

COVER PAGE

Fanfare for Faded Dreams

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~ 9082 words

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A pall hung over him. A shroud. Like an illusion unfolding and gathering itself beneath a magician's black cape, Questus Custer faced the setting sun with hooded, quiet eyes, gradually releasing the fluttering doves of his self-awareness to the flaming sky.

The old Indian had walked away, down the trail over the edge of the butte, dissolving into the late afternoon shadows, disappearing without another word. "Empty yourself," he had said. "Pour yourself into the river of the hours. Let your spirit breathe anew."

It was not mad judgment that had driven him here to this spiritual *auto-da-fé*, crosslegged and naked on a woven grass mat at the altar of the sky, not the agony of love's abandonment nor the sting of its scorn, not the chaos of plans gone awry nor even the suffocation of spontaneity by relentless order. It was something deeper, something more excruciating, and yet in the end far simpler, a force that had enabled every wretch in the world's endless wretchedness to rise with every morning in the hopeless but certain faith of the damned.

It was hopeless necessity.

Necessity had presented itself to him as it often does to young men grown old before their hour – in the guise of women, those burgeoning repositories of passion, and in the words of philosophers, the implacable placer miners of truth. The love of women had perfused and transported him, but the soaring gull that carried him aloft had dropped him like a catatonic clam upon the rough black rocks of despair and left him shattered, naked and formless, in a shallow tidepool high above the sea. Now bright philosophy would analyze and dessicate him, leaving nothing in its noumenological wake but the dry dust of empty death. The phantom confronting him now had not

arisen from an excess of desperation nor a paucity of choices. It seemed to be wrought from insight, understanding, and conviction. Scoured with grief, riven by despair, promised a path to salvation through the dark night of expiatory catharsis, his hot ambitious youth cried out, "I *must* do this!" No alternative seemed to exist, and he sought none.

Tonight he faced nothing less than excoriation, the repudiation of everything, everything he had seen, felt, thought, imagined or experienced, every habit and mannerism, every assumption, impression, suspicion and conclusion, every wish, every belief, every desire. Everything he'd acquired since the moment more than twenty years earlier when he'd emerged from the black amniotic sea into the soaring blue sky and the great green earth. Everything, in short, that he was.

It all had to go, to be expunged and discarded in this night of cleansing, this rite of ablution, so he could begin again. The systematic disintegration of the self, preparing the way for its reconstruction. The suicide of the psyche making ready its rebirth.

Of course, much would survive. It was unavoidable that a fundamental kernel would remain, and likewise some system of proceeding shaped by will and driven by desire. Nevertheless, what could be done, he would do, guided by the rudimentary faculty that judges true and false, pleasure and pain, love and hatred, right and wrong.

The whole effect of himself, Questus believed now, contained so many false and twisted strands, so tightly interwoven, so subtly interconnected, that it—he—could not be readily unravelled, nor merely patched over with more such unworthy cloth, and surely not entrusted with the restoration of the temple.

The only approach that might succeed, commended to him by the venerable minds of contemplative men, was to start over in a more innocent state, free from the accreted errors of an inattentive life—tenacious barnacles and careless debris and bugs in the woodwork. A new beginning of Questus Custer.

"Except ye become as a child," Jesus had said, "ye shall not be born again." What

did this mean? It didn't mean one had to become an embryo, nor even an infant. It meant one had to attain some condition of relative grace. It meant one had to give up the illusion of mastery over one's personal destiny, to set aside pride of self-ownership, to acknowledge something absolutely beyond and oblivious to one's will and desire.

It meant, he thought, a return to the first binary choices. Me and not-me. Good and not-good. True and not-true. It meant one had to reach a clear and simple fundament upon which the edifice of the self might be rebuilt, using honest materials, with insight and forethought, from wise and visionary schemes. A thorough psychological and philosophical evisceration followed by a painstaking reconstruction, avoiding, one hoped, the unexamined flaws that had crept through the darkness and bred like clicking beetles in the crevices of his mind. Self-elution, self-eversion, a ritual exorcism of the soul.

A new Questus Custer, that was now his goal. *Tabula rasa*—an empty slate, wiped clean of the impenetrable clutter of days whose echoes surged and tumbled in a cacophonous, reboant babble through the hollow chambers of his soul.

His denouement had begun a few months earlier under the transcendent influence of Elizaveta Dybukov, stepdaughter of Hugh Prescott, master of the Winslow Horticultural Gardens, whose own father had once served as herbalist to the Czar.

During a tour of the grounds which she'd conducted in her official capacity as Mistress of the Exuberant Frondescence, and which Questus had attended, quite by chance, one lazy summer afternoon, he had slowly, inexorably become entranced with her, drawn into the shimmering spheres of her radiant presence, enamored of her humor, knowledge, grace, and eyes, pretty much in that order. Her rapier wit and feisty attitude were expressed with languid and genteel confidence beneath a nimbus of fiery red hair, and he could not help but be captivated by her coruscant mystery.

Lord Hugh, as everyone called him, a slight, white-haired gentleman who affected an ornate hickory cane, surreptitiously accompanied the group that afternoon, and after

twenty minutes or so, as they stood side-by-side admiring a bed of spectacular salmon-tinted and yellow roses, he spoke softly to Questus, who did not know at first who he was.

“Very beautiful.”

“Exquisite,” Questus replied, gazing at the scintillating palette of lavender rouge and powdered daffodil.

“I think of her as a perambulating caryatid,” said Lord Hugh.

Questus paused and glanced at him, then turned his eyes to the elegant Elizaveta, who at that moment was introducing her rapt listeners to a magnificent persimmon tree nearby whose green leaves sheltered a heavy crop of ripening red-orange fruit.

