

COVER PAGE

# **A Bird on the Train**

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~ 36,789 words

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## A Bird on the Train

With care, but without caring, the insurer begins. His job is not to make sure that nothing goes wrong in his clients' lives. It is to be sure that nothing goes wrong in his own. He cannot prevent trouble – who could do that? – but he does compensate people for the trouble that finds them, provided they've had the foresight to engage his services.

His calculation is straightforward. For each ingredient of a policy he must determine the statistical features of the covered risk. What is the chance of a loss? How big is the loss likely to be? What is the value, including a modest capital incentive and adequate compensation for his packaging, of this indemnity? He must assess all these things as a whole, taking into account the effects of interplay and overlap among the various risks. And finally, of course, he must take account of hazards from beyond the universe of contemplation, such as arise when, for example, a policyholder who is speeding through an intersection on the green with a nose full of cocaine is blindsided by a drunken non-insured coming at right angles through the red. His client, and the world at large, are risks, too. Negotiation is expensive, and his contracts must cover explicitly as many contingencies as he can imagine.

He is patient, though. He factors it all in. If he works carefully enough, all future risk will be in balance with the pool of present precaution. His is a tedious and disrespected art, but the world could not go on without it. And he lives well. His clients are always a little more afraid than, statistically speaking, they ought to be.

Most people will pay something to avoid unpleasant experience. They adopt techniques of risk aversion. Some of these, and others too, will pay to ameliorate the inconvenient consequences of untoward events – one might think of this as loss aversion. They buy insurance. On both sides of trouble, the insurer stands ready to

serve.

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The taxi pulled up along the concrete apron beneath the once grandly decorous but now grimy and *déclassé* granite portico which loomed above the train station's heavy brass and thick glass doors. "Seventeen seventy-five," the driver said. He gave the driver a twenty. "Keep it," Malcolm said as he got out with his luggage. He liked to curry good will among the common citizenry. "Take care," he said, smiling, as he shut the door firmly. Who knew? Maybe there'd be a revolution. One couldn't be too careful.

Malcolm liked the train. It was massive, substantial, like a ship, several hundred feet long, weighing altogether several hundred tons. It inspired awe and confidence. The ground rumbled as it passed, and the platform vibrated with a steady thrum-thrum-thrum, like the purring of a gigantic cat, as the idling locomotives waited in the station. All around was the sour odor of old steel and creosote, and the hot, rubbery damp fragrance of the air brakes. Once inside the cars, one's head was ten feet, on the upper deck maybe twenty feet, above the ground. He noticed as soon as he climbed aboard that the oily metallic odors gave way to a warmer, more familiar smell, of travelers and leather, and fabric, old and new.

He made his way past people stowing their luggage in the overhead racks, women trying to contain their rambunctious children, people who seemed to be fixed in their seats and who gazed warily at every newcomer, their darting dull eyes betraying an anxiety that more passengers might overcrowd the train, clog the toilets, encroach on their intimate space.

The train was not very crowded, though, and he found an empty brace of seats. He placed himself next to the window and put his bag and briefcase on the seat beside him. He read for several minutes while other people worked their way past him, he pretending to ignore them, feeling triumphant as each one went by that he or she had not dared ask him to share his domain. He heard the steel doors being closed and

latched below and the conductors shouting, “Bo-ard!” Finally, with a slow lurch, the train crept almost imperceptibly forward, each car’s couplers catching on as the long articulated assembly stretched itself out again like a steel worm.

Then he relaxed. He looked up from his book and looked down the corridor where only the conductor stood, swaying with the moving car. He watched the buildings go by outside, fewer and smaller as the train gathered speed, until, at maybe fifty miles an hour, only a rough green countryside, dotted with trees and houses and barns and livestock, curled away in the distance. He felt free. In three days he would be back in the city. But between now and then, within the cavernous confines of this undulating beast, he could be at ease. He questioned briefly whether he ought to have paid Amtrak’s stupendous surcharge for a sleeping pullman, but he seldom slept for very long, did not much value sleep, and preferred to read and wander around the train at night anyway.

As he gazed out the window, he found himself wondering how he had come to this pass in his life. An actuarial analyst. That hadn’t been his plan. When he’d been a young boy in Vermont he’d wanted to be a speed skater. But then his father had died and his mother had urged him to think about something practical. Like selling insurance, or bonds, maybe. Something that would pay the bills and the mortgage and provide a nest-egg for retirement. He had been a scrawny boy, not particularly athletic, but he’d skated well enough to play in pick-up hockey games at the local pond in the park. Later, at college in the midwest, he’d found that ice-skating wasn’t considered much of a sport, and he’d discovered too that he had a greater affinity for numbers and statistics than for loud-mouthed fraternity jocks and their obsequious cheerleader girlfriends.

After college his uncle had offered him a job as a risk manager, appraising the exposures of self-insuring entities like governments and corporations and teaching them to operate in ways that minimized trouble and its attendant costs. He liked this work, at first, anyway. It paid well, he was good at it, and his clients respected him. In time his

uncle had passed most of the business along to him. And now, as if by default, he had been doing it for almost thirty years.

He had the feeling that he'd never really chosen any of his life, not his career, not his friends, not his residence, not even his family. It had all just happened. Once he'd acquired serious clients, it had seemed impossible to move away from the city. And when Misty Quinn had spurned his suggestion of marriage for what she saw as her chance in the movies, which had of course never quite materialized, it had seemed all too easy for him to settle down with the pliant and agreeable Althea Scott. He'd focused great attention on his career, and, as the years passed by and Althea became ever more ambitious, self-absorbed and remote, he'd allowed himself to do little else.

Unfortunately, in the end his career had proved almost as bland as his marriage, and nowadays he looked forward only to getting away from it all at these conventions, where, for a day or two or three, he could be with strangers, without expectations, free to wander through some city's streets and parks and museums, go to the waterfront if there was one (there almost always was), rent a car and go for long drives through the countryside, even occasionally dally in a tavern and shoot the breeze with the locals.

Sometimes he dreamed of running away from it all, but he was daunted by the inevitable corollaries of such a move. First of all, friends and strangers alike, not to mention his family, would pass summary judgment on his repudiation of his marital oath, as if no such thing had ever occurred before. Having seen no evidence his marriage was different from any other – indeed, perhaps it wasn't – they would now see no justification for his action. Althea would take all their collective assets; she'd as much as said so. Money meant a lot to her. He might have to start a career again from scratch. He'd never really done that, not even the first time. So he kept these dreams to himself and tried not to think about them. He wasn't a particularly attentive husband or father, but he was faithful and dutiful. He had become, day by imperceptible day, a prisoner in his own dry life, but he liked to console himself that the joke was on his jailers, because,

inside this body, which he and they had surrounded with great tangled heaps of familial claptrap, he was not really present. He lived in a twilight world, without deep feelings of any kind.

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As the train continued through the outlying towns, working its way into the broad Columbia River valley, clickety-clacking and swaying gently from side to side, its rhythms mesmerizing the long mid-afternoon, he lay down the book he'd been reading and arose to explore the cars, of which there were about a dozen.

The coach cars were the most numerous, situated toward the rear of the train. There seemed to be six or seven of them. He decided to walk to the back first. He thought there were only a few cars behind his. As he made his way along the aisle, adjusting himself to the rolling motions of the train until he no longer needed to touch the seat backs, he noticed the faces of the other passengers. Almost no one looked at him as he passed by. Their languid stares seemed fixed somewhere else – out the window, or on a magazine, or just into the emptiness of the seat back in front of them. There was a certain resigned emptiness in those faces, he thought. The same thing Thoreau had seen a hundred years before. They were lost in themselves and in their hollow lives. He didn't see anyone who looked as though he, or she, was really enjoying being on this train. It made him keenly aware of how much he enjoyed it, how much he loved it, really. How free he felt. And yet, in some disturbingly elusive way, he knew that he was just like them.

In the no-man's-land between the cars he paused to savor the open roar of the rails, the smell of iron and creosote, the rushing sound of the wind. Here, when he had been young, and even in modern times late at night, he could open a window in the exterior door and put his head outside the train, his face into the wind, and watch the fleeting ground blur past him, the light glinting off the rails, the sides of the cars ahead sometimes invisible to him, then coming into view behind the locomotives as the train

extended itself concavely along a sweeping curve, and the ubiquitous wires strung alongside the tracks, swooping and falling from pole to flashing pole in a mad, often startling rhythm.

The railroad bureaucrats of course frowned upon this sort of thing. Maybe, he reflected, that was why all the passengers looked so vacant and morose. The passenger train had become a gray governmental enterprise. It was run by accountants and clockwatchers, not adventurers. It was transportation; it wasn't supposed to be fun. Ironically, it was also hugely unprofitable and almost never on time.

Malcolm liked to stand sideways within the flexible bellows that connected two cars together, just above the knuckled couplers, one foot on each of the shifting steel platforms, feeling the contrary lurching of the cars as lateral forces played against them and the mean steel plates danced and slid under his feet. Finally, as he moved on into the interior of another car, he liked the impossible resistance, the gradual, grudging yielding of the sliding pneumatic door and the sudden disappearance of the roaring sound when the door, expressing the air it had moments before sucked in, resealed itself behind him.

At length he was in the last coach car, the airlock door behind him relaxed. He walked along the carpeted corridor, past the stairwells that led down to the bathrooms and baggage racks, and made his way toward the very end of the train. It occurred to him that when he got there he could no longer pretend he was going anywhere. The people in this car seemed for some reason more at ease. One or two looked up at him as he passed. A woman, with a baby asleep in her arms, even smiled faintly. Another woman, a few seats from the rear, looked up from her book as he approached her. For some reason, he quickly glanced away, only to realize at once that she was exquisitely beautiful. His eyes had been, for an instant, fixed on her without his even realizing it, and she'd sensed it. Her face was serene, framed by long blue-black hair that fell over her shoulders. Her eyes were crystalline blue, like sapphires, almost electric in their

gaze. When he turned to look at her again, embarrassed by his sudden shyness, she was quietly reading, as if the preceding moment had never occurred. She didn't look up again. He noticed her hands were strong, smooth and graceful.

He could see through the window of the last door the glittering twin ribbons of rail spewing out behind the train in the late afternoon sun. He could see, faint in a gray purplish haze, skyline remnants of the city, already far away. The train had freed itself even from the suburbs and was rolling along the northern bank of the Columbia, the carotid artery of the American Northwest, a broad, phlegmatic river much like the long narrow lakes that sometimes fill great landlocked valleys. But this proud behemoth rose wild and prodigal along the Continental Divide in British Columbia and ran thence twelve hundred sinuous miles, gathering everything in its path, growing ever more ponderous as it descended toward the ocean awaiting it in the west.

Down here it was grand, stately, almost placid, only perhaps a day's journey hence to the salty bosom of the Pacific. Only the persistent wind disturbed it, sometimes making little whitecaps on its rippled surface. And civilization, of course, in its always less-than-infinite wisdom, had saddled the river with civilization—power generation, recreation, irrigation, and flood control struggled to reshape its nature born of the weather in far-off places. The river carried these burdens gracefully, with quiet dignity, although slowly their intrusion was sapping its vitality. It had rolled into this valley, carved this valley, wandered in its recumbent majesty through this valley for hundreds of thousands of years, and, Malcolm reflected, long after all signs of human life had disappeared the river would still be here, flowing freely through this valley once again to the sea.

Beginning his own journey forward, he looked deliberately at the young woman with the cool blue eyes as he walked by her, resolved not to shy away again if she turned to look at him, ready to smile, to acknowledge with his eyes the twinge of passion that rippled through him. But she appeared not to notice him. Within a few



minutes he was entering the car in front of his own, passing the seats now from behind, more interested in the people in the aisles, the conductors and trainmen and folks traversing the stairways to the bathrooms, and in discovering what was forward of the coach section. He entered the club car, spacious and bright, outfitted with garish orange seats and carpet and surrounded by huge windows with spectacular views of the river on one side and endless miles of tall grass and wheat on the other, silvery green and dusty straw yellow by turns, stretching away across the high rolling plain as far as the eye could see. Down the steep and narrow stairs was the barroom, the only place on the entire train where smoking was permitted.

The next car forward was the dining car, sumptuous in its white linen tablecloths, elegant stemware perspiring with iced water, and heavy plated silver service. He made a reservation for dinner at seven. Beyond the dining car, the *maitre d'* told him, were the sleeper pullmans, and beyond them a car reserved for the train's staff, and a baggage car. He decided to return to the observation deck of the club car, but then it seemed too noisy and crowded so he walked on back through the coaches to his seat and moved his suitcase and travel bag over to the right-hand side of the train. He sat down and stared out the window for a while. At length he resumed reading. He hadn't completed a paragraph when her face came back to him, briefly echoed in his mind, her dark-edged irises once more piercing his self-consciousness and surveying the pallid landscape of his soul.

She had already passed him when he noticed her walking forward through his car. She wore a pleated skirt of Night Watch tartan, a white blouse and over it a pale blue cardigan sweater unbuttoned down the front. Her black hair fell liquid smooth and curled slightly over her shoulderblades. A grade-school teacher, perhaps, Malcolm surmised. Except for those eyes.

During the last hour or so of daylight, as the train wound its way slowly up several hundred miles of meandering river gorge, he read in his book and struggled to

comprehend the weird world of quantum physics. A most uninsurable world it would appear, and yet—he couldn't put his finger on it—it just seemed that in a way it was the most insurable of all worlds, where nothing happened by chance, where everything was smoothly statistical and there were no surprises until one tried to escape it.

He persisted, trying hard to grasp the book's somewhat obscure mathematical notions, but repeatedly he would suddenly find himself thinking of her and then he would gaze absently out across the mirrored surface of the river and into the sere yellow hills beyond, increasingly etched and shadowed by the impending darkness. Finally, just before seven o'clock, he took his toilet kit from his bag and descended the narrow stairs to the lower deck, where the stainless-steel luggage racks and a small compartment of eight or ten seats were located, and closeted himself alone in one of the bathrooms where he washed and shaved, brushed his teeth and combed his hair. He decided to put on a clean shirt too.

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The dining car, resplendent in its linens and silver, its curtained windows and spotless burgundy carpet, teemed with people eating, serving, and talking, yet the sound of all this activity was oddly subdued. The *maitre d'carrosse à manger*, a small, self-assured gentleman with gleaming teeth and glistening skin the color of burnt umber, wore a well-tailored dark blue bell-captain's uniform over an oyster-white shirt with a maroon bowtie. He comported himself with the formalized dignity of old British nobility. He did not *take* reservations, he graciously deigned to accept them. He was obviously not the sort of person who suffered fools in any way whatsoever, and certainly not in his dining room. A reservation at seven meant seven, not five after seven or any other time.

Malcolm arrived at seven. The *maitre d'* led him toward the front of the car and seated him at a table across from a pleasant-looking young couple, Nicholas and Susan, evidently of Japanese extraction. Malcolm was next to the window and facing the rear of

the train. The three of them had hardly had time to introduce one another and exchange a few pleasantries when the fourth chair, next to Malcolm, was claimed by a large rough-hewn man with a somewhat brash but decidedly cheerful manner.

"I'm Frank," he said with a laconic drawl, reaching out to shake each of their hands, first Nicholas' and then Susan's. "It's my name and my habit." He had big, powerful hands, Malcolm noticed, and a firm grip which he displayed avidly to both men. But he held Susan's hand with uncommon tenderness. "I have a daughter just your age," he told her, smiling.

After the waiter had taken their orders they talked a bit about themselves. Nicholas and Susan were from Chicago. They had met at Northwestern University and gotten married while Nicholas was still in law school. They had postponed their honeymoon until he'd graduated and now they were returning from a month in Hawaii and a few days visiting her family in San Francisco. Nicholas worked for a public defender's office and Susan was a travel agent. Both were avid scuba divers.

Frank told them he was a veterinarian who specialized in the troubles of draft animals, particularly the horses used in small logging operations from northern California all the way up into British Columbia. He was travelling from Portland to a fair in Illinois, a sort of horseman's holiday as he called it, where he was to be a judge of the Belgians, Percherons and Clydesdales that would be gathered there from all over the country.

Once the food was served, they mostly ate in silence, although Susan and Malcolm had a brief exchange about the difficulties of managing property risks in foreign countries and Nicholas inquired about Frank's view of timber harvest levels in the northwest forests. "Well," Frank opined, "the extremists get all the flash, of course." He laughed. "Nothing new there. People with real knowledge and sensible ideas don't make good copy and usually have better things to do than expose themselves to the press." Nicholas smiled and nodded in agreement. "Truth is," Frank went on, "most of

the big old wood is long gone. Everybody knew twenty years ago this would happen about now. All you had to do was superimpose the growth trendlines onto the cutting trendlines. Where the lines met, those trees were gone. So it wasn't a surprise to people who knew what was going on."

"Harvest levels weren't reduced to save the owls?" Nicholas asked.

"Owls didn't have anything to do with it. Harvests declined because the trees were gone. Pure and simple."

"Why did they keep doing it?"

"Well, you know as much about that as I do. It's human nature. The forest was manna from heaven. Everybody was addicted to it. And the lying, the covering up, the greed, the bribery, the thievery was just too big. It was a whole culture, it was a capital fixture, and it'd gone on so long, and so many folks depended on it, that nobody could stop it until they had to, until somebody finally came in and made them quit. And of course that didn't happen until it was almost over anyway. Same as it was with coal in West Virginia or iron ore in the Mesabi, or wherever nature's wealth is worth money. 'Course a lot of folks really suck it up when these things end. Now things have gone the other way and you can't cut anything, even though there's plenty of timber that could be cut, and should be cut. Still," he shrugged, "it's good for the horse loggers, and that's just peachy by me."

Malcolm was listening to this when she walked in. She was alone. He wished Frank were elsewhere, the seat next to him empty. But Frank was obviously not to be wished away. The *maitre d'*, ceremonially chivalrous, held out her chair and seated her at a table across the aisle from Malcolm's and at the far end of the car, with three other people, a woman and two men. She glanced up at him as she settled into her seat, and he looked this time directly at her sapphire-blue eyes, trying to convey to her in that instant that he recognized her and was delighted to see her again. She pursed her lips slightly as she looked down, lightly placing her graceful hands palms down on her place

setting, as if adapting herself to it, and Malcolm thought she'd smiled just a little. Then she began introducing herself to her tablemates. Malcolm couldn't hear her. He tried to infer speech sounds from her mouth, lips, teeth and tongue, but quickly found himself enchanted by the fluid movements of her face and utterly oblivious to words.

Enchanted he was. It surprised him to realize it. He felt like a schoolboy. She'd looked at him and smiled! He was smitten with her, awash with feelings for her. And he didn't even know her name. He looked out the window into the darkness. Occasionally a light drifted by, far from the tracks, somewhere out in the rugged terrain. The sudden, unfamiliar passions that surged within him both pleased and frightened him. They seemed so senseless, and, he told himself, were likely inappropriate. What could it mean? He was washed by waves of excitement, each one followed by a deep trough of doubt. What if she were just being polite? What if, could he dare believe, what if she weren't? For he was already half in love with her. All it had taken was a glance—no, two glances and a smile. And those electric blue eyes. Eyes that looked not at his image but at him, into him, into the deepest, loneliest secrets of his psyche. He felt as if a long-ignored and empty darkness, a thousand miles deep in his soul, had been abruptly flooded with light.

He leaned down near the tabletop so he could look up at the stars. "I think she likes you," Frank said in an aside. Malcolm looked at him and laughed. He almost said, "Too bad I'm married," but he didn't. He felt a bit like Peter at Gethsemane. Already a moment of truth had come and gone, and he had missed it.

They talked for a while longer as the supper dishes were cleared. The young couple, no doubt with better things in mind, decided to forego dessert, but Frank and Malcolm each opted for apple pie. Frank told a story about tying an empty five-gallon can to a horse's tail when he was a boy, and watching in delight as the crazed animal ran around trying to kick it off. Malcolm kept sneaking furtive glances at the beautiful woman thirty feet away who was conversing intently with the younger blond girl across

the table from her, laughing occasionally, and once, when Frank guffawed at the recalling of his rowdy tale, glanced again toward them and then smiled at her friend. Malcolm thought she had looked at him, but he wasn't sure.

"I don't know how you can live in New York," Frank said. "I come out here once a year and it wears me out, and this is only Chicago."

"And we're not even there yet. I suppose you live in some beautiful country place," Malcolm said.

"It's so beautiful," Frank said, raising his eyebrows, "it would bring tears to your eyes."

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Anya noticed that the attractive, enigmatic man with the flowing wavy hair and warm green eyes was watching her, glancing her way every now and then as she talked with Chloe. She kept her own eyes averted from him, except once when his companion laughed a long, loud, uproarious laugh that filled the car. Then, not quite successfully, she had tried to look only at the silver-haired jokester, a ruggedly handsome man himself. But for an instant, her eyes had met his, again. For an instant, she wanted to know him, to crawl inside him, to make him cry out with joy. She decided she was completely insane.

Chloe was a singer. Country, she said, mostly. But she would sing anything that was sad and beautiful. "I like to bring flowers to a lonely heart," she said. "I love other music, but my voice is made for romantic balladry." Then she laughed. "That's my label for whatever I can sing well."

"I'd like to hear you sometime," Anya said. "Where do you work?"

"I've been singing the past couple weeks in Spokane with our band," she said. She had long, curly blonde hair and a cute little smile that seemed to play around her mouth for a long time before it broke through. "My boyfriend kicked me out. He said I was being disruptive. Actually, he wanted to screw around with some groupie cowgirl who

claims to have a voice and a following. Personally, the only following I saw was her big butt. So anyway, I'm headed back to Urbana."

