

**CHAPTER ONE**  
**THE MEETING**

**THE MAN WHO CAN'T DIE**

**A NOVEL**  
**by JON FRANKEL**

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If only the monkeys had died, then we wouldn't be here now, thought Dr. Bryson. Marketing wouldn't have gotten a hold of it, and there'd be no shebang in the auditorium, no state involvement. She had made her last stand alone, in committees, and now she would be honored as the leader of a team, inventor of a drug everyone thought was sure to put Monozone back on top.

Bryson, a cantankerous, 67 year old woman, had been studying the brain her whole life, the last several decades at Monozone, developing a class of drugs known as Euphorics, to treat everything from suicidal depression to ennui.

Transcryptasine, marketed as Paregane, was the latest and most powerful of these. For ten years she had lived in her lab, through dead ends, delays, long depressions when no ideas came and she lost most of her staff. Those that stayed were sometimes drunk for weeks on end. Finally, they made the breakthrough and produced a cure for depression and ennui, proving that by manipulating fields in the brain you could reset consciousness. People took a pill before bed and dreamed of paradise. They awoke feeling at home in the world. They liked their jobs and their spouses again; had realistic expectations about life. They didn't feel like they had been ground down to nothing by meaningless work and twisted relationships.

There were no side effects, no loss of sleep or sexual function, no weird feeling of otherness, no bloating or anorexia, no let down or crash. She had discovered the key to a signal produced by a cluster of

stars in the brain, a little universe of mood and expectation, of time perception and being.

There was only one drawback. In the trials it killed ten percent of everyone who took it, and for no apparent reason.

The little wind up dolls were clapping now, for Martin Bruce, Head of Marketing, the corporate boss of her unit. Morons, let them have their day, she thought. Her throat was dry but the glass of ice water on the table looked insipid. As insipid as her colleagues, human resources, weirdly dry beneath the sun lights, as if suffering powdery mildew.

Martin Bruce was an unlikely but true ally in the recent battle, adamant about not going ahead with a drug that dangerous. He saw nothing but lawsuits, two months out. No one had ever successfully marketed death. Contempt for the lunacy of the notion strained every word he spoke till, after a while, Martin Bruce became shrill. Martin Bruce had gone hoarse for her cause. She would remember that.

People answered his objections. It was pointed out, by one of her own people, that there would never be any way to prove that transcriptasine was the culprit if someone did die. There would only be anecdotal evidence, a statistical correlation that could easily be accounted for in other ways.

An accountant explained that 10 percent really wasn't too bad, if you considered that ninety percent survived. It was less dangerous than war.

Well, that did it. Bruce capitulated and they applied for a patent. It should have ended there--state would never approve transcriptasine--but this afternoon she learned that it had been approved, and that they were sending a man over to take charge of the project.

Everyone was there, raked at a steep grade toward the orange and blue bulbs, seated on grey composite bucket chairs with stiff white side tables. Veal stalls for humans. Walls, floor and ceiling were

carpeted in a beige substance that both contained and breathed. Seated at a table, behind the mike, were a half a dozen men and women in grey and white linen suits, with Mondrian ties of one sort or another.

Bruce's face was permanently worried and dour. He waited for the applause to die. "It is my pleasure then to introduce to you an old friend, a man who first rose to prominence working for our company, and who has in one way or another represented our interest at state for over ten years. We old timers are certainly glad to have him back, and I'm sure members of the team who don't know him, will come to love and respect him as much as I do. Mr. Owen Bradlee, the new Monozone/state liaison officer in charge of Paregane."

Bryson stared at her ice cubes. Owen Bradlee. That was no surprise either. Who else fit the job description so well? No one even really knew whom he worked for, just that he was always there, on the winning side.

Owen Bradlee had a slightly stuffy English accent, one of those upper class mumbles, and he made affectation look natural somehow. She liked to drink with him in the old days; he could booze and eat, but he was a little tight. And, despite his saturnine appearance, he was a good fuck too. Big dick. Monstrous appetite at forty. She reached for the water and wanted to retch. There was no substitute for a martini. Bradlee cleared his throat.

"I want to congratulate everyone on this team. Paregane,"--he exaggerated each vowel so the word came out like a short, ironic pop song--"or, as the insiders still affectionately call it, transcriptasine," this he made crisp and dignified, "is a triumph. Not only will it eliminate severe depression and reduce the rate of suicide, it will prove to be the ultimate Euphoric, a cure for people's lives. We at state are particularly sanguine about it becoming the major weapon in

the war on negative attitudes, which are, frankly, undermining production in many key, human resource based industries.”

He looked around the room and took in some more wind.

“Although of course no single individual can ever claim to be the sole author of such an important innovation, there is one person, an old friend of mine, a great woman, who in mid-career stands at the very pinnacle of professional achievement, to whom I think we all owe a special nod of recognition. Dr. Ruth Bryson.”

A sea of dough turned upon her and the clapping erupted. Bryson swallowed a teaspoon of bile and stood slightly, acknowledging them with a nod.

“And now, before I step back into the shadows,” he chuckled, “I want to tell you all how happy I am to be back in the old Monozone bosom.”

Crap you can’t cut, she thought. A dry lifeless stool produced by a lifeless asshole in a lifeless head. The shit of the damned. Bruce returned to the podium.

“Reynolds, would you like to make a few brief remarks about the marketing campaign?”

Reynolds stood. He was a tall, thin, stooped man with black hair and a bald spot. In a mincing voice he addressed the assembly. “At first, we only market it to doctors, in this country, as a prescription drug for the severest forms of depression. At the same time we release it in China as an over-the-counter drug, with a heavy saturation ad campaign on billboards and television. It spreads here through fashion circles, an illicit drug. That gives us that little oomph we look for at the beginning. People think they’re getting something cool. When demand gets high, we go over-the-counter here.”

Someone yelled, “What’s the slogan?”

“Yeah, give us the slogan.”

“The slogan.” Reynolds had to raise his voice a little above the

buzz. “We start out with a tease. Black billboards with the words, Is this your lucky day? Later, we hit them with, Paregane...Everyone who takes it goes to paradise. Is this your lucky day?”

Someone in the back, twenty rows up, yelled out, “Ha! How about, Paregane! Everyone who takes it goes to paradise. Ten Percent stay. Is this your lucky day?”

Dr. Bryson stared into her water glass past the facets, into a mountainous abyss of frigid cliffs and blue chasms pierced with light. Form obliterated form and her eyes erupted with crystals.

From the other side, two rows down, “Ideally, the 90 percent who live envy the 10 who die.”

Bryson shook herself awake and stood. No one paid her any mind as she left the room. She needed a drink.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE LOUNGE

The lounge was dark, and almost cool after the choking heat of the night air, breezeless and slightly dank with canal water. No one was there. The walls were painted a neutral grey darkened by years of cigarette tar. Brass sconces with amber chandelier lights lit the red tabletops and punctured black cushions of the booths. Small ceiling fans whirled quickly on the shadowed ceiling, between recessed, colored accent lights. She took a seat at the huge, horseshoe shaped bar. On either side of the mirror were liquor cabinets, with illuminated stained glass panels chipped here and there. There was a champagne cork embedded in the wall with a circle drawn around it, Big Al's eye died here written in laconic letters. Jammed in at the top of the mirrors were two signs. One of a parrot, with red and green and yellow and blue feathers, bending down to pick up a beer in its beak, which it then lifted and drank, replacing it with a squawk and ecstatic blinking. The other was of a dancing leprechaun, green top hat and red cheeks, seeming to toast the bird with a yellow martini glass. The colors were warm and vivid; they bounced off of a curved wall of windows on the long side of the room. It cheered her up. She could watch that bird drink for hours.

"Evening ma'am," said the bartender, a man with premature wattles and eyes sagging down his face. He suffered from a rare wasting disease contracted after accidentally eating a mutant zebra mussel. The parasite was slowly eating its way through his connective tissue.

"Jim." She looked at herself in the gold mirror. "Martini please. Make it a Razor's Edge."

He nodded and placed a bowl of spanish peanuts on the bar.

Seated directly across from her, at the other end of the horseshoe, was a man in uniform, with a typically coarse haircut. Even in the dolorous orange light, and at that distance, she could see raw cuts. A cheap hemp newspaper lay out on the bar and he poked at the crossword with a pencil, tongue between his teeth. He was drinking a melon ball, in a tall frosted glass, with a cherry. Drinks like that made her almost as happy as the bird did. The man looked at her and she smiled, then instinctively looked at her hands.

The first sip of the cloudy martini had been everything she hoped it would be. It was the one reliable thing in a day of make believe. Her triumph. But they couldn't just hand it to her without all that stuff about the team. And it was no triumph at all but a loss of control. Her name would be forever associated with transcryptasine but she would never have any power over how it was used.

She played with the three olives--drab army green, with pimentos, like raw nipples on a gangrenous tit--and finally speared one with a toothpick. The lactic bight made her wince with pleasure. She tossed off the rest and called for another, hoping to have all three sheets hoisted before the meeting let out.

Tonight she'd sleep in the lab; tomorrow, she'd join her husband, Leonard, at their place in the Finger Lakes. The very thought made her sweat. The house was in a Greenhouse Mitigation Zone, on a ridge above a mosquito-infested valley near Keuka Lake, known mostly for its failed avocado farms. In exchange for a lifetime of indulgence she had indulged Leonard and bought this land. There was just no reason not to give him what he wanted. Leonard had had his share of inconsequential sluts over the years but it didn't hold a candle to her near constant infidelity. And he was in his mid eighties.

Like many people his age he wouldn't make 120, as she was near guaranteed. She had modified genes, and a stem cell line established by her parents. Leonard's family were poor, and religious; they didn't believe in manipulating the genome. In the next ten years he'd fall apart, one thing at a time.

The house was an abandoned vineyard he had restored with the help of his Amish neighbor. It was comfortable inside, large, with power to run ceiling fans, which kept the miasmic murk going in circles. The windows had screens to keep the biting night flies out. The lake was fine to swim in so long as the weeds died back in winter. The one thing she looked forward to was the artesian well; it came up at a constant 14 degrees, so she could spend hours in a claw foot tub, under an old oak tree behind the house reading detective novels. The tub was big enough so she didn't feel like a cork in a bottle. She could really spread out. Leonard grew and prepared the food himself. It was superb. His wine on the other hand tasted like battery acid.

She was beginning to enjoy spending time in the country with him. They were both less obsessed with their work. For most of their 42 years together they'd lived apart. Leonard was an emergent ecosystems analyst, a passionate biologist. Whenever he was not teaching he was doing fieldwork in places she couldn't imagine, Louisiana, Florida. Their time together was often brief, intense, conflicted. Big egos, exhausted, depressed or totally manic.

She sipped her second drink and stared out the windows at the arriving and departing hovercraft. Like bumble bees, she thought, shivering. Their green and red lights blinked against the pale concrete of the Monozone lab building, across the canal. The labs had no windows, just black grills to let the cool air in in winter.

Owen Bradlee walked in carrying a suitcase, in a dove grey suit, starched white shirt and collar, and a silk tie of green, gold and red

chevrons. In her more objective moods he seemed like a bit of a stooge. He liked his little home in the suburbs, always dressed well, better than he earned, and knew the right people. A lover didn't need to be smart, he needed to be fun, no challenge at all. Then you were free to love. Husbands were different. Husbands had to be hard, difficult. Everything else was boring.

Bradlee had a way of drifting into a room, like fog into headlights. Even his touch was a little foglike. The chill lay on his fingertips, in the manicured nails, the sapphire ring on his right ring finger, the two silver bracelets sliding out of his starched cuffs, and the onyx cufflinks. It was a little cold, but everything else always seemed so hot. She looked at him as he approached. Even in his sixties, going ruddy with drink and smoke, his mustache a puff of white, his hair synthetic, he was desirable. He smiled at her with recognition as he crossed the glassy puddles of light spilled down from above.

"Well Bryson, congratulations are in order. Mind if I join you?" When he spoke it was as if his reserve were meant to hide a touch of sadness. And what might in another man come off as condescension with Bradlee appeared to be mere reticence, a mastery of the pain caused by contact with other humans.

Bryson scowled at a small fleck of ice floating in her drink. A drop of sweat formed at her temple and rolled down her slightly plump cheek, stained cherry red by the sign. She had been there long enough to perspire now, it was either time to leave or take off her lab coat.

"No please, sit down. What'll you have?" To face him, she stood and pushed her stool out a bit and wiggled out of her lab coat. She was a little heavy, and liked it that way. It gave her heft, which came in handy in the right position.

"Manhattan," he said, with evident enthusiasm.

Bryson pointed loosely to her body and said, "I haven't had time to shower or change." The strap of her damp, white tank top dropped

off her shoulder. She looked at the bartender. He was bent over the crossword, helping the soldier out. “Jim,” she called. He started up, craning about in sudden alarm and panic. His adam’s apple rolled up and down between the wattles like a ball on a track. He was an older man, sick and afraid of losing his job, even though he had been there so long, it was hard to imagine who would fire him. Then he saw it was only Bryson and relaxed.

“Forgive me ma’am, I was just helping Private Cooper out with the crossword. It’s his last night.”

“Where’s he going, up to the front tomorrow?” Private Copper nodded vacantly and went back to the puzzle. “Jim, you remember Mr. Bradlee?”

“Why yes I do. Manhattan dry?”

Bradlee nodded and Jim headed for the speed rack.

“Make it top shelf Jim, I’m buying,” she said.

“Everyone is quite pleased with you.” Bradlee patted her hand and smiled beneath his mustache. His warmth waffled in with his cold like a changeable day.

Jim plunked down Bradlee’s drink. The cherry swam up from the dark, plasmic bottom of the glass and stood briefly in the clear red light. With a slight grin he took a tentative first sip, gazing across the rim of the glass at Bryson. He had weepy blue eyes. Allergies were his excuse, but Bryson always suspected melancholia.

“Brutal meeting,” he said, staring now straight ahead, at the bottles.

“Stupidity at its human limit,” replied Bryson.

“I wouldn’t go that far. But you were certainly both deprived of authority and given insufficient credit for the discovery.”

She dismissed him by looking at the ceiling.

“Well, I come bearing gifts. Your work will certainly not go unrewarded.”

She said nothing.

In silence, and slowly, he opened the brass snaps of the briefcase and withdrew a small leather wallet. It contained three thin gold wafers. “A private bonus, for you.”

She lifted the wallet up and examined the discs. “What are these for?”

“Jewels. Twenty five million dollars. No one will ever know you have them, they’re untraceable.”

“Well,” she said, jocularly, “who the hell are we?”

“Ah, I knew it would come around to that. Now, you also have an option to buy, at today’s trading price of 23, a hundred thousand shares of Monozone stock.”

“That doesn’t answer my question.”

“You don’t seem to understand how profitable all this is likely to prove. Paregane could push us up over two hundred, which would get us a seat on state council. We could bump Genetel. Do you have any idea of what that stock will be worth then?”

Skeptically picking out points on Bradlee’s face she reached for the wallet and placed it in her pocket. She couldn’t stop looking at him, at the blue dots of his eyes floating in pink, the total stillness of his jaw. “I should quit while I’m ahead.”

“But you have decades to go. Your most important work is ahead of you.”

“Oh please. I did that forty years ago, at Cornell, with Velodia.”

He snorted. “Vadge Velodia. Haven’t thought about her in years. Has she changed much?”

“It’s Quap, not Vadge. And I wouldn’t know.” It was a lie. She had plans to see Velodia the next day. They drank in silence. She ordered another Razor’s Edge and lit a cigarette.

“You don’t look so bad Bradlee,” she said.

"Neither do you."

"Yeah, well, they can keep us alive, but they can't make us young."

He smiled as if the thought of being young were slightly repulsive. "I had my liver out you know."

"So what, Leonard's on his third."

Bradlee looked surprised, raised his eyelids. "I didn't think Leonard drank. Has he been hiding it?"

She shook her head and waved him off. "No, Leonard didn't drink, at least not until we bought the vineyard--"

"The vineyard?"

"Forget about it. The first one he had out because of Hepatitis. Down in Lake Pontchartrain, some exotic river worm from the Amazon swam up his urethra. They treated him for that, but they didn't know that the worm carried a retro virus in its digestive track. When they poisoned the worm, it released the virus into Leonard's body and the virus attacked his liver. No one knew a thing was wrong till Leonard blew up and turned yellow. So they gave him his first transplant. Then the virus attacked his new liver, so that one had to come out too. He had a hell of a time finding the right antiviral."

Bradlee looked distastefully away from his drink. "Does he still wear those dreadful rubber boots?"

Bryson laughed. "Yeah."

"You've got one wish left Bryson. What do you want to work on next? Name your project."

"Transcriptasine."

He shook his head, "I can't do that. It would be totally irresponsible. You don't understand the importance of what you've done. People are unhappy. Productivity is down. There's a plague of ennui and misery and boredom out there. The statistics are terrifying. Suicides up in all age categories, especially the young. Accidents,

emotional family murders, street brawls, drug addiction, absenteeism, all on the rise. I would say consumer confidence is eroding."

"If you want to make people happy do something about the weather. Transcriptasine isn't snake oil, it's meant for debilitating, suicidal depression. It's an important finding, it has a promising future, but you know and I know that it's insane to market a drug over-the-counter, in China or anywhere else, that kills ten percent of the people who take it."

"That's where you may be wrong. The gamble may prove to be exciting, give people a sense of purpose, something to feel good about, you know, I survived another day. It's what gave our parents' generation such backbone. The world ending. Flood, wind and fire, work to be done. All that blah. Now people are soft and stupid. There's no risk. If we can offer them paradise in a pill, how can that fail?"

"That's just what the angel called it," she mumbled, feeling suddenly haggard. It was an argument she'd been having for months, and here she was having it again.

"Speak up Bryson, the what?"

"Oh, the angel."

"Good lord, what ever do you mean?"

Wearily she explained. "When I took transcriptasine, I, like everyone else, dreamt of going to Eden. But I was the only one who saw an angel."

"That must have been some surprise." He chuckled and popped a handful of peanuts in his mouth.

"Scared the hell out of me."

"And this angel, did he have wings?"

She shook her head. "No, no no. It was nothing like that. The place feels real, as real as this, as you and me right now, here. And the

angel was actually kind of a hairy fellow, very, earthy, you know? Hairy red arms, bushy eyebrows, sideburns. He came out from behind a shrub, like I'd caught him napping or something and said, very sarcastically, Paradise in a pill, what will they think of next?"

"How did you know he was an angel?"

"I just did. It gave me the creeps and still does. That whole place made me nervous."

"Sounds like transcryptasine didn't really work on you."

This observation prickled her pride, though she had made it herself. "Oh, it worked just fine. I went there, didn't I?"

"Yes, but you had no desire to stay."

"Maybe not, but I was happy as a pig in shit for weeks after, even though I knew I would lose that battle with marketing. That's the thing right there, isn't it, about transcryptasine. Happiness and reality don't cancel each other out. The real world doesn't get to you, doesn't destroy your confidence in things. Nevertheless, you're right. I didn't want to stay."

"Well, I like it here just fine. It's all the paradise I can stand." As he said the word paradise he glanced around at their surroundings.

"So I can just forget about further research."

"I'm sorry Bryson, anything but that. State's approved the marketing plan. By next week there'll be black billboards from Lhasa to Hong Kong, and our reps will have held virtual meetings with every doctor in the country."

The doors swung open and people in gregarious groups of four and five began to amble in, one member of each table bellying up to the bar to buy pitchers of beer. Individually any one of them would be afraid to be near Bryson, but as a herd they broadcast a fatuous contempt.

Bryson stirred her drink around with her finger, licked the gin off

and took a long sip. "Time was, on a night like this, I'd go home and fuck my husband."

Bradlee smiled, drained his drink and said, "Or me."

"Or you."

"Well, shall we go to my place then, for a night cap?"

She sighed. "I was going to sleep in the lab tonight and meet Leonard tomorrow, at the vineyard."

"The one I'm supposed to forget about."

"Keuka Lake. About, I don't know, nine, ten years ago I bought it for Leonard to retire on."

"Greenhouse Mitigation Zone? How eccentric."

"What can I say? You know Leonard."

They headed out the door and were absorbed by a hot vapour of stale seawater. Haze drifted up into the orange sky. Cool green phosphorescent pods of hovercraft crossed above, rose and fell and moved about like dancing eggs.

They crossed a steel footbridge across the canal separating Monozone from the Lounge and she turned left, towards the elevator to the hovercraft lot.

"Not that way, Bryson. I've got a car."

She followed him without the least resistance. She did not remember the last time she had ridden in a car. Pick up trucks and tractors in the country, toy cars at car parks, sure, but a car?

It was a thing with her, transportation. Hovercraft made her nauseous. It was like sitting in a bucket with windows and getting kicked around. Amphibatrains gave her hives, all those people packed in, yacking their heads off about nothing, drinking shitty booze. And the interminable card games in the smoking car. The only other reliable form of transport was Individual Commuter Pods. At least they rode on a rail and only sat one.



In the city, a car was big business. Bradlee must have gravitated to a winning side. It was maybe time to reconsider his power. "Who do you work for now? What side are you on?" She felt she could at least demand that of Bradlee. They had spent quite a bit of time together. He was never one to let on in an obvious way what his ambitions were, but they were clear enough, if not generic. Bradlee always seemed to occupy a noman's land, between things, undecided till the last moment when he would instinctively break in the right direction, landing wherever the opportunity was, but for seemingly disinterested reasons, or as if by means of coincidence.

"Same side as always, Bryson." He pulled out a key chain. They were in a small parking lot, back by the generators, behind the Monozone building. A single, two-story pole dusted the air with a dim bluish light. There was a garbage truck parked by some 10-ton dumpsters. Beneath them black canal water chugged. Insect shoals swam in and out of the light. Then there were a couple of modern cars, wheeled vehicles, she thought with scorn. That model year they were two-toned boxes, grey and white, like a cubist pigeon with tinted windshields and crappy batteries. Cheap as always, she thought, and then watched him stick his key into the door of a 1967 silver Cadillac.

"Jesus Bradlee, where the hell did you get this?"

"Relax. It's a Nigerian knock off. But it's damn good, I can tell you that. This thing can go wherever you want. There's no programming. You just drive fast."

"How did you ever get permission?"

"Defense Department portfolio. I'm civilian staff. It's an official car, but of my design." He opened the door for her. It swung out and bumped her leg. The weight nearly knocked her over. Even closing it was difficult. The door seemed to want to bite her foot off. She sank back into the grey leather sofa seat. It roared.

"Is this a gas car?" she asked.

"Dual system. It's a ten cylinder internal combustion engine, that runs on gasoline or alcohol and a modified hybrid solar hydrogen job, Korean design." The air grew frigid. She reminded herself that such things shouldn't matter to her anymore. She had twenty five million in jewel discs.

"I could live in this thing," she said. They eased out of the security gates, and onto a narrow dark road built above the main canal into Manhattan.

"There's nothing out there on the road anymore. I can go for days."

They were on a long causeway, the approach to the Queensboro Bridge. The city was dark, scattered with light from a few offices, a few homes, but nestled in the middle of the island, behind the towers, was a bright glow. The streets of midtown.

They crossed the levee and circled down onto the Beltway, through warrens of damp concrete and out onto 44th street. Here they drove up a plastic composite ramp and into a small, secure parking area. He summoned an elevator. She looked at the buttons.

"Jesus, what floor do you live on?"

"Actually, it's the 53rd. It looks south, west and east."

### CHAPTER THREE THE NEXT DAY

Shortly after dawn Bryson awoke, unable to sleep. She belched gin. Her stomach was in flames. Bradlee's wallet and keys were on a steel table and his pants and suit were draped over the back of a black folding chair. She took his white, monogrammed robe off the back of the bedroom door and walked into the living room to look at the blue glass and steel of the city adjacent to her window. She wanted to watch them sway in the morning wind, against the dull, far off bricks and, below them, the composite buildings, constructed of fused landfill. Impermeable. Flexible. Extrudable. Cheap.

The apartment was austere. The walls were various shades of white. The floor was natural stone, smooth but unpolished, cool on the feet. Water flowed continuously down one wall, over bedrock, and into a pond with three water irises at one end, the delicate sulfur blossoms opening above green spears. Two goldfish swam in languid circles. The air was 19 degrees at 50% humidity. The other three walls were windows, floor to ceiling. There was some generic metal furniture around a glass coffee table. There were no paintings on the walls or decorations of any kind. A pair of black crepe shoes stood by the door, and an umbrella stuck in a plastic elephant's foot.

From this height, the world looked even dirtier and more remote than usual, but also less menacing, not as harsh.

Gin was only the proximate cause of her stiff neck, the flames licking her esophagus. She just couldn't sleep off the failed trials. All the time now, even in her sleep, she probed the data, autopsy reports,

prior conditions, for a discernible cause of death. But there was none. It was like SIDS for adults. A failure and an unsolved mystery. How could she just leave that undone? Nothing perfect could be real, reality is a botch job, disparate things crammed together, junk DNA, aberrant proteins that started to think. The real was Bradlee's stretched out gut and her pendulous breasts. The sound of the universe was the sound of Bradlee's thighs slapping against her ass.

She ground her teeth and lit a cigarette. Somewhere he had to have a bottle of vodka. She couldn't take anything with a taste.

Bradlee padded up behind her and touched her shoulder. She seized up and hissed. "Goodness Bryson, what's wrong?"

"Get me a drink, vodka, ice if you have it." Now she was mad. Now she knew what was wrong. Anyone with a car like that, with an apartment like this, could make it happen. Bradlee was no one's errand boy anymore, he was running his own show now. If she was part of it, then he owed her something, something more than 25 million bucks and a bunch of stock. He brought her the drink. She took a sip and squeezed the glass till her hand shook. "My reputation, my career, my life."

"That again."

"No, you listen to me. I can't become known as the woman who killed ten thousand people just to prove a theory."

"My goodness, we've all done that in one way or another."

"Don't be flip, and don't pretend you're a monster. I'm serious. It won't do. I'll retire. You've given me enough to. I can get by fine on it, with Leonard."

He lifted and dropped his fists slowly and said, "I don't think we're ready for you to do that yet. But I understand your concern." He stroked his mustache, made a point with his fingers and touched his lips. "Would it make you happy if I arranged things so that, when you come back to work, you have a little free time, a small budget, to

pursue unspecified, pure research? Then you could, with your time, conduct some discreet experiments.”

In her ruined eyes there dawned a light that marked her as a daughter of the sun. “Of course it would.” She turned away from him and looked out the window, down into the low buildings.

“I’ll make the necessary calls.” He crossed his arms across her belly and kissed her ear. “You’ll need an assistant, someone from security to help with surveillance.”

She hadn’t thought about that. But it was true. She had to find someone to study. She faced him and spoke close to his lips. “Yes of course.” He kissed her and squeezed her hands. “I have to go now. I’ve got to pack.”

His face twitched. “Not staying for breakfast even?”

She broke away. “Rain check, Bradlee.”

After she dressed and left Bradlee went over to the kitchen area and made toast, which he methodically spread with french butter and grapefruit marmalade. He made black tea and downloaded the news onto a sheet of gold electraweave and sat down at the steel table in the bedroom.

He had not taken on the Monozone job to be with her, but he had looked forward to starting up again with Bryson. He was unusually drawn to her. And he had great hopes of her being there to relieve the boredom. By boredom he didn’t mean the day-to-day business. Details of his job he treated with the utmost respect, and attended to them diligently without ever appearing to do so. It was the other boredom. A sense of the attenuation of things. She was one of the few people he could be with and not feel the passage of time. Sometimes when he masturbated or went to a prostitute he thought of her in his bed, years earlier, a ripe 47, with a big hard ass, in the suburbs, when it was always hot indoors.

There was no harm in conceding her a privilege, if it made her

happy and didn’t hurt him. The main thing of course was to protect Paregane from meddling. Then he could ride it for as far as it would take him. And if Bryson wanted to go for the ride, so much the better. In some ways, he was counting on it.

Still, he would have to know what Bryson was up to, if only to protect himself. If she failed, no one would ever know. And if she did manage to succeed, how could that be a bad thing? A safer Paregane was in the best interest of everyone involved.

He took a quick hot shower and dressed in a grey wool suit and called his employer, General Valdez at the department of defense. “No no,” he said to the general, “She won’t be a problem. She’s happy with the money, and is ready to move on.”

Next he called Laraby at Monozone. Laraby was Director of Security. “Hello Laraby,” he said in a jovial, sing song voice, booming, “Owen Bradlee here. I say, do you mind assigning a good man to Dr. Bryson when she gets back? We anticipate a little trouble over this Paregane business. And, do you mind, have him report to me as well. You understand?”

Laraby understood. He had just the man for the job. Jacob Boyle. He got Boyle at home, just to tell him the good news.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### VERONICA

Once Veronica Clay was certain her husband Felix was at work, she set about her business in a very deliberate way. First she fluffed the cantaloupe and kiwi colored throw pillows on the couch, a grey futon folded against the wall on a tatami mat. She dusted the slate floor, straightened the pen and ink drawing of a shawled girl crossing an empty road, hung about two metres above this couch, on a wall painted to look like the mouth of a weathered nautilus. There were two tea mugs and two plates in the porcelain sink, a fork, two margarine covered knives and a spoon with a coffee drop drying in its dipper. These she washed and placed in the ceramic drainer.

Satisfied at the job she had done in the living room she descended the composite steps into the bathroom-sleeping area. In the bedroom she smoothed down the white cotton sheets and matched up the corner of her book, Sydney's Old Arcadia, with the rounded edge of the smoked glass end table. Felix's boxer shorts and tank top lay unfolded on the clothes bar. She folded them and left them on top of his pillow. The house was clean. She had done her work for the day.

Next Veronica went upstairs and poured a double shot of Old Yeller's Real Kentucky Bourbon into a squat juice glass. She would need it to wash down a couple of tranquilizers. She wanted to remain focused and relaxed. Clarity and calm had descended on her of late but she knew it wouldn't last, it never did. If she could just keep it together long enough, she'd be able to get everything done.

Downstairs again she swallowed the pills. They were dry and the

bourbon was hot but they went down. Two and two, she always liked to say. Enough to feel good, not enough to puke or pass out.

Across the short, narrow hall was the bathroom. It was almost as big as the bedroom. She turned on the spigots of a large, white tub with gold claw feet. It took a few seconds to get the temperature to just right. She sat on the toilet, running her fingers under the water, feeling the pills slowly take affect. Things faded just a little, she lost track of what she was doing.

As the tub filled she got out all her prescription bottles. Some were rolled up in her socks, there was one in her hiking boots, a few in a box of emerald silk folded in tissue paper on the top shelf of the closet. The most recently prescribed were lined up in order of consumption in the medicine cabinet. She took them all and laid them out on the bed so she could see the labels, sort of review her recent history by its artifacts.

Veronica went back upstairs because she had forgotten a glass of water and the chef's knife, a big, ten-inch wedge of carbon steel, with a very sharp edge.

She wanted to die the way most people wanted to live, down to the last drop of sweat, the blind wordless greed to be. What she sought was total extirpation, non-existence, extinction of mind and body. Had she been able to she would have exterminated every memory of her that had ever been, as if her name had never been spoken on earth.

She sat on the edge of the bed, slowly unbuttoning her loose white shirt, staring at her elephantine feet. They looked squat and grey. There were the extra two toes, stubs with distorted nails, barely emerging alongside the small toe of her left foot. Her belly hung out and her breasts dropped down. Every part of her felt bloated with some hideous, mean spirited gas she could not expel. It seemed to move around the joints, making her fingers or her ankles or her chin

fat. Her nails were chewed down to the pads. She couldn't remember what it was like to be strong. She couldn't remember what anything was like at all.

One by one she opened the bottles and swallowed the pills. Barbiturates, hypnotics, muscle relaxants, analgesics, Euphorics, narcotics. Drugs for nausea, for overeating, for starvation. For diarrhea, constipation. Mood elevators. Temporary Induced Coma. That was fun. The little amber bottles lay scattered at her feet. She burped bourbon, grabbed the knife and swaggered, naked, into the bathroom.

Veronica Clay was forty years old, tall, intelligent, beautiful. She had an advanced degree in English literature, was once operational sales manager at Intellatrawl, and could run twenty k a day when healthy. She had climbed mountains in Alaska. She had driven a car from Thunder Bay to Vancouver. She loved her husband and he loved her. Veronica had black hair that hung in gentle curls against her shoulder. Her face was long, with high cheekbones and full lips. Her nose was strong and straight. She had a high forehead and skin the color of dark honey. Out of her face shined a pair of greenish blue eyes that had the power to stop speech and breath.

Holding the knife in one hand, she turned the water off and dizzily lowered herself in. Water sloshed out onto the floor. She stretched up out of the tub and pulled a towel down off the rack and clumsily mopped the water up. It was exhausting work. She fell back against the tub and lay there with her eyes closed a minute, water lapping her chin.

She watched her body bloom and wobble, brown, disconnected beneath the blue, white and yellow reflections, limb not aligning with limb. Then she took the knife and dragged it across her wrist. But her hand and eyes were weak. The knife took a long, curved bite out of her arm. The skin split apart and blood ran out over her hand. It

dripped onto the white tile. Her thoughts began to blur.

With a surge of focused energy she lifted the knife again and took careful aim. The inside of her bloody arm swam in and out of view. Finding the veins at last, she drew the knife across them. It did absolutely nothing. She had used the blunt side. Now Veronica was mad. But frustration only served to weaken her further. She felt muted horror as the aperture seemed to narrow. With short, desperate strokes she began to hack away at her arm. The knife cut the flesh, tore at it and blood began to turn the water red. Finally, sort of hitting at the air, her wrist and arm aching and growing cold, the dizziness, the black swirling took hold and she dropped the knife in the water and fell back. She lay there a while, half passed out, bleeding. Suddenly, her body seized and her eyes snapped open, involuntarily. She sat upright, vomited spasmodically and passed out, smacking her head on the wall, cutting it open. Her body sank slowly forward, into the crimson water, smearing the tile with blood. The skin flap on the back of her head caught onto the edge of the tub, halting her slide. It was, depending on one's point of view, either her lucky or her unlucky, day.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### FELIX

For most of his life, starting as far back as he could remember, Felix Clay had a feeling that something was wrong. Usually he felt like something was wrong with him but it was very easy for him to turn it around and feel that something was wrong with the world. Things didn't fit right, one with the other. It was like the bones of the universe were in need of a chiropractic adjustment.

As a child he naturally assumed an orbit at the outer edge of any group, neither despised nor accepted. He would form a close friendship with one member of the group, sometimes another edge dweller, sometimes someone close to the center. This was his in, his anchor.

These were his feelings. People meeting him for the first time saw a quiet, relaxed, intelligent man, serious enough to make good money, kind enough not to go very far in business. Felix was tall, very thin, with big joints. He had a friendly face, the color of old tenement brick, brown eyes and full, semicircular eyebrows. When he smiled his eyes creased. He kept his hair short and dressed well if conventionally, owning a few good suits--italian hemp, linen, in shades of grey and artichoke, with white egyptian cotton shirts and narrow, somber ties. He moved gently and gracefully through the world. He appeared to be a father of young children, a little league coach, someone who attended school meetings, belonged to the museum society, read quality best sellers. And in fact he and Veronica had season's tickets to the local BroadwayInc Theatre, and belonged

to the Rockland branch of the City Library. His voice was rich, considered, analytical, if a little shrill when upset. He did not get others' backs up. If he raised no hackles neither did he raise goosebumps. Felix rode the currents and eddies of his time like a leaf on water.

In college he developed an inner direction, which absorbed most of his attention. Books fascinated him; he read the Romantics, he read the Beats, he read everything and anything that made him feel like he was somewhere else. His graduate thesis was on Spenser and Whitehead: Process and Reality in the Bower of Adonis. That was when he met his wife, Veronica. That was when everything changed and he started to feel at home in the world.

Felix sat alone, at a BioWatch Work Station, in a dark room located on an unlit spur of the Intellatrawl Office Corridor, in a forty story office building, erected on an artificial hill, sixty k north of Manhattan and four east of the Hudson River. The building was shaped like a hive, with a papery composite facade. Inside, each company had its own corridor, with side shoots, which spiraled up from the ground floor to the top, at a gentle grade. Elevators bisected the corridors, but an employee could, and often did, walk from the bottom to the top of the building, passing only his company's offices. The building was cooled by means of nano fans and porous ceramic walls and ceilings, so that hot air was circulated out, and cool underground air, in.

Felix was a Remote Virtual Supervisor for Intellatrawl. Intellatrawl was an internet salvage company. Programs trawled the net for abandoned code, material out of copyright, expired patents, resalable content, rare ads, anything they could recover, own and sell. Turn around was important, but they kept huge inventories of junk that customers could search and buy. Felix supervised a thousand human search analysts, processors, traders and pricers.

He monitored the programs that monitored them and if necessary sent one of his three holographic aliases to have a virtual meeting. Since he himself was subject to random alias visitations, he knew how terrifying it was to have a slightly scratchy, dim puppet of light strut about and berate you and try to make you feel worthless and stupid, so you'll work harder or not make mistakes. But he still had an alias just like that. He had worn mean looking black shoes for the sampling. Then there was the gentle caring guy, for personal crises. The third was an affable, congratulatory hand shaker, for promotions and first days on the job. Mostly though he sent out written warnings, resolved conflicts, reported scofflaws, fired shirkers.

Somewhere someone was his supervisor. He had seen the alias many times; most recently when Veronica went on Mental Health Leave and the gentle good guy popped in to reassure him that the entire Intellatrawl family was 100% behind them.

A BioWatch Work Station, which was standard Intellatrawl equipment, measures and monitors a continuous stream of information: breathing, oxygen levels, blood pressure, eye movement, posture, chair pressure, electromagnetic field activity, expression and demeanor.

Did they spend too much time watching an unauthorized crawl? Did they stay too long at lunch or take too frequent bathroom breaks? There were secret, back channel communications. Conspiracies to defraud Intellatrawl. Artificial employees, dupes and cutouts indistinguishable from the real thing, who revealed themselves through anomalous fluctuations only a human might notice. Felix monitored all of this on a forty-inch screen set in a console, his ergonomic chair bolted to the floor.

He had his own illegal crawls; a porn crawl at the bottom of the screen, business news on the right side and baseball futures gambling on the left. The futures gambling he controlled by means of plausible

blinks. The plausible blinks were not foolproof of course; anyone analyzing blinks per minute would detect pattern clusters which correlate with futures gambling, but he was confident that the other supervisors would tolerate his minor indiscretions because he himself overlooked them in the human resources under his purview. It was the only way.

Felix also had his drinks timed out pretty well. The trick was to drink enough to prevent dehydration without overfilling the bladder. If he could make it to lunch without taking a piss he would have that much more time to eat, provided he started his sandwich on the bathroom line and continued to eat at the urinal. Sloppy sandwiches were a bad idea but extruded meat and mayo worked great, as did sausage sticks and raw vegetables.

So he spent his day sucking on ice chips, eyes never leaving the monitor, head covered in a transparent cap of CellPack, speaking every time the program completed a scan of the data, "Reanalyze quadrant 2," or "Scan 120, done, no incident." Butt pressure, blinks, palm sweat, voice range, piss breaks. Some days he felt murderous. Some days murdered.

Veronica was his great topic, object of his thoughts, subject of his daydreams, confidant, ancient opponent. The scans passed, the neon green winked and rolled up his face and across the cells of the cap. Data trance set in. All that was odious in a day was reduced to a spectre, driven off by her.

After so many years the surface of their marriage was as dented and grimy as anyone else's. A sort of smog had settled over his feelings but he knew what lay beneath the toxic grey layers and that his first love was still there and true. It was the only thing in the world that meant anything at all. Of things and places he had his share and expected more but they gave him no pleasure. There were the embryos in Cryovac, but until one took to her womb and grew it

would still be like money down.

The porncrawl at the bottom of the screen failed to arouse him. He had no control over the content. He had requested real looking naked women walking around and heterosexual, uh, ordinary situations, which he thought might be regular men and women fucking, no silicon jobs, maybe some cunt hair, or hair under the arm, people like him. It started out that way too. But over time it mutated, becoming perverse. Now it was men fucking goats and playing with their shit. He tried, everyday, to delete it but it would not go.

Men took turns sucking off the biggest cock he'd ever seen.

He blinked a twenty-dollar bet that Ralph Roister would hit three home runs in the next 32 innings.

Sick as she was she was still beautiful to him. Though he missed the luster of her hair he could still take a bunch in his hand and breathe in the scent through the pores of his skin. Her eyes could still upset the sky, with stabs of green and blue. Her serious, wary expression still broke with delight. Every inch of her body still bewitched him.

The only time he felt in sync with anything was with her. Colors were more real, sounds less discordant. Their words and feelings see sawed. They made the same compromises. He had always felt that Aristophanes had it right in the Symposium. Love reunites the divided sphere of the soul, and when they met he had become complete.

And yet and yet and yet, he could not stop thinking, turning it over. What happened? He replayed the consultations with Intellatrawl Doctor Tarlton. He tried to piece together arguments that raged over nothing at three in the morning, sitting in the chair by the bed watching her sleep, black and white movies playing on the tv.

He climbed up on her and she was eager to please--eager-- but also seemed to be suffering his touch, the way she flinched a little, and it

ended often with his orgasm and her tears. Sex became like draining the pipes.

He could not hate Veronica, he could only hate himself, or what their life had become, or the building, or the chair. Yet he had to maintain optimism. It was the only way, to pretend to be optimistic that Dr. Tarlton would find some cure. Veronica hated Tarlton and so did he, but what else did they have? Fantasies of moving to Alaska? But they had been there. Neither of them had the first idea of how to survive for real. Their packs had been loaded for them and they had a mountain guide who shot their meat and kept them alive. They couldn't even keep a cactus alive at home, or a gold fish.

Sometimes they appeared to him like naked corpses stretched out on slabs in the morgue, under bright lights, bloated, skin the color of oxidized beef. Spit, like frogspawn in the mouth and ants covering his legs. He took no pleasure in eating or drinking or fucking without her.

His gorge grew restive. Hunger twitched and growled within. The end of the day was close now. Nothing had happened. Events worth noting were rare on the job. He blinked another bet. Brindsdale's average will drop twelve more points before his slump ends. Checked the business crawl. Monozone Continues To Climb Mz 75 +2 1/2....It was the time of day he reached his most baleful thought, that his ancestors had been slaves, and he was an overseer.



## CHAPTER SIX GOING HOME

The time bell went off and the screen shrank to a dot. He stood his lifeless body up, removed the squeaky skull cap of CellPack, reached for the ceiling, touched his toes and marched out the door to join the others. His bladder was backing up into his kidneys, poisoning his blood. Something was using a nerve in his lower back for a kick drum. The usual Friday crowd stood around outside the steel doors to the bathroom, nobody but a few jawbones talking.

They were all headed towards the Friday assembly. There were five assembly rooms, one for every eight floors. Felix's was on the 16th floor. He worked on the third. It was a good enough walk, if he could avoid the crowd.

Monday morning and Friday evening assemblies were the kind of ritualized affairs no one even bothered to make fun of. If you were to go into a room full of Intellatrawlers and start cutting up about Chairman Aung Thwin's Friday sermon on excellence, with dead on impersonations of his voice and slightly exaggerated pantomimes of his characteristic moves, no one would laugh, they would stare glassily and wonder what you were talking about. People showed up, took their seats, fixed their eyes upon their chairman's cheaply reproduced three dimensional alias and watched it deliver his thoughts on a number of recurrent themes, in an emotionally distressing monotone, like a man who never blinks. Often these talks touched on loyalty, work, and life's uncertainty.

Small spurs off the main Intellatrawl Trunk were dark, crammed

with cell like offices, but the main hallways were brightly lit and the walls were painted in bold colors, the sorts of colors that make us happy, green, yellow and pink. The floors were unpolished stone, they felt cool to the foot. The air smelled faintly of the woods, of wet bark and wild flowers blooming in the first morning light. Overhead were signs of encouragement, in vibrant neon.

EXCELLENCE BEGINS WITH YOU

TO BE ON TOP STAY ON TOP

THE PRODUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE IS POWER

Some were more topical or exhortatory than others:

OUR VOICE IS YOUR VOICE AT STATE

DON'T FORGET TO ELECT

RAINY DAYS DON'T MEAN DISMAL DAYS

These bright bromides passed above the heads of Intellatrawl associates without catching their eyes, but new employees were sometimes puzzled by them, getting bumped along the way if they paused to figure them out.

Felix and the others strode up to the 16th floor. It was a long, slightly banked hall. From any spot a person could see three floors in either direction. Without a murmur they filed in and took their usual seats, not assigned but assumed by custom. His was almost precisely in the middle of the raked room. The walls were brown metal rods on a white clay background, and the seats were white, composite buckets. The whole room pitched down towards the small presentation area, where a wooden podium was set up. No one wasted time in getting seated, they didn't clear their throats or cough. The lights overhead dimmed and some serene yet inspiring music warbled out of the walls. The wall behind the podium glowed a dark blue and in walked Chairman Aung's holographic alias, in a simple paper suit. He wore round, steel framed glasses, had a full head of black hair and skin so white you could powder it for house paint. His

eyes were serious, dark, like pits beneath his brows and his red mouth was fixed. He flickered, almost at one point zipped out, and walked to the podium. Once enough time had elapsed for the entire Intellatrawl nation to come to attention, he smiled.

“Greetings my friends. It is Friday, the end of our week. I know you are all tired with your final effort, that last mile to which you always give your all, with unflagging attention and devotion. I thank you all. Not a penny here is earned unless you go out and earn it.

“This week I’d like to remind you that every effort towards excellence is its own reward and that you can expect both love and perfection to be a part of your organizational lives.

“The Motivated associate doesn’t wait for perfection to happen but seizes upon every opportunity to achieve it, to proactively perfect our workplace and take Intellatrawl all the way to the top, where we belong.

“But just as love and perfection exist in our organizational lives, so might they elude us at home. And so, as we leave each other on this beautiful Friday evening to join our families at home, let us remind ourselves that life may not be perfect. Our children cry for no reason at all. They throw food on the floor, curse and run off. Our husbands and wives betray us or we betray them. Our parents live in far off places, stubbornly refusing to come to their senses, suffering diseases and dementias caused by the long and painful decades of loss, followed by their brave reclamations.

“Though we may, through the miracle of genetic medicine, live to the Methuselean ages of 110 or 120, many of us will fail to establish stem cell lines, or will die of an unnamed disease with no known treatment.

“Accidents, disasters, and crime beset us. We do not control our world. Failure is surely a part of life and we must learn to accept and even embrace it.

“Until Monday then, I leave you all in peace.”

Chairman Aung, oscillating at his customary rate, traveled across the room and vanished in a spark.

The associates stood and left, in waves of grey and tan suits, linen, hemp and cotton, and playing above this wave, a few coats of loosely woven metal, gossamer capes of gold, bare shoulders showing through, copper headscarves and platinum wraps, pastel synthetic jackets with one belly button and shoulder pads. White shirts and crepe shoes and loose black pants stood at the doors and merged.

After about a half an hour Felix exited the Intellatrawl door. He and Veronica did not yet own a hovercraft. They commuted via Amphibatrains, to their home in Rockland, on the west bank of the Hudson.

He struggled to breathe. The air smelled of burning rubber. Hovercraft droned about in the evening light, into celadon sky. Gnat swarms caught on his eyes and lips, he brushed them off and spit. He still felt flutters of joy on Friday afternoons, walking quickly even with the late summer heat. Free of the chair, of the graphs and numbers, of the bleeps. And the feeling would persist till right before he opened his door and realized Veronica was about to offer up to his lips her medicated cheek.

He stood on the concrete platform, beneath a composite shelter, nonreflective, grey and violet and pink, watching for the Amphibatrains. The train arrived silently and hissed to a stop. It was like a glass log with dorsal, wing and tail fins. The doors popped up and Felix entered the chilly car in a crowd of Intellatrawl associates. They pushed and wiggled into position. Felix got a seat between two people.

He tried not to look at anyone directly. He looked at people’s knees and waists and rear ends. He looked at his feet. He tried looking at the bamboo and pines on the hills, and pampas grass

growing thick on the slopes between land and water. No matter what he looked at, he could still smell and feel all the people. It wasn't like he could read their thoughts, it was like he could feel the volume of internal chatter. Like insects chewing leaves.

Slowly the car filled with murmurs. The man in the black wool suit to his left spun into a restless sleep and began to snore fitfully. The train hummed and rocked, picking up speed. As the liquor went around, voices grew louder, and soon there was laughter.

Felix divided their relationship up into three stages. Stage one began imperceptibly almost, with a flickering between their eyes, of signals sent and not received, received but never sent. An evanescent thing between them that developed of its own accord into a crush. They read together in the library, drank in the afternoons at a variety of grad student dives on Broadway. They participated in a staged reading of *The Tempest*, rode out to New Jersey on the Amphibatrains to drive cars, spent afternoons in November wandering the gentle ruins of Central Park or the decayed halls of the Museum of Natural History.

Soon they were living together, in a crusty old apartment on 106th Street, between Broadway and Amsterdam. They sweated and fucked in front of a roaring fan, watched t.v. all night and drank cheap espresso in the mornings in their underwear, watching the angry, impatient, lovely world conspire below. They were wholly for each other. No one else existed except as barrier or entertainment. The ugliness and folly of the world stood at a comic distance. All discord was resolved in the system of their boundless bodies. As the practical demands of life intruded they experienced a redivision of their collective self into two functioning, differentiated selves that nonetheless incorporated so much of the other that what they became was two complementary composites. Where one left off and the other began was permeable.

Felix looked at the sleeping man's head, at the pores of his skin in the shaky light, the pink scratch left by a razor on his jaw, the hair growing out of his ear, the grease shining on his nose, the flecks of dandruff on his scalp. Mucus gurgled in his throat, soft palatal tissue throbbing like a bullfrog.

The woman on his right, with the dry, nearly transparent skin of a centenarian, peered through red Bakelite reading glasses at a sheet of silver electraweave displaying the news. She had black synthetic hair, glossy as if wet, and a perfect set of teeth. The rest of her was flaking off beneath and around these two formidable features. The train dipped down and headed for the river.

They had never planned on any kind of career at all. All their plans were of travel. Then school was over and they had to go to work. The first job offer either received was in sales. Veronica had applied to a small but growing company that distributed outdoor gear for hiking and skiing, located in a strip mall in the Poconos. They moved to a small studio apartment not far from work, on the edge of a state park. Here the first stage rocketed into the second, the great complacency.

It proved to be a delightful setting for the exploration of, and surrendering of, dreams. Slowly they settled into jobs, Felix processing the orders, Veronica handling virtual sales. Soon he was a supervisor and she managed all the operations.

The apartment was the third floor of a small, two hundred year-old house. They had a kitchenette, shower and toilet cubicle, double bed, dresser and two chairs around a tiny circular table. If a storm was up they could go to the basement, but the age of the house was reassuring, and the area was not prone to tornadoes. For the first time in their lives they were free of their parents' expectations, of school, of their own crush.

Now instead of virtual mountains and virtual kayaks on virtual

streams they could hike the state park and rent a canoe to take out on the relatively tame rivers in the area. They boated through townships and wooded hills, sailed on lakes, swam in reservoirs and climbed small mountains. Not far away was a CarPark with over two hundred k of road. There were stop lights and turn signals, potholes and yield signs, sharp turns and straightaways long enough to go 100 miles an hour.

They thought that one day they could buy a country house and a car of their own.

Years passed in this way, in which they took morning kisses and Sunday afternoons sprawled naked in front of the t.v. as a matter of course. But then the Intellatrawl jobs came up, through an associate they dealt with there, a buyer and seller of antique inventories. Without thinking about what they were leaving behind, assuming the additional money would give them more of what they had, time and joy, they bit and moved to Rockland.

Life on the west bank of the Hudson was more varied, more cosmopolitan. The views of the river from the levee park were grand, but the trees were genetically modified pines and bamboo, they had no smell, and they could never ride a horse. They had a Shakespeare subscription and ate out in nice restaurants and the one bedroom on the cul de sac was much larger. If the climate was hotter, nastier, more humid, at least their home had perfect air, and space for clothes and things.

With the extra money they decided to start a stem cell line and have children. They bought a cryovac package deal and Veronica produced six embryos in five years. Two would be children, the remaining four would go to the stem cell line. The package included two non-inheritable genetic modifications. They chose longevity and musical talent over dozens of options, like height, beauty or athletic ability.

It was a form of coasting, a life drifting into ritual. Friday French food, virtual book club, sex three times a week, yearly vacations somewhere in the far north or the Rockies. Christmas with her parents in Florida, Thanksgiving with his parents at a hotel in Manhattan. They were no longer saving for a car, but for a hovercraft.

The ritual, starting with work, began to degenerate into a stultifying sterility. It was in fact not a life either of them had ever dreamed of having. They had no friends to speak of because they hated people like themselves. And the selves they loved in each other were disappearing, under a load of dull routine.

Now the newspapers spread between their nude bodies were no longer flimsy hemp but copper electraweave. Even so it served as a prop for an empty voice: "There's a rock trio playing an all Hendrix program on original equipment, Saturday night."

"Do you want to see the Jazz Orchestra play on the levee?"

"Ellington?"

"No, Basie."

"Look, there's a total sound immersion at three. Your body becomes the instrument. Feel what it was to be Bach's organ."

Their faces, more beautiful at 35 than at 25, eyes like still drops of human pain in an endless, frigid dimension of space, the candle light between their irises, as they sat in a calm, poised against black restaurant windows. "The rolls are warm tonight."

"Did you get the real butter?"

"I've never had New Zealand lamb."

"Maybe," he said, picking apart a chicken breast with knife and fork, "we should become vegetarians." He often thought this while eating extruded meat products, but why bring it up while slicing into the real thing?

The train dipped down suddenly. He looked out the window. As the cars uncoupled (without slowing down a bit), he felt the moment of freefall; thrilling, to be suspended in nothingness, however briefly, before striking the water, each car heading across the Hudson to a different rail link. He never tired of watching the thick tubes with their quiet green and red reflectors at intervals on the top, the blinking tail fins and dorsals, each car nosing through the rough water while a carnival of other crafts evaded the wake. It was a silent world, hot and attractive but removed, far beyond the hard thick walls of the amphibatrains.

Veronica was the first to crack. The prolonged stasis of the second stage provoked the chaos of the third. It was like an aesthetic, a creative renaissance marmorialized in a classical period followed by decadence.

It started with complaints--work was boring, stupid--then became metaphysical, why do we work so hard, for what? But this was their agreement, silently negotiated, a future they conspired to make.

"Couldn't we move out west?"

But everyone was moving out west, there were no jobs. That was when he unwittingly became the voice of reason. It was a voice poised against himself. He hated the cul de sac as well, and the job, and the idea of a job. In the midst of this initial churn they reacted by clinging together tighter, more desperately. They'd come home from work, bathe and then begin to fuck, wordlessly, brutally, tearing away at something they didn't understand, trying to rend the curtain that had descended between them. One night as he was ramming away at her, as she bucked to meet his pelvis and he collapsed onto her sweating breasts, his lips pulsing in her ear and little gasps escaping he felt a trickle of hot liquid on his cheek. He lifted off and looked down. For the first time Veronica's eyes had that raw red look that would become so familiar.

"I'm sorry," she sobbed. "I'm just so afraid."

"Afraid? Of what?"

"Of losing you."

Gently, he said, "Oh baby," and touched her cheek, tears brimming up in his own eyes now. "Never. You will never lose me, I would never go. Never."

But that was probably not what she had in mind.

Over the next few years their meals became more and more catatonic. She was often ill, vomiting for days on end. She broke things, injured herself, didn't talk but brooded incessantly over things. They saw the Intellatrawl doctor. He prescribed physical therapy, walks, swimming and meditation. Then came the medicines, anti emetics, appetite stimulants, tranquilizers. They rarely made love and when they did it was quiet and desperate or mechanical, a release of his load of semen and her load of guilt. Everything they had once enjoyed was now a source of pain.

Then came the deaths. Her father was bitten by a rabid bat while sleeping out one night on the everglades, and didn't know it until it was too late for treatment. He went mad and Veronica's mother shot him and then herself. A year later Felix's father had a series of strokes and lay in a coma awaiting reconstructive brain surgery. His mother, in a paroxysm of grief, overrode the program controls of her hovercraft and it crashed fifteen k out in the Gulf of Mexico. It felt then like some monstrous beast had arisen to raven their lives.

Now she began to rave and he found himself drinking alone after work, just to avoid going home to the scenes and abuse.

Intellatrawl Dr. Tarlton prescribed her first course of Euphorics, saying that grief was natural but Euphorics could restore her balance. Nothing worked. She went on medical leave and was finally fired.

They had to live on his income alone now. Everything grew precarious. There would be no more saving up for a house or a

hovercraft. No more fantasies of moving out west or to Alaska. No recreational car. His job just covered the necessities, insurance, retirement fund. It was just enough to keep them alive. He worried about everything. He worried about the embryos and stem cell line. He worried about his own dumbfounded confusion and melancholy, his need to somehow smother an outraged protest against life, his need to demolish every conscious thought with alcohol. He was worried that Veronica would do something genuinely crazy.

Of late, he began to feel jealous even. Thoughts nibbled away at him, that she might be with someone else during the day, that she might be masturbating. Even her madness made him jealous. As she drifted off he became possessive and this he experienced as a kind of insanity, as one part of him warred against the other.

The amphibatrains reassembled as they crossed in a breathtaking, technological ballet and then bumped up onto the rail at the Newburg tunnel, a brief, steep climb up through the towering levee and onto dry land. In a few minutes they hissed into the station. The snoring man sucked in breath, his eyes popped open and he stood, with Felix and the old woman. They exited the car.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### LES JARDEEN

As Felix unlocked his silver bike in a pool of blue street light filled with billows of mosquitoes and gnats he thought that he might as well go straight to Les Jardeen and call home from there. If Veronica wanted to join him for dinner (which he doubted) she could ride into town. Normally (whatever that meant) he preferred to shower and change before dinner but he was extremely tense and couldn't face the scene at home. In public they would have to pretend nothing was wrong. A drink first would give him time to decompress. Anyway, the most likely outcome was that she wouldn't join him at all. Lately she was going to bed early, another way of saying that she passed out by nine o'clock. So he mounted the bike and joined the others riding up the little hill, wooded on both sides, to Main Street, the village center.

The village of Rockland consisted of two commercial streets that served about 20,000 people spread out, mostly underground, over three k of constructed hills. It was one of five planned villages that made up the town of Hartland. Planned settlements had superior water drainage and protected utilities so that even in tornado and hurricane seasons life went on much as usual. Each village had a large 24-hour supermarket, retail mall, post office, gym, levee park with a small bandstand, plus assorted diners, restaurants, cafes and bars.

Felix locked his bike up at a titanium rack as close to Les Jardeen as he could get, about two blocks away, and strolled along, looking into restaurant and bar windows. They were all full and cheery, with

rosy lights winking on and off, neon sculptures of various beloved characters, a figure skater spinning on glowing skates, a pink and powder blue ballerina leaping up, a cat dressed like a whore exposing her breasts, ruby nipples flashing and then emitting the words POW POW POW, a chef stir frying a colorful mess of vegetables in a wok.

Les Jardeen, his regular watering hole and dinner spot, was part of a quiet neighborhood spot chain. In the window was a neon monkey in a red beret drinking a glass of beer. The doorbells jingled as he entered the foyer and wiped the sweat off his forehead with his sleeve. The room was cozy, paneled in real wood, decorated with old parisian cafe posters, lit by brass sconces and chandeliers with faux gaslight. A fake fire burned in the dining room beneath a mantel with decorative crookneck gourds and a basket of apples, pale green and dark, almost black red.

Peter Nguyen, the bartender, greeted him with a napkin. "Good evening Mr. Clay. How are you sir?" Peter was a young man, an aspiring actor, handsome, light skinned with dark eyes and a smile seductive to both sexes. He wore a red bartender's jacket and black T-shirt and moved efficiently in the narrow space between the zinc bar top and the mahogany liquor shelves.

Felix felt quite indebted to Peter since he had, over the years, unburdened himself to him over many vodka martinis. He said, "Couldn't be better, Peter," and watched him load a steel shaker with ice, rinse it with vermouth and glug three shots of Gulag Potato Vodka in.

"Where's Mrs. Clay tonight?" Peter asked, alighting the drink on a coaster and placing before him a basket of bread and a dish of olives.

"I'm not sure if she's meeting me or not. I'll call in a bit and see how she's doing." He munched the bread and olives and rinsed them down with the martini, feeling the long week's discipline unravel like mummy bandages. Maybe he'd better call now, she might be worried.

There was no way to tell. Although fear and sorrow were her dominant moods, she was also unpredictably hostile. He pushed his empty glass forward and called her. There was no answer and he hung up, annoyed.

As he worked on the second drink a pocket opened up in his stomach swallowing all of the light and leaving only dark feelings. Maybe she was with a man and they'd lost track of the time. His call had interrupted them. Even now he was in a panic to get his pants on while she lay in a trance, perhaps thinking the man was Felix come home in disguise. It made no sense. He saw her nude body, as it had been, when they were young, on all fours sucking a strange, faceless man's cock, his lips planted on her upraised vulva. Veronica turned to look at Felix and smile. He practically knocked over his glass. He had to shake free of it. But the image of Veronica's arched buttocks and the man's puckered lips on her cunt would not fade, it raced about, now shaming, now exciting, till finally he downed the rest of the drink and doused the red hot poker in a bucket of cold water.

He called home again and again no answer. Maybe she was taking out the garbage, or was in the bath or on the toilet. But these seemed silly to him. As the veil of alcohol descended, the veil of optimism was rent aside. She wasn't fucking a strange man and she wasn't taking a long shit, she was passed out or semiconscious, the t.v. stuttering.

He drank his third drink with equanimity then. Peter spread the evening paper out on the bar and read the news. Gangs were shooting it out in midtown. A new drug fad had hit the cities of China. He munched on the bread and olives and reflected on the fact that food was good, nourishing, it brought the world into focus. The madness of midtown shootouts, of business deals faded before the reality that he could trust her, his jealousy was a sort of paranoia. Veronica loved him, they were faithful to each other. She couldn't even stand the sight or smell of other people, much less get into bed

with them.

It was nine o'clock and he'd had five drinks. She still didn't answer the phone. She was definitely not going to come down to meet him then. When he stood up to go to the bathroom the room did a loop around him, then he was steady. Five drinks, he thought. Let's make it six, then I'll eat dinner and go home.

The sixth drink was the ticket. He no longer cared or noticed who was or wasn't in the restaurant. Peter saved him the embarrassment of having to carry the drink to the table, sloshing it over fingertips and exaggerated attempts at maintaining balance. He sat down near the fireplace and felt the linen tablecloth. A beautiful young woman, two metres tall and flat chested, with disproportionately long naked legs and a disdainful, humorless expression, took his order. He got the half a duck with currants, lentils and parsnip latkes. With it he had a split of pinot noir. By the time he was done he had ceased to notice anything in the world, not the garbage or the bath or his sleeping wife or the faceless cunt kissing man, or even the build up of rage in his own heart. The waitress brought him his bill, which he signed without reading.

It was eleven o'clock when he left. The air felt like a stocking soaked in hot water had been pulled over his head. Above he heard the squeak of bats and the thwack of flying cockroaches striking the lamps. Rowdy crowds of people poured in and out of the bars in lurching groups of five to ten. He weaved up the center of the sidewalk, storefronts and streets on a tilted plane, like refractions of a vanished reality. Ahead a man approached, also weaving down the center of the sidewalk. Felix stepped to the left to allow him to pass. As he approached he could see the man's face--it was hard, stupid, belligerent. He had prisoner eyes and walked with his hands balled into fists.

The man stepped onto the same side of the sidewalk as Felix. That

was just ridiculous. Felix had yielded the center. If the man wanted a fight, he'd found one.

The two men were on a collision course now, neither slackening their pace, nor stepping aside. They didn't collide; each stopped and stared at the other.

Finally Felix said, "I stepped aside, all right!"

"What are you, from Mars? You stepped to the left."

"Maybe that's how they step on Mars," Felix snorted.

"You're drunk."

"What if I am."

"Step aside."

"No," Felix said.

The man swung at Felix and the punch landed square on his jaw, knocking him back. The sky circled massively and he felt and saw himself fall. It was the cunt eater, he knew it now. Fueled by an accumulation of rage he stood and the man laughed. "Drunk motherfucker in a suit. Serves you right."

Felix slugged him in the face. The man went down and Felix leapt on him but before he could smack him around the man kicked him in the balls and the two began to wrestle on the ground. They pulled hair, bit and screamed, finally standing up. Blood poured out of the man's nose and out of a cut on Felix's forehead. A small crowd gathered to cheer them on as they cautiously and murderously circled each other.

"Cunt eater," Felix growled.

"Cocksucker," the man growled back.

They sparred, striking at chest and stomach but neither man yielded to the other. Finally, Felix, darting in, hit the man in the stomach and then the face and he fell to the ground at his feet, vomiting blood and teeth.



Quiet now spread through the crowd, a palpable disappointment. The sky lit up with hovercraft; the county police were landing. Mobilized by panic and nerves Felix pushed through the crowd, some of whom shouted, go man, go. Somehow he made it to his bike and rode home. He was sure the police wouldn't come after him, a man in a suit, if they had a criminal in hand.

The streets leading up to his house were lit only by green and red ground lights. The headlight wobbled uncertainly over the stone composite road. He weaved towards the edge and then out into the middle. Hovercraft passed overhead, blinking. Thunder rumbled in the distance and heat lightning flashed. Insects bounced off of his face and the air was full of the sound of nocturnal bugs. Toads hopped out of his way. He rode up the cul de sac, through thickets of bamboo, each house marked by a garage big enough to house a hovercraft, the peaked solar roof a foot or so off the ground, and the tall solar tower extending up above the tree line. Every house was separated by a hedge, or bamboo, or stand of RapidPines. He parked his bike next to Veronica's and descended the spiral stairs leading to their living room. The ambient ceiling panels were on late dusk, cool, green and amber. Felix turned them up till his eyes ached and headed for the little kitchen off the living room, a straw colored cubicle large enough for a steel table for two, a two burner stove, black toaster, small convection oven in the wall, sink and fridge. His face was broken and crusty with blood, it was hard to breathe through his nose, which felt crooked. His eyes were swollen. His hands hurt; they were scraped up. He ran water in the sink and tried to wash his face a bit, soaped up his hands, and then he drank a glass of juice and took some aspirin. The taste of blood dissolved on his tongue.

As the alcohol wore off he felt a creeping sense of shame. He had inexplicably attacked another man and left him to his fate with the police. At least he was safe and not seriously injured, but he had no idea how he was going to explain any of this to Veronica. Hopefully

she wouldn't wake up when he crawled into bed and he wouldn't have to. He opened a beer and went downstairs to their bedroom.

The bathroom light was on, the door was shut and all of the lights in their bedroom were off, even the baseboards. He went into the bedroom and sat down on a chair in the dark and took off his shoes as quietly as a drunk man who has just been in a fight can. They tumbled off of his feet and clunked to the floor. His eyes adjusted to the dark. He rolled off his socks and took off his pants and shirt and took a long slug of beer. Then he removed his underwear and sat a moment naked in the chair. He couldn't possibly sleep. His heart thumped. The excitement kept at him, agitating his thoughts with alternating feelings of triumph and guilt. He'd won a fight, he'd crow; he'd beaten an innocent man, came the response. Finally he put the t.v. on and casually looked at the bed. It was empty.

"Veronica?" he called. "I'm home. Is anything wrong?"

No answer.

"Are you sick?" That might explain why she didn't answer the phone or come, she was sick. Why hadn't he thought of it before? He smelled, faintly, vomit. "Babe," he said, standing unsteadily, "can I come in? If you're sick I can get you something."

He knocked on the bathroom door. "Come to bed. I'm home now." He knocked again and turned the handle. It was locked. "Babe?" He rattled the door. Everything slowed down. For what seemed like a long time he stood in a silent time bubble. His mind wouldn't turn or work. Pressure built in the bubble. He pushed weakly at the door and then, all of a sudden, the bubble burst, reality whooshed in and he exploded. "Babe! Veronica!" He shouted and smashed at the door, running blindly at it from the bedroom, kicking until the wood splintered and it swung open.

Felix looked down at Veronica's body in the tub. The water was murky, red and orange. The floor tile and sides of the tub were

smeared and caked with half dried blood. Little bits of food and whole capsules floated around on the surface of the water and Veronica's head lay tipped back, caught on the edge of the tub by a flap of skin. It was like she was watching the ceiling except that her eyes were shut. A puddle of blood had collected between her neck and the tub and had trickled down to the floor. Her lips were parted and her tongue protruded slightly.

"Oh, Oh!" he cried in confusion and panic even as his body went into action. Please please please not dead, he thought, don't be dead, not dead, and yet he was sure, surveying the shambles, that she was. He dropped to his knees, afraid to move her, and took her scabbed, lacerated arm up in his hands. "Oh my god, my baby," he sobbed quietly. He knew he couldn't just squat naked in a puddle of his wife's blood sobbing, he had to do something. Gently at first he put his hands into the cold water, one beneath her knees, spread haphazardly apart, bringing them together, and the other beneath her shoulders to gather her up as best he could and lift her. But she was slippery and heavy. He got her up a bit, enough for her head to tilt back and mouth to gape open hideously before he dropped her, sending slow sloshing waves over the edge of the tub.

Again he lifted, this time not gently but with all his strength and he carried her dripping body into their room and laid her on the bed. In a functional trance he called the Hudson County Emergency Medivac number and collapsed beside her on the floor, convulsed with tears, all thought shattered. Then he laid his head on her breast, took up her hand and prayed and waited. Sometimes he felt a heartbeat, but whether it was hers or his own he had no idea.

## CHAPTER EIGHT THE POLICE

Sonny 'Bop' Molloy and Deb Shannon, of the Hudson County security forces, assigned to the town of Hartland, serving in the Rockland Precinct, landed their armored, four person hovercraft on the street outside of Felix and Veronica's home and got out. Their faces were nearly invisible behind the thick globe of CellPack that encased their heads, the amber data stream cascading on either side of the visual field. Their silver armored suits seemed to glow a bit in the reflected hovercraft light.

They had been searching for Felix and caught up with him just as he entered his living room, when the heat sensors indicated a recently ridden bike in his garage. As they landed they heard his emergency call to the county medivac. This was a surprise since they had assumed the criminal had sustained the usual minor injuries. They were there mainly to issue a court summons and evaluate the situation. If necessary they could bring him in, but neither expected to do so. They were mostly pissed off at having to chase down another brawling businessman.

If there was one thing they hated more than breaking up fights it was uncertainty. Especially on a Friday night when all the suburban towns slowly exploded with drunken violence. Approaching a home like this was always dangerous. They simply never knew what awaited them on the other side of the door.

Shannon drew down her gun while Bop Molloy knocked loudly. "Security," he said in a commanding, amplified machine voice.

“Open up Mr. Clay. Let’s get this over with.” When there was no answer they repeated the command and then opened the door, to which they had an override key, and descended the spiral stair into the soft aura of night light.

Quickly they secured the living room and kitchen and then slowly walked down the steps to the bedroom, headlamps on high, the cold bright beam playing over the walls and steps. “Mr. Clay,” Bop Molloy barked, “Do not move at all when we enter the room.”

With a little push of adrenaline they faced the bedroom doorway, blasting Veronica’s disheveled nude body with light, wet bloody hair half across her face and pillows, legs parted unnaturally, one arm across her belly, the other entwined in Felix’s, who winced and cowered. Felix hoped they would just go away. Bop Molloy said to Shannon, “Shit,” and then, “Mr. Clay, sir, step away from the body.”

“Fucking typical,” Shannon said. “So you go and get drunk, beat a guy up and then come home and kill your wife.” She shook her head. “Typical fucking Friday night.” Felix didn’t move. The lights played over him, shined in his eyes. One of the cuts on Veronica’s arm had opened up again. Blood oozed out. It was smeared on his cheeks and forehead and all between his fingers. His eyes were swollen shut. He had a fat lip.

“I can’t let go,” he said. “I think I hear a heart beat.”

“Give it up. She’s dead. Step away from the body.”

“Then you might as well shoot me now. Without her I’m nothing.”

Shannon said, “I’m losing my patience Mr. Clay. Step away.”

The door upstairs opened. There were shouts and commotion.

“It’s them,” he said. “The medivac!”

Bop Molloy looked at Shannon who said in a sarcastic, crackling voice, “It ain’t the fucking cavalry Mr. Clay.”

“She’s all done,” Bop Molloy added. Felix stood, chest trembling,

the bloody arm still in his hands. “Drop the arm sir.” Felix laid it gently across her chest. It swung down off the bed. He reached for it and Bop said, “Leave it. Raise your hands above your head, where I can see them, and lay face down on the floor, feet spread.”

Shannon aimed her gun at him, the red dot resting on the back of his head. The medivac team trotted down the stairs with a small, collapsible gurney. A young, intense redheaded woman raced to the bed, shouting.

“Forget it doc,” Shannon said. “She’s dead.”

The doctor looked at the helmets with contempt. “She’s not dead, it’s a botch job. Look.” She pointed to Veronica’s lips. A bubble of saliva was forming. She yelled instructions out to the orderlies, who set up an i.v. while she gave Veronica an intercardial shot and oxygen. With great efficiency they installed a line, hooked her up to several bottles, jerked open the gurney and hoisted her onto it.

“Alive!” Felix shouted into the stone floor. “Alive!”

“You shut up,” Shannon said.

Bop Molloy, ready to give the information to a small pad, asked the doctor, “Where’d he stab her?”

The doctor looked Veronica over. The shot, the oxygen and the i.v.’s were taking affect. Her chest rose and fell. “He didn’t. These wounds are self-inflicted. She passed out before hitting a vein is all. They wanna die so bad they can’t get it right. It’s my second one tonight. It’s like a fucking epidemic. What I don’t get is, why don’t they just use a fucking gun and get it over with?”

Bop Molloy asked Shannon, “What do we do with him?”

They looked at Felix.

“I dunno. He’s in worse shape than the other guy.”

“And he’s got a job.”

“Fuck it.”

“Mr. Clay,” Bop Molloy said, “you can stand at ease now. You are no longer under suspicion. We apologize for the mix up.”

“She’s alive. I told you but you wouldn’t believe me.”

The orderlies covered Veronica up to the chin in a copper electraweave sheet. Sparks darted across the surface. The doctor said, “Load her up boys and bandage the arms. If she wakes up, keep her awake and restrained till we figure out what she took.” She turned to Felix. “Are you done with the cops?”

He looked at the helmets.

“Yeah yeah, he’s done,” Shannon said. “And no more street brawls, Mr. Clay, or I will personally haul your ass in front of a public safety board, after kicking all of the shit right out of it.” They followed the gurney up the stairs.

“Put your clothes on Mr. Clay,” the doctor said. He was covered in blood and vomit, wet, sweaty, dirty, tired. His eyes burned. “You can wash off in the shower first if you want, I’ll wait. We’ll catch up with them at the hospital. You can tell me on the way what drugs you have lying around the house.”

Without comprehension he watched the bloody water drain out of the tub and stood beneath the scalding shower jets just long enough to be clean. Then he dressed and followed her out of the house, as if it belonged to her.

## CHAPTER NINE TREATMENT OPTIONS

Veronica was much closer to death than the Medivac team had led on. They had gotten to her in time however and there was no permanent damage done to her brain or liver. The wounds to her arms were superficial and would heal, but without cosmetic surgery there’d be scars.

That first night Felix sat in a chair by her side, not really sleeping. The sun, advancing up the center of the windowpane, reached his eyes. She stirred, swallowed and opened her eyes, staring at the ceiling.

“Baby?” He sat up straight and whispered, “Veronica? Are you awake?” For a minute she continued to stare at the ceiling, and then her head flopped on its side, as if it had been knocked over, and he was in her line of vision.

She gulped painfully and studied Felix. She seemed to recognize him. He smiled.

Every cell of his brain, lungs and heart, every breath and thought was bent to the one task of bringing her to life, as if he could control both matter and fate by will alone. It was childish, he knew. And despite these efforts, he was too skeptical to believe that she would be all right, or even that she would live. Yet here she was.

She swallowed again and said, in a low brittle voice, “Fuck you!” Then she looked back up at the ceiling, shut her eyes, and went to sleep, with a grunting snore.

For several days they kept her heavily sedated, strapped to a bed in

the locked ward. He sat in the chair, only getting up to buy food and drink, or go to the bathroom. Once a day he washed his face. Twice brushed his teeth. Her food remained untouched till it was cold and congealed. Then someone came and took it away. They measured her fields, they drew blood, spinal fluid, assayed her tears, incinerated stools, disarticulated urine.

When it was time for a consultation with Intellatrawl Doctor Tarlton, they restored her to her senses.

"I've fucking had it with that Intellatrawl quack," she said, sitting up in the hospital bed.

"I know, but we have no choice.

"Can't you just push me out the window?" He ignored her. "It's my right to die."

"I'm at a loss. We crossed a line here somewhere."

She hid her disgust in her hands. "If I could take it, take you or any of it, do you think I'd want to die?"

"But that's crazy despair."

"No, that's not crazy, that's sane. This--this whole fucking planet--this organization of matter into molecules and brains and society, sexual reproduction, language, viruses and history, are insane. Woman, man: insane; the binaries and the unities; progressive division. This clade ends here. Like Christ. If we stopped fucking it would all go away and then there'd be the kingdom of god. Or Buddha. The end of passion is the end of suffering. To go and not come back. My bath was not insane."