“Exquisite,” Questus said again.

Lord Hugh raised the tip of his cane matter-of-factly and laid it close by his cheek, raising his eyes as if in thought. “My stepdaughter,” he said.

Questus realized that Lord Hugh intended much more than his words embraced. He realized, too, from her soft distant glance, that she had noticed and perhaps understood their impromptu tête-à-tête.

“She seems the crown jewel of this magnificent place,” Questus said gallantly.

“Oh, she is,” Lord Hugh replied. “She is. And you seem quite the jewel thief.”

Questus smiled and extended his hand. “I beg your pardon,” he said. “I’m Questus Custer. I’m afraid you have me at a disadvantage.”

“Hugh Prescott,” Lord Hugh replied, disdaining Questus’ outstretched hand. “But I’m sure it’s the other way ’round, Mr. Custer, particularly as it seems the girl’s already taken a fancy to you.”

“Oh, surely not,” responded Questus, encouraged to believe quite the opposite.

After the tour, at the linen-covered table where white wine and cakes were served in the cool dappled shade beneath a brace of towering willows, Questus contrived to stand beside her, bathed in the fragrance of lilacs that surrounded her, and he said,

almost in a whisper, "I met your stepfather, Lord Hugh."

"So I see," she said, tilting her head slightly, eyeing him.

"He called me a jewel thief."

"And rightly so, no doubt." She smiled at a small elderly woman with wispy silver-blue hair, the color of faded bachelor buttons, and handed her a delicate crystal flute sparkling with brassy effervescence.

Questus smiled. "I was merely admiring your splendid garden," he said.

Still smiling, still graciously serving the wishes of each expectant face before her, she blushed a little. "You said, 'exquisite,'" she demurred.

"Yes, I did. But..." He laughed. "How did you know?"

"I've known you forever."

"My name is Questus," he said, bowing slightly.

"He told me," she replied, proffering another flute to a young boy who passed it along to his mother and requested apple juice for himself, which she poured over ice into a water goblet and handed him with a warm smile.

"He wasn't so generous with me."

"My name is Elizaveta. It probably slipped his mind. He'd prefer to forget the intrigues that he and Queen Victoria have had with Russian society."

Questus sipped the tea she'd given him and watched her flaxen hair shimmer in the sunlight as she graciously served the last of her guests, who were now sitting or standing around the grassy glade, talking quietly among themselves, comparing understandings, fixing in memory the names and colors and shapes of so many flowers and trees.

"Let's walk down by the river," she said at long last. "It's cooler there."

On a footbridge just below the confluence of two large streams they watched the water glide gracefully away like the passing of time.

"Life from two valleys flows together here," he said. "All they share is carried to

the sea and taken aloft by the winds, which scatter it as rain across the earth.”

“Yet,” she rejoined, “by dint of this the valleys do not merge into one thing, nor do they wander. They remain distinct and in place.”

“The water carries soil and sand, vegetation, primitive animal life, evidence of sunshine or snowmelt—all sorts of souvenirs, all sorts of news from the highlands, and these things do merge with and alter the outside world, which, like the valleys themselves, is after all only a fiction.”

“And you think this outflow from the valley’s heart affects the world in some meaningful way?”

“Yes,” he said, “and the affected world makes a reply. Heavy rains, or maybe a drought. Unusual warmth, or cold. Some foreshadowing of a milieu not yet fully realized.”

“You’re talking about the intelligence of rocks and plants.”

He paused contemplatively, watching a silver cloud rolling like a wave through the aquamarine sky. “There’s a preternatural libidinal intelligence, don’t you think? You know, the director of instinct.”

“Instinct *has* no director. That’s why they call it instinct, Questus.”

“So its intelligence is immutable, more or less. But it’s still there. There’s a certain intelligence in instinct, in your genes, isn’t there?”

“Otherwise it’d be maladaptive.”

He gently placed his hand on her warm shoulder, her bare shoulder uncovered by the white chiffon of her antebellum gown, and guided her like a dancer to the other side of the bridge, where they might look upstream. She floated gracefully beside him.

He spoke wistfully. “That stream, which ripples into view from these sun-dappled birch woods, perhaps it is the journey of a man. He flows down mountainsides, over precipices, through shaded vales and sun-drenched meadows. Gravity beckons him. The weather helps or hinders him. Fateful geography shapes his path.”

"He's moved by primitive forces."

"Yes. And one sweet day he chances here, and here, suddenly by his side, he finds another traveller, much like himself, come from another land but now, now on the selfsame path as he, and as they flow together..."

"Hold on, webspinner. I think your metaphor may be departing its analogic pylons."

And yet, he thought, the mere and simple fact that they were having this conversation gave the lie to her objection.

He looked directly at her, discovering with some surprise how close to his was her face, how riveted on his were her eyes. He could feel the heat from her skin. It seemed as if the panorama of her mind were laid open to his view. "It's the confluence thing, isn't it?"

She took both his hands in hers, holding them against the firm stiffness of her bodice, and studied the depth of his eyes, so steely blue, so full of mystery and pride. "I like to savor things," she said.

She smiled impishly and raised her lips, full red and parted, and he fell upon them hungry as an Assyrian wolf, yet subtly as a leaf in restless repose on the cool green moss of the forest glen, as he would fall upon her comely nakedness, like a lustful butterfly, aflutter with delicate rose-scented passion.

Her eyes opened again, after the sighs and the searching, and her mouth, quivering, touched his again as she spoke. "Perfusion," she whispered.

