded. And I really hope you won’t take my message personally. I mean, not as egoistic listeners but as people free from the vanity of self-pride. It’s very simple, really. You must repent. You must repent. And you must repent soon,” here his voice became very soft, and he leaned down toward them so that they might more easily hear him, as if they were planning a conspiracy together, or sharing a secret.

“Are you sure about this?” Teresa asked.

“We gave at the office,” Harry rejoined.

“All right,” Father Malcolm said, still softly, the gray eyes lurking deep in his narrow, bearded face staring directly down at the table, not looking at either one of them. “Don’t wait too long,” he whispered. Then he stood erect again and smiled, bowing slightly. “Pardon me again. Enjoy your meal.”

“Unfortunately,” Harry said, “we have nothing of which to repent.”

But Father Malcolm was forgotten entirely as the dinner arrived on a serving cart. For Harry, a huge slab of medium-rare roast beef, a porcelain container of freshly shredded horseradish, a baked potato, buttered, split and garnished with parsley, and French sliced green

beans in cream sauce. For Teresa, a graceful, shallow bowl heaped with lettuce, apple pieces, grapes, walnut halves, bacon chunks, and celery slices, all covered with a thin milky dressing of oil, vinegar and Roquefort cheese.

"God, I'm hungry," he said, slicing easily through the tender beef and conveying a large bite of it into his mouth.

"Bon appétit," she smiled, gazing at a royal wad of crumpled lettuce and all its irregular retinue skewered on her fork, then deliberately placing the entire carnival of tastes and textures inside her mouth, drawing it off with lips glazed modestly in seashell-pink lipstick.

He carved off another piece of roast, part brown edge and part pink center, oozing its scarlet juice, and dipped it into the shredded snow-white horseradish, and felt the stinging on his tongue, the burning in his cheeks, and the bath of beefy liquids released by his chewing washed the shrieking tissues with calming warmth.

"Ahhh," he said.

She chewed her salad quietly, watching him as if mildly amused.

Everything was delicious, including the Boston Creme pie Harry had for dessert, and of which she had several bites.

They sat for some time afterward, drinking coffee and talking. Then finally Teresa yawned a little, quite by accident. She felt happily full and at ease. It had been a very pleasant day.

They went upstairs on the elevator and came to their floor. They walked together to her door. He put his arms around her and she let him draw her close, smiling up at him. Trembling, he kissed her. It was not an easy kiss, a little hard and rigid and tense.

She smiled. "It's been a wonderful day," she said.

"Yes," he agreed, smiling, releasing her a little. "Thank you so much for sharing it with me."

"My pleasure," she said, and turned to put her key in the lock.

"I'm going to read for a while," he said. "An hour or so, anyway."

"I'm going to listen to the surf and drift off to z-land," she said with a sleepy little smile.

Harry lay on his bed in his pajamas, in his elegant royal-blue robe, and read. Now and then he thought of her, only a few doors down the hall, probably lying awake on the cool white sheets, in the dark, listening to the constant repetition of the waves, their gentle rushing rumble rising near then rolling away along the shore until it was drowned in the next breaker's fall and swallowed up in the night.

He thought of Lydia, how long ago now it seemed, when there'd been passion aplenty boiling in him and nothing to do but puff up his cheeks and breathe slowly through his nose. He thought of flame-crowned, fire-eyed, rocket-propelled, smolderingly seductive Aurora, at the ABA convention a year after Lydia died. She'd wanted to know who was supporting his candidate for Treasurer. The chairman of the board of the district Federal Reserve bank had enlisted her for this mission on behalf of his own candidate and she intended to deliver the goods. God, she was beautiful! And she was good. She'd told him up front what she wanted, and he'd told her up front that he would never tell her. And then the game was on. How far would she go to find out? How long could he resist? Very far, he recalled with a chuckle. She had nerves of steel. But so did he, oh, did he, and she'd never found out a thing.

He'd found out something, though: that passion was no longer the boisterous, brash, reliable ally in the alley it had once been.

He wondered whether, if he should tiptoe down the hallway and knock on Teresa's door, she would gaze at him with a sleepy sloe-eyed grin and welcome him in. He wondered if perhaps,

perhaps, she might knock on his. He'd welcome her with keen delight, he thought, but then he wasn't sure.

Teresa, for her part, wondered if he might knock on her door, and what she would do if he did. She smiled when the thought occurred to her that she could gather her ample terrycloth robe around her cool nakedness and venture out to tap softly on his door. He'd have apoplexy, she thought. He'd have to ask her in. Then he'd turn on all the lights and the TV and start making coffee or something. She laughed aloud, amused at his almost stylistic shyness, almost wishing the evening had turned out otherwise.

She got up quietly and switched on the floor lamp near the balcony doors and went outside to look at the glimmers from the sea below that were occasionally illuminated by light from the hotel. She noticed that she couldn't see Harry's balcony from hers. She fetched a pad of paper and a pen and sat on the wooden chair outside, wrapping her robe closely against the cool breeze.

The Mermaid's Song

Some happy features I may own,
A few I purchased well,
To travel with as I go down
Beneath the ocean's swell.

The course I compass may be one
Whose gauge you cannot take,
I leave no footprints on the brine
Nor maps of pleasure make.

When nights and stars are clear and crisp,
I swim up into heaven;
When days are dark with drifting mist,
I keep my keel even.

There is no fickleness in me,
Though logic seem awry;
I am a creature of the sea,
And see—the sea am I.

No Lorelei am I to call
A sailor to his woe;
But if a sailor were to call
I mightn't tell him "no."

No Siren of the deep am I
To lure you to your woe;
But if you look me in the eye
I mightn't let you go.

She smiled at this and listened some more to the long, slow swooshing of the surf sliding away up the beach. She considered that she'd gained more than she'd lost. And then she went to bed, and fell asleep.

Chapter 7

Crannyberries

Little flower—but *if* I could understand
What you are, root and all, and all in all,
I should know what God and man is.

—*Flower in the Crannied Wall,* Alfred, Lord Tennyson

Teresa sat down across the little round table from him and regarded him critically. A very handsome man, who wore his years with grace and their indignities with good black humor. Respectful, warm, trusting. She sighed and drew her head down to her shoulders, leaned forward, put her clasped hands between her legs, and pressed her elbows together between her thighs. Then, looking at him with a demure sidelong glance, and grinning mischievously, she sighed again and said, "I declare, Harry, you do look enchanting in that chair."

He smiled and raised his glass to her. They were having lime daiquiris, as a tribute to his birthday and to spring. She had bought him this lovely white wicker chair, which looked a lot like Queen Victoria's throne, or perhaps a caricature of Queen Victoria herself. She had bought it as a gift, on condition that it couldn't be removed from the premises.

"I know you wanted things to be a little different between us, Harry," she said, "and I really am sorry to have disappointed you because it would've been grand, but I'm also very, very happy that we are friends." She paused. "You know, usually, well, the hunter moves on."

"Well, perhaps the hunter found what he was hunting for."

"Perhaps. I just want you to stick around. Hunt as you please. Just come by now and then and play King Harry and wave your scepter and keep order in the land. We need the spectacle."

He smiled and surveyed his surroundings, feeling truly regal. "This is such a glorious garden, 'Resa," he said. "And you are such a beautiful princess. How could I not have wanted to make love with you? I'll always want to make love with you. I fancy in my vanity, taking this liberty against my birthday, that you do not find me altogether ludicrous as a man. I don't know what exactly has kept us apart, but I, too, have come to value—no, to prize—the feelings that exist between us."

"You're a gorgeous man, Harry Orville. Any woman would be proud to call you her own."

"Well, any woman looking for a sex slave."

They laughed and sipped their frosty green Caribbean rum. There was a satisfyingly patrician atmosphere about it all. The day was uncharacteristically warm, as indeed the whole spring had been. The February peas had sprouted and grown rather than rotting away or being eaten by slugs as usually befell them.

"Oh!" she said suddenly, rising, "I almost forgot. I got you another little present. Do you want anything from the house?"

Harry looked at her. She really was quite beautiful—young, happy, vivacious. Even in those leggy Levis she looked very womanly. Of course, in high-heeled shoes…

"No," he said, "thanks. Not a thing. Mind if I smoke a cigar?"

"Do you have two?"

He reached into the breast pocket of his jacket and produced two long, thin cigars, the color of dry dust with a hint of willowy silver-green, fanning them into a vee for display. "Yes."

"Okay, I'll join you when I come back."

When she returned he deliberately peeled the cellophane sheath off a cigar and held the tobacco under his nose while he inhaled its sweet, musty aroma. With his teeth he neatly clipped the sealed end and spat it into the soft black dirt a few feet away.

"How much do you bite off?" she asked.

"A nipple's worth," he said. She spat artfully. He lit hers, then his, puffing thoughtfully, letting the smoke curl around them. Then slowly he began to unwrap the package she'd given him. First the lacy white bow and then the paper, metallic blue except for a cloud of forget-me-nots she'd attached somehow. Then the box. It was a huge magnifying glass, about eight inches across, complete with a stand that held both the glass and, in adjustable carbon-fiber calipers, the miniature subject of one's interest.

"Incredible!" he said, grinning with pleasure.

"I have something for you to use it on, too," she said, smiling. She helped him set up the device next to a nearby plant and carefully secured in its narrow black fingers a single purple blossom. "There," she beamed at him. "Take a look at that."

Harry carried a small wooden stool over to the plant, sat straddled on it, and adjusted the glass just a bit. "Ah," he said, peering at the flower. "Lobelia, yes?"

"*Gandii*, I think, but yes," she agreed. "An early bloomer in early bloom."

He gazed down at the vivid violet petals of the flower, illumined with bright sunlight, edged and webbed with veins of indigo, tinged with royal blue, the deep velvet tissue everywhere flecked with tiny specks of iridescent red. The two upper petals were separate but overlapping, and arched like a delicate roof over what appeared to be three lower ones, themselves joined along their edges, altogether forming a curved stage which swept upward from its footlights and then plummeted down backstage into the flower's trumpet-shaped throat, a five-sided conical shaft that descended through a pale violet light into the mystical chamber of its ovary.

Toward him from this faroff lavender world rose the lobelia's clitoral pistil, oozing droplets of honey from the swollen stigma at its tip, its slender style reaching upward through the grayish lavender light like a miniature Eiffel Tower, viewed from high above, its five-legged base far below. And he saw too the male anthers, like tiny brains covered with grayish-white fur, two bulging silver lobes of eager pollen, one fixed in each blue-violet seam of the three lower petals.

It struck him incomprehensible that all this intricate structure in its sublime beauty awaited merely the arrival of some hummingbird or bee or breath of wind to mutter the whisperings of love that would make a new seed, new roots in a new place, new flowers, and new beauty never before seen anywhere, a new day…

About this time, Mo's old car came crunching and chattering down the gravel driveway, music blaring, bearing Mo, of course, and Margaret, whom Teresa had invited to share a bite of angelfood cake with Harry and herself.

Margaret wore a t-shirt that said, "Bite me! And me too!" beneath two strategically located chocolate kisses, and a pair of blue denim jeans with an elastic waistband.

"Look at this," Harry said to her, gesturing toward the flower grasped in his apparatus. She smiled and sat and peered through the lens as the other three stood nearby.

"Wow," Margaret said, after a few silent moments. "You know, it's funny. A few nights ago I was looking through a telescope at the stars. Now I'm peeking into a flower's boudoir."

"That's not a boudoir," Harry said. "That's the Casbah."

"Do you ever see Sibyl now that she's back?" Teresa asked Mo.

"Sibyl who?"

"What happened with you guys? Or shouldn't I ask?"

Mo sighed and looked far away through the trees before he spoke. "Love lost its savor, I guess. You know. Love's savor's lost."

"You know," Harry said, "this gadget almost makes me want to sell off some stock and get a telescope. But then I consider that I live in this in-between world."

"What world is that, Harry?" Teresa asked.

Mo admired Harry's new chair, its high arched back sweeping down then gracefully out into the arms which hugged the sitter in their beneficent clasp. Harry beckoned him to try it.

"The world of Dædalus," Mo said, sitting briefly, finding it grand. "The lawyer's life's labor a labyrinth in the caves of Crete, his soul escaping only on waxen wings, his eyes beholding with horror but without surprise his vaulting ambition fallen hapless into the sea."

"Yes," Harry said. "It's a cautious world. But lawyers just represent human behavior. And human behavior just represents evolution. And evolution says it's prudent to walk down the middle."

"Evolution also says it's mandatory to walk off the edge. That's what you see in a flower. That's art. That's the frontier of truth."

After a while Margaret relinquished the magnifying glass and Mo sat for a time gazing down at the purple flower and into its endless velvet shadows. "I think it's a vagina," he said. "And a damn sight better looking than the ones I stare into every day."

"Did you ever notice," Margaret asked Teresa, "how men first order things and then they purport to find meaning in this ordering?"

The four of them sang *Happy Birthday* and sat together for half an hour and chatted and enjoyed the angelfood cake Teresa had baked. Then Mo and Margaret left again, crunching and grinding down the driveway, Mo's car rattling louder than Luciano Pavarotti's soaring, haunting taunt of Turandot on the CD.

Harry put his magnificent magnifying glass back in its box and then he and Teresa took one last short walk around the sloping yard, along the path which skirted the little terraces she'd constructed in the hillside, each of which contained a fruit tree or a few large shrubs, perhaps rhododendron and azalea, or a picnic table, and was fringed with flowers she'd planted in beds above the downhill walls.

Harry stopped beside a large lilac bush and pressed a soft bract of the pungent blossoms against his face, holding it there a long time while he repeatedly inhaled their heady fragrance. "Fresh as the sea," he pronounced.

At the next turning they startled a covey of top-knotted quail, who scurried on quick little legs across the evening grass and then, as one, flapped noisily into the long-shadowed air.

Harry noticed a small blackberry vine protruding from the terrace stones—a few twisting and thorny feet long, with a handful of parched yellow-green leaves, and near the end a single luscious black berry. He reached instinctively down for it and then stopped, looking back at her.

"It's all yours," she said. "It's still your birthday."

He hesitated, contemplating its sweet violet blackness cozied among the rough green leaves and their prickly host of thorns. "No," he said, as if to himself. "Not today. I like it where it is."

Finally they walked through the bower of yellow-white roses that led back into her garden.

He sat quietly for a moment in his magnificent new chair, smiling at her. Then he hunkered down and took up from the flowerbed a double handful of the dark, fecund soil. He held the soft tilth close to his face, against his nose and chin, and savored its damp aroma. It was ripe and cool,

sweet and sour, fresh and decaying. He poured it back and brushed his hands together once or twice.

"Well, you honey-eyed piece of work, this has been a wonderful birthday."

"Don't even say it, sailor. The boys won't seem quite up to muster around here, so come back soon." She hugged him affectionately. "I'll keep it warm for you."

"And I'll be proud to say I know you, and I'll come ashore now and then, when you've hung a stocking on the lighthouse rail, or maybe oftener when the sea is high, to sit with you on the Champs Élysées and sip the nectar of the gods in the lavender twilight of our dreams."

"I love you, Harry," she replied, kissing his cheek.

Chapter 8

Old Masters

About suffering they were never wrong,
The Old Masters: how well they understood
Its human position; how it takes place
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along;

—*Musée des Beaux Arts,* W. H. Auden

Margaret emerged from her battered blue Peugeot, her black heels descending to the wet pavement, her midnight black full-length faux-mink, parting just long enough for a well-turned if zaftig and silk-clad leg to slide out from beneath it, glistening in the scattered light of falling snow drifting through the beams of tiny spotlights hidden here and there outside the gallery. The doorman escorted her to the entrance and held the door open for her. "Thank you," she said. "Madam," he replied, deferentially touching the brim of his cap with his gloved fingertips as she passed.

A jazz quartet played softly but energetically in the dim colored lights of the lobby.

Margaret shed her coat into the hands of a girl at the door. She stood for a long time, taking in the scene, surveying the spotlit rooms beyond the foyer, listening to the the low cacophonous hum of the milling crowd beyond the rhythmic music, detecting above the subtle smell of the paintings the odor of art. The odor of people who define art. Artists, connoisseurs, and courage money.

She wore a dark-red crushed velvet dress, cut low in front, the long skirt overlapped on the side to about mid-thigh. The bodice failed to contain an almost shameless exuberance—well, two almost shameless exuberances—of pale flesh, an effect she had softened with a necklace of pearls. Her skirt flowed around her like rippling swells of wine-colored firelight caressing the Venus de Milo. Her black hair was sculpted above her head, embraced by a simple silver and ivory tiara, not unlike the coiffure, she imagined, of Cleopatra at ease on her barge, elegant even at rest.

She walked slowly through the rooms, gazing enchanted at the paintings Robin had chosen for this, his first real big-time one-man show, a retrospective of the past five years, attended, so the gallery owners had promised, and so it seemed, by all the serious lights in town and some from far away, from New York and LA. In a way, at first blush, many of the canvases looked as though they'd been painted long ago, in a different age, for they were rich with figures, and dark woods, and flowing surfaces, and an incredible interplay of light and shadow, and most were rife with tiny details and magical symbols, with objects both strange and commonplace presented in extraordinary ways. Robin Ecst was no ordinary painter, and this show, so beautifully hung, made that clear. She hoped the people who mattered would agree.

"Kid sounds like Lionel Hampton," she heard somebody say.

Then she heard Robin's laugh. "Yep, but his name's Emmett Robinson. Lionel introduced me to him." In Emmett's dark fingers the flying hammers skipped upon the gleaming bars, releasing meteors of sound with a satisfying "fwump" or a soft "pish" as they arced into the

dancing air, like rambunctious lambs gamboling through a sunny spring meadow. “Nice touch, eh?”

“Mister Ecst,” a young woman who appeared to be a graduate student asked, “what is the meaning of some of the symbols that seem to recur in your work? Like the black birds?”

“First of all, I’d prefer you call me Robin,” he said. “Every artist adopts certain symbols, certain subjects, certain styles, even his medium, because they have some sort of special meaning to him, or maybe at first he’s just attracted to them because, well, he doesn’t know why. Maybe they look pretty. Anyway, if whatever it is works for him he uses it, and thus invests it with meaning, his own meaning, and this meaning can become large and complex and take on a life of its own. As long as it keeps working it just becomes more and more useful as a tool of expression, because it has so much force and subtlety which it derives from the panoply of situations in which it has appeared.

“But what one symbol or another means, what one subject or another means, I don’t know. If I’m still doing it then I’m still exploring that, and if I’m not, well, I’ve lost interest in it. If you look at any artist’s work you’ll see this, and you’ll probably know as much about it as he does in a way, maybe more. But you have to say whether it has any meaning to you and if so what that is. After all,” he laughed, “it’s always possible it may have no meaning whatsoever.”

He looked searchingly at the girl as Margaret joined the periphery of the small group of people listening to him. He looked splendid in a black cableknit turtleneck sweater and crimson vest embroidered with gold lions and bounding ibex and endless sinuous vines. The student looked skeptical, and he laughed again, his face aglow with kindness and humor, his soft hands clasped in pleasure before him. He looked like a monk, she thought. A jolly black friar. A gentle prophet of art.

“You think I’m just BS’ing you, don’t you? You think I know what it means that I often find myself painting a dark-colored object that might be a bird. But I don’t. I do know I like it. It feels right. It looks right. In *English Idyll*—do you know this painting?” The girl nodded. “…there’s a dark shape that has often been interpreted as a swan. Or perhaps as the hope of a swan or the memory of a swan. People ask me whether it’s a swan. I don’t know. It’s a daub of paint. Sometimes, when I look at it, it is a swan. Sometimes it’s a shadow. Of a swan. Or not.

“I’ll tell you this. When I saw this image in my mind, there was something over there at the edge of the pond where this so-called swan is. It looked like what’s there today, represented by a daub of paint. I didn’t know what it was then, only what it looked like. And I don’t know now. Only what it looks like and that, for some reason, it’s important. It is the mystery of shadows that they may always be alive.

“Sometimes the birds are deliberate, of course, but sometimes I’ll just sketch something in and look at it and chuckle and say, ‘there are those damn birds again.’ Even when they’re deliberate, and even when they’re both deliberate and freighted with significance—not an automatic thing by any means—their meaning will often change as the composition progresses.”

Margaret saw Kate standing in the next room, looking attentively at a painting Margaret hadn’t yet seen. Someone else asked another question and Robin addressed it patiently.

“My interest in the past, in the ideas and techniques of the past, is a purely joyful interest. I don’t mean I’m always glee-stricken, obviously, but I get great pleasure from understanding what masterful artists have wanted to accomplish and how they’ve sought to accomplish it. But I don’t try to do what they did unless it happens to work for me. I don’t stand in front of my easel and think Rubenesque thoughts. I think Ecstian thoughts. Of course, I’m delighted when they have Rubenesque expressions.”

“I’ve been accused of living in the past, dwelling in the Renaissance. Who wouldn’t want to? Only a boor.” He nodded, smiling now with his eyes, a gesture of recognition to her through

the crowd, and went on. "Artists in those days, some of them anyway, seem to have been persons of respect, if not means. They had courtiers who kept them solvent. And black men were not more likely to be the offspring of slaves than white men. There was a handful of rich families, all white no doubt, because this was Italy, not Cairo, or Algiers, and there was everybody else, and practically speaking everybody else, wherever he came from, was either a slave or a serf. Well, so everybody was used to being part of the great mass of people of all different kinds of colors and languages. And, if you could make paint do tricks, or pluck a lyre into song, you could eat. Good deal.

"But I don't live in the past, for better and worse, and although I see the world through a black man's eyes it is everyone's world, and I am not just a black man, nor a short round black man, nor a short round painterly black man of Hungarian descent, nor even an eternally happy black man, and I see things through all of my eyes. That's what I do in my daily life, acquire more and more eyes. I'm like a fly. I have thousands of eyes, and each one sees something different. But when I lay paint on the canvas all my eyes have agreed on what that thing we're looking at really looks like. As the painting evolves all my minds come to agree on the painting as 'it,' as the true image. Or as one true image."

During a brief lull in the attentions of his admirers, when he and Margaret had worked their way over to the tables laden with food, he spoke to her. "Whew! I'm beat. Boy is it good to see you."

"It's a great show, Robin."

"You're the most scrumptious morsel in the place."

"There're some Seventh Avenue gallery people here, aren't there? And Craig Hillman. And Kate. What's she doing here? She looked very preoccupied."

"She's writing a review for somebody." He grinned. "She wouldn't tell me. Geoffrey's here, too, shooting video. I'm not at all sure I want my paintings on video but I have complete control over it and he's a genius with the camera so I guess maybe we'll do something with it someday."

"Have you sold anything?"

"Hey, I'm going to be rich, girl. Eudora sold *The Wreck of Hieronymus Bosch* and two little engravings about ten minutes ago. Four thousand bucks. And André St. James wants to take *Spiral Circus* and some other paintings to Paris, but we haven't worked out the details. I want to find a way to get shown in Prague, so I can go there and, well…"

"And to Africa? And now you can, yes? You're rich and famous. Just buy a ticket and go."

He laughed. "Well, I'm not rich or famous yet," he said, rocking back on his heels, obviously amused at this thought, "but right now it's looking pretty good."

"Oh, I hope it's all wonderful for you."

"Can you hang around? I'm going to slide on out of here pretty soon; I've been here since five-thirty. Maybe we could go get a cup of coffee or something."

"M-hm. Or something."

And shortly afterward, she in her heels and silky black coat and he in a gray wool cape that made him look, she thought, like Toulouse Lautrec or some noble character from *Les Miserables*, watched as the parking attendant coaxed her little wheezing car into position under the portico and opened the doors for them.

"Have a good evening, miss. You, too, Mister Ecst."

"Thanks, Michael," Robin responded as he clambered into the car. Then he looked at Margaret, smiling. "I know everybody," he said.

The snow crunched under the tires as they left the parking lot. “I’d like to see your studio,” she said.

“I’d like you to, Maggie,” he replied. “But, um, well, there’s one thing I think I should tell you, if it’s not too presumptuous.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well,” he smiled, “it’s just that I, uh, well, painting is my whole life, you know? And I can’t…”

“Make love?”

He laughed and reached over to touch her, stroking the back of her neck where a few wisps of hair had fallen away from her upswept coiffure. “No,” he chuckled, “I can do that. And I want to do that with you, Maggie. I’ve wanted to for a long time. It’s just that, well, I can’t really get involved in a relationship, you know, a boy-girl thing. I mean, we can get together now and then, but I’m a driven man. Obsessed, I think you’d call it.”

Margaret turned onto the street where he lived and deftly parked the car. Then she turned toward him. “You’re so beautiful, Robin,” she said, touching his cheek with her fingers. “And I know painting is everything to you. I promise, if I fall in love with you, I mean if I fall any *more* in love with you, I’ll never say so. Anyway, I have my own life, too, and I’m not looking for anyone to share it with because frankly, most of the time, I like sleeping alone.”

Through the silently falling snowflakes swirling like a million tiny white moths under the streetlights, they walked along the sidewalk and then up the path to the door of the duplex. He found his key and they entered the dimly lit hallway, warm and cozy against the winter’s chill. She turned to him and he embraced her, their lips sliding, teasing, grasping, seeking one another in slowly thorough eagerness. Her eyes got very big. “Shouldn’t we be somewhere else?” she whispered.

“I suppose you want to do it right here on the hall rug,” he said, grinning.

“Of course.”

“Well, then, we’d better go upstairs.” And he followed her up the old wooden stairs, several of which creaked softly under them, each time inspiring a fresh round of giggling, until finally they entered his studio loft, where the air was warm and thick with the heady vapors of volatile dryers, linseed oil and turpentine.

She slipped her arms out of the sleeves of the faux fur and bared for him the exuberant flesh, now warm and eager, and she helped him out of his heavy wool cloak, and then the vest and sweater, his muscular coffee-colored arms glistening in the soft light.

He kissed her softly, deliberately, just below the collarbone, so that his chin rubbed gently over her breast, then he drew back from her and suppressed all but a hint of a smile. Her eyes were liquid. “I’ll make some coffee,” he said.

She kicked off her shoes and wandered around the studio, looking at paintings on easels, stacked along the floor, hanging on the walls. There were sculptures, too, carved, cast and constructed. And drawings everywhere. A chaos of images.

Two of the paintings, or whatever they were, that were set on easels had paint-stained sheets pulled down over them. “I suppose I shouldn’t look at some of these,” she said, unravelling her hair.

“Anything except those two.”

There were many studies of birds.

“Does the bird represent freedom?”

He carried the coffee to her side, in front of a group of pencil sketches of birds in extreme stages of flight: taking off, swerving, landing, even falling. “What do you think?”

She sipped thoughtfully. “I don’t know. I mean, of course it does, but what else does it represent?”

“Well, the dodo was a bird. The turkey is a bird. Then again, I’m not a bird.” He put his arm around her and smiled. “You’re kind of a bird, though.”

“It’s funny,” she said, as they slowly sauntered toward his bed, tucked away in an alcove behind a screen of beads, “that even though your loft is so alive, so full of all this energy, it’s also very serene. Almost like the Garden of Eden.”

“M-hm,” Robin agreed. “But you know in the Garden of Eden they were naked.”

“Oh, no; I didn’t know. You mean they had no clothes on?”

“Yep.” He slowly ran the zipper down the back of her dress, which peeled open like a banana to her bottom. “None at all.”

“Mm, then they touched one another’s nakedness,” she said coyly as he slipped his hands under her arms and around her breasts.

“No, they didn’t. They weren’t allowed to know they wanted to. They didn’t know whether they’d like it.”

“Gee, they were kinda dumb.” She squirmed a little under his touch.

“Then the snake got the woman to sample the fruit of knowledge.”

“Oh, yeah?” she whispered, breathing heavily. “How did he get her to do that?”

“I think he tickled her fancy.”

“With what?”

“With his whole self, darlin’,” he said, lifting the dress above her head. She raised her arms.

She heard him unbutton the fly of his jeans. Then she felt him step toward her again and, looking at him over her shoulder, she reached back to unhook her brassiere. “I’ll eat the apple,” she said, “if you’re really, really, really good.” His warm dark body melted against her, his skin hot against hers. His soft, strong hands cupped her creamy breasts and his deft fingers swirled lightly over her hard nipples.

“Shall I surrender now?” she purred.

“Huh-uh,” he demurred, lowering her onto the bed. “’Cause you know I’m no good without you, baby.”

She pulled aside the sopping crotch of her panties and guided his black lance inside her. As they rocked and swelled against each other, her necklace burst and pearls went skittering everywhere.

“Sorry,” he said.

“Fuck them!” she cried. “They’re not even real pearls.” And with this she started laughing and she laughed so hard Robin popped right out of her, and then they both laughed while he slid back inside.

“Oh, God, I love to feel you inside me,” she moaned. “You know what I mean? I can feel you inside me. I encompass you. I grasp you. I let you go. I feel you slide through me. I feel you swell and quiver in me. I see and hear and feel that you can feel it, too. It’s like holding your hand,” she said, and here she gazed at him and giggled a little, “only much nicer.”

“Ever look closely at a flower?” he asked. “Like an iris for instance? You think, oh, my God, how beautiful it is, how sensuous, how sexual it is, incredible colors and textures and delicate structures that soar out into space like tongues or antennae, sweet with honey, and even more beautiful hidden things, and it’s all an incredible bait aimed at the transfer of a few specks of pollen to a receptacle containing the other half of the mystery. A woman is like a flower, you

know, her clitoris a hooded Lorelei, the secrets of the deep wrapped in soft labiate petals, sopped in hormonal nectar and wreathed with silken hair." And all this time he kept moving inside her, gently, rhythmically.

"Oh, God, Robin. I feel such magic in you. Your paintings must have orgasms while you're doing that. Such love you pour into me, such fire."

"I'm painting you, Maggie. Myself in you, Maggie. We're being immortalized, in this moment."

"I don't want to be immortalized, Robin; I want to be whipped into a froth and shot into space."

Their rhythms grew irregularly more frenzied.

"Fuck me, Robin."

"Oh, yeah, slap on a little cobalt blue. Work me with that big brush. Oh, yeah, oh, God—Robin, you have such beautiful innocent eyes."

They lay side by side in each other's arms as the first pinkish blush of gray dawn washed the icy windows.

"Tonight was very sweet," Margaret said.

"Yep."

"It tasted like us."

"Cinnamon honey," he said, grinning a little, not opening his eyes.

"Chocolate sundae."

"Mashed potatoes and gravy."

"Robin?"

"Go to sleep, Maggie."

"Robin," she whispered again, very softly, so he, adrift in some contented land between a wake and a sleep, might have thought it an echo from a far-off, happy time.

Chapter 9

The Summoning Knight

From ghosties and ghoulies and long-leggedy beasties,
And things that go bump in the night,
Good Lord deliver us.

—*English Book of Common Prayer,* Scottish Litany

With an host of furious fancies
Whereof I am commander,
With a burning spear and a horse of air
To the wilderness I wander.

—*Tom O'Bedlam's Song*, Anon

The long icicles that hung from the gutters melted steadily in the low late February morning sun. It had been unusually cold, but this day was to be a turning point toward spring. Margaret had gathered her tribe of twenty-two psychologically incapacitated individuals and told them about Robin's coming to have lunch with her, and, if any so wished, with them. Some had seemed interested. With these people, the egg was never completely hatched. (One of many ways in which, she'd discovered, they differed only marginally from people on the outside.)

As a treat, she sometimes let them have lunch in the day room, which was more comfortable for many of them than the dining room and provided a little variety, but it occasionally resulted in little accidents and upsets. No matter. Today she and Robin were having lunch in the day room and whoever wanted to was invited to join them. The rest would eat in the dining room.

A few minutes before noon, carrying a multicolored bouquet of roses, red, pink, and white, and a sketchbook, wearing a long tweed overcoat and a navy blue watch cap and a broad grin, Robin came striding down the hallway, a brown face emergent from the black shadows, aglow in the soft golden light from the day room.

"Hi!" he said as she greeted him at the open door. He handed her the flowers. "These are for you, and everybody else," he said.

"It's wonderful to see you," she said softly, guiding him into the room, smiling, sampling the perfume of so many fragrant roses.

She had set two places at a small table near a window. She and he would eat there. Others could sit where they wished. Only three were in the room. "Robin," she said, "this is Beatrice, and this is Poco, and this is Dexter."

"My real name is William," Poco said.

"How do you do, William?"

"No, call me Poco because William is hiding. And only I can say it."

"Okay, Poco."

"It means 'small.'"

"Well," Robin said, smiling, "you're big inside, eh?"

"Oh, no, because then I wouldn't fit in my skin. I'm the same size inside I am outside, except a little smaller. It's a law of physics."

Dexter had been regarding all this from a chair several yards away, his face partly hidden behind a newspaper. "Mister Rembrandt?"

Robin noticed that Dexter's was an especially fine-boned face, the blotchy skin pulled snug against its frame. "Robin," he said.

"You look like Toulouse-Lautrec," Dexter said, smiling with an earnest smile, engaging despite its missing several teeth.

"He's black," Beatrice said, pointing at Robin as if nobody'd noticed. She herself was darker than he, her Jamaican black skin the color of licorice. Not the ebony of Ethiopia, but very dark.

Robin smiled. "Yes, and I'm not French," he said.

"Italian, then? Oh, those Italians! They sing the most wonderful arias! But Faust was a German. So-so-so."

"But I am short and I used to have a beard."

"I met Toulouse-Lautrec once," Dexter said. "Toulouse and me, we were good buddies. We called him 'too loose,' you know, because, well, we couldn't call him 'low trek,' could we?"

"No," Robin agreed. "I suppose not."

"He walked the high road, Toulouse did. Wasn't his fault he wasn't much higher than it was. He was a tall short guy. Proud. Righteous. He walked with the angels. But he visited all the taverns and milkmaids along the way."

Robin laughed. "I think you're onto something there!" he said, delighted at this flight of fancy.

"Notice I said 'visited,' and not 'frequented' or 'explored' or 'entered'…"

"Point taken," Robin said.

"But, Dexter," Margaret said, "I think his name was Henri."

"No," Dexter said, leaning forward, raising his eyebrows and pursing his lips as if he were about to divulge a great secret, "that was his *French* name. Plain Americans can't even say that name. *Ahnn-ree´*. It's like trying to say 'houyhnhnm.' It can't be done by a person with a normal American voice box."

Robin rocked backward with laughter. "What's a hoo-ey-hun-hun´-um?"

"I think it's hoo-ey-hnu-hnum´," Margaret said.

"They were horses in *Gulliver's Travels* who ruled over the world of humans, who were called, dare I say it, Yahoos. The Yahoos were incredibly stupid and irrational, just like real humans."

"I met Norman Rockwell once," Robin said.

The food-service people brought luncheon salads and iced tea to Margaret and Robin's table. He held her chair and they sat down. Beatrice sat nearby, in her rocking chair. The delicately wrought Dexter stayed where he was. Poco, a light-skinned, freckled Mexican, carried a footstool to within about three feet of the table and sat on it, facing them, somehow like a dog.

"You're looking in the pink, so to speak," Robin said.

"I'm so glad you came," she replied, reaching across the table and placing her hand briefly on his.

"So this is your studio?"

"Yeah, except I don't very often get to create anything. Everything here is strictly smoke and mirrors."

"You create illusions."

"Basically I scrape people off the dashboard and try to stitch the pieces back together. The illusion is that we have any success."

"Nothing changes?"

"Oh, everything changes," she said. "That's just it. Everything changes while you're looking at it. You can never really get a fix on anything. Because *they* can't, you know? So even if something changes, it takes a long time to see it and even longer to understand it, and usually long before you do it has changed again."

"'Except for the point, the still point, There would be no dance, And there is only the dance.' So said T. S. Eliot."

"Yes," Poco piped up, "because then what would be the point of it?"

"I've often felt lucky," Robin continued, "that I had a finite canvas in front of me, with edges and corners and a bounded surface. When you draw on cavern walls, or when you make sculpture, the space you work in is undefined, and you have to make one unified single thing that will exist in an essentially unknowable space. But inside a canvas you can go hog wild. You can put a thousand things, a zillion ideas, whatever you want in there. And it retains its coherence, because its universe ends at the edges. All that little space belongs exclusively to you. Wherever the painting is, it carries its own space with it."

"But you wouldn't say one frame of reference is as good as another, would you?"

"Ethically, I would. After all, they're only windows on reality. We can't assume that any sector or segment of reality is any better or truer or more important than any other. But artistically, no, I wouldn't. I think each subject has an ideal window, an ideal canvas size, colors, texture, even an ideal representation that carries this subject to its zenith. I mean this Platonically. And it's sort of backwards, because in fact you can start anywhere. For instance, having a subject, I might choose a canvas and then invent a representation that fits it. I might even start with the representation."

"Are we going to read the poems?" Dexter asked.

Robin laughed. "Sorry, Dexter," he said, "I've been prattling."

"Yes," agreed Beatrice, "you have."

"Okay," Margaret said, sitting up in her chair. "Shall I read, or do you want to read your own?"

"You can read," Dexter said softly. He handed her a scrap of kraft paper carefully cut from a paper bag.

"Okay, we'll start with Dexter." She cleared her throat. "This is called *A New Broom."*

> A young maid polishes daddy's pole,
> The green odor of new hay makes shiny
> Young dancers cry in a white room;
> Wash out your mouthpiece and tongue it again:
> An old witch has taken all the dirt.

"Interesting images," Robin said.

Margaret smiled. "Yes, Dexter," she said. "Very nice."

"No," Poco demurred, "not nice. Not nice at all."

Poco proffered a torn sheet of notebook paper. Margaret reached out and he handed it to her. "Does it have a name?" she asked.

"It has a name," Poco said. "but I can't tell you."

"Okay," she began. "This is Poco's poem with a secret name."

I see that glance
Away from me,
I know the hollow eyes,
Already gone afar
While voices murmur low
In empty air;
As all between us fades,
You turn and sigh
A last goodbye.
And as love draws its final breath,
The harum-scarum kiss of death.

I see that con
Descending smile,
For pity's sake expressed,
The little word
That cannot crawl
Through stiffened lips;
The whys no longer matter,
The what's the thing
That's all with us.
And as love draws its final breath,
The harum-scarum kiss of death.

I see that look,
You know the one,
That says in this unholy place
Where whirlwinds whirl
Through silent pain,
You will abandon
What you loved,
And look upon it
Ne'er again.
And as love draws its final breath,
The harum-scarum kiss of death.

"Wow, Poco," she said. "That's pretty good."

"Very sad," Robin said. He noticed that Beatrice had turned her head a little and was staring out the window, rocking slightly in her chair while big tears rolled down her brown cheeks.

"Not sad," Poco said. "Very angry."

"I'll read mine," Margaret said quickly. "It's called *Granny Smith."*

If I sat beneath a tree
And an apple fell on me,
Would I think of gravity?
Or would I just,
As most men must,
Consider it fate's depravity,
Nothing particularly grand,
Only a snack that's come to hand, and
Op'ning my oral cavity,

Chew it all up and swallow it,
Rather than trying to follow it
From letting go to falling down
Upon an unsuspecting crown,
Rather than wondering why it did
What every apple before it had,
Rather than trying to ponder
Why it didn't just float over yonder?

Margaret smiled and Robin laughed with her.

"I like apples," Poco said.

"You should call it 'The Pome that Came to Hand,'" Dexter said.

"No," said Poco, "'The Poem that Came to Mind.'"

"Yes," Dexter said gleefully, "that came a'knocking but couldn't get in."

"Beatrice?" Margaret inquired gently. Then to Robin she said softly, "Beatrice can't write. But she has a famous memory."

Rocking slightly, her eyes half closed, Beatrice spoke slowly.

"I rock here all day long;
It doesn't make me strong
But takes me through a song,
And gets me where I've been,
And there and back again.
And to and forth and fro,
I'm always on the go,
And yet it somehow seems
It's always in my dreams.

"I rock throughout the night:
When shadows give me fright,
It makes a little light;
I visit God up in the sky,
I hum the baby's lullaby,
I feel the former fire,
I sense a great desire,
And yet somehow I know
It really isn't so.

"I rock a metaphysic sign;
I rock for all that is divine;
I rock the ages into time.
With tedious labor built I this,
No more precious than a kiss,
A life of caring, ne'er mind woe,
Kissed I all and all let go.
And yet somehow I am
The Queen of old Siam."

After a long pause, Robin said, "Gee, Beatrice, that's very beautiful." He smiled affectionately at her.

"Thank you, Pablo," she said.

"I," Dexter began imperiously, "make pictures with colored pencils."

"Oh?" Robin responded. "Could I see them?"

"No, I don't show them to anybody, except sometimes to Margaret. But sometimes they're—well, I try to make life, as I *would have lived it* if I hadn't lived it as I have."

Robin laughed.

"So my question is, how do you escape from it? Supposing that you were, you know, not in your own mind…"

"Well," Robin said, "even mediocre things, you know, can have great symbolic power. Besides, if you throw out all the bad stuff the whole thing might crumble, because sometimes that's all there is. Focus on acquiring good stuff. And speaking of good stuff, did you like Beatrice's poem?"

"Well, I didn't understand it."

"Yes, but did you like it at all?"

"Well, she does do a lot of rocking. Sometimes she sits in here all day long and just looks out that window and rocks and rocks. It's a little weird, if you ask me. And she does kind of look like the Queen of Siam, or someplace. So I guess I liked it."

"Would you like to hear mine?"

"Sure."

"Oh, yes," Poco said.

Robin opened his sketchbook. "I'm not as good at this as you guys are," he chuckled.

"We'll focus on the good stuff," Poco said.

Just then there was a loud ripping and crashing noise as a section of icicles, still frozen together, broke free of the gutters and tumbled past the window, striking the ground below with a faint thump. In the ensuing silence, they heard it begin again: the steady drip, drip, dripping away of the easing winter.

Robin took a deep breath. "I call it *Icy But Smiling*."

This is a story about a guy
You all should know at a glance,
But to protect his identity
I'll call him Lion Florance.

Lion Florance was a simple man,
He lived at home with his wife;
Painter of portraits of anyone,
He brought all faces to life.

Lion was famous for all his might,
Each hair as fine as a hair,
Each cheek a blushing delight,
Each eye a vibrating stare.

Everyone knew that if Lion saw
The hint of anything swell,
Certainly more than a camera
He'd make it clear as a bell.

Therefore it sure was a mystery
Why Lisa's face wouldn't work;
Lion felt trapped in some calumny,
Her lips seemed only a smirk.

Then in the midst of a winter's night
His wife tarried long on the pot,

Warm as she was, her rear end froze tight,
And there 'til dawn she was caught.

Lion Florance at the outhouse door
Perceived her frustrated grin;
"Just the expression I'm looking for!"
He cried. "Now please let me in."

Lion remembered, and late that day,
He finished Lisa's sweet face.
"Mona, dear wife, come and see the way
You looked in hapless disgrace."

"Lion, you genius," she cried, "it's great!
But as I see it I ponder,
Whether, consid'ring my tender fate,
You'd call it *La Gioconda.*"

After awhile, Robin arose. "I really must get back to my studio," he said, "but you all have been delightful and I thank you for inviting me here today."

He shook hands with Poco and held out his hand to Dexter, who said, "I'll just skip the goodbyes if you don't mind."

Robin leaned over Beatrice' chair and, reaching out slowly, slipped his soft, strong fingers under her slender palm. She continued to gaze out the window. He bent down further and lifted the rich brown hand, light and delicate as a leaf, its surface soft as sable, rippled with sinuous veins and traversed by tendons radiating from thin wrist to graceful fingers that perhaps had stroked the frightened and fevered brow of a child or woven a spell on a piano, the lovingly polished rings, now outsized and garish souvenirs of more worldly times, which hung loosely yet still gracefully on its shrunken structure, this hand that bore babes and scrubbed clothes and defended the faith but never learned to write—though she could read, and in this hand she had held words and worlds—this hand that was now almost a sacred icon, he took gently to his lips and kissed it and her.

He looked at her, her face turned away, perhaps not unknowingly, perhaps in some now vague and painless despair, perhaps in some now odorless flowery meadow on a perfect summer's day. "Thanks for all your sweet thoughts," he whispered.

Margaret smiled and took his arm as she escorted him out of the room, and then their footsteps and his happy laughter faded down the hall. And all Beatrice heard was the steady drip, drip, dripping of the icicles into spring.

Chapter 10

Stumped, for the Record

There in the starless dark the poise, the hover,
There with vast wings across the cancelled skies,
There in the sudden blackness the black pall
Of nothing, nothing, nothing—nothing at all.

—*The End of the World,* Archibald MacLeish

Margaret and Robin met one bright May morning outside the Waterman Museum, among the sculptures and the birch trees where they would have their lunch. The chill that had lingered in the morning air was gone, replaced by an enthusiastic spring warmth, and they welcomed the lacy shade of the trees that arched over the marble bench where, after they'd hugged and said hello, they sat and placed their paper bags, his brown, hers white, between them.

"Oh, look," Robin said, "racially correct paper bags."

"I'm sure mine has better stuff in it," she replied.

He grinned. "No doubt," he said.

"So," she began, unwrapping a bologna sandwich, "what've you been up to lately?"

"Well, this morning I had to go to the doctor's."

"Oh? Is something wrong?"

He laughed. "No, I've been pestered by odd headaches lately and I had to get the old apparatus checked out. He gave me something to calm them down a little, that's all."

"Migraines?"

"Yeah, I don't know. Headaches. You know, hot spears sticking out from between your eyes. It's probably from too many fumes." He laughed. "I love fumes."

She regarded him carefully for a moment. His eyes were clear and the pupils a warm glossy black. His skin seemed almost iridescent in the sunlight, like rich brown leather, supple and smooth. His smile was as captivating as it had always been. "Anything besides OD'ing on fumes?" she asked.

"Well, when I'm sucking up fumes it's because I have a couple of new paintings going."

"Good. I'm glad. That's good, isn't it?"

"Yep," he grinned. "I like it."

Robin took an orange from his sack and began peeling it. "We should spend an afternoon in here sometime," he said.

"That'd be fun," she agreed. "I suppose you've spent a few already."

"Well," he smiled, "Dozens. But I'm not bored with it yet."

"Me neither. I've spent some long hours in here myself, wandering around. Most days, I don't have time to do it. Which means I don't have the inclination. But now and then I get a craving for it, you know?"

"Yep. Like grapefruit juice. Or chocolate pudding."

"Or you. Every strange and beautiful thing you see can somehow totally rearrange your perspective. And sometimes you really need that kind of incentive."

"Uh-huh. It works if you see it."

"Yeah. Like you do."

He rocked backward a little as he laughed. "Don't embarrass me. I'm already shy enough."

"Uh-huh."

"You know what I like? The extinct animals."

"Really? Why?"

"Well, first of all, they're gripping because they're gone. Their time's up and over. They're free of all the strife of life. Not just as individuals but as a race. And it seems they died out not because there was anything flawed in them but because something radical happened to their environment. An asteroid hit the earth or the crust slipped or something and all of a sudden the whole world was a different place for which they were ill-adapted. So what you're looking at isn't some stupid, useless creature just waiting around for a final exit—as you might imagine the dodo or the passenger pigeon—but an animal in the fullness of its glory that was cut down by an irresistible stroke of fate."

"Uh-huh," she said. "And why does this appeal to you?"

"I don't know. Maybe it's like the paintings and sculptures of the ancient civilizations, and the periods in which one sort of art, one sort of idea in art flowered profusely and then suddenly, invariably finally, it disappeared with the culture that inspired it, memorialized only in what was left behind and preserved, like these skeletons and reconstructions."

"So the environment, the milieu, determines who will live and what art will be produced?"

"Yes, in a way, I think it does."

"And what about you? Aren't you out of the mold of your times?"

Robin laughed. "Sure. A lot of people seem to think so. They don't like my fascination with the past. It imparts an old-fashioned quality to my work, they say. For them, the image doesn't bounce up off the canvas. It's tied down—one reviewer actually said this—like Gulliver by the Lilliputians, by thousands of strands of connection to the past, a past they'd like to forget, a past that, for them, has no bearing and no relevance to the present time.

"It would," he continued, "be, I guess, as if people were to say about psychiatric ideas, no, we can't seriously entertain this idea because it's Freudian or Jungian or Maslowian, or it came from those roots or has that cast."

"I guess there's a certain amount of that. More in writers and theorizers than in practitioners."

"Yes, and in the sciences there's a presumption that the present ideas are and should be elaborated from the notions of the past. But art, many people think, should always be something utterly new, unexampled in history, totally unheard-of. It's nonsense, of course. Whether it's Picasso or Warhol or Ecst, it's still paint on canvas, it's still some sort of representation of life, it's still done by guys with two hands and bad eyes and personal problems, and the difference, such as it is, is really the difference between Picasso and Warhol and Ecst, who are just otherwise normal run-of-the-mill people."

"Well, possibly not…"

She withdrew two plastic containers from her lunch bag and offered one, along with a plastic spoon, to Robin. Just then Alexei and Aurora emerged from the museum's smoked-glass doorway. Margaret waved to them.

"What's this?" Robin inquired.

"Concupiscent curds," she said, smiling at the approaching pair.

"Tapioca? I love tapioca!" Then he turned and greeted the dark-eyed young ballet dancer and his green-eyed acquaintance. "Hi, guys," he said.

"You really ought not refer to Aurora as a guy," Alexei said. "She gets confused."

Aurora rewarded him with an elbow to the ribcage.

"Nor you, either," Margaret rejoined.

"I refer to everyone as a guy, including my mother," Robin said. "I guess I could say, 'Hello, guys, gals, gays and gynandroids,' but, I don't know, it lacks a certain *je ne sais quoi."*

"I prefer Twinkletoes, anyway," Alexei said, laughing.

"Twinkletoes and Tinkerbell," Robin mused. "It's catchy. Want some tapioca?"

"Oh, no," Alexei said, turning away and wrinkling his nose in mock disgust. "I can't look at its tiny eyes."

Robin laughed.

"So what've you, ah, guys been doing?" Margaret asked.

"We, ah, guys have been looking at the Mirós," Aurora said.

"The stuff on loan from the MOMA," Robin observed.

"Uh-huh."

"But you can't look at tapioca?"

"I've decided I like the dinosaurs best," Aurora said. "After all those sculptures and paintings and the beautiful old furniture and gee-whiz machines people invented and built by hand, finally in the Hall of Dinosaurs I can feel superior to something."

"Really? You feel superior to Tyrannosaurus Rex?"

"Sure," she said, grinning. "He's dead and I'm not."

"She'd feel superior to him even if he were alive," Robin observed.

"I believe it," Alexei responded.

Aurora took a deep breath and stood a little taller, emphasizing an almost military bearing beneath the soft lines of her clothing. "I'd tear off his jaw and shove it up his ass," she said.

Alexei feigned shock. "I only hang out with her because she adds something to my aura of *panache,"* he joked.

"Don't know what it'd be," Margaret said.

"Video, my dear," Aurora confided to her, "*Sacre du Printemps* on the satellite feed. The Douglas Ballet, or should I say Alexei Kashlikov, on the satellite feed."

"Ahhh," Margaret said.

"Why she hangs out with you would be the question," Robin said to Alexei, drawing the last spoonful of tapioca into his mouth.

"Because I," Alexei said, spinning up onto his toes, "am a one-man, walking, talking three-ring circus and more fun than a barrel of monkeys."

"Just the kind of guy I've always wanted," Aurora said, her green eyes glittering above her shy, little-girl smile, her silken hair aglow with fiery copper reflections in the noonday sun.

Robin wondered if there mightn't be something to that.

"Speaking of funny guys," Margaret said, "I just watched W. C. Fields in *The Bank Dick* again the other night. Of course, he didn't dance, but…"

"Oh, yes," Alexei said. "What a wonderful fool he was. I think he really was, too. He played the fool in all of us. Well, all except certain redheaded lawyers, anyway. So inept, and pompous, so full of manic desire and arrogant ingratitude, so small-minded and short-sighted, so eager to leap to the most absurd conclusions, and by all this he was laid completely bare and vulnerable to the merest vagaries of chance. Every aspect of reality frustrated him and fate seemed opposed to him personally, because his whole approach, the whole approach of his characters, was to constantly thumb his nose at reality."

"But he got away with it, too," Margaret said. "That's the part I like."

"He went to the bank with it," Aurora said.

"Funny and rich," Margaret sighed. "Sounds pretty good."

"I'd rather dance," Alexei shouted, as he skipped and turned a cartwheel across the plaza. He struck a pose with a shock of bamboo.

Robin and Margaret watched them go as Aurora and Alexei strode away toward the street.

"I wish I understood how some people can be so devoted to their work," Margaret said.

"Well, you're devoted to your work, aren't you?"

"No, but I'm not," she said. "That's my point. Not like you are, or Alexei. Because your work is to create a completely original image out of all the pieces this world gives you. My work is more just trying to fix something that's broken. I don't devise whole new personalities for my patients. For you, everything you see, everywhere you go, is grist for your painterly mill."

"Well, maybe you *should* devise new personalities for them," he said.

"Well, yes, maybe."

"I don't agree with you in any case. There are intense people in every profession. People for whom the world is a gold mine of useful ideas. They're regarded with suspicion by the obedient majority who've worked hard and been lucky to make the system work for them and don't want to change it. But it has to change continually. It's a law of nature. Things are changed by radical behavior that happens to impinge on a weak spot in the system. Driven people do this work and therefore have to be tolerated, even occasionally honored.

"As for what's original and what's merely derivative, it seems to me that you use every available insight, no matter where it might have arisen, to create a useful therapeutic model for your patient, and that's just what I do, except that instead of a working insight into someone's mind I end up with a painting, or a sculpture. Your model is just as original, just as unique as my canvas."

"I think there's a difference," she said, smiling, "in the scope of your design, in the room for unprecedented ideas. And in the utter explicitness of your creations."

"Too explicit, you think?"

"No, I like it. In the recent stuff you mean? I like that. It gives your work an eerie quality. I noticed it really at the show."

"In Dali's *Persistence of Memory* everything sags, softens, liquifies, except for the background, which is sort of romantically dead, and presumably at some deeper level it all runs together. It's an example of a painting that's rather inexplicit. It doesn't appeal much to my emotions, because it isn't breathtakingly beautiful like a Renoir, nor vibrant with perfect color and subtle shading like a Cézanne, nor magically suffused with light like a Rembrandt, but its idea tantalizes my brain. What *is* the idea? What did Dali mean? Memory has no meaning unless it persists. So he must've had in mind memory which persists too long, memory that won't go away in spite of one's wishing it would, like a nightmare, or like the memory of better, happier times when things are going badly or one is growing old."

"Maybe," she said, "he meant that memory *doesn't* persist, that it fades and fails, that it's distorted and oversimplified and vague, and that it's we who must persist in enlivening it or otherwise it just slips away like old slime into the protean swamps of the unremembered past."

"Maybe," he laughed, his broad face widening around his mirthful eyes. "Anyway, it *should* be that, even if it isn't."

"Well, then it is," she said, packing away the cups and plastic spoons and thermos in her white paper bag, pressing her lips against a paper napkin, then smiling at him. "You're so delightful."

"As are you. And I always enjoy having an opportunity to view the world through the eyes of someone else who looks carefully and sees much."

Her pale blue eyes gazed lovingly at him, and his smiled warmly back at her.

"Want to come over and check out my new telescope? I just got it put together. An eight-inch reflector with dual eyepieces and a motorized equatorial mounting that can follow whatever it's aimed at. Kind of complicated, but it's mind-boggling."

"I'd like to."

"How about Sunday? It's a new moon, and if the weather's good maybe we can see the Crab Nebula."

"The Crab Nebula is a special favorite of yours? Because you're so crabby?"

He laughed. "Because it's so beautiful," he said. "I'm only crabby when I can't see it."

"Okay," she said, packing up the empty soup container and uneaten pickles into her paper bag. Then, looking at him with twinkling eyes and that bright red smile he'd always adored, with mock suspicion she asked, "Are you sure this is just an invitation to see your new telescope? Didn't you show me that eight-incher already?"

"Well," he said, laughing again and rising slowly to his feet, "it's an invitation. We'll see what we see."

Chapter 11

Pas de Deux

Shake hands forever, cancel all our vows,
And when we meet at any time again,
Be it not seen in either of our brows
That we one jot of former love retain.

—*Farewell to Love,* Michael Drayton

The March weather was brisk and lively, swirling with memories of winter and promises of spring. Geoffrey was glad to reach the sheltering doorway and then the warm interior of the old Moose Hall. He gathered himself for a moment before he started up the stairs that led to the Douglas Ballet's practice room, which had once been a bowling alley but was now a huge hollow space with a relatively smooth hardwood floor, a mirrored wall, and a few clerestory windows at one end where the pinboys used to do their endless labor.

There were a half-dozen dancers doing stretches and practicing pirouettes at the windowless end of the room while another dozen or more were doing exercises in the center of the floor under the ever-watchful and critical eye of Anya Markova, the company's director. Alexei was among the latter group.

Geoffrey watched them repeat the same brief sequence of moves—a few glissading steps to one side, then raising the arms and turning slowly, swooping down and around, then leaping back in the opposite direction, over and over and over again. He watched Alexei's seemingly effortless motions, the graceful contractions of the muscles under his leotard, the amazing distance he could travel in the air as he leapt from a standing start, his always precise and fluid landings.

He opened his coat and unwrapped the muffler from around his neck as he sat in one of the few chairs alongside the unmirrored wall. He marvelled that these dancers, who had only a few nights ago danced their closing performance of *Billy the Kid,* were already deeply involved in their next performance, in which Alexei was to play the title role, Stravinsky's *Petrouchka.* Very soon he found himself thinking about the placement of his cameras for its filming—videotaping, actually—while he watched the intricate dance within Alexei's compact and powerful body.

Anya Markova gave the dancers a five-minute break and walked over to where Geoffrey was sitting, a long towel draped around her slender shoulders.

"Madame Markova," Geoffrey greeted her as he rose.

"I noticed you weren't there the other night," she said, drawing herself up to her full height, which was about a foot and a half taller than she really was.

"No," he smiled, "I've been sick as a dog. With the flu. But the crew did a good job. And we have plenty of tape. We'll have a wonderful film. And I'm almost ready for *Petrouchka."*

"Oh, dear me," Anya commiserated mockingly, "sick as a dog. And yet here you are again, wagging your puppy tail and hoping for another bone. Well, here's a bone for you. Saturday night, when you were lying around feeling sorry for yourself, the dancing was perfect, the lighting was perfect, the orchestra was, well, as perfect as it gets, and the audience was perfect. The dancers, the tempo, the costumes, everything. Now, like your pitiful malady, that rare

moment's gone. But one thing about it will live on: you, the great genius vidiot, weren't there to direct the filming."

"I'm sorry."

"Yes, you are, but I don't care, you see? I care about ballet, you see? I care about this company. In your piddling case I care about videotape. That's what I hired you for. I didn't hire your heaving heartstrings and I didn't pluck them and I won't care when they're all broken. I want film, film, film from you, Geoffrey, and you may pray to God it had better be good."

"I…." Geoffrey thought to protest her characterization of his absence as malingering occasioned by lovesickness, but he changed his mind. "Yes'm," he said.

"If you're not there for the entire *Petrouchka* on opening night you need not bother coming back," she said. "We don't have the luxury of cancelling productions because we don't feel good."

"Yes'm."

"And neither do you."

"I understand."

"Please do. And I want your mind entirely focused on the company and the performance, and not on one dancer." She looked aside and clapped her hands sharply. The dancers working with her formed up again on the floor. "You work for me, Geoffrey, not for Alexei, no matter how magnificent he may be. You understand me, don't you?"

"Yes." He understood that she had perceived the nature of his fascination with Alexei. It was a fact he had not quite acknowledged to himself. Alexei was a captivating subject for the camera, graceful, lithe, strong. His passion for ballet was boundless, generous, as enchanting as his smile. When he danced, he was in a world of his own, but he seemed always to know exactly where the audience was.

Geoffrey thought again about this as he and Alexei walked, an hour or so later, through the gathering dusk toward Alexei's apartment. Geoffrey wondered if Alexei knew. "She got on my case for not being there Saturday," he said.

"Yes," Alexei said, "it was a shame, though. The performance was spectacular. The audience was fantastic."

"We have good film."

"Well, good film is like white bread, maybe. *Petrouchka* is going to be a big deal for me, you know."

Geoffrey's ears burned. "I do know. Because it's a Nijinsky role, right?"

Alexei laughed. "Because it's *my* role," he said. "Oh, it gives me the willies. I understand everything about it. Everything."

Soon they reached the building where Alexei lived and where they were planning to have a light supper and to review progress on the separate video that Geoffrey was editing especially for Alexei's portfolio.

Alexei's apartment was a lovely, almost surrealistic haven of shapes and shadows. A sensation of free and flowing space was created by its high ceilings, white walls, pale pinkish-beige oak trim, and innumerable windows. The furnishings were tasteful, modernistic, graceful. Two winged chairs and the large white sofa were extravagantly cushioned in luxurious leather.

"Have you seen my newest *objet d'art?"* Alexei asked, shedding his coat and pointing to a large painting on the wall beside the staircase that led up to what Geoffrey supposed was the bedchamber, an open area that overlooked the living room.

"Robin's?" Geoffrey asked.

"It's called *The Wreck of Hieronymus Bosch.* Take a look while I go put the soup on. Here, let me take your coat."

It was a strange painting, as were all of Robin's paintings. Beautiful, but a little queer. Well, peculiar. To begin with they looked at first glance a lot like paintings from the ancient past. Superficially, they seemed quite literal and not at all abstract. "The geometry is inside," Robin had said once to him.

Here part of the bow of a ship rose from a rock-studded sea off steep gray cliffs, heeled over on its side, its half-shrouded masts pointing off toward the fogbank that hid the horizon. The letters "HIERONYM" were visible along the gunwale above the black swells that pressed thence ashore into a shattering surf. In the water were dozens of creatures, not only people but animals, some alive and some grotesquely dead, and musical instruments, and tables and chairs and boxes and barrels. Some of the people and animals had gained purchase on floating furniture or other debris and wore expressions ranging willy-nilly from terror to boredom, sadness to resignation. Some screamed or swam or struggled. Some played cards or drank beer or lay back with their fingers interlaced behind their heads and just floated along. Along the ragged shoreline was a long tangle of washed-up bodies and detritus from the wreck. At the skyward end of one of the yardarms, above the snapping sounds of torn and wind-whipped canvas, a white gull preened itself.

This whole scene was bathed in a brownish-yellow light that accentuated the leaden-gray sea and made a few hazy eggshell-blue glimmerings at the edge of the fulvous sky look tentative and mocking.

"Why didn't they stay on the ship?" Geoffrey asked as he entered the kitchen where Alexei was preparing sandwiches, ham and swiss on rye bread, to go with the pea soup.

"Maybe they ran out of Gray Poupon."

Geoffrey watched the rippling muscles play over Alexei's forearms as he deftly sliced the sandwiches into quarters and placed them on small plates. Every move was precise and confident. Alexei's body did exactly what he expected of it, no more, no less.

"You can get set up in there if you want to," Alexei said, smiling. "We'll sit on the sofa, okay?"

"Sure, great," Geoffrey said.

"I have a nice new Riesling," Alexei said.

"Can I have milk, too?"

"Sweetie, you can have anything you want as long as you make me look beautiful on tape."

"Well, that just sort of happens," Geoffrey laughed.

"I want it to happen from beginning to end, though, and I know that doesn't just sort of happen, Geoffrey. That only happens when you edit the tape. That's why Anya hired you. And that's why I asked you to do these tapes for me."

"Oh," said Geoffrey, "I thought it was because we were friends."

Alexei chuckled. "In spite of that," he said.