"And what do you do there?"

"I sing in the local dives. And I take care of my kitties. And I like to go to the museums and look at the paintings and sculpture. I love Seurat."

"Seurat?"

"The impressionist. I don't know why. I love the depths, the separated planes, the colors, the frozen serenity of his compositions. His foreground objects seem to have things hidden behind them, like you could walk around and peek in there. Each person is in their own dimension, their own little world. But I like other things, too; he's just my favorite. I try – you'll think this is crazy – I try to sing like Seurat."

Just then the storyteller and Anya's mystery man arose from their table and headed toward her end of the dining car. She noticed that the two men at her own table, sitting across from one another next to the windows, seemed to know each other but were eating in silence. "Check this out," she whispered to Chloe as the other two approached. Then the man with the warm green eyes, looking directly at her, paused and laid a rose on the table in front of her plate.

He smiled, a little shyly. "Beautiful things enhance the taste of the food," he said, acknowledging with a glance and a nod first Chloe and then the two men, who had turned to look at him. He looked at her again.

"Thank you," she said.

He raised his eyebrows, smiled slightly, nodded almost a little bow, and walked away.

"He's shy," the storyteller said, offering his hand in greeting. "But I'm not. I'm Frank." She took his hand.

"Anya," she replied.

"And who might this lovely young lady be? Your niece perhaps..."

Chloe extended her hand and grasped his. "My name's Chloe," she said, looking up at him. Anya noticed that her eyes were very soft. Chloe held his hand for a very long time. "You have strong hands," she said.

"The better to hold your heart, my dear," Frank said. She laughed at his courtliness. "I'm going to the club car," he continued, "and I'd sure be tickled to buy you two ladies a coke."

Chloe smiled coyly. "I might want two," she said.

"Then I'll be doubly pleased," he responded. Almost as an afterthought he glanced at the rose on the table and said, "I think the flower boy has died and gone to heaven." Then he chuckled as he walked away.

"He's cute," Chloe said, drawing out the word "cute" into a long cooing sound of appreciation.

Anya smiled.

"Yours is cute, too," Chloe added quickly, laughing.

"Romantic, in a melodramatic sort of way," she said. "And he has beautiful eyes. But I don't know that I really have the energy for it."

"Mmm," said Chloe, "I think I do." Then she leaned forward as if to hide her question from the two men sitting next to them. "Are you married?"

"Yes," Anya replied, "but that has nothing to do with it, really." She looked down at the tablecloth, at her supper plate, at the rose. "It's in the past."

"Well? Is hubby on the train?"

"Hubby's on a train I got off long ago. It's just that I'm enjoying being by myself for a change."

"You like him, though, don't you?"

"Yes."

Chloe's face lit up. "I knew it," she said, grinning. "I know things like that. It's the artist in me I guess."



"I feel like I have a big blinking neon sign on my forehead," Anya said.

"I think it's your eyes," Chloe said, obviously delighted. "When he smiled at you, your eyes flashed up about five thousand watts."

"Not subtle, huh?"

"Not even close."

"I don't know..."

"Let's go to the club car together."

"Maybe later," Anya said. "I think I'll read for a while. This is all a little disorienting. I really meant to be by myself. Not with a man, I mean. Not romantically involved, I mean."

The two men got up, excused themselves, and left without another word. "They were cute, too," Chloe said.

"Conversationalists," Anya agreed.

"So what kind of work do you do?" Chloe asked. Anya noticed she had four or five silver earrings in each ear under all those golden curls.

"I'm an ethnologist," she said. "I study how people live. And I'm kind of a hobbyist paleobotanist. That means I study old plants, seeds, usually, that are sometimes found in archaeological digs."

"Sounds interesting," said Chloe, as if she couldn't really imagine it so.

"Well, I get to be outdoors, and I get to play in the dirt, and I get to try to solve mysteries and grow things that nobody's ever seen, and sometimes I even get paid, more or less."

"Sounds like the music business."

Anya smiled. "Yes," she said. "I think you understand."

"Me, I study people's feelings," Chloe said. "So I think maybe you are sad. But maybe you'll soon be happy." She smiled a big grin, and Anya smiled too.

"That's my plan," she said. They both laughed.

After dessert (they each had vanilla ice cream), Chloe went aft to the club car and Anya went forward to the pullman sleepers. Hers was the second one forward of the dining car. As she traversed the narrow corridors she thought of him again, tried to imagine his being beside her as she came to the door of her room. And what then? she thought. And what then?

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After supper Malcolm went to the club car, below the observation deck, where it seemed, in keeping with modern society's penchant for punishing people with unpopular habits, the railroad bureaucrats had provided a trash-strewn back alley for the crowd of non-conformists, who, oblivious as only non-conformists can be, were nevertheless drinking and smoking, playing cards and laughing and talking and generally having a good time. Malcolm went to the bar and got two bloody marys. Then he went to a table where a slightly inebriated couple, sitting side by side, were having an animated conversation about Libertarianism. "Mind if I sit?" he asked. "Lord, no," the woman said, smiling, "not at all. Please do." The other side of the table was vacant, so Malcolm slid in across from them and sat next to the window.

"She's Vera," the man said. "I'm Stan. Vera really doesn't get it." He was a small man, thin of face, with deeply wrinkled tanned skin that looked like old leather. His crooked teeth had large dark spots on them. His eyes were brown, sunken beneath prominent cheekbones and heavy brow ridges, but they sparkled with fire. His hair was sparse and long, once black but now streaked with gray, plastered carefully straight back on his narrow, sun-reddened head.

"What doesn't she get?"

"Libertarianism."

Malcolm took a mouthful of the bloody mary and swished it around thoughtfully before swallowing it. "I'm not sure I do either," he said.

"She's a Democrat," the man continued. "Now you, you kind of look like a

Republican. But then," he laughed at his own joke, "if you was a Republican, you sure wouldn't be in here, eh?"

"I'm a skeptic," Malcolm said.

"To my mind, government sucks," Stan said. "Republicans, Democrats, it don't matter none. They're there to take your money. They're there to steal your money and jail you if you don't give it up. And she just votes like crazy for them Democrats, as if that made any difference."

"Well, at least they do some good," she countered. "And that's more than your stupid Libertarians ever done." She was a slight woman, dressed in baggy jeans and a rumpled blue nylon jacket. Her eyes were a bit bloodshot and her thin lips showed traces of lipstick which, Malcolm thought, sort of matched her eyes. Her hair was an almost shocking red-orange, short and tightly curled over her ruddy round face.

"We'll abolish the damn government," he said. "Who needs it?"

"Well, who'd run this train?"

As she said this, Malcolm noticed that the train was just creeping along, at maybe five miles an hour, and seemed to be slowing down.

"Private business, of course," the Libertarian said proudly. "They used to do a pretty good job of it. Tell you one thing, if business ran this train it'd be on time, which is something it has never been in its whole goddamn bureaucratic life. And we'd abolish play money, too, and the goddamn Federal Reserve, and go back on the gold standard, and this ride would cost maybe half what it does now."

With a long screech, the train came to a halt. "Ha!" he cried. "See?"

"Now we'll probably go backwards," Malcolm surmised. And sure enough in a few moments the train began to drift back in the direction whence it had come.

"See," Stan said, "if private enterprise ran this train it'd only go in one direction—frontwards. Ha!" He laughed again.

"If you ran this train," Vera said, "it'd still be in Boise."

Malcolm saw Frank emerge from the lower entrance to the stairway and motioned him over. Frank acknowledged the gesture with a raised hand and went to the bar. He, too, bought two drinks and then made his way to the table.

The club car, being the sole legitimate venue of smokers, was filled with smoke. There must've been five or six dozen people in there this night, in various stages of inebriation, creating a hubbub of loud conversation and laughter. Six or eight people were sitting at or standing around each table, and each table held, along with a surfeit of empty potato chip bags and candy wrappers, one or two thin aluminum ashtrays, most of which were piled with cigarette butts and an occasional wad of old chewing gum. One of the toilets had clogged up and there was a thin film of water on the floor in the restroom entryway. Apart from the bartender, no train staff were ever to be seen in this place. Nobody picked up trash or did anything else to make it presentable. The cheapest juke joint in Harlem was kept in better condition than this.

"Nice place," Frank said as he sat down beside Malcolm.

"Yeah," Malcolm agreed. "Well, they say in their brochure there's something about a train that's magic, but the people who run this railroad don't seem to have any idea what it is, so they're doing everything they can to get rid of it."

"Ah, yes," Frank said, "the new society. Smoke-free, fat-free, risk-free, passion-free. A charming blend of anxiety and emptiness." He fished his pipe and pouch from a shirt pocket. "One of these days they won't allow smoking at all, and that'll finally finish it off. Riding the train will be just another tedious, colorless method for getting from one place to another."

"It's getting that way."

"Yep. Folks will just sit on their duffs, staring off into space with their hands folded in their laps, until they reach their destinations, just like they do on airplanes."

"It seems," Malcolm took up this thread, "that the whole society is on a long march from a world where people used to have fun and dream of doing great things to a world

where they try to see how long they can live and long for nothing more important than their next bowel movement.”

“Well,” the redhead interjected curtly, “at least airplanes don’t go backwards.”

“A brave new world of easy keepers,” Malcolm said, a little proud to show off this tidbit of the ranching idiom. “That’s what we’re after, I guess.”

About this time the vivacious Chloe, blond curls bouncing free over her shoulders, peered around the corner from the stairwell and, seeing them, smiled and waved at Frank. Malcolm looked at the bearded old horse doctor in mock surprise. Frank looked back and grinned. “My lucky day,” he said.

“It’s like Bertrand Russell once said,” Frank observed. “The moralists don’t object to the sometimes negative consequences of people’s enjoying themselves – they like that part fine, because it validates their black outlook. If you get cancer from smoking, or get killed while you’re drunk at the wheel, well, that just proves they were right. Pleasure is the root of all sin, and iniquity leads to death. They love that. But what really bothers them is that people enjoy themselves in the first place.”

“Society’s got groupified,” Stan interjected. “It used to be that Americans had liberties. Now nobody has no liberties. They give us rights instead, like beads and trinkets to the Indians. People slobber all over themselves to get some. But liberties are notions, not laws. They come from understanding history, and philosophy. The founding fathers thought they come from God. You had ‘em when you was born, right out of the gate. They were the natural condition of life. All government could do was take ‘em away. But with rights, like you got nowadays, they gotta come from a legislature, from lawyers and lobbyists. And they’re for big groups with big money and lots of votes – corporations and social whiners and such. You and me, we don’t get no rights, and we ain’t got no liberties.”

During this soliloquy, Chloe joined them. Frank stood up to let her sit between him and Malcolm, who rose slightly and introduced himself. She was remarkably pretty, he

noticed, though this wasn't entirely a physical attribute. Except for her long, curly blond hair, she didn't have especially stunning features, but the force of her enthusiastic engagement with everything around her, her irrepressible gaiety, made her radiant.

"Seems to me," Frank said, "that most people have little use for liberty. So they'll readily sacrifice a piece of it in order to get someone else to pay for fixing their bunions. And I agree that no freedom worth mentioning has ever come from politicians and legislatures, nor ever will. What I don't understand, I guess, is, since liberty has its origin in man's nature, or in the soul, or in god or wherever, in something beyond the state anyway, why worry about the state of the state? Me, I'm free because I choose to be free. It's as simple as that."

"You have to declare your own independence," Chloe said.

"Exactly," Frank said.

"Most people are like Ozzie and Harriet," Malcolm said. "They're born, they live, they die. They go through the motions. They do what their neighbors do. They know the world vicariously, through TV. They think this is what everyone does. They think their lives represent the cutting edge of evolution. They're nice enough, but they're like ants. A few die and a few more take their place. Nobody notices any difference."

"There *isn't* any difference."

"So it seems."

The train stretched itself out and, couplers banging, moved slowly forward again. Malcolm gazed out into the darkness and sipped his drink. Frank and Chloe fell to talking about her singing career and his life as a woodsman. Then, when Frank told her he was a veterinarian, they discovered their common love of animals. "I have a kitten," Chloe said excitedly, grinning, reaching out to grasp his upper arm and looking squarely into his eyes.

"On the train?"

"Yes!"

Frank laughed with sudden delight. Malcolm felt almost embarrassed at the obvious affection that rushed and tumbled through this laugh. Frank looked at Chloe as if he wanted to kiss her right then and there, never mind she was thirty years younger than he. Malcolm smiled to himself.

Shortly afterward, Stan and the startlingly redheaded Vera decided to go elsewhere. Frank and Chloe moved to the other side of the table so they could talk with Malcolm face to face. Frank went to the bar to buy them all more drinks.

“Frank seems kind of taken with you,” Malcolm observed.

“I’m kind of taken with him, too,” she said. “He’s funny. And he loves animals.”

Malcolm smiled in agreement. After an awkward pause he continued. “I was hoping your friend might come along.”

“Her name’s Anya. And I only just met her at dinner. She said she was going to read for a while.”

“Oh.” He looked down at the table for a moment and then back at her. “Anya,” he said. Her name just fell from his lips. He liked it. He liked saying it. He thought about her again, envisioned her face, her blue eyes framed in long black hair, her aquiline nose, her easy smile and perfect white teeth.

“That was sweet of you to give her a rose.”

“Seems it inspired her to go read.”

“I think she liked it.”

“Trust me,” Frank said as he set the drinks down, “she liked it. I thought it was kind of hokey myself, but she liked it.”

Malcolm smiled. He pushed a five across the table but Frank waved it off.

“So, my young friend,” Frank said to him, “what’s keeping you? The old ball and chain?”

Malcolm was a bit taken aback by Frank’s reference to him as his “young friend.” How old was Frank? Sixty-plus? (And Chloe was maybe twenty-five.) Malcolm, at fifty-

one, had already long felt old. Frank, he thought, seemed fit as a fiddle, strong and bright-eyed, much younger in some vital way than Malcolm was. "No," Malcolm said, knowing as he said it that Frank would never believe it, "um, chivalry. I mean, she knows I'm interested in her, don't you think?"

"I think you're a bullshitter, is what I think," Frank said, laughing.

"She's married, too," Chloe said.

"Ah, well...that explains it."

"That doesn't explain anything to me," Frank said. "You'd seen her even before we went in for dinner, hadn't you?"

"Yes." Malcolm mixed himself another drink. "Earlier this afternoon. She has the most incredible eyes. I think I fell in love on the spot."

"You think?"

"All right, I did."

"You've been selling insurance too long, boy."

"Risk analysis."

"Well, that's even worse. And is that what you're doing now? Analyzing the risk? And what exactly *is* the risk?" Frank grinned and turned to Chloe. "Have you analyzed any risks lately?"

"No, I just love cowboys," she said, her eyes dancing.

Malcolm looked out the window, into the darkness.

"What do you see out there?" Frank asked.

"Darkness." Malcolm took a large sip of his third bloody mary and smiled at his new friends. He raised his eyebrows, tilted his head and looked up at the ceiling over them. "Nothing much. Everything."

"Let me tell you a story," Frank said.

"I love stories," Chloe said, making a big stage smile. "Sometimes I make them into songs."



“Okay, goldilocks,” Frank began, “sing this.

“I married a girl a long time ago and lived with her for thirty-five years. Almost as long as you’ve been alive. We were young when we began, and we were old when she died, eight years ago. I have a daughter older than Chloe. In the course of those years we faced a lot of challenges together. We had a lot of laughs and naturally we shared a little grief, some of which we brought to one another.

“We had a son who was three years older than our daughter. He died in Vietnam. Belle couldn’t stand it. She couldn’t let go of him. She couldn’t get over grieving for him. Within a few years, even with therapy, she became totally unable to function. All she wanted to do was stay in bed. Every loud noise was apt to send her into a fit of crying or leave her cowering somewhere in abject fear. Know what she was afraid of? That news of her daughter’s death, or my death, would arrive. That everybody she cared for would die. Sometimes she believed that Bernie’s death was her fault, because she had been so proud of him when he’d graduated from OCS in that beautiful white dress uniform. She’d been so proud, she thought, that she’d encouraged him to go to ‘Nam, to his death. At night, even before she slipped into her constant nightmares, she would often suddenly see him fall to his knees, and then pitch forward face down, and she’d hear his last, blood-choked breath gurgling in the mud.

“For the last fifteen years or so of her life, she was hardly present in this world. In time she got so sick I couldn’t care for her any more. She was like a needy, frightened child. I couldn’t let her out of my sight for five minutes. She tried several times to kill herself. My daughter was married, and had children of her own, and lived a thousand miles away. So finally I had to place her in a home, where she lived out the last few years of her life.

“During all this time, more and more I craved the companionship and affection of a woman. After it got really bad, I used to wish every day that she’d die, so I could get on with my life, especially with my life as a man. After awhile, though, I realized, or I

decided, take your pick, that this was my life. As a husband. Not pretty, but that was it. I felt like Hortense the elephant sitting on the flighty bird's egg while she toured with the circus. I didn't want to stay, but I'd given my word, and I couldn't leave. For a time, my desires and my commitment outstripped one another by turns, battling one another for my life. But, after awhile, my desires just seemed to have burnt out. Even my love for her became a sort of tolerant kindness. She was just an image to me, a memory. Oftener than not, she didn't know who I was. Sometimes she thought I was her father. Sometimes she thought I was one of her doctors. Sometimes she didn't recognize me at all."

At this point Frank paused and looked for a long time out the window, into the silent blackness of the Idaho forest through which the train was climbing ever higher toward the Continental Divide in western Montana.

"One day, toward the end, I was visiting with her in the hospital. She was having a lucid afternoon, and it was a gorgeous spring day outside, warm and faintly breezy, so I wheeled her into the garden and we sat in the shade amongst all the flowers, just quietly for the most part, enjoying the fragrant air. My mind was full of memories.

"'Frankie,' she said finally, 'you've been such a sweetheart, a savior almost, to me these past few years. But why don't you have a girlfriend?'

"I'm your husband," I said, as if that explained everything.

"She seemed totally astounded. She didn't believe me. Then she said, 'No, Frankie, my husband was killed in the war, remember?' And then she laughed. I think it was the heartiest, happiest laugh she'd had since Bernie's death. Her eyes glittered as she leaned toward me with an impish grin, as if she'd seen right through my silly deception. 'If you're my husband, Frankie, then where is your wife?' She looked at me for a moment, her eyes held wide, giggling with glee, in triumph at having demolished the logic of my claim. And then she laughed some more.

"Then she said with great solemnity, 'You really need a girlfriend, Frankie. It's not

normal, a husband without a wife. I worry about you. I won't be around forever, you know. You really have to learn to take care of yourself.'

"For a long time afterward I considered she'd just been daft that day, as she often was, but over the years I've come to see it a little differently. I think she was telling me the truth. The truth was, she didn't need a husband, she didn't even know she had a husband, not after the first few years. We were no longer connected that way. She needed me to care for her, to stand by her, to treat her, and to see that others treated her, with kindness and dignity—just as I had done. I'd assumed, or maybe convinced myself, without really thinking about it, that I couldn't continue to do these things if I loved another woman.

"I'd lost my job as a sawyer when the mill closed, and I'd gone to veterinary school. I'd spent most weekdays away from her during my years in class, and many days and nights at a time almost every month thereafter in the field, working with these magnificent animals. I loved the work and I enjoyed the pitch of the people I met. But I had a black hole in the center of my life. And after a while it started to expand into everything I did. Life became a shapeless task. I felt I was only going through the motions. I always faithfully did what I had to do, but it really didn't matter to me. I did this for a dozen years before that afternoon when she tried to liberate me. And you know what? All my self-denial didn't matter a bit to her. Maybe it even distressed her a little. It didn't do a thing to brighten her life. All it did was darken mine. And hers as well, really.

"Here's what I'm trying to say to you, my calculating friend. You need love in your life. You need passion in your life. If your wife no longer brings these things to you, and no longer cares whether you bring them to her, then whatever you may do about your marriage, you really must, like my Belle said, learn to take care of yourself. And you might find that, in the end, your wife will not begrudge it you much if you find another love, because she will know, long before you do, that while you may still care greatly for

her, she no longer has a husband in the carnal sense. She may not even care.”

“Some story, Frank,” Malcolm said, looking at the weathered face and the clear gray eyes.

“Yeah, sweetie,” Chloe said softly, touching his arm, “I’m sorry.”

“I’m just saying, if your reality doesn’t conform to the norm, then being a conformist puts you out of touch with your reality.”

“My reality used to conform to the norm,” Malcolm said.

“You stuffed it in there,” Chloe said. “You’re much too nice to be normal.” Both men smiled. Malcolm shrugged a little, as if to say he wasn’t so sure.

“Risk analysts are such humble people,” Frank observed drily, smiling at Malcolm. He grinned at Chloe, who melted.

“One thing I learned as a singer is that there are some songs you can sing and some you really can’t, some roles you can play to the hilt, that really knock the audience out, and some you’ll just never get quite right, because you can’t feel them and neither can the audience. Know what I mean?”

Malcolm noticed the silver bangle bracelets on her slim wrist and the blond fairy hairs on her forearm. He counted five earrings in her right ear. “Um, well, I understand what you’re saying, but I’m not sure what your point is,” he said.

“My point is that you have to go out and find out who you are, what you like, what you’re about, and who you aren’t and what you don’t like and what you aren’t about. You have to try different things, things you’re attracted to. Sometimes they’re great and sometimes they’re not. But the things that work, in my experience, are the things that move you, the things that tap into your soul, the things that are right for you. And I think you became an old man at a young age – well, I mean, not that you’re old...”