He kissed her again, holding her so that with the side of his thumb he could stroke the smooth but urgent cloth beneath her arm, the curvature of her eager breast. Her hand covered his and pressed it firmly against her.

"Not yet," she whispered. "I want to see everything, Questus. I want to chew on my pleasures, and swirl their flavors between my teeth, and remember always how they tasted. Let the blossoms come one a time. Let's appreciate every fleeting nuance for the

glory it contains. This way, we'll have it for a long time."

"Even confluent waters retain their separate identities," he said reassuringly. "At least for a while."

"But we have shape independent of the channel, so we're more like yarn than liquid. Our weaving can be unknit."

He feigned surprise. "Our kiss can be undone?"

Now it was her turn to gaze far into the distance, in pensive solitude beside him. "Of course not, but a kiss—however divine—is unimportant. It's the feelings, the wonderful, crazy, all-believing, all-hopeful feelings, the magical feelings that matter and that really represent our doing, our being together here, our moltenness. And feelings can be gone as quickly as they appeared."

"Oh, surely not," he argued. "For yesterday this ecstasy had neither meaning nor existence and yet today, in this exquisite place with you, suddenly it is everything, it means everything."

"That's today," she said skeptically.

"Yes," he whispered, taking her by the shoulders, looking at her squarely. "Yes! It *is* today, that's exactly it."

Lord Hugh was charming the guests and missing his guide. He kept glancing down across the meadow toward the footbridge that spanned the little stream.

Elizaveta's eyes narrowed as she gauged him, then opened wide. "I must go back now. Papa Hugh is burning holes in my honor with his cold gray eyes."

"Surely he can't see us."

"He doesn't *have* to see us."

Questus held her close again and kissed the silken softness of her hair. "I don't want you to go," he said. "I don't want to lose you."

She kissed his lips. "Come back after eleven, when the park is closed and Papa Hugh has retired to his bedchamber, where he seldom reads for long before sleep

overtakes him. Tonight. In the meadow, behind the sugarloaf rock, in the moonlight. I'll show you how to get in."

"I'll come in on a moonbeam," he said as they strode nonchalantly into the open.

"Walk like a normal person."

"Like a tourist?"

"Like someone I'm not smitten with. Like we've just spent the last twenty minutes discussing the biology of mayflies."

"The anatomy of orchids," Questus mused. "The nature of beauty."

"Pesticides," she said, putting an abrupt end to his soaring fancy.

He grinned and teased her with a *sotto voce* rendition of *I Wanna Hold Your Hand* while they walked up the gentle slope of unmown grass to the emerald swath where Lord Hugh and the others were milling about, beginning to make their farewells.

"Don't try to sidle up and rub against me," she said, looking down, trying to appear as if she were broaching some utterly pedestrian topic.

"Actually, I was going to put my hand on your butt so I could feel your muscles working as you walk."

"You'd feel Hugh's hickory stick upside your bony cranium is what you'd feel."

He smiled. "But I wouldn't *feel* it," he said. "I wouldn't *care*."

"Uh-huh. But you wouldn't be coming back tonight either, would you? And you'd care about that."

"More than anything in the world," he said. And it was absolutely true.

Later that night, in the pale gray landscape under a full moon, he'd scaled the wall and traversed the winding path through the old trees and their ancient silence.

Emboldened by its simpler terrain and less complicated shadows, he'd crossed the open hillside with an air of insouciant bravado, yet cautious to make no sound, especially as he came 'round the great boulder, a cold jutting rock island shaped like a heel of French bread and twice as high as he was tall. When he reached the far side of the rock, hidden

from the view of the upstairs window of the main house where Lord Hugh's reading light still shone faintly through the lush summer foliage and he, still bespectacled, slept precariously, where the soft sward swept sweetly down to the river's edge, Questus saw a vision, a diaphanous sylph in the cool bluish light, surrounded by glittering jewels that danced on the water's surface, kneeling on the bank and staring into the murmuring blackness.

Elizaveta Dybukov, Mistress of the Exuberant Frondescence, was not his first conquest, but none had ever seemed in prospect half so sirenic, none had so exquisitely bewitched nor more vividly enticed him. At this moment, watching her silhouette float through the moonglow like a ballerina trapped in the brief timewarp of a dream, a dark and graceful chrysalis unfolding within a luminescent cocoon of silken veils, a shadowy succubus swimming through an aurora of phantasmic luminescence – and sensing the extravagant passion with which she had quickened this stunning effect, he wanted her more than he had wanted the luscious favors of Lucy Lindstrom that night in his car after the prom when she'd placed his hand against the warm slippery crotch of her panties and hers, after she'd unzipped his fly, around the turgid urgency of his unravelling.

But it would not be so easy. After a magical and soulful greeting, including an endless kiss that transported him far beyond this enchanted garden, they had walked for an hour along the little river's edge, holding hands, talking, pleaching their heartstrings. Afterward she had lain warmly in his arms on the soft grass below the monadnock while he paid homage with eager lips to her hair, her nose, her ears, her throat, her hands, and even – though he had to disengage himself from her embrace to do so – her bare sculpted ankle, where a prominent Achilles tendon flared ever so slightly into the narrow span of her heel. The moon had drifted through the southern sky and begun its descent into the west before she had told him the story of her childhood and of her hopes for the future, her yearning to discover herself in the world beyond the beautiful

and delightful bounds of her stepfather's Eden.

He interrupted her occasionally to kiss her, sometimes to taste her sensuous lips and so delay her continuing her narrative except as a muffled sigh or a murmur, and though she yielded warmly to these advances, and seemed pleased to receive them, she did not encourage him to further incursion upon the margins of her virtue but quickly resumed her tale.