"Do me a favour and don't talk like that in front of Tarlton."

"Oh, what are you afraid of? You don't understand. I used to think you did. I thought you knew."

"Knew?"

"Yeah, knew. About things. Knew what was up. You don't know

shit. You just," she mumbled.

"I do understand about things. Now be quiet. If you want to go, be quiet."

"I'm just going to try again. By the end there, when I wasn't scared and I wasn't cold, I liked it. I think I'll try again, first chance I get."

Felix helped her into the wheel chair. Her legs were stiff. She had little white booties, and a hospital gown that came untied in the back, showing the crack of her ass. She looked forlorn and damaged, old. The bandages on her arm looked like white crosses in a graveyard at dusk. Despite her anger, she took his hand, and clung to his neck, before sitting down heavily in the chair. He pushed her to the desk, signed out of the locked ward and went through double leather-upholstered doors, down another hall and into the consultation room.

The lights popped on. An older man, in his seventies, with a grey crew cut, sat at a computer. His well-tanned head was large, larger than his small skinny body. He had heavy hands. "So good to see you both again," he said without facing them. "Have a seat Felix, I'm just reviewing Veronica's file." He had a cheerful, professional voice, no hint of condescension. "Well, well, well. Here we are again." He swirled around in his chair and looked at them. "Still hostile, Veronica?"

"Why do you say that?" she asked.

"Just thought I'd ask. Let's get down to it. We seem to have tried everything. You first came to me complaining about ennui, restlessness, anxiety, lack of satisfaction with life and career. The treatment option we pursued was a mild mood enhancer, increased exercise, a low fat, high protein diet. Then it was insomnia and frequent painful cramping. We selected DigestAid to relieve gas and a mild relaxant before bed, maintained the mood enhancer, increased protein intake and the intensity of exercise. Meditation

recommended. Your irritability increased and you manifested hostility towards the various treatment protocols. So we increased the mood enhancer, went to a strong narcotic therapy, and advised you to seek out some form of therapeutic talk sessions, spousal communication therapy, and deep massage. Next it was nightmares and delusional episodes. Drop the mood enhancers and narcotics and add antipsychotic preventatives, SchizAvoid 9000, Norave, Comatode. Headaches, lack of sexual desire and anhedonia with incipient drug-induced anorexia. Anti-anxiety drugs, intense aerobic workouts, labial dilators. Then there's the death of three parents, oh my, a bad stretch, that. We went straight to sleeping pills and the most potent Euphorics then available, as well as four hours of confessional psychotherapy. You changed analysts several times, Neo Freudian, Adlerian Modified, Jungian...hmmm...oh, look, a Lacanian. How quixotic. How long were the sessions?"

"Ten minutes."

"Not bad! Chiropractic readjustments, electroconvulsive therapy, acupuncture and quantum wave analysis. Now you've tried to kill yourself."

Felix and Veronica said nothing.

"You know, I've been at this a long time. Flus, cancers, hepatic conditions, resistant congenital defects, various manias and dementias. All sorts of things. I've even treated broken bones. Nearly every mental illness known to us has a treatment option. But there are a few recalcitrant disorders that respond to no known treatment. These usually end in suicide and we have to just throw up our hands and say 'boo'." He turned to the computer. "I suppose you are starting to despair, or you never would have done this to yourself. I don't blame you. But I have a rather pleasant surprise for you. I've arranged for a consultation with the chief of psychiatry here at Rockland General."

The computer burped and the alias of Dr. Eulendorf materialized in the room. It looked at each of them, a stoop shouldered man in his forties, completely bald, with a face like a bellows. Periodically the alias dissolved into pixels, and reassembled into grids of color, or a grainy continuum of grey, pink and lavender. The voice was missing its bottom.

"Greetings Mr. and Mrs. Clay, Dr. Tarlton."

"Nice to meet you Dr. Eulendorf," said Felix.

Veronica glared distantly.

"As Intellatrawl Dr. Tarlton was saying. There are those persnickety cases that always seem to end in death," his voice dropped to give the next word drama, but with the lower end out, he garbled, "or tragedy. Despite our best effort. But I have been having great luck with a new Monozone Euphoric. Now, Monozone has the best Euphorics on the market, they invented the field after all. But Paregane is a step up. It is the first drug that has ever been truly effective in cases like yours, where the prognosis is grim."

Veronica wiggled her butt around on the chair and made a face. "I'm tired of your stinking drugs. And you aren't even real."

"Mrs. Clay, I understand why you feel that way. Are you aware of the statistics--"

"You mean more fucking chances."

"The numbers, Mrs. Clay, are clear. Over 90% of cases like yours end in successful suicide."

Veronica spit. "This one kills your appetite for food. This one makes you never wanna fuck again. This one makes you feel stupid. This one suffocates you in your sleep. This one destroys your dreams. This one your hope and desire. I would like to finish what you started."

It spread its hands apart and smiled, squatting down beside the wheel chair and speaking at eye level to Veronica. "Now," he said

kindly, “I’m aware of our shortcomings in this area. But you’re really in for quite a surprise here. There are no known side effects to Paregane. You take one pill at bedtime, have delightful dreams and awake after just 7 1/2 hours sleep fully refreshed, strong and happy. It doesn’t just restore your appetite, it makes it stronger. You have better sex, better relationships, better exercise even. Paregane makes you feel good again, without killing your energy.

“Will that be all?” the alias of Dr. Eulenfeld asked.

Intellatrawl Dr. Tarlton smiled. “That was great Dr. Eulenfeld. Thank you.”

Dr. Eulenfeld collapsed into a spark and a dank, echoey voice said, “This has been a Virtual Consultation with Dr. Eulenfeld of Rockland General Hospital. Your consultation number is 7756-32-70574--02279-565628109/udot/memcodes3H. If at any time in the future, for the period covered by the statute of limitation, you wish to file a complaint, reference all correspondence and evidence to this number, along with your case file number, name of your Intellatrawl Primary Physician, and today's date and time.”

Dr. Tarlton smiled again. “A formality. All of that information is right here on your chart.” He waved his personal recorder around in the air. “So Mrs. Clay, what do you think? Give it a whirl?”

Veronica was phasing in and out, chewing her tongue and licking her lips.

“Dr. Tarlton. If she says yes to Paregane, can she come home?”

He folded his hands in his lap and leaned back in his chair. “If she takes it tonight, I would say she could go home in the morning. Is that soon enough?”

Felix could hardly restrain his joy. “Did you hear that babe? Tomorrow!”

“Fuck,” she muttered.

“Mrs. Clay, we need your consent.”

“It’s the only way, babe.”

Veronica, with great effort, turned to Felix and said, “Will you stay another night then?”

He wanted a shower, a good night’s sleep. “Of course. Dr. Tarlton, it’s been a long time in that chair.”

“Oh, we can do something about that. And let’s get you off the locked ward.” He turned back to the computer. “I have a private room available on the Klingenstein Pavilion. It’s small, but I think a cot’ll fit, just for one night. I’ll come by at 9 am and discharge you. How does that sound?”

Felix stood. “Great. Thank you Dr. Tarlton.”

They settled into their new room and watched a movie about the swimming kangaroos of Adelaide. They held hands, between the cot and the bed, and ate packaged food. At midnight a nurse came in and gave Veronica a glass of orange juice to wash down a little green pill stamped with the letter P.

## CHAPTER TEN

### DR. VELODIA

Something, growing suspicion perhaps, propelled Dr. Ruth Bryson from Owen Bradlee's apartment, down the elevator and into a Personal Commuter Pod station a block away. She hadn't even brushed her teeth.

The morning air was chilly and dry. It blew down on the concrete platform, two stories above the street. She leaned against the dark blue ceramic balustrade and looked up the tracks. Four silver rails arrived in a knot and separated just beyond.

Bradlee must be up to something, she thought, but she couldn't figure out what it was yet. She had gotten what she wanted, she should be happy. Many years of research had taught her to follow her hunches though and she wasn't about to rationalize away the suspicion that Bradlee was setting her up.

The problem was, that as far as she could see, she was the patsy anyway, no matter what. So her instinct was to get the hell out. She wouldn't feel right till she was with someone she could talk to. Someone she could trust like Leonard, who wasn't involved.

A couple PCPs chugged by stuffed with outsized office guys and then an empty one arrived. She got in, punched in her destination and stared at her feet, like someone on the toilet, dazed by gin. The claustrophobic, faded plastic bubble lurched out of the station and along its track. They crossed empty canals, glazed with a brownish green slick of mire and algae stuck full of garbage.

Maybe, she thought, there was another way. Her old friend and

colleague Dr. Velodia had been back at Cornell for almost a year now and they were to have lunch that afternoon. Maybe she could do something to help her out. It was delicate though. Bryson couldn't even appear to be moving against Monozone interests, they would kill her. And Velodia would be in danger too, if she were caught in an act of sabotage at Bryson's direction.

She was flung out on a cable high above the wide, churning East River. Flooded, broken and abandoned homes and factories poked the tidal mud, a slew of wreckage left by the bankrupt state, to fall apart in the ceaseless tides and inundations. Then she descended onto a network of elevated rails that took her to the Monozone stop, where she got out with an empty, pitching stomach and aching bowels, in a coating of thick sweat.

The Monozone office building was a massive pink neoclassical skyscraper, with broad, steep steps leading up to three story brass doors. That was not her entrance though. The lab building, which was an annex to the main office tower, was entered by means of two small, highly secure doors. ID was required to open the first, then bIOMetriscAn opened the second, which led to a small, grey, functional lobby of BioWatch tiled walls with brushed steel trim, and composite floors.

Security greeted her at the door as usual, guns lowered and visors up and she had no doubt that they noted her condition. It was a running joke. Nothing malicious, just the knowing nod of the guards in their slightly shabby blue uniforms, rumpled from a night's long duty in the sweltering lobby. The elevator at least was cool.

In the lab she observed the stark early morning order with a little sadness: it would remain stacked and clean until a new project began. There were no windows, and the overhead work lights were off. Floor lights glowed like candles, up the walls and across the white composite tile. One day it would revert to its human appearance,



machines and chemicals out on the black work tops ranked in two rows up the center of the room, clothing and coffee cups piled up in the workstations along the walls, personal items hanging by straps off the backs of steel stools and chairs, glove boxes lit through the night, air alive with the ambient hum of assorted meters, incubators, refrigerators, vacuum chambers and compressors.

She crossed the lab to her office, turned on the low lights and shut the door. It was deliciously cool, 16c. She locked the door and undressed, turned on the coffee maker. The smell of her own sweat mingled with the funk of decaying sex and diffused through the air.

The office was a purely functional cell. There was a bed, a desk, and a counter top with a toaster, a small oven, and a coffee brewer and below, a bar fridge and shelves for bowls and mugs. There was a dark red composite stall with a toilet and a showerhead from which hung a small, soap-splattered mirror. Toilet paper hung on the wall just outside of it; she could reach around and pull off a wad by feel.

Dr. Bryson opened a container of plain yogurt and ate it slowly, seated naked at the end of the bed. Then she lay back and tried to go to sleep but she could not stop thinking. Images of her and Owen Bradlee in bed together, not unpleasant, were interrupted by snippets of their final exchange, and the flash of anger that still hadn't faded. Vainly she tried to think of nothing, a white light, water rippling into sun.

Finally, she took a hot shower. The water drilled away the gin and Owen Bradlee's damp clutch. She shut her eyes, and let it come down on follicles and eyebrows, neck and shoulders, between her breasts, belly and legs. Then it was gone, the day, all of its events and humiliations washed away with the semen and spit and the long rhythmic undulations that continued, hours later, to radiate out from her womb. All she felt was steam and water, till finally she was a plump, pink lady with red eyes and tired joints and a nicely sore

crotch. She stepped out in a yellow cloud of soapy vapour and toweled off.

It struck her that transcriptasine, over time, would prove to be highly addictive. There was nothing to prevent people taking more than one dose a day. No one even knew what would happen if they did. They never tested transcriptasine abuse levels with humans, and the deaths made pretty obvious the fact that animals and humans reacted differently to it. Animals weren't likely to be dreaming of gardens and angels anyway. They didn't definitively penetrate to Penumbra, much less Umbra. Maybe it was the mental equivalent of ready prey. Once people got a taste of something easy and decent, they'd go for it all the time. What would that do to the 10% fatality rate? There wasn't a bastard out there who knew anything at all, she included. Shoddy, time serving science, she thought.

The thing to do was to design a protocol. Maybe advertise in the newspaper for volunteers.... her thoughts began to slip around from thing to thing, like smoke, imperceptibly fading out of language and she knew she had to get dressed, she didn't have time to lie back on the cot, eyes shut and the cold dry air patting her down. There was an opportunistic aspect of herself, one loath to change any situation pleasant enough to warrant lingering in. It wanted nothing more at that moment than to nap for an hour and then sit in boxer shorts at the computer futzing with thoughts and calculations. But then she would miss her lunch with Velodia.

Bryson forced herself into muslin travel clothes, a puce wrap she detested over polished hemp pants, and fibre sandals, worn knotty soles squooshed black and flat at the heel. It was like being wound up in cerements and buried. Into a canvas bag with big wooden handles, the kind of thing her mother would have once had, she flung some black night clothes, soft and sexy but with frump (Leonard required nothing in the underwear department, never seemed to notice if she was dressed or not.) Leonard could be exquisite in bed, 3 out of 10

times, which wasn't bad, after all. The fact that he didn't require all the do dads was fine with her. But it was always so fraught. He had no technique or sense of rhythm and was often distracted. And he was old and refused medication of any kind. When it worked it was the quality of affection, so odd and alarming, that overwhelmed everything before it. The love came positively rolling off of him in waves, great vibrations and oscillations of humor and kindness and infectious fulfillment. Desire was what it was she supposed. A dimension they had entered together once and could, without warning, inexplicably return to. And then, poof, it was gone in a cloud of sudden and enthusiastic work. All the passion for flesh was sublimated. Now it was for classification, or a search for an undiscovered something far away and awful. Counting crocodiles, crossbow murderers, mutant rednecks pumping out collection pools in 44c sun, loading landfill onto barges headed for the composite fusion plants, with their concrete vents rising 200 metres in the air. It was the worst of every world down there, biblical, forsaken. Who but desperate fanatics could stand it? Yet Leonard was not a dangerous man, or a lunatic. She understood that if the object of your study was Venus, you'd go there if you could, you'd search out what dark surface lay beneath the poison clouds. Those deltas down south, the lake basins and tidal washes, the Great Lakes of the north, they were his laboratories.

Into the bag went two bottles of Cargill Bros. Scotch, a stack of papers, her computer and some electraweave, and a book of detective stories set in 19th century Russia. She looked around her and thought that if she dropped dead there was nothing to tie her to this room but fingerprints and DNA.

Would they really try to kill her though? Her plan, such as it was, did seem to involve that possibility. So long as the plan was an abstraction, so long as it existed in a part of her mind where all plans are born and succeed, there was no chance of detection. They would

never find out it was her. There would only be the fact that no one was prescribing the miracle drug. Flat domestic sales, combined with foreign lawsuits and the evident disaster of many inexplicable deaths, all apparently linked to transcriptase.... Certainly she was safe and in the event, she would be right. You don't kill people for being right. But that line of thinking was unsustainable even by her most optimistic monad. There were all the examples of licensed researchers who had disappeared, their mutilated corpses dumped in the canal or left to rot in the city. Companies were neither quiet nor slow in their retribution. Contracts were sealed in blood and loyalty was the first oath taken. They owned your genes, they owned you. She began to feel afraid. She had never done anything like this before.

With the trepidation that customarily precedes journeys and transitions she allowed the office door to close behind her and crossed the nearly black, odorless, echoey lab without looking back. On the stainless steel elevator she joined a couple of techs in white coats with clipboards and work-absorbed expressions. They recognized her right away and smiled with their eyes, which she acknowledged.

Hovercraft were a hateful invention. Their sole redeeming feature was that they only sat one comfortably. Not that she had ever experienced comfort in a hovercraft. But it was all she could afford. Maybe now that she was rich she would buy a car, a cheap ugly one, and keep it in the country.

She slammed the clear composite door shut, sat back in the black chair and programmed in her coordinates, Cornell, and Keuka Lake. The hovercraft coughed a bit and swung upwards in a slightly drunken flight path that took her at a steep angle out over Long Island Sound, and then across Westchester and New Jersey, with its sparsely broken tree cover, scattered with settlements, roads and factory complexes. To the south lay large rectangles of green farmland offset by stretches of tan and brown earth. She passed over

horse country and then it was desolate, wooded mountains, flooded river valleys along the Delaware and the Susquehanna, flashing back the sun like tinted windshields. She was there in under two hours.

During the flight Bryson consumed three litres of water and had had to pee into an in-flight urination bag. One of the plagues of middle age--fat, veiny, grey--and having to piss without regard to circumstance. Fortunately none had spilled; her agility, even at two hundred K an hour in a scarred and blistered, lurching bubble with an aging guidance system, was still good.

She landed on a roof adjacent to the building where they were to have lunch, *al fresco*, she thought sourly. And in this heat. It radiated even off the nonreflective roof surface, that horrid putty colored material.

She walked down the dim, green internal stairs. The smell reminded her of her twenties, of beer and cigarettes and staying up for days. But wasn't that what she still did? Not with her fingers in it though, not immersed in the smells and sounds of research. She spent as much time now adjudicating conflicts and setting budgets as anything else. In the wet, mildewy stones and concrete were hundreds of years of postdoctoral ambitions. In stairwells and halls here she and Velodia had created the future. She had arrived a bitter, lonely, rebellious rich girl, a total failure in her world of estates and horses and political dinners. Here she found herself, her husband, and her life's work. She spent nearly fifteen years eating in these old stone buildings, or glassed-in in the labs. They water skied on Cayuga Lake, hiked in the surrounding hills and gorges, twice, even, played in huge drifts of snow. It was an uncomfortable, odd feeling, to be brought low by memory. In the intervening thirty years, she had returned often enough, for conferences, or to visit her friend, without a second thought. It was just a place, no different from any other. But just as she and Leonard had ascended, early, into desire, so had she and this place at some time ascended together and it only took a

glint of light, or a waft of grilling hamburgers, or undergraduate vomit drying on a stone, to bring her back. It was infantilizing, it wasn't real, sometimes it meant nothing at all. But what hovered, always, at the edges of the memory, was a sort of delight, a happiness she could not even believe was true or possible. And if she tried to pick apart the two lives, here, and the last thirty years at Monozone, she could not find the difference, not with her eyes, though she tasted it. All she ever did at either place was work. Here she had been a virtual slave to professors whose work she did and then to whatever grant was sponsoring her own research. Was it teaching then? But she still taught all the time. She only hired people who wanted to learn; no one else was any good. She wanted hungry, young, ambitious people, out to make a name for themselves. She could rein them in and the harder it was the better it was. That's what Leonard had seen in her.

Even under the awning the patio cafe was blazing hot. But Dr. Velodia was a visionary, masochistic, survivor type. She beamed with rude, throaty vigor beneath a pile of artificial blond hair, nearly tipping over as she stood up from the table on her canary high heels. The bug nets swayed gently in the swishes of giant ceiling fans. The women embraced and kissed. Dr. Velodia's mouth was cold and tasted of gin and tonic. Dr. Bryson, sitting down, craned about for a waiter and said, mostly to herself, "Bring me one of those."

The patio jutted out from the fourth floor of an ancient stone building, with a slate roof and copper gutter pipes, built into a hill overlooking Cayuga Lake. Cayuga Lake, fed by torrential gorges, slopped over homes, railway tracks and stores. The creeks burst out of their canals and culverts, fish spawned in the crevices of collapsed retaining walls.

At neighboring tables sat a few elderly professors, either alone (newspapers and books open before their eyes), or with students. There was a young couple in sun hats, she catlike, he unfinished with

a big adam's apple.

"Whuddya gotta do to get a drink around here?" Bryson asked.

Velodia demurred. She had white, freckled skin, like milk with nutmeg floating on it. "You're not in the city anymore, relax."

"If there's anything left of me. I'm about to sweat five kilos off."

"That would do you some good."

"Oh come on, and be one of those mean old ladies with tight faces, and scrawny bodies. Blech, who would fuck that?"

A waiter appeared at her side, towering, bald, and fit. "Good afternoon," he said.

Bryson said in a brusque, dismissive voice, "Gin and tonic." She was impatient with waiters. He stepped away for a minute and returned with a tall icy glass on a tray.

"Oh god, it's been a year and I still can't believe I'm back," Velodia said, looking around at the screen, and the indistinct, green and grey valley beyond it.

"Well, it's been a while for me too."

"But you haven't worked here for thirty years, it isn't your home."

"No, thank god for that. So what's good to eat?" The menu swam around in her eyes.

"The duck's smoked locally. And most of the meat is Amish."

Bryson grunted. "Good. I loath that legless pork they have now."

"Hmmm. It's worse in Boston."

"Oh, I was at Mass General once for a conference. What is it about that place?"

Velodia shook her head and ran her finger over the menu. "Beats me. Here, the trout. It's still on the menu. That's what I want. And beets with dill."

"How about the chowder?" Bryson asked, and they both laughed.

"Not today thanks, I'm drinking."

"Cheers then. Welcome back." They clinked glasses. A breeze blew through the place and the waiter took their order. Bryson got a smoked duck salad with frisee and lardons. They split a linguini with plum tomatoes and basil. Velodia got the trout and the beets.

Velodia had been in Boston for two and a half years, as interim head of Psychiatry at Mass General. Before that she had been on sabbatical, so it had been many years since they had last met. Velodia, of course, was aware of Bryson's work with transcriptase, but they had to be discreet when writing and even if meeting in public. Not only were researchers like Bryson under strict confidentiality agreements, companies like Monozone were particularly sensitive to academic contacts, since they could conceal other more nefarious contacts with rivals.

Velodia had also followed the budding career of transcriptase through rumors, discussions at conferences, speculative articles in the trade literature. When they started animal trials she read the published results. Since then there was largely silence. But she had recently received a visit from a Monozone Rep alias and just that morning a package of promotional literature had arrived on her desk with a sample.

"You're not going to believe this, but I just got a whole transcriptase package today."

The waiter set down their salads and Bryson slowly raised the sweating highball glass to her lips. "They don't waste any time, do they?"

"Didn't you know?"

"It was only official yesterday."

"Paregane. I like it. It oughta fix you for life, if it's for real this time."

Bryson's stomach felt like a worm on a hook. "Oh, it's for real."

Velodia lowered her fork and moved as if to shade her eyes,

though they were in a veil of black netting. “Then why aren’t you happy?”

Bryson laughed. “Yeah. Maybe I should take transcryptasine.”

“Or something. Euphoria’s not your problem.”

“It was just too soon,” Bryson said, quietly, to the table, and then she looked at Velodia, probed her face, her hazel eyes, a tiny dot of beet juice on her lower lip.

“Ruth--” her voice dropped a little. It was Velodia’s way of calling her out, using her name like that.

“They gave me 25,000,000 bucks too.”

“Holy fucking shit. No.”

Bryson nodded and smiled. “You’re not kidding. And an option to buy a 100,000 shares, at yesterday’s closing price.”

“Exercise that.”

“There’s talk of a council seat.”

“Then it really does work.”

Bryson forked a piece duck breast. “Should we order wine?” she asked.

“There’s a Riesling I like. Lots of acid. Good fruit.”

“O.K. Waiter?”

Velodia ordered the wine. “I can’t tell you how badly something’s needed, even if it works a little. There’s an epidemic of suicides. I can’t explain it. People aren’t just killing themselves, they’re mutilating their bodies first, setting themselves on fire and jumping out of buildings into crowds. Violent, sick stuff. Vindictive notes blaming the survivors. Extreme desperation. A man came into emergency one night. He had chopped off his own left hand and before he bled to death, had managed to cut out his tongue. These people, they load up on painkillers first. It’s a level of self-hatred that is inexplicable, and statistically significant. Nothing seems to work

with them either.

“Most of these people are high functioning normal types too. They don’t hallucinate and may even appear to be rational in most respects. What they have is a rage to die. It’s as if they can no longer endure the normal pain of existence. When things go wrong, they have no resilience, no hope, none of that loopy narrative sense humans use to keep themselves going.”

Bryson couldn’t just come out and say it. “Well,” she began, unsure of where the sentence would eventually land, “I’m afraid transcryptasine carries a risk.”

“New medicines always carry a risk.”

The waiter presented the wine to Velodia, uncorked it and poured her a taste. She nodded and he poured two glasses of pale yellow wine.

“What’s an acceptable risk in psychiatry today? What’s your theoretic limit?”

“Well, one has to be philosophical about things, given the history of the profession. We routinely render people frigid and impotent so they won’t feel bad and want to kill themselves. Sometimes we make them fat, sometimes skinny. Let’s see, we’ve used electricity, insulin shock, cold baths, whippings, isolation, cages, sedation. Field manipulators: neuronanobotic, prion, or viral mentation rewrites. Or we can get them high; restore perceived or conjectured imbalances, either chemical or electromagnetic. Every method has one thing in common: most of the time it fails, at least in the worst cases. The ultimate outcome then is suicide. Given that, a little danger in a drug is acceptable, as well as a lot of skepticism going in about talks of panacea.”

They tucked into a nest of linguini built on a puddle of scarlet sauce with a chiffonade of basil and shaved parmesan cheese.

Bryson sipped the wine. “Does a ten percent fatality rate seem

high?” Velodia arched her right eyebrow. “Not for experimental chemotherapy on terminal patients with less than six months to live. Experimental.”

“I have no control here--”

“Then they took it away from you.”

She shook her head. “Did I ever have it?”

“Ten percent.” Velodia kicked it around. “Well, I could see in some situations, where suicide is a certainty, and the patient, paradoxically, say in a moment of clarity, wants to recover; it would all depend. Maybe condemned criminals, if it actually made them feel good, without side effects--”

“There are no apparent side effects and they feel great.”

“What about consent though, how can a person crazy enough to benefit from this drug be sane enough to consent to it? How many clinical trials have you had?” She sipped her wine and began eating again.

“Right. Three different double blind studies, a thousand in each, all suicidal. A hundred and fifty died.”

“Was it ten percent in each study?”

“Exactly.”

“And how many controls killed themselves?”

“1 percent during the trial, some more after that. We’re tracking them.”

“But that’s madness. You can’t put out transcryptasine as a general Euphoric, what about the liability?”

“It gets worse. It’s being marketed overseas as an over-the-counter drug.”

“My god, consider your reputation.”

“I’m screwed.”

Velodia sat stupefied.

Bryson said, “They dismiss liability as a concern because the cause of death can’t be traced to the drug. Nothing can be proved.”

“Surely there’s a cause of death.”

“Nope. Natural causes. There’s no little pin point hemorrhage, no constriction of a blood vessel, no toxicity, no fluid in the lungs, no evidence of arrhythmia. No predictors either. Nothing. The patient takes a dose at bedtime, goes to sleep, and just doesn’t wake up.”

“Nothing like that could be approved.”

“It was rushed through. Monozone had someone on the inside that got wind of what the drug can do and it sailed through without a hearing. They didn’t even tell us on the team, they went straight to sales.” The waiter cleared their plates, which they had swiped clean with bread. Bryson sighed and drank deeply of her wine. “What’s the point of a long life if you don’t enjoy it?”

“I don’t know,” Velodia mused. “People are so desperate. Even the sensation of being alive is painful. Not agonizing, but a little bit off. And I don’t mean a spiritual state, mind enslaved by matter, or a body made uncomfortable by the presence of spirit. It has nothing to do with joy or agony or all the losses and disappointments and temporary ecstasies. It’s just that the pulse of consciousness is contrary to the pulse of the universe. The necessary discord. Duality, paradox. Chiasmus. It’s what accounts for that sensation of something being wrong. Now, if that’s the way of things, then what are we restoring? Treatment is a denial of the facts. Being is a design flaw. A mistake that draws more and more energy to itself. If we could, wouldn’t we drain the universe of its last photon just to stay alive? And yet, we hate it.

“Now you say you’ve found a way of correcting that pulse, at least in highly variant individuals, those who suffer more than others, those who feel like they’re on fire all the time. So maybe sometimes, transcryptasine goes too far in restoring balance, it reconciles the

pulse of consciousness with that old ripple of the big bang and life ceases to exist.”

Bryson smiled at Velodia and they drank another glass of wine in relaxed silence. Then she said, “I took it, you know. It did nothing for me. But the oddest thing about transcryptasine is, everyone dreams of returning to the Garden of Eden.”

Velodia unleashed a peal of delighted laughter. “Well, I’ll go dust off my Jung then.”

A six foot two woman, with silver bangles on her long bony wrists walked in, wearing a flamingo pink paper suit. Her long neck terminated in a slightly small, square head of short black hair, with two lawn green composite discs in the ears, a sharp nose and pert, jungle red lips. The ancient professor she brought along was dressed for tennis. Without the stoop, he would have been a little taller than she was. He had blond, synthetic hair, a whole head of it, and it shined against his plum colored cheeks. Velodia rolled her eyes. Bryson checked them out and said, “She’s exotically bad.”

“But what’s with the geezer?”

Bryson drank some wine and lit a cigarette, flicking ashes in her water glass. “I only do geezers these days it seems. Last night I screwed Owen Bradlee. Remember him?”

Velodia made a face like she had just sucked smoke up her nose. “Not that pinky dick faux Englishman you used to drink with.”

“You’re confusing him with someone else. Bradlee’s got a whopper.”

“Well, I’m sure I never trusted him.”

“I’ve got no choice but to trust him, at least a little.”

“He’s a snake, always in and out of things, quiet, smooth. I wouldn’t fuck a man like that.”

Bryson dropped her cigarette in the water glass. “You don’t like

dick anyway.”

“I don’t mind a little now and then, just to gas up the jets. That girl we were looking at? When she was just seventeen she ate every pussy worth eating in this place. But now? I hear there’s this intern who goes to her once a week and fucks her in the ass.”

Bryson made a face. “Once a week? My god, she’s made of strong stuff.”

“It must hit the spot, that’s all I can figure. No one likes her now.”

“Oh, who the hell cares. Look at her. The height genes took, but proportion failed. You can’t think of everything.”

“Do you want coffee?”

“Hell no. I’ve still got to ride out to Keuka Lake.”

“Well the wine’s gone.”

They looked around for the waiter. A new one came by, this one with hair, big red curls of it, and sallow skin. They ordered two more glasses of wine.

“So how is Leonard?”

“I hardly see him at all. It’s been close to six months since I went up there.”

Velodia stretched her arms across the table and made her hands into fists, and pulled the fists slowly towards her with a sigh. “I Like Leonard, always have.”

“You oughta come up some time.”

“I’d love to.”

“We eat a lot of deer and fish.”

“That’s fine with me.”

“And there’s a sort of crazy entourage.”

“You get used to that up here.”

Bryson scowled. “Oh, I suppose. Tell you the truth, I get bored. They talk so goddamn slowly. You have to ‘get around’ to everything.

God help you if you try to rush Mordecai Hertzler. Tomorrow might mean next week. Nothing happens right away.”

“But it must be beautiful.”

“Sure, hot and more bugs than air. There’s like this constant screech of living things”

Velodia laughed. “You used to like that when we were young.”

Bryson shook her head. It was true. She was quite acclimated to nature as a child and despite punting nearly every facet of her upbringing this she retained through college and all of her years of research at Cornell. But thirty years of living in the city and suburbs was a long time. It had effaced so much of that early self that when she felt it peering at her she usually turned away and that was that. Sometimes though, like an ivy-covered face of statuary in a dream, she couldn’t lose its stare and fell before it.

Bryson looked around the room, at the net walls swaying into the blue, cloudless sky, the army green ceiling fans, the stone floor and stonewalls. No one seemed to be paying any attention to them at all. The professors were either absorbed in their books or themselves. The waiters did their jobs, whisking crumbs off of tables before dessert, bowing slightly as they presented the menu cards. There air was serene, if hot. One could think here. She felt suddenly wistful and her usual wariness gave way. “I really loved working here,” Bryson said, feeling a little drunk. “Maybe with that money, I could afford to come back.”

Velodia looked at her friend strangely. “Why would they ever let you do that? It’s a lifetime contract.”

“Well, I could try to buy myself out, they don’t need me that much.”

Velodia lit a cigarette and pursed her lips. She didn’t look jolly or harebrained or comical anymore but hard. Bryson wasn’t making any sense. “They decide that and you know it. And as long as you

produce, as long as see these things that you see, the danger of even suggesting--”

“Oh, but I’m tired of the things I see. I’ve earned my keep. And who the hell are they anyway?”

“With a council seat you’ll find out soon enough.”

Bryson looked around again. “Do you know all these people?” she asked.

“I think we’re safe enough. There’s more hostility than sympathy around here these days.”

“Did you tell anyone I was coming?”

“No, of course not.”

“After I get back I’m going to keep working on transcryptasine. Bradlee said he could fix it for a while. But it seems prudent, to me, to have a back up plan. Just to cover my ass.” As she approached what she had to say she faltered, her words forming around a hard black lump in her gut. Bryson wasn’t a fearful person and she gave little thought to death. Most of her life she’d been coasting from one success to another, and the way things are, the order, had always yielded to her irreverence. She got away with doing what she wanted because what she wanted to do always in the end proved to be so profitable. But now she was breaking a law, perhaps the only law. Others had done it, but they had done it by changing allegiance, going from a weaker to a stronger patron. Moving against Monozone was a transgression no one would forgive, especially not Owen Bradlee, unless he was in on it. But this kind of move would never interest him; it would appall and disgust him. This kind of a move had no pay off, it was a simple betrayal. The words came trembling to her lips and with a gust of determination left them, so small after such great effort.

“I’m wondering if there’s some way to try to stop sales by alerting doctors to the danger.”



They were quiet then. The ceiling fans took the separate curls of smoke from their cigarettes and dispersed them into haze.

Finally, Velodia, who was in a state of introspective fear, almost a swoon, whose head felt like a candle flame suddenly blown flat by wind, intense and vulnerable, cleared her throat. "Are you really ready to do this? Do you have an escape plan?"

"It doesn't have to be so very dangerous," Bryson said, recovering her footing some. "Maybe a discreet word here or there. Everyone knows the dangers involved."

"No one wants to die, not to save the lives of strangers. Besides, a lot of them will look at these reports, they'll get the briefings, and they'll go for it. It looks like a panacea. I mean, you, or rather they, are touting it as a cure for ennui. Give me a fucking break. A drug that cures unhappiness is worth a little risk for most people."

"That's what they'll say. But I know it's not true and now you do too."

Velodia studied her bony pale hands, the color of birch bark, with the sculpted red nails; she turned them over as if she were reading her own palms. "I've been lucky in life. I didn't go with you to Monozone. I didn't become a conference whore. I believe in psychiatry, the treatment of the soul. I believe that life inevitably makes us sick at heart, but that the mind is also an organ, the brain. I have studied its waves, its sirens and its tickings. I've tinkered with its stops and pedals, I've turned its tuning pegs, raised and lowered its pitch with drugs and talk and in return I get to sit on this terrace of an afternoon and sip wine with a dear old friend. There aren't so very many of us in the world Ruth. I'll see what I can do. The chiefs at the major teaching hospitals will be easy. It oughta diffuse from there, down through the ranks. Give it a couple of months. But I'll tell you what, it's the company doctors who scare me. They'll just hand out what's given them. And if they catch on to what we're doing, then

you and I are dead."

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### GMZ

The morning of the day his wife, Dr. Ruth Bryson, was to arrive Leonard Bryson awoke with an almost adolescent shudder of anticipation. He had not been a reflective man, more a sensation seeker bent on satisfying his own curiosity, a doer, but he had, since retirement, surveyed his personal conduct with a shock. It seemed that since his marriage there was rarely a time when he wasn't sexually involved with a woman considerably younger than himself. Right at this moment he was sleeping with one of his neighbors, a thirty-year-old woman named Sky who worked a commune with her brother and sister and her brother's wife and child. Every couple of weeks she'd wander by for a cup of coffee. He liked her to lean against the rail of his porch and lift her skirt while he went down on her. She gripped his white hair in her hands and threw her head back and crowed. It was deeply gratifying. Sometimes she'd reciprocate and he could feel his whole heart's blood draining into her mouth and then the valley rang with his high hollers. Other times they just had a quick missionary fuck. Anywhere else he would have been suspicious of her motives but up here there weren't a lot of choices and her chances of seducing an Amish farmer weren't great, though of course it had been done. He liked Sky, she liked him. He could taste her on his lips just thinking about her.

Leonard didn't feel guilty, it was how they had chosen to live, but he felt he hadn't much time left to do something he had always, since the beginning, wanted to do, which was to spend time alone with

Ruth in an actual home. Most of all he wanted to both know and enjoy her the way he imagined he would when they first met, when he didn't know anything at all about what happens in life and stepped right into it with her. Love, abiding, real, shocking, erotic, jealous, tender, erupted into his 44th year...then lay dormant, like herpes, every few years inflaming him anew. How can one, he thought, so screw one's life up, so as to miss the central point? As he creaked out of bed and made for the kitchen, barefoot, wrapped in a black fringed, gold sarong, he knew their life would probably not take some sudden turn for the different. But he wished that it could. And then he thought of his dying grape vines, withering in the drought, for which he had no more energy left. He thought of the lemon tree he was coaxing back from death, of Muscatine's that needed pruning, of an artichoke patch he'd been meaning to mulch, and a drainage ditch that had silted up last spring and had to be cleared before the fall rains arrived, if they ever did. But before he could do any of that, before the sun was fully up, he and his chow Sasha had to go out hunting for signs of the mountain lion.

Leonard's day began before dawn and ended after dark. There were stretches of time when it was too hot to work, or too windy, and then he would sit for hours in his living room, with the view of the lake and valley and its shelves of old books, reading with only the dogs for company. He stared out onto the dark porch, beneath the overhanging roof, perched three stories up. The dogs were barking to be let out and other dogs and coyotes, across the hills, howled and barked back. A rooster crowed harshly and often. There were the gentle early cheeps and whistles of birds. Down below the terraced vineyard, past an orchard and fields of crops and tall meadows, about a mile off, Keuka Lake was a luminous black, edged with shadow. The sun was below the horizon, turning the sky a dim, periwinkle blue.

Sasha followed him around the kitchen. He poured hot water from

a white enamel kettle, blackened on the bottom, onto fresh coffee grounds in a deep mug. The water swirled up to the rim and turned dark. He gave it a stir with a long spoon and watched the grounds slowly settle, then took it out on the porch with a book, 17th Century Naturalists' Accounts of Siam. He lit an oil lamp and the roof timbers glowed like amber ribs. Mourning doves hoo-hooed. Jays shrieked from tree to tree and a woodpecker tocked at the old oak spread out over Ruth's bathtub. His hand fell down to his side and Sasha licked it. He scratched the thick red fur behind her ears abstractedly and sipped his coffee, listening to the nocturnal world sink away into silence and the diurnal one emerge just ahead of the sun. Ruth really was the only thing missing from his life. And soon she would be there.

Greenhouse Mitigation Zones (GMZ's) were a joint state, business and university effort to reclaim frontier lands that had been abandoned and gone to waste. Settlers in GMZ's were given free title to land and in return they agreed to restore wetlands to control runoff, plant trees and experimental crops, to find profitable uses for the land in a changed climate, track and protect wildlife, destroy insect disease vectors, and in general bring the land under cultivation and human control and keep it that way.

That, at least, was the official explanation and certainly why many people moved there. They were idealists and drifters, people bored and disgusted by city life. Some, like Leonard, were scientists.

But state had other reasons as well for establishing GMZ's, as an examination of a map will reveal. A hundred and more years ago, as climate related disasters became more devastating and more frequent, populations began to abandon entire towns. The few remaining farms, weakened by generations of successive drought and flooding, finally succumbed to a combination of insects and disease, followed by wildfire. Cities like Rochester, Buffalo, Syracuse and Binghamton burned to the ground before sinking beneath rising lake and river

waters.

In the Great Lakes region, from Minnesota to the Hudson, casino gambling collapsed and Indian capital fled to the cities or out west, along with the people who had come to depend on it. In upstate New York this left only the poorest and most traditional people of the Haudenosaunee, the Six Nations of the Iroquois Confederacy, behind in villages located on the old reservations, or in isolated settlements, where they had been hunting, farming and fishing for centuries. They were now free to reclaim their land. State neither noticed nor cared; the entire region was written off as worthless.

Next, they annexed any land contiguous with theirs that had been abandoned. Lawyers at state became alarmed at the annexations, which were being repeated elsewhere in the country, wherever similar conditions prevailed, in Maine, Wisconsin, Florida and Georgia, the Pacific Northwest, coastal Massachusetts, Louisiana, all along the Mississippi, St. Croix and Missouri rivers. But all state money was consumed by reclamation projects in the major cities, managing unruly refugees, controlling internal migrations to the west as well as the border crisis with Mexico and international military obligations. State signed the treaty with Haudenosaunee, which became the model for other state-Indian treaties, recognizing their sovereignty on any land they could claim to occupy, contiguous with their own, for more than a generation.

For decades, as the land between Buffalo and Albany became infested with malaria, dengue fever, West Nile virus and encephalitis, and the water bit deeper and deeper into the land, things went on in this way. Populations left and each of the Six Nations annexed land. But as the worst of the storms and temperature fluctuations seemed to abate, and the polar ice caps started to re-form, businesses began to look at the waste areas and wonder if they had made a mistake. This was once valuable land and one day would be again. The sovereignty movement was beginning to claim a lot of territory and

state was now treaty-bound to recognize those claims. Military officials ruled out a reinvasion as a waste of badly needed troops and ammunition. By establishing GMZ's the state could compete for open land, under the uncontroversial guise of an environmental reclamation program, with broad leadership support.

Recently Leonard had heard another explanation. Indians believed that the most compelling reason state had for establishing GMZ's was water. The population shift west to high arid regions with agreeable climates was taxing water supplies. There was a plan in the defense department (the only branch of state still capable of thinking in these terms) to build a series of aqueducts from the Great Lakes, across the country and into the Rockies. To avoid war with Canada, they would secretly drain water out of the Great Lakes and divert it south to the Finger Lakes. To do so they would need the Erie Canal and the rivers, which were increasingly under Iroquois control.

When he had finished his coffee he dressed and took a rifle down off the rack, loaded the magazine and checked the safety. He filled a canteen with water, got a coil of rope and headed out the door with Sasha. The house was built into the hill, and the top floor exited onto a dirt and stone driveway, deeply rutted and parked up with three decrepit trucks, one with a boat hitched to it. Around on one side of the house was the dog pen. Beyond that was the hen house, a stack of weathered wooden crates and a sort of shed built of bamboo, corrugated tin and chicken wire, surrounded by a steel fence. Then there was a pen for three black pigs.

The dogs he had collected over time, a basset hound named Boswell, anonymous pit bulls and retrievers, a border collie named Bruce, a toy poodle named Max, 8-12 at any given time, running back and forth and barking and yapping to be let out. They burst through the bamboo gate when Leonard unlatched it and surrounded him in a lithe, excited stream of noisome fur before breaking up and heading off to hunt for breakfast. He and Sasha walked up the steep path to

the road above and then crossed into the cornfield, owned by Mordecai Hertzler. The ground was hard and yellowish grey. Stunted corn stalks brushed his legs. They weren't green enough for early August.

Leonard wasn't sure exactly where he would find it, but he had heard the mountain lion in the middle of the night. It was a terrible sound, a disturbing high pitch scream that set every dog barking for a mile around. The nearest woods were at the edge of this cornfield, and he had a hunch he'd find the remains of a deer there.

Sasha ran ahead. There was no better time of day to be out, the wind was soft and cool and he could think. Soon they were in the woods. These were young trees, thin boled, with plenty of undergrowth between. He walked along slowly, following Sasha, smelling the dusty air, listening to the leaves stir. She became suddenly focused and he had to follow her now as she drove in a line toward the spot. Mountain lions had been seen for a hundred years in Iroquoia but he was particularly interested in this one because of its size. The Hertzlers had spotted it several times and the old man insisted it was 3-4 meters, which was huge. Gigantism in animals was of particular interest to Leonard. Everything that survived seemed to get bigger. He had seen six and eight inch cockroaches. Bull frogs 45 centimeters long. Eighty-pound catfish were common and, on the Mississippi there was a 1,000-kilo carp hauled in by a sludge barge. He himself caught fifty kilo Sturgeon in Lake Pepin, but it had hormonal ulcers. The elk and deer were 10 percent larger on average. It was what one would expect with few people and more territory. But in a carnivore it also increased the danger. Bears were especially worrisome at five hundred kilos and 3, 3-1/5 meters tall. He didn't want to run into any bears without a gun.

The problem was convincing people not to kill off the big predators. The idea of the whole cycle repeating itself sickened him. Indians were more inclined to them. They mostly lived in villages, in

houses with fenced yards. Their fields and orchards were at the edge of town and they hunted the forests. But the Amish and the homesteaders might live miles from another neighbor, surrounded like Leonard was by cultivated land and young woods. Mountain lions and wolves could live in the big forests to the north and come down hunting at night. If they ever lost their fear of people there'd be trouble.

The woods were denser now and Sasha's rust colored coat flickered between the trees. She would circle around and come back and then head on. When he had first come here he went for long walks with her every day. He knew nothing would be as simple as advertised, that the land which was his was probably also claimed by Indians, that there'd be a well established community of sorts, spread out as it was, into which he'd have to fit. It didn't take long for Dennis Blampied, the local sheriff, to show up on his motorcycle and inform him that he was trespassing on Seneca territory. Haudenosaunee did not recognize GMZ settlers as legal occupants of the land. He would be allowed to stay. The land was his so long as he could keep it under cultivation and recognize the sovereignty of the Haudenosaunee.

And there was indeed a complex community. Salvage companies, the spawn of rough, get-rich-quick schemes, cruised the canals and lakes in their weird collection of work boats, fueled by salvaged diesel, coal and sometimes even wood, or alcohol. The crews had a reputation for being desperate, borderline criminals. Then there were the Iroquois and their antagonists, pockets of Upstate New Yorkers, descendants of the original colonists, mostly born again christians. Sporadic, open warfare broke out between them until the Upstaters were subdued and scattered. They continued to live in deep resentment, clustered around clapboard churches and dark, violent taverns, praying and drinking. In the high land between the lakes lived the Amish and hippies.

All the land around there was dotted with the failures of earlier entrepreneurs, eccentric millionaires who had tried to start tropical fruit farms but had failed to take into account the periodic blasts of arctic air the region still received. Lake Effect snow and once in a decade blizzards of a couple of metres wiped them out.

Leonard had avoided politics his entire life. The whole business was dangerous and unproductive. Politics epitomized everything about the human animal he despised. He was incapable of that philosophical mood in which politics become the shit of human interaction, unpleasant but necessary, nor did he see it for what it was, the human ecosystem. It was what kept him on the road, away from universities and think tanks or even offices. He could have been an experimental scientist like his wife but lab conditions drove him crazy. He was very much a nineteenth century man. The most pleasing activities he could think of were drawing and describing specimens and their habitats in his journal, or reading the journals kept by other naturalists. He had collected many of these books over the years and gone to great expense to have them shipped up to Keuka Lake; the last twenty k the boxes were dragged by horse cart. These volumes, some three hundred years old, preserved from old libraries by families like his own, quixotic and endangered individuals holed up in ancient apartment buildings, now lined the shelves of his living room, shelves built to hold wine bottles, glasses and flatware. He never understood Ruth's enthusiasm for the blood and guts of research, office machinations, bureaucratic brawls, competition for dollars. Yet despite his avoidance of politics and people he had always found himself plunged in the life and death struggles of those living in the places where he worked. For from the outside these places seemed depopulated, grim sites of disaster, symbols of the failure of political process to address the most fundamental issues of survival ever faced by modern human beings, especially the failure to understand the impact rising sea levels would have on every single

major city in the world. But from the inside they were not only rich with flora and fauna but with that most tenacious weed of creation, humanity. Here life for humans was stripped down to something far more harrowing and basic than one would ever experience in a restored city or suburb. And for every person who chose to be there, there was another who had no place else to go.

Indians had largely recovered their land, it was not even really contested, but what were they going to do with it? That was politics. Religious folks, Holy Rollers as Dennis Blaupied called them, saw the world through 16th century eyes. These could be Indians or Amish, and as Dennis was also fond of saying, "How do you forge a nation out of people who just want to be left alone?"

If they ever forged that nation Leonard Bryson would be its most ardent patriot. It was why ten years ago he was among the first to stake a GMZ claim. He joined a group as naive as the nuts that had tried to plant bananas. Few had a good understanding of the weather, of what plants did well under such circumstances, or even of how to build and maintain a house without reliable power. They would live far from any doctors, with limited supplies arriving via long networks of trade. It was a 19th or even 18th century world they were entering, albeit with fuel cells, solar panels and computers. But to date none of these has ever shot a deer, dug a well or built a road.

Leonard was fascinated. All his life he had studied places just like this, made recommendations, identified mutant life forms and emergent species, but he had never been in a position to stay and do something, to be a part of a people, connected to a land. There was Manhattan of course, but he was no longer of that place; his place was a tent, a factory apartment, a motel room or a berth in a boat. He had slogged through every coastal swamp of the country east of the Mississippi. Hip waders were his second skin. He'd had fevers: malaria, dengue, hemorrhagic, West Nile Virus and encephalitic, yellow fever, typhoid, cholera, dysentery. He'd been bitten by bats,

toads, snakes and dogs; stung by wasps, spiders, jellyfish and scorpions. Once in Alabama he was forced to flee a fifteen-foot estuarial crocodile. Compared to that Keuka Lake was relaxing. And the 1970's vineyard, built of 19th century wood, felt like a spawning ground, returned to in old age with no memory of having been there before.

He was born in Manhattan, born into an old matriarchal clan occupying a palatial suite of rooms on Central Park West and 89th street. This world was so contained, so crowded, so loving, he scarcely knew any other existed till at the age of ten he was sent off to school. The apartment and the family of Goulds who occupied it were inseparable. The eponymous Ur couple were Eli and Stella Gould, Bulgarian Sephardic immigrants from the lower Danube, who met and married in 1920 and purchased the apartment in 1947, after Eli, a chemist, invented a process for producing long synthetic fibers cheaply. It was a seven-bedroom spread with three bathrooms.

Upon Stella's death in 1990 at the age of 97 the apartment passed on to her granddaughter, who had been angling for it, progressively turning her grandmother against each of her siblings and cousins. This granddaughter married and had children with an afro cuban saxophonist. She taught comp lit at Columbia for 40 years. Upon her death, her daughter, Ursula, and Ursula's lover, Siam, moved in and began collecting scientific texts discarded by libraries and children discarded by their parents. They joined a Wicca coven and established a matriarchal clan centered on goddess worship, ritual lesbianism, scientific research, poetry and the apartment. The apartment was passed on to the oldest female child; male children could stay until married, when they were expected to take their wife's name and move out. Thus any male child born into the Gould family was surrounded by women from birth, and books.

Nothing in the household conformed to the outside world. They had just hung on somehow, resourcefulness cropping up every other

generation or so to meet the threat of eviction for unpaid taxes. As rising sea levels flooded out the city, resourcefulness became a prime survival skill. Each of these old apartments and buildings that escaped demolition for the canals was like a museum preserving some impoverished family, ossified by tradition--dark hallways walked by wispy old women in muumuus and housecoats and sarongs, little underground whorehouses, vessels holding the oil of obscure religious cults, political heresies practiced in bizarrely evasive language, a sort of Alexandrian poetry, radical ideas imprisoned in acrostic puzzles. There were clans of vegetarians, Latin praying catholics who ate fish on Fridays, muslims who slaughtered goats for the birth of a child. The center courtyards were gloomy with neglect, ailanthus breaking up through the cobbles and growing to great heights while within, plaster fell upon each generation. It was a sepia colored, coffee and incense scented childhood of naked old ladies praying over a bowl of roses, libations of sweet wine and foreheads smeared with menstrual blood.

When he thought of it he could hardly breathe. There was never any sun and the dust tasted of the flesh of mouldering Goulds. Iroquoia place on the other hand was an environment in transition. Strange and chaotic, but immensely prodigal in its power to dispense new forms and destroy old ones. The hot lakes and marshes were incubators of mutant life forms. New diseases flourished in weakened populations of plants and animals. The air was thick with flying cockroaches; flies grew fat on the bloated corpses of animal herds felled by epidemics. People could use vaccines, stay indoors, take antibiotics and immune boosters but wildlife could not. Populations of cattle, horses, turkeys, pigs, cats and dogs gone feral surged and dwindled by the season. He registered their numbers and conditions in his journals. To the north oaks had grown into immense forests while maples shrank, leafless, barkless, drowned in bright green pools of water. Rats, mice, raccoon, possum, squirrel, porcupine and skunk

flourished.

Even in the time he'd been here the storms had become less frequent and intense and the temperatures were beginning to modulate towards a mean. Big predators, wolves and mountain lions, grew fat on the elk and deer herds restoring some semblance of balance. Moose were again sighted in the north.

Small, independent homesteads and communities could survive these circumstances. Even the Amish, especially resourceful farmers, had gone north in large numbers, to settle on the plains of Canada.

Hippie communes on the other hand had short shelf lives, due mostly to a disproportion of enthusiasm to skill, though some families had first settled in the 1960's and '70's. Some thrived as specialized hunter-gatherer.

The Senecas were the only legally constituted authority in the area, with a system of laws and police to enforce them. But they themselves were deeply divided over just about every question except for one, and that was that all the land that was once theirs would be again.

The lake country was mostly peaceful, but drifters came through constantly and there were bandits, gangs hiding members out from the city. Fights broke out on the road, people were robbed and murdered. Justice was simple, restoration of property, fines, and in the case of murder or rape, if the victim or their family demanded it, death.

Out there, everyone relied upon their neighbors. There was a rule of hospitality. He had ingratiated himself with people, made available whatever records he had, plant specimens. He helped to identify insects and animal diseases. Strangers could always stay with him and get a meal. The Hertzlers helped him rebuild his vineyard and he gave them rides, hauled their hay, corn, sugar and cheese for sale up north. There was a family of Rastas about a mile away, Sky's commune up

the lake, and of course his fellow GMZers. All of these folks could be relied upon to help bring in crops or raise a barn.

They crunched through a clearing. The sun was fully up and he had been walking about an hour. By now Leonard had assumed they would find the kill. Given all the racket he reasoned the cougar had stalked the deer through his property. Then, beyond the clearing, in a stand of cottonwood trees by a dry creek bed, Sasha began to bark animatedly, wagging her tail and poking her muzzle down. Quickly Leonard walked up to her and there on the ground was a huge albino doe, her rump completely devoured. Bloody bones lay collapsed and glistening on the ground, the white pelt pushed up about the shoulders like a shawl. The smell of blood and shit was heavy in the air. Warily he looked about for the mountain lion, above in the trees and at the bushes. It was obviously a big animal. He would have to consult Munkden's *Carnivores of North America* to find out exactly how big, but the doe would have stood two metres tall at the head and its spinal cord was cleanly severed. A mountain lion attacking a larger animal would chew through the throat. This one was big enough to have stalked her and when it was good and ready, leapt on her back, and very precisely, controlling her with its paws, found the space between two vertebrae with its teeth and bitten through. The wild cats were remarkably precise. Connections between their jaws and brains were dense and complex. A mountain lion was a two-meter house cat, which should unsettle anyone.

He was tired by the long walk and thirsty. He drank water from the canteen and took the coil of rope off of his shoulders and tied it around the deer and then around his waist. It would take time and he'd have to rest but he was determined to drag the carcass back to the house before vultures or bugs got to it. If he came back for it later there'd be nothing left.

## CHAPTER TWELVE HOLIDAY IN THE SUN

Loopy with booze, Bryson sat back into the black foam seat and toyed with the radio. Clouds, enormous hunks of coal with little lightning forks leaping between them, approached from the north. The rest of the sky was achingly blue, in every direction. She passed over Seneca Lake. The land about was parched, the meadows bleached blond and copper, except for the woods, and the fringe of dark green that followed the shores and banks of lakes, streams and gorges, like veins of emerald. Lake levels were low and she could see the old northern shoreline of Keuka Lake, under water since 2130, a wavy, indigo Y discernible just beneath the brighter, bluer surface, which petered out in a large swamp over the lost town of Old Penn Yan.

The craft set down on the west side of the lake, in a sheltered area Leonard had cleared, beneath the ridge of the hill that separated the vineyard from the road. Set in the brush like that it was safe from wind and invisible from the road and the house. In one hand she carried a bag and used the other to balance herself. Grasses and weeds grew up two metres high and smelled of corn silk. There was a cacophony of insect and amphibian voices, frogs going dunk dunk dunk, scissoring cicadas, the busy mandibles of grasshoppers chewing. Moths and butterflies bounced among the tall hot weeds and she was a little unnerved to discover that the unbroken background buzz was made by yellow jackets. Overhead a turkey buzzard circled.



Weeds slowly gave way to rhododendron. The dark, resinous leaves smelled strong, of nightshade, and the stalks, or trunks, had grown rankly, reaching a frightening height for a plant she thought of as a sort of flowering shrub. The shade was close, choking. As a child the leaves always reminded her of fingers. A cool breeze from the north bore a cruel scent of rain. It wouldn't stop here; those clouds were just passing through.

She was sweating profusely now. It ran off her head and back. Long ago she had stopped noticing the drops rolling down her side. Black flies settled en masse upon her shoulders. She could feel their little feet running around on her neck. Mosquitoes and gnats engulfed her face. They bit at the tips of her ears. But she didn't bother swatting, confident that the BiteStop pills she took would keep them from stinging anywhere else.

The path soon joined the driveway and the space opened out on either side. To her left was a stand of oak trees, hundreds of years old, with broad canopies. Each was different. There was the listing fat one and the one with a trunk like a mast. A few were split and twisted. Even on the hottest days the air beneath these trees seemed cool, sweet with acorns and dense, tannic leaves. To the right was a grove of dogwood, separated from the driveway by a split rail fence. Then there were crooked apple trees, moss and lichen covered, small green apples hanging in the gnarled boughs. Up ahead the weathered grey clapboards of the house came into view. In between was a sort of tent, a flat canvas roof held up by bamboo poles with netting for sides and a hole cut in the center to let out smoke. It was connected to a couple of mismatched composite shacks with solar panels. Then there was the baby blue and white pickup truck with the smashed out headlights. The thatched roof of the house blazed like a stupa covered in gold.

A small dog began to yap and within seconds there was a din of barking. Dogs ran in from all sides, starting with a mangy black

poodle. Inside the structure sat an old man in shorts, shirtless, his back to her. He was tending a fire with a stick and talking to another man.

"That you, Ruth?" he shouted. The seated shadow stood and as it approached the black netting, its flesh came into soft focus. A red snout poked out from the bottom and Sasha ran up to her. She pet the dog but could never match her enthusiasm. The fur felt dirty in her hand, greasy, with a vague odor of death. "Hello, hello, hello," she sang. Leonard rushed towards her and hugged her to him. They kissed lightly on the lips. "Come in, come in," he said. They entered the netting. It was dark and smelled smudgy, of smouldering green wood. In the center of the room a pot bellied copper alembic sat atop a pile of coals. The air was unbelievably hot. She could not remember anything so unpleasant. A man sat sweating in a chair. As she approached, choking and blinking back sweaty tears, he stood. "Forgive me," she said, blowing her nose.

"Let me get you a glass of water."

"No." She waved him off though she desperately wanted one.

"Here," Leonard said, thrusting a warm water bottle into her hands, which she began to plug down. "You won't believe what I've got going here. You remember Dennis Blanpied?"

"Of course," said Dennis. He was in a khaki uniform, with pistols in each holster. He had a middle aged, weather beaten face, kind brown eyes and a military haircut.

"Try this," Leonard said, handing her a small glass with clear liquid at the bottom. "It's made from the grapes. I finally figured, why not make booze if the wine's no good? So I got Jason, you know that hippie who lives off the main road, about a mile up in the woods, just past the tobacco shed? You know, he's got a fat wife, a bearded daughter and two beautiful sisters? He helped me rig it up. It's a pot still."

"Not bad," Dennis said. "For moonshine."

"The Italians call it grappa."

She took a sip and sputtered. It burned into her lips, tongue and throat. Then the heat faded and a slight taste of fermented fruit lingered on her palette. Immediately she wanted another sip. The second didn't burn half so much. "You ought to at least age it in some of those oak barrels downstairs," she said, when she could finally speak.

"Well, that's what we were just talking about," Leonard said.

"I figured he could char the barrels and put some color on it. Anyway, I'll take a bottle of it just as it is."

Leonard handed him the bottle. "Dennis brought tobacco."

Bryson looked up with interest. Between smoking and drinking it was a bit of a toss up but in the end smoke always took the prize of her affection.

"Yeah, I have Canadian cigarettes if you want to buy some. But I also have some of my own tobacco."

"You wouldn't believe the taste. It's, it's heirloom tobacco, what you imagine a cigarette tasted like in the 1940's, the kind Humphrey Bogart smoked."

As Leonard spoke Dennis rolled her a cigarette and she lit it up. Jesus fucking christ, she thought. No wonder Bogart died of cancer. A few drags later and she was able to inhale. That was better. But between the two she could feel her voice getting hoarse.

She lowered her bag to the floor and sat on a crate between the men, who stared periodically at the fire. Leonard was strong. His calves were sharp and his stomach small. His white hair had grown down below the ears but he was clean-shaven, deeply tanned.

They made small talk for a while and she drank grappa and smoked the tobacco. She figured it would tan her like leather and then the

bugs wouldn't bother biting the extremities not protected by BiteStop. She wouldn't feel the heat either, even if she dried out and cracked.

Leonard stood. "You want to go up to the house and cool off Ruth?"

"That would be nice."

They left the tent. "Why don't you go inside," Leonard said. "I have to show Dennis something."

"What?" she asked, not wanting to be left out. The sun hammered at them. "Aren't you worried about skin cancer?"

"Skin cancer," he roared. "My god, I'm more likely to be eaten by a mountain lion!" He crossed the driveway and they followed him into the shade under the oaks where a canvas tarp covered the remains of the doe. "Hold your nose Ruth, and look at this." He lifted off the tarp and he and Dennis squatted down around it.

"That's a big one," said Dennis.

"Look at the neck."

Dennis poked his fingers into the bloody crumpled fur. "That's a big cat."

"Hertzler's seen it down on his place."

Dennis shook his head. "They'll have to shoot it then. Too bad."

"Do they though?"

"Look Leonard, I know how you feel about this but I'm no game warden." They headed up to the house. "These days I feel like the sheriff of Nottingham. That's not what I set out to be."

Inside it was cool and smelled of pine. The room was a big loft with a wall of screened in windows, shaded by the over hanging thatch roof, overlooking the lake. To the right was a living room area defined by floor to ceiling bookshelves, with a big woodstove and ceiling fan turning quickly, and a couple of easy chairs and a couch

covered with red muslin arranged on a cotton rug around a low oak coffee table. Directly in front of her was a long dining room table with three high backed chairs and to the left was the kitchen, with a doorway leading out onto the porch. The rafters of the cathedral ceiling were exposed and amber with age. The wide plank pine floor was worn smooth and unpolished but swept clean. She took an open wooden stairway to the next floor down. Here there was a hallway running along the windows and to the right, built into the hillside, were bedrooms. Their room was a small, spartan space. She sat on the edge of the flat futon and undressed, put on a black bathrobe hanging for her on the back of the door and padded to the shower down the hall. The water was frigid; she gasped and seized up as it struck her but soon she was dancing around beneath the cold jet. She toweled off, brushed her teeth and returned to the room to lie down. When she awoke it was early evening. The hills were glowing with low reflected sun and the lake was striped orange, blue and black. Bugs banged into the window screens, big hornets and grasshoppers.

Upstairs Dennis and Leonard were seated in the kitchen, a sweating pitcher of iced tea between them, munching on dried strawberries.

"I've got it coming from every side," Dennis was saying. "So I need your help here."

"I try to stay out of things," Leonard said.

Dennis spread his hands and shrugged. "Sure, me too, and they made me sheriff. But the time comes when you have to take sides. What we're offering you is a civilised life. You GMZ folks can choose as you like of course, but when the shit comes down, there'll be no neutrals in Iroquoia."

Leonard stared out the window and ate a strawberry. "And the Amish?"

"The Amish have already cut a deal. They're the seventh nation.

They're exempt from military duty, but they pay taxes, help to build roads, things like that."

"Well the others will certainly do that."

Dennis shook his head skeptically. "I dunno about that."

Ruth got a glass out and sat down with them. "How far will twenty five million bucks go around here?" she asked, drinking down the sweet, minty tea. "Cause that's what I'm walking around with. You gonna keep the muggers off of me, chief?"

"I'm not a chief, ma'am, and god help me if I ever am one."

"Was that your pay out?" Leonard asked. He looked like he had just swallowed an ice cube.

"That's just the half of it."

Dennis whistled. "Well, I wouldn't say that out loud around here."

"Why not? The whole world will know by the end of today."

"The whole world who watches t.v.," Leonard said. "There's a lot of world out there that never sees a paper, much less t.v."

"Yeah, well the town crier will carry the news if Monozone gets a council seat." She scowled.

"Ruth works for Monozone," Leonard explained.

"I don't know what the fuck a Monozone is, but it sounds lucrative."

"You've heard of Genetel?" she asked.

"Sure."

"Well, we just got bigger."

"So they approved transcryptasine?"

"Bingo."

The three sat musing on what twenty-five millions bucks can do.

"Ruth," Leonard said, addressing her now as if Dennis weren't there, taking her hand in his, "why don't you get out? Isn't now the

time? You could come live here.”

“They’d track me down in a second. There’s no secret about this place.”

“Isn’t it right Dennis that they have no jurisdiction here?”

He rolled his eyes. “What’s a jurisdiction exactly? I’d say, whoever has the greatest firepower has jurisdiction. Fugitives come up here expecting us to hide them out but if a police convoy pulls in or a fleet of armored hovercraft, what’m I gonna do? It happens all the time. We have to be realistic.”

“Sovereignty must mean something,” Leonard said.

Ruth shrugged. “I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

“That’s o.k.,” Dennis said. “I didn’t mean to stay so late. I want to make it back before dark.”

“You’re cutting it close,” Leonard said. “If you stay the night we could go out and look for that cougar before sun up. I figure we could tag it with a BioWatch bug and track it.”

“Where are you gonna get that around here?”

“I get all that stuff from Cornell. It’s part of my contract, isn’t it? To track and preserve wildlife.”

“Just another reason to stay indoors at night.” Dennis looked at Ruth and said, “I don’t want to be in the way.”

“It’s no problem, is it Ruth?”

Ruth was expecting this. Warily she said, “No, no problem at all.” It was the usual, Leonard so self-involved he had forgotten all about her. She wondered which of old Jason’s sisters or daughters he was fucking and if a beard would keep him off of her. But that was unfair, jealousy was unfair.

“I’ve got a venison tenderloin and some rice,” he said.

Dennis stood. “I don’t know. I’m curious about that mountain lion, but I think we might as well kill it and get it over with. And I

meant to tell you, there’s a group of uh, pilgrims I guess you might call ‘em, coming through sometime today or tomorrow.”

“Church?” Leonard asked.

“I guess so. They’re a rough looking group, man and two women. One of the women is blind. Nice though. I think one of ‘em’s a christian. They’re walking to Onondaga.”

“I’ll take them as far as Ganudasaga in my boat if they want. Wouldn’t you like that Ruth? We could do some fishing. Camp out the night and come back the next day.”

They looked at her. She felt like an alien invader. What will the lady want to do? She didn’t want to be seen as prissy, afraid of a boat trip, of dead deer and wriggling fish. She chewed a strawberry. It was soft and sweet. It made her feel good inside. “Sure,” she said. At least after they got rid of the Handsome Lakes they’d be alone.

After dinner the three pilgrims arrived. After settling them in Dennis and Leonard retired to their rooms and she sat up in the living room with an oil lamp watching the news on her computer. There was a message from Owen Bradlee. His face was smoothed out, painted, a put on job. “Bryson,” he said jocularly, with lips pursed into an ironic smile, “just wondering how you’re doing. Try to keep cool and don’t work too hard.” He held up a Manhattan and winked, then pulled out the cherry by the stem and munched it. “Sweet dreams.” The picture zeroed out.

She replied, “Gone fishing. See you in two months.”

In the morning she awoke early, with the first light, but Leonard was not at her side. She never awoke this early at home, but here it was the coolest time of day. The air smelled good, of blossoms that only open at dawn, of wind chilled in the shadows of gullies. Upstairs the coffee can was out and the water was hot, quick to return to a boil. She padded barefoot, wrapped in a green sarong, out onto the porch to watch the morning and read her detective story. There was

this huge state of siege in her nerves she hadn't even been aware of before but now that they were starting to release she could feel them. All of her preoccupations continued but they were less frequent. She seemed to have minutes of abstraction where she thought of nothing at all.

It took most of the day to reach Ganudasaga at the north end of Seneca Lake. The three passengers sat in the bow as if in prayer. The man was quite large, dressed in old denim and a blue button down work shirt and the women, one of whom had cataracts, wore long grey dresses with loose sleeves.

Seneca lake was huge and deep. They spent the afternoon fishing in spots he liked. At its widest point one could barely see the opposite shore. The sun was intense; she dove overboard a few times to cool off. The air smelled good away from the rotting vegetation of the shores. She caught a big trout, 2 kilos, and he caught three small bass and a four-kilo salmon. An hour before dark they pulled into a cove, tied up the boat and prepared a campsite, working quietly and quickly. She sat on a barkless fallen tree, cursing the insects under her breath while he gathered wood and built a fire. They grilled and ate the trout and watched the sunset, bleeding out into a puddle of inky lake water. He got boards of cedar out of the boat and planked the bass and salmon, smoking them in the fire and wrapping them carefully up to stow away in the boat, so they wouldn't attract bears. After a few glasses of grappa they lay down in the tent and talked things over in the dark, to the sound of croaking bull frogs. She told him about everything but hesitated when she got to the part about Owen Bradlee.

"So how exactly did state take over?" he asked.

"They sent in Owen Bradlee." He tensed up. She could feel it. Immediately she felt a rush of guilt. Of all her lovers Owen was the one who pissed off Leonard. There was something about him,

probably the length of time they were together, how it had almost become a second relationship as opposed to an occasional fuck.

"That bastard is back?" He sat up.

"Look, you haven't been any better."

They stayed like that in the dark, she on her back, a root digging into her hips, he upright, head brushing the top of the tent, for minutes.

"I need a cigarette," he said. She joined him outside of the tent. He poked the embers with a stick and blew on them, lighting a hand rolled cigarette off of a coal. The strong tobacco odor filled the air.

"Can you roll me one?" She asked. He handed her his and rolled another.

"We're not exactly an ad for the nuclear family," she said.

"I love you, Ruth. Always have."

"Look, let's not start now. We've made it this far in our lives, living as we do."

"Or wasted them. Ever feel like that?"

"Not really. But," she hesitated, making sure it was the truth, "these days I have some questions."

"Those bastards you work for, Owen Bradlee, Monozone. What good do they bring you or the world?"

She hated when he became self-righteous, better than the world around him. Everyone did what they had to do and not everyone had the luxury of living in isolation. "Every time a sick person takes a Euphoric and gets to work or stays with a lover or doesn't kill herself we've done some good."

"Is that what it's about though? Haven't we both pursued dreams we thought were for the good of someone or something but really served no other purpose than to feed our egos? I remember, or at least I think I remember, a time, maybe a month or two, when you

were my dream. I thought we'd get a chance to know each other and to be together. You were just this slightly demented, really hardboiled kid in her twenties who liked to drink a lot. I felt like there was this bottomless meaning to you, something I could never hope to plumb but in the process of trying would find out what it was to be alive. And it seems to me in the forty years we've been together, I've felt that over and over and yet you weren't there. And then, there were all those times I felt like you were after the same thing but I wasn't there. For once I'd like to feel that we're in the same place again, together, that it isn't just an old man's fantasy of youth."

They were both exhausted and stared into the fire. He didn't expect or receive an answer. She touched his shoulder and it relaxed. They each smoked another cigarette and crawled back into the tent. In the dark, she reached out and took his hand, stroked his forearm. He rubbed her belly, between her breasts and brushed his fingers in her pubic hair. Slowly they aroused each other, stroked and kissed their way back, not in time or space so much but back into their minds to the place where they met. Brain stem resonance hummed between them. Age, depredations, insults, history vanished for a time and they made love as the moon rose full above the hills and an owl hooted in a nearby tree.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### SHA LA LA, MAN

Once Veronica began taking Paregane their lives returned to normal very quickly. It was almost as if nothing had happened. But something, of course, had happened. The world didn't fit the explanations. It marked Felix in ways he was trying to understand and understanding eluded him.

Veronica recovered both physically and mentally. She spent her days working out at their gym, The Arcadia, a synthetic indoor rain forest with five story waterfalls and sulfur crested cockatoos flying about. Money was running short.

As Veronica's strength grew her physical presence became almost threatening. Some force was imposing its will on the world through her body. It made Felix feel like a bug, creeping about. It was an extremely subtle eclipse of a pride he didn't know he had. He hated himself, he hated the world. Life itself had become hateful and that was the pride that was hurt, the pride he took in being alive. A loss of vitality and its self-regard.

Felix was cornered, by her, by work, by circumstance.

For a while he fussed over Veronica at home, but not anymore. Now he spent most nights getting zonked on a slow drip of Gulag martinis stirred to frigid perfection by Peter Nguyen.

Peter poured two shots of vodka over ice rinsed in absinthe and gave it a few decisive spins with a long, twisted metal spoon. The glass shaker whitened. He dumped ice and water out of a trim martini glass, wiped the inside dry with a napkin and ran lemon zest around

the rim. Then he strained the drink into the glass, and gave the zest a squeeze. A little spritz of lemon oil sprayed down on the surface. Deftly, without concentration or effort he carried the drink to Felix, seated at the end of the zinc-topped bar, back to the door.

The words for no reason at all repeated blandly in his head. He was resting on a certainty, that his constant feeling that the world was about to do something awful to him was a delusion driving him to behave in ways incomprehensible to himself. He sipped the drink. It had an evil flavor. He gave it another chance.

Felix scratched his head and looked to Peter for some sort of human interaction. Peter wore his usual uniform of maroon jacket and black t-shirt. To appear busy he messed with things that didn't need messing with. Appearing to be busy is important. He measured out the cheerfully colored glass straws. He folded red cloth napkins. When he could no longer avoid it he opened a cheap edition of the paper (printed on flimsy, recycled hemp) next to Felix and casually read the news. From time to time he looked up to indicate he was listening.

Felix, as he did every night, was trying to figure it out.

"If my wife calls, tell her I'm not here."

"Where should I say you went," Peter said to the paper, without inflection.

"Say you don't know."

He laughed quietly. "She'll know you're here."

"Not if you don't tell her."

They read a headline together.

MAN GUNS DOWN 3 IN MIDTOWN BAR

Peter poked his finger at the picture of three bloodied corpses laid out on the sidewalk in front of the bar. "Shit. That's near where I live."

"It's not like she'll actually call," Felix said.

Peter turned to the business section. "She never does anymore."

"But that's just it. Even when she hated me it was like we were in it together, you know? She hated me cause she couldn't get rid of me, I wouldn't let her go, I wouldn't let her die. We were one then, at odds, o.k., but one. Now, I don't know."

Peter grunted. A couple, elderly, in their mid nineties, entered carrying umbrellas, which they shook off like wet dogs. The man stood tall and predatory, gazing around at the small, wood paneled room through avian eyes over an avian beak, in search of helpless wait staff. His wife, equally avian and equally impatient stared at the water, which had pooled in the creases of his shoe.

"The host will be right with you," Peter said, standing stiffly. "Would you like to have a seat at the bar?"

"If I wanted that, why would I stand here now?" He turned to his wife. "We might as well leave."

"The food is good," she reminded him. He looked at his watch.

"Slow as all get out."

Felix shuddered and slunk between his shoulder blades. This was the future. This was what awaited him.

"Let's have something at the bar, dear."

He glanced angrily about. The host, a man in his fifties, a little slow of breath, and sad in the way of all people lost in jobs they neither love nor hate, came with a stack of menus. "Mr. and Mrs. Mortimer?"

"What took you so long?" Mr. Mortimer asked.

"Yes, that's us," Mrs. Mortimer said.

"Your table is ready." They placed their umbrellas in the large brass stand by the door and followed the host to their table. Peter landed like a butterfly on his paper, looked at Felix's empty glass and

said, "Another?"

"Yeah, why not."

As Peter mixed the drink Felix reflected further. "She doesn't even have a job yet, which is fine, it takes time. But it doesn't worry her. Nothing does. She wakes up feeling perfectly great. I mean, radiant, grand. But it's like, I'm not in it with her."

"Sounds like you're out of phase."

"That's right--that's just it. Out of phase."

After another drink he slurred. "You remember what it was like. She took it right out of me. Maybe there's just nothing left."

"You need to recharge a bit, that's all. Once she starts working, things'll look up."

Felix darkened. "I don't know about that. I think it was work that set it off. That mess with her parents didn't help. She shot her husband, and then herself."

"But she was rabid."

"So what?"

"Rabies makes a hell of a difference. Down there in Florida weird things are always happening. Too hot. Too wet."

Felix mulled it over. He had said such things himself, to his parents, when they announced that they were moving to Louisiana.