“And for you,” Frank continued her thought, “becoming an adult meant reining in your feelings, your hopes, your dreams. Becoming a dispassionate analyzer of other

people's hazards."

"Yes," Chloe agreed.

"You didn't just rein them in, though. You stamped them out. Or your job, or your marriage, or your kids, or old age, or those things plus a lot of other things stamped them out. After a while you were just going through the motions, a lot like I was."

"That's true," Malcolm said.

"Sure. That's why the feelings you have now are making you so uncomfortable. So why are you doing that?"

"Having feelings?"

"No, not having feelings. In your real life."

"In my real life, if you can call it that, having feelings, I mean, having powerful feelings, overwhelming feelings, feelings that really matter, is inappropriate. It's out of place. It doesn't fit in with the humdrum rhythm of life. It makes your clients, your wife and your children mistrust you. They want you to be steady, sturdy, predictable. If you get caught up in passion, that threatens them. Clients don't want you assessing their risks while you're struggling with an urge to jump off a cliff naked in the middle of the night. Your friends don't want you forming a passionate attachment to them because they have neither the time nor the inclination nor even the tools to deal with it. It isn't what they do. It's time-consuming and pointless. They don't want you forming a passionate attachment to anyone else, either, for exactly the same reason. You belong to them. They have an agenda for you. They feel threatened if it appears you might not follow it."

"Well, then," Frank said, "not to put too fine a point on it, I'd say you're fucked."

"Do you like living this way?" Chloe asked.

"Guess I never really thought about it."

"Until now."

"Yes."

“You never were attracted to another woman before?”

“Well,” he squirmed a little at the thought, “not very often. And I never let it get to me. I always arranged to remove myself from the situation so I wouldn’t have to deal with it. I didn’t really want to deal with it. After all, I subscribed to the passionless dogma as much as anyone.”

“Women have some curious things to teach us, Malcolm,” Frank said as he swirled and then drained his glass of bourbon. “Some are too simple for the male mind to grasp. Especially that detached, analytical, risk-averse mind that some men think characterizes their manhood. One of them is that feelings are facts, Malcolm. Feelings are facts. And sooner or later you can’t just ignore them.”

“Not at the moment, anyway,” Malcolm said, smiling at him. He looked out the window again, into the darkness, as if from all this emptiness some jinni might appear with a magical potion that would soothe his mounting sense of chaos.

“I think Anya has opened Pandora’s box,” Chloe said. She stared down into her drink as she slowly stirred it. “It’s one of those things you just never see coming around the corner, but then it does, and then you have to deal with it whether you want to or not.”

“All I know is,” Frank said, with the easy drawl that homilified his philosophy, “if I had twenty-four hours to do something, I don’t think I’d start by sitting around wondering if it would happen all by itself.”

Malcolm sighed and glanced again at the window. He felt alone, empty, helpless, hopeless, confused. He smiled at his friends across the table.

“It’s a pisser, ain’t it?” Frank asked rhetorically. Then he turned to Chloe. “Well, singing lady, shall we see what else is going on in this rolling ship of fools?”

“Wanna see my pussy?” she asked, tilting her head mischievously. Malcolm felt vaguely envious of their ease with each other.

“Thought you’d never ask, darlin’.” Frank extended his hand to Malcolm. “Get

some sleep, my risk-averse friend," he said. "You may have a dangerous day tomorrow."

Malcolm smiled. "I hope so," he said, but he wasn't sure he meant it. He hadn't really considered the dangers, only his fears.

He had one more drink. It was after one o'clock when he left to cruise the train, from the club car back to the tail end, but even after two careful traversals he did not find her. He concluded she was probably in a sleeping compartment.

He decided to try to sleep. He curled himself into his seat in the darkened car and tried to find some – any – comfortable position. Despite the fact that he was more than a little tipsy and not too particular, there didn't seem to be one.

He heard the far-off diesel horn, its throaty, hollow baritone, certainly no match in sheer poignancy for the plaintive coloratura shriek and wail of a steam whistle, nevertheless evocative – two long, sorrowful bovine bellows, one brief whoop, and a final, long, trailing cry that continued even as the red crossing lights flashed by his window, casting an eerie pulsing glow across an empty roadway. He was oddly reminded of hearing once, many years earlier, a chattering flight of wild geese, high in the cold sky above the nighttime clouds, and never seen, whose haunting cries had floated down to him for many minutes as they flew steadily southward. It was a Lorelei that called to him then, an invitation to be free, to wander the earth in search of whatever might be found. But he had hunkered down instead by the hearth, by its comfortable, reliable sameness, and ventured nowhere more. And he had forgotten the geese, and the lonesome train whistles, and all the calls of the wild, until this night. Now he could think of nothing else.

\* \* \*

Anya's music box was set up on the upholstered bench beside her compartment's little bathroom and across from the lower bunk bed, which folded up into another elongated seat. From her small collection she selected a CD of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* and

started it playing, softly. Then, nakedly comfortable in her white terry robe and heavy cotton socks, she opened the bed, took up her book, and settled herself elaborately upon her pillows to read.

One thing that interested her about mushrooms, and plants like them, was that whereas most plants, with the aid of water and sunlight, gathered up and combined elemental materials into protoplasm, that gelatinous stuff of life, mushrooms lived off dead plant tissue and profited by performing the reverse process, separating inert protoplasm into its constituent parts. So while the commoner forms of life were busily weaving simple chemicals into something more complex, here was another form of life assiduously dismantling all that worn-out complexity back into elemental simplicity.

The train rocked gently as it made its way slowly up the western flank of the Rockies, and Anya, imagining life forever assembling and disassembling the world around it, much of it alive, found herself thinking of the shy but happily impetuous owner of the jade green eyes that had focused themselves on her at supper, somehow making the back of her neck feel warm. She wanted to run her fingers through that luxurious growth of hair which seemed to bespeak a certain eccentricity and scorn of manners, although he seemed at the same time otherwise rather conventional. Still, she had seen him avert his gaze in the sitting coach that afternoon. She had sensed the hot flush of sudden desire that had so embarrassed him. And then the rose.

It had been a long time.

Eric had given her a rose once, just after the homecoming game, when they'd been about to leave for a three-day skiing vacation at Tahoe, she a junior anthropology major, full of bright-eyed enthusiasm for good works, he a football player majoring in business, which seemed to be mostly an exercise in cynicism. She'd let him conquer her innocence on that trip, and they'd been together ever since. "The perfect couple," his friends called them, which had turned out to be a throwaway comment they made primarily to encourage her belief in it and thus to ingratiate themselves with him.



Of course it had seemed utterly perfect to her at first – the one, the only, the original perfect love. How in all the world of two billion men she had found the one made just for her, she had not known. Rather than the banal absurdity she now knew it to be, she had regarded it as a miracle. Although he had not shared her interest in primitive peoples, and in fact regarded all non-WASPs as evolutionarily challenged, she had at first found his passion for outdoor adventure exciting and agreeable. Kayaking down wild rivers, rock climbing, skydiving, hiking sometimes twenty miles a day through the mountains and living off the meager biota of the back country, were activities she found exhilarating. If at the end of day he came to her to spill his excess of boyish energy, so much the better.

But in time, especially after they were married and the perfect couple nonsense had given way to the mundane, gritty accommodation of living together without hope of surcease, she had gradually come to perceive his incessant outdoor recreationism as a means of avoiding the inner self, the world of ideas and feelings, something she associated with a certain lack of imagination and dullness of mind, much like athletics.

Then, after the accident, when almost all these sorts of activities had been rendered either impossible or, at best, perfunctory and pitifully difficult, their shallowness, and his, had become ever more evident. For a while, they'd tried to grin and bear it, make the best of it, keep on keeping on, and all the other things people advise who are not actually confronted with it. But it had inevitably grown more difficult. Their friends, his in particular, had faded out of the picture. Eric had in time become bored, bitter and demanding, almost sadistic. The more she took care of him, the more he accused her of not caring about him, and one day she realized that, at long last, he was probably right. She could no longer please him in any way. And after five-and-a-half, almost six years, she'd decided to leave. He had of course made a terrible fuss, threatened to kill himself and so forth, sobbed great alligator tears about how he now realized she had never really loved him. Somehow, at the moment he'd said that, she had felt finally free to go

without any further pangs of conscience.

She thought about the stranger, his shy smile close to her face, his arm around her waist, his green eyes charming her with their humor and melting her with unspoken words, his laughing lips brushing against hers, his nakedness warm and urgent against her body, his burgeoning desire pleading against her soft thigh. But wait. Was this just errant fantasy, induced by so many endless nights of empty loneliness, or was it something more? Did she intend to follow this path of idle wondering to some living moment of experience, assuming the opportunity arose?

The long threads of pale mycelial tissue, like hollow pipes of spaghetti, searched everywhere through the soil, looking for stuff to eat, encouraged by success. Periodically, and quite mysteriously she thought, many strands bonded together to punch up through the surface into the sunny, aerobic foreign world, where the fungal mycelium fruited and propagated its spores.

What would motivate a plant, or an animal for that matter, to spawn outside its natural environment? Obviously some clump of primordial subterranean mycelium did not one day feel the urge to propagate and say to itself, well I think I'll shoot some spores around in the world above the surface, where I have never been and where I would quickly die. It must be, she thought, that earlier forms had evolved in water, on the sea bottom, say, or in swamps, where the boundary was not so distinct, and had adapted as the land rose and the covering water went away. Thus, although it still lived its life under the surface of the soil, it fruited back into what had once been its ancestral environment, except that that environment over millions of years had been transfigured from seawater into air and sunshine.

Yes, she did.

Just as she drifted off into the vague, shrouded, floating world beneath consciousness, from deep in her throat there emanated a little involuntary moan. It was quite audible, and it startled her momentarily to wakefulness. Then she smiled to herself

and fell asleep.

\* \* \*

He did not sleep well, and very early, even before first light, he made his way forward to the observation car. The bar was closed, the tables empty save two or three wearied smokers. The observation deck was likewise almost unoccupied, and he sat down in an empty section on a garish orange benchlike seat, put his stockinged feet up on the sill, and settled in to watch through the dim morning grayness an unfolding alpine panorama beyond the huge windows.

The train was working its way up the spectacular Kootenai River valley in one of the most rugged regions of the Rockies, nearing the Continental Divide. Malcolm gazed at the snow-tipped peaks in the distance, granite massifs and spires that soared into the clouds, rills choked with broken scree and patches of snow, green meadows that slipped and spread down the mountain flanks, edged occasionally with trees, spruce, larch, fir, pine and silvery stands of birch. He wasn't really paying attention to his immediate surroundings when she slipped in.

"Good morning," she said, seating herself beside him. "Beautiful, isn't it?"

He looked at her and chuckled slightly. "It's improving," he replied. She wore a loose white cable-knit sweater and well-worn levis that fit her like a comfortable glove. She had a silver bracelet on her left wrist. Malcolm noticed that she wore no wedding ring and realized that he probably looked pretty grubby.

"I missed you last night at the tavern downstairs," he said.

"I was just listening to music and reading," she said. "It was too relaxing, I guess. I fell asleep early."

"Your dinner companion was there."

"Chloe?"

"With Frank, the guy I was sitting with. They seem to have a certain affinity for each other."

She reached down and picked up a thermos. "Want some coffee?"

"Sure," he said. "Thanks."

She unscrewed the top, which was a cup, half-filled it and handed it to him. "My name's Anya," she said.

"I know," he replied. "Chloe told me. Mine's Malcolm."

They shook hands. It was a warm, lingering handshake, almost as sensual as a kiss. Her blue eyes fixed on him. They both smiled. Malcolm felt brave.

"I was thinking about you last night," he said, sipping the hot coffee.

"And I you."

"I looked all over the train for you, but you were hiding." He looked at her and handed her the cup. "Very nice," he said. "Thanks."

"I have a sleeper. Did you sleep in here?" Her eyes searched his as she raised the cup to her lips and sipped from the very spot on the rim where his lips had been, only moments before.

"No, I slept standing up. Or scrunched down in the seat. Or maybe not at all. I'm really not sure. I suppose I look it."

"You look fine to me," she said, smiling. "A little ragged maybe. But it's a look. I like it." She reached down and deftly untied her shoes. Then she sat back and put her stockinged feet up on the window ledge next to his.

"So tell me, Malcolm," she said. "Who are you?"

"I'm a risk manager. I help people figure out where they have exposure and how to minimize it and how to cover it. I'm from New York. Long Island. Lived there forever. And I'm just coming back from a..."

"But *who* are you?"

"I'm a lost soul. And I love trains. It's like being in another world. I like the motion, the rhythm, the romance—you know, in the broad sense, the romance of being on a journey in the middle of nowhere. Or maybe on the Orient Express."

“No romance in risk management, I suppose.”

Malcolm thought about his situation at home, his family, his friends at the club, his business acquaintances and clients. He could perceive no romance in the lot of them.

“No romance anywhere in my life,” he said. “Just an endless gray void, kind of like it looked outside here a half hour or so ago. An occasional massive shape looming through the fog. Other than that, nothing. Just silence.”

“You’re not married?”

He felt a little panic brush over him. He really wanted to lie. “Oh, yeah,” he said, “I have a wife and two children, and three cats. The cats are sort of a paradigm of the family; they get along all right but if one died the others wouldn’t miss it.”

“What does your wife do?”

“She’s a lawyer. She went back to law school a few years ago. Mostly corporate antitrust stuff, I think. She likes the high-pressure environment and schmoozing with important people, most of whom, as near as I can make out, are respectable, acquisitive and very aggressive criminals.”

“You don’t get along?” She poured some fresh coffee into the cup and handed it to him again.

“We live in tolerant proximity. She’s sort of a matron. I think she became a matron at the age of thirteen. She looks like a matron; you know, sort of cylindrical. Ample. Almost grotesque, actually. I can hardly bear to look at her. But she’s very nice, really, sometimes.

“She works twenty-four hours a day. Even in her sleep. She doesn’t have the kinds of dreams most people do, but sometimes she wakes up with new schemes for keeping her clients’ scams from running afoul of the law and calls people up at five or six in the morning to tell them what she’s come up with. It’s kind of bizarre, but they seem to like it.

“Me, I’m very fond of art, paintings, sculpture, books, music. Things with passion.

I like impassioned music, tragic operas, big symphonic music, stuff like that.”

“I listened to the first movement of *Also Sprach Zarathustra* this morning before I came back here,” she said. “It’s kind of my wake-up song.”

“How do you do that?” Malcolm asked. “And where did this coffee come from? Do you have a kitchen up there?”

“I like my tunes, so I travel with a portable tape-CD player. And of course I have to have my coffee, so I stopped in the dining car and made them fill my thermos. That wasn’t easy because they really weren’t in the mood, but I have ways.”

“Oh, I’m sure you do,” he said, smiling at her. She most assuredly had ways. And he wanted to know every one of them.

She rotated her white-stockinged foot over on its heel and stroked the top of his foot gently, casually, playfully, once or twice, just as a friendly gesture. Malcolm almost jumped out of the chair. “I hope you’ll be hungry,” she said. “I made us breakfast reservations for seven-thirty.”

He looked at her out of the corner of his eye, quizzically, and then looked at the floor, noticing her long shapely legs, and how white her socks were, and then he looked at her again and laughed.

“Tell me what other music you like,” he said.

“Oh, where to begin? *Madama Butterfly*. *Turandot*. *Cats*. Vivaldi.”

“How about *Rigoletto*,” he continued, “*Tosca*, Leontyne Price in *Aida*, *Carmina Burana*, any fifth symphony, such as Beethoven, Tchaikovsky, Mahler, Stravinsky, or Dvorak’s, which is now called his Ninth. And, um, let’s see, Sibelius’ *Violin Concerto*. *Concierto de Aranjuez*. Lionel Hampton playing vibes. Miles. Ella in Berlin. Pink Floyd. I like funky stuff, emotional, soulful, melodramatic. Schmaltz, yes? How about books?”

Her smile of delight had just kept expanding as he went through this list, and now she laughed aloud and reached out and put her hand on his arm, gripping him softly, briefly, firmly. “You first,” she said, excited, childlike.

"Jeez, it's endless. Um, *Lolita*. *You Can't Go Home Again*. *The Ambassadors*. *House of the Dead*. Authors – Nabokov, Wolfe, James and Dostoyevsky there, Aldous Huxley, Kenneth Patchen..."

"Camus," she rejoined, "Dickens, Cervantes, London..."

"Goya, Dali, Pollock, Renoir..."

"Wyeth, Cezanne, VanGogh, what's his name, Picasso..."

"*Impromptu*."

"*Vincent and Theo*."

"*Tess of the d'Urbervilles*."

"The book or the movie?" she asked.

"The movie."

"I haven't seen it."

"Oh, you should. It's absolutely magnificent. The photography is fantastic. The locations, the staging, the costumes, the action, the camera angles, the lighting, the images, the sequences, the flow, it is all superb, constantly amazing. James's plot is a gothic masterpiece, intricate and powerful, like *Notre Dame*. A Greek tragedy. Two great geniuses, Nastassja Kinsky and Roman Polanski, invested it with a new love that shimmered between them off-camera. It's a paean sung by each to the other, and by both of them and all the cast to their art. It's incredibly beautiful."

"You recommend it in other words."

"You will love it."

"I think we love a lot of the same things."

The train, which had been proceeding rather cautiously for some time, now slowed to a dead crawl. They could see that they were about to cross an immense and precipitous ravine. The morning light had not yet penetrated to the bottom of it. Quickly, the ground dropped away around them. Malcolm got up and pressed his face against the glass. "Look at this," he said excitedly, as he looked down, and she rose to

press her cheek against the window too. They could see only the steep gray-green walls plummeting several hundred feet into the depths of the canyon, and the sparkling silver stream far below. Neither track nor trestle was visible beneath them. It seemed the train was floating in the air.

He moved his hand on the glass so that it touched hers, almost accidentally, almost involuntarily. It was a shock to feel her skin against his. He pulled away, just a little, and, without moving his head, looked up at her. She was staring right at him. Without changing her expression, she lightly lay her fingers on his.

“Neat, isn’t it?” she asked.

“Beautiful.”

“Kind of scary, though.”

“Yeah, kind of.” He noticed her fragrance. Faintly flowery. Vaguely tropical. His fingers caressed hers on the glass and when they both stood straight again it seemed they were only a foot or so apart, looking each at the other’s face, directly, without pretense, examining the eyes, nose, mouth, chin, cheekbones, forehead, eyebrows, eyelashes, skin, hair, lips, suppleness, softness, little motions of the eyes, tiny flickerings of the lips, the lips, the...

“It’d be a long fall,” Malcolm said, staring into her eyes, feeling hypnotized by her gaze, by her exquisite beauty, by her forwardness, by her humor.

“But a great ride,” she said. “And I think we’re really quite safe, aren’t we, mister risk fixer?” She was a half-dozen inches shorter than he was, and she smiled coyly up at him. He felt as if he were being suddenly swept away in a tremendous flood.

“Oh, I really want to kiss you,” he said softly.

As if by magic she seemed instantly much closer to him, fully but just barely touching him, her clothes against his, her presence now intensely intimate and irresistible. Her eyes searched his. “I really want you to,” she whispered.

They held each other then, somewhat tenderly, and her lips brushed his, and then



he pressed his swirling passion gently upon her mouth, supplicating, urging, yearning. And then she gave in to him and they let their hungry lips explore each other's ripe, warm, succulent delicacies.

And then they just held each other, and, after sighing for breath, softly said, "oh, god," in one another's ear. And then they drew their heads back and looked at each other and laughed.

"Where did *you* come from?" he asked.

"I've been here forever," she said. "Waiting for you."

They sat down sideways on the benches by the window, their knees touching, holding hands, alternately smiling at one another and gazing out the window at the majestic, breathtaking scenery passing by outside in stately serenity, craggy ridges and jagged peaks of steel-gray granite, streaked with black and white, hung heavy with snow, great dark green patches of alpine forest, occasional meadows overrun with wildflowers, yellow, white, purplish-pink against the coarse grass, itself chartreuse in the morning sun that rippled over them. Once they slowly passed directly across a long, narrow vale flanked by meadows and divided by a crystalline creek that fell as it rushed toward them through a series of half a dozen waterfalls, framed in deep green iridescent moss and brilliant as diamonds falling through the frosty mountain air.

Malcolm uttered an obscene expression of awe and appreciation. Anya's hand tightened its grip on his.

"Kind of like sex, isn't it?" she said, still gazing out the window.

"Mm," he said. He turned to look at her, her long, soft black hair lying on her shoulder, hanging silkily beside her face, almost hiding her ear. Her profile seemed elegant, confident, proud, but softened with a wistful sadness.

"Like looking at the face of god," he said.

"Like looking at your face," she replied, still without turning. Then she did turn her head to look at him. Her eyes were soft and full of innocent wonder. As were his.

She raised her arm and placed her hand behind his head, pushing her fingers through his lavish mane of hair. Like a green-eyed lion, she thought, and then discerned that really his eyes were blue but marked with many flecks of amber, not glittering icy blue like hers, but nowhere actually green. This made them seem even more fascinating and mysterious to her. And he looked at her as though he wanted to draw her into him through those eyes, to physically consume her.