Geoffrey pressed the cassette into the VCR and cued it up. On the white marble table in front of the couch Alexei carefully set out, among the crystal, silver and white linen, a bottle of Grey Riesling, a small glass pitcher of milk, a relish tray containing mustards and sour cream (for the soup), two delicate Limoges plates each bearing four quarters of ryebread sandwich, each with ham, swiss, tomatoes, lettuce and mayonnaise peeking out, and two matching shallow bowls of thick green soup each with a small dab of butter melting in its center.

"Well," Alexei said smiling, tucking his napkin into the open throat of his shirt as he sat down next to Geoffrey, "what's been happening in your life?"

In reply, Geoffrey started the videotape, smiled at his friend, picked up a sandwich and leaned forward to watch.

Alexei was thrilled. Geoffrey had woven several performances into a nearly seamless whole, and had emphasized Alexei's dancing with great skill. A person who didn't know the story of this ballet mightn't have realized, he thought, that Alexei's Pat Garrett was not the starring role. "Wonderful!" Alexei said, clapping his hands together like a child delighted by magic.

"The *Petrouchka* will be even better," Geoffrey said.

They watched mostly in silence, with Alexei interrupting now and then to exclaim his approval and appreciation and Geoffrey complimenting him on the creamy, thick, tasty soup.

"You did a fantastic job," Alexei said when it was finished. "I'm really pleased." He turned in the sofa to face Geoffrey. "I really appreciate your doing this for me, Geoffrey," he said. He almost placed his hand on Geoffrey's knee, but he drew it back. "Sorry," he said.

"Why?" Geoffrey asked, realizing at the same time that a little thrill of anticipation and anxiety had passed through him in that instant when he'd thought Alexei was going to touch him.

"Well, because you mightn't know what to make of it, if I put my hand on your knee."

Geoffrey laughed. "Well, I think it's okay," he said. But he wasn't at all sure.

"You're not gay, are you, Geoffrey?"

Geoffrey blushed as he sputtered out a "No," and then, "well, no, I never thought so. I mean, I like girls, you know."

Alexei laughed and clapped him lightly on the shoulder. "I do, too," he said. "I do, too."

"I'm really quite fond of you, though."

"Aha!" Alexei said. "And I of you, my friend." He gestured toward the table as he arose. "Would you like anything else?"

"Coffee, maybe," Geoffrey said.

Alexei had brewed a fresh pot. He filled the mugs in the kitchen area and returned to the sofa. "So," he said, "what do you think of my new painting I paid three thousand dollars for?"

"I don't know. The colors are nice. There's a wrecked ship and a bunch of bodies and a lot of people floating around and some are shrieking and some are looking as though nothing has happened. I don't quite know what to make of it."

"I don't, either," Alexei said. "That's why I bought it."

Later on, as they said goodbye at the door, Alexei told Geoffrey not to worry about Anya's outbursts. "She's really mad at Kate," he said. "Kate's ghostwriting her book on choreography. About words and language Kate's as much a perfectionist as Anya is and every bit as stubborn. So it's prima donna wars. Anya just wanted to speak some words and have it said. That's how it works in the theater. But Kate wanted to explore the relationships between the choreography of ballets and modern dance routines, the dancing of ballet and less structured work. It's like the relationship between classical music and jazz. Anya lives on both sides, but she just wanted to talk about ballet, I think because that's what she'd thought most about, in the most organized way. She's seemed a little frustrated since Kate talked her into branching out into all these other areas."

"These arenas where her word is not quite law."

"Exactly so."

Geoffrey reached out and gathered Alexei into a mutual embrace. "Have a great opening Friday," he said, still holding the dancer close, clapping his back a few times. "The camera's eyes will be all over you, taking everything in."

Alexei separated himself enough to look into Geoffrey's eyes. "Surely," he said, as if abashed, "not *all* over me."

Geoffrey laughed. "As a matter of fact," he said, "it's very subtle. You mustn't dance to the camera and I mustn't focus on you. Yet at the same time we both know that's exactly what's going on."

"But there are many other things going on."

"Yes, and we can't lose track of them because they all serve, we hope, to heighten the illusion."

"And it's all illusion," Alexei said.

And on opening night that Friday, among Robin Ecst's gay and somber sets, and wearing costumes designed by Elizabeth Baldwin, the clown Petrouchka and his fellow puppets, the beautiful Ballerina and the debonair Moor, and the Puppetmaster and a throng of twenty or thirty townsfolk who must bear witness to Petrouchka's tragedy of love and death, dancing before an audience that packed the house and three video cameras that took in everything, Alexei in particular and the whole cast reached new heights of timing, coordination, and airy grace. Alexei's elastic and expressive face, the eyes made sad with makeup, caricatured every nuance of his character, so that when Petrouchka's ghost returned to mock the audience for its indifference to his fate, for its presumption that his woes were of no personal concern to them—when, its inconvenient corpus hidden behind a parapet, that face alone was his presence on stage, its dark sorrow and pitiable fury were perfectly plain.

As the applause and wolf-whistling died down after the second curtain call and the picture faded to black in his camera's eyepiece, Geoffrey exhaled a sigh of relief. A spectacular performance, and it was all on tape. "That's a wrap, guys," he said into his microphone. "Thanks a million."

They signaled him with thumbs up in the rising lights.

Chapter 12

Trading Places
(Moth to the Flame)

It's no go my honey love, it's no go my poppet;
Work your hands from day to day, the winds will blow the profit.
The glass is falling hour by hour, the glass will fall for ever,
But if you break the bloody glass you won't hold up the weather.

—*Bagpipe Music,* Louis MacNeice

Wild nights! Wild nights!
Were I with thee,
Wild nights should be
Our luxury!

—*Wild Nights,* Emily Dickinson

Geoffrey had persuaded Alexei, after several weeks of delicate campaigning, to take him some night to the Beastrow tavern, and one night in April Alexei did.

Life at the Beastrow was a perpetual Mardi Gras. On joyful holidays the celebrants might dress in flamboyant costumes of flowing silk brocade and gigantic feathers, or top hat and tails (but perhaps pantless), paint themselves in glittering gold and silver hues, dance and parade and pose and perform for the general pleasure of the crowd and one another. Even when, in more normal times, the costumes were the most conservative suits, there was always an air of excitement, a sense that, as the great mathematician Charles Dodgson once said, "anything can happen, and often does."

On Saturday nights, as in any happy tavern, clothes and behavior at the Beastrow tended to be a bit on the wild side. Not frankly obscene, nor uncivil, but daring, reaching, sometimes crossing the foggy boundary into what some overstuffed people would consider really bad taste. As in any happy tavern, the regulars referred to Saturday as "amateur night."

Alexei wore a loose white blouse with long puffed sleeves and a black velvet vest with a gold watch chain, dark maroon plush knickers, purple knee-socks with narrow black stripes, and gray leather Peter Pan shoes. A thicket of straight, bowl-cut black hair framed his intense black eyes and mischievous smile.

Geoffrey wore a blue button-down shirt, rather somber MacEwan plaid trousers, cornflower blue socks and brown-and-white saddle shoes.

Men greeted Alexei warmly as he and Geoffrey made their way through the crowd to a table not too near the band. Alexei introduced each of them to Geoffrey. They welcomed him, too, if not quite so effusively. Nevertheless, Geoffrey felt a little claustrophobic.

"So," said Alexei brightly once they'd sat down at a comfortable little table, "do you think that getup will protect you from, uh, you know…?"

"Groping sex maniacs?"

Alexei laughed.

"Well, I thought it would put me in a unique context. And it doesn't look too bad, does it?"

"No," Alexei said, "not too bad." Then he laughed again. "But bad enough, that's for sure."

A waiter came by and they ordered drinks. Geoffrey ordered two double brandys, Alexei a vodka tonic.

"Two double brandys?" Alexei asked. "Isn't that sort of—*risqué?"*

"I have a long way to go," Geoffrey said, laughing.

Two of Alexei's friends stopped by to chat. Invited, they sat for a moment. Stubby looked like a cross between a New York cab driver and a prizefighter. He smoked a cigar and needed a shave. His friend Reed was a tall, skinny black man, Jamaican maybe, Geoffrey thought.

"Alex tells me you're a chess player," Stubby said.

"Well," Geoffrey said immodestly, "I play a little."

"We should play sometime."

"Sure."

"I especially like the queen," Reed said, giggling. "She's so powerful. You know, that silly king, he's just a eunuch, don't you think?"

"I like the horses," Alexei said. "They get to jump over things."

Geoffrey smiled. "Even the pawns are interesting," he said. Their drinks came and Geoffrey swirled his brandy for a moment, nosed its fragrance, and downed half the glass in one swallow.

"Oh, my, yes," said Reed, "the pawns. And they can all become queens. I just love it when a whole flock of queens traps that nasty king in the lavatory. It gives me the shivers."

"They're all cannon fodder as far as I'm concerned," Stubby said. "One thing bothers me, though, is that bishop. All the rest of them are secular, from the world of the profane. Monarchs and their castles and their armies. But the bishop is a churchman, I daresay a Catholic churchman at that. That's why everything he does is oblique. Anyway, I wonder if chess is really a suitable game for the American mind. What do you think, Geoff? I mean, first of all there's the First Amendment problem. A war game featuring bishops, commingling church and state, *rouge et noir.* Then there's the Catholic problem. I mean, these are kind of violent guys, these bishops, the equal of three ordinary pawns in combat. Third, there's the fundamentalist problem. I mean, is this a Christian game? Its whole purpose is for one king to kill the other king. Has kind of an Old Testament ring to it, yes? Then finally, there's the feminist problem, because, although the most powerful piece on the board (no offense to you ladies) is a female, there's only one of them on each side but there are thirteen males, two horses and two castles. What do you think?" He eyed Geoffrey carefully and chomped on his cigar.

"Well, I think you have a point there. We should ban chess from the public schools. They should tear out the chess tables in the parks. Chess players should be forced to retrain for checkers."

"No," Reed said, "checkers is worse. I think that the idea of having one checker flopped down on top of another checker to make a superchecker is absolutely obscene. They're all guys, too, you know. People say, 'Oh, you jumped my man!' What do they mean by this? And they call the supercheckers 'kings.' When one man is on top of another man, together they become a king. This is obviously a very deranged game and not suitable for young minds or public sufferance."

"Bingo, then," Alexei suggested. And they all laughed.

Geoffrey treated his second drink slightly more circumspectly, taking it in long sips. He began to feel its effects. When the DJ in the booth put on *Deep Purple*, and Reed asked him to dance, and promised to let him lead, Geoffrey assented.

"Now are you straight, honey?" Reed asked as Geoffrey put his hand on the bony hip. "Or are you trading?"

"I'm totally naive," Geoffrey said. "What's trading?"

"Well, you know, crossing over, AC-DC, switch hitting. An omnivore."

Geoffrey smiled. "I get it," he said. "Well, it's just, I'm just, well, strangely attracted to Alexei. I mean really attracted, you know? And, but, well, I just don't know how I'm attracted exactly. I mean, we're friends and all. Don't tell him I told you this, okay?"

"Sure, baby, your secret's safe with me."

"He's just magnetic."

"Well," Reed said, smiling a soft white smile and putting his hand against Geoffrey's cheek, "you're a pretty sweet guy for a straight guy, and I'm sure Alexei finds you attractive, too, or he wouldn't have brought you here." He paused. "Stubby never dances with me," he said. "He's really nice but he doesn't dance. So it's nice to have someone to dance with, especially when the music's soft and slow like this."

Geoffrey held him a little closer, close enough that they could dance in an easy, faroff rhythm to the plaintive tune of soft violet shadows and misty memories. Reed let Geoffrey decide how close close enough was.

Geoffrey didn't dance again that night, partly because he'd soon consumed his fourth snifter of brandy and, in the course of lifting the fifth to his lips, he became exceedingly woozy. The scene in front of him dissolved into liquid, Alexei and Alexei's laughing smile, and Alexei's puffed white sleeves, and the vague faces behind him, and the dancers on the floor, and the searching colored lights and the flashing and the music and the movement and it all suddenly slipped away from him, up into the ceiling, everything sliding away and then, piled up like a rolling wave, it all fell over on top of him, and Alexei's face was very close now and someone was asking him was he okay.

Alexei guided him outside, to the car.

"I'm sorry," Geoffrey said.

"Your forehead feels very warm," Alexei replied. "You have a fever. It's not your fault. Well, maybe four glasses of brandy didn't help much, but I'm pretty sure you have a fever, Geoffrey. So it wasn't just the brandy that tipped you over. Anyway, don't worry about it. You'll be fine. It'll all be fine. Don't worry about it."

Geoffrey felt his forehead. It was hot and damp.

They went to Alexei's apartment and Alexei helped him up the stairs and onto the sofa. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm in outer space. My brain is bubbling like fondue cheese. The whole room is as plastic as Dali's world. Things keep sliding away. But other than that, I feel okay, I guess. Sort of."

Alexei put a thermometer in Geoffrey's mouth and went into the kitchen to fix coffee and some chicken soup.

Geoffrey slowly raised himself from the couch and made his way over to Robin's painting. He examined it intently, slowly moving his head from side to side like a cobra trying to gauge the nature of an approaching apparition.

He had an impression, which he could not well resist, that the ship was dissolving into these hundreds of people and floating objects, and that they in turn, and it, were attached by almost-visible threads of causality to the accretion of debris on the beach, which itself seemed organic and alive. So the whole sensation was, then, in this canvas, of an object whose origins lay in the slime and decay of other objects, connected by the human passion which represents all the

myriad forces that, in consciousness, combine disparate substances into discrete wholes and shatter them again into meaningless pieces.

Alexei returned with the coffee and withdrew the thermometer from Geoffrey's lips. "A hundred and four," he said, shaking it down.

"This painting is incredible," Geoffrey said.

"Come sit on the balcony; it's nice out. I'm making you some soup."

From the balcony Geoffrey could see the lights of the city among the trees. For a long time he sat, gazing, as the branches fingered the lights like children playing with fireflies. It all seemed sad. The darkness. The soft zephyrs of warm spring air. The faroff sounds of human business. His own lost soul. His head felt thick and phlegmatic.

Alexei brought chicken broth in a shallow bowl. "Sip this," he said. "I'm going to fix you a nice cool spongebath."

Alexei's bathroom featured a large black sunken tub, big enough for two, or maybe four people. It was set in a raised platform of wine-red tiles. Alexei had filled it to a depth of about a foot and a half.

Geoffrey removed his clothes, shoes, socks, shirt, trousers and underwear. It required stupendous effort to reach and remove each article. He was well beyond modesty. He sat naked on the side of the tub, his feet dangling in the tepid water. Then, as Alexei approached, he slid in. It wasn't entirely a conscious decision.

Alexei guided him to the shallow end of the tub and propped his arms on the sides so his face wouldn't slip under the surface again. The water came up to Geoffrey's armpits. It felt cool and delicious. Alexei added to the water a little of something or other that smelled like lilacs and turned the water a milky white. Then he produced a large, soft sponge, a real sponge, and began stroking Geoffrey's head, and his face, and his chest, gently, lingeringly. It felt so good, so cool, so relaxing. Geoffrey closed his eyes and a million colored lights spun past him, shimmered into the far-off darkness.

He smiled. "You're so sweet. You're fabulous. No wonder I love you. Oh, don't take that the wrong way. I wish I knew what that was. The wrong way. And the right way. Is there a right way, Alexei?"

"Sit up," Alexei said.

Geoffrey's back was white and pasty and thick with inactivity. But it was Geoffrey, not his back, that Alexei wished to soothe and comfort. Alexei drew the white fragrant water again and again up to Geoffrey's shoulders, and then he washed carefully with the sponge his spine, his shoulders, his ribs, (lifting his elbows) his underarms, his midsection, his lower back, his neck. Geoffrey was asleep. Alexei washed his chest, and his abdomen, where he lingered for a long time while he thought of the video Geoffrey had made for him of his performance in *Billy the Kid.* It was very good.

Alexei moved around to the other side and, one at a time, washed Geoffrey's legs, the feet, the toes, the soles, the heels, the arches, the ankles, the calves, the knees, the thighs, the thighs…

Geoffrey became partly conscious, if not lucid, when Alexei lifted him from the tub, and he managed to stand while Alexei dried him with an enormous blue towel, as thick as a man's hand, his face, his torso, his arms, his legs, his buttocks, between his legs…

Then, wrapped in another huge towel, of the same color but dry and warm, Geoffrey sat on the couch while Alexei fluffed his hair, and then lay down as Alexei commanded and was nearly asleep again when Alexei covered him with a soft, light white blanket.

Alexei tiptoed up to the bedroom and called Kate, who agreed to come by and look after Geoffrey for a few hours, until one o'clock or so.

After Alexei left, and before Kate arrived, Geoffrey awoke. Alexei had left him a glass of ice water, a robe, and a note telling him that Kate would soon arrive and that he, Alexei, would be back soon. He wondered what Kate would think of his being there, naked, on Alexei's couch, and then he roused himself, quite unsteadily, and put on the robe. He could not stand for very long and soon sat down again, pulling the blanket across his lap. Then he noticed that, on the other side of Alexei's note, was a poem, or the rudiments of a poem, written in an almost miniaturized hand, most certainly Alexei's but very small.

Alexei had entitled it "Mayfly," and then "Mayday," and then "I May Fly."

> I think of the mayfly,
> Whose life spans
> But a single day.
>
> For playing and learning, love and loss,
> For laughing and crying, spring and fall,
> For fear and courage, dream and dross,
> A single rising sun is all
> She has, and its attendant hours.
>
> Nay, none of these has she,
> But a little breakfast egg
> As bland as any worthless dreg,
> And then the drying of her wings,
> Greenish iridescent things
> Aglint among the morning flowers,
> Chartreuse diaphany.
>
> Then sails she on the streamside breeze
> And lights upon the leafy trees;
> In concentration of some kind,
> Some gathering of the insect mind,
> She lays in vegetable tissue
> Tomorrow's mayfly maggot issue.
>
> And then and only then she flies
> Across the boundless watercourse,
> Beneath the blue and endless skies,
> Upon Apollo's aging horse;
> For but a glittering moment lifts her shout
> Of living joy before she's eaten by a trout.

Geoffrey found a pencil in the kitchen and managed to return to the sofa with it and an envelope he'd taken from the trash. He spread the envelope on the table and bent forward to compose a verse or two of his own. The drawing of each letter demanded concentration and oddly physical effort.

When Alexei got home again from the Beastrow, about fifteen minutes later than he'd promised, Geoffrey was sleeping peacefully and Kate had gone. She'd put Geoffrey's poem on the kitchen counter. One couldn't tell whether "Serfing USA" was meant as its title or not. If not, it had none.

> How dare we chew through our cocoons?
> How dare we venture on the dunes?
> How dare we lift the love we feel
> Up to the eyes of the commonweal?

How dare we strike out toward the sun,
Abandoning the caves of convention;
How dare we raise our voices to
The scowling fate that greets us,
To plead for but another hour
Of frolic on the beaches?

"A world without redemption," she'd noted underneath, "would be too small by half for any man with feelings."

Chapter 13

Moment of Truism

"All that I ask, is just one tender touch
Of that soft cheek, thy pulsing palm in mine,
Thy dark eyes lifted in a trust divine,
And those curled lips that tempt me overmuch
Turned where I may not seize the supreme bliss
Of one mad kiss."

—*All That Love Asks,* Ella Wheeler Wilcox

A few weeks later Geoffrey walked through the warm May evening toward Margaret's house. As he passed the old pioneer cemetary, green and long-shadowed in the waning afternoon, he thought of his father, a Special Forces sergeant working with Montagnard villagers, killed in the green uplands of Southeast Asia. He'd died the day after Geoffrey was born, long before most people knew there even was such a place as Vietnam.

"You mustn't think of it as a tragic thing," Geoffrey's mother had insisted to him many years later. "He was doing something good, something that mattered a great deal to him. He loved those people and he believed in the work he was doing with them, the work the country was doing, to save their way of life. We were lucky, really, awful as it was, because at that point it seemed to everybody who cared that the struggle was both worthy and justified."

Geoffrey had recoiled, when he was younger, at her suggestion that dying in the service of one's deepest desires might be an ideal end, for no end seems ideal to the young, but on this afternoon it was a congenial notion. He laughed to himself at the thought, because he couldn't imagine how a video production designer—a vidiot, Alexei called it—might contrive to die behind the camera. And then he remembered again Vietnam, where more than a few brazen and dedicated videographers had paid with their lives for the glory of their revealing art.

For several years Geoffrey had specialized in filming staged productions, plays, ice shows, symphonic music, opera and now, since he'd met Alexei and Anya, ballet. The work required great skill. The placement, movement and operation of the cameras could not disturb the audience. The lighting and staging effects had to serve the audience first. And the only performance that mattered was the live performance; fitting retakes and parts of other performances into a film was always tricky and not always possible.

But Geoffrey's tapes allowed performance artists and their companies to examine their work at leisure and in detail, to learn from their mistakes, and to preserve, for various reasons, the work they had done. Geoffrey had mastered issues of copyright and sound production as well as the technical aspects of managing multiple camera operations above and behind and otherwise hidden from the live audience. And he had a flair for the work.

Still, his life seemed hollow and insubstantial. He didn't jump out of airplanes into the pitch black night, he didn't run across rough terrain carrying thirty or forty pounds of medicines and an automatic rifle, nobody was shooting at him, and nobody's life or death depended on whether he showed up. His body, now the same age as his father's when he was killed, was pudgy and soft. His rust-red hair was thinning and prematurely flecked with gray. Unlike the

intrepid souls who had ventured a hundred years before across the plains afoot and in wooden wagons, and who were now interred unknelled in this parklike plot of earth, Geoffrey's most daunting challenge was to convince egotistical artists that their work should be immortalized on videotape.

He passed a large yellow poplar, heavy with new leaves and great green magnolia buds. A large broken branch, torn by a burden of wet snow from its juncture with the silver-gray trunk, swooped downward a dozen feet to the ground, only barely still attached at its heel below a ragged yellow scar in the soft wood, and yet its twigs were thick with foliage. It was inspiring, the ebullience of life, however silly or pointless or futile. Life gloried in itself. It gloried in everything.

Across town, no longer clad in his waiter's garb but now adorned in peppermint-green Bermuda shorts and white running shoes and a Madras sport shirt, Alexei strode from the City Club, southward past a few blocks of quiet office buildings, along the tree-shaded sidewalks toward Margaret's house.

The warm evening and its lengthening shadows (or was it the little white houses under the sycamores?) recalled to his mind his grandparents' house in Connecticut, where he'd grown up. They'd emigrated with two young children from Leningrad during the German siege in World War II. Their daughter, his mother, had married a rebellious young Polish unionist. Living in London, the two of them had become involved in smuggling orphaned children out from behind the Iron Curtain to homes in the West. When Alexei was six months old they'd been killed in a plane crash in Czechoslovakia.

His grandparents' house had been small, dark, warm, richly scented and densely cluttered with history—photographs, old newspapers, icons, shawls, rugs, furniture, embroideries, draperies—everything in rich shadowy reds and browns and scorched shades of white. Everything, beginning with themselves, seemed old, fabled, patient, resolutely penetrating and devoted to sustaining the past, not just their past and his past but the past of humanity as they knew and understood it.

After he'd come to live with them, his grandmother had worked as a governess to help support the family. His grandfather, a bootmaker by trade, who had on several occasions danced in a children's troupe for the Czar, had contracted a mild case of polio and become somewhat frail, but he retained a vital energy and sense of humor, vivid memories of the past, and great passion for his embargoed Russian people and their culture. Years later, as perestroika emerged they'd both become ten years younger. With Alexei's blessing they'd left Connecticut and returned to the Baltic, and they were living there when Leningrad had become again St. Petersburg. "I am still crying every day, three months later," his grandfather had written in his shaky hand shortly before he'd died, "and Natasha's smile reminds me of the way she looked when she was only a child of twenty."

Now his grandmother was well over seventy, still occasionally making candies and cards to send to her grandson and granddaughter in the land of promises, sitting contemplatively on the balcony of her little flat overlooking the sea, surrounded and comforted by all those ancient artifacts of memory. "You will gather for yourself in your years different things from these," she had said to him one quiet afternoon, "not doilies and tintypes, and perhaps not walnut and Persian wool, but actions and memories and icons of your own life. See to it that you think them beautiful and worthy of your affection, because you will live among them for a very long time."

Alexei thought of her often, and now longed to see her again before it was too late.

When he arrived at the house Geoffrey was already there, standing on the porch with Harry and Billy, who were engaged in a conversation (which had evidently been going on for some

time) about extreme behaviors and situations, what they meant and how they operated on human life.

Harry, naturally, claimed extremism itself a vice, and extreme circumstances generally unwholesome. Billy, equally naturally, considered extreme situations the perfect testing ground for courage, resourcefulness and other manly virtues, conditions in which extreme behavior seemed not only appropriate but often admirable.

Geoffrey was agreeing with this latter view. "Everything's up for grabs when something extreme happens," he said. "However it works out, there's always an opportunity there, to move the situation in some unexpected way."

"Yes," Harry said, "but the question isn't whether one should react appropriately to extreme situations, but whether one should seek them out or even create them."

"Well," Billy said loudly, cocking his head skeptically to one side, "I think it's also how you react to them when they come up. If you act like a goddamn cheechako…"

"…your ass will freeze off," Alexei interjected, joining them, and they all laughed.

Geoffrey reached out and put his arm around Alexei's shoulders in greeting. "So it's a question of whether these kinds of situations are likely to benefit you or not, isn't that it?" he asked Harry.

"Well," Harry said, "yes, I think that's exactly it. You may have a golden opportunity to engage in some sort of superhuman heroism when you're stuck on the tundra and it's fifty below and you have no food and your leg is broken and gangrene is setting in and it's a hundred miles to the nearest trading post, but more often than not what you're mainly going to do is die."

"Well," blustered Billy, "what kind of a positive outcome is even possible if you're mired in your overstuffed sofa eating bonbons and you're fifty pounds overweight and your big excitement is to drive the BMW two miles to the mall so you can buy six giant-sized sacks of potato chips for dinner?"

Alexei laughed. "I was going to say, 'well, at least you'll live,' but I guess I oughtn't," he said.

"I guess not," Geoffrey concurred, smiling.

Harry objected that being fifty pounds overweight and living on potato chips seemed itself a form of extremism as Alexei drifted away and, opening the front door, entered the house. The third movement of Sibelius' sad and passionate *Violin Concerto* burst deliciously out from Margaret's huge rosewood speakers.

A small group of people he didn't know was gathered near the fireplace, standing, drinks in hand, engaged in cocktail conversation. Margaret sat at one end of her blue velvet divan, conversing with Sibyl, who, her white-stockinged feet tucked up under her, sat crosslegged at the other end. They smiled and greeted him as he entered. "Grab a beer and pull up a seat," Margaret said.

"What's the topic in here?" Alexei asked.

"Life without men," Sibyl said.

"Well, without sex," Margaret sharpened the point.

"They sort of go hand in hand," Alexei laughed. Then, listening to a particularly strenuous passage, he ventured, "Oistrakh?"

Margaret nodded. "Very good, Lexie."

"Hm," he said, raising his thick black eyebrows. "Pretty good. I've always loved the way Tossy Spivakovsky played this. But this is good."

"Personally, I like the Beatles," Sibyl said.

"Well, sweetie, that's why all your men are flighty and crude," Alexei said jocularly.

He went into the kitchen to find something to drink. Teresa and Elizabeth were standing against the counter, talking with a third woman. "How beautiful!" Alexei said, spreading his arms wide as he crossed the room to hug them.

"Hi, Lexie," Teresa said. "What's new?"

"Nothing much," he said, grinning, as he embraced her. Then he took Elizabeth's hand and bowed to kiss it.

"My," she said, "are you sure you don't like girls? I could go for a guy like you."

"For you, dear lady, I would make an exception," Alexei offered, smiling directly into her dark eyes.

"Well, you just might have to do that one of these days," Elizabeth laughed, her eyes dancing.

Alexei laughed and peered into the refrigerator and withdrew a pitcher of lemonade.

"Oh, Alexei, this is Gabriela," Teresa said, indicating the young dark-complected woman in her mid-twenties with whom they'd been talking.

"Hi, Gabriela," Alexei said, smiling, holding out his hand. "How do you know these old maids?"

"Elizabeth was my teacher of English at Riverside," Gabriela said. She had the pleasant, wide-faced features he associated with people of Central American Indian origin and she spoke with a slight Spanish accent.

"Now she teaches English in Managua," Elizabeth beamed.

"Next year I'm going into the Moskito country," Gabriela said. "I want to work with people who don't really even know where Managua is. Not to teach just English, but all sorts of things."

"And how will you make a living?" Alexei asked.

She shrugged and smiled shyly.

"She'll live off her youth," Teresa laughed, "like we all have."

"We're going to find her some grant money," Elizabeth said.

When Alexei returned to the living room Billy and Geoffrey had joined Margaret and Sibyl in what had become an informal circle of six or seven people. The music had devolved from the exquisite sublimity of Sibelius into the more sinuous rhythms and funkier melodies of classical jazz. Billy and Geoffrey were sitting on a long curved sofa with a floral print and Alexei sat at the end next to Billy, who was drinking Jack Daniels from a bottle and occasionally fattening Geoffrey's cup of beer. He quickly offered to similarly embellish Alexei's glass of lemonade, but Alexei declined with a sour smile.

Sibyl was explaining how, on the east coast in the past winter, she had found a general lack of civilization and discovered a depressing lack of interest in improvement of the human condition. "Those people just don't understand," she said, waving her hands dismissingly, "that they have to take responsibility for changing themselves, that we have to completely reconstruct western society."

"Speaking of reconstructing western society," Alexei said, "how's Mo? Do you ever see him anymore?"

Sibyl snorted her distaste. "He's such an asshole," she said. "I really have nothing to say to him. But he does stop by now and then to visit Dylan, who for some reason seems attracted to him."

"But…"

"No, otherwise I don't." This subject seemed to catch her fancy though, because she half-turned to Margaret and asked, "Have you seen Robin lately?"

"Day before yesterday," Margaret said. "At the museum. Alexei was there, too."

"Yes," Alexei acknowledged, and then he leaned over and said to Geoffrey, "I had a no-lunch luncheon date with your special friend the litigious Ms. North."

Geoffrey rolled his eyes. The bourbon was beginning to soften their focus.

Alexei went back to the kitchen for more lemonade. Teresa laced it with a long shot of vodka and a mischievous smile. She and Elizabeth and Gabriela were talking with Harry, who was still grappling with the problem of extremes. "But isn't leaving Managua and teaching Indians on the Caribbean coast risky? The political situation isn't really stable there, is it?"

Gabriela shrugged. "Perhaps," she said. Then she smiled. "But I think the risk is really very small. So it's probably more dangerous, from what Teresa tells me, to get in the car and go for a drive with you."

Harry laughed. He loved a little joke on himself.

"It seems to me," Elizabeth said, "that what we judge to be extreme behavior, or an extreme circumstance, is always just a relative thing. It depends entirely on your personal perspective. So if you want to base the wisdom of behavior or the precariousness of conditions on some norm, you have to establish a norm on which everyone can agree. I'm just not sure that's possible. What would it be?"

"Well," he ventured, "how about a peaceful and productive life?"

"Yes, Harry, but peaceful compared to what? Productive in what way? How much turbulence falls within the norm? What kind of turbulence? What about people who produce hand-grenades, or land mines? What about peace brought about by repression, lies and intimidation?" Elizabeth was warming to her subject. "See, I think some of these philosophers of benign moderation have spent too much time wandering around college campuses and snoozing over old books. For them this is the perfect, idyllic life: contemplation, deliberation, a nice distinction of every factor, a painstaking evaluation of every eventuality, a serene levigation of the wild diversity of the universe into a metaphysical tapestry which they can wrap around themselves like a cosmic cocoon while the rash, untutored, busy world goes blithely on to hell. It's not that I see no virtue in their work, it's just that, once you go beyond their little sphere of dimly lit awareness, the meaning of their pronouncements becomes vague, and their words of dubious value, because the frame of reference in which these ideas were formulated doesn't comprehend the world most people live in."

"Wow," Harry said, grinning. "Okay, good questions. And it is true, as Aiken once said of Kant, that 'life is not a noumenal cookie-cutter.' But as a lifelong devotee of the law, I'm deeply impressed with the wisdom of trying to codify certain behavior, certain situations, certain structures and processes, even though we can be certain that we don't have it exactly right, that there will be many exceptions to any rule narrow enough to be meaningful, that the future may throw all our assumptions, all our understandings, into question, or throw them out completely, and still, despite all that, it's better if we try than if we don't. And, as you say, to do this we must take certain notions as norms."

"The desires and fears that drive human behavior seem pretty invariant," Alexei offered.

"But superficially they may be expressed in a lot of different ways," Teresa said. "Some are good and some aren't."

This conversation went on for quite some time, exploring the governance of society by law, until it finally drifted off course and then Margaret came in and broke it up with a joke.

In the living room Geoffrey was feeling a little bold when Billy asked him about the night he'd gone to the Beastrow and ended up at Alexei's apartment. "So Geoffrey, I mean really, are you doing the gay thing or not?" Billy wanted to know.

"Well, I know you can't tell the difference," Geoffrey said, "but my relationship with Alexei isn't about sex."

"Well, gee," Billy said mockingly, "when I spend the night with some chick, it seems like it's almost always about sex."

"Well, what *is* it about?" Sibyl teased. "Or more to the point, Geoffrey, what was it about that night? Because I heard you told one of your dancing partners that…"

"Dancing partners!" hooted Billy. "Oh, I didn't hear this. Damn, I wish I'd been there. You were dancing at the Beastrow?"

"Slow dancing," Geoffrey said.

Billy guffawed. He was really enjoying this. "I heard Alexei was giving you a bath and you got so rambunctious he had to call Kate over to calm you down."

"Could be," Geoffrey shrugged. "I don't remember. I was delirious."

"So," Billy said, his eyes big with disbelief, "you guys are, um, dating or something?"

Before he could answer, Sibyl, who seemed more than a little annoyed, interrupted. "See? That's what I mean about men. You were just playing with his feelings, weren't you? That's that man thing there, isn't it? Just playing around with people's feelings."

Alexei arrived at this point and, with a grin aimed directly at Sibyl, this time he sat next to Geoffrey, putting his arm over Geoffrey's round shoulders and planting an ostentatious kiss on the side of Geoffrey's head. "We'll be married soon," he said. "If he'll have me."

"I wouldn't marry you if you were the last girl on earth," Geoffrey said, rolling his eyes and looking up at the ceiling.

"See?" Alexei said. "He wants me."

"You're both animals," Sibyl said. Everybody was a little inebriated by this time. "Don't you realize," she asked Alexei, "that he's just toying with you? He doesn't know what he wants. He doesn't know who he is. He doesn't respect your feelings or anyone else's."

"Is that true, bubbie?" Alexei asked Geoffrey, coyly pooching out his lower lip.

"Of course not, pookie. I'm Yousef Karsh and I want a perfect expression."

"See?"

"Man," Billy laughed, unsure but much amused, "you two have entered a new realm." He tipped another splash of bourbon into Geoffrey's cup.

"Well," Geoffrey said, "we don't understand it so I guess there's no reason why you should."

Sibyl was incredulous. "You mean you *are* having an affair?"

"Yes, sweetie," Alexei assured her. "It's just not what you think."

"No," Geoffrey agreed. "Not at all what you think. But what does she think? What do you think? Can you be, um, specific?"

Alexei changed the subject. "Oh, I got a phone call from Anya today," he said excitedly. Looking at Geoffrey, he said, "She loves the video." Then to Billy and Sibyl, "She's decided Kate's ideas for her book are exactly right, which is really bizarre because a few weeks ago she was convinced Kate was an idiot." Then to Geoffrey again, "And the Bolshoi called! And maybe I'll have a chance to go to Moscow in the fall!" He sat up straight and clapped his hands together. "I'm so happy I could pee my pants."

"Wow," Geoffrey said. "That's great!"

"Of course," a crestfallen sadness dropped over Alexei's face, "it means we'd have to call off the wedding."

"Oh, well," Geoffrey shrugged philosophically. "Easy come, easy go."

Chapter 14

Edges

But when the surprise,
First vague shadow of surmise
Flits across her bosom young
Of a joy apart from thee,
Free be she, fancy-free;
Nor thou detain her vesture's hem,
Nor the palest rose she flung
From her summer diadem.

—*Give All to Love,* R. W. Emerson

Billy pedaled more furiously, feeling and fighting the burning in his thighs and calves, as he watched the stringy, freckled brunette, dressed in a white t-shirt and skimpy sky-blue running shorts, adjusting the weights on the drawdown machine.

There were only a few people in the cavernous room, its floor covered with thin, slick, sweatproof black plastic mats and a host of perverse "machines" whose purpose was not to make work easier but to make it, and its human energy source, as hard as one might desire. A sweatsuit-clad trainer lazed by the intake counter, reading a magazine about weight-lifting females who looked like tanned muscular boys with breasts as taut as teenage biceps. A janitor shuffled along the linoleum tile hallway with his dust mop, endlessly rearranging the few mites of dust he'd collected in maybe an hour of this lackadaisical activity.

Far to the back of the room, among the barbells, a small man in yellow bikini tights and a wide leather girdle slowly curled a bar bigger than he was, his neck and arms bulging with the strain. Billy knew him as Captain Curl. He came to the gym almost every day and spent a few hours in the weight room, lifting, curling, bench-pressing huge weights. One of the trainers had confided to Billy that Captain Curl had once been a champion weightlifter, but, such careers being necessarily brief, he now worked as a short-order cook, lived in a cabin on the outskirts of civilization, and seldom spoke to anyone.

Billy sat astride a white exercycle, pumping powerfully, steadily, gazing across a small open meadow of green mats where sometimes people prepared, with stretching and contemplation and calisthenics, for their serious exercise. And beyond this little expanse of vinyl were the muscle-group machines, each one designed to focus special challenges to a particular small group of muscles. They looked like an abstract display of ancient creatures in a museum, giant proto-insects built with ropes and pulleys and stacks of weights and hard fuchsia seats upon simple steel skeletons, utterly lifeless but for the human dynamos that sometimes empowered them, each capable of one particular action, one peculiar gesture, and no more.

With her feet tucked under the frame of the machine Sibyl reached up above her head for the dangling t-bar and slowly pulled it downward as a hefty platter of steel weights rose on the other side. Then she eased it upward and began another pull down, her whole body straining against the weights.

"I like it best when you're all stretched out," Billy called over to her.

She pretended not to have heard and Billy checked the glowing red digits of his odometer: 4.8 miles. A long way to go. He pedaled with renewed resolve. The t-bar reached its highest point and she paused for a moment, stretched to her full height with her arms high above her, her muscles small and sinewy but prominent against the taut, tanned skin, her small breasts yearning against the soft cotton fabric, already clinging with the dampness of her effort, her thighs hard even in extension. Then she began again to pull the bar down toward her, down toward the upturned eyes, inky-blue in their glistening concentration, toward her long sleek hair, black as coal, toward her mouth with its grimly determined lips that seemed for all that somehow soft and vulnerable.

Over and again she repeated this exercise as Billy stroked downward alternately against the pedals, driving the imaginary miles beneath him, staring at the glowing display, seeking endurance within himself, occasionally looking up at her, admiring her. He never saw her glance at him.

She moved from the drawdown machine to another. And then to another, where she was sitting facing him on a rowing-type machine, her legs straddling a wide bar to reach the machine's stirrups. She reached far forward with the t-bar to its relaxation point and then slowly pulled it, with the combined effort of her shoulders, torso and legs, backward toward her seat. Now she could not help looking right at him. He stared at her as though she were not there, but he was keenly aware that she was, and she seemed to know it.

He pedaled onward, seven miles now, the stinging of his muscles begging him to slow down, punishing him, driving him on to greater effort. Pain *was* gain. He watched her heaving chest as she breathed, the straining muscles of her glistening neck, the sweat dripping into her eyes and off her chin, her lips pursing now and then as she blew a spray of droplets off her nose, the way her thighs parted as she strained backward, the dark shadows between them, damp under the pale blue cloth.

Pump, pump, pump, pump, pump, pump….

Suddenly he caught her eye. "You look like you're fuckin' that thing," he said, laughing.

Sibyl stopped her exercise then and just sat back, relaxed, to rest for a moment, contemplating the machine. "See?" she said, out loud, but as if to herself. "It's a lot like a man. Without my doing all the work, it just sits there. It can't do anything."

When she finally walked over to join him in the aerobic devices area he addressed her with a sardonic laugh. "You'll never get anywhere that way, you know. You keep quitting too soon, before it gets really painful," he said. "You have to stay focused."

"Who the hell asked you?" she snapped. She stepped onto the treadmill of a jogging machine, standing slightly behind and to his left. "It's not my ambition to compete for Miss Jockstrap, or to be 'Dumbbell of the Month' in *Tits of Iron.* I just come here to give my body a chance to flush out some of the impurities it accumulates from spending too much time dealing with idiots."

Billy drove hard against the pedals, his entire body now achingly engaged in what had at first been a simple task for legs alone. Captain Curl, in baggy gray sweats and carrying a small gym bag, walked stoically out toward the door, exchanged a few words with the trainer, said goodnight to the janitor, and disappeared into the anonymous darkness. Billy gazed forward, across the empty room, and pedaled. The eighth red mile was pushed cycle by cycle under his whirring wheel.

Sibyl jogged steadily, her small breasts bouncing slightly, swollen against the soaked white cotton, her prominent nipples jutting ahead as if eager annuncios of her procession, her whole body drenched with sweat, her strong legs lifting, driving against the resistance of the treadmill belt, wap, wap, wap, wap, wap…

"Hey, Sibyl," Billy said, without turning around, "I can smell the pungence of your body. Did you know that? The sweat. The pheromones." He turned his head slightly and looked back at her out of the corner of his eye. "It makes me really hot." Pump, pump, pump, pump…

Wap, wap, wap, wap, wap…

"I can see the outline of your beautiful breasts against your shirt. I can hear the rhythm of your running in your thighs, in the muscles of your lovely luscious butt and the soft curves of your abdomen. I can taste the sweet breath of your passion as it escapes your warm, half-parted lips. I can imagine you close to me, under me, writhing, hot and panting with desire…"

She looked straight ahead and said nothing.

He fought hard, first to match her pace exactly, and then, imperceptibly, to pick up his own, trying to draw her into a faster rhythm. The glowing red scorekeeper signaled nine miles. And then ten.

Wap, wap, wap, wap, wap…

Pump, pump, pump, pump…

"You must be in California by now," she said, using a lot of breath and noticing the wiry muscles that leapt and rippled across his shoulder.

"Yeah, well I'm going all the way to Tierra del Fuego," he retorted. "And when I'm done with that, I'll carry you home. Ha!"

She jogged onward, wap, wap, wap, wap, as the minutes and the mythical metered miles went by. Now and then he looked back at her.

Finally, after another ten minutes or so, the red lights memorializing fifteen digital miles traversed, while he was flailing away at the pedals, looking back at her over his shoulder, his face flushed and his voice flagging, he gasped out hoarsely, speaking her name, "Sibyl. God, Sibyl, I really want to fuck you. I've always wanted to fuck you. Did you know that? I'm sitting here imagining what it'll be like."

Pump, pump, pump, pump…

"All that's keeping me going right now," he said, breathing through his nose, "is thinking about it."

"Do the little girls on your block get all squishy from your ultra-cool sex talk?"

"Who gives a fuck?" he asked, laughing. "I know you're getting all squishy because I can see it. I can see those delectable nipples dancing and straining out against your shirt, your breasts round and firm, just like your stomach, and your pussy is sopping wet, I know, because I was watching you over there and your whole crotch is soaked."

"My whole body is dripping wet, you asshole," she said. "Don't you know the difference between sex and sweat?"

Billy wasn't sure there really was one any more, but he kept this intelligence to himself. A research opportunity seemed to be in the offing.

"No," he said. "Why don't you show me?"

The twentieth mile went by on Billy's odometer and still she kept pace with him as they drummed out the time.

Pwapum, pwapum, pwapum, pwapum, pwapum…

Twenty-one.

"Remember," Billy said avuncularly, "if it's too hard for you, you should back off before you damage yourself."

"Fuck you."

Twenty-two. Twenty-three. Then she breathed a heavy sigh and her pace slowed perceptibly.

"Ha!" he cried. "Man wins again!"

"Man is a jerk," she said. "I did my four miles and, not being an idiot, that's all I do. Otherwise I'd turn into a compulsive, competitive automaton like—well, like a man." She laughed. He kept pedaling.

"You just don't get it," he said.

Her pace had slowed to a walk as she cooled down. "Oh? And am I going to get it from you?"

"You have to struggle. You have to go the extra mile. You have to ask for more than your body wants to give. You have to master the pain, the soreness, the distractions, the sideshows of the devil that guards the goal, that wants you to fail, that wants you to give up…"

"You didn't answer my question, William."

Pump, pump, pump, pump…

"I was telling you. You quit too soon. You don't press yourself to go far enough, hard enough, high enough, long enough, and you're wasting your opportunity to really tone up those muscles."

She was walking easily now as the treadmill slowed to a stop.

"As long as I have my daily quota of orgasms, I really don't care," she said.

Pump, pump, pump, pump…

Pump, pump, pump, pump…

Pump, pump, pump, pump…

She laughed as she walked past him and patted his swollen buttocks. "Mmm," she said, "Buns of steel." She sashayed her damp fulsome rump for him as she made her way across the room toward the ladies' lockers. He glimpsed an outline of her panties under the wet blue shorts.

"I sure hope you're not too tired after all this work," she said loudly, without turning around.

"Hey, lady," he retorted, pedaling hard again, "I'm just getting warmed up." His voice rose to a shout as she disappeared through the door. "Hey, in Alaska the women used to make me go out and run over fifty miles of frozen moonlit trails before we had sex so I wouldn't wear them out too much." Then he unleashed a triumphant laugh that segued into a barking wolf cry as his churning legs became a sweat-spraying blur over the protesting flywheel.

She poked her head back out of the locker room door. He could see that she'd stripped off her top; her shoulder was bare and brown. She watched him for a moment with those sparkling blue eyes. "Maybe they wanted time to get drunk first," she suggested teasingly. "And who said anything about sex?" He flashed his neon smile at her and pedaled even faster.

Chapter 15

Quetzalcoatl

Here by the camp-fire's flicker,
Deep in my blanket curled,
I long for the peace of the pine-gloom,
When the scroll of the Lord is unfurled,
And the wind and the wave are silent,
And world is singing to world.

—*The Three Voices,* Robert Service

But my words become stained with your love.
You occupy everything, you occupy everything.

I am making them into an endless necklace
for your white hands, smooth as grapes.

—*So That You Will Hear Me,* Pablo Neruda

Having traveled an easygoing three days south from the bay at Mazatlán to Paso Hondo, in southeastern Chiapas, Billy and Sibyl rose at dawn to cross the border into Guatemala. After a brief early-morning drive to the border, where the Mexican guards, in their infinite and exquisite boredom, blithely waved them thither, and after a leisurely proceeding then along another mile or two, piqued with unspoken excitement, the two of them in Sibyl's tin-can, run-forever, lemon-yellow Datsun station wagon arrived at the Guatemalan outpost around eight o'clock.

If Mexican officials were obscure, the Guatemalans were inscrutable. The Mexicans seemed to love suspense, and they particularly loved the suspense that their lackadaisical procedures could evince in more anxious boreans accustomed to regarding every moment of time as an economic asset which, if not profitably sold, was considered squandered. Absent a real emergency, quick action in the traditional Mexican worldview was not a positive thing but an inexcusable waste of the possibilities for drama, both tragic and comic, and the two were never far apart. But the Guatemalans didn't seem so much interested in drama or in the graceful procession of their interaction with people. The Guatemalans didn't employ the endless interpersonal dialogue that made Mexican border crossings into theater.

When Billy and Sibyl entered the cinder-block building, they confronted in its darkened interior (and this was on a bright tropical June morning!) a pale green wooden counter-desk, its paint chipped and stained, which stood a dozen feet in front of two doors that evidently led into more interior rooms. A poster of some rather Caucasian-looking military personage—the President, Sibyl said—was thumbtacked to the wall between the doors. A small dark-skinned man in a military uniform, with a forty-five holstered on his hip, emerged from one of the doors and asked in Spanish for their passports. He did not smile. Only once, before he spoke, did he look directly at them. He nodded in the direction of a bench along the opposite wall as he turned to go back whence he had come.

An hour went by, and then another, and they were still there, sitting in the car now, eating fig bars, looking across a narrow valley into the jagged mountains beyond, where the road went into the heart of Guatemala. Wondering whether they would ever get to go.

"We should offer them some money," Sibyl said.

"Why? I'm telling you, bribing people is a crime. What if the guy arrests us? I say we wait. If they want money, they can ask for it."

"We've been waiting for two hours already. All they do is send that guy out to say 'wait.' A half dozen other people have gone through, so why haven't we?"

"Because they were local peasants, and those two Mexican guys with the shades were probably cops."

About this time the soldier who'd taken their passports, now wearing his oiled olive-drab parade helmet, beckoned to them from the doorway of the building. As they approached him he handed them their passports, stamped for entry, nodded his head down the road, and receded into the shadows. This would be the enigmatic way of the authorities in Guatemala.

Billy took the wheel and they started off across the valley they'd been surveying all morning and climbed over miles of switchback roads until they were high above the little peasant farms, long out of sight, and worked their way along the sinuous highway, often paved only with gravel, that snaked along the precipitous edge of spectacularly steep mountains, far above a jungle river they could hear sometimes whooping through the canyons below, narrowing in places to a single lane (it seemed even less) where a portion of the road had dropped into the abyss and a raw new path had been carved by a small bulldozer which was often still sitting nearby, covered with gray and yellow dust, awaiting another disappearance occasioned by earthquake or rain.

There hadn't been a guardrail along any road since they'd left the Sonora several days earlier, but on this road into western Guatemala there often wasn't even enough of a shoulder to accommodate the haunting creches and crosses that mourners had erected, replete with ribbons and photographs and scrawled goodbyes, on practically every curve of Mexico's mountain roads to memorialize the last moments of people whose rattletrap jalopies and gaily twinkling DINA trucks had careered off the cliffside and into the next awakening.

They'd come to Guatemala to purchase macaws. It was Sibyl's idea; she'd read about it somewhere, or someone had told her about it, or something. She was impatient of details. The plan was to buy five or six young birds for maybe $100 each and smuggle them back to the US, where they would fetch at least $1500 apiece. She'd concluded she needed an infusion of such money because, under the influence of the reactionary philosophy of the times, the welfare system was exhibiting increasing skepticism of her basically boundless claims on its compassion and assets.

Around noon they arrived at the town of Huehuetenango, where Billy, relieved for a respite from the harrowing two-hour drive, pulled into a gas station. Less than three gallons filled the tank. "I need a rest," Billy said. "Where the hell are we?"

"Huehuetenango," Sibyl replied, checking the map.

"I know that," Billy said, clipping off the words in exasperation, "how could I not know it's Huehuetenango? It's not a name you easily forget. But I mean where are we compared to Guatemala City?"

"Um, it looks like we're about a third of the way," she said, tracing the road with her finger.

"Good, I need a break. Let's have lunch or something."

"I think we should keep going, William. We have business to do. It isn't going to be easy, finding the…"

"It isn't easy driving twenty miles an hour along a goat trail carved out of sheer cliffs, either, and I'm hungry."

"Oh, there's an old Indian ruin near here—Zaculeu."

"Mayan. It's Mayan. Hey, look at the faces on these people. They're Mayan."

"Whatever, William. They all look like Indians to me."

The station attendant pointed out a small diner and they went in. The flat-roofed stucco building had no door. It was painted pale green, inside and out. "Must be a popular color," Billy observed.

They ordered black beans and rice and beer. A few other patrons, short, ragged, dark-skinned, sat stolidly, drinking silently, staring down at the bar or their tabletops. Several ancient centerfold posters hung on the walls. "That's disgusting," Sibyl said.

"I think it's nice," Billy replied. "Nothing like a pair of giant boobies to cheer up a place. But you go ahead and tell them your opinion. Just wait 'til I leave, okay?"

They drove out to the ruins and spent an hour or so looking at the flat-topped pyramid, maybe twelve stories high, and the other buildings, now somewhat shattered and slumped into the jungle, the great volcanic stones pried apart by vines and rearranged by the restless earth.

"I don't like this place," Sibyl said. "It's spooky."

Billy laughed. "It's okay, babe," he said. "You're perfectly safe. They only sacrificed virgins."

She gazed at the pyramid and tried to imagine it, the fires, the masks, the intonations, the dancing, the drums, the drugs, the girl. She shuddered.

Billy looked up. "What a waste, huh?"

Several twisting, climbing, plunging, hair-raising hours later they came to a sign along the road announcing Zaculeu. For a few minutes Billy was convinced they'd somehow got turned around and come back to the ruins. But it was only another nondescript village of stucco and sticks. Then, in the lengthening shadows, when they were still thirty miles away from Guatemala City, twilight came. Like everything else in the tropics, it had a short and dramatic life. The sky blazed orange and red, the clouds burst into flame, the shadows deepened to black, and night fell. "Shit," Billy said.

As they drove along, even more cautiously now, a figure would occasionally appear in the headlights, walking at the side of the road, clad in loose-fitting pants or a denim skirt with a brightly colored scarf or serape. Then suddenly they saw the familiar fires in the middle of the roadway, oily rags burning in old steel barrels. "Shit," Billy said.

It was the police. Or the army. Or a bunch of bandits. One never knew. They'd run into this in Mexico, too, and Billy had vowed never to drive in the dark again, but here they were. "What'll we do?" Sibyl asked.

Billy looked at Sibyl's tan legs, long and lanky as they emerged from her short white shorts. "Act married," he said. "And don't say anything."

There were about twenty of them, mostly teenage boys, dressed in civilian clothes, each carrying an automatic rifle. As Billy brought the car to a stop, one of them came to the driver's side and pointed the muzzle of his M-16 at Billy's face. An older man, perhaps thirty, strode up and gestured for them to get out of the car.

"You have marijuana?" he asked.

"No," Billy said. "No marijuana. Turístas."

The men opened all four doors and the back hatch of the car and began scrabbling through everything. "Do you have to make such a mess?" Sibyl protested.

"You have marijuana?" the leader asked her. Billy thought she seemed far away in the flickering darkness although she was only on the other side of the car.

"What?" she shrieked. She curled her hands into fists and stomped her feet. "What're you talking about? We're tourists in your stupid country, for Christ's sake! No, no, no—no marijuana!" She was pissed. Then she started to cry.

Billy looked at the leader, his dark eyes, half-hidden beneath the visor of his cap, were expressionless and impenetrable in the dancing shadows of the greasy orange fires as Sibyl screamed and wailed.

"PMS," Billy said.

The leader spoke a word or two to his searchers, who shrugged in reply, and the car doors slammed closed. He gestured with his gun toward Guatemala City. "Okay. Go," he said.

They stopped at the next hotel they came to, still a dozen miles away from the city. There were no rooms, but it would be possible to park the car inside the walls, behind the iron gates, in relative safety. Billy paid the fee and returned to the car, where Sibyl was going through their belongings, cursing softly.

"I can't believe they made all this mess," she said, standing up and brushing her hair back, clearly exasperated. "Did you get a room?"

"No room," he replied. "But we can sleep in the car."

Sibyl tramped petulantly, wordlessly, toward the outdoor bathrooms as Billy moved their things into the front seats and spread out their blankets in the back. An outdoor light bulb dimly illuminated the grounds. The sallow-yellow car was parked among some small trees, in ample shadow for sleeping. Billy arranged their pillows and began undressing, looking forward to well-deserved relaxation and a peaceful sleep.

"I *hate* sleeping in the car," Sibyl said. She adjusted the car windows, opening them enough to let the air flow but not, in her estimation, enough for anything too big to crawl in and join them. Then, wearing only her underpants, she lay down beside Billy, who put his arm over her and tried to kiss her. "Go brush your teeth," she said coldly.

He considered it for a moment, wondering whether he needed to put his pants on for the trek, and then he fell asleep.

When he opened his eyes it was already growing light. Evidently Sibyl's mood and his breath had improved during the night, because she was slowly stroking his engorged penis and kissing his ear. "Billy," she said softly, cooing, teasing.

"Mmmph," he said. The purple gray air was fragrant and cool.

"Fuck me, Billy."

He kissed her mouth and her freckled tan breasts and suckled her long brown nipples. Slowly he raised himself over her and entered her hungry, slavering pussy. He fucked her for a long time before he came, and she murmured constantly and stared at him with wide eyes as if she had never before, ever before, been fucked like that, which she always did but he loved it anyway and they both smiled at each other and laughed aloud as Billy rolled off beside her and held her face in his hands and tenderly kissed her lips. "I love you," he said.

And then they noticed that the trees around the car were filled with brown faces, some adorned with sparkling white smiles of approbation, as well camouflaged as monkeys among the thick green foliage. "I think we have an audience," Sibyl said.

Billy grinned and made angry faces at the boys in the trees, who quickly scrambled down, like a sudden dropping of fruit, and frolicked away laughing.

An hour or so later, Sibyl was parking the boxy but faithful Datsun, the car whose engine, Billy said, had 'only two moving parts,' on a tree-lined street in front of the zoo in Guatemala City. It was a beautiful morning in a place where nature, anyway, was nothing less than an image of paradise. Inside the zoo, and apart from the birds and flowers, whose range of brilliant colors

and fantastical shapes was stunning indeed, there seemed to be very few animals—some goats and peccaries. No pumas. Billy was disappointed. "No pumas," he said.

Sibyl undertook a discussion with the zoo director's assistant about the possible acquisition of one of the animals. "No, no," he said, quietly but firmly, moving his hands apart, palms down and forward. "We cannot do that. It is strictly prohibited. Illegal. Against the law."

"Do other people do it? Could we buy a parrot, maybe, you know, to keep as a pet?"

"As you can see, the zoo has not very many animals. This is fortunate in a way because every day I have to vouch in a written report for every one of them, that it is present and well. Me. Personally." Spent of this irrelevant irony, he cocked his head to one side and regarded her over the rims of his glasses. "What is it exactly you're looking for? Parrots is it?"

"Well, I'm just curious," she said. "Just for instance."

"How about pumas?" Billy interjected, walking toward them with a laugh, laughing most heartily, as always, at his own jokes.

"If you get caught smuggling a puma out of Guatemala," the zoo director's assistant said, his own grin soft and white and genteel, "I recommend you immediately request the death penalty."

"I getcha, Marlon," Billy said with a smile. He gathered Sibyl and they turned toward the door. "Maybe we'll do pigs," he said loudly as they exited the building.

"At least you could eat them," the zookeeper called.

"Muchas gracias," Billy replied.

"De nada."

Sibyl's oracle had told her, regarding this trip, that the place where all manner of contraband could be had was the market at Chichicastenango. Chichi was a three or four hour drive, much of it steep and tortuous of course, back west toward Huehue, and then north a ways. Billy set out happily. The city gave him the creeps.

"Man, you know," he said, "I like guns. I know you don't, but I do. But all these guys with guns, automatic rifles and pistols, everywhere, some in uniform and some not, all over the place, watching you, looking at you, sticking a gun in your face whenever the spirit moves them. I don't know. It's weird. It's especially weird when they're all dark brown and five-foot-four and look like they're thirteen and only speak a language you don't know."

"It's the embodiment of evil, is what it is."

"Yeah. Quetzalcoatl. The serpent god. This is not a guy with a lot of warmth and compassion. Even the Old Testament Jehovah was a pussy compared to this dude. He doesn't speak. He doesn't blink. He strikes when and if he feels like it. He likes human sacrifice."

"Thanks for the picture."

"No problem."

The market was a garden. Fruits and flowers of every color were displayed everywhere in large baskets, and in women's long, straight, blue-black hair. There were many racks of clothes, black cloth interwoven with iridescent colors and fantastic designs, a stylized rainbow; and there was a milling crowd of beautiful and serene little brown Indians draped in shimmering designs of brilliant blue, yellow, red, green, purple, and orange, and there were some mestizos—so they were called in this mongrel world, and two cool gringo smugglers who'd driven up in a car the color of lemon rind.

There might be parrots for sale—yellow-headed Amazons, for instance, at $75 apiece—but not macaws. The one time Sibyl actually spoke the word "macaw" the old Indian woman she'd been talking to had abruptly turned around and walked away, deserting her stall. After that, they'd simply inquired, "Any other birds? Something bigger, more expensive?"

No. Parrots, maybe. And smaller birds. Songbirds. Finches. “They’re very colorful,” Billy said of the finches. “And they have a pretty song. I bet they’d fetch a good price.”

“Sure, and how many zillion would I have to have to make seven thousand dollars?” she hissed.

She looked around. “Listen,” she said. “I’m sure if I give one of these guys a fifty we’d find out something.”

“Yeah,” Billy guffawed, “you’d find out nobody can change a fifty and nobody wants one.”

“Okay, ten fives, or fifty ones, I don’t care, but you know what I mean.”

“I think you’re crazy.”

“Listen,” she said. “Let’s cash some of the traveler’s checks and just try it.”

“We’ll have to find a bank.”

They located the bank, which was in a small wooden shack under some trees and wasn’t open. The Army was due shortly, though, and then it would be open. For an hour or so. They waited.

“I still think you’re crazy,” Billy said. “This is not going to work. And I’m not going to ask the teller for fifty one-quetzal bills.”

“Well, you don’t have to. I’m going to do it.”

They cashed several $20 traveler’s checks under the watchful eyes of a squad of sharply uniformed machine-gun toting teenagers. “So what happens if there’s a robbery?” Billy asked her in an aside. “Do they start a firefight right here in the bank?”

The clerk counted out a stack of one-quetzal notes and a smaller one of five-quetzal notes without being asked. “Gracias,” Billy said.

“Next,” said the clerk.

Sibyl engaged an elderly Indian man in a discussion of the plumages that were part of the jewelry he had for sale. She chose a headband with three bright blue macaw tail feathers Inserted into a carefully sculpted circle of rich red mahogany. “How much?” she asked.

“Fifty pesos,” he said.

She lay a folded wad of thirty one-quetzal notes on the fruit crate in front of him, close by a basket so only he could see it. “I really like these feathers,” she said. “What kind are they?”

“Fifty pesos,” he said. “Please.”

“Pick up the money,” Billy said.

She did and gave the man his fifty pesos. “There is a woman,” he said. “At Lake Atitlán. Doña Isabél. She can tell you.”

They got directions from him how to find her and thanked him and walked back to their car, now baking in the early afternoon sun.

It took almost an hour to drive the twenty miles or so south to Panajachel, on the north shore of Lake Atitlán. Along the way Billy exclaimed, to his own amazement, that this country was actually in some ways wilder than Alaska. “It’s giving me symptoms,” Sibyl complained.

Billy laughed.

Lake Atitlán was a very magical, mystical, even a holy place. A quiet shrine of nature, raw, incredibly beautiful, an enormous expanse of pure, steel-gray water in an ancient volcano’s caldera, rich with fish (how did they get there?) and water plants. Across the lake to the south, perhaps fifteen miles away, the imposing Atitlán volcano dominated the skyline, a near-perfect cone rising more than a mile above the lake surface, a pensive and brooding offspring of the once-majestic mountain in whose relapsed remains the lake itself was located. In the forests

surrounding these waters some of the deepest secrets of the Mayan past were kept alive in the flourishing culture of its modern descendants.

The Mayans were handsome, quiet, deferent, polite and gentle. Very much like air, Billy thought. A warm zephyr. The more he looked at them, the more of them he saw, the more poignantly he realized that they somehow represented something from, well, prehistoric times, times that westerners, Americans, white people, barely knew had ever existed, but these people were actually part of such a time, living forever in a time long past, skew to the present, almost like ghosts, shades of a sacred and irretrievable land.