Her parents had insisted on retiring to Florida, despite the violence and the heat. All of it was under water and Amazonian in climate and wildlife. They had lived through the tail end of things, heard first hand stories of tornados, tidal waves and hurricanes. They made their fortune in the salvage business, running crews in and out of swamps, after diesel, bank vaults, machine parts, whatever. They studied old maps and located landfills for composite plants. It was big money and they bought land (a string of islands in the Everglades) from the Seminoles. Her father liked to shoot crocodiles and her mother

painted birds.

"I should go," he said.

Peter looked up from the paper. "Well, goodnight then."

"Thanks." Felix signed the check, slipped off of the stool and headed out the door. The street was empty. He looked up and down it for his bike. The air was cool after rain. It felt good. Water dripped rhythmically off facades and splashed on the crushed stone pavement, glittering in streetlight. Back and forth he walked, distracted by dim movements behind black windows, or the sudden burst of noise when bar room doors opened.

On a Sunday night most people were at home in bed. Only the unemployed, the retired and drunk came out. He thought about the old man and woman barking at the waiters. Why didn't they just get on with it? Why didn't they die and leave something for the rest of us? They were always going to be there, getting older and older, like the Sybil at Cumae, a voice in a pile of living dust.

At last he found the bike and rode off through the drizzle. He didn't raise his hood; he wanted to feel the rain at the back of his neck, running like a cold sweat off of his head and down his bare cheeks.

Once home, he blinked against the living room lights, dim as they were, set to dusk, and sat for a few minutes on the couch, taking off his shoes and staring at the blue mirror framed in opaque stained glass on the wall opposite. The reflection in the mirror was of the ceiling, and refracted light. Nothing really. He stared at his feet. In the bar he had felt tired, drunk, ready for bed. The contentions, worries, threats, and enticements of physical existence had receded sufficiently to release him back into the black, reassuring nothingness of sleep. But now this good rest stood off to the side. Like the mirror, it allowed oblique views but vanished at the touch of a head or look. A sleepless, sullen silence overcame him.



For all of the differences in temperament and class between his parents and her parents there were remarkable similarities. He was often struck by the fact that both had used the word freedom to justify their moving to the edge of the habitable world. Free from what? And for what? To die of some horrible disease. You would think they would want to retire in comfort, after living in such places all of their lives, working in that unbearable heat for months, his mother the only doctor around for hundreds of k. He remembered summers when he saw children lined up for shots, arriving by rowboat, which they tied up to the pontoons of the floating hospital. Certainly all four of them could have afforded what they had earned.

He had always been taught that one could have specific freedoms, but freedom as a general idea just didn't exist, a word without a referent. There was no defense of abstract freedom. Capital could be free, or speech. Markets.

He just couldn't understand how living where both his and her parents did constituted freedom at all. Nearly 2/3rds of people on the frontiers died of unnatural causes. Living in a bamboo and thatch shack erected on stilts in a lagoon wasn't free at all. You were enslaved to animals, became the food of insects and bacteria and of their reproductive cycles. You served their ends at your own expense.

The only time he ever had a sense of what they might have meant was on vacation, a sort of bracketed freedom within the security of a regular life. Skiing down a mountain, hiking and sleeping out beneath the open sky. Most of that had been on the road from Thunder Bay to Vancouver. In Canada he had felt the exhilaration of a momentary freedom. And the exhilaration had a charge that persisted in his memory long after the event. If that was what they meant, then maybe he knew.

Freedom is subjective. One didn't need to suffer pain and loss to be free. His parents, her parents, were a little nuts to destroy

themselves for that.

He stumbled down the stairs and brushed his teeth. In the bedroom he got totally naked. The cool sleeping air stippled his skin. He stood, swaying by the bed and watched Veronica sleep. She was curled up in a fetal position, facing him. The light cotton blanket, grey in the near dark, rose up over her hip and dipped at her waist and rose up her shoulders, like hills at dusk. Her black hair was tucked beneath the blanket, which she gripped across her cheek. Her face was relaxed, expressionless, still, as if she were immobilized, maybe frozen, and he had to watch very carefully to see her breaths come and go.

He looked at her for a long time. She wasn't there. Veronica was gone. This was her husk, her facsimile, a sort of place marker. The sarcophagus to which she had to return before morning, enlivened by her travels. But it wasn't that. It was an animal in repose, virile, in its prime, resting up for its departed master. Slowly he yielded to sleep in the chair. As his neck grew cold and stiff he half awoke and crawled into bed beside her. She didn't stir. He rested against her warm, upright body and slept.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

### MONDAY

At the first sign of light, a pink and yellow lightening of the ceiling, Felix's eyes snapped open like rubber gloves. Sleep done before it had even started. He felt like he had been thrown suddenly out of a painless place and into a harsh, discordant one and lay there in disbelief that it was all starting again, and so soon. Unable to go forward or fully return he observed half formed thoughts clash as if in an empty arena. The lights brightened. He watched them till they were too bright to look at directly. A sweet smelling breeze swept the room, as if through open windows with white curtains, Alpine Day, or Mediterranean Mural. Veronica awakened without stirring. She stretched out her arms, yawned like a cat and threw off the light, lavender blanket. She sat up, gazed down at him with a warm smile and touched his chest.

"Don't you have to get up? You'll have to rush." She swung out of bed and stretched again. He grunted. She breathed deeply and walked around the room. "That was just," she paused and exhaled.

"Will you make coffee for me too?"

"Anything to eat?"

He gagged. "No."

She smiled and sat down next to him on the futon. He smelled her. She had a strong odor, very enticing but not normal. It wasn't perfume exactly, it wasn't sweat, maybe something in between. But he couldn't respond to it, the martinis were stale on his breath and most of his thoughts were taken up by the next move. She felt

around in the blanket and took him in her hand. "I wish you could just stay here. We could fuck, go back to sleep, spend the day in the park."

His bladder ached. "It's a piss hard on," he croaked. She dropped his cock and stood, pulling the white silk sleeveless gown over her head. Felix looked up at her. She seemed to tower over him. In the bright light her skin smouldered like a jar of honey in the sun. It was almost like rubber, firm and lustrous. Her buttocks swelled out and her breasts were full, as if she were lactating. She wasn't any hairier than before but the hair she did have was glossy and thick and stood up off her body, under her arms, in a line down from her navel to her pubic hair. She had become an alien beauty. He felt small and dirty, weak and hung over. Even his unhappiness felt petty.

"How did you sleep," Felix asked, finally, knowing the answer already. But it was a custom with them to ask and he wanted to get on with it.

"Marvelous," she warbled.

"I wish I knew what that meant."

She faced him and stepped into a pair of black cotton briefs, the muscles flexing in her calves and thighs, her breasts swinging down as she bent forward. "I just feel so good in the morning now." She stood straight. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that."

"Why." It wasn't a question even, just a sound he had to make now and again, the human form of echolocation.

"It's just that you might feel bad, that I spend my nights walking through paradise."

Jealousy. Was that it then? He could feel it, so could she. There was no way to hide. They heard each other's thoughts. She put on a black bra and buttoned up a peach blouse, open at the neck, with loose sleeves. "I don't mind hearing about the dreams." He swung out of bed and rubbed his scalp. "It's when you act like those dreams

of yours are real.”

“I wish you didn’t get so mad about it.”

“Who’s mad?” he half shouted, and then, feeling ridiculous, glared at her to let her know that it was her fault they were fighting.

“That’s o.k. I understand. I would be mad too.”

He gripped the sides of his head and sort of silently screamed. “And then you are so even tempered all the time. It’s that goddamn drug, and that goddamn place. I don’t have you anymore. You’ve become something else.”

She sat by him. “It’s been hard, I know. I’ve put you through a lot. I’ve put myself through a lot too. But this is who I am, who I’ve always been.”

He shook his head. “That’s not it. Something’s not right with us. I slog away at that BioWatch WorkStation while you moon about. You’re like a lotus-eater. And we’ve got no money.”

“I’m looking for work,” she said evenly.

“Every day you say that.”

“Do you want me to work in a bar?” She stood and stepped into a simple obsidian miniskirt and went out the door. Naked, Felix followed her up the stairs and into the living room.

“No, not at a bar. Anywhere. What you do--I want us to be happy.”

“By drinking yourself into a stupor every night of the week? When did we last even eat a meal together?”

Felix grumbled. “I’m tense by evening. I’m trying to adjust.”

She ran boiling water out of the faucet into a glass bowl full of coffee grounds, which she stirred briefly but vigorously with a glass rod. “I think we should change our lives.”

“I’d like to have our old life back,” he answered, facing her close, in the doorway. She put slices of white bread in the toaster.

“Look at this place,” she said. “We’re like rats in a hole.”

“This,” he declared indignantly, counting off each point with a finger, “is a great apartment. We’ve got total climate control, dawn to dusk natural lighting, photosynthetic air and water filters, easy access to mass transit. People swelter away in storm prone boxes, little composite huts! In foul suburbs, near methane plants and fusion reactors, literally dying to get into one of these, which they’ll never do, even if they save all their lives. Be real.” He stared at her. Her composure was sound, she was relaxed, listening to what he said, sort of, but she seemed to be drifting off. “You’re there right now, aren’t you? Thinking about that place, fantasizing as we speak.”

“We can change, Felix.”

He retreated to the living room and sat on the couch. She poured coffee into two glass mugs and handed him one. They sat together on the couch a moment in silence and then he put his cup down on the coffee table and stood. “I have to get ready.”

Pud, he thought, gazing down at his penis in the shower. It was a depressing thought, a heavy, shapeless word dropping through his mind and landing on a soft dark contour with a dull thud. Felix soaped his dead member, dead in its little nest of hair, like a fledgling bird. He soaped up his nearly hairless armpits. He washed out the crack of his ass. He cleaned between his toes. The water felt good. It was hot. It smelled like vaporized perfume. The billows of steam and water contained him in a totality he otherwise lacked. It blurred the lights into amber and lavender clouds and it blurred his thoughts till the worst they could manage was the monosyllabic pud, without alarm, just the slow, depressing realization of the true, the inevitable. Then the shower dissolved even that into prismatic aerosol. He toweled off and dressed in a white shirt, white slacks and an artichoke linen jacket. He selected one of his many maroon ties and knotted it carelessly.

Upstairs they faced each other in the doorway. He felt hungry and tired and when he looked at her he saw that she had somehow grown a little in height and stature. There was a look in her eyes, the spokes flashing like emeralds and sapphires, that could command who ever looked there to do her bidding and yet her expression seemed to renounce this power. It lay all within, beyond intention or control and he realized it was focused entirely on him. It stirred up in him an old thought, I am a lucky man, but luck at that moment lacked the gravitas of pud.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

### THE PURSUIT OF EXCELLENCE

“Perfection,” the corpuscular, oscillating alias of Chairman Aung said, “is the ideal we may never attain but must constantly strive towards. Excellence is the means to that end, the path we choose to take, ever mindful of the destination.

“A ruthless honesty, dedication to fact, respect for process, a relentless pursuit of that which we know to be the end of all action--by these fruits shall we know the true Intellatrawl Associate.

“Let us begin this new day, the first of the week, as we would a journey through an unknown and dangerous wilderness beyond which lies a golden field, fresh water and great happiness.”

Felix filed out of the auditorium and walked down his stretch of the long spiral, in a herd of white, tan, grey and metallic mesh, with the occasional pastel silk like a dried flower in a bouquet of grass.

Over the course of the uneventful day he mused, sucking on ice chips, reviewing the stream of BioWatch data, productivity figures mutating upward or downward by the second. In his gut he realized that jealousy was the simple, elegant explanation that fit all the facts. He would rather have her sick and his than well with her heart in another world. But what was sickness and what was health? The concepts were unclear. If a person is happy in a delusion can they be well? Could he even be sure it was a delusion? Was it just a lovely dream that left its gentle mark on her day? Didn't he really envy her peace of mind?

Anger was justified; the contract had changed. The woman he had

fallen in love with, with whom he had negotiated a life, and who occupied with him an edge, had fallen off to one side. He kept his part of their bargain by grabbing hold of her sleeve, pulling her back up after a great suspenseful struggle with snapping stitches and fraying cuffs. Just when she slipped from his grasp and fell he grabbed her by the hair and flung her to safety. Now she went and fell off the other side and could fly, she didn't need him.

There was something in her silences, her frank and imploring eyes ever watchful of him that led him to believe she did actually need him but he felt in himself some resistance. The need was gravitational almost, an attractive power that meant to suck him into whatever alternate reality she haunted. Every time she dropped a green pill into her palm and swallowed it his stomach tightened, as if she were talking to a lover. He could not follow her there. He didn't want to. It was wrong.

He ate his sandwich mechanically at the urinal, the smell of ammonia and disinfectant disguising the processed meat taste and mustard. For exercise he walked to the fortieth floor and back and sat down at his BioWatch WorkStation, red and green lights dancing on the bubbles of CellPack encasing his head.

At six o'clock the screens shrank to a dot and he shuffled out to the Amphibatrains. His tolerance of things was growing brittle. Chairman Aung's paeans to the glories of excellence (at one time benign palliatives he took in the same attenuated spirit with which they were offered) began to seem idiotic, malevolent even. The air on the Amphibatrains was no longer a little stale but fetid. The man seated next to him was no longer ugly in the normal shabby way but vile, monstrous. Pores gaped and oozed. Dandruff was the sloughed scale of reptilian heads. People sat consuming filth. He felt like he was wandering among toads.

Peter poured him his second martini and he sank deeper into a

misanthropic gloom. The doors opened and another regular entered, a man with a pile of spongy hair and a long rippling nose. A big talker. Possessive of his bartender's attention, Felix stiffened with hostility. The man was repellant, a sports enthusiast who knew the performance records and genealogies of all the major players of every sport. He knew who had what gene and which company they were contracted to, even the history of bids and trades. He had mastered the human sports pedigree and shared this cornucopia of useless information with all in earshot.

The man ordered his fruit juice drink, a glass of moody reds and oranges, layered, intricate, sweet, and Peter executed the complicated procedure of juice and liquor pours while the man discoursed on the fate of Iranian tobogganers and Costa Rican high divers. Felix read Peter's paper, turning from the murder and mayhem of Midtown, where Police Chief Pradip Herskovitz was on the verge of declaring marshal law, to the serene uncertainties of the business section. MONOZONE ROCKET! Fueled by foreign sales of its latest Euphoric, Paregane, Monozone's stock price hit record levels today, out performing all other pharmaceuticals. Not since Broadway Inc's spectacular climb of two years ago has anything like it been seen around the world. Paregane, an over-the-counter drug in Asia and Africa, is only approved for prescription use in this country. But if Owen Bradlee, project supervisor and chief advisor to General Priss Valdez has his way, Paregane will be on the shelves here by the end of the year. "It's a juggernaut," he said, adding, "It's as close to a panacea we are likely to see in our lifetimes." Unlike other mood altering drugs Paregane is not a stimulant, there is no 'crash' associated with its use, nor is it addictive.

His eyes clouded. It was time to go. He was sinking slowly into the milieu, the stool was comfortable, and the air salubrious despite the chatterbox seated four spaces down. Two women who worked for Intellatrawl swung in giddily laughing.

"Hey Felix," the one on the left said, the red head whose name he could never remember. "Going so soon?"

"My wife made dinner."

"Isn't that nice," said Nadine, the other one, the one with a two inch high helmet of natural black hair twinkling with raindrops.

Suddenly, and with regret he signed the check, slipped out the door and rode his bike home through a strong, wet wind. It wasn't rain exactly. It wasn't even cool. It was a hot, industrial wind blowing around random drops of atmospheric liquid.

The lights of the living room were blinding at first, the smell of dinner revolting, the sight of Veronica (calm, regal) guilt and terror inducing. Her lips swelled up off of her teeth and her eyes fell on him like a disturbance, her vigor and health a rebuke. She smiled, tentatively, almost as if she were afraid to say anything. Why should she be afraid, he wondered. What does she see? "Hello. Have a good day?" Obviously she had decided to forget about the argument in the morning. It hadn't gone anywhere for him, it's killing animus was still alive. He wondered what he was doing there, withering beneath her electric gaze, the palpating energy of her body. "Dinner's almost ready," she said, the smell of hot dogs filling the room. "Do you want salad or broccoli?"

He sat down on the couch and looked up at her. She wore a loosely belted paisley silk robe that fell to her knees and was open between her breasts. One hand was placed provocatively upon her hip and the other held a long, two-pronged fork.

"Salad," he said, staring at the t.v, from which issued the flat, nasal voice of a virtual announcer.

Nervously she approached the couch and stood over him, lustrous, resilient, pliable, full. Her shadow fell on his face; his skin grew hot. He felt her eyes probing his gut. They were the kind of eyes he could never hide from. They always came for him, through his many masks,

self defenses, shifting personae and found out the place where he felt the pains and joys and contingencies of existence, where he himself existed as both known and knowing. She ferreted out his love for her even when it hid from himself. He tried to ignore her but she sat down next to him and took his hand in hers. Then she stood and returned to the kitchen. It was, he knew, an invitation.

He stared at the white plate trying not to smell or see the pale, pink, sweating hot dog with a twizzle of bright mustard running down its length. Instead he tried to get enthusiastic about the little pile of greens with orange dressing on the side.

"It hardly qualifies as food, I know," she said. "But they're cheap."

"Have you ever seen the animal they grind up to make these?" he asked, spearing it with a fork and holding it up like a specimen for display.

She thought about it and asked, "Seriously?"

He put it down on the plate and munched on the salad. "Yes."

"At a state fair when I was a kid, in Georgia. There was a warehouse of industrial pigs."

He nodded. "Vestigial legs. Kind of like land whales. Feed in one end, shit out the other."

She laughed. "Sort of like an elegant reduction of existence itself, wouldn't you say?" She looked at the table. "We can't afford better now."

He didn't feel like talking. He just wanted to drink and go to sleep. With effort he tried to maintain his end of things while also avoiding a fight, but this was difficult because the only things they had to talk about were the very things they fought about. "Do you ever feel sick about the pigs?" he asked.

Warily she ventured, "Of course. I could get tofu."

"Bean Curd." He let the words hang there like an implication of

dirtiness. "Better for us, better for the environment. Pud food." He sawed the tip of the hot dog off and chewed. Smoky rubber fell apart between his teeth.

She became pensive. "I feel sick, Felix, about everything."

"Oh. I didn't know. I thought Paregane took care of that. I thought you'd found paradise."

"I'm not afraid anymore. Not afraid to live anyway. But I didn't stop thinking Felix, I didn't cease to exist. I feel the perennial lousiness, the desultory, grimy, inane mess we've made of our lives, and of the world." Laboriously she chewed a bit of her salad and sighed. "It doesn't have to be like this. We used to be better. Remember--"

"Before you were sick? No, not really. It's like it chewed my life up and spat it out and now here we are, alone--"

"That's not what I meant. And we're not alone. We have each other."

"You may have me but I don't have you. You're--you're off somewhere all the time where the food is good."

"Please don't yell. You never yelled at me before."

"I'm yelling at myself. I can't live up to you now." He sputtered looking for words.

"I've applied for work."

He put his fork down. "Why didn't you say so? Where?"

"I didn't want to fight with you. Every morning we fight and at night you come home drunk, late. I'm afraid of you now Felix. Not of legless pigs. Not of hot dogs. You."

"Where's this job?" he demanded.

"Alaska."

"Great!" He slammed down his fork and stood. "First you go nuts on me, then you take a hike to Shangri-La, and now you announce

over dinner that you're leaving me to live in another country?"

"I won't take the job if you won't come with me," she said calmly.

He worked her over with his eyes. "What's the point?"

"To change our lives. Live according to our dreams, our beliefs, our desires."

Now he was incredulous. "Isn't that what we're doing? Isn't that the whole point? Of the jobs, the money? To travel--"

"No, not travel, not vacation, for real. There's a job in Fairbanks, managing a tour outfit's office. The pay's lousy but we can make it."

Felix felt his brain cramp up. Her eyes opened on him and she asked, "Will you at least consider it?" The eyes stirred up his nerves; they were little feelers, tactile tips, extensions of a visionless brain. They crawled up along the inner edge. He sat down and stared at his plate, afraid to look at her, but he did. He looked up from the warm tube of meat with its knotted tip sliced off, so that the contents bulged a bit out of the silicon casing.

"Come with me," she said.

And now he knew she wasn't talking about Alaska.

"If you want to live, come with me."

Mechanically he began to rub his forehead with an open hand, up over his hair and down. An odor, the odor, crept between them. What is that? What? He fired words, names at it but it evaded all his thoughts and yet maddeningly it--the odor--entered his nostrils, entered his mind and sank to his bowels and groin. Like her eyes, those hypnotic waters sketched with gold, stirring him up from within till his cock began to swell and tug, pud no more. No, he wanted to scream, rubbing his forehead, blinking. It didn't smell like sweat. It didn't smell like cunt or like butt or breath. It didn't smell like her hair or her flesh. It didn't smell like fruit or flowers or like an animal, not like wet fur, not like shit, not like semen. It hovered in-between these things and places, these vents, it was floral, piney, like

pepper, like heat, like something deep inside, like fucking, glandular, fishy, feathery, imaginary, slow and relentless, attractive, dark; it fermented, bred, grew, like crystals it multiplied, like wet wood and leaves rotting in the rain it spawned and fed, like everything and nothing at all.

"We have no money," he said, weakly.

"Then let's sell the embryos."

Felix was aghast. He didn't need to say a thing; his expression was a horde of scorn and terror.

"Look at you! Felix, we're people. We can have children naturally."

"What, so they get sick and die at an early age, no longevity, no cloned organ transplants, no--"

"Yes, we give birth and we die naturally, the way people always have done and still do. Do you think most people can afford to sock away a few embryos? That a stem cell line is some sort of entitlement, some sort of necessity? I've done the math. We have six months. We can sell off all our stock and the embryos. Then we fly to Winnipeg and buy a car and drive to Fairbanks. We can camp out on the way. Look, the embryos will pay for all that and leave us a little cash to live on till I can start work. You can find a job there too. I know it."

"But it's so cold in Alaska."

"Yeah, and dark. But it's not this--this--" she reached across the small white table and touched his clenched hand. He looked at her, into her eyes and face and saw through to the Veronica he had always known, always trusted, always loved. Tears surged into her eyes. They glazed up and glistened. "I know why she killed him now," she said.

"Why?" he asked, knowing right away that she was her mother.

"She didn't want to leave him behind. She didn't want to be alone and neither did he. It was the only way."

For a moment he imagined she was about to kill him and he felt suddenly exhausted by a surge of adrenaline.

"No," she laughed. "I'm not going to kill you. My god, you should see your eyes. Look, when I was lying there in that bathtub, all I could think of was our freedom, that soon I'd be nothing at all and you'd be free. Don't you see? I didn't want or need to take you with me, not your body. In me, in here," she touched his hands and touched her heart, "that's where you live, you're always with me."

He shook his head. "No, this is a gentle kind of madness, a safe delusion, a plan that has us abandon all we've worked for, to sit for six months at a time in darkness, half a year and half our life spent in dreams. But I still live in a world of daylight, and you grow stronger and stranger every day."

"It doesn't have to be that way." She stood and ran down the stairs. He pushed his plate away and collapsed into torpor. She stomped up the stairs and stood over him, panting, redolent of sex. "Look here. I have enough." She held up the brown glass bottle and twisted off the top. "I don't want to be alone. Come with me, I say." She shook out a little green pill and held it out to him in her open hand. "No one has to know."

Fear crept up his throat and furred his neck and back with cold. They were at a threshold he didn't understand and was afraid to cross but he couldn't stand the alienation anymore, couldn't stand being unhinged from her. He wanted to regain a sense of imbedded reality; he didn't want to drift through life like an impostor playing himself. He wanted the world back, he wanted to hate with satisfaction and love with fulfillment. He took the pill, dropped it in his mouth and swallowed it down with pale flavorless beer. The warmth of her smile didn't spread to him. He felt worse than ever, like he'd done something irrevocable. But at least he would have her.



## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

### THE GARDEN

The way was familiar. The flat stones beneath his feet were warm and smooth. Myrtle and ivy drifted over the path. As he walked along he thought, stone, myrtle, ivy. To the right was a low wall of cracked and water stained stucco and beyond the wall stood an orchard of apple, pear and peach. He thought apple, pear, peach. On either side of the path were red leafed maples, weeping mulberry and cherry in bloom, the branches hanging just above his head, petals dropping like snow as they passed. The air hummed with the noise of bees, crawling in and out of flowers, dusty with pollen.

All his thoughts and senses were intent upon the path that ended at a wooden gate set in a stonewall, leading to a cobbled courtyard that seemed to be attached to a great house, though none was in sight. In the center of the courtyard was a fountain splashing down through marble basins into a black pool of water. Seated at the edge of the pool, trailing his fingers in the water and humming a simple melody was a man. Felix thought, fountain, marble, basin, man.

Veronica stood at his side and he thought, woman. Together they watched the man, who looked up and said in a melodious voice, "Hello." He had a low forehead and a short neck, thick red hair, and sideburns that covered most of his face. His eyes were pale blue and happy. He had freckled shoulders and stubby pink fingers. The man stood and followed them out the other gate.

The garden continued in every direction without end. He could only see as far as the path was straight and all the paths meandered.

Wherever he looked there was a profusion of life. Beneath the periwinkle and sweet William, the ostrich ferns and hosta, beetles pushed up balls of dirt, ants roamed the rocks, red mites dotted banks of moss, and millipedes searched the leaf mold. Chipmunks and squirrels darted over carved gargoyles and cherubim obscured by vines, pausing to sniff the air. Slugs stretched out on tree trunks and snakes and lizards lay sunning themselves on rocks set among tufts of grass.

They passed a pair of donkeys browsing in thick clover and a small herd of black and white goats with silver bells around their necks. Whatever he saw he silently named to himself and wherever he directed his attention, for however long, more and more detail was revealed.

With every step his foot grew strong. Sinews in his legs and back stretched, filled with blood and breath. Connections within his body strengthened. Head, stomach, balls, feet functioned as one. The air entered his nose, his mouth, the pores of his skin. Mind tingled in his fingertips.

They crossed a meadow of wild flowers, pink, crimson, yellow, orange spots floating over the stalks of grass. Hawks circled overhead; larks and robins flew up out of the field. Sparrows cheeped in hedges. Butterflies and bees hovered above the blossoms and insects crawled up and down the stalks. It was hot but Felix had not yet broken a sweat.

"I'm Felix," Felix said to the man.

The man smiled and shook his hand. "Sammael."

Veronica crouched down and watched herself pee in the grass.

Felix pointed to the sky. "Hawk," he said.

The man squinted up at it. "No, eagle. Too big for a hawk."

Veronica stood and pointed to the puddle of piss. Insects swarmed over it.

"Piss beetle," Felix said. He had never felt so at home. The sky was bright; the earth drank up the sun and sighed it back in wind and radiant color.

Sammael picked a blade of grass and said, "It's the only place you can really feel at home."

They walked over large glacial rocks, glittery with mica and veins of quartz and then down a bank of woodland ferns to a twisting stream. At the head of the stream was a waterfall dropping into a shadowed pool, where a white heron stood fishing.

Sammael said, "Taste."

They dipped their hands in and drank. "Water," Felix said. He let out a huge belly laugh and splashed in, kicking water up over his body. They bent down to drink, squatted in the cold stream and scooped it up and poured it over their heads and down their throats and then climbed the opposite bank. It grew dark. On either side rose towering pines. Big mushrooms with fleshy caps and arching stems pushed up through beds of pine needles.

"After a swim," Sammael said, "I love to lie back on the bank and have a nap."

"I like to eat," Felix said. "Is there anything to eat?"

"The fruit's quite good," answered Sammael. "There's wine and barley cakes soaked in honey. Some people hunt. I've seen them feasting on the haunch of some poor dappled fool they've dragged down and slaughtered. But, the problem is this: if what you eat has nerves, you feel yourself being eaten. The fruit's much more pleasant and reliable."

Bark magnified in his sight, the lines became like maps. He could see the brush strokes of the world, the artifice, design without purpose, all themes and all variations. Even the disposition of pine needles and mushrooms seemed intentional, each placed to form a pleasing pattern.

They came to a small cove of a large lake, bound on either end by a high granite outcrop. In the distance stood steep, snow covered mountains. The far shore of the lake was a red cliff, thickly wooded on top. Waves gently nudged the warm black sand. The indigo water ruffled with wind and sun. It was going down some and faced them directly. As it sank, it grew brighter. Gasses and heat poured down on the mountain valleys, molten light struck the water and pulsed out towards them. Kingfishers squawked and shrieked in the trees and plunged recklessly in, emerging with silver fish impaled on their beaks, which they smashed on the rocks and ate. A bear retreated from the shore and vanished through the birch and willows.

They waded out up to their knees and dove in. The water was cold, almost too cold to swim in, but his back and head were so hot it came as a relief and soon he was swimming around, feeling the water stream across his eyes, behind his ears, rushing into every fold, between toes and fingers. Each hair of his body stretched out and sparked in its follicle. A dry, mineral taste filled his mouth and nostrils. Then the warm, honey colored air. He was laughing, swimming on his back like an otter, kicking up big splashes that broke and fell in iridescent showers.

He watched Veronica plunge in and out, her strong back arched over the water, the soles of her feet and toes pointed. Kingfishers talked madly in their ears. Sammael shouted, "They're telling us to get out of their water!" He gave a sort of whoop and splashed one maniacally insistent bird, its boxy cobalt head marked with red and green. "Go on," he said. "Room for all here."

Veronica swam to shore and stretched towards the sky. The water glistened on her flesh. She ran up the rocky promontory, stood on the overhang, leapt into the air, taking flight with outstretched arms and turned vertical, plunging straight down and disappearing. A moment later she popped up in the center of the lake where the sun fired up the scales of choppy water.

Felix climbed the rocks and stood at the edge. Veronica called out to him. He could barely see her in the busy refractions. He took to the air and felt for a moment like he could just fly out to her. There was an empty pause, he hung poised in mid air and then dropped in an explosion of bubbles. When he broke the surface he lay back and looked at the sky into a blue beyond all time. They swam to shore together.

Felix watched Veronica climb the rock and dive again. Then he followed her. Soon the kingfishers joined them and the whole noisy group took turns leaping and diving into the water. The sun was almost on the horizon and Veronica glowed in its light. As she leapt, a wave of energy, starting in the mountains, passed through water, sky, earth. Felix felt it disturbing his bowels, his heart, his brain. It rippled through the senses, through time. In the midst of this pulse all activity ceased, a massive punctuation. When it passed, the sun grew more intense. The water no longer reflected its light but became a blazing conflagration without heat. He could no longer look at the sun and even the water blinded him. He felt Veronica launch into the air and out over the water, felt her shadow pass, but she was engulfed in the light and all he saw was globules of color, suspended in protoplasmic goo. There was a roaring in his head. Then the world slowly reassembled. The sun was lower, half behind the mountains, scarlet, with purple clouds extending out like wings on either side. He looked up. She wasn't on the rock. She wasn't in the water. She was gone. Sammael was gone. The garden was silent. It didn't matter where he was in the universe, in the end he would be totally alone.

He wasn't afraid, he didn't feel lost. But he felt like each thing he had named no longer had a name. Water, bird, tree, rock, snake, bear, stream, were not things at all but one continuous articulated being. He took a deep breath. The wind blew, the water rippled and glittering wavelets broke out across the surface of the lake. Veronica erupted out of its midst, flying up in a fountain of water, breathless,

eyes bulging, mouth agape. She swam ashore, crawled up onto the beach and lay there panting.

He knelt down beside her and she whispered, "I was one of those birds. I flew out to the center of the lake and plunged down, flew up and plunged down." The water beaded up on her shoulders and forehead, she was on all fours, gasping at the ground. As she caught her breath and her eyes focused Felix sank to his knees, into the warm black sand. Her eyes were like glacial lakes, mirrored ice and sky. They were crouched down, face-to-face. She smelled like raw fish. On her lips, scales flashed like opals.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

### BEULAH

“There you are,” she said, dawn in the steel light slits on the ceiling. Forest Glade wafted in. Felix sniffed at the air. It smelled off to him, metallic. Veronica stretched and got out of bed. She went into the bathroom and filled a glass with cold water. He leaned up on his elbows and watched her drink it down.

“Bring me one, Veronica?”

She handed it to him, dripping over her fingers, and he drank it down, looking at her while the cold slaked his throat. It too had a disagreeable odor and taste he’d never noticed before. Well, what of it, he thought. He stood and kissed her. Her lips swelled against his, they bumped together, the water cool on their tongues. She pushed him down on the bed and said, “I want that,” and rubbed his cock through the ruby sparkle boxer shorts. He looked at the ceiling as she rolled them down over his ankles and started to suck. She pushed him till he trembled and then stopped to pull her nightshirt over her head. Then she climbed on top of him and dropped down on his face. It was like falling onto the earth on a hot day, brushing her lips with his, till they swelled and she got wet. Then he grabbed her ass and went at it hard. When they were one she pulled him in and let him out and he pushed back. It was tidal. They were lost on a long pulse of heat that only slowly released them to themselves. Separation abolished by a breath, the drift back.

They lay side by side. Semen seeped down between his legs and into his ass. The ceiling lights were on full sun now, birdsong

cheeped from the baseboards. He turned over onto her and lay his head in the hollow of her shoulder and breast. It smelled like them, not like the weird, metallic air being blown out of the vents.

He was sick at the thought of having to leave. Love sick. In a way he didn’t dream possible anymore. That was a phenomenon of youth. But he was wasted, with love, with lust fulfilled, and no one had ever invented anything as good as that. It was just them, that’s what they were. They had become themselves again.

Eventually they had to put their nightclothes back on and commence to enact the daily routine, with neither scorn nor enthusiasm. He had no dread or foreboding, actually. In the shower he had even briefly hummed and whistled. The coffee was delicious, the toast buttery and crunchy. They downloaded the news onto copper electraweave, ate and chatted.

“Did we, experience the same thing? It felt to me like we did. It wasn’t like a dream at all,” he said.

“It never is. I flew.”

“I know.”

“How can it be that you know that?” she wondered.

“I don’t know. But you’re right, the garden is real.”

She nodded. “I’ve never met anyone else before though.”

“You mean Sammael.”

“Yes, the angel.”

Felix looked at her, screwing his face up. “Is that what he was? Are you sure? I didn’t see any wings or harps or anything.”

She smiled. “It’s not like that. You can tell he was an angel just by the way he was. We flew across the lake together.”

“I thought I could fly too, but in the end I just stood there, kind of transfixed.”

“So you’ll take it again--” Not a question, but a statement. “I don’t

want to be alone.”

“Of course not.” He looked at his hands. “You know, I feel great.” Then he looked up at her. “What is that smell by the way? Is the climate control broken?”

Veronica raised her right eyebrow and laughed. “That smell is this house. It’s nauseating. You know that Halloween smell of a candle burning in a pumpkin? That’s what it’s like.”

“That’s it exactly. I thought it was metallic at first.”

“Well that’s first thing in the morning. As the day goes by, the air becomes fetid. Too many lungs sucking off the same system.”

“Well, we draw our own air.”

“It recirculates Felix, between us. You’ll see.”

“And the water?”

“The steam is like composite on a hot day.”

And yet, despite these observations he felt good. “Maybe we can disconnect them.” She smiled enigmatically. “What are you doing today?” he asked.

Veronica rubbed her head and became thoughtful. “Well, I want to talk to the Fairbanks Tourist Council, get some idea of the industry there. Then I thought I’d price flights to Winnipeg, and car rentals there, to get an idea of how much cash we’ll need.”

“This is very fast.”

“Did you think everything would just go away if you took the pill?”

“No, but I haven’t even thought about the reality of moving, I mean, this is a life decision.”

“So is putting your wife on medication. So is living in this den and working for Intellatrawl.”

They were not really fighting because neither of them was angry.

“I guess.”

“Things are just so fucked up Felix. How could they be worse? I

feel extruded. Now, mentally, things are o.k., I’m not going out the window or anything, but for instance, that smell. I live with it all day long, have been for months now. You just sort of tolerate it. Get rid of soap and deodorant and shampoo. Just be in the water, you know? The bad food, the transgenic trees, the people, flat and slow and senseless most of the time. It’s like, whatever filter it is you put up over your senses is down. All those blocking maneuvers, gone. It all comes bombarding in. But in the garden, it’s peaceful, it’s beautiful. Everything is there. But you can’t stay, can you? It’s not an option. The garden is the place you visit to get right with yourself and the world. But the world is where you have to live. Let’s choose a better one.”

“Look, that I get, it’s the embryos I’m not sure about.”

“It’s the only way.”

“But, don’t you ever want children?”

She laughed high and fast and said, “We can just make one ourselves you know, the way it’s been done.”

Felix blushed. “Yes of course, I know that, but it’s so, uncertain that way. And there’s the modifications.”

“No modifications, no thank you. Leave me out of that. Parents who sign contracts for their children’s lives, it’s slavery.”

“But the birth defects--”

She thrust her foot in his face. Two vestigial toes grew out of the top of her foot. “Like this? Life is sometimes inconvenient. My parents, your parents, they were right.”

“They were out of their minds.”

“No, free. They died how they pleased.”

“But that’s just what I mean. If we give up the embryos, we give up the stem cell line and we’re at the mercy of nature. Something goes wrong and we don’t have the time or money--”

“Then we die.”

“That’s what I mean.” He looked around the room. They were sitting in a metal tank under ground, part of a massive hive of identical cells. They were safe. They could live there for sixty more years without leaving, and become one of those moth people, demanding, ancient, life like a lamp flickering out behind a mouth full of perfect teeth. He thought of flying through the air briefly and plunging head first into the purple black water, then of the golden scales of light brightening till he was blinded and then, on the black sand, on all fours, facing her wet face. He kissed her and stood. “You’re right. I’ll be late.”

“I love you,” she said.

“I love you too.”

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

### ACCIDENTS IN TIME

After Felix left she straightened up the house, made the bed, washed the dishes. The stale air was making her a little nauseous but she brushed it aside and determined to make the phone calls to Fairbanks and Winnipeg, where she left messages (it was still night in both places). The Cryovac was more involved; they said they’d send her the forms, but recommended a cooling off period for review. Without rancor she thought, putz. He wasn’t just following policy, he had absorbed policy. Even the most inane procedure was like food to this guy, necessary and self-evident. He became indignant, defending the realm of policy. Even the aliases, the virtuals, took offense. Dr. Tarlton was the perfect example. His feelings were genuinely hurt by her diatribes, and she felt bad about them in retrospect, despite the fact that he had earned her scorn and ridicule; she did not simply bestow them upon him. Intellatrawl Dr. Tarlton, a man at work. A button pusher and a voice, great healer, relay to the latest research. It felt good to be sane.

She hated being mad. It appalled her, she was disgusted. Images made her flinch. The degradation, the infantile dependency. And the self-involvement. Everything she despised stared back at her from the mirror, as if she had suddenly embodied all of her judgments of the world. It was incapacitating. She had always been the most capable person she knew. Incapacity was in itself debilitating. But she didn’t care about that now. She had no feelings left. Madness had been the acts of other false voices and people. The only thing to do

was forget about them and move on.

Now that Felix was in the garden things clicked into place. Plans she had nursed for years were coalescing, not around paranoid fantasies, but around reality. She had a sensation of being larger than herself. Sometimes she walked around and it was like she wasn't there at all. The things that passed her by seemed to disappear from sight.

When she first got back from the hospital she was alone all the time. She liked it. She had always been solitary, yet she didn't know what solitude actually felt like. Being alone so much had numbed her to the pleasure. Even in the garden, she roamed the paths by herself, down to the lake, with only with the black sand, and the bears, who let her sit beside them while they pawed salmon out of icy rivers, for company. But then she began to long for an other, and it came about without reflection, desire, conflict or regret. And Felix found Sammael. Now there were three.

Paregane was like that. It didn't even exist in its own right. Effort vanished. Before, what could she think about, before? When feeling was an effort. What was it all about? Mercurial change, ambivalence, tortured her; like an old rock in a stream, she was the stunted spectator of her own accidents in time. Relationships, work, passed before her like theorized objects subject to inscrutable forces. Nothing acted by itself, all were passive. In a different mania, the opposite: even inanimate things were possessed by wayward spirits. Electrons, protons, nitrogen, water, Deoxyribonucleic acid, lead crystals, amoebas, rats. She had no meaningful role to play in reality, and reality held a special grudge against her. It was both blind and hostile. Or there was that voice who saw self-pity and helplessness as failures of the will, not even tragic. Every thought she had canceled out some other.

As far as she was concerned, Paregane was going to be just another nail in her iatrogenic coffin. Instead, she awoke light of heart. She

didn't even understand what was happening. Happiness, clarity of perception, seemed mad. When Felix noticed the smells he said so, but she was too afraid to mention them. The odors were obviously real. But the perception of strong smells meant you were crazy.

It took a few days to figure out the rules. She knew the difference and knew that she knew it. The difference was in how she felt at the points where she touched the world. They used to be like little pinpricks of fire. In the eyes, the spine, sometimes twitches in the fingertips. Blue sparks trailed her along in her peripheral vision.

She and her skin were not at war now. Her senses were not a sheath. Flesh touched air and did not feel strange.

With her sanity subject to proofs, she was suspicious of Felix. He could turn her in if she didn't behave. So at first she played it safe. Didn't mention things. But as soon as he left in the morning she went around gathering evidence: sniffing like a dog, trying to detect the source of the smell. She got rid of the most obvious things first, perfumes, make-up, deodorant. These she scooped into garbage bags and disposed of, along with all the medicine in the house. But it wasn't just scented detergent or dish soap; it was soap itself, the lye and fat. The manufacture of lather. She could smell the melted lard of sheep and cows. It was in the sheets, the dyed cotton and linen clothes, the ticking in the futons, the ceramic frame, the air and water filters. She couldn't throw them all out. It was the odor of the world, of mass transit, people clinging to each other, interacting swarms of molecules. Human smokestacks, tailpipes, and discharge tubes. The characteristic effluents of life. The garden had opened her senses up and then the dualities of her life multiplied. The divisions of childhood, how things had grown, one out of the other.

She could not bridge her present to her past. The whole trajectory seemed wrong. But she couldn't figure out where things went wrong, where the bifurcation occurred. Who or what was to blame? When

she was mad, there were days when permutations of that question went back and forth in her brain. It could start anywhere. If she hadn't married Felix she could have just picked up and gone. He was to blame for their moving to New Jersey and then Rockland. He wanted the pod, the embryos. Pods and embryos had not been part of the deal. Pods and embryos were diseases of the mind. But she went along. She could blame her mother for forcing her to go to college. The therapists assured her that her desire to stay with them was an infantile wish. Well maybe the division lay within her. Maybe she was the fused product of superfetation, a hybrid of spirit and animal, self-divided and at war. Or perhaps it was philosophical, the split in the subject was a linguistic artifact. When she became a grammatical subject her being was sundered into world and self. The transition from hunting and gathering to agriculture. The succession of the patriarchy. Christianity. The Industrial Revolution. Global warming, global disaster. The Big Bang was the first separation. Before that, all was whole.

There were voices for other things, but not the question of clades. Clades were debated by her alone.

She knew it was not Felix. He was all she could be sure of. It was horrible to watch him become more beaten by the day. He was afraid of her. He shrank away from her. She had no choice but to convince him to come to the garden. Until he did she would never have him. And without him she couldn't imagine moving forward. She was close to it now, close to Alaska. It was really happening.

She could remember nothing before the age of four, when she first went off to The Ochs Academy For Girls. Not even the pain of the first separation. She spent summers and holidays on the water with her parents. Her parents were the heroes of her life. When they died, the lights went out. Up to then she half knew what she was doing. It was a taunt, a taunting with failure. She didn't bathe because it was offensive. But the deaths turned the lens around. There was a

vacuum. She disappeared with them.

At school she felt her parent's world shining through into the dark dormitory. Eyes shut, head pressed back into the pillow, she smelled the burning fuel and felt the boat pull out into open water.

Riding in their entourage of eleven boats was like getting kidnapped by pirates. There was the big barge, black, with a red bottom and a white bowline, piled high with the haul; and the small barge, where the crew lived, and the tug that could pull both. The family stayed on the houseboat and used the launch to get around. And then there was the square crane, grey, with its fat coil of cable wound on a spindle behind the pilothouse. An oil lamp hung from the ceiling. She loved to sit at the wheel and work the levers, raising and lowering hooks and chains to the divers, searching for junk. The engine groaned and pulled whatever it was, a car maybe, out of the mud, a huge putrid mane of rusty water falling off the fenders.

The crew cursed, smoked and drank. Only the pilots stayed from year to year. Men and women with attached ears, cleft palates, eyes half hidden by the skull, third nipples, webbed fingers or like her, extra toes. The shower was a hose pumping lake or river water out. They adored her. They let her ride the trash barge, sit on the sorting boat by the rusty machine parts.

She always saw her father out on deck, bare chested, in his shorts, two holstered automatics and a machete on his tool belt, snug beneath his belly. He had a shaved, square head, a face broad featured and dark. His arms and legs were covered in scars, cuts and burns. He had an arrogant stride and even on a big boat appeared to be controlling it with his feet. Her mother was tall too but tough and wiry. She was fair complexioned and had a sort of permanent sunburn that only became apparent when she stripped down to go for a swim and looked like she was wearing white shorts and a halter top.



They were the last of the wildcat salvage operators plying the inland waterways. A hundred years before there were dozens like them on every lake and river. They'd band together for a big job, like Buffalo and Cleveland, words for jobs that became legends, passed down crew to crew. They were born to it, families that disdained city life as it reassembled on high ground behind levees and dikes and along canals.

They knew most everything worth salvaging had been salvaged. School was the only way their daughter would get ahead in the world and where they lived there were no schools. Money was not the problem, her parents were rich enough. But it would mean sending her far away, to be among people much different than themselves.

At Ochs there weren't many four year olds, and they all slept in a room with Miss Todd, who was also their teacher. She must have been only twenty years old. In the morning she bathed them in a big porcelain bathtub with brass fixtures. There was an iron casement window in the bathroom with warped panes. In the spring she could watch the sun rise through the colored glass from the tub. Miss Todd made them tea with honey and lemon when they were sick, and read books and sang songs.

Sometimes she cried and she learned to hide the tears. At bedtime the dark was unfamiliar, silent except for sirens and mumbling voices. She longed for the rocking boat, the raucous sounds of her parents and crew on a nearby deck drinking and singing dirty folk songs around a barrel fire. Her bed had two small windows with curtains and she could see their red faces and the sparks tailing into the wind. There was the sound of frogs and insects, and barge horns, her mother's hand on her back. She never got used to falling asleep at school, it was always like she was falling, with the sounds of chores and the coughs of little girls, into nothing.

Girls that started as young as four were marked as lifers. They ran

the show and got the privileges. Each year she attached herself to an adult on staff, a teacher, a cook, a custodian and in later years, the young women who supervised each floor of the dorm. Best friends changed from year to year. She was always, both by nature and inclination, aloof. She fell into books the way Alice fell into the rabbit hole. By fourth grade she found her niche as a story teller, wrote plays and mean, satirical lyrics to the old camp song tunes they learned in music class. The girls stayed up nights listening to her fantastic tales of adventure on the Great Lakes and the Mississippi, confected with gothic details of pirates, and cannibals of grateful corpses returned from the dead to help the child who buried them.

She was a pudgy kid who loved to eat and lived for the cafeteria where all four hundred of them sat three times a day with their pale blue composite trays full of soft, sugary pancakes, artificial mashed potatoes, fried chicken croquettes and extruded pot roast.

The food on the boat was so different! Her parents shot and cooked their own meat. They always had a fishing line out, a shot gun and a rifle ready at hand. Veronica cleaned the fish and plucked the geese and ducks. Her mother butchered the deer and pigs, which her father brined and smoked in fifty-gallon drums. They traded for flour, oil and salt, for rice and vegetables, at the landings. Four o'clock was quitting time. The whole crew cleaned up, scrubbed the decks, coiled the ropes and greased the chains. They showered under the hoses, men and women alike lathered against the low sun. The first drink out on the deck and they were like crowing cocks. At six o'clock they cut up the meat and onions for the stew and cooked corn bread in iron pans.

Her parents tried to arrange things so that they could spend the end of summer trading on the upper Mississippi or Lake Superior. By day they hit the markets and in the evening pulled into a tributary or cove to camp out. They built a huge fire of the dead trees that dotted the old inundated shores.

At ten she left Ochs and moved on to the sister school, ten k away, Payne Prep. The same year her parents decided it was time for them to settle down in the summers and chose a spot on the south shore of Lake Superior, at the mouth of the Mad River. For six years running they made camp there, every June, and stayed till school began again in September. That was where she met Charlie, whom she would always remember as an eleven-year-old boy, wild and hairless, with dirty hands and feet. His parents lived on high land, up from the river's mouth, in a two-bedroom cabin. They were teachers, grew corn in the summer, rode the teaching circuit in a sailboat.

It started out with him hanging around at the edge of camp the first year and after a while he was water skiing and swimming off the boat with her. He took her inland on his motorcycle, over rough backcountry roads. Half naked, they jumped in haylofts, stole corn and cooked it in the husk over a grubby fire. The next year they picked up where they left off and by August were sneaking whiskey and beer in the woods. They were wild together. She got to know his family, sat in their kitchen on cold mornings drinking coffee. There was a wood fired range and a small pot bellied stove. It smelled like wood smoke and biscuits. Corn and chilies were drying in the rafters.

Each summer they ran farther and harder, until she was fourteen. That was the summer she arrived with a crush that had agonized her for a year and they, that first day, kissed. By August they were screwing in spots they once prized for catching frogs and turtles.

In the fall she returned to school, tanned as black as her father, her oceanic eyes radiant and rowdy. She donned the pleated grey dress, white button down shirt, skinny red tie, black stockings and white sneakers and fell into place. The other children came from very wealthy families. Her parents had quite a bit of cash, but these were the children of diplomats, or regional executives with country mansions. A few were from frontier families anxious to keep their daughters out of danger. They were all of them more refined;

manners that came naturally to them she had to learn to perform.

Veronica was never ostracized. She played soccer and lacrosse and was a gold medal swimmer. But her true worth to the other girls was forbidden knowledge. She was the ball buster, the one who said there was no Santa Claus, and then the one who taught them how to french kiss and drink hard liquor. She used her lawless beautiful summers like cash. Tales of barefoot escapades on the bluffs, rattle snakes and sixty-nine with Charlie beat out the Swiss Alps.

The summer when she was sixteen she didn't go home but went with a friend to her family's ranch out in Montana. For the first time in her life she was lost. She had no idea what a servant was, and didn't know a thing about fancy china or different forks for different foods. All she knew was to sit up straight, chew with her mouth closed and keep quiet while the parents mumbled about state politics.

Veronica missed Charlie. She missed the smell of river mud and alcohol fumes and grease, of fat back frying while the sun crested the dark tree line and rose into a coral colored sky. They were in the middle of mountains, beautiful, storybook mountains. She always imagined them with snow on top, but it was so hot and dry the mountains were covered by swirling clouds of dust.

All her friend did was lie on a couch drinking cappuccinos and eating potato chips and boiled hot dogs without a bun. After dinner the whole family went for a swim in the indoor pool. They weren't allowed out of the house--too dangerous! --except for riding lessons.

Riding horses was the only freedom she knew then. After a while she started to sneak out at night to smoke and drink with the stable boy. One night, very drunk, they rode horses around the corral and she was thrown and knocked unconscious. The stable boy ran off, leaving her on the ground, where she was found the next morning. With a terrible hangover and a concussion they packed her off on the first train east to Chicago.

None of it terribly bothered Veronica; she didn't care about the stable boy, except for the betrayal of leaving her on the ground, though even this was understandable given the circumstances. She would miss the horses but couldn't wait to return to the Mad River and Charlie. Every day on the ranch she had spent long, languorous hours daydreaming about their excursions. She took endless showers and masturbated obsessively.

It was one of the few times she could remember her parents being angry. Her mother glared out at the light blue water of Lake Michigan, not turning to look at her, as she staggered up the swaying metal gangway, too weak to carry her bags. Her father marched down to the dock and grabbed them as if they weighed a kilo and tossed them onto the deck, then wordlessly untied the launch and they took off. It wasn't till dinner that any of them spoke.

Two days later they arrived at the landing but Charlie wasn't there. "Don't bother looking for him," her mother said, "he took up with some other girl."

It was true. Charlie wouldn't even look at her. He had some weak, whiney little towhead two years younger than him following him around. It was the first time anyone had broken her heart and she swore it would be the last. She spent the rest of the summer in bed reading Shakespeare.

From then on at school she drifted apart from the other girls. The friend she had visited was scared of her and the others let her go without protest. She immersed herself in English and in history, got straight A's, and spent all of her free time swimming laps. The laps burned off her baby fat. She grew strong and sleek, her face aging slowly into a smouldering, remote intensity.

Now in the summer she worked hard on the boat, fishing, cooking, repairing rope and chain. She studied old maps with her father under alcohol lamps at night. Her hands got hard with calluses, her nails

chipped and cracked. At night she stayed up late with the crew singing and drinking, listened to the stories she had heard as a child as a distant mumble, about men dying in whorehouses, shootings and stabbings, snake and scorpion bites. She was now, in the eyes of her parents, an adult.

And she read. Books now completed her life. The adventure was on the water, the work was in the wool skirt, but the roaming, the world, was in books. She read anything about the sea. Conrad and Melville, Homer. She fantasized that she would live on a boat with a man who was her friend and occasional lover, reading books all day.

They had never been obviously protective of her and yet, when she thought about it, the decision to settle down on the Mad River came just when her breasts had become little bumps and the hair came in under her arms. She was rarely alone. Her mother was always three steps off, her father always coming around the corner. Her father was not a violent or quick-tempered man. He ruled his crew with humor, generosity and charisma; no one stayed long who wasn't loyal. Still, she was a beautiful young woman and no one ever hit on her, they never even looked at her wrong. But then, she reflected, a man like her father didn't have to do a whole lot to inspire respect and fear. He dominated everyone he came in contact with with his presence alone, backed up by the pistols and the machete on his tool belt.

Years later she asked her mother about it. "Good lord," she said, letting out a hard laugh, "we was mostly afraid of you takin' up with one of the crew. That's why we put in at Mad River, hoping you'd find some farm boy to run around with."

When she was young, she did as she was told. She loved the water, wept when she left it and her parents, then loved school. But by the end she had this secret life. It was subterranean, a line of thought that threaded her days. She never imagined herself anywhere but on a boat. Her parents weren't always there. She would be wild and free.

The shuttered light of libraries, the green hallways and barred windows would be gone. There'd be no janitor sweeping the halls and mopping the stairs. There'd be no stairs at all, just gangways and ladders. And no people telling you what to do. The schedule would be work, up with the dawn, and seasonal. She'd follow the sun on its path across the tropics. Winter in the gulf, summer on Superior. She knew she could do the work; she wouldn't be a drag on the family. But her mother wouldn't allow it. It was a fight. It was many fights. She brought it up formally. It spilled out of her in a torrent after provocation. She had never fought like this with her mother. It was frightening. She trembled afterwards, took long angry swims. Leaving created a visceral agony. It got into the marrow of her bones, a sort of whistling emptiness and silence. Her ears rang and her eyes started with tears. She lay in her berth gripping the sides of her stomach, teeth clenched. They were wrenching her from her one dream, the thing she had always behaved for. The term was up. She didn't exist to live out her mother's plan. In the end they chased each other around the upper cabin, shrieking. She had to go to Columbia.

That first year was like any other year. A new school but no uniforms. The city. She was so angry she didn't speak. Men didn't interest her. They spoke to her all the time but she felt nothing. They looked stupid, they were weak and awkward. The girls were no better. Her studies were overwhelming. She thought because she had read a lot she'd be ready for college but she hadn't counted on not being able to concentrate. Her thoughts were scattered. She read but she read all of the wrong things. Days and weeks went by she couldn't account for. Payne and Ochs had been grim but nestled in a faux arcadian setting. The dorms were old stone buildings, laid out around a quad. There was a horse farm on one side and estates on the other. The city scared her. She had never been in such noise and darkness. It was hot. The fumes burned her throat.

She spoke to no one but her teachers. She was always afraid. The

more silent she was, the more afraid, the more immobile and intimidating her face became. People noticed her. She stood in doorways staring into rooms. The shadows wrapped her shoulders and cut across her chin. The green eyes were hidden in a cave like stalactites.

She first noticed Felix in her sophomore year. He was seated alone at The Luncheonette, reading a cheap hemp paper and drinking black coffee. He had a peculiar expression on his face. It made her smile. After that it seemed he was always with a different woman. Then he started to turn up places. The bookstore, the amphibatrain, a reading. One day she saw him with a woman and felt jealous. Why? So she followed him, considered him more carefully. She learned his schedule, showed up where he would be first and then leave when he got there. She had no idea what she was doing. One day he noticed her. Their eyes met. She saw the tiny burst of light in his cornea. He was done for and she knew it. Rather than run away she walked towards him. He smiled and said I'm Felix. She could not explain that. The hooks. They were never where you looked. She hadn't spoken in years and suddenly she was walking with this beautiful man, talking. They were like Othello, seducing each other with words, stories out of books and life. They charged themselves with a future, the places they would go when they were done. Canada, Alaska, New Zealand. Road or river, so long as they were on it, so long as they were free.

It was their last moment of flux. They had seduced each other with their dreams, had enfolded themselves with their books. But when the job in Jersey came, she stepped up to it. They went that way together. She got good at taking on swine like the Cryovac man. She got paid to push. But sales meant nothing; it was a way to live. She had never let it die out of her mind, the hope of one day going back home.

Alaska. A dream deferred, cashed in. She put on a lime green

strapless dress with a choke collar, a lightweight tan raincoat and a pair of webbed, red bike shoes and left the house.

She parked her bike and walked to the supermarket. During the day the only people about were forty years older than she was, or parents with small children. Mostly they ignored her. At one time the harridans who knew her business stared and whispered or gave pitying looks. She didn't care. She was glad to be out of Intellatrawl and would be glad to be out of Rockland. Paregane was great but she would be glad to be rid of it too, once they were out west living the way she wanted to.

The supermarket was cold and the sweat dried quickly off of her forehead. She loaded her cart with milk for breakfast, a loaf of bread, and, after hesitating, a stick of real butter. The smell of oleo made her retch. It looked like vaseline. A vacuum pack of coffee and something for dinner. Salad for two and what? The hot dogs lay in their packages. There was something about extruded meat she would always love but she couldn't subject herself any longer to the vile taste. She was not much of a cook and they had so little money. It was cheaper than restaurants.

Soon they would have some money again and a real selection of foods. One of them would have to learn to cook then, or they'd starve.

The fish case was dispiriting, it smelled bad and yet she was drawn to the trout, shrink-wrapped in cellophane with lemon slices. Saliva filled her mouth. She was airborne again, arcing into the sky off that rock. The water raced by beneath her and she worked with her whole body, swimming in the sky, banking up as the opposite shore approached and then, diving down head first into the water, spearing a fish. Then, bursting upward, exhausted, sucking in the air.

She grabbed two packages of trout and scrutinized the label for instructions. It seemed simple enough. One ate it with salt, lemon

and butter. That would go nicely with a small salad and toasted bread. With a bottle of Sauvignon Blanc it would be just like a restaurant.

At home she unpacked the saddlebags of her bike and put away the groceries. Then she did something she had never done before and was unable to explain. She took a second pill of Paregane and lay down on the bed to take a long nap. She was hoping to go to the lake with Sammael and fly.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

### BACK ON THE CHAIN GANG

The day disappeared into its end, vanished like no other day had in his memory. Felix felt like he had only just sat down when lunch came and again, when the screen zeroed out at the end of the day he could hardly remember even being there. It was a little worrisome, almost as if he had left things undone. He knew he had been at his BioWatch station physically but in his mind he was walking in the garden or in bed with Veronica. Over and over he imagined their love making, displacing it now from their bedroom to the meadow or the lake where the smell and texture of their skin became alive. Work was like a scene superimposed on a window, he could look and feel beyond it to an erotic paradise so real it rendered insignificant the ordeal of the job.

He gazed out the windows of the Amphibatrains at the falling darkness and followed the ferries as they plied the river and the many work and pleasure boats. A harsh rain erupted now and again and high wind buffeted the cars when they separated.

At Les Jardeen he ordered his usual and read the paper while Peter tended to the other regulars. Paregane and its manufacturer, Monozone, were all over the news and he took a particular interest in it. Monozone stock, even after a split, was pushing the 200 mark and it looked like it was sure to challenge Genetel for a council seat. Enthusiasm for approving Paregane for over-the-counter sales in this country was tempered however by the Chinese experience. People there were beginning to spend days and weeks in Lucky Day parlors,

flop houses with dark cafes. Users would doze and talk on bamboo mats and then retire, alone, to rooms upstairs to sleep away the time in paradise. Police in Shanghai, at the behest of the Yangtze Industrial Group, attempted to shut down several establishments and sparked three days of rioting that left two thousand people dead in the street. There were also reports that people were dying mysteriously but these reports were dismissed by Paregane spokesman Owen Bradlee as unfounded and absurd. There was no clinical evidence of Paregane causing death or having any other dangerous side effect.

Peter set down Felix's Gulag martini and looked at the cheap, grey hemp sheets of paper spread out on the zinc top bar. "Isn't that the drug your wife takes?" he asked.

Felix looked around and said, quietly, "Yes, and I've taken it too."

"Really?" Peter expressed uncharacteristic curiosity.

"I can see why they'd riot."

"I've heard of others, in the city who use it. A lot of actors. Someone said they opened one of those Lucky Day parlors might open in midtown."

"They oughta put it in the water." Felix drank his drink down and ate an olive. "Well, that'll be all for tonight, Peter."

"It's kind of early, isn't it Mr. Clay?"

Felix smiled mischievously. "Veronica and I are back in the saddle."

As he walked down the composite steps into his living room the sweet smell of fish baked with lemon and butter filled his nostrils. How warm, how delicious it was to come in from a needling rain and thunderclouds, a hot windy night smelling of rotten shoreline and burning tires, and the tall, transgenic pines sawing the orange sky, and into a room steamy with real food. Veronica was in her house clothes, a loose, blue, short sleeved cotton top and white silk boxer

shorts that clung to her thighs as she moved. He took off his wet rain clothes and greeted her with a kiss. Then he put on his red sparkle boxer shorts and a white tank top and came upstairs to watch her work. She pulled the small roasting pan out of the oven and basted the fish with butter. Then she emptied the salad bag into two bowls and opened the bottle of Sauvignon Blanc.

She washed her hands, wiped them on a towel and hugged him. It was almost more than he could bear, touching her swelling ass through the smooth fabric of the shorts; it made his nipples pucker and tingle. They sat down and ate avidly, in silence.

After dinner they sat in bed watching *The Rise of Ivan the Terrible*. Inhabitants of the planet Zorg have revived Ivan the Terrible from a DNA sample sent out into space by the Russians, centuries before, and which has just reached them. Ivan has a long white beard and bulging eyes--the moviemakers have captured his image from the Sergei Eisenstein classic. He wears a wizard hat. One by one he murders the leaders of Zorg and takes over the whole planet, plunging a modern society into dark age barbarity. Horrified at these events, the president of Earth, a Russian, sends an expeditionary force to relieve Zorg but they are lost in space, never to be heard of again. Part 1 ends with the people of Zorg suffering unimaginable tortures--. But long before this Felix and Veronica had drifted off into an almost desperate sexual hinterland where neither could tell anymore what was happening, she played with his tits and fucked him in the mouth. His cunt rang through all the next day till it was night and he paid her back.

## CHAPTER TWENTY GIVING NOTICE

And so it went for them. Time passed while they planned their escape to Alaska, plans achieved through intense and constant argument. They ate a vegetarian diet mostly with the occasional fish for which they had both developed a craving, sometimes polishing off an entire two-pound pond trout in a meal. Weeks of chilly rain, hard and relentless, were punctuated by hot hazy days when the naked branches of trees glowed in the strange yellow light. There were storms with 175k an hour winds that bore tunnels into bamboo groves and wrecked douglas firs.

They met after work at the gym, a place they once loved but now found barely tolerable. The Cafe Arcadia, (located in the faux tropical rain forest, once so beautiful and lush), looked like a gimmick and like everything else was pervaded by a musty chemical odor slightly burnt at the edges. But they exercised anyway and delighted in the sight of their sweating bodies. He could smell her passing by the florid, sickening bodies of the other women. They stood out with their thick, oily hair and skin. Others watched them, warily, and turned their heads if they should catch them at it.

Sometimes they ate together at Les Jardeen, sometimes Felix stopped in alone after work. On weekends they strolled along the levee and watched the boats on the river, or roamed the park. They went to the Broadway Inc. theater and watched holographic aliases perform Shakespeare, Marlowe and Kyd.

And they went each night to the garden. At first the garden seemed

to be endlessly various and they were unable to direct their travels, but over time they seemed to take control, moving about by instinct, creating each place they desired to be. It wasn't conscious and yet they usually started out from the courtyard with the fountain and then wandered, down to the lake or a river to swim and fly. Once they crossed the lake to the far shore and climbed the red cliffs, trying to reach the mountains, but no matter how far they walked the mountains receded in the distance and they never got any closer than the foothills. Sammael explained that the mountains formed the edge of paradise. On the other side were the gates, a thousand metres high, forged of steel, locked and protected by the cherubim, angels with flaming swords.

There were others. People it seemed, from their world, whom they avoided. Once there was a bonfire with singing but Sammael drew them away and they sat beneath a couple of spreading plane trees and watched the river, drinking sweet, purple wine out of a gourd. The river had a rapid current and as it raced by Sammael explained to them that here, everything is alive, all forms migrate in and out of paradise. "It isn't about four rivers and trees with seven jewels and all that nonsense." He grew an enormous erection. Veronica lay back and smiled. Felix watched a bead of water form in her navel and drank it. "You're limited, after all, by your bodies. There are things you just can't see. Still, over time enough of you make it here. The lunatic, the lover and the poet as they say." Then strange men came on a boat and spoke in a language they half understood, about a voyage. Once a lion fell on a couple of startled people and Felix and Veronica stood in horror as it killed and ate them. Felix felt the jaws of the lion crush his own neck. Sammael smiled and said, "Is there no change of death in paradise? Some people shouldn't leave their beds at night."

Moving worried Felix. Veronica wanted him to give notice soon but he resisted the idea, hoping it was just a passing enthusiasm of

hers. But Veronica was adamant. Her eyes would lock in on him and she would speak in a voice with an oracular timbre as if it came from another place. "Don't you see," she'd say. "Don't you understand? I want to get out on the open road, drive for days and sleep out at night, listen to the coyotes cry and cook on a wood fire. Aren't you dying to snuggle naked in a sleeping bag far away from people?"

Trying to deflate this he'd say, "But you can't live out a dream."

"If we don't live our dreams then what do we live for?"

"I can't."

"Isn't it clear?" she'd ask again.

"What?"

"Don't resist, don't do that. You know what I want. Do I have to say it?"

"Yes! Say it, now, what you want."

"You! I want you Felix, all the time, everywhere, always, forever. You, me, us, together, absolute, pitched against time, against the world."

"That's childish nonsense."

"That's what I want. I'll settle for less, I'll settle for getting out of this weak, pale image of a life, these attenuated bodies drained of all but the most tepid desires, treading into the void with nothing but fear for their dull, sexless companion. I want to be where life and death sing out their arias in bright beautiful tones, not the pusillanimous warble dying in the throat of some flightless, transgenic bird. The odor of burning crap in my nostrils all day long. Escape from here, where the only beauty lies in sleep: I'll take that."

"I thought you were better."

"Better? I'm alive. What's the cure for that?"

He couldn't answer. He felt the same way.

But still, as they walked arm in arm along the levee high above the



Hudson in a slapping, briny wind, watching the sea gulls circle and swoop down on schools of fish, the barges hauling equipment or composite ingots and I-beams, the prefab walls of buildings, and the tugs and ferries, he felt it was beautiful and it did feel like home. Clays had been on or near this water since the 18th century when they were conveyed as slaves to Brooklyn. They moved into lower Manhattan, up the Tenderloin and into Harlem, then onto the Bronx, Yonkers and Yonkers, all the way up to Albany. They started out as blacksmiths, carpenters and tanners. They sold goods from horse carts, were rag pickers, barbers and Pullman Porters. They worked in factories, laid bricks and drove cabs. They fought every war. There was a Clay in the Basie band. Another played first base in the Negro Leagues. There were gangster Clays, bootlegger Clays, crack dealing Clays, Clays in the NBA. There came a string of lawyers, teachers and administrators and then they began to rise through the ranks of city government, becoming engineers and commissioners. A great aunt was Bronx Borough president and then from 2061-2069 served as mayor of New York.

Her brother, Felix's great-grandfather, Cassius George Clay (named for the boxer) died a hero, sand bagging the Harlem River during the worst storm ever recorded in the northeast, the second of two consecutive hurricanes, with 340k winds and a ten meter storm surge that killed thirty thousand people and left millions homeless in New York City alone. Cassius was a sort of mayor of the South Bronx, young, charismatic and reckless. He stood his ground, laying up the 50-kilo bags even when it was hopeless. His son, Young Cassius, became city commissioner in charge of reclamation in the Bronx and supervised the design and construction of that portion of the levee. He too died on the wall, as an old man, of a heart attack.

Felix's father went into the army corps of engineers and practically worshipped these two men. As a child he took Felix to see the bronze memorial erected in their honor. He showed him the bust of

Rosemary Clay in city hall and then took him up to Clay Park in Riverdale. And Felix, who was no hero, dreamt of one day taking his children to these places. Clays had always been on this river, their blood flowed in it, swirled around the island of Manhattan and met again in the Atlantic.

Often at his BioWatch WorkStation he wondered what had brought him here, and how, like his father, it would be his wife who took him away. And her proposed trip to Alaska was farther west than any Clay had gone before. Clays had vanished in the west before, it was true, a hippy in San Francisco, a prospector into Mexico and a saxophonist who got drunk on a train and woke up in Kansas City, never to return.

But how Felix ended up anywhere was a mystery. They had just drifted like everyone else, more or less discontented, moved by peristaltic action beyond their control. What did it mean to break free? Was it a rebellion or an expulsion? Was the system choking on them? The price of freedom, a long life denied, security gone. And yet, what savour did a long life without meaning have, what could security bring but boredom?

He thought about all the others from whom he felt so disconnected and yet were always there, chugging along on the same current. Was he really so different? Everyday they stood together, walked the halls, rode the Amphibatrains. Side by side they urinated, ate and defecated. At the gym they sucked the same steam in the shower room. They shared mutual suspicions, traded knowing looks. Not all of them befriended each other either. He lived in a society of loners, of couples who kept to themselves, of families living for generations behind walls. And then there were the announcements at work. The ones who fell away, colleagues who had killed themselves or murdered their spouses and were in jail awaiting execution; and some who disappeared without a trace, either vanished into the river or madness or addiction. Some ended their days on the streets in the

city or out in the GMZ, others sank into the swamps of Florida. Some moved to Alaska. They all seemed so two dimensional, shades shivering in the shadows while he felt so full and alive and yet he felt no pride, in fact he felt more alone than ever before. Maybe they weren't any different, maybe they were only mad. They weren't deciding to do anything at all but were merely being swept up into a different current, leading to a different circulatory system, which would in the end excrete them into a different place.

It was possible they were all chattering away in their different dreams, that by day they floated on decisions made by vast, interlocking committees made up of intelligences only tangentially touching their physical bodies, plebiscites in eternity, transhuman fields of determination invisible on earth but present in the garden.

It did not matter. He loved Veronica absolutely. He would follow her wherever she went. Their current was the current of desire, pulled by imagination, the gravity of a greater place, a more intense beauty and involvement, of matter less constrained.

He knew what he had to do. One Friday, at the end of the day, he dictated the following words to his computer: "Dear Supervisor Wong Peterson and Chairman Aung Thwin, after ten years of dedicated service I am tendering my resignation, effective in two weeks' time. I am leaving of my own accord and would like to thank you both and the entire Intellatrawl family for these ten years of gainful employment. Best regards, Felix Clay, Virtual Remote Supervisor, Suite 8."

He blinked. The message was written and gone. It would arrive. He had lit a fuse but to what end and of what length he had no idea. He watched it burn but without a destination its speed was indeterminable. The screen zipped out, he yanked his CellPack cap off and stood up from the chair, propelled by fear and buoyed by elation. He took his place in the swarm of associates headed up to the

auditorium for the Friday evening kiss off. Chairman Aung's alias strode to the podium and flickered but his message, whatever it was, failed to find Felix, whose attention was fixed on the burning fuse.

The pressure outside had dropped. The southern sky was black. Occasional gusts of wind rustled the bamboo and they smelled of rain and hail. There was a feeling of anticipation. Everyone cast uncertain, fearful looks at the sky and hurried for the amphibatrains.

Felix couldn't wait to tell Veronica. On the amphibatrain he imagined her elation at the news, that he had done something spontaneous, risky and concrete to further her plans. He was now an active participant in their manumission, not a scold or a brake.

Now that the job was about to become past tense he could view it with objectivity and put things in perspective. It was important not to hate and vilify something he had done for so long. The job after all had sustained them through their ordeal, was even the means by which they discovered the garden. The job wasn't evil in itself but a catalyst, a necessary phase in their journey, midwife to a better future. He would miss the sustaining, nurturing aspect of the job. But once suckled one must be weaned. It was time to move along so he had lit the fuse and now the fuse burned.

The weather had only grown more ominous. The wind gusts were strong enough to make walking difficult and lightening flashes lit up the clouds piling up overhead. Thunder shook the ground. Rainsqualls erupted and stopped. He ran for Les Jardeen. The monkey in the window, looking a bit tawdry of late, beckoned him to take a seat at the bar and celebrate his good fortune.

He popped up onto the stool and drummed his fingers on the zinc top. Peter was mixing up a blender full of pina coladas. Three female Intellatrawl associates sat at the bar in party hats, Nadine, the red head and another one he had seen before. They were opening gaudily wrapped presents. Ice crunched and whirred in the blender, the

females laughed, the one he didn't know pulling at the silver ribbon of a large cube wrapped in glossy black paper. Her long red fingernails gnawed like rodents at the tape till the paper fell open. Peter filled three highball glasses with the ivory liquid and garnished each with pineapple, orange and cherry on a spear.

"Oh god!" exclaimed the woman, lifting up a sphere of pink spines. "It's so beautiful." She wiped a tear from her eyes.

Nadine fussed with a napkin and said, "I saw it and just had to get it."

The redhead said, "It's for the mantle piece in the bedroom."

"Of course," said the recipient, still crying a little. "Where else could it go? I love you guys so much."

Felix called Veronica. "Hi," he said, trying to repress his heartbeat. "I'm at Les Jardeen."

"I thought you were coming home."

"Well, there's a storm up."

"Can you beat it?"

He looked out the window. The facades of buildings were flashing white in the lightening and rain pounded down so hard it bounced. "No, I'd better eat here. I'll be home as soon as it clears up. Unless you want to try to make it down."

"No," she sounded disappointed.

"Is something wrong?" he asked.

"Huh? Wrong? No, not at all. I was just, you know. Missing you. It's silly. I'm tired."

"Well, wait up for me cause I have news. I'll bring home some champagne."

"What kind of news?"

"It's a surprise."

"A good one I hope."

"Don't worry. Bye now."

"Bye."

The drinks warmed up Nadine and the Intellatrawl associates even more. They were often together on the train, drinking hard in a large group of boisterous commuters. By the time the cars hit the river they were usually ripping along. Now the red head was pulling a pink ribbon off a luminously lawn-green cube. Her nails matched her synthetic hair and lipstick and disagreed with her butterscotch skin; she used them to pick apart the wrapping paper, which, on closer inspection, proved to be lizard skin.

"Holy fucking Jesus," she said. "It's lizard!"

"It's a snood!" shrieked Nadine.

The red head touched her hair gently and then wrapped it in the green lizard skin. "How do I look?" she asked.

"Deee-voyn," said the other two in unison before dissolving into a babble of laughter.

"I can't wait to see what's inside."

Peter eased up to Felix.

"Well Mr. Clay, you look very happy tonight."

Felix continued to watch the females and said, "Next round's on me. Is it a birthday?"

Peter looked at them disdainfully. "Some sort of an anniversary. I think they may be married to the same man."

"He must get spread kind of thin."

"That's the whole idea."

"Three wives!"

"Well, it used to be illegal."

"They oughta just marry each other and cut out the middle man. How about a martini? And Peter, can you ice down a bottle of Veuve Clicquot?"

“Is Mrs. Clay coming in on a night like this?”

“No, I’ll bring it home to her. It’s a celebration.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE COMPLACENCIES IN THE PEIGNOIR

Veronica was relieved that the storm would prevent her from going to Les Jardeen. She was tired and felt like going to bed. More and more that was all she felt like doing.

Paregane was supposed to be non-addictive, without side effects. That was what they had promised and while at first she didn’t believe them, in fact didn’t care, over time she was amazed to find that it was apparently true.

Apparently true. Because it didn’t really take long for her to discover that a second dose in the afternoon put things right, if she didn’t have anything to do. Afternoon jaunts in the garden were brief pick me ups, 2-3 hour naps spent walking in the mountains or sitting under an oak tree. She watched the squirrels gather nuts and listened to the birds sing. She found a part of the garden that was poised on the edge of autumn, leaves about to turn, fields full of golden seed. Everyone was busy bringing in the harvest, bees drunk on abundant nectar. Sometimes in the distance she caught a glimpse of a house behind towering trees. Among those trees there was no warm sun and the mortar of walls crumbled into sand. A roof, walls, a parapet would just emerge from the shadows. It intrigued her a little, but not enough to draw her away from her gold and russet world, clad in a mantle of dying sunlight, burnished, bronzed, sweet with honey and a twinge of melancholy, little violet shadows edging the luminous leaves. Day after day she visited her autumnal world. It was a place she had all to herself. It became a guilty pleasure, as when she had

discovered that masturbation could be a serious pastime, that summer on the ranch, and she spent hours on her back in her room in a self induced daze of orgasms.