Malcolm felt as though his heart were going to burst. He wanted to make love with her right then and there. Decorum steadied him. Conscience screamed at him. Venerable Aristotle, the pope of self-denial, and a gruesome panel of gaunt and ghostly judges, who eerily resembled his family and friends, scowled down at him from their exalted perches high in his private pantheon of demons with deep suspicion in their narrowed glaring gargoyle eyes and stern disapproval darkly knit into their furrowed brows.

"I need a drink," he said, and Anya laughed and sat up and poured him another cup of coffee.

\* \* \*

She offered to let him come to her room to wash up, but he demurred, preferring to attend to this in his own bailiwick. He did, however, accompany her to the door of her sleeping compartment, and at her behest he even peered inside. It seemed small, comfortable, cozy. "Nice," he said, but he was imagining being in there with her. He felt a little thrill of forbidden discovery, just seeing the place where she had relaxed and slept, naked and alone.

"See you in fifteen minutes," she said.

They had breakfast with the 7:30 crowd, which was happily sparse so they had a table to themselves. Malcolm had shaved, brushed his teeth again, and put on a clean shirt. Anya had exchanged her sweater for a dark green blouse cut like a man's shirt, open at the collar. She had rolled the sleeves up a few turns. Almost absently, they took one another's hand as they stood waiting to be seated. They elected, so they could look

at one another, to sit across from each other next to the windows. Just after they sat down and locked into each other's gaze, grinning at the dawning of their little secret, the train reached West Glacier, the entrance to the park.

"Ever been here before?" Malcolm inquired.

"No. You?"

"Yeah, once, a long time ago. I took a summer off and drove through a lot of this country."

"With your wife?"

"Uh-huh, and two little kids."

"How long ago was that?"

"Oh, I don't know, let's see, eighteen years ago I think." He reflected that eighteen years ago she had probably been in high school.

"I was just starting high school then," she said.

"It's stupendously beautiful," he said, smiling. "But it would be hard living here." Because it was cold and rocky and sterile, he meant, intellectually uninteresting and profoundly lonesome.

"I could do it," she rejoined. "For a while." For so long as it was warm and smooth and fecund, she meant, so long as she might be emotionally engaged and enchanted by it.

They moved their water goblets and he placed the little vase of flowers to one side and reached his hands halfway across the table, palms up, and she laid her hands on his. They searched in each other's eyes again, marvelling at the color, the clarity, the look of utter absorption each had for the other, the handsome structure and soft confidence of the face, the long sensuous hair, the attitude of liberated and good-natured commerce with whatever blessed gift—or curse—fate might offer them.

The waiter was nevertheless perfunctory. "Would you care to order, folks?" he asked.

They ordered orange juice, two eggs—over easy for him, scrambled for her—bacon, toast and coffee. Malcolm ordered milk, too. Anya inquired about english muffins but there were none.

Their hands crossed the table once more and they smiled at one another, a little embarrassed with themselves. Anya looked a little longingly at the three blossoms in the cut-glass flute. She glanced up at him. “That was so sweet of you,” she said. He squeezed her hand lightly.

They watched great mountains hunch themselves upward, into the vault of the blue sky, blue and bright as her sapphire eyes, cathedral pyramids of horizontally striated granite whose massive presence could be sensed, even unseen, from fifty miles away, shouldered up from deep within the earth, thrust high into the thin cold air, jagged, craggy, impossibly steep silver-gray surfaces, mantled in snow, home to agile goats but forbidding even to the gods, a silent, spectacular, magnificent testimony to nature’s wanton power, against which man’s measure was not only insignificant but imperceptible and meaningless.

“To happiness,” he toasted with the juice.

“To us,” she replied.

He grinned. His gaze fell momentarily to the linen tablecloth, then aimlessly around the car. “I don’t understand this at all,” he said, looking again at her. “What happened?”

“You seduced me,” she said, smiling seductively. He laughed at the idea that he might have some capacity to seduce this beautiful woman who seemed to find him so compelling. She laughed too, pleased that this oddly enigmatic man with the entrancing eyes was utterly taken with her.

“It must’ve been the eyes,” he said. “The first time I saw you, back there in the day coach, reading your book, my heart just almost popped out of my body. And then you ignored me.”

Her mouth curled wryly into a little smile. "I wanted you to think about me. And besides, I was afraid you'd come and sit with me, and, well, I wasn't sure I was ready for that."

"No?"

"No. I'm married," she said. "Or at least I was married. I mean, I'm still technically married but I'm divorcing my husband. I'm taking this trip to reacquaint myself with myself, with being on my own, with the world beyond my living room."

"I wasn't sure, you know, that I wanted to...that I wanted to get involved."

"And?"

"And last night I decided that that's what I'm out here for, to be involved with the world in whatever way appeals to me. If fate blesses me with beautiful scenery, I want to look at it, feel its impression on my soul, pay it my homage of awe."

"Fate has been good to us today."

"Yes."

Sometimes they saw where the glacial water, chilled and pellucid in its crystalline purity, offspring to the high white ice from which it had been so recently wrung, drop by drop, and gathering now from a thousand places far above, pressed onward by the rushing torrent that followed it, came to a ledge and leaped, hurtled over and sluiced into space, falling with a great echoing laughter, churning wildly against the unaccustomed air, whipped into raptures of swirling foam, shrouded in long gray veils of mist, plummeting downward into the canyon below, plunging into its pool with an endless hollow thunder, boiling back to the rolling surface, and then suddenly, as suddenly as its long, graceful dive had begun, flowing gently onward, serene again, as if this awesome glittering roaring spectacle, though forever undiminished behind it, had never happened at all.

"So what were you reading about?" he asked.

She laughed, almost losing a morsel of food, which she tucked back between her

lips with her forefinger, a gesture that caught Malcolm's attention and stirred his imagination. Sensing this perhaps, she let her fingers linger just a little longer, and slid her fingertips off her pouted lower lip a bit more slowly than she might have.

"Fungi," she said, and they both laughed.

"You're a fungiologist?"

"I'm an ethnologist actually. But fungi are my hobby. Sounds strange, I know, but it's something you can do at home when your spouse is bound forever to a wheelchair."

She went on. "Consider this. There's a fungus that lives in connection with an insect that is itself a parasite of certain trees. The fungus attaches itself harmlessly to the tree and its interior provides a safe haven for these insects, called scale bugs. The scale bugs feed on the sap of the tree and make the labyrinthine spaces beneath the fungus their home. The fungus thus shelters them from predators and from the weather. It keeps the bark of the tree shaded and moist and soft.

"In turn, the spores of the fungus, which are produced on its surface during its fruiting season, are poisonous to the bugs. Every season a certain number of the bugs are randomly infected with these spores. An infected scale bug develops a tubular growth on its back through which the bug becomes permanently attached to the underside of the fungus, and the fungus then feeds upon it through this tube.

"Here's a question, then: is this fungus a parasite on the scale bugs? Or does it live in symbiosis with the bugs? True, it immobilizes and eats some of the bugs. But, by necessity, for its own survival, it also shelters and helps nourish an ongoing free portion of the colony of bugs. So, to the bugs which get eaten it appears to be a parasite, but to the scale bug colony as a whole, it is a symbiont, a necessary partner without which the colony could not exist."

"This is called the ruling-class fungus?"

"No, I forget the name of it. But there is an interesting parallel with certain aspects of life, isn't there? I mean, we all protect and nourish the people we love. But we also in

some ways feed on them. And in order to keep them alive in our care, we have to feed and seed, so to speak, in a careful balance. Too little nourishment for them, too little nourishment from them, bingo, the whole system dies.

“Of course, in the case of people, that is of two people, rather than two classes in a society of people, the problem has a different status. Know what I mean? The bug colony prospers by feeding a certain number of its members to the fungus, but no individual bug prospers by being fed to the fungus. Between two people that would seem an untenable arrangement of benefits, since one of them would have to be eaten.”

“Yes,” he said, “it’s a much more appropriate model for intersocietal than interpersonal relationships, because of the statistical angle. But it’s interesting, you know – people in our culture tend to view society as an outgrowth of the coalescing of individuals, whereas historically society antedates individualism by a very long time.”

“That’s because it antedates conscious intelligence, or self-consciousness, or whatever you call it. Bugs have societies, and so do plants, that existed eons before Lucy. But behaviorally, at least, the members of these societies are not individuated.”

“Do you think we are individuated?”

“I think,” she said, “that once you have self-conscious intelligence, then bingo, you have individuation. But society antedated self-conscious intelligence. I mean, it was there when some monkey decided to call herself Lucy.”

“And then society had to sit down with her and hammer out some rules.”

“Yes. And when the other monkeys saw this, they all started naming themselves and trying to get preferential treatment from the government.”

“We were talking about this last night, about the loss of individualism and the rise of interest groups, the substitution of statutory rights for a broad philosophical presumption of liberty.

“In the old days, freedom was everything that wasn’t prohibited. Initially, the laws were few, small and specific. But nowadays the laws are immense and numerous and

regal in their scope. And freedom is more and more construed as whatever the laws authorize for you. But laws cannot authorize freedom. God authorizes freedom. Birth authorizes freedom. Conscience authorizes freedom. The laws only constrain our exercise of freedom, of the liberty that god, or one's individual soul, has posited as a condition of our existence."

"Rights for some restrict the liberties of all."

"It seems to me," he said, admiring the sweep of her mind, "that liberty is not something the government or your favorite group of social do-gooders can give you; it's something you just have to assert and live and develop for yourself. And you can be sure that, once they find out you have it, government and the do-gooders will start trying to figure out how to take it away from you, or at least how to charge you for it.

"So the wise course is to live free and not make too big a deal of it." He paused. "I'm sorry, I've been raving."

"It's all right, I like to listen to you talk."

"I'm just a natural ranter I guess. And I don't get to talk much with someone as quirky as you are, who actually likes it." Then he stared out the window, lost in thought. "It's because I'm full of feelings," he said.

She smiled.

Noticing a glittering surface in the distance, they marvelled together how a natural lake, indistinguishable on its vast mirrored surface from the grotesque puddles created by engineers and their arrogant dams, along its shoreline bears no resemblance whatever to those abominations. Graceful and sweet, delicate as a feather in its brush with the water's edge, shoreland steps lightly toward the water like a sylph, shedding her dry clothing for a summer's swim, gathering flowers and ferns as she nears the cool damp sand, pondering the rushes and lilies that shimmer slowly in the black stillness, dipping a princess' toe into the cool liquid slipper, sliding beneath the surface with a sigh.



"Let's go back to the observation deck," she said.

"I'd like to smoke a cigarette."

"Okay, then we'll begin in the bar. Oh, I should go get the thermos, too."

"Yeah, the coffee was very nice."

They finished theirs and Malcolm took a sip of water from his glass. The ice had melted and the water was warm. Anya's glass had been refilled and she offered its icy contents to him.

"You always have just the right thing," he said admiringly. "The right word, the right gesture. We like the same music, the same food, the same shows..."

"Do you like liver?" she asked.

"I love liver," he said.

"I think we're soulmates," she said.

Here and there along a gentler slope where soil and water might accrue, they saw spread out in green and yellow beneficence a peaceful rolling expanse of meadow, threaded occasionally by a narrow twisting goat's path, tinged everywhere with subtle glowing colors, snow whites and buttercup yellows, faded blues and cheeky pinks, where vast arrays of tiny wildflowers clustered and gloried in the sun.

As they prepared to leave, the train was suddenly enveloped in a long tunnel. "I love it when we go through these tunnels," Malcolm said. "Kind of a burrowing instinct, I guess."

Anya slid her foot up along his calf. "You'll have to save that 'til later," she said, smiling a wry little smile. "This is the Continental Divide." She liked the tunnels too. It was like a fade and dissolve in a movie. She loved bursting out the other end into who knew what, a new world, maybe.

\* \* \*

As he walked behind her along the observation car's upper corridor, Malcolm placed his hands on her waist and felt the smooth flexure of her hips as she walked. She

put her hands on his. When they reached the top of the stairs she turned and, so close their bodies almost touched, said softly, "I think I like the feeling of your hands on me entirely too much."

"Me too," he said.

"For such a public place, I mean."

"Well, ..." He felt a sensation of indecision, almost a panic. What did it mean? Was she suggesting they should...

"C'mon," she said, and started down the steep stairs. He caught a fleeting glimpse of her white bra under the open shirt, and a hinted emergence of warm, supple flesh. He let out a long sigh. Fate had brought her to him, fate had swelled his heart with love, and now fate was not about to be denied its recompense.

Frank and Chloe were sitting at a table beside a huge window and motioned them over. Malcolm let Anya sit next to the window and slid in beside her. Her thigh pressed gently against his, suffusing him with a glow of ill-concealed lust.

Anya greeted Chloe with a big smile and introduced herself again to Frank. "Now how could I forget such a pretty name?" Frank protested. "Is it Russian?"

She was delighted. "Yes. My mother's Russian and my father's Welsh. It was my grandmother's name."

"Well, I see you two finally got together," he said to Malcolm. "Last night we thought you might hurl yourself from the train and end it all."

"Well, I was going to," Malcolm replied, "but then I thought maybe you two would realize you needed me to help you relate to each other, so I figured I'd wait around for the call to serve. But unaccountably the call never came."

"Frank was busy," Chloe said. "I made him tell me almost the whole story of the Civil War."

Malcolm lit a cigarette and Anya gently took it from his lips. He smiled at her and lit another.

"Needless to say, I didn't get far," Frank said.

Chloe looked at him impishly and put her arm around him. She was wearing a light blonde deerskin jacket over a t-shirt that said *Zoo Life*, and, Malcolm noticed, no bra. "Well, you can tell me the rest of it later," she said. "One skirmish at a time."

"I think," Anya said sotto voce, "the call was routed elsewhere."

"It was a long war, darlin'," Frank smiled. "It may take quite a while."

"M-hm," she purred.

"Kind of like Scheherazade in reverse," Malcolm mused. Chloe's golden ringlets glistened in the morning sun, and Frank's face looked fresh and well-scrubbed. They seemed a natural pair in spite of the years that might have separated them.

"He likes the toilet paper coming off the top of the roll, too," Chloe said, "so that kind of makes him perfect, don't you think?"

"Oh, I always thought so," Malcolm agreed. "Even before I knew that."

"Oh, god," Anya said. "We used to even fight about that. Eric liked it coming out the bottom so he could see whether a blemish was coming up."

"Did he snore, too?" Chloe asked, inferring immediately who Eric was.

"No, not usually."

"My old boyfriend snored all the time. It sounded like a herd of pigs farting. I couldn't sleep in the same room with it. And you couldn't stop it. As soon as he went back to sleep he'd start up again." Here she made several grotesque snorts and grunts that really did sound like erumpent pigs. Everybody laughed. "Sometimes I couldn't even sleep in the next room. One night in a hotel I actually tried to sleep in the bathtub. It was awful. It drove me insane."

Malcolm did not know whether Althea snored, nor did he care. He had not slept in the same room with her for many years.

"You guys want some coffee?" Anya asked brightly, raising herself from her seat almost before the assents were given. "Let me out, sweetie, and I'll get the thermos."

Malcolm moved to the side so she could extract herself. "I'll try and swipe some cups from the dining car," she said.

"I'll go with you," Chloe perked up. "I'm good at that. And I hate those styrofoam thingies."

After they left, Frank asked Malcolm when he'd joined up with Anya.

"This morning," Malcolm replied. "Upstairs. I was watching the sun come up when she appeared."

"And you told her your name was Sweetie?"

Malcolm laughed. "I'm in love."

"Hell, you were in love last night."

"Yeah, but I was living in a fool's paradise then. Now I'm totally fucked. I want to make love with her every time I look at her. I want to take her home with me. I can't keep my hands off her."

"I s'pose your wife wouldn't appreciate your bringing her home with you."

"No. Although god only knows what difference it would make to her."

"Maybe she figures she can keep you best if she keeps you unhappy."

"That'd be a weird approach."

"Oh, I don't know. An unhappy man is a defeated man, and other women can sense that he isn't going anywhere. He's been hogtied and pussywhipped. He no longer dreams of escape."

"I wouldn't say that I'm unhappy," Malcolm defended himself. "Just, um, bored. Habituated. Well, not even that. Just—nothing."

"Dead," Frank said.

"Yeah."

"Did you tell her you're married?"

"Sure."

"Ah. Then you *are* fucked."

\* \* \*

“Did he tell you he was married?” Chloe asked.

“Sure.” They reached the door to Anya’s compartment and went in.

“Mmm,” Chloe said, sniffing the air, “it smells like gardenias in here.”

“Think he’ll like it?” Anya smiled.

“You haven’t ...?”

“No. We just got together this morning. I really wasn’t sure I wanted to do this. I had to think a long time about it last night. And I dreamed about him.”

“His wife doesn’t bother you?”

“She isn’t on the train. She isn’t in his thoughts. She doesn’t seem to be in his life, really. And I’m not planning on marrying him. So, no, she isn’t a bother as far as I can see.”

Anya picked up the thermos. “I’ll get some more coffee in the dining car,” she said, “and you liberate a couple of cups, okay?”

Chloe grinned. “Already have ‘em,” she said. She moved her hand away from the side of her open jacket and revealed four cups nestled along her forearm.

\* \* \*

Anya poured fresh coffee for everybody and they sipped it while the conversation hovered around Frank’s upcoming horse judging and what he and Chloe were going to do while they were there, which was, basically, see the fair and maybe go out dancing. And, of course, continue Frank’s probably endless disquisition on the Civil War.

“And then what?” Malcolm asked as a trainman announced from the stairs that the train was arriving at East Glacier and would be stopping for about fifteen minutes in case anyone wanted to “detrain” into the fresh air and sunshine.

“Oh, Malcolm,” Anya said, her blue eyes sparkling, “let’s get off.”

“I’m all for that,” he said, looking at her.

“Off the train, I mean,” she said with a little pout. “You really are a dirty old man.”

They grinned at each other. Malcolm looked at Frank. Frank looked at Chloe.  
“We’ll wait for you,” Frank said.

So they detrained into the crisp autumn air and bright morning sunlight. They looked around at the old lodge and the towering mountains beyond it and stretched themselves happily, feeling newly free and alive. Then they walked to one end of the platform, away from the small crowd, and melted into a long, silent embrace. Malcolm could feel her body almost as well, he thought, as if they had both been unclothed, from her thighs to her inky black hair, so thick and silky and soft against his face. She smelled delicious. She raised her face to him and caressed his eyes with hers, and with almost-innocent tenderness they clasped one another’s lips and breathed hot sighs against one another’s cheeks. Then at length, each with an arm around the other, they walked back down to the other end of the platform and peered through the window of the station house and looked at themselves reflected in the glass and opined that they looked pretty good together.

“I feel like a teenager,” Malcolm said, laughing. “You know? I have hormones. I have feelings shooting out of my pores. You’re so beautiful.” He paused, looking into her eyes. “I think I’m in love.”

She smiled. “I know I am,” she whispered softly.

Frank and Chloe, with his arm around her shoulders and hers hugging his waist, appeared on the platform, grinning, carrying the thermos and the cups. Malcolm and Anya walked over to join them, next to the train.

“We couldn’t miss this,” Frank said.

“Isn’t it beautiful?” Anya replied.

After they returned to the train, Frank and Chloe decided to go to his compartment rather than returning to the club car. “I need a nap,” Frank said.

“And the kitty’s probably lonesome,” Chloe added.

“Yeah, you look bushed, Frank,” Malcolm said. Chloe looked at Anya with a little

grin in her eye and then they took their leave.

“Want to come up to my place and catch a nap?” Anya asked.

“Sure,” Malcolm said. “But first let’s have a smoke and talk some more.”

“Am I making you nervous?”

“No, it’s not you. It’s me. I can’t believe what I’m feeling. I’ve only known you for three hours.”

“All I said was come take a nap. I won’t even bother you. I’ll read. I’ll leave. And haven’t you heard of love at first sight? I think that happened to us, Malcolm, let’s see, about eighteen hours ago, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, it did, and it’s beautiful. You’re beautiful. I’m totally dazzled and delighted by it. Nothing this incredible has happened to me in a long time, maybe ever. I would’ve bet it *couldn’t* happen.

“I am tired and it would be nice to have a comfortable place to sleep. But I just want to know so much more about you, I don’t know why, I guess it would make it all seem more real to me.”

They descended the stairs to the club car. “It is real, Malcolm.”

They sat again by the window, across from each other this time. They looked at each other and the urges that welled up in them spilled over into laughter. Malcolm stared out the window, watching the world go by, the world of which he no longer felt a part, the outside world, the other world, a backdrop world, painted on cardboard.

“I want you,” she said softly, leaning across the table. “I want to feel you on me and inside me. But I’m not trying to push you into anything.”

“Oh, god,” he said, catching the breath of his own desire, then looking at her and smiling wryly. “I want that too. But I’m a wreck.”

“We’ll work around it.” She took his hand. “Okay, we talk,” she said. “But if you start falling asleep we’re going to my place.”

He looked at her. How beautiful she was. How fascinatingly self-assured. He

smiled and looked out the window at the grandeur slowly passing by and shook his head. "Tell me about your life," he said.

"I was born in San Francisco, moved to Monterey when I was three, grew up there, went to Cornell, got excited about anthropology at Walden Pond, took an MS in Ethnology at USC, got a teaching job at SF State, met Eric, got married, life took a header. Now I'm making a comeback. My dad's a doctor and my mother's a psychologist. I have two brothers, both older, and a younger sister, none of whom I ever see. And you?"