Sibyl also was impressed by their otherworldliness. They were in touch with something in the dark night of myth, with monstrous spirits of fire and wind and water, with mankind's animal nature, with mystical traditions whose roots drank in the secret swamps of ritual blood lust, with the hot fecundity of the jungle and the rich volcanic earth churning with myriad lusty living things.

About four in the afternoon, while they were enjoying the creamy green sweetness of avocados the size of softballs, strolling the streets of this bustling little town where the native farmers reposed at night and traded in the marketplace when they weren't out working their farms, the sun-filled sky grew leaden gray, almost black, and from the boiling shadows rain poured down steadily, heavily, for an hour. Then it stopped and the hot sun returned and raised great clouds of vapor off the streets and the palm leaves and the rooftops and it was just like a sauna, so Billy and Sibyl again shed their outer layer of clothes and went swimming, just as they had a few hours earlier when they'd first arrived.

They'd secured a comfortable room on the second floor of a local hotel and after their swim they decided to go back there and have supper before going to visit Doña Isabél, whose whereabouts the innkeeper had pointed out to them.

Thus it was a half hour after dark when they picked their way down the back streets of Panajachel toward the lake shore, passing along the way a bamboo thicket which, owing to a streetlight nearby and an imprudent intrusion into its interior, Billy ascertained had choked out all life but its own twisted, gnarled mat of roots and runners. The bamboo stalks, however, were quite spectacular, almost twenty feet high and as big around as Billy's calf.

"They're quite useful for making rafts," Doña Isabél said, settling herself into a chair beside them on the veranda. Her short, wiry gray hair glistened in the dim light from within the house. Her magnificent scarlet macaw, Ferdinand, shuttled to and fro on his perch above her, squawking, excited by the presence of her guests. "But you didn't come here to talk about bamboo, sí?"

"We want to buy some macaws," Billy said.

Ferdinand squawked again. "Hush, Ferdie," she said.

"How old is he?" Sibyl asked.

"I don't know," she replied. "My Antonio, God rest his soul, gave him to me as an engagement present in, dear me, nineteen thirty-seven I think it was." She laughed. "We were all young then."

"A half-dozen maybe," Billy said.

Doña Isabél fixed him with a tolerant but mildly irritated stare.

"The Guatemalan government is very jealous of our macaws, and rightly so, wouldn't you say?"

"Yes," Sibyl said. "They're very beautiful."

"The simple truth is, my young friends, you can't get away with it. Everybody will want you to fail. The man who sells them to you, who'll get a reward, or get them back; the police,

who'll know from the moment you put them in your car that you have them, and you can guess who'll tell them; the professional smugglers you're competing with, who want to keep prices high and the supply down; maybe even Quetzalcoatl will be troubled by it. So you're going to get caught. I suppose you're driving your own car, no?"

"Yeah," said Billy. "The ultimate getaway vehicle."

"Yes," she said, laughing. "And only dead men will fail to recall a six-foot tall weightlifter with curly blond hair and a loud laugh accompanied by a tanned blue-eyed looker in tiny white shorts. You're not even Germans! If you do this you should plan on going through the border station at a hundred miles an hour. If they have a bulldozer there, or a truck in the road, you'll have to go around that. But don't slow up because you'll either die in a cloud of bullets or you'll spend 'way more time than you ever wanted to standing in a dark, wet room, peering out through a little hole in a thick wooden door and wondering how far underground your cell really is."

"The truth is," she went on with a smile, "you'd have just as good a chance of getting out with a quetzal, and the penalty for that is life imprisonment, assuming they don't shoot you. You may be sure they'd shoot everyone who'd helped you."

"Ah, okay," Billy said, well-convinced by this time. "What *can* we do?"

"Well," Doña Isabél said, "you can take yellow-heads into Mexico. That's legal and nobody cares. But whether you can take them into the United States I don't know."

"We'd be lucky to get two hundred dollars each for them," Sibyl protested.

"Yeah," said Billy, "but we'd actually get the two hundred, which would be a plus as far as I can see."

The next day they drove back to Chichi and bought eight yellow-headed Amazon parrots, two each in four bamboo cages that fit snugly side by side on the floor of the car in front of the back seat. They covered them with a blanket—whereupon the birds promptly fell asleep—as they approached the Guatemalan outpost at the Mexican border shortly before sunset. This time nobody evinced the least interest in their passing. A Guatemalan soldier waved them through without their even stopping. The Mexican border guard looked at their papers and grinned. "Back to civilization, eh?" he said, laughing, as he handed the passports back and jotted a note in his log. "Welcome to Mexico!"

Two long days later, at the edge of the dusty Sonora, amid the roar of huge trucks filled with cotton, they stopped at the huge Mexicali border crossing facility. It was about six o'clock on a Friday evening. They had counted on a mad crush of cars to conceal themselves among, and the traffic was indeed heavy, but the customs people were in no hurry. The parrots were (surprise!) a bit of a problem. Oh, they could be taken into the United States, possibly, and possibly there would be some sort of fee for this, but nothing could be decided until they'd been inspected by the resident veterinarian. Only after more than an hour did it become apparent—nobody would actually say so—that this worthy gentleman had long since gone home for the weekend and wouldn't return until Monday.

They decided to try to cross at Tijuana, almost a hundred miles to the west. As they drove across the rolling sands of northern Baja, the sun sank slowly in the southwest, providing them with a gorgeous view that endured for much longer than that to which they'd become accustomed a thousand miles to the south. Then, in the early darkness as they passed through the little town of Tecate, Billy noticed an inconspicuous sign indicating a local border crossing. They stopped and covered the cages with the blanket. The small, two-lane road led up to a single booth set in the middle of the road. The guard was probably unused to seeing tourists in this out-of-the-way place, and he uncurled himself nonchalantly from his chair as they approached.

He didn't even acknowledge the passports Billy extended from the car window. "Any fruit or vegetables?" he asked.

"Nope," Billy said.
"Okay," he said, resuming his seat and waving them through.
"Shit!" Sibyl said. "We could've brought a *dozen* macaws."
"May be," Billy said.
Sibyl started to cry. Billy craved a hamburger, a bath, a long night's sleep in a real bed.

Chapter 16

Shadow Box

Then hey for boot and horse, lad,
And round the world away;
Young blood must have its course, lad,
And every dog his day.

—*Young and Old*, Charles Kingsley

Sibyl sat on the back porch of the house she shared with Dylan and her best friend Stephanie, and Stephanie's daughter Sadie and Stephanie's boyfriend, Cecil. They were all there, sharing some peaches and ice cream that Sibyl's new friend Lisa Hare had brought along with her. It was a sunny, lazy summer's day. The garden was speckled with blossoms and everything green was in full leaf.

"Oh, yeah," Cecil said, "a seance. That'd be far-out."

"It's not a seance," Lisa said. "We don't try to materialize the dead. We try to make the journey to them, through meditation and the path of insight. If we're fortunate, sometimes we can live in their world with them and they can teach us things."

"So it's like history," Cecil said, a little confused. "But how do you do that?"

"Well, you open up a conduit to the past, so there can be a union of present consciousness—well, present awareness, anyway—with the incorporeal consciousness of the past, and of the timeless."

"Yeah, but, um, how do you open up this conduit?"

"You better come and see, sweetie," Stephanie laughed.

"Uh-huh. So you've done this before?"

"Well, I've heard all about it. I think it's really spiritual. So let's go try it, okay?"

"Hey, sure, baby," he laughed.

"Ship ahoy!" A shout came from inside the house, a loud, rollicking voice, followed by a stage laugh any Pirate of Penzance would've been proud to perform. "And where's my beamish lad?"

Dylan, who'd been sitting on the grass playing chess with Sadie, smiled and stood up and then deliberately climbed the porch stairs and let himself in at the screen door. Back through its veil of wire cloth came shouts of greeting, the silence of a hug, some nonsensical animal growling rituals and laughter.

"The dodo has landed," Sibyl said with raised eyebrows and an upward glance, mimicking with her spread-fingered hand the feet-first, wings-deployed landing of a bird. Cecil and Stephanie laughed.

"Yes, indeed," Billy responded as he emerged from the house, following Dylan, "that mercifully extinct, fat-footed, pea-brained, nutcracking corpulent chicken, the dildo."

"There's a faint resemblance," Dylan said wryly.

Billy laughed and clasped the boy's shoulder. His blond curls flared in the sunlight as he bent to kiss Sibyl, but she turned her cheek to his lips. "Where have you been?" she asked irritably.

"You don't really want to know, do you?"

"No, I was just asking to be polite."

"Well, just now I've been at the gym."

"Well, how about for the four days before that, since we got back from Mexico? You know—since the last time I heard from you before you skipped off like Peter Pan."

"I told you where I was going," he said. "I went to Alaska, just like I told you."

"You said you *might* go."

Billy laughed. "Yep, and I was right, wasn't I?"

"You never said you were *going*."

"Well, let me tell you something my sweet. When I know for sure that I'm going somewhere is when I'm already on my way."

"All right," she said, quietly exasperated. "You could've called, but never mind that. You just showed me how you feel. About me and Dylan."

"Whoa," he said. "I lived in a car with you in the tropics for a week. I helped you smuggle a small flock of goofy green birds across the border. I'm here now on this gorgeous day. I brought you a present, and Dylan one, too, of course. Now do these things show you anything about how I feel? What are you now, anyway, my mother?"

She mulled this over. "You know, I still just can't believe that you, that we could've…"

"Well, let's kill ourselves. Besides, we couldn't've. We only got across the border by a fluke. If we'd had a car full of macaws we would've been in jail, or disappeared, long before we found that little hole in the wall."

"Forget it."

Billy laughed sardonically. "Well, anyway, did you miss me?"

"What's to miss?"

"Okay, well, look: I'm sorry, okay?"

"No, but forget about it. Are you coming with us tonight?"

"Coming where?"

"Lisa's going to guide us on a journey into the labyrinths of our past."

Billy looked at Lisa, realizing now, from occasional comments Sibyl had made about her, who she was. He smiled. "Sure," he said. "Sounds like high adventure. Back to the primordial ooze."

"I'm sure you'd find it comfy there, but maybe not that far."

That evening, the six of them—Sibyl, Dylan, Billy, Stephanie and Cecil, and Lisa—sat in overstuffed chairs in Lisa's living room.

"Okay," Lisa said. "Let's begin. First of all, if you want to leave at any time, you may do that, or fall asleep, or whatever seems appropriate to you. I ask only that you not interfere with those of us who are going on, and I assume that right now this is everyone, yes?"

"Is it spooky?" Dylan asked, drawing out the vowels almost comically.

"I don't think so, Dylan," Lisa said. "It can be a little disorienting. But if you feel uncomfortable at any time you can just step out of the room, okay? And outside this room everything will be perfectly normal, okay? And no harm will come to anyone from this, although at times it may appear that very strange things are happening. Understand?"

"Okay."

"Just remember," Billy said, laughing and smiling at him, "there's nobody here but us chickens. And this is probably a lot safer than taking drugs."

Dylan was less than sure about that. To him it already seemed a lot *like* taking drugs.

Sibyl was eager to begin. “I think we’re ready,” she said. “I know I am.”

“All right,” said Lisa, folding her hands in her lap. “Let’s begin.”

Billy looked at Lisa. He had thought earlier, when he’d first seen her on the porch steps, chatting with Cecil and Stephanie and Sibyl, that her manner seemed supremely self-assured and urbane. Now, looking at her in the dark amber warmth of her small home, sitting in the soft candlelight, dressed in a flowing silver-gray Turkish caftan, her head covered and her eyes shaded in its cowl, she seemed somehow silly, vulnerable and unsophisticated.

She leaned forward and beckoned the others to do likewise, reaching out so they could all join hands while she incanted softly, rhythmically, some seemingly endless sequence of gibberish syllables that, she had explained earlier, would strip away the false maya of their bodies and liberate their souls to commune with the rest of the spirit world, and particularly with the parallel realities commonly (but mistakenly) regarded as “the past.”

After a few minutes Sibyl’s hands, and then her mouth and eyelids, tightly closed, began to twitch slightly. Her breathing became deep and deliberate just as her consciousness seemed to fade away.

“A traveller seeks solace,” Sibyl said in a flat, strange voice.

“Yes,” Lisa agreed.

“She has come far.”

“Yes.”

Billy and Dylan exchanged a glance but said nothing.

Sibyl’s hands disengaged from Dylan’s and Stephanie’s, and everyone else did likewise as she sat back in her chair, her eyes closed but obviously seeing some private and secret scene.

“She reclines restfully on her sofa like a satisfied cat while soft warm winds drift lambently over her delicate skin. The blue water glides silently by. The flat green lands drift past her. The sky goes on forever.”

Lisa’s eyes were closed, too, as she shared in this vision.

“Her wise and trusted and much-beloved advisor sits quietly next to her, dressed in a long white robe of fine cotton. His black skin glistens in the tropical heat. He regards her with compassion, awed by her serene beauty which is somehow magnified now by her evident unhappiness.”

“Yes.”

“A great bird, a gray falcon larger than an eagle, grips his bar at the bow of the ship and gazes off toward the north.”

“The eye of her mind, yes.”

“Far astern the water writhes in silken blackness. An enormous slithering shape, like the shadow of a bare tree branch, follows the drifting boat. The princess bids her advisor speak.”

There was a painfully long pause. Billy grinned at Dylan and rolled his eyes. Dylan returned a small, brief smile.

Sibyl now spoke in a distinctly different voice, deep and very soft.

“A ragged host of strangers, knights and cannoneers and mercenary rabble, awaits at a narrows, in ambush athwart her path. They are led by a handsome and arrogant prince, once her favorite courtier but long since gone astray, who, with his hungry perversion of will, is determined she shall never attain her destination among the mysterious caves of the city of light.”

“Yes.”

Dylan looked at his mother. She seemed uncertain and weak now. She was shaking, quivering subtly. Suddenly her eyes opened but she was unseeing. At least whatever she was seeing was not in the room, not anyone, not him.

"Or perhaps it is an honor guard, and he means only to carry her sedan in triumphant glory to the promised land. Her wise companion says that not everything that's knowable is worth the knowing."

"There is a way," Lisa said gently.

"She cannot trust him."

"No."

Sibyl seemed at this point to become agitated, confused, afraid.

"It's all right," Lisa said. "There is a way."

"The great bird suddenly lifts itself on its huge wings into the bright torpid air. It circles slowly and swoops near the water behind her, scooping up the sinuous shadow in its beak, and carries the dark, dangling shape into the sky above her prince's army, and there releases it. The soldiers flee in panic, running in all directions until they are dispersed like specks of chaff across the green fields."

"Yes, I see it."

"Her advisor turns away from his easel and smiles at her. His landscape is full of haunting shadows and mysterious shapes that look like things until you really look at them, and then they look like other things, and now she cannot say of anything on his canvas that it is this or that, because no sooner does she perceive it in one way than it refuses thus to be seen, changing itself again into something strange and unrecognizable."

Tears began to flow down her cheeks. Her eyes were closed again, tightly now. Her fingers were curled into tight bony fists. Her weeping was augmented by a sob. Then another. "He's still there!" she cried. "He wants everything!"

"It's all right."

"No! No! No! It's *not* all right." And now her crying took on a more desperate character, full of shuddering and soft ululations.

Billy eased himself out of his chair and tiptoed to the door. Dylan followed him a few minutes later and they squatted together on the steps outside Lisa's kitchen, looking out at the lights of the town and the dark sky punctuated with myriad stars.

"Is she okay?"

"Sure," Billy said. "She likes this kind of stuff."

"What's she talking about?"

Billy shrugged. "Who knows?" he said. "Who cares?"

"I think she wants to go back east."

Billy looked at the young boy. "May be," he said. "She's out of money. The welfare people are trying to make her go to work."

Dylan laughed. "I don't think she's ever had a job," he said. Then his face looked wistful and sad.

"Hey, Dylan," Billy said. "Don't you worry. You'll be okay."

"Are you coming with us?"

"Whoa, there. Number one, she hasn't invited me. She was kind of pissed about not getting any macaws, you know. And I don't know that she even has any plans."

"She said you chickened out."

"Uh-huh. Well, you can come to your own conclusions about that. But for some reason she thought she needed a lot of money and now she doesn't have it."

"She got two hundred bucks each for the parrots."

"Well, she would've got ten times as much for the macaws she wanted me to risk death for."

"So why's she doing this do you think?"

"This? With Lisa?"

"Uh-huh."

"Well, I think sometimes you come to a fork in the road. You have to decide whether you're going to go to school or whether you're going to play hookey. There are good arguments on each side. Sometimes you can't decide. So you flip a coin. You call your astrologer. You consult the *I Ching*. You meditate for three weeks with your head between your legs. And bingo! In one white-hot moment of revelation you have the answer! It's agenbite of inwit. Conscience. That which knows you. Of course, to some people this is an abdication. They prefer a psychophysiological interpretation of dreams, cultural norms, cultured behaviors and other imaginary formalisms to guide them to the ultimate crapshoot, which is a decision. Any decision. Beyond a certain point, you may as well flip a coin. In any case, time flips one for you. That's the difference between this life and all those other lives floating out there on Lisa's Milky Way. They're outside of time. Our time, anyway."

"Which means what?"

"She does this for the same reason some people want to touch the Pope. It means something to her. It doesn't make sense to me, but it makes sense to her, and that makes sense to me, because I don't want anybody telling me which floating life forms I should appeal to when I've run out of time."

"I think maybe you *have* run out of time, Billy," Dylan said, laughing.

"Nah," Billy said, grinning back at him. "You and me, we're never going to run out of time, Dylan. Not for a long while, anyway. Besides, my gods are from the mighty land of the north—like the polar bear, and the eagle, and the salmon, and the midnight sun and the moon on the snow and the aurora borealis. And they are mighty powerful medicine."

Billy was quiet for a moment, and then he went on. "But let me tell you something. Down there in Guatemala, with those Indians…"

"The Mayans," Dylan interrupted.

"Yes, whose culture just disappeared. I can't get that out of my mind. They were invaded, and they abandoned their cities because they were indefensible, and all the art and mathematics and medicine and ideas that had been sustained by the internal synergy of their cities just vanished into the jungle or the savannahs, where life was subsequently and necessarily once again tribal and familial. They didn't write, or everything they wrote was destroyed. There are almost no archaeological remains other than the buildings, most of which are in ruins. They lost their whole civilization. Pretty weird, huh?"

"Yep," Dylan agreed.

"Anyway, it's a very beautiful country. And it has very major mojo, you know? Big magic. You always feel the presence of enormous forces just beneath the ground. There's a kernel of deep distrust, an almost preternatural fear, among the people responsible for keeping order, and at the same time you sense a complete serenity among the common people, especially the Indians. There are spectacular colors everywhere, in plants, animals, clothing, tools, buildings, and most especially in the markets. The fruits and vegetables are magnificent.

"There's boundless wealth—ignoring an occasional earthquake or volcanic explosion—for people who wish to live in harmony with the land, among earth's simple natural treasures. Guatemala is an Eden for them. There's also incredible wealth of the dollar kind. Oil, coffee,

bananas, minerals, maybe other things. So in some ways, for some people—well, for a majority of the people—Guatemala is a sort of idyll suspended in hell. It'd be like having to stay in kindergarten all your life, with bullies at the door to make sure you never left and a squawking teacher saying, 'All right, children, now we're going to sing, now we're going to clap hands, now we're going to sleep, now we're…'"

"Roger," Dylan said.

"Anyway, it's a lot like Alaska. Except for one thing."

"The people."

"Yeah."

"And the heat."

"Well, yeah, and a lot of other things, but I meant the people."

"I know," Dylan said, grinning.

Sibyl and Lisa came into the kitchen, talking. "Hi, guys," Sibyl said.

"Hi, Mom."

She came to the screen door. She was smiling. "Lost you guys, huh?" she said.

"I got confused when Cleopatra flew off with Grandma Moses," Dylan said, tilting his head and looking up at her.

"So, did Mark Antony turn out to be Robin?" Billy asked.

"Gee, William," Sibyl said, smiling sardonically, "I don't know. Nobody turned out to be you, I'm pretty sure of that." And with that she turned back into the kitchen to help Lisa, who was making cookies.

As it happened, Lisa had no baking powder, or it was too old, and Sibyl went to the supermarket to get some. She chanced to meet Robin there. Robin was his jolly, irrepressible self. "How are you? How's the dashing young genius?"

"We're great," she said. "And guess what? We're moving to Philadelphia."

"Really? Why? I'll miss you guys."

"Well, I just had a session with Lisa."

Ah," he said, "say no more."

"You have to follow your spirits, Robin. And it's what we need to do now, you know? Get back into the swim of things. And we'll miss you, too. Where'll we ever find another friend as sweet as you?"

"Oh, it'll be fine," he said. "You know what W. C. Fields said."

"'On the whole, I'd rather be in Philadelphia.'"

Robin laughed. "Yeah, rather than dead. He hated Philadelphia. But he was an old sourpuss. He hated children and dogs, too. And everything he didn't hate, he despised." Robin laughed. "I will miss that kiddo, though. When are you going?"

"Don't know yet," Sibyl shrugged and smiled. "Soon, I guess."

"Is Billy going with you?"

"No."

"Well, at least we should have a party for you, to say goodbye."

"Sure, that'd be great."

"I'll talk it up. Gee, all of a sudden I'm sorry. But I wish you all the best, both of you."

"Thanks, Robin."

He gave her a big, gentle bear hug. He smelled faintly of paint, like a museum on a warm afternoon.

Chapter 17

Bon Voyage

Amarantha, sweet and fair,
Ah, braid no more that shining hair!
As my curious hand or eye
Hovering round thee, let it fly!

—*Amarantha,* Richard Lovelace

Around three-thirty on a sunny summer afternoon, Mo and Robin walked together for several blocks past the grimy walls and open doorways of rough businesses and warehouses, beneath a massive steel structure that rose from the shadowed center of the street and carried the freeway high above the waterfront. "I'm ethically conflicted about doing charity work for television stations," Robin said with a chuckle.

"That's the whoring business," Mo replied.

"I don't want to take money from the effort to help people with AIDS, but I do want to take money from the television industry."

"Yep. But you won't."

"I think Kate takes good money from them."

"I'd count it a privilege."

"Well, and I'm getting a little."

"I should hope so."

Robin laughed. "And I guess now you're going to be getting a little, too."

"No, I'm in bad odor nowadays. I have inadequate ambition. But she asked me to help out with this project. She intimated maybe I'd get something nice if I did. But of course I won't. It's just a come-on. But it was fun, anyway, working with you guys."

"Kate's great to work with," Robin laughed.

Just then they came to the shaded doorway of The Wharf Rat, where they were going to wait for Aurora to meet them. They sat down in a booth away from the door, where it was cooler. Robin ordered coffee, Mo a beer.

"So?" Robin asked, his grinning round face tilted slightly askance at his friend.

"So?"

"Did you like her?"

Mo smiled. "Well, yeah, kind of. I think so."

"You think so? You spent yesterday evening with her, didn't you?"

"We went over some things. For a while, yes."

Robin laughed and leaned back in his seat and cocked his head and wagged his finger. "Uh-huh. See? I knew it," he said.

"Hey, today I'm on my way to the thules with Aurora. Four days, just the two of us, alone on a desert island."

"Ahhhh," Robin said understandingly.

"Where absolutely nothing will happen. She made me take a vow."

"Are you kidding me?"

"No, I swear to God. I guess I'm swearing to God about everything these days. She said she'd only take me if I promised to keep my hands off her."

"And?"

"Of course I agreed."

"And?"

Mo stared at something above and far behind Robin's left shoulder for a long moment. Then he glanced directly at his friend's black, dancing eyes. Then he grinned and looked away again, into unformed time, raising his own eyebrows in a speculative arch, and shrugged his shoulders. "Four days, man. Four days. Anything can happen."

"Yeah," Robin laughed, shaking his head in admiring disbelief. "With that woman, anything can."

"Yeah, see, that's what everyone thinks. But of course it's only what she wants us to think. In reality nothing happens without her majesty's permission. Sunrise, sunset, tides, aging, nothing."

Robin laughed. "Well, you sure can pick 'em. Speaking of which, how's Sibyl?"

"Who cares?" Mo said as he paid the waitress. "I see her every now and then. I go to visit with Dylan sometimes. She's usually concerned enough to construct an instant polemic on atavism, with me as Exhibit A."

"Yeah, well, I don't get that, but I do get the usual mystical advice. Horoscope readings and colonic diets, stuff like that. She's all right, though. She's just kind of a space cadet."

"Nothing is too absurd to be meaningful to her."

"Well, maybe that's an unreasonable criterion."

"How so?"

"Well, what's meaningful to you?"

"Not much."

"But what?"

"Whether I'm hot or cold, whether everyone around me is safe and happy, what's for dinner, staying alert, stuff like that. Hardly a venture into the absurd, I'd say."

"Well, okay…" Robin began.

But Mo continued. "Not on the same plane with whether Venus is riding the crumpled horn of Taurus, or whether some guy with vacant eyes and a foreign accent says that everything is everything."

"Yes, but that's not my point. For the sake of argument I'll grant you she lives in a world of the absurd and pointless, largely oblivious to cause and effect. I don't disagree with your assessment on that score. I'm just unpersuaded as to what's wrong with it."

"Well, it might've cost Dylan the normal use of his legs."

Robin drew back, his eyes wide and white with chagrin. "Oh, no, man," he said seriously. "Don't make that judgment. Even if it's true in some sense, and it may be, you have to judge the whole situation they were in. And you can't, because you weren't there."

Mo took a long, deliberate draught from the chilled glass mug. "Yeah, I know," he said.

"You love these women who push you around, don't you?" Robin peered at Mo over the top of his coffee cup, which hid a hint of a smile that nonetheless radiated warmly across his dark brown face.

"I like free-spirited, independent, assertive women," Mo said. "They're out of control by definition. So I just try to think of times like these as little stumblings in the dance of love."

"Seems as though you and Aurora have gone beyond stumbling. I mean, things were so tight between you there for a while."

"Yeah."

"You were always together."

"Yeah."

"And then all of a sudden it seemed like it was over."

"Oh, it was. We had a huge fight."

"And now you're doing this."

Mo smiled. "You know, there's just something really bewitching to me about neurotic women," he said.

Robin laughed rollickingly. "Sure. They make you crazy. And you always think you're crazy about them, but really you're just crazy."

Mo smiled as a flood of light burst through the doorway, and in it a silhouette appeared, and then, the brief unwelcome glare of the sun receding into the shadows as the door closed behind her, the image of Aurora herself, clad in levis and a pale blue cashmere sweater like fluffy ice beneath her flaming orange tresses, emerged from the dust and smoke, a smile on her face as enigmatic as the Mona Lisa's.

"Hi, guys," she said cheerily.

She sat beside Mo, ostentatiously bumping him with her rump as she slid into the booth. "What's up? How'd the conference go?"

Mo shrugged. "Fine, I guess. The script looks pretty good."

"Uh-huh. Do I get a beer here, or what?"

Mo went to get her a beer.

"It looks good," Robin said. "We'll be ready to start shooting next week, I think."

"Great. Was he helpful?"

"Sure."

She raised her eyebrows and stared hard at him. "Was he good?"

Robin laughed. "What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean."

He laughed again. Mo returned with her beer.

"The bartender says the barometer's headed for an all-time low," he reported.

"Yeah, there's a storm coming," Robin said. "I had a hell of a headache this morning."

"Are you okay?"

"Sure. It didn't last long. And I do some of my best work on stormy days. It's all that energy, I think."

"Well, it's not going to spoil my vacation," Aurora said. "I checked, and the ferry's scheduled to go on time."

Mo looked at his watch. "Thirty minutes," he said.

"Hey," she said brightly, "Anya's video's on PBS. Have you seen it?"

They both shook their heads. "Ten o'clock tonight," she said to Robin. "On channel twenty-three I think."

Robin smiled and shrugged. "I don't have a TV," he said.

"I think Alexei's promoting his own cause in some of these films," she said. "The *Petrouchka*, for instance. The camera closes on him all the time. I think he and Geoffrey have a little personal thing going."

"More power to them," Mo said.

"Well, they are sort of an odd couple."

"They're just friends," Robin ventured.

Aurora laughed. "That's not what I've heard," she said.

"Did you ask Alexei?"

"Of course not. It's none of my business."

"So," Robin said, "where are you guys going?"

"A cabin on some little island in the San Juans," Aurora said. "A perk from a client. No telephone, no television, no fedex."

"Electricity, though," Mo said. "Lights and heat."

"What are you going to do?"

"Read, walk, eat and sleep. Read, walk, eat and sleep. Who knows if we'll survive it."

Robin smiled.

"You should come with us," Aurora said to him.

"Can't," he responded. "I have to get back to work."

"Are you going back with Kate?"

"She'll be up here for another week, I think. Anyway, I'm going back on the bus."

"Ugh," Aurora said.

"I don't mind. There's a certain gypsy quality to travelling on the bus. You go to the station and get on. It's dirt cheap. Nobody's anybody. It's not posh and it's not romantic and it's not assertive. You just go. And then you get off. Nobody cares and nothing has changed. For some reason, I like that." He laughed at himself. "Am I making any sense?"

"I don't know," Mo said.

Aurora slid her hand along his thigh. "I'm sure you are," she said. "I'm not sure I understand it, though."

"It's your bohemian heritage," Mo speculated.

Robin laughed.

"Is that story true?" Aurora asked. "Are you really part Hungarian?"

"Well, Mo thinks he's part Indian," he said.

"No, really."

"Well, it's kind of a long story. And I only know what I've been told." He looked at Mo. "And weren't the Bohemians Czechoslovakian?"

"Bohemians are from everywhere," Mo countered.

Aurora took a cigarette from her purse and Mo lit it for her. "Okay," she said, blowing a long stream of gray smoke toward the ceiling. "Let's hear it."

Robin grinned and took a deep breath. "One of my great-great grandmothers was a slave in Virginia. She was originally from Liberia, I think, but I'm not sure. Anyway, as the Civil War turned sour for the Confederacy she somehow made her way to Paris, where she met a musician from Hungary—a gypsy, maybe. They fell in love and moved to Prague, but she wasn't happy there so eventually they went to Hungary. My great grandfather was born in a little village called Esztergom, on the Danube, about 1880. His parents were both killed in some troubles between the Magyars and the Turks I think, so he came back to the United States and settled in New England sometime around the turn of the century. He had a son, who curiously enough was an accomplished painter of portrait miniatures, and he married and had two sons of his own, one of whom was my father."

"Incredible," Aurora said.

"How do you know all this?" Mo wanted to know.

"My grandfather wrote it all down in a Bible he gave me for my twelfth birthday. I believe all my other ancestors since great-great grandfather Ecst were Afro-American."

"Amazing," Mo said. "And do you know the names of these people?"

"Only a few. My grandfather knew the first names of his father and mother, naturally, and of his grandmother, the one who'd been a slave, but he didn't know his mother's maiden name and he didn't know for certain what great-grandfather's original Hungarian name was.

"But," his face brightened, "he painted his parents' portrait, which I have."

"Neat," said Mo. "I'd like to see it."

"So," Aurora calculated, "counting your great-great grandfather, the Hungarian, and his wife, the former slave girl probably descended from West Africa, and the other fourteen great-greats, and eight greats, and four grands, and two parents, that makes thirty ancestors in four generations, all Afro-American except for one guy, yes?"

"Well, apparently so."

"Okay, so here's my question: do you consider yourself to be of Hungarian descent?"

Robin laughed. "Well, it depends on what you mean. Some people think that if a person has any black ancestor in the recorded history of mankind then he's black, no matter how white he is. I completely agree. Of course it works the other way 'round, too. You're the product of all your ancestors, and genetically each of them is part of you. So I strongly suspect that I'm of Hungarian and Liberian descent, among other things. On the other hand, as Sibyl's fond of pointing out, each of us also probably contains atoms that were once contained in a Caesar, or a primitive hominid, or even an insect. That possibility, however remote, tells me I have to be circumspect about all this. Therefore I don't feel guilty that I know almost nothing about Hungary or Liberia, other than that they're probably fascinating places. Nor do I feel any compunction to know about them. They have no special relevance to my cultural life. So, am I of Hungarian descent? Yes, I think so. Is that a significant aspect of my consciousness? Only to the extent that it's broadened my perspective. It's a curious quirk of history, that's all. And I would say the same thing about Liberia. Physically, I'm descended from the ooze, like everyone else. Culturally, I'm an American."

"I consider *my* self to be of Cro-Magnon descent," Mo said.

"Physically and culturally," added Aurora, "and rather recently descended, I'd say."

"Well, what about you?" Robin asked her. "Do you consider yourself a cultural scion of your ancestors?"

"All her ancestors were Hyperboreans," Mo answered, "and she's definitely one of them. A chip off the old iceberg, you might say."

"My ancestors came over on the Mayflower," she said. "Their culture was Puritanism. It's always seemed a little rigid for my taste."

"You're a liberated pilgrim," Robin said.

"I like that," she laughed.

"Maybe we should get going," Mo said, "so we can get a place in line."

Aurora tossed off the last half of her beer in one gulp. Robin took a final sip of coffee as they gathered themselves and stood up.

Outside, the sunlight was dazzling, but there was a wall of black clouds in the southwestern sky. "Something's coming," Mo said.

"Something's always coming," Robin chuckled.

They crossed the street, under the grimy superstructure raining thunder from the oblivious traffic above them, and bundled into Aurora's silver-gray Camaro convertible. She drove the two blocks to the pier, where a double line had already begun to form for loading, and deftly eased

her car into place facing the open maw of the waiting ship. Mo got out and walked over to the dockmaster's office to confirm the sailing.

At Aurora's invitation, Robin clambered into the front seat. "I guess this is one of those really fast cars," he said admiringly.

"Well, I can get rubber at eighty," she said, smiling. "But I've never had it over one-twenty because I'm a responsible driver."

Robin widened his eyes in a gesture of appreciation. "There's always more to you than meets the eye," he said.

"I hope so."

Robin gazed into the shadowy interior of the ferry as the crew moved about making ready for the journey north. "I'm grateful to you for including me in on this job," he said.

"No problem. You do good work. And there's plenty to go around. I know it's more symbolic than substantive, but I feel as though I'm supporting the arts when I can steer something your way."

He laughed. "I'm not so sure about that," he said, opening the door and stepping out as Mo approached.

"I'll get in the back," Mo offered.

"I should get going," Robin responded, lifting his arms and stretching them above his head. "Everything's all set?"

"Yeah. This is the last sailing of the day, though," Mo said, "because of the storm." For a moment, looking at Robin standing there with his stocky arms raised, almost as if in a gesture of triumph, Mo was oddly reminded of a magnificent statue of Prometheus done by sculptor Jan Zach.

"Well, you guys have fun."

"Thanks, Robin," Aurora called out. "We will."

Mo got back in the car and watched as Robin ambled up the ramp and disappeared from sight. He heard the crewmen shouting instructions at the drivers nearest the ferry. Then he looked at her brilliant green eyes and watched the incipient smile that fluttered across her mouth, like a breeze playing on the sound, but never actually materialized.

"What're you thinking?" she asked coyly.

"Nothing," he lied.

"Good," she said, starting the engine. "Did you bring sandwiches?"

Chapter 18

Typhoon

When lovely woman stoops to folly,
And finds too late that men betray,
What charm can soothe her melancholy?
What art can wash her guilt away?

—*The Vicar of Wakefield (Song),* Oliver Goldsmith

drink more beer.
there's time.
and if there's not
that's all right
too.

—*How to be a Great Writer,* Charles Bukowski

Aurora eased the car forward over the steel ramp and onto the ship, and then into a narrow slot beside a large furniture van. Mo admired once again her unerring skill at the wheel. It was not only people she controlled with that deft precision, but everything else as well. Her car, her body, the tools and machines she used to make the jewelry which was her hobby, all were managed with a discipline wholly belied by her devil-may-care air of nonchalance.

"Nicely done," he said as she switched off the engine.

"Of course," she replied.

"I did bring sandwiches, by the way."

"I knew you would," she smiled. "That's why I invited you along."

Mo opened his door. "Want to go look around?"

She turned around in her seat and leaned into the back, reaching for one of her bags. "No, you go on. I think I'll read for a while. I'm almost finished with this book. I'll meet you later, okay?"

"Okay. What book?"

"*Moll Flanders."*

"Ah, a woman after your own heart."

"More than you know."

He opened the car door as far as he could without its contacting the steel structure of the ship's bay and smiled as he squeezed himself out. He found something about her so beguiling that he couldn't help being amused with himself about it. As he made his way forward to the stairs he noticed metal surfaces, thick with layers of white enamel over swollen blisters and irregular depressions that had resulted from the corrosive savagery of the salt spray. Objects of brass, wood or glass seemed relatively unscathed, but steel plates and beams exposed to the air were heavily etched.

Although most of the passengers would spend most of the voyage in the comfort of their cars and vans, Mo encountered quite a few people up on the main deck, where they stretched

themselves, purchased snacks from vending machines and gazed out across the water. It was hot in the sunlight but there was a cool breeze blowing from the southwest and he could see the dark shape of the storm approaching them. High above the deck, the ferry's captain plotted a course that would skirt the edge of the storm, perhaps avoiding it altogether.

Mo walked out along the railing near the bow of the ship, behind the lifeboats lashed tightly to their frames. The massive ferry vibrated in resonance with the low hum of its idling diesel engines. Now and then it rubbed and squealed against the huge pilings to which it was moored, telephone poles driven deep into the bay mud, bundled together with steel cable, redolent with creosote. The air smelled of fish and fuel oil. And then, the last vehicle finally aboard, he heard the cries of the crew as they raised the ramps and prepared to get under way. The ship's horn announced their imminent departure.

He leaned out over the railing as far as he could, straining to see where the hull met the dark water, but he couldn't quite. Then he sensed her standing next to him and drew back.

"Shucks," she said, "I thought you were going to jump."

He looked at her, her emerald eyes bright and laughing in the afternoon sun. "Too many sharks," he said. "How'd it come out?"

"She lived happily ever after."

The ship's engines growled in full throat and the steel hull shuddered as it began to slide slowly away from the pier, out into the deep water of the sound.

"I love that feeling," she said. "So much power."

"Me, too," he replied, smiling at her. "I used to feel that way about you."

She put her arm around his waist and stood close to him as his arm encircled her shoulder and they both watched the rippled expanse of water and time slip by. "You still do," she said impishly.

He kissed the soft orange silkiness of her hair.

Almost imperceptibly the sun sank lower in the southwestern sky and the dark clouds rose to challenge it. Mo and Aurora stood for a long while by the ship's railing and spotted several small pods of orcas moving alongside them. The ferry's course turned gradually northward. The breeze and the swells grew more noticeable as the shadows began to lengthen and fade.

"We're going to get caught in that," Aurora said, looking at the wall of clouds pursuing them, its upper edges glinting, its rust-red underbelly streaked with black hairs that fell into the sea.

"I think they're going to outrun it," Mo demurred. "But it would be fun, wouldn't it?"

"This tub couldn't outrun a jellyfish," she said.

Mo laughed. "Well, we'd better eat then, speaking of jelly, before we go down like the Titanic. You'll need your strength to hoist one of these lifeboats over the side."

"Did you make peanut butter and jellyfish sandwiches?"

"Gross."

"No kidding," she said as they walked back to the car. "I can imagine its little tentacles drooling out of the bread, grabbing you every time you tried to bite it."

"Slithering down inside your clothes."

They got their sandwiches and went back upstairs to the glassed-in observation deck. The sea was a steely gray now, slick-looking, with long, shallow swells, ominously calm. They chewed silently and watched.

"Here it comes," she said, as the first drops of rain streaked the windows.

"Great," he said, excited with anticipation. "I love storms."

"I'd rather be on land."

"Didn't you love storms when you were a kid?"

"My best friend was killed by lightning in a storm when I was a teenager."

"Really?"

"We were out at the park, drinking beer, playing touch football or something, cooking dogs and burgers, and it started to rain. Nobody thought anything of it, but it got really heavy, it was pouring, just dumping on us, and the wind started howling and whipping the trees, and we grabbed our food and the beer and headed for a shelter, but lightning struck this big old tree just as she was underneath it."

A gust of wind slammed into the side of the ship, momentarily bowing the glass windows. The sky seemed very much darker. Flecks of spume appeared on the waves.

"And?"

"I looked back at her just as a huge spark shot out of the trunk and seemed to go into the ground right in front of her. She just crumpled. And then there was an incredible explosion that shook the ground, and the smell of burning, like burning dirt. It was awful. We ran back to where she was, and I bent over and reached down to help pick her up."

More rain spattered the windows and began falling in earnest on the ship's deck. Mo looked at her. She was facing in the direction of the impending storm but her eyes were far away.

"She was hot," she said.

"Cooked, you mean?" Mo asked after a long silence.

"It was weird. The only real sign of it was the bottoms of her feet. They looked like charred roast beef. The stench was unbelievable. I couldn't eat meat for years. But the hardest part was seeing how normal she looked otherwise. Not dead, I mean—as if she were sleeping. For an instant I really expected her to open her eyes." Her eyes filled with tears. "So ever since then I've hated storms. Especially lightning and thunder."

"Where was this? I mean, where were you living then?"

"Maryland."

"Well, there's a lot less lightning and thunder here than almost anywhere else."

"I know."

"And it was the freakiest of freak accidents."

"I know that, too."

"I've been struck twice by lightning. Didn't put a scratch on me. But I could've just as easily been Cajun Mo."

By this time the storm had engulfed the ferry, and the rain was pounding steadily against the steel structure, adding the roar of raindrops to the deep-throated reverberations of the engines. The wind was blowing and occasionally there was a sharp gust, but it didn't seem particularly severe.

"I think we're probably just on the edge of this one," Mo said. "I haven't heard any thunder, have you?"

She shook her head. "Couldn't hear it over all this racket anyway," she half-shouted, glancing around the small room. And then she smiled. "Let's go outside," she said.

"Are you kidding?'

"No, I want to."

The crew had warned everybody over the loudspeaker that there might be rough weather for a while and that passengers should stay off the decks and especially away from the railings. But Mo and Aurora easily slipped out the door—the crew probably had better things to do—and made their way forward, where, unobserved, they hunkered down beneath the lifeboats. They were soon soaked, but the air remained warm, in spite of the wind, and for a while they enjoyed

their sense of forbidden adventure. Then an enormous gale of wind hammered them, pummeling the heavy boats above their heads, impelling rain almost horizontally across the deck. This was more than a brief anomaly; it persisted for fifteen or twenty seconds, long enough that the thought crossed their minds it might not abate, or might even increase.

But then it was gone, and Mo, hoping to glimpse the water's heaving surface, made his way across the deck to the ship's rail.

"Hey!" she protested. "Come back here!"

"You come out here," he reassured her. "It's easy." He hung on to the rail with one hand and extended the other toward her. She ignored this gesture as she stared at him.

"I'm scared, Mo; come hold me, please."

"Come on. Just hang onto the rail."

But she wouldn't, and he returned to her side.

"Hold me, Mo."

He put an arm around her.

"You can hold me, can't you? I'm not a nun, you know."

She clasped him with both arms, snuggling against him awkwardly as they both remained on their haunches.

"Yeah, well, I'm not a saint, either," he said, putting his other arm around her, abandoning his purchase on the ship's structure. "I love holding you. I'll hold you all night long."

"I don't want you to hold me that way. I just want you to hold me, you know, like a friend. Like a brother. Like a daddy. Because you love me."

"I do love you."

"Mo?"

"What?"

She pressed herself against him. "Fuck me, Mo!" she whispered in his ear. "Please. Right here." Her eyes burned into his, big and intense and eager. "I don't care if we get washed overboard. Come on, they can't see us." The wind whirled down from the black sky still faintly backlit with a yellowish glow of the setting sun. "We're going to die, Mo. We're going to drown out here. We'll hit some fucking log or something."

"It's okay. It's not that rough. Look, the boat isn't even rocking very much. We can even stand up." And, grasping with one hand the structure that held the lifeboats, he drew her up with him.

A huge wave boomed against the ferry's quarter bow and a shock of salty water splashed over them. She persisted. "Do you remember the last time, Mo?" She grasped his buttocks and pressed her pelvis against his. "That was so beautiful."

He remembered the warm moonlit night by the creek, not yet a month previous.

"If this piece of junk goes down I want you inside me, Mo. You want to, don't you? Don't you?"

He did. But just then the ferry's bow lurched sharply upward, then slued down sideways, and the two of them, clutching one another, stumbled and fell onto the cold, wet steel deck, their legs entangled, Mo astride her.

"You okay?" he asked.

She was furious. "Get off me, you animal!" she screamed.

Mo rolled over, laughing. He lay on his back, splayed out in the pelting rain, and laughed at his predicament while she elaborated her general disgust with his lack of honor. Then he watched her make her way back along the railing to the observation room.

She was not amused. But then she was seldom amused anymore. She locked the car doors and changed her clothes. It was awkward enough, changing clothes in a car, but when everything was soaked it was considerably less pleasant. When Mo arrived, still smiling, a few minutes later, she really wanted not to let him in. She even considered leaving him on the ferry, when and if they ever arrived.

"How could you be so stupid?" she asked as he clambered in.

"Must be all the help I get from you," he said, working his way out of his clothes.

As he dressed she stared out through the windshield, her hands on the wheel. She felt the absurdity of it, bucking along at five miles an hour on this floating parking lot in the dark, headed for a remote island that probably didn't even have roads, accompanied by a man she'd once thought she loved, a man whose convictions and commitments were no deeper than the moment.

"I'm really angry," she said.

"At what?" he asked, laughing again.

"At you. You don't take anything seriously. Most especially me."

"Well, do you think your making me take a vow of chastity is a license to torment my honor?"

"You have no honor. That's just the point."

"Aha," he said. "Well, look, when we get to the next stop, I'll get off, okay?"

"Fine."

He took a book from his travel bag and opened the car door. "I'm going to go up and read a while."

"Fine."

They arrived at the island shortly after midnight. The storm had slowly been left behind to reveal a spectacular clear sky full of stars, but they were two hours late. She switched on the dash lights and studied her map as the ferry bumped against the pilings and came to a stop. Mo appeared and climbed into the car. He turned in the seat and lifted his bag from the back seat onto his lap.

"What are you doing?" she asked irritably.

"Enjoy your stay," he said, smiling, pushing the car door open.

"Don't be an idiot."

"I've already been an idiot. I thought this time I'd try something different."

She started the car's engine. "Look, I have to drive for ten miles over some goat path in the pitch dark and then sleep in some spooky abandoned shack and I'm damned if I'm doing it by myself. You agreed to come on this excursion and you can for once do what you said you'd do."

"You want me to come with you?" he said, pretending to be amazed.

"Just behave yourself, okay?"

"So what am I? Your trained dog?"

The steel ramps were dropped onto the apron of the pier with a great clanging and cars began to depart the ferry.

"Put your bag in the back and close the door."

"Arf," he replied as he hoisted the bag over the seat backs. As they pulled away from the pier and began the journey along the narrow, winding gravel road that led to their cabin, he said, "Well, I like solitude."

A mile or so later, she said, "I'm sorry. I'm tired."

He shrugged. "Me too," he said.

The cabin turned out to be a snug little cottage with a fireplace and a well-stocked kitchen and two double beds in the bedroom, and without saying much beyond exclaiming at its warmth and charm they undressed, clambered under the covers, and turned out the lights.

Mo awoke at first light. Somehow during the night she had surreptitiously joined him in his bed, and he slowly, carefully, unwrapped himself from around her until he could slip away without disturbing her. Then he dressed and made coffee. She was still asleep when he quietly closed the door and headed down the trail toward the beach.

Chapter 19

Betrayal

Last night, ah, yesternight, betwixt her lips and mine
There fell thy shadow, Cynara! thy breath was shed
Upon my soul between the kisses and the wine;
And I was desolate and sick of an old passion,
Yea, I was desolate and bowed my head:
I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion.

—*Non Sum Qualis Eram Bonae sub Regno Cynarae,* Ernest Dowson

Aurora felt well-rested after the first night. She'd slept late and taken a leisurely shower and was nursing her second cup of coffee by the time Mo reappeared from his walk. She listened good-naturedly as he described the dawn, the red sun rising out of the eastern sea, beyond which he could see, from the bluffs, a thin sliver of land pressed against the horizon but nothing more. On the west side of the island, which was only a few miles wide, he'd found a nice beach only a few minutes' walk from the cottage.

"Pretty remote," he said, smiling.

"Did you see any other houses?"

"Well, there's another one you can see from just above the beach. Remember that driveway we almost went down? And I passed a couple of log cabins on the way over to the east side, but there's nobody anywhere near here that I saw."

Except for a milk run they made two days later to the little store near the pier on the south end of the island, they never did see anyone else while they were there. The seclusion soon became as comfortable for her as it was for him. During the day they explored the woods and the shoreline, together and separately, or went to the beach. Mo loved lying in the sun for hours, almost inert, reading or sleeping, working on his tan as he put it, but she burned easily and was more restless in any case, so she spent the long afternoons walking and looking for interesting knickknacks in a few little streams that meandered across the sand in shady coves. She found many beautiful stones, including several dozen intricate agates, and a few glass fishing floats which she left behind among the cabin's already extensive collection.

On their last night, which happened to be the fourth of July, a fantastic aurora borealis danced for more than an hour in the northern sky and she and Mo lay on a blanket in the cool air and watched while the diaphanous and evanescent light shimmered in rippling blue-green curtains across the black sky, a veil through which they could see more stars than it seemed possible there could ever be. Then, slowly, the light paled, and suddenly there were crimson streamers falling from a doughnut-shaped hole in the zenith, pulsing downward toward the horizon in all directions.

"This is your light," he said, his arm under her shoulders, his hand brushing the hair back from her forehead.

She smiled. She wanted him to touch her. To press himself down on her. To make love to her. They'd slept separately since the night they'd arrived, and she hadn't felt tempted again to lie next to him in the darkness, to feel his warmth pressing against her nakedness, but now she did.

"We're all children of Cain, you know," she said idly.

"I don't know. What about Seth? And besides, we're all children of Noah, if you believe any of that shit, which I can't imagine anybody does."

"It's just a figure of speech."

"Meaning we're all descended from evil so we all may as well accept the evil we do?"

"Something like that."

"Uh-huh." He raised himself, grinning, to look at her face in the soft light. "Is this a prelude to something?"

"Let's go back to the cottage. I'm getting cold."

They walked hand in hand back up the path to the little house that now seemed so familiar. As they approached it, she felt a pang of sadness that they'd be leaving it the next day.

"I'm going to miss it," she said, stopping for a moment to look at the warm light that shone out through its windows and thinking of all the quiet, happy hours they'd spent there, bathed in its glow.

"Me too," Mo said.

"Let's build a little fire and have hot cocoa and make love."

"Sounds great."

While she mixed and stirred the cocoa on the stove he started a small fire of dry pine cones and branches in the fireplace. Then he placed a few small logs on it and went into the bedroom.

"I wrote you a poem," he said as he emerged again.

"Just now?" she exclaimed.

He laughed. "No, night before last."

She drew one white-socked foot up against the inside of her opposite thigh and stood, Masai-like, still stirring the simmering cocoa. "Is it nice?"

"I think so. Want to hear it?"

"Sure," she smiled.

He sat down beside the fireplace. "It's called *Seclusion."*

> There is the seclusion of love's absence;
> It is called loneliness,
> And there is the seclusion of love itself;
> It has no name.
>
> Think of Glenn Gould,
> Alone in the frozen silence of his soul;
> Think of mad Van Gogh,
> At the hot moment of denial.
>
> I know the way through loneliness;
> It has much company.
> But love is harder far, because
> It's you against the endless odds.
>
> Another's vision mirrored in your mind,
> That is the solace of love.
> When I'm alone I am always surprised by you;
> Your coming sears me.
>
> I have no perfect refuge now.
> You are everywhere.

Love makes me long
To forget you.

Still, in the stillness of my day,
In the empty eye of some sudden wink,
My heart casts roses on your way
And longs to remember.

Love's heaven's a bourne
From which all venturers return;
Thus is it distinguished from the fire;
But none returns entire.

In the dream within oneself,
Another's love's a dream—
A dancing shadow on a veil,
A fragile seam in what may seem.

But let another enter there,
Let love make its intrusion;
Then you will find beneath the glare
The meaning of seclusion.

He looked at her. "Well? What do you think?"

"Keep your day job," she said, and they both laughed.

Later, as they snuggled by the fire with their hot chocolate, she looked at it again. "You wrote this for me?"

"Uh-huh."

"That was sweet." And then she raised her lips for him to kiss, and he did, and his hand slipped beneath the thick velvet softness of her robe and sought the smooth sculpted swells and hollows beneath her white teddy. Her hair smelled of frangipani. She uttered a long, low sigh, and then another, punctuated by occasional whisperings of his name and the names of the deities as they revealed themselves to one another on the thick rug in the light of the fire beneath a vast and glittering sky.

Mo awoke about four. The fire was gone and it was chilly in the room. He covered her with her robe and then with the blanket they'd had outside during the aurora. Then he heated the coffee and went into the bedroom to read.

It was a beautiful day, hot and still. The woods were fragrant with the odor of the firs. The rush and roar of the surf, the odor of the sea, the rich decaying sweetness of soft black soil all swirled around them in the long afternoon as they walked the periphery of the north end of the island, saying little, pausing wherever they would to gaze or touch or sniff or marvel at the mysteries of this unassuming world.

And then it was time to go.

They sat on the deck and read for the first few hours, Mo in the sunshine, Aurora in the shade. The sea air was pleasantly cool, and the sound was calm. The ferry's engines purred comfortably. About an hour before they reached port the sun set in a drawn-out display of golden color that grew deeper orange, then red, then almost violet, until the vault of the western sky glowed like a sea of flame around the recumbent jewel of the vermilion sun.

And then, as they stood by the rail, their arms around each other, the last fiery sliver slipped away below the horizon.

"I'm glad you came," she said.

"Me too."

As they drew nearer the mainland in the gathering darkness, the ferry was enveloped in a thick fog which they didn't notice at first because they were down in her car, resting, dozing, now and then murmuring sleepily to one another, enjoying the long, slow approach to the conclusion of their happy adventure. Aurora gave Mo a small envelope which she asked him to open later, when he was at home.

The two of them watched the lights of the city shining diffusely through the fog and tried to guess where they were. The ferry's horn echoed over the quiet water. Its engines slowed. The lights came closer. And then, momentarily, they could make out the pier and the great black pilings of the landing before the fog hid everything again. The ferry captain ordered the engine thrust reversed and the ship shuddered as it slowed almost to a stop and then slid forward into its slip between the treelike pilings, thumping, bumping, swaying, and gently settling their journey to its end.

Aurora's car was among the first at the bow of the ship and just before the ramp was set in place so they could debark they saw a shadowy figure standing ashore in the thick fog, near the piermaster's house, and both of them thought, for some reason, it looked like Kate.

"Wonder what *she's* doing here," Aurora mulled incredulously.

"Well," Mo replied, "maybe she's meeting somebody. Maybe it isn't her."

The flow of traffic off the ferry didn't take them close enough, in the fog, to identify her, if indeed it was her, positively. Aurora thought it was her. Mo wasn't so sure.

Several hours later, as they neared their exit from the freeway, long after they'd left the pier and the fog-shrouded woman standing there, long after Mo figured Aurora must've forgotten about it and as he stared out into the night wondering whether, indeed, it had been her, and if it had been, what she'd been doing there, she said, "She was waiting for you, wasn't she?"

"Who?" he said, knowing and knowing she knew he knew.

"You spent the night with her, didn't you?"

A long silence ensued, not unsurprisingly, and the longer it lasted the louder it got. "I never touched her," Mo protested finally. "And besides, you asked me to!"

"I didn't ask you to *fuck* her!" she screamed.

"No, and neither did she." More silence. He felt triumphant. A riposte that good should put an end to it.

As the car swept down off the freeway into the town, she laughed sardonically. It was a low, bitter, malevolent laugh that made Mo's skin crawl. "I think I understand everything now," she said.

"What are you talking about?"

But she didn't answer. "Listen," she said. "I have to get ready to go back to work tomorrow. I don't feel like driving all the way out to your place. I'll drop you off at the Beastrow and you can find a ride."

Mo could feel the heat of her anger on his skin. She was seething. Anything he said would be a provocation; so he said nothing. When she stopped in front of the Beastrow he reached back for his bag. She didn't look at him.

"You're wrong," he said.

"Get out."

And then she drove away.

Mo shrugged. "Nice vacation," he said to no one in particular, as if making a mark in the sky. Then the weight of her absence fell over him like a dark finality that blanketed his soul. "Shit," he said.

Across and down the street, behind a facade of red brick and white shutters and discretely draperied windows, stood the Paul Revere Inn, and above its white Colonial doorway, within the embrace of its two-story Jeffersonian portico, a single glowing yellow jewel hung at the end of twelve feet of black chain, a medieval lantern framed of wrought iron, with fourteen rippled amber glass lights, reminiscent of Gothic cathedrals, and this weighty chandelier, like a pendulum of golden sunlight caged in shadow, wandered in slow circles, caressed by the warm summer breeze. Time had come to an end.

Mo took a deep breath and walked into the Beastrow. Happily for him, Robin and Alexei were immersed in a conversation that could only be sustained by beer. They greeted him warmly. He sat beside Robin and set his bag next to Alexei.

"I kind of prefer the bag anyway," Alexei said.

"Uh-huh," Robin said, turning to look at him. "So, how did it go?"

"Oh, great!" Mo said. "We had a wild ride through a storm on the way up there. Aurora thought she was going to die. She told me a story about this friend of hers that got cooked by lightning. Then we get up there about two in the morning and the bedroom's kind of chilly…"

"*The* bedroom?" Alexei crowed. "*The* bed?"

"…two beds, separated by a DMZ…anyway, I wake up in the morning and she's in my bed…"

Robin couldn't contain himself. "You wake up in the morning?" he asked incredulously. "What do you sleep in, man?"

"God's pajamas."

"And she crawls in with you and you…"

"I was wrapped around her like a snake around a rabbit."

"And you didn't wake up?"

"Well," Alexei said delightedly, "why on earth would he want to wake up? That just would've ruined it."

"Really," Mo said. "Here's how I figure it. While I was asleep my proto-brain, jolted awake by a sudden surge of pheromones as she slithered between the sheets of my dreams, s-ur-realized that if she'd wanted something she'd have knocked on the door instead of crawling in through the window. Based on this perception, it decided to experience the thrills for itself and not bother to let me in on the action."

"Man," Robin said with a half-dejected grin.

"Yeah, okay," Alexei said, smiling, "but we don't care about your tragic sex life anyway. So what else did you do?"

"Well, we walked and talked and read and took sun baths and watched a sunrise and a couple of sunsets, especially one coming back on the boat that was phantasmagorical. The cottage was nice and the weather was great and the food was good and we had a lot of fun being together and being at ease. And then last night there were auroras. Red and blue and green and white ribbons of light, the veils of the stars quivered and swirled and we laid a blanket out and watched them for a long time, maybe an hour or more."

Robin took a long draught from his mug.

"Then," Mo continued, "we went inside and had hot chocolate and fell asleep in front of the fire."

"I'm not going to ask," Robin said.

"Me neither," echoed Alexei. "I don't want to know."

"No," Mo agreed. "You don't."

"And then today we walked around our end of the island and had a beautiful cruise back, including a world-class sunset, and then an hour or so later, when we got close to land, we got into a heavy fog. We were in the bow of the boat and as it nestled into the pier we both noticed someone standing by the window over in the little office where the pier-meisters hang out."

He took a quick breath, not really meaning to. "Guess who it was."

"Gorbachev?" Alexei offered.

"Kate," Robin said.

"Yep. She and I both thought, in the same instant, that it was."

"You're a dead man," Alexei said.

"You're a dumb shit is what you are," Robin laughed. "I told you you were going to get in trouble for that."

"Oy vey!" Mo exclaimed. "How could it have been Kate? Why would she be there? What are the odds? It doesn't make any sense. You couldn't have identified your mother in that fog. She was forty feet away. She was in the shadows, wearing a trenchcoat and a cap of some kind. Maybe it was even a guy."

"You remind me of somebody," Alexei said.

"So shall I guess that she dumped you off here instead of taking you out to the creek?" Robin asked.

"She dumped me off here rather than throwing me out on the freeway."

Robin laughed. "I see," he said. "I told you, you know. Just like you said, she controls everything. So she knows everything. Her radar sees beads of sweat on bugs. Her missiles go right up your butt."

"But I'm innocent!" he cried, and they all laughed for the joy of it.

"I really am," he said afterward. "That's the tragedy of it."

"And the comedy," Alexei observed wryly.

"And you're really not," Robin said.

"Why? Because I lusted in my heart?"

"Nope," Robin said, closing his eyes and shaking his head slowly. "Not even if you lusted in your loincloth. Or hers." Then he smiled. "For pretending not to notice when she snuggled her warm little buns up against you. But ultimately for agreeing to the covenant of chastity in the first place. For that you were damned forever."

Mo finished off his second mug of beer and put money on the table for another pitcher. Then he walked back to the men's room.

A waitress came by and Alexei ordered another pitcher.

"Man, she keelhauled his ass," Robin said, laughing.

"No kidding," Alexei agreed.

"She has another boy."

"Oh, I know. I met him. He's very sweet. I told her I wanted him next when she was finished with him."

Robin smiled.

"Fuck," Mo said when he sat down.

"No, that was a dream," Robin laughed. "Remember?"

"I don't care anymore."

"Sure, Mo," Alexei mocked him. "The man of steel."

"And besides," Robin reminded him, "in real life there's Kate."

"I don't know that."

"I do."

"And Mo," Alexei began, "there's no point second-guessing yourself. She's not really a Roman goddess, you know. She's a high-strung, red-headed, hard-scrabbling, take-no-prisoners bitch on wheels. Look, you had an experience, didn't you? And it was a hell of a ride, wasn't it? And you had to have it, didn't you? And from a lawyer yet. What an idiot."

"Let me tell you one other thing," Mo said.

"What?"

"After another six beers, I'll need a ride home."

Robin reached for the pitcher. "One more," he said. "I can't stand too much excitement all in one night."

When they walked out of the Beastrow Alexei nodded toward the pretentious facade across the street. "You could stay with the minutemen," he suggested, smiling mischievously.

"Take him home," Robin said. "We may find a use for him later."

On the drive out to Indian Creek Alexei asked Mo if he had any regrets.

"Yeah," Mo said, "but I'll wash them off. You know, I've always liked the juice of things. I remember in college, the parties, the women, the aura of wild discovery. It was of no moment whatsoever to me whether Shakespeare was gay or really wrote *Macbeth* or whether he sent coded messages to protestants. But I loved theater people, and especially the actresses. Shakespeare had juice, so I read Shakespeare. That's my take on things. It's honest at least. My quest for the meaning of life took me to this: the first principle of knowing is personal experience, and personal experience has two coequal spheres, the inner world and the outer world, the me and the not-me."

"Sure."

"In both of these spheres it's easy to see a world shot through with pain, chaos, fear, anger, hatred, sorrow, jealousy, repression, bullying, injustice, cruelty, and deceit—you name it, we make it. A lot of suffering, most of it man-caused. But then, on the other hand, you look again and you also see inside and out a world of beauty, peace, happiness, hope, compassion, and even love. This tells me that the inner world and the outer world are the same. It tells me that the game's the thing. And regrets are pointless."

"I completely agree," Alexei said, as they pulled into Mo's driveway.

"Thanks a lot for the ride," Mo said, lifting his bag from the seat.

"I think I should tell you she didn't go home."

"Thanks. It doesn't matter. It was fantastic."

"Good. Take care."

Later, after he'd warmed and poured a small snifter of brandy, and dug out a dried but still-palatable cigar, and lit it, he settled in his old leather armchair and opened the envelope she'd given him. It contained a poem. It was entitled *To the Sun King.*

O dawn that drove away my darkest hour,
That sang of promises no day had ever kept;
O rising morn that raised me from my bower,
You kissed away the tears the night had wept.
O you brought music to my deafened ears
And flowered fragrance for my bitter sighs;
O you cast into shadow all my fears
And bade my humbled hoping to arise.