Once the arrangements had been made there was little for her to do. The weather was getting worse and more unpredictable by the day so she couldn't go for bike rides in the park. The stale, ridiculous 'garden' air of the gym was unbearable and she lost her attention span for books. There were just so many hours she could spend doing nothing at all, shopping and cleaning and thinking.

Soon she was taking that second pill every day and after that she added a third. As soon as Felix was out the door she went back to bed with Paregane. She found she could go to the garden by merely sitting or lying down with her eyes closed. She wasn't asleep at all and it was just as real. The world around her had frayed and faded. Her senses, once so acute, perceived more of the garden than her home or town. Only Felix remained vibrant. In his presence she felt the allure of his odor, like exudatious bark gums. His body was like the plums that hung heavy above the riverbank. His eyes were like the shadows of the oaks, obliterations of light, crystalline. They were transmigratory spirits married in eternity, wandering the physical world in search of a key and door, a way out of the cave their barbaric devolution into bodily existence required for a habitus.

More and more she felt their exile had to come to an end. For some reason he was resisting the return. He seemed so wedded to ordinary things still. Celebration, food, movies, walks. She had the power to pull him out of it and then, like chemicals, they reacted, pulsing and streaming in the sky and raining down to earth together. Paregane three times a day and there was nothing left but the garden.

People crammed up against rough-hewn walls, drinking wine and shouting, upset her. Then they changed forms, became dragonflies in the mouths of emerald frogs squatting by a pool of water. Sammael

rode in on a giant camel and when he got down she saw that his back terminated in a long, scaly tail. It switched back and forth as he walked. Crowds in paradise filled the air with an alien sweat and she shrank from the press of their naked bodies, ran through the woods. Was panic bleeding into the garden? She had no idea. Everyone looked insane now, there was no difference. Only at her oak tree could she be safe and she stuck by it as much as possible.

Sammael stretched his short pink legs out and lay back beside her. They didn't say much, never did. She looked at the rusty fur on his toes and the huge cock like a hank of rope draped over his thighs. Just as he was leaving he said, "They're here for the wrong reasons. It's too bad." She never felt regret in the garden, never felt nostalgia or loss. In the garden matter was always pregnant and it seemed to her most of the time everything was poised to take off. Yet, her favorite place was a place on the verge of death.

She was strong in a weak world of watery images, a single, flame-like presence. Flying, or swimming, or fucking Felix, it was all the solitary flame. He filled her up, she gasped as he came in her heart, her belly, her guts pitched and her eyes glazed over. She would never be satisfied, never be disappointed either, so long as she could penetrate his ears with her voice, her eyes breaking down the scales and piercing through the iris into the ganglia of nerves, driving down his gullet, up and out of his fingertips, her nipples hard beneath their touch.

It wasn't easy to get up. She didn't want champagne. She didn't want the future or the past. She wanted to lie there. She wanted to be a vibration rippling out through space into eternity. She tried to get up and dress but instead, reached out to the night table and put a pill on her tongue. He could wake her when he returned. In no time at all she was back home in the garden, wandering down to the lake. Sammael was seated by the shore, clasping his knees in his arms.

“If it weren’t for my body back home, I’d stay here for ever,” she said.

Without turning around to look at her he said, “Do you really think that husk lying back there in your room is more real than I am? Do you think it means anything at all? Everyone comes here looking for god but I can tell you, if there is one in all the universe I’ve never found it.”

She climbed the granite outcrop and launched herself out into the air, soaring across the aching, cloudless sky, goose bumps rising on her flesh. Down below a bear and its cub caught salmon. She rode higher, harder, faster than ever before. The sun grew warm on her back and the world below got small. She circled high overhead, alone and free on the pulsing thermals. As she plunged down straight for the lake she felt something strange, almost painful. Her back twitched and her legs shriveled. Feathers pierced her shoulders and her arms, as if bursting into flame, became blue wings. Down she shot into the water. It bubbled up around her, raced past her eyes. She speared a fish through its center with her beak and rose up out of the lake and into the air, heavy at first, beating hard to be air borne and then popping up. She could taste the blood of the fish in her mouth and at the same time felt something strike through her heart, as if she were dangling half alive off of a spear being lofted into the sky. She dropped the fish onto the rocks below where she was smashed apart, flooded with a dying, narcotic warmth, blood oozing up and colors fading to white. She pecked at the raw, mangled flesh and swallowed it hungrily. Then, exultant, she fled upwards and into the light of the sun, swooping out over the wide water to join her brethren on the far shore of the lake.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO SOLOMON AND THE WITCH

Felix leaned his bike against hers and descended the stair. The ride home, full of food and happy, free of the job, still giddy from the convivial bar crowd, had been over rain-washed streets, in the calm, cool aftermath of a major storm. He drank a glass of water, brushed his teeth and swallowed his Paregane and then sat down on the chair by the bed as he had often done, to watch Veronica sleep. Only now he wasn’t tortured with jealousy and unhappiness. He didn’t wonder where she was, he knew. Veronica was in the garden. She wasn’t insane or vengeful or catatonic, not the creature of some mood altering drug but restored to a younger, simpler self. She slept so peacefully now. She didn’t clutch the blanket or thrash about and mumble or lie on her back snoring and drooling.

He looked at her and knew he was at a point of convergence and had been for some time. It reminded him of the Yeats poem, Solomon and the Witch, when the lovers joke that the world should end when the ideal and the real coincide. Yeats had only known loveless sex and love without consummation till in his 43rd year he married George. Felix and Veronica were in a time when true and magnetic north were the same. But he knew it was unsustainable, it was a moment of poise that would pass and they would after this have to live on the feeling, let it feed their sense of themselves, of the future, as a context that would sustain them, but which, like the garden, they could only visit. Because to stay there really would mean the end of the world, they would cease to function and the Bower of

Adonis would become the Bower of Bliss, a false paradise. To stay was infantile. Mystics who achieved union either returned, blinded, to expound their vision, or vanished into heaven, bodily, like Elijah or Enoch, or sinking, joined the Autochthons like Oedipus. But that was an individual vision, the self joined to god. He and Veronica had drawn a circle around themselves. The circumference was the known universe and at the center was their give and take. By means of their double vision they saw stereoptically, achieved depth of vision. The irreducible number of the universe was not one but two. What lay beyond that? Were there visions of families, clans, cultures? What did the many eyes see peering into the dark? What did they conceive and construct there, what did they receive? Duality of effect, unity of being. It was a radiant node of time that they contained and were contained by and they knew it.

Gently, so as not to awaken her, he climbed under the light cotton blanket and nuzzled up against her, shutting his eyes to sleep, already feeling the contours of the garden take shape beneath his eye lids. But something was not right. He stirred against her. She was perfectly balanced on her side, perfectly still. Then, she tipped over onto her back and the alarm rippled through him, though he didn't move. His eyes popped open. After a while he reached over and touched her skin. It was cool. He lifted her eyelids. The pupils were fixed. No breath came from her body. Her lips were blue. And yet he lay there next to her most of the night, unable to move or cry, waiting. When it was morning he called the Emergency Medical Team and the crew arrived an hour later to pronounce Veronica dead, and take her away.

"What do you want us to do with the remains?" the doctor with the clipboard asked.

Felix mumbled, "Can I call you?"

"It's Saturday morning sir. If you tell us now we can get the autopsy done and process her by Monday morning. If you wait it

might take another week."

"Why did she die?" He voiced his questions without energy or interest but the words came to his lips and he let them out.

"I can't tell sir. There doesn't appear to be an immediate obvious cause of death."

"She was forty three."

"It happens. Did she have any allergies?"

"No."

"Heart condition?"

"No."

"Strange or unusual insect or rodent bites?"

"No."

"Was she on any medication?"

"No. Well, yes. Paregane."

He frowned. "Transcriptasine. Well sir, I've seen a lot of these lately. That Paregane is terrific stuff, if you live. Have you thought about the remains sir?"

"The remains? Yes of course, cremate her after the inquest."

"I'm sorry about your loss Mr. Clay." He touched Felix on the shoulder. "Are you sure there's no one I can call? A friend or a relative?"

He shook his head. "No. There's no one."

After they left all he could think was that he was now totally alone. There was no one to talk to and even if there was, what would he say?

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

### THE RETURN OF DR. BRYSON

Bryson lay in a tub of cold water beneath the broad and shapely crown of an oak tree. Hanging off a wooden coat stand was her white cotton bathrobe and a hemp sarong tie-dyed blue, pink and green. A side table to her left supported an ashtray and a bunch of hand rolled cigarettes, and a gold composite lighter with a woman doing a strip act on it in three abrupt moves. Her pasties flashed like red bubble sirens.

She lay at the end of an entropic mental process through which all the binary tensions had attenuated into an even, granular grey. It had been weeks since she had watched t.v obsessively for news of transcryptasine. Many more weeks since she had sat up late reading by lamp light in the library. Life in the GMZ had neutralized her.

Never in her life had Bryson experienced such enervation. Except for a week at the beach now and again she didn't take vacations. Travel consisted of trips to conferences, junkets in secure ports on the Adriatic or the Caribbean. Once she met Velodia in Irkutsk where a psychiatrist, Dr. Karensky, laboring in Siberian obscurity, was experimenting with prion therapies; or to Milan where Dr. Marinetti's neuronanobots were busy destroying brains for the good of medicine. Noble failures all. She could afford to be generous.

Everyday tasks engaged her. The fates of pigs and chickens, the thirsty vines, weeding the garden. Everything else seemed irrelevant.

After a month she no longer noticed the smell of rotting vegetation on the lakeshores. The flies crawling across her face and neck in big

black mats ceased to irritate. Her stomach growled hungrily when the first fumes of grilled venison filled the air.

She pulled the cold guts of fish out with her thumb and forefinger, nailed their heads to cedar planks and smoked them. In the mornings she awoke a little after he did, read while he wrote in his journals. There was something beautiful about these black leather bound books with the creamy lined paper. They filled three shelves in the library, almost eighty years of notes and drawings, each day's weather, recollections. He wrote in a flowing script and his drawings were stark and precise. He was secretive about them, but referred to them unabashedly in conversation or argument.

Then she took water to the dogs and pigs, in two huge galvanized steel buckets. Some days she shoveled chicken and pig shit, some days she turned compost. He had a solar farm machine that could sow, till and pick. It was small and extremely light, with tall wheels and articulate arms and she liked to ride it between the grape rows. Together they repaired the irrigation lines and the electric fence, jobs he hadn't gotten to. It saved the grapes. Wine was fermenting in the vats.

Some mornings, after work, they packed a lunch and walked a mile through sultry fields loud with stridulating insects, down a wooded path, through a swamp, to the landing where they kept a dinghy tied up to a rotting pier. Keuka Lake's color changed like gorgeous eyes, jade, cobalt, indigo. They rowed up to a little cove to swim, eat and nap till the sun was low and the bugs started to bite. Sometimes they made love. Sometimes they just sat and watched the kingfishers dart crazily out over the water, laughing and diving for fish.

For the very first time in her life she wanted to be gentle and relaxed. Whatever knot she had used sex to pound away at was gone and with it her most trusted companion, urgency. How could life be worth living without it? Urgency got things done. It left in its wake a



hunger, a vacuum in the senses. Her body was used to going twelve, fourteen hours without food and then devouring whatever lay at hand, panic and need like a fistula forming in the gut and the attendant thirst. She tried to burn the hunger out of her lungs with cigarettes. But now something else was taking hold, bright ease.

The hardest part was not thinking. For that she was self-barraged. In the beginning she substituted long sessions with Owen Bradlee and constant news watching. By day she fired off missives. Every idea for a study that she ran by him he nixed and yet, in light of the news reports he insisted that she return to work right away. Phones were not secure. They spoke about these things vaguely. She wasn't always sure what was going on. It was typical Bradlee.

Leonard was terribly jealous and neither knew what to do about it. They were just not used to living together. And then she met Sky.

Bryson came in from the pigpen at ten one morning, covered in shit, profoundly pissed off at the pigs for existing at all but also defiantly proud of having slopped and watered them. The reek of pig feces was strong in her nose. She kicked off her green gumboots outside the door, examined with disgust the grime of filth that coated her thighs and forearms, and headed for the solar shower downstairs. On the way she stopped to drink some water in the kitchen, and spied them on the porch. Sky was tall, slender, unadorned. Her hair was disheveled, hanging in a loose, golden tangle. At thirty she was just hitting her stride, and still innocent, which was both pathetic and intriguing in a woman that age. Bryson certainly knew a thing or two about throwing her ass around. But she had a lot less to work with, and earned every inch she got. She had powered her way through men by means of personality, which was enough to land them in bed, where she knew how to close the deal.

When Bryson met Leonard, he fell hard for her, and she knew it. It was the hair. In those days, she could just let it down in a bar and

scrounge someone up. And then there were her eyes. If they caught the spark, they could give it back and then some. At 27, she was so fast. She saw things others didn't see, in the math. It had happened all of her life, starting with simple things, decks of card, checkerboards and chess. It was not till she got in college that she realized it was worth something. She would run down a problem and then stupidly toss a napkin she had nervously and pointedly balled up into the lap of her interrogator. What manners she had were acquired painfully.

It was strange, assuming that with age and isolation he would stop taking lovers. That he wasn't up to it. Well, she hadn't caught them in flagrante. That was important. It was one of their two rules.

Sky leaned back against the rail, hands spread out behind her, with a puzzled look. He stood facing her and said with his hands, what can I do? Sky shrugged and pushed past him, stomping her foot at the threshold and nearly knocking Ruth over. They stared at each other a moment and then Sky smiled condescendingly and said, "You must be Ruth."

My god, thought Ruth, there must not be any men around here. "Call me Bryson."

"All right then. Bryson."

"Who the hell are you?"

"Ruth," Leonard said, coming in from the porch. "This is Sky, Jason's sister."

"You live up in the woods past the tobacco shack?"

Sky smiled. "I'm just here to give Leonard a hand if he needs it."

"I'll bet you are. I thought he got along just fine with his own hand on the rip cord." Then Bryson bit down on it and said, "Won't you stay for lunch?" She had been bred for this.

"I've already eaten. Another time though. I'm here," she looked around, trying to calculate how often, and came up with, "a lot."

After she left Bryson said to Leonard, "She seems a little pissed off."

"She wanted to stay for lunch."

"Then why didn't she stay when I asked?"

"How the hell should I know? Did you slop the pigs?"

"Can't you smell it on me?"

He made a noise with his lips and said, "That's just how this place smells. I don't even notice anymore."

"So I'm to the manner born now, indistinguishable from pig shit."

"She's a good woman," Leonard said. "A midwife. Very strong. She also lays 'em out when they're dead. People around here couldn't do without her."

After that a mutual jealousy simmered between them, but who was pot, and who liquid, over what flame, she couldn't say.

In early September they met Velodia near Old Geneva Landing and went on a three-day hike on the Interlaken Trail, which ran through the forest between the lakes. Velodia and Leonard had not seen each other since Christmas '68. It was a blazing, dry day, 45c in the shade. A hard wind blew in across sere fields, spinning the many clustered blades of windmills through a shimmering blue.

An Amishman drove up to the landing, dust in big swirls overhead, in a black coach. He was young, with a short black beard and hair-hanging straight below his ears. They loaded their packs in the back and squeezed into the facing seats, Sasha on the floor between them.

"Not a day goes by Leonard," Velodia said, leaning forward to keep her hair and hat from coming apart on the ceiling.

"Me too Velodia."

"We had some good times."

"The best, hands down."

"So what about this forest?" she asked.

"Some real old trees, two, maybe three hundred years. Mixed hardwood, mostly oak. Swamps and streams and gorges, some high land. We've got panthers, wolves, bears. One cat I know is over three meters long. Possibly four. It may be a case of emergent gigantism." He smiled as if that really pleased him.

Velodia stared at him doubtfully and then laughed. "Are you trying to scare me?"

"Don't ask about the bears. Don't ask about anything." Bryson half sincerely cringed.

"I like to let people know what they're in for."

They rocked along. Vegetation by the road grew in thicker as they passed. Brown gave way to grey and green. "So who's the driver?" she asked.

"Tobias Big Coach. People say he's proud, you know, to put him down, cause he makes money-giving people rides to the forest. A short cut goes through it, you see? There's a trail, straight through, to Cayuga Lake."

Velodia held her arms out and said, "I can't remember the last time I did this."

They paid Tobias Big Coach ten dollars each, and put their things down on the ground. On either side of the road grew a thicket of sundry thorns and thistles. The bees were heavy and large, and gave off a loud, threatening buzz. She couldn't stand to look at their six hairy legs and the octagonal eyes, or that bag with the long ugly stinger.

Here they waited for a friend of Dennis Blanpied's to drop off a mule. They were absurd, she thought, standing out in the middle of nowhere, dressed in light khaki, in these preposterous hats (black Amish hats on Leonard and Bryson, a straw extravaganza perched on Velodia's lemon meringue hair, casting shade down over her alphas skin.)

And then, of course, the guy was two hours late. Bryson and Velodia stood together smoking in a patch of shade beneath a stand of extremely lethal vegetation. A morass of sharp and twisted brown and green was brought to order by Leonard who pointed out highlights, poison ivy, stinging nettles, burrs, varieties of thistle, and something he called brambleberries. On the ground, in long straggly knouts, were tricornes, an invasive Australian native, a tiny, rock hard, three-cornered thistle. "You step on one of these barefoot, the tip breaks off and works its way into your skin. Then it goes septic."

"I'll try to remember that," Bryson said. "Jesus Leonard, where the hell is this guy?" She ground out a cigarette with her foot and kicked the butt onto the pile growing between them.

Velodia looked around and said, "Let's go sit on the baggage."

Leonard professed irritation. "Where the hell is he? How should I know?" He began to mutter. It was clouding up but no rain fell. Occasional, chill gusts teased before dying back into the hot air. Once twelve fat raindrops pocked the dust. In the late afternoon they watched two distant figures grow larger, walking through shadows and shafts of sunlight punching through cracks in the cloud. The man was covered in dust, dressed in old jeans and a big green T-shirt that said UCLA. He was leading a grey and brown mule with a long face that seemed to have had all the mirth beaten out of it by life. Puffs of dust rose up and engulfed their feet.

"Sorry I'm late," he said, offering the reins to Leonard. Bryson looked at the man's face and decided he looked a lot like the mule. They had spent too much time together.

"What's going on?" Leonard asked.

The man checked them out.

"Dennis says you're all right. Which one's your wife?"

Leonard nodded in the direction of Bryson and then Velodia. "And our friend. Dr. Velodia."

"There's trouble back in Ganudasaga. Army surveyors. The man who owns the land told 'em to get off, and when they don't, starts shooting." He chuckled. "I wish I'd been there, see them run off like that. But, you know, the police might come tonight." He shook his head. "If they're looking for a fight, they'll find it." He made a noise of disgust and smiled. "So, if we're all still alive, meet back here in three days?"

How did he know to laugh, she thought, watching Leonard pause and then chuckle, with the man. "That's right," he said.

They loaded the mule with their packs and followed Sasha into the woods, down a narrow path and onto the main trail, broad enough for a four-horse wagon team to pass. As the woods closed over them, as it grew dark and cool and silent, all feeling for the world outside faded and it was just the three of them.

Most of the day was gone and they were tired, so they didn't go far and made camp a ways off the main trail, by a stream.

That night, as Sasha walked her beat and the fire fell to coals, they drank whiskey and talked. After old times had been discussed they got around to transcriptase.

"Did you buy the stock yet?" Velodia asked.

"Yeah, just like you said to."

"Well it's going up like crazy."

"I don't see why you give a damn," Leonard said, taking a slug off the bottle and passing it to Velodia. "You oughta just come out and say that this thing kills people and put an end to it."

Bryson looked at Velodia, and thought, pass the bottle. Well, at least she was there, cause Bryson couldn't say it again, not for the hundredth time, naming all the things she couldn't do.

"Please," Velodia said. "She can't. They'd never let her do that. You know what would happen."

"Leonard, I told you what we were going to do."

"Don't you think it's a good way to go?" asked Velodia.

"What way is that?"

"You haven't been listening?" Bryson said in exasperation. She drank down the hot whiskey and passed the bottle. "We only talked about it a half dozen or so times."

"I just don't get how you ding something."

Bryson groaned. "Let's not get hung up on the word ding here. You know what I mean."

Leonard poked at the fire with a stick. He threw on a piece of wood and it smouldered. "How does bruited it about that transcryptasine kills, on the sly, affect sales sufficiently to bring the product down? You need lawsuits to do that," he said, wincing through the discharge of smoke. Flames lit up the log.

"Look, we have to do something, but we can't let her risk her life--"

"Oh, as opposed to the thousands of lives you're willing to sacrifice?"

"But that's not the point," Bryson said.

"That is precisely the point. Owen Bradlee--"

"That prick," Velodia said.

"Can not be up to any good. You're at risk now, the way it stands. This thing blows up in his face, when he goes down you go down with him."

Velodia shook her head. "It doesn't have to be that bad. To get the stock price down, all we need is rumors about safety. I mean, everyone will know of course, but if doctors start refusing to prescribe the drug--"

"Other doctors, fearing liability won't prescribe it," said Bryson.

"Right, and then stockholders get the jitters. It drops enough

they'll discontinue transcryptasine to preserve the council seat."

Leonard nodded. "But aren't the illegal sales driving all of this? They can't get approval for general use but--"

"Sure," Velodia said. "But again, what are our options? And don't suggest again that Ruth should hold a press conference."

"It's the only right thing to do. I trust you two know more about this than I do though." A couple of crickets creaked.

"I'm hoping they fire me, actually."

"For what?" Velodia asked.

"Transcryptasine, whatever. I just don't give a damn any more." She stared into the fire, watched the colors change from red to orange. "I keep trying to work out a protocol."

Velodia nodded and leaned towards her. "Well, what kind of sales have you had? What's the customer profile?"

Bryson rubbed her temples. "Every day Bradlee tells me precisely that and by night I forget." She picked up the bottle of whiskey, drank some and passed it to Velodia.

Velodia sat up straight and announced, "There's a conference of the Lackawanna Psychiatric Association. Freudian Analysis, that kind of thing. I'll notify my colleagues that this would be an important conference to attend. They won't look for us there. It's a totally obscure venue, far from state or corporate eyes. We can talk there. I'll let them know."

"Do you think Fripp will let me go?" She took a drink and offered the scotch to Leonard.

"Fripp's a prick too," Velodia said.

"But a stooge kind of prick."

"A stooge? Who for, his wife?"

"Who's she?" Bryson asked.

"Julie Fripp? I remember her from some boarding school, in

Connecticut I think, it was one of those. Ochs? Anyway, she was rich, liked to have a good time.”

“Well,” Bryson said. “I knew Fripp in Switzerland I think. He doesn’t have any idea who I am. I mean, he does now, but before this, forget about it. If he’s not working for his wife, then it’s his old man. The Fripps are big.”

Velodia said, “Well, he brought in Bradlee, and Bradlee’s with General Valdez. Maybe they’re,” she wiggled her fingers, “you know.”

Bryson seemed to know what this meant and shook her head. The fire reddened her white hair, and her stare was fixed and angry.

“Either way,” Leonard said, taking a slug off the liquor, “it’s not going to go well. If they found out you colluded with Velodia to hurt sales of a Monozone drug--” He let it hang. They stared at the fire. Sounds she had only been dimly aware of before magnified. The crickets were almost deafening and the water rushing over the rocks was bright and loud. The dark around them grew dense. Leonard was densely ethical and unrealistic. It wore her out, depressed her. He was an absolutist, unable to compromise with the realities of their time and so had gone off on his own. She used to have no such desire. Although she hated her family, and had been thoroughly disowned by them she had been made by the dangerous and elegant world of politics. By contract she was committed to Monozone for life, and had no choice in the matter. But she thrived in its ethically neutral environment, threaded the labyrinth of science, business and bureaucracy with great skill.

Through the early fall news about transcryptasine and Monozone was constant. Bradlee’s daily reports were professional and ebullient. When the stock hit 110 and split he sent an alias to congratulate her. It was more than weird to see his dapper, grey presence against the bare plank floors and walls. It made the place look like a lodge for

retired travelers, those fraying ancient presences in obscure resorts.

“Hello Bryson,” it said. Without the mellow delivery his voice lost its modulating sarcasm and sounded menacing.

“Bradlee, delightful as always. Why the personal appearance?”

“An awful lot of bare wood, or so it looks from here. Do congratulate Leonard for me on his good fortune in finding such a place so far from home.”

“He’ll be gratified to hear you say so.”

“My dear, I do miss your dry sense of humor.” The alias walked about, through chairs and furniture. “I thought you’d like to know that the stock hit 110 today and split. By afternoon it was up twelve points. They’ll be warming up a council seat soon enough.”

“What’s the news from China?”

The alias darkened a shade. “Sales are spectacular but there appear to be a few, eh, squeaks in the springs. Taiwan just banned Paregane, though I’m reassured private sales are substantial. There is talk of retaliation for the bans but the fact that it’s not approved here is making things difficult.”

“Why was it banned?”

“I believe it has to do with a cluster of unexplained fatalities.”

“What a surprise.”

“Indeed, death always catches one off guard.”

“It has no mercy.”

“None that I know of. Perhaps your next venture could address the situation.”

“Dark Force modifications?”

“I leave the details to you. So how are you getting on?”

“Today I shoveled pig shit. Too bad you’ve got no sense of smell.”

“Another project!” It silently clapped its hands together and chuckled airily. “You are pregnant with ideas tonight. When do you

anticipate your return my dear? We miss you terribly. And I'm dying for you to join me and the general for dinner one evening."

"I said two months."

"Hasn't it been that long yet?"

"No."

"You know, it's quite lonely getting hammered by myself. Half the reason I took on this job was to be with you."

"Go hammer your dick to the wall, Bradlee."

He chuckled airily again. "Does that image console you in your isolation?"

"I'll be back when two months are up, give or take. End of October."

"Don't push it, Bryson. You don't work for yourself."

"So I am constantly reminded."

"Well, I'm sure you are happy about the news. Ciao." The image stuttered and warbled out.

Now the two months were up. It was late October. After weeks of intermittent rain it was hot and dry again. The intense green of summer had given way to the dark and tired green of late fall. Many trees had lost their leaves. The sumac was dark crimson, covered like everything else with a film of dust that looked like ash.

For days she had been sitting, depressed, unmotivated, or distracted, in the tub. She did not want to return but she was down to her final days if not hours.

In her torpor, relieved only by reverie and daydream, she gradually became aware of Mordecai Hertzler, a tall, scrawny Amishman with sunken eyes. He stood about thirty feet away, under another oak. He wasn't exactly staring; she didn't feel spied upon, but instinctively slid down the tub till the water covered her. It was a move as calculated to relieve his embarrassment as hers. He must have come down the

road. She waved and smiled. "Hello Mr. Hertzler. Are you looking for Leonard?" she shouted.

He looked at the ground and said, "Ja ma'am."

They were called plain people by some. His affiliation was traditional, Old Order Amish. They wore black pants, jackets and suspenders, over plain white shirts, and wide brimmed black hats. His hair hung down straight to an inch below his ears and he had a beard like a thick brush, but no mustache.

The Amish worried her. They had so many rules and she seemed to violate them all. But they were also tolerant people. And, she had observed, they smoke and drink: pipes and hand rolled cigarettes, and beer. It didn't seem to square with the Christian business, but then, neither did sex. And given the size of their families, sex was just fine in their religion.

She didn't know Mordecai well, had only met him a few times. His kids were all over the place though, and they looked just like him, but with young skin and a rebellious spirit. Bravely she decided to continue the conversation.

"He's up the lake. Something about thatch."

"Fur de roof, ja."

"He'll be back by supper. Turn around, will ya? I'll get out and put my things on." He faced the trunk of the oak he was standing by and she got out, towed off and dressed in a loose t shirt and hemp sarong, tie dyed blue, pink and green by the Rasta family Leonard was up lake visiting. "All clear." When he didn't turn around she clarified. "I'm done. Will you come to the house?"

"All right." He had a very serious face, calm, with penetrating eyes and sunken brown cheeks above his beard. His hands were big, with wide fingers and dirty nails. The skin around his eyes was creased. He smelled of manure and animals, but he wasn't, despite the heavy clothes, sweating. They walked into the house.

"Sit down, please," she said in the kitchen. It was ten degrees cooler inside and smelled of old pine. He took a seat at the table and stared at his hands. "There's cold ginger water to drink." Ginger water was made with sugar, ginger, vinegar and water, an old recipe Leonard got out of a book, *Little House on the Prairie*.

"Ja ma'am."

She sat down opposite him and they sipped their drinks. "Is it important what you've come for?"

"Ja. Ich believe he would want to know right away. Ist de thatch he went up lake about at de Rasta farm?"

"I think so, yes."

"That mountain lion he's been after came to our farm last night. It took a lamb, and one of de boys was going to de barn when it happened. Ich had to run it off."

"Oh, how terrifying. Weren't you afraid?"

"Nein. Not till Ich saw it. It was ein big cougar. De biggest Ich seen is no bigger than a man. But this one, it's ten feet. Maybe more."

Leonard would be thrilled. Mr. Hertzler didn't look thrilled at all. "That's big for a mountain lion?"

"Oh ja, ja, that's quite big. Leonard says out west they get to eight feet. This was bigger than that. As Ich say."

"Well, I know Leonard wanted to tranquilize and track it. The big cat."

"We've got to watch de children."

"Of course. If I embarrassed you out there, I'm sorry."

"It's a way to keep cool, Ich guess," he smiled. "Ich best be going now. De family don't want to wait long."

"So you're going to go get him?"

"It's a gutt idea. Dr. Leonard would want to know what we decided."

"Well," she calculated what hours of lying alone on the couch doing crossword puzzles and drinking grappa would be like compared to riding up lake up to the Rasta's with Mordecai Hertzler. "Mind if I come?" she asked. "Can I ride with you?"

Mordecai's thin, dark lips pressed together and his eyes became intense, not angry so much but as if they were scrutinizing all the possible consequences. "That'll be just fine, if you like."

She jumped up from the table. "Just let me run to the toilet."

He nodded gravely and she got the feeling for a moment that his wife was her age and he was thinking, women are the same all over. She peed, spritzed on some rose water and joined him on the path up to the main road. Weeds loud with insects towered over the narrow, washed-out way. She brushed bugs from her eyes and spit out gnats. Down by the hen house a peacock screeched. The air smelled faintly of smoke and a haze blew in from the south and west on a slow, hot wind. The last bit of the path was steep and she stepped breathlessly out on the road. Acres of broken cornstalks stretched like fire into the western sun.

Mordecai held open the door to the buggy, a little black composite box with an unbleached canvas roof and big rubber wheels on a sturdy, intricate suspension system. It was hitched to two horses eating oats out of bags and depositing piles of shit behind them.

She got in. The seat sank down on its springs. He got in next to her and, like Charles the Fifth, spoke German to his horse. Horses were thoughtful enough animals but the joy of horse-human synergy had eluded her since childhood.

The road was a single lane dirt path through fields and woods. The ruts were deep, sometimes filled with tan dust and level with the surrounding road. The ditch on either side was weed choked. Hertzler let the horses pick their way through, but even with the suspension her teeth rattled in her head.

Her mouth was dry. Dust was sifting down onto her head through the roof. It was like smoke, boiling up around them and drifting into her eyes, a fine, gritty mist. It filled the wrinkles and creases on her face. Turkey buzzards circled high overhead. The lake twinkled blue and purple in the distance. Fields gave way to light savanna and woods.

All her life had been a playing out of consequences determined for her by her parents. And all her life she bucked hard against them, broke every rule and custom, but the one. She had honored the contract. It gave her all she ever wanted. Money, exciting work, doing what she loved. The total opposite of the life she had been bred for.

Her family shuttled back and forth between Geneva (Switzerland) and the Catskills, where they had an estate. She spent summers and vacations in their suite of rooms in The Hotel St. Denis, built on stilts out on Lake Geneva, or back home.

The Catskills' estate was a stone castle built on the side of a commanding hill. The approach was by a winding dirt road (not much better than the one they were on), which ended at a moat and drawbridge. There were turrets, and towers, and crenellated walls. Banners, emerald, scarlet, gold, fluttered in the wind.

Within the castle walls stood the main house, a bleak Norman fortress that was fully modern within, and assorted outbuildings, stables, gardens, servants quarters, a brewery, a winery, a smokehouse. It was built in the nineteenth century by a robber baron, a Van Diesing. Next it devolved to a degenerate heir who lived there alone, committing despicable acts, for seventy years. After his death a succession of insane rich people took up residence until a developer turned it into a resort, which he subsequently abandoned for tax purposes. Thus it lay forgotten and unoccupied, slowly buried under a canopy of trees until finally, 250 years after it was built, it became Bryson's maternal grandfather's wedding gift to his daughter.

Bryson's father spared no expense in its renovation. He had fallen victim to a fad for aristocratic living. The surrounding land was brought into cultivation, planted in fruit and nut trees, hops and vines. The remaining woods were full of turkey, boar, elk and deer, which her father and his friends hunted. They ate exclusively off the land. He had a water wheel built in the creek to run nut presses and gristmills. The cellars were stocked with ripening cheeses, the rafters hung with curing hams, and kegs of beer and barrels of wine were aged in the warehouse. Over a hundred people were on staff, architects, engineers, carpenters, masons, mechanics, gardeners, custodians. There were maids, butlers and footmen. Chauffeurs drove their big black cars with tail fins and fat fenders. They even had tenants who paid part of their rent in food. Her father was obsessed. She could still see him sitting in the window of their hotel room in his red silk caftan and yellow fez, pouring over garden plans or investigating heirloom varieties of corn. He was such a bastard, but it was her mother she really hated.

She could not remember a time when she didn't detest the lot of them. Of course she loved her surrogate, Lena. Who didn't love their surrogate? It was she who gave birth to you, she who nursed you, she who took care of you when you were sick. Lena was certainly the only one Bryson could trust. She used to accompany Lena and her dog on their rambles, up and down the orchards, out into the fields. But she never got on the horses. She didn't play tennis, or hunt. Her favorite days were sick rainy ones, when she could lie in Lena's bed and watch t.v. and play cards.

She never wanted to hear the word breeding again. It was a constant topic of discussion. If you had nothing to say, you discussed the pedigree of the baby bronze lettuces you were eating, or the lineage of the koi swishing through your pond. There were orchids, blue hound dogs with long droopy ears and bloodshot eyes. Horses came from houses of royalty. Even rabbits had a genealogy. But it



was the pedigree of human beings that commanded the most attention. They followed each other's trade in genes like stocks. They plotted out their marriages to maximize licensed heritable traits.

Enormous sums were lavished on the genetic make up of each thing. They were obsessed with control and order, of perfecting the world, convinced that this was the nature and destiny of things. Without this effort, this shoring of the ruins, the world would degenerate. The universe had been biding its time till their superior control methods had had time to evolve. Now all that dirty becoming could end and true being begin.

The house, or whatever you call such a thing, was obscenely grand. Every time she stepped into that ground floor rotunda, with the spiral staircase, and the floor to ceiling tapestries, she could feel a little wisp of warmth fleeing her. The dome was frescoed midnight blue, with a constellated firmament of gold and silver. The floor was of inlaid marble, a mandala of black and white diamonds. In the center was the fountain, an enormous white marble basin on a pedestal, sporting a buxom headless goddess, water gushing out of her neck. The busts of select Greek and Roman Stoics monitored the doings of the great hall with their empty eyes and bulging adam's apples.

Her father entertained from a high-backed crimson velvet chair, in the grand salon on the second floor. The floors of that room were literally strewn with priceless hand made carpets from the Hindu Kush. The shelves were packed with plunder, Arabian hookahs, brass oil lamps hanging from the ceiling by chains. Persian miniatures, scenes of the Moghul court, erotic rubbings. There were several intimate areas of overstuffed crimson and gold couches and green velvet wing back chairs; chinoiserie; a card table covered in baize, amphorae and painted apothecary jars.

The family assembled in the first floor drawing room for cocktails

at five, plenty of time for everyone to go to dinner drunk and irritable at seven, around the mahogany table, one end of which they occupied while the rest stretched like Siberia off of Russia.

Unlike Bryson, her brother Roger and sister Noel had successfully expressed their full suite of genes. Thus, instead of having unpigmented hair they had their selected shades of chestnut and straw. Well, what did she care anyway. Most hair screw-ups were much worse. No hair all. They dyed it when she was young. And her first successful act of defiance was at the age of ten demanding that her hair be allowed to revert to its natural white. Her mother could not hide her disgust. It pulled at her lips. White hair in a child scared her. She preferred, voice creaking, "The lemon yellow look in a little girl. Egg yolk by thirty." Yes, and hollandaise in the crypt.

They got the heroic profiles and full lips. She got longevity and intellect. It was the only reason they let her off the leash. Or at least, that was how they understood it. But intelligence was not something any of them actually understood. And because they so thoroughly lacked it they uncritically accepted that her intelligence was a result of their superior judgment in all things genetic. She was convinced that the intelligence package was a fraud. Perfect pitch is one thing, but even computational skills are too complex to genetically determine. And what of intuition, what is the program for that?

That intelligence package determined her fate. She was a trade secret, from birth. She didn't own the gene, she leased it. Any thought, any idea she had was theirs. She didn't buy it, but there was a fact in their argument that was hard to refute. Her one strange talent, the ability to visualize multiple dimensions, up to twelve, was the basis of all her work. And it was also the bridge over the moat, out of the Catskills and into the world. She took it. But nothing pissed her off more than the belief in intelligence genetics. What did Shakespeare's children do? Milton's daughters? Where were Einstein's spawn and Newton's progeny? Nowhere on earth. They

happened once and went away.

There the five of them sat in their customary places. She and her mother on one side, facing her placid siblings. Her mother filled the ashtray up, eating little, flicking blond hair from her twisted face. At the head sat her father, broad, black mustachioed in full diplomatic dress (white or black depending on the occasion) sawing away at his meat and announcing his thoughts on whatever mania consumed him currently. His obsessions were unerringly dull. "They just don't understand trade talks." Shaking his head angrily, "Pass the rolls."

"Well good lord, tell me what it is they do understand," her mother would say. Or, "The world is full of idiots, you know that."

Like their sire and bitch, Roger and Noel thrived in a morass of stupid, common opinion. Her only escape from this was school and school was so uncertain. Every few years she wound up in a new place.

Being unhappy places, all boarding schools had a different story. But the buried struggle was always the same. It took her about fifty years to realize it was authority that pissed her off, not the particular institutions of family, school and state. In any event, institutions were created to crush the imagination. She responded accordingly.

The Ecole de Polytechnique was lenient but located in a stretch of industrial and intellectual slag between France and Germany. There they drank in the local dives. No one gave a damn that they were fourteen, and looked it. They hung around the sex clubs, where the beer was cheap, and the tables were sticky.

Others were so strict it was like getting throttled, except the academics might be good and there was often a teacher she loved. Then there were the hybrid schools. There was one such place in the White Mountains, rich in illicit possibility and with a first rate department of physics.

The absolute worst were the entertainment and sports academies

for genetically altered humans, where she swam in a school of replicated siblings.

For a while when she was sixteen she'd fuck anyone who'd get drunk with her. She liked men but girls would do in a pinch. She went after cooks, custodians and security guards. She seduced her physics tutor, which was great, till he fell in love with her and her father found out. That ruined everything. Grounds crews were reliably felonious.

Most of the wild girls were good looking. They rode dressage and came out at sixteen, in a private ball. The most depraved, nihilistic pagans she knew put on lace and pumps and a corsage of green carnations. Not Bryson. They never put the doilies on her. She looked so crazy, with that white hair and those eyes that seemed to pop out of her head like cobalt marbles.

She hated the horses till her senior year, in New Hampshire, when she discovered a riding trail that took her past a salvage crew working a landfill. She got one with a missing eye and three nipples. That might have been her greatest year with men. Every one that looked at her, if she wanted him, she took. And she hadn't even had an orgasm yet.

The horses trotted along. Mordecai gave her a black shawl, which she wrapped around her head and face, to keep the dust out. The mountain lion was an exciting piece of business. It was brave, strong, out of place and now the farmers were going to band together to hunt it down and kill it.

She had never been to the Rasta house. It had a legendary feel to it, the way Leonard and Dennis Blanpied talked.

"What's a Rasta?" she asked, aware that her interlocutor was not exactly voluble, and by conviction showed no interest in the outside world. Her voice startled him out of a road trance. The reins, loose in his hands, tightened some and he said, after thinking it over, "I don't

know exactly.”

Now she was sure that it pained him more to talk to her than she had ever imagined.

“Ich guess the Rastas are religious folks. Sort of like a hippy. Folks say they come from Jamaica. Not this family though. They’re de English. They come from Iroquoia. Been here a long time.” His face darkened and he nodded, “Their way is not our way.”

“They smoke marijuana, right?”

“They do. They make gutt medicine, salves and pulses and essen only what the bible tells them.”

They rode on for a while through fields and then groves of cypress, bamboo windbreaks shaking in the wind.

“It’ll get a little rough here,” he told her. She wrapped the shawl tighter, seeing out through a slit framed in black. The horses climbed up a twisted, narrow path through bamboo to the top of a ridge. The wheels thudded into ruts or had cliffhanger holds on the edge of a wash out, teetering upwards. Leaves of bamboo scraped the sides of the carriage. Bamboo gave way to tall pines, natural conifers. It grew silent, dark and cool, the wheels turned over the soft bronze carpet of needles flecked with yellow sunlight.

Suddenly they came to a clearing. It was high land, cooler, and dry. Old stonewalls wandered, fell over and got up again like drunks, through bleached fields and orchards. Then just as suddenly, they entered irrigated fields of marijuana, hemp and tobacco. The air had the resinous smell of oozing sap. Further on were harvested fields of corn and soybeans.

“Corn and soy beans aren’t in the bible,” she said.

“No ma’am. They’re cash crops.”

They came to a low, long shack on a little clearing of land. It was shaded by a fat oak tree and some pines. The earth was bare and dry. In the back was their barn and gardens. Pale firewood, cut small for a

cook stove, was neatly stacked against the side of the house, and kindling littered the ground around a stump. Smoke curled up out of a metal pipe stuck into the composite roof. The walls were of mismatched siding, some clapboard, some shingle, and patched all over with sheets of tin, plywood and composite. A fence, also built of this-and-that, topped with barbed wire, surrounded the place.

They heard a sound like distant thunder but it came from behind the fence. Two massive greyish-black mutts with square heads stood growling at them. Meanwhile, within this perimeter, chickens peacefully pecked at the ground: white ones with white and black striped ruffles around their necks, and little red bantams pricked out in green, blue and grey, strutting among the fretful hens. A bunch of beautiful, spooky goats, with little horns and black and red coats lay in a sunny corner against the fence, in a scattering of cabbages and corn stalks. Outside of the fence was a small wooden cart, and Leonard’s pick up truck, the grey one. The bed was loaded with thatch and covered with a tarp. A horse, a mule and two ponies chewed grass in a field a little bit off. And between was parked an outlandish contraption, a fantastic sort of carriage, difficult to describe, so varied was it in detail. There was a low seat, with small wheels, and pedals the driver pushed before him. Extending forward from this seat were long, bowed wooden handles, painted yellow, with multi colored ribbons hanging down like fringe, so that the whole thing could be pulled like a rickshaw. Behind the seat, was an enormous, multitiered carriage with benches, extending in a half moon up either side of the shell, which was framed out in bamboo and decked with a crazy quilt of bright patches. On top of this floated a silk dragon with a head of gold, nostrils spewing scarlet flame, armored plates of kelly green, a great swagging belly of jeweled bells, and an undulating tail of black spikes hanging down the back. The legs extended down the side of the carriage into golden talons framing the doors, which stood two metres off the ground and were

entered by means of a knotted rope ladder.

Warily observant of the dogs' exposed lowered teeth, they stood at the gate and knocked. It was then she noticed a naked child seated in the dirt playing with a stick. Three black flies crawled across his face in opposite directions. "You can just go in," he said. There was a loud screech. A peacock stepped into view. The door opened a crack. A pair of somber eyes looked them over a second and then the door opened. The dogs jumped up on him and began barking loudly. "Shsh," he quieted them and beckoned gently with his hand. "Come in, come in. Mordecai, hello."

He was short, with a wavy blond beard and dreadlocks coiled up in a light blue snood. He had thick eyebrows and a large nose, like a rock in the ground, and grey eyes.

The house was a single room, long, rectangular, lit only by beeswax candles and oil lamps hanging by chains from the rafters. To the left bunk beds lined the wall, down the entire length. Above them were shelves stowed with all kinds of stuff, guns, fishing rods and nets, traps, blankets and earthenware jars. Tied upside down on the rafters were strings of dried pears and apples, bunches of herbs, braids of garlic, bandoliers of chili peppers. People were seated on chairs and pillows in several discrete areas. They sat around a high wooden table, with a bowl of pears and another of apples. The air was hot, but had a spicy, herbaceous odor. There was the smell of wood smoke, like bass notes, and the rhythm of tobacco and marijuana, a haze hanging in the varnished light. And the sweet buttery candles, the cello and viol, the melody of sandalwood and drying herbs and fruit about to turn. Around this table Leonard and the others sat.

To the right was the kitchen. Over an iron cook stove stood a very sturdy middle-aged woman, stirring a pot of beans with a long wooden spoon. An assortment of dented, blackened aluminum and steel pots simmered on the other burners. She was pouring off these

liquids into open jars. Every now and again she turned her head from the bubbling pot of beans back towards the conversation at the table. She wore a black snood, shorts but no top.

Leonard sat next to the head of the table. Next to him was Sky, asleep on her elbows, breasts squashed flat. There were two other women at the table with their dreadlocks hanging down. One was nursing a baby and filling in a crossword puzzle in a crossword puzzle book, the other fussed with two naked children. There were children everywhere. Some ran up and down the house, bouncing in and out of various bunks, shrieking and climbing ropes up into the rafters, which they swung off of and back onto their feet, running away again.

Two men, hard to see in the shadows, sat at a low table on cushions, playing cards and sipping from big mugs. Far in another corner a man sat playing guitar while a teenage girl beat out a rhythm on a small handheld drum with two skins, a high and a low.

The group smiled to welcome them. She looked at Hertzler. He looked just the same as always.

Leonard said, "Ah, Ruth, Mordecai. We were just about to have a smoke and some peppermint tea."

A congenial air passed through the room, and as her eyes adjusted faces emerged out of the dark, in the old master glow of lamps and candles.

"Jordan," Leonard continued, leaning back in his chair. "This is my wife Ruth." Jordan was the bearded man who had opened the door. She went up to him at the head of the table and shook his hand.

"A pleasure," Jordan said. "This is my family. Rose at the stove, our daughter Rebecca," the woman doing the crossword puzzle nodded, "And there her children are, running." His daughter laughed and filled in a clue, leaning down close to look at the squares. "This other one having a bite to eat is my child Bob with Grace. My son

Tobias is playing guitar, and that's his wife Willa, and her brothers, who just stopped by to visit and pick up some supplies. We have an herbal medical practice up on Buffalo Creek. Please, come sit down. Mordecai, how are you?"

Bryson wondered if she was expected, in the land of naked breasts, to take her shirt off. She sat at the opposite end of the table from Leonard and Sky, so she could see them. Mordecai Hertzler casually took a corn cob pip out of his pocket and began stuffing it with pinches of tobacco.

Jordan put the finishing touches to a long cigarette and handed it down to Ruth. "It's our finest red bud. Light up."

"We've had a very profitable discussion. And business deal to conclude," Leonard said.

Ruth lit the 12-inch cigarette up and took a deep hit. It made her cough and tear up terribly. Once she calmed down she tried a little bit and passed it on.

"I see you got the thatch loaded," Mordecai said. He took short puffs of his pipe and when it was well lit, settled into just keeping it going.

Leonard said, "We all put it on. There's a couple more loads."

"It may rain," Mordecai observed.

They chewed on that for a while. Would it rain? Leonard observed there hadn't been a fall drought in thirty years. And it had rained in September.

"That rain saved us, that and the ponds," Jordan said.

Mordecai nodded. "We have enough till spring I reckon."

Leonard said, "Every day clouds blow in off the lakes."

"What we need is a few big rains from the south." Jordan took out an ivory pocketknife, opened the blade and cut an apple up into wedges, which he popped into his mouth and chewed slowly.

Bryson was not a marijuana smoker, never had been. Hallucinogens made her nervous, paranoid. The physical symptoms were unpleasant too, and it never seemed to end. Alcohol was a great reconciler; it funneled one into sleep, beguiled one into sympathy with the world or allowed a fully justified indignation to come to a boil. But marijuana always seemed like a girls' bathroom drug. Nothing terribly serious and hardly worth the effort. Like sucking cock in the woods and spewing bourbon on the ground. Midnight swims. Hot sheds, faces crowded around a cracked window blowing smoke. Even so she had taken the cigarette to be polite. It may even have been that she had so accustomed herself to things here that she did it out of habit, did what others were doing as if she had done so as long as they had. Every time the spliff came to her she took a robust hit and passed it on. She really did like the taste. It was as if she had never smelled or tasted it before. It seemed to have a dimension she had always missed. The sensual aspects had heretofore eluded her. These were the most important aspects of any drug, after the high of course. But seduction precedes the effect. It is the anticipatory act, the initiation. Teetotalers of every stripe failed to appreciate this. The habit, the high and the lifestyle embodied in tastes and lingering odors. The way a glass of hard liquor will diffuse through a room. Like sex, the shambles afterward, the wetness, the myriad sensations that form the ambiance of orgasm. How different the taste and texture of first tentative kisses are from the open, florid ones of love making, the nearly unhinged post coital embrace of tongue and lips. So the stale air of a finished cocktail party, in the nose of a ten year old, before the servants had cleaned up. She rummaged through the main room, and the banquet hall hung with mirrors and chandeliers, through abandoned glasses, lemon and lime crushed in a puddle of ice melt. The stagnant adult air of hors d'oeuvres, frilly cellophane topped toothpicks in ashtrays, gnawed stogies.

She held the long, smouldering joint like a cigarette. They were talking about something else now. Leonard and Jordan talked back and forth. No one else seemed to listen, but neither did they speak. The burning paper curled and grew moist. Smoke hit her eye. She passed it on to one of the men playing cards. He wore cutoff overalls and no shirt. The suspenders cut into the muscle between his neck and shoulders when he leaned forward to take it, acknowledging her with a slight drop of the head and a smile. The light in the room was oily, dark, vermillion. The babies, nursing or running about with the other children, were shellacked by the oil lamps and looked like antique dolls.

The woman stirring the pot of beans looked like smoked meat. The spoon beat at the side of the pot. She lifted her strong arms out of their shroud of steam and stood up straight to laugh. Her breasts pointed to her feet. They had fed so many people, it made them beautiful. They had served her well, not as play things only. They had once been full of milk. Her body built the bodies of her children. She gave them fat, protein and sugar. Placenta. Flesh from flesh, bone from bone.

Jordan was asking Leonard a question. It seemed to be important. They were discussing the council, politics. She strained her eyes to bring them into focus, but they were blurry and small. The words were coming out backwards. She concentrated. Jordan's voice was garbled by his magnificent beard, like carved maple. Leonard rose like a white headed copper pole, rail thin and stiff.

Hertzler spoke, but his words were lost on a wisp of air.

It was politics. "The General Council meeting in July, at Onondaga," Leonard said. "Some folks think I should go, to represent state citizens."

"What does that involve for us? I mean, I certainly don't feel like a citizen of state. I mean, this is sovereign land as far as I'm

concerned."

"There will be taxes, for the roads--"

"Ha," Jordan said. "Right."

"Security."

Everyone in the room looked at Leonard. Jordan said, "We have guns, if that's what you mean."

"The idea would be that anyone not currently a recognized nation of The Haudenosaunee would become an eighth nation. The Amish are the seventh, isn't that right Mordecai?"

Mordecai thought about it for a while. They all went far away. She was a ghost, haunting them, unable to make contact. Their syntax became strange. What was it like to be Mordecai Hertzler in a room full of drugs and naked women? She thought she should feel sorry for him. There was nothing here but menace and shame. She should never have brought him here. It was like lying there naked in the bath. Had she been masturbating? A man walks into the woods and sees a woman masturbating in the tub, Hand me my towel, she says. But she made him turn around. Well, even the president of the united states sometimes has to stand naked. She could have driven one of the other trucks over, or flown the hovercraft. It would have been so much faster.

The nursing baby's eyes were closed and one hand clasped its mother's breast. The mother's eyes were slightly dazed, they gazed off into the dark. There was something so bovine about nursing a child. She herself had had a wet nurse. It was the healthy thing to do. But that wasn't what she was thinking about. It was this sort of sustained, mutual harvest. To dissolve bones into bones, mulch oneself and give over. It was life, that thing that always lay beyond control. There was something irredeemably errant and free to life. Drift was ruler of the universe. Complexity and change, theme and variation. They thought they could nail it down, but all you could

ever do was initiate a new process.

"We need to have a voice at council. The idea is to first put together a delegation, and then hold elections. It's a start."

"We'll talk about it."

What had she asked her friend to do? It was insane. They'd find out, right away, it was inevitable, they always do. Owen Bradlee, reviewing an electraweave sales report, while eating toast, will want to know why sales are down and get an answer. A hospital administrator will crack at the bottom; sell out a psychiatrist to a sales rep, who will send it on to a manager and so on up the line. Bradlee nails the doctor, and then they search for an inside job. One day, someone you don't know walks up to you at a soda machine and shoots you in the back of the head. Her heart pounded in her ears. Possibilities raced by behind her eyes. Everyone was under an imminent certain threat. There was nothing specific, just an increase in chatter. And the certainty that things always work out badly. She had overplayed her hand. The contract. It never went away. People were slaves to their genes. Parents signed lifetime contracts before birth. You can't control life itself, but you can control things. You could satisfy vanity. There were gene hunters out there. After women like Sky. Naturals. They searched for beautiful eyes and tall physiques; sense anomalies, acute vision, perfect pitch. The richest people in the world were enslaving themselves for vanity. What did that mean?

There was no way out of this. Every second she spent just sitting there increased the risk. The room diminished around her and her eyes were buried deep in the middle of her head. Way across the table she watched Leonard and Sky break into slow laughter. Smoke poured from his nose and mouth. Jordan laughed in quick amused outbursts, and pinched his nose. The nursing woman smiled and Hertzler was laughing too. Then her face became a point, her eyes slits. She felt very snakelike. She could actually become her snake self,

a cobra, hissing and flicking her tongue, with a jeweled hood, like a crown of fire, charmed by the dancing lights of the room. She realized at once that she was going insane.

The woman stopped nursing and her distended, purple nipple glistened in the candlelight. The candle on the table grew brighter as she watched it. Wax accreted in drips up the base. Leonard was speaking to Hertzler and Hertzler was looking at her.

"But Little Shem is O.K.?"

"The boy's afraid. We had a meeting with the bishop and we're gonna go ahead and kill it tonight if we can. I knew you would want to know, so I come to tell you."

Leonard frowned. "If you'd only let me tag it."

Mordecai shook his head. "The old ways are the best ways."

"But I could have rigged a collar. Anytime it came near your place, ZAP," he said, pointing at his head, "in the neck."

Jordan chuckled. The woman at the stove smiled.

"The Bishop says it isn't Ottning."

"But it uses solar power, you've been doing that for two hundred years."

"Can't be, I'm sorry. Do you want to come with us then?"

"It's worth studying alive. It could be the only one of its kind, or it could be one of many. We need to know."

"Children got to milk the cows in the morning. It ain't safe up there like that. You know."

Jordan said, "The tag, what's it do?"

Leonard grew animated, sat straight up in his seat and began to shape what he was saying with his hands. He was squeezing words between his fingers like dough and then saying them. "It's a BioWatch Unit, about as big as a tick. It sends out a signal. You can program it anyway you want. It'll send back medical data, blood

analysis, and its position, up to twenty k away. I could tag an animal and know everything about it without ever seeing it.” Leonard stood. “Well, let’s get on with it then. Jordan, I’ll pass along what you said to the others, and we’ll meet at my house. Thank you for the thatch.” They shook hands. “You coming with us Ruth in the truck?”

She nodded yes. “I’m sorry Mordecai.”

“No ma’am, it’s quicker that way.” He smiled and bobbed his big rough head. Reality was starting to gel again. She was tired. Thoughts and feelings knocked about. The fear and panic faded and she felt dull and flat and thought, poor cougar.

Sky was slumped against the door of the truck, Bryson sat in the middle. They waited. Sky’s eyes were bloodshot. She smelled sweaty and her arms were dirty. My god, she thought. What would a bounty gene hunter do. They’d scrape out all her bone marrow, harvest her ova, her neural stem cells, and sell off the organs. There was a knock on the window. It was Rose, with a basket. Sky sat up and opened the door. “For you Ruth,” she said. Ruth took the basket.

“What is it?”

“Many things. Chamomile and peppermint tea, skin cream, one for your face, one for your body. And the green one there is bite and sting salve. It’s real good with ticks.”

“I love these candles.” She felt and smelled the beeswax.

“That’s the last thing. Honey.”

She held the jar up to the sun and watched the light refract. “Thank you so much.”

Back at the house she couldn’t make herself look at the computer or think about work. She was ravenously hungry and thirsty. She popped some popcorn and drank a couple of stouts on the porch, then lay down in the hammock, swinging back and forth. Velodia was at risk. Bryson knew how to work Bradlee, but the people he worked for were another story. Bradlee under real pressure? She’d never seen

it.

The only way to protect Velodia was to go back and fix it.

She needed to study a large number of heavy users without tipping off the competition, or lawyers. They were gathering in underground clubs. She had read about it in the newspaper, and reports from Bradlee. He knew how many pills they were selling.

The dogs made a huge racket, barking and claws scraping around on the truck bed. He was on his way out to join the Hertzler’s lion hunt. Most likely they’d tree the animal and gun it down that way. What was worse, getting gunned down out of a tree, or wearing a BioWatch tag and a shock collar? It was better off dead.

What would a BioWatch unit do to a man, she wondered. How would it feel knowing your every move is monitored. Heart rate and respiration. It happens all the time. House arrest. On the job surveillance. Certain medical conditions.

She could tag them on the street. Follow their movements, monitor their vital signs. Chart their mortality. It would be the only intervention. There’d be no exposure. There would be no placebo effect. Just data.

It was time to go back to work. Then she’d be all done with it, one way or another.

She tried to go to sleep then for a few hours, before packing her things and leaving but she couldn’t. At 11, 12 and at 1:30 she awoke to pee, feeling as if she hadn’t been asleep at all. She drank shots of liquor and still her heart took off with her thoughts and raced out of control. It was like being divided in two and the two halves were passing each other by at high speed, like Amphibatrains arriving and leaving the station. One side watched an onslaught of images, of Hertzler and the distended purple nipple, Sky’s perfect breasts squashed flat on her elbow. Of BioSynthesis Tanks, goggle eyed embryos suspended in yellow liquid. A handful of barley pouring into



the pot of beans, dreadlocks in a midnight snood. The cold empty space where Leonard belonged. She drank so much she felt nauseous and the room spun slowly overhead.

She must have fallen asleep because the cry awakened her. Her heart froze, her neck got cold and her scalp tingled. It was the cry of a murdered woman, a soul shrieking out of the body, followed by dogs barking and a dozen or so gun shots, trailing off. She got out of bed. It was 3:30. She threw on a wrap and stepped into sandals, stomped up the stairs and out the front door. No one was in the driveway but there was a commotion in the apple orchard up the driveway, lantern lights flashing in the trees.

The hunting party, all dressed in black, with white shirts, hats tipped back on their heads so they could see, stood around the cougar which lay steaming on the ground, punctured with bullet holes. The lanterns were set around the cat to light it and the men were quite animated, their big shadows cast onto the bare apple boughs loomed and shrank. They talked all at once, kicking back the dogs that kept poking their noses in-between their legs, to get a piece of what they found and caught. Three dogs lay mauled on the ground a hundred yards back, where the panther turned to fight. It didn't look so huge. It was brown and gold and white, soaked in blood. The head was large and limp; the eyes squeezed shut, the white jaw slack.

Leonard didn't say a word. He and Mordecai Hertzler stood off to the side, in the shadows. His face was creased and grim. He stared coldly at the dead animal and shook his head. "It was just a regular cat. We could have beaten it away with a stick."

Dennis Blanpied came in from the driveway. "Whudja catch?"

Leonard squinted at the dark to see him. "Oh, a mountain lion," he said scornfully.

"I need to talk to you."

"So do I," Bryson said.

"Can it wait Ruth?"

"I've got to go back."

"I've got time," Dennis said. "I'll see what the boys are up to. Hey," he yelled out. "Whatcha got there?"

She looked at the cat as the men opened their circle to let Dennis in. There is always something shameful in a corpse. This cat who had terrified men lay dead in a heap. It was that way with people. This is how we learn.

The men began to tell about the hunt, in German and in English. Dennis handed out tailormades. She followed Leonard up the short path out of the orchard. In the shadows he looked old and hollowed out. His eyes were red and sunken.

He made coffee and they sat on the porch.

"I'm not up for this anymore, staying up all night hunting," he laughed. "Those boys thought they had treed the world's biggest cat. My god, they were expecting a monster. Hell, I was too. I believed it."

"It's out there somewhere, isn't it?"

"Oh sure. I got casts of paw prints, teeth. But, even to hunt one down like that and gloat. Maybe it had to go. But it's a bad thing. They have furious, bloody souls. They contemplate, stalk their prey. A bunch of men and dogs blast that to pieces in a tree. Anyone of us alone with that animal would be wetting our pants and climbing a tree, I can tell you that. You can beat them off with a stick, but will you? Or will you stand there staring at it, too afraid to move. It will look you in the eye and decide what to do."

"Leonard, I'm sorry about the mountain lion, but I've got to talk to you now."

He looked at her absently and then smiled. "Yes, of course, I'm sorry. You were saying?"

"It's time. I've got to go back."

"You're not happy here?"

"It's been two months."

"It hasn't been that long. You've only just gotten here. The weather is turning. Rain will be here any day, more than you can stand. And winds, I promise winds."

"I'm serious. Two months are up. I have work to do. I'm worried about Velodia. I think I'm onto something. I think I can get a BioWatch bug made, to tag transcryptasine users and monitor them electronically."

"But that's demented. You can't do that."

"You'd do it to a mountain lion."

"Yes, a wild cat. Rather than kill it I would. To protect people. To learn."

"Why draw the line there? Look, I've been following the news. It's a fad in every city now. They estimate thousands of users in the New York alone. I know with a sample that size I'll find something, some way to make it work. And then, I'm out of it. I'll come back to stay. I'll pull my weight. You can hang on to Sky too, I don't care. Just let me finish this one last piece of business."

"And your contract?"

"They'll let me go if I fix it."

"And if you can't?"

"I'll write a report and release it."

He rubbed his chin and drank some coffee. Dennis appeared in the doorway. Leonard looked at her.

"Goddamn it Leonard! Do you know how hard it is for me, leaving you here? I'm going to do it though." She breathed to calm down and said, "Dennis, come in."

"I've got a favor to ask." He spoke quietly and low, looking at

them steadily.

"What is it?" Leonard asked, suddenly worried. "Sit down. What's wrong?"

Two men walked into the room, dressed in jeans and T-shirts. Baseball caps shaded their faces.

"I need you to hide these guys out for a few days."

Leonard nodded slowly. "Who might come looking for them?"

"The police. The army."

"What'd they do?"

Dennis looked at them and made a face. "Killed two surveyors who wouldn't get off their land. Oh," he said, interrupting Leonard, "the surveyors fired first, but--" he gestured with open hands.

"What do I do if the police come?"

Dennis looked around. "Hide 'em out with your dogs, or your pigs. These cops, they're stupid. They follow their little instruments around and bark into their helmets. They won't mess with dogs and they won't get into any pig shit."

Leonard looked dubious.

"Look, I'm asking as a favor. These men are my nephews. I look out for them."

"O.K. Take 'em down to the where the wine vats are. I'll bring 'em some blankets. We can work something out in the morning."

They shook hands. "Thanks Leonard. In a couple of days we'll move 'em out to Hertzler's."

"No."

"Yeah. The Bishop says o.k. Ruth, goodbye."

He kissed her on the cheek and she said, "Chief, keep my husband out of trouble."

"Yeah, right. Tomorrow Leonard?"

"Tomorrow."

When the three men were well out of earshot she handed him one gold disc. “The phone won’t be safe. We have to be extra careful now. If there’s a dip in sales they’ll be looking for an inside job. I’m leaving these with you. Keep it in one of your diaries. When the time comes I’m going to sell the stock and buy diamonds. The other disc I’m hanging on to.”

“I don’t want the money.”

“It’s eight million dollars. Of course you want it. Knock yourself out.” She laughed. “I’m going to pack now.”

“When will you come back?”

“It all depends.”

“Thanksgiving?”

“No. Definitely not.”

“Christmas?”

“We’ll see.”

He got up and went to the rail of the porch. The men were down below asking what to do with the cougar.

“Put it in the tool shed,” he yelled in German.

“Let’s go downstairs and take a shower.”

“Do I smell that bad?”

“Feral. But I’m beginning to like it.” She put her arms around him. They showered in the hot, sulfury water, soaping each other up. They towed off and lay down side by side, dozing until sunrise. Then she packed her few things into the canvas bag with the wooden handles, kissed him on the lips and flew back to the city.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR DISCREET PROTOCOLS

“There’ve been a few F changes, Bryson. Don’t be alarmed.” Bradlee rose up behind the black desk like a vapor plume at night, and pushed a paper clip around.

Bryson assessed his office. He had a wall of monitors behind him, and he faced two walls of tinted windows, with a view of the world. No that there was much worth seeing in that part of Queens. But the sun looked grand reflected in all that water. “I can see that. What happened to my lab?”

“Needed it for another project. We can’t have idle labs, can we? This is not a tax deductible, charity organization.”

“Who got it?” she demanded to know.

“Katsy Chou I think.”

“That time serving Genetel bitch? You gave it to her?”

“Monozone Research Associate now. Be collegial.”

“Did you recruit her?”

“She defected. Fripp picked up her contract and she’s working on rapid cell division. The research is very promising with tremendous applications.”

“Growth dynamics. Boo hoo.”

“Gratitude, my love, gratitude. Name the three graces.”

“How the hell should I know?”

“The seven deadly sins? Ha. I thought so. You’ve been moved to lab 5. It’s a little more discreet.”

"Antarctica. And it's tiny. An office crammed full of equipment, and a room to sleep in."

"A luxury cell, Bryson. And I've seen it. It's maroon and black. Very sexy. The shower is a delight, and you can get chilled sunlight beamed in whenever you like. I think it's grand."

"And what about my team? Some of those people have worked for me for ten years."

He clapped his hands. "Broken up, presto! Sent around the world. Had to be done. They are so effective, they need to be, er, spread around. To prevent talent from clumping up all in one place. You understand?"

Bryson shook her head. "Bullshit. You fucking liar."

He laughed. "Please don't be that way, Bryson. Now, suppose you tell me all about this plan of yours." He put his hands behind his head and leaned back in the chair, eyes half shut. "Go on, I'm listening."

"Can I sit down?"

"By all means, do."

"But there isn't any chair."

He sat up abruptly and looked around. "Heavens. I am so sorry. Cindy, bring in a chair for Dr. Bryson."

Cindy, a young woman with a bloom of tinselly black hair and a perky, bouncing bosom, brought in a chair. Bradlee gave a curdled smile.

"What's it like with her?"

"Ah, young wine, Bryson. Doesn't have the complexity or structure of a ripe old tawny port like you, but a beguiling sweetness suffuses everything she does. In bed, anyway. She's not terribly useful around the office, I'm afraid."

"All right Bradlee, let's get down to business."

He leaned back in the chair as before and said, "Fine then."

"I need to get a bug made."

"A bug?"

"Yeah. A biosurveillance bug."

He pondered this and said, "Not really our kind of thing, that."

"Well, they do it with animals."

"Oh indeed. And police and intelligence officers and gaolers. And then all the medical applications."

"But they don't monitor what we have to monitor."

He spun slowly in his chair away from her, still recumbent, and gazed at the screens. He mumbled something and then said, "Bryson, tell me what you think of this."

All the screens filled up with the image of a fawn drinking from a stream at dawn. A vigilant buck and doe stand by. There's a chorus of birds and crickets. Then the screen goes black and the words appear: Is this your lucky day? A deep, calm voice says, "Ask your doctor for Paregane."

"Well? It's going into every key market, five times an hour all through primetime."

"Don't involve me in this stuff."

His voice became dour. "If you're thinking of keeping your hands clean, forget about it. There's work to do." He sat up and brightened. "I've arranged a press conference for this afternoon, and tomorrow you've got two meetings in the Catskills somewhere."

She groaned and looked at the ceiling. "God how I hate the Catskills."

"But you grew up there."

"What meetings?"

He stuttered and looked about. "Oh, some biosynthesis something or other, and a civic organization. Didn't you read the itinerary I

sent? Anyway, you're to present Paregane and discuss synthetic amino acid production and tubule alteration at the conference and the civic club is one of those, er, current events type places, a puff piece. I believe your father or grandfather had a hand in its early endowment." Bryson started to say something but he stopped her with a slight lifting of his face, so she would not ruin the drama of his pause. "I'm saving the big one for last. You're coming with me to the Fripp dinner."

She was simultaneously stunned and irritated, flattered and appalled. "Why am I going to the Fripp dinner?"

"As my escort of course. You don't expect me to go alone?"

She spoke slowly, but with a strange smile impossible to interpret. "I loath," she said, drawing out the long o, "and when I say loath, I mean, when I enter a room full of black tie brass, I can feel it in my asshole; so when I do manage to open my mouth--"

"Just open it to eat. The food is extraordinary, or so I hear. Last year they brought in Gaston Montague from Geneva."

"Just keep smackin' the sore spots Bradlee."

"Surely you don't bear a grudge against Geneva?"

"Stiff, Calvinistic Aryan bastards camped out on pylons. Nothing's changed in seven hundred years, and the food wasn't fit for a horse."

"Montague may be the best chef in the world right now. There are at least a half dozen others there from all around the world preparing everything from lobster to sausage. Have you tried Peculaire's sea foam? It looks for all the world like a chunk of that crud you find on the beach. But when you slice into it, you realize its dab and fois gras. The fois gras gives it that brownish yellow color."

"I gag in honor of Peculaaar. Now what about my bug?"

"Excuse me." He mumbled to his computer and stock prices began to flash across the screen. There were summaries, digests and raw data. "We just went up ten points, Bryson. No, this dinner is very

important. Priss Valdez will be there and so will a lot of others who have business with each other. Leonard Two Feathers." He nodded gravely.

She started to fidget. This was her absolute time limit for spending on something without a result. "My bug."

"Let's have a little talk with Jacob Boyle. Boyle?" Cindy opened the door and led in Boyle.

Like life itself Jacob Boyle was nasty, brutish and short. He was squared off at the shoulders, had a slight potbelly but otherwise was scrawny, with a black pencil mustache, and dark penetrating eyes. His cheeks were acne scarred; his nose was crooked, broken and never set right. He was dressed in a cheap, charcoal linen suit, the lapels thin and long, with one brass button below the navel, and pockets big enough for a gun. Although he was clean, the general impression he gave was of a man making every effort not to succumb.

He also looked harassed. His wife, Trinh Ma, was a devout catholic who refused to use birth control. They had nine children, aged one to seventeen. The nine children had impoverished them, and there was little they could afford to do besides fuck, which they did often enough, time permitting.

Boyle kept trying to get somewhere but he could not. He stalled out on police work, got nowhere as a crook, and landed in private security at Monozone where, for some reason, he thrived. But the only place he had ever truly been happy was the military. As a contractor in the Third Caspian War, and then in the Carpathians, Kashmir and Mexico, he learned everything he needed to know for a career back home. But the constant violence had knocked a few screws loose, and he spent most of his time trying to tighten them with alcohol and then heroin, neither of which worked. Then he met Trinh Ma and cleaned himself up. She was the most beautiful woman who ever let him fuck her. He couldn't give that up. He wasn't

stupid.

When he took the job, she told him, Jacob, deyuh gonna make you do things you don't wanna do. Yeah, but they were also going to pay him, and if they could make enough money, then their other kids could go to school, not just his eldest.

"Ah Mr. Boyle, come in. This is Dr. Ruth Bryson. Bryson, meet Mr. Jacob Boyle." Boyle attempted a smile, which in his case involved lifting his thick eyebrows and turning down the corners of his mouth.

"It's a pleasure," he said.

"You two will be partners of a sort. Boyle, you're to do what she says. She'll have money. Your job is to keep her safe, handle all the details. We have to get results and we have to be discreet. I presume, Boyle, you're familiar with the term?"

"Whatever boss. Don't go blowing off in da bar. Keep it tight, between us three."

"Henry the Eighth used to say, Three may keep counsel, if two be out of the room."

Boyle scratched his face and stared at Bryson.

"I need a BioWatch bug made."

Boyle nodded. "For surveillance? Like what they use on animals? I seen it on nature shows."

"Precisely," said Bryson. "Only we need to program it a little differently."

"I know a guy who can do whatever."

Bradlee stood. "Well, hasn't this been nice. Now, run along to your new lab, draw some cash," he said, escorting them to the door, where he put his hand on Bryson's ass. She stepped on his foot, hard, and left with Boyle.

They sat down in her office. It looked exactly like the old one, maroon and black walls, composite shower/toilet unit, kitchenette,

desk, cot and computer. "Shall I tell you what I want?" she asked.

"Nah, I'll just take you down there," he said, looking the place over. "So you're some kind of a star around here? A real doc's doc?"

"I'm just a piece of ass they kick around to see if any money will pop out."

He laughed. "Oh yeah, one a dose. Look doc, I gotta take you wit me, but you gotta stick close. Dis guy I know, he can do what you want. He's an old army spook. A guy who did a little bit of everything, interrogations, assassinations, sabotage, psyops, surveillance. But you gotta understand, the kinda neighborhood where guys like that live, dey don't see too many high class docs walkin' around."

She lit a cigarette. "Do you want some coffee?"

"Sure."

She made coffee in a glass beaker with filter paper and poured out two cups. They drank it down. "How do you know this guy?"

"Me and him, we worked together overseas. Mostly on the Caspian."

"How many years did you do?"

"Eight all together."

"That must have been bad."

He shrugged. "I liked it well enough. I've seen some stuff. But I never got nuked, thank god. Over there, a life ain't worth halfa one here. And here, it ain't worth nothin' at all."

"Less than nothing. This bug guy, how's his math?"

"I never saw his degree or nothin' but I think he's some sort of physicist. Experimental is what you call it."

"Why does he do this then?"

"A man's gotta make a livin' somehow. Maybe he don't wanna go down as some company bitch." She flinched. "Oh, excuse my

french.”

“Forget about it. Let’s go, Boyle. You got a family?”

He smacked his head. “Do I got a family? Jesus fucking Christ. Nine kids Dr. Bryson. One still hangin’ off da tit. Two if ya count me.”

Boyle thought the hovercraft would get ripped off so they flew to a parking deck on 52nd Street and took two PCPs into midtown. They got off on a crumbling platform three stories up. The handrail was broken, the stairs down were slippery with rain and creaked and swayed. Every surface was covered in an incomprehensible scrawl of writing. It was not hot, just regular and overcast with an occasional dirty drizzle.

“It’s just a couple of blocks from here,” Boyle said. They were on a street along a small canal choked with garbage. The water pushed its way over busted bags of rotting foodstuff. Household refuse collected in high soggy piles. Men pissed into it. On either side were boarded up apartments, charred with smoke. A few were habitable, doors and windows behind steel bars, and many more occupied. Other than the men pissing there was no one out. There was no noise. A giant rat trundled across the way. Bryson’s muscles tightened. “They don’t come out in the day.”

“Tell that to da rat!” he said, laughing. He pulled out his gun and shot it. Its body spun around splattering blood. Pigeons fled up to the roofs. Bryson stared at the rat and then at Boyle.

“Why did you do that?”

He looked confused. “Didn’t you want me to do that?”

“Well I--no. It was just a rat.”

“Oh. Sorry then.”

The composite bridges over the canal were dirty with graffiti but it was more legible than at the PCP station. I got no fuckin job, street sheet. DKO was prevalent.

“What’s DKO,” she asked.

“Dr. K-O. Knock out. Doctor Knock Out. It’s a drug. Ya sleep for five days.”

“What’s the point of that?”

“You sleep for five days.”

“I don’t get it.”

“What’s to get? They say it’s like death. You get to be dead for five days, no noise, no dreams, no distractions, no stink, no fuckin’ rats. Get it now?”

She shook her head and mumbled, “Like sitting down to a snack before a great banquet.”