"I was born in Franklin, Vermont, a tiny town near Lake Champlain. My father was a schoolteacher; he died in an auto accident when I was eleven. We moved to Long Island, where my uncle and his family lived, on Montauk Point. I grew up there, studied accounting at Columbia, went to work for my uncle selling insurance, married Althea, had two kids, got into risk analysis, settled slowly into the thick gray quicksand of everyday life and eventually disappeared."

"And now you've been reincarnated on this train as a beautiful mysterious man with gorgeous green eyes."

"So it would seem." The train appeared to be moving a little faster now, swaying gently from side to side, the wheels beating a steady rhythm that somehow mirrored the song of his heart. "And what magic brings you here to quicken my life?"

"Everything is fate," she said. "Eric had a terrible accident shortly after we were married. It destroyed him. Over the years it began to destroy me too. I tried to believe this was my destiny, to be the heroic wife, and that something worthwhile would arise from all this sacrifice. But it only got worse and worse, and in time I realized that all I'd ever accomplish was my own destruction as well. So I decided to let it go, to accept the fact that I couldn't save him, to move on with my life. And," she brightened a little, "here I am."

"What happened to him?"



“We were on a rock face in Yosemite,” she said. “We had to go up a narrow pipe and then laterally for about 80 feet across a sheer wall. It wasn’t especially tricky otherwise, and we’d done it several times before. Eric went first, because he was stronger in free climbing. When he was ready, I started over. When I was about halfway across, I stepped on a little ledge. I thought it felt peculiar, but when I pressed down on it, it held me, so I transferred my weight onto it. It held. So I moved over and prepared to take my next step, and suddenly it gave way. It just disappeared under me. Before I even realized it had collapsed I had fallen past it. I never knew I could fall so fast. Above me, although I had no sense of it at the time, several pitons that should have shortened my fall just blew out of the wall. It seemed like I fell forever, but suddenly I felt the rope snap me up. Then I thought the rope was going to kill me, and I was swinging wildly back and forth, slapping over the rocks. Anyway, to make a long story short, Eric caught me. And when he did, he broke his back. Two vertebrae were crushed and that severed his spinal cord. I couldn’t get up to him, and he couldn’t move. It was awful. A rescue team had to come down from above and get us. That was six years ago, and he’s been paralyzed basically from the neck down ever since.”

“Sometimes, afterward, in the beginning, we’d do things, like go scuba diving. Eric would usually just snorkel, you know, float on top and peer down into the water. It’s hard when you can’t use your legs, and after awhile his arms weren’t strong like they had been. We pretended for a long time that we could deal with it. I don’t know, maybe we did deal with it. After going through the first few months, and remembering how awful that was, we sort of had to be courageous and see it in the best light we could. At first, after he got home and started his rehabilitation, I think we were happy that he could do anything at all, and when we discovered anything that he could do, any way he could experience sensual pleasure for instance, we told ourselves that it wasn’t so bad after all, because at least we could do this.

“But he really couldn’t experience sexual pleasure. And in time this became true of

sensual gratification generally. He really couldn't enjoy snorkeling even, because he was totally at the mercy of the wind and the waves. He felt like a cork bobbing on the ocean. In a way, he said, it only reminded him how totally helpless he was, even in this most forgiving environment. He felt guilty about the time it took for us to accomplish even the simplest things. He felt guilty about the fact that I was stuck with him. After a while, everything we tried seemed to have this effect on him and eventually he preferred sitting in his chair, talking or listening to music, to anything else.

"At first I know he just wanted to be reassured that I'd stay with him. And I was determined to do that. I love him, and even though he isn't the man I married, he is all that's left of the man I married, and I am all that's left of the woman he married. After all, in time we all grow old and decrepit and sickly and, while we couldn't ever really be prepared for that, at least we knew it would happen someday. But not right away, not all of a sudden, not a year after you're married. He was scared to death that I'd leave him, I know. Still, I think over the years he came to really, truly hate the fact that I was with him. Seeing me made him feel ugly. He became sullen and morose and after awhile he started to get mean. I was no better for him, really, than a nurse. I was less interesting to him than a whore. Love means nothing to him now. Life means very little to him except pain and boredom and despair. And being with him, struggling with him, always fighting against his black reality was dragging me under, too."

"And you kept teaching all this time?"

"For a while I did, but he needed somebody with him 'most all the time. He got sick a lot. He always thought I was meeting other men. It just got too crazy. My dad helped us get a bigger place and steered me some contract work doing fungal studies and eventually I just stayed at home." She gazed out the window for some time, pensively, remembering. "It's all history now."

"Now you're free."

"Yes. No. I'm working on it. It's not so simple."

“Disentangling yourself...”

“Yes. I decided to take this trip for a change of scene. To be somewhere completely different. To separate myself from everything I knew, to see who I was independently of all the paraphernalia of my life. The thing is, when I get back it’ll all still be there. So somehow I have to achieve a real separation, a real distance from it, so it won’t have the same power to suck me in and drag me down again. I’m looking for an epiphany, I guess, a great spiritual conversion, a transformation, an awakening. Don’t have one of those handy, do you?”

“Wish I did. I’d eat it myself.”

“Actually, meeting you has been kind of like that, just being instantly attracted to you, falling in love with you, finding myself swept up and away by you. It has, I don’t know, liberated me in some way. Last night when I was thinking about you, and whether I wanted to pursue getting to know you, I felt really fresh and carefree. I realized that I had nobody in the whole world whose interests or opinions I had to satisfy except my own. I really enjoyed that very much. It made me feel powerful and confident and alive.”

“It makes me feel good just to know that you’ve experienced such wonderful feelings. I wish I could always inspire such feelings in you.”

“You always will. And what about you, Malcolm? What inspires you? What are you looking for? Where are you going?”

He laughed at so many questions, and such big questions they were. And so few and such minuscule answers he had at hand. A long sigh escaped him. “For a long time, many years, anyway, I haven’t wished, I haven’t dared to dream. I haven’t felt inspired by anything much, partly I guess because inspiration only aroused feelings in me on which I couldn’t act. It seemed to me that circumstances had me fully enveloped in their grasp, their tender, sticky, impenetrable web, their dark, densely woven cocoon, its silken threads going this way and that, cozy and stifling, nourishing my social existence

at the cost of my soul's dessication. I'm like one of those bugs that feeds the fungus.

"I make good money, have a nice house, live in civil relationship with my family and friends, none of whom I actually know anything about, take vacations now and then to exciting new places that would bore a dead person, and I am constantly reassured by everyone I know that I live in Doctor Pangloss's best of all possible worlds. I know it isn't true, because now and then, when I'm not looking, sometimes maybe when I'm listening to some gut-wrenching, soul-swelling aria, or when I chance upon a flower blossom somewhere and really take the time to look at it and to see how amazingly beautiful and intricate it is—I guess that's true of a lot of things—I have feelings so primitive, so intense, my spirit struggles so desperately, I have such overwhelming longings to burst forth and fly free, like you, and yet these things are all foreign to my world, which I laughingly refer to as the real world but which at the point of these rare moments I know to be a prison of mirrors from which there is no escape."

He looked at her, deliciously warm and silky (was she just another furry spider?), her glittering blue eyes fixed compassionately and bemusedly upon him, her mouth a gentle, slightly amused smile. "Pretty pathetic, huh?"

"No," she said softly, "I understand."

"And now, as I wend my way across the country to return to my dreary cell, as I tangle my mind in spinning questions about the nature of mathematics and knowledge and quantum physics and the ineffable qualities of thought, as I relish these few moments of effortless, flowing, hauntingly rhythmic motion through time, now, bingo, as you would say, now there is you. Now these little hinted shades, these nuances of passion that have lain hidden and quiet in my soul for so many years, for such an endless lifetime, have exploded into a riot of colors, a swell of glorious song, an exaltation of larks, a tumbling, churning maelstrom of joy and desire and ecstasy that has overwhelmed me, ripped open my cocoon, blasted me into the frolicking winds, transformed my gray dirge into a glorious rainbow of celebration.

“I feel as if I’ve been suddenly transported into the Garden of Eden. I want to stay here forever. I want to be in East Glacier, standing on the platform in the golden morning sun, wrapped in your arms and with you in mine, in love, kissing you forever.

“But now, because I’ve had no such passions since I was very young, and didn’t perhaps even then have the strength to sustain such passions, I am suddenly once again a child, feeling vulnerable and tormented and afraid.

“Everything in my real life, or in my unreal life if I take this moment, this day as a reference, shrieks at me that I cannot possibly love you, that everything I feel is wrong and false and fantastic and impermissible, that this is the sheerest madness, which it certainly is. If I dare to succumb, I’m assailed by a Grecian chorus, now quite Victorianized in its emphasis, enumerating the heavy prices that will be exacted for my departure from the one true way, even for a dalliance. And if I leap from the precipice in any case, despite the baying of these hounds, I’m assaulted by my own imagination, my risk manager’s instinct, my instinct as a boy too suddenly flung into manhood, my instinct as a prisoner, that if things are good, they’re bound to get worse.”

Anya laughed uproariously at this, grasping Malcolm’s hand and looking at him in affectionate disbelief as she rocked backward, holding her hand against her mouth as if to hide her glee, convulsed with an outburst of delight.

“I love you,” she said. “And you forgot the most important part, which is that if things are bound to get worse, we may as well get a jump on them and make everything worse to begin with.”

They both laughed at this succinct summation.

“Everything doesn’t add up to zero, Malcolm.”

“I know,” he said, “I know. But it’s such a subtle thing. It’s like a dream, so vivid at the moment it occurs, and then, as soon as you look at it, it starts to evaporate, and the harder you look the faster it dissipates, and eventually, if you’re fortunate that way, you can explain it and write it down and tell people about it, but the dream itself has

escaped, the ethereal beingness of it is gone, and all that's left is a hard dry shell."

"Well, it is a corpse, isn't it? Like an ethnological monograph. Like a marriage maybe, once it has devolved into rigor. You can look at it and say, yes, this was most interesting. But you see it has now expired, so what was the point of it? Hasn't it all come to naught? Is that what it's like, Malcolm?"

"Yes, I think so. You know, none of this changes my feelings for you, and maybe it even makes my craving for you – not just carnal lust but lust for your mind and your heart, lust for your person – more poignant, more gripping, more..."

"Desperate."

"Yes, desperate, because, I know it's weird, but I'm so afraid of losing you, of losing this moment, this passion, this dream..." He reached out to take her hands. His eyes became moist. Then she got up and went around the table and sat beside him. She turned toward him and they held each other close, their cheeks touching, their eyes gazing beyond one another, out into the unknown future. He kissed her neck softly.

"I'm sorry. It's crazy, I know. I hardly know you. I hardly know anything about you. I want no claim on you. I can't make you responsible for my happiness. I'm blessed by god that you've given me your love for this moment. It's absurd and sick and disrespectful and ingracious that I should be thinking these things, let alone wasting precious time talking with you about them, because I really just want to be with you and share all this beauty with you and feel how wonderful you are and give you all the happiness I feel."

"Love doesn't just go away."

He looked at her. "It's been my experience that it does. And the more intensely you feel love for someone the faster and more surely it disappears."

Anya had wanted to tell him about her plan to leave the train in the morning, but now she wondered if she could.

"Maybe it's like a dream," she said. "Maybe it's all this scrabbling to capture it, to

analyze it, to preserve it that makes it seem to disappear.”

“I’m sure that’s so.”

“I think you have to live it, Malcolm. Just live it. You have to have your feelings, so if you can enjoy them, enjoy them. Fate has given us this time together. Fate has brought me you, your beautiful eyes, your gentle heart, your twisted mind, all the things that fascinate me about you, and I just want to drink it all in, to bask in it, luxuriate in it, let it overwhelm and transport me, to float in the warm glow of it. Maybe the train will crash and we’ll all be killed. Maybe the morality police will rush in and shoot us for being in love. I don’t know what’s going to happen. I don’t care. I just want to love you.”

“My mind is full of buts,” he said, smiling, and they both laughed.

“I’m not love, you know,” she said. “I’m just a person who finds you incredibly attractive, engaging, beautiful, delicious.” She looked for a long time into his eyes.

“Love’s in your heart, Malcolm. In my heart. I just want to share this feeling with you. I don’t want to agonize over what it will be like to separate from you. It’ll be hard enough when it happens.”

He was chilled by this thought. It doesn’t have to happen, he wanted to say, but the words wouldn’t come out.

“You’re not planning to take me home and introduce me to your wife, are you?”

“No.” Now the awful reality of it descended over him like the sudden darkness of an eclipse. Somewhere between central Montana and eastern Long Island she would be gone, as absent again from his life as she had been before, only now there would be a huge gaping bleeding keening dying emptiness in his soul where before there had been only torpid unconsciousness. Tears welled up in his eyes as he looked at her, sensing that soon he would never see her again. So exquisitely beautiful. Like a blossom pushed from its bud into the sunlight of the day, vibrant with life, perfect, fresh, unstained, unworn, but only for a moment, a day or two perhaps, until the chill air of night, the incessant ravages of time and its hungry legions, the effort of existence would weaken,

wilt and wither her, and she would disappear forever from his world.

Somehow this realization, the utter inevitable truth of it, seemed to clear his mind of fear. Yet in that same instant he felt very far away from her, as if, even though she was right there next to him, touching him in fact, he could no longer reach her.

How could he not accept losing her? He would lose her anyway someday, just as he would lose his life. All that mattered, all there was, was this moment, this day, and it was his, she was his, love was his, to take or not, to receive or repudiate, to enjoy or deny, to embrace or reject. He and Althea had long since neglected cleaving to one another, and might not really want to. In any case, there was on that score no promise left to break. And today or tomorrow or the next day his time with Anya would be over, she would be gone. What happened after that, well, it didn't matter, it would happen. The alternative, the only alternative, was that nothing would happen here, that he would declare it all a mistake, say goodbye to her, return to his seat in the coach, read his book, get off the train on Long Island, go to his house, greet his family, go into his study, take out his pistol and kill himself.

"Perhaps I should leave you alone," she said.

"Oh, no, god no, please don't. I'm sorry. I'm a fool. I want you to stay. I never wanted anything more. I want to be with you every minute we can be together. I love you, Anya. I do. It doesn't make any sense, but I do. Whatever happens, I don't care either. You're right. This is all we have, this moment, and it's too precious, too priceless. I can only embrace it with all my heart and hope I survive the experience."

About this time Chloe came hurrying down the stairs and, looking a trifle disheveled but grinning broadly, strode over to their table. "Hi, guys," she said. "Anya, I wonder if I could ask you a big favor."

"How big?"

"Does your boombox play tapes?"

"Uh-huh. You want to borrow it?"



“Frank wants to hear some of my songs.”

“Well,” Anya said, “I’ll want to use it later, but you can borrow it until, say, suppertime if you want.”

Chloe lit up. “Gee, thanks,” she said.

Anya reached across the table and took Malcolm’s hands in hers. “I’m going to go do this,” she said. “Why don’t you get your stuff and bring it up to my compartment, okay?”

Malcolm smiled. “Sure,” he said. “Okay.” She squeezed his hands and she and Chloe left, sharing a laugh as they climbed the stairs. “Uh-oh,” he said to himself. He’d dared a not-quite-innocent glance, and now he dared not look away.

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Back at his seat, thinking that Chloe’s business might take a few minutes and feeling emotionally drained and bone-weary, Malcolm decided to sit down and watch the high plateau of Montana slide by, a barren, arid, harsh land dotted here and there by clumps of tortured trees and leafless scrub. Occasionally a shack or two, often covered with tar paper and topped with corrugated steel, would whiz by – the train was rocketing along now at almost 80 miles an hour.

“It’s just a conceit to think you have a real life on one hand,” she had said, “and an unreal, non-real life – within the bubble of this train for instance – on the other. Your wife and your career and the whole situation you’re returning to are real, no doubt, but I’m real too, and just as real in your life as they are. Isn’t this so? I should like to know how this can seem otherwise to you.”

And of course it couldn’t be denied. Not by him anyway. If she and the train and, most especially, his feelings, which perfused the whole situation by this time, were not real, then nothing was real. There was no way he could put the train and his feelings in one box and his life in New York in another box and pretend they had nothing to do with each other. There was no way he could pretend Anya was a dream, or a

hallucination, or a trifle of no moment, any more than he could do the same with his family and friends.

He could not even say, he thought, that they were more important and she less, nor could he say, given an absolute and awful choice between them, which he would choose. He marvelled at this result. Who would stand him up to such a decision? If she did, he'd choose them. If they did, he'd choose her, so onerous and wrongful would such an act appear to him. On the third hand, if fate were to present him with this Hobson's choice, he didn't know how he would choose, but inasmuch as fate had only moments ago brought them together here, this would seem pretty fickle even for fate. He might well, he thought, choose neither. It was the irony of consciousness, of conscience, of free will, of life itself, that while fate might make the rules, and fate might always win in the end, fate did not hold all the cards. He might be expelled forever from the Garden, he might be hung on a cliff and subjected to eagles tearing at his liver for ten thousand years, but he could eat the apple, he could steal the fire, and he could spit in the terrible eye of fate.

He really was in love with her. He really did want to share her bed, her nakedness, her physical self in its uttermost glory, or anyway one of its uttermost glories. He wanted to share with her, for a moment, the pinnacle of romantic passion, a moment in which the sacred and the profane are one thing, where heaven and earth are joined, a flash of holy fire, kindled by carnal lust, in which two people may pay homage to one another, each taking away from the experience something of the other, if nothing more than a glimpse of another person's most sacred inner self, if nothing more than the sure knowledge that out there somewhere, wandering the land, is someone who has seen you, known you, loved you, changed you, and become forever part of you.

It was more than that, though. He loved her too. He adored her. This had nothing to do with sex, nor even with gender. Her personhood enthralled him. The music she loved, the food she loved, her devotion, her self-esteem, her will to live, her sense of

humor, her keen and sometimes charmingly perverse perceptiveness, her warmth, her ease with people, her brashness, her courage – all these things drew him to her like a magnetic vortex. They resonated with one another like piano strings. Where they were not distinct from everyone else and alike to one another (like two bluebirds in a world of pigeons) she, he thought, possessed qualities and understanding he wanted for himself. She was not only very much like him in these secret ways, but she was very much better than he, very much more like the person he wanted to be, in other ways, and he wanted to understand how she accomplished this and how he too might accomplish it. For this alone he would have prized her, for this she was immeasurably precious to him, and she would still have been had he but sat and talked with her and never kissed her or fallen in love with her.

Had they not fallen in love, of course, they likely wouldn't have shared the feelings they did, they wouldn't have laid bare their souls and hearts to one another, and probably they wouldn't have, probably Malcolm wouldn't have come to regard her as an almost oracular figure in his life. Had they not fallen in love he would still have been delighted by her, he still might have left her feeling glad she'd met him and perhaps disposed to remember him fondly for a while, but he wouldn't have loved her, he wouldn't have made a place in his heart for her, he wouldn't have erected a little shrine to her in his spirit world. But they did fall in love. They burst into love. They were projectiles fired from opposing cannons into one another's paths. It was like walking into a doorframe in the dark. Blam! And once the dam was breached, there was no holding the water back.

Malcolm smiled at this congeries of metaphors. It was just like her. Just like her.

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After Chloe left, Anya washed her face and sat down to wait for Malcolm's arrival. Outside her window the hard gritty panorama of the high desert flew by. Off in the distance the Rockies stretched southeastward along the horizon, purplish and small,

slowly changing their aspect. She became suddenly aware that the train was going fast and that its rocking lateral motions were both soothing and exciting.

To him it was love, the kind of love that held people together through all the churning complications of days and years and decades, the kind of love that seemed so often to witness the transformation of a man and a woman into a pair of eunuchs.

She had seen perhaps too much of that kind of love, for a while anyway. It was all very well for the old, perhaps, and for those whose ambitions or possibilities were limited by one circumstance or another. It was, arguably, better than nothing. But nothing had its charms, too. At least one was not locked into a life of silent misery, of continuously unrequited longing, of contradiction and deceit.

She had looked into the cold, unseeing eyes of such love for many years now. She had watched her father and mother pass days into weeks without ever once looking directly at each other, certainly not just for the joy of it. Her father had made an occasional chivalrous gesture he might as well have made to a mannequin. Her mother had, on Sundays when the cook was off, heated up an occasional leftover supper which served mainly to remind everyone why they had a cook in the first place. Their relationship was friendly, but formal and distant, and yet they referred to it as love. They neither slept together nor cozied up in front of the fire on cold winter nights to tell each other stories. They seldom touched one another and then only perfunctorily, one to guide the other when both needed to traverse the same space. They might as well have been cousins, or brother and sister.

Anya accepted academically that this was love, love of some kind and doubtless an important kind, but it was not the sort of love she sought nor even wanted. With Eric, over the past half-dozen years love had turned to something even colder and crueler. Their eyes locked now, or had until she'd left him six months previous, only in fury and recrimination. In the end there had been no pretense of affection. There had been only duty for her. And habit for both of them. And her mother had dared suggest that she

owed it to Eric to remain with him no matter what the situation was. "For better or worse," she'd said. Well, Anya thought, her mother was no better exemplar than she herself. And marriage without love, without real love, was nothing more than a pathetic folie à deux, a grim mechanical danse macabre. Nobody considered this to be within the scope of "better or worse" when they pledged it (she certainly hadn't), and it seemed to her absolutely pathological that anyone should endure such a relationship.