With trembling hands I held your golden rays,
With lips of dust I kissed your azure eyes.
With happy heart I mended all my ways,
As from my raiment fell the dust of doubt.
Then came vermilion to the evening skies
And all my sacred candles flickered out.

Chapter 20

Mise en Scène

Had we but world enough, and time,
This coyness lady were no crime.
We would sit down, and think which way
To walk, and pass our long love's day.

—*To His Coy Mistress,* Andrew Marvel

"This is a beautiful place," Geoffrey said as Elizabeth welcomed him into the foyer of her modest abode among the trees.

"Yes, thank you," she said. "I'm very fond of it."

The ground floor was dominated by the living room space, which rose twenty feet to its beamed ceiling. Directly across from the front door was a large free-standing stone fireplace, and beyond it on either side were a bright and spacious kitchen and dining room. In the foyer the floor was glazed gray flagstone instead of the broad oak planks that glistened in the living and dining areas. This flat stone was repeated again on the floor of the kitchen. An elegant staircase led upstairs to the cantilevered balcony, off which were her bedroom and study, separated by a bath. On either side of the living room were huge vertical windows perhaps fifteen feet high, through which now the evening light flooded the room. One gazed out over the river and the other looked up along the verdant sweep of a wooded hillside across the road.

She led him into the kitchen and placed a frosted glass of iced tea, bestride its gleaming lip a yellow lemon slice and afloat in its amber clarity a jaunty verdant sprig of mint, into his hand, which she held briefly in hers. "I have to change and I'll be ready," she said. "Five minutes, tops."

"Your pleasure is my Grail," he replied.

"Okay," she said, smiling, "make yourself at home, but don't pocket the silverware, because I counted everything before you got here."

"You know," Geoffrey said, watching her as she started up the stairs, "six weeks ago, the night I first saw you onstage, you really brought Electra to me as I'd never seen her before. More than you yourself, more than your portrayal of her, I saw Electra. Electra as Sophocles and his audiences saw her. A godlike woman of unassailable stature who, in grappling with the fiends unleashed within her by terrible injustice, comes to a base and tragic end."

"Why, thank you again," she said, leaning over the balcony rail. "I'm happy to know you enjoyed it."

Geoffrey sipped the tea as he glanced around her house. There were many small *objets d'art,* including a small painstakingly rendered ink drawing by Robin Ecst featuring a baby's head grafted onto a bewildering maze of mechanical systems in lieu of a body. A welter of pipes, cables, conduits and tunnels connected it to the earth. If he looked hard enough, and long enough, he saw, as one commonly saw in Robin's work, other faces in fantastical shapes among the shadows. From the beatific aspect of this dark-skinned infant's face its large black eyes stared steadily out at him, devoid of any expression.

"Whatever made you think of that?" she asked as she descended the staircase dressed in levis and a baggy gray sweatshirt.

"What?"

"Electra."

Geoffrey noticed that her face was impeccably scrubbed and free of any blemish whatever, its dark chocolate skin toned and smooth and its topographical features—brow ridges, lips, nose, cheekbones, chin, jaw, forehead—all delineated with strong but delicate grace. "Watching you climb the stairs, I guess," he grinned. "Your liquid motion. Your confident grace. Your elegant bearing."

"My," she said with an indulgent grin, arching a thick shiny black eyebrow over the skeptical glint of her eye. "Why aren't you writing my reviews?"

"I mean it," he said. "I'm completely in love with you. I have been, ever since then."

She laughed. "You're a shameless sycophant," she said.

He smiled and opened the door for her, and did the same when they got to his car, and did the same when they arrived at the backstage entrance to the theater.

As soon as they stepped into the bustling, shadowy warrens of the backstage their rôles overtook them. She had to get dressed, and made up, and go over a few last-minute changes with the director. Geoffrey talked briefly with the lighting manager to make sure everything was in order for the taping of the show. Because the theater was small, he was working the job alone. He had two cameras set up near the stage and two more at the back of the theater. From his dimly lit booth behind the last row of seats he could guide his remote camera along its semi-circular carbon-fiber track above the audience, soundlessly choosing the perfect angle for each shot. He'd worked it out in his mind, and on paper, and in practice, for three nights of performances. Now he checked one last time that all his equipment was functioning flawlessly. It was.

"Be good, baby," he said to himself. Then he went outside to smoke a cigarette.

Like a well-trained animal, Elizabeth seemed able to adopt an entirely new dramatic personality in the blink of an eye, but her elegance and self-confidence always shone through, Geoffrey thought, even when she was playing a character who had neither, in tiny flickering gestures of humor that appeared in her eyes and around the corners of her mouth.

This evening she played a wealthy socialite who was constantly pursued for her fortune by boringly self-centered and meaningless men but who, naturally, fell madly in love with the gardener, who had no interest in her money and, because of the gulf between their stations in life, could only bumblingly evince his attraction to her, and then only in the garden itself. Although her friends, accustomed to being fawned over, complained of abandonment, her illicit passion grew ever more zealous. The poor gardener sought to resist by placing bizarre constraints upon their assignations and one night tricked her into thinking she'd killed him while he, finally at wit's end, was making good his escape far away. One of the foppish worthies she'd earlier rejected responded at this point to her cries of despair and, blithely unawares, helped her plant a tree over the spot where she'd hastily buried the "body," whereupon she realized that, in order to protect this evidence of her "crime," she was doomed to live out the trivial and hollow life for which her upbringing had prepared her.

In the pompous, mannered indoor scenes Elizabeth's portrayal was perfect, impeccable and commanding but at the same time charmingly vacant and increasingly disengaged as her character's surreptitious liaisons with the gardener consumed more and more of her life. In the garden scenes, though, where she was ostensibly slumming and debasing herself, Geoffrey thought the characterization lacked a certain resonance and perhaps revealed her personal discomfort with such inane depravity. Nevertheless, he kept the camera unflinchingly upon her as

much as he could. He'd learned from working with Alexei that sometimes the artist's interpretations proved to be right even when everyone else at first thought otherwise.

The performance, like the videotaping, was a pleasant success, and afterward, while he paced in the hallway outside Elizabeth's dressing room, Geoffrey overheard voices in a nearby office and realized it was Kate interviewing the playwright.

Was it, she wanted to know, inevitable that Diana, the heroine, would come to such a depressing end, or was it her relentless pursuit of a relationship with the gardener that caused her misfortune, if such it could be called?

The playwright acknowledged the inevitability of everything and then launched into a thinly veiled criticism of Elizabeth's performance, suggesting that a more sensitive actress would have made clearer the faults in Diana's personality which led to her finally hopeless conclusion.

And was it intentional, Kate persisted, that there seemed to be overtones of operatic melodrama in the plot, or had the playwright's intentions been more Ibsenic?

Again implicitly asserting the inevitability of everything, the playwright supposed that, had Ibsen written an opera, perhaps this would've been it.

"And perhaps," Kate inquired, "I might not be remiss in detecting here a certain deep element of Greek tragedy?"

"Well, of course," the disembodied voice replied, laughing, "Sophocles is the father of us all, and if in the spell I weave there are threads that emanate from the Greeks and glisten like the sun on Verdi's grandeur and flow darkly through Ibsen's drawing rooms to illuminate the mysteries of contemporary society, then so much the better, eh?"

She must've foregone an opportunity to raise any objection to this, because he went on at great length about the confusion of the times and the folly of human efforts to transform the world or escape from the predicaments in which men find themselves.

"If there is a message," he said, in a way that artists seemed to have of always finessing what meaning might inhere in anything they did, or whether indeed there might be none, "if there is some cosmic message in my works it would be that we must be who we are, where we are, as we are, for we cannot escape it and when we try we are led inexorably into despair."

Geoffrey felt that, had he been conducting the interview, he'd himself already have been cast into despair, but Kate seemed to be revelling in it, plying the playwright with flattering ambrosia, skillfully illuminating every predicament in which he found himself.

"I found Ms. Baldwin's performance quite enchanting," she said, "and yet you say, if I understand you, that she relied too much on Diana's social circumstances as motivation and didn't delve deeply enough into her personal demons. Would that be accurate?"

"Well, she did a beautiful job," he said, his voice drifting off, "and I wouldn't take that away from her, but…"

"And what about the direction? Will you be making changes in the direction? How much of a part does the direction, and the staging and costumes and so forth, have on the impact of this play, in your opinion?"

"Well, everything matters, naturally…"

Elizabeth emerged at last from her dressing room, looking fresh and eager, clad again in jeans and wearing a pale blue cotton peasant blouse, a narrow rhinestone-encrusted tiara in her jet-black hair, and a huge smile on her happy brown face. For an instant Geoffrey was tempted to alert her to the conversation going on down the hall, but she said, "Let's go to Mumsy's!" and he swept her away in the opposite direction, filled with glee as her arm entwined about his while they strolled toward the car.

"You were magnificent," he said.

"Oh? And now?"

He laughed. "And now you're even more magnificent."

Mumsy's place was constructed in an old barn that had once served—and still did, occasionally—as a venue for summer stock. The stage had been trimmed back and was now rather too small for full-fledged theater but quite ample for even a large musical ensemble. Around a dance area suitable for two dozen rowdy couples were tables of all sizes and shapes, and on one side was a large balcony with more tables, and opposite it was the serving area, including a bar and a kitchen.

Although the music this night was typically raucous, the room was cavernous—the huge timber beams that spanned its walls and supported the roof were twenty-five feet from the ground—and on the balcony, back away from the railing in particular, people enjoyed easy conversation. The tables here were large, accommodating six or eight people, and the lighting was a low amber color, furnished by ornate sconces on the walls that had, so the legend went, once been gaslights in a lavish whorehouse in San Francisco.

It seemed that everyone knew her. Some had been students in her literature classes, and many had attended the play, tonight or recently, and these praised her for her performance despite the fact that, as a few said, the play itself was wanting.

The band, which appeared to be an eclectic mix of pick-up musicians, one or two obviously somewhat in their cups, was playing a medley of what Geoffrey might have described as salsa polkas, but it didn't really matter much to the dancers, who danced for almost anything with a perceptible rhythm. Geoffrey and Elizabeth worked their way upstairs and joined a table of five which was more or less the province of an ancient character actor and sometime bartender from Chicago named Bruno Novak, whose tanned, leathery skin and white Vandyke beard lent an air of noble aristocracy to his piercing blue-gray eyes and rough, yellowed smile. He stood and bowed deeply as Elizabeth approached the table, kissing her proffered hand, and she curtsied as gracefully as anyone wearing levis could, and several people shuffled themselves so that she could sit next to him and Geoffrey next to her.

"Bonjour, madamoiselle," Bruno said, replacing his wire-rimmed glasses and looking at her through their tiny oblong lenses. "I was there on opening night, as you know, and I was in the audience again tonight, and may I say Diana has blossomed in your capable care, although I persist in my belief that Norvalt is a blithering idiot who does not yet know what his play is about. Perhaps if he watches you carefully enough he will someday grasp it."

"You're too kind," she said, laughing.

"Yes, but we must pretend to see something profound in our playwrights even when we don't, because that's what keeps them scribbling, you know, that illusion of their poignant insights blooming in the wasteland of the public soul, because without them we actors are only empty shells echoing imponderable nonsense into our beer."

"Oh, besides," she said, "I think it's good for them. It even makes some of them better, don't you think?"

"I don't know," Bruno said, leaning back in his chair. "Geoffrey, what do you think?"

"I don't know either," Geoffrey said. "But I can tell you illusions are hard to capture on film. Illusions have to be represented in physical reality, ultimately in the physical reality of light on a surface, or they're only in your imagination. Then they're *de*lusions. In order to bloom in the wasteland, those poignant insights have to be acted out on the stage. They have to be there when the band starts playing. They have to dance to the music. The audience is only going to be ready once for tonight's show. Well, actors create and maintain those illusions, but writers have to create material that supports an actor's efforts and allows good acting to be credible."

"At the very least."

"Yes. So I guess that actors and their friends should, in their idle unemployment, embellish and nourish—no, even embrace—the illusions of writers in what is both a remote hope and yet an occasional certainty, that for some writers it will prove inspiration to climb higher artistic heights and thus spark more great moments in the world of make-believe, which somehow, like mathematics, bears an uncanny resemblance to the real world of human affairs."

Bruno looked pleased and chagrined both at the same time.

"Think of it as applause," Elizabeth said. The others at the table expressed their agreement with this.

"I don't know," Bruno said. "I think it's bullshit. I don't think Shakespeare had a bunch of sycophants following him around, saying, "Gee, Bill, the lines you've written for Hamlet sure have that old, how shall we say it, *je ne sais quoi.* Let's see:

> 'I'd dare not draw this dagger deep inside
> My mortal flesh, except I should be free
> Of all the whirling misery of this hour.
> And for such butchering, eternal what?
> An endless summer's journey on a swan,
> Or, think of it, a hellish aftermath
> Of pain? No, I'm a Dane; my bodkin's bare
> And I shall peel before I eat my peach.'"

Everyone found this both impressive and amusing.

"See?" Elizabeth said. "I think it works."

"Exactly," Geoffrey said. "I think he went down to the theaters and the pubs and hung around with actors and actresses and set designers and costume-makers and tried things out with them and let them teach him things, and I think there was a powerful synergy between Shakespeare and his actors. And I think that contributed a lot to his greatness." He paused for a moment. "As it obviously has to yours."

"Now tell me again," Bruno said to Elizabeth, "where you found this person."

She smiled. "He's part of my poetry group."

"Yes," Geoffrey said, "but when I watched her do Electra, the poetry group faded to nothingness. I was mesmerized."

"You were electrified," someone said.

"Electrocuted."

"Electrolyted."

"Yes?" Bruno inquired. "And now?"

"I just finished videotaping the play tonight."

"But you two," Bruno began, waggling his finger back and forth between them, "you're not, like, an item or anything."

"Actually, we're like friends," Geoffrey said.

Elizabeth put her hand on his shoulder as she arose and said in his ear, "Time for us to go dancing, boy."

Geoffrey beamed. "I'll dance anytime with you."

"Wear him out a little before you bring him back here," Bruno called after her with a pained expression.

Chapter 21

Acting Out

Out upon it, I have loved
Three whole days together!
And am like to love three more,
If it prove fair weather.

—*The Constant Lover*, Sir John Suckling

"Ah, serving wench!" Bruno called out teasingly as one of the waitresses approached. "More grog! And two more steins for our dancing fools. And a kiss if you please."

The young woman leaned over and kissed him full on the lips. "I fear I shall swoon," she said as she straightened up unsteadily. "Please, sir, no more." With this she raised the back of her hand to her brow and continued on her way.

Shortly afterward, Geoffrey, dripping sweat and still breathing heavily, returned to the table. Smiling broadly, he lowered himself into his chair. "She's tireless," he said.

Bruno nodded. A woman across the table exclaimed apropos of this that Elizabeth was a wonderful, inspiring teacher, who tried to teach her students to experience the worlds of words that writers wrote about.

"I can't even say that," Bruno responded. "'The worlds of words that writers wrote about.' Are you sure you're not making this up?"

She laughed.

"When I saw her in *Electra*, I felt as if the princess Electra herself were walking before me," Geoffrey said. "I saw a mortal woman, ridden by demons even goddesses might not endure. I felt the consuming force of her passion to avenge her father's murder. I sensed the loss of her dignity, overwhelmed in an Olympian struggle against a profound corruption which fate had thrust upon her."

"Incredible," Bruno said. "You should be writing her reviews."

"Yeah, that's what she said."

"Actually, Electra is an interesting character. And those Greeks seem to have foreshadowed almost everything. But of course that's mainly because they came first."

"I'm not sure I understand the Freudian take on her motivation, though," Geoffrey said, pausing to empty his mug of beer. "I mean, an incestuous overtone in her relationship with Agamemnon seems unrequired, it doesn't add any dimension to the action, and its existence is questionable."

"Well, the Greeks weren't Freudians," Bruno said, refilling Geoffrey's mug, "and Freud wasn't a dramatist."

"Take away that it's her mother against whom she seeks this revenge and you still have the essence of her crisis, I think."

The woman across the table perked up again. "Then it could've been anybody?"

"Well," Geoffrey conceded, "it had to be somebody whose death at Orestes' hand was especially reprehensible. Like his brother, for instance."

"He didn't have a brother," Bruno said, "but I take your point. Still, I think matricide was a bigger no-no, and that enhances the conflict."

"May be. Anyway, it was Elizabeth's portrayals of her that brought all these ideas to life for me. She revealed Electra to me as a real-life person. And it was so wonderful, I just fell in love with her."

"Uh-huh," Bruno replied, squinting his eyes. "Somehow I suspected as much. And did she fall in love with you, may I ask?"

Finishing a long, thoughtful draught, Geoffrey laughed. "No, I don't think so," he said, tipping his glass up and then pouring himself another.

"Well, you'd know, wouldn't you?"

The woman across the table, whose name was Hannah, thought that Elizabeth was too dedicated to her work to fall in love. "Or maybe she has a secret lover nobody knows about," she said.

Bruno sat back in his chair and stroked his short beard thoughtfully, regarding Elizabeth as she approached the table. "Maybe now we'll find out," he said.

Geoffrey moved his chair a little and she sat down, grinning, and Bruno filled both their mugs from one of several pitchers on the table.

"We're wondering if you have a secret lover," Bruno said.

"Yes," Hannah echoed, "and if your mother killed him, would you entice brother Geoffrey to go kill her in revenge?"

Elizabeth smiled and sighed. "We're back to Electra again?"

"Well," Bruno began, "speaking only for myself, I think we're a little confused whether we're talking about Electra or about you."

"Personally," Geoffrey said, "I'm interested in how you see her. How you saw her when you played her. Whether you think an incestuous shading in her relationship with her father was a critical part of her story."

"I didn't feel that," Elizabeth said. "I don't feel that."

"But," Hannah objected, "isn't it part of the classical analysis of tragedy that a seemingly unimportant event or momentary sin gets compounded by self-indulgent and obsessive passion into some awesome eventuality?"

"Pride, Aristotle said. *Hubris*. The pride that leads one to believe one's prerogatives are those of the gods. That's the little seed that starts it all off."

"Well, far be it from me to disagree with Aristotle," Geoffrey said. "I'm just a vidiot. But I think the play is about obsession. Its danger and its glory. And Electra is obsessed."

"Trampling the cloak of honor beneath the muddy boots of insatiable passion," Bruno said.

Elizabeth smiled. "I'm not sure I'd call it honor."

"Honor," Bruno continued, "is the linchpin of the social contract. If passion overwhelms honor, then civil society comes apart. Civil society hinges on the common existence of personal honor."

"Okay, Bruno," Elizabeth said. "But I don't think it was honor Electra sacrificed when she induced Orestes to kill their mother; I think it was love."

"Love? Really? But the stage is littered with dishonor. No one's reputation is spared. Even poor old Agamemnon is impugned. It seems to be the death of all honor. It was certainly his honor that Orestes sacrificed."

"Was it? He was bound by honor to avenge his father's death. And to protect his mother. And perhaps to obey the pleadings of his sister. He had no choice but to fail in one of these. He was just an innocent bystander. After all, Athena spared him. It was Electra through whose folly

the tragedy occurred. Her ultimate failure was her betrayal of her brother, her willingness to sacrifice him, his sense of self-worth, even his sanity in pursuit of her revenge. And that was a failure of love."

Geoffrey was beginning to regret he'd brought the whole thing up. "So is what we see as a failure of love the same thing the Greeks saw as a breach of honor? I mean, is there really a disagreement here?"

"I think we're talking about two different things," Bruno said. "Electra's obsession made her betray her love and despoil Orestes' honor. I think for the Greeks it was this loss of honor that constituted the real horror."

"And so," Hannah inquired, "both Electra, and then Orestes at her urging, exemplified *hubris* by undertaking this act of matricidal revenge?"

"Sure, absolutely," Bruno began as Geoffrey finished and refilled another mug of beer. "In Homer's time kings and princes were regarded as the direct descendants of gods. Whether the gods shape men out of clay or impregnate unsuspecting teenagers or transfigure ordinary blokes who become kings—exactly how it's done is pretty much beside the point. The fact is, all god cosmologies envision this transition. Some say it was done once, at a respectable remove, like fashioning Adam from clay. Others think the process is ongoing, a pleaching of the corporeal and the spiritual, the mortal and the immortal. But for the ancient Greeks it was something that had happened in historical time.

"Well, if there's god nature and an animal nature, if humans are sublime spirit one moment and illusory maya the next, if the gods are flesh and the quick are gods, it's not so strange that a society like the Greeks might consider its primordial fears and fancies to be external realities, or believe its gods to be powerful ancestors from which the world's present population are recently descended."

At this juncture the playwright and the director, along with several of their friends, made their way up to the balcony and seated themselves at another table some distance away. Elizabeth leaned over to Geoffrey and whispered, "I'm going over to talk with David for a minute. I'll be back."

Bruno turned his attention to Hannah and barely paused. "Jaynes speculated that the psychic continuum from god to man in the Greeks of this period was sustained by a much more balanced power relationship than exists today between the blind, libidinous stem brain and the sighted, rational cerebrum. Today they struggle often with one another, and we consider it important that the cerebrum should rule. We've made a deal with the devil of technology and science, and rational knowledge generally—the Faustian bargain, the sin of Eden—and this has led us to emphasize the cerebrum, whose infernal thinking is what got us into this mess in the first place. But of course technology enabled us to populate the earth in ways we couldn't sustain without it, so getting rid of it now would wipe out most of humanity."

Hannah smiled her understanding and Geoffrey refilled his glass while Bruno went on.

"Anyway, the Greeks had no need for such a distinction between the world within and the world outside, between the dark inner world known to the stem brain and the bright outer world known to the cerebrum. By anthropomorphizing their gods, they were able to maintain a harmony between the inner world of their feelings and the outer world of their deeds. Rather than embarking on a struggle with his own conscience, a Greek would seek a riddle from an Oracle, not unlike the riddles of the *I Ching* and other such texts, from whose contemplation one might discern an essential truth. Nowadays we look at Rorschach blots and horoscopes and believe that whatever truth or wisdom might arise from them must be constructed in the self-aware interpretive mind. For the Greeks the power of insight and prophecy resided in sibyls and gods, in myths and plays, in the blots and blurbs themselves, and the mind simply winnowed it out. Like

most people today naively believe that numbers and atoms exist, most people then believed that gods existed—that is, lived—as truly as they themselves did. Without this belief, the idea of *hubris* cannot really be appreciated, because it means arrogating to oneself, in one's delusional mind, the powers and privileges of a god."

"'Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord,'" Geoffrey said. It surprised him to hear these words tumble from his lips. He hadn't intended, he thought, to say anything. Then he realized he felt strangely remote, unsure why he was even sitting there.

"Exactly," Bruno said. "And this was written a thousand years or so before Homer, so it just compounded Electra's tragic flaw that she would dare take vengeance, dare kill her mother, dare sacrifice her brother's honor. All these things were beyond the moral scope of merely human privilege, and in all these things she…"

"Excuse me," Geoffrey said, rising with some difficulty to his feet. "I have to go to the head."

How he'd got to the bathroom, he reflected as he stood swaying in front of the urinal, he wasn't sure. He'd hit a few things, bumped a few chairs as he'd made his way along the balcony. And he'd gone down the stairs, gripping the railing, with the same exaggerated caution people evince when, too drunk to walk, they drive their cars along a road at ten miles an hour.

He washed his hands at the basin and looked at himself in the mirror. He looked like hell. He splashed some cold water on his face and looked again. Better, but he still looked oddly pale and unkempt. Moreover, he felt like shit. He hadn't spent two minutes talking with Elizabeth. He couldn't bear the thought of returning to the table where Bruno, no doubt, was still droning on about *hubris* and honor and the corpus callosum. He went to the bar and ordered a cup of black coffee and stirred a spoonful of crushed ice into it. Then he stood with his back to the room while he drank it as quickly as he could, watching himself and the amber-shadowed merry world through the mirrored wall behind the bottles. He ordered another and sipped it pensively, stretching his eyes and mouth, trying to feel his face, trying to recover some sensation of normalcy. And even though he was watching the mirror this whole time, she surprised him when she appeared behind him, at his shoulder. She smelled like gardenias.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

He smiled blearily at her. "You sure smell good," he said.

She smiled back. "I'm about ready to go," she said.

"Me too," he said.

"Tell you what. Finish your coffee. I'm going to go say goodbye to Bruno and Hannah. Then I'll meet you out in the parking lot in a few minutes, okay?"

"Good."

Every step seemed difficult. He tried to appear nonchalant as he walked toward the door but it took all his concentration to get outside without falling down or breaking something. The night air was fresh and cool against his face. It felt good. As he approached the car he realized he couldn't drive. He wondered if she could.

"I feel like an idiot," he said as she approached him a few minutes later.

"You are an idiot," she said, smiling and taking his keys. She let him in on the passenger side then walked around and arranged herself behind the wheel.

"Can you drive?" he asked.

She laughed and started the engine. "Think you'd know the difference?" she asked, backing the car out with the aplomb of an experienced lot attendant.

"Well, I thought maybe, um, since you didn't have a car, ah…"

She laughed. “Let me tell you something about me, Geoffrey. I’m a simple sort of person. I’m very dedicated to my work. I love reading and teaching and the theater, and that consumes most of my life. And that’s exactly the way I want it because it leaves me happy and fulfilled. I don’t have a car because I don’t need one. If I need one I can rent one, and I can even drive it. I don’t have a TV either, but I can program a VCR as well as anyone.”

Geoffrey looked at her and stared out into the night beyond the windshield. She was saying she didn’t have room in her life for a half-potted vidiot.

“I know you have feelings for me, Geoffrey, and I’m very flattered. I have feelings for you, too. Maybe they’re not quite the same.”

Geoffrey felt small, like a child.

“But I care about you,” she continued. “I don’t want you to feel rejected, because I’m not rejecting you. It’s just that, well, I have a full life. A satisfying life. I’ll be happy if you become part of it; I just hope there’s enough of it there to interest you.”

His mind swirled like black smoke in the darkness. He couldn’t say anything. He felt pained and numb at the same time.

“I suppose I’m speaking out of turn,” she said.

“No,” he replied. “No. I understand. I’ve imposed on you. I’m sorry.”

“You haven’t imposed on me at all. That’s silly. I’m quite fond of you and I enjoy your company. I just want you to feel comfortable with who I am, that’s all.”

And as she parked the car in front of her place he reflected that perhaps she had, perhaps he did feel a little more comfortable with her, and perhaps it would work out between them, something would, and perhaps he had been way too anxious, and all he wanted then was just to relax and go to sleep.

She offered him her sofa for the night—insisted, really, although it wasn’t necessary—and he managed to walk almost normally up the steps to her door and into the great quiet room and even to slip off his shoes after he sat down and she went into the kitchen to brew up a pot of coffee.

“When I watch you perform,” he said, “I feel liberated somehow. I feel your characters, as if they were precious to me, and I feel as though I’ve been inducted into some mystery, something profound about the human experience. It’s so intense. I can’t describe it.”

She returned to the room and stopped by the stairs to put a CD on the sound system. Chopin’s *Nocturnes*. “I’m going to slip into something more comfortable,” she said, “as the saying goes, and I’ll be right back, so don’t go away, okay?”

“Great,” he said, glancing up as she headed for the stairs.

“Coffee’ll be ready in a few minutes,” she said.

He watched her mount the stairs, two at a time, and he felt both awed and freed.

On the coffee table was a magazine containing an essay by Bruno Novak on the nature of Greek tragedy in the modern consciousness. He glanced at it quickly and then remembered the poem he’d written for Elizabeth. It was in his pocket. He fished it out and opened it, bending the creases back on themselves so it would lie flat on the table.

> *Umbra* (in your shadow)
>
> Black-shadowed in the blue light of the spot,
> Draped and gathered in shimmering silk,
> Graceful and sure as St. Joan,
> I saw you.

Rich clear hues arising from the still,
Caressing the undulant air,
Sweet as Leontyne's pietà,
I heard you.

Brushed by the sudden puff of a breeze,
The waxy white gardenia's sigh,
Like young love and autumn leaves,
I smelled you.

On the rim of your glass, once,
After rehearsal when you had gone,
Like a thief
I tasted you.

And often by a door or on a stair,
With trembling fingers swathed
In awestruck reverie,
I touched you.

In dream and fancy, sun and shade,
Roof and rain, sense and silence,
My sovereign, sister, sloe-eyed sweet,
I loved you.

He folded it again and tucked it under the magazine.

A few minutes later (or was it twenty?) she emerged from her bedroom and walked across the balcony, watching him carefully as she descended the staircase, her blue-black hair glistening in the light, her lips slightly parted, her eyes aglow, clad in an ankle-length royal purple velvet robe, carrying a pair of blue pajamas.

"You awake, vidiot?" she asked softly as she stepped off the stairs and padded barefoot into the kitchen.

She poured two cups of coffee and walked back to the living room, where Geoffrey was stretched out supine on the couch, his head on the big gold pillow, his eyes closed.

She sat in the black leather Queen Anne chair across from him and soundlessly set the cups on the table. She smiled. "I see you've read Bruno's piece," she said.

His expression didn't change.

"Too bad. You missed out on something. Not what you wanted, I guess. But something you need. And I'll give it to you, you know, if you'll let me."

But Geoffrey was asleep. And he didn't know.

She pressed the robe down between her thighs and crossed her legs. Geoffrey would have appreciated how long and tan and smooth and muscular they were. He would've waxed eloquent over her feet.

She sipped her coffee for a while and gazed at him over the rim and wondered what it was about him that attracted her so. He was something more than a student, which he wasn't, or a fan, which he most decidedly was, or a colleague, which he was in some ways not well-defined, or even a friend. His crush on her, like his crush on Alexei, had made him wild-eyed, and overwhelmed him, and so he was the passionate brave—suicidal might be a better word—warrior at the same time he was the crushed (!) and humbled little boy all women yearn to hold.

"We're both warriors," she said, "you and me. We're both trying to take new ground. I hear your challenge. I like you, and I'll fight beside you. Maybe I can teach you to enjoy fighting for yourself."

But Geoffrey was asleep. And he didn't know.

She picked up Bruno's article and started to read it. The music played softly in the background.

> …Electra is filled with grief and righteous hatred over a monstrous injustice, a crime that goes much deeper than the murder of Agamemnon itself. It is the lust of Clytemnestra for her husband's cousin Aegisthus, and his for her—this lust, so enraged that it overwhelms the boundaries of civil discourse—from which the living tragedy springs, because everyone who lives long enough must one day confront an upwelling of such intense feeling.
>
> And Hamlet succumbs to the same temptation, descending into the miasma of absurdity and so defeating himself at long last, disabling the cerebrum so the cerebellum can play through, and killing almost the entire cast as a result. It's quite natural, I think. Indeed, even infants seem to experience it, and curiously enough the events depicted in Hamlet seem to have been drawn almost entirely from historical fact.
>
> But Hamlet and Electra are both confronted with injustice that cannot go unchallenged, perpetrated by persons too elevated in stature to be grasped by the ordinary instruments of the law. When queens and emperors commit crimes, however abominable, will the courts of the common man reach up to bring them before the bar, and mete to their purple robes the same swift, merciless justice that is laid so readily on the rags of the rude mob? Does not justice serve the pleasure of the king? How then shall the king, or the queen as seems to be the case in all these stories, be brought to face justice if not by direct action?
>
> No such dilemma exists in Macbeth. The murder is not for revenge, nor for the presumptuous righting of a wrong, nor driven by psychoanalytic ur-forces, but rather is nakedly undertaken for an utterly illegitimate power, to glorify overweening ambition run amok, to bring a king not to justice but to an ignominious and undeserved end in his bedchamber, in his nightclothes, for the purpose of usurping his throne and his kingdom. So what is Electra's relation to Lady Macbeth?
>
> Well, I'm almost tempted to say that, in killing Duncan, Lady Macbeth is somehow making herself his consort—you can't really use the word "lover" here. Macbeth is so pliant and insecure that he might be rendered as Duncanesque as she would like. But many threads go from Electra to Lady Macbeth. I think the solicitation is an obvious one, the effort to escape one's own personal commission of the deed. Of course Lady Macbeth's instrument is considerably less apt than Electra's and she must reduce Macbeth to the level of royal worm castings before he is sufficiently intimidated finally to do the deed. But here again passion slips the bonds of upright character and then of civil behavior. And here again the engine of passion's fatal endurance is an obsessive feeding frenzy of desire.
>
> Superficially, their motivation could not be more different, and yet both women are driven to terrible murder by blind, fire-breathing, take-no-prisoners blood lust which is kept red-hot by their obsession with the achievement of their goal. Does the origin of this lust, in righteous vengeance or regal larceny, matter really?

She yawned. Chopin had faded into the early morning silence. No, it didn't matter, really. She lay down the magazine and finished her coffee. Then she rose and bent over him and kissed him on the lips and whispered goodnight.

But Geoffrey was asleep. And he didn't know.

Chapter 22

Rose of Tralee

Beauty, thou wild fantastic ape,
Who dost in ev'ry country change thy shape!
Here black, there brown, here tawny, and there white;
Thou flatt'rer which compli'st with every sight!

—*Beauty*, Abraham Cowley

The weather was beautiful the next morning when Geoffrey awoke in the white leather cloudiness of Elizabeth's sofa. The high late-morning sun streamed in through the east windows. The room glowed. On the coffee table was a note from her:

> Read your poem. Very beautiful. Thank you. Coffee's on the stove. Sticky buns in the microwave. You look good in blue. Believe your virtue is intact—what little there is of it. Call me later. Love, Liz.

He did call her later that day and they made plans to drive up to the mountains the following Sunday, two days thence. Elizabeth packed a picnic lunch and Geoffrey brought a bottle of *Château Lafite-Rothschild* Bordeaux, vintage 1972.

"An excellent year," he said.

"Yes, as I vaguely recall it," said she.

As they followed the winding road up the fir-covered, black-shadowed east slope of the mountains they briefly considered going to the lake where the annual poets' retreat was held, but Elizabeth wanted to visit a ghost town a hundred miles north and they'd be going to the retreat in a few weeks anyway, so they took a different road. As they neared the ridgeline of the mountains they noticed that the vine maples were beginning to take on their autumn colors, yellow as burnished gold and red like the wine, but mostly everything was still green in the bright late-summer sun.

Along the mountain crest the dense, cool shade of the firs gave way to a drier and more open panorama of sparse but colossal yellow pines and twenty-foot longleaf scrub growing in ecru-colored volcanic tuff. They'd each brought a warmer change of clothes but now, at mid-morning, the day was already hot. They had to cross thirty miles of high desert to get to the long-abandoned town of Kishona, once the site of a poor amethyst mine and then for several decades a sawmill and shipping point supported by ancient two-hundred-foot yellow pines, now all but gone from the surrounding forests. The highway pavement took on a rusty red hue, reflecting the peculiar ferric ash from which its asphalt was composed, and lazily followed a small, meandering creek along the gradual downhill slopes. When they came to a gravel spur road that seemed to lead down to the water's edge, they decided to take a few minutes' stretch break and presently, trailing a cloud of fine dust that quickly dissipated, they entered a grove of small firs and spruces where the road ended in a clearing by the stream.

Geoffrey got out and stretched himself, arms high above his head. "Gorgeous!" he exclaimed.

She smiled as she slipped into her sandals and stepped out onto the soft, cool earth. She watched him walk down to the grassy bank of the creek, his strong, hairy legs seemed compact between his shorts and the tops of his heavy socks that were folded down onto leather walking boots, which he began to unlace and remove as she came up beside him.

"Bet it's cold," she said.

He reached over and put his hand into the pellucid water. It was shockingly cold. He cupped a bit of it and splashed it up at her, and she twisted away, laughing. "Freezing," he said, and then, barefoot, he hoisted himself off the bank and into the numbing, icy stream, a little deeper than his knees.

"God that's cold," he laughed. He scooped up some of it and splashed it over his face. "Feels great, though," he said, sputtering.

She contemplated the stream. She was wearing a white halter top and a pair of white denim shorts she'd thought at first might be a bit too short, especially when she bent over, but she liked the way they fit her and she knew Geoffrey would too. She slipped off a sandal and dipped her long brown toes into the gently flowing icewater. Geoffrey gazed at her sleek, muscular legs, like sculpted mahogany.

"You have to jump in," he counseled, offering his hand. "Otherwise, you'll never do it."

The creek bottom was covered with small, round pebbles, and she wiggled her wet foot back into its sandal before she took his hand and hopped in. She shrieked involuntarily as the cold gripped her legs.

And then they stood in the shallow water together, close together, their feet numb, their shoulders warmed in the hot sun, their arms around each other, and for a moment they grasped one another playfully and he kissed her neck and they both laughed. Then he stepped back away from her just a little and regarded her, only for an instant, her snow-white smile lurking mischievously behind deep red lips, her eyes black as coal but sparkling bright as the water's surface, her coffee skin smooth and supple, her small brown breasts half-hidden beneath the white cloth of her halter, their nipples erect from the cold.

"Ah, you look good," he said.

"I'm just a chocolate fantasy," she said.

"You're sure you can't find me physically irresistible?"

She laughed and kissed his lips so quickly he hadn't the presence of mind to kiss back. "Well, I do already," she said. "I might even secretly wonder now and then what it'd be like with you. I know it would be sweet. I envy the woman who finds you. But our lives run to different rhythms, you know? I mean, *we* run to different rhythms."

He looked down, into the flowing water, through the sliding currents of glassy liquid, through the rounded pebbles, red and mustard and sienna, green and white and black, through the lens of time into his own pining heart. "I guess," he said.

"But we'll be great friends," she said, taking his hand in hers. "That is, if you want to be. I want to be."

"I have lust in my heart for you."

"It'll pass."

"What if it doesn't?"

"Then you'll go away. Or I'll get fat."

He laughed. Then he scooped up a double handful of water and threw it on her chest. She, laughing, retaliated. When they stopped, their hair, skin and clothes were soaked. And they were still happy.

"Well," she laughed, spraying a mouthful of water into the air, "we'll be cool now, baby."

He shook his body like a dog's, spraying a mist of water from his rusty locks. "You look like a monk," she said.

He walked behind her up to the picnic table beside the car. "I can see the outline of your underpants," he said.

"Oh, is that causing you to have a lust attack?"

"Yes."

"It's really my bathing suit," she said, drying her hair with her towel. "I don't wear underpants."

"Thanks," he said, smiling.

"I notice you like those bikini things."

"No, that's my bathing suit."

"I saw them on the chair the other night. Unless that was your bathing suit too."

"Well, they keep Mighty Mo from dangling out the leg of my shorts."

"Uh-huh."

He went around to the other side of the car and they each changed into dry clothes. "Come over here for a minute," she called as he was pulling a warm pair of socks on over his damp feet.

He joined her at the picnic table.

"I have a poem for you," she said, taking it from her straw bag and unfolding it on the table for him to read.

Aura (in your light)

Pale skin soft in the red wink of the lens,
He who sees is watching every move.
I pirouette along the light beams to his eyes,
But later, in the dark, I am alone.

Behind the mask his voice is firm and sure,
Before my face it floats in gentle tones;
His music has an easy way with mine,
But in the silence he is gone.

Flowers and incense, perfume, shampoo and soap,
My hair and skin awash in these,
My world abuzz with fragrances of every kind—
He thinks me an orchid in the jungle mist.

He tests the air like a prairie dog, squeaking and whistling,
Tonguing it like an old bull snake.
He gets half the story, but he doesn't know,
Nobody told him that salt makes things taste better.

Now and then I feel his hand laid softly on my waist,
Or only the wish of it, so quickly is it gone,
A breath of pressure, warm as a sunbeam.
"I am with you," it says.

In dream and fancy, sun and shade,
Roof and rain, sense and silence,
My knight, my brother, ah, you know,
I love you back.

They arrived on the outskirts of Kishona about an hour after noon. It was completely deserted. Not even the desert mice lived there any more. None but an occasional—sometimes lost—tourist entered its empty buildings any more. Now and then a tumbleweed careered drunkenly along the dusty main street, knocking against a door or window and then, when no one answered, moving fitfully on. Grain by tiny grain, the whole place was slowly being scattered across the desert by its one faithful visitor, the wind.

She showed him the blacksmith shop beside the stable, the old horseshoes, the anvil, the hearth still there, its bellows' leather in dry white tatters, the odor of iron still strong in the hot air. They crossed the street to the bank, where the glass in the front doors had been broken out and where they discovered someone had bothered to pick up all the money on his way out of town. They decided not to walk the half-mile down the road to the huge old sawmill buildings where every big pine within a hundred miles had been reduced to boards, beams and byproducts. She'd been in it; he'd been to other ones. Instead they found the old diner, that looked suspiciously like an Airstream trailer, and there amid the hush of voices, the mute dust of the jukebox, long gone, the forgotten odors of bacon and coffee, the chattering hiss of potatoes on the griddle, in a booth previously occupied only by people now dead, they had their lunch of deviled eggs, carrot sticks, peanut butter and strawberry jam sandwiches, and the *Rothschild* Bordeaux 1972. A sublime year in anyone's book.

After lunch they drove for an hour and a half across the bleak desert, the long road imperceptibly descending until finally they rounded a bend and looked out onto an immense, lush green valley, perhaps ten miles wide and divided by a narrow, silvery ribbon of water that wandered through it like an aimless dream. A few miles on the other side, rising vertically almost a thousand feet and extending as far as the eye could see, was the Hubbard Escarpment, a sheer rock wall that marked the boundary of a tectonic plate, and the subduction of the valley geology under the floor of the Rockies farther east. Such, in any case, was the story as Geoffrey told it while they drove into the valley, crossing the river on a graceful steel bridge, and began the long climb up the other side, winding back and forth through steep terrain until, an hour later, they parked in a lot a half-mile from the cliff's edge and got out.

The top of the escarpment was nearly flat and mostly grass-covered. A smattering of trees grew here and there, but within a few hundred yards of the cliff's edge they gave way to occasional sagebrush and patches of scotch broom. There was a waist-high rail fence, perhaps twenty feet from the dropoff, that marked a slight crest in the slope of the land and provided modest warning of the sudden danger only a few yards beyond. Even from the protective shade of the trees they could see the vast panorama of the valley stretching green and lush beneath the sere brown hills.

"Tell me something," she said.

"Okay."

"How much of your fascination with me is because of my heritage?"

"Oh, a lot. A great deal. An enormous amount. But only to the extent it's embodied in you. To the extent your heritage shapes and defines you, I'm fascinated with it. I'll search in it for deeper understandings of you. In time, I may come to revere it much as you do—perhaps differently, because we're on opposite sides of the wall."

"Yes."

"But to whatever extent it doesn't matter to you, it doesn't to me either. Among my many female love interests I can count no blacks, no English professors, no actresses and no women who write poetry. Well, maybe one who wrote poetry. So I'm not fixated, if that's what you mean."

"Black is what I mean."

"Just another breed of Norwegian to me."

It was at this time that Elizabeth saw, perhaps a quarter mile further along the rim of the escarpment, a stout, dark-skinned figure, clad in jeans and t-shirt and wearing a beret, sitting quietly just beyond the fence before a small easel, carefully daubing paint onto a canvas.

"Look," she whispered, pointing, although the breeze was in their faces and the painter couldn't have heard her, probably, even had she shouted.

Geoffrey stared at him. "You think it's Robin?"

"I don't know. Looks like him, doesn't it?"

Geoffrey peered harder. "Maybe," he said.

Elizabeth couldn't help thinking he seemed very far away. She was reminded of a haunting passage from the third movement of Brahms' *First Symphony* that had always seemed to her a cry of the most profound loneliness, and now its sweet, poignant melody drifted across the barren landscape, through her memory, as if to say there could be no escape, no relief, no surcease, but only beauty, only beauty to soothe and swell her sorrowful soul on its slowly winding journey over endless empty tracts of time.

"Maybe we should go," she said.

Chapter 23

First Flight

There's a certain slant of light,
On winter afternoons,
That oppresses, like the weight
Of cathedral tunes.

—*A Certain Slant of Light,* Emily Dickinson

Alexei had invited Margaret to share a leisurely social brunch with him at Mumsy's on Sunday morning, and he was already seated at a table by a window, reading the funnies, when she arrived a few minutes after ten. The sunny mid-August morning outside was already quite warm and the vast interior of Mumsy's felt pleasantly cooler. Soft but sonorous music spilled from the stereo system. Bright green and yellow light, reflected from grass and wildflowers, filtered through leaves of buckeye and maple and oak, streamed in through the windows around the first-floor periphery, under the floor of the loft. Smoke drifted slowly upward on shafts of light and disappeared into the distant embrace of the roof high above them.

"Good morning, Mister Kashlikov," she said cheerily as she neared his table.

He looked up, smiling. "Ah, Maggie," he said, affecting a little brogue, "and a bonnie good marnin' it 'tis now that you are here."

"Ah, you silver-tongued Irish devil, you," she said as she disengaged her wavy black hair from the straw bonnet she'd worn. "This was such a nice idea you had, Lexie. It's gorgeous outside, and being in here is almost like being outside, only much more civilized."

"Which reminds me," he began, but he realized she was anxious to go get something to eat, so he said, "but never mind, I'll tell you later."

"What?"

"Later, woman. Go git some vittles and make yourself to home, and then we'll palaver on it."

"Cool," she laughed. "But I think your horse has kissed the Blarney Stone."

When she returned with a poached egg, a stack of wheat toast, a cup of coffee and a *New York Times,* Alexei was laughing to himself and his brown eyes glittered with eagerness.

"Listen to this," he said. "These guys are hanging around their guy club, drinking beer and telling dumb-blonde jokes. All of a sudden an uppity blonde appears and upbraids them furiously for their insufferable ignorance in poking cheap fun at women, making scurrilous slander against their mothers and sisters and girlfriends. 'You ought to think,' she says, 'about how you came to be the manly fools you are today, and where you've always gone to find sustenance and pleasure throughout your miserable lives.' And as she walks away, they stand stupefied, eyes and mouths agape. Then each of them sucks in his belly and hooks his thumbs in his waistband and looks down into the front of his pants."

She smiled. "Of course. And actually, they're moron jokes."

"Well, that wouldn't work, would it?"

"Actually, it doesn't work unless there's an implicit understanding that a dumb blonde is a euphemism for a woman of easy virtue."

"Exactly. And likewise a moron is a person even more spectacularly innocent than a teenaged boy."

"Adults don't tell moron jokes," she said, deftly slicing the white membrane covering her egg and dipping a corner of toast into its yellow eye, "because by the time they're adults they've discovered the moron is like everybody they know, including themselves."

"I've always enjoyed the irony of the presumption that anybody who'd have sex with you would have to be stupid, drunk, or morally corrupt."

"But then when you think about it, when you think about the guys you're talking about, you can kind of see that this might easily be so."

He laughed in agreement while her lips wrapped the dripping toast in a succulent embrace and her eyes scanned the paper.

"Hey, look," Margaret said, "Kate says Robin's work is radical and significant and 'uniquely powerful.'"

"Our Kate?"

"Yes, it's a critique of her reviews."

"Sounds like a jacket blurb."

"Well, actually, it's a cover blurb from the magazine. It says she's the Pauline Kael of the galleries."

"Then she'd better stop saying 'uniquely powerful.'"

"Listen to this. 'These paintings have a classical grace of style, line, color and motion. Yet they are rich in symbolic detail, with images that seem to appear from nowhere, and sometimes disappear again for long periods of time, images of people in deep communion with their species' creations—machinery, buildings, conveyances, tools, ideas, all the tangible paraphernalia of civilization. It's not Aristotle contemplating the bust of Plato, it's Dick Sixbeers having sex with a sack of wheat or Jane Fatbuns getting strangled by an electric cellulite pulverizer. Teasing Ecst out of his art isn't easy, because his art is eclectic in the extreme. I don't know of an ongoing series of his paintings that's been intended to cohere thematically or stylistically. His moving finger writes, and then it stabs down a period in the wet paint and begins something new. But frequently, very frequently, Ecst explores the neurotic relationship of modern man to technology and, by extension, to rationality."

"Uh-huh," Alexei said, and she went on.

"'Ecst demurs from characterizing this relationship as neurotic, but he admits it is the suprarational aspect of it that fascinates him. "Artists," he says, "typically do not themselves keep any but the most personally precious of their finished works, but in society today we are buried in what we may, and do, consider 'our' collective works. The vast majority of people make nothing themselves, but mass production is anonymously generated and people cling to its spawn as if it were their own, much as they identify with the fortunes—especially the triumphs—of sports figures or teams, or social and political movements.

"'"I'm always a little amused," he goes on, "and more than a little mystified, when I hear someone say of a favorite basketball team for instance, 'We won today.' What does this mean? To me it means that people 'adopt' reality in bizarre ways. They develop an intense delusion of kinship with groups whose members don't know they exist. They nurture deep emotional attachments to things—tools, toys, cars, places, documents, even ideas. They have limitlessly extended families and numerous friends, none of whom they really know. You have the distinct sensation that if you stripped all this stuff away, you'd be left with nothing. It's just fascinating."'"

Alexei smiled. "He may have a point there," he said.

"We were looking through his telescope the other night," she mused. "At Sirius. Geoffrey was there when I got there, in the studio, filming things what else, and he continued doing it while Robin and I went up to the roof. He kept moving things, and making noise, and we'd occasionally see a flash or a reflection from his lights. Robin I think actually got upset. He went downstairs and shortly afterward Geoffrey left. When he came back up he said, 'Sometimes too much light blinds you to the truth.'"

"Sometimes you can see more in the dark," Alexei mused. "I like it."

"Yeah," she said.

"So what was he doing up there?"

"Geoffrey? I don't know. Who knows. I think he thinks he's Robin's Boswell."

"Well, I thought he was *my* Boswell."

"You know," she pondered, "he, and Kate, too, by so assiduously recording and promoting the art scene here, they sort of become its definers, don't they? Just like I'm the definer of my patients: I examine them, interpret them, label them, decide what's important about them psychologically and therapeutically. I even write about them, and my readers sometimes conceptualize my descriptions as if they were the actual people."

"You can't really blame them," Alexei said. "I'm sure there'll be people who'll look at our videos, for example, and never come to the ballet. Some may think they've already seen the ballet, experienced the ballet, because they've watched a video of a ballet. But others will be inspired to want to see it for themselves, to experience it in a more immediate and comprehensive way. That's the risk you take. For everyone who reads Boswell's *Life* and skips Johnson himself there are many others who find Johnson because of Boswell's portrait. That's my faith, anyway."

"You know," he went on, "Anya was furious when Kate insisted on expanding the scope of her book into modern dance. But it's turned out that a lot of people whose bodies aren't suited especially to ballet are nonetheless very much interested in dancing, and perhaps even capable of it. So now she's opening a new school for modern dance, directed specifically at shapes and sizes never heretofore seen on any stage. And I bet she'll succeed, too."

"Well, there are things you can express by moving your body. Even a whale has a sort of primordial grace when it breaches the surface of the sea."

"Exactly."

"Dancing for whales."

"Dancing lets you express dreams and feelings, perhaps, things you couldn't express the same way in words."

"Or at all. Well, that's…"

At this moment a chair scraped across the wooden floor and stopped beside her, and as she looked around, Billy, grinning, dropped his muscular frame into it with a groan. "Don't mind if I join you, do you?" he asked loudly.

"Even you are welcome on this fine day," she said.

"What's up?" Alexei asked.

"Ah, shit," Billy said. "I gotta do something different. I'm dying here." And then he let out a raucous guffaw. "Figuratively speaking, of course."

"Oh," said Margaret, "we were hoping…"

"Yeah, I'm a wreck. That fucking Sibyl…"

"Sibyl wrecked you? You? Wrecked by a woman?"

"Nah. Well, she was just a piece of—a port in the storm, you know? She was nuttier'n a goddamn fruitcake. But I loved her, you know? She took a piece out of me, you know? She just ripped a big chunk out of me."

"And now you're but a mere shadow of your former self," Alexei said. "Soft-spoken, timid, mild-mannered…"

"Fuck, no!" Billy laughed, "I'm just all fucked-up is all."

"Maybe it's Dylan," Margaret offered.

"Nah. Yeah, sure it's Dylan, but I gave him that piece of me, you know, that was a gift, it is a gift, but not her, she just sank her demented, blood-sucking fangs into my heart and ripped out my guts, just for spite, and she didn't even know it."

"So what now?" Alexei asked. "Go after her? Kill yourself?"

"I gave a lot to that relationship, you know? I mean, at first I just wanted a piece of ass, but I got really involved, and I did a lot of things her way, because she was so nuts everything had to be her way, even sex, which was really weird but never mind that. And then she just said, 'Oops, I have to go somewhere else,' and disappeared like none of it ever happened, you know? So now I have to figure out my life all over again."

"You forgot where you were?" Margaret asked mischievously.

"Well, where I was got me involved with her," he said. "So I don't want to go back there, that's for sure."

"I'm going to Russia," Alexei said with a grin.

"You are?" Billy said; "I thought the Bolshoi rejected you."

"'Rejected' is such a harsh word," Alexei objected. "Well, but they did. However I just found out something much better: the Kirov has accepted me."

"Really? Lexie, that's wonderful."

"Yeah, really," Billy agreed.

"When are you going?"

"Soon. In two weeks."

"Oh, that's wonderful," she said, clasping her hands together and smiling a big congratulatory smile. "But it's awful, too. We're going to lose you. How long will you be there?"

"Well, my grandmother lives there."

"In St. Petersburg."

"Yes. They raised me after my mom and dad were killed. And I'm dying to go spend some time with her. She's frail, but she's still got a little zing in her eye and I'm crazy about her. And St. Petersburg is a beautiful place, a little old world but culturally adventuresome, and they have great dancers, and…"

"You're Russian?" Billy asked incredulously.

"Polish and Russian and Turkish and French and Gypsy and, of course, gay. But I grew up in Connecticut. And you really can't tell, can you, that I'm a descendant of the Romanovs?"

"Well, I'd always suspected something," Billy said good-naturedly.

"You can't trust these Americans," Margaret said. "They're all from foreign countries."

"And you, Margaret? Irish, I know, but part French, maybe?"

"No, English. Welsh, actually."

"Ah, Welsh," Alexei said. "That's where you get that blue in your eyes. All Russians are part English, you know. Shakespeare started it and Wellington put blood on it. Of course, we're part French, too, and nowadays we're even part American."

"And Czech and Polack and Magyar and Gypsy and Serb and Croatian and Cossack and Tatar and Greek and Afghan and…"

"And Mongolian, and Eskimo. Exactly. And this gives Russia a tremendous strength and richness, but people are afraid of it, just like here."

"It makes them feel unrooted and bereft of identity."

"Yes. People look back at Dostoyevski, Tolstoy, Gogol, Pushkin. The old gods. They say, 'Now there was a real Russian. What do these savages know of Tolstoy? What do they know of being real Russians?' See? Just like here."

"I don't have any heritage," Billy said. "I was adopted. All I know for sure is my mom was Indian, from some tribe in New Mexico someplace."

"I'd say that's a heritage," Alexei said. "And you have one, whether you know what it is or not."

"And if you go back far enough, nobody knows," Margaret said.

Billy laughed. "If you go back far enough," he observed, "everybody came from the same guy."

"If you go back far enough," Alexei said, "it wasn't even a guy. It was some little monkeys making their business in the savannah. Some simian miscegenation."

"Remember Beatrice, Lexie?" Margaret asked him.

"Oh, yes, that sweet old white-haired black lady in the rocking chair, of course…"

"She doesn't rock much any more. She's getting old. She's sad. She doesn't know where she came from. She doesn't know where her people are. She can't say goodbye."

"Oh, I'm so sorry…"

"I don't know what to say to her."

"She's one of your patients?" Billy asked.

"Yes," Alexei answered. "She's a very sweet and beautiful old lady; she's just a dear really. I danced for her once for maybe five minutes. She was so excited I thought she was going to pee her pants."

"Oh, she does that anyway," Margaret said, laughing. "But she talked about that day, and about you, for weeks afterward." She paused pensively. "Now sometimes tears run down her cheeks while she's sitting by the window, because the children of her daydreams won't know where she's gone and they'll worry about her."

"She has children?"

"No, I don't think so. I think she invented the children so there'd be someone to care for her, someone she could be young and happy with. Now her reveries are hard, and she can't go there any more. Or she goes there and they're gone."

"You think she'd like some fruit or something?" Billy asked.

"She loves to suck on a piece of apple," Margaret said. "But you have to cut it up for her."

"Maybe I'll bring one by." He stood up to go.

"Sure. That'd be great, Billy. Especially during the noon hour."

"Take care."

"Take care."

Margaret sighed as she looked at Alexei. "I can't believe you're going," she said. Then her face brightened. "You were going to tell me something…"

"Actually, I was going to ask you something."

"Well, what is it?"

"Well, before I leave for St. Petersburg—wow, that has a strange ring to it, doesn't it? Anyway, before I go I want to spend a few days down in the redwoods. I've lived here all this time and I've never been there. You know, camping, sleeping out under the trees. Cooking on a campfire. Walking around. Just being there. And I wondered, if it doesn't seem too primitive, whether you'd like to come with me."

"Oh, I'd love to. When?"

"Next weekend? Sooner?"

"I could leave Wednesday after work and come back Sunday night."

"Perfect."

They looked at each other for a moment and smiled, and each thought, quite privately, that the other looked a little more beautiful, and was a little more beloved, than either had realized before.

Chapter 24

Fine Feathered Friends

One hope is too like despair
For prudence to smother;
And pity from thee more dear
Than that from another.

—*One Word Is Too Often Profaned,* Percy Bysshe Shelley

There was a medieval art show on the grounds of the local cathedral later that day, and after a hiatus of several hours, during which Alexei practiced at the barre and Margaret took a shower, changed into a pale yellow cotton dress, and read most of the *New Yorker*, they met again about mid-afternoon on the church steps. Robin had been planning to join them, but he'd decided he wanted to work instead.

Margaret and Alexei determined to take a look inside before walking around to the gardens where the show was on display. It was pleasantly cool in the anteroom through which they passed to reach the interior of the church.

"Do you suppose we should genuflect or anything?" Margaret asked.

"I don't know," he replied. "I thought you were the expert on all this Catholic stuff."

"I went AWOL when I found out you were a sinner whether you got to enjoy any sin or not," she said. "Pretty soon after that I forgot everything. I can barely speak Latin anymore."

"Uh-huh."

Inside, someone pursued a Bach cantata across the terraced keyboards of a pipe organ whose location they never discerned. In the pews near the front a scattering of people sat quietly or knelt on prayer cushions. Upon the massive carved white marble altar at the far end was an ornate cross of gold, and behind it on the wall, glittering in gold leaf, loomed a heroic mosaic of the crucified Jesus, silent in his eternal moment of agony.

The abiding impression, though, was of a vast empty space held motionless within a gray granite cage. The music, the vaulted stained-glass windows, the innumerable gilded icons did nothing to relieve this sensation. Alexei gazed at the intricate stone and carved wood fretworks that soared eight stories above them.

"Awesome," he said. "Absolutely stunning. Except for the windows it's like a gigantic cavern."

"When I was a little girl," Margaret said, "I always wondered, what's the presumption here? Is God a very tall guy? Does he need room to fly around? Why would people enclose so much useless space at such enormous cost? To frighten the natives into giving up their gold and jewels? To make people feel small?"

"Well, there's probably a theory about that," Alexei said. "Catholics seem to have a theory for everything."

"Well, it's not just Catholics…"

"No. Well, I suppose it's grand. As in grandiose. I mean, some people worship in hovels and some do it in places like this. Presumably it's the same religion, whatever it may be, so the difference must be in the grandeur of the setting…"

"…and in the grandiosity of the people who adorn it."

"Exactly. You take a dump; the King of England takes a dump. Same dump, but he dumps in his dump and you dump in your dump. You think it's all the same, but the difference is that after you take your dump you're still a peon whereas after he takes his dump he's the King of England."

"I see."

"Isn't that Harry over there? With Teresa?"

And it was indeed, so they joined forces. Harry and Alexei soon concluded that a grand church was no different from a grand house and a grand car and a grand station in life. "People have the gods that suit them," Harry said.

"This place gives me the creeps," Teresa said, and they adjourned outside to the parish gardens where the gods that suited her nodded colorfully in the flowerbeds.

The paintings had, of course, a rather thoroughgoing religious flavor, even though Alexei said they were considerably more representative of the early Renaissance than of medieval work. Most were very small and some were copies, credible and otherwise, of the originals. There were depictions of Jesus and especially of Mary, and numerous and sometimes quite fanciful angels.

The four of them examined one painting in particular that portrayed the Annunciation, a popular subject of the times, in which the angel Gabriel tells Mary she is to be the mother of Christ.

"She has no expression at all," Margaret said. "You'd think that if somebody flew in your window and told you the Holy Ghost was going to come thump you in the middle of the night you'd be surprised, or delighted, or skeptical, or terrified, or something. But she has no expression at all."

"She's divine," Teresa said. "She doesn't have mere human feelings."

"Besides," Alexei added, "she's a woman, so even if she had them it wouldn't seem proper for her to express them."

"Well, yes," Harry chimed in, "and to these artists she's not even a woman in the fleshly sense. I mean, it'd been a thousand years, hadn't it? How would you portray Charlemagne? Nobody knew what Mary looked like. Nobody knew anything about her except that she'd given birth to Jesus. As far as I know, God impregnates her, she wanders around, she undergoes parturition in a barn, and thirty or forty years later she shows up again and floats off to heaven. She never does anything or says anything. So she falls pretty short of having anything like a life, or a personality, and these guys more or less had to follow the way earlier artists had portrayed her, didn't they? They try to make her look radiant. Maybe put a little gold paint on her. Maybe give her a halo. Only her face and hands are visible. And that's really all there's ever been to her."

"That's sort of the way they all look, come to think of it," Teresa observed. "Blank-faced."

"And now, this Holy Ghost person," Alexei asked Margaret, "did he ever do anything except diddle some poor little wide-eyed virgin girl?"

"Hey, ask a Jesuit," she said. "How would I know? I think it's the artistic character of these things we should be focusing on here, especially since the subject matter is obviously a little beyond our grasp."

"Well, I prefer to think it's a very limited subject matter," Harry said. "And rather arcane. It's not that it's incomprehensible; it's just that it doesn't make much sense."

"Kind of like astrology," said Teresa.

"Well, do quantum physics and higher mathematics make sense?" Margaret asked.

"Or a gargoyle?" Alexei queried.

"Well, look," Harry said, "I see your point. A gargoyle makes sense as an object of art, or as a magic icon. Even as a joke. Quantum physics and mathematics make sense as part of an elaborate system of logic and rudimentary presumption. But religion, any religion, only makes sense in the context of its particular faith. So I should've said, 'it doesn't make much sense to me,' because the intricacies of religious thought are of very little interest to me."

"Oh, and why is that?" asked Margaret.

"Because spirituality to me, for me, is instinctual and revelatory and not a tendentious intellectual exercise. I don't detect any intellectual component in ultimate truths. Intelligence, yes, sometimes. Insightful common sense. But I just don't believe that great irreducible truths are discovered by intellective thread-spinning."

"But Cantor discovered the uncountability of the real numbers by intellective thread-spinning," Margaret objected.

"Well, it's a deep idea," Harry countered, "but it's not a fundamental truth."

"You could get an argument on that."

Harry laughed. "I can always get an argument from you," he said. "It's part of your charm."

Alexei and Teresa were looking at the fuchsias hung in moss-filled baskets among the fruit trees.

"It must be a peaceful life," Teresa said.

"Living in a cloister? Like a monk you mean?"