It seemed as if she were saying that, yes, she adored him, was drawn to him as powerfully as he was to her, but that he might just as well lust for a beautiful princess, or a tempestuous coloratura, or a slinky new movie star as for her on this transcendental night.

So with her body, wrapped in layers of the sheerest white silk voile, pressed hotly against his, with her open mouth, its wet lips still caressing his chin, emitting a low guttural moan wreathed in humid musk, with her eyes big, dark and damp, searching the recesses of his passion, she said: "Questus. I want you." She said "want" the way a sun-crazed desert wanderer might say, through parched lips, "water."

Ah, but it was not so simple. As the sun raised its brow and peered over the hills far away across the river, Questus lay back with his hands behind his head and stared at the emergent blue sky. She had not let him touch her above her golden calf nor kiss her below her intensely prurient clavicles.

"You can't love me," she said. "We've only just met. You don't even know me."

"I feel like I've always known you, just as you yourself said. I know you're very beautiful. I know I want you. I know I love you. And I want to know everything about you."

She tucked herself closer against him. "And you will," she said softly, promisingly, into his ear.

He sighed.

Two days later she'd called him to say Lord Hugh had flown to Boston for a

weeklong superfetation of horticulturalists and that she'd like to picnic with him on the day following, which was a Saturday. The garden would be closed and they could be alone. The house, too, was theirs, but only for the weekend, for Lady Hugh was due to return from Victoria on Monday.

Questus had pondered. What did it mean? Two days of exquisite torture while she danced backlit in diaphanous veils and revealed herself to him as an endless series of Chinese boxes? Would they lie together nude in the old fourposter while he chanted Latin lamentations of the monks and she sang siren songs of silly boys who'd sacrificed their lives for illusory love?

"Wonderful," he'd said at once. "I'll bring the wine."

It was a '73 Merlot, round and fruity, of excellent color and clarity. After they'd drunk most of it, laughing and gazing fixedly into one another's eyes, and he'd consumed a half-dozen deviled eggs and three pieces of her chocolate cake, they crossed the bridge and, arms around each other, took a long stroll into the woods until they were far out of sight of anyone, and there, in a little meadow filled with pink and blue and yellow wildflowers, she'd let him learn all he most wanted to know, and he'd rummaged her well enough.

On Sunday morning, as they ate English muffins slathered with Dundee marmalade and listened to the pellucid melodies of Vivaldi, while they sat nearly naked, crosslegged on the old fourposter, she, draped and radiant like the Virgin in a rumpled sheet, looked longingly at him and said, "You're so handsome, Questus. We'll have such gorgeous babies."

Questus almost expressed his mouthful of muffin across the void between them, but he contained the explosion, all save the initial shock that forced a few crumbs up the back of his nose. "But I hardly know you," he'd wanted to blurt out.

"Well," he'd said warily, "I think people should be married before they have babies."

"Yes," she'd smiled. "Oh, Questus, let's do it! We could have a beautiful life."

Indeed. But Questus believed he already *had* a beautiful life.

The day after Papa Hugh returned, she invited him to dinner. Mama Hugh was hostile and haughty, but his lordship was in an expansive mood. He kept calling Questus "my boy." After dessert Mama Hugh left Questus in the study with the old man while she took Elizaveta to the kitchen for an angry and accusatory disquisition on the foolishness of young girls who do not obtain commitments.

"And even if he does ask you, what are you going to live on? Love?"

"We can live here. I can keep working with Papa while Questus goes to school."

"Questus, what kind of a name is that?"

"Well, what kind of a name is Cassandra?"

"Brandy?" Papa asked. "Cigar?"

Questus said yes to both, although his mind was far away, tumbling through an alkali wasteland in a hot wind. Marriage! Children! Brandy! A mother-in-law with the disposition of Cerberus! When he returned home late that night he packed a suitcase and early the next morning he boarded a train for the coast.

As the train rocked and swayed across the plains that evening, he'd been reading in the club car, feeling pleasantly full of good food and blissfully free from entanglements, when he'd noticed at a table across from him a young woman of strikingly handsome aspect and an exceedingly self-confident mien. She was reading a book as she sipped on a dacquiri. Occasionally, she'd pause to gaze reflectively out the window into the dark night.

Her name was Amy Camus. She'd said so as he'd walked past her chair on his way to the bar, watching her subtly but intently, smiling when she glanced up. "My name's Amy Camus," she'd said, and he'd fallen completely in love with her then and there.

She had a sleeping compartment. They made love all night and all the next day and well into the following night. Afterward he'd slept like a baby, and when he awoke

on the morning of the third day, as the train inched its way down the last mountain range before the seaboard, she was not there. He found a note from her tucked into the book she'd been reading, about the great adventurer John Muir, who'd tied himself into the crown of a giant Douglas fir during a gale so he could experience the sensation of the tree's violent flailing in the howling winds.

"Darling Q," it'd said, "my body and soul sing for you. No one has ever made me happier. But I have things to do and I must go, like a thief in the night. Let it be. Bon voyage. Love, Amy."

He was devastated. He left the train at its next stop. He determined the station where she must've got off. He rented a car and drove up there, an unassuming cluster of quaint structures clinging to the side of the mountains. A sign at the edge of town proclaimed it "Little Switzerland." He called all the Camus's (there were three) in the phone book. All professed never to have heard of her.

While he sat in a little restaurant and looked out over the postcard panorama of snowy mountaintops he remembered that he'd given her his address. In any case, she knew where he was going to school. She could find him if she wanted to. But unless she did, probably now he would never see her again.