“I don’t come from here,” he said. “My people, they threw it all on a truck and crammed onto high ground in Jersey. All da poor together. Back in them days, everything was racial. Now, after all that, we’re fucking mutts. I heard stories growin’ up. You got no job, no money. Where you gonna go? For me, most guys, it’s war and then the police. But here, you don’t wanna fuck with them. They’re no good. This is where it all sinks doc. When you fuck up where I come from, this is where ya go. In catlic terms, where I am is purgatory and this is hell. But it’s various. Cause up there,” he waved in a northerly direction, “you got your rich, and da theaters, and them, what? Fancy, you know, da kids. And then there are the entrepreneurs. The people makin’ money, like my friend. Restaurants, nightclubs. They wanna be near the action, those kids and people. So they’re here too. Not here here,” he said, pointing to the block they were on, “but here,” waving his hands around to indicate the generality.

One of the men pissing into the canal, as he saw them approach, faced them and started jerking off.

“Will ya,” Boyle said under his breath, looking uneasily back and forth. Bryson laughed. As they passed he continued to pump away with an idiotic, toothless grin. “She’s a fuckin’ lady,” said Boyle to the

man and then he casually kicked him into the canal. The man fell in backwards with a piercing shriek and struck a pile of decomposing animal remains. "I hope you fuckin' drowned, you fucking pervert," Boyle shouted. Then to Bryson, as the bloom of putrefaction engulfed them in its fumes, "Sorry doc, but a man's got to show respect or take a hit. You think that guy was just doing a pecker show? He milks his fang and don't get squashed and two blocks later, you see, someone's got a shank at your throat. Da first rule is, no one fucks with us."

They arrived at Ninth Avenue and turned south, into the lower thirties. In the center was an amphibatrain way and on either side were two lanes for traffic, delivery trucks, clumps of people on bikes and pedal cars. There was the odd automobile honking through the throng. Ninth Avenue was full of businesses. Residential buildings were heavily rented. Blackouts were common. The windows buzzed with fans. Storefronts lined the streets selling clothes and appliances, workers loading them in and out of sidewalk elevators. There were coffee shops with big blinking signs in the shape of a donut. On the second floors were sweatshops or bookies. They hit a block with a couple of bars. Outside of them men and women stood in groups of two or three, faces the color of fog, in heavy make up, legs bent, boots on the wall, cocky, and vigilant. An armored hovercraft passed slowly overhead.

Boyle walked fast, hands in pockets, looking at everyone, ahead, behind, to either side. A stream of patter poured out of him, informational mostly, but interrupted by editorial hiccups. At least he's consistent, she thought.

"Ain't I goin' too fast for you doc?" asked Boyle, slowing down.

"No, not at all. It feels good to give it a stretch."

He nodded. "Ever since they gave me a desk, I got this gut. Trinh Ma tried to put me on this blue paste shit. She calls it a diet to get

ridda da belly. And I ain't goin' to no fuckin' gym. Gyms are for assholes."

The air warmed, her joints limbered up and she felt a sweat about to break. "What time you got?" she asked.

"Two o'clock."

"And how far are we?"

"Just up there." He pointed to a 19th century brick building, braced on either side by massive wooden beams bolted through the facade. An ornate concrete stoop with eroded lions and scrollwork led up to a scarred, black composite door. In the vestibule, lit by a dim orange fixture sunk into the ceiling, were unmarked doorbells to each apartment. Boyle pushed one and flexed his jaw. He pulled out a pack of filterless cigarettes and shook one loose like he'd been meaning to do it for a while. "This guy here, he's a little weird."

Bryson feigned alarm. "In what way weird?"

"Well, aside from how he looks? Things didn't leave him right. His injuries upset him, made his mind a little sick, you know? He ain't loony or nothing. But you'll see. He's got a lot of mechanics."

"Mechanics, as opposed to what?"

"Not everyone got synthetics in the war, doc. Too expensive. But still, there's somethin' else. Anyway, he's a real nice guy." The door buzzed and he pushed it open, blowing smoke out which flew backwards in her face. The hall smelled like boiled cabbage and dirty feet. The floor was black with dirt and the walls were covered in what looked like grease.

"There's no elevator or nothing, but it's just a coupla flights up. Don't touch the banister."

"I'm used to it."

He stopped. "For real?" He shook his head. The steep narrow stairway sank and creaked beneath each step. All the doors were



boarded up except for one, which Boyle slapped with the flat of his hand three times. A second later it opened and they entered the room. The air was twenty degrees cooler. It had a dense, sour smell of chemicals. The windows were covered with two-inch slabs of composite and heavy flack curtains were rolled up tight against the ceiling. All the walls were knocked down and he had the entire floor. Lamps hung from the ceiling on chains at random intervals. There were workstations with roaring hood vents sucking out the fumes of assayers and fabricators. It was a bedlam of dials and boxes of equipment stacked against the walls. Computers in mismatched banks chugged along. Her eyes adjusted to the clutter and picked out familiar objects, three generations out of date: microscopes, spectrometers, atom smashers, lasers and glove boxes. Liquid nitrogen tanks stood smoking sullenly in the corner.

Seated at a desk, between two tall metal wheels as high as his ears, behind a computer and towering piles of paper, crumpled scrolls of electraweave, translucent cables like a swarm of neurons and composite boxes, was a tiny man with long black hair surrounding a bald spot. His face was lined and old. His right eye, the skull above it and the cheek below, were clearly mechanical. His left hand was articulated metal, no skin, no tactile sheath of any kind. Riveted on top of the fingers were little red diodes, shining and flashing every time he moved. On the wall behind the desk was a prosthetic limb with an arrow through it. Hanging from the arrow was a crudely lettered sign:

fUck yoU

V.A.

loVe,

zAck

"The sign," Zack said, "is of interest?" His voice was artificial, disembodied, trebly.

"I'm Bryson," she said, sticking out her hand to shake the metal one. He looked at her hand with his crystal eye (a blackish ball with a dilating aperture in the middle) and sighed in a rich baritone, "Forgive my disdain for human flesh." He smiled, revealing a row of composite studs. "The V.A.," he continued, in the deep liquid voice, "condescended to outfit me with prosthetic limbs." He clacked his fingers together and the red rivets glowed brightly. "Hello Boyle."

Boyle got an uncomfortable grin and started to sweat. "Zack, Bryson's my boss. Can ya try and stick to one voice?"

"Variety is the spice of life Boyle. But if you insist." Then he looked at Bryson and said, "Very brave of you to come. The inventor of Euphorics. I've seen you on the news. Got anything to cheer a tap-dancin ambassador up? A little Paregane perhaps?"

"I neither carry nor use anything stronger than tobacco."

"And you aren't even an alias. Most people like you try to project into here and find themselves immediately phased out." He slid back from the desk and they saw that instead of legs he had a movable base. "It goes up and down stairs and I can empty the potty chamber myself. The hubris, the, ah presumption of so many people is that we want to be whole again. Who by choice would keep a thing so easy to blow off as a leg. If my eye offend thee, pluck it out." He reached up with his metal hand and pulled the upper right quadrant of his face off, holding it forward, the eye roving back and forth between Bryson and Boyle. He plugged it back in and smiled. "How may I assist the inventor of Paregane."

"I need a BioWatch bug for humans," she said, relieved his show was over.

"Hmmm. To track their position only?"

"No. I need to monitor their brains."

He spun around on the base, and rode off into the hinterland of worktables on the two tall wheels. At a ten-foot high shelf he stopped

and rose up on a flexible steel pole attached to his seat, which bent whichever way, he bent to reach boxes, bags and baskets crammed onto the shelves. "I've just the thing here," he said, his voice going deep and coarse. "They used it to hunt spies in Champa back in '75, very effective. Ah--" he sank down into the base with a hiss and was back at his desk. He took out a ceramic box and showed it to Bryson. "This contains a generic nanobot. A template."

Bryson watched him put it down on the desk. "Can it be programmed?"

"Certainly. What you need is a neuronanobot."

"I'm searching for very specific fields," Bryson said. "Can you program one to transmit what I need?"

"No problem. May I have a cigarette?"

Boyle, who had been standing by half asleep, grabbed suddenly for his crumpled pack.

"Not one of yours Boyle, one of hers," he said in a long, scaly voice, smiling like a snake. The paranoia was like walking face first into a cold web. Warily she took out a pack of cigarettes from her pale green muslin smock and handed him one. "Organic, aged Turkish leaf. Fragrant, earthy, with notes of clove, cherry and oak." He lit it and the grey exhalation drifted up into the naked bulb hanging by a wire overhead. "I am most honored to have met you Bryson. What would this world come to if people were allowed to feel their unhappiness, if they knew their true condition?" He fussed with the ceramic box and said, "In order not to interfere with the signals it's measuring, this neuronanobot will transmit data to a booster located in the subject's neck. That will have a limited range, depending on circumstances. Could be as low as ten k and as high as a hundred fifty. You'll get location via GPS and whatever electromagnetic activity--" his voice dropped and became officious, "specified on this form." He handed her a scrap of paper and a pencil

stub. "Anything else?"

"Heart rate, pulsox, REM, blood chemistry--"

"Full regular BioWatch features. No problemo. So, what's all this for?"

"Nothing," Bryson said.

"You know how it is Zack. We were never here."

Zack looked sad and said, in a cool, subterranean voice slightly hoarse with static, "I'll need a week to make a prototype. Copies after that I can do quickly. Now, the manner of delivery. Can you touch the subject? Does it have to be remote?"

Bryson looked at Boyle.

Boyle said, "What's the difference?"

"A neuronanobot is programmed to go to the brain and sit there till it decays. It's best delivered to the spine or nervous tissue, but can make its way up through the bloodstream. It cannot go via the digestive tract. So you can't put it in their food say. Eye drops, nasal swabs, a prick in the ganglia. There's also the risk of malfunction or rapid decay--"

"What are the stats on that?"

He hissed unctuously. "I don't know. Never used 'em on anyone I cared about if they lived or died. But I guess, odds are nothing happens. A few go blind, some die. It's like a stroke. Sometimes it happens over time, like a bunch of little tremors before an earthquake. And sometimes, boom, they go down."

Bryson lit a cigarette and squinted into Zack's onyx eye. "Remote delivery. Like a dart gun."

"A dart gun it is then. Go see a man down the block. Lieutenant Drake, weapons specialist and tattoo artist." Observing Bryson grinding her teeth he said, "Relax, it's a referral. I'm a great admirer of his work." He held up his silver hand and made the diodes flash.

“He did my lights. And this.” He pulled his shirt up to reveal a lightshow on his belly and chest of blue waves crashing on white sand. A blood red sun sank between his nipples, through the hair down to his belly button. “They showed us that picture and said it was the beach we were storming in Champa. Haven’t seen it yet.” He looked off around his lab, like a patriarch surveying his flocks. “But there’s always hope!” he smiled cheerfully. “Perhaps when I retire I’ll head off to a bungalow on a tropical shore and try my hand,” he clacked his finger together, “at a little surf casting.”

Bryson took a drag off her cigarette. “Yeah, maybe I’ll join you.”

“That would be an honor. There’s a lot a man can do down there for a woman at this height, you know, and it ain’t all cunnilingus either. Believe it or not, this thing swims.” He swiveled back and forth.

“I’m surprised it doesn’t fly,” she said.

“Oh, but it does! It does!”

“How much for the bug?”

“That depends on how long the prototype takes. I’ll need cash down, an advance applied to the final bill, nonrefundable. \$10,000.00 oughta cover it.”

Boyle gasped. “You must be fucking nuts, Zack.”

“This is Monozone I presume, you’re not, er, an impostor?”

“At ease, Boyle. Here’s your ten grand. We’ll be back in a week. And I want you to go to that guy what’s his name.”

“Drake. Lieutenant Drake,” Boyle said.

“Yeah him. Go get us a gun, make it two of ‘em and we’ll need, eventually, a thousand bugs, maybe more.”

Zack could not suppress a genuine smile. “See you on the beach, Dr. Bryson.”

Bryson bowed slightly and then, striking like a snake, with a flash

of intensity in her eye, she gripped his metal hand in hers and said, “There’s always hope, Zack,” releasing him before he could react.

Boyle had never seen anything like it. He thought about it all the way home on the amphibatrain, as it crossed New York harbor, stopped at a station on the former Staten Island, crossed the no longer narrow Verrazano Narrows and made land at Landing, New Jersey where it became a Jersey Go Transit amphibatrain and a new fare was charged for each passenger. Boyle was now half way home and nearly suffocated by the crush of bodies. Heads stood centimetres from his nose and even if his gut was big enough to act as a barrier it would have made no difference. People would have crammed it flat. There was nothing worse than a fat man on an amphibatrain.

Most people like Bryson were snobs. Condescending, always acting so nice, talking to you like you were stupid or something, or a child. Army and cop brass never talked to you like a child. Like a dog maybe, but not a child.

People like Bryson never say what’s on their mind and expect you to guess and get pissed if you can’t. It was lose, lose, lose with them. And he could never run it all down in his head, he was no good that way. The real game was never where he was, unless it was too late. But somehow he always pulled through. He was there, wasn’t he?

So what he thought. It always came down to so what. He couldn’t remember the last time something surprised him. Until Bryson. She was tough and didn’t give a fuck about rules. Sexy too for a lady in her sixties. The oldest woman he ever fucked was however old Trinh Ma was. 38. Maybe a few of the old buzzards he screwed in Azerbaijan were older, but he doubted it. They just looked old cause they were dying young. Starving people always look old, even the kids.

There was something about her face, he didn’t know what. It was a

hard face, not too pretty, except when she smiled. Then you could see how blue her eyes were. It was like looking at a cat, the white hair, the eyes all lit up. She wasn't stretched out and fake. She was rich, but she looked like a person. Maybe that was it.

And she was one ass kicker in a bar. The bar had been her idea but after the business at Zack's he needed a drink, even though he knew it would give him a headache later. The headache he had now. It was like this big river of pain fed by little streams of perfume and clothing smell and flesh. Maybe, he thought, another drink. But the bar car was a long way off, it would wipe him out working his way through the crowd and he didn't have the money anyway.

The only thing she shouldn't have done was pay Zack all that money. Zack never got the ten grand down from anyone. He was ripping her off. It didn't matter about who it was for. It was Boyle's deal and Zack would have done it for half of that if she'd let him fuck with him. You don't do that and then the respect's not there. That was a difference between rich and poor. They don't care. Chump change to them was what you could live on for a year. Well, aside from that he liked how she operated. How she treated him.

At Edgewood he struggled out of the car and took a huge gasp of foul air. The complex of methane plants that employed most of the town were pink and grey in a hazy twilight. Bamboo and modified fir stood in thick groves up and down the track and along the roads and sidewalks leading out of the station into the village of Edgewood. Edgewood was a grid of streets a half mile away from the methane plant, streets lined with little house cubes, arranged around a strip of bars, fast food joints, sex clubs and discount stores. Every block had its stand of evergreens and bamboo, municipal water and sewage, solar and hydrogen power for each house and a fire hydrant. The houses were composite sided cubes, blue, yellow or white with flat, solar paneled roofs and a little concrete play space in front. A narrow driveway entered a garage big enough for a family of four's bikes and

a box of all season sports equipment.

Boyle, in an increasingly choleric humour, rode the fifteen blocks from the station to his house with a thousand other commuters, weaving and ringing their bicycle bells and flashing their lights to turn or to stop. Even though they were more or less like him, he hated them all. Life was a pestilence. An imposition. Most days he would have been happy to just stay in bed. In fact, he felt that being born in someway was just being awakened out of oblivion for no good reason at all. They roused him up for this? But somewhere buried in the cynicism and ennui there was an ambition to get just ten centimetres ahead of the other slobs. He hated this ambition. It was like being possessed by an alien. A thing that looks like a lawn green octopus with intelligent eyes and delicate hands. But once it's inside you it hides out, waiting to take over when your guard is down.

Sometimes he thought of it as responsibility to his family. But that explanation always seemed false. Life, the village, the job were full of losers with families to support. They gave up while he kept banging away at it to get a few more bucks, move a little ahead.

And there was the law. If he wanted to send more than one kid to school he had to pay for it. Where do you get scratch like that from? He had to become a free agent if he wanted to move up. His search for the right patron took him to Laraby. Talk about a guy who always lands on his feet. Then Laraby put him onto Bradlee. That led to Bryson.

But he didn't work for her really, he knew that. She was butter on the toast. She was his assignment. He was, in the end, spying on the only person there he liked.

With a slight intake of breath he opened the door and prepared for the onslaught. He was clammy with drizzle and sweat and the cool air evaporated it off of his skin. The pleasant sensation consumed his entire mind for a moment. He was in the living room, with its folded

up day beds and blaring t.v. Toys, clothes, bowls of luridly colored food and cups of luridly colored beverages covered the bare, composite floor. Four children sat on a daybed in a stupor interrupted only by turf battles. They were Candy, 13, Lesbian, 11, Big Guy, 9, and Little Guy, 6. Crawling through the trash on the floor was his three-year-old Maria.

Standing in the doorway to the dining room, where there was a table between two day beds with six chairs crammed in around it was his wife, Trinh Ma, a small, worn out woman of thirty eight. She had short black hair and rough, dark skin. Her eyes looked like they'd been hammered into her head. She wore a white, V-necked t shirt and a one year old, Agatha, was sort of hanging in her forearm, sucking contentedly at her left breast. Trinh Ma's belly hung out over the tight waist of her pink jeans. Tugging at her leg was a dirty, four and a half year old boy, Nero, in underwear with a deep shit stain in the back. Trinh Ma screamed, "I told you to go potty an hour ago!"

"But Maria wouldn't let me in."

"Maria? What da fuck was she doing in there alone? Maria! I told you a million times--" she looked up at Boyle. "Oh, you. Let me tell you. I hate those fucking things!"

"What fucking things, what?" He hated being dropped into the middle of shit.

"I don't know what you call it. Alias. Awright? Alias! Ali asses in the kitchen. They make my skin crawl. Go deal widit. It's your work."

"You gotta slow down."

"Don't hit me Little Guy!"

"It's my pillow."

"Ow. Mommy, Little Guy hit me."

"Hit him back," Boyle said. "Don't let him get away with it."

"You fucking idiot," Trinh Ma said. "Don't listen to him. There'll

be no hitting."

Boyle snorted. "Reform. What a joke."

"Will ya get in der and talk to doze damn things and get 'em da fuck outta my house?"

"All right already." He turned his most formidable mug on the children on the day bed and said, "You listen to your mother! No hitting. No screaming. No nothing. Watch the fucking t.v. and shut up."

Trinh Ma swayed and looked at the ceiling. "We ain't raising robots! Shut up and watch t.v.? And you call yerself a father?"

"Leave me alone."

"Ow, no biting," she said to the one year old, and jerked him away from her breast. The hem of her t-shirt sat on her swollen, wet nipple. Boyle stared at it.

"Gimme a taste of that. I promise not to bite."

"Get out."

"C'mon," he implored.

"We got enough kids," she said out of the corner of her mouth, giving him the eye.

"I never heard a one got pregnant in her tit."

She yanked down her shirt. "Boob."

"I could eat yer pussy and that wouldn't knock you up either."

She looked at the kids on the day bed and said, "You don't think they understand? What are you, drunk?"

"I ain't drunk."

"Sure you are. Come home from work drunk. Ain't we done with that?"

"Come on. Don't be a fucking bitch. I just got home."

"Go deal Jake. The kitchen."

"I'm goin', I'm goin'." He rubbed her ass on the way out, up between her legs and she gave him a kiss on the ear. "Awright mister," she yelled, "get in the bathroom to change those pants."

Boyle went into the kitchen, a tiny, clean white room with a ceramic sink, oven and stovetop and a scarred composite island in the middle. The fridge was in the pedestal of this all around surface, which was currently piled up with crap. Several feet away, standing in the corner, were two high definition holographic aliases, Laraby and Bradlee. They almost looked real, but the high definition over-saturated the colors so they looked like they had been painted out of light. Laraby was a short man with a potbelly and a little purple head, his face marked by a permanent scowl. Humorless, he lived for the rat fight. Hot to Bradlee's cool.

Bradlee scared him. His color grey wasn't right. Like beer in a frosty mug. Guys like that, you never knew where you stood, but you had to work for them cause it's your boss who says so.

With Laraby, if things didn't go his way, you knew it. Then for some it's a bullet in the head, end of story. But with Bradlee, meaning drifted in and out of the conversation.

He hated aliases as much as Trinh Ma did, maybe more, but he was used to them. Monozone had the money to use them all the time and their equipment was state-of-the-art. Boyle balked at a home receiver but Laraby wouldn't take no. This Bryson case would involve spontaneous home visits.

"Well Mr. Boyle. A little late?" The alias of Bradlee asked, as Laraby paced the corner.

"I missed my usual train."

"Explain that, willya? Why'd ya miss the train?" the alias of Laraby asked in a big barky voice.

Boyle faced it. The Bradlee alias said, "Do face the machine, Boyle."

"Oh yeah." Boyle faced the dull ceramic cube bolted to the wall.

"Why'd ya miss the train?" Repeated the Laraby alias.

"Cause Bryson and I stopped off for a drink, o.k.? We was thirsty. She said it was all right," he added in his defense, "and you said she was the boss."

The Bradlee alias pinched its lips into a smile and its long pale fingers brushed at its white mustache. "Relax Mr. Boyle. We're all on the same side here. She is the boss. And an important woman."

"You're damn right she is," expostulated the Laraby alias with a lucent spray of saliva. "Don't you forget it Boyle."

"We trust Dr. Bryson implicitly. You're there to protect her. This," it paused and hummed, "situation is delicate. We need to conduct our research in total secrecy. Dr. Bryson might inadvertently do something--"

The Laraby alias cut in. "If she fucks up Boyle, we need to know. Don't ever forget who you work for."

"Indeed. Did she talk about anything of interest at the bar? Mention anything?"

Boyle understood. "No, not really." He looked from one to the other and then snapped back to the box. "Just about her husband and her vacation."

The Bradlee alias raised its eyebrows. "Leonard Bryson. I see. Anything about a Dr. Velodia?"

"A doctor what?"

"vuhLODIA!" shouted the Laraby alias.

"No, not that one."

"And what did you do about this bug." The Bradlee alias said the word distastefully.

"Well, we ordered it from my buddy Zack. The only problem is, she paid too much. I told her not to but she did."

"Oh, don't worry about that Mr. Boyle. You've done well. I'll see you in the morning then."

"Yeah, have a good one Boyle. And keep your eye on the ball. She may be your boss but I, we're who you work for."

"Yeah yeah," he mumbled. It was making his stomach hurt, having to talk into the cube, feeling like they're in back of him staring.

"Cheer up old boy!"

Boyle pretended to smile. "So I can get fucked up with her if that's what she wants?"

The Bradlee alias chuckled. "Absolutely. And it needn't stop there. If you've got anything left over after coming home to this place, give it to her. Knock yourself out Boyle. Have a time of it."

They zipped out into a hiss of static.

Bradlee and Laraby turned away from the screen and sat down on either side of Laraby's bare distressed steel desk. From his office they could see Manhattan's jagged towers rising from invisible battlements, the Atlantic Ocean, miles of tidal mud flats, and the grey, battered industrial expanse of buildings and waste lots below. The sky was a coarse, granular grey flecked with violet and lavender. Rain occasionally sprayed against the window.

"Well, I think he'll do," Bradlee said, touching his fingertips together. Laraby was an indispensable species of rat.

Laraby looked at the window irritably. "He's a stooge. Hot for her already."

"Every man who meets her is. Her charms are inexplicable. She's not beautiful, she runs to fat, and for the daughter of a diplomatic family, incredibly vulgar. And yet, well--"

"Who gives a shit about that?"

Bradlee stared at him and said nothing.

"You saw that place. Those kids have got him by the balls. Like a

brood. Boyle will do as he's told."

Bradlee shook his head sadly. His eyes watered. "That was an awful lot of children under foot. I've never seen anything quite like it. Just watching it made my skin itch. All he has to really do is protect her."

"Ah," Laraby scoffed. "There's not one of 'em who's loyal. You wait and see. Genetel or Meditron will come sniffing her butt and she'll go."

"I don't think so."

"Whatever." Laraby stood.

"Well then," Bradlee said, remaining in his chair a second, "I'll be going." He stood slowly, as if it pained him slightly and rumbled his lips and mustache into an equivocal smile.

Bradlee started out for his own office but half way there he changed directions and took an elevator down and a lateral to Bryson's lab where he found her seated at her desk eating a plain yogurt and drinking a cup of chamomile tea, with honey and lemon. The screen lit up her face; her hair was blue. She had changed. She was relaxed and her face was tanned. Her cheeks were lean and her eyes were bright.

"I thought maybe you'd like to get a bite," he began.

Bryson looked up from the computer screen. He never knew exactly what she was thinking. He always assumed there were many layers to a person's thought and one's survival depended upon penetrating as many of these as was possible. Human intelligence, such as it was, evolved for this very purpose. The problem of course was that after a while people became so transparent he felt only boredom and contempt in their presence. Thus the only interesting people were also dangerous. There was no way around it.

"I'm eating."

"Perhaps something more substantial?"

"I'm not dressed."

"Sweats are all right for the Lounge."

She sighed, put down the yogurt container and looked directly at him. "O.K."

The Lounge was empty except for a few workers in jumpsuits at the bar and a table full of technicians in white lab coats drinking pitchers of beer and eating a platter of nachos. The air smelled like burnt rubber cheese and warm dog food and above it all was the sour stink of industrial salsa. They took a table far from the windows and other customers, a dark green pocket in a puddle of amber light. They ordered hamburgers and french fries from the bartender, Jim.

"Aren't you glad to be back?" Bradlee asked.

Bryson lit a cigarette and narrowed her eyes. "What do you think?"

"Forgive me for asking. I thought you found the, er, country disagreeable."

"So what if I do?"

Bradlee craned around, desperate for a drink now. "Well then. How did the talk to the old folks back home go?"

"You watch everything. You tell me."

"But from your perspective."

Jim brought a manhattan and a gin martini with three olives on a toothpick magnified by the booze. "From my perspective I saw a bunch arrogant, stupid time servers lapping up whatever shit anyone feeds them. They were that way in my father's day and they're like that now."

Bradlee chuckled and sipped his drink. "You give them your usual."

"My mood is foul. There was this, this woman there who very subtly put me down after I had inadvertently insulted her. And it's just awful bombing around in a hovercraft."

That afternoon Bryson had landed at the Catskills Resort Complex, wiped the film of sweat off of her forehead and walked, head down, over the burning crushed stone of the landing lot and into the circular, sandstone building. It was a back entrance so she wandered the halls past service rooms and sinks till she found a sign that said, Bryson on Paregane, 4:30.

The conference room was generic. She took a few deep breaths and put her briefcase down by the podium. The audience were milling about in mannered groups of three and four, producing a mumble that grew louder by the second and was sometimes spiked by a laugh intentionally loud. Her handler, in a humiliating panic, rushed forward to greet her. "We weren't expecting you from that entrance," she said, smiling and extending her hand forward.

Bryson took it and said, "Did you think I was walking?" The woman looked at her with a sort of horror. "Relax, I'm joking. I flew in on my hovercraft and walked in the nearest door."

"I'm so sorry. We have a valet of course."

"Of course. Again, don't sweat it."

"Can I get you anything?"

"A bathroom."

The woman blushed and gripped her fist. "I'm sorry, of course. I'll take you to your suite. Where's your hovercraft? I'll have someone bring in your bags."

"There are no bags." The woman said nothing. She examined Bryson's clothes and twitched. "I'm wearing my work clothes if it's all right. It seems more authentic, and anyway, I can't think with a strap choking off my circulation and shoes that feel like a vice." The woman touched the waist tie of her guava culottes and wiggled her feet against the FlexiSteel pumps crushing her feet into a tiny V. "No offense. Where's the can?"

The woman smiled and paused a spell before saying, "Just this way



Dr. Bryson.”

“Did you say Bryson?” Bryson asked. “Good lord. I’m Doctor Bitztein, Valvoleen Spark Plug Professor of Sogdian Studies at the University of Leiden. This is the olfactory event sequencing conference?”

“No!”

Bryson gave her a moment of self-immolation and said, “A little humor, Ms. Nelson. I’ll take my name tag when you’re ready.”

“Then you are?”

“Dr. Bryson.”

She peed and splashed her face with cold water. Then she stepped out into a grim little courtyard of large stones and stood under the eaves smoking. When she came back the participants were seated on folding chairs arranged in rows with an aisle down the middle. About a third were holographic aliases. If she had done that they would have accused her of phoning it in. Ms. Nelson stepped up to the podium. “Welcome to the Catskills Society for the Advancement of Learning. My name is Gloria Nelson. The Society is a private civic organization first organized just over a hundred years ago by area families so that they might, in the words of the charter, remain current in our knowledge of scientific, artistic and religious advancements. Our guest tonight may not be a familiar name but within her field she is genuine star. Dr. Ruth Bryson comes to us today from Monozone, a company many here are happy to own stock in, to discuss the new drug, Paregane, developed by her team over the past ten years. While at Cornell in the thirties she did work in the mathematics of successive and emergent mental states, call and response cognition, multiple field interaction, distant wave and long pulse mental phenomena and most famously, synthetic amino acid wave stimulus matrices. These studies served as the foundation for her work in psychopharmacology at Monozone, specifically the

development of Euphorics. Paregane is the most powerful and promising of this class of drugs. Dr. Bryson divides her time between her lab at Monozone Headquarters in Queens, N.Y. and a farm upstate in a GMZ, maintained by her husband of 40 years, Dr. Leonard Bryson, an emergent ecosystems analyst and author. Please welcome Dr. Ruth Bryson.”

She stepped up to the podium, nodded with humility and cleared her throat. “Thank you Ms. Nelson. And I’d like to thank the Catskills Society for the Advancement of Learning for having me. I’m no stranger to these hills. As a girl I lived not far from here and used to attend Society lectures when it was still located in Cobleskill, at the Niemen mansion I believe. I guess that dates me!” Laughter. “Anyway, it’s a delight to be back. It was here that I was first exposed to the basic ideas of quantum psychology, evolutionary biology, the theory of states, 12 dimensional universes. My father was an early member of the Society and, as many of you probably know, a major contributor to the initial endowment. It was and is a permanent family interest.

“I promise I won’t make anyone here do any math. But you might wonder how that’s possible, given our current understanding of how the mind works. The short answer is that while mathematics can describe the operations and states we study, what really interests us, and what mathematics can’t describe, is the experience of life, of the mind, of cognition. We study the parts so that we might study the whole and the whole is no more mathematical than a sunset. A sonnet is a poem with compositional rules but the rules themselves are not terribly interesting compared to sessions of sweet silent thought.

“Now, is thought ever silent? How is it we remember, or project into the future? Why do we anticipate? What makes thought sweet? The Buddha asked, what is the cause of human suffering? and set about answering that question, systematically. That was 500 BC or so.

The work goes on.

“Now, before we get to Paregane, I should explain a little about how Euphorics work. For centuries now we have been synthesizing neurotransmitters, complex molecules that fit into receptors in the brain, like a key fits into a lock. Of course, the ancient Egyptians were doing that when they brewed beer, as were the shamans of Siberia, who ate psychoactive mushrooms and traveled to the underworld. But it’s as different from what we do as, say, domesticating the chicken or dog or the major cereals is from genetic engineering. Work of this kind basically came to a halt in the last century, for reasons we all know. I was privileged to grow up at a time when research was on the upswing. The result of that has been Euphorics, among very many other important drugs developed by my friends and colleagues at other companies and institutions.

“Those old drugs worked all right. Some, like Lithium, are still used. Lithium is a salt that some manic-depressives lack a gene to make. Give them the salt and the manic depression is reduced or eliminated. But once we got the body to manufacture it naturally, it was far more effective. Why is that? Well, suppose that when we look at the brain we are seeing the three dimensional projection of a twelve dimensional entity. Now, I know I promised you there’d be no math, and here I am talking about dimensions, twelve of them no less. But bear with me. No one can visualize twelve dimensions. Mathematics, however, has no difficulty describing twelve dimensions. Now, imagine a cube. A cube projected into two dimensions is a square, just as a sphere is a circle. Now, if you had to design a key for a twelve dimensional entity while only perceiving 3, or at most four, of those dimensions, it is not going to fit very well. Imagine having to design a key for a cube, but all you knew of it was a square. It would fit in some ways, very well even, but not in others. A Euphoric is neurotransmitter designed in twelve dimensions. And in the case of Paregane, the fit is perfect.

“That leaves what Paregane, or, as I prefer to call it, transcryptasine, does. Quite simply it makes the person who takes it feel like they’ve been in paradise, and they carry that feeling with them throughout the day, without side effects.” People in the audience smiled. She smiled back. “You see? Even thinking about it is delightful. And it works. Now, let me just remind you that the mind has many states and that we label these states in terms of their energy. These states can be successive or simultaneous. They interact and counteract. There are also the two operations, Delta, or transformation, and Chiasmus, or reversal, contradiction, dialectic. It seemed as if the names and numbers of states and operations were proliferating at an alarming rate, sort of the way elemental particles did at one time.

“The important states here are Penumbra and Umbra. These are states at rest and in the case of the latter, characterized by long, slow waves. It is the lowest state of rest a body can be in without dying. It is also remarkably similar to the background pulse of microwaves, what we call Drone, or ghost of the big bang.

“Studies show that people who are able to descend, during sleep, into Umbra, show greater contentment with their life. They don’t necessarily earn more money, for instance, but they report high satisfaction with their material life. It follows through consistently with sexuality, friendship, personal development. The contrary is also true. People of all mental types, from neurotics, to those suffering alienation and ennui, and the most desperately ill, suicidally depressed and schizophrenic people, spend less time in Umbra. Most people fall in the middle, never quite tipping over into misery or contentment. But when necessary, we have found that their brains naturally increase Umbra. Now, we have never been able to adjust this until now. Paregane allows a person to sink to Umbra for a portion of each night and the effect is immediate and remarkable.

“Are there any questions?”

A man stood up and asked, "How did you do it?"

"We studied a lot of sleeping brains. The ability to be in Umbra is universal. Only a few people consistently go there though, and this number is evenly distributed among people. Learning how and why the mutation works was difficult and just about everything connected with that is proprietary."

"They say they dream of paradise. Is that what Umbra is?" a woman asked.

"Well, people don't dream in Umbra. It is a state that would at one time have been characterized as sub-comatose. There is barely any brain activity; just enough to keep the body alive, and even that is an extremely low state. So the paradise effect you refer to must be a Penumbra state that is retrospectively viewed as Umbra. It's not really possible to dream in Umbra."

A man asked from his seat, "What are some of the other states?"

"Well, we reserve some upper ones and leave them unnamed. The highest named is sphere, a theoretical upper limit of total awareness. Below that is Dodecahedron, heightened awareness, and Tetrahedron, which is an unimpaired, waking awareness."

"I heard somewhere there was one below Umbra."

She laughed. "Yes, the notorious Grembo. I leave it out because it is theoretical. Anything below Umbra is death."

"Then what is Grembo?"

"Grembo is the residue. Look, we correct to zero where life ceases. But in reality, there is a residue of energy. It's small, anomalous, insignificant, but it screws everything up. So we correct to zero and it all works. Grembo is the Italian for 'lap'. We like to say that when you're in Grembo you're in the lap of the universe. Anyway, no one has been recorded at Grembo or come back, because by definition it doesn't exist. Existence ends before Grembo, but Grembo won't go away. But remember? I promised no mathematics."

Ms. Nelson stepped up to the mike and said, "Thank you Dr. Bryson, it has been most enlightening." She gulped down her drink and looked at Bradlee. "Who can stand it. The cheery talk. The boosterism."

"A little tense?"

"You wouldn't understand."

This was most unusual. "Wouldn't understand?" He lit a silky thin cigarette with a gold match and blew the smoke up into the air above them.

"That's right."

"Maybe I wouldn't understand. Anyway, I've been reviewing the sales data and things are just fine. You should be happy. There are only two small glitches I see. One is this China business. I don't like it at all. Unofficial sales there still amount to huge profits, but nothing compared to over-the-counter sales, nothing. That ban has to be reversed. Valdez will help with that. She's in touch with the ATO (Asia Theater of Operations) chief, General Stein, and through Fripp we have the trade attaché in Shanghai."

Jim made his was way over and lowered the plates to the table like a pallbearer. He gave them ketchup, mustard and relish and cloth napkins. Bradlee bit into the soft brown bun, toasted and wet with grease, and squeezed off a piece of grey, gristly meat, which he chewed until he got bored of the taste and swallowed. Bryson bit into hers and visibly relaxed. It was just what she needed, he could tell. Bradlee smiled. He enjoyed the pleasure she took in eating. He almost could feel it himself.

Bryson shoved in a wad of french fries and grunted, "Any lawsuits yet?"

"Dozens overseas. Our people in Geneva are slowing them down. Even if we have to settle a few cases, so long as we admit no wrong and gag the plaintiff, it won't affect profits adversely--that's been

factored in. It's the other thing that worries me more. It may be nothing. It's quite small."

"For god sake say what it is and then qualify it."

He cleared his throat. "I'm not sure if it's real, but I noticed a glitch. I have a feel for these things. It's just a wiggle in the numbers of prescriptions. It seems that big companies are prescribing it like mad for their malcontents. And the private doctors, they're on board. But the major nut houses, the teaching hospitals, you know, that sort of thing, are not keeping up their end, despite an especially heavy rotation of sales associates. I mean, they eat three meals a day with us. Just a glitch, you understand? But that's how it always starts. The little thing you overlooked. The stray hair. So, how did it go with Boyle?"

"Fine." She slurped up some gin and made a face. "I don't want this. It tastes like fuel. I want a beer. Jim? A beer. A pint of whatever." She tasted the beer. "This isn't bad. I expected worse."

"But you've eaten here for decades. You know exactly what that piss tastes like."

"Nope. Everything is different Bradlee. I'm different."

"Other than a tan and five kilos--"

"Five? Blah. I wish I weighed a thousand more. I'd like to swag through this world with a gut so big it would never fill. No, it's that GMZ and Leonard. They've ruined me for work. I can't get back into the swing of things. I've got no ideas, no mmmphph."

"You make it sound like a commercial for piles medication. Every scientist goes through a slump. You'll get it back, I know you will. It's in your blood. You could do no different if you wanted to. Isn't that right? Anyway, given the situation, I think a fix for Paregane would be timely."

"Boyle's a real pissier," she said, watching the foam collapse in her glass.

"In what way?"

She bit off a chunk of burger and bun, swallowed some beer and munched on the yellow pickle spear. "He just has a way about him that's endearing. I love the way he explains the world to you, things you take for granted everyone knows and that he thinks he's discovered."

Bradlee looked at her and her blue eyes met his and he smiled weakly, trying to conceal a surge of sadness. "Well, he is quite stupid of course. Nine children. Requires a sort of brute."

"I wouldn't underestimate him."

"No, but one should never expend more energy than necessary when sizing a person up."

"He's no dope."

"But the man lives in a verbal fog of solipsism and malaprop--"

"You don't really expect me to believe that grammar is the measure of a man's intelligence?"

"Of course not. But in the end the complexity and nuance of thought bears a direct relationship to the complexity and nuance of language."

"Yeah right. If you want to play Scrabble with Boyle you'd probably win. But a chess game?"

"Let it not be a form of boasting when I say he would go down to defeat before the game even began."

She laughed. "If it's a board game you're playing, sure. But the game I'm playing with him now--"

Bradlee swept the air between them with the flat of his hand. "He's just the man. No doubt about it. Just the sort of Virgil you want for a midtown guide." She polished off the french fries and wiped up the ketchup with a remnant of bun. "Don't get too close to him Bryson."

"Why?"

This petulance, he thought. Bryson really was argumentative. "It's just not a good idea," he explained. "These fellows are a sort of cut throat bunch, greedy, ambitious, violent. You know the type. Quite personable, in their own way charming. But the nature of their role in our work makes them expendable. One doesn't dispose of a friend so easily."

"The neuronanobots will be ready in a week or so."

He frowned. "Wasn't there something about those? Some lawsuits a few years back?"

"Every couple of decades someone takes a stab at neuronanobots. The problem is they malfunction and decay in the brain and destroy the adjacent cells. It's hard to place them where they'll do some good without risking the destruction of the very part of the brain you're trying to save."

"Another nifty little paradox."

"Well Bradlee, I'm full."

"Another drink?"

"One more."

She got another beer. "Why do you want me to attend this party, Bradlee?"

"Who else is there? I don't know a soul," he said, taking a stab at flattery. The fact that she was in demand would just chase her off.

"Please. You must have a string of women."

"But they're all whores, even the wake up service." He lit a cigarette and flicked the ashes into his half eaten hamburger. Bryson frowned. "She comes in first thing and awakens me with fellatio."

"What a way to start the day. It sucks."

"Delightful."

"I was thinking of her."

"But not the sort you take to the Fripp's. I need someone there

who can act the part. I don't normally trust you to behave of course, but even you can see the importance...." She wasn't not listening to him. "What's gotten into you?"

She rubbed her head and stretched. "Don't you ever just--I don't know--mourn for things? To hear Boyle, it's funny, relate the, you know, history of the city, his elementary school history supplemented with stories handed down in a family of ostensible losers, it made me sad."

Bradlee sniffled a laugh. "You've gone soft, Bryson. I prescribe to you a strong dose of Stoicism."

"Marcus Aurelius? Or Epictetus."

"The emperor of course."

"Maybe for me the slave." She shook her head and seemed to drift off. "Leonard loves Aurelius."

Bradlee felt a coal in his chest burn. "How is the old boy anyway?"

"Very involved of course. Did you know that the Indians run the show up there?"

She didn't need to tell him about that. It was an obsession in the military. Valdez was trying to hold the line against the fanatics. "Indeed, Bryson, I do. Valdez is involved with water rights negotiations. Very hush hush. There are competing plans, competing means. Leonard should be careful about whom he associates with." He contemplated his hands and the pitted tabletop. "And how about your old friend, Vadge Velodia?"

"She hates that name. And I don't know how she is."

"Surely there's been no falling out?"

He scrutinized her face. Velodia was a danger and he had never liked her when she used to visit in the old days. Day long drinking parties inevitably ended with them practically coming to blows. Bryson might divulge important information to her, which she could

pass along to a competitor. But in her mood he judged that if he wanted to sleep with her he'd best not piss her off by suggesting as much.

"No," she shook her head and smiled. "Over time, you know how it is."

"What a shame."

She laughed derisively. "You're better than that Bradlee. You must be as tired as I am."

"I mean it. Old friendships shouldn't be allowed to expire."

"Uh huh." She finished her drink and called for the check. "See you in the morning, Bradlee."

"Are you going to the lab?"

"Where else can I go?"

"You can always come home with me." The light shined off the wet of her eye and his nerves stirred. Her lips parted slightly. He wanted them on his. Her kisses galloped after him.

"Thanks, no. Not tonight."

"Oh don't be like that. Why be alone? It seems to me that tonight we could both use the comfort of an old friend."

She smiled, coldly. He'd lost the game. "Sorry Bradlee. I need my beauty sleep. Leave a message on that morning gal's phone and wake up to a nice warm mouth agitating your glans till you cough up 10cc's of paste."

In her lab she couldn't think or do anything. The soft light was somber, irritating. She didn't feel like watching a movie or reading. The taste of alcohol wasn't good. She wanted to recover the mood broken by Bradlee's intrusion, the smooth concentration, the sweet taste of the Rasta's chamomile tea and honey. Now undeniable devastation took hold from within, bedeviling loneliness. Behind the humming of the building lay silence. Beneath the radiant lights was a

vacuum. She could feel quarks blinking in and out of existence within her. She was a flickering, discontinuous thing without anchor or substance. There was no echo, no answering voice. A sense of things undone and of important names forgotten overcame her. She couldn't stand the restlessness, the hunger. The only thing to do was to call someone, Leonard. It was late. He'd be asleep, but she could leave a message. That would be o.k.

Leonard answered her call. For a second she couldn't speak she was so surprised. He said, Hello, again.

"Leonard--I didn't think you'd be up."

"Well, there's been some," he paused, "excitement. The state military police just left."

"Police?"

"You wouldn't believe--apparently some men have escaped, murderers, and the police thought they might be here. What a fright." So they came looking for the men.

"What men?" she asked.

"Senecas I believe. Apparently, according to Dennis anyway, private contractors working for the army corps were surveying the Keuka Lake shoreline and the men told them to get off their land and when they refused the men returned with guns. The contractors panicked, shot at the men and the men killed them. Dennis has no idea where they fled to but he allowed a military gunship to land and search the area. They've widened the cordon to include the entire Seneca territory. They've been flying overhead all day."

"Then they must have captured them. Men on foot are no match for our armed forces."

"No no, they haven't. The funny thing is with all this bio mass their sensor equipment is useless. Those men could be hiding near a pile of shit, or a composter, or in a herd of animals. Even in a pack of dogs. Anyway, by now they're probably in one of the big forests.

Flying over is useless. They'll have to track 'em down with dogs."

"How's Dennis taking it?"

"Well, they're Turtles."

"The police are turtles?"

"No no. Dennis and the men all belong to the Turtle clan. He keeps his cool. He's very politic about such things. But it seems state shot itself in the foot up here with this one. Dennis is worried about the violence spreading. He's worried about his family."

"I didn't know he had a family."

"Oh yeah, three children under six. One on the way."

There was a silence. Leonard was bad on the phone, always had been. She couldn't let it go yet, she needed more voice, anything not to return to the silence. "Tell me about her," she said.

"Who?" He sounded suddenly nervous. Sky must be there, she thought.

"Dennis's wife."

"I don't know her personally at all but she has an interesting story. She's Amish you know."

"I thought they couldn't marry outsiders."

"They can't. She was shunned, excommunicated for some offense. They forcibly took her husband and infant child away in the middle of the night and the entire community refused to talk to her. You have to realize every congregation is different. She came from a particularly fanatical group of families up in northern Ontario. They're Old Order Amish but they really try to go back to 16th century practice. Families like Hertzler's won't have anything to do with them. Anyway she took off with just the clothes on her back and a day's worth of food and water and started to walk south. Dennis found her wandering around half out of her mind six months later. She'd been raped on the road, taken prisoner by some Mohawk

bandits holed up in a cabin on Lake Erie. They made her cook for them and chop firewood till she escaped. She lived door to door then. The Amish gave her food and let her sleep in their barns but none would take her in unless she confessed and joined their affiliation. Well, she wanted none of that, as you can imagine. Dennis took her back to Salamanca with him. She settled in there and eventually they married."

"They're so hard core and yet Hertzler sat there at Jordan's house talking crops and irrigation and soils."

"The soil is their life. Lots of folks up here feel that way about the land. It's what we have in common."

"Yeah, but does he just ignore the half naked women and the marijuana?"

Leonard laughed. "I don't know, but I'll tell you what. Mordecai Hertzler's known Jordan since they were kids. Dennis says when Hertzler was seventeen he and Jordan and a bunch of other Amish and hippy kids used to tear around on motorcycles raising hell. The Amish let their kids run wild in the years before they marry. They drank and smoked and hung around market towns playing music. I wouldn't be at all surprised if Hertzler had a few bastards out there he can't remember fathering. Dennis says for two years running Hertzler grew the best marijuana and brewed the strongest hooch around."

"So what happened?"

"Well, like most of 'em he just knuckled under when the time came. I guess around the age of twenty he joined the church officially, renounced worldliness, married and started his own farm and family. But for the Amish you know it isn't right to judge, that's god's job. Pride is a big sin. You won't find Mordecai hanging out with Jordan unless there's work to do, but when there is, the two men respect each other. I also think the Amish like to keep a few

English friends so they can let loose a little. Sometimes they tell me dirty jokes.”

“Keep talking,” she said softly, tears starting into her eyes.

“What?”

“Please keep talking? I know you’re tired.”

“Is everything all right?”

“Fine,” she sniffled.

“What did you do today? How is it getting back?”

“Nothing. I gave a press conference and went down to some absolute tenement toilet to find a man who could--” she paused, “--help out with a new experiment.” She hated the cagey use of words, wanted only to be sitting in the kitchen across the table from him.

“I see.”

“How about you?”

“Well, just the usual. After the hunt I was too tired to work so I lay around reading Wallace, *The Malay Archipelago*. Listen to this: The Durian is, however, sometimes dangerous. When the fruit begins to ripen it falls daily and almost hourly, and accidents not infrequently happen to persons walking or working under the trees. When a Durian strikes a man in its fall, it produces a dreadful wound, the strong spines tearing open the flesh, while the blow itself is very heavy; and then, he goes on for a while about this and then, he says, Poets and moralists, judging from our eastern trees and fruits, have thought that small fruits always grew on lofty trees, so that their fall should be harmless to man, while the large ones trailed on the ground. Two of the largest and heaviest fruits known, however, the Brazil-nut fruit (*Bertholletia*) and Durian, grow on lofty forest trees, from which they fall as soon as they are ripe, and often wound or kill the native inhabitants. From this we may learn two things: first, not to draw general conclusions from a very partial view of nature; and secondly, that trees and fruits, no less than the varied productions of

the animal kingdom, do not appear to be organized with exclusive reference to the use and convenience of man. “He laughed. “I mean, it’s all right there. Oh yeah, one of the pigs died.”

“Oh no.”

“I know, it was sad.”

“What of?”

“Hard to say. I won’t eat the others till I know. Mordecai’s boys are going to build a quarantine pen to isolate them from the dogs and the chickens till I find out. It looks to me like a parasite.”

“I wonder if that big cougar will ever show.”

“I’m sure. It’s a female so there must be giant cubs. My guess is they’ve been breeding fifty, sixty years up in the woods and we’re just seeing them now.”

“It’s easy for things to go unnoticed up there.”

“That’s it, isn’t it?” he said. “You think about all those extinctions and want to just cry yourself to sleep and then you come to a place like this, it’s just seething with life. You could wipe out every last person on this planet and in a couple of million years you’d never know we even existed. Less. Hell, you could wipe out the planet and it wouldn’t matter. Out there, life simply is. We’re the only ones who give a damn about it and there are precious few of us at that. If you can’t convince people to care who’re you gonna convince? The gods? I’ll tell you what, those men that shot those surveyors, they’ll get away. We all think of this climate thing as a disaster, something that’s gone on for so long no one remembers anything different. But like Dennis says, for the Senecas, for the Indian nations, except out west of course, it was a lucky break. Think about it. They lost it all because they couldn’t resist the diseases Europeans brought with them. No army could have come here and flat out conquered them. It was settlers, killing off ninety percent with measles and small pox and chiseling them out of their land. The Indians didn’t figure them



out till it was too late. Now it's the other way around. Settlers die of the diseases. And the Indians nibble away at the land. Soon it'll all be theirs again. Only now, what can you take from them? They know how to be poor. They're used to the heat and the bugs. And they have something to believe in. They're organized. But most of all, they know us better than we know them. They've been watching us for seven hundred years. This time, things will be different." He took a deep breath. "Damn it Ruth, you've talked me out."

"I'm sorry."

"I wish you were here right now. I missed you all day."

"Me too."

"Good night. I love you."

"I love you too."

Leonard stopped talking and stretched out his legs. He felt empty for a moment, and realized that that was why she had called, to share some of her emptiness. Then Sky, in a pair of white cotton pajamas, came up the stairs and stood by him.

"Can't you sleep," he asked.

"Who were you talking to?"

"Ruth."

"Is everything all right?"

He paused. "No, I don't think so. It's hard to say. She never calls."

"Maybe she was lonely."

"Maybe." He looked up at her and tried to smile.

"Do you miss her?"

He shook his head slowly. "Yes." Emotions worked on Sky's face like wind on water. Leonard looked into it and saw complications of fear and loss ripple out from her eyes to her mouth. "I'm sorry," he said quietly.

"No, she's your wife." She moved closer to the couch and he

touched her pajama top at the hem. She sat down and leaned into him. "Are they still here?"

"They're down in the dog pen."

"Will those men come back?"

Leonard wondered the same thing. They were a compound of absurd and terrifying. Absurd because they looked ridiculous in their silver armor and huge CellPack helmets, and because of their barky electronic voices. Absurd because with all their sensors they couldn't find two men hiding out in a pack of dogs. But terrifying because they were so scared. One of them almost shot a chicken when it fluttered up behind him. They were out of their element and expected to be ambushed at any moment. Leonard didn't think they were under serious suspicion though. "I doubt they'll be back," he said finally. He felt protective of Sky. She wasn't used to violence, to outsiders of any kind. She had never been farther than the market town of Auburn at the north end of Cayuga lake and had spent her whole life tending to the births and deaths of subsistence farmers. They were so far off the road they never even saw travelers. There was something superficially fluttery, almost mothlike about her. It was a quality that concealed her many strengths: the rough strength a lifetime of chores had given her, the delicate command her eyes and fingers exercised over all their intricate tasks, and the solid inner power, the realism her vocation demanded.

He didn't love her the way he loved Ruth but he loved her. Still, he had known that over the years his love of other women had become increasingly aestheticised. He liked her certainly, enjoyed her conversation and company, respected her, but their relationship was frankly and necessarily sexual, almost vampiric, as if they were absorbing each other's energies. They were both after the same thing, perhaps for different reasons, he didn't really know. He adored her vagina. He couldn't help but think of the quaint restoration word

quim when he thought of its slightly acidic salinity, the way she puckered up and swelled at his touch. Breasts, buttocks, cheeks and eyes were all beautiful but really they were the petals and perfume drawing him into the heart of things, where it mattered. It was an obsession, one that had taken over the second half of his life and before which he stood hopelessly enthralled, a little foolish but in the end resigned. And there had been so many. Some were pudenda, big impertinences demanding broad measures; others were vulvic, hot and erupting. But Sky's was as delightful and free as she was. It expressed that knowing innocence, that shifting, breezy quality of her laugh. Surely it was harmless to bring pleasure to such a beautiful thing, to take in the scent of her body, the scrawl of pale hair and the pink lips.

"Do you love me?" she asked.

"But you know Sky, it's different."

"Love is love I was always taught. Love is a dimension of the universe, perceived by the soul."

"Different intensities of the same thing then."

She looked at him and squeezed his hand, then lifted it and pretended to study his palm. "That's her and that's me," she said, tracing the fork in his love line. "She hates me you know."

He laughed. "It wasn't very politic of me to have you here."

Abruptly she dropped his hand. "What do you mean by that?"

He realized now that he had angered her. "I've never been good at this. We have an agreement. To be discreet."

"I don't get it."

"I love you Sky, yes. I could try to tell you all the ways you delight me as a friend and lover and still I wouldn't have told it all. And if Ruth lived here with me I'm sure we would have to end things. And, if Ruth weren't my wife I'm equally sure you would be, if you'd have me. Of course, I'm an old man."

She thought about it and said, "I don't want to be a wife. A wife is a stupid thing to be. People have each other. They make love. Live together, do the chores. I think pigs and people love the same as dragonflies and lilies."

"Ruth and I are from a different world."

"Like those men, those cops. They looked like walking frogspawn. If the Indians go to war with them everyone'll die up here. That's what Jason says."

Leonard became grave. "If it comes to that. But if they have to go to war and don't, or we don't support them, then all this will end. They want to drain the lakes and send the water out west. That means clearing the land, digging massive aqueducts, tunnels. It means a hoard of hungry, stupid men and women living off the land for decades. They'll log the woods and replant them with bamboo and douglas fir clones. All the land will go to cash crops, the animals will die or flee and your children will be whores and bartenders. It won't be worth a damn."

"Then we'll go north, to Ontario."

"I won't live to see it, thank god." She kissed him on the lips and he said, "I could ask you the same thing, you know."

"What?"

"Do you love me?"

"Of course I do."

"Do you hate Ruth?"

"Why should I?"

He laughed. "You'll see. One day you'll be sixty, seventy years old. If your man takes up with a beautiful young woman."

"That's just dumb. I love you for that tongue of yours, like a snake, not a dog. And I love your long white eyelashes and I love your dogs, especially Sasha, and your glasses of hootch at night on the porch."

And most of all I love that you talk to me, explain things.”

He burst out, “Explain things? That’s just what you’re supposed to hate!”

“If only you went to the Amish school, you’d like a good complex explanation now and again too.”

“But you know everything about this place. You speak pieces of ten languages. Do you wish you were different Sky?”

“I wish I had some money.”

“Money? But you have time.”

“I guess.”

“And you like to read.”

“Of course. I like to talk too though. You can’t just read and not discuss what you’ve read. It’s just like a recipe for something then that you’ve never tasted. At home all we talk about is the crops, or the stars. Or we gossip. Here we talk about politics, science.”

“Yes. And we gossip.”

“People came here to get lost again but if I had some money I’d leave.”

He stood up and went over to the bookcase, searching the black spines of his diary. “You can.” He took one down and withdrew a gold disc, holding it up to her. “This is money.”

“What is it, gold?”

“No, it’s a computer disc.”

“You see? I’m ignorant. I don’t have any idea about computers.”

He sat back down with the disc in his hand. “Computers are just tools. You can do anything you want with them.”

“Like what?”

“Well, whatever. Talk to people, study things, bank. This is a bank disc with millions of dollars on it. When I die, it’s yours. Then you can go somewhere. Where would you go?”

She looked confused. “I don’t know. Far away.”

“A city? Bangkok perhaps?”

“No, no. Too many people. I want to see mountains. Big towering mountains with snow.”

“North then.”

She shook her head sadly. “This is stupid. You’ll live a long time and I don’t want to take your money. And nothing will ever change.”

“Maybe your children then. Maybe they’ll be philosophers.”

“And who will give me a child? Mordecai Hertzler?”

“I will.”

He had never seen her look stunned. “I thought you never wanted children.”

“I never did. But you do.”

After a meditative pause she brightened and asked, “When do we start,” smokily.

“Well, we can start right now if you like.”

She undid his robe and saw that he was hard and pulled down her pajama bottoms, straddling him on the couch. “I’m getting wet just thinking about it,” she said.

“I can feel that,” he said, rubbing two fingers between her legs. “It might take a while. We might have to do this more often.”

“I can manage that if you can,” she said, resting her face against his. He felt a little electric jolt travel through them.

“I think I’m up to it,” he said.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

### DISMAL DULL AFFAIRS

Bryson peered through the scope and watched the fine rain beat down on ponchos. The enlarged faces and bodies of people entered the building. “Might as well hit them all,” she said.

There was a series of puffs and she watched them flinch slightly as the tiny darts struck their necks. Boyle put down the rifle and lit a cigarette.

“I’m dying to go in,” Bryson said.

Boyle laughed. “Doc, I can get you into a lotta jams, but not that one.”

“It can’t be very dangerous. Look at them. They’re like exotic orchids and butterflies. Little sexual display models. Lotus eaters.”

Boyle and Bryson crowded around a rotten window covered in silver electraweave programmed to display emptiness. The room, a studio apartment facing Gametria, a Lucky Day parlor on 31st and Tenth, was bare and dreary, raw and cold as the day. Boyle opened a box and said, “Let’s give these another try.” These were a jar of synthetic insects that Zack had thrown in as a bonus when Boyle tried to talk him down from ten grand. They flew into a target building and settled on windowsills and moldings, or flew about. There was an assortment of the most common indoor insects, the kind that wouldn’t be noticed. Even if they were and someone attempted to swat one, they were virtually indestructible. Typically they fell to the ground and, after a specified period, rose up to resume their positions. Whatever they saw or heard was transmitted

back to a computer. The first batch went into the wrong window, a warehouse on the third floor, and beamed the doings back. A cherry flush shot up Boyle’s neck and then slowly took over his face as Bryson howled in delight.

“Whatever,” she said. He released another swarm and this time, watching through the scope, they saw them fly in formation up to the building and into the correct windows. “Well, let’s pack up and get a bite.”

The street was particularly filthy, even with the rain. A six-inch cockroach moseyed across the cracked sidewalk. Cold rain splattered the pavement and ran into the gutter. It dimpled the tarry surface of the canal. They crossed a composite bridge and a shit smell filled the air. Down the block was a cafe, The Elysium. It’s windows were festooned with white Christmas lights swarming over an arrangement of cardboard deer cutouts with gold bells and bent antlers that looked like they had been crammed onto their heads. They sat down at a grimy table on wobbly chairs. In the background, Christmas carols played faintly and they heard men shouting in the kitchen. A space heater groaned in the transom above the door and filled the room with tepid, mildewy air, which at first felt good but soon became stuffy.

“You want anything?” she asked.

“Only if it’s in a package or boiled,” he said. “This place looks dicey.”

An old lady creaked up to them in a black cotton uniform with a holographic pin of a mooning Santa Claus. Santa’s ass was not a pretty sight, it was battered and saggy and dotted with glowing pimples. She had straight, poppy colored hair, cut into a pageboy, and earthy skin with beige and pink freckles the size and shape of raisins. The flesh on her arms jiggled as she wiped the coffee stains and crumbs off the table onto the floor.

"Menus?" she asked.

Bryson looked at the menu cards, saw the gnawed edges and dried pasta sauce and crust, then looked at the flyspecks on the green walls. It smelled like cockroaches. The waitress yawned. "Yeah," said Bryson. "Menus. Please."

When she proceeded to order a hamburger and french fries Boyle raised his eyebrows in alarm and agitated his thin mustache with an index finger. "I can't let you die alone doc, I'm gettin' the pancakes. Make it a short stack with sausage and a bloody mary."

"A bloody mary sounds good. Make that two."

The waitress nodded, took the menus and shouted, "Floydd, burger, fries, flaps and pig and two bloodies."

Bryson took out her tobacco pouch, rolled up a cigarette and lit it.

"What's that?" Boyle asked dubiously.

She took it out of her mouth and admired it. "It's from Iroquoia. Leonard's friend grew it."

"Iro-what? You mean Upstate? So what is he anyway?"

"Leonard? A scientist, like me. Emergent ecosystems analyst."

Boyle squirmed. "Whatever that is."

"It's not so very difficult Boyle. Wildlife is changing with the climate. Everyone knows about the extinctions but the flip side is mutation and migration. New species of animals, or species we never noticed before, arise in marginal or changing environments. Hot, wet places are ideal. Just like your throat, or an open wound or the gut. Especially bacteria and insects. He's retired now."

Boyle said, "Oh," as if he found the word retirement to be bitter. "I hope somma my kids'll get to retire. My oldest, she got the best shot. She's smart."

"I'm sorry, what's her name again? I can't keep 'em straight."

"Who da fuck can? Medear."

"Medear?"

"No, Medear. Like Jason and Medear. Trinh Ma and me, we did it watchin' that movie da first time and dat's how she got pregnant wit Medear. That kid's smart. She's like you. Halfa da time I got no idea what da fuck she's talkin' about."

"And she goes to school."

He nodded. "Yeah, she's da one. The others I gotta pay for it." He smacked his head. "I can't catch up! Every two years Trinh Ma drops another."

"Well," Bryson observed dryly, "you could use birth control."

"Yeah," he sneered, "but you forget, she's catlic. They don't allow it."

"What about you? You aren't Catholic. You could use it."

"What are you, a lawyer?" He laughed. "It don't work dat way. We took vows and everything. I'm tellin' you, those priests have got you by da balls. I ain't goin' ta hell on toppa everything else. No birth control." He shook his head at the wonder and pain of it, rolling his eyes. "Ya notice that cunt is the first parta control."

The waitress brought them their food. Fetid steam rose off of the plates. They sipped their bloody marys and Bryson said, "These are good. So what about a vasectomy. She doesn't have to know. I'll take you in."

"You mean when they clip your balls like a dog?"

"Well, not quite the same."

This clearly upset him. "Forget about it Doc. I'm a man still, anyway. I ain't losin' my sperms and goin' weak alla da sudden. There's two things in life, booze and fucking."

"Amen to that."

"And I ain't givin' up either one."

"But that's just it Boyle. With a vasectomy you can't get someone

pregnant.”

“Dey say it don’t feel da same.”

“Look. I’ve fucked the same man before and after and there’s no difference.”

“Doc, Trinh Ma likes a good load in her.”

“Stupid. She can’t feel the difference between a big and a small load till it comes dripping out of her.”

“After nine kids I can tell you it comes out as fast as it goes in. And we gotta either do it on towels or my side a da bed so she don’t gotta sleep in it. Ain’t I got a right? Every time it’s me with my ass on a cold puddle of spoooge.”

“Boyle I’m telling you. Go to a doctor and he’ll zap you. It takes five minutes, tops. You’re sore for a week and after that you’re home free.”

He scowled. “Sounds like something your basic rich motherfucker does.”

Bryson decided to change the subject. “So Medea is the smart one?”

“They’re all smart I guess. Most kids start out smart and then they get stupider the older they get. Go figure. But she’s gonna be a doctor. Right now she’s in a special school. Every day she takes the amphibatrain to the city. The kid’s up at five a.m., before I am. Always working hard. But it ain’t fair to the others. I gotta get some scratch to send ‘em to school too. Right now, what you got is the big kids teachin’ the little ones to read.”

“Trinh Ma doesn’t read?”

“Why would she? Where we grow up, dey hardly ever do. It’s point and touch. Me, I learned in the army.”

They paid their check and headed for the PCP station.

“So what’s Leonard do all day if he’s retired?”

“Oh, it’s nothing but work I guess. They produce most of what they consume up there. That tobacco was grown by his friend Dennis, a Seneca Indian and the honey, the tea I drink back at the office, they come from these Rastas he knows up the lake.”

“What’s some rich Indian doin’ growin’ his own tobacco?”

“These Indians aren’t rich.”

He looked at her like she was crazy. “If you don’t think those guys you see drivin’ around in them big gangster cars don’t hide alla dat money dey make with the brothers Upstate, you’re naive, doc.”

“Nevertheless, they aren’t rich. All that money you see stays down here. Dennis says they like to come up for the Strawberry and Green Corn festivals to take pictures and they come to be named and buried in their ancestral lands or they send their kids up for the summer if they’re acting weak and stupid. None of that translates into shit though. It’s just wanna be and window dressing.”

Boyle pouted. “I dunno doc. I never heard that.”

“Leonard has a very rich life I guess. Rewarding.”

“Don’t ya miss him? If I didn’t have Trinh Ma I don’t know what I’d do. Have a goat or somethin’.”

“I miss him, yes.”

“But it must be fucking hot and buggy. Even the pock sucks that way.”

Bryson slowed down. “If I could I’d quit tomorrow and go up there.”

“You don’t need the money?”

“I have enough now. They paid me off for transcryptasine. But Monozone won’t let me go.”

They climbed the wet rusty stairs to the PCP stop and took separate cars to the hovercraft. As it jerked into the air she said, “You’re a good shot. You always hit them right in the neck.”

They were cramped and she could feel him puff up a bit at the compliment. "I ain't da best you understand. But in the war, I could put one in the back da head from a 100 metres every time."

"You were a sniper?"

"Sometimes." He swallowed. "I hate to think about it. Assassinating people ain't right. But an order is an order."

"If no one else cares, why should you?"

He looked astounded. "You just do is all. You know, your mark is walking down the street, maybe with her kids or maybe he's going to his girlfriend's house, every day kinda things. War is fucked up, doc. Don't let 'em ever tell ya different. Once you get used to alla dat killing, and you don't give a fuck anymore, it's just awful sad. And then, nothing else in your life even comes close. Over there, you're important, even if you're a shit like me. You're fighting for your life alla da time. Everything counts. Even da bullshit means something. Then you get back here, slap on a mask and talk to some computer in da methane plant or you shake down junkies in an alley. Fuck it. You know, Laraby's a motherfucker all right but he's gonna get me some money, enough to send those kids to school. As long as they don't hafta do this. They can buy their way outta da army and go get a good job."

Bradlee was waiting for them in her office. She hated when he sat in her chair at her desk. It was his right of course but it bugged her nonetheless. He stood irately. "I smell a rat in this!" he said, smacking a thin stack of paper printouts with the back of his hand. "Boyle, you and I have some business to do at some point. Can you spare him Bryson?"

"Not yet. We still have more to tag."

"Well, you're going to have to take a break and monitor the ones you have."

Bryson glared at him. "At the doses we're seeing they don't live

long enough."

He silently snorted and flared his nostrils. He's really pissed, she thought. "What are you wearing tonight?" he asked, as if it were another piece of business on their agenda. She had no idea what he was talking about. Between writing conference papers and monitoring her transcriptase subjects she had been too busy to remember anything. It was her preferred mode; it filtered out need and self-reflection though it left a throbbing itch in her gut that no amount of distraction could cure. It was the little agitation, the knot of nerves returning after their two-month hiatus. She hammered away at it but what it really needed, a good drubbing, she resisted. Her resistance was raising the tension level around the office too. Bradlee had lately gotten a sort of wild look in his eye. She only caught it here and there. Most of the time it was just the slow, saturnine stare, the chill blue in its bath of pink. Sometimes she gave herself a good work out in the shower, with a dildo she bought and kept in her bedside drawer. It was big and knobby and purple. What an embarrassment, to resort to a machine. Soon though she knew she'd give in to one of Bradlee's invitations and not restrict their intercourse to after dinner drinks in the Lounge.

"Dressed for what?"

"The Fripp dinner?"

"I forgot all about it." Vaguely she indicated the drawers by her bed where articles of clothing shared space with her composite cock. "I've got something."

"Not a muumuu I hope."

"Now Bradlee, I hate--"

"You're dismissed, Boyle. Go home and sing Come All Ye Faithful to poor Tiny Tim or something."

Boyle had faded into a corner whence he observed them with ill concealed boredom. "Tomorrow then?" he asked.

"Yes yes, we'll figure out tomorrow tomorrow." He turned his worried, pale demeanor upon Bryson. "This is not some scientific brouhaha where the competition for most slovenly displayed leisure couture is intense. Four hundred of the most important military, diplomatic and business leaders and their entourages will be in attendance to celebrate the council seat. You can't pretend not to care."

Bryson snorted and sat down on the bed. She pulled out a pack of cigarettes, considered them a moment and rejected them in favour of a hand rolled one. As she placed the tobacco in the paper Bradlee grew curious. "Surely you haven't become a marijuana smoker?"

"Fat chance. It's tobacco."

"How very novel. A habit you picked up in midtown? They say bums scavenge the garbage for discarded butts and make cigarettes from them, which they sell to other, less enterprising bums."

"No. It's home grown."

"That my dear is quite illegal."

"Not in Iroquoia it's not. Everyone up there grows tobacco, even the Amish. Where do you think your cigarettes come from?"

"Turkey I believe, by way of Frankfurt."

"Well, some of the finest leaf is grown up there." She lit up.

"It smells like burning cow shit."

She laughed and exhaled a big cloud. "And how on earth do you know what burning cow shit smells like?"

He looked offended. "Every Englishman of my generation knows. What do you think we smoked during the troubles? Besides, I served in India. They cook over buffalo dung."

"It doesn't taste bad once you're used to it. Sometimes, nothing else hits the spot."

"By my watch we have time to get you dressed if we hurry. We can

stop at, let's see." He looked her up and down. "There's no time for something custom, it'll have to be off the rack. But you are a scientist. Allowances will be made by those who know. Elaines has a shoe department and down the street we can get you a hand bag."

She gasped. "A hand bag!"

"Everyone will have one. It's for your cigarettes and lighter and your make up."

She stood and stomped her foot. "No make up. It makes me, blech, my skin feels like it's dying under all that goop."

"A little lipstick, a little blush--"

"I don't even know how to do that."

"We don't have time to get your hair done."

"Did you do yours?"

He blinked. "And my nails." She looked at her cracked nails and calloused hands and smiled. "Good lord," he said, rubbing the bridge of his nose. "How are we supposed to get anywhere with you looking like this? Bryson, I'm telling you, you're ruining yourself with that farm up there. You look like a cowgirl in a lab coat."

"I slopped pigs and fed chickens."

"Yes, and hung around Indians and Rastafarians, playing Marie Antoinette. It all seems so lovely, cut off from the turmoil of this nasty, fallen empire of ours. But you know, the serpent always finds his way into the garden. Have you seen the news?"

"Of course not," she said with disgust. "Who can bear it."

"You might be interested in this story." He put the news on. A man spoke over a montage of images: black smoke boiling up out of small houses in a row; bulldozers ploughing over acres of fruit trees; soldiers in silver armour and CellPack helmets crouched in a line, rifles pointed at a crowd of men and women, their shocked, angry faces illuminated by flames and search lights.



"The territory is tense tonight. Military hovercraft again patrol the skies of western New York, lit up by the fires of scorched fields and burning houses. Residents look hopelessly on as state security forces destroy the homes of two gunmen today in retaliation for the execution/murder of state surveyors.

"The Seneca Nation protested the action to state council, asserting it to be a violation of their sovereignty, which includes jurisdiction over all crimes committed in its territory. So far there has been no response from state, but the military actions of this morning indicate that the spiraling violence is likely to continue, as it has since late October, when the Keuka Lake murders set off a chain of executions of state associates and punitive raids. General"

Bryson turned it off, suddenly nauseous.

"Friends of yours?" Bradlee asked with a smile. Bryson said nothing, she just wanted to vomit. "Forget about them, we've got to hurry. We'll take your hovercraft into town, pick up the clothes, dress at my place. That should leave time for the drive up to Connecticut."

Elaines was unmarked, except for a sculpted sign of three interacting cubes of cobalt, vermillion and emerald, above an old doorway on Park Avenue. They strode through the marble and gilt mirror lobby to an elevator with a gate, operated by an old man seated on a red plush velvet bench with gold tassels. They sat down on the facing bench and rode the three floors up to the store.

Immediately upon entering its half-lit warrens Bryson got a headache. Tall, demure, borderline-idiots in silver silk tunics and shapeless black pants stood discreetly back from the racks. Bradlee led her through these tall, treelike structures lit by spotlights. Headless, shoulder-bust-and-waist mannequins displayed two button lace shirts and ruby GloCloth teddies with braided gold and silver straps. Mother of pearl brassieres in violet ovals of light passed overhead. To either side, hip to foot mannequins in sparkle

stockings, or bare leg and a sock, a room full of pants in mid stride. And always the women standing placidly by. They arrived at a section where Bradlee could address one of these anonymous attendants by name. "Penelope," he said breathily. "How are you my dear?" He took both of her hands and exchanged cheek kisses.

"Why Mr. Bradlee," she said, surveying Bryson (who was dressed in a shapeless grey t shirt, stretch pants and black sneakers) with amused disgust, "what have we here?"

"We're in a bit of a pickle you see. My companion is Dr. Ruth Bryson, a very important woman, a scientist, you understand? Tonight, we are to attend a rather formal affair."

"Like a wedding?"

"Eh, no. A state dinner, that kind of thing. We need to outfit her."

Penelope tisked. "You are always such a tough customer, Mr. Bradlee." She petted his sleeve. "I'll see what I can do."

"Good Penelope, I knew I could rely on you in a pinch. Bryson, please do me the honor of giving her you're full attention, with a minimum of sarcasm or overt editorializing."

Penelope scrutinized her differently now, viewing her from an assortment of distances and angles. "Well, Dr. Bryson, shall we begin?"

Bryson stared at her feet and looked away.

"What do you normally wear?"

"A lab coat and a tank top. White and black, though I've forced myself into colors. Look lady, I'm not a dresser. Never have been. Frankly--"

"Bryson," Bradlee said.

"I'd say a gold wrap of sorts," Penelope said with the intensity of a speculating philosopher.

"Surely I don't look so old that you would roll me up like a big

cigar.”

Penelope unleashed a peal of false giggles. “Surely not, Dr. Bryson. Gold wraps are really the thing now. We can start with a ginger memory cling and then drape you in gold, with black leggings.”

“She’ll need shoes as well,” Bradlee said sharply.

“I have just the thing. And a hat.”

Bradlee chimed in, “I saw at a rewards ceremony in Hollywood women were wearing fur.”

“Mr. Bradlee. Absolutely. Fur is just the thing. Beaver? No, no. Ermine. An ermine stole.” She touched Bryson's shoulders and examined her hair. “And an ermine hat. Then we go to the aubergine pants and gold macramé belt with an ivory buckle, and for the blouse, I think coral would compliment you very well.”

Bryson's skin clammed up. “I’ll boil to death in fur,” she said through gritted teeth.

“Nonsense,” said Bradlee. “You’ll need it to keep warm.”

Penelope addressed a mousey, scampering sort of person in furtive whispers and she returned with a rack of clothes. “Let’s go into a fitting room, shall we?”

The fitting room was brightly lit. Bryson went into a changing booth, stripped naked and put on a paper robe. Then she joined Penelope and Bradlee, who were exclaiming over the clothes.

Nothing they brought was right. The blouse made her look feverish and the pants pinched at her belly. For a while they worked on the bra and underwear.

“I’ll never squeeze into that,” she scowled, looking at the bone china lace panties. “They’ll fall apart.”

They treated her like a recalcitrant child. Desperate to end the torture, Bryson attempted to cooperate. She wiggled into the panties and called from the dressing room, “They seem to fit.”

“Come now Bryson, let’s have a look. Nothing all of us haven’t seen before.”

“Like hell! You haven’t seen these veiny thighs bulging out of lace in bright lights!” She stalked out of the door fixing the bra. “Serves you right, you bastard.” She turned around. “Drink it in.”

Penelope applied her critical eye to the white pubic hair bulging out of her crotch and up over the waistband and said, gently, “Many women choose to shave their panty line.”

“Yeah, and a lot of women poke a finger down their throats after dinner, but not me.”

“Relax, Bryson. I like a nice bush. A lot of men do,” Bradlee said.

“What about this?” She pulled at the bra.

“Like the prow of a mighty ship.”

“You look gorgeous Dr. Bryson. Let’s try some cashmere.” Penelope wrapped Bryson’s upper body in a caramel and white cashmere drape that covered her shoulders and left her now-deep cleavage exposed.

“This itches,” Bryson said.

“No problem. We’ll use a SuperLite cotton undergarment.”

“Sounds stuffy.”