"Uh-huh. Nothing to do all day except tuck in a little moss here, admire a blossom there, pick a few apples, sing a few songs…"

"I don't know," Alexei pondered. "I'd be pretty bored I think. I'm kind of addicted to *joie de vivre."*

Teresa smiled. "You sort of look like a monk," she said.

"I'm not going bald, am I?" he asked, feigning alarm.

"Nope. It's just the bowl haircut and the impish mannerisms, I think. Certainly not your getup. Maybe it's the way you move, so fluid and free, as if you were floating over the ground."

"Oh, I am, too," he said, laughing, "because I'm going to Russia! Did Margaret tell you?"

"No! When?"

"The day after Labor Day I fly to New York. Three weeks from now, I'll be in St. Petersburg, dancing with the Kirov."

"Gee, that's wonderful news, yes? I mean, you'll see your grandmother and everything? But we'll miss you, Alexei."

Harry and Margaret walked over toward them and Teresa told Harry the news.

"Congratulations," Harry said. "But this town'll seem dead without you around."

"This town's already dead," Margaret said. "Lexie's just been jiggling its gelatinous corpse."

"Well," Alexei said brightly, "you guys'll have to take over the job of shaking the bacon."

"Well, honey, I can do that," Margaret countered, "but I don't know as how anybody'd want to see it."

Nobody even wanted to imagine it, apparently, because all were silent for a moment before Harry asked, "Will you be living over there?"

"Well, for two years, anyway. That's the length of my contract."

"I'll miss you, Lexie," Margaret said. "Good men are hard for a girl like me to find, and that's no lie, you know."

"Well, you're just too picky," Alexei said. "*La dona e mobile.* You've heard it…" and he sang in a whisper, "La don-ya eh mob-ee-lay…," while he grinned a wide white grin and gazed at

her from under darkly raised eyebrows with his blackest Russian eyes, deep as a winter's night on the steppes and warm as mother's milk by the fire, with his Ringo bangs and gnomic face cocked to one side and his luminous lips, which, puckering, said, "That's you, you know."

"Oh, no. Huh-uh. I'm a one-man girl, honey. Never mind that my drug of choice is an obsessive workaholic with the demeanor of a jolly elf; the times we have together are the sweeter for their rarity. After all, I'm the mistress of a happily married man. No, it's much more than marriage. It's deeper. It's sicker. Painting is his Helen: his goddess and his mistress. His teen angel. When he isn't painting, he's looking at things. No, that's not right either. Sometimes, all the time really, he's doing what his heart tells him is good. And his heart is very good. When he laughs with you, he's really with you. He's not looking just then. But he's seeing, and he does remember. Most of all, besides painting, he loves to look. Because, he says, it's when he really looks that he really sees, and when he really sees that he can bring the image to life on canvas."

Each of them smiled at her but none spoke.

"Well," she went on, shrugging her shoulders and tilting her head toward Alexei, "*he* said I was fickle, and that's not true. As I see it, I'm a cultivator of good men—my farm girl physique is my metaphor—and I'm as lazy as any self-respecting person and I like rewards, so I insist on working in fertile soil. But I'm not inclined to abandon my friends and lovers opportunistically. *Au contraire.* Still, sometimes things go awry, sometimes people go astray, and sometimes no one's to blame, but always life must go on. So when I lose a friend like Lexie, even though he's just kind of moving out of town halfway around the world, I know something's going to replace all those hours of good friendship and fun and tears and wonderful dancing and devil's advocacy, and I don't think the computers are quite ready so it had better be somebody awfully good. As good as Lexie's toeshoes. Why mess with less?"

Harry chuckled. "What a pleasure passion is," he said.

"Well, that's just what I was saying," Margaret asserted.

"Stability is nice, too," Teresa said. "Having Lexie here all these years has been very nice." She laughed. "Energetic, but calm. Now some other lucky people are going to have him for awhile."

"I'm being traded," Alexei laughed.

"Is passion unstable?" Harry asked.

"Sure it is," Alexei said, "because it pushes the envelope."

"But it also gives you power to cope with greater risks and dangers and hardships," Margaret said. "It elevates your play. It's like every game is a championship game. Every game is the big one. It sharpens your reflexes, focuses your eyes, emboldens your spirit. You risk more, but you can afford to risk more because you can achieve more. So I think the perception of passion's being inherently unstable is an illusion."

Harry continued his approach. "Some people would say it makes people crazy. It makes them irrational. It causes harm."

"Well, that's true. I can show you a lot of crazy people who have no passion whatsoever, though. In fact that's pretty typical. Outbursts, but not passion. Passion doesn't make people insane as a rule. It makes them less risk-averse, it focuses their attention on passion's object and blinds them to the periphery of consequences and limitations, and it gives them power to achieve what are for them extraordinary things. This is the vernacular meaning of crazy as in 'passion makes you crazy.' And that's true. And it's true that sometimes people go overboard and suffer difficult consequences. But it's also true that passion wins objectives, even when Icarus falls from the sky. Someone once said that the unexamined life is not worth living. Well, the unimpassioned life is very difficult to examine."

"There's not much to look at."

"Think of the times when you had no passion for life. Can you remember what happened then? No, because nothing happened then. And how often do you meet someone you haven't seen for years who can't think of anything notable that's happened since the last time you saw each other? I think that's scary."

"Do you think life in general is less passionate these days?" Harry asked. "The cultural life, I mean."

"I do," Alexei said. "Culturally and personally. For a lot of reasons. It goes in cycles. Right now it seems most of the cycles are in a low swing. Passion is subdued in many arenas, in many ways. But passionate people are out there being as passionate as ever people were. And they'll keep the flame alive. And their time will come again."

"Well, maybe not their time," Margaret said.

"Yes, for some maybe not. But the time of their passion will come again. That's my faith, and theirs."

"You know," Harry said, "as you get older, you lose some of the simple equipment with which you generate and experience passion. Your strength diminishes. Your senses fade. Social life encumbers you. Then the decline of passion seems to some people to be normal and inevitable."

"It might even be a survival mechanism," Teresa said.

"Yes, I agree. I'm sure it is."

"But survival isn't everything," Margaret said.

"No, it isn't, and that's just my point, I think."

"As you get older," Alexei said, "you have to work harder to take chances. You have to develop discipline that both makes you take chances and helps you succeed. Yes, I think that's been true for me. It's easy to take chances when the only possible consequence you can envision is glory. It's harder when you know about the other stuff that's out there. It's harder when you've missed the jump three times in a row in practice to go out a fourth time and do it well on stage.

"It's easy to be obsessed with ballet when it's like young love, when you may still harbor fantasies about rising to the top of the world and being the greatest dancer anyone's ever seen. It's harder to maintain your passion when you'll be a 28-year-old newcomer to the Kirov supporting the blossoming careers of 19- and 20-year-olds. But if you don't, if you can't, then you may as well hang up your slippers and become a full-time waiter."

"It's an honest job," Harry said.

"Precisely the sort of thing I try to avoid," Alexei said, laughing.

Chapter 25

Phoenix

A necessary world succeeds what world
we call our own. Another rough truth.
Gone in swift moments, they are gone:
those people there and those years.

—*Who Said We Won't,* Mark Salerno

A few days later they were on their way south toward the fog-belabored coastal hills where the last groves of redwoods still resisted the ineluctable encroachment of civilization. Alternately or in unison, verse by verse they were reciting the entire story of the Walrus and the Carpenter, attempting to realize it as it ought to be said, as it ought to be read.

"'The time has come,' the Walrus said, 'to talk of many things: of shoes, and ships, and sealing wax, of cabbages and kings, and why the sea is boiling hot, and whether pigs have wings.'"

"I think it should be called 'The Oysters,'" Margaret said.

Alexei laughed. "An excellent point."

"It's oyster abuse."

Alexei laughed again. "Yes, but the perpetrators are so deliriously perverse about it. The demise of the oysters isn't of the slightest consequence, although the walrus does squeeze out a crocodile tear. We never see a thing. Not a single mollusk is consumed in our presence. We only see these gullible, lovable, hard-shelled schmoos blithely waltzing to their doom. Which brings me to the deep question: might it not be that for them this is the most desirable of all possible outcomes?"

"How might that be, Professor Pangloss?"

"Well, I'm an oyster myself, but I get paid by those other guys, the bankers and builders of things. Believe me, oysters have much the more interesting lives. And, in return for a little harvest now and then, a little premature departure—a small price, surely—oysters are prized and loved the world over as a delicacy, and are cultivated and protected everywhere, and get to live robust lives in clean, posh digs with plenty of plankton or whatever they eat and basically live the niftiest life an oyster can live. Albeit statistically truncated. *C'est la vie."*

"So the oysters of the world, had they minds, would elect to be kept in this elegant style, to have their offspring kept in this elegant style, in return for which some small percentage of them, every year, would be sacrificed to the keepers?"

"Of course. If no one liked to eat them no one would value them and they'd go back to living in primitive conditions and their population would be much smaller, less healthy, and perhaps less long-lived than it is."

"You're saying the few percent wouldn't even have been there otherwise."

"Yes."

"This is an allegory, isn't it?"

"I'm sure it is. Many allegories. Sucking insects make these kinds of agreements with fungi. The fungi protect and nurture the insect community and periodically the fungi impress a bunch of them into a life of irrevocable slavery and self-sacrifice."

"Symbiosis," she said.

"On the community level."

"Uh-huh. So the Walrus and the Carpenter were good guys, even though they blatantly deceived those poor little innocent childlike oysters and then—O! Destiny!—ate them. With considerable relish, apparently."

"Why not let them have their mindless happiness to the end? Why cause them fear, or anguish? Better they should laugh and skip for one more hour, *n'est-ce pas?"*

"Before they leap into the glowing coals, preferably."

"Precisely. A happy oyster is a tasty oyster."

"So being eaten is a good thing, and the oysters should compete for the honor?"

"Why not? This predator cultivates, nurtures and protects its prey. It's like a gardener clipping a few flowers for a bouquet."

"Good," she laughed. "I like it. The ravisher is really the Holy Ghost. And how's this miracle of transformation accomplished?"

They were in the redwoods now. The highway turned and twisted through stands of trees more than two hundred feet high, higher than the ceiling in Notre Dame, some growing right up to the edge of the road, their shade deep and profound. Alexei drove fast but kept the car on a trim and flowing line that made the ride seem a little like flying.

"By dint of nonsense, don't you think?" he said. "Because otherwise it'd be some tedious socialist tract. But this way, the truth is delightful. Carroll's reliance on foolishness and whimsy lets him create a story so silly, so clever, so utterly charming that, when the truth is finally revealed, people are pleased to think it charming as well."

"You have a bizarre mind."

"Undoubtedly the reason we're friends," Alexei grinned as the car slowed and he turned off the highway into a labyrinthine forest campground.

"Pretty," Margaret mulled as Alexei drove slowly along the sinuous, narrow roads, past the numbered wooden posts that marked each site, until they found an empty one they both liked at once, on a sort of promontory overlooking a small creek and with a view of the hills to the west. Alexei backed the car into the parking area.

"Such a holy place," Margaret said when they got out of the car. The forest here was twenty stories high. The late afternoon sunlight filtered down to the ground in places, but almost everywhere there was shade. Birds flew in the understory, a hundred feet up and yet far below the yellow-green tops of the trees. The earth was soft and reddish, a mat of vegetable fiber on soft volcanic dust. Down the slope from them the little creek gurgled over smooth round stones, its water brilliant, icy and sweet.

The campsite contained a picnic table and near it a firepit. They found two amply cleared flat areas where they might set up their tents and then they walked back down the road to the pay station to stake their claim. The air was fragrant, warm and still. A faint sweet odor of damp bark and mushrooms commingled with the smoke of campfires. A gray jay scolded someone from a low branch twenty feet above them. They made note of the location of the bathrooms and paid their fee. On the way back a diesel pickup hauling a huge boat passed slowly by them, spewing its black cloud of putrid particulates across the road.

"Auugh," Alexei gagged, ducking and twisting away from the stench.

"Think of it as the best of all possible worlds," Margaret advised ironically, and they both laughed because this seemed actually to be true.

After they'd set up their tents and arranged their bedding and opened a bottle of wine Alexei built a small fire and prepared to cook their supper, which was to be lamb chops and wild rice with snow peas.

While the fire settled down they sat at the picnic table and sipped wine and gazed around at the chittering ground squirrels, the furrowed red bark of the redwoods, the slight haze of smoke and moisture that drifted lazily among the sunbeams. Most of the campground was a few feet higher than they were and the noise from it, the sounds of children and moving cars and occasional rude shouts, which neither of them had noticed at first, seemed muted by this happy circumstance.

"So," Alexei said, "how are things with you and Robin?"

She smiled. "There aren't things with me and Robin exactly. We see each other now and then, that's all."

"But you said the other day that…"

"I know, it's kind of hard to explain."

"Well, I didn't mean to ask you to explain it."

"No, I know. I guess…I guess I've been hoping all along, really, that it'd become something more than it has. Something we agreed from day one it would never be, and I meant it, and I know he means it so I've tried to live by it. No commitments, no expectations of more frequent get-togethers, nothing but what we have, what we do, which is spend an evening at his place now and then."

"This isn't enough?"

She sighed and refilled her glass. "It's very nice. He's wonderful fun, gentle and exciting and romantic. We have great sex. We say we love each other. In the morning I go home." She paused to consider it. "There isn't anything else for either of us. I don't have time for it. He wants to work day and night. I understand this. It's who we are. But I want something more, inside, you know?"

"You want more but you can't ask him for more and even if you could he can't give it to you."

"Yeah. And even if he did, I'd hate myself for taking him away from his work. I couldn't enjoy it."

The fire's blaze had subsided somewhat and now onto the hot grill, beside the rice in its steaming water, Alexei placed the black iron skillet containing four thick chops which he'd been seasoning delicately as they talked.

"So you have to find something else," he said.

"I don't suffer gracefully."

Alexei laughed. "Nor should you," he opined.

They talked about other things during the course of the dinner, how succulent and sweet was the lamb, how oaty the rice, how crisp and cool the snow peas.

Afterward Alexei produced a surprise—a half-gallon of peach ice cream.

"Jesus," Margaret said, pleased, complaining, "look at the men I love. One's gay and the other's on Pluto."

"Pluto seemed so lonely."

She sighed. "And no peach ice cream."

He grinned and handed her a blue-glazed bowlful. Then he sat down with his own. "*Bon appétit!"* he said.

"Mmmm," she replied. "Luscious."

He'd made it himself the night before, with fresh peaches and sugar and cream. He grinned at her. "Such simple tastes we have, eh?"

"Yes," she agreed. "And how seldom we indulge them."

They concurred that the ice cream wouldn't stay frozen overnight in their cooler, the dry ice having long ago vaporized, and so Alexei had a somewhat smaller second helping and Margaret was awarded the container. She spooned it slowly in thoughtful appreciation.

"I had lunch with Elizabeth the other day. Monday I think it was."

"Oh?"

"She and Geoffrey saw Robin over at the Hubbard Escarpment. At least they thought it was Robin. He was painting *en plein,* outdoors, a landscape of the valley I guess."

"They didn't talk with him?"

"He was quite a distance away when they just happened upon him, sitting out beyond the guard fence with his back to them, painting away on his easel, so they decided not to interrupt him."

She took another spoonful of the sweet, fruity ice cream and kept the spoon in her mouth while its cargo melted.

"She said he seemed remote."

Alexei filled both their glasses. "Meaning what, do you think?"

"I don't know. She didn't either."

"She felt far away, like he was far away."

"Because she didn't dare intrude on what he was doing."

"Maybe so."

"The loneliness of the *friends* of the long-distance runner."

She smiled. The sky had grown dark above them, above the towering trees. She watched his face in the shadowy reflection of the firelight, ruddy and bright, soft and sensitive, dark and enigmatic, bright-eyed and often wrinkled with laughter.

Finally, with a whimper, she finished the ice cream. "I have a new poem," she said.

"Oh, and I suppose you're going to read it."

"I want you to read it." And she went to the car and took it from her purse and sat down again across from him.

He glanced through it.

"Read it aloud," she said.

"Okay," he said.

"*Beatrice*. Oh, this is the lady in the rocking chair, yes?"

"Yes."

"Okay." And he read it aloud, as she had requested.

> Her heart broke over distant shores;
> it roamed the earth, I know, in constant searching
> for something familiar only to her dreams.
>
> Like you look for a puppy you lost,
> even years later, in the place where it disappeared.

Her heart examined every island, reach and reef,
looking for what, it did not really know—
a warm and simple moment in the sun of laughing days.

Her heart is quiet now and cold (as yours will be when you are old),
and rests in peaceful silence deep, while over it,
against the wind and sun and myriad little boats,
her cheek is pressed—so soft, so delicate, so black.
A glistening tear falls on the sea,
and the sea cries back.

And the children who laughed in wonder
and tugged at her muslin skirts and licked the blackstrap off her mixing spoon,
and whose white teeth gleamed in the light of her eyes,
are waiting there in the warm summer grass
to show her all the joys and some few sorrows they have found
in her long absence.

They know she is coming.
Her lips release the wind, setting it free with a kiss,
and the wind bears her easily, like an autumn leaf,
into their outstretched arms.

For the next three days they waded in the creek and went for walks and read and talked and ate fabulous meals that tasted even better in the wake of all that exercise and fresh air.

Sunday morning Margaret made eggs benedict: for each of them two lightly toasted English muffin halves, each topped with a bit of butter, a slice of lightly fried ham, and a perfect poached egg, and the whole thing slathered in hollandaise sauce. They had orange juice, V-8, milk and coffee, too.

"I don't eat this well at home," he said, laughing.

"If I ate like this every day I'd weigh a thousand pounds," she said.

"Maybe not," he replied, considering it. "Maybe you'd eat less because the pleasure of each bite would be so much greater."

"Have you ever noticed the light," she asked, "in the mornings and again in the evenings, how different it is? Why should that be, I wonder."

"What do you mean?"

"In the mornings the light is coming in on rails. It's bright, and white, stark and cold. It makes everything keen with contrast. But in the evenings the light is redder, yellow and orange. Greens jump out at you. The focus is soft and languorous, the shadows create enormous depth and sonorousness. The yellowing landscape is sad, and sighing, and empty. So my question is, why?"

Alexei laughed. "Does Robin know about this?"

She laughed too. "I don't know. We've never talked about it. I mean, obviously, the light's different at different times of day, and on different days. He knows a lot about that, naturally, because he's very sensitive to its effects. But why is there a difference between the light an hour or two after sunrise and the light an hour or two before sunset? We've never discussed that."

"Is there a difference?"

"If somebody put you in a cave for a few days and then let you out into one or the other of those times, and assuming you didn't know which direction was what, do you think you could tell which it was? Whether it was morning or evening? Without waiting long enough for obvious changes? Say, within three minutes?"

"I'm not sure. There've been times when I woke up from a nap or an unusually timed sleep and had a bit of trouble determining whether 6 o'clock on the analog was 6 a.m. or 6 p.m.. And I don't believe I've ever decided it based on the light outside except by the orientation of the shadows. Usually I try to reconstruct the circumstances before I went to sleep."

"But suppose they set you down here, in another part of the camp, in an environmentally controlled booth, so you had nothing but the evidence of your eyes. Could you tell?"

"So, let's say, seven in the morning or seven in the evening. Well, on these past few days, yes, I think I could tell."

"I think you could too, and I know I could. So, my question."

Alexei put his cheek in his hand and pondered her. "Do your patients know you think about things like this?"

"Of course," she laughed. "We talk about things like this all the time. They feel more at ease where everybody's on the same playing field, namely, when nobody has any idea what the answer is."

"Okay," Alexei said, "in that spirit I'd say that the difference is that morning follows night whereas evening follows day."

"Very good. I like that even better than your oyster theory."

"I love oysters," he said.

"Yeah, me, too, with garlic butter. But the good guys ate every one, remember. Anyway, at night, and in the morning, the air's clear because all the moisture goes into the ground. Until the day gets warm, it tends to stay there, and morning light passes through clear, dry air. And maybe a little ground fog. But in the evening the moisture is up in the atmosphere, along with the dust kicked up by daytime winds, caused by the heat of the sun, and the evening light passes through an atmosphere with a lot more stuff suspended in it."

"Sure," he said. "Sounds good to me."

That night they sat beside one another at the picnic table, facing the campfire and trading sips from the dwindling fifth of Jack Daniels she'd brought. Each had an arm around the other's shoulders at one point, and after awhile the sips became swigs.

"I almost wish we could—you know—be lovers," Alexei said. "Create that kind of sensuous, carefree pleasure for each other."

"Me too," she replied.

"Some guys like peanut brittle and some like salt-water taffy. Me, I'm partial to kielbasa."

She smiled.

"And, much like the brown buddha, I'm also possessed. I'm like the girl in *The Red Shoes.* I have to keep dancing."

"I know," she said softly. "It's part of your charm."

Alexei stared at his glass and then looked up as a coy smile crept onto Margaret's red lips.

"We could cut off your feet," she said with a grin.

"Ouch," he said. "But speaking of feet, I'm glad you reminded me. I have a poem for you to read."

He handed her a sheet of notebook paper. "I call it *If Wishes Were Horses,"* he said. "And you can see it has no feet to speak of. Maybe that's symbolic."

> They say the road to hell is paved with velleity;
> no question it's true. But beyond mere hypocrisy,
> that signal flare of lost conscience,
> there's a sheet of ice and a film of oil, a smattering of BBs and a splash of

mercury
—and it's downhill all the way!

Think love will go demurely from a blooming dawn through a long-
ripening day 'til the quiet end
at sunset memories garden of souls?
Sure. That's daytime TV, love.
Love on the surface.
Friendship.
A convenience, sometimes, of cohabitation.

But love is a night thing.

It gets high in the hot hawking air, goes to sea in a pea-green sieve, burrows in the bowels of the earth.
It tunnels amid the labyrinths of Dædalus, dreams on the stars, disturbs the planets,
glories and plummets like Icarus.
Like the black angel falls from the heavenly halls
to the hell-fired baths of Beelzebub,
so night's velvet drapery sublimates at sunrise,
and so love's deliquescent veils are washed away to reveal
the shining silver mirror of the morn.

O, it's easy to slip in the seed of night love,
but it's hard to tear from fecund soil one's wandering roots
when morning comes and beckons one to go.

The skids are greased in the amber light of passion's longing shadows,
and slathered in the brassy crimson hues that herald the time of the stars.
But the journey back through the gray dawn is slogging through crotch-deep mud,
and swimming out of Charybdis and shinnying the greasepole,
and a hard climb up a steep slope slick with desolate tears.
And the sharp hulls of broken dreams
are useful for traction.

"You'll come visit me in St. Petersburg, won't you?" he asked on the way home. "When I get a decent role I'm going to have you over and show you off to all my new friends. If I have any new friends."

"Uh-huh. And how will I get to St. Petersburg?"

"Well, you just go to Minsk and hang a left. No, seriously, I'll take care of everything."

"And if I come will you make love to me?" she asked, smiling.

"All through the dance," he said.

Chapter 26

Old Men at Sea

Before the beginning of years
  There came to the making of man
Time, with a gift of tears;
  Grief, with a glass that ran;
Pleasure, with pain for leaven;
  Summer, with flowers that fell;
Remembrance fallen from heaven,
  And madness risen from hell;
Strength without hands to smite;
  Love that endures for a breath;
Night, the shadow of light,
  And life, the shadow of death.

—*Before the Beginning of Years,* Algernon Charles Swinburne

The tree of knowledge has been plucked—all's known—
And life yields nothing further to recall
Worthy of this ambrosial sin, so shown,
No doubt in fable, as the unforgiven
Fire which Prometheus filched for us from heaven.

—*Tis Sweet,* George Gordon, Lord Byron

Three weeks later, as his bubeleh Natasha was kissing Alexei on the cheek for what seemed like the thousandth time, Harry eased his diamond blue Aston-Martin into a space at the far end of the parking lot, just beyond Mo's ten-year-old VW bus. He gathered his CDs and notebooks off the seat and carefully placed them in his briefcase. Then he set the door locks and got out. He retrieved his suitcase from the trunk and for a moment he paused to inhale the warm, pine-scented air. Then, smiling, he walked across the tree-lined pavement to the Wolf Lake Inn.

Above a few feet of stone foundation the hotel was an old three-story wooden structure, well-maintained, with a huge porch that wrapped around two sides and, like many of the rooms, afforded a serene and often spectacular view across the lake toward the southwest. Even impecunious would-be poets found the rates reasonable.

When he came to the large white doors with the ornate wrought-iron handles and frosted glass lights, Harry tucked his briefcase under his left arm and opened one of them. As he walked toward the desk across the dark oak floor of the lobby he saw Mo, apparently himself just checking in.

"We may have to stop meeting like this," he said.

Mo turned and smiled. "Hey," he said.

The young woman behind the desk seemed unamused. "They're all arriving today?" she asked.

"Well, I don't know," Mo said to her. "Today and tomorrow, yes." Then he looked at Harry. "They lost our reservations."

"I'm sure they've just misplaced them," Harry said, smiling at the frazzled-looking brunette across the counter as she looked up from what seemed idle rummaging through a file of reservation cards.

"They have five rooms, it looks like," Mo said. "But only three on the lake side."

Harry laughed. "Well, *we're* taken care of, anyway," he said.

"You made these reservations last year?" she asked.

"Yes," Mo said.

"We always do," Harry added. "As we're leaving, usually." Then he smiled at her. "We're going to do it again this year, too, if you'll let us in."

"For twelve rooms?"

"Eight on the second floor and four on the third," Mo said. "I think that's what we reserved. But we don't need that many."

"You made the reservations?"

"No, but I was standing right here when Kate did it."

"And what was the name of your group?"

"The Douglas County Poetry Society," Mo said.

"Was and is," Harry added.

"You're all poets?"

Harry laughed. "I wouldn't go that far. We just write poetry for fun. Mostly it's like the girl with the curl; sometimes we're good but mostly we're horrid."

"Oh."

"As I'm sure you'll discover for yourself. We come up here for ten days every year to learn new rhymes and rhythms." While she absorbed this, he turned to Mo. "How many are we?" he asked.

Mo pondered this. "Let's see. Sibyl and Alexei are gone."

"Excuse me," the dark-haired woman said. "I'm going to get Mrs. Osgood."

And as she left, Teresa pushed her way through the door, bearing a bag slung over each shoulder and carrying a suitcase in either hand. She grinned at them. "No dumb blonde jokes," she said. "I really need all this stuff."

"It's her wigs," Mo confided.

"Huh-uh. Gardening tools," Harry demurred.

"So what's up?" she sighed as she set all her paraphernalia on the floor and wrapped Harry in a warm embrace.

"Oh, they screwed up the reservations," Mo said. "The three of us are all booked into the same room."

"Cool," Teresa said.

Mrs. Osgood, round, ruddy, and a bit out of breath, appeared through a doorway behind the desk. The younger woman followed her tentatively, and stood back at a discreet distance. "Well, hello again, Mr. Douglas," she greeted Harry, smiling broadly. "Welcome back to Wolf Lake."

"Thank you," Harry said. "But actually my name's Orville. The poetry group's from Douglas County. Nevertheless, let's not stand on formality. I'm delighted you remember my ugly mug."

"I do, indeed," she said. "And this lovely lady, too."

Teresa smiled. "Is there some trouble with our reservations?" she asked.

"Oh, dear, I'm sure not," Mrs. Osgood said.

After declaring them to her young assistant to be "our poets," Mrs. Osgood shuffled some names around and managed to find eight available rooms, some with two double beds, six overlooking the lake, and they all agreed this would do nicely.

"We're friends," Harry said, laughing. "Of course, if some of these people had to bunk together, that could change."

Afterward, Mo invited Harry to join him on the lake for a lazy cruise and some idle fishing.

"No fishing," Harry said. "You can if you want to, but I'll just kibitz."

Mo had rented a comfortable little wood-and-fiberglass boat with an outboard engine, broad enough of beam to accommodate two reversible bench seats that had removable backs and vinyl-covered seatcushions. The latter luxury pleased Harry greatly.

Mo loaded his fishing rod and tackle box and two life jackets into the little craft. Harry, with a small book of poems, stepped in gingerly while Mo held the boat steady. Then, pushing off and settling himself in the stern, Mo pulled the starter cord and they were soon parting the smooth waters of Wolf Lake at a ripping seven or eight miles an hour.

"I love these little islands," Mo said. "In twenty minutes, once we're out there, we'll be totally lost."

"Well, I skipped lunch to get up here early, so make sure we get found before suppertime."

"It's like canoeing through those reedy marshes down at the south end of Diamond Lake. Have you ever done that?"

"Huh-uh. I get most of my wilderness experience from National Geographic reruns."

"Everything in every direction looks the same. You can't tell where the hell you are. And once we get out here you won't be able to tell where one island ends and another begins. It's like driving in a thick fog."

And very soon, to be sure, Harry could no longer distinguish anything familiar on the shoreline, and Mo said, though there was no way to be sure, that everything they were looking at was an island. In the reach of water their little boat occupied they were alone. Mo cut the engine speed and they eased in along a shaded shoreline distinguished by considerable vegetation in the water, which appeared to be about ten feet deep.

"How about here?" he asked.

"Fine," Harry said, leafing through his book. His hat was pulled low over his eyes and he'd stretched his bare white legs out onto the bench seat opposite him. The afternoon sun was warm, but a little freshet of wind along the shore was soothing and cool as the evening would be.

Mo sat next to Harry's feet and clipped a green, triple-hooked doodlebug to his line leader.

"So," Mo said as he flicked the doodlebug into the reeds. "I hear you were seen disporting yourself at the Jazz Festival."

"Uh-huh. And what are you, the CIA?"

Mo shrugged with a smile. "Well, when a white-haired old codger gallivants on the public greensward with a beautiful black woman half his age on his arm, people notice, no matter what Merrill-Lynch says. *In* his arms, I heard."

"Don't the people you know have anything better to do than gawk at strangers?"

Mo raised his eyebrows and looked amused.

"Well, she's hardly half my age as you well know. And I'm very young for my age."

"Uh-huh. You are that. And I could care less, as you well know."

"We're as far apart agewise as my father and mother were. They were married when my dad was thirty-eight and my mother was twenty. So I don't think it's so strange."

Mo jigged the lure a little.

"Is it serious?"

"Oh, very. I'm a serious person."

"Seriously demented, you mean."

"Well, I didn't take up with that green-eyed firebrand you were all doe-eyed about a few months ago."

Mo laughed sardonically. "Huh," he said, reeling the lure slowly in toward the boat.

"Went down in flames, didn't you?"

"Crashed, burned and exploded," Mo laughed.

"See, I like to remain friends with my women."

"How do you do that?"

"I treat my relationships as investments. On both sides. I keep my word. I don't invest in people I don't like. I still have a throne in Teresa's garden."

"I know; I've sat in it. Very posh. In fact you were there, too. It was your hundred-and-first birthday, as I recall."

"Uh-huh, but it's still there. And I'm still welcome there. And you couldn't sit on Aurora's commode, could you?"

"If I did, she'd flush me."

Mo lifted the lure out of the water and flicked it away again. It landed with a plop. Harry read silently. The nylon line whispered through the water's surface as Mo reeled and tugged gently on the doodlebug. With calm indifference he retrieved and cast it again and again.

"This is how I write poetry," he said, to himself as much as anyone. "Casting bread upon the waters."

Harry laughed. "Except this bread is boobytrapped."

"Yes, in fish parlance I'm probably a bad god. If you go for my spiel I'll eat you."

"Well, but you don't even like to eat them, do you?"

"Huh-uh. Too many bones."

"You're just playing."

"Yep."

"So you're more like Loki, or Coyote. You just do it for fun."

"Well, I toss the bait out into the world and see what comes by. You're right, though, once I've got the fish in the boat, once I've had time to admire its size and strength and color and design, then I've counted coup and the game's over as far as I'm concerned. The fish can go home."

"Uh-huh. And this is basically your approach to women as well, eh?"

Mo laughed. "This is basically my approach to everything," he said.

"Kind of cynical isn't it?"

"Well, we've been friends for a while now, haven't we? Does it seem cynical to you?"

"Well, it has a tinge," Harry said. "A glowing fringe. But no."

"The reason is, you're not a fish. You run with the lure but you don't get hooked. You only come close enough for me to see the glimmer in your eye. You don't let me count coup on you. You make me keep fishing for you. See? Just like writing a poem."

"I'm a poem in progress?"

Mo shrugged. "Could be," he said.

"I hear you have another poem in progress."

A sixteen-inch trout that looked like a muskellunge burst out of the water with the doodlebug grasped firmly in its translucent, cartilaginous lips, signalling with a wild unblinking eye its angry triumph over the superficial world, not yet aware of its error. Mo set the hook before the behemoth hit the water again, and his rod curled over as the fish fought vainly its now-inevitable fate. Some minutes later, holding its gleaming and slippery bullrush-brown and pink and silver body in one hand, Mo carefully worked the barb of the hook back through the tissues and out of the fish's mouth.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" he asked.

"Yep."

He slipped it back into the water and held it for a moment. "Okay, stupid," he said. "Off you go." The fish rippled itself once or twice and disappeared.

"Let's go explore an island," he said. "I have to take a leak."

"Okay," Harry agreed.

Harry stood on the top of a small island that rose perhaps twenty feet above the lake level and surveyed his surroundings. It was a little easier from this height to make out the features of the land across the black and silver surface of the water. He could distinguish the edges of several islands, and through a certain passage thought he could see a bit of the shoreline.

"Height is a great advantage," he said.

Mo walked up alongside him. "Harder to defend your knees, though," he supposed.

"Ever been to an old Civil War battlefield?"

"Sure, Gettysburg. And Manassas."

"Well, the problem at Manassas was different. A choke point. But at Gettysburg the high ground made a big difference."

"Yes, but still it's like Masada, or the Alamo, you can get isolated there. Surrounded. And then wearied out."

Harry laughed. "You can see a lot farther."

"That you can."

"Obviously you still have to go to the water's edge to go anywhere."

"Obviously."

"You don't believe in reconnoitering the situation, do you?"

"Well, what are you looking for? I mean, I don't sleep with one eye open, and I'll bet you don't either, whatever you may think."

"I mean, you'd just as soon cruise around on the lake for a long time trying to find your way out rather than climb up on some rock like this and see what's what."

Mo smiled. "Oh, I see, this is back to the subject of relationships again."

Harry took a briar pipe from his vest and tamped a little tobacco from a zippered leather pouch into it and lit it.

"I quit smoking," he said. "I only do it once a year, while we're up here."

"I like the smell of it," Mo said.

"I'm just trying to understand why your relationships with women seem so much more simple and natural than mine."

"Maybe it's an illusion."

"Mmmph," he puffed.

"It would seem odd to me to consider a woman as an investment."

"Mmmph."

"Or any relationship for that matter. But it's a stronger sensation vis-a-vis a woman, for me, anyway, and especially in a romantic relationship." Mo paused. He looked out over the water, rippled by the late afternoon breeze. He saw the sun-dappled islands and hills of shadowy green trees. He imagined he could see the soft wave of oncoming night, a low line on the eastern horizon, a dark fringe beneath the dazzling blue stage curtain of the sky, Apollo's eyelid over the stars.

"Because," he continued, "I want to experience a woman. I want to be face to face with her. I want to crawl inside her. I want her to crawl inside of me. I want us to fly away with each other. To me this is very natural. It takes no calculation. It bears no calculation. To put it in Zen terms, it's non-rational. It's a touching, a commingling, of spirits. It's driven by very powerful feelings, on both sides, apparently."

"Isn't it just the thrill of the chase?"

"Yes it is the thrill of the chase. That's no sin, is it? I like to be thrilled. But it's like the fish thing…"

Harry chuckled. "I knew you were going to bring up that damn fish thing."

"Yes, well, that's because we've crawled inside each other, figuratively speaking of course, and not because we negotiated anything."

"I take your point."

"See, I mean, I don't want the fish. I just want the game."

"Very sporting."

"Granted, it can be a risky game. The hooks are real. But you know, it seems to me the game can go on forever."

"And yet in your experience it seems not to."

"I think that's because people, maybe including myself sometimes, try to capture the fish and thereby end the game."

"And possibly people, sometimes including yourself, get hoist by their own bootstraps."

"Curious metaphor, but yes. Life is not a lace quadrille, if I remember rightly."

On the way back, as the little boat ploughed its steady way through the rippling waves, Mo sat facing him while Harry, sitting sideways at the stern, drove. The sun was low in the sky, perhaps two hours before sunset but already the light was changing and shadows insinuated themselves everywhere.

Harry laughed aloud. He looked at Mo. "I was just thinking about my Uncle Jack," he said. He laughed again. "He used to fish on this lake back in New Hampshire, where I grew up. He'd take me along so I could row the boat."

Harry noticed that the bow of this boat stayed fairly low, even with both of them sitting toward the stern, and he had a good view of the water as he aimed to skirt another island. He went on with his story.

"Somehow one summer there was a crop of catfish in the lake. Bullheads. Ugly as sin they are, fat gray fish that eat crap off the bottom. This lake was prime smallmouth bass water. Occasionally you'd get a nice perch. But these things, they were an abomination against nature. He hated them.

"At first he'd beat them to death against the side of the boat. Then he took a hammer along to do it with. But that made a hell of a mess, so the next time he decided to use his gun. As an old infantry officer, he had his military .45, and he brought it along one morning. He must've had two hundred rounds of ammo.

"Well, the first few bullheads he shot in the water as he drew them alongside. They just exploded into a mess of blood and yellow chunks with gray pieces of skin stuck on them. Pieces

would float up for a minute or two, like flotsam from a submarine. The damn gun sounded like an artillery piece. It sort of spoiled the Hiawatha atmosphere, if you know what I mean.

"But he was exultant. He'd found the right tool for this job, and he went on a crazy crusade. He stood up in the boat, peering down into the water, and started jigging for them, dropping worms on the bottom. He wanted a really big one.

"And suddenly he got one, and it came charging up toward the surface, right at him, and when it got to the surface it just shot out of the water like a cruise missile, and as Uncle Jack instinctively shied back the gun fell off the seat and discharged and made a sizeable hole in the bottom of the boat. And because he'd lost his footing, the fish and the rod and Uncle Jack all went overboard into the water. It was quite spectacular.

"He made me promise on pain of death never to tell anybody, and to this moment I never have."

Mo enjoyed the story. "Now," he asked, "is this an allegory of some kind?"

"No, this is the truth. I'm the kind of person who thinks *Moby Dick* is about a whale."

Mo wondered whether he could actually write a poem by casting something over and over—a word, or a phrase, or a question.

"Well," he observed, "Ahab tried to capture Moby and end the game. So it's really about human relationships. Too much virtue leads to virtue mortis. Just like a complete abandonment of virtue leads to pandemonium. You should fish, Harry. Fishing is the answer. The game's the thing."

"I like having friends," Harry said, grinning.

"Suit yourself," Mo said. "Is she coming up?"

"Tomorrow."

"Don't get mushy, okay? I can't stand to see a man debase himself like that."

Harry smiled.

Chapter 27

Subtle Wreaths of Hair (*fka* Spade Queens)

Let it be forgotten, as a flower is forgotten,
Forgotten as a fire that once was singing gold,
Let it be forgotten for ever and ever,
Time is a kind friend, he will make us old.

—*Let It Be Forgotten,* Sara Teasdale

When I am dead and over me bright April
Shakes out her rain-drenched hair,
Though you should lean above me broken-hearted,
I shall not care.

—*I Shall Not Care,* Sara Teasdale

Whate'er she meant by 't, bury it with me,
For since I am
Love's martyr, it might breed idolatry
If into other hands these reliques came.

—*The Funeral,* John Donne

Teresa, dressed in a light flannel shirt, shorts and running shoes, had decided to go for a walk while Harry and Mo were out boating. She'd met Aurora in the lobby, smartly dressed in a pleated Night Watch tartan skirt and a pale cream blazer with brass buttons over a cool crystal white silk scarf affording a narrow décolletage, with plain white stockings and pale cream heels.

"The Hilton's up the road, babe," she'd said, grinning, as Aurora looked at her.

"I'm slumming," she'd said. And they'd decided to go for a walk together.

Aurora had changed into a pair of softened levis with a very tailored fit, a man's buttercup yellow button-down shirt (obviously her size) with the sleeves rolled up, a crocheted beige sweater vest with pockets, and a new pair of gray leather hiking boots over thick white socks, folded once over her ankles. She'd tucked her golden red hair into a puffy plush velvet cap the chatoyant color and luster of dark blue silk.

"I really think you should be on TV," Teresa said.

"I am on TV," Aurora replied. "You know, like Ken Nordine said, 'I'm *on* TV.' I live in a TV universe."

They strolled along the lakeside for a while and then took a trail that lead up the hill.

"Two paths diverged," Teresa said as they began the steep switchback climb.

"I never think about it," Aurora said from behind her.

"Mo says it's all a crapshoot."

"I know what Mo says," Aurora said dismissively. "Fuck him. You can effect outcomes."

"Yes, but it's always partly accidental."

"Of course it's statistical," Aurora responded, breathing in rhythm with her steps as they lifted themselves higher, "but that just means it's controlled partly by forces we can't measure or don't understand."

"And sometimes we have outcomes we didn't intend."

"Yeah, sometimes."

After a while they gained the ridge of the shallow bowl in which the lake dwelt and began following a trail along it, lost in a woods of young pine, passing an occasional old giant much-abused by lightning, fire and beetles, treading in the soft ecru-colored sandy earth packed firm by many feet.

"Oh, look," Teresa said, pointing to a patch of pretty pink tufts standing like bottle brushes among the scrub on the forest floor. "I think it's liatris."

"Pretty. Isn't it called Shooting Star or something like that?"

They walked off the path and bent over to look at the flowers more carefully. "No, that's a totally different thing."

"They look like little colonies of coral," Aurora observed, "with their feeding tubes swaying in the current, you know?" And, raising her arms, she undulated in imitation of the coral's feeding tubes doing a slow-motion hootchie-kootchie in the warm turquoise waters of a tropical sea.

Then she stopped, overtaken by some idea. "God, I've got to get out of here!"

"Uh-huh." Teresa plucked a sprig and worked it into a small paper bag she'd had in the back pocket of her shorts. Then, flattening it with her palms, she tucked it back into her pocket.

"Research," she said with a smile. And then, as she stood up, Teresa remembered to ask, "Out of where?"

"Out of here," Aurora said, still waving her arms. "Out of my life."

"I thought you had the ideal life. Flash and fashion, big deals, fast money, handsome men—wealthy men yet—swooning at your feet, clients with gobs of money and no obvious clue. What more might there be?"

"Ah, well, yeah," she said, laughing, "well, there might be a lot more. I just had an offer from L.A. for five times what I'm making now."

"Wow. Doing what?"

"Pretty much what I do now, buying and selling and developing projects for a network. Not this artsy PBS stuff. Big-time stuff."

"But I thought you liked this. Art and all, I mean."

"Well, you like what you can, know what I mean?"

They continued along the ridgeline while Aurora explained her view that every situation was a microcosm of the whole, except scaled or colored or somehow configured differently.

"It's always the same job, the same guy, the same story, just reiterated in a different way. Here, it's schlock art and no money. In L.A. it's no art and tons of money. At least it's honest."

Now they took another trail to the left, gradually down and away from the lake. The air grew palpably hotter. There was no breeze.

"That sounds like one of Mo's rationalizations," Teresa said.

"Please," Aurora said. "Spare me. He's a squirrely, dissimulating coward, pure and simple." As they descended the trail she noticed her new hiking boots now seemed much too stiff. "A spineless bastard, just like Sibyl said he was."

"He really loved you, I thought," Teresa said.

"Bullshit, he—hey, let's take a break, okay? My feet are killing me."

Teresa stopped and turned toward her. "There's a little creek down here not too far where we can sit in the shade and dunk our feet in the water."

"Okay. How far?"

"Just over that rise. Five minutes, tops."

"Great."

"That's a terrific cap, by the way," Teresa said, continuing walking.

"Thanks. Jim bought it for me for my birthday. It's from Saks."

"Of course. Jim's your new victim?"

"He's an ophthalmic surgeon. He specializes in some radical operation that lets people see better. Of course they may go blind later, but the money is unbelievable."

"Don't people take exception to that?"

"Well, it's a slow degenerative process. It takes twenty or thirty years. Nobody can prove one way or the other what the mechanism is."

"And meanwhile there's the money."

"Precisely."

They were nearing the stream now; they could hear its little chortling gurgles and smell the cool air wafting up from its shaded banks.

"They all cheat, you know," Aurora said. "It's in their nature."

"Well…"

"Even the lordly Harry Orville."

"Oh?"

They scrambled down the embankment, into the deep deciduous shade, and found a place where they could sit by the cool rushing water of the little stream, which was only maybe a foot deep and four or five feet wide.

"We met at a bar convention once," Aurora continued. "Did he tell you?"

"No."

"I suppose not. Well, I'm sure it was before he knew you. Anyway, he had some information I needed, and unfortunately," she said as she removed her shoe with a sigh, "he knew I needed it, so he told me he'd tell me over dinner if I'd buy."

Teresa smiled. They peeled off their socks and let the cold water tumble and bubble over their hot, tired feet.

"God, that feels good," Aurora said.

"Sure does."

"So I took him to the best restaurant in town. What the hell," she laughed, "it wasn't my money."

"Uh-huh."

"All through dinner he ducked and hemmed and hawed and changed the subject until I realized he wanted a lot more than dinner for this information. He had me over a barrel and he wanted me inside the barrel. You know."

"When was this?"

"Oh, a couple of years ago. But I mean, he was an old man, and I certainly wasn't attracted to him. In fact, the idea seemed pretty disgusting."

"He told you he wanted sex for this stuff, whatever it was?"

"Oh, he's no fool," Aurora said. "He never said anything like that. In fact, he never said anything. He's very cagey. But I was cagier. There was a young guy, a clerk I knew Harry was

fond of. After dinner I looked him up, and after a few drinks I dangled a little hanky-panky in front of him and sure enough he fell all over himself giving it up." She laughed at the memory of her little victory. "The thing is, 'Resa, you really can control almost everything. It's like driving a car. Sure, a wheel can fall off. A plane can land on you. But it almost never happens, and in the meantime you can drive all over the place, where and when you please."

Teresa smiled.

"You choose every path you take."

"I guess so."

"Even if you choose it by flipping a coin or reading tea leaves or making a blunder, you choose it. It goes with the territory. So whatever's on that path, you chose it and you have to deal with it."

"The 'you chose it' part just sounds kind of moralistic."

Aurora sighed. "I don't do morals," she said. "I only make rules I can live by. If people want to go through life like cobblestones bouncing downhill, that's okay by me. I just want to take my own path. If somebody gets in my way, I roll right over them. I don't much give a damn whether they like it or not."

Teresa picked up a few pebbles and plunked them, one by one, into the water. She regarded her companion, small, compact and wiry, lithe and beautiful like a cat.

"You're a tough cookie," she said admiringly.

Aurora laughed and splashed her hands in the water. "Sibyl used to talk all the time about being a life form trapped in a human body. You know, like one of those wormy things on *Star Trek."*

Teresa didn't know. "An alien, you mean."

"Especially about sex," Aurora continued. "I've always wanted the pleasure of sex without the sex itself, without all the mess—the psychological mess, I mean. That'd be handy, don't you think? No man, no woman, no nothing."

"I don't know…"

"I'm not talking about masturbation. You have to have yourself involved in that, so that's no good."

"Some imaginary force then…"

"Yes, something like that. Something you could control completely, that just came in the night, so to speak, and evaporated when you were through with it."

"You really don't like men."

"Not mauling all over me. Nor women either."

Teresa pondered this.

"I love sex though, that's my problem." She laughed.

"And you love the power it gives you."

"Of course." She wondered if Teresa had any idea what she was talking about. "Don't you?"

Teresa was thinking about Billy. "I guess I just don't think of it that way," she said. Then she noticed a little delicate clutch of bearberries on the opposite bank, translucent bell-shaped flowers of glowing lavender with bright pink lips.

"I just like being alive," she said. "I don't fight with it."

"Oh, God," Aurora said, as if she'd been reminded of something. She leaned back on her elbows against the soft earth and contemplated the extent of her supine body, her small, firm breasts jutting up beneath the bright yellow cotton, her flat belly curving downward, her levi-clad legs, crossed at the ankles, seeming long and sleek from this perspective, her white feet looking a

trifle bluish beneath the rippling water. “I saw Robin the other day,” she said. “He doesn’t want to fight either.”

“What do you mean?”

“He’s sick.”

“I don’t understand. Sick how? He seemed fine to me when I saw him last; it wasn’t even two weeks ago.”

“I don’t know. Some kind of condition he’s had for a long time. He gets migraines. Well, they’re not exactly migraines. Seizures maybe. Weird visual effects. I don’t know. He’s very vague about it. The doctors wanted to run a bunch of tests but he wouldn’t let them.”

“Tests for headaches?”

“I really don’t understand it.”

“It sounds ridiculous.”

“Yes, maybe, but he won’t stand up and deal with it. He just wants to paint, he says.”

“But that seems silly. Maybe I should have a talk with him.”

“No, don’t. You can’t. He doesn’t want anyone to know. He swore me to secrecy.”

“But…” Teresa paused. “Well, it’s his decision, isn’t it?” She stood up and splashed carefully across the creek to look more closely at the bearberry flowers. “Look at these,” she said. “They’re so beautiful.” The sunlight filtering through the leafy trees fell on the little translucent petals and filled them with a pale violet light that was surrounded as it emerged by puckered pinkish lips. “Almost kissable.” She retrieved another small paper sack from her hip pocket.

Aurora felt a warm rush of anger. “You don’t take anything seriously, do you?”

“Oh,” said Teresa, “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t you think Robin should fight this? Don’t you think people should fight for all the life they can get?” Then suddenly she felt very foolish, because obviously Teresa didn’t think so. She was a legal secretary, not a lawyer. She’d let Harry have his vaunted seat in her garden without so much as extracting a pledge of fidelity, of anything, really, from him, and now that he was seeing Elizabeth she still kept it there, as though nothing had happened. Of course she wasn’t a scrapper, she was just another passive taker of whatever fate dished up, just like Mo and Robin and all the rest of them.

After a few more minutes they dried their feet in the warm air and put their socks and shoes on again and headed back up the trail. For a long time they walked silently. Aurora lead the way.

“So,” Teresa asked her as they strolled along the ridgeline, “are you going to L.A.?”

“Well, Jim won’t go of course. But his clinic’s going to suck air anyway eventually, when the truth about the consequences starts coming out. So I don’t know. Maybe.”

Teresa laughed. “I don’t suppose you’ve ever wanted kids.”

Aurora laughed too. “Hell, no, what for?”

“I don’t know, really...”

“I’m too tough for kids, ’Resa. I decided when I took my bar exams that if I failed I’d become a whore. Then I passed and became a whore anyway. It’s my life, you know, and I’m really, really good at it. I like getting in the pits with these assholes and carving a piece of them off for my treasure chest. I hang their heads on my wall. I guess you think it’s sort of sick, but I love battles. I love to win.”

As they climbed the last gentle incline before the descent to lakeside, Teresa idly felt in her hip pockets the paper bags, fat with their treasures of flowers, and watched Aurora’s rump flexing firmly beneath the faded blue denim material. It was obvious she had nothing in her back pockets. With her, the show was everything.

Chapter 28

Eat Your Heart Out

They that had fought so well
Came thro' the jaws of Death,
Back from the mouth of Hell,
All that was left of them,
Left of six hundred.

—*The Charge of the Light Brigade,* Alfred Lord Tennyson

Before supper, as the evening breezes rippled and billowed through the curtains on her windows overlooking the lake, Aurora curled up for a nap and dreamed that she was astride a wild stallion, racing furiously across the moors, the harsh wind whipping her hair like tongues of flame, and that Robin, interposing himself to save her, was knocked to the ground and crushed beneath the pounding hooves, and that the sweat-soaked, foam-flecked beast then leapt from a cliff into the sea, and that, as it plummeted downward, she floated skyward like a child's balloon, and was wafted over the spot where Robin lay, and that Robin opened his eyes and began laughing at her, and then as she drifted down toward him it wasn't Robin at all but Ralph Battaglia, the producer who had offered her this fabulous opportunity in L.A., and she had awakened with a start, hot and moist and anxious.

Harry, meanwhile, relaxed on the porch in a softly cushioned wicker armchair, his legs, extended and crossed at the ankles, propped atop the broad white wooden railing, and tried to read his new book on the role of Negro troops in the war, but she had given it to him and it smelled faintly of gardenias, and he kept seeing her black eyes gazing at him and sensing the warm caress of her breath against the white skin of his neck, and he couldn't concentrate.

He lay the open book face down on his lap and let himself imagine she was there, as she would be soon, sitting beside him above the little green sward, above the broad sloping expanse of pale dust and scrubby pines, above the glassy lake, riffled here and there by the breeze, above the myriad petty velitations by means of which one's days were entangled with the world, and he imagined her graceful brown hand, its fingernails tipped with an iridescent purplish hue, lying peacefully in his rough bearish paw while he told her, looking at her, that he—well, that he felt overcome with feelings for her, that he wanted her with him always now, for all life, for all time. And she would look at him with her steady, quiet eyes and her lips sweet as ripened Concord grapes would soften and curl imperceptibly into that amused little subliminal smile she always got when he began stumbling over his silver tongue molten and riven with unaccustomed feeling.

Up on the third floor, in a small corner room with a panoramic view of blue-gray mountain peaks now streaked and dusted with new snow, Teresa carefully pressed her treasures of the day's gathering and positively identified, with the aid of the extensive library of books she'd brought along in the white canvas shoulder bag, all but two of them. Harry had often urged her to organize the thousands of sprigs she'd collected, since she'd been a child, really, and to include such elemental botanical data as their Latin names on the labels she sometimes, but by no means always, attached to them. Still, most rested between the pages of books, where the description of their characteristics and often the Latinization of their eponym was located, or in boxes of little

glassine envelopes labelled, when they were, with common names, which, as he'd rightly pointed out, varied "from holler to holler and granma to granma," and so probably did the flowers themselves.

She thought with a smile that this was something important she'd learned from Harry, first about herself, that she thrived in the midst of this sort of casual chaos, and second about chaos itself, that it served a useful purpose, because she always knew most precisely where the things were that were of current interest to her and she had no need to keep track of things she'd long ago lost interest in, so the stuff that was on the tip of her mind, as Charlie Brown would say, was exactly the stuff that ought to be there, and the stuff that was old, irrelevant, or already incorporated into her everyday knowledge, was no burden on her activities. It seemed the perfect system.

And sitting crossways at the end of the dock, Mo leaned against a piling and gazed off across the lake at nothing in particular. Then he realized he'd spent almost an hour thinking about Harry, and how old he was, and about Aurora, and how young she was, and of course about himself, and how despairing and tired of it all he was. Kate had teased him the other day about "acting existential." But what about Candide? What about Rousseau? What about Robin Ecst? What about Richard Harris in *Man in the Wilderness?* Well, it was a distinguished list. One could be in worse company. Harry was, well, anything but existential. Harry's mind was perfectly suited to discerning a path of consequence through the jungle of the law. He thought it amusing to devise a route with unexpected justice at its end. But his mind was also critically adapted for interpreting language in a teleological way, to serve some external purpose.

There was a virtue, Mo had known it from infancy, in bending like a reed, being a leaf on the river of joy, listening to life's own music, and now, working at the clinic and puttering in his garden and maintaining a relationship with Indian Creek as preternatural as that between cavemen and fire. There was most assuredly virtue in loving women, even if they turned out to be shrews and cursed him and perceived him as a contemptible bastard who lured young virgins (themselves) with dangling participles of love into the smoke-filled den of his iniquity, his black frog's tongue flicking out like a striking snake to snatch their soaring sisterhood from the heavens, reeling them into its slimy maw, its gaping red gums adorned with shark's teeth like curved knitting needles, not for chewing (he swallowed them whole) but for holding them captive while he tortured them with metaphysics.

But then there was Harry, and there was time. Was it time for him to stop acting existential? Was it inappropriate to his age, his failing eyesight, his adumbrated hearing, his incipient pot belly, his wrinkling skin, his awareness of ever-more-numerous, but so far mostly minor errors of judgment, often caused by diminished perceptual resources including inexplicable lapses or abdications of attention? Did these elemental ravages of time invalidate to any degree the struggle of the individual soul to choose its own path through life, even when it meant, as it always did, a greater effort, both in the creation of new trails and in resistance from the highway owners who thought lonely pioneers a risk to profit, and the freeway mobs who regarded even blue liners as traitors to the cause and shirkers from the common duty. If they had such implications, then the truth of the matter would go something like this: Freedom is for the young. For the old, there is responsibility, a growing web of obligations to others, circumscription, resorption of identity, and, quite incidentally, death.

What sense would this make? It was as if society, in its habit of crediting youth and debiting age, were to become the model of one's own mind, so that one might think the young should express themselves and the old should listen. Well and good. But the old should express themselves, too, and the young should listen. And if either side won't listen, then deal with them as one had always dealt with the closed-minded: ignore them. Harry believed, Mo thought, that

age thrust upon one a greater responsibility for the coming age. It made sense. One's time grew short, one never knew how short, but statistically speaking it did, and like a horde of mute insects age kept filling one's ears with cacophonous silence and sucking the juice, cell by cell, molecule by molecule, from one's essential elasticity. It made sense to sacrifice certain claims on behalf of the young. But did the claims of humankind extend to one's own soul? Even if one were as old as Methuselah, it would be tyranny, no matter how salved by metaphysical snake oil, and it could not be allowed. The virtue of liberty was not compromised, as a principle, by time and its nefarious indignities.

The four of them had dinner together. Aurora and Mo were civil, even sociable. The steaks, and Teresa's lemon sole, were excellent. Nobody wanted dessert. After paying their shares of the check, they agreed, at Harry's suggestion, to repair to the porch overlooking the lake for coffee and further poetical repartee.

Aurora and Teresa went to the ladies' room. "Mo's being very polite," Teresa said.

"Talk to me, 'Resa."

"Well, you two seem to be getting along, and I like that."

"He's an ant to me, see? An ant. I'll be as polite to him as you'd be to the Queen Mother. I ply my living among ants. It's excellent practice. But he's a pusillanimous pismire, and I wouldn't pleasure him with a personal remark." She paused at the doorway and smiled. "I'm kidding, of course."

Teresa laughed and held the door for her. "Of course," she said.

Mo got a glass of B&B at the bar and joined Harry on the porch. "I have cigars," Harry said.

Mo smiled. "You're a hell of a guy."

"Yes, I am." Harry raised his cup of coffee in a toast. "To guys," he said.

"Guys," Mo agreed, sniffing and sipping the fruit-hinted liquor.

They sat facing south, on the back side of the hotel, looking through and over a sparse forest of pines, some small and some a hundred feet tall, down onto the lake and up into the hills and valleys beyond. There was a grassy apron at the foot of the stairs, alongside the building, and a few feet below the edge of the porch there were flowerbeds. The porch itself was large, perhaps sixty feet long and fifteen feet wide, its floor painted a dark gray. The roof was supported by wooden columns perhaps twelve feet apart, and between the columns, painted white as they were, ran a broad wooden rail that capped a simple latticework of vertical rungs joining it to a lower rail, so children might not tumble off.

"Can't do that in mixed company," Harry said.

"Well…"

Teresa came out with her coffee and some danish rolls on a platter. She put the rolls and some paper napkins on the black formica top of the old maple coffee table, and set her coffee quite close to Mo's brandy, and sat next to Mo.

"You want brandy?" Mo asked.

"Just the fumes."

Harry laughed.

Aurora sauntered out with a double shot of Jack Daniels and a towel.

It was at least an hour before sunset, but already the evening breeze had come and gone and the air was distinctly less warm than it had been a few hours earlier. The west edge of the lake was in shadow. Casting a beneficent smile across the group, Aurora glanced toward Teresa as she passed behind Harry and made her way into the chair next to his.

"Nobody home," she said confidentially.

"What's that?" Harry asked, nodding toward her drink.

"John-John neat."

"Double Jack Daniels in an old-fashioned glass," Mo offered. "No ice, no water, nothing but a mouthful of the world's finest Kentucky sippin' whiskey."

"He knows this because I taught him to appreciate it," Aurora said.

"Among other things."

"Now, now, children," Harry interjected. He offered cigars around. Mo took one.

"No, I'll tell you what," Aurora said, "this is a good illustration of the difference between us. He'll drink whatever kind of rotgut's available. Moonshine. Dago red. Goat piss if it comes to that. He may buy B&B here because he can, and besides he wants you to think him a connoisseur, but really he's, well, I won't say a bottom-feeder, but capable of any indiscrimination shall we say.

"I, on the other hand, am a simpler soul. If there's no Jack, there's no bourbon."

"And what if there's no bourbon?" Harry asked.

"Well, then," Aurora said, shrugging her shoulders, "maybe I'll drink water, and maybe there's another town down the road."

"But my real question was, why the towel?"

"She's messy," Mo said.

"I'm going in," Aurora said.

"Oooo," Harry shivered. "That'll be cold."

Mo bit his cheek and lavaged it with brandy.

They talked on while the sky reddened, then blazed orange and purple, and finally faded to gray behind a few high pink-tinged clouds, and the air had grown cool and damp. Then a little later Teresa called it a night and departed.

"Strange about Billy," Mo mused.

"First I'd heard of it," said Harry.

"He's a cowboy," Aurora said. "Looking for the open range."

"In central Europe?"

"Well?"

"There is a sort of wild west character to central Europe nowadays," Harry agreed.

"And now I guess there's a wild west character *in* central Europe," Mo riposted.

"You have to move on," Aurora said philosophically.

"Are you moving on, Aurora?" Harry asked.

"Well, I have an offer," she said.

They waited for her to elaborate.

"Oh," she began, and then she paused. "Well, I probably shouldn't tell you this."

"Then don't," Mo said.

"Oh, do," Harry demurred.

"Robin was sick last week. He called me in the middle of the night and I took him to the emergency room. He fell in his studio and cut his head. He seemed fine the whole time he was with me, but he said he'd passed out or something. The doctor said he couldn't find anything wrong, maybe it was an isolated event. But he's been having these headaches. They wanted to keep him and run some tests, but he wouldn't do it."

"That's all you know?"

"That's all I know. Well, he intimated to me, sort of, that there was more to it. Evidently some doctor who's seen him before wasn't there, and Robin was concerned that this guy would

tell his regular guy. I told him he should let them do the tests, or whatever else they want to do, because he ought to respect his life that much at least. But of course he's as pigheaded as all men." She paused. "And of course I'm sworn to secrecy."

"Of course," Mo said.

Aurora stretched herself as she sat in the chair, straightening her legs in an open vee, arching her back, raising her breasts to the gods, splaying her arms wide, wrists up and bent back, and then with a satisfied sigh she sat forward again, smiling at them. "Think I'll hit the beaches," she said.

They watched her prance down the steps to the grass and then stride off into the darkness toward the water. She carried no flashlight. There was a glimmer of light from the rising crescent moon and, not to be forgotten, all those stars.

"I'd ask you how a person knows when a relationship is destined for the long term," Harry said, "but that'd be like asking a Greenland eskimo how to cook purple mombin fruit."

"I'll take your word for it," Mo laughed.

Harry lapsed into thoughtful silence. Mo's glass was empty again. "Want another coffee?" he asked, preparing to rise.

Harry waved his hand as if to say, "Don't bother."

"Is this about Elizabeth?"

"No, it's about me."

Mo sat back.

"And?"

"Don't laugh, okay?"

"Okay."

"I know you will."

"I will."

"I think I'm in love."

"You *think* you're in love?"

"Well, I can't go around shooting from the hip, so to speak, like some people."

"So you shoot from your brain?"

"Well, I don't want to say anything unless it's really the right thing. I can't afford to make a mistake, for my sake and hers."