She wasn't sure, then, what Malcolm meant when he said he loved her. She thought it clearly implied something in addition to being in love. Something that reached beyond the fantastic, emotion-ridden, thrill-of-the-moment wondrousness of being in love and tried to grapple with the other person as a person, as she or he actually was. Might it be, she wondered, that such a course led eventually and inevitably to the sort of gray acceptance and grinding commitment without passion that she'd seen between her own parents, in her own life, and that Malcolm evidently had come to perceive (and had doubtless participated in creating) everywhere in his? Was this the immutable journey of love? It was a question she couldn't answer, although she thought she knew of people to whom it had not happened, people who had kept the fires of passion burning all their lives. Charlie Chaplin, for instance, and Pablo Picasso. But they were few and far between, they had many partners, and they had enormous *joie de vivre*. She doubted very much that they anguished over whether love was "real".

In any event, she thought, she would be getting off the train tomorrow at Minneapolis. She'd be taking another train to Port Superior and then a freighter to Thunder Bay and then another boat to Isle Royale. After a few days or a week she'd be boarding the Canadian train for Vancouver. She'd be taking up an independent life, free, for the time being anyway, if not of love then certainly of commitment and all the wretched loneliness that went with it. Malcolm was unquestionably going on to New York, back to his dull, unfelt life, back to the mess of pottage for which he'd sold his soul. This made her very sad. He would not be saved, not by her anyway, and perhaps

not at all. Magnificent as he was to her, she saw also that he was yet—in a confrontation with the searing and soaring passions of love—a frightened and helpless child. On the other hand, despite his long life of gracious deference, despite the certain and likely painful disapprobation of his family and acquaintances, and despite his evident confusion, he was fully engaged in the struggle, and this seemed to her a little heroic, rebellious, self-assertive, courageous, foolhardy, and dangerous. She greatly admired and was profoundly attracted to these qualities, for, in a strange way, she perceived him as a soldier—in his case an old soldier—going off to war. Maybe he was Don Quixote and maybe he was an aging D'Artagnan. Maybe he would succeed and maybe he would fail. She could not know that, because she'd never see him again. But she hoped he'd take strength and courage in all his life's struggles from the love she had to give him.

A frivolous romp on the bower of unholy communion, that was all she'd wanted. Spinning in mad, passionate love among the stars, for a moment or a day, and then a kiss goodbye. Maybe a few tears. That was all she'd thought it would be. That was all she'd wanted it to be. That was all she had time or space for. But now it had metamorphosed into something else. Now she loved him.

\* \* \*

When Malcolm awoke she was sitting on the seat beside him. He strained to stretch himself and smile at her. He felt chagrined. "Oh, shit," he said. "How long have I been asleep?"

"About an hour."

"I'm sorry."

"No problem. I liked watching you sleep. And I read for a while. Anyway, rouse yourself and come up to my place like you promised. You can finish your nap in comfort."

"Where's my bag?"

"I already took it up there, so you have no choice." She grinned and rubbed his

shoulder briefly. "C'mon," she said, standing and offering him her hand.

"You can sleep a couple more hours and then take a shower before dinner. You'll feel like a new man."

He unkinked himself and followed her up the aisle. "Right now I feel like an old man."

"I'm sure you can be resuscitated," she said.

When they were on the platform between the cars he carefully and wordlessly maneuvered her so that the two of them were standing sideways across the seam between the cars, one foot on each car's apron, and held her close to him while the floor beneath them slued crazily. Then he gently kissed her. "Nice action, eh?" he said, grinning.

"Mmm, yes," she responded coyly. "Can you reproduce that elsewhere?"

"We'll have to try it and see."

"I think you're feeling much younger now."

"I'm easy," he said. He, Malcolm Napier, easy? It was a bizarre concept. And yet he felt as easy as air.

\* \* \*

Anya read in Malcolm's book for a while and then showered and dressed while he slept. Around five she sat on the bed next to him and bent down and kissed him softly on the lips. His eyes opened slowly, grinning and sparkling. Her hair smelled fresh and scented with lavender. Her eyes poured subtle passion into his. "I've spent a lot of time watching you sleep," she said. "You look so peaceful."

He pulled her down against him, careful not to muss her. "You look beautiful," he said as he kissed her again. "I'm sorry I missed seeing you get dressed."

"I was tempted to wake you but I knew you needed to rest, you being such an old man and all."

"I suppose you're not going to let me take all those pretty clothes off you right

now, so I guess I better get up.”

“Well, we have plenty of time...” At this moment, propitiously, there was a knock at the door. Anya answered it. It was Chloe with the boombox.

“Hi! Come on in,” Anya said.

“Oh, pardon me,” Chloe said when she saw Malcolm.

“Hi, Chloe,” Malcolm said. “I’m just resting.”

“Oh, I see. From your labors? You should see Frank,” she said, laughing. “He’s dead to the world.”

Anya set the music box on the small seat, next to Malcolm’s bag. “Want some coffee?” she asked Chloe.

“Well, I should...”

“It’s okay, he’s actually still got his pants on—I think.”

Malcolm stuck a clothed leg out from under the covers.

“You guys are kinky,” Chloe laughed. “Sure, I’d love some.”

Chloe and Anya sat together on one of the seats. Malcolm, dressed in his levis and nothing more, sat up on the edge of the bed. “I’m going to wash up,” he said.

“There’s a shower in there,” Anya said. “Your toilet kit’s on the washbasin.”

“Thanks.”

While Malcolm was showering, Anya and Chloe decided that the four of them should have preprandial drinks and then supper together. Anya told Chloe that she’d be detraining in the morning to continue her journey along Lake Superior.

“How sad!” Chloe exclaimed. “Does Malcolm know?”

“Sort of,” Anya replied.

“He’s kind of cute. He always seems to be in such a tizzy.”

“He tries to see every side of every subject,” Anya said. “But he never can. I think it’s sort of fascinating to watch him writhe around, but it makes me crazy, too.”

“Are you guys, um...”



“Let me tell you. I have feelings for this guy like I never had for my husband, even when we were first married. We’ve known each other for less than a day and we’re madly – and I mean madly – in love. I’ve told him things about myself that I’ve never even told my mother. And by this time tomorrow I’ll be on Lake Superior and he’ll be a thousand miles away. We’ll never see each other again. But it seems as though we’ve known each other forever. We talk about everything. We have so many bizarre things in common. He loves operas that I love, we’ve read a lot of the same books, I love poems that he loves, he likes liver, I like liver (here Chloe turned up her nose and made a face), I like sweetbreads, he likes sweetbreads, we look at the scenery and see the same features and have the same responses to them. It’s like we were cloned from the same cell. And I think somehow we were, and that we’ll always remember these hours we’ve had together as something totally unique in both our lives. It’s really weird, but it’s incredibly intense.”

“God,” said Chloe, “if you both like liver it must be a romance made in heaven.” And they both laughed.

“I really love him,” Anya said. “I just thought it’d be a fling. I didn’t mean for that to happen.”

“Isn’t it odd? I mean, that we met them here, at the same time and all?”

“And you and Frank are going to spend some time together?”

“As long as he wants me, which will be forever, I hope.”

“Really?”

“He’s really fun, and interesting in bed, too. He just accepts everything. I mean, he knows what he wants, and he goes after it, but he’s very open to new things. And he’s very understanding of things, I think.”

“He seems to be. And he’s crazy about you. Did he like your songs?”

“He even learned a couple of them.”

“Yeah, I think there must’ve been some kind of cosmic wave shooting through the

train last night. I mean, this was definitely not something I was looking for. It just seems like some kind of miracle or something. So I'm going with the flow. I'm on a quest for the grail of self-identity, and naturally I have no idea where I'm going. Somehow this New York risk analyst is an enchanted figure along the trail who if I love him enough will help me find the way."

"You think so?"

Anya shrugged. "Why else would he be in my bathroom?," she said, and they both broke out in helpless laughter.

"Anya?" Malcolm called from the bathroom.

"Yes, sweetie?"

"Is there a towel around anywhere?"

Anya held up the towels and smiled at Chloe. "They're out here, lovebug," she said. "Do you need one?"

"No, I'll just dry off with toilet paper," he said.

Anya went to the door, opened it part way and made an ostentatious show of presenting the towels to him without looking in and then, as he took them, she looked right at him, and then down and up his body. "Hairy legs," she said with raised eyebrows and a teasing smile.

Malcolm emerged from the bathroom a few minutes later with a towel wrapped around his waist. "Pardon me, ladies," he said as he went to his travel bag and began looking for clothes.

"Nice buns," Chloe said.

"Hairy legs. You know what that means."

"Kinda like big noses, huh?"

"But more so."

Malcolm turned around. "Purple hip-huggers with white hearts," he said, holding them out to an admiring audience.

Then he proceeded to put them on without exposing himself under the towel, finishing with a little wriggle and the slow removal of the towel. "Lust on, ladies," he said. This received polite applause and wry smiles all around.

"I'm really sorry Frank missed that," Chloe said.

Malcolm regarded Anya studiously. She had on an almost-sheer white cotton blouse and another pair of those well-worn levis that fit her trim hips and legs so comfortably yet conformingly. Her belt was a ceremonial sash of colored beads strung on gray goatskin. In her ears, barely visible under her thick, inky-black hair, she wore dangling silver vines adorned with drupes of amethyst. He noticed that one of her dark eyebrows was always cocked a little and that she could raise it independently of the other one. He selected a bright red shirt with a slightly oversized open collar, slid into it and tucked it into his gray slacks. Then he put on electric blue cotton socks. "Where do I come up with this stuff?" he said.

"Colorful," Anya said, feigning faint praise. She really did kind of like it on him.

He brushed his long, curly dark brown hair but it recoiled mostly and more or less piled up on his head. "My hair has a mind of its own," he said, "so I don't see why I can't."

"I must say," Chloe said, "that you really don't look quite like my image of an insurance salesman."

"No, and I really don't feel like an insurance salesman either. It must be something in the air." At this precise moment he noticed that Anya's compartment smelled faintly like a garden. He sniffed the air. "Gardenias?"

"C'mere," Anya said, raising her hand to him. He leaned over to her. She gently took his head in one hand and pulled it close to the front of her neck. As she did so she held open her shirt a little. Again he saw the soft flesh of her breast swell at the edge of her bra. The faint, warm odor of gardenia wafted through his nostrils. He wanted to kiss it.

“More,” he said.

“You have a good nose, Malcolm,” she said.

“I’m going to die.”

“Not yet.”

He tasted her lips. They stared into each others eyes, molten and immobile. Each smiled wryly and made a little unuttered sound of pleasure.

“You guys are off the deep end,” Chloe said.

“Oh, we’re way beyond the deep end,” Malcolm said.

“We’re beyond redemption,” Anya said. “We’ve abandoned all pretense.”

“Well, maybe we can get redeemed in the club car, because Frank’s meeting us there at six-thirty.” Chloe had on an abbreviated saffron top with slightly puffy sleeves and ruffles, revealing a few inches of midriff, a floral print mid-calf wraparound skirt, and sandals over bare feet. She’d crossed her legs, and the uppermost one was uncovered almost to her hip.

“I’m sure Frank will want you sitting next to him,” Malcolm said.

“Why, Malcolm,” she said with a prim little smile, “what ever do you mean?”

\* \* \*

Frank wore levis and cowboy boots and a green-and-black checkered shirt that seemed to showcase his silver hair. The club car was packed. “Let’s take our drinks upstairs,” he said.

“Good idea.”

“You ladies go up and secure a spot on the observation deck and we tough guys will belly up to the bar and grab us some apéritifs.”

As they stood at the counter awaiting their order, Frank turned to Malcolm. “Quite a day, eh?”

“One in a million,” Malcolm agreed.

“They say that, if you look at ’em just right, they’re all like this.”

"I don't think so."

"Me neither. But that's what they say. You should hear her sing. Man, she's a hot pistol. And she writes a lot of it herself. Pretty good, too."

"I like her."

"I kind of thought I was coming back here to run a devoted connoisseur's eye over some beautiful draft horses. That would've been plenty for me. But now all of a sudden a palomino filly named goldilocks is kicking up her heels in my pasture and daring me to be young again."

"Yep."

"I'll tell you one thing. Being young again is tough on an old guy. You remember that in case you ever get old."

"I think I started out old. I'm going in reverse now."

"Driving at high speed in reverse is tough, too."

"Yep."

The women had found and corraled two facing two-person seats. Frank sat down next to Chloe's bare leg and admired it for a long few seconds. Then he laid a big hand on it just above her knee. "I s'pose we could skip dinner," he said.

She covered it with a laugh. "You might need your strength, Francis."

Frank looked sharply at Malcolm. "Don't even think about it," he said.

Malcolm looked at Anya and mouthed the word in mock disbelief: Francis?

Chloe bowed her head slightly and looked up at Frank, pretending contrition for this slip. "You learn a lot," she said to Malcolm and Anya, "going through a guy's wallet."

"I told you there was nothing in there."

"Yeah, but you lied."

"I didn't go through your purse."

"You strip-searched me."

“Yeah, but I didn’t go through your purse.”

“This is a very bad man here. He took me into his bedroom and strip-searched me. He told me he was a government spy and he had to do it for security reasons. But once he got me undressed he wanted to do evil unspeakable things with me. Of course I yelled for help but nobody heard me, so I had to succumb.”

“Is that what you call it? Succumb?”

“You stop it, Francis, or I’m going to get out my handcuffs next time.”

“Oh,” said Anya, “if you’re not using them could I borrow them?”

“You’d like the ostrich feathers better,” Frank said to Malcolm.

“I don’t know,” Anya said, “I kind of like to make a man totally helpless before I devour him.”

“I think you’ve already accomplished that,” Malcolm said as the train streaked through another lonely crossing, its bells clanging and red lights flashing past the window.

“Must be back up to eighty miles an hour,” Frank observed.

“Where are we, anyway?” Malcolm asked.

“Near the North Dakota border, I think,” Frank said.

“Pretty desolate country.”

“I think we’re running alongside the upper reaches of the Missouri River.”

“Really?” Anya interjected. “Way up here?”

“Think so.”

“What time is it?” Chloe asked.

“Can we take our drinks to the dining car?”

“Sure,” Frank said. “Why not?”

The *maitre d’* stopped them in the galley and asserted a ban on drinks in his car. Frank put his arm around the man’s shoulders and turned him aside. “Listen,” he said in a low voice, “this is your bailiwick and I wouldn’t presume to tell you what to do

here. Whatever you say goes, no questions asked. But I'm a member of the Interstate Commerce Commission. Frank Carson. You probably know what we do." He paused for a moment while the *maitre d'* tried to gauge whether he believed this, but Frank went on immediately. "Mr. Spivak and I are here on a fact-finding trip to decide whether certain trains, like this one, should be kept on the schedule even if they can't make any money. Personally, I love this route – I was born on a ranch near Bozeman – and I'd hate to see this train on the ground, but Spivak (he nodded toward Malcolm) is one of those bureaucratic bean-counters, know what I mean? Everything is numbers to him." He moved in closer and lowered his voice a little more. "General Accounting Office. No imagination, no soul, you know? Numbers. Completely bleak. But he's – well, let's say a little lubrication helps keep him in a positive frame of mind, if you get my drift."

"I can put you at the first table, sir."

"I appreciate it."

They and their drinks were discreetly seated. Shortly thereafter Anya and Chloe left for a powder room tête-à-tête.

"How goes the war?" Frank asked.

"Never ends," Malcolm replied with a smile. "And you?"

"I think I'm overmatched."

"Somehow I doubt that. You guys are going to be together for the whole fair? What then?"

"I just take things one day at a time," Frank said. "But maybe I'll take her back with me if she hasn't killed me by then."

"There are worse ways to die, I suppose."

"There are worse ways to live, I'm sure of that. And Anya is leaving tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow? Yeah, I guess so. Minneapolis. I hadn't really thought about it."

"You going with her?"

"No. This is it."

“Kind of a quick romance. Suddenly here, suddenly gone.”

“Yep.”

“It’s the best way.”

“How’s that?”

“No getting tired of them. No fights. No feeling caged-in. Nothing but good times.”

“I suppose.”

“But you’re feeling all lonesome already, right?”

“Yeah.”

“You know, Malcolm, I like beautiful things. Horses. Mountains. Sacrifice in battle. Women. Tragedy stalks everything beautiful, did you know that?”

“Why is that?”

“I think it’s because great beauty encourages us to see ourselves as we wish we were. When I see a draft horse, I feel strong. When I see mountains, I feel invincible. When I see great battlefields, particularly places where men did mad and heroic things and paid for them with their lives, I feel kinship with these men, as if they were my brothers and their sadness was my own. When I see a beautiful woman (two of them returned to the table about this time and the men stood to help them in, but Frank went right on talking) or two beautiful women, I feel like a matador, like Manolete. If she loves me, I feel worshipped by a goddess.

“What is all this? Besides intensely pleasurable, I mean. I’ll tell you. It’s pride. It’s what the Greeks called hubris. It’s not characteristic hubris, because that kills people. It’s momentary, occasional, ad hoc hubris. It’s not usually fatal. But it’s always exquisitely powerful. It can lift you to rapture and hurl you into the writhing pit of hell. And sometimes you wake up from it in a another world.”

“So to love beautiful things is to risk being expelled from the garden of innocence, is that it?”



“But only if you’re weak. Only if you succumb to the temptation to believe that this beautiful thing is invested in you, has somehow transmuted you into someone else, into your ideal self.”

“Your Platonic self?” Anya asked.

“No, into your vain self, your prideful self, a self you might wish for in a moment of delusion, an unexamined self, the dream perhaps of your most hidden emotions, even a demon perhaps.”

“This is a consequence of loving beautiful things?”

“No,” Frank explained patiently, “it is only the consequence of a flawed and mortal human like myself loving beautiful things because I throw myself wholly into them, I leap into their abyss, I want to embrace them, to weep for them, I want to consume them and be consumed in them. In love I’m one with them, their beauty radiates through me and I see myself in them, and vice versa, and I lose my sense of who I am and I become someone far greater than myself, someone of whom this beauty is part, and then, in that state, I am vulnerable to making a grave mistake.”

“According to the Greeks,” Anya said, “in that state you’re drawn toward a great mistake.”

“Yes, I think the particular error is very much conditioned upon one’s weakness.”

“Obviously,” Malcolm observed, “the solution is not to shun beauty, nor to withhold one’s love for it.”

“Obviously not,” Frank said, smiling. “I do love beautiful things. When my father was dying, he asked me to sit at his bedside. ‘Francis,’ he said – I guess I can say that now that Chloe has spilled my secret –”

“Among other things,” Chloe said with a grin.

“Among other things, yes. Anyway, he said, ‘Francis, do what you love. And when you can’t do what you love, take care to love what you do.’”

“Kind of like ‘love the one you’re with,’” Chloe said.

"Yeah," Malcolm said.

"Well," Anya said, "except that it has a much different, a much larger scope than that."

"Yes, I try to see it in everything I do. And given that I'm going to have to love what I do, I try hard to do things, to be around things, to work with things I'll enjoy loving, things that will engage me intensely. And, being the fool that I am, sometimes my love for them gets me into trouble."

"Are you in trouble now, Frankie?" Chloe asked, stroking his hair and looking at him with a mock-sympathetic pout.

Frank laughed. "You *are* trouble, darlin'," he said. "'Cause you're so beautiful."

Anya put her hand on Malcolm's thigh. His eyes widened and a smile fit for a smarmy serpent spread across his lips and into his eyes.

"What love does to you, Malcolm," Frank said, "is it pulls you in. It melts you down. It transforms you into somebody else. A different Malcolm. It pulls everything out from under you. But it gives you everything you need, too. The old Malcolm dies, shrieking in pain and torment, lost, abandoned, and the new Malcolm is born, vulnerable, naive, innocent, and soon afraid."

"Oh, Frank," Chloe whispered, "that's so beautiful."

Malcolm looked at Anya. "We're talking about your leaving tomorrow. I'm missing you already. Frank's telling me to savor the moment."

"And are you savoring this moment, Malcolm?" she asked smokily, turning up her glowing blue eyes to him, moving her face a little closer to his, smiling just a little. Her hand slid a few inches down his leg toward his knee and squeezed him gently.

"Yes, very much."

"Good."

"I'm also missing you."

"Good."

They'd long since finished their drinks when the food arrived. All but Anya had a half-dozen large iced shrimp surrounding an ordinary red hot sauce, served in flared-out glass stemware. Anya had a clam chowder she described as "clam chowder." Malcolm and Frank each had a medium-rare 14-ounce top sirloin with a buttered baked potato slightly split and garnished with a sprig of parsley, and broccoli liberally impastoed with a slightly separated hollandaise sauce. Anya had a salad featuring a large tomato stuffed with crabmeat and celery, embedded in spinach leaves and surrounded with an avocado necklace, the greens splashed with bleu cheese dressing. (She'd asked for roquefort which of course was unavailable.) Chloe had a bacon cheeseburger and french fries, no doubt an antidote for the bean sprout and tofu salad she'd eaten first. Everybody had iced tea. The broccoli was a bit *al dente* for Malcolm's taste but everyone ate with great relish.

"So, Frank," Anya said, "what's in your future? I mean, after the show and everything?"

"I don't know. I usually meander my way back home. I've been thinking about spending a few days in Belize maybe. You know, lie on the beach, tramp around in the jungle, drink piña coladas in a hammock, read Hemingway, decompress a little."

He turned to Chloe. "Think you could do that, little lady?"

She took his hand from his lap and slipped it inside her skirt, against her naked thigh. "Can we make love on a pyramid?"

"I'm afraid it's inevitable."

"Oh, good." Everyone smiled and laughed at the image of them stealing a moment on one of the somber vine-covered altars of virgin sacrifice that the Mayans had abandoned in the jungles of the Yucatan hundreds of years earlier.