“It’s MemoFab cotton. SuperLite. It fits like skin, wicks preparation and it will allow the cashmere to drape perfectly. The folds,” she fitted the wrap, so she looked like a Greek statue, “will fall here, at your hip. Let’s try a silk skirt, ankle length.”

Bryson tore everything off as if she were on fire. “Gimme some frumpy gold and silver gown with a shark tooth necklace and screw all this drape shit. I’ll wear the ermine stole and those white flats with the gum soles and gold piping I’ve seen in the magazines.”

“The Acata Antedermas?”

“Who the fuck knows.”

Penelope whispered to the mouse woman who brought the gown, the stole and the shoes.

"Everything but the ermine works. Hmm. Try this." Penelope handed her a bronze and turquoise cape.

"Oh, stunning. You look like a Minoan princess," Bradlee gushed.

"Queen of Knossos," Bryson muttered dourly. "My dream."

They packed up their things. "Well," Bradlee said in his heartiest voice, "I knew I could count on you, Penelope. Wasn't she just magnificent Bryson? When she pulled that scarf out of nowhere."

Penelope blushed. "It was easy Mr. Bradlee."

He handed her a hundred dollar bill. "Until next time?"

She beamed at him and seemed to fade back into anonymity among the racks.

Bradlee made a call from the hovercraft. It was dusk. The city lay under dark clouds with yellow and purple breaks of sun striking the buildings haphazardly. They landed on his guest lot and handed their bags to an attendant. "Bring them to the desk, will you?" He handed the man a dollar. "Thank you."

Upstairs he said, "Mix yourself a drink," and to the doorman with their bags, "Set those down over there, by the fountain. But not against it, you understand? Fine then." He gave the doorman a dollar and turned back to Bryson. "I'm going to shower. When Benazir arrives let her in, will you? She likes manhattans as well. If you would, mix us up a couple then?"

"Benazir? Is that her name?" Bryson looked over the bottles on the drink cart.

"Yes. My wake up service."

"You're not--"

Bradlee wiggled his mustache and his eyes filled with mirthful water. "Now there's an idea, sort of an amuse bouche, but alas my

dear, no. I know more than to insult you like that. She's here to make you up."

Bryson set about pouring gin over ice she had rinsed with two drops of vermouth. "If you're going to paint my cheeks, I'll need a shower too."

"Of course. Can't have you smelling of the farm if we want them to fawn all over you."

"If we what?"

"She's bringing everything you'll need, razor, shaving soap, perfume, shampoo..." His voice trailed off. He went into the bedroom and she muttered to herself.

The only thing she was enjoying was the outrage. Well, she thought, dropping a red glass sword, upon which three spanish olives were impaled, into the martini and tasting it with her finger, it's a diversion.

The Fripp party was nothing she ever thought or cared about. Fripp had no idea who she was until transcryptasine. But she remembered going to school with him in Berne for a couple of semesters. He was just a big, self-important nobody. The usual idiotic bluster. She watched the lights of the surrounding buildings go off and sank with her drink into the soft white couch.

Benazir arrived carrying two big grips of black rubber. She was all business, hair half pink and half purple, buoyed up by bosoms. "Dr. Bryson."

"Hello Benazir. Not your usual time of day here, eh?"

Benazir looked at her quizzically. "No indeed, Dr. Bryson." She pushed past her and set the grips on the floor. "How about a drink before we get started?"

Bradlee came in wrapped in a plush grey towel. His belly pushed it out but did not hang over. Swirls of gray hair covered his soft, breastlike pectorals. "Ah Benazir, so good of you to come. I'm always

delighted to see you.”

Benazir opened one of the grips while Bryson poured over proof rye into a pitcher of ice, a quarter full of red vermouth. She shook in bitters and gave it a few vigorous turns and strained it into glasses.

“I couldn’t find any cherries,” she said handing Bradlee his but looking at Benazir.

Bradlee frowned. “We’ll survive, I suppose.”

Benazir handed Bryson a gold bag containing soap, razor, shampoo and conditioner. “Wash two times Dr. Bryson. Leave the mousse in for five minutes. What color do you take?”

Bryson tried to wither her with a look, but she was too ebullient, too physically full to respond. “White will do just fine.”

“If you say so.”

Bryson snatched the bag and went into the bathroom. It was a grotto carved out of granite, with polished surfaces around the sink and in the shower. Even the toilet was chiseled out of the same material. There was the soaking tub and the shower jets and a small sauna. Leonard called after her, “Be sure to shave your legs and your arm pits.”

Once they were done dressing, Bryson and Bradlee looked like a typical society page couple in their late sixties. Bradlee naturally looked perfect in any outfit. He could relax in lederhosen, or put on gaucho gear with equal ease. She had seen pictures of him in a pith helmet and puttees and he looked like a nineteenth century colonial officer. She had also seen him in a scarlet tunic and black military dress pants and he looked exactly like what he was, civilian attaché to a 2 star general, who, when he met her, was a colonel. He was in his element now, a tux with tails, copperweave cummerbund, black blunt heeled shoes, red carnation in the buttonhole and copper bow tie. The ruffles sat just right and his charcoal fedora, cocked slightly over his left eye, matched his overcoat.

Bryson on the other hand felt like her legs were two posts stuck in the ground. She writhed beneath the mask applied so coolly by Benazir. She hated the smell, and she hated the taste, not that she could taste a thing with that cloud of perfume they had attracted to her outer ring. “It’s the latest,” Benazir said.

“Good, good,” said Bradlee, sniffing the air to discern its constituents. He patted her hand where it lay, in her lap like a kitten. “Don’t bother coming in the morning, dear. I’ll call.”

They drove up Third Avenue to the Triboro Bridge and crossed into the Bronx on the elevated road till they reached the New England Thruway Corp. Toll Entrance. They drove up a long spiral ramp, through several sets of electronic security checks and came to a giant iron gate that slowly rose to let them on the road, whereupon Bradlee opened up and sped through the suburbs of Westchester at a little under 190 k. The car was frigid. Bryson let go of everything, forgot where she was and watched the artificial hills and buildings pass. She didn’t notice the black billboards with the little white words in the center: Is this your lucky day? and in the lower right: Paregane. Bradlee droned on about the car, “It passes right through. None of the hassles. And it’s armoured. No need for all that fuss with motorcades.” Then he launched into an exhaustive catalog of guests, their appearance, their achievements. She lit a cigarette and stretched her left arm out across the back of the sofa seat and put her head back.

“Fripp’s wife Julie was a real baller,” he said, looking at her briefly and then turning to the road. “Then her mother made her knuckle under. Fripp was an inconsequential shit, but everyone knew his father would buy out Monozone and give it to them as a wedding present. The old man was no dummy. It was he who sent me to Valdez when she was a Colonel.”

“How do you keep track of such things?”

He slowed to descend the spiral exit ramp, into a maze of pillars and turrets, remote sensors shining like animal eyes in the dark, releasing electronic gates. Up a country road then, the air thick with flying insects which thwacked off the windshield, leaving a slick of bug grease which he periodically rinsed and wiped away. On either side grew towering douglas firs, over a half moon smudged with haze. "You've got to mind the ball, Bryson. Paregane will take us far if we let it."

"What's this 'we' business Bradlee?"

He looked at her and squeezed her hand. "Now, the biggest star will be Jock Two Feathers."

"The hotel and entertainment guy?"

"Even you've heard of him. There's talk of his marrying his daughter off to Milt Spahn, the creator of BroadwayInc. Spahn got his heart broken, he's a widow. Word is, he can put his HologRapHICpRодукtions into hotel rooms. And Jock Two Feathers is a partner at The Pine Ridge Group, with considerable holdings in building and construction."

Her mind glazed over. BroadwayInc was a sudden, huge success that bounded onto state council. Spahn made his fortune by buying a bunch of theaters and improving the holograph equipment till the quality was so good he could project live theater anywhere in the country. He had 7,000 theaters fed by a handful of studios in midtown Manhattan. Jock Two Feathers had hotels and casinos in every state. A deal like that would put him on council too.

Bradlee slowed down and they drove up a long narrow road of fused stone, canopied by boughs. They entered a circular drive and waited while a white Rolls Royce deposited a couple dressed in white. She wore a white turban and a white tux with white shoes. Bradlee clucked. "The invitation was quite specific." A boy in full scarlet and gold livery opened the door and they ascended the polished granite

steps of the entrance into a Georgian stone mansion.

In the entrance hall they were greeted by a regal, 71/2 foot tall Ibo woman clad only in gold strings. "Good evening," she said.

She seemed familiar to Bryson. "Who is she?" she whispered.

Bradlee smiled. "That is Ova, the fashion model. Quite wealthy in her own right," he mumbled and then obsequiously took Ova's proffered hand. "Oh my," he said, a little short of breath, handing his coat to the footman.

"Good evening sir and Madame," he said. "Drinks are in the Trophy Room and hors d'oeuvres are being served in the Arboretum."

They entered the cavernous hall of marble, decorated with christmas wreathes. At the opposite end, by a grand stair, stood an unlit, forty foot Christmas tree. Around the perimeter were busts, one for each house of the heavens. Soaring above was the tromp l'oeil sky with clouds and birds and treetops. The hall was centered on a golden sun, shining out at the cardinal points in long serpentine rays. This was set into the black and white marble floor. And the sun itself had a face beaten into it, like the death mask of Agamemnon. The formal rooms lay off to either side, framed in thick moldings and draped in curtains.

A footman stood at the entrance to the Trophy Room, which they entered arm in arm. At one end of the Trophy Room was a walk-in fireplace, in which burned a few two-meter logs. There was a wall of stained glass windows. A woman mixed drinks at a bar while boys picked up empty glasses with trays and brought them to the bus pans. People milled about chatting in groups. Middle-aged people, like Bryson and Bradlee, were in suits and gowns, with towering, flowing, sculpted coifs and lilac scented facial hair. Their make up was more mask like and they tended to mumble. The younger they were, the sparser their clothing grew. Shirts open to their waists, they were hairless and greased up with glistening body oils. They showed their

money off in jewels. Women's skirts were slit up the leg to the hip so a single buttock flashed as she walked. They wore strapless dresses of spun jasper and obsidian and leather gloves extending up above the elbow. Shoes of molded crystal, electraweave sandals that sparked as they walked. And then there were those men, with their dreadful mascara and ponytails.

Bradlee and Bryson milled about, quaffing cocktails, oblivious to the trophies that surrounded them. It was so old hat--the large eighteenth century oil paintings of foxhunts, nineteenth century landscapes. There was a Pre-Raphaelite painting of nymphs bathing in a grotto. Save for an uncomfortable couch and two chairs placed in front of the fireplace, there was no furniture. The floor space was devoted rather to the collection of trophies, purchased at auction in London and New York.

The prize piece was a young elephant, two metres tall, his trunk lifted in the air. From a distance he looked alive, save for the glass eyeball staring into the room. There was the head of an extinct rhinoceros in front of a case devoted only to extinctions. Its shelves were packed with small rodents, amphibians and birds, each on its miniature prop, a tuft of ceramic grass or a wedge of crystal. The walls were covered with moose, elk, bear and bison heads. There were tiger, leopard and lion skin rugs and zebra pelts on the floor. A komodo dragon commanded the far corner. Then there were the engravings, the original Audubons and framed pictures from old pharmacopoeias. There was a collection of rare botanical books and bestiaries, illuminated nursery rhymes.

Bryson looked at each of these things with an acute boredom stabbed through the middle with disgust. Bradlee admired the elephant. "Remarkable animal, really," he said.

"Too bad it had to wind up here as a prop for pleasant conversation."

"I dare say it would have ended in a pile of worms otherwise."

"I wonder where the petting zoo is?" she asked.

He chuckled. "Probably out back."

"Let's hit the Arboretum."

"Not till I've introduced you to Valdez. That's her over there, talking to the redhead."

Across the room, a smallish, intense woman in full uniform was laughing loosely, glass of champagne in one hand, panatela in the other, an ess of smoke uncurling upwards. She was speaking to a young woman in uniform, with a cherry-red flattop and green eyes, who was poking the air with two fingers and making a face. When she paused the General laughed even harder. Bradlee caught Valdez's eye. She said something to the redhead and the two couples converged on a polar bear rug with elephant foot ashtrays.

The General bent down and rubbed the white bear hide with her hand and said, "It's a shame to have to wear shoes."

"General Valdez," said Bradlee. She stood. He took her hand and bowed slightly. "I want you to meet Dr. Ruth Bryson."

"Call me Bryson," Bryson said, shaking the General's hand.

"Well, Owen, I'm delighted you've finally brought her in from the wild and introduced us. Bryson, I've heard so much about you."

"And I you, General."

"Valdez is fine. One doesn't think of Owen as a gossip, but he does get around, doesn't he? I can't say how lucky we were to have him named to Monozone."

"Well," Bradlee said, "I usually land on my feet. I couldn't help but note your allusion to Bryson's sabbatical in the GMZ. Was it Keuka Lake my dear?"

"Yes, that's where my husband lives, in a restored vineyard."

"Owen never said you were married."

"Forty years."

"Well, when I was a child, I spent some time up there. My mother was a buyer for composite plants. You must tell me about it."

Ruth was ready for another drink. She tried not to look around for a waiter, but every passing body caught her eye. "I'm sure you know more about it than I do. You know, we're like weekenders."

Valdez looked puzzled, and then she pointed to her uniform. "You mean because of this? But military intelligence is actually based on reports from people like you."

"We were just headed to the Arboretum," Bradlee said.

"Well, let's go then," the General said. They walked towards the doorway and a very old man paused to greet the General. They shook hands briefly and Valdez looked at Bryson and Bradlee apologetically. "I'll be right with you."

In the hall Bradlee mumbled, "That was Chairman Bellows--hovercraft engines."

The Arboretum was a synthetic indoor rain forest. It extended for two acres off the back of the house and was enclosed in a twelve-story transparent electraweave dome that regulated light, water and temperature. There were paths wandering through groves of tropical palms and trees. Fig vines wound about the pale silver trunks. A large waterfall descended over a pile of black volcanic rock and into a pool of lotus flowers. There were cockatoos, black and sulfur crested, and parrots and toucans and strange ducks that paddled in the pool while monkeys swung in the canopy. Lost among the mists and tree ferns were the guests whose conversation hummed between the periodic squawks and howls. Tables and chairs were set up by gushing hot springs and fish pools. A boy arrived with a tray of sashimi. They each took a piece of fish.

"Toro," Bryson said.

"I told you the food would be excellent. Let's see if we can find

Fripp."

"Do we have to?"

"Absolutely." They wandered over the paths. No faces were familiar so they sat down at a black iron table and ate medallions of seared venison tenderloin. "If you see any fois gras, give a shout," Bradlee said, munching contentedly on a blue potato with truffle oil.

"I could use another drink."

"So could I, but I think it would be prudent to take it easy till we get home."

"Get home?"

"Surely you'll stay the night?"

"What's in it for me?"

He looked hurt. "Bryson, what's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong. I feel like a clown is all. Get me that drink. My dogs are beat."

He looked at his plate forlornly.

"You want me to come home with you but you can't be bothered with getting me a drink?"

"It's not that."

"You're hungry, aren't you?"

He sighed soberly. "I don't like these people any more than you do. But I wasn't born wealthy like you were. If I don't work crowds like this I'll go nowhere. And yes, I was quite enjoying the truffle oil on these potatoes." He stood. "I'll be right back."

He returned with a bottle of Veuve Clicquot and two glasses. "Fripp is in the Ball Room, surrounded by board members. I caught his eye and he raised a finger. I'm certain we can get to him."

A couple came by their table and Bradlee's somber expression brightened immediately. "Ah Milt, how are you?" He stood. "Bryson, this is Milt Spahn."

"I've heard of you," she said, trying to sound amiable.

"Not Dr. Ruth Bryson?" he asked, as if he if were just then coming into consciousness after a long stupor.

"Indeed," Bradlee said. "The one and only."

"No shit. Honey, look, it's that woman, the inventor, Dr. Bryson. This is my fiancée," he said, pointing to the woman next to him, dressed in a cut-away gown of coral and turquoise, "Utopia Two Feathers." Sudden engagement seemed to be spreading. She snapped to, out of an ill defined, transitory mental state.

"You're the one?" She took Bryson's hand and shook it vigorously. "Everyone, I mean everyone is taking Paregane. It's just made life so," she searched for the word. "Jolly."

Milt Spahn, with trim grey hair and smooth skin, smiled. "What a delightful word, jolly."

She turned from Bryson towards her fiancée and spoke, using her right hand for emphasis. "Well, it's true, darling." She addressed them both then: "I can't tell you how many people I know have seen a turn around. Their servants are on time; their factories are more productive. All of your stage hands are using it dear, and even my assistant (who I can promise you is (or was) a real bitch) takes Paregane."

Spahn shook his head with grave understanding and said to Bryson, "How does it work, Dr. Bryson?"

Bryson smiled. "How does holographic projection work?"

Spahn looked successively surprised and puzzled. After a pause he laughed and wagged his finger at her. "You're no dummy, Bryson."

Bradlee exhaled. "Your last production of Macbeth was delightfully gruesome."

"A fan of the Scottish Play. Then you'll love The Duchess of Malfi. It's all updated. Rupert Sturges is directing and Kelly Kelly plays

Bosola."

Bradlee shook his head. "A woman in the role of Bosola. Brilliant."

It was like having little disembodied teeth chewing on her brain. It took effort not to say anything. She watched the water splash down over the rocks and ferns, through a little natural gully and into a pool banked with tree roots. She watched the undulating shapes of orange fish with huge white fins and soft, gulping lips. A loud shriek of female laughter went up.

She tried to think about work but it was a black well. She tried to lose herself to any kind of thought but couldn't. There was just the rise and fall of human chitchat and the zooish din of animals.

Milt and Utopia had apparently moved on. She couldn't think if she had said goodbye or not. Quite possibly she had waved and smiled. It seemed the kind of thing she would customarily do.

General Valdez sat abruptly down beside Bryson and wiped her brow. She said, in a heavy breath, "God I'm whipped. I wish you would do half of my talking, Owen."

"Sometimes I do," he said, popping a smoked scallop in his mouth like a cocktail peanut, washing it down with champagne.

"I know you do darling. But these parties are so enervating. Without support staff it's everyone for himself."

A waiter brought a bowl of bright, fussy greens dressed in a blood orange vinaigrette. "Organically grown by the Fripps," said the waiter, serving each of them with silver tongs. Another boy came by to grind fresh black pepper on and a third to shave parmesan.

"Why do I come to these things," Valdez asked the air. "Please Owen, give me some of your champagne."

"Let me get you a glass."

"Only if you hurry."

As soon as he left she drained his glass and started eating. "You



know, growing up in Madras, I never dreamt I'd be here doing this. It's strange how things turn out."

"Yes," replied Bryson. "I hope he brings another bottle. My feet hurt."

"From standing?"

"No, the goddamn shoes I bought are biting my feet. I thought they'd be comfortable."

"Hm," she grunted.

"So what's with Milt and Utopia?"

"My young adjutant was just telling me that at Yale she was known as Utopia Two Fingers."

"Has the name stuck?" Bryson asked, with the barest touch of innuendo. The general chuckled dryly. "I've never been to Madras."

Valdez became quite pleasantly avid. "Oh, but the new city is delightful. Not as driven as here. People enjoy life a little more. I hope to retire there some day."

"Where's Mr. Valdez tonight?"

"At home, recharging his batteries in my sock drawer."

"I guess that makes me polyandrous."

"Even better yet. The other, sentient one lives Upstate then?"

"Yes."

"Have you been following the news? There've been quite a few incidents."

Bryson felt almost queasy. She swallowed hard and wondered what was wrong. "I haven't heard."

"Then you're good at avoiding the news. The Indians have been running state security and police off of their land. There've been quite a few assassinations. And all they show is that god damn picture of crying Indians and our troops blowing up a couple of cookie cutter cottages. Terrible press."

"Surely you can control that?" Bryson asked.

"You overestimate our power I'm afraid. I think we've done a terribly stupid thing."

"Interesting."

"Too frank for you? I thought being a scientist--"

"No, not at all. What were the surveyors there for?"

She nodded, looked around. "They are surveying the lakes. There's a plan to bring water into the west, and they worked for one of the construction consortiums bidding on the job."

"Not Jock Two Feathers?"

"As a matter of fact, no. You understand, all of this is in the exploratory phase, feasibility studies, that sort of thing. But I think it was to provoke an incident. All that surveying could be done remotely. We just don't need to have feet on the ground, churning things up. It was stupid. We don't want their land, we want the water. If people would slow down and do it right, there doesn't have to be a war."

"Isn't war your business?"

Valdez laughed. "Dr. Bryson, business is our business. I'm just in the military end of things. Now tell me, what do you think of things up there?"

"You don't want an honest answer do you?"

"Of course I do. Someone has to tell the truth now and again, don't you think?"

"Well, my observation is that Iro--Upstate is economically worthless. The population is necessarily marginal, fed by delusions and hopelessly archaic. Environmentally they have a minimal impact and reforestation is absolutely essential for greenhouse mitigation, so they serve a purpose. All the available resources have been tapped out. The little that remains cannot possibly repay extraction costs."

The bugs and heat in summer make it unbearable for most down state dwellers. One spends ones summer days indoors cursing the existence of the outside world. The Indians will never be a force to reckon with, though they will remain on their land as long as they receive outside infusions of cash. GMZers appear to be the usual mixed bag of utopian fools but they are, to a man, committed to state and have no sympathies with the indigenous Upstaters. To live successfully there you've got to adjust to conditions that are unacceptable to the average person."

"You said that very well, Bryson. I couldn't agree with you more. Colonisation, which is really the only way you could take back the land, is out of the question."

Bryson's stomach knotted up and she felt another, stronger wave of nausea. A cold sweat formed on her forehead. "Valdez isn't an Indian name."

"No, my father's an engineer. We went over when I was just a child, to construct composite plants. It's the family business."

Bradlee returned with two bottles of champagne, a glass, and a man in a dark green tuxedo with gold ruffles at the sleeves. His face was an ageless face, the product of genetic engineering, make up and surgery, smooth skin the color of peanut butter, cornflower eyes, black, light textured hair, straight and parted on the side and long on one end. His mustache had a small quantity of grey hair and was thick beneath his pronounced, authoritative nose. He had sensuous lips and a strong chin with a deep cleft. He stood over two meters and had an easy manner.

"Look whom I've found," Bradlee said, the skin around his eyes and on his forehead crinkling with delight as he struggled to restrain a smile.

General Valdez stood immediately, as if she was coming to attention, and flashed her teeth. Bryson, almost swallowing vomit,

looked up, afraid to stand or even move. Bradlee kicked her foot gently.

"Chairman Fripp," Valdez said, shaking his hand. "Congratulations."

"Thank you General. As always it's an honor to have you as my guest."

"The honor is all mine sir."

Fripp beamed at Bryson. "So it is you. Ruth Bryson, the Terror of Lab Three." He ho-ho-hoed and she stood uneasily. "No no, sit down. Let me join you for a minute. After all," he said, sitting down, "were it not for you, this party would be its usual insular self. But you haven't changed a bit." She pretended to stare blankly. "You don't remember, do you? Of course not. Berne, '29 was it? Academie de Saint Croix?"

"Of course," she said. "I'm so sorry, Chairman Fripp. I was the student supervisor that year. I'm afraid I'm no more tactful today."

"Forgiven, forgiven. She gave me an F--a gentleman's F as they say. Well, chemistry is not my forte. In those days skiing and girls were of more interest to me. Your father was a great friend of ours. We were very sorry to hear of his passing."

"That was some years ago," Bryson said.

"He'd be proud of you today, I'm sure."

"I'm sure."

"And General Valdez, Owen assures me we'll be seeing a lot more of you these days. You and I must contrive to sneak off with Chairmen Spahn and Two Feathers. Jock has some ideas about water that might be of mutual interest."

"Anything Chairman Two Feathers has to say is of interest to me."

He returned to Bryson. "But Ruth Bryson! How it takes me back to those days. Wasn't life a delight then? Carefree days of riding on

distant mountain trails, hot cocoa and blizzards.”

She smiled and nodded.

“I spent a summer working for your father in Vienna you know. He had us up to the house a number of times. What a place that is! One could hunt for days and not see a soul. How are your brother and sister? Er, Roger and Noel. Noel, she could charm an ogre. It must have been exciting to grow up in such a large and gifted family.”

“They get on famously,” she said. “I saw Roger on television playing golf in Uganda.”

“Uganda. Marvelous place, marvelous place. We have a plant there you know.”

“A bit warm,” Bradlee observed wryly. Everyone laughed.

“I’ll bet old Roger never broke a sweat,” Fripp said. Bryson shook her head. “Well, I look forward to spending more time with all of you. Let’s have dinner some time, here at the house. Just a few of us, ay? We’ll shoot billiards.” He looked at Bryson and wrapped her hand in his cool papery palm. “I’ve often wondered over the years if that was you working for us. It’s a shame how out of touch people become.”

When he was gone Bradlee turned to Bryson, who was now collapsing about a ball of black fire in her gut and said, “Is something wrong? You’re acting very strangely and you’re deathly pale, I dare say bluish green.”

“I don’t feel well.”

He poured out champagne and signaled for a waiter. “You might overcome it when you meet the boss.”

“Relax, Bradlee,” said Valdez. “He’s nothing but a Cheshire Cat.”

“Maybe, maybe. But I don’t see the point of all that Swiss boarding school nonsense if you don’t play it.” The waiter came. “See here.

I’m tired of getting up. Bring us a bottle of cognac, will you? And I’d like dessert.”

Bryson bolted to her feet and said, “I must find a bathroom.” She walked as fast as possible into the cold columned hallway and to a massive staircase lit by a chandelier like a waterfall of crystal. She climbed this and searched about till a servant in black directed her to a sitting room, off of which was a lavatory, a large black marble room with a toilet, bidet and a sink. Bryson barely locked the door and collapsed to her knees at the toilet where she painfully and noisily vomited till there was nothing left and then, in a wretched panic, sat down and emptied her bowels. The contractions continued long after there was nothing left in her. Shakily she got up and washed her hands and face, rinsed out her mouth with scoops of water. The lights and mirrors flattered her. In the gold and black room she looked younger, intense, her eyes an inky blue, the recent pallor of her skin returning to tan. Her clothes weren’t soiled. She smelled like lilac soap. She caught her breath and felt herself sinking into a deep hole of bad feeling. A fear from the past, maybe older than herself even, ate away at her, like black, corrosive waters. She flinched, as if the future were a knife aimed at her eyes. There was no way she could return to the party feeling like this. Instead of going downstairs she left the bathroom and went through another door in the sitting room, entering a library paneled in cherry with a dark green plush chair and a reading lamp with a cream silk shade. For a while she looked over the books, rare old calf bound volumes of literature, library sets mostly, never opened, chosen for their value and the color of the bindings. There were editions of Pope and Milton, Darwin, Hegel and Freud, Shakespeare and Jonson, Aristotle and Plato. Johnson’s *Lives of the Poets*. She took down a volume of Plato and opened it randomly. But here let me ask you, friend: Is not this the plane tree to which you were conducting us? Phaedr. Yes, this is the tree. Soc. Yes indeed, and a fair and shady resting-place, full of

summer sounds and scents. There is the lofty and spreading plane tree, and the agnus castus high and clustering, in the fullest blossom and the greatest fragrance; and the stream which flows beneath the plane tree is deliciously cold to the feet. Judging from the ornaments and images, this must be a spot sacred to Achelous and the Nymphs; moreover, there is a sweet breeze, and the grasshopper's chirrup; and the greatest charm of all is the grass like a pillow gently sloping to the head. My dear Phaedrus, you have been an admirable guide. She replaced the book, feeling like she had been to that place before.

Next she wandered into another room off of the library. It was warmer than the house and had a smell difficult to identify. The air was thick and humid, it reminded her of the air in Iroquoia. It was full of plants. There were big potted trees on the floors and various vines and ferns hanging from the ceiling, pots of geraniums, impatiens and ivy on painted iron stands and shelves made of weathered boards. It was dark except for an oil lamp on a wicker table. As her eyes adjusted she became aware of a woman sitting in a wicker chair, staring out the lead pane windows and then, staring at her as she entered. Her eyes, even in the dark, were big and glossy and flat.

"I'm sorry," Bryson said. "I'm just trying to find my way downstairs."

"That's o.k.," said the woman. She studied Bryson a moment. "Aren't you Dr. Ruth Bryson?" Bryson looked warily at her. "I caught your press conference. I'm Julie Fripp." She stood and indicated that Bryson should pull up a smaller wicker chair and sit down for a chat. "You aren't feeling well?" she asked in a patrician voice devoid of emotion yet somehow also warm.

"No--er, how can you tell?"

Julie Fripp laughed. "One just knows these things. Don't wounded animals hide out in dark places? You've found my suite of rooms, by

accident I suppose."

"The library is impressive. And this is a lovely room." It wasn't a lovely room, it was a weird room. The casement windows were open, letting in the bugs and night sounds. Bats darted in and out of the green garden lights. Mist webbed the trees and there was a buzz in the air. Inside, boughs hung over their chairs and it looked like Julia Fripp was seated outside. The odor became stronger. It was like soil and wet leaves but a little sweaty too, as if a large animal lay stretched out in the dark.

"Hm. It drives most people nuts. My husband walks in here, usually angry, says I make him feel small, but in five minutes, if I want, I have him begging for sex. Ha! Six months ago I couldn't get him to look at me. It's a cruel thing to toy with someone's desire, so I don't." She drank from a glass of water. At first she looked typical for someone of their age and class: thin, tanned, with crayon blue eyes, a pile of dark hair and high cheekbones. What nature and the geneticists provided as raw material, cosmetic surgeons sculpted into perfection. She stretched her bare legs out and periodically crossed and uncrossed her feet, next to the pair of opalescent ceramic high heels she had kicked off. It was surprisingly undisciplined. Something wayward shined through the fake face, and caused the mask of make up to crack. Her eyes and skin had an uncanny lustre. Bryson had the sensation she could hear her heartbeat and blood circulate. She could feel the sweat, smell her sebaceous glans. There was a pulse in the room, multiple pulses. "I really ought to thank you Dr. Bryson. I saw your name on the guest list of course. If they hadn't put it on I would have insisted. Six months ago my husband Ahmed wouldn't look me in the eye, I said. He was more afraid of me then than now I suppose. I was like a basilisk, with vile breath and guts like eels. I wanted to die. It's hard to imagine how badly I wanted death. Everyday was a suicide watch, with silly games between me and the oppressive, stiff, puritanical host of warders he assigned to keep me alive. I have no

idea how or why it happened. Nothing seemed to work, all the purpose was blown out of life and whatever it is (I now know it's gratitude) that keeps one alive was gone. I was just this putrefying mess of hatred, fat, self starved, drugged into oblivion, devoid of dignity. Paregane changed all that. I owe you my life, my marriage."

Bryson didn't know what to say. Transcriptasine had till then been a matter of test subjects and numbers. The weight of responsibility was all conceptual. She had never met anyone who actually took the drug as indicated, an individual. She became curious, looked at her skin, at her hair and eyes more carefully. "Why do you stay in here? If you don't mind my asking."

"I can't stand the air conditioning and all the people. Too many people make me sick. The perfume, the body oils and wax, shampoos, soaps, that kind of thing. Paregane makes one sensitive to light, to odors, to sound. I don't like the feel of synthetic surfaces and substances. This make up is making me crazy. It doesn't show, I know. I don't actually even feel it, I just know it does. I might have scrubbed it off with steel wool before, or pulled a scene. I was big on scenes. It's worth it, to have my life back. I gladly suffer the discomfort of hypersensitivity to have my will to live back, to have peace of mind, perspective, restored. I'm waiting for Ahmed to catch up with me."

"Your hair--"

"I had it all removed and grew this myself."

"It's very--"

"Lush. Nails and skin too. Each day I awake sustained by strength more like a visitation. I don't know how to put it. It's visceral. Everything is visceral."

Bryson smiled uneasily and thought, she has no idea. Julie Fripp was the kind of person she instinctively hated. Yet she seemed not to be that person. There was a solidity to her, as if she were allowing

Bryson to see into her in a way they were trained never to do, even to themselves. She pitied her then. The right thing to do was to tell her. Instead she replied, "I'm so glad my work has had some positive effect."

Julie Fripp stood and walked up to Bryson, put her hands on Bryson's face and looked into her eyes. Her hands were warm and full. The pulse beat in the palms of her hands. A pent up soul pressed up against her eyes and peered impishly out at the world. "You don't need to worry about us Dr. Bryson. Don't make yourself sick over this. We're truly happy." She kissed her on the lips and Bryson felt like she was being kissed by a young woman, with lips like fresh strawberries. Her heart began to race. Then Julie Fripp sat back down in her chair and looked out the window. "I envy you Dr. Bryson. When we were young we did as we pleased, I maybe a little longer than most. I gladly took the bit and bridle, but I knew my heart was elsewhere." Her voice became choked and bitter. "Marriage, business, duty. The family line. You said fuck this to that and went your own way, continued to study. We watched, you know. Maybe we thought you were a fat ugly fool. Imagine that." Her voice became distant then. "If I could get up and fly out that window into the far north right now I would. But only crazy people do such things. Sane people sit in chairs and don't fidget. Sane people keep their thoughts to themselves and silently plot, obtaining what they need on the sly."

"My friends," Bryson said. She wanted to get out before yielding to the impulse to blurt.

"I'm sorry. I forget the effect I have on other people sometimes. Gratitude and empathy. It's so simple."

"Yes. I'll remember that. By the way. Did Chairman Fripp mention any side effects?"

She looked startled. "He said there weren't any."

"Really? I'd double-check that. Well, goodnight, Mrs. Chairman

Fripp. And I appreciate your gratitude.” She backed out of the room.

“There you are,” Bradlee said. “We were just about to go into the ballroom for a dance. Care to join us?” Valdez stood.

“Bradlee, I’ve got to get out of here.”

“But it’s not yet midnight. The children’s choir will be singing carols, they’re going to light the tree and there’s a bombe of some sort.”

“I’m sorry, I feel like shit. Something I ate maybe.”

“But they shot the venison themselves.”

“I know all about putting on the chaps and riding after game. Tallyho! then hang the velvet corpse up by the hind legs in a tree and strip its pj’s off with a skinning knife.”

Valdez said, “Understood, Bryson. It’s been a long day and these things are exhausting. Go on Bradlee. Take her home.”

“But Jock Two Feathers--”

“I can handle him. We’ve done good work here tonight.”

“What about Julie Fripp,” he implored.

“Saw her,” Bryson said. “I’m kinda faint and spinning here, Bradlee.”

“Owen, don’t be an ass. This is not the only opportunity.”

“Very well.” He exhaled through his nose and tossed down an inch of cognac.

“I’m sorry Valdez,” Bryson said with a slight deferential bow.

“Please, after tonight it’s Priss. And I’m charmed to have finally met you.”

The women shook hands and Bradlee led Bryson out of the house on his arm. The valet brought around the car and they drove off. As they left a violent, churning loneliness seized hold of her and she felt the black burning ball return, this time to her womb. She tried smoking and drinking from Bradlee’s proffered flask of cognac and

finally, as they drove up the ramp to his parking lot and stood at the elevator she abandoned herself to a need so great she could barely wait to be in the apartment. By the elephant foot umbrella stand she grabbed him and kissed him boozily and deeply.

Bradlee, in a fit of delight, pulled away. “So that’s what this is about. I knew you’d come around, Bryson. It’s about time.”

“Shut up Bradlee.” She followed him to the bedroom where they undressed and fell to the bed clawing, sucking and thumping. She punched his chest and said through gritted teeth, “Goddamn you Bradlee, go! Go!” Shut up, she thought, shut up and finish the job. Obliterate me, make me nothing. Her head hit the headboard and she felt the top of it blast off. At last there was nothing left, not even stars.

Once Bradlee was asleep she disentangled herself from his legs and arms and sat in the dark in the living room, listening to the water run down the wall into the fish pool. A thunderstorm was smashing the city. Huge gusts of wind sent bursts of rain against the windows. She took a sheet of gold electraweave and watched the news feed. It was another village, another team of security agents in silver armor and helmets restraining an angry crowd in front of two houses engulfed in flames. As she grew tired her last coherent thought was how could she have ever told Julie Fripp, no matter how obliquely, that her husband was trying to kill her with Paregane?

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

### THE PATH SICK SORROW TOOK

After about twenty minutes of actual sleep, Felix awoke. He lay in bed looking up at the lights as they intensified into synthetic morning sun. There were things to do but he had no firm sense of them yet and lay there for a few moments free of any memory of what had happened. He wanted nothing more than to remain immobile. He tried to get back to sleep but that was impossible. Then lying there became in and of itself painful. Still, he didn't budge until he remembered that he had given notice at work. He had to get up then. There was just no way he could afford to leave work now. The job would be everything. Before stopping the sale of the embryos, before arranging for her cremation, he must secure the job.

All of his sensations were extreme and changeable. Time lost all stability. It stretched out: the present. Then past brought present to its knees. He moved from a state of disassociation to one of total immersion. Sometimes he viewed himself and everything else through a grainy filter, a conceptual filter that prevented him from being an actor in his own existence. It was in this state, floaty, without emotion, as if suffering from an acute head injury, that he showered, drank coffee and dressed. Like old blue screen animation he performed these tasks as if Veronica were there, to be edited in later. These were things he did the same way so often that they required no special mental effort yet he felt that even lifting one foot in front of the other to walk, or taking a breath, or a sip of coffee, required effort, unnatural effort. Every fifteen minutes he had to

battle back giant, convulsive waves of grief. He felt disgusted and hopeless as each wave approached and slowly engulfed him till he coincided exactly with the state from which he, the rest of the time, was alienated.

Perhaps an hour at most had transpired between his awakening of sorts and his emergence into the cool, rainy light of morning and yet he had already cycled through the extremes of alienation and grief several times. How, he thought, will I ever get through the day? Or even ride the amphibatrail? The prospect of bursting into tears in public appalled him, yet he doubted his ability to stop it. Even the welling, burning, reddening of the eyes, the slight gag in the throat were unstoppable. And if he tried to speak, or tell another human being what had happened? Words were impossible. Perhaps he could straighten everything out and take a week of bereavement leave. Such a policy existed. Deaths were treated with great solemnity at Intellatrawl. Even custodians had their losses publicly announced. And there were many such events in the lives of Intellatrawl associates.

The sight of her bike was like a bomb going off. Everything was; life was booby trapped with her things. Pubic hair in the drain. A brush. Clothes, books, even the last cup she had drunk from. He looked at the bike parked next to hers and wondered how to ride it. Awkwardly he mounted the seat and balanced uneasily. He rode away vowing to throw every thing that reminded him of her away. He would rent a dumpster and pay teenagers to dispose of it all, then hire a cleaning crew to scour the walls and floors.

At the bottom of the cul de sac he joined a small mob of commuters and raised the hood of his poncho as the thin, smoky drizzle thickened into rain. He wondered at the fact that none of them knew that he was marked. To them he was just another guy on a bike and yet he knew he had been disfigured. It was like being in love. You enter the crowd with a secret, knowing you've been

transported to another realm while they, the crowd, are immersed in the usual chronologies. Their lives ticked on while his had been blown out of the world into a different metaphysic. Removed from the comforts of time he roamed wild mists pitted with nothingness and danger. Time is the mercy of eternity. Now like a painting his bike went backwards in the air. Now his song took an atonal turn, it wandered off key and into a different time signature, splats and honks of sound interrupted the smooth melodies. Bike wheels turned. Puddles broke like glass beneath the tires.

On the amphibatrain he became preoccupied with the order of things. Priorities obsessed him. First he would get in touch with his immediate supervisor, then the Human Resources Department. No. First he would go to his office and pretend nothing had happened. Nothing had changed. Felix Clay showed up for work. It was all a mistake. No, tell the truth. He was leaving, not because he wasn't happy but because his wife had taken another job and had died, tragically! over the weekend. Yes, his wife was dead. No, he didn't want to explain about it. The pity--the explanations. That was the worst. There was something both shameful and irritating about pity and curiosity and embarrassment. Death was embarrassing. Everyone embarrassed! Why was this so? Why were tears embarrassing? Didn't people at one time shriek and wail and rend their garments? Hadn't Hamlet and Laertes leapt into Ophelia's grave? And Heathcliff? What of the Greeks? Their long revenges and keening pain, or old Heironymo, mad againe for his dead son. But we aren't like that. We aren't like that.

Everyone was staring at him. He had lost his transparency. He used to be the only pair of eyes on the amphibatrain. He weighed and pondered every visage that he saw, and had to turn his head to hide out in private thoughts and memories and cancel the dull, frightening panorama of human faces and bodies. Now he was the visible one, the object seen by a thousand probing brains whose eyes could

monitor the chaotic phases of his soul while remaining themselves opaque. Passive faces, unrevealed, eyes and ears attuned to his secret vibration.

En masse they swarmed up the steps, his entire car emptied all at once. Now with the buzz of nonexistent machinery in his ears he moved with the others, getting smaller and smaller beneath the bulging, towering walls, the papery, pitted facade looming above them with the millions of little vents and windows like holes randomly drilled into interlocking spirals.

They entered the Intellatrawl doors, and he allowed instinct to carry him along, as it had carried him to the shower, the coffee and the bike, to the auditorium for the Monday morning address. It was all so normal. Maybe he wouldn't take time off. Maybe normal was what he needed. This normality of routine gave him strength. He could hold back the tears. He knew how to walk, how to breathe, especially in the familiar, colorful hall. Suddenly he loved the flashing phrases:

EVERY DAY IS A BLESSING

GRATITUDE NOT GRAFT

they filled him with good feeling, comfortable, simple phrases; we are a homey people after all, our company is intact, there is safety in the team, the group is real, one is not alone.

They slowed and gelled at the doors and sorted themselves into a line. It seemed that he and Veronica had enjoyed but a moment of happiness in their lives. A moment. Why couldn't it have been terrible to the end? Why not the whole thing bad? If only she had died on that terrible night, drowned or bled to death in the bathtub, then he would have no memory of their love. The beauty would be gone. He would not tremble as he did now, hearing her voice. It sang, it spoke, it shouted.

He approached the door swallowing hard. There was a wave on the



horizon, he felt it looming, the pressure dropped, the air chilled, he held his breath and pitched all his strength against the black wave but was helpless beneath its weight. Up and down, it came. The wall. Higher and higher.

There was a disturbance. It wasn't clear what kind of disturbance but it distracted him from his wave and yanked him from the dream. He smiled to join the others in looking about for the cause.

From either side two men approached the line in a great hurry. People on the line looked startled, indignant, and then afraid as the men roughly examined each one of them, moving quickly. They were from security, in green uniforms with red buttons on the shoulder and visored hats. Finally they reached Felix and grabbed him. One man nodded at the other. Their fingers were like iron. The people in his vicinity stared briefly and then looked at the floor as Felix was yanked away. Well, he thought, I guess I'll have to explain earlier than I had hoped. They entered a dark little office and the men turned on a bright light that made them all blink. There was a desk and a computer and a plain steel chair.

"Sit down."

He sat.

"Are you Felix Clay?"

"Yes. I can explain about the--"

"Shut up. Did you send this message?"

The screen displayed his letter of resignation. It seemed so rash and stupid, the actions of another man. What had gone wrong? What had happened to him and Veronica? They should be able to take all this back. There had to be a way to redo things. They made mistakes they didn't understand. Tears surged into his eyes. His hands shot to his face and he pressed his sleeve to his eyes but then snot surged into his nose and he had to sniffle it up somehow.

"A weeper," said one of the guards with disgust.

"Don't think you can cry your way out of this," said the other.

"Give him a tissue."

The guard handed Felix a tissue and he blew his nose loudly. "You don't understand," he mumbled.

"Explain it to the boss."

"The boss?" Felix asked.

A door on the other side of the room opened and Chairman Aung Thwin entered. He was so familiar and yet Felix realized he had never seen him in the flesh. He was smaller and but much more solid. His skin wasn't so unnaturally white, nor were his lips so red or eyes so black. "Mr. Clay," he said in a warm, deep voice. "You disappoint me greatly. Hasn't Intellatrawl been a good employer? Did we not assist you when your wife, a prized associate, succumbed to the general malaise of the times? Did we not nurse your family through mental illness?"

"Y-y-yes sir. I meant no disrespect."

"What did you intend?"

"My wife Veronica found a job out west--" his voice cracked and he fought back tears, "--we were going to move there, mostly for her health. She sold everything and I gave notice but now I regret these actions sir. They seem like the desperate acts of a madman to me now. You see, she's dead." Here he broke down completely, his head practically hit his knees and he said in a barely audible whisper, "I'm sorry to be like this--oh god! She's dead sir, and it's all my fault." His guilt became both evident and crushing as the black wave broke down over him and he drowned in sobs. He hyperventilated and wiped his face. "She died in her sleep sir. They don't know why. So it's all a mistake. I never meant to leave Intellatrawl."

"You just said she decided to seek employment elsewhere. You contradict yourself."

"B-but it was a crazy plan. She was on drugs, a crazy drug sir, I was

too.”

“Our drug policy is quite specific and inflexible.”

“It was prescribed, not illegal.”

“Your wife’s prescription, and yet you took it.”

“She begged me. I didn’t want to.”

“Loyalty and efficiency Mr. Clay are the two most important character traits of our associates. We can’t afford to keep associates around who lack judgment, who undermine moral. Moreover, while I accept your regret as genuine, and you have my sincere condolences, I don’t see how we can reinstate you. These men--”

“Oh, that can’t be all! I’ve been a good, no, an excellent associate. No one’s done--”

“These men,” he said louder, drowning out Felix’s protest, “will escort you to the door. Your severance pay of one month will be credited to your account. Any attempt to return to these premises will result in your arrest. Good day.”

Felix’s sense of unreality by turns grew deeper and shallower as the men escorted him to the amphibatrain. Soon he was wandering up Main Street, through the rain, lost in thoughts that were no thoughts. He had things to do but had no idea where to start. He stared at a sign of fat men dancing naked in Santa hats.

Eventually, of all the places he went to, Why was where he stopped. Why led him first to his bike and then home. Home was a weird place to be during the day, during the week. But it was as good a place as any to pursue why. He stared at the alien walls, smelled the strange air. He sat down on the couch and tried to read but could make no sense of the words, they hovered off the sheet of electraweave. Even the inanities of the news were too complex. Then he tried to sleep but the futon was cold and white, he couldn’t get comfortable. Still, sleep dragged him down. He couldn’t sob anymore, he didn’t care. There was only this sinking impulse, and

why. Sleep would get rid of why. It pulled him to his feet and he followed it down the spiral stairs as if down a drain to the darker, warmer, comfortable hole that was their bedroom. The room was a mess, unwashed clothes on the floor, the bed sheet tangled in a ball, pillows crushed. On the floor were the paper wrappers left by the medical technicians when they had tried to revive her. He told them it was no use, but it was standard procedure. Her body thumped like a dummy beneath the electrical paddles.

Out of work. His lips were numb. He was hungry. He wanted to vomit. The bed looked so comfortable. Fully dressed he crawled in as if it were a womb. Death had a sweet smell. He gripped the pillows, jammed his face into them, and smelled her body. Felix she said. They were drinking tea together, with lemon. The channels changed. There were voices now in a jumble, bubbles of water racing to the surface. He swam down to the bottom of the river, where fish circle drowned buildings, laying spawn among the bright green grasses. Dad came into his room. The sun’s almost up. Sleepily he dressed and pulled his new boots on. The marina was a short walk away. Felix. And a fifth age passed over in dismal woe.

Nights came and went. He spent hours in concentrated thought, making plans. He had to retain the embryos. Despite the impracticalities this was his driving idea, that the only way to deal effectively with her death was to immediately give birth to one of the embryos, the female one, and name her Veronica and raise her himself, whatever sacrifice this involved.

He spent hours on the phone. The idiot at the cryovac company insisted that their embryos had been decoded and sold to a commercial stem cell company manufacturing generic organs and such. There was no way to identify, much less retrieve, them. The proceeds from the sale had been credited to their account, as per Mrs. Clay’s instructions.

Why? He knew, (and this knowledge came to him on the black wave), that it was Paregane that had killed her. He never wanted to see that drug again, never wanted to go to the garden, never wanted to think about it. They were fools, idiots to fall for it. Paradise was the oldest con in the book, and he was through with it. He, assuredly, was to blame but the doctors had a share in it. Dr. Tarlton, and that other one, the big blustery psychiatrist alias, had promised them a cure without side effects. They never once mentioned any danger. But hadn't the emergency doctor said he'd seen dozens of cases?

The hospital called. They had performed the autopsy and cremated the remains. Remains. In the field it's a cow and beef when you eat it. Corpse. Excrements: nails and hair. Did he want them to send her cremated remains to his home address or did he want to pick them up? It was a bit of a bike ride but he had nothing else to do and he determined to track down Intellatrawl Doctor Tarlton at the same time and demand an explanation.

He had not left the house since getting fired. He had not done the dishes. Mostly the thought of food was disgusting, but at odd hours he was ravenous and then he called various restaurants, ordering more than he could possibly eat, a dozen egg rolls, two pizzas, four cheese burgers, shakes and fries. By the time the delivery arrived he had lost his appetite and the cartons piled up in the fridge, on the counter and the table. He ate cold greasy food, vomited it up, drank. Drinking didn't help any but he kept at it, hoping to succeed. A case of cheap bourbon arrived with two quarts of assorted curry. His tips were enormous. Money was nothing. One month of severance. He'd be dead in a month, eating rotten food. He adjusted the light sensors for perpetual evening. Now the soft orange and pink shadows of evening were always on the walls. He smelled her underwear once. They didn't smell good at all! Or bad. Even flushing the toilet was a problem. If only everything could always be the same.

Now he had to go out and collect her remains. He looked in the

mirror. It was still his face, with a week of growth, not really a beard. He showered and found some rumpled clothes that were passably clean. The world outside of his door had become a mystery to him. He was afraid to leave. Here, in the house, he could sit with Veronica and order food he wouldn't eat and scream. Screaming didn't feel any better than drinking, but he kept at that too.

The hospital had a deathly feel despite the warm lights and synthetic forest smell, Sylvan Moment or Evening on Old Lake. Enough Paregane remained in his system to render these effects meaningless at best, hostile manipulations at worst. The whole way over anger and indignation rose in his gorge till everything, her illness, her death, his loss of the only happiness he had ever known, the termination of his job, and the murder of their posterity were all Tarlton's fault! The man had destroyed his life and he had some explaining to do.

As he walked down the main hall from the reception desk to Request Processing, he attempted to soothe himself, control his breathing which was trying to catch up to his pounding heart. These hospitals and their doctors were hateful. They ruined lives. For what? Money. They pretended to treat illnesses that they didn't understand with drugs that didn't work, selling hope where none existed. The fact that the patients were people eluded them.

They handed her to him in a wooden, coffin shaped box with a composite handle. He signed forms and bore her off, the autopsy report under his arm. Officially this was all that was left of her. The death certificate would arrive in two weeks. How many copies did he want? In the mean time he would have to contact insurance companies, the pension administrator. Appointments had to be canceled. Friends notified. All of these tasks were outlined in an interactive brochure the grievance counselor handed him over the glass brick divide, When A Loved One Passes. He wondered why he had to do anything. Wasn't the fact that she was dead enough?

Perhaps he could hire a service. A responsible party. There had to be people to take care of things. He had more important stuff to do. There was her closet and the drawers. Then the files to go through.

He returned to the lobby, took a lateral and an elevator to the Intellatrawl wing where his first human encounter was with a an obstinate receptionist. She pitched the word appointment at him and he swung at it and missed. "Intellatrawl Dr. Tarlton is a busy man," she said. This one he took for a ball. Tarlton was in his office, he knew that now.

"He's in there," Felix said. "Do I have to break the fucking door down?"

"Mr. Clay, that kind of threatening language will get you nowhere. I'll have to call security."

"Please," Felix begged. "I'm sorry. I just. You have to understand. My wife is dead. I need to see the doctor, to tell him, to ask why. She was his patient. He took an interest." A wave was approaching and he felt his guts tighten against its onslaught. His eyes reddened. He rattled the box, waved the autopsy report in the air. "This is all I have now. Please. I'm begging you, five minutes with the doctor and you'll never see me again." She wavered and somehow he was in.

Intellatrawl Dr. Tarlton looked up from his magazine with alarm and then, after a moment of scrutiny, smiled. "Mr. Clay. I didn't know I had you today. Please sit down. How are you? How's Veronica getting along?"

Felix's eyes burned. He was choked up with hatred. This affable buffoon was the cause of all his misery. "She's dead."

Dr. Tarlton looked stunned. "My goodness, no. That's just terrible. I'm so sorry. What happened? When?"

"Just this weekend. In her sleep." He waved the autopsy report in front of his eyes. "This says of natural causes." He shook the ashes back and forth. "This is all I have left of her. Why? You tell me

why."

He took the autopsy report and his face darkened. "I am so sorry."

"You killed her."

"Now look Mr. Clay, my business is saving lives, not ending them. It's natural to assume--"

"That drug you gave her, Paregane."

"I see she was taking it. One of the early ones. I no longer prescribe that drug in most cases, though in hers it would still be indicated."

"Why don't you prescribe it anymore?"

"There have been some unexplained deaths associated with it. There are risk factors we didn't know at the time. Word is there are better alternatives."

"And yet--"

He shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "I'm not really at liberty to discuss this. Things happen. A new drug often represents such hope to people as ill as Veronica was, we take a chance."

"Take a chance? You never ever said there was any risk."

He straightened in his chair. "I'm sure Dr. Eulenfeld explained that there was a better than 90% chance of a successful suicide, hardly an optimistic prognosis. The assumption in such cases is that the medicine poses less of a statistical risk than the illness itself. It's just common sense."

"Someone has to pay for this. I've lost my job, our lives are ruined, my wife is dead because you doctors made her so sick and crazy and then finished her off--"

"I'm sorry!" he shouted. "Do you think I feel good when patients die? That I don't care? That I became a doctor to behave with craven indifference to the people who trust me with their lives? I do the best I can, just as I'm sure you do in your job. Now please try to

get a grip on yourself and listen to me.” His voice dropped and he became professional and soothing. “Paregane is a problem, I won’t deny it. We didn’t know. We were as misled as you were. In the past few months word has gotten around and now we don’t use it, do you understand? Except, and I emphasize this, except in cases much like Veronica’s. Now, if you really want to get to the bottom of this I suggest you see a lawyer and sue the manufacturer. It won’t be easy. Paregane has a life of its own and, frankly, doctors have no power over which drugs are approved and how they’re marketed. Companies like Monozone can squash people like bugs. Understand now? They have a council seat. I know a guy. He has offices in the city and one here in town. He’s very good; he’s had some success in wrongful death lawsuits. I’ll call and get you an appointment. You go see him. But I’m telling you, I won’t testify, I won’t admit any wrong, I won’t even admit that this meeting took place. And again, I’m sorry. Veronica was a wonderful woman, and you’re a good man Felix. You did nothing to deserve this.”

Felix stormed away from the hospital in a fit of rage. Now its object was a company, a company powerful enough to sit on state council. At home he bustled about, tight-lipped, competent. He had started to speak aloud to Veronica, as if she were in the other room. “I’ll get all this shit cleaned up soon. First I have to make an appointment to see that lawyer Tarlton talked about. Now we’re getting somewhere.”

He had an appointment in two days. He spent the time searching through the garage and her other things. Every time he began to go through a box he did so with great energy, but the energy died almost as quickly as it was born and all he succeeded in doing was making a greater mess. Every effort to consolidate, dispose, make new, only resulted in things becoming dispersed, retained and mulled over. He savoured each of her earrings and bracelets, her rings and hair ties. These, once removed from the various sandalwood and lacquer

boxes that contained them, remained on whatever surface he had laid them. The contents of her life each day spread farther and farther from their home. Peach, apricot and lemon scarves. Underwear and bras. Pants, shorts, skirts and dresses. Even each of her files was stacked open on the screen in so many layers and tiles that they were like a mosaic. Finally the day of the appointment came and again he had to shave and dress. Clutching Veronica (he couldn’t leave the box of ashes at home for fear of their being stolen) and the reports he rode his bike to Main Street and found the offices of Max Mbeke, Esq. on the fifth floor of a glass box. It commanded a view of the meandering hills and inlets of the Hudson. Mist filled the valleys and rain fell in grey scrim.

Mbeke was a handsome man of about 40 with a round face like a chestnut and tightly curled gold wires all over his head. In each ear was a fashionable red diode. His suit was of hand-stitched linen and silk with wide lapels, loose in the shoulders and tight in the waist. He came around his desk to shake Felix’s hand.

“Mr. Clay. How may I help you?” He sat Felix down and returned to lean back in his chair, sizing Felix up with the still eyes of a preying mantis.

Felix explained, a little incoherently, wandering both out of nervousness and fatigue, all that had occurred, starting with her first illness. As he went on Mbeke’s expression became concerned; he nodded and shook his head and made small interjections of oh my and just awful. When Felix broke down he smiled and handed him a box of tissues. He sighed and allowed Felix time to collect his thoughts, looking at the peaceful and beautiful view of the river valley. When he got to the Paregane part Mbeke’s entire attention was engaged. He leaned forward out of the chair onto his elbows on the desk. He started to scribble down notes. He became so agitated he stood and paced.

"I think you've got a bang up case here Mr. Clay. You realize I'll keep 35% of the pay out? If it goes to trial we're looking at years of litigation but I imagine, given the climate, Monozone will want to shut you up fast. I would look for a settlement in the multimillion-dollar range with a gag order and no admission of wrongdoing. How are you fixed for cash, short term? You say you lost your job?"

"Yes, but I'm o.k. for two months or so."

"Give me some time to poke around."

This was great news! Felix bounced out of the office and onto his bike. He raced home feeling ebullient. There would be justice. Then, he reflected, there wouldn't actually be justice, there'd be hush money. No blame would be admitted or assigned. There'd be no statistic for her other than death by natural causes. This was nothing. Well, not quite nothing. Millions of dollars were an admission of sorts. It would have to do.

As he approached the house he felt the strength and joy slowly die out of him. The house was an oppressive negativity. The idea of it drained the energy from his muscles and bones. Yet it was his nest, his last refuge. He had to do something about it. It wouldn't do to just keep going through everything. He had to stop talking to her. He had to pack the stuff up, not look at it all. He had to start throwing stuff away. Maybe he had no wife and no job but he had a home. It was time to make it his home by purging it of her memory and then slowly readmitting whatever mementos he could stand. But once inside he was again overwhelmed and a sixth age passed over in dismal woe.

It might have been afternoon. He spooned some cold, congealed coconut curry into a bowl over hard rice and ate half, stacking the remains carefully on top of the tower of greasy dirty bowls and plates rising out of the small sink. Then he made a cup of tea and lay down on the couch to sleep. Lately he had come to prefer the couch, at

least for daytime sleeping. It was less intimate than the bedroom and bathroom. Those rooms were deeply stained with their lives, their auras. They had marked every surface with their exhalations, excretions and secretions, their sloughed skin and hair. Their moans and tears and laughter pervaded every fabric and coated all the surfaces. The ghosts of all their great dramas continued to strut and proclaim and act out the past. The first time he had kissed her was a day much like this one, late in the fall, on the quad at Columbia. He was so unsure of her. They spent all their free time together, huddled in his or her room to the annoyance of their housemates, listening to music and reading. There were other guys following her around and she could flirt. Surely none of the others had the same rapport, the same feeling of completeness in her presence. It had to be between them, not just an irrelevant longing. But he didn't know and he was afraid to kiss her without knowing. A mistake would be so costly. She was heading off to Connecticut to spend the winter break with a high school friend, someone she claimed not to even like anymore. They had made the plans long before though. The sky was coarse and grey and a strong wind blew in off the river, smelling of heavy storms. She was in a short black coat. They had run out of things to say but neither would walk away from the other. He was steeling himself to kiss her but reluctance overcame him and now it seemed it would never happen. He gazed at her face, into her eyes, like crystals illuminated in a cave, jeweled craters calling him. Well, goodbye then, she said. He nodded and turned to go and she said, Wait. Come here. He didn't wait, he didn't turn, he didn't walk away, he didn't even have to come to her because they were suddenly together, both moving in the same direction. Their lips touched and opened and his tongue melted into hers.

He lay down on the cold hard couch and drifted off into a chaotic, tortured half-sleep, which was interrupted far too soon (though it was hours later) by a loud, repetitive pounding on the door. "Go away!"

he shouted. "Go away!" The pounding continued. He buried his head and kicked his feet, hoping to black out the sound. Finally he realized there was no way he could do so and got up to look at the monitor. A workman in a T-shirt and overalls with goggles was at the door. He was shouting something into the audio. Felix engaged the full security routine and hid out in the kitchen. Eventually the man would leave. But to his surprise not only didn't the man leave, he apparently overrode the security routine and was clomping down the stairs. Felix looked about for some means of defense and found the chef's knife Veronica had used to cut her wrists.

The man stepped into the living room and scowled. "Is anyone here? Hello? Mr. Clay? Oh." He smiled and then, seeing the knife, pulled out a gun and pointed it at Felix's face. "Mr. Clay, put down the knife. Listen to what I have to say. Here's my identification. I'm a deputized associate of the Arlington Housing Group. This is an official notice of eviction. You have twenty minutes to collect your things and vacate the premises. You have the right to appeal this decision and any items found on the premises will be retained by the Arlington Housing Group for sixty days pending the outcome of the appeal, but you must vacate these premises or face arrest and conviction, as per section 23 of the standard housing contract signed by you and your spouse on August 4, 2169." He stared at Felix, his finger twitching on the trigger. "It ain't worth it Mr. Clay."

"Eviction? But I haven't done anything."

"Weren't you fired from your job?"

"Well, what happened is, I gave notice, and I tried to get the job back, you see--" he put the knife down on the counter and sat at one of the two kitchen chairs. The man, not taking his eyes off of Felix, retrieved the knife and holstered the gun. "But they fired me."

"We don't allow unemployed tenants."

"But I have money, and I'll find another job, really. It was all a

mistake. My wife died you see, quite unexpectedly and--"

"That's none of my business. This order says to evict you now."

"Where am I to go?"

"You say you have money. Go to a hotel in the city. Stay with friends."

"I've got no relatives or friends," he said, more to himself.

"Look, you're wasting time Mr. Clay. Lots of people lose their homes. You'll find another, if you really have money. Now, by my clock you have fifteen minutes to pack up what you need."

Felix ran downstairs. The room swam in his eyes but there was just no time. He would have to figure out later on what to keep. He went into the bathroom and scooped everything he saw on the white marble sink surround into his leather travel bag, toothpaste squeezed in the middle and hastily capped, a toothbrush, a razor and a bar of pure, coconut oil soap and the bottle of Paregane. From the tub he took the loofah.

The bedroom looked like another man had lived in it. He could smell a madman on the air, a ranter, a man who talks to himself, quietly at first, and then in accelerating outbursts of invective, directed now at a god he had never believed in, now at himself. The piles of clothes were thrown about and the blanket on the bed looked as if he had tried to wring it out like a dishtowel.

He found a small black duffel bag and started to pack: a few sheets of electraweave he plucked up from a thicket of towels and underclothes, then *On the Road* and a one volume collected Shakespeare. He dressed in his work clothes, an artichoke colored suit, so all he really needed was a dozen boxer shorts and sox, a pair of pants and two t-shirts. He looked at the barbells and all the books they had collected. Her clothes, lying where he had scattered them, in pools of silk on the floor, in the closet with her shoes. He wanted to take something of hers, something to touch. Each night he had slept

with something different in his hands. Her satin sparkle shorts, her bra. No, he thought. There was no time. He packed the travel bag of toiletries, the hospital papers, and the wooden casket containing Veronica's ashes. He looked around, at the autumnal, fading light on the wall. The things, he thought. What will become of the things?

Without protest, but feeling a mute horror that was quickly overwhelmed by that sense of hopelessness which arrives when nothing one does matters, he went out and left his home in the hands of the evictor. As he wobbled off on the bike he watched the crew start to empty his home into a small truck. They were preparing it for the next tenant.

By the time Felix floated into Les Jardeen it was dinnertime and the glass was fogged up with good cheer. The tables were set and lit by small candles in globes of glass. Early diners, mostly ancient, buttered rolls and sipped wine or cocktails. The line cook slid single serving roasting pans of oysters, topped with bacon and breadcrumbs, under broilers. Waiters memorized specials, ladled soup into bowls and brought salads to the tables. Amphibatrains entered and left the station in rapid, rush hour intervals, disgorging hungry and delirious Monday night commuters. Outside it was dark, but the day had darkened with cloud before the sun had set and no one noticed the change.

There was a time when he routinely walked into Les Jardeen at this hour to take his place at the bar. There was nothing strange about it. Nevertheless, he viewed the restaurant with unease. He wasn't hungry, but there was just nowhere else to go, he concluded, after mindlessly wandering the streets, paralyzed by indecision, for nearly an hour. His dilemma, both in its totality and its constituent parts, was nothing he could, or even wanted, to explain. If he could have he would have vanished, though vanishing involved a change of state and Felix, at this point, was totally inert.

He set his bag down and sat on his usual stool, back to the door. The action was warm with familiarity. Upon crossing the threshold he knew he had done the right thing. Even the odor of roasted potatoes and meat, of buttery sautéed vegetables and New England clam chowder, salty potato cubes in cream, were agreeable. After his weeks of cold, dead food the anticipation of sitting down at a table near the fireplace, perusing the menu over a glass of Beaujolais, made little pangs of hunger break out across his stomach like a steel drum, each strike yielding a different note, a different desire. Yet all this desire lacked will. He had no ability to act; there was nobody in charge. Felix Clay was a mote in time.

Peter Nguyen wiped down the bar, polished glasses, cut limes into eighths and tidied up, preparing for a dismal Monday night. He was preoccupied with thoughts of his boyfriend and their roommate. He and his boyfriend had not been connecting of late. They still slept together but only when Peter initiated and it had not the usual abandon. The boyfriend was using a lot of drugs as well, and obsessively watched pornography. The roommate was a whole other problem; she was in love with Peter even though they had broken off over a year ago. And despite this break he could not shake an attachment to her. They were in fact a family. It was intractable and perverse. He would not have her nor would he let her go and she was spinning out into an awful sexless depression. Then he had a big audition the next day. It was a job he desperately wanted and needed. Since moving to the city he had worked little and almost never for pay. This was a paying gig, for Milt Spahn. Each of these problems played out in his mind as he prepped the bar. Each led to its own dead end. Felix did nothing to interrupt him. But, when he was done and everything was in its place he took a deep breath, turned around and said, a little more warmly than usual, and with considerable evident surprise, "Well good evening, Mr. Clay. It's been a while. I was thinking you'd left for Alaska without saying goodbye."



Felix, upon being greeted, immediately fell into a turmoil of speculation as to how much of his ordeal he would narrate, and when. He didn't really decide but rather commenced to behave as best he could, as if nothing had happened. A light sweat broke out on his forehead as he spoke.

"I'll have a gulag martini please, Peter."

Peter mixed it up with the usual brio and gave him his drink with a dish of bread. "It's still warm. We have bean spread, garbanzo I think. Would you like some?"

Felix chewed the soft, yeasty bread. "A dish of olive oil maybe, and some olives. Picholines and those big green ones, cracked with garlic." He looked at the newspaper. The headline read:

#### IT'S WAR

The Carpathians had erupted into open warfare from one end to the other. Troops were deploying to Turkey. The department of defense was consulting with the allies. The usual crap. He dipped the bread into the green olive oil and watched apprehensively the other regulars filter in. The sports guy sipped at his colorful drink and said, "9 times out of 10 he takes the pitch. The guy's a loser."

Felix was becoming rapidly drunk. He stared at the middle distance where a haze of color hung. Then at Peter talking through a pained smile, pulling wine corks and opening beers which the waitresses picked up on their lacquer trays with a decoupage of old bistro images. The tall beautiful one was working. But they were all that way. Tall enough to give you a straight shot at their crotch when seated. Growth hormones. Height genes. She had broad shoulders, mighty hips, a narrow waist and her slit silver skirt opened and closed like scissors on her brown thighs and calves, her buttocks like a dented bowl.

The man rapidly inhaled his cigarette and coughed up statistics. "One thing for the luge is toughness. I'd crossbreed Inuit and

Sherpa. A guy in Pyongyang is working on it now. They stand to rake in millions at the next olympics if they can displace Nepal for the luge."

Peter nodded mechanically and drifted towards Felix. The news reports pressed on Felix's eyes like unknown objects. Peter entered his line of vision and grew larger. He said, "I read that The Pine Ridge Group is building 12 new cities in Montana, Utah and Nevada."

Felix nodded as if his head were on a spring. He took a sip of his drink and felt his eyes get watery. "Do you think--" his voice cracked "--it would be all right if I ate at the bar?"

Peter looked at him with a sort of half smile and wrinkling of the brow, highly enigmatic, almost deadpan humor. "Of course you can." He handed Felix a menu. "The rabbit's good tonight, and they're trying an Olde Vienna thing. There's wiener schnitzel with spaetzle and sour cabbage and a roast goose breast with juniper and an apple, onion and sage dressing. They both come with cucumber salad. They smell o.k."

Felix grumbled at the menu. His upper lip was sweaty. He felt like he was huffing, instead of breathing. The air kind of sawed away at his lungs, going in and out laboriously.

"Is everything all right?" Peter asked.

Felix licked the sweat off of his upper lip and swallowed. "No, not really. But I'm afraid," he swallowed hard and tossed down the milky martini. "Another, please? This time make it with vermouth and olives. I'm sick of these razor's edge drinks."

"Sure." When he set the drink down he didn't move away. "That guy is driving me nuts," he whispered. "Do I look like someone who even remotely cares about the luge?"

"No," Felix said. "Boring losers. Sometimes it seems the world is full of 'em."

"Sometimes? Get on this side of the stick and that's all there is. Boring assholes."

"How long have you worked here?"

"I don't know. Three years maybe."

Felix nodded. "I don't even remember who was here before. I'm sure I was a regular then."

"I don't think you even came in when I started."

Felix tried to think. "Well, it started when things went bad with Veronica." Not mentioning Veronica till now was unusual. If he was trying to be normal, he should be talking about normal things, like Veronica. But what was there to say?

"Are you going away or something?" Peter asked.

"No. Do I look like I am?"

"The bag."

"Oh, well, the bag--"

"Did something happen? You seem," he paused. "I'm sorry. It's none of my business. But I thought, given how you were the last time you were in, that everything was going well. You look different."

"Can I have the meat loaf with celery root puree and wild mushroom gravy? A dinner salad, champagne vinaigrette. A glass of Burgundy."

"Sure."

"I hate to dump it all out, Peter," he said, observing himself slide into it, wondering in dumb show why he had ever opened his mouth to speak. "It's kind of unbelievable. I have nowhere to go. I don't know what to do."

"Go back to her if you can," he said, putting the finishing touches to the order. He dinged a bell and the waitress in the silver skirt came. Peter handed her the order and she frowned at Felix.

"Hi," she said. "Why don't I get you tonight?"

"Sorry," he said, smiling. After she walked away he said to Peter, "Why do they pretend to like us?"

"What, men?"

"No, customers."

"She's not pretending with you Mr. Clay."

"Why do you call me Mr. Clay?"

"Because that's your name."

"My name is Felix."

"O.K. Felix. Her name is Allisoun. She likes you. You're her regular, one of the ones she looks forward to. You order off the menu, don't ask for special favors, you're patient when it's busy, quiet when it's slow, you tip well, you have a nice, warm smile, you don't seem like you're full of shit and you don't obviously undress her with your eyes."

"Oh."

"So why don't you have anywhere to go? Did you fight?"

"No, I got evicted. Came home, took a nap, woke up to some deputized janitor with a crew and a dumpster truck."

"Evicted." Peter shook his head. "Why?"

"Well, you know how I gave notice? I tried to get my job back and they fired me, and then they notified Arlington. I can appeal of course but everything's been impounded."

"That's terrible. Why'd you try to get your job back? What happened to Alaska?"

Felix covered his face and took a deep breath. "I'm not going to Alaska. I'm not doing anything anymore." He finished the martini and burped quietly. "Pardon me. Veronica's dead Peter, she's gone."

"Dead?" He gasped and looked around suddenly, like he wanted to escape. He touched Felix on the shoulder. "Mr. Clay, Felix, I'm so sorry."

"I loved her so much."

"I know you did."

"It didn't seem like I hated her? All the complaining, over the years? The hours of tedious analysis, the constant picking apart--"

"No, no," he said in a soothing voice. "That's just what people in love do. You had real problems. You were trying to solve them. Dead. Oh, dead. That's just awful." His eyes reddened. Felix turned away and looked at the back of the yellow monkey in the window. The bell dinged.

"It doesn't seem real. Nothing does."

Peter brought Felix his food and left him alone to pick at it. It all tasted good enough, but the sight of it made him want to vomit. When he looked at the meat loaf all he saw was three rectangular portions of granular grey meat fanned out on a puddle of brown gravy, lying like a plain beneath two mountains, one of mashed potatoes, with gravy running like a mudslide into the other, peas and carrots drenched in butter. His nose filled with mucus. Out of a sense of duty he poked at the meat loaf with his fork and brought a chunk to his lips where, despite a gag response, he admitted the foreign meat into his mouth and chewed. It really wasn't bad. The grains of fatty meat squished between his teeth and diffused across his tongue. Pleasure centers in his brain felt pleased. He was so hungry his mouth digested the food before it could hit his stomach. The restaurant reached a slow bustle. Old people in moth-eaten, conservative suits came in and stood until the host led them away to tables. Couples even older than them left. The Intellatrawl women, Nadine (the redhead), and the one he didn't know, came in. He avoided their eyes. Then a burly woman in her sixties, maybe seventies, with a mole on her cheek and attached ears, sat two stools away, drinking a frosty schooner of ale. She had a deep, soulful laugh. Peter greeted her as a friend. They discussed the theater.

"Sort of a Brecht thing," she was saying. "A carnival on stage, with text. They could never do it with aliases. It has to be seen live."

"Maybe we'll come next week, on my day off."

"You should try to work with this guy. Moises and Promethea too. He's good."

Peter nodded. "I have an audition for *Life on the Mississippi*."

She vented exhaust and lit up a cigarette. "Milt Spahn dinner theater. Tackier than Broadway Inc., with its All Shakespeare! schedule. Nothing but. What's so great about that? You've got to mix it up. In the city right now new shows play seven nights a week. Look at Edsel. He manages to do both. You just have to know where to look." Laughter rumbled up her throat and came out her mouth. "Of course, everyone's got their head up their ass. It's called the lotus position. Strictly for Paregane eaters." Another laugh rolled out of her. "I got a rich girlfriend. Father owns a couple of hovercraft dealerships and some high ground in western PA. Harvard degree in communications, Ph.D. in something or other. You know the type. So what does she do? She goes to Algeria, on a camping trip to the Atlas Mountains. She meets a local schoolteacher there and marries him. Now she lives as a traditional Berber wife, burkah, head to foot, in a village of 300. I went to the wedding. Haven't heard from her since."

Felix had started listening at the mention of Paregane. "Paregane kills," he said softly.

The woman turned towards him. She had a big round face, a double chin and brown eyes, and bleached synthetic hair cut into bangs with a shoulder flip. Her smile was warm, like pancakes with butter and syrup. "What's that son?"

"Paregane kills." He chewed some meatloaf rapidly and swallowed it down with red wine.

"Sure it does," she said quivering with laughter. "What doesn't?"

But I don't wanna be lied to along the way. Paradise. The Garden. Please. I'd rather die in a crowd, than grabbing this," she said, jerking her fist up and down.

"I've been there," Felix said.

"Don't get started," she said. "I shoulda figured you for one a mile away. Anyone who looks so damn good must be in the garden. I ain't interested. Now tell me, have you seen anything good lately?" When Felix said nothing she continued. "I'll tell you what. Come see me sing sometime. I'm at the cafe in the Met for the next few months. Know where that is? 83rd and Fifth. Can't miss it. I'm there Thursday thru Sunday."

"I've been to the garden. It's real. It's not this," he said, jerking his fist as she did. "But they don't want us there. The angels kill the people. Seduce us away. Or eat us. In paradise, when a lion eats you, it's an angel in a wrathful form." The woman turned away. "Did you ever try it?"

Without turning around she said, "I don't take drugs, buddy. And I ain't big on religion either. Peter, another beer and one more of what John the Baptist over here is having." She turned back towards Felix. "I hope booze don't make you any more voluble. Cheers."

Felix pushed away his plate, smeared and half eaten, and slid the empty glass forward. "Gulag, vermouth and olives."

"Blach! Gulag vodka. That stuff'll kill you a lot faster than the angels."

Peter gave him the drink and said, quietly, "Is that how Veronica died? Paregane?"

"I guess," Felix said, looking down out of the light. "Officially there's no cause of death. It's natural causes."

"Then how do you know it was Paregane?"

"I just know is all. And there've been indications. Hints from the doctors and the ambulance people." Felix wobbled in his chair.

The woman said, "That stuff's dangerous, no doubt about it. I know someone lost half his cast over the course of four weeks. It was The Ozone Conclusions. You can see what was at stake. I always thought they bugged out west, but who knows now. Maybe they just died."

In a monotone Felix said, "I'm going to sue the bastards."

The woman asked, "Who died anyway?"

"My wife."

"When?"

"A while ago." He drank some more. The place became vague, colors slightly askew, as if the appearance of things was shifting, surface coming unglued from the trellis beneath. Constituent parts came free of the matrix and recombined uselessly. He drifted towards his hands and snapped up abruptly.