It seemed so cold, so cruel, so inexplicable. It had all been so perfect, like an incredible dream. It had been a halcyon fantasy, then suddenly a desperate nightmare, and now in waking it was nothing at all, vanished as if she had never existed, save the fragrances of her perfume, her silken hair, her...

It was fate's own gauntlet of fine Afghan goatskin, dropped coyly in his path by a debutante, flung rudely at his feet by a banshee. He rented another car and drove back across the country. He laughed at the karmic symmetry of it; his leaving Eliza, Amy's leaving him. How rich. He shrugged. Thank God people really didn't get all they deserve. And after all, he had gotten quite a lot. Two beautiful women. Incredible sex. Romance.

As he crossed the mountains, the wind-washed prairie, the grainfields of the plains and the farmlands of the east, as he drove into piezoelectric sunrises, through torpid afternoons of silos and corn, away from the cherry-red glow of stupendous sunsets celebrating the harvest, under the canopy of long warm nights full of stars, he forgot, for a moment, the keenness of his despair.

He returned to his apartment high above the Cornish River, some three hundred miles from Elizaveta's lovely garden and infinitely farther than that from the dreamscape of Amy Camus. Early the next day he returned the car and walked across campus to his office in the basement of the Earl B. Farley maintenance shed, where he called Jake.

"There's trouble along the border," Jake said. "I need you to go up to Kenutka."

"Christ, I just got back yesterday. I'm wrung out. I have a life, you know..."

"I know everything, Questus," Jake said sweetly, "that's why I'm your boss."

"I'll be there in the morning."

A few hours after he arrived at Kenutka, just as he was settling down in the office he'd been assigned to, deep in the bowels of an earth-covered concrete bunker indistinct from numerous others nearby, the military went on Red Alert. Along the line of confrontation, far away, the long lenses of soldiery watched and waited, waited and watched. Nobody knew what would happen. At Kenutka, people were mostly nonchalant. If worse came to worst it'd be a sour day for them, although it'd be quick and sure. Otherwise, it was nothing.

Questus ground out press releases. No reason for alarm. No serious difficulty is possible. All is well. Base activities are completely normal. The heightened state of alert is merely precautionary. There is no risk whatever to the citizenry.

The base was virtually sealed. No weekend passes. No overnights. No civilians. A long quiescence. PX beer and endless games of hearts. The border was occasionally probed in annoying but not militarily significant ways. Neither side had the

wherewithal for successful attack but neither would stand down. The whole thing was absurd. The crisis went on, day after day, for a week, then two.

He had plenty of time to think, and soon he found he could think of nothing but Amy. Those hours with her had been an excursion in paradise, a demonstration that life could be resplendent with wonder and joy. He loved and longed for her. He dreamed about her. He imagined her arrival at the gates. He relived every moment of their brief encounter, trying to claw his way back to her laugh, her taste, her crazy humor, her hair, flaxen and onyx-black, like a tiger's eye, warm and sleek to the touch. He grieved with the loss of every detail, and began writing it all down, every jot and tittle, every word and glance and sigh, every time he'd kissed each precious field of flesh. He felt as if his soul had been torn from his body, as if he were nothing now but a hollow shell, cored out by wasps, as meaningless as carrion.

Tensions along the border subsided when each side realized neither could proceed. Some small concessions were made by both sides, troops were withdrawn, and the Red Alert was downgraded to nervous normalcy. But Jake wanted Questus to remain at his post for another week or two, writing press releases that would gradually confound all memory as if none of this whatsoever had ever transpired. Day-in-the-life stuff. A leisurely afternoon of golf during the tense days of the ostensible crisis. A matinee at *Pinocchio* with the kids. Shopping at the PX. Business as usual. Life without history.

Early in the third week he received a letter. By the postmark, it was from Elizaveta.

"Dear Questus," it began. "The memory of the feelings I had with the man you pretended to be is dear to me still, although I hate you. You have scorned my personhood as so much noisome lint, hardly worth the glance required to pluck it from your cuff. Having seduced my eager heart with earnest protestations of consummate affection, having gulled my trust with an elaborate pretense of friendship, honor and faith, you have shot me in the dark and left me for dead.

"For many years, in many situations with many better men than you, I shaped my

life so that, forgoing some pleasantries, some momentary amusement, I might carry forward into my union with a man the most beneficent of virtues. With great cunning and practiced skill, knowing my heart even better than I did, you persuaded me that you were the moment arrived. But everything you did, everything you said, everything you pretended to be was a lie, and everything you are is a lie. You are a betrayer. You are a betrayer of love and of one who loved you without reservation. I do not know which is worse. The pain I feel is very great, and will forever torment me, the more so because you took me so lightly. Yet I think the greater sin, the fatal flaw, the irredeemable failure of your character is that you are a betrayer of love, and therefore you are a betrayer of life itself. I shall not mourn your death, though it be today." She signed it, "Elizaveta Dybukov."

He felt as if she'd driven a flaming spear into his heart. Obviously the cosmic retribution represented by his separation from Amy was not yet complete. His passion for her would never abate but would instead become more and more intense until it consumed him. Yet never again would he see her. Never again would he hold her naked in his arms and listen to her breathing in the quiet rhythms of the night. All that was left was the terrible scorn of women and the recurrent despairing sensation of loss that haunted his reveries, where he would imagine her, see her, hear her, cry out to her, and then in a moment, just as before, completely inexplicably, when he reached for her, she would be gone.

Only if faith is perfect will the devil surrender love.