"The past meets modern decadence," Malcolm said.

"Yes," agreed Anya, "but somehow it seems perfectly natural. I wish..." Her eyes seemed far away, and then she smiled. "I'm going to Isle Royale to camp among the

wolves," she said.

"Oh, neat," chimed Chloe.

"I envy you," Frank said. "I've never been up there."

"I hear it's really beautiful," Malcolm said.

"The sound of wolves howling in the cold night, taking up the cry one by one as their song echoes through the starry darkness, enriching its harmonies until even the vibrating air starts to sing," Frank rhapsodized, "is so incredible, so full of pathos and haunting beauty. When I hear it in the northwoods, as I have many times, I feel akin to time, just as I do when I see a great aurora or hear a flock of geese going over at fifteen thousand feet beneath a big old hunter's moon."

Anya grinned from ear to ear. "In the presence of god," she said.

"In the presence of god."

Chloe looked at Frank as though she were already in the presence of god. "You know," Frank said to her, smiling, "I just remembered I have a friend who has a recording studio in Seattle."

For dessert they each had apple pie and ice cream.

"How much of a tip should we give the big kahuna?" Malcolm asked as he and Frank calculated their shares of the bill.

"The usual," Frank said. "Fifteen percent. The ICC can't go around rewarding people who violate the rules. It wouldn't be proper."

"He'll never seat us in here again."

"Sure he will. He's been snookered now. He has to believe in us. Otherwise he has to hope we don't turn his ass in," Frank said. "Don't worry about it."

\* \* \*

Malcolm noticed that, despite his self-assured bluster, Frank had stopped to shake hands with the *maitre d'* on the way out of the dining car, and that worthy had smiled in the way one might if he'd discerned a folded gratuity pressed into his palm.

As he followed Frank down the steps into the club car, Malcolm said, "I suppose we'll have to make that palmed bean a footnote in the ledger."

Frank laughed. "Insurance, my friend. I did it for you."

"Uh-huh."

The club car was crowded again, loud and chaotic and milling. The only table at which four seats were available was already occupied by the Libertarian and his red-headed ladyfriend Vera, who graciously welcomed them. "Hell, yes," Stan said, "otherwise we'd have to let in the hoi polloi."

Malcolm offered to buy the first round for the four of them and returned with four bloody marys and four Jack Daniels', neat with water back. "God," Anya said, "I haven't drunk this much booze since the day my sister found out she was pregnant by Uncle Dick."

"It's always Uncle Dick," Malcolm said.

"He wasn't really my uncle. He was a fishing and golfing buddy of my dad's. He used to come by sometimes to fix things around the house, because he was handy with tools and my father wasn't at all. When my folks weren't home he and Natasha used to lock themselves in the bathroom and turn on the water so I couldn't hear them. She told me they were praying and swore me to secrecy, because my father scorned religion in any form and often railed against the Catholic hierarchy that had sold out to the Nazis and the Communists and the banana growers and everyone else. So it made sense she'd want to keep it a secret and she was three years older than I was and I believed everything she said.

"But one sunny summer day when I was fourteen she took me up to the little woods behind our house where she'd stashed a pint of rye whiskey. After we'd had a few sips, which I could hardly stand, she told me a miracle had happened and she was pregnant with Uncle Dick's baby. Then we had a few more and she started telling me about all the things they'd done during their supposed prayer sessions. Then we had a

few more and she started crying and I started crying, and eventually we were totally drunk and she was talking about getting an abortion and how she'd shamed the family and how Uncle Dick was an asshole, and then we started laughing at the images of the two of them screwing on the counter and knocking everything cattywunkus, and on the floor while the water was splashing over them, and about the whole predicament, and we laughed and laughed until we puked.

"Fortunately, my mother discovered us and washed us up and put us to bed and my father never found out."

"Oh, the poor child," Vera said.

"What do you mean? You were screwing your brother when you were fourteen," Stan said indignantly.

Vera smiled knowingly. "Well, it passed the time," she said.

"So, Anya," Frank interjected, "where are you headed now?"

"Up to Lake Superior," she said, "and then west again through Canada, Lake Louise, Vancouver, and then I don't know what."

"That'll be a gorgeous little walkabout. But what then?"

"I think I still want to do ethnology. Study cultures in the field. I like the work. It's fun getting to know people, trying to understand what they think and believe, observing how they behave, trying to see how it all makes sense to them. Naturally, there aren't any isolated, really isolated cultures to discover any more. You can't be like Malinowski and just go to an island and spend a couple of weeks learning the language and six months writing a monograph and then bingo move on to the next thing with a big discovery in your pocket."

"Cultural differences are being smudged out by worldwide communications and travel."

"The easy ones, yes. The obvious ones. The ones everybody understands already. The ones you can deal with on TV, the ones that are affected by tourists. But there are

subtler things. The stuff that binds people together and persuades them that they're different from other people. Arcadians in New Orleans. Vietnamese in San Francisco. Gangs in Chicago. Born-again Christians in rural Tennessee. There are lots of cultures like this that appear to be woven into the fabric of the larger society but that really are separate and inconsistent and, on some level, bizarre in the context of the generalized world."

"Yeah, like Libertarians!" Vera whooped with delight. Even Stan laughed at this.

"I just find this kind of adventure really fascinating," Anya said.

"Well, that's what makes anything worthwhile," Frank observed.

"You have to love it," Chloe said. "You have to make love with it. When I sing I make love with the song, I make love with the audience, I make love with the microphone and with my band. I make love with my voice. I try to understand what the song says, what it means really, what feelings it's about and how those feelings feel inside me. I think about how the chords and the changes express this. I want my audience to feel when they're listening to me that I'm making love to them through the song."

"That's just what it feels like, too," Frank said.

"I *am* making love with you, Frank."

"Okay, so tell me," Malcolm asked her, "why is it that certain passages, certain patterns of notes, certain visual images in art or sculpture have such a stunning, heart-searing impact on us, just a kind of cosmic reverberation through our souls, when the rest of the work, a symphony or a painting or a book, might seem by comparison rather ordinary. Do you know what I mean?"

"Sure," she said. "I think so. There are certain phrases in certain songs, certain words or musical changes or ways you can do them that just seem so perfect, so ripe, so full of sweetness or passion that everything else fades away from them, they just leap out at you. But I don't know why exactly. It's like if you're walking down the street, or

out in the woods, not thinking about anything much, and suddenly you come upon some scene, a building or a brook or kids playing in a park or anything almost, and you just have an overpowering feeling of how beautiful it is, how exactly right it is, how perfect it is."

"Yes."

"So I think it has something to do with being lulled along, you know? With having your mind open to it, sort of totally relaxed, like in a reverie."

"But it still has to have some quality," Anya objected, "that's incredibly beautiful all on its own, even outside of that context. Something that somehow runs down to the collective unconscious or resonates with the fundamental patterns of brain activity or something."

"Maybe," Chloe mused. "I don't know."

"Why are beautiful things beautiful," Frank said. "It's a lot like why mathematics works."

"Yes, I think so," Malcolm said.

"Well," chimed Stan, "it's like why is money money? And what is money? And where does it come from? And what does the green stuff in your pocket that everybody thinks is money have to do with the little numbers that pointy-headed gnomes in Switzerland write on parchment scrolls?"

"It's an illusion," Frank said, whereupon the two of them fell into a long, tortuous discussion of the true nature of money.

"Let's go listen to some music," Anya whispered to Malcolm.

"Maybe we'll figure out why beautiful things are beautiful," he said.

"Maybe we won't care."

"Cause we'll be separated from our minds."

"Something like that."

"Okay." And they took their leave and went to her room.



\* \* \*

"Kinda scary, huh?" she said as she locked the door behind them.

"Kind of," he replied, smiling.

She put a languorous jazz CD in the player and turned the sound down just a bit. He wedged a piece of paper into the light fixture over her bed so that the room seemed almost as shadowy and soft as if it were illuminated by firelight. They let down the bed and sat side by side with their arms around each other and just let it all wash over them. So many feelings. So much excitement, so much urgency, so much incipient sorrow. The train wafted gently from side to side, its rhythms relaxed, regular, stately, folded easily into the music.

Malcolm thought of the night long ago when, at the outset of their relationship, Misty had invited him over for supper one evening and surprised him afterward with a bath, a warm, soapy bubble-bath in a room full of flowers and a hundred flickering candles, where she, fragrant and naked as an Egyptian slave girl, had washed him from head to toe and back again, slowly, longingly, lovingly, until he had felt as warm and fluid as the silky water, utterly mesmerized, no longer possessed of will nor even desire, and then she had dried him fondly as he kissed her freckled breasts and they had made love until the sun came up.

His heart thrilled in his chest. He looked at Anya, radiant in the dim light, more beautiful even than the first time he'd seen her so long ago, her blue eyes alive with excitement, her lips inviting his, her cheeks smooth and downy, her hair like black silk, thick and warm and fragrant, and he smiled.

"I love you," he said.

"I love you, too, Malcolm."

And he kissed her and they lay back on the bed and explored each other's faces with their lips and tongues and stared longingly, enraptured, into one another's eyes and made small preternatural sounds of pleasure, and he put his hand under her blouse

and felt her breast urgent within her bra, its nipple rigid and yearning against his fingertips.

“Oh, god, Anya.”

“I want to feel your nakedness against me,” she said.

“Yes.”

“Let’s take our clothes off and get into bed.”

He rubbed his thumb gently over her erect nipple. “I’d like that very much,” he said. “But I’m kind of busy now.”

“I’ll make you a lot busier if you don’t let me go. Why don’t you find another CD for us while I go to the bathroom?”

“Mmm,” he grinned.

He keyed up *Madama Butterfly* and took off his shirt and trousers, which he folded neatly and placed on the seat. Then he removed his underwear and folded it on top and lay down on the bed. He closed his eyes and listened to the water running in the bathroom. For some reason he thought about a dream he’d often had when he was a child, in which a great fiery orange and fearsome sun had slowly descended toward him and his thumb had swollen to ten times its normal size, pulsing with pain. He had always bolted up from it filled with terror, his pulse racing, his body drenched in sweat. Even the memory of it sent a shudder through him.

“Oh, shit,” she said loudly.

“What?”

“I just put body lotion on my toothbrush.”

\* \* \*

She emerged from the bathroom clad only in her panties, lithe and supple, tan and lightly freckled, muscular but soft, as beautiful nude as ever he had imagined her, graceful and sure. She smiled at him as she flipped the switch on the CD player and the overture began.

“A lovely choice,” she said as she pulled back the sheet and wriggled in next to him. Then, looking at him, she said, “Malcolm, you don’t have any clothes on.”

“No,” he confessed.

“Hold me, Malcolm.” He had never wanted anything more than to hold her naked body next to his, to feel the cool warmth of her, shimmering against him, her skin, her shoulders, her breasts, her legs, her feet, her hips, her firm belly, her hair on his face, her warm breath as she sighed in his ear, her eyes but inches from his, deep, pleading, radiant.

“God, you feel good.”

He kissed her neck, slid his hand over the small of her back. Every time he touched her she writhed and whimpered just a little. “Oh, Malcolm, oh god, Malcolm...”

*i move slowly now, rhythmically, pressing myself upon your yielding mystery, which seems to be having a Mardi Gras festival in my honor, blending my flesh with yours, my soul with your soul, then shyly, achingly withdrawn again, feeling your soft lips at once plainting my return, your hips, your belly, your breasts, your gentle fingertips, your ululations and your eyes, your soul-shattering, heart-rending, life-giving, laughing, singing, witty and wise blue eyes, hungrily clamoring with a single voice, imploring my presence, begging our pleasure, then, entering again the gate of your treasured eden, past the wildflowers, the waterfalls, the sun-drenched meadows, the singing, swooping swallows, the dancing princesses, into the oracular mystery of woman-love, i am a humble supplicant in the blinding grace of god*

The train drummed on, swaying gently from side to side, vibrating with the syncopated hammerblows of steel wheels across the rails, sliding through the empty expanse of night on the sere and desolate land, a great and sudden presence among the hardy things that lived along the tracks, bludgeoning the earth and then, almost as suddenly, a receding hope, diminished to nothingness, leaving behind it a few swirling memories and the settling air and the keening loneliness.

*i am floating in an ocean of ripe expectant buds of a million hues, and with every motion,*

*every gesture, every sigh, every whisper and every glance a great host of them shout into blossom, and as each one unfurls into its flowery glory i fall in love with you again*

She pressed her fingers through his thick hair, kissed his mouth, his eyelids, his ears, his neck. "You're so wonderful," she said. "I thank god for you." She pulled his face down onto her breast, its nipple hard, its areolae puckered, her chest flushed with excitement. Her fingers danced along his thigh, across his abdomen, coaxing him back to tumescence.

*with every bewildering moment i am intoxicated anew by the lusty fragrance of your kind, made mad again by the labiate perfume that wafts into my mind and reels my senses and beckons me return to days that i have never known and cannot now resist. i go because, on these insubstantive angels' wings, these hints and glimmerings of immortal time, i am at last free of myself and one with you, innocent and unborn*

Afterward, as they lay together lazily drifting toward peaceful slumber, he thought of the hot summer night he had waited on the gentle slope above Lake Seneca, where he lay beside the little path that meandered up the hill, wandered through the trees, led back to Jennifer Wymer's room at the inn, lay there in the grass waiting for her to appear, to slip down toward him like a naiad from the shadowy oaks, she who had plundered his young heart and so plaintively pledged her love, her swirling passion, her doe-eyed devotion to him, she who had promised him, even as she yielded the treasure of her thighs to his eager fingers, that she would join with him this magical night under the floating August moon, above the silent black and glimmering water, upon the soft green hillside redolent with sweet anticipation, and, though he stayed until the darkness and his sadness had swollen slowly until it obliterated the stars, she who at last had not come, not that night nor any ever after.

\* \* \*

Long before first light, near Grand Forks, the train slowed considerably. Perhaps this change in its velocity and rhythm had awakened him. Within a few minutes it

entered a long sweeping right-hand curve and, its wheel-flanges squealing against the rails, gradually turned southward along the west bank of the Red River. He drew Anya gently closer to him, feeling her supple warmth against his body. She sighed softly from her dreams. A tear slipped down his cheek. Soon she would be gone.

He lay awake for a long time, listening to her breathe, remembering all the things they had done and said, the moment he'd first seen her – how long ago it seemed! – the dinner, drinking with Frank and Chloe, meeting her at dawn the next morning, her white-stockinged feet, her lips on his, the tumultuous flood of feelings that overwhelmed them both, the sinister torment this evoked in him, Frank and Chloe again, napping in her bed, this very bed, drinks and supper with the three of them...

...the wonderful correspondence of their tastes and passions and proclivities, so foreign to most people either of them knew, which did not seem to end however much they explored it, their sense that they had known each other for ever, that they had been living, hidden from one another, in parallel universes, almost as if they were twins, or facets of a single jewel...

...her splendid and perfect beauty, the luxuriant black softness of her hair, the supple fullness of her delicate lips, the silky smoothness of her brown skin, the pellucid blue eyes rimmed round with inky black that instantly penetrated his soul, her quirky sense of humor, her thoughtfulness, her straightforward and irrepressible passion.

Had he been Mark Antony she had been Cleopatra, so utterly was he captivated by her, so fatal was she to his will, and yet he was Prufrock, and she had sung to him anyway. For her, Eve to his Adam, he would eat the proffered peach while all the serpents rejoiced at his fall into the pit of Beelzebub. Let them dance. He had tasted truth.

The sun was coming up on the opposite side of the train, and the room grew warm with a comfortably rosy light. She stirred beside him. Her thigh slid over his and she sleepily kissed his ear.

“Good morning,” she said. “I love you.”

“Yes, you do, and I love you.”

“Did you sleep?”

“A little.”

“Are you rested?”

“Oh, very.”

“Good. I was hoping you might be.” Her hand glided lightly over his chest.

“And you?”

“Oh, yes, Malcolm, I’m very relaxed. I slept all night in your arms. The train rocked me to sleep like a baby. You sang me a lullaby. I feel all young and innocent, like a child.”

“You are beautiful.”

“Like a teenaged girl, Malcolm. Curious about you. Passionate for you. Crazy about you. Wanting you, Malcolm. Wanting to touch you. Wanting you to touch me. Wanting you to want me. Wanting you to take me. Wanting you to love me. Wanting to feel you inside me again. Wanting you, Malcolm. Touching you, Malcolm.”

So beautiful. So earnest. So fresh. So coquettish.

“Malcolm? Malcolm...” She buried her face in his hair.

“Anya...”

“Can I touch it?”

“No. Not unless you ask nicely.”

“Please?”

“I’m not sure I’m in the mood.”

“I love you, Malcolm. I want to kiss your cock.” Under the covers, she stroked him lightly with her fingers. “Please?”

“Yes,” he said. “I want you to.”

The train had turned eastward again and the sun’s rays streamed through the

window, into the little cave where they lay, her exquisite body illuminated by the virgin light of day, her eyes sparkling with impish fire, her smile warm and wanton, vulnerable and begging, knowing and naive. No woman had ever seemed so beautiful to him as she did then. No woman had ever transported him so effortlessly from commonplace life as he knew it into a world of rapture so intense and strange and wondrous that he could only believe it sacred. And yet she bade him know that she too was there, there for him always, his soul's companion in this molten rush of wind that swirled through the heavens, spirit to his spirit, joy to his joy, sorrow to his sorrow. She bade him feel her, beside and within him, in her presence and beyond, in his heart. And he did.

Later, as she showered, he gazed out the window. Perhaps it wasn't always best when the beautiful princess came gliding down the path to meet her swain in the moonlight. What if sweet Jennifer, tanned and taut, tease and trollop extraordinaire, had come to him that night? Would he be thinking of her now, grown torpid and stultifying? Would he be here anyway with his beloved Anya, his heart in tatters, bleeding with the anguish of separation from all that now inspired and exalted him, writhing with agony in the certain knowledge he must return to her, she for whom he had longed all these many years? Was it not better that she should remain for him forever as she had been once, bright and young and full of happy life?

\* \* \*

They had scrambled eggs for breakfast, and toast and coffee. He had tomato juice and she orange. He made a toast with her to love that is never forgotten.

"I won't forget this day for a long time," she said. "And I'll never forget you."

"You will, though. Life will come along somewhere, at Isle Royale or Banff or somewhere, and you'll think of this and realize you can no longer remember what I looked like or what we said or maybe even what we did. It's all right. It's just the nature of things. The past belongs in the past."

“Don’t you remember any of the women you’ve ever loved?”

“Of course.”

“Well?”

“I don’t remember really what they looked like. I remember certain events, certain disconnected images, and certain feelings now blended with time. And that’s about all.”

“Do they mean less to you now?”

“No,” he said, a little surprised. “In fact, they may mean more to me now in some way. I mean, I’m not in love with them anymore, I don’t pine for them, I don’t feel the unquenchable passion for them that I felt once, but they’ve become part of every sinew of my life. I have great tenderness for them still, every one of them.”

“All right, Malcolm, I will always have great tenderness for you. I will always hope you’ve found happiness.”

He looked at her, her lips turned up at the corners in an almost playful smile, her eyes looking at him with ineffable fondness. Such a beautiful face. Such a singular, beautiful face. A tear rolled down beside her nose and across the faint angel hair on her upper lip. Tears swelled in his own eyes and flooded down his cheeks.

“I have,” he said. “My heart will go with you wherever you go. What you’ve given me, this enormous love I feel for you, will always be there.”

\* \* \*

The conductor strode through the observation car announcing their imminent arrival in Minneapolis, where the train would be standing for all of twenty minutes. Passengers were invited again to detrain but cautioned to stay nearby because, as always, the train was late and wouldn’t linger.

Sworn persistence of affection, the enshrinement of mad love that had in some small way transformed their lives, especially his, was little solace for Malcolm, who had made what had seemed a great sacrifice of disbelief and contravention of commitment (or convention, which to him had been so nearly the same thing). No sooner had he, in



his fevered mind, believed in love than love had flown. Now he was once again a prisoner, rudely awakened from a dream in which, for one cruel moment, he had been free.

Anya shouldered her travel bag and Malcolm followed with the CD player in its nylon case. The two of them stepped from the train onto the concrete apron beneath the gold-lettered sign that said *Minneapolis*.

"Christ," he said, "I don't even know where Minneapolis is."

"In Minnesota, I think."

"Yes, I know that, but I don't know where...you know what I mean." Tears came again, blurring his vision. "You always know what I mean." He wiped them away.

"This is kind of ridiculous. Sorry."

She stepped close to him and kissed his wet cheek. "Let's put this stuff in a locker, okay? I have to wait until two o'clock for my train north."

As they pushed her bags into a locker, an old crone approached them.

"Begging your pardon, sir," she said, jabbing him lightly with her walking stick. Malcolm turned to look at her. She was short and bent, her face craggy and crooked, her hair dirty and unkempt, covered with a blue babushka, her wearied frame covered with rags of clothes and a gray cotton tweed coat that hung to her ankles.

"You seen my doggie?"

"No," he said, "I'm sorry, I haven't seen any doggies."

"You see my doggie, honey?"

"I don't think so. What does he look like?"

"He's brown."

"How big is he?" Malcolm asked.

"Oh," she rolled her eyes upward and shook her head slightly from side to side, "oh, I think he's very big. But might look small too."

"Um, well, we'll keep an eye out for him."

“Lost my doggie,” she said, her face cast downward, looking up at him with red, damp, sad eyes. “You help me find my doggie, sir?”