"I've got to go," he said, picking up his bag and weaving out the door. His name echoed after him, in Peter's voice, but he couldn't stop for it, the summons of the air was too great. He stumbled out the door and drank it in. There were choices now. A few bars along the strip enticed his eyes. Banging red signs with fishnet stockinged legs crossed at the ankle, red toenails flashing in sapphire pumps. The rear half of a kicking donkey and notes floating off a guitar the color of goldenrod at dusk. Behind those flashing, vibrant signs were dark, composite booths and crowds of howling drunks. There, he could be nobody without challenge, succumb to the mood and go out kicking like the donkey, ass first. Once he'd seen a python get hold of a rat the wrong way. He watched the little pink eyes pop going down. The thing was dead, but there was something shameful about dying that way. Everyone but the snake and the rat knew it.

The other way was true dark, away from lights and noise, from people, down the road to the amphibatrain. No one was about. Everyone had arrived or left. The ground was wet, streaked with blue

lines from the lamps on either side of the road. There were benches on the platform. He thought maybe he'd sit on one of those, but he was very tired. Even the ripe, amber glow of the station lights was too intense. There was a stand of bamboo before the platform. He crashed against the thick, round trunks and water fell like rain off of the leaves. Again he bounced against them and fell down on the ground, the bag still in his hand. He watched himself lose consciousness, then let go and gave up watching.

Some time later, he was being poked awake and he heard a voice. At first he took hold of his suit lapel and drew it against his face like a blanket. The ground where he lay was warm, like a nest. It wasn't even terribly hard. He and the place had reached an accommodation. It was awful to be stirred. But the voice insisted. He awoke slightly and looked at his interlocutor. It was Peter and the waitress, no longer dressed in silver. "What," he mumbled.

"Mr. Clay. Felix. Are you o.k.?" Peter asked. The waitress stood back, erect, while Peter loomed in on him.

Felix didn't know what to say. He sat up, aching, bruised on his side and arm. "What?" he asked again.

"Felix, it's Peter. Can you stand up? Let me help you."

Felix stared at him. Moment by moment he knew and didn't know who he was. But he gave him his arm. Peter pulled him up, and all three smiled. "I'm all right," Felix said. "I was waiting for the amphibatrain."

"Well that's just where we're going," Peter said. "Look Felix, where are you headed?"

They each took hold of one arm and took him the rest of the way down the dark road, and into the composite shelter on the platform. He dragged the bag along between them, mostly keeping his balance despite the struggle of thought going on in his head. Evidently the autonomic nervous system was in better snuff than the volitional.

Finally he said, "I'm going home."

"I thought you lost your home."

"Is not the earth my home? I'm a man."

Peter smiled and set Felix down on the bench. He and Allisoun stood, smoking furiously and pacing back and forth.

"I can't bring a man in the house," she said. "Brenda and Chloe would kill me."

"Well, Allisoun, the way things are going with Moises." His face became resigned. It aged him. They both looked at Felix. "I mean, how long before--"

"I know."

"But we can't just leave him, he's Mr. Clay. He's hurting. I'll bring him home."

"Someone has to, but it shouldn't have to be you. Can't we like, call his parents or something?" Allisoun asked, scrutinizing him doubtfully, saluting to shield her eyes from the amber platform lights.

"I'll ask. Felix? Can we call someone for you? Like, do you even have parents?"

Felix shook his head, his face a mask of incomprehension. "No one. Nothing to say."

Peter rubbed his forehead, pushing back his soft black hair, stretching out his neck, his thin lips pursed. He moaned quietly and said, "O.K. Felix. You're coming home with me."

Felix laughed and looked at the waitress. "I she coming with us?"

"No," Allisoun said. "I live with two women."

"Oh shit. I used to live with one woman. Before that, it was one woman or one man."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

### MIDTOWN

Peter Nguyen lived with his boyfriend Moises Cruz and their friend and former lover Promethea Donne, in a studio apartment in a 25-story glass and ceramic building on the corner of 40th and Eighth. It was a run down building in a bad area but it was cheap, not unimportant to three unemployed actors working in restaurants. The amphibatrain stopped at 42nd and Eighth. The short walk filled Felix's brain with badly needed oxygen.

Crowds of people wandered over sidewalks crammed with shacks and jerry-rigged structures with walls of paper or cloth, and roofs of corrugated composite and sometimes just faded, patched sheets of composite pulled from dumpsters. Vacuum lights and hissing gas lanterns, strings of naked light bulbs, oil fires and diodes dangling off of wires made a weird orange glow that filled the air.

The booths sold food, or hosted a crap game or a game of cards. People hawked drinks out of coolers, unlabeled beer bottles and jugs of whiskey for two dollars. There were tents for fucking, and over-the-counter drug sales.

The waitress left to catch a PCP home and Peter threaded through the crowd with Felix in tow, distracted by everything. He watched red, blue and yellow-feathered darts knock into a board. Beer foam gushed over the sides of mugs. Strange smells called after him. Clove cigarette. Smoking brazier. Meat grilled on little skewers over an hibachi on the sidewalk, for a handful of coins. In two blocks he saw more of life than in twenty years. On a dark stretch of stoops,

concealed in the shadow, he saw a man sprawled out on his back snoring loudly, two crutches on the ground, his right leg cut off at the knee. The stump was raw.

Felix had always known that the world was ludicrous but until he met Veronica he had suffered this knowledge alone. It was a feeling they shared between them but didn't reveal to others. Neither had any inkling that an entire subculture rooted in this perception even existed, that in fact the world's absurdity was a commonplace in some quarters, to be debated, celebrated, agonized over. They had lived like solitary rainforest creatures, adapted to the trees, nocturnal, staring out with big round eyes into the arboreal dark, oblivious to the Bohemian beetles down below, busy churning up the dung and the earth.

Bags of rotting garbage were piled in front of the building. The steps were white with pigeon shit. Graffiti covered the door and walls, fat bands of black, cartoonish drawings, crude genitalia dripping red. There was a careful rendition of an eye with teeth for lashes. The lobby of the apartment was dark and dirty. It smelled like fresh urine. Peter yanked a croaking metal door open and they entered a narrow hall lit with blue and orange glow balls. At the end was an elevator, difficult to discern from the wall, due to the continuous scrawl of invective. They got off on the twelfth floor and went down an identical hall to a door and entered a tiny square room in a haze of smoke. Obscured by this haze were two people seated on folded floor cushions watching what appeared to be a knot of naked humans, engaged in an orgy: greasy reared bottoms and recumbent bodies with raised legs, multiple penetrations of all genders and holes, a fist rhythmically pounding a thigh.

"I've brought a friend," Peter said.

The woman shrieked and the man, in a nasal, preternaturally sarcastic voice said, "Turn it off, quick." The vision of Sodom faded.

Felix hid behind Peter, wet and dirty from sleeping out in the rain, afraid he was intruding, feeling lost and miserable. Why had he ever consented to come here? With his bartender of all people. A man he didn't even know.

The woman was sultry, not terribly tall, a little heavy but not fat, in her late twenties with thick, disorderly hair, the color of dark antiques. Her half closed eyes were somber and her lips were thick and sensuous. She was tired and wasted; sprawled on the cushion, head against the wall. In her left hand was a square glass and in her right a cigarette. It was hard to see how she could tilt the glass into her mouth at that angle without spilling it down her chest.

The man was a little younger maybe, with a wavy pile of chestnut hair, high cheekbones and a prominent cleft chin. His mouth was fixed in a mischievous smile and his eyes were open warily with surprise. He was seated upright on his cushion, back straight, smoking, drinking from a square glass. In the middle of the room was a low, black, wooden table. On it was an ashtray bulging over with cigarette butts, an ice bucket and a bottle of cheap gin. They were dressed for bed, the woman in a pair of black cotton shorts. Her large, fleshy breasts lay flattened against her like old balloons. The man wore black bikini underwear. His body was like an ice sculpture, perfect musculature and no hair, but somehow it didn't fit his face at all, which was a little coarse and very expressive. There was a third nipple in the center of his chest, which he rubbed back and forth compulsively.

The room was hot. A ceiling fan spun furiously and a window fan buzzed and roared but both to no effect, the smoke was just too thick.

"Are you watching that shit again? I thought you had to bring the equipment back to Edsel."

"It was just the live feed from Fallopia," the man said.

"We had to watch Zeke perform," the woman said.

"You two are obsessed," Peter said, angrily. "So, this is my friend Felix."

"Oh, hello," said the man, looking Felix over with increasing interest. The woman sat up, abruptly aware of herself, and covered her breasts. "Hand me a shirt," she said, a little languidly, looking at Felix and then at Peter and the man. On the floor a number of shirts, bras, pants and skirts lay in a heap around a full laundry bag. Peter tossed her the first shirt he laid hands on, a black tank top. She smelled it and made a face but put it on. "Hello, Felix," she said.

"This is my boyfriend, Moises Cruz, and our friend Promethea Donne." They shook hands without standing. There wasn't much room on the floor. Promethea made room for Felix on the cushion and nervously, stiffly, he sank down on it. Moises went into the galley kitchen and returned with two glasses into which he spooned some ice cubes and poured gin.

"I hope you like gin," he said, handing a glass to Felix. "It's all we have."

Peter took off his shoes and Felix stood up abruptly and did the same, bending over and nearly falling as he did so. Once they were more or less settled in comfortably around the table, within arm's distance of each other, Moises and Promethea looked at Peter, awaiting his explanation.

"Felix is a regular at Les Jardeen. He's had a terrible personal tragedy and I told him he could spend the night with us." He said this as if he were summarizing a play he had just seen and as if Felix were not seated right there, close enough to smell their breath and sweat. Inside, Felix squirmed around, expecting a tremendous fight to erupt. He searched for a means of escape, but it was too tight, he was trapped. Promethea became terribly concerned about his personal tragedy and said, "That sounds just awful. Do you mind my asking--"

"Ew, Promethea, don't pry," said Moises. The way he peered at Felix expectantly, Felix knew he would have to tell them something. He looked at his bag, by the door, feeling the distance between himself and the remnants, or remains, of his former life. But it had only just ended, hadn't really ended at all. There were two trajectories now, the one his life was supposed to have taken and the one it was actually on. The real died into an ideal and he was left to live out a grotesque fantasy.

"No gory details," Peter said, glaring at Moises.

"It's o.k.," Felix said, his voice low but rooted. He had no trouble speaking. "My wife died, very suddenly. Then I got fired from my job and evicted."

Moises opened his mouth dumbly and said, finally, "Oh my god."

Promethea shook her head. "Just awful." They drank up in silence and Moises poured another round. Felix waved off the ice cubes.

Peter asked, in a tone suspended between sarcasm and disgust, "So, was the live feed from Fallopiia all you were going to watch?"

"We couldn't agree on a movie and then we remembered about Zeke," Moises said.

Peter sighed miserably. "Zeke's gonna need a renovation if he keeps it up."

"Zeke's got buns of steel, and you know it."

"He's Dorian Grey."

Promethea turned confidentially to Felix and mumbled, "Zeke's been a live porn star for as long as anyone can remember. He just never seems to age."

"Well, he used to be in the theater," Moises said.

"Oh, but he was never a leading man," said Promethea. And then, to Felix, again in confidence, "He did stand up as well."

They fell to theater gossip then, throwing around names of people

and places that bewildered Felix as much by their speed as their obscurity, but he was flattered by their apparent instant acceptance, and felt as if he had always been sitting next to Promethea and across from Peter and Moises. Even the odor of their bodies was sinking in, becoming familiar.

"Do you see many shows?" Moises asked.

"Well, we have a subscription to Broadway Inc."

"They've taken over everything," Peter said. His face became dark and bitter. Felix had only seen his face at work, when it was pressed into service and betrayed his thoughts and moods fleetingly.

"But Milt Spahn is a genius," Promethea said. "Without him there'd be no viable commercial theater."

Moises made a loud dismissive noise almost like the braying of a donkey. "Milt Spahn doesn't know his Holinshead from his Henslowe!"

Peter said, in a voice a little louder, "There was more work when the independents were operating."

"And the plays were better," Moises added. "Did you see the Antony and Cleopatra?" he asked Felix.

"I did," Felix said, trying to remember the night. He and Veronica had seen the whole season.

"What did you think?"

Felix took a breath. His thoughts scattered like pigeons, just out of reach. He and Veronica had discussed it at length on the amphibatrain, but he only saw the image of them in a bubble of conversation, cut off from the other passengers. What they said was swallowed up by the feeling of sitting with her. "They were all quite good...the actors I mean. But, well, I've always seen Augustus as the villain, and they made him the hero of that production, it seems to me anyway."



All three of them nodded. Peter said, "Unsurpassed stupidity."

"It's worse than stupid," Moises said, "It's intentional."

"Well," Promethea said. "I'd better make up the guest room." Felix briefly searched for this other room and then understood by the chuckles that the guest room was the third, inflatable mattress she pulled out of the wall unit that covered the wall between the bathroom and the kitchen. The room was just big enough to accommodate the three mattresses, a double for Felix and Moises, and the two singles for Promethea and Felix. The little table folded up. The four of them silently made up the beds with sheets, Moises and Peter along one wall, with a little space, and then Promethea's along side, against the opposite wall. Felix's was perpendicular to these, beneath the windows and the t.v., his head not far from Promethea's feet. After another drink and another round of cigarettes in the dark they went to sleep. Felix felt himself shrinking. He was small, a small hunched creature hiding in a tree. Even the discordant waking breaths abating into rhythmic unison were menacing. His eyes adjusted and he lay there watching the lights throb on the ceiling. He got up, stepped up the narrow aisle between the two beds and brought his bag back to the bed and draped his arm across it and tried to sleep. But even with his eyes shut lights burst on the lids and the distant hooting and howling of the city seemed to go on forever. There were sirens, and screams and the sounds of things breaking, glass, cracking wood. There was water rushing. And agony. The constant sound of human agony, the kind that sows no empathy. Rather it was the kind of self-lacerating agony that germinates contempt. It was as if by night the destruction of humanity went on, a municipal project of long duration, like the building of pyramids. Drifting in and out he was vaguely aware of movement and realized that Peter was humping Moises.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

### THE RULES

Hours before the others awoke Felix could no longer stand pretending to sleep but was afraid to awaken them by getting up. Weak sun filtered by the blinds filled the room. He watched them snore quietly away and took On the Road from his bag but there wasn't enough light to read easily and his eyes wandered. What he really wanted was coffee, but without a key he couldn't leave.

The city was stirring awake, the late night agony giving way to bike horns and the honks of trucks. These were only distantly familiar sounds, more a part of old movie soundtracks. He had spent his early childhood in the city, uptown, when his mother was doing her residency at Mt. Sinai. There was a bedrock of sounds and smells then. But by the time he was seven they had moved to Yonkers, into a two-bedroom apartment in a luxury high rise. Then the city became a place to visit. His mother sometimes took him in to shop in the department stores for designer clothes, clothes she didn't wear except for rare official functions. Or there were theater and ballet performances, the opera and museums. He remembered the rundown dioramas of the Museum of Natural History, poorly lit by lanterns. There was something dutiful about these trips. They were always with his mother or the mother of a friend. They ate hot dogs and drank cartons of weak orange juice and pressed their faces against the window of the amphibatrain as it dove into the river and raced along. When his parents were in town together they took him to ball games at the coliseum on the west side. He saw Smitty pitch a

perfect game in '49; a man behind him burned his neck with cigar ashes when he stood to roar with the crowd for the 16th strike out and final out of the game.

But listening to the madmen and women rant in the hours before dawn, the constant yow of sirens rising and dropping, reminded him of their apartment on 105th street. How he loved sitting by the open window with Veronica and a cup of coffee watching the people below. It seemed like all they did was fuck and talk and shower. He remembered the hot street smell, even in winter, of sewage and garbage and brackish water, of burning alcohol beaten into the room by fan blades. Even the smell of rot and insanity was young. That was all that was left of their life now, memories. They had only begun to know each other. She had left right in the middle of things. All that they had yet to learn of themselves and each other and the world, all those future memories would never be made now. And it pissed him off to think about how she had just abandoned him to it, this life that they had been making together the way a spider makes its web, time and strands flung across an empty space, built of feelings and sensations and memories. Like spiders they spun their mental habitat to trap their sustenance, the food of others entering their lives.

Around noon Promethea stirred awake. She lay there staring at the ceiling through half open eyes, blinking. He didn't mean to stare but he did. She stood and the blanket fell away from her body. Then she drifted off into the bathroom. The toilet flushed and she returned in a black silk bathrobe and noticed that he was awake. "Oh, good morning Felix," she said, louder than he would have.

"I couldn't sleep," he whispered.

"Don't mind them. They'll sleep through anything."

"That's not true," Peter groaned, folding his head in the pillow.

"He's not even awake," said Promethea. "Pay him no mind." She turned and went into the kitchen calling, "Would you like a cuppa?"

Felix followed her into the kitchen. It was a narrow short room. To the right was a window, propped open by a stick, with a soot clogged screen, and to the left were a sink, a bar fridge and two burners along the wall. She boiled water in a dented steel pot and poured it into a glass beaker over the coffee grounds. The strong smell diffused in the air and she handed him a chipped purple mug full of steaming coffee. There was no room for cream and she didn't offer any sugar. The space was tight and they stood practically touching. This nearness was unnerving to him and yet she appeared to be totally relaxed. "I'll go out for croissants," she said.

"Can I come with you?" The coffee was hot and dark, darker than he'd ever had it, smoky. They stepped back into the room and sat down together on her bed.

"Oh, don't bother. It's only a few blocks. The coffee's not too strong I hope?" she asked. "Guests sometimes complain. I can water it down--"

"Don't worry. It's fine. I don't want to impose on you. You don't even know me."

"Peter knows you," she said.

Felix shook his head and looked at his bare feet. They were not far from hers. "I'm just a customer."

"Oh nonsense. He wouldn't have invited you if you weren't o.k."

Felix blushed. They balanced the cups on their knees. Her toenails were painted green and black and the polish was chipped. The toes were short and curled. Her lower legs had a sparse covering of black hair that thickened near her ankles. The window shades were bright and the traffic noise had reached its midday pitch, where it remained, a constant roar punctuated by squeaking gears, crunching metal and thuds.

Felix confessed, "He found me passed out in the rain."

Promethea smiled. "So you lost your job, your house. Mind my

asking what you're going to do?"

There was a knock on the door and it opened. From beneath the pillows Peter said, "Go away."

A tall, skinny man squeezed into the room and filled it with a big laugh. A pair of silver framed, round glasses rested on his nose, white against his nearly black skin. "But I haven't had my coffee yet," he said. His accent was very distinctive, one Felix knew from a couple of summers spent with his father in Detroit, shoring up the waterworks.

Promethea got up and said, "I'll get you a cuppa. Felix, this is Edsel. Edsel, Felix." She nodded in mock seriousness and swished into the kitchen, the long, chaotic curls of her hair shaking over the black silk.

"Hi Felix." Edsel extended his hand and looked Felix over. "My, but you are crowded this morning." He shook a cigarette out and lit up. "The boys were busy last night," he said, a little louder, leaning back against the door gulping coffee.

Promethea blinked seriously and asked, "What happened?"

"They shot someone at three this morning on my corner. Then the police came."

"Who was it?"

"Just some man angry about some woman. You know. This couple is walking down the street and her ex comes up from behind and shoots 'em both, bang, in the backada head. Then the police have to come and chase the shooter around, which frankly I can't explain. They caught him over on Ninth trying to--get this--swim the canal!"

"Eeeew," she sang.

"But that's not all. It was that section they just flushed with ScatAway."

"Uh!"

"That's right. What a mess. There was nothing left to pull out."

Peter sat up in a muss of sleep. "What time is it?"

Edsel said with a knowing, mocking smile, "It's one o'clock Mr. Nguyen. Don't you have to be somewhere?"

"It's my day off," he groaned, squinting and swallowing.

"I know that." Edsel tapped ashes onto the floor and rubbed them into the carpet. "Ain't you got an audition?" he asked in a backcountry drawl.

"Use a bloody ashtray!" Promethea said.

"Oh--"another, more guttural groan--"Mark fucking Twain."

"Well call it Death on the Mississippi if you don't make it," Edsel said.

Peter stood and went to the bathroom. Promethea handed Edsel an ashtray.

"What brings you among us, Felix? Are you a distant relative, country mouse come to visit our mansion full of cats?"

"He's a friend of Peter's," Promethea said, almost matriarchally protective. "From Les Jardeen."

Edsel nodded. "Any more coffee?"

"I'll make another pot."

Edsel pointed at the lump in the blankets with his forehead. "Still wrapped in his winding sheet, dead to the world. O, Moises--Edsel to Moises." There was no response. "What was he drinking last night?"

"Gin," Promethea shouted from the kitchen. "We watched Zeke's orgy."

"That old faggot is still at it. Who would believe."

"You're just jealous," said Moises from under the blanket.

"Jealous? Of what?" Edsel asked, hands on hips.

"Everything." Moises sat up and scratched his head and yawned. "His looks, his stamina--"

"Well, you know I'm not the jealous one around here," he said in a

lower, slightly indignant voice. Moises looked at the bathroom, hissed, and mouthed shut the fuck up.

“Boys, boys!” Promethea handed each of them a mug of coffee.

Moises lit up followed by Promethea and then Edsel till the room grew milky with smoke. For a while Felix followed the banter, grateful to be taken out of his own head but the coffee made him stir crazy and his stomach hissed with hunger. When there was a pause he said, “Shall I go get the croissants?”

“Oh, I forgot,” Promethea said. “You stay here, I’ll go.” She shed the robe and pulled on a pair of pants and a white blouse, which she buttoned halfway so that the black cups of her bra showed. Felix insisted on accompanying her and they descended together the twelve floors to the street. Without the glow of lanterns and the nighttime commerce it was quite different. The daylight revealed all of the junk and litter and filth. Balled paper, bags of rained-on clothes, smashed take-out containers full of chicken bones and buns smeared with ketchup and mud; there were dirty diapers and coils of fresh steaming shit. Every few blocks was a dumpster heaped with uncollected garbage, construction material, the refuse from demo jobs jagged and high, but mostly it was moldering garbage. Eighth Avenue had no canal or mass transit, it was a major thoroughfare. They walked quickly downtown and Promethea was very graceful at dodging vile, threatening things. Felix picking his way through the alien obstacle course, fearful of stepping in shit or bumping into a person. The people were everywhere and they seemed to barrel along oblivious to them. But the oblivion wasn’t reassuring. If it broke, he felt that most anyone would take his life. There was a uniformity of expression, a sort of dark, furrowed, hard attitude in the face and shoulders. Even the old had a predatory aura. Yet Promethea almost danced along. Why didn’t they notice her? It was the grace of nativity, that was all. Probably he couldn’t see the pinched mean look of her face. It was a mask, a projection, like a skunk’s stink or a

urinating toad.

Even in school he had never come to midtown. Their haunt was upper Manhattan, Harlem, Inwood. They spent their free time hiking in Cloister Forest or hanging out in the bookstores and nightclubs on Amsterdam Ave., the restaurants of Broadway. Midtown was a world apart. And in those days the neighborhoods were still largely cut off from each other, canals acting as moats. There were colonies of rich people in the east fifties and sixties, a middle class enclave in the old village, student ghettos around Washington Square and uptown where he and Veronica lived.

As they walked along his sense of danger became acute, it stabbed at the air and agitated his bowels. He felt like Promethea was in danger. The complexion of the street became cinematic, it shaded off into the grainy texture of late night movies about gangs raping and dismembering lost women, of long torture sessions in trash filled warehouses. Historical fiction, old Hollywood movies, television shows from the last century played before his eyes and he felt a suspense that wasn’t real, a fear rooted in art, as if he had wandered out into space and found a race of demons.

Promethea strode on unconcerned. They passed men in rags. Even the words men in rags were evocative. Men in rags stood on the banks of the Ganges, ribs like picket fences, enveloped in the smoke of burning pyres. This is not a movie, he thought. This is not the Ganges. They were the color of scarred concrete. And as he walked, he looked down and saw how they had literally blended in like chameleons. The sidewalks were the original sidewalks, eroded down to a sort of immobile rubble kept in place by dirt and shit. In the interstices and cracks little weeds grew. He glanced up alleys and side streets and on these less trafficked thoroughfares huge tufts of grass grew in coarse, tough clumps, a metre or two tall, traps for drifting trash. The men in rags were as if wrapped in fraying mummy cloth. Their skin was scabbed, and their faces old, their eyes hollowed out

of thick, diseased skin like bark, their lips slack in sleep.

A man dressed all in green pushed a nineteenth century baby pram up the middle of Eighth Avenue, with a large dog in it, oblivious to the delivery vans honking their horns and veering around him like water divided by a rock in a stream. The dog was more alert than the man was and yet immobile, elite, above the fray in his canine certainty. They passed a store on a block of locked abandoned buildings selling junk. The owner was screaming at a boy and Felix winced at the harsh, loud abuse, feeling the boy's heart race with shame and hatred. Next there was a man slapping a woman across the face. She had no shirt on and her brown breasts were like pastry bags swaying against her belly, her wide, asymmetrical face swollen and bloody but defiant as she shrieked back at him a string of inscrutable abuse.

They crossed Eighth Avenue, dodging traffic, fleeing the irate horns, and headed over to Ninth on 33rd Street. 33rd was quiet, less desperate. The stoops were intact. Old people stood sentinel before their buildings. The windows of the tenements were shuttered by thick composite grills bolted onto the brick.

The amphibatrain ran on Ninth in the canal. There were more stores. The buildings were a typical mix of 25 story ceramic structures built during the reclamation, like the one Peter and Promethea and Moises lived in, and old tenements. But the bustle here was different. There was a robust, urban quality to it, less desperate, less incongruous. On Eighth Avenue the few stores sold things no one would ever buy. They bought and sold things merely to do something; the weird commercial projects of superannuated humans, determined to persist in a form without content. The real trade there was the perpetual market in bodies, drugs and gambling. Murder for hire. Weapons. Ninth Avenue was full of food stores, bakeries, fruit stands, butchers, grocers. Farther south was a wholesale goods district.

Felix was out of breath. His hangover, not really noticeable as he was lying on the bed and drinking coffee, had flared up. He had not slept properly in weeks, could hardly keep any food down, and his whole body felt like a sponge full of gin and cheap vodka. His mouth tasted like he had mopped a floor with it. Images floated like mirage water before him, of storefronts, of pyramids of blood oranges and limes and apples, of squat old people with pasty skin smoking leisurely against composite railings.

Promethea, always a step ahead, stopped in front of a grimy, nondescript storefront between 33rd and 32nd. "This is it," she said. "Better than Paris."

"You've been to Paris?"

"I left London when I was seventeen and settled there to go to art school. Fancied myself a real bohemian," she laughed. "Then I got pregnant by this little French Algerian dog named Memphis. He seduced me by telling me he was the reincarnated spirit of Cheops, emperor of Egypt. Don't tell me Egypt never had an emperor, I was stupid then. After the abortion I tried to kill myself and this busybody Yank, who claimed to be a theater producer, picked me up off my ass and flew me to New York. That fell through of course. He was just another butt sniffing dog looking for a cheap fuck."

They entered the little place, Boulangerie Swisse and took their place on line behind two shriveled up old people, a man with a bag on his head counting out coins into the filthy palm of a woman. The floors and walls were dirty and the ceiling was covered in dead fly grease. A fan clanked in the transom. There were cats all over the place, two seated on the ledge by the window, a tail swishing back and forth under the display case, one running across the floor, another brushing between their legs. A moist, yeasty smell and the ghost of slightly charred bread crust filled the hot room.

"They have the best bread," she mumbled. "And they're cheap."

They used to live in Viet Nam. All the rich folks come here after work. Sundays it's ramming. You'll see."

They stepped up to the tall glass case. On the back wall were slanted shelves piled high with assorted breads, volkornbrot, pumpernickel raisin, seeded Jewish rye, enormous corn loaves, ciabattas, batards, country sour dough rounds, baguettes. In the case were brioche, bagels, bialys, donuts, croissants, cheese danish, poppy seed cake, muffins. An aproned man, dusty with flour, sleepy and white headed, moving like one of the cats, was stocking the composite trays on the shelves with loaves out of giant brown paper sacks. The woman had an ageless, unflappable face, lips pressed together without a smile, eyes skeptical and inquiring. She stared at Felix and Promethea and said nothing.

Promethea ordered six croissants and opened a black shoulder bag that Felix had not noticed her wearing.

"No," Felix said. Promethea looked at him warily. "I'll get these. It's the least I can do, no?" Then to the woman he said, "I'll take one of those dark breads."

The Woman shrugged and said in a thick accent, "Which one young man?"

Felix laughed at the thought of being called a young man. He felt the pressure of surrounding impatience. "What do you like?" he asked Promethea.

"The pumpernickel raisin is brilliant."

"I'll take one of those and a challa bread please."

Back on the street he asked, "Aren't you afraid of walking around here alone?"

"No, not in the day, anyway."

"Haven't you been hurt? Don't people like, get murdered all the time?"

She stopped abruptly. They were crossing over 33rd to Eighth. Other than the few old people on the stoops the street was empty. They faced each other. Her face was intense. He looked at her in the daylight. She had round dark eyes, almost black. Her thick lips, not stretched into a smile, were a little somber. The slight heaviness disappeared as he watched her. There was a cagey, unrevealing quality to her expression, which seemed to compete with an underlying melancholy. He could feel it, how it gave her strength, how it never failed her. Loss was her closest friend. And the paralyzing knot of nothingness, his inconsolable center was aligning with hers, there on the street, as they talked. She had something he needed and she was offering it to him, by impulse.

She patted her bag and opened it. "Look," she said, a little impatiently, as if she were explaining the obvious. He looked. Next to her wallet and things was a gun. "Now, these are the rules. If they want your money, give it to them. Anything else, you take one with you."

Felix's face became numb. "But guns are illegal," he said. "Aren't you afraid?"

She laughed and punched him on the arm. "Where are you from, Felix?"

"Originally?" he asked.

She rolled her eyes and shook her head and smiled. Her face became full again, her cheeks bloomed. "Whatever. Look, as I said, the rules. If it's my money they want, fine. Anything else, forget about it. This," she pointed vaguely at her body, "doesn't get taken again."

"Have you ever shot anyone?"

"Well, no. But I would. People are creeps. They have nothing. Nothing but the power of life and death. That's free, or so they think. If they can make you beg for your life, imagine what that feels like."

You're on your knees, crying, begging to live, you shit your pants, you sob and scream and no matter what it just makes them hate you more. The more you beg the more they want to kill you, see? But say you control yourself. Just imagine you're a guy in a movie who can have a gun pointed at his face and it's his last moment on earth and he doesn't budge, doesn't cry, he doesn't even say fuck you. He just stares with pride and defiance, totally unmoved by death and life. Now that makes them really mad. Before they hated you because you were weak, but you were playing their game so they enjoyed it. But make a person like that mad, take away their power to terrify you, and you're just as dead. You see? Either way you lose. But with this?" She took out the gun, waved it casually around and put it back. "Now we both have the power."

Felix nodded slowly. He understood the rules. As they walked he took out a croissant and ate it. She was looking at him strangely, he thought. Did she imagine she knew him? What did she see? He was so diminished in his own eyes, so fearfully broken, he had no perspective. He couldn't even tell if he were still feeling the effects of Paregane. He had not been to the garden in a long time. And his sleep, such as it was, was loud and bright. Veronica didn't come to him in his dreams, he had no dreams. Rather, when he did sleep it was as if he were awake, talking to her, arguing with her, screaming at her in a brightly lit chaotic room full of roaring noises. The roaring noise was of a nearby but invisible vortex. It could one minute spew forth Pine Barons and AutoParks and the next suck down the works of Marlowe, Kyd and Shakespeare along with a dozen holographic aliases in chain mail with pikes and hammers.

Back in the apartment they had folded up the mattresses against the wall and taken out the black table. His had been deflated and returned to the cabinet. Two cigarettes sent up ribbons of smoke. Edsel reclined on one cushion, his long bony legs like sawhorses and Moises sat opposite him, bent over a glass mortar and pestle, in

which he ground a white powder. They were arguing.

"Did Peter leave?" asked Promethea at the door. Felix squeezed by her and brought the bag of bread into the kitchen. He opened the cabinets above the sink and stove and found a plate.

"Finally," Edsel said.

"God, I hope he gets this part," Moises said, dipping a little silver spoon into the white powder and snorting it up his nose.

Edsel frowned. "I'd better be going." Felix set the plate of croissants down on the table and stood in the kitchen doorway.

"What's up later?" Promethea asked.

"I'll call." Edsel looked Felix over and smiled. "It was very nice meeting you." He shook his hand again and let it linger a moment, looking into Felix's eyes. Edsel's eyes had a comic spark that seemed to play off the edges of his iris but his expression was serious, almost wizened. Felix couldn't guess his age. He seemed older than the others. His face was a little lined. But he also wanted something. They all did. "Are you staying for a while?"

Felix uttered a monosyllable and then, confusion passing, said, "I don't think so."

Edsel released Felix from his attention and said to all of them, "Well, I'll be seeing you for dinner then," and left.

"Is there any hot water?" Promethea asked.

"Peter didn't empty the tank," Moises said in a tight voice.

"I'm popping in the shower then."

Felix sat down where Edsel had been, took a croissant and asked, "What's that you're sniffing?" Promethea rifled a couple of drawers in the wall unit and groaned. Then she put her hand into the top layer of laundry but had second thoughts and headed into the bathroom. The lock made a loud click. As soon as the door was closed Moises turned on the tv and started to flip channels, one per second.

"It's LBD," he said, not taking his eyes from the screen, which was propped against the windows on a couple of composite blocks.

"What's LBD?"

Moises shook his head vaguely and smiled. "Beats me. Every couple of months they change it. But it sure puts the day right." He laughed and then moaned. His wavy chestnut hair hid his face. The muscles on his arms tensed as he crushed the controls. "All these stations and nothing to watch. Oh my god! Look at that dress. She must be two and a half meters."

The woman strode into a black room and turned on the light. Her dress, a gossamer wrap of rubies, sparkled. "Growth hormones," Felix said, vaguely. It was the kind of thing he would have said to Veronica on a Sunday afternoon as they sat flipping channels.

Moises shook his head. "That one's genetic, I'm sure. Look at her legs."

Felix looked at her legs. They were perfectly gorgeous and perfectly boring, chiseled out of muscle and bone, buffed and polished with light. "What about them?"

"Proportional. 9 times out of 10 growth hormones are disproportional. She'll be making her million bucks back soon, her parent's didn't waste their money."

"But paying off the contract, and the licensing fees--"

"Even so, she's good." Moises sighed. "That's all they care about." He looked at Felix with his pinned turquoise eyes and said, "You really are gorgeous you know."

Felix was taken aback by the sudden intimacy. "I--"

"Don't be embarrassed. Peter said you were beautiful but I had no idea. How did she die?"

That question would be impossible to avoid. It would come at him all the time now. The only escape was to leave human beings behind,

to go into the forest somewhere and live the life of a hermit, in a loincloth. He would shave his head, renounce everything and walk to the Himalayas. Or shrink into a chamber of the past, go mad and never return. A cave in a primeval forest where he would die beneath the dripping canopy and be taken piecemeal by the ants and beetles into the belly of the earth. "Paregane, I think."

Moises was momentarily transfixed in amazement. "She was on Paregane?"

"Yes. She'd had.... troubles. We were trying to put our life back together. Move to Alaska."

"Alaska? She was on Paregane and you were going to live in Alaska? That is just so cool!" Moises's face fell. "I'm sorry, that was stupid. Stupid stupid stupid." He slapped his own cheek. "Bad!" he said and then he did it again, leaving behind a red mark. "Did she tell you what it was like?"

"It killed her."

"But I mean, taking Paregane."

Felix felt the room dissolve a little so his attention was no longer fixed upon any point. It wandered a bit and then, no longer a spectre but an emanation, diffused between past and present, earth and paradise, remembering the feeling of the garden. "It was beautiful," he said. "I mean, we use the word beautiful all the time but this was different. When you sleep you go to paradise and then carry the feeling of beauty back with you and it lingers all through the day. Work, it just didn't matter. Nothing did anymore, except for existence."

"How do you know though? How do you know it really is paradise? People say it's a garden."

"You just feel so at home there. It's like--well, you know how in spring, after the cold and rain, you get a sunny day? And there's a breeze that seems to come from some far off place? It's warm, and it



smells sweet, of opening flowers, flowers you've never touched or smelled before but they are somehow familiar. And the light seems to be calling out the leaves and buds.... Have you ever been love? Those first few weeks? I felt so at peace. There was no yearning, no emptiness, no past or future. And I knew I was a part of everything, and everything was a part of me."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE LITIGATION

Felix stood outside of Max Mbeke's office with a pit in his stomach. All the way there his fantasies of vengeance had intensified. He would have his day in court, with a jury and a judge and lawyers. The executives and doctors would be made to confess what they had done. He would prepare for trial with his lawyer, Mbeke. The money was nothing. He wanted to see someone beg for his life. He wanted to see it drain out of them with the same horror he had felt watching Veronica shrivel up into nothing from the vibrant, bursting fruit of youth. If his life was going to be cut off in mid stride so was the life of whoever was responsible. Mbeke would gather all the evidence. The investigation would involve him so totally he would forget everything else. The job, the apartment, the dreams, the future. All would be paid for. And then, when justice was done, he would move on to Alaska. He would buy a headstone and mark a grave for Veronica. Then the ashes could go free. Then she and he would be at rest.

"Mr. Clay. Sit down," said Mr. Mbeke. He was seated behind his desk and didn't rise to shake Felix's hand. He was relaxed, his blue pinstripe jacket open and red tie loosely knotted. "Would you like a cup of coffee? I can have eNeNe bring one in if you like."

"No thank you, sir." Felix felt suddenly like he was back in school.

"Now, let's see." Mbeke examined a sheet of gold electraweave. "I'm sorry Mr. Clay, but I'm going to have to disappoint you. There is nothing actionable here."

Mr. Mbeke no longer seemed so relaxed. But Felix couldn't really read him. "How can that be?" he asked.

"Well, the coroner reports natural causes as the cause of death, for one."

"B-but she was forty years old! And healthy."

"Healthy Mr. Clay? It says here that for the last 3 years or so Mrs. Clay suffered from a variety of severe mental illnesses. As recently as six months ago she was on, how shall I put it? A veritable drugstore of medications. Proving it was Paregane is impossible."

"But the doctor said--"

"Doctors," Mbeke gave a little burp or hiccup and his face briefly knotted before going on as before, "don't like to admit they're wrong Mr. Clay. Who does? And Dr. Tarlton said he could not testify to the side effects of Paregane."

Felix started to hyperventilate. "But someone has to pay for this. She didn't die, she was killed."

"Do you not have money from her insurance policy?"

"That's not what I mean!"

Mbeke swelled slightly. "What do you mean?"

"Money isn't what I want. Christ. Someone is responsible. The drug should be illegal if it kills. There should be warnings. Something."

"If it kills. Word on the street is that Paregane is perfectly safe. And the street, you should understand, doesn't lie. By definition."

"But what about all these reports from China? And the medic who came in the ambulance said--"

"That's China. They do things differently there than here." He made a sipping noise and wooshed a little. "I did a lot of digging Mr. Clay. Paregane is not a candidate for a wrongful death lawsuit. Nor was it misprescribed. What I suggest for you is a long rest and a

change of scenery. You can afford it I'm sure. Take a little vacation time. Go to the Andes for a ski trip, or Alaska. Kill a walrus. Join a club. Screw a waitress. In a year you'll be in fine fettle. You're young Mr. Clay and you've suffered a terrible injustice. But I'm afraid it's a cosmic injustice. I can't take God to court, after all." He chuckled and his eyes widened and narrowed. Felix's face burned with a rage that lacked direction, like a fire that has consumed everything and goes in search of combustible material. The last tree standing was Mbeke. Mbeke tightened and grew an inch in his chair. "Now Mr. Clay, get control of yourself. This is a dangerous game you're playing and your hand isn't good enough. The opposition in such a case has weapons we just can't possibly hope to equal." He shrugged sympathetically. "I know you're disappointed, but this wasn't my idea. And I've already taken quite a few risks on your behalf for no remuneration at all. Try to understand what I'm saying. Read between the lines, ey? Be an adult. You know how things work."

Felix made two fists and rose in his chair. "She's dead and someone has to pay!" he yelled.

Mbeke forced a smile and swallowed hard. "I think that's about all then."

The emptiness of the room whirled around Felix. The windows were streaked with rain and the sky was a sack of cinders. Mbeke pulsed in his chair. "You were my last hope," he said. "Please." Mbeke didn't budge or even speak. Felix then felt himself launched into the air as if by the hand of another. Mbeke screamed hoarsely, "Mr. Clay!" Felix dove across the desk and crashed into Mbeke's chair. He wanted to crush his windpipe in his hands but he could not get a grip on any part of him. He thrashed about, fighting with the air, pounding the soft leather upholstery. "Mbeke!" he shouted. "You come back here!" But there was no Mbeke. The alias had zipped out. He turned around and in the doorway stood eNeNe looking very scared.

"I'm calling security," she said.

Felix panted. The blood throbbed behind his eyes and in his temples. "That won't be necessary," he said, and ran by her to the elevator, tears starting to squirt out of his eyes.

He stormed out of the lobby like a man in flames. People stared at him. He wanted to run somewhere and hide but there was nowhere to go. He looked around at all the fake little stores with their cheery composite signs and neon fixtures flashing in the windows and wondered how he had ever come to live in such a place. He searched his memory for a time when he belonged here and couldn't find it. The only time he felt at home was when he was with Veronica. All that time his happiness or contentment or complacency even was because she was the world he lived in. Without her it was all a sham, hostile, put up, a trap. Intellatrawl! He became indignant. Ten years wasted sitting in that stupid BioWatch WorkStation listening to the insipid insights of its Chairman. And the home he was so loath to leave, what was it? Sales. Who gave a damn about who bought what? Who gave a damn about administration, how things get done? New Jersey had been lovely. They were happy there. Or so he thought. Would he have been happy there alone? Like a diseased organ he cut it out of himself.

On the amphibatrain he cast a destructive eye out the window. It was like a scalpel now and the steel flashed as it cut away at portions of his life. In Manhattan he changed for the Ninth Avenue line. He thought about that apartment in Yonkers and how strange it was living with one parent at a time. He rarely thought of those times, the perfect suits of clothes, marching off to school with the other kids. It appeared to be as absurd as the little shops selling cheese and stationary. Why hadn't they just taken him to the territories with them? His father was a silent unhappy man. Always in the shadows, while Felix sat at the square, antique dining room table with the pad and tablecloth doing his assignments. He was tall, stooped beneath

the low ceiling, as if the apartment were a suit of tight clothes, in the kitchen scrambling the eggs into fried peppers and onions. It was all he ever made, and they ate it five nights a week. On the other two they went out to Chinese or had pizza in. The silence of men...he took it for granted. Darkness and silence and scrambled eggs. Outside his father was a big, expansive man, with the same smouldering complexion of brick Felix had. He was martial, square shouldered, powerful but graceful too. Always in uniform and yet informal when moving about in the park, say. Sundays were good then. They played ball. They fished. On the water his father grew bigger, his face opened up. But why would they imagine they could buy his comfort and happiness with their misery? Because he understood now that they must have missed each other terribly.

His parents were gone. You know how things work, Mbeke had said. Parents die. How childish to want them now. As if they had ever done anything for him, besides feed and house him and dress him in the proper clothes. And fuck Veronica! She should have died in the bathtub that night, when it was meant to be.

He was too agitated to go back to the apartment. It was always full of people. They never stopped. Never stopped visiting, talking, smoking and drinking. He was grateful to Peter but he was used to quiet and solitude. He was too old for them, he felt his age constantly. They could drink all night and get up and go to work while he was like a pile of debris, dispirited and aching from head to foot. The chatter of young voices, the ceaseless gossip, the concerns he knew nothing about. Alone at least he could be with Veronica. Alone he could seek out the only thing he desired, devastation. He read devastating literature, *The Book of Job*, *King Lear*, *Jude the Obscure*, *Anna Karenina*.

Some essential part of reality had been cut away, whatever it was that made the world vital, that part that commits one to life despite the terms. Daily crying jags drove him into private places, the

bathroom if necessary, or out of the apartment and onto an isolated stoop between Eighth and Ninth. The emptiness would build and build and then the tears drained it away like poison. The very physicality of the process was a relief from malevolent despair.

He and Veronica argued about Alaska. Their future was at stake. They discussed what to eat for dinner. Fish or bologna. "Why did you say such a stupid thing to Promethea," Veronica asked. "Do you want to sleep with her?" He didn't want to sleep with Promethea. "You find her attractive." No, she was fat and pale with tiny little toes. He got off the amphibatrain and started to walk. He walked like her. He imagined he was Veronica walking among the people through the glass shelters. He was Veronica, her hair was on his shoulder, he shook it the way she did, smiled at the sensation. His fingers and lips smelled like her. He dipped his finger between his legs and felt the warm pool beneath her swelling clitoris.

Home would mean sleep and there is no sleep. The goal was to drink so much there would be no dreams of any kind. Alcohol didn't kill any pain and finally it exhausted him, as if he and the alcohol were running a race each night and he finally gave out.

His mother used to come to him in dreams after she died. She didn't know she was dead. She floated around in the air above the Gulf of Mexico and said she could fly now, she didn't need a hovercraft. She had an idiotic, childish grin. His serious, military mother. After a few weeks she stopped coming. So much was going on with Veronica he could barely pay attention to what had happened to them. His father's coma wasn't real. He had no time to grieve. If he cried at work it would screw up the equipment. They would take him from his set up and put him away. Take a few days off Mr. Clay. Bereavement leave. For mother and father, yes. Veronica was going in for tests. They took spinal fluid and blood. Then the wave interference pattern analysis. Toxicity screen. Her urine was clean. Her menses were normal.

There was something terribly unfulfilled in his parents' generation. They hadn't found a way to live so they ran off to Louisiana in old age. They had been people of the land, pilers up of dirt but they ended their days in the bayous among alligators and predatory fish. All the needs were out of whack, society, childhood, maturity. Duty without heroism, how empty that was. Duty became a habit, like sacrifice. They wanted a better world for him but a better world for him would have been more of them and then, Veronica might have lived. There would have been a way to the future.

Veronica came to him in dreams. He watched her swimming in the garden but she couldn't see or hear him. She reclined in the hairy mouth of a cave, on some high-forested hill, or in the doorway of a barn. Come with me, she said. Once she brought him a red rose and he wrote a poem.

In my dream she comes each day to bring a rose.

I cannot see her face, she's tall and gay.

She puts the rose into a glass and says she loves me.

She has brought the rose because she knows what I have been through.

I cannot say her name.

The rose is mercy.

The rose is a gift.

But the rose is red and still I cannot say her name.

If she wanted him at peace he couldn't understand why she continued to call him. It was wrong for her to leave him and then call out all the time. She had chosen to stay, of that he was sure. Which was strange. The choice had killed her. It was a stupid, selfish, infantile thing to do. He wouldn't have abandoned her. He didn't abandon her when many would have. What husband in his right mind would have stayed through all that abuse? She broke the contract and he had stuck it out, renegotiated, refused to let go.

Perhaps he had driven her to it. That was what went wrong. If he had been stronger and walked away she would have pursued him. Or maybe in his weakness he didn't understand her sufficiently. Didn't understand what she was saying, resisted change, was overly interested in a way of life that on reflection was ridiculous. He was no different than his parents. He had forgotten the primary things, love, affection, friendship. Where were the friends? The family? What had they made together? A pile of cash and some embryos? Moises and Promethea and Peter and Edsel had infinitely more in their little world of lofts and garrets, performances, porn stars and potluck dinners. There was love there, commitment to an ideal.

Then there were all the treatment options. Wasn't he the one driving them forward, going to the doctor, trying different therapies and drugs? He was the one pushing her to get 'better', whatever that meant. He had insisted that she take Paregane. Had he not done that she could very well be alive right now and he wouldn't be wandering around in the rain without an umbrella. At twenty he had sworn to live without regret. That was the great revolt from the stultifying suburban childhood he wordlessly endured for his own good. It seemed now he never spoke up and only saw the other children in their absurd circles while he sat apart. It was his destiny then. Childhood and adolescence were periods of waiting outside before being admitted to the assembled present. And once admitted he made his declaration. No regrets. Diving into books his brain, his thoughts became like fire, fed by the imaginative flames of Shelley, Spenser and Blake, of Dostoyevsky, Joyce and Lawrence. That was his mood when he met Veronica. He had known her in her youth! There will always be tall, silent girls in black coats with red scarves and penetrating eyes. He saw her in doorways and alone drinking coffee at the luncheonette. Wherever he went there she was till he noticed once that she was looking at him, as if she were trying to figure him out. What could possibly have puzzled this beautiful,

achingly beautiful sylph who always stood apart? He had no idea it was his own aloofness, the fact that he too drifted through classes and crowds apart. It never occurred to him that she was in love with him, that he could be the sustaining mystery to another, that he too was a tantalizing, beautiful cipher.

Regrets. It was all regrettable. Sure he wanted her, loved her, but he had given himself over to the world's oldest heresy, human worship, and that led to human sacrifice. They let each other stand-in for divine things, lost things, divinities long fled for lack of worship.

They were mad hermits shouting in their cells now, sometimes in unison. He began to see the function of ancient burial rites. To appease the dead. He did not believe in god, no, but he did believe in ghosts and he was being haunted. The dead had conquered the living. The dead would not let go. And even if he could let go of her, she would not release him. He could feel her hand even now, walking, gripping his ankle. It gripped him in his sleep, in all his waking moments. He looked out through her seductive eyes and her warm breath filled his lungs.

Perhaps, he thought, it is time to dispose of the ashes. He had been carrying them around with him in his bag. At night he slept with his arm draped painfully over the box. It was time to let them go. He tried to think of what she would want. That night he went to sleep asking for her guidance but he received none. He would have to decide for himself.

## CHAPTER THIRTY

### CAFE BERESHIT

Veronica would not let him alone. He couldn't stand another minute of it. There was no respite. Insects, birds and even rats turned to look at him, messengers from the other world, spectres of her wayward spirit sent to bring him back. His resolve to scatter her ashes came and went by the day, by the hour, and yet he could not empty the little coffin of its contents. But finally one afternoon he left the apartment and took her with him, in a small black shoulder bag, along with a book, an apple, a bagel and a bottle of InstaCold water. He was not thinking now I will go do this, he was just doing it. Moises called after him, Where are you going? but he pretended not to hear. He took the Ninth Avenue line to Spitting Devil and changed for an amphibatrain to Yonkers.

It was a short walk from the station to the levee park he used to play in as a child. This was the first levee ever supervised by his father. The grass was bleached, the bamboo shivered in grey-green curtains, the tan stalks of pampas grass crackled in gusts of wind. He climbed the steps cut into the tall, sloping levee wall. He and his friends used to come down here and pretend it was the Great Wall of China, playing warriors from space engaged in a cosmic battle between good and evil. The Hudson flowed along against the incoming tide, churning. He watched eddies and spurs, the water turning upon itself. The force of the ocean and the moon were the same force as the descending river, divided against itself and in the clash, spirals were born. Veronica had another home but this river

was his home. It had swallowed the bodies and ashes of his people, absorbed his river of flesh and blood as it descended in time through generations of men and women, dancing up from infancy to death. He knew no other certain thing. It beat against the fused stonewalls, blackish grey, cold, with chunks of foam. It smelled vaguely of tar, like huge ropes of salted hemp and tugboats, of railroad ties, of iron wet with rain and drying in the sun, of dead fish.

He cradled the coffin in one arm and lifted off the lid, hunching to shield the contents from the wind, which whipped around, paused and rushed in again. He gave them a shake and moved to pour them out but gagged. They were no different from incinerator waste and yet he knew that all that was left of her in the universe lay in that little box. How could he dump them out? Even if she couldn't or didn't or wouldn't care...he didn't even know what state to posit for her, how to characterize her cares and wishes. A dead woman has no desires. Yet her desires lived on through him. He was the only being who could satisfy them. They were suspended now, words had left her mouth to settle in his heart and issue their dicta.

He closed the coffin lid, put it back into the black shoulder bag and hopped down off the wall. Up ahead was a small boat rental place, closed for the season. There was a chain link fence between the park and the piers. His father used to rent a motorboat here and they fished for stripers and blues off of Manhattan, or went up north in the spring when the shad were running. The wind numbed his face. An amphibatrain hissed by.

He sat down on a bench by the tennis courts, in the middle of the park, beneath tall oaks and maples and a stand of black locust. For three years he had played every day on these courts. He was o.k., but he only played because his best friend Niko Tiber was on the tennis team. Niko Tiber was a rich boy, son of Belgian diplomats exiled first to the Congo and then, after the coup there, New York.

The family was a little down at the heels. Their apartment, on the fifth floor of the identical building adjacent to his own, was Felix's first attachment away from home. He was nine or ten. He spent whole weekends there. Niko had younger and older siblings. There was a sense of bedlam in their apartment. It was brightly lit and loud, with several televisions on at once, and music. The furniture was shabby and his father only shaved every other day. People got mad and yelled. Pubic hair clung to the soap in the shower and adhered to half dried piss on the toilet rim. The mother drank a lot, starting at noon with cans of beer. At five o'clock they all took a break from smoking alone with a book to drink martinis. And there was Paola, the older sister, the one with the biggest tits ever.

They made his family look abnormal. It was his first perspective, the beginning of something that took years to develop. They were the seed.

So those became the years they played tennis together as a family, wherever they happened to be, indoors in the winter. Then he stopped being friends with Niko. He couldn't remember the reason exactly. There was the girl down the hall, Allesandra, a child of Polish ballet dancers. She was fourteen and they were twelve. Her pants were so tight her crotch looked like a cloven hoof. But he never slept with her and neither did Niko. You could populate a sterile planet from the DNA he spilled in mental pursuit of her. Anyway, he never played tennis again.

The memory depressed him. The park was terrible. He looked at the leafless trees, the fused stone paths, the upturned hulls of boats, the banks of rhododendron and azalea and forsythia. In spring there would be a rush of color and bees. In the open field along the levee they flew kites and families came to bike and run and picnic along the overgrown verges. At night they got drunk on the benches. Men gave each other blowjobs in the shadows. He smoked his first and last cigarettes on the swings. He finger fucked a few girls there and

vomited on the levee more than once. The sky looked like a smudged and scratched piece of paper, from which the park was being slowly erased. It was a reminder of a past he didn't care to know. After Veronica's death all he did was remember things he had put from his mind.

He walked slowly back to the amphibatrain stop. The only place to go was home. An inflatable mattress on the floor. Yet it was the most normal thing in his life. He loved that mattress. It was his home.

They had taken him in, allowed him to stay. He felt no closer to Peter than before, when he was just his bartender, yet Peter had said, after he had been there for a few days, "Why don't you stay for a while?" They were seated at a dirty table in Cafe Bereshit drinking coffee. It was four in the afternoon. The sun had come out, just before sinking beneath the horizon, and shadowed recesses of the cafe were lit up a dark orange. A distorted scarlet orb was reflected in the mirror behind the bar. "We talked about it. It's o.k. We want you to stay."

Felix could not speak. He didn't know what transfixed him more, the light or the words. "Thank you," he said, and they finished their coffee without saying much more.

Sometimes he and Peter walked around. One warm Sunday they walked down to Battery Park and sunned themselves on the base of a monument. Seagulls circled the Statue of Liberty and garbage scows headed out to sea.

At Edsel's they sat together when they were over for dinner. Edsel was an actor and director. He had a loft, which he shared with a set painter, some sort of a man/woman named Daen, and a woman named Iseult who was a stage manager by night and studied Holographic Projection at the School for Media Arts by day. It was different from their apartment. People drifted in and out there too, but they were older, more established, and the atmosphere was

charged with politics. Dangerous arguments raged back and forth.

Edsel was a fine cook. They often ate there, but Sunday nights were different. Then he prepared elaborate meals, which they ate around a long wooden table with antique chairs he found in the garbage. He made pork roast with rosemary and polenta, braised brisket and mashed potatoes, lemon and garlic chicken, and baked fresh bread. He roasted boneless veal shoulder rolled with spinach and pine nuts and served it with pasta with porcini mushrooms and tomato sauce. Felix stood in the open kitchen and watched as if hypnotized as Edsel sliced and chopped his way through onions, garlic, celery and carrots, all the while keeping up a steady patter. "That play sucked, that director gets drunk, the police are going to shut down this block, there's talk of a mayor...." At dinner they drank red wine out of juice glasses and afterwards there was usually a staged reading of a friend's play, or poetry. Sometimes they read Finnegans Wake aloud.

Peter was a remote man, beautiful but insecure. He was acting now in *Life on the Mississippi*. It made him a little less morose. He was an understudy for Jim and Huck, but the role he usually played was the riverboat pilot who taught Young Sam Clemens how to navigate the Mississippi. The part consisted mostly of cursing, which the audiences found very funny. "Damn it all to hell you shit eating bloody cunt," was a line certain to draw a hearty chuckle from the mostly retired, provincial crowd that fed into Milt Spahn's chain of dinner theaters.

He got off at 42nd Street to walk. The ashes pulled his shoulder down. He just didn't understand why he couldn't have dumped them out into the water. It was as if she had gripped his arm and stopped him from doing it. They would have poured out. The wind would have born away the light dust and cinders while the heavy remains would have fallen straight down into the swirling water. Then contrary currents would have drawn them apart as they settled into

the old industrial mud. That would have been the end. But she would not let go.

He walked down Eighth, past their corner to Cafe Bereshit. It was Christmas time. The soggy Santas and flea bitten reindeer cheered him up. Ninth was glitzier but even that was relative. Up the river, the towns would be decked out in full Christmas Tradition. Neon Santas and reindeer weren't torn dirty things jerking on fire escapes; they acted out scenes. Holographic crèche's with neighing horses, mooing cows, fretting Josephs and full-breasted nursing Marys. The baby Jesuses babble and coo while Zoroasters draw their horoscopes.

It started to rain. It got colder, grayer. The canals were rising. Sometimes the garbage blocked them so completely it would flood. The foul water spread disease across the streets and sidewalks and into basements. Eventually it would back up all the way to a good neighborhood and then the crews came in to clear them of junk with articulated barges designed to pick up, crush and grind anything, spewing the result behind them. Next came the scrubber with its flood of blue digestive fluid and massive brushes.

A few nights earlier a little snow fell. For an hour or two people ran out onto the sidewalk to watch. Junkies, homeless old ladies, bikers, whores, punks, everyone transfixed by the fat descending flakes.

He was used to it now, all of it. He could distinguish the smell of shit from decomposing meat. Rats didn't make his heart pound. Roaches he brushed away in irritation, not revulsion. The only thing he hated was the eyes. Everything alive, aware. Roaches sat thinking their roach thoughts and rats had rat thoughts. They watched him pass by. He could feel their black eyes moving slowly in the shadows, following him as he went from street to street. They whispered to each other. Reported back to Veronica. The world was full of spies. The world was waiting for his next move. The world wanted him to



do the right thing but he wasn't moving in the world, he wasn't doing the world's work, or any work at all. He was simply moving through it with his cargo of chaos.

Cafe Bereshit was on a side street. The sidewalk out front was swept clean but inside it was rundown with tipsy tables. The overhead fans turned slowly, creaking. It was lit just enough to read. On the green walls were old movie and theater posters, all print. The entrance was a wide hallway. To the right was a short, composite bar with four stools, where they made drinks and rang up checks. The tables were in the back, where the room opened up enough to have a pool table. Behind that were the kitchen and the bathroom, a room almost too gross to enter. The flush liquid couldn't handle the volume. By the end of the night it backed up, breached the bowl and sent a blue puddle of ScatAway across the floor.

It was a place to be alone, mostly, but anyone might come in. Sometimes he'd start to read and then Edsel or Peter would sit down for a half hour or so, or any one of a dozen or so people he had met at Edsel's, or parties and private performances, would join him. Some nights he found himself in a loft space lit up like the firmament, in a corner half concealed by objets d'art. Oh, paralyzed particular, unhinge/greet this my determining eye with guilt/ descend and stop/ be organ to my despise/ hurl. Promethea rolling her eyes and sipping champagne from a blue glass, looking at him over the rim. Peter glaring as he always did when they spoke. It was obvious he did not like her to talk to him and yet Peter never touched her. His agon was with Moises. What it all meant was unclear to Felix, what their relationship was. Edsel tiptoed around it with little poking jests.

A few older workers were eating lunch. He took a table against the wall and ordered coffee from the owner, Mrs. Giordano, a fearsome woman with murderous eyes. He drank the burnt liquid down and read his book, Emerson's Essays. Circles. There were a few hours a day when he enjoyed a truce, when the eyes and ears and whispers

were turned away, when Veronica slept. He loved the loopy prose, the grand pronouncements, the confidence of Emerson. He wanted so badly to be convinced of his own soul's authority to recognize truth. Even to be convinced of his own soul's existence might quell the voices. But that was not to be. He would only take a seed from the voice of Emerson and plant it down next to Veronica's and hope it would grow. Finally, for a while, it became so, as his mind, the voice in his head, became the voice of the essay. Whatever voice spoke through the lungs and throat of the nineteenth century man called Emerson, now spoke in his. It too was a river, pouring down through the mouths and ears over time.

A couple came in and took a table near his. She was late middle age and nicely dressed, with white hair and a ginger complexion. Too nicely dressed. No one in the neighborhood dressed like that unless they were buying drugs, and that trade was on Eighth. Mrs. Giordano didn't allow it. A few mornings a year she could be found hosing brains and blood off of the sidewalk to prove the point. With her was a frightening little man dressed in a rumpled, dirty, cheap suit. He fit right in, with his rough face, mean mouth and scarred cheeks. When their eyes met he felt a chill in his neck. He looked away quickly hoping to disappear back into Emerson. Their presence was disruptive. Cops, he thought. This was a new kind of thought, one he picked up from his new family, distrust and suspicion of outsiders, especially the police. In his old life there just weren't any outsiders. The police carried that fear for them. That's what police did, filtered out alien carbon masses. Cop osmosis filters. There were few intrusions and little fear.

In midtown the police were concerned about the mixing of elements. Gangs, drugs and pornography were beginning to blend-in seamlessly with the theater and art worlds. Certain individuals were crossing back and forth. Proxies were vanishing. There were places like Fallopia and Metatron and Gametria where gangsters and lawyers

and secretaries all sat in close proximity.

The woman and man ordered some food. Mrs. Giordano was almost deferential. She smiled when she handed them the menus and polished the silverware with her apron before placing them on their napkins. Her smile was awful. All of her teeth were gold and they made her look like a crude folk puppet. Her nose was a patched bone.

Felix looked at the woman. There was something powerfully attractive about her. Their eyes met briefly and he felt a kind of stirring in his groin. It was like staring into the sky on a cloudless day. Then the man looked at him and again he looked away as quickly as possible. He listened to their conversation. Paregane and Lucky Day.

"We'll never get in," the man sneered, blocking his mouth with his hand.

"We've got to see inside," she said.

"Bugs maybe. Real ones."

They think they're so smart, he thought. If he wanted to, in five minutes it would be all over the street. They'd get nothing. The Lucky Day place would be gone.

"No one will know," she said. "Now what about those diamonds?"

The next afternoon Moises poured whiskey into his coffee and lit a cigarette. He had a way of doing these things, which made them look casually glamorous. His hand gestures were slightly extravagant. Every action could be improved by art and deliberation. He shivered and sniffled and said, "I haven't slept yet and I can't decide what to do." He ran his fingers through his mussed hair and rubbed his nose vigorously.

"Well, mixing coffee and whiskey won't let you do either," Promethea said.

"It's yin and yang," Edsel said.

Felix sipped his coffee and picked up the bottle. It had bumpy frosted glass and a canary colored label with red script, Whiskey, 80 proof, Product of The Philippines. He glugged some of the caramel liquid in. "I didn't sleep either."

"You went to sleep early enough," said Promethea.

Felix shrugged. It made no difference what time he went to sleep. Lately he had been trying to close his eyes while the others sat up, hoping the noise of their voices would ease him into a forgetful sleep. But it was no better than the hiss of wet wheels and disembodied voices. Promethea looked at him and touched his cheek. It was a strange gesture. She had been touching him more and more. They sat close together on her bed. Sometimes he emerged from the groggy hinterland between nightmare and consciousness, a sort of marshy transitional zone that allowed neither rest nor observation, to find her feet in his face or, more alarming, to realize he had begun to cuddle with her calves. His outstretched hand found the hollow behind her knees or rested on the warm back of her thighs. When she greeted him with a kiss it was on the lips. And her whole manner was more animated when he entered the room. He could see the lights of her eyes. A sort of pinging excitement between them was apparent. The crush that was circulating between them was something he perceived more than felt. How could that be? It was a phenomenon, like grass or sky. Something he saw, something he smelled, the current of sex flowing between them. But it wasn't restricted to them. He had become a part of an erotic circuit. It included Moises and Edsel and Peter. They looked at him, laughed at his jokes, touched him. No one said a thing. But a game of looks and sighs flashed around him. It was pissing Peter off too. He had said as much. There were comments. In Bereshit, he stirred sugar into his coffee and stared at the carved and scratched tabletop. "Promethea's been hurt," Peter mused, dumping in some CReaMaTe. "I don't trust Moises. I feel so scattered, between the show and Jardeen." He

grimaced. "People you love should be trustworthy." Peter said it without emotion but he looked up from his stirring to investigate Felix.

His time in the apartment was probably running out. The emotions were building. The excitement caused by his arrival was mutating into lust. The longer he denied them his body, the more intense their desire. And Peter was vigilant. No one slept anymore it seemed. The humping stopped. Promethea no longer stared at Peter with pain. She shifted around to Felix. They walked down the street and she would lay her hand on his arm. They walked like a couple then. He felt a great comfort in the arm, the hand, in her calves and thighs. The nearness to her flesh was nourishing. But he would not sleep with her. She hadn't asked. The thought was in some way sickening. He wanted lips to graze his lips. He wanted her eyes pricked out with concern and desire to rest on his. He wanted to blend in with her emotionally. He liked being the node through which their lust circulated without satisfying it. But the thought of an orgasm caused him to shrivel up. As soon as he got an erection he felt stricken by weakness. It was like keeling over to vomit. All the air was let out. He sagged and shivered and vanished.

They were silent. Promethea brushed his cheek and Moises looked at Felix as if he were drinking him.

"A weird thing happened," Felix said. "At Bereshit."

"Weird things are always happening there," Edsel said. "I mean, does a Bereshit in the woods?"

Moises groaned.

"Well, it wasn't the usual weirdness," Felix continued, carefully. "There was a couple there, a man and a woman, and I think they were cops. They didn't belong."

"You see?" Edsel said, standing with agitation, bending slightly at the waist. "Like I told you last night, they're coming. We've got to be

ready. What were they talking about?"

Moises interrupted. "What do you mean by don't belong. All kinds of people hang out. Just because they're pigs doesn't make them cops. Maybe they were producers or something. Who are we, anyway, to say who does and doesn't belong?" He glared at Edsel. Edsel didn't relent.

"They were talking about a Lucky Day parlor."

Edsel nodded knowingly and then shook his head. This was all clear to him. "You'd know all about that, Felix. What did they say?"

"Uh, something about trying to get in and not being able to. They were going to set up across the street. The woman was scary, like a Japanese ghost, with this wild white hair, and the guy looked like he had crawled up out of the canal. Scars on his face and a nasty look about him."

"Well," Edsel said, "I wish them luck. Everyone wants a piece of that operation. Where are they?"

Moises said, "Lucky Day?"

"Glad to see you're paying attention."

Promethea said, "I think it's Gametria. Someone told me they were closing."

"Those people are very particular," Edsel said, sitting down again next to Moises, knotting and unknotting his long fingers restlessly on his knees.

Promethea stood and went into the bathroom. Water splashed dimly behind the walls.

"They can smell you out," said Felix abstractedly. He felt like he needed to stretch. It was as if they'd been sitting there for a week. Edsel and Moises looked at each other and exploded with laughter. Felix hated when this happened. It made him feel old, like an outsider. There were things he didn't understand. In-jokes. Innocent

phrases could cause train wrecks of laughter. They were like children. For all their cynicism, their innocence didn't allow them to see their cruelty as cruel, it was merely fun and fun was the object of their lives.

"What?" Felix asked, helplessly, as their laughter died down.

"Oh nothing," Edsel said, dismissing it with a wave. "It's just--"

"Tell him. He wants to know," Moises said, still shaking a bit.

"Well, that first morning when I met you, I walked into the room and could smell it right away. The boys had been at it, and not just Moises and Peter either. It was fresh in the air. Didn't you notice? My god Felix, you smelled like sex. It's hard to describe. Not like spoooge but just like hard-core lust, it was like, I don't know, spring fever or something. I got a hard on the instant I walked into the room."

"It drives Promethea nuts," Moises said. "I didn't think she gave a shit for sex anymore. She was off men."

"Told me she was a nun," Edsel said.

"Not anymore. You primed her pump, Felix. Ever since you showed up, it's like a viral horniness."

"Spring fever in perpetuity."

"Hormones galore."

"I didn't know," Felix muttered. It was a lie. He was ashamed now, for the lie and for the truth. He remembered what it was like to be in Veronica's presence before he had started taking Paregane. How her odor tortured him. How impossible it was to get it out of his head and how overbearing her superiority was. Like being suffocated in flowers and ripe fruit. How frightening ripeness was. How full the flesh became before the bruise or bite. How the seed swells before it sprouts.

"You sure didn't," Moises said.

Felix got his bag out of the wall unit and sat on the cushion. He

wanted something to do. He pulled out a wad of electraweave.

Moises and Edsel looked at each other rapidly and Moises, licking his lips with uncertainty, ventured to speak with a little noise that almost budged into a word. He and Edsel were having a silent conversation, which Felix, intentionally preoccupied with the electraweave and shuffling of his duffel bag's contents, didn't note. A moment had occurred, a breach in the silent conversation all of them had been engaged in since Felix's arrival. They were mysteries to each other. There was so much they didn't know about Felix. Between them, between Felix and Peter, Peter and Edsel, Edsel and Moises and Moises and Promethea, the stories flowed, but the whole of it was unknown. Here a piece was being revealed. Moises had wanted to ask, since first noticing the box, what was in it. When Felix was gone he had been tempted to look but it was a law among them that certain private places could not be entered. There was no other way to live in such close proximity. One's bag, one's corner of the closet, were sacrosanct. He would have violated the sanctuary if the others had allowed it. He was curious beyond agony. But he still lived in their community. Peter refused to allow it. Promethea was scandalized. She stood guard over Felix. And how Peter hated that. Yet Peter's ethic was absolute. He would not violate it even to get at Promethea.

Edsel prodded Moises with his foot and Moises, clearing his throat, voice cracking a little, asked, "What's in the box, Felix?" As he did so Promethea emerged from the shower smelling of coconut. Her hair was wrapped up in a towel and she had a towel around her waist. Steam poured off her body and into the room.

Felix lifted the cherry wood casket out of his bag and shook it. "Veronica's ashes," he said matter of factly, then put it back into the bag and messed around with the electraweave.

They were silent again, only now disturbed. They had known

death, violent death, untimely death, arbitrary death. But they were young. "Don't you like, scatter those out at sea or something?" he asked.

Promethea dried her hair briefly with the towel and it fell dark and wet against her bare shoulders and breasts. She put on a green bra and red underwear and began her tortured search for something to wear. "I have to buy some clothes," she said.

"I guess," said Felix to Moises. "I tried to yesterday but couldn't."

"It takes time," Edsel said, quietly. He got up and peed without shutting the bathroom door. "My father," he yelled, "kept my mother in the closet till he died. Every year at Thanksgiving he told us that next year," he flushed the toilet, rinsed his hands and came out patting them dry on his pants, "he was going to bring her up to Mackinaw, on the day of their anniversary. We were going to have a picnic, the whole family, and a little memorial. The next Thanksgiving would come around and nothing. My sister's got both of 'em in the closet now."

Moises rubbed a marijuana bud between his fingers till a pile had formed on the table. This he carefully rolled up in a cigarette paper and lit. "I want to be laid up in a mausoleum covered with calla lilies," he said.

"Oh come on!" Promethea shouted. "Be more original than that."

"The Bower of Adonis," Felix said.

Promethea scoffed. "And then am I to play Venus?" she asked.

"No," said Moises. "Zeke will." And they all laughed.

Felix stared into his bag. It was ridiculous, idolatrous, perverse, to carry her around like that. Like a bone in a reliquary. But he missed her so terribly. He said, "I just miss her so terribly, I can't let go. We.... I can't describe to you, what it's like. There is something gone from me, cut away, like a color missing from the world. I spent half of my life with her, my entire adult life. We were still growing when

we met. All my thoughts and feelings and hopes and dreams are bound up with her and it felt like I would be scattering myself on the waves."

Moises passed the joint to Edsel and said, "Why don't you go find her?" Felix looked at the bottle of Paregane at the bottom of the bag. Promethea settled on an antique lace blouse, which allowed the bra to show through, and a strawberry pleated skirt that fell to her knees.

"Find her? Where would I find her?"

"Well, if she died in the garden, couldn't you take Paregane and go find her? That's what I would do."

"Ts, Moises!" Promethea cried.

Edsel shook his head with disgust and passed the joint to Felix. "Don't be an idiot, Moises. The man is hurting, can't you see?"

Felix smoked a little and passed the joint to Promethea who waved it off.

"Well," said Moises, taking the joint from Felix, "I think we should all go. I'm dying, dying to try Paregane."

The three looked wistfully at Felix. He had described the garden to them individually many times. It was a favorite topic of conversation. He found himself elaborating on paradise. His own words enchanted him. They were intoxicated by it, by the feeling, the beauty. It was like his words had some power to evoke reality. Or rather, to abolish reality and put in its place something more real and true. Wherever he went he felt he had to dim the world around him. Everyone felt that way. The disagreeable smells, the horrendous dying and suffering, the ugliness of the buildings. The noise of living, trucks, voices. Even in parks and resorts most of reality had to be ignored. But the garden opened the senses. The sun was not a nuclear inferno frying skin cells, it didn't spew waves of energy inimical to life, rather it poured energy into the heart.

They felt instinctively that this world could not be their home.

There must be a place from which they had been exiled. It was the only explanation. And Felix filled in this X with a value they understood and knew. Their hopes centered on the little green pill now. They had exhausted the other possibilities, spent their dreams in dancing, amphetamines, African toad skins, mushrooms, Paleolithic shaman rites, medieval heresies, medical manipulations, cortical correction, exercise. They Rolfed and centered and gestalted themselves. People drank their own urine. They learned to masturbate without touching themselves. The young practiced lesbian autoasphyxiation. There was a castration cult in New Mexico syncretizing Berdash and Hindu devotees of Kali. Even Catholics chanted in Koine hoping to invoke the word and feel the door creak open to the pressure of human wind in the gales of heaven.

Promethea brushed her hair, spritzed herself with jasmine water and sat down next to Felix. Now he felt almost desperately in love with her. It came and went in long, slow accelerations and decrescendos. She was frightening. He wouldn't make it; there was no way. He felt himself poised above her, her head thrown back huffing air as he danced in and out of her cunt, the water working up slowly from the well bottom. Physical proximity was what he craved, he wanted to play the drums with her, be privy to her inmost rhythms, her menstrual floe. He loved to watch her dress and wash up, brush her teeth. The smell of her coffee in the morning awoke him and he sighed with pleasure for a moment as if Veronica were agitating the grounds. Lately he met her at the end of her work shift at an expensive east side restaurant, PaRDeS. The bar was tiny, full of wicker and antique bric-a-brac. He stuck out in his rumpled artichoke suit, slumped over an expensive cocktail. It took her a while to change into jeans and a T-shirt and then they walked, arm and arm, through the virid mist and the tall cobalt lamps to the Deco PCP stop at 59th and Second. Bony women in metal wraps stood on the platforms with their ghastly tuxedoed partners, glaring at Felix and

Promethea. He was like an anchor as she circled him in almost giddy afterwork agitation; unloading the insult she had acquired serving haut cuisine to the vulpine, surgically sculpted doyens of the ancien regime.

Promethea said to Moises, "Peter would kill you. He'd kill us all."

Moises scowled. "He's afraid. Afraid to live. I don't know what happened to him. He's like an emotional sinkhole these days. All the ecstasy is gone. He works and grumps about and tries to tell us all what to do. It's like living with a crossing guard, a little nanny in a red suit with a gold sash telling us not to go against the light. But that's what we are, the people who go against the light. Fear. Puh."

"He has reason to be afraid," Edsel said. "People take that drug and next thing you know they want to drop dead. Angry to be alive. What's that?"

"It's exciting, that's what, not knowing if you'll wake up or not. And the garden! Imagine. Why would anyone want to leave?"

Promethea stood and stared at them. "I can't believe you're talking like this." She turned to Felix. "I'm sorry."

"It's o.k.," Felix said. He didn't want to cause any dissension among them. That would ruin everything. He got up and gazed into the brown soft eyes of Promethea. He looked at her slightly parted lips, her wet, curling hair, the tips of her teeth, her small nose. "I've got to take a walk." Walking was the only thing that relieved the buzzing in his solar plexus.

After they left, when the door was closed and Moises and Edsel had sat for a few minutes in a dazed bubble, Moises said, "I don't know about you Edsel, but I can't stand not looking in that bag. I don't care what Peter would say."

Edsel collapsed into a prolonged, disappointed, resigned sigh. "Don't be a child Moises."