That night he couldn't sleep. Sometime between two and three in the morning he went to the barracks bathroom with a sewing snips and began to cut his hair, one strand at a time. His image in the mirror was haggard, gaunt, frightening. A spider scouted across the sink and, sensing his presence, paused for a moment too long. He cut off two of its legs. As it struggled he amputated another, then another. It dragged itself to the edge of the basin and slipped down among the jackstraw hair segments scattered

around the drain. With the scissors he pushed it back up to the flat rim and severed another leg. It became still. It wouldn't give him the grotesque one-legged dance he'd hoped for, so he flicked it back into the sink and flushed it.

He stared at himself for a long time. The torrent of water that rushed from the faucet splattered loudly against the porcelain bowl. His eyes were huge, dull, vacant. Soaked by the splashing water, the front of his olive drabs turned dark. His expression was drawn, rigid and hollow. The wounded spider plummeted through the dark pipes on the crest of an endless wave propelled by the thundering water that sluiced down through the open drain. His skin was blanched, almost bluish. The sink began to fill. His hair looked as though it were falling out in tufts. Perhaps the spider had fought back. His hands shook. He shut off the water. The time had come. The devil had won. Eurydice was gone because he had looked back. There could be no redemption now, no hope, no joy. Love would call, and he would answer, and hell itself, whose game it all was, would intervene, finding in his longing passion the means of the death of love.

After a frantic search of his pharmaceutical assets he assembled fifty-two aspirin, six spansules of amphetamine, three antihelminthic boluses, eleven blue tablets he couldn't identify and eighteen diuretic pills. He took them all. Then he lay down on his cot and waited to die.

Two hours later, just before dawn, he awoke with a shudder. He was sick as a dog, vomiting into the air, shivering, urinating in his bed, stumbling along the hallway, writhing and moaning on the commode. Pain shot through him from every angle, into and out of every organ, muscle, nerve and bone. He was wringing wet. For a while he wished he'd died, but he didn't die. "Pseudocide," Jake called it.

"It's against the law, you know. Man, what a fakir. No wonder they won't let you in the regular army."

"I'm sick, Jake. I'm going home."

"Look, stay 'til the end of the week, okay? Take it easy. Things look pretty good

now. Take a day off. You'll be back at the university Monday morning. I've covered everything for you. I need you to do a couple more things and then you can forget all this ever happened."

"Man, you guys are obsessed with forgetting things ever happened."

"It moves you along, Questo. No history, no hangups, know what I mean?"

"I'll stay until Sunday."

"Next time use a gun."

In the Zen teaching they say the most delicate and enchanting things never reveal themselves to you until you're completely transparent to them. That is to say, never when you're expecting them, never when you're thinking about them, never when you're aware of their possibility. Because your egoistic expectations alter their shape and behavior, frightening them away.

Just before five that afternoon, Questus was printing out the last draft of his article describing the parklike setting surrounding the duck pond in the woods just east of Bunker 23, where young officers sometimes took their families for picnics when the weather was amenable. Never mind what reposed on the steel benches in Bunker 23 and most of its sister crypts. Never mind that the entire area was surrounded by three parallel twelve-foot cyclone fences, the outer ones topped with curls of razor wire and the inner one sufficiently electrified to kill a rhinoceros. The people who worked on the base, who knew it and its mission best, even their women and children, frolicked among the trees, reclined on the grassy slope, picked wildflowers and idly communed with nature. It was safe there, and tranquil.

A sergeant appeared at his door with a TWX, a military telegram. It wasn't enclosed in an envelope; it had simply been torn from the teletype and folded in half.

"Need tall ship, and star to steer her by," it said. It was signed, "Amy." There was an address below her name, in a small seaside town about two hundred miles away.

He grinned from ear to ear. An hour later the MPs at the gate waved his old blue

VW bug into the outside world without a second look, and he was on his way, billowing sails unfurled to the topgallant, stardust swirling in his eyes.

It took four long hours for him to get there, despite his driving as fast as he could. The road wound among pleasant forests, still green but splashed now with the yellows, oranges, reds and purples of impending autumn in the mountains, past dark moss-draped grottos cool with secret brooks and limpid pools, through sinuous steep and rocky gaps and across lush lowland meadows, weaving its way with elegant unconcern toward a moment the very hope of whose possibility he had fervidly renounced but whose ineffable ecstasy was now —he gasped to think of it— imminent.

Surely everything that had happened had been divinely inspired. He felt cleansed of whatever sin he might have wrought against Elizaveta. Had she expected his soul in exchange for her charm she ought have said so in advance. Not every adieu is a betrayal. And he had truly loved her. He had paid honor and respect to her beauty and grace, as indeed he still did. Not one word had passed between them in those breathless days about station wagons, diapers or mortgages. She had warned him about her mother and stepfather, but he had never contemplated their, or even her, ubiquitous presence in all his future days, nor would he have.

In truth he still loved her immensely. She was proud, bright, imaginative, warm and funny. Obviously she had a regal temperament. He loved her like a sister. Just as he did Barbara, and Lynne, and Althea, and Julie, and Sue Ellen, and...well, many others.

He loved Elizaveta, sad Princess of the Exuberant Frondescence, but he adored, he craved, he worshipped, he sweat and salivated, he trembled, he lusted and yearned for Amy Camus, free spirit, wood-nymph, Tinkerbell, succubus, tsigane, Lorelei, dear Tess, all the Evanescent Goddesses of Dramatic Intensity.

His abandonment of any hope that he'd see her again had left an eerily silent cavern in his soul. It had dulled every taste, bruised every flower, dimmed every music, sullied every sweet thing. Life had decomposed into a vague fog of bug specks on

grainy black-and-white film.

Elizaveta's *j'accuse* had put a keen edge on the whole thing. There was no reason to persevere because nothing was possible except endless Sisyphusean labor and Tantalusean defeat.