"Well, God, Harry, this sounds serious. Almost maudlin. I don't know. I always figure, if I feel like I'm in love, then I am. I mean, the question's never come up in my mind. I know when I'm sleepy, I know when I'm hungry, and I know when I'm in love."

"Uh-huh, and your relationships last as long as a midsummer's night."

"This is true. But there's something to be said for it."

"And there's something to be said for looking before you leap."

"I don't know," Mo said, rising to refill his glass. "That might make it too scary. Better to leap first and look afterward."

"If you survive it."

"*C'est la vie,* eh?"

Harry got up too. "I'm going to go read for a while," he said. "You won't be lonesome here without me?"

Mo smiled. They walked back inside together and Harry headed down the hallway as Mo walked toward the bar. He set his empty glass on the polished oak surface and waved off the bartender as he turned back toward the door to the porch.

The sliver of moon cast long, faint shadows on the gray landscape as he made his way along the trail above the shoreline. Fifty feet below him, on a spit of sand a hundred yards from the dock and the beach, he heard, and then saw Aurora splashing in the cold black water. When he came to a place from which he felt sure he could observe without her seeing him, he descended part way down the hill and sat on the soft ground.

The stars were reflected in the water all over the lake, as far as the eye could see, and the pale first crescent glowed on the smooth surface behind her silhouette as she stood naked and gathered double handfuls of the sweet icy liquid up and splashed it over her face and chest. Then with a little hop, she dove in.

How could it be? Mo wondered. So fragrant, so sleek, so vibrant, and so exquisitely poisonous, and maybe that was it—she was too beautiful, a siren of Pythian mystery whose obscure, sinuous wisdom enraptured every curious mind and drew it inexorably down to its doom in the labyrinthine darkness of her insatiable hunger for dominion over uncertainty.

He laughed at himself for this grandiose nonsense and then lay back and tried to imagine how far out into the dark of the sky he could see.

Aurora felt refreshed and relaxed after her swim. Now she knew what she was going to do. She could see very well, even in the dark, and she had places to go. As she walked briskly along the lake shore, she felt for a moment, poignant but brief, a twinge of empathy for all the wrecked and wretched souls she'd be leaving behind. But every course was a course of pain. And ambition was her course, her curse, her jealous lover. And frankly, she didn't give a damn.

Harry encountered Robin just as he entered the hotel. The rotund black man was, as always, grinning from ear to ear, a suitcase in one hand and a portfolio case in the other. "Well," he said, "I'm here!"

"I see that," Harry said. "What happened to your face? Did Margaret bite you?"

Robin laughed. "I hit my head on my workbench. But it feels fine now."

"How'd you get here?"

"Kate brought me," Robin said. "Have you ever driven with her?"

Harry smiled. "Nope."

"It's an experience."

"I can't say I'm surprised. And where is she? And how are things with you?"

"She's coming up later today I think. She has a meeting in the morning, so she went back. And I'm fine. I'm on vacation!"

"You look like you're on vacation," Harry smiled.

"Who else is here?"

"Teresa, and Aurora, and Mo, as far as I know. Teresa's gone to bed I think, which is where I'm heading." He laughed. "No, I mean I'm heading to my own bed."

Robin laughed too.

"Mo and Aurora are outside somewhere."

"Not together I hope."

"Well, I don't think so. On the other hand, they're both out there in the dark, so who knows. Actually, Mo might be sitting on the porch. That's where I left him."

"Okay, well, I'll look him up and see you at breakfast."

"See you then."

Teresa studied the words inscribed in the foreleaf of her new book on wildflower classification. It was a quote from the physicist J. B. S. Haldane: "My suspicion is that the universe is not only queerer than we suppose, but queerer than we can suppose. I suspect that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of, in any philosophy. That is why I

have no philosophy myself, and must be my excuse for dreaming." She made a mental note to mention this to Harry.

She turned off the light and lay on her back and thought about Billy. An owl sent three little hoots scampering through the cool night air. And then silence filled the darkness like a recumbent fog.

Chapter 29

Working Girl

Heart, you were never hot,
    Nor large, nor full like hearts made great with shot;
And though your hand be pale,
Paler are all which trail
Your cross through flame and hail:
    Weep, you may weep, for you may touch them not.

—*Greater Love,* Wilfred Owen

Three days before, on Tuesday, amid the contrapuntal tickings of her keyboard and the clock, on a fine early September morning beneath a clear blue sky, Billy Newman had walked, no, burst through the door of the law office of James P. Lee, Esq., Teresa's employer.

"Oh, my God," he exclaimed in his bullhorn voice as he recognized her sitting there, behind her desk, dressed to the nines, smiling at him. Then he laughed so loudly that the good counsellor stepped from his office to see what all the ruckus was about.

Teresa introduced them and Billy assured him, in undiminished tones, that he had come to conduct some important legal business, and the lawyer returned to his phone call.

"He's sensitive to loud noises," she said.

Billy guffawed. Teresa was a little surprised to find that somehow, in this moment, despite his inveterate rowdiness, she liked him.

"Okay, and what may we do for you today?"

Billy ran his fingers through his thick blonde curls as if to set them aright. "I'm going away," he said. "To Europe."

"Following Alexei?"

He laughed. "No, following my star."

She looked up at him. "I don't think you need a lawyer for that."

"Yeah, well, I have some stuff here I inherited from my aunt in California. Property and trust funds and stuff. And I need a passport and visas and whatever else I need, and I want to make sure everything's okay here while I'm gone and that I can get access to stuff if I need it."

"How long will you be over there?"

"I don't know," he laughed, "maybe forever."

"Hmph," she said, completing her notes. "That'd be a shame."

"Oh?"

She blushed a little. "Well, I just mean we'll miss you. You know, at the group."

Mr. Lee buzzed on the intercom and said he'd be ready in a few minutes. She asked Billy to take a seat and transcribed her notes onto an e-mail message for the attorney and sent it. She looked at him and smiled. He smiled back.

While she typed he looked at her. Her blonde hair, almost white, draped in a gentle roll over her shoulders. She sat very straight in her chair, her back arched gracefully, her derriere prominent and taut as it curled under her. She wore a white blouse of silk or rayon, he couldn't

tell which, through which he could see the outlines of her bra and slip, and a navy blue skirt with white pantyhose. He wanted her to get up and go file something or something so he could see whether she wore panties. But she didn't.

"Mr. Lee will see you now," she said.

"I like your hair," he replied.

"Thank you."

"You're letting it grow out."

She nodded.

She could hear Billy's blustering laughter even through the heavy door. The thick carpet and tapestries on the walls didn't seem quite adequate to absorb the excesses of Billy's effusive manner. She smiled to think of the distress this must have been causing Mr. Lee, who truly did not like loud speech or any other kind of noise but who was now irremediably ensconced in his office with one of the world's great producers of ear-shattering vocalizations.

The evident physical power of Billy's body, even of Billy's person, was unconstrained, it seemed to her, by anything. He was like a radio with only one volume setting: full blast. Yet she knew that, on rare occasions, he could be almost quiet, almost reverential, as he had been the week after Sibyl had left and he'd spoken with her briefly, after a poetry group meeting, about Dylan. His voice had been soft then—she hadn't really noticed it until afterward—and even his eyes, with their odd purplish hue, had seemed to soften and grow shiny. It was most uncharacteristic of him and she'd seldom, perhaps never, seen it since. But it was there.

When he emerged a half hour later, she asked him if everything had been worked out all right.

"Yep," he beamed. "I'm on my way."

"When are you going?"

"Day after tomorrow. The plane leaves at ten-thirty and I get to New York at eight and then I fly to London and then Prague. I'll be there Saturday night."

"You'll miss the retreat."

"No retreat for me, babe," he laughed. "Only forward for me now, into the fray."

"Well, um, would you like to meet for a drink somewhere after work?"

He looked at her and pushed the blond curls back again from his forehead, his fingers lingering on the back of his neck. "Hell, yes!" he said. "You bet; I'd like that a lot!"

They met at a quiet little restaurant beside the river. Billy had secured a table next to a large picture window from which they could watch the water, green and opaque, flowing slowly and sedately past, barely rippling against the far bank dressed in sun-filtered chartreuse and black earth shadows.

"Where are you from?" he asked as she sat in the chair he'd pulled back for her.

"Up north," she said.

"No, your family I mean. Where'd that blonde hair come from? And those amazing eyes, the color of buttered toast. Your eyes," he said, seating himself across the table from her, "are like those cabochon tiger eyes, you know? I've never seen eyes like that."

She laughed. "Well, we're all mixed-up, like everyone else. My dad's from Argentina originally, and my mom's people came from a little town above the Arctic Circle in Norway. But I was born just this side of the Canadian border in the Okanogan country in eastern Washington, so I'm just a farm girl from America."

"Your mom was a reindeer herder?"

Teresa laughed. "No, they were fishermen I think. The Laplanders are even farther north, and inland, and Narvik is on the coast. It's very pretty, actually, in a quaint sort of way."

"Isn't it cold?"

"I'm sure it is in the wintertime. When I was there, in the middle of summer, which lasts for about a month, it was eighty degrees."

"You know," he said, "it just amazes me. We all tend to think that the way life is where we live is the only decent kind of life there is. But guess what, everybody lives pretty much the same way, all over the world."

She smiled.

"But then," he went on, "it isn't."

"Well, everybody eats and sleeps and works and has sunshine and vegetation and fresh water."

"Yeah, more or less. More or less. I guess the differences are mostly man-made."

The waiter came and took their order. For her, a chef's salad; for him, a sixteen-ounce tenderloin, rare. "Bloody," he'd said.

"I'm from California," he offered, laughing.

"I thought you were from Alaska."

"No, I was born in New Mexico and raised in California. I chose Alaska. I like the wild frontiers."

"And what motivates a self-sufficient ne'er-do-well from California and Alaska to go to Europe—where is it? Prague? Is that in Czechoslovakia? Is there a wild frontier there?"

"Yep, the old spiritual heart of central Europe," Billy said. "In Bohemia."

"Okay, and what draws you to Bohemia?"

"The Bosnians."

She looked puzzled then and he laughed delightedly.

"Can't figure it out, huh? Finally, there's something about me nobody can figure out. I like that."

"Billy, nobody's ever been able to figure you out."

"You have captivating eyes," he said. "Did I tell you that?"

"Huh-uh," she lied, and he laughed.

"The wild frontier is in Bosnia," he said. "It's lawless. It's rough. It's every man for himself. You can't even get into the damn place. Not legally, anyway."

"And there'll be people shooting at you."

"Yeah."

"From all sides."

"Yeah." He laughed a defiant laugh. "I love it."

"But why? What's there? Do you speak the language?"

"Hey, I can barely speak English, as you may have observed," he said. "I couldn't speak Spanish either, in Guatemala, but I guess I got by. I mean, it's like I said, people are the same everywhere. They eat and sleep and drink and make love. If you point and grunt enough, they can understand you fine."

"Uh-huh."

Billy's eyes wandered out onto the river, watching the murky water slip and swell and roll along. "I've had a good life," he said.

The food arrived and Teresa ate deliberately as they talked. When she spoke, Billy would carve off a large piece of the lightly charred purplish-pink flesh that oozed crimson juice and chew it enthusiastically. "Damn good," he'd say.

"So you've had a good life."

"Well, I have. But you know, the other day I saw a photograph, from Srebrenica, I think it was, of a young boy standing by a roadside ditch in the mud and the rain, looking at the camera like it wasn't even there. Behind him, face down and face up, draped over each other and dressed in rags, were his father and mother and brother and his dog, all shot dead."

"It's awful."

"Sure, and that's what I'd always thought, too. It's awful. And then I'd go back to whatever I was doing without ever giving it another thought, and a day or two later, or maybe a page or two later, there'd be another picture of a body and another pool of blood in the street, and I'd say God, that's awful, and then off I'd go to do whatever I was doing.

"But the picture of this boy, I don't know, it just riveted me. I couldn't stop looking at it. I couldn't stop thinking about him. Here he is, just a boy, maybe six or seven years old. Everybody, everything he's ever known and loved is piled like so much garbage in this muddy ditch by the road, dead. And there he is. And there's his older brother, only a boy himself, splayed out over their parents and staring unseeing into the gray sky. And what does life hold for him now? The whole country is a shambles, in ruin, as desolate as his feelings. Nobody has food, or water, or shelter. Nothing. Not even a piece of bread. He has his clothes, torn and bloody, and if the soldiers who've just shot his family don't come back maybe he'll stay alive for a while. But what is there for him? Where'll he go? What will become of him?"

He fished the folded photo from his hip pocket, a black-and-white newspaper clipping only a few inches square. She unfolded it carefully. A boy, his straight hair hanging down, wet in the drizzling rain, his eyes directed at the lens but utterly vacant, stood before a scene all but familiar in the prosecution of war.

"I know this is going on everywhere," Billy said. "But it touches me here I guess. I don't know why. Maybe that's where I'm from, you know? Maybe I know this boy."

"I think you do," she said.

He looked down at the photograph, now on the tabletop. "Yes," he said. "It's me."

After dinner, after a dessert of ice cream and apple pie, they went for a walk along the river in the dying yellow light of the day. Billy, odd as it seemed, waxed philosophical.

"Tomorrow is up around the bend," he said, "and yesterday's gone to sea. And the gurgling sounds the water makes are the souls of the living, crying out as they pass."

Teresa smiled. "Maybe there is some poetry in you," she said.

"I read a book about a river in Bosnia. The Drina. About an ancient bridge actually, that spanned the Drina. It witnessed the lives of people going on as lives do for years, and decades, and centuries, always the same, good crops and bad crops, better wines and worse ones, pretty girls and not-so-pretty girls. Young men with flowers in their teeth became old men without teeth who gummed their pipes and played endless games of checkers and watched the children laughing and gamboling and gazing wantonly into one another's eyes. And every so often, for no reason at all, no reason that made any sense to anybody, the armies, outfitted with horses and cannon, or just as a ragtag horde of bullies with guns, would sweep through the valley and shoot up everything and kill people and cows and sheep and blow up houses and rape the women and beat the old men. And after a painful while they'd move on and life would return again, slowly, and pretty soon it'd all be like before. And then in a year or two or ten or fifty another army would come through and the same thing would happen all over again."

"I didn't know you read books," Teresa said, smiling and slipping her arm around his, over his forearm, which felt as firm under his jacket as a bundle of thick rope.

"Oh, I don't," he laughed. "I was just reading this while I worked out on the resistance cycle. To exercise my feeble brain. Anyway, it seemed to me this was a very rich place, rich in history and culture and joy and pain, and full of opportunity, you know?"

"To do what, though?"

Billy shrugged and cocked his head and looked at her with a silly grin. "That's just it! I have no idea. I'm going to let this photograph lead the way. I'll do something to help these children have a future. Or maybe one of them. Or maybe none. Or maybe I'll run off with some gypsy girl. I'm going to find out if there's something I can do. And of course I'll try to have fun."

"Of course," she smiled.

"What's the North Pole like?"

She laughed. "It's not the North Pole, and it was just like any town on the seacoast north of Juneau, except less vegetation and more extreme angles. Fishing culture. Low-light culture. Low-heat culture." (And here they both laughed.) "Coastal Scandinavian. Or should I say Scandinavian Coastal. Ever been to the fishing towns up in Maine?"

"New Hampshire."

"Well, and on the Olympic Peninsula?"

"Uh-huh."

"Okay, fishing towns. Same the world over. Lots of small boats. Rough seas. Overcompetition. Cutthroat markets. But a way of life. A life, really. Now to this you have to add Scandinavian, or particularly Norwegian. How do you do this? I only really know it has something to do with Lawrence Welk."

"I know it," Billy said, "I know it. Fish, fish, fish and the sea. A cold, gray, hard sea. Long nights, cool days, rocky terrain, hard work and death. Reindeer and lichens, sparse, spare, shrill, cold, dissonant, white, and cautious, ever cautious."

"But seriously, why are you going?"

"The best I can say is: because it's there. It's called me. I need to do it."

"It's little like falling in love, maybe?"

He laughed and put his arm around her. "A lot like that," he said. "A few weeks ago, I didn't care. Today, I'm ready to go."

"Well, I'll miss you."

"Uh-huh."

"No, really. I like your style. I like your spirit. You're a little grating sometimes, but tonight I see a different part of you, and I like it."

"I thought you liked those fancy guys, like Harry, who read and think and contemplate ultimate truth."

"And I thought you liked those slinky girls like Sibyl and buzzing little dynamos like Aurora."

"Well, I do, but Aurora is as convoluted as a pretzel, and Sibyl, well, what can I say? Sibyl lives in the mind of Apollo, and Sibyl saw me as Apollo until she discovered I was actually only a man, at which point she lost interest I think."

"As for Harry, I couldn't have a better, closer, sweeter and dearer friend."

"No romance?"

"Oh yes, plenty of romance, nonstop romance in fact, but no fire in the loins as it were."

"And your loins?"

"You'll soon be gone, Billy."

"Yes. And soon not to return. I'm like a blossom you see on your morning walk, under a tree in the woods, and you say, 'Oh, I'll come by later and look more carefully at this, and then

later when you return it's gone, and you can't find it, and then you can't even be sure you really remember which tree it was. Like the woman who only knew what she meant when she heard what she'd said, I know who I am when I see what I do."

Chapter 30

Quis Custodiet?

Let not young souls be smothered out before
They do quaint deeds and fully flaunt their pride.
It is the world's one crime its babes grow dull,
Its poor are ox-like, limp and leaden-eyed.

—*The Leaden-Eyed,* Vachel Lindsay

By lunchtime the next day, Teresa knew a great deal more of Billy's views and had even heard some of them in a more modulated voice that seemed to emerge when he was lost in thought or transported by some fleeting rapture and thus momentarily unconcerned with the usual histrionics of his persona.

They'd agreed to meet at the zoo for a brown-bag retrospective on the biological past. She drove from her office along the autumn streets lined with old sycamores and buckeyes, streets splashed with sunshine and shadows. Then she turned into the wooded park that surrounded the zoo, its maples already shimmering scarlet and yellow, the hues of plum skins and squash meats. She parked the car across from the main entry gate. He was waiting.

His compact frame was snugly wrapped in levis and an open white dress shirt. He wore black cowboy boots and a short, heavy gold chain around his neck that hung down only an inch or so below his clavicle. His curly blonde locks, streaked with hints of black, flounced on his head with a just-washed, blow-dried look of ridiculous insouciance.

As she stepped from the car a smile flashed across his face and he laughed a whoop of pleasure, loudly enough to cause a chattering ripple through the monkey cages. "Oh, you *do* look good," he said, stepping toward her, welcoming her into his open arms for a warm embrace. Then he drew back so he could look at her, search those liquid amber eyes, the color of an owl's, search inside their mystery for her.

But she was dancing on their surface, and the dance rippled down across her cheeks and into a smile, and she said, "Compared to the monkeys, I suppose."

Then, disengaging herself, she said solicitously, mischievously, "Oh, I hope you aren't embarrassed by public displays of affection."

"Not as long as it's me and you," he said.

They walked through the sweet, dusty odor of the zoo, the insinuating fragrance of too many animals of too many different kinds living too close together. They came to the cats first. Billy liked the tigers best, but Teresa preferred the cougars.

"A grown tiger is eleven feet long, counting four feet of tail, and weighs six hundred pounds," Billy said. "Nothing fucks with it."

"Poor thing," Teresa said.

"I feel as though I'm made just like one of them," he said. "If I were an animal, I'd be a tiger. Strong, nervous, hungry, opportunistic, merciless."

"Good thing you're human," she said. "You are human, aren't you?"

He laughed because actually, he didn't really think so. "Yeah, and if I hadn't decided to go to Europe, I felt I'd be like them in another way—I'd be caged and dying."

"Though you'd sing in your chains like the sea."

"They're all extinct, you know, these animals," he said.

"All but, I suppose."

"Their homelands are gone. They can never go back. There's nowhere they can live but right here, and when these die, that's the ballgame."

"There're still tigers in the wild," she protested.

"Well, I know, but their time is past. The wild is shrinking, and it'll keep shrinking. Every year there'll be fewer and fewer of them in smaller and smaller areas. And even now they survive only by the indulgent whim of alien humans. They're like indigenous people everywhere. Relics."

"So it's a museum," she said. "Yes, of course. Good point. And I suppose you're a relic too, in some way."

He laughed again. "Yeah, but I'm free and alive," he said, "and that makes all the difference to me."

"If people like you become extinct, you won't care."

"Hell, no. Not really."

"And they probably don't either."

She walked a short distance along the path. "Look at these cougars, Billy. Don't you think they're graceful, more graceful even than tigers?"

"Yeah, I ran into a cougar one time up on the Yukon, just outside of Skagway. Killed my lead dog. I had to jump on her with just my hunting knife. Here, have you seen these?" He pulled up his shirt at the side to reveal a trio of long purple scars. "Here's where she got me."

"Nasty," she said.

"She ran away with my knife still jammed in her ribs. Seven inches of steel carving up her lungs every time she moved or breathed. She died that night about two miles away. Some trackers found her on a rock ledge. They brought me the knife and offered me the hide."

"You took the knife."

"Yep."

"Kind of a lucky charm now, I guess."

"Yep."

"Well," she said, putting her arm around his waist and leading him on toward the monkey cages, "you may need it where you're going. The luck, that is."

He laughed. "I may need the knife, too," he said.

"Seems as though a quick tongue would be a better asset."

Billy guffawed. "I do have a quick tongue," he said. "Want to see it?"

"Huh-uh, and if you stick it out at some Serb soldier he'll probably shorten it for you, no matter how quick it is."

"Yeah, but I'll cut off his dick first," he laughed.

They came to a dusty bowl-shaped enclosure where the baboons lived. Most were indoors where it was cool, but a small group was lolling under a tree, lazily squabbling over a chewed-up piece of what looked like an apple. One would carry it off and examine it and then quickly lose interest in it and drop it, whereupon another would sneak up and try to grab it, which would result in a brief but fierce skirmish and a third monkey's stealing off with the prize nobody wanted.

"They just like to fight," Billy observed.

"Seems like they're playing, really, not fighting."

"No kidding, did you ever see the film of the baboon running off the lion?"

"Huh-uh."

"This huge lioness is stalking the tribe all day and finally isolates a young baboon and lunges in for the kill. It's a charge of about twenty yards, maybe, but the instant she streaks from cover toward the baby an adult baboon, the mom I guess, comes out of nowhere and heads off the lioness and postures for an attack with those huge canines and the damn lion just veers off and runs like hell while the baboon chases her."

"So nobody fucks with baboons either."

He laughed. "Well, an animal with big fangs and a red-and-blue butt is not to be messed with."

They found a small picnic table not too near the monkey cages, shaded by an old black-barked buckeye, and sat down to eat. Billy had two ham sandwiches on rye bread and a half-pint of strawberry kefir and Teresa had two bananas and an apple and a carton of cranberry juice.

"How can you live on fruit?" Billy asked.

"I don't live on fruit," she said. "I don't think it's possible. But it makes a nice light lunch. Of course I go home and eat a shank of ox and a half-dozen candy bars for dinner."

"Well, that explains how you can eat bananas and fruit and still look so good."

Billy took a bite from one of his sandwiches and chewed it vigorously. Teresa noticed he'd devoured about a third of it.

"So, you're all ready to go?"

"Yep. I'm packed and everything. I'll just put my toothbrush in my case and get on the plane."

"And you've said all your goodbyes?"

"Except to you. I went over to Robin's earlier and spent the morning with him."

"Oh? And how is Robin?"

"You know," he shrugged. "Same old Robin. Painting up a storm."

He took another bite and a drink of the kefir.

"He's feeling okay?"

"Sure, why? He looked as healthy as a horse to me. I laid on his bed and he worked on a painting the whole time I was there, just jabbering away and laughing and carrying on like he always does. Why, is he supposed to be sick?"

"I'd heard he wasn't feeling well is all."

"Well, you heard wrong I think. He's fit as a fiddle."

"Good; I hoped so."

Billy picked up a buckeye and opened the thick, spiny green husk with his thumbnail, peeling it away to reveal an oily, burnished nut the color of mahogany.

"Too bad these aren't good to eat," he said. Then he tossed it into the baboon pit and the baboons all looked over to see what it was as it bounced across the dusty earth, but none of them went to investigate further.

"Maybe they're not as stupid as they look," he said.

"You're not supposed to throw things into the compounds," she said, regretting it immediately.

"I'm not feeding them," he laughed.

"You're harassing them."

"They don't look too harassed."

"No, they don't. They look pretty bored, actually."

"Yeah. You know what? Everybody around here was looking pretty bored to me, too, you know?"

"Oh?"

"The people in the group especially. I considered waiting until after the retreat, you know?"

"Oh, yes," she said. "Day after tomorrow—a whole week of freedom. It's my summer vacation. And you didn't want to go?"

"Well, if I'd known you…" He hesitated. "I just had to go."

"I understand. But what did you mean that everyone looked bored? Do I look bored? Did Robin look bored?"

"No," he said, "that isn't what I meant. I meant it seemed like I could pretty much predict what everyone was going to do, you know, that's just the way I felt, you know?"

"So we were boring you?"

He laughed. "No, but I was bored, you know, with the whole scene. I didn't have any ladies around. No, you're not boring, 'Resa, far from it. In fact, you're completely mysterious to me. I just realized that yesterday, you know? I think it was your eyes." And he laughed again.

"It's always my eyes," Teresa said, "and I don't mind at all. But that's just the marquee."

"Well, sometimes that's all you want is the marquee."

"The entree."

"Yeah."

"A snack before bedtime."

"Exactly. There's no sin in that."

"No." She bit the first crisp bite from her apple. "How does it work as a strategy for helping children?"

"Well, I don't know. I've never actually done it. I guess that'll take a longer-term commitment."

"Seems like it."

He laughed. "Hey, well Robin wants to send some paintings to Prague, so maybe when I get there I'll just open a little shop and sell art and donate the proceeds to somebody."

"Wouldn't it be boring? Don't you want to see those children eye to eye?"

"No and yes. I do want to see them eye to eye. But maybe it wouldn't be boring. Maybe it'd be fascinating and exciting and even dangerous. And maybe I'd rather see those kids outside of Bosnia."

"Away from their homes, their culture, their friends?"

He looked over at the dry desolation of the baboon world. His lips writhed as he let out a long breath. "I don't know how to do it," he said. "I don't know what to do. I'm going to have to make it up as I go along."

"I think the kids will make it up for you."

"Yeah, maybe so."

"Maybe just one kid."

"Maybe."

"Maybe you'll marry some gypsy girl and have babies."

"No can do, babe. I only shoot blanks. I decided a long time ago not to contribute to the continuation of this."

She smiled. "You think the human race is in a zoo, too, don't you?"

"Sure. I'm sure of it."

"Already on the road to extinction."

"Well, where else?"

"But life can go on for a long time, don't you think, and in the end that's all there really is, isn't it? I mean, that's what it is, a temporal thing."

He smiled. "Exactly. And you can't just go into stasis. I can't anyway, and that's kind of what it looked like to me was happening with, well, with a lot of people around here, people in the group, you know. Just going into fucking stasis. Standing around waiting to die. Not Robin, of course, and not you, but…"

"But you."

He laughed. "Yeah, but me. I was dying."

"And now you're rejuvenated."

Again he looked far away. "Ever been on the desert in springtime?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Things you never would've dreamed could bloom just explode one morning with incredible colors."

"M-hm."

"And then two hours later it's over."

"M-hm, for some of them."

"Well, that's the way every moment of your life is. A whole eternity. A blossoming instant. And what do you make of it?"

"Not much, mostly, I'm sad to say. But when I can, I do. And when I do, it brings me a lot of happiness."

"Exactly. And I know this is going to bring me a lot of happiness."

"I hope so, Billy, and I guess I believe so too. And I know you'll take a lot of happiness to other people too."

"Yeah, well that remains to be seen, doesn't it?"

She laughed.

"Hey," he said, "I'd like to bring some happiness to you tonight."

"Okay, we can do that. But I'm going to work a couple hours overtime to cover for the time I'll miss tomorrow while we're at the airport. So why don't you come about nine?"

"Okay," he grinned.

"And bring something to eat. A pizza or something. With everything."

"You got it."

She looked at him. "What are you going to do this afternoon?"

He pulled from his hip pocket a small, thick envelope, folded over once, and unfolded it as he spoke. "I got this letter a couple of days ago from Dylan," he said, taking it from the envelope and passing the pages to her. "I'm going to answer it. You can read it if you want. It's kind of interesting. He's growing up. He's got a girlfriend. They discuss sex." He laughed. "Can you imagine that?"

She smiled as she looked at the tiny but neatly scrawled handwriting. "Oh," she said. "I wrote a poem last night. Want to read it?"

"Sure," he said.

From her clutch bag on the long leather loop she took a small notebook and opened it and leafed through the pages until she found the poem. She held it out, smiling at him. "Here." And then she settled into reading Dylan's letter.

This Knight

Some mighty power summons him, this knight,
That will not let him rest beyond the dawn,
That rouses him from every quiet place
And bids him on his journey to be gone.

Some magic force infuses him, this knight;
His strength and vision grow in its embrace.
He ventures o'er the farthest wildest pole,
To glimpse at last within his errant soul.

Some keening madness swells in him, this knight,
By which, so utterly is he amiss,
He must to arms as dragons must to flame,
And quest in noisy battle for a kiss.

Some dark wind whispers over him, this knight,
Perhaps it knows the secret of his name.

Chapter 31

Much To-Do About Everything (Silverback)

True, a new mistress now I chase,
The first foe in the field;
And with a stronger faith embrace
A sword, a horse, a shield.

—*To Lucasta [on going to the wars],* Richard Lovelace

It began raining shortly after midnight. A weeping rain of course. The tears of God. But a refreshing rain. A rain of renewal. A coolish tropical rain, steady with just a bit of a breeze. A rain for rum daiquiris and ceiling fans and Peter Lorie in a white suit.

The sheer chenielle curtains billowed inside Teresa's bedroom window, the lower sash of which was wide open. She slid quietly out from under the sheet and crossed the room. She grasped the handles on the sash. The fresh air felt good on her legs. Even the occasional drop of rain. She straddled a brocaded stool in front of the window and leaned out, her elbows on the sill, and let the rain and the wind caress her face.

Billy was fast asleep. He had dutifully arrived almost at nine, and he'd brought with him, in addition to a suitcase, an overnight bag, and a duffel, a giant pizza with everything including pineapple, Canadian bacon and anchovies, the latter which she loved but he despised.

She had returned home earlier, around eight, and taken a long warm shower. She'd been standing nude, brushing out her long blonde hair in the full-length mirror in her bedroom, when she'd decided to wear the short, sheer, iris-purple ensemble with the fluffy fringe edges under her long royal blue plush robe and matching slippers.

"If he gets under the robe, I'm a goner," she'd laughed to herself.

She'd brushed her hair to a brilliant, silken sheen and let it fall loose over her shoulders, which she'd noted with great pleasure it was at last long enough to do. Its flaxen whiteness contrasted deliciously with the indigo blue of her robe and as well, if not better, with the leno-woven gauzy violet shades of her nightclothes. A moment before he'd knocked on the door, she'd decided against the pearl choker. It wasn't her purpose to seduce him.

Now he slept manfully under a light cotton blanket she'd laid over the top sheet as the evening air cooled. His golden hair was tousled, as was hers, but his body was spread out in peaceful, childlike ease beneath the covers, weary and relaxed. He breathed slowly and quietly through his nose. There was just a hint of a smile on his face, perhaps from the intimate pleasure of such singular comfort.

She closed the window halfway and the bedroom door almost all the way before she tiptoed out to the living room to retrieve her robe and then into the kitchen to brew a cup of coffee.

A few minutes later she sat with her coffee and her notebook in the breakfast nook, a small room beside the kitchen that she'd added as a greenhouse, and which was indeed filled with plants—on the floor, on shelves along the walls, even hanging from the ceiling. It had a brick floor and glass walls and a sloping glass roof on which the rain made a loud and hollow sound she loved. Despite its intended use, she'd been unable to resist moving into this room a little

glass-covered wrought-iron dining table and four matching chairs. It was a wonderful place to sit and think or have a small companionable conversation.

She thought about the lowland gorilla they'd seen the day before, sitting quietly on the other side of the large plate glass window through which the ogling tourists might observe it, and it them. It sat on its haunches in the corner, its thigh against the glass, gazing out at them with expressionless brown eyes that looked here and there, at this person and that, with evident indifference. Its great leathery black face was lined with years and the black fur was streaked with gray. Occasionally it picked a nubbin of something up off the floor of its cage and examined it thoughtlessly, then ate it or dropped it again. But it never stopped watching the people who gathered to watch it, and it never displayed any reaction to their antics, even when an obnoxious young father, seeking a show for his son, flicked a peanut at the glass.

"It's called a silverback," Billy had said. "A wise old man."

"Looks like a bored old man to me," she'd replied.

Billy had watched the beast for a long time and she'd noticed the tears welling in his eyes. "He's probably lived like this all his life, twenty or thirty years at least," he said. "Ever since somebody captured him, probably when he was just a baby, after they'd killed his mother. Every night he curls up in his nest to sleep gorilla sleep and every day he sits here and watches these stupid people, watching him. Nobody says anything. Nobody knows what to say."

"There isn't anything to say," she'd said.

"He probably doesn't dream gorilla dreams any more, except maybe once in a long while. When he does, it must depress him, like dreaming about being free must depress any prisoner. And that's what he is: a prisoner. He can never go back to gorilla world, to trees and sunshine and fresh mangos and running streams and his gorilla family, because none of it's there anymore. If he had gorilla children their whole lives would be spent in cages like this one, watching an endless parade of idiots shuffling by, gawking at them, marvelling at how ugly or human-looking they were, or how mindless they seemed, never mind that they lived in concrete boxes and had nothing to do all day except pick an occasional grub off the floor and watch the idiots who came by to stare at them."

"It's sad," she'd agreed.

"Why don't they just go up to the penitentiary and look at the lifers? It'd make about as much sense. Except the lifers live better."

Then suddenly he'd raised his voice, as only he could, to the level and intensity of a drill instructor, and yelled at the crowd, "All right, you people, all of you, it's time for the gorilla's nap. So come on, move along out of here. The gorilla's going to take his nap and can't be disturbed. Go on, get out of here!" And he'd actually chased most of them out before a zoo attendant had come by and ejected him from the room.

He'd laughed uproariously afterward. "Well," he'd said, "at least today he got to see something different." And this had amused him even into the evening.

Now she listened to the rain. Sometimes it sounded like a train passing nearby. Or the thunder beneath a waterfall. Or, as it surged and receded, the roaring tongue of the breaking surf curling away up the beach and into the darkness.

Rain dissolved minerals in the soil, made worms active, enhanced the decay of dead floral material and release of its assets, washed dirt and dead tissue off leaves and flowers, redefined the terrain, carried surface material and atmospheric gases to roots and zillions of foreign particles to the soil. On warm days it transformed the temperate garden into a steamy jungle where life went on a romp.

It smelled good, it tasted good, it felt good, it did good. Of course, it was all a matter of proportion. But rain was pretty good. And it always felt magical to her, even in the wintertime when it drizzled continually and she hated it.

She wrote in her notebook. "Tonight the lowland silverback dreams in the rain. The jungle beckons to him, and eagerly he goes to it. His family greet him with great displays of thumping and roaring and toothy gorilla smiling and then they all eat bananas and lie in the sunshine playing with the children and snoozing. Or perhaps he encounters a comely Dulcinea, for whom he performs great feats of strength and courage and with whom he blissfully eats bananas ever after. But tomorrow the dawn will come, the cruel dawn, that laughs at dreams."

And then she slid gracefully back between the sheets and drifted off to sleep.

When she awoke she recognized the fragrance and then the sounds of bacon frying. He was already dressed. "Hey," he said. "Good morning! I was going to bring you breakfast in bed."

"Well, you still can."

"You bet."

"Let's eat in the nook, okay? It's prettier."

It had stopped raining.

"Hope you like bacon and eggs," he laughed. "You had them so I figured you might."

She smiled. "I'm hungry as a polar bear," she said.

He lifted the bacon strips onto a paper towel and prepared to fry the eggs. "Two or three?"

"One, please, over easy."

He liked that. "A woman after my own heart," he said. "But I'll have four."

She made toast while the eggs cooked and then they took their repast to the greenhouse nook.

"I'm sorry," he said, "about…"

"Nonsense," she said.

"I really wanted to see your flower collection."

"I think it'd take a few days to look at it all," she said. "Maybe someday you'll come back and then you can. And in the meantime, I really want you to send me wildflowers you find over there."

"Just put them in plastic bags and mail them?"

"No, you have to dry them first or they'll rot in transit. Pressed between paper, in a book or under a book, works best. And I want descriptions of where you found them and when and what they are if you can find out."

"Hey," he said. "I'm going to do it, too."

She smiled. "I hope so," she said.

The phone rang. It was Kate. She wanted to say goodbye.

"There's a daffy broad," Billy said when he hung up. "Meaning no offense, and I really love her, but she's nuts. At my going-away party, she asked me if I'd donate some of my testosterone to science, and I said, 'Sure, why not?' and then she came by later with a huge hypodermic needle and asked me to let her take fluid samples from my testicles."

"Did you let her?"

Billy laughed. "You're kidding me. Hell, no, I didn't let her. And then just now on the phone she wanted to know could she come to the airport and do it there. I told her she'd have to come up with a more agreeable method."

"The gorgeous virgin with big tits."

"Yeah," and he laughed again.

Then they gathered up his things and Teresa drove him to the airport. They parked the car and walked along the carpeted corridors to his gate. He checked in. Boarding would be soon.

"Well," Teresa said, "are you sure you're ready for this?"

He laughed. "I couldn't possibly be any readier."

"Listen, Billy, if it doesn't work out in any way, you know you can always come back."

"I know. Thanks. But it'll be great, I know it. I just feel it calling me, like you said. I don't know why. It's like Wolf Lake, you know? It's just beautiful, and so it calls you, you know? And when you get there, it's glad to see you, because you love it. Isn't that so?"

"Yes."

"Well, when I get to Prague, it's going to love me, because I'm going to love it. Hell, I already love it. I feel like I'm going to meet some girl who's fallen in love with me from my pictures, and I've done the same, and we're going to just run through the woods and play in the wildflowers and have a wonderful, marvelous time."

"No sense in setting yourself up for disappointment."

"Hey, that's what having no expectations is, 'Resa. Guaranteed disappointment. Because something will happen. And if you want the greatest possible thing to happen, you have to believe it's going to. You bet I can be disappointed. I can be disappointed big time. I can even disappoint myself. But I hope for everything, you know? And I get a lot."

The flight clerk called for boarding to begin.

He looked at her, suddenly, as if before he hadn't realized who she was. "I got a lot from you, 'Resa. Seriously. I appreciate it."

"It was too short, Billy," she said, kissing him on the cheek and then on the lips with a tear in her eye. "Have a wonderful time. I hope we'll see you again someday. I may even miss you."

"Oh, here," he said, taking a letter from his pocket. "This is for Dylan."

"I'll mail it," she said.

"And," he grinned, "I have one more special little treat for you."

With that he walked to the boarding counter, facing the line of his fellow travellers making their way onto the plane, and announced that he had written, and would presently read, a poem for a beautiful lady—mercifully, he didn't point to her.

"It's called *The Rain,"* he began his recital, quite loudly, but not too offensively. Then he smiled at everyone. "It's short, I promise."

The rain's a fortuneteller
That wanders o'er the earth;
Each tiny drop's a challenge
In which to stake a portion of your worth.

From ev'rywhere it gathers
The voices of its song,
And note by note assembles
The symphony of life it plays e'er long.

A shout composed of whispers,
A sea composed of drops,
A life composed of daydreams,
A silence all the louder when it stops.

And rain is what a life is,
A thousand moments gathered in the mist.

Then, standing erect again from a flourish and a bow, which won a smattering of applause amidst a few bewildered sniggers, he blew her one last laughing stage kiss and turned into the tubular walkway, and thence the tubular fuselage, and thence a tubular journey, wherein, not yet unwound from the spindle of time, lay New York, London, Prague, and many further adventures of Billy Newman, aka Billy the Kid, William the Conqueror, Bill Bailey, Willie Loman, and a young boy with faraway eyes who maybe knew the secret of them all.

Shortly afterward, from the parking lot, she watched as the plane rose into the morning air, shimmering like a mirage through the hot roiling wake of its thundering exhaust. Higher and farther it went until, after a few minutes, the clouds and the haze swallowed it up. She slipped the key into the door lock of her car and turned it. The little “click” seemed oddly distinct and alone in a sunny blue world now strangely quiet and still.

Chapter 32

Harbinger Sprung

A shudder in the loins engenders there
The broken wall, the burning roof and tower
And Agamemnon dead.
Being so caught up,
So mastered by the brute blood of the air,
Did she put on his knowledge with his power
Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?

—*Leda and the Swan,* William Butler Yeats

Aurora North, alone and coolly naked between her jade green satin bedsheets, her fiery hair splayed out across her pillow like a high-tension halo, was having an uncharacteristic dream.

Robin Ecst was painting in his studio. It was three in the morning and he'd been working without surcease since he'd eaten his supper at six. Miles Davis teased and caressed the warm night air. Robin was working on a huge canvas, and the colors were jumping off his brush. He felt ecstatic. Tired, but full of energy to go on. Everything was working perfectly.

Robin was clad in a white sleeveless undershirt, gray pantaloons and sandals. He sat on a dark wooden stool spattered with paint of many hues, one foot on a rung and the other on the floor, working color into a shadow with a large stiff-bristled brush. A black beret tipped jauntily off to one side of his head, revealing part of a round, acorn scalp, rippling with muscles, bearing a velutinous velvet of short glistening black hair.

He wore gold rings on his fingers, and gold bracelets, and even engraved gold armbands around his powerful biceps, which swelled and stretched effortlessly beneath a layer of soft fat as he worked. His rich brown skin glistened, even dripped, with sweat. He juked and jived with himself as he worked, riveted on the painting.

He didn't see her come in. He was painting a portrait of her, as a young girl, full of life and joy, a girl who seemed to dance as he pressed the bristles against her image, who wore an expression of amused innocence despite the shadow looming over her.

She approached him now, and draped her arms around his shoulders and slithered over him like a snake, then flattened herself into a thin membrane, transparent and colorful as glistening jelly, soft and smooth and sweet as creme custard, gliding over his black skin, then standing on her hands on his massive thighs, arched over like a gymnast, her thighs by his cheeks, her legs dangling behind him, his dusky godhead winking up at her, supplicating, as he thrust the brush into the canvas, molding its pliant terrain in the soft, slippery oil, the colors swirling wildly in a jungle bonfire as frenzied drums beat the pulse of the gyrating night.

Suddenly a wave of fear swept through her as the dancing girl turned dry and colorless, a gaunt and wrinkled study in gray death, and an enormous accipitral crane swooped screeching and croaking out from the painting's surface, its emergent shadow plunging the room into spinning darkness, and she tried to scream but could not as the talons ripped into her flesh, shrieking, and then she awoke with a start, her skin damp, her heart racing.

The phone was ringing.

It was the cellular on her night table. Her private line.

"'Lo."

"Hi, Aurora, this is Robin."

"Oh, my God, Robin. What time is it? I was just dreaming about you. Are you all right?"

He laughed a little. "Oh, yeah, I'm fine. It's, um, three-forty. Listen, I'm really sorry to bother you at this hour, but I need a favor."

"Sure, what is it?"

"I want you to give me a ride to the hospital. You don't need to stay or anything, I just need a ride over there."

She turned on the light. "Well, sure, Robin, but…"

"I'll tell you all about it on the way down there."

"Okay. Ten minutes."

"Thanks."

She cupped her hands under the running tap and pressed her face into the cold water. Again. And again. Then she softly toweled the tingling skin. It felt good. She looked at herself in the mirror, at the green eyes peering over the white towel held gently against the sides of her nose, across her mouth and cheeks, like a mask, and said to those unblinking eyes, "What the fuck is going on here?" The eyes made no answer.

When she arrived at Robin's studio ten minutes later, Aurora was stunned to see a huge canvas, incompletely covered, in the center of the cavernous studio area where Robin usually painted, and a little frightened, oddly she thought, that it appeared to be of Dylan.

Robin himself was wearing unbleached gray levis and a clean white dress shirt, and sandals. He had a nasty gash across his forehead that continued onto his right cheek just under the eye. Nevertheless, he was grinning from ear to ear.

"Boy, am I glad to see you," he said. "This is really wonderful of you."

"What happened to you?"

He smiled and shrugged, and the wounds began to bleed again. "Don't make me laugh," he joked, laughing, as he turned to the sink in the kitchen for another paper towel to staunch the blood. "I don't have another clean shirt."

While she helped him stop the bleeding she noticed what appeared to be a heap of blood-soaked towels on top of his hamper. "Man, you've bled a lot," she said.

"Head cuts," he said, holding the folded wad of paper against his cheek while she secured it with tape.

"How did you manage this?"

"I think I hit my head on the anvil." Against one wall of his studio he had a heavy wooden workbench that he used sometimes for making picture frames or pieces of sculpture. Beside it at one end, and somewhat lower, was a massive iron pedestal crowned by a two-foot piece of railroad rail, tapered and smoothed at one end to serve as an anvil, and on the floor beside it was his stool, still lying on its side.

"You fell off your stool?"

She steadied him as they walked down the stairs and out to her car. He protested continually that he was fine, but he seemed grateful for her support and once or twice had to stop for a moment to regain his balance.

"I just feel a little dizzy."

"Buddy, you *are* a little dizzy," she retorted, laughing.

She worried about him as she drove through the deserted streets, even continuing through red lights after she'd ascertained that no one was around.

"I'm sure I'll be fine," he said.

The nurse behind the desk in the emergency room looked at him and inquired about the nature of his accident. "I fell down and cut my head on an anvil," he said.

"Do you have insurance?"

He did.

"Take a seat, please, and fill out this form. Someone will be with you soon."

They sat down next to the windows that overlooked the street and within a few minutes he'd filled out the form indicating that he suffered from no chronic diseases, had no known allergies, and didn't experience dysmenorrhea. When he returned it on its clipboard to the receptionist, she smiled and said, "Thank you, Mr. Ecst. It'll be a little while. Are you all right?"

"Sure," he said.

Aurora looked up from the copy of *People* she was reading.

"So how did this happen?" she asked, it seemed for the tenth time.

"Am I in *People?"*

"No, but you will be after I murder you because you wouldn't give me a straight answer to my question."

"I feel a little weird sitting here with paper towels taped to my head."

"Robin…"

"Okay, well, I was sitting at my workbench burnishing some silver for a little sculpture I'm making, and I got kind of dizzy. I thought maybe it was the fumes from the propane torch maybe, so I shut it off and went upstairs for a while and looked at the moon. It's just the last sigh of a sliver now."

"And?"

"And then I felt fine, so I went back to work. And the next thing I knew I was lying on the floor with a sore face and blood all over the place."

"That was pretty scary, huh?"

"Well, a little bit."

"Has this happened before?"

"No," he said. "Not really."

"Meaning yes."

He laughed and looked at her coyly, a little embarrassed. "No, honest," he said. "Not like this."

She seemed alarmed.

"Honest," he insisted, laughing. "I've had some headaches. I've always had them, but they've been bothering me more lately. But I've been to the doctor and he says they're just headaches, there's nothing wrong with me. Well, with my body, anyway. Nothing a stiff diet of lettuce leaves and yoghurt wouldn't cure."

"Well, don't you think that tipping over is a sign there's something wrong?"

He shrugged and laughed. "That's why we're here," he said.

"Uh-huh."

"And I've been going pretty hard lately. And I've had a touch of the flu."

"People don't get the flu in September," she said.

"Okay, I ate a poisoned wienie then. I've had a low-grade fever off and on for the past week or so, and sometimes I've felt a little queasy. And like I said, I haven't had a lot of sleep. So it doesn't seem all that peculiar to me that I might tip over, as you say."

"Where's Margaret?"

"She's in Vancouver for a therapist's convention."

"British Columbia?"

"Uh-huh. She's due back tomorrow night."

"Does she know about this?"

"Oh, sure."

"But not about tonight."

"No. And listen, Aurora, please, let me tell her, okay? And please don't tell anyone else, okay?"

"Okay," she said, and she was immediately sorry she'd said it.

"If people start on me about this kind of stuff I'll never get any work done."

The receptionist beckoned him.

"Well, maybe you should take a break. Work isn't life, you know."

"Oh, but it is," he said, grinning, as he got up. And then, "I'll be right back."

"Oh, take your time," she said. "There must be thirty issues of *People* here. Surely there's somebody interesting in one of them."

She noticed that the sky was a pale pinkish blue-gray and that the world outside was getting light. She noticed the antiseptic odor of the room and the sheet-draped cart in the corner with stainless steel trays and vials and instruments and some other folded sheets on it. She felt suddenly very tired. No good news comes through the door of an ER, she thought.

She thought about her sister, Melody, who'd been mangled in a gruesome car wreck when she was only seventeen. But she hadn't died until four years later, until she'd spent four years in a coma, filled with tubes for feeding and tubes for hydrating and tubes for eliminating and tubes for air, and patches and wires for monitoring heartbeat and blood pressure and everything else, and a machine that sucked air from and pressed air into her paralyzed lungs, every few seconds, twenty-four hours a day, for twelve hundred and forty-three days until finally her parents had obtained permission from the courts to stop it.

It had seemed wrong to her. Melody was only twenty-one when she died. She was still young. She had some brain function. But the day-to-day reality of it was awful. And her parents, especially her mother, had had to bear it while Aurora had finished college and then gone on to law school.

And then, not three months after Melody's death, a young girl with an almost identical injury had apparently been resuscitated by a new technique involving experimental drugs that had been rejected as too dangerous for Melody. Aurora had been heartbroken and outraged. She'd mounted a hammer-and-tongs investigation of the handling of Melody's case—a bitter crusade, her father called it—even engaging the services of an experienced and very expensive attorney. Nothing but further fury had come of it, and her parents had been deeply hurt by her early hysterical insistences that, had one thing or another been done, her sister could have been saved.

Morning light had succeeded the dawn by the time Robin emerged from the door he'd left through. Two small bandages covered a dozen tiny sutures, and his face was wreathed in smiles. "Good as new," he said.

"That's it? Good as new?"

"Well, he said I'd bruised my skull—no big loss there—and that I should get some rest. And that's basically it."

"Did he have an opinion as to what happened? What caused it? Whether it'll happen again? What you should do about it? You know, any of the things you'd think he'd know?"

"He said it wasn't all that unusual, when a person was tired and maybe not feeling totally up to snuff, for anybody to pass out, and that it probably won't happen again and I shouldn't worry about it. And," he laughed, "you shouldn't, either."

He offered her his arm as they walked toward the doorway leading out to the parking lot, and she slipped hers through it, clasping his forearm.

"How do you feel?" she asked.

"Fine, thank you. Can I make you breakfast?"

She opened the car door for him. "Sure," she said.

"Can we stop over by the university library for a minute?"

"Sure. Why?"

She started the engine.

"I want to visit Prometheus."

"Oh, God. You and Mo."

He laughed. "Well, see, I must have good taste."

"It looks like a hulk to me."

Robin laughed again. "It *is* a hulk," he said. "Just like me."

When they were standing before it, flames leaping from its brow, its huge arms, bearing their torches, raised high in a gesture of triumph, Aurora complained again. "It just looks like a caricature I guess," she said. "In the first place, the casting is really raw. And then it's covered with all this concrete stuff."

"Fireclay, probably," Robin said.

"And he only has three ribs. And his arms look like tree limbs struck by lightning. And some of his flame teeth are missing."

"Some drunken yahoos broke three of them off."

"And this is great sculpture?"

"Oh, absolutely. This *Prometheus* is the equal of any sculpture in the world, bar none. Because the form of it is absolutely perfect. See, this moment, when Prometheus returns to his human friends with the fire of Zeus, which he's stolen, this is like the moment in which Adam's teeth burst into the apple, the instant when that flavor flooded over his taste buds. It's the great 'Aha!' as they say in science. The instant when you finally grasp the truth of some once unfathomable mystery. Or, as has never been grasped at this university, the magical moment of knowing, which one may be forgiven for believing is the crux of all education."

"You like this psychomythological stuff, don't you?"

"Well, mythology is the stage upon which psyches play. Psyches know the world as best we can know it. Not the world as measured by rulers and clocks, nor as shaped by churches and legislatures, but the world as it actually is, from the human perspective, inside and out. Byron said the Prometheus myth represents first love, and taking nothing away from beautiful poetry, I think that leaves a lot out.

"What you're looking at here is the joyful, ecstatic, all-consuming feeling of the moment of conquest over ignorance, and over the fear that goes with it. The fact that it's just his upper torso and head and arms emphasizes the instantaneousness of it, because he's coming over the horizon. Unfortunately, from where he's installed here, there's no way to place him facing you on the horizon at dawn, which is how I think it should be situated. But never mind that. The roughness, even the crudity of the execution are meant to emphasize the figure's mass and to enhance the superb impressionistic sensation of this magnificent gesture. You can hear him shouting, this immortal titan, almost a god himself, 'I did it! I got it!' and you want to repeat his cry and share in the joy of this moment, because after all, it is your moment, too."

"God is ignorance?"

"Oh, very much so. Of course. Look out there. Everything out there, except for this little tiny momentary bag of beliefs we've amassed, is unknown. So if God is everything, what we know is a speck of dandruff on God's pillow. Then I think there's one other important element here that's also effected by the funkiness of the shape and texture, and that's the humor, the effrontery, the brazen rightness of it all. Because that's a critical ingredient in conscious life, and not just human life, daring to steal the truth from the gods, who'd prefer we not bother with it."

"Because that's the end of them."

"Well, the end of them so far as that's concerned, and gods are typically jealous of their prerogatives."

"Even though, given the overwhelming preponderance of ignorance, it hardly matters to them how much truth one steals or how much one knows."

"Of course. It's absurd. And stealing from the gods, tweaking the noses of the gods, is obviously one of the most significant, meaningful, dignified and delightful things a person can do."

"So Prometheus is laughing?"

He laughed. "Well, don't you think? He's laughing his ass off. He's ecstatic. He's delirious. He's just pulled off the biggest caper of all time, and here he is rejoining his dear friends for whose eternal benefit he did it. And whatever Zeus does to him, mankind will forever after have fire, will forever after know the truth. I think he feels pretty damn good, and this statue really makes me swell with that feeling too, and I really love it."

"Hmph," she said.

Chapter 33

Stardust

She dwelt among the untrodden ways
Beside the springs of Dove,
A maid whom there were none to praise
And very few to love.

—*She Dwelt Among the Untrodden Ways,* William Wordsworth

Sometimes she driveth o'er a soldier's neck,
…and then anon,
Drums in his ear, at which he starts and wakes,
And being thus frighted, swears a prayer or two
And sleeps again.

—Mercutio describes Queen Mab, *Romeo & Juliet,* Wm. Shakespeare

When they returned to Robin's apartment, Robin listened to the messages on his answering machine, which he hadn't debriefed since the previous morning. The first was from Geoffrey, who'd noticed in Robin's studio a new group of paintings and drawings, done in what he called "an African flavor," that he wanted to videotape.

"He doesn't miss a thing, that guy," Robin said, half-admiringly. "He comes up here and noodles around and then wants to shoot everything he sees. I half expect to find him up here someday taking pictures of my dirty laundry."

"He just tapes whatever he wants to?" Aurora asked incredulously.

Robin laughed. "Well, he looks wherever he wants to, more or less. But we have a strict agreement—at least I think it's a strict agreement—that he doesn't shoot anything until and unless I explicitly authorize it. And I think he honors that."

"He's your Boswell?"

"Seems so. Anyway, he's decided I'm his Johnson."

The next voice was Margaret's. "Hi, you chocolate-covered cherry, this is Peaches. The good news is that I'll be home around midnight Friday. The other good news is that I'm horny as a toad on a hot rock, so be prepared." Click.

"I wonder who that was," he said. "Today is Friday, isn't it?"

"Barely," she said.

He shrugged and smiled. "Guess I'll soon find out, then," he said.

Click. "Hey, Robin, this is Billy Newman. I'm leaving Thursday for Prague and I'm never coming back, so I want to come by and say goodbye and godspeed and fare-me-well and all that crap. Let's get drunk, too, okay? Where the hell are you? Call me back, okay? I'm staying with Geoffrey but I'm never here, so leave a message okay? Okay, 'bye." A series of clicks announced the end of the messages.

"How does he make a living, anyway?" Aurora wanted to know.

Robin moved toward the kitchen to begin preparing their breakfast. “I don’t know,” he said. “I never asked, and he never told me. I think he has money, though, from somewhere.”

“Somebody said he was related to Robert Maxwell, the publisher.”

Robin shrugged. “He’s never offered to publish me,” he said, cracking an egg into a delicately glazed earthenware bowl. “Do you like Denver omelettes?”

“Sure. Hey, let me do that, okay? Why don’t you just put your feet up and rest awhile?”

Robin smiled and stepped away, and then an expression of concern crossed his face. “Oh, listen, I’m really sorry. You probably have things to do today. I bet I’m keeping you.”

She deftly cracked another egg on the edge of the bowl and opened it with one hand, its gelatinous contents falling in a long blob, the yellow eye of the yolk in its train.

“I’ve cancelled all my appointments for today,” she said. “I did it while you were in there getting your face stitched back together. I figure I own you today, and I’m going to hang around for awhile to make sure you behave yourself.”

Robin laughed.

“Aren’t you tired?” she asked.

“Yeah, a little.”

“So after we eat you can sleep and I’m going to go do some things, and then I’ll come back later to check up on you, okay? Don’t worry, I’ll get out before your hot peach pie arrives.”

While Aurora finished making the omelette and squeezing some orange juice, Robin arranged a group of drawings and paintings and other creations at the far end of the room where he worked. He set up a small table and two chairs, side by side, so they could look at this display while they ate.

“Well, it does look sort of African,” she said as they set their breakfast on the table and she sat down. He went back to the kitchen for napkins.

“This is much fancier than I usually am,” he said, sitting beside her, “but for an opening morning we always have cloth napkins.”

“So this is something new?” she asked. And then, blushing a little, she added, “Pardon my ignorance.”

He laughed a rollicking laugh. “It’s so new it doesn’t exist yet,” he said. “It’s really not finished. I felt like I’d come to some kind of limit with the European painters and sculptors. I wanted to explore the African tradition, but then the more I studied it, the more I saw it as an aboriginal tradition, with hauntingly similar expressions among the indigenous artists of Australia and the Americas, North America especially, but not in Asia, interestingly enough.”

“Asia’s a world unto itself.”

“Yes, in many ways. And I haven’t really ever gotten into that. And I don’t know very much about the old art south of the border, you know, in Central America and Colombia and places like that. I’m sure a lot of it didn’t survive. So I don’t know how far it extends. Right now I’m just trying to master the colors and shapes and techniques, to see things the way they saw them.”

She savored a mouthful of omelette as she regarded the paintings, which were mostly on wood, some on rocks, a few on canvas, perhaps two dozen in all.

“First I decided to work almost exclusively with a palette of reds and yellows and browns and blacks, a little white, almost no green or blue, only an occasional trace of purple and orange. Then I decided to work with a characteristic kind of object, stick figures, masks, dusky animals, blowguns, spears, shields, utensils. I didn’t want to get sidetracked into the anthropology, but I knew I actually had to make some of these things. So I learned to wash and dry and flatten pieces

of bark, and made a few masks, as you see there. I even threw pots and made a few flaked tools." He got up and brought back for her two obsidian spear points with edges like serrated razors.

"Guess which one is mine."

She smiled. "The one with the red streaks," she said, and he laughed.

"You mean the one with the big gouges. Those old guys were so good at this. Even Louis Leakey was a lot better at it than I'll ever be."

"Well, I'd be bereft. How long've you been working on this stuff?"

"Almost six months now. Well, a few years off and on. Anyway, once I'd settled into the materials and the colors and the basic styles, like brow ridges and big eyes and exaggerated mouths and stick people and the talismanic nature of a lot of it, the work started to look pretty African, or I should say pretty aboriginal."

"Well, it really does, Robin, at least to my untutored eye."

"Uh-huh. And then I looked for differences based in the environment, like art of the savannahs, the jungle, and the high plains. Because you know, there's an element of place in these things, and even a hint of events."

"These are really beautiful."

"Thank you. But I still have a long way to go, because I really haven't learned yet how to express more elaborate ideas with it, and maybe it's not suited to that in the way European art is. I mean, it *is* primitive."

"And has ideas of its own."

"Exactly, and maybe ideas we don't understand. Ideas about making a blowgun or taking an animal's life or finding water."

"Do you feel a kinship with African art?"

He laughed. "I feel a kinship with all art," he said. "With artists. And, well, I don't know. I don't feel I have the same affinity with aboriginal art, even African art, that I do, for example, with the paintings of the Renaissance and the older Italian artists."

"So maybe you're Italian."

"I'm a product of my life. The material is genetic, in part. The interface with the outside, the world where my works of art live, is experiential. I was born in America. I've lived here all my life, in Georgia and Pennsylvania, and now here. My whole experience is American, in the context of American culture and life. But then I've always been fascinated with the older cultures, the older masterpieces and masters of art, maybe because, as a black man, and as a freethinker, if you will, I was less accepted into the culture, the culture made itself less valuable to me, and so I sought to find truth and meaning in history and understanding and expression. This is my liberty. My mind is on art, on these canvases and in these works. Doing this keeps me free. It keeps me happy and alive."

"And it's very good."

"And God has blessed me with a facility."

"Which you've nurtured like the wolf nurtured Romulus and Remus."

"Like Buddha nurtured life. Each thing in its time. Each thing worthy of respect. Each thing the perfect thing."

"Your experience has a basis in your biology, though, doesn't it? And what about the collective unconscious? Do those things color the framework, create the language of perception do you think?"

Robin laughed. "I love talking to you," he said. "You're just like a wolverine, fierce and fearless."

"And foxy, too."

He smiled at her. “Yes, very. And yes, the acuity and the other qualities of your senses are certainly genetic, and that’s a critical influence, but the collective unconscious, I don’t know. That’s everybody’s unconscious, isn’t it? Or do I have only the collective unconsciousness of my ancestors? But all our ancestors, if you go back far enough, have a common root. Now we have a common, and very ancient collective unconscious up to the point where we branch off. And this happens at each branch. So I wind up with a collective unconscious…”

“Wait a minute. Interbreeding must merge the collective unconsciousnesses of the father and mother somehow.”

“Hm. Well, maybe you’re right. May be.” He was quiet and thoughtful then.

And suddenly they blurted out, simultaneously, “It’s a web!”

“Sure,” he said, “because first they diverge, genetically, and then down the road somewhere they rejoin, in reproduction.”

“And so,” she said, “you don’t have infinite branching, like you don’t have it in trees, but rather you have the creation of a pattern like a river delta…”

“Or a leaf or a network. So you have this thing where genetic improvements are salted all through the population.”

“And defects?”

“Sure, but maybe not nearly as much.”

“Soooo,” she said mysteriously, “does this mean that humans are not going to evolve a new species?”

“Maybe it means that the new species is already evolving among the apes,” he laughed. “Species change overnight, you know. Anyway, I think, my gut feeling is—and my gut feeling has a respectable basis, as you can see—that the most extensive part of my collective unconscious, my response to iconic phenomena and my odd preferences, such as they are, is based on more recent times when my family, my ancestors, were living not on the savannahs of Africa but in the jungles of America, replete as jungles are with days of effervescent glory and nights (drawn long by pain) of merciless and cruel injustice. And innately I’m more responsive, emotionally, to that.”

“The farther back you go in history, the fewer things you have to work with.”

“Yes. A few big things.”

He got up then and walked over to an easel covered with a sheet. “I just finished this a week or so ago,” he said. “I haven’t shown it to anybody, not even my nosy videographer. It’s a portrait of Kate.”