“I wouldn’t know where to look,” he said.

“We don’t have much time,” Anya explained. “But we’ll help you if we can.”

“Oh, bless, honey. Such a sweet girl. You a lucky man, sir, to have a sweet girl.”

Malcolm took a deep breath. “She is a miracle to me,” he said. “And I guess if we have another miracle we can find your doggie who is brown and large and small.”

“And lost, sir.”

“Yes, and lost.”

“You lost something you loved, sir?”

“Yes.”

She shuffled from one foot to the other. Her shoes were thin and broken over.

“Miss my doggie very much,” she said, sighing. “Doggie loved me. I don’t have many lovers now, you know. The boys, sometime they give me things to eat, but don’t love me, you know? But my doggie he loved me.”

“Where did you lose him, ma’am?”

“Where I lose him?”

“Yes.”

“Doggie ran away.”

Malcolm looked at Anya. “Where were you, honey, when he ran away?”

“Who?”

“Your doggie.”

“He ran away at night when we were sleeping. He soft and brown and holding him and then he ran away.” She looked slowly around the large waiting room. “I don’t see him.” She started to cry.

“Where were you sleeping?” Malcolm asked.

“Come I show you,” she said, and she turned and began walking in an ungainly

waddling shuffle toward the door.

Malcolm and Anya looked at each other. Malcolm looked at his watch, and then at the huge brass clock. "We have ten minutes," he said. Anya nodded, and they followed the old hag out the door.

"In back," she said, and began making her way toward the other side of the station. Malcolm and Anya walked on either side of her. "Lost my doggie," she said.

Presently she came to a pile of cardboard behind a brick building next to the station, beside a forgotten and overflowing dumpster. "Here," she said.

"Does your doggie have a name?" Anya asked.

"Yes. Doggie lost. Poor doggie. He lost. I miss doggie."

"What is doggie's name?"

"I know, honey. Doggie lost. Doggie ran away." She sat down awkwardly in the cardboard, looking defeated, staring at the pavement. She held her walking stick and buried her face in her arms.

"Doggie doesn't love me. He run away."

"Where would he go?" Malcolm asked. Then he looked at Anya. "Is that a really stupid question?"

"Depends on who you ask," she said with a smile.

Malcolm walked down to the end of the alley and looked both ways down the nearly empty street. Then he walked back to the old woman's pile of cardboard and idly tried to imagine how she could live in it. "I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't see any doggies."

"Maybe you could get another doggie," Anya suggested.

Malcolm raised the dumpster lid, already propped open by a great surfeit of trash. No dog. He looked again at Anya and breathed a sigh of relief.

"Do you live here?" Malcolm asked.

"Yes, here," she said. "In there." She pointed with her stick at a box over which a considerable quantity of trash and cardboard had been strewn, like a cave entrance

someone had tried to hide.

“Do you mind if I look?”

“Doggie is gone.”

He moved aside some of the cardboard and peered into the dark cavern. There was a worn carpet for a floor. What appeared to be several burlap sacks and a torn seafoam green blanket. A flashlight. A little shrine made out of an upturned coffee can topped by a plastic dashboard Jesus and a birthday cake candle.

Anya crouched down beside him and crawled part way into the box, feeling amongst the sacks and the blanket. She came out with a tan, eyeless, moth-eaten, teddy bear with a silly red felt tongue. “Doggie?” she mouthed to Malcolm.

He shrugged. “Sure, why not?”

“Oh,” Anya said, “here comes doggie. Here comes doggie, honey.” And she hunkered down and presented the woebegotten creature to its pitiable companion, searching her eyes for some response.

The woman’s face brightened and she smiled a big smile with all her remaining teeth. “Pooh bear,” she cried, reaching out to take the bear from Anya’s hand. “Oh, pooh bear.” And she cradled the little blind stuffed bear in her arms and rocked it like a baby. She seemed oblivious to their presence.

Malcolm took Anya’s arm and they walked slowly back toward the station platform.

“Oh, pooh bear,” they heard her cry, “where doggie gone? Doggie run away, pooh bear...”

“Shit,” Malcolm said. And then he laughed.

“What?”

“I was just thinking about you putting body lotion on your toothbrush.” And they smiled together and held each other close as they walked out onto the platform.

“How much longer?” Malcolm asked the trainman. The trainman looked at his

watch. "Three minutes," he said.

Malcolm was staggered. He felt crushed by the weight of time that had now almost, forever and ever, run out, time that filled his heart with enormous sadness, time that had lifted him soaring into the stratosphere of passion and a woman's love and now, now was about to collapse upon him, heavy as the earth itself, darkening his heart for all eternity.

But for her this moment with Malcolm had been the quintessence of her new life, love wherever it should be found, less prelude or post mortem, less tedious posturing, less crowded rooms of bric-a-brac, less ghostly silence, a thing that was, as it was, because it was, the sound of words unspoken.

\* \* \*

"Maybe the wolves will get me on Isle Royale," she said. "Maybe I'll go mad in the plains of Manitoba. Maybe a Chinaman will kidnap me in Vancouver and sell me into white slavery in Shanghai. Whatever happens, my love, I shall not forget you."

They both cried copiously and unashamedly as they held each other, looking into the faces they would never see again, faces they loved, faces so full of beauty, eyes so full of tears. Their lips, wet with crying, parted and met.

"Separation isn't the end of love," she said softly. "Sometimes it's only the beginning."

"Oh, god, Anya, how can I be saying goodbye to you? I love you so much."

"I love you, too, Malcolm. I'll never forget you. Never, my darling. I promise."

He looked at her, blinking back tears. What could he say? What would happen now to all those things he'd never had a chance to say to her? "Thank you," he said.

"I love you," she whispered, wiping a tear from his cheek.

"Here," he said, reaching into his hip pocket, "let me give you my card. You can call me, or write me someday..."

"Malcolm." She placed her hand again upon his cheek, holding it with sorrowful

tenderness, touching his lips with her forefinger. She pressed herself against him and raised her lips for the last time to his. They kissed deeply, desperately, and then, cheek to cheek, they held each other tight.

“Bo-ard,” the trainman called.

“God,” he wept. He could not take his eyes from her.

“Goodbye, sweetie.”

“May god protect you.” Malcolm had to force the words through his lips. And then he turned and climbed back aboard the train. He paused for a moment in the foyer of the car to wipe the tears from his face. When he turned to look at her again, she was gone.

\* \* \*

The train lumbered endlessly down the emerald, sun-speckled upper Mississippi valley, broad with water everywhere, peaceful, rich, lush. Malcolm had returned to his seat in the coach. His thoughts were far away and yet they filled his heart with infinite sadness. At first, he could think of nothing else except that she was gone. How could she be gone? How could she? He could not stop the tears that streamed down his face. He wiped his eyes, and wept some more. Anya! Her name, her beautiful name, her name that he had loved so utterly, so briefly, that had renewed his dying life and filled his heart with so much lovely joy, now brought only tears.

The green morning glittered outside his window, jade and silver among the black shadows. She too would be warm in this sun. She would eat lunch, perhaps, and walk around the town. She might go back and talk to doggie’s mistress. Then she would board a train for Lake Superior, a hundred miles to the north. Then this evening she would get on a freighter and sail to – where, he couldn’t remember. Tomorrow she would take a boat out to Isle Royale. He imagined her arriving there, a brave and beautiful warrior like Jeanne d’Arc. The wolves would know her. She was one of them. Weeping silently, he made a prayer for her success and happiness.

He wondered at his failure to conquer the circumstances that were slowly squeezing the life from his spirit. Was it guilt that hindered him? Compassion? Or laziness, or inertia, or a spineless willingness to bear the ills one has...? Perhaps he enjoyed seeing himself as a tragic figure. Perhaps he was really just a pathetic clown, lacking the fortitude required to strike out on his own, to externalize the person inside himself. Perhaps he, too, like all the people around him, was paralyzed with fear, fear that, having nothing, one might yet have even less.

Well, now he had even less. Only death might leave him more bereft, and death seemed nothing to him now. Nothing.

He was very tired, and soon he fell asleep. Several hours later, he awoke from a dream of her. She had found doggie, and the old hag had given them both a ship in which they might sail across the great lake together. But just as they were about to get aboard they seemed suddenly to be trapped in a warren of old tunnels, through which they ran desperately, trying to find their way to the wharf, although it seemed they were already at the wharf, and she had become separated from him, and though he searched and searched and called to her in his gathering misery and panic, he could not find her anywhere. Then he woke up.

For a long time he stared unseeing out the window. "Oh, god," he said, and bit his lip. "Anya." He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. The woman across the aisle seemed to be eyeing him uneasily. He got up and walked forward to the observation car. Maybe he would find Frank and Chloe.

But he didn't, and after awhile he returned to his seat. Underneath his travel bag he found her book. Inside, on the first page, she had written, "For Malcolm. Love always, Anya." He felt as though the sky had fallen down upon him.

He closed the book and stared at it for a long time in his lap. It was about mushrooms. *Mushrooms of the Sierras*, it was called. It was, for him, her memoir, her memorial. Not unexpected tears welled in his eyes as he carefully opened it. He looked

at the inscription again, and ran his finger over it. Longing and loss swept over him. Then he began to turn the pages, carefully, reverently, just looking absently at them, seeing only her face, hearing her voice, feeling her soft touch. It was all he had left of her that he could still hold, that his eyes could still see. For a brief few hours it faintly smelled of her. He knew that in it were the last words she had read before he'd found and lost her. Words that in any case were part of her mind, words in which he could share one last moment with her before his pale gray life would once again close in around him.

\* \* \*

Late in the afternoon, as they approached Chicago, he found Frank and Chloe in the club car. The train's progress was maddeningly slow. Stopping, backing up, going forward at one or two miles an hour, it frittered its way among endless tangled yards of rusty steel, dusty brick, crumbling neighborhoods in a rat's nest of humanity, a glaring symbol of the ultimate futility of civilization and man's monstrous ambitions.

Frank and Malcolm had several drinks apiece while Chloe drank black coffee. The three of them talked mostly about Anya and how they'd all liked her and what she'd meant to him in particular. He fought back tears as they talked about her, especially when Chloe brought up the rose he'd given her that first night at dinner. (Had it been only day before yesterday?) "That really did it, Malcolm," she said. "That really blew her mind."

Malcolm had to change trains here and Frank and Chloe were going on by car. There was time to have something to eat in the station at one of the little shops below street level. Frank, a small white kitten's curious eyes peering out from his denim jacket, regaled them with a tall tale about last year's show, where, according to him, a young banker had evinced an interest in buying one of the most magnificent Belgians as a stud horse. "He was an imperious bastard," he said, chuckling. "He considered himself quite a judge of horseflesh and me a hopeless hick from the boonies. I hadn't given the horse a



ribbon, and he was pissed. He upbraided me for unfairly diminishing its value at stud and suggested I'd done it because I wanted to buy the animal myself. I really didn't want to say anything, but the asking price was about fifteen grand, so I told him, 'This horse is cut, you know.' He looked at me as though I'd just spit on his lapel. Then he said, 'Well, it'll heal.' And then he went and paid fifteen thousand cash for a stud horse with no balls." They all laughed, and Frank laughed so hard he almost fell off his stool. The kitten looked quite startled.

"I hope he's there this year. I've got to ask him how old no-balls has done with the ladies."

Finally, it was time to go.

"It's been a pleasure, Malcolm," Frank said. "You know, for a while there I thought you were going to talk yourself out of it."

"I tried," Malcolm said, smiling, "but it was so intense, and everything about her was so beautiful, and meeting her like that was such a miracle, I just couldn't."

"It reminds me of a famous line from Shakespeare. *Julius Caesar* I think: 'There is a tide in the affairs of men which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune; omitted, all the voyage of their life is bound in shallows and in miseries...'"

Malcolm pondered this for a moment. "It was so crazy," he said reflectively.

"Well," Frank said, "I don't care what Aristotle says, moderate excess is much to be preferred over excessive moderation. And you know what they say: a bird in hand is worth two in the bush."

"And you know what Sam Johnson said," Malcolm replied: "A great bowel movement is better than sex."

"Ewww, gross," Chloe said, smiling beneath a pucker of simulated distaste.

Malcolm laughed. He shook hands with Frank and shared a long hug with Chloe, who said softly, "Believe, Malcolm. It all comes true somewhere."

He smiled at them both, trying to print their faces indelibly in his memory,

knowing he could not. "Good luck," he said. "I'll miss you guys." Then he picked up his bag and walked back through the terminal to the gate for the train to New York.

\* \* \*

He had no appetite that evening. Beyond his sorrow and his exhaustion, he felt tormented by reverie. What had he done, what had he become that had left him, without Anya, so devoid of all sensation, so hollow inside, so destitute of passion? How had this happened? Why had it happened? And why, when he had suddenly found her, when the skies had parted and she'd descended from heaven to lay the crown of love upon his soul, why had he not the courage, the wisdom, the means, the way to accept her love for all it was and all it could have been? Why had he now, not two days beyond this transcendent miracle, nothing to show for it but fading memory already slipping away from him like a dream and a broken heart riven with shattered agony?

The train's haunting horns shrilled out again at some unseen grade crossing, two long bawling whoops, an impudent yawp, a lost and lonely cry of the heart that echoed endlessly through the darkened corridors of his mind. It was a lament, the grieving wail of a lone wolf, for love flown, for life dribbled through one's fingers, for the settling of fire into embers and embers into ashes and ashes into dust.

But Malcolm's predicament was neither so grand nor, perhaps, so irremediable. Freed now from struggling against his loss, if not from mourning its enormity, he seemed to have gained some access to insight. Perhaps, he thought, with resurgent caution, perhaps in his unerringly careless care he had sown the seeds of his own destruction. To attempt to reduce every risk to a nullity, to take at every turn the course deemed least risky, was ultimately to create an existence devoid of every fragrance, every vibrant color, every searing passion—empty of everything, in short, that ever made living worthwhile. To indemnify oneself against risk was to shield oneself from hope and dreams and charm and laughter and wonder, and, ultimately, from every shred of meaning and every iota of mattering that life allowed.

Later, while he stood in the bathroom, he wondered what it would be like to die there. He'd always had this thought in travelling bathrooms, on planes, trains and buses. The smaller the room the more likely he would experience it. What if I'm in here when this thing crashes? This time, though, it seemed stupidly comical.

Returning to his own book, Malcolm soon found himself contemplating again the masterful perception of the logician Gödel, that any sufficiently rich logical system can express propositions whose truth or falsity it is not capable of resolving. What could this mean? Did it not imply that, no matter how one construes the world, there must be unanswerable questions that prompt, for the curious, an ever larger, more powerful construction? Had it not meant to Anya that such efforts, ultimately fruitless of achievement, were unworthy of undertaking? But was she not herself in the process of doing that very thing, widening her scope, making for herself a new and more diverse comprehension of the universe?

No, it was not the attempt to achieve understanding that she had scorned but the unwillingness, his unwillingness, to act on the understanding one had, to strike out across the world, across the universe if one were so inclined, with no real knowledge of the outcome, to recognize that, in the end, life is a crapshoot, and a miracle, and to simply go forward in full confidence that, until the end, insured or not, one must go on living.

\* \* \*

She stood alone on the steel deck of the ship, traversing Lake Superior from Duluth to Thunder Bay. It was late, but she hadn't eaten. She felt sad, wistful, and yet abuzz with anticipation.

She thought constantly of Malcolm and wondered if all the glorious moments of his life would now once again be put behind him. At least, if they were, she'd shared the last with him. There was so much good in him, so much joy and love. How could he bear to have all this just locked away forever? She hoped that somehow Malcolm would

find a way to change his life as she had hers.

A foghorn, baying high above her on the pilot's bridge, echoed through the cold air, across the water's endless black surface and into the vast lonely darkness. It was a wednigo, haunting the emptiness, awaiting the unwary traveller. The water parted and churned and washed along the steel hull as the ship passed, then slowly settled again into the black stillness.

Perhaps, she thought, it was always unwise to linger too long.

She was filled with excitement now. Ahead of her lay great adventures, profound and awesome experiences that would brighten and reshape her soul. She found comfort in motion, a kind of security from fear, knowing that to each new thing she would be new, a stranger, a wanderer, an explorer, one to whom the whole world is not an imposing, insuperable obstacle but an equal, a small thing like herself, a speck of dust adrift on a sunbeam.

As the first pink light of dawn flickered along the horizon off the starboard bow, she suddenly felt sleepy and wanted to lie down to rest before they made port at Thunder Bay. She stopped at the rail before going inside and looked out over the dark water that stretched as far as the eye could see.

"Goodbye, Malcolm," she said in a whisper. The words were so much harder to say than she had expected. "I love you. I loved you." And then she cried.

\* \* \*

Finally New York. Where everything is happening. Where the lights are never turned out. Where the simple multiplicity of everything creates a statistical reality that spans all possibility, save one.

Perhaps he would buy Althea the book of love poems Anya had mentioned liking. If he had to live with her, and with all of them, as he did, he might as well make the best of it. As his lawyer, Biggs, used to say, every turnip can bleed a little. He couldn't know or care what was possible. He knew he couldn't get anywhere with her all by himself.

He knew she couldn't get anywhere with him all by herself. Maybe they could do it together and maybe not. Maybe they cared and maybe they didn't. If not, it just didn't really matter much. In any case he would find other things. His family weren't responsible for fixing his life. It didn't matter if they couldn't. And maybe in the end he couldn't do it himself. That didn't matter either.

What mattered was keeping Anya alive in his life. Keeping himself as alive as he had been while they were together. And if other people wanted in on it, well, he might welcome them too. For all he knew, he reflected, under that stolid lawyerly nit-ridden exterior Althea was every bit as interesting, every bit as complex, every bit as passionately alive as Anya. But it wasn't true. He would have a go at it, but he wouldn't hang himself on it. Like Nabokov's Cincinnatus, he would simply raise his head from the chopping block, step down off the gallows, and walk away through the crowd to begin a new life, whether or not he still had his head no longer of any concern to him, nor to us.

With Anya it had been easy. They'd been sprites, evanescent souls aflight in the air, dancing moonbeams making a *pas de deux* in the starry night. They wanted each other right where they were. Their whole life together spanned only a day but it covered half the breadth of the continent. In that time they quickened, touched, fell in love like two rogue stars in glorious collision, swept soul and body into a single self, and then separated, each with the strength and virtue and radiant madness of the other, into two separate beings again, each now inextricably part of the other, each having left something ineffable but transcendent within the other, a mongrelizing seed. Then they'd disappeared from one another's lives forever, as surely as if they both had suddenly slipped off the earth. But they would live. That was their covenant. That was their gift. They would live.

\* \* \*

He listened to the rhythm of the steel wheels pounding and straining against the

endless gleaming twin ribbons of the road. Sometimes it was a steady pa-click, pa-click, pa-click as each wheeled truck passed over the seams in long segments of welded rail. Sometimes, as the train crossed other tracks, the rhythm would be five beats and skip a beat, or a quick 1-2-3-4, 1-2-3-4, then skip a half-beat, and back to the top. Choo-choo syncopation. Sometimes it was pa-click pa-dum, pa-click pa-dum, perhaps as one and then the other side of each truck passed over breaks in the rails. These shifting, omnipresent rhythms, infinite in their variety, were sometimes ephemeral, barely established before they were gone, quickly replaced by another pattern of sound. Sometimes they went on unchanged for miles, over, and over, and over, and over, until eventually you didn't hear them anymore, just as in the normal course of things you cannot hear your own heart.

\* \* \*

The most extensive organisms we know of on earth are mushrooms. Some extend across many tens of acres of land, their fruits in season crowding and glorifying the earth in which they live. Many blooms appear at once, widely disparate and sometimes at great distance from one another on the land's surface, but deep inside they're all part of a single organism.

Quantum reality is like this. A single particle may appear to exist in many places at once. These multiple "appearances" are spacetime independent, and there is no before and after among them. Perhaps there is no here and there among them either. Each appearance is completely real and has all the qualities of the particle in its particular single appearance. But each appearance particle reacts to a disturbance of any other just as if it were still united with the disturbed particle. Because it is. Quantum mycelium lies beneath the surface we see, in a dimension outside spacetime.

It lay beneath Malcolm and Anya, or fell over them perhaps, like an immanent net of causality, and it quietly but immutably united their lives. No amount of caution could have prevented it. No amount of compensatory undoing would serve to disentangle

them nor could ever unravel the knot of their common fate. Malcolm smiled as he gathered his bag and briefcase and walked to the end of the car. He was home. And Anya was with him.

As he stepped off the train he saw his son standing a few cars nearer the station and waved. Peter waved back.

They shook hands. "What are you doing here?" Malcolm asked.

"Well, mom took off for Europe a couple days ago with Mr. Schenker and there's nobody around the house. I figured you could use a ride home. How was your trip?"

"Fine. Interesting people. Beautiful scenery. Cal Schenker?"

Peter looked down at the ground and nodded. Malcolm smiled. "It's all right," he said. "Listen, forget the car for now. Let's put this stuff in a locker and get a cab." They began walking. "Is the ice up at Rockefeller Center?"

"No, I don't think so; it's too early. Why?"

"Okay, Central Park then. I want to go skating."

"They still have rollerblading at Wollman, I think."

"Great, we'll go rollerblading."

"It's really fast, Dad. And dangerous."

"I'll think of it as a walk on the wild side," Malcolm said, putting his arm around Peter's shoulder, grinning at nothing, really, some wisp of memory.

••• The End •••