He winced when he thought of how sick he'd been. Then he laughed aloud as he passed in the darkness the green and white sign, illuminated in his headlights, that announced his arrival in the town where Amy Camus now awaited him, succor of his suffering, mistress and devotee of his thundering heart and indomitable spirit.

An inquiry at the only open gas station elicited for him the location of the lodge where she was staying. As he drove slowly up the winding blacktop driveway, between and under the brooding elms, he sat up straight, tried to relax, took several deliberate deep breaths. He felt as if his whole body were grinning.

He parked the bug, shut off the lights, killed the rasping engine. Standing outside the car, he became aware of the darkness beyond the lodge, the whispered chirping harmonies of crickets in the cool summer air. He noticed perhaps a dozen people standing on the porch outside the main door as he approached. They seemed to be having a party. Then he heard music and laughter, and the humdrum of conversation, bubbling out from the great main hall.

"Can just anyone come to this party?" he'd asked one of the couples near the door.

"Sure," the girl said, smiling at him.

"Hey," her date said, raising his glass in tribute, "if you're here, you're one of the guests."

Questus smiled graciously.

Inside, wrapped in the cheerful warmth of the crowd, he searched for her as he made his way through the room. Quite unexpectedly, he found himself traversing the kitchen, where a few bantering women were fixing food, and then walking along an empty hallway beyond, and then drawing himself up at a door. And, following cosmic

karma or preternatural instinct, he opened it.

She looked even better than he'd remembered. More beautiful. More arrogant. More compromised. She was sitting crosslegged on the thick burgundy carpet, as were three young men, in a circle, playing cards. Well, at that moment they were all convulsed in hilarity as a fourth man struggled to shed his trousers without further embarrassing himself, although, given the state of his Fruit-of-the-Looms, he couldn't succeed. She wore faded skin-tight levis, one sock, and a lacy white bra. God, she looked good!

He closed the door quietly behind him as he entered upon this merry scene. Then he stepped toward them, smiling, his arms crossed, his eyes on the hopping fool, and glanced very briefly again at her. "Can just anybody join this game?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Hey, Questo," she cried out. "What brings you here? Come sit in!" And she squinched to one side as she patted the floor on the other.

He smiled wryly, pursing his lips. His eyes acknowledged their upturned faces. "An oracle brings me here. But then you already know that." His expression softened as he settled his gaze on her.

"Thanks," he declined. "I think I'll go socialize. I know this shell game, and the pea is in Dubuque." To the young men, including the one most recently pantless, he raised a mocking fist of triumph. "Male power, guys," he said, winking.

"Yeah," they responded with waves of their own half-clenched fists and fatalistic smiles, but a certain absence, he thought, of real *joie de vivre*.

He retreated to the door, and then, reaching it, he turned his head and looked back at her, and smiled. She did not seem to notice. He closed the door behind him once again, drifted down the hallway, shaking his head in dazed bemusement, negotiated the social swirl in the kitchen, and once again entered the grand gathering room. Standing on the spacious hearth before the huge stone fireplace, he fell into conversation with an

older gentleman who, as it happened, was waiting for his estranged daughter, whom he had not seen for several years, and who was this party's guest of honor, to make her appearance. His visit, his presence at her party, was to be a birthday surprise.

August 23rd. Her birthday. It was her birthday! Or was it tomorrow? What the hell day was it?

"You know," Questus said, "it's quite remarkable, really, but you remind me of someone. Perhaps it's your very elegant manner. Your air of distinction. Your patrician ease with everything." He put his hand to his cheek. "I just can't think of who it is," he said with a laugh. Then he proffered his hand. "I beg your pardon. Questus Custer, public relations charlatan."

The elderly gentleman shook his hand firmly but not warmly. "Pleased to meet you, Mr. Custer. But surely my story is too mundane for one to whom truth is merely a jewel trapped in the rough, of no value until you have transmogrified it into some glittering nothingness."

"Well, sir, that's my profession. Personally, for me it is the most mundane of things that form the essence of truth. I'm obsessed with innocence. I trust people. I believe people. I rely on the evidence of my senses, instinct and reason. So I like your story very much. In fact, I'm here to meet someone, too, whom I haven't seen for a long time and who I never expected to see again."

"A young lady?"

Questus smiled. Suddenly he felt on level ground with this man.

"Is it my daughter, do you suppose?"

Questus said nothing. The Brahmin continued.

"I have excellent reason to believe that my daughter is marrying a young man from the Naval Academy in October."

"Uh-huh."

"Doesn't ring a bell, eh?"

"Well," Questus said, smiling skeptically, "I think the young lady who lured me here, whom I've only recently seen, has a more footloose future in mind."

The distinguished gentleman laughed. "All right, then," he said, a twinkle in his eye.

"Her name's Amy Camus," Questus said suddenly.

"Why, yes..."

The old man turned ashen and Questus helped him down into a brocaded Queen Anne wingchair, where, trembling and perspiring, he struggled to regain his composure. "I was afraid of this," he said.

"She seems capable of steering her own course," Questus replied, realizing with some surprise that he had used this metaphor.

"Oh, indeed. And she's utterly fearless. She'll take a ship into any storm, onto any shoal, because, after all, if she sinks it, like any accomplished swashbuckler she can readily lay hands on another."

Questus smiled.

The old man glanced up at him. "I take it she's run your vessel aground."

"Exocet missile, sir. Amidships at the water line."