It was beautifully done, exquisitely done, and bursting with color, but done in the aboriginal earth hues he’d been exploring, and her face—for it was her face, serene but vibrant—her face was eerily childlike.

“She looks starry-eyed,” Aurora said.

Robin laughed. “She was in love,” he said.

“With mister make-believe.”

He shook his head and laughed as if to say he wouldn’t be commenting on that.

“Well, I like her anyway, and the painting is fantastic, Robin. Really. She’s going to love it.”

As Robin recovered the portrait, Aurora picked up a small collection of drawings of clothing. “May I look at these?”

“Sure.”

They were sketches of costumes, nineteenth century Russian peasant garb, Aurora thought. “*Petrouchka?”*

"Yes! Good for you."

"Well, it says it right here," she laughed.

"Elizabeth and I kicked a bunch of ideas around one evening. And then she went home and did it. They were great, didn't you think?"

"I didn't see them."

"Oh, they're incredible. You should get her to show them to you. They're very clownish and overstated."

"A departure for her."

"Yes, but not really, because she loves to play. She's just very dignified about it."

They both laughed.

"Robin, would you paint my portrait someday?"

"Sure," he said. "I'd love to. Can you sit still that long?"

"Sure," she said perkily, wiggling a little in her chair. "How long?"

"A few hours. A few times. And I'm not saying when I can do it yet, you understand, and I haven't told you what I charge."

She laughed. "And what do you charge?"

"Nothing," he said, "and that means I get to say when you sit and where you sit, and you get to put up with the vagaries of my life until I'm finished with you."

"It's a deal," she said, obviously delighted.

"I might do you in metallic paint," he said, a glint in his eye.

"I throw myself on your tender mercies," she replied.

He picked up the breakfast dishes and carried them into the kitchen. "Well, I did the same, and I was very well treated. Still, the thought of a metallic nude, with brass skin and copper hair and chrome oxide eyes, and plumbing—I don't know, it's very Hieronymous Bosch."

"I'm not posing nude for Hieronymous Bosch."

He laughed. "I'll think about it," he said, turning on the water in the sink. "I mean…"

She put her arm around his shoulders. "I know what you mean. And you can think about it any way you please, because you're the artist."

"And because you're shameless," he laughed.

"Yes, and that too."

He smiled at her, a little wanly she thought. "I think I want to get some sleep after we finish the dishes, and you have things to do."

"I'll be back around six," she said, slinging a tea towel over her shoulder and rinsing a dish under the tap. "With dinner."

"I really can't tell you how much I appreciate all this you've done for me, Aurora," he said.

"Don't do me in aluminum," she said.

He laughed. "I know you're worried now."

"I'm worried about you."

"Let me," he began, circling a brush carefully around inside the skillet, "tell you a little story."

"Okay."

"It's about my mom. She had a hard life. A good life, by and large, but a life of hard physical work, like a farmhand, except she was a mother and a wife and a servant too, to her employers.

"She lived to be eighty-three. She died in April, a few years ago. That spring she wanted to be wheeled out to the orchard every day in her chaise, and my brother and sister and I, whichever

one was there, would get her all bundled up in blankets and wheel her out, and she'd sit quietly and maybe knit a stitch or two, and watch the birds and the clouds and the flowers and just delight in everything with what few senses she had left. And sometimes she'd talk a little, but she was very weak. It was chilly sometimes and we'd have to set her beside the window. It rained a couple of times, and she loved that. Mostly, toward the end, she slept.

"The doctors had offered her an operation—a quadruple bypass—that they said would prolong her life, for maybe a year or two, possibly more, and of course, maybe a lot less. The life she'd maybe gain might be a continuation more or less of what she had, or it might entail a serious degradation of the scope and depth of her existence.

"She declined. She just flatly declined.

"This shocked us at first. My mother was a fighter. She feared nothing. What reason could there be to turn down a chance for another blessed day of life? For her and for us? I couldn't understand. And of course neither could all the people who took it upon themselves to disapprove and the few who raised all kinds of cain about it.

"One night, before she became really, finally ill, she sat us down in the living room, and she said, 'For eighty-three years I've been a fox in pursuit of one chicken after another. Nothing could ever sidetrack me when I had something in my sights. And I always did. You kids have always been in my sights. As were a lot of other things from time to time. But now the good Lord is beckoning me, and it would be very impolite, not to mention mighty undignified, for me to go chasing off now after another chicken.'"

Aurora laughed.

He turned to her, soft and full of concern, and placed his hands against her shoulders and faced her full square. "I'm just chasing chickens," he said. "Chasing chickens keeps me alive. No, it *is* my life. It's what I do. It's who I am. Making art is the essence of my being. If I stop making art then I'll die. Until I quit painting, I'll be a happy man. If I quit painting, then you'll know the end is near. Until then—no worries, mate, okay?"

She kissed him on the cheek. "Okay," she said. "See you at six."

She paused at the doorway.

"I'll sleep," he laughed.

"Hmph," she said.

Chapter 34

Endless Time

The lion couching in the centre
  With mountain head and sunset brow
Rolls down the everlasting slope
  Bones picked an age ago,
  And the bones rise up and go.

—*The Road,* Edwin Muir

Aurora returned to Robin's studio shortly after six. Having no idea where to go for soul food, nor even whether Robin liked it, she'd brought Chinese.

She entered the outside door into the common hallway that led to the two downstairs apartments and, crossing it, climbed the occasionally sighing stairs to Robin's door. It was open, and Robin was sketching out a new canvas.

"Hi!" he said, grinning broadly. "I hope you hadn't expected to find me lolling around in bed."

"Well, a girl can dream, can't she?"

"More than anyone," he agreed as she began rummaging around the kitchen for the accoutrements necessary to the supper: plates, cups, silverware.

"I have chopsticks."

"Oh, good, where are they?"

"In that little drawer under the breadboard."

"I couldn't find soul food. Do you like soul food?"

"Not especially."

"What is it, anyway?"

"Collard greens, mustard, chicken necks, rice, black-eyed peas, grits, pig knuckles, chitlins, corn bread—whatever poor people eat in the South."

"I brought the stuff poor people eat in Chinatown. Shrimp-fried rice, gung bao, sweet-and-sour pork and egg noodles."

He laughed and came into the kitchen to see, putting his arm around her shoulder as he looked.

"Great," he said. "Thanks."

He got out paper plates. "I have instant iced tea or Earl Grey," he offered.

"Earl Grey," she said. "Hot."

He ran some water in the kettle and put it on the stove. She stood beside him, her arm across his back, her hand on his shoulder now. He seemed huge although he was barely taller than she was.

"Mmm, where do you work out?" she asked, squeezing his neck.

"Over there." He nodded toward his bedchamber, laughing. "And," nodding again, this time over his shoulder toward the open and cluttered studio area that constituted more than three-fourths of his living space, "in there."

"Seems like you'd die in all these fumes," she said.

"I like it."

She laughed. "I like it, too," she said. "I'm just not sure it'd be good for you."

They walked out to the table where they'd had breakfast. "Think of it this way," he said. "I love the odors of turpentine and oils and dryers. The fragrance in here is incredible. It's part of my work. I feel like I'm in a garden of volatile color, if that makes any sense. How could it not be good for me?"

"Uh-huh. Okay. I take your point. How much sleep did you get?"

"Oh, four or five hours. I feel great." He looked at her searchingly. "I'm very grateful to you," he said.

"My pleasure," she said. "Besides, it gave me an excuse to tell Jim I was too busy to see him tonight."

"Oh?" he inquired, spreading a small mound of rice over his plate. "Jim's your sweetie? Are things not well between you?"

"Well," she said, "no, things are fine, I guess. It just seems like sort of a dead end. And, I'm kind of like you, I guess, inasmuch as I really do like to work almost more than anything, so I don't have a lot of time for screwing around."

He smiled and paused for a moment before bringing a mouthful of rice to his lips. "I think I've heard a few comments about that," he said. And then he added, "For my own part, I mean."

"Well, I hope nobody's commenting to you about me."

"Not any more."

They ate in silence for a while. Aurora wanted soy sauce and Robin found it for her. She asked him about the large painting he was working on but he said he wasn't ready yet to talk about it. Then she noticed the large number of sculptures and sketches of birds that seemed to be scattered around the studio.

"Crazy for birds, aren't you?"

He laughed with delight. "Well, they're sort of amazing. They soar, they dive, they dart, they glide, they fly thousands of miles—days on end sometimes—without stopping. They chatter and cheep and croak and whistle all day long. They're very kinetic."

"Somebody said you often have birds in your paintings, and they have some symbolic meaning."

"Oh," he said, "I don't know about 'often,' but I guess they've shown up often enough that now people see them even where I myself really can't. You know, a painting is just a plane surface with a lot of dried pigment on it. It's the eye and mind of the viewer that really determines what's represented there, and what it means."

"Oh, that's a little facile, isn't it?"

Robin laughed again. "Yeah," he said.

She ate quietly for a long time, seemingly looking around the room—for there were endlessly many things to look at, stacked, piled, heaped, hung and growing everywhere—but she was seeing none of it.

"What is it?" he said.

"This is like the history of your life, isn't it?" She swept the room with her hand. "Your legacy."

"Well, those are two different things; both true, neither complete."

"What do you mean?"

"First and foremost, it's the history of my life as a painter, or more accurately an autobiography, but not of my personal life, the history of which would fit in a thimble and be

about as interesting. I do like the idea of legacy, although it has those awful legal overtones, because it is, in a way, my gift to the world, and because I am continually creating it. On the other hand, I hold up the giving for various reasons, not least of which is money, and I suspect I hold some of it in higher esteem than the world does. If I were a plumber I could drive around to different houses and buildings and say, 'Hey, I put the pipes in that baby,' and it'd be the same thing, don't you think? And that's a plumber's legacy—some fine pipes hidden away in the walls of buildings."

She laughed and reached over and touched him. "I like you," she said.

There was a knock on the door. A young female voice asked, "Are you at all decent?"

"Oh, come in, come in, my little chickadee," Robin called, and in came a beautiful dark brown girl, perhaps no longer a teenager, with waist-length black hair and the biggest, whitest smile Aurora had ever seen.

"Hi!" she said. "I'm Annie."

Annie, dressed in a short cotton shift and blue-green satin bloomers and sandals, was a trim, sprightly girl with a long face, strong brow ridges, prominent cheekbones and a long, broad nose, and big black eyes that burned a hole right through you. Aurora thought she looked a little like one of the African masks Robin had recently made, and that she was very beautiful.

"Annie, this is my lawyer, Aurora," Robin said to Annie, and then to Aurora he said, "Annie's my model. She's also Elizabeth's daughter."

"Really?"

"Uh-huh," Annie said, shrugging. "We both like to act. Well, she acts and I pose. But it's the same thing, except I don't have to move and learn lines and stuff like that. And I make better money. Except when I work for Robin."

Annie knelt on the floor across from them and looked at Robin with a smile. "So are we working tonight, or are you indisposed for the serious life?"

Robin was nonplussed. "Oh, hey, Annie I forgot, really. I totally forgot. I'm sorry. I can't do it tonight. How about tomorrow night?"

"Sure," she said, perking and grinning. "No worries. But…what happened to your face?"

"Oh, just an old dueling scar I picked up in Cologne."

"Sure." She looked at Aurora.

"I'm not really his lawyer," Aurora said. "We're friends from the poetry group. Robin's doing my portrait."

Annie glanced at the big canvas on the easel. "I hope that's not it," she laughed.

"Are you hungry?" Robin asked.

"Only for love," she said. "I don't get this figure from eating flesh…"

Which provoked a bubbling of laughter among them.

"Hey, I can make love using only my eyes," Annie said.

"Believe me," Robin assured her, "I know you can. And this is a worthy accomplishment, but can you also make love with your toe? With words, drawings, songs, meals, gestures? With your creations? With your footprint? And can you make love with the Eye of Atman? With the soul of the universe? With your fellow man?" He paused, but only for a moment. "And if you make love with people, and other entities, and make love with these entities using talents of lovemaking possessed by you, leaving aside the why of their existence, is there not some confusion, some arbitrariness in the distinction between the making of love and the entity with which one makes it, so to speak?"

"I'd say," Aurora said, "the real question is, can you make love to a *blind person* using only your eyes?"

"Yes," Robin chimed in, "and will you go blind from making love with your eyes alone?"

"Or making love with entities." Aurora went on. "Because I find that lovemaking isn't what you do with your eyes, nor what he does with his eyes, but the ineffable interaction that arises from the interplay of these actions, and therefore I would say that you can only make love with another person, because only another person can sustain the intense communion that shimmers between you which itself is really the essence of the lovemaking."

"God," Annie said, pretending to be aghast, "what've you guys been smoking?"

"Life," Robin said.

"I want some."

"Seems to me you have more than plenty," he said.

Aurora chuckled in agreement. "Besides," she said, "you get it whether you want it or not."

"Yikes," Annie said, bringing her knuckles to her mouth and looking around in mock concern.

"Tell you what, though," Robin said, rising from his chair and walking toward the bedroom. "You can do a dramatic reading for us, all right?"

"Uh-huh," Annie said, smiling at Aurora. "You know," she confided, pointing with a long brown finger at her forehead, "he's a little daft."

Aurora smiled. "Charmingly demented, I'd call it."

Robin returned with a sheet of paper covered with scrawls.

"How am I supposed to read this?" Annie exclaimed.

"Pretend you went to college," Robin said.

"It looks like the Rosetta Stone," Aurora agreed, looking at it where it lay on the table in front of Annie.

Annie pored over the hieroglyphics for a few minutes while Robin poured coffee for himself and tea for her and Aurora. It had grown dark outside and he hadn't really noticed.

"What the hell does 'The Fee to Lotus Rex' mean?" Annie asked abruptly.

"Some kind of legal thing," Aurora surmised.

"What does that earring in your ear mean?" Robin rejoined.

"The earring in my ear, and there are seven of them I believe, isn't created in the language of logic," she said. "It's jewelry, adornment…"

"A statement," Robin said.

"All right. It's a good thing you're a genius because otherwise I'd think you were missing a few synapses, know what I mean?"

"More than a few," Robin laughed.

After he'd seated himself again, and fixed his gaze expectantly on her, and raised his eyebrows, she began.

"Okay, here goes," Annie said. And then she unlimbered herself from the floor. "Oops, guess I better stand up. This Lotus Rex guy might eat me."

Aurora smiled at Robin.

"I'll ask the audience not to get oversexed during my debut performance of the world premiere of this great poem," Annie said. "It is a poem, isn't it?"

"Yes," Robin said. "From your lips, all rude words of common commerce ring like silver bells."

"I'm telling my mother you said that. And Margaret too."

"Read," Robin said.

The Fee to Lotus Rex (a coalescence of buzzards)

I woke one day and there I was,
A coalescent son of time,
Another skein spun up from fuzz,
A gathering of rhyme.

I have so many origins
I scarce can count them all:
From black and white and jungle dins,
From ancient tribes of Gaul,

From conga drums and piccolos
From Harvard's Yard and Harlem's lot
From slavery and gigolos,
From purest polyglot.

A million billion threads converged
To form the soul that I desire;
A thousand artist's spirits merged
To bless me with the fire.

O, once I went in search of me,
And all the world my heart did roam;
Exploring every branching tree,
In search of whence I'd come.

I did not wear a Cambridge gown,
Nor danced savannah's whooping grass,
Nor shelled the pea in shantytown,
Nor rode an Appian ass.

O, yes I went in search of me,
And o'er the world my eye did roam;
Exploring every star I'd see,
I found myself at home.

But while upon this backward path
My mortal hours flowed,
I've captured many a dreaming moth
And copied many a toad.

I've copied many a toad, my dear,
And many a jewel as well I know,
And many a laugh and many a tear
I bore beneath my brow.

One day I'll slacken and be gone,
A cloud dissolving in the wind;
But all my works will linger on,
The stardust of my mind.

Aurora applauded.

"Very bizarre, Ecst," Annie said. "I mean, truly bizarre."

Robin was obviously pleased. "You did a great job with it. It almost made sense to me."

"Uh-huh."

"I have one, too," Aurora proffered, looking at Annie. "I wrote it for the retreat."

Annie smiled. "Sure," she said.

Aurora went to get it from her purse.

"Robin," Annie said softly.

He looked at her.

"Are you okay?"

He smiled again and nodded. "I'm fine," he said. "I got sick earlier. I needed some sleep. She came to help me out."

"She seems very nice. Can she write?"

"Of course I can write," Aurora said, returning with her poem. "I'm a lawyer."

"Yeah, but you didn't know Elizabeth had a daughter, did you?" Robin asked.

"Huh-uh."

"Kind of like two peas in a pod they are, don't you think?"

"Beautiful black-eyed peas," Aurora said. "Beautiful."

"Okay," Annie said, smiling. "I'll read it. Please, don't let it be as weird as Robin's."

"I'm a lawyer," Aurora said again. "I don't do weird."

Robin laughed. Annie looked at her in disbelieving condescension. "Honey," she said, "there is nothing weirder than a lawyer. Trust me on this. I know."

She looked at Aurora's poem. "Gee, Robin, she was right. I can actually read this."

"Read."

The Measure of a Marching Life

How shall I know when I've done my time
In this life without parole,
Whether I've made the intended climb
From hell to redeem my soul?

O how shall I gauge in the gauzy haze
Of the writs and the briefs and the schemes,
The worth of the best and the worst of days,
The value of passion and dreams?

O how will I know in the dottering fog
That covers our senses at last,
That the things that I wrote in the heavenly log
Are worthy of all that they cost?

O what is the evidence I will take
To justify all I have done?
O what is the argument I will make
In defense of my day in the sun?

And what if I come to the end of it all,
The loving and laughter and tears,
With nothing to show but a knitted shawl,
And nothing to measure but years?

It was Robin's turn to applaud, and, standing solemnly, he did.

"You're okay, aren't you?" he asked her solicitously.

"Did you like it?" Aurora asked, pursing her lips to keep from grinning immodestly.

"I did," Annie said.

"Then you're the judge," Aurora said.

"You know," Robin said, "if we do this long enough, one of us might get good at it." They all laughed.

"Robin, we're not working next weekend, are we?" Annie asked.

"No," Robin said, "I'm going to Wolf Lake. I'll be there 'til the twenty-fifth."

"Good. Okay, well, I'll see you tomorrow then, okay? At seven?"

"Great, thanks, Annie. And again, I'm sorry about this evening."

"No harm done," Annie said, waving her arms like windswept palm fronds as she danced toward the door. "And I'm leaving Thursday for the coast," she said, making big eyes at Robin.

"The Renaissance Faire?"

"Yep." She gave a smile and blew a kiss to Aurora as she paused at the door.

"With a guy?" he asked.

"Yeah, what's it to you?"

"Wear your dark glasses."

She laughed and closed the door behind her. "You two be good now," her voice teased from the hollow hallway. Then they heard her skip gaily down the stairs.

"Hmph," Aurora said.

Chapter 35

Daffodils

I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host of golden daffodils,
Beside the lake, beneath the trees
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

—*The Daffodils,* William Wordsworth

Elizabeth and Margaret arrived at Wolf Lake around mid-morning on Saturday, in Margaret's dusty blue testament to French engineering, a car that, despite the fact no two parts were any longer in intimate contact with one another, still ran, albeit noisily and with great exudation of blue smoke, which, she'd mentioned to Elizabeth with evident pride, matched the color of the car as well as that of her eyes.

Mo, who'd been reading on the porch and heard them come in, met them in the lobby and told them that Harry, Robin, Aurora and Teresa had gone for a hike up to a high cirque lake that mirrored some nearby snow-covered peaks and would likely return by late afternoon.

"I'm just going to hang around and read 'til lunchtime," he said. "Then I'm going down to the beach to thrill the women and soak up some rays."

"Yeah," Elizabeth said, "that sounds good. I need to work on my tan."

"And I'm going to put my bikini on and scare all the fish," Margaret said.

A half hour later, Margaret, in bright orange Bermuda shorts and a loose yellow blouse, wearing multicolored socks that slumped around her ankles above her shoes, and Elizabeth, in trim khaki safari shorts and a matching khaki vest with thirteen pockets, a gift from Harry, over a white t-shirt and white socks turned down neatly over her graceful ankles, met in the lobby and sallied forth from the hotel for a walk along the western shore, a nearly flat path that followed the lake contour and seldom rose more than twenty feet above the water.

"So," Elizabeth began, her words tentative and inquiring, "I hear you and Alexei sojourned in the redwoods before he left."

Margaret smiled and sighed. "Oh, we did, we did," she said. Her mind returned to the dense, cool forest and the childlike afternoons they'd spent hunting wildflowers along the trails or little stone treasures in the creek below their campsite.

"Had fun, eh?"

"Ate like kings, too. Or queens I guess."

"He's not bisexual is he?"

"No, I don't think so."

"So it was just a friendship thing."

Margaret became lost in thought at this.

"I'm sorry," Elizabeth said. "It's none of my…"

"Oh, no, it's fine, it's fine," Margaret said, smiling.

"Geoffrey thought maybe you guys were an item or something."

"Geoffrey's a ninny," Margaret said. Then she looked at her friend. "You look so spiffy," she said, "maybe you don't want to sit on the ground, but I'd like to sit a minute."

"You tired?"

"No, I just want to take a load off. For a minute."

"Sure," Elizabeth said.

The two of them sat on the soft earth beside the path, about ten feet above the water's edge, and gazed out over the lake.

"It really is beautiful here," Elizabeth said.

"It sure is."

"How're you doing?"

"Oh, I'm fine. I was just thinking about Alexei. We had such a fantastic time in the redwoods. I really love him. It's way more than friendship. It's very passionate. But he's gay. I mean, it's like I had a dog or something. No, that's too crass…"

"I understand," Elizabeth said. "He's not a candidate as a lover."

"Yeah. And besides, I love Robin, and he's a wonderful lover."

"And a wonderful person. And an incredible painter."

"Yes, and a teddy bear and a—well, a veritable cornucopia of virtue."

Elizabeth let down her knees, which had been tucked up under her chin, and stretched her long legs and turned sideways to lie on her hip and forearm. "This is a problem?"

"Well, if he beat me once in a while or farted a lot during sex it'd be easier to think about…"

"Finding someone else?"

"Oh, God, Lizzie, I don't know. No, I couldn't do that."

"Some *thing* else then."

Margaret sighed and stared out across the water, across the treetops, across the hills and valleys and into a miasma of feelings and memories. Then she laughed, and looked at Elizabeth and stood up, brushing the pale dust off her ample orange behind. "I need a warm, furry anaconda that wraps itself around me and whispers sweet nothings in my ear while I fall asleep every night," she said.

"And craves your presence like a dog." Elizabeth rose too and slapped the dust from her shorts and smiled as she wiped her forearm against her palm.

Margaret laughed. "Yes, a little craving might be just the thing."

They walked in silence for a while, down a long slope until they approached the edge of a little meadow almost at lake level.

"And you?" Margaret asked at length.

"I hate having people wrap themselves around me and blow in my ear while I'm trying to sleep," Elizabeth said.

"Oh, one of those ice maidens then."

"No, when I want to burn, I can burn through steel, I can incinerate the whole universe, I can have ecstasy that I'd happily, gladly die for. At the moment, anyway. But when I want to sleep, baby, I want to sleep, and you better not mess around with me." She laughed to hear herself say this.

"I'd much rather fuck," Margaret said. "I can always sleep."

"You're bad," Elizabeth said, pursing her lips and looking sidelong at Margaret with a smile.

"I meant Harry," Margaret said. "You know that." Mischief danced in her eyes.

"You can see this meadow from the dock," Elizabeth replied as they walked onto a wide, green, grassy area that sloped gently up from the lake shore into a dark boundary of sizable trees, including maple and ash. Then, in the bright sunlight, they rounded a curve in the path that took them near the rushes in the shallow water and they could indeed see the dock, and the hotel through the trees across the lake.

Elizabeth chuckled to herself. "Harry brought me up here last Monday night for a drink. It was almost dark when we got to the hotel and Harry wanted to walk down to the dock first and have a look at everything while we could. There was no moon at all.

"When we got down there he pointed this meadow out to me—it was much brighter than everything around it, because it's so flat I guess. Then he put his arm around my waist, I don't know, there was something so cute about it, and he sort of invited me against him, and he said he'd memorized this poem for me and I should stop him if I'd heard it before."

"Right," Margaret said.

"It's a poem by Robert Browning. I don't suppose you know it. It's called *Meeting at Night."*

"Huh-uh."

"He said he'd been up here before, a couple of weeks ago, just to spend the night and read a little and think things over…"

"Things like Harry and Elizabeth things?"

"Now, girl, I don't pry," Elizabeth said playfully. "Anyway, he'd been reading this poem and he'd come down on the dock and there was a half-moon hanging over the water, and this slope was bright and the edge of it full of shadows and he thought he saw, up there in the trees, the light of a house."

"I don't believe this," Margaret said.

Elizabeth laughed. "And he had this fantasy, he said, that he was a young man in a canoe, paddling across the lake in the moonlight, coming to visit me in the middle of the night. And he reached the beach over here and the canoe ground up on the sandy bottom and he got out and made his way along the shore and then walked across this grassy slope before coming to my house in the forest over there somewhere." She pointed across the meadow and up into the trees beyond it.

"Then he imagined himself tiptoeing up to my window and tapping on the pane, and me coming to the window in my nightdress, and looking out at him and lighting a match for the lantern and then opening the sash."

"On your kimono?" Margaret asked.

Elizabeth suppressed a grin. "Here's the poem," she said. "I know it by heart."

"I hope to kiss a duck," Margaret said.

The grey sea and the long black land;
And the yellow half-moon large and low;
And the startled little waves that leap
In fiery ringlets from their sleep
As I gain the cove with pushing prow
And quench its speed i' the slushy sand.

Then a mile of warm sea-scented beach;
Three fields to cross 'til a farm appears;
A tap at the pane, the quick sharp scratch

And blue spurt of a lighted match,
And a voice less loud, through its joys and fears,
Than the two hearts beating, each to each.

"I liked the part where he gains the cove with pushing prow," Margaret said.

"Uh-huh," Elizabeth said. "You are bad, girl. I think I like the blue spurt of the match better, though."

They both laughed.

"So you liked this," Margaret said. "Even the touchy-feely part."

"Well," said Elizabeth, blushing, "I started it."

"I see."

"I put my arm around him first. He's always been so afraid, you know, to touch me."

"He's afraid he'll lose control and be swept away by his desire for you."

Elizabeth laughed. "May be," she said. "I might've coöperated that night."

"Right there on the dock."

"Yep."

"Splinters or no splinters."

"Ouch. Well, maybe on the beach then."

They turned there and began to walk back toward the hotel.

"So this is obviously serious between you and Harry. Like love or something."

"Something. 'Serious' sounds so—serious. Actually, it's been really fun, and fun-loving."

"But it is."

"Uh-huh, it is, yes."

"I'm happy for you, and maybe a little jealous."

"Jealous? Why?"

"Because you're in such an idyll, I guess. You know? The uncomplicated fullness of new love, where you only know the good stuff, where everything's positive and upbeat and perfect. Before the day-to-day reality settles in and you have to start paying the bills."

"Well, I was married for seven years. I do know about paying the bills."

"I know," Margaret said. "I'm sorry. You're entitled to every wonderful moment of this, and so is Harry."

Elizabeth put her arm around Margaret's shoulders. "You do so much good for other people," she said. "It's not fair that you should be unhappy."

"Well, I'm not unhappy, I'm just not happy."

"Is it because Robin's so attached to his work or because you're so attached to his attachment?"

"Yeah, that's a fair question," Margaret responded. "I was talking with Mo the other day, just before I went up to the convention, I think. We were talking about being around sick people all the time."

"Depressing is it?"

"Well, I don't know. But it colors your view of course. Of what life is. Most people are only rarely exposed to critical illness, but it's a daylong fact of life for us, every day. And I think there is a potential for depression."

"Do you think it warps your perspective?"

Margaret laughed. "Psychotherapists always have warped perspectives," she said. "Ask anybody who knows one. But I think it does a funny thing. It shifts your sense of the normative

condition, and I think that makes you abandon some of the territory at the wild end, where sickness and pain and discomfort and inability are simply not part of the picture."

"It just gradually happens without your being aware of it?"

Margaret nodded.

"And probably something like this happens to anyone who focuses a lot on any one thing over many years."

"Sure, why not? It's adaptive." Margaret sighed. "I'm just not sure I'm built for it."

"Well, I do know that sometimes life is not fun. And sometimes the place you're in isn't fun."

"Sometimes the place you're in is damn hard to get out of, and maybe impossible really."

"Well suppose somebody locked you in a room. Would you stand there pounding on the door yelling, 'Let me out! Let me out!' or would you walk across the room and climb out the window?"

"What if there is no window?"

"Make one." She looked at Margaret and stopped walking. "Again this is none of my business. I understand how you can feel there's no exit. I understand how you can love something—someone, even—with all your heart and still have to turn away. I don't think you have to do that, but I know how awful it is just to contemplate. My approach is this: if I'm not having fun doing what I'm doing, then I do something else. I don't have to give up what I'm doing necessarily; I just have to do something else.

"You know what I'm saying? I don't know how much it matters what you do. Take up stamp collecting. Jump out of an airplane. Join the Foreign Legion. Dye your hair. Something. That's what I think, and that's what I do. I do something." She shrugged. "It's stupid, but it usually works."

Margaret demurred. "It's not stupid. It makes a lot of sense."

Presently they came to the grounds of the hotel again and decided to sit on the porch for a while and rest before lunch. Margaret went to the bar for iced tea while Elizabeth went to the ladies' room. Then at a table near the end of the porch and back toward the wall, in the shade, they sat down and slipped off their shoes, put their feet up, clinked their glasses, and smiled.

"Want to hear another story?" Elizabeth asked.

"Sure. I appreciate all this tender encouragement, by the way."

Elizabeth smiled. "Willie and I were still in college, at San Francisco State. We'd been practicing coitus interruptus as our method of birth control because we both hated all that other stuff, cremes and goos and awful rubber things. He'd pull out and then I'd get him off somehow, which wasn't hard, sometimes all I had to do was look at him.

"Anyway, just before graduation one summer, in late May, we went for a weekend of camping to this absolutely gorgeous place, the Tetons in Wyoming…"

"Ah, yes," Margaret said.

"And the last night we were there, camping in his bus, we were making love on a blanket near Jenny Lake under a full moon and he said he was ready to come and I, I don't know, I was just in a rapture, we'd had a weekend a lot like yours and Alexei's in the redwoods, and I said, 'No, don't pull out, Willie, come inside me,' and he did. And I knew, I mean I really knew, the instant I felt his hot come swooshing into me, that we had made a baby. And that's the night Annie was conceived. It was so magical, it still gives me goosebumps thinking about it."

Margaret smiled. "That's sweet," she said. "What happened to Willie?"

"Willie went to work as a stockbroker while I raised Annie. He was very successful for a while. Maybe too successful. I mean, it was so easy for him to make money. And then he

discovered cocaine. And then he started selling it. And then he got really abusive and couldn't stop, and we had to go."

"I'm so sorry."

"Yeah, it was sad. He went to prison eventually and had a tough time there. He lives back east now, in Virginia I think, and I've heard he's dried out and remarried, but we never hear from him. It was really tough on Annie."

"What a shit."

"The night we left we'd been arguing because he wanted to move to San Diego, where he was convinced he could get into the big time with some friends of his, and he was screaming at me because I wouldn't agree to it, and Annie came out from her bedroom, crying, just as he slammed me up against the wall, and he accused me of having tricked him into having her just so he'd have to support me and take care of us when he really only wanted to be free.

"I could've killed him. I was so furious he'd said that, I really could've killed him. I hit him so hard with my fist he fell backwards onto his butt on the floor. Annie was crying. God, I was mad." She made a wry smile. "I'm still mad, fifteen years later."

"Well, I'm mad, too," Margaret said, getting up from her chair to give Elizabeth a hug.

"The thing is, though," Elizabeth said, smiling, "the night Annie was conceived was so beautiful and miraculous, and I can remember it, too, every delicious moment of it, and no matter what happened afterward, even while things were unravelling between Willie and me, I've always had that incredible memory to sustain my faith and give me courage for the future, and her future too, and to kind of set a standard for what life can be."

Chapter 36
Visions

Let the wenches dawdle in such dress
As they are used to wear, and let the boys
Bring flowers in last month's newspapers.
Let be the finale of seem.
The only emporer is the emporer of ice cream.

—*The Emporer of Ice Cream,* Wallace Stevens

Robin and Harry walked casually along the gently descending soft bark path behind Aurora and Teresa, who were setting a more vigorous pace down the mountain and gradually disappearing from their view.

"Women are fast nowadays," Harry said.

Robin laughed. "I prefer to see the sights," he said.

"As I recall, they used to *be* the sights."

The sparse pine woods was sere and hot in the early afternoon sun, and Robin's face glistened with perspiration although the walk up to the mirror lakes had been pleasant and, for the most part, easy enough. The pungent odor of the trees was occasionally mixed with a sour, musty smell from the chopped fir bark that covered the trail surface.

The two men walked beside one another when the path was wide enough but Harry fell in behind when the trail narrowed. "How are you doing?" he asked as they negotiated a brief tangle of limbs and fallen trees.

"I'm doing fine," Robin said. "And you?"

"Well, the old legs are getting a little tired but I'm hanging in there."

"That was a pretty spot."

"Yep. I was surprised we saw so much snow."

"September in the mountains," Robin said. "It gets pretty cold, especially at night."

The path widened again and Harry came alongside. "Mind if I ask you something?"

Robin smiled at him. "No, go right ahead. Anything at all."

"It's about Elizabeth."

Robin readjusted his beret. "You probably know her better than I do," he said.

"Well, I'm sorry. I'm not being very precise. It's about us. Elizabeth and me. I think she likes me, and I'm crazy about her."

"I think she likes you, too."

"It's just that, well, do you think I'd be causing trouble for her, you know, among people of color?"

Robin laughed. "Well, as Eddie Murphy once pointed out, you're also a person of color—a pink person."

Harry raised his bare leg high on his next step and pointed to his thigh. "Hardly even pink," he said, laughing. "More like library paste. But seriously…"

"Seriously, I try very hard not to do stereotypes, but of course a lot of people don't work so hard at it. I don't think those kinds of people are worth worrying about, and I'm sure she doesn't either."

"No, she doesn't; I know that, but I'm worried that I might, well, cause her some unnecessary and irremediable discomfort if we were to, say, become more closely involved."

Robin thought about this for a while as they walked. "Elizabeth and I live a little differently from a lot of black people," he said, "because many of our close friends are white, pardon the expression. For my own part, and I assume for hers as well, it's really not an issue you ever think about, except for those rare occasions when somebody who finds this objectionable—finds *us* objectionable actually—makes some comment about it. You know, being an oreo or not considering black folks to be good enough for us, or some such nonsense. Haven't you heard comments like this?"

Harry sighed. "Not when I was with Liz," he said. "Not for many years, in any case."

"Shine it on," Robin said, laughing. "Don't get caught up in it. Some people have prejudices against lawyers, too, you know. Think of it that way."

They walked on in silence, the path meandering slowly downward as they approached the lake.

"People have all sorts of notions," Robin said thoughtfully, "about mad artists and rapacious lawyers and all the aspects of other people that are ordinarily hidden from them. A lot of people haven't got much perspective and can't fathom how anyone else can be really different from themselves. That's their problem. They don't have the insight to understand you so they presume you're touched by God or the devil, and that what you do, what you are, must be unnatural because it's foreign to them."

"They only see the outcomes."

"Yes. They don't get to see the sweat that produces the outcomes." He laughed. "Maybe in some cases that's just as well."

Harry laughed too. "Well, in the law that's certainly so."

"Sure, and if you love her, and she reciprocates that, well, it's reasonable I guess that some people will look at you, as they do Margaret and me, and assume that there's something queer and abnormal about your relationship, that it's simply impossible you could be together just because you like each other. They wouldn't be with you, or your ladyfriend, for some reason, and they can't see why your partner wants to be. But fuck 'em, I say. Life's a one-way ticket, and you'd better respect what's offered you."

"An old friend of mine once said you might as well laugh," Harry said, "because it's not going to get any funnier."

"That's the spirit," Robin chuckled.

Teresa and Aurora strode briskly along, creating a little breeze against their faces.

"Think they're okay?" Teresa asked.

"Sure," Aurora replied.

"I like walking fast. I can't stand dillydallying around."

"Me neither."

"Maybe they'll think we abandoned them."

Aurora grinned. "Well, we have," she said. "It's good for them. And I'm sure they could've kept up if they'd really wanted to."

"I don't know. I think we'd run them into the ground."

They both laughed.

Geoffrey arrived at the hotel around three o'clock. After he'd taken his clothes and equipment to his room he changed into his swim trunks and walked down to the beach, where Mo was lying on a huge towel, reading.

"Where is everybody?" Geoffrey asked by way of greeting.

"Hey, Geoff," Mo replied, looking up. "I don't know. Maggie and Liz are around here somewhere. I saw them at lunch. And Harry and Teresa and Aurora and Robin went for a hike somewhere, up to the mirror lakes I think."

The sand felt hot under Geoffrey's feet, even through his sandals. The water near the shoreline was roiled and thick with sediment. There was a faint odor of rotting fish in the still air. A half-dozen people lay along the beach, reading, sleeping, talking. A man far away along the shoreline stood quietly, fishing. Out on the lake, children splashed in and out of rubber rafts and people in canoes, rowboats and little outboards made their ways from hither to thither and back again, enjoying the late summer warmth and the peacefulness of the day.

"How's Robin doing?"

"Fine."

"I heard he got the stitches out."

"Yeah, he looks great. You can hardly see it. They did a nice job. Why? Are you worried he won't look good on film?"

Geoffrey laughed. "He looked like shit on Monday."

"Ah, well, a few scars lend character to a person's visage, wouldn't you say?"

Geoffrey shrugged. "Is the water cold?"

"I don't know," Mo said, rolling over and sitting up. "Seems warm enough to me. Jump in and see."

"I don't know," Geoffrey hesitated. "I was just going to dip in and then go back up to the hotel."

"Uh-huh."

Geoffrey tendered a toe to the green water and decided to walk back up to the porch without actually going in. Sliming himself, as he thought of it. Just as he mounted the steps, Harry and Robin came out from the lobby, laughing, each carrying a large glass of iced tea garnished with a sprig of green mint leaves. Robin was dressed in loose black slacks and a short-sleeved white shirt, but Harry had his red swim trunks on and a beach towel over his shoulder. The three of them sat in a row along the porch railing overlooking the lake.

"That water looks mighty inviting," Harry said.

"It's freezing," said Geoffrey. "And filthy."

"Filthy?"

"Well, you know, all that stuff from the bottom's all stirred up from people mucking around in there."

Harry laughed. "Well, twenty feet out it's clear as glass," he said.

"Green glass," Robin said. "Coke-bottle glass."

Geoffrey looked carefully at Robin's scars. There was a little keloid swelling on his forehead but the lines were very fine. "I guess they won't be too noticeable," he said.

"Huh," Robin responded. "I guess I'll have to do it again."

"If he's too dinged up for TV," Harry offered, "I'd be glad to serve as a stand-in. Any time. Just ask me. I can wear a smock and wave a paint brush as well as the next guy."

"You're too tall," Robin said. "People would notice."

Geoffrey went in to the lounge to get himself a glass of tea. On the way he encountered Aurora, on her way to the beach, dressed in an aquamarine bikini so small she seemed destined to burst out of it.

"How was your walk?" he asked.

"Great!" she said. "Hot. Pretty. Exhausting."

"Just like you," he was going to say, but something stopped him. "Have you seen Elizabeth?"

"Nope," she said, tugging at the white towel around her shoulders, "but she's around here somewhere."

He watched her walk across the lobby and go out the door. "Damn," he said in a whisper, surprising himself that he'd said it aloud.

"Did you see Aurora?" Robin asked when he returned to his chair.

Geoffrey raised his eyebrows and nodded in reply.

"Not in love again, are you?" Harry asked.

Robin laughed. "He's always in love."

Geoffrey idly smoothed the material of his paisley Bermuda shorts along his thigh. "Hey, Harry," he began, "you're a lawyer aren't you?"

"Well, I used to be," Harry chuckled. "Although some people didn't think teaching was very lawyerly."

"Okay, tell me this. If I take pictures of Robin's paintings and stuff, with his permission, who owns them?"

"Whoa," Robin said.

"You don't have a written agreement?"

"No."

"Well, before I went showing them around, I'd make sure I had explicit authorization to do that," Harry said. "Why?"

"He's making a documentary of my life," Robin said.

"I just wondered," Geoffrey said. "Usually, if I'm doing a play or something, I have to negotiate with the author to shoot the video and then with the company if I want to show it somewhere, although they usually own it and we usually have to agree to restrict its display. I was just wondering if the same sorts of principles would apply to a documentary about an artist's life."

Just then Elizabeth and Margaret walked onto the porch, on their way to the lake. Margaret still wore her orange and yellow outfit, now augmented with glistening orange lipstick, and Elizabeth had on a white one-piece bathing suit under an open, flowing cotton smock that reached to her knees. In their arms each carried a pile of towels, lotions, books and beer.

"Ready for the beach, I see," Harry said, smiling.

"You look pretty hot in those red shorts, mister," Elizabeth said to him. "You'd better come with us."

Margaret bent over to share a kiss with Robin while Harry gathered himself and said to Geoffrey, "The two of you should sit down and decide exactly what your plan is. Then find a lawyer and get it written down. But the safe thing, the right thing in my opinion, would be to never do anything without Robin's explicit knowledge and consent. That's my advice."

After they'd left, Geoffrey sighed a long sigh.

"I just don't want to spend a lot of time talking about it," Robin said. "We understand each other. Why don't you come up with something and we'll show it to Aurora and see what she thinks."

"I don't trust her," Geoffrey said. "What does she know? She's a huckster."

"I trust her," Robin said. "And she knows the business."

Geoffrey sighed again.

Robin looked at him and smiled sympathetically. "Moonstruck, aren't you?"

"She's so beautiful," he said.

"She's in love with Harry."

"I know. I think I'm going to enter a monastery."

"Have you heard from Alexei?"

"No, not since he left."

The sun beat down on the warm afternoon. Fleecy white clouds drifted in the south, making their way northeastward.

"Some people find love," Robin said. "And some never do."

"Yeah. That's easy for you to say."

"Maggie's not all that happy either, I'm afraid."

"Oh, sure she is, Robin," Geoffrey said animatedly. "She's nuts about you. You're the best thing that's ever happened to her."

"She feels left out. She wants a regular relationship, you know, with one bed and a washing machine and all that."

"Really?"

"She says she doesn't. She even says she's happy, and maybe she is. I hope she is. But after I paint all day…"

"…and all night…"

"…and all night, there's not a lot left of me, and I think it's wearing her down."

"I think you're wrong, though. Alexei was like that, too. I mean, I'm even like that. You make allowances."

"Alexei is like that. If you'd had a long-term relationship with him you would've found it very different I think. I used to run into him sometimes at two or three in the morning, at the diner, on his way home from practicing all night. But you go home and sleep at night, don't you?"

Geoffrey smiled wanly. "Usually. Sometimes I stay up and edit tape if I can't sleep."

"I don't think I'd ever sleep if I didn't have to. And if I didn't have to stop to recharge my vision now and then I'd probably never stop making art either."

"Sometimes," Geoffrey said, "I feel as though I'm just living my life through other people. Vicariously, you know? They do things and I record them. They paint, they dance, they act, they sing, they fall in love, and I get it all down on tape. They become immortal and I don't even exist. That's how I feel."

"Elizabeth just lives a regular life. And Margaret, and Teresa, and Harry. Nobody videotapes them. But I think they all feel amply alive."

"Well, I've shot Elizabeth, as a matter of fact, several times."

"Uh-huh."

"I've made love to her through my camera. It's so intense. But that's the only way I'll ever make love to her. Same with Alexei. It's weird, because it's so intense, and yet it isn't anything."

'Well, I make love with the world through my paintings. I understand that. It seems perfectly reasonable to me." Robin laughed. "I wouldn't say it isn't anything, though."

"Well, you know what I mean. The world doesn't make love back, does it?"

"I never thought about that," Robin said. "I think that would spoil it."

Geoffrey sighed again. "I'm just a factotum," he said.

"You're a biographer," Robin said. "That's how I think about it. But that has its own art and its own honor. When you make video of a performance onstage, it's not the performance, it's your interpretation, the camera's interpretation, of the play or the dance or whatever. Isn't it?"

"Yeah."

"And when I paint something, even something straightforward like some of the portraits I do, or a literal landscape, that isn't Kate, or Dylan, or whatever I'm painting, it's a painting. It's what I saw."

"Yeah."

"When you make love with your subject through the lens, that's you talking. And I can't speak for other people, but when I watch your videos I can see that sometimes."

Geoffrey smiled. "I try to be more subtle," he said.

"Subtle is good," Robin said, "but it's precisely that quality in you, I think, that makes me comfortable with our project."

"The passion?"

"The willingness to pour yourself into the mix."

Geoffrey smiled again. "But I want a real lover," he said.

Teresa walked up the broad stairs from the beach and stopped to say hello. Her long blonde hair was dark and damp.

"You look a little red," Robin said.

"Charred," she replied, laughing, pressing the skin on her chest, watching the white spot flush again with pinkness. "I'm going to take a nice hot shower and a nap before supper."

"Who's still down there?" Geoffrey asked.

"Um, Mo I think, is off exploring around somewhere, and Aurora's giving some rube the thrill of a lifetime with that blue bikini she's popping out of. And Maggie and Liz went for a ride with Kate."

"Kate's here?"

"Yeah, she just got here a little while ago. They were going over to Moose Lake, I think, for something or other."

"The thrill of it probably," Robin said.

"Oh, God," Geoffrey echoed. "Have you ever driven with her?"

"It's an experience," Robin laughed. "We made it from here to the border once in five hours flat. We didn't go under ninety the whole way."

After Teresa left, Geoffrey said, "I want to shoot the African stuff, Robin. It's fantastic. What I've seen of it."

"I'm not ready yet," he said. "Soon, though. I promise. And think of it in a more global sense, as aboriginal stuff, because I am."

"What does aboriginal mean, in this context?"

"Pre-Iron Age. People living on the land in the conditions of the Stone Age. It's all over the place. The styles just melt into each other. Whatever people were making in one place other people were making something just like it somewhere else. Certain people and cultures got extremely good at certain things, and people distinguished themselves from their neighbors, and their forebears, but people had, I don't know, similar dreams, if that makes any sense."

Geoffrey contemplated the white wood post that separated his view into two lights and the vertical risers below his stockinged feet propped on the railing, that divided the grass and the

flowerbeds into several little frames. For a moment he imagined he was in the south of France, sitting on a terrace above the Mediterranean, feeling the warm sea breeze in his face. But it was just the dusty wind that briefly swept through the trees along Wolf Lake most evenings this time of year.

"Well, Margaret says that non-Euclidian geometry was discovered by three different guys independently."

Robin laughed. "Yeah, I've heard that. But I wonder if geometry is discovered or invented."

"Know what those pretty purple flowers we found on the outcrop are?" Teresa asked Aurora, who had just entered the lounge.

"No, what?" Aurora smiled, rubbing her hair with a towel, attracting surreptitious glances from several men at the bar.

"Tragopogon."

"You made that up," she laughed.

"Oyster plant."

"What does Tragopogon mean?"

Teresa shrugged and spread her palms and smiled. "Don't know yet."

"Okay," Aurora said as she headed back to the lobby, still fluffing her hair with the towel. "See you at dinner. Tragopogon it is."

Teresa sipped her cola, pleased with herself. Suddenly Margaret appeared beside her.

"Hi!"

"Hi!"

"I like your outfit," Teresa said.

"Thanks. It felt autumny. You're coming to dinner, aren't you?"

"At seven, yes? Yes. I'm just having a coke then I'm going to take a nap. But yes, of course I'll be there. Why, are you going to find something truly colorful to wear?"

Margaret laughed. "Nope, you'll have to wait 'til tomorrow now for the next show. And I have one, too, you may bank on it."

"Oh, I do. I love your costumes. I thought the orange lipstick and the orange rouge were superb."

"You should try it sometime."

Teresa raised an eyebrow. "I don't know," she said. "I think it'd seem sort of wild on me. To me, I mean."

"Don't be too sure," Margaret said. "Dressing out is fun."

Teresa smiled. "It looks like fun," she said.

Margaret exchanged hellos with Elizabeth on her way out.

"This is like Grand Central Station," Teresa greeted her.

Elizabeth smiled. "Mind if I join you?"

"Not at all, please do, but I'm only here for a few minutes."

"Yeah, I'm planning to get a long bath in before dinner myself." She sat down.

"Oh, that sounds divine."

Elizabeth smiled again. "Yeah, it will be. Listen, 'Resa—you don't mind my calling you that, do you?"

Teresa shook her head.

"I know you're Harry's dearest friend in the whole world."

"It's okay," Teresa said, reaching out to take her hand. "I know what's going on. He's like a teenager. Well, for him, anyway. And I'm fine with it."

"Well," Elizabeth whispered, grinning, leaning across the table, looking at Teresa's amber eyes made even brighter in the soft light of the lounge, gripping her hand, her own eyes glistering like onyx, "but *I* don't know what's going on."

"Liz—I guess it's going to be Liz here—is this the big scary thing?"

"Well," Elizabeth said, "I don't know, really. It might be one of the big scary things. They're all scary to me. He wants to take me on a trip around the world. For three months."

"Oh, my God. And will he make an honest woman out of you?"

"Well, that'd be a lot scarier. I don't know. He just mentioned it to me a little while ago. About the trip, I mean."

Teresa grinned. "You're in big trouble, girl," she said.

"I have to go," Elizabeth said, getting up and grinning back. "I'm glad you're here."

"No guts, no glory," Teresa said.

Elizabeth laughed. When she reached the elevator, Aurora was waiting there. "Hi, red," Elizabeth said.

"Hi, noir," Aurora replied. "Hey, I met your beautiful daughter last week."

"And how is she?"

"Going to the coast with some lunatic guy for a weekend of bacchanalia."

Elizabeth laughed. "Barney," she said. "He's at the top of his class in law school. More of an Apollonian, I'd say."

The elevator doors opened and they got in.

"This is beyond laziness," Aurora said.

"We're on vacation," Elizabeth replied.

Elizabeth got off on the second floor. "Oh," Aurora said, holding the door, "and I saw your sketches for the *Petrouchka* costumes. They're beautiful."

"Come by sometime," Elizabeth said. "I'll show them to you."

"Thanks. I'd like that."

"See you at supper."

Outside, the blustering wind subsided and twilight settled over the lake, covering even the little meadow across the way where Harry's canoe had pushed its imaginary prow into the hot, yielding sand.

Chapter 37

An Island In Tyre

And he felt in his heart their strangeness,
Their stillness answering his cry,
While his horse moved, cropping the dark turf,
'Neath the starred and leafy sky;
For he suddenly smote on the door, even
Louder, and lifted his head—
"Tell them I came, and no one answered,
That I kept my word," he said.

—*The Listeners*, Walter de la Mare

Elizabeth and Geoffrey, carrying aluminum lawn chairs, and Margaret, carrying a large flashlight, made their way after dinner to the firepit by the picnic table where Harry and Mo had earlier cut and stacked a large quantity of firewood. They walked carefully, because twilight had largely surrendered to the darkness.

"I must say," Margaret said when they got there, "this is a lot more civilized than camping in tents."

Elizabeth laughed. "Is that better or worse?"

She and Geoffrey set up the chairs.

"Well, my legs are telling me that bed'll feel awfully good."

Geoffrey attended to building a little tepee of sticks over some crumpled newspaper on the cold ashes of the last campfire. Elizabeth zipped up her jacket part way.

"Gets kind of chilly up here this time of year," she said, gathering a few larger logs. "Hey, Geoffrey, let's build a wall of logs around that so when it gets going it'll have somewhere to go."

"Okay. That's assuming a lot that it'll actually get started."

"We have faith in you."

Harry, Mo and Teresa arrived, carrying food, mugs, and coffee. Robin was with them, carrying a little white kitten that had adopted him, he said.

"I'm not going to say anything," Mo said.

Robin laughed. "She came in my window last night and curled up on my bed, and now she thinks I'm her momma."

"You look like her momma," Harry cracked.

"How did it come in through your window?" Geoffrey asked as the fire rippled softly through the papers and began licking the tent of sticks above them.

"Beats me," Robin said. "It's a dormer window. I'm on the third floor, next to Aurora. It must've been on the roof."

"How could it get on the roof?"

"How did we all wind up here? I don't know. It must've been kismet. Anyway, I checked every room in the hotel, and I even asked Mrs. Osgood about it, and nobody's claiming her, so I guess she's mine."

Harry and Teresa laid out the snacks on the picnic table and Teresa went to get water for the coffeepot. The fire had engulfed Geoffrey's stick structure and was crackling enthusiastically.

"Good job, Geoff," Margaret said.

Aurora came with two bottles of whiskey: Jack Daniels, of course, and another called Yukon Night, with a picture on its label reminiscent, for Harry, of *The Ballad of Sam McGee*—a man dressed in a fur cap and a long black bearskin coat, wearing fur boots and gloves, standing by a fire on the frozen northland wastes, the blue snows of a winter's night blanketing the ground that rose behind him into spectacular, forbidding mountains.

"Billy would like this," he said.

The fire began to spread onto the surfaces of the logs Elizabeth had laid around it, and it snapped and popped merrily, casting its warm ruddy light on their faces and long, fluttering shadows over the ground. Mo watched it grow and thought idly about the cabin at the end of the aurora borealis.

Teresa returned with the coffee water and Geoffrey set up the grill so she could put the pot on the fire. Mo lit a gas lantern, which elicited several cries of criticism aimed at its brightness, so he turned it off. People milled around the table, filling mugs with whiskey, sampling the snacks, and then slowly chose chairs and settled themselves. Harry offered cigars around. Teresa, Geoffrey and Mo each took one.

"Aids the digestion," Harry said as they lit up.

"Stinks," demurred Aurora, taking a swallow of the bourbon from her cup. "Oh, by the way, the Yukon Night is a rye whiskey. It's quite good and everybody's welcome to it."

"I prefer the Jack," Mo said.

"Well, it's a free country. Make yourself silly."

"Thanks."

Mo sat on the picnic table bench. Harry and Teresa had taken two chairs close together but she'd moved hers and placed another between them for Elizabeth. Robin sat across the fire from Mo, with Geoffrey on one side and Margaret and Aurora on the other. The bottles circulated at a genteel pace.

The black sky above them was pullulant with stars.

The white kitten snuggled on Robin's chest, half-hidden by his jacket. It looked up at him with wide blue eyes, yawned greatly, and meowed once before it laid down its chin and dozed off.

"In the bosom of Abraham," Harry said.

"Borne on the belly of Buddha," Margaret replied.

"What are you going to name it?" Elizabeth asked.

"I can't think," muttered Mo.

"I think I'll name her 'Pussy,'" Robin said, rubbing her head gently with his forefinger.

"Of course."

"After *The Owl and the Pussycat,* of course. Which Elizabeth was kind enough to write down for me."

"I think you should paint it," Harry said.

"Paint my Pussy?" Robin laughed. "How rude!"

"Yes."

Robin's eyes grew wide. "Yes, I will. I'm going to. That's a great idea, Harry. Thanks."

"I'm getting a dye job," Margaret said.

"Pea green would seem appropriate," Aurora suggested.

"You're going to dye the kitten green?" Geoffrey asked, amazed.

"To match Margaret's muff," Teresa said.

"You know, Geoffrey, the color of the soup the fog in your mind is as thick as," Aurora said.

"We can't have you knowing too much, Geoff," Robin said. "From the biographer, some things must always be hidden."

"Ah, those hidden things that artists seek," Elizabeth said. "And I suppose for artists as rare as black guys with white pussies, some mysteries would just unravel themselves like budding roses in sunshine."

"Can I read it sometime?" Harry asked her. "*The Owl and the Pussycat?"*

"Honey, I'm going to make you read it to me tonight."

"Oh, Lord," Robin said.

Teresa, still laughing, looked at Mo.

"I'm going to check on Kate," he said to her, the lit cigar clenched in his teeth. "I'll be right back."

And then he slipped away into the shadows.

"She has fur on her eyelids," Robin said. "Wouldn't that be nice? To have fur on your eyelids? And long white eyelashes."

Geoffrey sipped his whiskey and gazed at the fire. A small branch that had been reduced to a glowing ember sported a white eyelid of ash that seemed to wink at him.

"I had a dog once," Harry said, apropos of nothing.

"I *love* dogs," Elizabeth exclaimed in a whisper, smiling hugely.

"I gave her a tennis ball the night I adopted her. She learned to play with it. All by herself. Because of gravity. I wondered what might have happened if dogs had had tennis balls all along. If monkeys had had tennis balls. If amoebas had had tennis balls."

"Or dinosaurs," Aurora said.

"What do you mean?" Margaret asked.

"Well, dogs—all animals, really—play. There's even a time of day, an hour or two before sunset, when all the animals I've ever known get just playful as hell and run around and feint with shadows and chase each other. Know what I mean?"

"Uh-huh. So?"

"Well, my wife was a poet, and a professor, and I was a practicing attorney as well as beginning my career as a lecturer at the law school, and Sheba was a strong young dog, so we really didn't have enough time for her. One evening she was pestering me for attention and I said, 'Take your ball outside and play for a while.' About a half hour later I walked by the window and there she was, chasing the ball down the hardpan driveway that led up to our house. She'd take it and drop it on the ground at the top, and it'd bounce and skitter downhill and she'd chase it and grab it. Then she'd hold it for a few seconds as if to count coup on it and toss it up in the air and chase it some more. And when she got to the bottom she'd pick up the ball and come panting back up and start the whole thing all over again. Sometimes she'd do this for an hour or more."

"So I think, 'What if ancient man had had more sophisticated tools to play with? What more would he have learned? What more might dogs have learned?'"

"Videocameras," Geoffrey suggested.

"Guns," Aurora and Margaret said simultaneously.

"If dogs had invented tennis," Elizabeth asked, "wouldn't they have evolved differently?"

"If cavemen had had guns," Margaret observed, "dogs would probably be sitting around in silk kimonos watching the demise of humankind on TV."

"Yes," said Elizabeth, "and if dogs had invented tennis, they'd have much bigger paws."

Their cries came from the north as a vee-shaped flock of Canada geese made its way across the inky sky, the high thin air echoing a patter of familiar wheezing and honking sounds that can only be made by slim necks fully elongated in a frigid wind. Everyone looked up. Then they passed almost directly overhead, their far-off silhouettes winging like ghosts beneath the stars.

"Somehow it reminds me of Billy," Teresa said.

Elizabeth put her hand on Teresa's arm.

Walking briskly, Aurora and Margaret had gone down to the lake to get a longer look at the geese.

"They're getting out," Aurora said.

Margaret watched the flapping, chattering formation ripple across the sky just east of the sliver of new moon that reached out to embrace them.

"The moon is watching them," she said.

"Hard times are coming and they're headed someplace more amenable."

"Obviously, they're smarter than we are," Margaret sighed. "I'd like to put time on hold and go south for the winter myself."

"Why don't you?"

"Well, I just might."

"Time will go on, of course, which can be a drawback."

"Back here, you mean. Yeah. That's true."

Aurora stared at the sky for a long time, in the direction of the geese at first and then here and there, everywhere among the glittering stars.

"The sky's a little different, wherever you are," she said.

"It looks a little different."

"But that's all the sky is, isn't it? How it looks?"

"You'll still be you."

Aurora laughed. "But I'm in some way a creation of my environment. The milieu is part of me and I of it. So I'll still be me but I sure won't be the me I'd be if I were elsewhere."

Margaret grew thoughtful. "How true," she said.

Geoffrey stared into the fire. It was so primitive, one's interest in fire. He could stare at a fire forever. How could this feeling not have its roots in the campfires of tennis-ball-deprived monkeys in the Serengeti before the dawn of man?

He prodded the logs with a long poker he'd found among the dry branches on the woodpile.

He'd watched Aurora walk by the lounge. He'd watched her walk out the door into the afternoon. He'd seen the sunlight surge in when she pushed the door open, and wrap itself around her thighs. He'd seen the flexure in her body, especially in her buttocks, swelling against the elastic electric blue skin of her bottoms, when she'd pressed against the door. Now, as he gazed into the faraway world of the dancing flames, he saw her again, dancing on his bed like a diaphanous succubus, aloof, alluring, alive.

From his knees he pled his hot passion as she whirled above him, raised his forearm openhanded when her bare leg whisked but inches over his head, leaving her scent in its wake, gathered his elbows to his side when she curled herself slowly in a spiral around him, daring him to touch her. Her fulsome breasts puffed up their cheeks beneath the iridescent sheen of the caressing cloth and pleaded in the shrill voices of a million tiny nerves to be stroked, licked, kissed, loved. Above his upturned face he saw her face, wreathed in soft, fine strands of fire that felt cool on his forehead, her jaguar eyes slowly taking control of his mind, her smile a taunt and a prayer, her slowly undulating hips a childhood swing that hung from the old elm tree in the

back yard that his father had put up there, where he used to lie at night in the grass, thinking, pushing the swing with his feet as if it were a living presence, watching it depart into the shadows and suddenly flash back into the light where he lay.

Aurora materialized from the lakeside night, her face aglow in the firelight. Margaret followed her.

"Nice moon," she said.

Geoffrey rose vacantly and poured himself another half-cup of Yukon Night while he listened for the yipping cries of the coyotes.

"Why don't we think of the moon as a magical presence any more?" Teresa asked.

"We're too smart," Elizabeth said. "We know it's just a big chunk of rock, like this place."

"Not even," Robin said.

"Probably we don't know any more about it than people did a thousand years ago," Harry said.

"We do forget," Robin agreed.

"Would you mind," Harry asked him, "if I ask you something about *The Wreck of Hieronymous Bosch?* Did you know I'd bought it from Alexei before he left?"

"No, I didn't," Robin said. "I'm glad it's in good hands. Sure, ask away." He laughed. "That's not saying I'll enlighten you."

Harry laughed too. "Fair enough. Well, what I want to know is, what the hell does it mean?"

"Well," Robin began, chuckling, "the short answer is: I have no idea. The long answer, which is equally true, can never be completed. But let me consider the disappearance of the moon from the pantheon of the gods. What happens when the idols, the icons, the symbols, the gods of meaning die? People hang on to stuff. Clothing, furniture, territory, money, symbols, even one another. Their stuff, the stuff they created. Having lost a linchpin of faith, reason, which has always been everything to them, goes adrift and fails them. If the Oracle at Delphi is not infallible, all the logic that was spun up from her presumed perfection is suddenly at loose ends. Her special friends lose their place at court. Her priestesses lose their livelihood. Her adherents are without succor or means."

"They're glueless," Harry quipped.

"Yes," Robin laughed. "And little girls are no longer named Sibyl. And in the wake of such a man as Hieronymous Bosch, whose mind maintained such an intricate mesh of symbols, mankind becomes lost, logic becomes rootless jetsam, if I may swamp a metaphor, and people reach out for their tinkertoys, their puppies, their kitchen sinks, whatever seems familiar. They're in shock from a sudden loss of meaning. The wind and the tide will govern them for a while until, like flecks of spume, they come to rest in some quiet cove, on some empty beach, where they may again take refuge in magic and regain the feeling of sense and continuity in their lives."

The fire was little more than glowing coals now. An occasional yellow tongue flickered around the periphery of an unburned chunk of log and Geoffrey would push the butt-end inward with his stick. The flames would dance again for a few minutes and once again subside.