Mr. Camus nodded, drew out his handkerchief, cleaned his glasses, daubed his face delicately, expressed a sigh, picked up a copy of *The Economist* and settled comfortably into the chair, perusing the financial tea leaves in front of the fire while Amy's party buzzed and hummed around him. After awhile, he fell asleep. He was still asleep an hour later when, having ascertained that the poker party had forsaken its previous locale for premises unknown, and with all doubt concluded, Questus slipped out the door and rolled his dung beetle through the open cast-iron gates onto the dark empty highway.

Neat all shit and bar for bier buy. Knead Al's hip an's tart oyster Herb awry. The Volkswagen flew over the black road. Hell, she'd never said it was *him*. It hadn't been an

invitation at all, merely a declaration of fact. An important announcement. I'm insane and right now I'm really hot. It's an act of revenge. (But for what?) Every man will act the fool. Just like my father and the pink-cheeked cadet. For what, you ask. You are droll. For being a man. For having something I crave with every fiber of my being. For being twice gratified. But it's also an act of art, and philosophy, and witness. You think me a pirate, a thief, a vagabond, a gypsy. But I live free. I live askew to the system that ordains judgment on people's lives. I am beyond good and evil, as Nietzsche says, as Schiller says. Have you loved me? I have no hollow days, least of all those I spent with you. Do you miss me? Let it inspire you for an even greater adventure tomorrow.

As he sped through the winding, shadowy tunnel illuminated by the bug's headlights he realized that he and the car and the road and the night had found a common rhythm that carried him gracefully through the pavement's twists and turns, that let him fly effortlessly through the warm air swift as a nighthawk negotiating the dark spaces of the forest canopy. He seldom passed another car, and during the long periods when he was alone, a fleeting beacon slipping through an ocean of blackness, driving became instinctual, un-self-conscious, as the Zen masters would say, and his mind seemed free to wander at will, as if he were on a spaceship guided by an android autopilot.

Jake would be unsympathetic.

"What the hell do you want? You flew to the moon, didn't you? On company time, I might note. Listen, she works for me, understand? She's a bonbon. It was my treat to you. You don't get the whole box. Carpe diem, Questus."

"I could have carpe'd a few more diems. Here I am over the edge of the cliff again. All I embrace now is emptiness."

"Would you choose her to be the one who's with you at the end of the world?"

Questus laughed. "What does that have to do with anything? And what difference does it make? I'm stuck with you, aren't I?"

"Oh, you'll escape eventually, Questo. You might get good at this and go find a real job. People will get jaded about nuclear weapons after a while. Or one of these bimbos might tie you up and keep you."

"I would've liked to have had more time, that's all."

"I'm talking about the end of the world. The last day. The end of the trail. I'm talking about who you want to kiss your ass goodbye, or maybe share in your demise."

"Shit, I don't care. Let the carps of fate play their little charades."

"Personally, I hope I'm alone."

"I want to be buried in a cunt."

"It'd have to be a big cunt. Do sperm whales have cunts?"

"You're a master of misunderstanding."

"Yes, of course, and you're dismissed. The money's in your bank account. You did a good job and I feel sorry for you poor bubby so I gave you almost as much as I promised."

Questus felt relieved and annoyed. "You put me on top of a pile of nukes and dared some agitated maniacs with missiles to shoot at me. You set me to work portraying sow's butts as silk pillows. You promised me anything and, as always, gave me a big cold fish eye. And you didn't send me Amy Camus. Not even you could handle her. It'd be like having a roman candle in your pants. You're too fastidious for that."

"Perhaps. And besides, you have a magnetic attraction for young women and a somewhat predictable penchant for self-annihilation. Why salt the earth with golden manna for a guy who eats mud?"

Questus shrugged.

"Don't play tricks on Merlin, Questo."

This couldn't be the end of it, no matter what Jake said. His whole outlook was corrupted by the kind of crap that Jake said. Life was not arranged willy-nilly. He had

enticed Elizaveta to love him and then deserted her in the consequences. He'd flung himself into the wild abyss of Amy's fairy tale, and she'd sent her echoing laughter to mock him. Love always came to this. Love led to separation and dishonor. Love led to the catastrophic loss of its own priceless edifice. The most vibrant of all the icons of life was a poisoned apple. Now, like Snow White, he would sleep for a millennium.

As the star-filled blackness of the eastern sky slowly yielded to a nacrous silver haze, Questus Custer, a nude child of chilly innocence, having turned with the world and now facing the dawn, could not foresee what miracle was to follow, the slithering tongues of fiery pinks and oranges that would lick out across the endless horizon, their reflections tinting the veiled blue vault of heaven, the hot, brazen, blood-red sphere of ruby that would rise slowly from the earth's edge like a warm maraschino cherry emerging from the pursed and glistening lips of supine Aphrodite, daring him to pluck it with his own.

It was all utterly new, a primordial drama of staggering beauty. But Questus Custer, naked and crosslegged on a mat of woven grass on the altar of the earth, understood everything that mattered, including much that no child could know.

Suddenly the old man stood again before him. His dark visage shone like copper reflected in the ruddy dawn. A young girl whose ink-black hair hung braided across the swelling of her bosom – a Cherokee princess, Questus surmised – accompanied him, standing quietly off to the side, a step or two behind him. She was intensely beautiful. Questus' heart leapt.

"It is time," the old one said.

Questus arose. The girl smiled demurely at him, her craven eyes ablaze, her shy lips slightly parted.

"This night you have changed everything. And yet everything is the same. Does this surprise you?"

"No," Questus answered.

"This is my daughter," the Indian said. "She will accompany you to the next turning. See that no harm comes to her."

Questus wanted to protest that, in the jumbled swirl of life's tumultuous time, misfortune comes to all, despite everything anyone can do. But he did not.

"I will," he said.