In the shadows, guided as much by voices as by the glow of the hearth, Mo and Kate, who'd gone canoeing in the dark, made their way toward the fire and the half-dozen people, some now standing, arrayed around it.

Elizabeth stretched catlike in her chair and then stood up, glancing at Harry, who noticed. "I think I'll turn in," she said. "Tomorrow could be another beautiful day."

"Oh, it will be," Teresa said.

Robin and Margaret decided they too were going to go in.

"I'll walk you," Harry said, rising slowly from his chair, easing the kinks out of his stiff body. Elizabeth gently grasped the front of his green flannel shirt and drew him close to her, her body against his, her face almost touching his, her eyes fixed on his.

"Like you walk the dog?" she whispered.

"I'll walk your dog," he said. "Honest. Whatever it means, I'll do it."

She pursed her lips and grinned.

They said goodnight to Pussy, who was still fast asleep in Robin's jacket, with her little ears perking out, and then they followed Robin and Margaret out into the darkness, toward the faint yellow lights of the hotel.

Mo and Kate changed course to intercept this group at the inn, and thus Geoffrey and Teresa and Aurora were undisturbed in a long pensive silence as the pulsing coals faded into deeper shades of orange.

"Well, Geoffrey," Aurora said, "your fire's about gone."

"Yep."

"You're about gone, too."

"Yeah, I know, don't remind me."

"All night long you've been watching that fire like there was a double-feature going on in there."

He smiled, looking at her. "Well, there was. For a while. But mostly it's just, I don't know, a connection to something real."

"We're not real?"

He looked down again, into the red coals and the dark patterns playing over them. "I don't know," he said. "Maybe not the way I see you."

"How do you see us, Geoffrey?" Teresa asked.

"Can I really tell you?"

"Sure," Teresa said.

"Well," demurred Aurora puckishly, "maybe you should keep it to yourself."

"But of course he won't."

"Of course."

Somewhere inside, the white kitten meowed again because the bosom of Buddha was invaded by a gigantic black-cowled fish with glowing orange lips, and a huge brown hand lifted it up and carried it to safety on a pillow, in the dark future that spins forever into life.

Chapter 38

Into the Valley (Down from Olympus)

A winning wave (deserving note)
In the tempestuous petticoat,
A careless shoe-string, in whose tie
I see a wild civility,
Do more bewitch me, than when art
Is too precise in every part.

—*Delight in Disorder,* Robert Herrick

A fortnight previously Harry had gone to supper at Teresa's, intending to discuss with her the extraordinary feelings he'd been developing for an elegant actress of their acquaintance. Elizabeth, on that same weekend, had gone home to visit her mother, a small, gentle woman, recently widowed, suffering from diabetes, gradually going blind, living on the survivors' benefits from the railroad pension her husband had earned over thirty long years of faithful and sometimes grueling service.

She sat in front of her mother's wheelchair, so close their knees almost touched. "I have a man, momma," she said. "I mean, I'm interested in a man."

"Of course you do, darling," her mother said, smiling, and she reached out for Elizabeth's hands, which she clasped gently in her own, in her lap. "It's not my birthday, or Christmas, and why else would you come to visit your old momma in the middle of a school term?"

"He's a fine, gentle man, momma."

"What sort of work does he do?"

"He's a retired professor. Of law. His name's Harry."

Her mother smiled.

"He's a very different man from Willie," Elizabeth said. Then she laughed. "He could hardly be more different."

"From Willie? This is serious, then."

"It's not today, momma, but it could, it might get serious soon."

Her mother gazed at her, seeing only an indistinct blur against the light behind her. "I'm not sure I could recognize you any more, Lizzie, if I had to rely only on my eyes," she said. "But I know you pretty well, so let me guess. He's old, trim and vigorous, he's not a black man, he's financially independent and he's fun to be with. Annie likes him and he loves dogs."

Elizabeth laughed. "Well, I don't know about dogs, but yes."

Her mother raised her eyebrows in earnestness. "Your dad and I saved a lot of living for later on," she said. "We couldn't know how brief later on would be, and there wasn't much we could've done about it anyway. Your dad always considered himself lucky to have his job, and I guess we were, too. We were able to make a good life for you. We always had food on the table and flowers in the yard. Well, in window boxes, anyway."

She smiled. “But life is short, Lizzie. Most of the things we put off for another day never come to pass. You have a good, rich life, and if you want to live it alone, so be it. If you live long enough, you’ll be alone. It’s not a sin or a curse. It can be quite pleasant as you know. But if you want to share your life with someone, the small and quiet and simple things that fill the days, then I understand that too. And you always have my blessing, you know, whatever you do.”

A little later, Elizabeth lay her head softly within her mother’s comforting arms.

“You let me know how this romance goes along,” her mother said. “Well, you can leave out some of the details. And tell that girl to come visit me sometime. I’m feeling the urge to bake cookies.”

“I will, momma. I love you.”

“I can still get out of this wheelchair, you know, and come down there and give you two a good licking.”

“Yes, momma.”

Teresa had been turning her flower beds when Harry’d arrived, after having called unexpectedly that afternoon and invited himself for supper, and he’d eased himself into his King Harry chair with a sigh.

“I brought steaks,” he said. “And a nice Bordeaux.”

“Sounds great,” she said. “You can barbeque them.”

He smiled his assent. “I came over because I need some advice.”

“Oh? I thought you came over to see me.”

“Well, I did. You and these marigolds.”

“They’re zinnias.”

“Well, like you, they’re a pleasure to the old eyes.”

She continued turning the soil while they talked.

“So you want advice about gardening?”

He laughed. “No, about romance. I don’t know how it’s done any more.”

“Oh, you do, too. And you do it very well. You just go down to a bar and pick up some nymphet and take her home with you. The rest is just doing what comes naturally. I’m sure you remember what that is.”

“Well, I remember, but I’m not sure all my body parts do. Anyway, that’s another subject. What I want to know is, what are the rules? Do men still hold doors open and bring flowers and kiss women’s hands? You know, things like that.”

“Harry, what are we talking about? No—more to the point, *who* are we talking about?”

Harry shrugged. “Well, it’s still in the incipient stages,” he said. “I mean, there’s nothing really, yet. But there could be, you know…”

“There could be? Has she been born yet?”

They both laughed.

“I know who it is,” she said.

“No, honestly, it isn’t anything yet. I mean, we’ve just gone out a few times. It’s just friendly. And, well, I’m not sure how to change it. That’s what I wanted to ask you about.”

She pushed the shovel blade into the soft soil with her foot and walked over to the little table beside him. She reached down and picked up her glass of lemonade and took a long draught from it. Then she leaned over and kissed the top of his head.

“I think you’re confused, Harry,” she said finally. “‘Just friendly’ is like you and me. When you start having anxiety attacks over whether you can make a relationship with a woman, that’s not ‘just friendly.’ That’s puppy love.”

“I’m not having an anxiety attack.”

"Aha, so it is puppy love."

He laughed.

"Bet I know who it is, too, don't I? It's Elizabeth, isn't it?"

He grimaced a little. "She doesn't know," he said.

"How you feel about her?"

He nodded.

"How do you feel about her? And if it's really mushy, spare me."

"It's really mushy."

"Really?" And with this she patted his balding crown. "You don't have much left here," she laughed. "You'd better work fast."

A week later, about two o'clock on a warm autumn Saturday afternoon, Harry knocked on Elizabeth's front door. Annie answered it. "Hi, Mr. Orville," she said cheerfully.

"Hi, Annie," he said. "You're looking especially radiant today."

"Come in and take a load off. The princess will be down shortly."

He followed her into the kitchen where a young black man whom he thought he recognized was standing, eating a peanut butter sandwich.

"Professor Orville!" he cried out in greeting. "I didn't know it was you."

"Harry Orville," Annie said, "this is my fiancé Barney Newton."

Harry and Barney shook hands. "You're both welcome to call me 'Harry' if you like," he said. And then he turned to Barney. "You didn't know *what* was me?"

Barney blushed. "Elizabeth's…. I mean, I didn't know the guy she was going out with—going on the picnic with, today, I mean—was you." He chuckled. "Oh, dear…"

"You guys know each other?" Annie asked, incredulous.

"Barney was in my environmental law seminar two years ago," Harry said. "He found some of my views a trifle cantankerous, I think."

Barney smiled from behind the bread. "I've come to appreciate the ways that politics influences science a little more since then," he said, grinning. "You made me look."

Harry shrugged. "Teachers just open doors," he said. "You guys have to decide whether you're going to walk through them."

Elizabeth breezed down the stairs, smiling. "Personally, I don't mind giving them a little shove," she said, touching Harry's arm and kissing him, when he turned to greet her, lightly on the lips.

Harry's face flushed red. She smiled, her face only a few inches from his.

"Raspberry-grape," she said, still smiling, cocking her head, her black eyes riveted on his. "You like it?"

Harry's blue-gray eyes shone like jewels. His mouth hung open for a moment before he smiled. "Um, yeah," he said, looking directly at her. "Very tasty. It tastes just like it looks."

She went to the big woven rattan picnic basket on the counter, on whose lid sat a dark brown teddy bear with amber eyes and a red tongue and round, tan palms and soles. She handed the furry character to Harry. "His name's Teddy," she said, smiling. Then she transferred some things, including a small white box, from the refrigerator into the basket.

"Teddy's her chaperone," Annie said.

"What if he gets, um, lost?" Barney wanted to know.

"He seems harmless," Harry declared, regarding upon his outstretched palm the little stuffed creature with the round ears as if he were Aristotle contemplating the bust of Homer.

"He's very good at his job," Annie said. "He's kept her out of trouble for fifteen years."

Elizabeth looked at her. “Speaking of trouble, where’s FDR?” she asked.

“At home.”

Barney laughed. “With his face turned to the wall,” he said.

Annie gave him a dig in the ribs.

“I aim to make friends with Teddy,” Harry said.

Later, when Harry and Elizabeth finally found the perfect place to spread their blanket, on a flat patch of lawn, just out of sight of but not too far from the sound stage, they discovered that Teddy was no longer with them.

“Maybe I left him in your car,” she said.

“No, I had him. He must’ve fallen off the box when I changed hands. I’ll go find him.”

She spread the food on the blanket. “He’s just a toy, Harry,” she said.

“Understood,” he replied as he walked back along the path toward the car. To himself, he said, “He’s just a toy. But I’d better find him. I mean it. It’s just a toy. But I’d better find it.”

And, right about where he’d expected to, he did find it, or him, lying face down in the dry leaves. Harry brushed him off and presented him to Elizabeth. “None the worse for wear,” he said.

“What was he doing?”

“I’m not sure. Enjoying the smell of the autumn leaves, I guess. Hiding his eyes, maybe. A chaperone’s life is kind of vapid, I’d suppose.”

She laughed. “Depends on the company,” she said. “Come sit.”

They ate amid much pleasantry in the warm sun. An alto saxophone, greeted by applause, backed by a thumpingly plucked acoustic bass and a slowly slapped and swishing snare drum, worked the kinks out of *Mack the Knife* to great and frequent expressions of appreciation from the audience.

Harry had brought a small packet of photographs to show her, of his parents, in their Sunday best, and their parents, the grandfathers in stiff white shirts and suits of rough cloth and the grandmothers in plain buttoned dresses that went from their necks to the floor. All wore stern expressions. “My brothers and I were the first Orvilles ever to be seen laughing in public,” he said, laughing. He had a few photos of himself as a child, as a young boy driving a tap into a maple tree, as a sailor at sea on a destroyer off the coast of Okinawa when he was just seventeen, and as a young man in knickers, probably on his way to college. He had two color snapshots of his wife, the poetess Lydia Markby, who had died many years earlier of a chronic pulmonary asthma complicated by a pneumonia they’d both contracted while camping out one awful stormy spring weekend in the high country of Glacier National Park.

While they looked through his pictures they ate the two pieces of chocolate angelfood cake she’d brought along in the little white cardboard box. “You have to come back to my house to get the rest,” she said.

Afterward, the two of them put most of the foodstuffs away in the picnic basket, including Teddy, who was ready for a nap on the napkins, and went off, hand in hand, for a walk. They strolled around, looking at the trees and the flowers and the light that illuminated everything, but each aware before all else of the hand enclosing and entwined with his or her own, and of the warmth and fragrance of one another’s presence, and of the bouyant feelings that whooped and whispered inside them in some boisterous foreign tongue, demanding that something be done but shy of suggestions.

As they returned, a young woman with a kindergarten-age boy approached them. She held up a teddy bear. “Is this yours?” she asked.

"This guy gets around," Harry said admiringly as Elizabeth took Teddy from the mother's hands.

"His teddy bear Marcus got lonesome," the girl explained, "so he thought yours would like to keep him company." The youngster, eyeing them from a downcast face, held up Marcus by way of introduction.

"Well, Teddy had a nice time with Marcus," Elizabeth said to him. "Thanks for bringing him back home."

The child looked down at the ground and then turned away to go with his mother, Marcus' free paws bumping over the grass. He looked back at them. Elizabeth waved Teddy's paw. "Bye-bye, Marcus," she said.

Harry looked at her and breathed a big sigh. "Teddy's having an interesting day," he said.

"It's the company," Elizabeth replied.

"Want to go ride the merry-go-round?" Harry asked.

"Sure," she said, and the three of them walked to the playground where Teddy fell off a swing and was later more or less launched from the merry-go-round.

A half hour before sunset they sauntered back to the car, packed their gear, including the wayward bear, into the back seat and drove up to the bluff to watch the last salute of the sky to the receding sun. It was a grand yellow and purple and crimson spectacle against the clear western horizon.

Later, Harry had another piece of angelfood cake and a large glass of milk before he had to go so she could get up in the morning to teach a class.

"I'm free Tuesday," she said at the door.

"Liz…"

She took his face in her hands and kissed him again on the lips and then placed her forefinger gently against them. "If you can still taste that on Tuesday, wash your face and come over."

When he'd parked the Aston-Martin in the garage under his townhouse, and as he lifted the blanket and the packet containing his photographs from the back seat, Harry chanced to look on the floor and there, his caramel-colored paw extended in supplication from beneath the driver's seat, was Teddy. He hadn't been lost this time, just forgotten.

Chapter 39
R-e-s-p-e-c-t

Nothing in the world is single;
All things by a law divine
In one another's being mingle:
Why not I with thine?

—*Love's Philosophy,* Percy Bysshe Shelley

Elizabeth returned home from her class on Tuesday afternoon to find a message from him on her machine saying he hadn't eaten a thing since Saturday and could still taste her kiss. "I'm showering at five and I'll be there at six," he'd said. "I'm wearing dark gray slacks and a gray tie on a white shirt and a pale blue silk jacket with a white carnation buttoniere and my gray desert boots. Pack a little something in a bag and we'll stay out late. Or pack a suitcase and we'll never come back."

She wore a white linen skirt & jacket, a violet blouse, raspberry-grape lipstick, lavender eye shadow, white stockings, purple nails and heels to match. Her long silky hair was swept back into a graceful ponytail which she tied off with a purple bow.

He wore a gray suede safari jacket instead of the blue silk.

The restaurant was glittering and elegant. "I hope you won't mind my choosing this place," he said. "I'd be happy to eat with you in levis in any dive in the Bowery. But the service here is superb, the food is excellent, and seeing you amidst all this ostentatious finery warms the cockles of my heart."

"Warming your cockles is a particular aim of mine, Harry," she said, grinning.

After supper they went to the Performing Arts Center, where they had seats near the front of the hall, in a region known for the quality of its acoustics, and there they saw and heard Strauss' little opera *Elektra*.

"Electrifying," Harry said, grinning, amid the applause and wolf whistles as the curtain sank to the stage.

She smiled demurely and handed him a note. It was in a sealed envelope, addressed to him in Teresa's hand.

"What's this?" he asked.

She shrugged. "I don't know. She just asked me to give it to you after the opera when you'd said it was electrifying."

He opened it and unfolded the paper. "Dear Harry:" it said. "I asked Elizabeth to give you this note because I knew that after the opera tonight you'll say it was 'electrifying.' I know, too, that you'll think about it, about what it meant and why it was or wasn't effective, more than any other six people I know. I know you, Harry, and I know you came over last weekend to say something you couldn't bring yourself to say. That was just as well, because I'm not the one you should be saying it to. You can always say nothing and do nothing, Harry; believe me, I know. But I know the other side, too, where you say 'yes' and do whatever you please. And I can tell you, that's at least as electrifying as Strauss' music, and, if you're lucky, just as beautiful. You're an old stick-in-the-mud, Harry, but you're also a venturesome soul. You sought my advice, so

here it is—take a trip. Find a new world. Remember what Nietzsche said: 'What doesn't kill you makes you more interesting.' Oh, and he should have added that if it doesn't come close to killing you, it doesn't really count for much. Love, your friend, Teresa. PS. Your chair expects a *very* interesting visit when next we meet."

He smiled and showed it to her. "She really does love you," she said.

"And I her," Harry replied.

Elizabeth took his arm as they left the theater. "What happened between you?" she asked.

"We decided we wanted to be friends," he said.

"Just like that?"

"Well, no, but after awhile it just became apparent that that was what each of us wanted. And I think it's really helped us become great friends."

"Because you don't have to deal with her as a sexual woman?"

"Are you a lawyer?"

She laughed. "No, I'm just very curious about you."

"Well, I guess that's so, yes. I was very attracted to her for a long time. Once we put that off limits I felt much freer to interact with her in other ways."

They came to the car. He held her door for her and she got in. She looked up at him and mimed the words, "Thank you."

"I'd like to drive up to Wolf Lake for a drink," he said. "Would you like that?"

"Sure," she said.

As Harry turned off the main highway and onto the back road that wound for thirty miles up into the mountains, he mentioned that he'd written a poem for the retreat, then only a few days away, and he'd appreciate her reading it.

"Oh," she said, "I'd be delighted. And I have one too if you'd like to hear it."

"I would indeed," he said. He fished his from his jacket pocket and handed it to her. "Read mine first. Then we can dwell on the sumptuous beauty of yours at our leisure."

"Yeah, sure, Harry," she said, reading it over. "Okay, here goes."

Who Owns the Land

Who owns the earth, this little sphere
That gimbals in the quiet night,
That's full of chocolate bars, and deer,
And quarrels and delight?

Is one six billionth part for each
To be condensed this way or that
So every part is out of reach
To all but the secretariat?

There are as many ways to share
The land and all its wealth
As there are clouds upon the air,
As there are states of health.

And all of them, in various ways,
Are practiced all the time,
Re-balancing on different days
The virtue and the crime.

There is a common interest in

The things that we all own:
The air, the sea, original sin, the terrapin, the quark's spin, the origin, a tuna fin, a baby's grin, Bolivian tin, Ursula LeGuin, the will to win, yang and yin, where you been, a pointy chin, the cosmic din, slow-fizz gin, Rin Tin Tin, kith and kin, Ho Chi Minh, Anaïs Nin.
And then there is our own.

What is the claim of the man who lives
On land another man craves?
What is the right of the man who strives
To live in primordial caves?

If I draw art upon my wall,
Can you declare it a shrine?
If I find water in my well,
Can you declare it divine?

Can other men coming upon my life
And liking the part they see,
Just cut off my tail with a carving knife
And feast on this ain't (no longer) of me?

It's a dangerous game to entrust the land
To men who are not upon it;
It's a dangerous myth that the hired hand
Knows nothing of what is on it.

The men and the women who came to a place
And made a life there and discovered its grace,
Must be presumed at least to know
Its ups and downs, its ebb and flow,

Its woof and warp, its stern and stem,
The way that it has nourished them,
And be they shepherds, be they sheep,
Be they shallow, be they deep,

But if they only conscious be,
They've grappled with its mystery,
And we should not be quick to say
Who've never lived there even a day

That we have found a better way,
From our loftier view of things,
In which they ought to work and play
While we look on from the wings.

"Well," she said, not knowing quite where to begin. "it's cute, I'll say that. And clever. The subject's unusual, and I love the line with all the 'in' rhymes."

"Okay, thanks; I'm grateful for that. But there's a 'but' lurking in there, yes?"

"Oh, sure, a lot of buts."

"Well, let's hear 'em."

"Okay. But it seems a little unripened. Maybe a little facile in places. And I think the use of 'gimbals' isn't standard."

"Well, I dashed it off, it's true. And I wanted the image of the earth in a gimbals, which is a thing as I suppose you know and not really a verb, but I thought it fit well here, and you can, if

you must prevent me making it a verb, read it as if I were calling the earth, and its suspension system in particular, a gimbals."

She pored over the line. "I think that's not easy," she said. "But I'm agreeable to your making it a verb. It is poetry, after all."

"Is it?"

"Well, bad as it sometimes is—present company's productions excepted, of course—I've always said to myself, 'Well, it isn't vichyssoise, and it sure as hell isn't prose, and we *call* it poetry, so poetry it must be. You know, I go every biennium to a retrospective exhibit of the best art of the past two years that the organizers can find, from all over the world. They're holding it again next spring, and we could go together if you like. It's fascinating. But I never find more than a tiny fraction of it really gripping, you know?"

He smiled at her. "The best is none too good?"

"Well, I wouldn't say that exactly, although that applies to a lot of it. But most of it, naturally, is very good. It's very avant-garde, or it's very well crafted, or it has stunning effects, or something the judges gauged unusually telling as art. But still, the stuff you see that makes you gasp, both with its beauty and its significance, both with its artistic and its emotional force, that is very rare."

"And even the artists who produce the very great things make a lot of schlock, isn't that so?"

"Well," she said, "by their standards, by the standards of their very best stuff, I'm sure that's so. But some people's trash is better than most people's treasure."

"How true. Can you say that at school?"

She laughed. "It's risky, but it's an obvious reality, so you can't exactly ignore it, and believe me, whenever they find a student whose trash is well-endowed, the hypocrites fall all over themselves hitching their wagons to his or her star."

The twilight was fading and Harry needed the headlights as they neared the lake. "Read yours," he said.

"You know what Chekhov said about bringing a cannon onstage, yes?"

"Yes."

"Okay, here goes."

Chekhov's Canon

I'll wheel old Chekhov's cannon on:
Its barrel split, its rifling gone,
Its fuse too short, its powder wet,
Its merkin bald, its ball unfit.

For several scenes I'll let it sit,
The tensions growing bit by bit,
The old boards creaking under it
And Gridley waiting in the pit.

The characters will come and go,
The action wander to and fro;
Toward the end the plot will plod
With murd'rous lust and acts of God.

And all the while the silent gun
Will loom like doomsday in the sun

Until the gullible grow tired
Of waiting for it to be fired.

And when its rusty iron will
By all's considered safely still,
I'll give the signal to the hand
To touch it off with fiery wand.

O, rip the lanyard! Spark the shot!
Let it thunder, loud and hot!
Give 'em hell and grape to boot!
Blast their hides with burning soot!

O, fright them from their innocence,
Roll them down the aisles like pence,
Bowl them over in the lanes,
Rattle all the ancient chains.

Then ring the curtain down upon it;
Let a sea of huzzahs crown it.
Slather it again in grease,
And let old Anton rest in peace.

"Oh, I like that a lot," Harry said.

"Do you?" she smiled. "Thanks."

"Much richer and more focused than mine, and very nice in its own right. And fun. And I thought Gridley was a nice touch."

She reached over and placed her hand behind his head and stroked the fine gray hairs high on his neck with her fingertips.

"That's a nice touch, too," he said.

It was almost dark when they arrived. Harry eased the Aston-Martin into a parking space at the end of the row, far from the nearest car. He turned to her even before he switched off the ignition. "Let's go down to the dock for a minute, while it's still light enough to see, all right?"

"Sure," she said.

It was only barely light enough to see, and they had to take an unfamiliar route because Elizabeth didn't want to walk across the sand in her heels, but within a few minutes they stood together on the pier, and then he told her the story about the fantasy he'd had after reading Browning's poem.

She'd smiled the whole while as he recited it. What a cornball he was. How passionately he yearned for her.

Afterward, as they made their way back toward the hotel, her arm around his waist and his around hers, she asked, "So are you saying that if you have to deal with a woman, say, me for instance, as a sexual woman, this would inhibit you from exploring a full relationship of friendship with her?"

"I'm saying that this is something I didn't learn to appreciate until fairly recently. And I think I am learning to appreciate it."

"I think so, too."

"What about you?"

"Oh, I think that sexuality hangs on passion and romance hangs on mystery and friendship hangs on openness, and sometimes these things diverge. But I'm learning to appreciate their integration." She laughed. "I think it's part of the aging process."

"More friendship and less sex."

"Well, it's true."

"Liz…"

"Yes, Harry?"

He stopped and turned to face her in the dim light from the hotel's windows. In the rich brown darkness of her skin he could make out every tiny wrinkle, every pore, every nuance. A warm glow emanated from her eyes. Her lovely violet lips were tucked up in a subtle little smile. He put his hands on the shoulders of her suit. He could feel the warmth and sinewy strength of her arms beneath the formal cloth.

"I'm enormously fond of you."

"I like you, too, Harry."

He looked at her. She was so beautiful. Breathtaking.

"I'm supposed to tell you how I feel about you."

"That's okay," she smiled. "You already have."

"No, I mean really."

She kissed him quickly but firmly on the lips. "I understand other things besides words," she said, and they resumed their journey toward the soft lights in the hotel windows, toward the soft music from the amber lounge, toward the softly scented breeze that rippled the curtains while they slept.

Chapter 40

Country Gentleman
White Corn

O Love! who bewailest
The frailty of all things here,
Why choose you the frailest
For your cradle, your home, and your bier?

—*When the Lamp Is Shattered,* Percy Bysshe Shelley

It was Tuesday afternoon, three days since their evening around the campfire. They'd spent the past two evenings indoors; the nights had turned quite chilly. The air was very warm in the daytime, though, and after lunch on the beach the sun and the sand were still hot. The autumn sky was clear and blue above them, but far to the south they could see great thunderheads forming, drifting eastward toward the mountains and then slowly turning northward.

"Might rain tonight," Mo speculated, watching them.

"Nah," Kate demurred.

Most of the hotel's other guests had gone home on Sunday evening, or Monday morning, and now the whole place seemed to belong exclusively to the poetasters. Geoffrey, Aurora and Teresa had slipped away for an adventure in one of the hotel's green canoes. Harry, Elizabeth, Margaret, Mo and Kate were down on the beach, sunning themselves, reading and talking. For his part, Robin had set up an easel just above the sand, in the reedy lakeside grass, and was painting a scene of the hotel, barely visible through the trees.

Elizabeth and Harry were lying side by side on their towels, reading. She regarded Robin, his broad back toward them, sitting in his smock and beret, painting, lost in his work. "It's weird," she said softly. "He looks just like he did that day at Hubbard Escarpment, above the gorge."

Harry looked up. "Just lost in his imaginings, isn't he?"

"That's why his stuff is so good," she said. "He doesn't know right now whether he's at Wolf Lake or on Mars."

Mo, warmed on both sides again after his previous dip, got up and walked down to the lake's edge for another plunge into the clear water. Kate and Margaret, pleased to be dry again, decided they'd go instead for a walk. They pulled shorts and t-shirts on over their bathing suits and brushed the sand from their feet before tugging on their socks and shoes.

"Off for a hike?" Mo asked as he returned, soaked and cool, shaking his head like a dog, brushing himself with his towel.

"Yes. Want to come along?"

He shook his head again. "Too strenuous," he said.

"Do you have your compass and flashlight?" Harry asked. "And plenty of matches?"

"Oh, yes," said Margaret, "and I've got my gun in case we scare up any grizzlies."

"Good."

They walked up the slope along the path and stopped by where Robin was working. “We’re going for a walk, sweetie,” Margaret said.

He daubed a little paint and then turned to smile at them. “I’ll be right here,” he said. “You guys have fun.”

“Wild colors,” Kate commented to Margaret, when they were far enough off not to be overheard.

“Where?”

“Oh, in Robin’s picture I meant.”

“Really? I hadn’t noticed.”

“Kind of like chartreuse, and magenta, and chrome yellow, pushed into all those grayish shades. Pointillistic almost.”

“I was looking at his face. I think he’s tired.”

Kate laughed. “You’ve been wearing him out, maybe.”

“I don’t think so.”

Robin strained to see the nuances of color flashing in the dark shadows through which the hotel, the porch stairs, part of the railing, a corner window peeked out from the branches of the trees. Its existence could only be hinted at, and yet its whitish planes and edges dominated the scene.

Elizabeth, her eyes weary, paused in her reading and drifted into a reverie about Robin. They had met one snowy winter’s evening many years before, not too long before Christmas, at a theater party. Willie, drawn far away from her and Annie by his addiction, had just been sentenced to prison. She’d been divorced from him for a year. Annie, who was then seven or eight, had asked her whether they would go see him at Christmas, and she’d said, “Of course.” But he’d said no.

At the party not long afterward, an opening night soirée at which everyone was dressed in Elizabethan costume, Robin had come bedecked and jolly as Sir John Falstaff, and, as it happened, she was arrayed as Juliet. “I have never, ever seen such a beautiful Juliet,” he’d said as he introduced himself. “Although considering my character you may doubt my sincerity.”

“Oh, your character is eminently sincere, Sir John,” she’d said. “He’s merely a buffoon.”

“Well, then, we’re well-suited to one another. And perhaps he’s an interesting buffoon as well.”

“Oh, yes,” she’d said, “intensely interesting.”

“You’re such an incredible actress. How will I ever know when you’re speaking the truth?”

“You never will. That’s part of my mystery.”

He’d laughed that effervescent laugh, tilting his head, looking at her with wide, adoring eyes. “I love a mystery,” he’d said. “I especially love unravelling it and finding a beautiful woman inside.”

Later, on the way to her apartment, they’d walked through the crisp night past a large tropical botanical garden comprising a dozen enormous interconnected greenhouses whose entrance was set well back from the sidewalk and the streetlights. “We should go there sometime,” Robin had said.

“I love walking through there,” she’d agreed. “It’s like being in the jungle.”

“Would you like to go now?”

He’d had a key because he was cleaning several pieces of sculpture inside and often worked at night. So they’d gone in, and shortly afterward, as they strolled enthralled through the

empty corridors, they'd noticed that the blackness of the glass above them began to fill with snowflakes, and before they'd left again, at dawn, a foot of new snow lay on the city, blanketing their warm fragrant world beneath a roof of white, and both Juliet and Sir John had shamelessly shed their identities.

The new snow glared in the rising sun and became a mirage in the sand. Four hundred years evaporated in a flash. Juliet was lying prone in a white bikini, covered by a long white terry robe, reading through tinted glasses, lying beside…

She looked up. Because of the slope, she could see only the painting and the top of the easel. A flood of anxiety rushed through her. "Where's Robin?" she said aloud.

"I don't know," Harry said, looking up, "wasn't he there?"

But he wasn't there and she was already on her feet. "Harry…" she cried as she rushed forward. She could see him lying crumpled on the ground, his beret gone, his arms at his sides. So still.

Harry and Mo got there almost as soon as she did. Robin's breathing was labored and he didn't seem to be conscious. Mo felt his neck for a carotid pulse. He felt one.

"Call 911," Harry said.

The parking lot, ordinarily full of pickup trucks with radio transmitters capable of reaching the North Pole, was empty.

"I'll do that and get my bus," Mo said, sprinting off.

Elizabeth sat up and put her hand over her mouth. "God, Harry. I can't believe this is happening," she said.

"It's happening," Harry said. "It's a stroke I think. Let's lay him on his back and elevate his feet."

She knelt beside him, her hand pressed against his cheek. Harry held his hand. On Robin's neck the pulses were huge, visible, irregular. "Look," she said.

And then they stopped.

Robin's neck became as rigid as iron. Harry gently peeled back an eyelid. Elizabeth looked up.

Mo backed the van toward them, stopping only a few feet away. He opened the back and the three of them lifted and then dragged Robin inside. "They're coming from Meander," he said. "Great name, huh? We're going to meet them on the way."

It was thirty miles to Meander, on a two-lane mountain highway. The road was good, but it'd take a half hour, at least, to get to the hospital. And Robin's heart had stopped beating.

"I'll drive," Harry said.

When they turned onto the road from the hotel driveway, Harry asked how fast he could safely go. "Seventy-five," Mo said. "I've got nothing here. No pulse, no pupil, no nothing."

Harry went seventy-five. Elizabeth stared down the road. It was as empty as a sleepless night and just as long.

They met the ambulance in twenty minutes. While reflections from the red lights flitted inside Mo's van and the three friends stood outside, one of the corpsmen drove an ampule of epinephrine into Robin's heart. Nothing happened. The other shined her penlight into one eye, then the other. Then she placed her hand, just as had Elizabeth not a moment before, against his cool cheek. "Such a beautiful face," she said.

Elizabeth cried while Harry held her. Tears streamed down Mo's face as he thanked the EMTs for their help and they lifted Robin's body onto the stretcher for the ride to Meander. Harry and Elizabeth went with them, Elizabeth and the female medic riding in back, while Mo returned to Wolf Lake.

He asked Mrs. Osgood to request any of them that might show up to stay put there in the lobby until he returned. "It's very important," he said. "I'll be back on the hour."

"I understand," she said, but fortunately she really didn't.

The canoers were nowhere to be seen. Kate and Margaret had been gone for, he calculated, maybe an hour. They might still be on the way out. He couldn't walk for more than twenty minutes before he'd have to turn back to check in.

He went down to the easel and picked up Robin's things. He stuffed Robin's black beret into his waistband. He put the paint tubes and the clean brushes into Robin's bag. The bottle of thinner had spilled, but it lay on its side and much of it remained. He soaked a rag with the fluid and began wiping the paint from the brush Robin had been using. Then he wondered if he should. Then he poured some of the liquid onto the brush directly and wiped it clean.

He'd take the painting, and the palette, which was smeared with garish colors, and carry them in one hand, back to back; he'd take the bag in the other; he'd leave the easel where it stood. As a memorial. But…

"Mo, what are you doing?" Kate had asked from the infinite void behind him, her voice echoing down long hollow corridors before it reached him.

He rose and turned toward them. Margaret stood agape, stunned, speechless. "He collapsed. We took him to the ambulance." He looked at Kate. Then he looked at Margaret. Tears flooded her eyes. He looked at the sky above her head. Large, fluffy white clouds billowed into the stratosphere.

"He's, um," Mo said, forcing out each syllable. He looked again at her blue eyes, staring through him, seeing nothing, just as Robin's had. "He's dead."

"No…" Margaret gasped, in a whisper. Mo and Kate held her then and eased her onto the ground, where they all huddled silently for a long moment.

"It was some kind of a stroke," Mo said. "I don't know. I don't think he ever really regained consciousness."

"He just fell off his stool?"

"Yes. Nobody saw it. Elizabeth found him, I think very soon after it happened."

"Did he say anything? Did he know you?"

"No, I don't think so. He was unconscious."

"Oh, God," she sobbed. "Where is he?"

"They took him to the hospital in Meander. Harry and Elizabeth are with them."

Kate drove Margaret to the hospital while Mo waited for Geoffrey, Aurora and Teresa to return in the canoe. He explained the situation to Mrs. Osgood and took Robin's gear, including the easel, to Robin's room. On his neatly made bed was a sketch of Harry and Elizabeth walking in a garden, each holding one of Teddy's soft, tubular paws.

Mo sat on the porch and played with little Pussy for two hours before the three voyagers walked up from the lake together, Geoffrey between the women.

Mo walked out to greet them, Pussy in his arms.

"Hi!" they called.

"Hi," he said, stopping before them, stroking the white kitten's head with his fingers. He couldn't say anything.

"Oh, God, no," Aurora gasped.

The four of them went to Meander together.

They made arrangements to have Robin's body taken back to the city and agreed to return to Wolf Lake to decide what to do next. As they left the hospital, Harry searched frantically through the pockets of the jacket Mo had brought for him from his room.

"Need a cigarette?" Mo asked.

Harry felt something smooth and velvety. He knew at once what it was. Elizabeth's purple ribbon. The one she'd worn in her hair a week before. "Oh, Christ," he said, taking her hand.

"You okay?" Mo asked.

"Yeah," Harry replied. "You know, death is always a revelation. When something dies in your arms you can feel the life slip away from it, just like when a soap bubble bursts, and suddenly the world's a different place."

"An empty world," Elizabeth said.

Kate, Aurora and Margaret went back to Wolf Lake in Kate's car. Mo took Harry, Elizabeth, Teresa, and Geoffrey.

"You know," Mo said as the van sped in silence along the darkened road, "for a few seconds as we were going out the driveway he sort of came out of it. He was mumbling very faintly. I lay my ear next to his lips so I could hear him. Know what he said? 'Cupid.' And then he said it again, as if I might not have heard him."

"Sure he didn't say, 'Rosebud?'" Harry asked, laughing softly.

Elizabeth smiled.

Later, in the lounge, they decided that Margaret would return to the city to make arrangements for a service of some sort on Friday morning. Harry and Elizabeth would go along to help however they could and then return to Wolf Lake on Thursday evening. Margaret asserted that Robin had wanted to be buried. In a pine box. Beside his mother and among his friends. They drew up a list of the people they'd have to try to contact. Geoffrey wanted to go to Robin's studio but Margaret nixed it.

"I feel as though Buddha died today," Aurora said, smiling bravely as a tear paused on her cheek and then dropped off.

"No," Margaret responded. "Robin died. Robin's Buddha lives. He's just sad. He's lost a great heart."

"Boy, that's for sure," Harry said. "And a richly bejewelled pair of eyes."

"Yes."

"A mighty bosom," Elizabeth said.

And instantly they all thought of Pussy.

Mo and Aurora together volunteered to take care of her.

As Harry wheeled the Aston-Martin onto the long, dark, empty highway, Elizabeth nuzzled against him and he put his arm lightly around her.

"I'd always thought this car was, well, a little pretentious," she said.

"Of course it is."

"It's ironic, isn't it? A delightful, magical pretense has suddenly ended. But being in this car, with you, it seems as though the world's at bay and hope's still alive."

He hugged her, drawing her close. "It's only for a moment, Liz. Then it'll all be up to us again."

She lifted her hand to her shoulder and carefully interlaced her fingers with his. "I want a big dog, Harry," she said.

Chapter 41

Gathering

Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,
Old Time is still a'flying;
And this same flower that smiles to-day,
To-morrow will be dying.

—*To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time,* Robert Herrick

By midmorning Friday, when Mo and Kate arrived at the cemetary, the drizzle that had begun the day had tapered off. The air was warm and muggy, the sky a pale gray. Margaret and Robin's sister Mary were seated under a large white-fringed blue canvas pavilion, talking with a tall swarthy man dressed in a black suit. Several other people sat and stood nearby, talking in quiet tones.

The actual gravesite was farther up the hill, overlooking the river, next to his mother's. Mo could see the pine coffin resting on the ground and three black men, two young, one a wizened old gnome with a cloth cap, sitting nearby under a tree.

The man in black, whom Mo recognized as the one who'd been at his birthday party, so long ago, came to greet them.

"I am Echota," he said.

"I remember you," Mo said, after introducing himself and Kate. "You were at my house once on Indian Creek."

"Yes," Echota said. "I remember. A beautiful place, blessed with serenity."

"How did you know Robin?" Kate asked.

"I am his brother. Our mother raised us together. She used to say we were like inside-out twins: he looked outward to see his soul, and I inward to see the world."

"How's Margaret doing?"

"Well, I think. She's been busy but Harry and Elizabeth took on a lot of the chores, so I believe she has had some time to grieve. Still, it will be a long autumn for her."

Harry and Elizabeth, who'd brought Mrs. Osgood with them, strolled up the gentle slope from the parking area, across the green grass and under the canopy that covered a half dozen tables laid out with coffee and doughnuts and vases of flowers. On each table were drawings, small sculptures and notebooks of Robin's. There were several paintings on easels standing around the periphery.

Elizabeth introduced Harry to sister Mary, and Mrs. Osgood to both Mary and Margaret. "This is all so beautiful," the innkeeper said to Margaret. "I never saw so many flowers."

"Teresa did it," Margaret said. "She came down yesterday. She said she cut every flower she had save one."

"I believe it," Harry said.

"I'm so sorry we've lost your brother," Mrs. Osgood said to Mary. "There was never a smile or a laugh could light up my lobby like his. He was just the sweetest man."

"He was one of a kind," Mary said, smiling.

"I feel badly I didn't take the time to get to know him better."

"He loved your place, you know. Wolf Lake, is it? He talked about it often. He loved to sit on the porch in the evening and watch the sky and the water changing colors and textures. He said he always slept like a baby there."

"Oh? Have you never been there?"

"No," Mary laughed. "I'm really not one for the wild country."

"Oh, it's quite civilized," Mrs. Osgood assured her. "Please do come visit us sometime, as my personal guest. I'd be just delighted if you would."

Elizabeth bent close to Margaret. "Did you get any sleep last night?" she asked.

Margaret had spent the night in Robin's studio. She smiled sadly. "I was afraid I'd dream about him."

"He'll be with all of us for a long time, Maggie."

"Sorry I couldn't find Billy," Harry said. "Or Sibyl either." That was a lie. He didn't tell her that Sibyl had said she was too busy to come on such short notice, and had refused to let Dylan fly alone on a plane. He didn't mention he'd shouted at her, over the phone, that she was a self-centered bitch, so loudly that Elizabeth had wakened then and made him go to bed.

"You two did so much," Margaret replied. "I'm very grateful to you."

"I just feel helpless," Harry said.

Teresa, who had been at the little cemetary earlier in the morning, finishing arranging the flowers, and then had driven to the airport to pick them up, now arrived with Alexei and his elderly grandmother Natasha, who looked as frail as a dry leaf. Margaret had asked everyone to dress informally, but Natasha wore a long black velvet dress and a black hat with a veil that, on Alexei's insistence, she'd turned back so people could see her pale but still piercing eyes. Margaret stood up as they approached. Alexei! She hadn't seen him for such a long time. Tears flooded her eyes.

Alexei was dressed in a snugly cut black suit with a wine-red velvet bow tie. He smiled as Margaret approached him and he opened his arms and hugged her, rocking her slowly from side to side as she cried, almost hysterically, saying nothing. Finally she stepped back, sniffling, and managed a smile for Natasha.

"How sweet of you to come," she said.

"I'm so sorry for your loss," Natasha said softly, taking Margaret's hand. "Lexie told me all about your friend Robin. He must have been a wonderful person."

Margaret's tears resumed. "Lexie's a wonderful person, too," she said.

Natasha smiled. "Yes," she said.

Teresa looked quizzically at Echota for a moment. "Haven't I met you before somewhere?"

"Yes," he said.

She laughed. "I seriously considered falling in love with you one afternoon."

He smiled at her. "You are Teresa."

"Yes."

"I remember. I am honored."

"But…"

"I am Echota. Robin was my brother."

"Your brother?"

He smiled. "I am one half Cherokee," he said. "Not Mayan as your friend Billy thought. And my mother was Robin's mother."

Teresa smiled. "Billy jumped to the first conclusion that came into his head."

"I know," Echota said. "And sometimes he was more right than even he knew. My given name is Robert. I took my name to honor all my people who have suffered dominion by those who despised them."

"We all loved Robin," she said.

Elizabeth and Harry joined them. "The flowers are breathtaking," Elizabeth said to Teresa, who smiled and introduced them to the tall bronze man with the long straight hair.

"These are all from your garden?" Harry asked.

Teresa laughed. "This *is* my garden," she said.

"It will bloom again a thousandfold," Echota said.

Elizabeth smiled at him. "It already has," she said.

"Yes," Teresa said, "but somehow it seems as though it shouldn't."

Elizabeth hugged her. "You're the sweetest girl," she said. "Of course it should. Robin loved your gardens. He loved your flowers."

Teresa's eyes filled and Harry put his arm around her.

"It's only a moment," he said. "And you've made it a lot more beautiful for everyone."

"It's all only a moment," Echota smiled.

Alexei and Natasha joined them.

"We're very honored by your presence," Harry said to the small, silver-haired woman, bowing slightly.

"Thank you," she said, a twinkle in her eye. "You must be the lawyer."

Harry laughed.

"He's in denial," Elizabeth said.

"We're most grateful to you," Natasha said.

"Robin would be delighted that someone so exquisitely lovely came half way 'round the world to be with him and us today."

"Well, he and I will meet soon," she said, smiling, "and I wanted to let him know how you're all behaving yourselves." She turned to Echota and reached her thin arms, clothed in black velvet and lace, toward his face, which he, bending toward her with a hinted smile, placed within her grasp.

Through her delicate wire-rimmed glasses she gazed into his black eyes. "You have the same wonderful nonsense in your eyes as my Alexei," she said.

"It runs in the family," he said.

She looked around at the burgeoning crowd. "Quite a family," she said. "Even on this sad day."

Annie and Barney arrived then. They seemed as young as children. Annie made hellos and introduced Barney to everyone and Elizabeth introduced her to Alexei and Natasha.

"Did you know him well, Professor Orville?" Barney asked Harry.

"No," Harry said. "Not well enough."

Annie hugged Elizabeth. "It's so awful," she said softly. "I keep thinking, what if it was…"

"It is, honey; it is. It's okay."

Geoffrey and Aurora appeared then.

"We have shadows," Geoffrey said as they approached the tent.

"What?" Aurora cried, somewhat louder than she'd expected.

"We have shadows. The sun's coming out. We'll have good film."

"I don't even want to know about it," she said. Then she stopped short, her face making weird contortions.

"What is it?" he asked.

She pointed. "Kate's portrait," she whispered. Her hand involuntarily covered her mouth, and then she took a handkerchief from the pocket of her levis and blotted her eyes and looked again at the painting.

"Oh, God," she said.

Geoffrey took Margaret's hand. "I'm really sorry," he said. "Everything seems so scary now. I never ever thought this would happen."

Margaret smiled. "Of course not," she said. "But you know, he wanted you to do this, to memorialize his work, and I know you'll do a wonderful job."

"I'll need a lot of help," he said. "I'm scared to death."

"This is my grandma," Alexei said.

"Oh, how beautiful you are!" Geoffrey smiled at her, bowing and gently kissing her paper-thin hand. Then, looking at Alexei, he said, "Gee, it's great you guys could be here. I know he…"

Alexei grinned. "We just flew in ten minutes ago," he said. "Well, an hour ago, maybe. But this—well, I needed to be here."

"I'm thrilled to meet you," Geoffrey said to Natasha. "In some strange way, Alexei and Robin are—were—a lot alike. So full of *joie de vivre.* And now…"

She smiled at him over her lenses. She looked as light as an angel.

Kate leaned over to Alexei. "Your grandma's a peach," she said.

"Told you," he replied, grinning.

Annie took Aurora's proferred hand. "I want to thank you again for caring for him," she said.

Aurora's eyes seemed dark. She looked at the grass. "I didn't care enough," she said. "I should've made him see his regular doctor. I should've made him let them run those tests."

Annie laughed. "While I was sitting for him the next night he was kidding about doing a portrait of you in metallic paints, connected with all sorts of wires and tubes to monitors and printers churning out reports on all your various functions, and a sort of Mona Lisa smile on your face."

Aurora seemed confused.

"Then he said he wanted to remember you happy, because he'd so seldom seen you happy. And he thought maybe he'd put all the doctors and equipment in the background, because he thought really they were like ghosts that haunted you, and that all the laughter he'd seen on your face seemed really precious to him because he understood what you'd had to endure to achieve it."

"Robin was one of the very few people I've ever felt sure I could count on," Aurora said.

"He counted well on you," Mo said, standing beside her, "And he didn't want all that probing around, and it wouldn't have changed anything. It was a saccular aneurysm. A burst blood vessel in the core of his brain. Huge and instantaneous. Nobody knew. Nobody could've done anything if they had."

"By the way," Harry said to her. "I owe you an apology."

"I doubt it," Aurora said. "For what?"

"I talked with Derek Tillson yesterday. Remember him?"

She smiled.

"I'd always thought you stooped too low to wring that misinformation out that I'd carefully planted in him, but he told me you'd only gotten him blitheringly drunk."

She smiled. "He didn't tell you *how* I got him that way?"

"No."

"It took a lot of stooping."

They all laughed.

"And by the way," she said, "he'd already figured out that you were prepping him for something so he'd troubled himself to get the true poop. He didn't tell you that, either, did he?"

Harry smiled. "Who won the election?" he asked, arching an eyebrow.

Echota spoke softly to Margaret. "Robin held you in almost reverential awe," he said, "because you accepted him exactly as he was."

She laughed through her tears. "Fat chance," she said, "anybody'd ever have had of changing him."

Mary smiled. "I thought I couldn't stop crying when our mother died," she said. "Robin held me and said, 'Our tears are the river on which the dead are borne to heaven, but our courage is the wind that fills their sails and our laughter the sun that lights and warms their way.' I'll never forget it."

Just before noon Echota offered his arm to Margaret and the two of them, with Mary following on Geoffrey's arm, began walking slowly up the hill toward Robin's coffin, and the grave behind it, and the sprays of blossoms that Teresa had created from her garden and that dozens of well-wishers had sent and brought for the service.

Harry and Mo brought up the rear of the procession. A few small blue patches had begun to appear in the sky.

"I've been to too many of these," Harry said.

"I never went," Mo said. "I always wanted to think of them as being still alive, the way I knew them."

Chapter 42
Farewell

Sir, I admit your general rule,
That every poet is a fool,
But you yourself may serve to show it,
That every fool is not a poet.

—*Epigram*, Samuel Coleridge

The view to the west from the gravesite was expansive. The river below them wended its way sedately northward through a broad valley tanned by the summer's heat. Many miles away the low coastal mountains, their flanks girded with forests of green, red, orange and yellow, lazed in the blue mists of the autumn midday. Beyond them, unseen, the gray Pacific stretched off into a morning long past.

As the several dozen mourners made their way in small groups up the grassy slope, the vibraphonist Emmett Robinson tapped out the haunting dirge *Amazing Grace* while tears ran down his cheeks.

Echota, with Mary on his right and Margaret on his left, stood facing the others who gathered among the flowers at the foot of Robin's grave.

When all was still, Echota said, "He whose absence from us is today the object of our sadness has returned to the spirit of our mother, and to all the inhabitants of the silent world. If his loss brings grief to our hearts, remember that it is because of all the joy his being here engendered in our lives. Let us not weep overmuch for what we have lost. Let us celebrate this brief life as he did, and honor the memory of our brother Robin Ecst in our laughter, in our deeds, and in our simple faith in the grace of the world."

A quartet sang *Lord, Take This Child.*

For Mo, as for the rest of them, the desolate shadow that stood in the place of Robin's genial cheerfulness, the final cry of his passionate determination, the loss of his exquisite and whimsical perspective on the world within and around them, seemed to touch everything. Robin had been torn from the daily fabric of their lives like Duncan from the womb, and life itself seemed shattered and strewn on the ground around them. Everything looked the same. Everything was the same. And everything was different.

Mary invited anyone who wished to speak to do so. The blue patches in the sky grew larger and, although the sun stayed hidden, the day grew brighter for a few minutes while various people remembered him. The air was heavy with fragrances, the moist soil beside the freshly dug grave, and the flowers, and the women's perfumes: lilac and gardenia and ylang-ylang, hyacinth and jasmine and frangipani.

Margaret told about the little painting Robin had given to Beatrice, of herself holding a bouquet of flowers, surrounded by a dancing circle of children who thronged about her while little bunnies hopped in the hedges and bluebirds fluttered above them. It was an image from *Song of the South,* except that each child's tiny face, most of them brown or black, seemed to have its own distinctive features, seemingly needless details which he said he'd put in with a

magnifying glass. “So that,” he’d said, laughing of course, “by the time she gets to the bottom of it, she’ll actually be there.”

Teresa read from notes she’d prepared:

“Robin Ecst introduced me, many years ago, to the biological dictum that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny, which means, simply put, that each living thing, in its individual development, retraces the stages of life that preceded it. Thus a fetus develops gills before they become lungs, and has a tail that usually shrivels to insignificance before it is born. Carl Jung went further and supposed that something similar occurs in the psyche.

“This fascinated Robin, but typically he took it one step further. He realized that ontogeny also *creates* phylogeny, because the individual’s life becomes part, by its nature, of the life of the race, which will, in subsequent generations, be relived by all.

“For all we modern voyagers may know, we do not know and I think we never can know what force impels a grain of pollen, awakening in the sweet caress of a stigma, to drive its root down into the ovary, there to cause the elaboration of a tiny embryo, if you will, whose development is then suspended, perhaps for many years, until the outside world knocks on the door and yells, “Room service!” And then, voilá, an oak tree, a rose, a quince or a daffodil.

“My point is that Robin didn’t just look at the world, although he was a very skilled observer of it and of course especially of what it looked like in terms of color and texture and space. But to him that visible world was a metaphor for what is variously called the inner world, the metaphysical world, the next world. Understanding metaphor’s great plasticity, he undertook to make his world speak for the best of the historical world, and for the greatest achievements of the historical world, things that he, as an artist, could rely on fundamentally.

“Robin found this force we cannot understand in all the beauty of magic, revelation, laughter, and art. And he showed it to all of us who knew and loved him. He opened our eyes and he rejoiced in our vision almost as much as he rejoiced in his own. And as you can see around you, he planted many seeds. May they flower in glory.”

Mo recounted an evening when he and Robin had drunk a fair amount of beer and Mo had, in his usual way, undertaken to engage Robin in a deep philosophical discussion of talent, which had turned to Robin’s talent in particular, and Robin had said finally, with a grin, that he’d learned everything he knew from other people and that he’d concluded, from this, that his real talent was in getting people to like him.

Geoffrey and Robin had had a strict agreement, about which Robin was quite adamant, that, unless he explicitly authorized it, no work would ever be photographed until it was finished. Geoffrey recalled a day when he’d been shooting in Robin’s studio and Robin, in the midst of relieving himself in the bathroom, had produced an unsavory sound.

A few minutes later he’d come sauntering out, grinning broadly. “That’s an unfinished work,” he’d said.

Several people stepped forward and placed flowers or small objects on the simple pine box. Teresa gently laid upon it one last red rose. Everyone said his or her last goodbyes.

Margaret nodded to the three black men who’d been waiting nearby. As his two muscular assistants fitted ropes around the coffin and lowered it carefully into the ground, the grizzled old man, his clothes tattered and his shoes bursting at the sides, stood next to the grave and watched, his gray cloth cap held in both hands, his head bowed. “Farewell, Mister Ecst,” he said.

As they turned then and began to wander slowly down the hill, a gray squall that had been threatening to move in from the southwest finally arrived amidst gusty winds. The sky became much darker and a few drops of rain fell. A crow that had been watching them from somewhere swooped in, cawing irreverently, and alighted on a treetop not far from where three perspiring men with shovels and grim faces were busily filling a deep hole.

There was a sudden flash, and then a loud crash of thunder. Aurora made an involuntary whimper as she flinched. Then she let out a long sigh. Margaret, who was walking beside her, told her that Robin used to love making love during thunderstorms. It was the drama, she thought, that had so appealed to him. He liked to invent silly stories in which he was a great bird, an eagle or a condor or an albatross, circling overhead, riding the thermals, gliding over the earth, soaring and swooping and then plummeting down, talons spread wide, only to extend his wings at the last moment like a madcap parachutist, bringing himself almost to a stop before alighting weightless on the earth like a downy dandelion seed. Then, after he'd had an orgasm and was lying supine and flaccid on the bed, he'd always say, "Alas, who killed Cock Robin?"

They had all agreed earlier that they'd return to Wolf Lake for the remainder of the weekend. The other guests at the service had been invited to join them, and a few did.

Later that afternoon, as they drove along the highway into the clearing skies east of town, Elizabeth told Harry about her first encounter with Robin and about his later giving her Teddy as a symbol of his presence in her life.

"Why didn't it work out for you guys?" Harry asked.

"He needed to be alone," she said. "To work. I needed to play. We didn't have time. I had Annie, and he loved Annie like a daughter, but the transitory elements of kid society don't operate on artistic time. He had a mission that meant everything to him, and I had a thirst for society, and fun, and variety. And, last but not least, we wanted very much to be friends."

Harry smiled.

Chapter 43

Coalescent Cliticizm

My heart is warm with the friends I make,
And better friends I'll not be knowing;
Yet there isn't a train I wouldn't take,
No matter where it's going.

—*Travel,* Edna St. Vincent Millay

Mrs. Osgood set up a huge banquet table on Friday evening, there being few other guests, and about twenty of us sat down to supper together. We discovered none of us had eaten for a few days and we were ravenous. Later we all sat out here on the porch, or walked by the lake, and bantered and laughed and drank brandy and smoked Harry's cigars.

On Saturday, and again today, we played in the lake, went for walks, read our books, and talked quietly with one another. We tried to regain our sense of normalcy and resume our lives. But that will take a while.

On Saturday night, that is, last night, we met on the porch and Harry read Robin's will. Robin left the miniature of his parents and all of his money to Mary. His rights in Geoffrey's video went half each to Mary and Echota. He left his beret and his diary to Echota, and his personal effects, including his telescope, and a few of her favorite paintings and sculptures, to Margaret. Everything else, his paintings, sculptures, notes and tools, he left to the poetry group, naming Margaret as executor. We all agreed to place his art in a foundation that Margaret and Harry will set up to raise money for the arts.

We milled about the porch for the rest of the evening, sipping whiskey and smoking and talking.

Harry went out to his car and brought back a dark bronze sculpture he'd bought for Elizabeth of a huge bird landing on the edge of a nest, as seen from the perspective of the hatchling.

"I don't understand it," he said, chomping on his unlit cigar, "but I know it's great. Like Donatello, Cellini, Brancusi, and Moore. One, it's beautiful. Two, I find it unfathomable. This is my foolproof two-step formula for the appraisal and criticism of great art."

"You're full of it," Elizabeth said, her black eyes twinkling through a plum velvet haze.

Harry gave the *The Wreck of Hieronymous Bosch* back to Natasha and Alexei. "When you figure out what it means, you might call me," he said. "All I ever got was a disquisition on the rootlessness of reason in the wake of the demise of the gods. Afterward I couldn't decide whether that had made any sense or not."

"It makes the same sense," Kate said, "as the rootlessness of feelings when their cathexion disappears."

"The object of my cathexion," I mumbled in a singsong, "can change my complexion…"

"All right, when the objects of their affections disappear. So I'd say it makes perfect sense."

"I couldn't agree more," Alexei said. "Whatever it means."

"When the ship goes down," Natasha said, looking out over the black lake, rocking her

chair in a soft rhythm, "we all grieve. We believe in ghosts. And then we go back to living, because we must. Sometimes it's better, sometimes not. But the bird on the bow is a messenger from God. Good land and a new life are always near. And besides, it's very beautiful. I'm going to hang it in the sitting room, overlooking the Gulf of Finland."

"Jeez," Harry said, "maybe I should've kept it."

Kate was awarded custody of Pussy, the white kitten, with unlimited visitation rights for everyone else.

"I hate cats," I said, scratching her silky white head above those purring half-open blue eyes.

"They don't care," Kate said. "So long as you feed them."

"Uh-huh. And pretty soon you wind up holding doors for them and rubbing their tummies and giving them cushions to sleep on and generally putting up with their arrogantly oblivious and whimsical little psyches."

"That's just how we pussies like it," she said. "And don't you forget it."

In Robin's room Margaret and Geoffrey had found several sketches and a delicately colored pencil drawing of a genial dark-faced owl, winking knowingly, and a white pussycat robed comfortably in a black cape, sailing off across a lake in a green canoe under a full moon and the ghostly silhouette of silent geese, forever on the move. This we gave to Margaret, although Harry mischievously voted to give it to Geoffrey.

After a rambling consideration of various scenarios of international intrigue viewed through too much brandy, we decided that Alexei would probably be the one to locate Billy, who would be discovered working in a Catholic orphanage in Croatia as a physical therapist, growing gigantic erotic vegetables for the amusement of the nuns.

"Dylan might know where Billy is," Teresa ventured.

"And I know where Dylan is," Harry said.

We decided to let all that be as it would. Harry volunteered to send Dylan a photograph of his portrait.

Alexei reiterated his intention, and Natasha's, to have Margaret as their guest in St. Petersburg.

"Oh, come with us," Harry said to her.

"Oh? When are you going?" Margaret asked.

"Whenever you are," Elizabeth said. "As long as it's after the first of the year. We want to be home for Christmas."

Margaret had quashed Geoffrey's plan for shooting Robin's hotel room and the lot of us rebelled when he suggested recording anyone, so he turned his camera for a half day yesterday and all this morning on the spot where Robin had been working, looking toward the hotel as he had been. For some reason much of the daytime footage featured the antics of numerous birds. He even recorded several haunting flights of geese.

Aurora offered a hundred dollars for an ink drawing of an ogreish frog with a million shark teeth in its gaping mouth, lecherous bug eyes and a sinuous tongue thrust out like a squid's tentacle which was about to slurp up a tiny helpless virgin girl, suspended from the waist in midair by the webbed thumb and forefinger at the tip of the fanged amphibian's spidery green arm, a hapless and innocent victim obviously lured to her doom by its huge and luridly yellow sexual apparatus. Over my objection, alleging that this was a major *objet d'art* worth many times her offering price, the group decided it rightfully belonged to her.

"I'll give you a hundred bucks for it," I said then.

"In your dreams," she replied. Then she told us she'd decided to move to Las Vegas for a while, where she knew nobody, there was very little lightning, and all illusion begins with cash up front.

Kate offered to donate her portrait to the foundation's collection because we have no place to hang it except in the sauna. The offer was accepted.

Late this afternoon many people departed for home. At dinner tonight it was just the poets, and sometimes it got so quiet you could almost hear his laughter echoing through our minds.

But there won't be any more Ecst paintings, or poems, or jokes, or smiles, or any more Ecsticisms of any kind, ever. Oh, there'll be memories for a long time. Our memories. Right now, they only remind us that he's gone. Later on, they'll remind us as well that he was with us.

Before he left this evening, I stood Geoffrey to a rematch on the chess board. He rolled me up like a wad of wet paper.

Times are peaceful here at Wolf Lake. In all the years I've been coming here, I've never seen a contrail in the sky. Only rarely, during fire season, do I hear a plane. The phone doesn't ring and except for a small number of very agreeable people I seldom see anyone. I always liked that. But tonight the silence has seemed a little too immense, as if it extended far out into the darkness, far beyond the confines of this planet and even beyond the stars. So I'm glad you stopped by. You've been a generous audience.

Robin Ecst was a strange guy, you know. He wanted to recreate all the virtues of the old masters in his own style. He thought a thing couldn't be beautiful unless it was beautifully made. He thought art ought to be beautiful. He thought that, if it wasn't beautiful, it couldn't be art. It could be called art, it could be treated as art, it might even be sold as art, but art it could not be. He didn't bother the world with these ideas; he just lived them. Toward his friends he was always engaging, good-natured and helpful. Even with his critics he was invariably courteous. In his studio, though, he was a driven man who struggled incessantly to discover the deepest, richest secrets of the past and to place them in service to the present. He made art. Never mind he didn't live long enough. Never mind many critics thought him overmuch in the thrall of antiquated notions insufferably trite and jejune. Never mind if some regarded him as a harmless artistic buffoon. Tirelessly and assiduously, he made art. And some of it was very beautiful indeed. I think that's all, really, that he ever wanted.

Of course I didn't find out until later that the reason no one came to my first convocation of the poets' group was that Kate, devious wench that she is, had quite deliberately invited them all out to our house for the evening, where they'd enjoyed a potlatch supper by the creek, and she had thereby once again impelled me to one of those rash and desperate acts that turn everything inside-out, upside-down and topsy-turvy, and sometimes produce a treasure of discovery.

Well, the sun has set and Venus nestles close by the gibbous moon. I should be going soon. Kate's expecting me home for supper. The poets will be meeting again in town in two weeks, but I won't be there. I'm going to find someplace quiet, someplace like this, where I can draw all these memories back from the distant past and write everything down. Memory, like all our precious understanding, soon dissipates in the quicksilver currents of time.

THE END