"Come on, tell me you aren't curious about those ashes."

“Leave it Moises.”

Moises grabbed the bag and pulled out the cherrywood box. He tried lifting off the lid but it wouldn’t budge. “Damn,” he said. “What’s the secret.”

“Just put it back.”

Moises slumped and rubbed his third nipple. His face looked old when downcast. Three days growth of beard was on it. He scratched his cheek and moved his lips in and out, licking them. Then he put the box back in the bag.

“He’ll know,” said Edsel.

“It’s our house. We have a right to know. What if he has a gun?”

Edsel threw up his hands. “So what? Who doesn’t have a gun? The man has a right to protect himself.”

“All we know about him is what he’s told us.”

“And what else do you know about me?”

Moises rubbed his nose and sneezed. He peeked in the bag. “Christ!” he said bitterly. “What’s wrong with us?” He started to cry. “Look.” He reached in and pulled out the pills. “Look what I’ve found.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE THE WILD MAN

Promethea had an audition before work. She and Felix stood on the street in front of a vacant lot. The weeds in the lot were broken and yellow. They stood on guard. There were dogs living in the building behind the lot. Even in the day one might come suddenly upon them.

“I’m all wrong for Desdemona,” she said. “But I might get Emilia.”

“Good luck,” Felix said.

The wind picked up. It was chilly and wet. A large military hovercraft moved slowly over the buildings across the avenue. The sun was a blur beneath the clouds. She touched his face. “Your skin is so, lush.” She kissed his lips lightly and drew away but he grasped her about the waist and hugged her. She smelled like cigarettes and leather; jasmine on her neck and the floral scents of her shampoo. He held his face against her hair. They kissed again and he felt her lips opening but he wouldn’t open his. Instead he inhaled deeply, searching for the smell of woman, beneath the perfume and soap. More like tanned hide. The beast. His eyes misted over.

“You’ve been good to me,” he said. “Thank you.”

They walked on to the PCP stop on Seventh Avenue and said goodbye at the foot of the listing, bent, metal steps.

Every day he walked for miles, sometimes in circles, sometimes not. He walked up to the library, to Central Park. The gated mansions of Fifth Avenue fascinated him, with their ancient wealthy families,

inbred, hiding behind curtains, with armed guards, like the Venetian palaces in Henry James stories, evil and decayed. The park was dangerous but he walked the overgrown paths fearlessly. There was a hobo camp at the north end, near the great woods, where people washed, cooked and slept out in the open. No one ever paid him any mind. It was as if he didn't exist.

It was true wherever he went. Street gangs and crime crews let him pass almost stunned by his lack of concern. The desire to kill, inflamed by any unknown person, was absent in his case. No one saw him approach but everyone knew his back as it vanished up the street or around a corner. Stray dogs stopped and whined. Police on horse back passed him by. He never challenged anyone but continued his grim stroll wherever it took him. Maybe they saw that killing him would be a favor. Whatever it was that secured his safety, he didn't care or even think about it. For a while the young with a reputation to prove tried to take him out but something always went wrong. Potshots missed. He didn't even flinch as bullets smacked into brick inches from his torso. Felix was a shadow man, the man who walked. A mystery began to attach itself to him. To one crew he was Black Flash, to another Fish. On the Upper West Side they called him Phoenix but in the hobo camp, people stopped doing whatever it was they were doing, boiling a kettle of water for beans and rancid bits of meat, washing out a pair of rotten socks in the pond, fucking like dogs in the open, to stare. In the hobo camps he was The Man Who Can't Die.

He went east through the vast, empty, mirrored halls of luxury high rises. The sidewalks were narrow, dwarfed by ramps up to garages and when the automobiles drove by he felt like he was being squeezed flat. Here, in the world of glass and mirrors and cars and boutiques he was not even a shadow but a vapour trail, like a victim of a nuclear blast.

The shops were bizarre; tight, jagged spaces starting at street level

and rising in shards and planes several floors up. The windows were full of mannequins in puce and scarlet or glowing gold and copper wraps, tropical fish and dolls dressed like rainforest birds. He never saw a naked human face here. The car windows were tinted so dark they appeared to be driven by themselves without passengers, like the world of machines predicted centuries ago.

He scrambled up an old composite service stair to the top of a concrete rampart and made his way to the levee overlooking the East River. He watched vortices form and break in the pewter water and the hovercraft cross and drift, the amphibatrain racing along. Uptown, in the seventies, he climbed down and crossed over towards the park. On Madison he bought a soft pretzel from a vendor and squeezed a squiggle of mustard on it. A little farther on he got an espresso and took these to some green composite benches just within the park, under a leafless oak tree with a huge trunk. Its roots had broken the stone retaining wall along Fifth and grown down under the cobblestones. It was like the park was bursting out of its sides. There was a playground nearby. Squirrels raced around the old, crumbling play structures. Trees had grown up around them. Buried beneath the bark and roots and dirt was the cast bronze figure of Alice seated on a mushroom, between the March Hare and the Mad Hatter, deeply patinated. It was never going to end, he thought. The only thing to do was die.

Well, there it was, he had reached his destination, the end of all his thoughts. Sometimes it took all day to reach the conclusion; sometimes it came to him before he had finished his shower. But everyday he resolved the problem in the same way. No one would care anyway. He could disappear without fear of disappointing anyone. No one depended on him for anything. No one's life would be devastated or emptied of meaning without him. His words would echo in no minds. It would be a clean getaway without guilt. He was no one's mental prisoner, he served no greater need or completed



any feeling or thought. Felix was free. No one had ever been freer. His only enslavement was to nonexistence, to Veronica and things passed by, things he only dreamed about.

He crumpled up the wrapper and shoved it into his jacket pocket. Despite the piles of rubbish and trash he could not bring himself to litter. He walked down off the path into the thicket surrounding Alice. The ground was soggy. There was a dense layer of leaves and branches. It smelled like wet bark. Smell was important. If he smelled cats or dogs or humans he had to be careful. Once a vicious cat had leapt down onto his head, near the reservoir. Feral cats had taken over an acre or so of territory but he had ignored the smell. He was blundering along senselessly when he felt a piercing pain on his head, as if a titanium grappling hook had dropped down from a spaceship and seized him. Then a muffling of fur and panic blinded him till he realized what was going on and was able to grab hold of the cat and fling it away. That was merely annoying. A pack of wild dogs was another story completely. Now he unconsciously searched for signs of animal or human spoor. Each had a distinct smell.

Felix didn't carry a gun. The others did and had tried to persuade him to buy one but he didn't want it. Anything he couldn't fight didn't matter. He was half hoping someone would put an end to him, saving himself the trouble. None of the methods of self-dispatch appealed to him. He considered death by drowning. But he always swam to the surface. A bullet to the head was efficient but he lacked the will to pull the trigger. Hanging made him crazy. He hated heights more than life. The swan dive into crushed rock was not for him.

He stepped over the bracken and leaned against the cold metal sculpture. Saplings crowded in between the larger trees. Roots had grown up over the characters. Alice was like an abandoned goddess, with her big grotesque head, and this was her temple, lost to the jungle. He looked up into the high branches. Crows stood on the bare crowns, cawed and flapped off in pairs. Even the king must die.

A squirrel rooted in the leaf mold. Fundamentally it was the violence he shrank from. He was too weak to bring it off. And if he had the strength he would no longer want to die. Another paralyzing paradox. He was like an injured animal staggering from trap to trap. But at least the trapped animal has the will to gnaw its leg off rather than die doing nothing.

He climbed the hat of the Mad Hatter and stood stretching out his hands. He gave a yell, a loud, throaty yell, and jumped back down. Who cares? He walked back up to the path and deeper into the park. Rain pitter-pattered the branches and the ground. It was a soft rain, filtered by the denuded canopy, somehow less grimy and depressing than the incessant winter downpour he was used to, with its metallic taste. Well, it was the rain or the storms or the heat and with the heat came the clouds of gnats, flying cockroaches, toads and bats. These were the alternatives.

He came upon a big rock and climbed a hill. He paused on a stone bridge crossing the old transverse, now a winding canal, to watch the water. People used to come just to see the beautiful canals built through the park. He had read about it in books. The water was black. A yellow leaf floated along. Branches blocking a bend collected these yellow leaves and released them. The water was only a foot or so from the top. It had a briny, industrial smell but it was still peaceful to watch it pulse along. Perhaps a gun was the way to go. It would only take a second to pull the trigger. There would be no lengthy preparation, no slow transition into death, no moments of terror and pain at the approaching sidewalk or struggle with amorphous water. Just the will to pull the trigger and then nothing, not even black. It would be like before he existed. Between the two eternities. Horseman, pass by!

On the other side the path climbed steeply. But there was something wrong. He smelled alcohol. A man emerged out of nowhere, on the path ahead. He looked like an animal. His hair was

long and tangled with leaves and twigs. It stood off his head and stuck out in all directions. His beard stuck out all over the place too and grew almost up to his eyes, which were dazed and unfocused. Dirt encrusted the skin on his forehead and arms. As Felix approached he just stood there, naked to the waist, in torn jeans, bare feet imbedded in the ground like claws. In one hand was a bottle with an inch of yellow liquid. He smelled of animal fat. His nails were long and cracked and black. As was his habit Felix smiled briefly, nodded his head and kept going. But a sort of electrical current crept through his limbs as he walked by the man. Two minutes later he felt a deep chill. He was coming. It was coming. Felix didn't turn around. He was like the rain. Let it come down. He pulled together and awaited the blow. He became aware of everything around him. A chipmunk hopping, sparrows chattering. The leafmold's sweet smell and the earth and stones soaked with rain. Veronica. There was a boat with three stripers lying on the bottom, gills pulsing, soft lips opening and closing. It had been a good day. He and his father had started at dawn, with a turning tide. Felix piloted the boat out onto the river and headed north.

It came. The man had Felix by the throat. He started to cough and gag. He had no power, no strength. The man's arms were like the roots of trees, rough and sour smelling. He felt himself going down. He felt the stinking breath of his assailant on his ear, saliva soaked into his hair, burning like acid. At last, he thought. I'm going to die here. He was going to succumb. There was no fight left in him. The blood vessels in his eyes popped. He watched his body slowly decompose. First the dogs fed on his entrails. Then birds came down to peck at his eyes and flesh. Flies laid their eggs. Maggots, ants and beetles picked the bones clean. Dead leaves settled over the bones and turned to earth.

Everything blurred. He began to feel warm and he headed out on the boat with his father, into the sun. They started out on the canal,

rocking slowly along, down to the river. Slivers of gold and grey scaled the water and then the boat entered the sky. His father lay on the bottom of the boat, wrapped in canvas. Sea gulls cried. He looked down through the trees at the park below. Veronica was on a bench, weeping. Felix! she screamed. He felt a jerk, as if the boat had reached the end of its rope and was yanked out of the sky. He was falling into her voice. The woods circled around and he felt a pulse of violent, focused rage go through him. His mind shut down, the narrative that had plagued him for years, for his whole life even, ceased. His mouth opened, his foot rose up and he loosed a fearsome guttural roar and kicked at the man violently. He stood and stamped down on the man's foot so hard it crushed all of the bones and the man loosened his hold. Felix whirled around, acid surging into his mouth. His teeth felt long and sharp, like sabers. He hissed and grabbed the man by the hair and the man swung at Felix's exposed chest, knocking him to the ground. Howling and hopping on one foot, the man pulled out a knife and fell down onto Felix but Felix got to his feet, seized the man's arm and broke it in two across his knee like a stick. Then, in a slow, calculated fury, he kicked and punched him to the ground till he was bloody and inert. Felix stood panting over him a moment, pried his fingers off the knife and ran out to Seventy Second Street and down Fifth Avenue, stopping only when he was sure he wasn't being followed. He looked up and down the avenue through a dark canopy of interlocking branches. Uptown, a block away, a horse and buggy trotted along. The hoofs clopped on the cobblestones. Beneath the tattered awning of a sandstone building across the street stood a family, dressed in black. There were two children heavily swathed in dark cloth, covered entirely except for the eyes. The parents stood together behind them, the father in a tailored overcoat with sable lapels, and the woman in a sable fur with a high collar and a red cloche. A uniformed guard with a multi-barreled, robotic assault rifle resting on his hip, stood stiffly off to the

side.

Felix looked at his hands. They were bruised and bloody. His throat and neck burned. It was hard to breathe, he felt like he had swallowed rocks and his eyes ached and burned, stabbed from within by needles. The blood throbbed in his head. He wanted to scream but no sound escaped his throat. He started to cry and threw the knife over the broken stonewall into the park and walked home.

He could barely speak. It felt like someone had shoved toothpicks into his neck and throat. Peter was pacing tight circles in front of the bathroom, gripping his hair with one hand and pointing with the other. "Are you going to get a gun now?"

Moises, pouring gin into a glass and handing it to Felix, said, "Why do you walk there anyway? Do you want to die?"

Promethea stared at her feet and blew smoke at her toes.

"I like to walk in the woods," he croaked, taking the gin.

"A wild man!" Moises said. He turned on the t.v.

Peter stared at Felix. He couldn't tell if Peter was mad or worried. He didn't want to piss him off, and he didn't want to worry him. It was a burden either way. "Can I at least look at your neck? If you need to go to a hospital I'll take you."

Felix waved him off. "I just need to sleep."

Peter nodded and yawned. "They're just wiping me out at Les Jardeen. I can't talk about sports anymore. God, Felix, I miss Mr. Clay."

But Felix had no idea who he was talking about. He watched the news blurrily. Bulldozers and hovercraft lay waste to towns in Iroquoia. Then live sex from Fallopia. Controversy. He laid out his mattress and they watched t.v. over his recumbent form. When the t.v. went off and they were all asleep he got up and took out the bottle of Paregane from his duffel bag. He couldn't go back to that depression anymore. He wanted to feel good. Booze, marijuana,

mushrooms, stimulants, and narcotics: he had tried them all; whatever Moises did, he did. Nothing worked. They all fell flat. Paregane at least worked. And if it killed him, so much the better. That was how he would go, like Veronica, like all those people on the news. It was painful, but he managed to swallow the pill.

The first thing he did when he reached the garden was to go in search of Sammael. He went to the fountain in the ruined courtyard but there was no one there, just a few gold fish gliding in circles. The stones were wet with recent rain. The sun was coming out and the water was starting to evaporate. His throat felt whole again. He strolled through the pinewoods listening to his feet press down the bed of copper needles and drank the icy water of a stream, which he followed down to the lake. There he sat on the warm volcanic sand and watched the sun flame out across the waves in glints of red and yellow. Kingfishers shot out and back over the water like arrows fired from the boughs. Eventually he dove into the purple water. It absorbed him and gave him back. He breathed the sweet air deep into his lungs and felt it diffuse through his limbs all the way to his toes and fingertips.

Then it was morning. He dressed before the others were up, showered quickly and went out for croissants and bread. There were enough pills for a month. Maybe that would do it. If not, he'd have to buy Paregane on the street. Gametria had closed its doors to all but Paregane users. It was not a place he liked; the one time he had gone there he had felt totally alienated. It was Moises's idea, he knew a bouncer who would let them in and they all dutifully dressed in their most stylish clothes. That meant for Felix that he had to assemble a hat, jacket, pants and gloves from Peter, Edsel and Moises.

From the street it was an ordinary building, seven stories high, with a brick facade, gargoyles and scrollwork at the corners. The transition zone was the stairs, after the bouncers allowed you into the steel

doors. They passed through a mist, which, like a drug, altered their perception.

Inside was an environment of light and music. There were no walls, ceilings or floors. People were like butterflies and dragonflies gathering over the glittering pile of lucre in the Cave of Mammon. He had entered a liminal zone where humans passed like bright scarves of silk dropped through the night. The music and lights drifted. They drank a strange cocktail. There was a weird sexual vibration that seized them but no one touched. When he focused on faces he saw nothing at all but gaunt, severe features. There was no conversation. One walked on glass stairs, through gates of falling water that neither ascended nor descended. The walls breathed music and light. There was an odor of electricity. He felt awful for days.

Now the rich clientele were tired of hallucinations. They wanted reality. They wanted Paregane. Everyone got a little younger. They lined up in black and pink cotton tunics, shirts trimmed in green and sapphire, hats with red feathers.

He passed them. They were a herd. How much did it cost? In thirty days there'd be no more.

He had money. Even after rent and food he could go a long time without working. But Paregane was expensive. Street people didn't use it. There had been no outbreak of peace in midtown. The industrial suburbs were untouched. Most places the same inane violence ground on without cease.

If he spent his money on Paregane he would never leave for Alaska. Wasn't that his plan once? To do something with his life? In Alaska he would at least be honoring Veronica's wishes. But Veronica's wishes, who cared? It didn't matter what she wanted, she was gone. He could go where he wanted. Or not go anywhere. He could look for her in the garden, maybe stay there with her. That was what they were chasing after, lining up on the street in front of the

building called Gametria.

He felt inside of himself a new kind of power. He felt like a great cat, a lion, had become his familiar. It was in his arms, his jaws and loins. He had lion's teeth and lion's eyes. He could see fear. His hunger had a searching quality. He had no will to fight and yet there, in the park, when he both wanted to die and could have, this self-shattering will had seized hold of him. He had become ferocious, a predator. Whether the man lived or died meant nothing to him. He suffered no remorse or fear. A calm confidence suffused his limbs.

He walked by Gametria again. Enormous black bags of garbage were piled two-and-a-half metres up on the curb. A wave of rats had arrived and they were gnawing their way into the bags. Sometimes they squealed. Sometimes a late arrival ran across the feet of the people on line. They looked at him and smiled and said good morning. There were maybe ten of them, men and women. He paused to breathe in their odor and decided to join the line.

Back at the apartment, Moises, Peter and Promethea awoke. Edsel arrived for his morning coffee and Peter took a shower. Since Felix's arrival it had been rare for Moises, Promethea and Edsel to be alone together.

"This is it, before he gets out of the shower," Moises said. He grabbed Felix's duffel bag and went through it.

"Moises!" said Promethea.

"Moises!" repeated Edsel.

"You'd better stop."

"It's his bag."

Moises bared his teeth. "I don't give a damn! He lives with us."

"What are you doing?" Promethea asked.

"Don't pretend you don't know," Moises said. "We've talked about it often enough. Christ, it's all we talk about now." He pulled out the

bottle. “Here.” He shook three pills out. “He’ll never know. You’ve heard him. He’s afraid of dying. Why he keeps it I don’t know. It’s like those creepy ashes.”

“He might have counted them,” Edsel said. He and Promethea, despite their protests, had huddled around Moises and were gazing down at the three green pills in his palm.

Moises made a face and said, “As if I care.”

“Even if Felix doesn’t notice, Peter will kill us,” Promethea said.

“Come on. Aren’t you just dying to know?”

Promethea stared at the bathroom door and the bag. She bit her lip. Edsel grew quiet. The three were in an orbit around the pills. Then Promethea and Edsel held out their hands. The shower stopped running. The toilet flushed. Peter brushed his teeth. Moises gave them each a pill and replaced the bottle in the bag.

“If we like it we can always buy more at Gametria and replace what we took.”

The bathroom door clicked. Hastily they hid the pills and Moises said, “Tonight.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO BACK IN THE SADDLE

Felix came to a broad, fast river. The far shore glowed in the low sunlight, a deep dark red, and on the near bank stands of plane trees shivered in the breeze. He had come there through a quiet, autumnal oak wood that smelled strongly of mushrooms, of fallen leaves and decomposing bark. A soft warm wind rustled the crimson leaves. They drifted down, gliding back and forth. Two tall turkeys ran by gobbling. Red, black and grey squirrels scrambled about in a frenzy, burying nuts. The bees were heavy, buzzing low. He smelled honey and wood smoke.

The river was familiar. He and Veronica had been there, with Sammael. The air was scented with apples and river water, it smelled like a hot day in October after weeks of rain. There were clumps of purple asters with yellow centers and russet chrysanthemums, golden choreopsis and black-eyed susan. There was no sign of Sammael. He went down to the river bank and lay back on the grass under the plane trees, to look at the few clouds crossing the otherwise unbroken blue of the sky. The breeze picked up, crossed the river and caressed him with warm encircling arms, brushing his face with her long hair.

Sammael appeared beside him, squat and hairy. “Mind if I sit down?” he asked, smiling.

“No, not at all,” said Felix. There was something he knew he was supposed to say but the wind had made him forgetful. Carefully rehearsed words stood in the wings but would not enter his mouth.

"Is something wrong, Felix? You seem perplexed."

He nodded. The breeze warmed his ear and breathed upon him till his flesh stirred and rippled like water. Felix looked into Sammael's eyes and thought. He shook his head as the words formed distantly. In a slow, quiet voice he said, "Where the hell is she?"

"Veronica? Haven't seen her." Sammael chewed on a piece of grass.

"But you know where she is. She came to stay."

He chuckled. "Is that what happened?"

"But you're here. Others have stayed."

"They're just passing through. Anyone who tries to stay finds themselves someplace else. Here isn't here. Of course, it isn't there either. It's neither here nor there."

"But you do come here."

"Do you mean me or one? The generality...."

"Specifically you, as an instance of one who comes."

"Sure, for me it's nothing."

Felix stood. "I've got to find her."

"Felix, don't look for things. Here you will find nothing if you look for it. Let things find you. Relax."

"Since she's been dead--"

"Who said anything about dying? Nothing ceases to be, it just becomes something else. Proteins, amino acids, shit."

"But there must be an end."

"There is no end of things in the heart."

"Pound, you're quoting Pound."

"Well, Pound's translation of Rihaku, or Li Po. He certainly made a hash of things. Great vision destroyed by political pathology--"

"I'd rather not do Ezra Pound."

"What thou lovest well remains, the rest is dross."

"Veronica."

"Dross. That body of hers was trash. It was time to move on."

"Who decides?"

"There is no who Felix, I told you that."

"I've decided then."

Sammael burped and disappeared. A large reptile crept away into the oak wood, its tail swishing back and forth, the scales like jewels. Felix watched the water in complete peace. Prahus with crimson sails passed by. Before it ended in wakefulness, thoughts he wouldn't remember, propositions about reality and the world he was entertaining converged in a dream within the mind of the garden. The garden loved him. She was a winged creature and they rose into the sky. A cold shadow crossed the water. Then a loud, discordant braying, like a donkey in distress, interrupted them. He turned around to find Moises, running towards him, Promethea in tow. But before they reached him their expressions turned from delight to terror and Felix walked away.

He lay down in the hot meadow. Now he was hungry. Hunger roused him and he rose up over the butterflies and bees and ran through the tall hot grass after a small deer. His haunches pumped back and forth. Sweat poured down his face. The deer smelled like fresh meat. It leapt between the clumps of grass, changed direction, but Felix was locked in on it. He bounded forward and brought it to the ground. It hurt his neck to pierce through the vertebrae and as his mouth filled with the hot blood he grew faint.

He awoke with the taste still in his mouth. His neck was a little sore, but he was entirely healed now of the wounds inflicted by the wild man.

After Peter had gone into the shower Felix looked coolly at Moises and Promethea and said, "You stole from me."

Promethea tried to disappear into her coffee. "I'm sorry." She glared at Moises. "I told you it was wrong."

"You're risking your life," Felix said. "I promised Peter I wouldn't involve you in this. He, you, have taken me in. I'm responsible, you understand? I killed one person and I won't kill you. I won't repay your kindness in that way."

Moises stood and seemed to explode. "I don't care if I die! I hope I do die and stay in the garden. I've never felt anything like that." He stared into space, paralyzed by the thought. "My god, it makes me sick even to smell this place. It's like a place where stinking insects come to pupate. I'm a hive of disease, a mausoleum of discordant cries. Garbage.... the human garbage on a tide of death floats out to nothing and we weep like children in this prison of flesh."

"You don't understand. It's not a place to stay. People come and go. It's a place of repose."

Moises turned towards Felix, his turquoise eyes focused, not blurred by drugs or drugged by sleep. "How do you know?"

"There's a man, an angel. Sammael is his name. He told me."

"I didn't see any angel. Just this beautiful lion. Its mane was all of fire and around its neck was a diamond-studded collar. A beautiful woman, like an undulating goddess with long black hair and eyes of jasper had him on a leash and they turned on us. I thought I was going to die then and do you know how gladly I would have given myself to that magnificent beast, to have its teeth buried in my throat, to be ripped to pieces and consumed by him? My god, I'd be reborn, a pillar of gold. But instead he chased down this little deer and ate it."

Promethea sighed heavily. She rubbed her cheek and looked at Felix. "Was that you, Felix?"

"I saw no woman there," Felix said.

"There was a fountain that had overflowed and formed a channel in the limestone. We followed it," she said. "How can that be? Do

you remember Moises?"

"It was a slow stream. There were four, an emerald, a diamond, a sapphire and a ruby. We followed the sapphire. The trickle from the fountain grew."

"That's right," Promethea said. "It grew into a stream and then a river. It was at the river we found the lion. If you and I had the same experience, then it's true what they say."

"Of course it's real!" Moises said. He stripped off all his clothes. He had a huge hard on. "Look at this." He pumped it back and forth in his hand. "Oh god," he groaned. "That was you Felix." His cock bobbed free of his hand. He flexed his buttocks. "I can't believe how I feel."

Felix stretched out. He had no idea what to do. It was annoying, he was scared. There were outcomes now he couldn't determine. "Look, it might have been me, I don't know. Let me try to explain. In the garden, forms are mutable. You imagine reality. Or rather, reality is the imagination. It's like thinking in words only you're thinking in physical change." He found himself struggling with language, that he couldn't express the obvious.

"That's just so cool," said Moises, making a muscle with his arm and squeezing it.

Felix said, "What am I going to tell Peter when he finds out."

"He's not going to find out. And you have to promise not to tell him."

Felix could no longer sort out the various promises he had made. All he wanted to do then was return to the garden, where life was simple.

The door opened and Edsel, glowing, entered. Peter emerged from the shower, his long black hair wet against his shoulders. Moises's eyes grew large. They lingered over Peter's body, the flat, tight stomach, the small patch of public hair, his hairless chest and erect

nipples. “What?” Peter asked. They were all staring at him. He looked back at them strangely. “Did something happen?” No one answered. “Felix,” he said, “Are you still coming tonight?”

Felix didn’t know what Peter was talking about. “Huh?” he asked.

“The Met Cafe? My friend Miss Bailey, the one who was in the bar that night when you came here?”

“Oh,” Felix said, recollecting. “Of course. Yes. I’m on for it. I go by the Met all the time but I haven’t gone in.”

“You won’t regret it,” Edsel said. “Miss Bailey’s great. She really belts ‘em out, makes you feel just like skid row. It’s like all devastated. And the museum, don’t forget to get there early and see the galleries.”

Peter dressed slowly. He stepped gracefully into a pair of black underwear and pulled on loose linen pants. He threaded a red belt through the loops and buckled it and stretched into a red shirt, which he buttoned from the bottom up, leaving it open at the neck. He ran a comb through his wet hair and stood there a moment with a worried, puzzled face. “Something’s wrong.” He shook his head. “I’ll meet you at Bereshit, Felix, and we can take the PCP up.” He looked at the others and narrowed his eyes. “I’ll see you guys later, after the show.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

### THE MET

86th and Lex was as close as they could get to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. It was early evening. A few grim automobiles pulled up in front of the imposing old buildings, depositing men and women in overcoats with umbrellas. They walked west, to Fifth Avenue and then south a few blocks through the rainy, concrete hush. Blue street lamps, widely dispersed, lit the pavement. The cobalt light was broken up between the shadows of the trees and awnings like pieces of stained glass. The museum emerged from the rank trees and vegetation of the park. Its monumental steps led up to banks of ancient revolving doors. A few orange and red lights lit portions of the brutal, 19th century facade. They walked up the steps and pushed through the slow doors into the lobby. A small crowd was gathered around the entrance to the galleries. There a security guard took donations and handed out yellow hard hats with lamps attached and gallery maps. Both young people and eccentric, moth eaten elderly people were there to hear Miss Bailey. Once the province of old families in the neighborhood and antiquarians, the Met was now the stomping ground also of those on the edge of fashion: artists, prostitutes, hangers on. Viewing the galleries before sitting down to drinks and music had become a thing to do.

Felix and Peter wandered the unlit galleries. The halls were endless, echoey caverns of grey and white and black marble. They had to walk with their heads down to see their way though they could follow the lights of others. The lights on the helmets raced and bounced along



in a pack then staggered off in different directions as the crowd broke up and entered different galleries. They were in a series of rooms full of Renaissance paintings with huge gilt frames stacked floor to ceiling. The lamps were too weak to light the highest of the paintings. The circles of white light played across the surfaces. With a little practice Felix could fix a painting with his eyes and carefully let the beam travel over the surface, taking in its details. Then he would stand back and see the whole canvas dimly. At least, Felix thought, there's art to look at. His mouth was dry, and his heart beat hard anticipating Peter's questions about Paregane. But they didn't come. He confined himself to spare, cryptic utterances about the art, or bitchy comments about the other people.

They spent time in the Egyptian rooms, staring at sarcophagi. The mummified remains beneath the glass cubes looked like they had been partly devoured by the stone. Dark, leathery flesh pulled back on teeth and empty eye sockets. Mummy cases with stunned, almost happy faces stood haphazardly about. The displays along the wall were crammed with scarabs, papyrus scrolls, figurines of jackals, ibises and asses. The few descriptive plaques had faded to illegibility. He had no idea what any of it was or meant but there was something stifling about it. They were buried in the building and the shadows and now the funerary art swallowed them into its gut till he felt like he was in a pyramid. Felix knew about pyramids, they had studied them in elementary school. He had made one out of soap in third grade and they watched educational shows about the secrets of ancient Egypt, how they embalmed the Pharaohs, the history of tomb raiders. Then in high school there was a fad for mummy movies recycled out of recently rediscovered and restored films. But these mainly spewed out phantasmagoric images of melting flesh and bat-like humans.

The lamps reflected off of the glass cases so he had to press up close to see into them. It was silent. It smelled of dust and stone. He

wanted to speak but couldn't. If he opened his mouth to speak he might blurt it out. The truth sat in him like shit. Peter stood beside him. He had to know. He was torturing him on purpose. The air was cold. They drew together and Felix felt them shiver as one. Finally Peter spoke. "Let's go to the temple," he said.

To get there they had to go through galleries of American colonial paintings, portraits of governors in white wigs with dead lips, men with hunting dogs, women staring out of eyes a little too big. There was furniture, canopied beds, escritaires. They looked at 19th century paintings then, academic paintings and the Impressionists. These were familiar from college.

"The thing to do is find a wing no one's been to," Peter said, as they scrutinized the worn map for a route to the temple. "We stumbled into the Islamic wing a couple of months back and everything was covered in cobwebs."

They wandered around an exhibit of Haut Couture, with diminutive mannequins dressed in emerald sequined evening gowns; uncannily similar to ones he had seen on t.v. with Moises. They were dulled by dirt and some lay on their sides, tipped over and never set upright, the child-sized clothing lifeless on the floor.

Finally they reached the Temple of Dendur. Two hundred years ago the museum had purchased and reassembled the Egyptian temple in a specially constructed glass addition. Several giant oaks had been felled by storms over the years and now the glass lay smashed on the ground. It glowed in their lamplights. Trees had encroached from all sides; the park was growing up around and over everything. The temple was a huge block of hewn stone covered in moss and lichen, diminished by the vines, limbs and trunks that swung in and out of their lamps as they danced over the walls.

"It's so strange," Peter said.

"It feels like some long deceased world conqueror like Tamburlain

once ruled here and built this place as a mausoleum, as if he believed he could drag the spoils he had plundered with him down into the underworld.”

Peter nodded and the lamp went up and down Felix’s body. They focused their beams on each other’s faces, blinking back the light. “I think it’s time,” Peter said. “I could use a drink.”

“Me too.”

They surveyed the temple and the glass one last time and walked to the cafe, which was located on the main floor, in a black marble room with heavy velvet curtains, maroon and dark green. There was a small stage with colored lights and a baby grand piano. Tables for two were arranged in front of the stage, each with a candle in a glass, an ashtray, salt and pepper and sugar packs. Along one wall, against the heavy drapes, a makeshift bar was set up and along the opposite wall was a counter serving hot drinks, sandwiches and sweets wrapped in cellophane. Ceiling spots lit statues and busts on pedestals, muscular Greek men with tiny penises and hollow eyes, grotesque Hellenistic faces in the throes of physical and mental agony, a randy Venus looking matronly and whorish, more out of Shakespeare than Virgil. The entrance was a long hallway lined with suits of armour on either side, lit by spotlights in the ceiling, glinting off the shiny metal and giving the lowered beavers an unnerving expression of life.

They walked in their unbroken mood of enchantment with a few other couples into the room, ordered gin and tonics and took a seat in the front row of tables. Peter lit the candle, which he then used to light a long, thin cigar. After a while in which they sat silently sipping their cocktails, Miss Bailey came out on stage in a long teal and gentian evening gown woven of glass beads. She smiled a coarse, vulgar, good-humoured smile full of bad teeth. Her hair was pinned up exposing her attached ears. Her bare arms shook and wiggled as

she gestured and began to speak in a thick, borough accent which was both exceedingly rare and eagerly sought after if genuine. There were things that couldn’t be faked, nuances of the letter ‘R’, of terminal syllables, of speed, vocabulary and diction.

Twenty or thirty people were crowded around the tables, mixed young and old. The men wore black tuxedos with bow ties and cummerbunds and tails. In the dark they looked retro and elegant but a close look revealed how shabby they were, the cuffs frayed, the tails chewed up like the ears of an old tomcat. The women wore evening gowns like Miss Bailey’s and like Miss Bailey’s their evening gowns were ancient hand me downs, worn by generations of women sinking slowly into poverty and irrelevance, their only wealth the enormous apartments they inhabited. A haze of smoke hovered near the ceiling. Miss Bailey sat down at the piano, hit a few notes and cleared her throat and went straight into *Stormy Weather*. Polite, necessary applause followed but Miss Bailey knew her audience was incapable of expressing in handclaps the desperate enthusiasm they felt for her. They all felt it, for the museum, for the music, for each other. Age had left them the brittle containers of bitter memories and feelings. Generations of loss, of hunger lived on in them. They were the heirs of a dead world that would not vanish. The past was drawn and written on their hearts like hieroglyphs in a burial chamber. They had gripped the hands of dying people who had touched other dying hands, hands that had delivered the new world out of the old. Long, cold winters with snow on the street, summers and springs of delightful sun, avenues choked with traffic, sidewalks so thick with people they were described as a sea of heads, and cities lit up through the night, thronged with crowds, playgrounds alive with the shrieks of children.

Scattered among the old crowd were the young, a dozen or so like Felix and Peter, Felix in his wrinkled artichoke suit, Peter, relaxed, graceful, in a flush of youthful beauty and ease not just imagined,

attained and lost so fast it doesn't even become a memory.

As she sang *One More for the Road* Peter said to Felix, "I know what you're doing."

Felix was relieved to have it out at last, even though he was terrified of losing all he had gained, terrified of hurting Peter with his betrayal. "I can't help it," Felix said.

"It's none of my business, of course. But you live with me, Felix. Your presence, when you're on *Paregane*, is so imposing. Understand, it's attractive." He stumbled a bit. "I find it entrancing and scary all at once. But the others. It's all they talk about. *Moises* doesn't fuck me anymore. *Edsel's* at our house all day long. When we go to parties they don't leave your side and soon the four of you have drawn the room around you. Everyone wants to fuck you Felix. It's driving *Promethea* crazy."

"I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault, I guess. I like having you live with us."

What? Felix thought. Then, cautiously, he said, "It's not too crowded? I'm not in the way?"

"No, it's not that. There's always room and we need the rent. But I'm afraid of losing my boyfriend. Our life together--I mean, try and understand how important *Moises* and *Promethea* are to me, to each other. We've been together since college."

Felix knew this was only one part of it, but it certainly wasn't his place to remind Peter that he had rejected *Promethea* for *Moises*. "Do you want me to leave?" he asked, trying to conceal the panic he felt at the prospect of leaving behind his bed, pillow and blanket at the end of the room, or *Promethea's* legs and feet.

Peter looked at his fingernails. "I don't know what I want. When you're using *Paregane* you're so, strong, it's like this black hole we're all falling into. In a way I can't resist what you want and in another way it just scares the shit right out of me. It seems to spread to their

bodies even, so the light I see, the queer, otherworldly sun of your eyes, has lit up *Promethea* and *Moises* too. You--you're like some beautiful animal, some godlike creature, a leopard made out of gold and jewels found in a Mayan tomb. Someone you want to fuck so badly it feels like to do so would mean dying and then it's like dying gives me the pleasure a murderer feels squeezing the life out his victim. The spasms are all alike. Even these words and thoughts of mine, I should have kept them to myself. You incite me to this, Felix." He spoke in a rush, without regard for what he was saying or who might hear.

Miss Bailey sang *Forty Acres and a Mule*, *Highway Work and Is That All There Is*. Her voice was a little off, spirited, humorous, edged with years of whiskey and cigarettes. Her piano playing was just passable. The performance was a lot like the clothes, elegant, flawed and old.

Felix said, "I think I should go. You've been so kind to take me in. I don't want to--" he choked up. He didn't want to leave them at all. "You've been a family to me. I've never known that. I'm just trying to find some peace of mind, find *Veronica*. I can't live without her and no amount of stoicism works. The obsessive thoughts, reliving every moment we lived together, the constant analyzing, the fruitless search for a person or thing to accuse and convict of her murder. You knew me when she was alive. You know what it is to love like that. To be in the constant grip of a phantom. I just have to find her."

"If I kicked you out the others would kill me. But let's face it, *Moises* and *Promethea* are dying to take *Paregane* and if they do, I'll lose them. The way it is, with me working all the time, and them all obsessed with you, it's like we don't exist as a family anymore, not for me anyway." He became suddenly focused and looked Felix in the eyes. Felix felt Peter's eye trying to pierce the rich brown and black wheels of his own, trying to enter him through the pupil but his dark,

clear eyes were like autumn leaves reflected on a pool of water. He could absorb the thoughts and desires and orders of a hundred Peter Nguyens and one by one their lights would go out, joining his. “Don’t sleep with my boyfriend, Felix. And don’t break Promethea’s heart.”

“I promise,” Felix said.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR CHARIOTS

Sitting and laughing by the lake after a long swim he thought, if only I wasn’t alone. The sun was just above the mountains and everything was hot and still. Every now and again a cicada unwound its harsh song or a butterfly wandered in among the nearby bramble of honeysuckle. Felix dozed off and when he awoke the sun was a little lower and the snow on the mountains deepened into blue shadow. He felt it on his face, in his eyes and veins. He stretched, smiled and then she was there, standing over him, blocking the sun, hair haloed with light, mouth half open in a smile.

“Veronica.” He started to his feet and took her in his arms. Her skin was hot and a little sweaty. He kissed her hair, ran his hands over her back from the strong shoulders down the arch of her spine to the muscles of the small, and finally her ass, touching each part of her and naming silently to himself what he could never forget. He held her heavy breasts, felt the bumpy surface of her nipples, kissed her mouth. They fell to the ground. He was growing; they grew together like a fig tree. He kissed her, beyond the loneliness, despair in tatters. The scorched surface of the earth flaked off and blew away. He kissed her feet, her calves, her knees. He ran little biting kisses up the inside of her thigh, ran his lips around her hair up to her navel, inhaling the warm air, then slowly circled in on her cunt, kissing her to life. She swelled between his lips. He kissed her belly and grabbed at her hands, kissed her breasts and sucked her nipples till sweet milk flooded his mouth. He kissed her neck and his head filled with the

smell of her thick black hair. He sank his whole life into her mouth and they lay there in perfect poise. He was inside of her but they didn't move. There was a heat, a beating of the heart, as she pulsed against him and they swelled and swelled. They lay like this till he awoke in the morning, still shuddering, when a yip of pain brought him into full daylight. He checked the sheets with his hands. They were dry.

Promethea and Moises bought a small supply of their own Paregane at Gametria and secretly took it. Peter had not yet noticed the change in them but Felix saw it right away. They grew in stature. Promethea was becoming beautiful to him. It was a strange realignment because after finding Veronica that one time in the garden he lived in a state of constant expectation. Now there were two women, the one who lay near him at night while he slept, whose company he kept through much of the day, who gave him physical intimacy, the exchange of simple words, the sharing of meals, and the other, Veronica, whose scent hung on the air of paradise, whose presence was palpable. She was there, alive, and he had found her. Now he spent his nights restlessly roaming the paths of the garden in pursuit. It brought him to new places, less private, where the others went. People crowded around bonfires in the dark while desultory, spiteful angels looked on.

He was becoming more like the angels. People in paradise were like children, unreflective, happy or afraid or angry but mostly in a state of simpleminded joy. He knew that state, he lived it. But now he found himself perched on the rock of a barren mountainside, above the plains and woods, in a strange darkness, brooding. Down below the idiots were dancing. He turned and looked up the shadowed outline of the crags, black against a sky illuminated by the full moon, which lay, gravidly, on the opposite horizon. Not far off an angel leaned his face against his fist and gazed down at the crowd. He had a huge hooked nose and thick eyebrows. His skin was covered with a

grime of dirty gold dust. A pair of heavy wings were at rest against his back. He looked up at Felix, raised his eyebrows and shook his head. Then he nodded and smiled, revealing two rows of pointed teeth. After a while the angel stood up on the outcrop of stone, his feet like talons, flexed his wings and leapt off, circling slowly down from the height. The people did not notice him. They were drinking cider out of stone bowls, laughing and dancing in and out of the dense red light of the fire. Gracefully, the angel dropped in and seized a woman about the waist. With a short, aching cry he carried her off, disappearing into the mountain peaks at the edge of paradise.

Another time, Sammael sidled up beside him as he stalked a section of forest, certain she had just passed by. He could taste her on the air and yet every path he took wound through thickets of tree ferns, in and out of primeval bogs. They walked side by side, on all fours, prowling.

"You'll never find her like this, you know."

"How the hell else can I do it?" he asked, turning to look at Sammael, whose face was tawny and whiskered like a lion's.

He smiled incisors. "Tantalized by glimpses of her?"

"As a matter of fact, yes. It's a scent. As if she just left the room."

Sammael groaned suggestively. "Scent of what?"

"You know what. She's rubbed off on every tree trunk in this place."

"If I'm going to spend time with a human being you might at least allow me to be small minded. The taste of cat. We couple with people you know. When Adam leftus, and the devil took our hindmost, gifting her with his painapple." He chuckled dourly. "You can't look for her, my little Felix Culpa, I told you that before. You have to find each other. The harder you search, the more of a game it becomes. You two are still attached but her substance has changed. Yearning for you is a yearning for embodiment. This is a rather

delicate desire among us, or should I say delicacy. Or better, delectstasy. But for you it's a yearning upward, beyond matter or the gross material of your existence. You're growing Felix. So few do. You've become angelic in your melancholy. Maybe this path to Veronica's cunt is your true calling after all." He stood upright and smiled as a man does, his face once again covered in a rough beard of red hair. They were at a pool of water surrounded by palm trees and ferns. Felix was going to say something but Sammael was gone and so was the scent on the air. He sat by the pool and wept. There was no reflection in the water.

One afternoon he came in from a long walk. He had stopped at Gametria for pills. They were expensive but he didn't really care. Days and weeks ran together now. He lived for the nights. Every trip to the garden brought him closer. Gametria was transformed. He went up the narrow stair, past the guards who knew him, in their bubble suits. The main room had been taken to pieces. The windows were open and fans and filters circulated air throughout the floors. Huge natural plants, ficus trees, ferns and palms, spider plants and geraniums were everywhere, hanging from the ceilings, along the walls, in pots beneath the windows. The foliage scented the air. Pipes rained periodically and then the air smelled of waterfalls and earth. There were tables and comfortable chairs and couches set up, built of raw wood, wicker and rattan. The floors were unvarnished, split bamboo. Upstairs the dance spaces and galleries had been similarly stripped of ornament and illusion and replaced with plants, real rocks and water. The only sound was of wind and falling water. They had created grottoes out of stone, just large enough to shelter a single person. In these grottoes was a futon and nothing else. A person could enter, buy a tablet of Paregane and lie on the futon, resting or sleeping as they pleased. When they awoke they went downstairs to the room with tables where naked waiters served them herb tea and fresh fruit. When someone died, which happened all the time, joy

rocked the inmates, and though envy was inimical to the state of paradise, it was but one of many serpents slithering silently through Gametria. The corpse, wrapped in a muslin winding sheet, was carried out by staff dressed in black pj's and carted off. By the time people came to live there they had left family and friends. This was terminal stage paradise; no one living at Gametria had any intention of leaving.

The thought of lying for days on one of those futons frightened Felix. He was sure that each and every trip to the garden would be with all the others, that the mobs dancing around bonfires, that the paradise parties whose edges he skirted while searching for Veronica, were made up of all the people in various Lucky Day parlours around the world. They were polluting the garden and feeding the angels. And every loner like him who took an animal was taking a careless soul. And he knew that his day would come. He only hoped it would be Veronica who took him.

He paid the naked man with a distant manner and left. He walked up to the park and sat on the benches, then walked down the west side. When he walked now he walked very fast. His muscles were strong. Sometimes he ran. His heart beat hard and his breath came and went in deep gusts. He enjoyed his days. South of the park, on Sixth Avenue, he was caught in a sudden thunderstorm, a cold, thick rain with winds of a hundred and twenty k an hour and hail the size of ping pong balls. These bounced and scattered over the streets and thwacked the canal water. People ran for shelter but Felix kept walking. He didn't care. He came in soaked through and sore from the hailstones, expecting to be alone for a few hours, but Promethea was there, sitting on the cushion, reading a script and drinking a cup of peppermint tea. The sun had just come out through a break in the heavy black clouds and shined in through the window and the rays lit her hair up like an electric filament.

At first she didn't notice him and he saw her as he had never seen

her before. Her expression was different, not affected by his presence, not wary as on the street. It was relaxed and strong, requited. Her skin was lustrous, her lips and eyes full of life. She had beautiful hands; her long slender fingers held open the electraweave script and lifted the cup of tea. Her arms were muscular, smooth and her breasts had grown fuller and firm. He could see her nipples erect against the white cotton t-shirt. Even her feet were beautiful. The nails were not painted and cracked and the deformations of a lifetime of service were gone. The gnarled and curled toes were open. They looked plump, almost like baby feet. He remembered vaguely that he had found them attractive before. Hands and feet were so expressive of existence. The lines in faces, crow's feet around the eyes, dry lips, were beautiful to him. Age was beautiful. The beatings the body took were real and artificial youth was repellant. But they had really regressed. She was a mature woman with the skin of a ten year old.

Gradually Promethea became aware of his presence. When she looked up at him he didn't look away, didn't blush or hide. She put down the copper electraweave and said, "They gave me Desdemona, Felix! Can you believe it? I thought they'd forgotten about me. I try out for Emilia and they don't call for weeks. Then a fortnight ago I waited on the producer. Well, he couldn't get his eyes off of me and he asks me what do I do. Blech, the smell of his cologne! But everything there turns my stomach. So I told him, thinking, if he plans on me screwing him for the part, ha. That was that, another part lost to virtue. But this morning his assistant called and I go in, thinking it's for Emilia, but the director has me read for Desdemona. I know the part of course, but oh god, was I ever petrified." She stopped speaking and bit her lower lip. "What?" she asked.

Felix shook his head. He could not stop looking at her nipples, at her feet, at her mouth. "Congratulations."

"Come," she said, patting the cushion beside her. "Sit down."

He had intended to sit across from her but autonomically sank down next to her. "Do you know who'll play Othello?"

"MacKenzie Knight." She hid her face in her hands and groaned. "Oh Felix, how on earth will I ever do this?"

He put his arm around her and said, "I don't know. Tell me, when you're on the stage, when the words are in your mouth, do you question it?"

She shook her head.

"You just know?"

"Somehow."

"Do you ever suck?"

"Sometimes."

"But it's part of the job?"

"It's worse than death."

"But when you connect, do you always know?"

"Not always."

"And Shakespeare?"

"It's like breathing."

They faced each other and their voices seemed hollow and remote. The space between them shrank. They were both so afraid there was not a breath left in the room. Air moved between them. It was the common element. Finally the touch came, a hand to a hand, a cheek, hair touched in the light, and then they touched lips, testing the others' intention, still withholding and then, slowly, kept nothing back, there were no barriers. They didn't speak or negotiate or hesitate, they didn't interrupt themselves. It was better than any two people in their situation could expect. There was no love, no history, no practice, no need. Nothing ordinary. Two bodies coming together in complete accord on a rainy afternoon. By the time they were done their lips, fingers and groins were wet and a little sore. They had

kicked over the peppermint tea. Sleepily, naked, they sat up against the cushion, dozing, talking, touching. They had not even the energy to move when Peter and Moises walked in.

Felix had not slept with anyone besides Veronica in twenty years. Before that, he remembered in a distant and wistful way, he had had girlfriends and lovers. Yolanda Schultz was his first. She was a pretty, smart girl. He was destroyed by his crush for her through most of tenth grade. What was she really like? he wondered. At the time she was so aloof and perfect, a dancer, an actress, a straight A student. From afar he'd watch her and dream of fucking her outrageous, nubile body. Pornographic fantasies obsessed him and he fell prey to the customary dishevelment and moped about, unkempt, hungry, shivery. He contrived elaborate plans for meeting her, which he never carried out, and then, one Sunday, found himself quite by accident swimming next to her at the pool. They started talking. To his surprise she was easy for him to talk to. He watched the water bead up on her chest and roll down between her breasts, a view she allowed him. At school she was so self-conscious, so put together but in the water that was all gone, she was almost childish. She blew water out of her mouth and nose. She slouched and kicked and dove about with abandon. They talked and talked, hanging on the poolside, till they both became cold and a little nervous. They got out and dressed and had a bag of coke together, then rode their bikes to the park. Soon they spent every Sunday together and began to talk at school. It was as if he had conjured her up out of his imagination and she was his without a struggle. Well, there was the sexual struggle. For two years they engaged in a long, fruitless sexual play until finally, early in their senior year she allowed him to screw her. At least one of them was satisfied. The relationship didn't survive long after this. Exhausted by the long battle, they had both lost interest. Yolanda, ever the realist, ditched him for a man, as she put it, a twenty year old college student. It rattled Felix badly. His indifference effloresced

into a raging, jealous love which slowly abated, finally dying into a simmering resentment against women and a canniness about relationships.

But nothing survives long in youth and shortly after this, during the summer before college he met a woman in his building. He helped her with some moving on a brutally hot June day and she invited him into her apartment to pay him and have a cold drink. She was a dermatologist, 38 years old, with cornsilk hair. Carmen something or other. He stood in her kitchen drinking down the cold water, staring at her face. He smelled bad, and he knew it. The florid kiss she bestowed upon him then was like none other he had known. The contents of the room swam in front of his eyes. Soon he was in her bed, sworn to silence, learning the less than delicate art of bringing her to orgasm, to every one of which he delivered two ejaculations. He had never known a woman's body. His ideal was of plump breasts with tiny nipples and dark aureoles, easily excited, of flat muscular bellies and firm bottoms and slender, delicate vaginas just barely concealed beneath a soft, mosslike covering of pubic hair. Having finger fucked his way through long dark evenings in the park, and at last gaining entrance into Yolanda's paradise, he felt he knew a thing or two about the odor of sex and the inundation of tissue, but nothing in his experience could prepare him for the strong, lusty lips of Carmen's cunt, buried under a mound of black hair, with its wild smell, or the giant, flaccid breasts coming to life under his hands and lips, and the buttocks, which she threw back into his hands and demanded silently that he grip, or when she stuck her finger up his ass and he was like a fish wiggling on a hook.

He went off to college where he discovered other types of relationship, equally loveless and primarily oral, which produced spectacular orgasms that for some reason evanesced in a day. Then there was Jewell who, for a year or so, until he met Veronica, gave him the feeling of an adult affair, mutually satisfying, sad, necessary.



But Veronica was the first woman he made love with whom he loved and cared about, who loved and cared about him. It was like Yeats said in *Solomon and the Witch*: Chance being at one with Choice at last. For twenty years he knew nothing else. And now he had slept with Promethea. What would he tell Veronica? Veronica was dead, it didn't matter about Veronica. But what of the Veronica in the garden? The Veronica in the garden was just a hint, a spirit, a wind, a wordless creature. Or was she now a creatrix? A fantasy, that was all.

Peter looked at them with the face of a cobra and slithered out the door.

"You two," Moises said with a snicker. "How dare you leave me out of things?"

Felix stood, pulled his clothes on and ran after Peter. On the street he strained his eyes. Bikes floated and rattled by, putt-putts plotzed along. A couple of junkies, evidently in love, walked arm in arm. A crazy old man stood in the street screaming. Two stoops down a couple of guys were making out. There was no Peter.

Peter didn't return till late that night and when he did he spoke to no one. He descended into darkness and silence, stared at his feet and wouldn't engage them. Attempts at conversation failed. Promethea could not call him out and Moises refused to. He was like an ink well in their midst.

The garden drew them in now. The drama was there. Felix carefully avoided meeting them. They went their way and he went his, always after Veronica. Now instead of hints, shadows and sighs and a fugitive scent found in the interstices of branches, between the breezes, a single leaf turning against the others, he caught glimpses of her on the paths. He heard footsteps crunching the twigs and leaves. He followed his longing through the night. It was like those hot summer weeks of build up, clouds piling on the horizon but no rain.

Sometimes he would give up and sit beneath the shimmering plane tress by the river, watching the colorful procession of the prahus with their single, pastel sails. Then he would look up and find her by his side, silent and imperial. If he said nothing she would sit down next to him and they would hold hands and then he was fused to the warmth of her body and the life of her eyes, whole again. The only thing she ever said to him was as he was fading out, and he would awake with a single word still in his ears, Stay.

Sometimes he felt like he was stalking her against her will, that by not letting her be he was somehow imprisoning her in his garden, that he was in pursuit of a fleeing animal. He didn't want to bug her, but he would do what he had to do to get her. That was the only reality.

The day was starting to form a continuum with the night. There were no calculations between Moises, Promethea and Felix now. They didn't speak about the garden or Peter. They were in some weird single world, a bubble of desire, separate pieces of a single drive, three flowers on one stalk.

The first time it happened Felix awoke late to see Promethea crawling on her hands and knees over to Moises, who lay back with a vague, mischievous smile on his face, his perfect body glistening with sweat like oil, his chest swelling and hairless. She kissed his three nipples and his navel and he gripped her hair as she began sucking him off, her ass high and full and her back arched. Felix watched her tits sway heavily beneath her, watched her cunt from behind. He crawled up to her and kissed her ass and her lips till they were wet and she started to snort through her nose. She dripped over his lips, swayed with the motion, spit welling out of her mouth down the sides of the cock, Moises's legs spread. She rolled his balls around with her fingers and pressed into his asshole. Felix rubbed the head of his cock against her clit and dragged it up the crack of her ass, pushing back and forth till the rhythm came and he got up inside of

her, teasing her clit with one hand and her nipples with the other. They moved then as one, neither to the one side or the other, slapping and squelching and grunting till together they reached a long, high climax that somehow sustained till none could stand it anymore and they collapsed, trembling. Then they got their coffee and sat together silently till Edsel came.

Whenever they were alone now it happened. No one had to say a word. Felix spent his days in a field of continuous orgasm, distracted, unaware, apathetic, joyful against his will. His thoughts were only of the garden. What happened by day was unreal. It was pure pleasure and yet he was indifferent to it, awaking at night in the garden, as if from a dream.

Daffodils were coming up. The days were warmer. Forsythia came and went, then lilac and magnolia. As the days got longer people sat out on the stoops into the evening. He loved his walks still, they were peaceful, and he loved errands, getting bread, buying coffee out of barrels, the smell of the beans grinding into a paper sack. Some days he awoke early and went out into the cool dawn air, the sun weak and low. Even the canals could be beautiful in the early morning when the sun danced on the black water. People coming home from clubs had a look of satisfaction, like they had reached some place they had set out for uncertainly. And the old folks of course, poor and hard, sweeping the filth off the sidewalks, hosing shit into the canal.

One morning he stood on line at the bakery thinking that he had to do more, that he was reaching an end of things and that it was time to move on. It was something he had sometimes thought; it was a square in the checkerboard of obsessive thoughts and plans he played on all day. He was approaching some sort of resolution. He had violated his promise to Peter, at first in spirit and now in fact. When they fucked each other they did so as one. Felix felt like he was on fire from the waist down when he fucked Promethea. Light and flame erupted from him. Then he was going down on her and Moises

was fucking him in the ass and the fire shot up his spine and exploded in his head, pouring like lava into her cunt, bringing her to life. And when Promethea sucked him off he felt like inert matter being brought to life by her tongue and mouth, that the fire spewed out of Moises, through Promethea and into him. They jerked each other off, they fucked each other in the mouth and cunt and ass, cum flowed from mouth to mouth, cunt juice ran out of their lips, purple bubbles winking at the brim. They were indistinct now, a fountain of water with three jets, pots broken by liquid fire pouring up and out.

He surveyed the bread and tried to decide what he wanted. The man behind the counter had white hair falling straight to his shoulder, pale lips and pink eyes. In each ear was a golden hoop. Tattoos of vintage cars drove up one arm and down the other. Felix decided on the raisin pumpernickel and a whole grain loaf dusted with flour, the top dark brown and cracked. He paused on a bridge across the canal and watched the water go sluggishly around a metal cart and a garbage heap. Bikes and trucks went by.

Upstairs, Promethea stirred and felt for Felix. When she felt the empty bed she awoke, vaguely disappointed. She looked at Moises and wondered how it was she was fucking so passionately her old friend, a man who never used to fuck women at all. She didn't understand, but somehow it seemed natural. They both wanted Felix and maybe that was the only way Moises could have him. Anyway, they had each other now, she was three again, like in the old days when Moises first came and Peter tried to share her with him. Then Peter and Moises ended up together and she was alone. But this was different. A charge surged through them, one to the other. It moved back and forth, in an out, like lightening, going out and coming in.

Moises was out cold. Peter too. She went into the kitchen and poured boiling water onto coffee grounds. There was just enough to make eight cups. She made a mental note to buy more. Peter called to her, "Bring me a cup?" It was the first nice thing he'd said to her

since walking in on them that first time. She had no idea what he knew but assumed if he found out about them, about Felix and Moises, he would become violent, maybe suicidal. Yet she felt no guilt or shame. They just didn't exist in the garden. Sensing an opening she handed him a cup of coffee and said, "How was work?" Just like they used to do.

"Slow."

"Me too. They've hired another chef."

"What! Is that four?"

"Since I've been there."

"What is it about that place?"

"It drives them nuts. They ought to give 'em Paregane." She said it and regretted it immediately but he laughed. "Reb Akiva. He seems even keeled enough. There was a hood vent fire and he managed to put it out without even breaking a sweat, or closing down the restaurant. And he's better than that old goat we had before, Barbi Aher was his name, the one who got sucked off by the bus boys while he cooked and said it was his call to prayer."

Peter nodded and rubbed his eyes. "I was hoping that now that it's getting to be spring things would pick up."

"I know, but it's like, they're just not spending."

Peter poked Moises. "Hey," he said. "Get up."

"Let him sleep," she said.

"I never see him anymore," he said sadly. "What's happened to us? I'm lonely now." They drank their coffee.

"Peter," she said, eyes pricked with tears.

"Look, Moises," Peter said. "It's time to get up." He kissed his ear and whispered something. "It's just not fair," he mumbled.

"What?" she asked, worried that the good mood was evaporating.

"You fucking Felix and me and Moises not getting any."

"You two need some time alone."

"Oh, even then he's not interested. Ever since Felix came. It's not his fault. I don't blame him."

Promethea couldn't lie. She said, "I'm in love with Felix."

He darkened and then gave Moises a good kick. Moises didn't move. "Moises? Moises!"

Bile surged into Promethea's throat and she couldn't breathe. Peter shook Moises vigorously. "My god, something's wrong."

"Give him mouth to mouth."

Peter looked around abruptly, as if there were an expert in the room who could do it, and then nodded and ripped the blankets off the bed. He straddled his waist and started to pound his chest, covered his mouth and tried to breath life into it. Promethea began to pace.

"I can't wake him up," Peter cried. He shook him, pulled at his feet and pounded his sternum. The body thumped. "He's all limp! I can't make him breathe. Promethea--"

"I don't know what to do."

Peter stood up and faced her. He stared, tried to figure out what was happening. Then his face developed slowly into murderous rage. "You did this. You and Felix."

"What do you mean?"

"I knew it all along. Stupid me. You're on that fucking drug. He gave it to you, Paregane. All three of you. It wasn't just him."

"No! He didn't, Peter, I swear. We stole it at first because he wouldn't give it to us, even though we begged him. He didn't want us to take it. We bought our own. He wouldn't even talk about it. And we made him promise not to tell."

They faced off and then Peter turned away and made for the cabinets. Promethea knew what was coming, and knew what to do.

She grabbed her purse and took out her gun. Peter, his back to her, said, "I'm going to kill him. When he walks in that door," he turned back towards her, a pistol in his hand. "I'm gonna kill him!"

"No you're not," she said coldly, pointing the gun at him. Peter backed against the wall and held the gun straight out with both hands. Neither took their eyes off the other.

"You'll have to shoot me," he said.

"Don't think I won't. Felix did nothing wrong. It's an accident."

"He brought that shit into our home. He killed Moises."

Felix was lost in the water. The horn of a delivery truck startled him out of his reverie and he crossed the street and headed over to Eighth Avenue. Halfway down the block he bumped into Edsel smoking on a stoop.

"Felix," he said, sun warping on his sunglasses.

"Good morning, Edsel."

"I was just heading over. Thought you might be asleep."

"It's one of those days when I get up with the sun."

"Me too. I love this time of year. The city smells nice for about an hour."

"Everything's in bloom in the park."

"Those lazy ass housemates of yours up yet?"

"Not when I left."

"Why don't we go to Bereshit for coffee then?"

Felix thought, I don't know.

"C'mon." He followed Edsel, like a leaf adrift on a stream. That was how it was, going where things took him. Even his own will appeared to be an alien order. He bought the burnt coffee from Mrs. Giordano and took their cups to a sticky, rickety table in the back. Bereshit had its usual morning odor of poorly mopped beer stains, vomit, ScatAway toilet flush, and ashtrays wiped out with a wet rag.

"What are you working on?" Felix asked.

"A new play, Acedia."

"Sloth," Felix said. "The vice of monks."

"Indeed. It takes place in a monastery. The monks are so bored they play a game called Secret Murderer. A box is filled with white marbles and one green one. Each monk draws a marble without showing it to the others. Who ever draws the green marble must plot to kill one of the others and the others must try and discern who the murderer is and prevent the crime. One by one they kill each other off."

"Sounds dramatic."

"I guess. I've directed worse."

They drank their coffee for a while. It was awful. He wanted Promethea's coffee. He began to feel a pain of separation. Without Moises and Promethea he felt unstabilized.

Edsel said, "So Felix, have you thought any more about what you're going to do?"

"About?"

Edsel shrugged and smiled, looked at Felix over the silver rims of his glasses. "Alaska, work, whatever."

"No. I've got to work through this business. It's only been a few months and I'm really getting somewhere now." He searched for the right words. "I see Veronica all the time now. As long as I don't look for her. Which is a trick, because I can't not look for her. Sometimes I just show up and then she's there. Actually, I'm more there than here, you know?"

"I stopped taking it."

"Oh."

"Didn't do anything for me. Felix, I'm worried about Peter."

"Me too."

"You can do something about it."

Felix stared at the floor. "I know."

"There's an apartment. A corner of a loft actually, upstairs from me. It's a theater space but they said you could stay there for almost nothing."

"How much is that?"

"Not more than you pay now. Whatever you can afford. They aren't interested in money as such."

"Acedia."

"Will you think about it?" His voice was quiet and kind. It didn't come as a rejection.

"Sure, of course. I just.... I've always done what I was supposed to do. This is the first time in my life where I've really had a choice, where there isn't 'a thing to do', you know?"

Edsel covered his mouth with his hand and nodded. "Peter's going out of his mind. I think he blames you but he's afraid of losing Promethea. Why he hasn't figured out the Paregane--"

"That's my fault. I should never have left it where they could find it."

Edsel waved him off. "They would have gotten it anyway. You aren't to blame. But they're a tight family. A fourth is just too much. Do you love Promethea?"

"I don't know what to call it. I love Veronica. But Promethea is there. We're like, I don't know, some kind of thing. Entangled. But in love? I don't know. No."

Edsel looked at him sadly. "Peter's younger than we are Felix. All three of them are. They don't understand about that. With Peter it's absolute. And I sincerely believe he knows on some level about the Paregane. And when he finds out you're fucking Moises too.... I don't have the heart to tell him. But he will know, eventually, about all of

it."

"Let's go back. Give me a few more weeks, o.k.?"

"I think a week will do," he said definitely.

"Are you telling me that?" Felix's eyes dilated.

"Don't get your back up with me. I know what you can do."

"What does that mean?"

They stood. "Don't take this wrong Felix. I like you, a lot. But you're some kind of a freak. Everyone wants to fuck you. You're the most passive person I've ever met and yet everyone doubles over to help you. The gangs let you pass wherever you want. You beat that man in Central Park to death. You scare the shit out of me and yet here I am, having coffee with you thinking you're the most ordinary, middle-of-the-road weenie I could hope to meet. Then your eyes start to flash like that and you get this smell like an animal, like a predator, and my skin starts to crawl. Or you smile and what wouldn't I do then to have five minutes in your bed. My god Felix, you could fuck me ten different ways and it wouldn't be enough. It's too much." He laughed and slapped Felix on the back. "You're gonna make every one of us nuts."

They headed out the door and towards the apartment. Felix carried the bag of bread in his arms almost like a baby. The loaves chafed together. "I know how you feel," he said. "That's how Veronica made me feel before I started taking Paregane. It's an insidious business. The way it spreads from one person to another. And the medium is love. Who can resist that?"

"That's why I don't go for that crazy garden. Those angels give me the creeps."

Felix stopped walking. "You saw angels?"

"Yeah, there's that one with the red hair you always talk about. I saw him. And others. It's like, out of the corner of your eye, this bear comes lumbering along. Hello, bear. I should be afraid, but I'm not.

And then you notice, it's like the way light filters in through the slats of venetian blinds, that he's a man in a coat of golden mail. There were men of marble come to life with winged sandals. And lizard men with long slithering tongues, feeding on people like bugs."

"Promethea and Moises don't see the angels."

"Yeah, well I did. Whatever they put in that pill is evil if you ask me. Everyone has the same delusion. Isn't one reality bad enough? Who needs two?"

Felix sighed. The sun was warm on his shoulders. He wondered about that. It ought to be enough to be alive, to exist in this partial disclosure which in and of itself is beyond final explanation. "I guess I must need it." They walked into the trashed, dark lobby and waited for the elevator. "Are you really afraid of me?"

"Yes. But don't think I wouldn't kill you if I had to, or die trying."

Felix laughed. "Thomas More used to say of Henry the Eighth that he knew his lord loved him but that he would cut his head off if it would get him a castle."

They rode up to the twelfth floor and got out. At the door Felix searched his right pocket for the key. It wasn't there. He shifted the bag of bread to his other arm and dug around in his left pocket. "I got it," Edsel said.

"No, no," Felix said, pushing the key into the door and turning the knob. As it swung open Promethea screamed, very loudly, NO. How strange, Felix thought. She must be naked. But that was absurd. She didn't care if Edsel or he saw her naked. Then she must be fucking Moises and think it's Peter. He was going to say Don't worry, when he saw that Peter was facing the door, at the far end of the room, and that Promethea was facing Peter. Edsel stood behind Felix, with his usual smile, hand raised up to take off his sunglasses. "It's only us," Felix said.

"Don't Peter," Promethea warned. "Let's just talk about it."

"Fuck you," Peter snarled.

"What the hell?" Edsel asked. He craned his head to look around Felix and saw the guns. "Shit. Now you just calm down there," he said.

"You don't understand what he did," Peter said, his face squeezed tight and trembling, tears pouring out of his eyes.

Felix didn't know whether to enter the room or run into the hall. He wondered where Moises was and then saw that he was asleep on the floor.

"It doesn't matter about that now," Edsel said, but his voice was not so calm now, it trembled. "Both of you put the guns down. Where's Moises?" Felix saw that Moises wasn't asleep, that his eyes were staring vacantly at the ceiling. "Oh my god," Edsel said, looking at Moises. "What happened to him?"

"Ask Felix," Peter said between his teeth. As he did so he fired off a shot that hit the door lintel. Felix flinched down and then the second shot came, hitting Edsel in the face and throwing him back into the hallway. Felix turned to see if Edsel was o.k. and saw blood splattered all over the wall. He dropped to his knees and Peter shot again.

"Peter please don't!" Promethea screamed and she fired five times into Peter's chest and stomach, smashing him all to pieces. Felix stood up, panting, his ears ringing, the smell of cordite in his nose. Promethea's hands shook. They stared at each other for what seemed like a long time, not even a time but a vacuum in time in which neither entity was real to the other. She looked through the drifting smoke at Moises's inert body, stretched out on the mattress, at the splintered bloody body of Peter, at Edsel lying in the hall bleeding out across the tiled floor, and then at Felix, a man she didn't even know. She uttered a strange cry then, more like a bird than a woman.

"Promethea," Felix said. The name filled his mouth like blood. He

couldn't really even hear his own voice, all he heard was the ringing in his ears, but he felt like he was falling and he knew that that was what Promethea was feeling, like she was falling into nothingness, racing down and out.

"Felix," she sobbed. "My beautiful friends, where are my beautiful friends?" She crouched over Peter's body, her long dark hair spread out over his naked corpse. She looked up at Felix, blood smeared across her face, mixing with the tears pouring out of her eyes and said, "It was for you," she said. "Tell me you love me. Please."

Felix could barely understand what she was saying. She wanted something from him, he knew that, but he couldn't think, couldn't feel. Was she asking him if he loved her? "For me? Why?"

"Is it true what Peter said, that you don't love anyone, that I'm crazy, that he was all I had?"

"No! I don't know anything Promethea. I don't know what's true."

She took the gun and pointed it vaguely around the room and started to caress Peter's face, running her fingers through his long black hair. "Don't go baby, don't go." She looked up at Felix. "You love her, don't you? All along it was Veronica. I fell in love with a man who cares more for a box of ashes than the flesh and blood of human beings. Say it's not true!"

"It's not, none of it. Promethea--" He moved towards her tentatively. "Give me the gun now. It's over. We'll be all right. You'll see."

"What the fuck have I done?" she asked, looking up at him. "My friends, they were all I had." She stroked Peter's face, looked into his black empty eyes. "Oh baby, don't go, don't leave me here." She put the barrel in her mouth and looked into Felix's eyes, afraid, her lips and teeth opening and closing around the metal tube.

"Promethea!"

She swallowed hard. Her eyes became fixed, as if she saw something and then she pulled the trigger. The back of her head exploded and she thumped into the wall.

Felix stepped into the room between the bodies and found his bag. He checked for Veronica, for his clothes and books and Paregane and walked mechanically out the door and down the fire stairs. Gunshots followed him down. The echoes would not stop. Promethea's eyes were on him.

On the street he ran. He ran like a fool. His feet hurt, his chest hurt but he ran and ran and still could not outrun the images, of Promethea shooting Peter. NO! If he had not opened the door. Then she turned it on herself. Why didn't he say he loved her? He ran in an agony of grief and guilt. He had killed Moises. He had killed them all. He did nothing to stop them. There was only one thing to do, one place to go. He slowed down to a walk and went to Gametria. They had remodeled the entrance. They had painted the building white and the entrance and hallway were a light seashell pink, shaped like the lips of a conch. He walked up the stairs and into the main chamber. The people seated around the tables didn't turn to look at him. He was sweating, panting; his face was crusty from crying.

He hadn't enough money to live there. He didn't even want to. He had to go far from people. He had to end things. He bought enough Paregane for a week and walked back out again. As he stepped out of the Gametria entrance and turned to head off he felt a tiny bite on the back of his neck. He slapped whatever it was and thought that the biting flies were early this year. Then he walked up to the far north end of Central park.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

### CONNECTIONS

Blinking back the bright light, Jacob Boyle surveyed the contents of his refrigerator without comprehension. Once again Bryson had drunk him under the table and he regretted it. Actually, he enjoyed the various dives they had found. There was Bereshit, there was Acrasia. Strange names but it was a strange neighborhood. Still, whiskey was whiskey and he liked sitting on a barstool in the dark dank air chasing shots of Paddy with tepid, malty ale. The next day was always murder, a crack in the head and ears stuffed with putty. Ass mouth. His father would have said she had a wooden leg. Well, a wooden leg is a fine thing if you can cash your liver in for a new one. But he had to live with his old decrepit organ till it gave out and then, if he were lucky, it would be a morphine drip.

Then there was Trinh Ma's temper to deal with. His arrival home always caused a storm, if he didn't enter a storm in progress. When he was drunk he would duck out by heading directly to the room they shared with Agatha, Maria and Nero, collapsing onto the bed and sinking into a slumberous noman's land terminating in a snore.

The milk cartons repelled him; the chalky blue liquid was an insult. Margarine was too yellow and flavorless, adding only a slick of salty grease with a ghost of butter. The bread was almost gone; there was just enough for Medea's sandwich.

"Whuddya doin' in the fridge? Do I gotta yank your head out?" Trinh Ma asked.

Boyle groaned and looked at his wife's hard, pock marked face.

They were dressed in identical clothes, loose grey sweats, his a little short in the leg. "I'm late," he said.

"Cause you stayed out late drinking with that cunt you work for."

"She ain't a cunt."

"If that cunt can keep you out drinking late why can't she let you come in late? Ever think about that?"

"I said what she ain't."

"She's a puke, every one of them. Blech. And we ain't outta this yet. Where's all the money you promised? Huh?"

He turned his attention back to the fridge and bent down beneath the counter top to rummage for a chocolate yogurt, presenting his ass to his wife and said, "You don't understand how these things work."

"What I understand is that we got nine kids and only one of 'em in school."

He stood and stared wearily at the package of yogurt. Blurred writing came in and out of focus. "Is this stuff expired?"

"Not for four years."

"How can this be good for you? It's like a fucking fossil. I'll tell you what. You know where they live to be a hundred without fake fucking organs and genes and shit? In the Caucasus, that's where. If they don't blow you all to shit. And do you know what? They eat yogurt. I had it when I was there. This here, this?" He held out the container. "This is shit, that's what."

"So starve yourself, see how old you get then. Who cares."

"I'm making coffee," he said, setting down the yogurt and running water into the kettle.

"Congratulations."

"You wanna cup?"

"Make one for me too," came a high, female voice from the other room. Then a shriek and Nero and Little Guy raced into the kitchen



firing pretend guns from composite space trucks, pew--pew--pew!

"Yeah," Trinh Ma said.

Boyle opened the yogurt, took a bite and poured hot water from the kettle into a French press.

Medea stood in the doorway. She was taller than her parents, and pretty, without the hard, defeated look of her father or the leathery, prematurely aged look of her mother. But neither of them looked that way at seventeen either. She had hair bleached and dyed till it was like brass, milk chocolate skin and morose eyes. She looked disdainfully at the collision of her space-weapon toting siblings, winced with every shriek and stood near her father, who spooned the yogurt into his mouth like medicine and poured out three cups of weak coffee. She dumped in a heap of Sweet and another of CreaMate and followed Boyle out to the table.

Boyle looked at Medea and realized, in a slow, aching kind of way, that something was wrong. Times like this he felt like a constitutional monarch, deprived of all power, but still responsible for hearing grievances. There was always something wrong in his kingdom, after all. He could tell as surely as if it were himself. He knew all the sighs and looks. With Medea it was ambition. She had showed signs of intelligence from the first. His family had thrown up its share of smart ambitious people over the years, but none had been in a position to do anything about it, except lead a life of crime. Trinh Ma too. So they recognized it in their daughter. At four she organized neighborhood kids into putting on plays she had 'written', not knowing yet how to read or write. But she scribbled out long plays and letters and stories with crayons on scraps of paper she taped together.

They had the right to send her to school free, but rather than just throw her into the local school they got her into special schools at each level and pushed her hard to read and study. Medea thrived,

especially when she was young, but the better she did the more alien she became. Increasingly from the age of ten on she and the rest of her family viewed each other across a divide that could only be breached by love. Now she was in an advanced high school in the city, which drew, in gifted children from the entire region. The tension was nearly unbearable. Each day she came home late and screamed and vomited for an hour. She had temper tantrums or retreated into a silent stare that turned her eyes black. Then there were the sarcastic comments, the bitter denunciations of all that they stood for. Some days she spoke nothing but German. Very rarely the tension became too great and she would break down. The divide was breached. She needed to be with her people again. Boyle could feel it coming. He briefly considered hiding somewhere, even under the table, but he didn't budge. What else was he good for? He couldn't give her money, he couldn't teach her anything. All he had was an ear.

"How's school?" he asked.

She scowled and drank her coffee. He watched her thin lips tremble. Tears welled up in her eyes. Trinh Ma yelled, "Get the fuck outta the kitchen if yer gonna run around blowing shit up. Beat it!" She shooed Little Guy and Nero out with a broom.

"I just can't fucking think in this place," Medea said.

"I'm sorry," Boyle said guiltily, looking at the time. He was going to be late but he could hardly get up and walk away from her. "I'm trying everything. I mean, I'm gonna have to do some bad shit just to pay for this."

"It's always about you, isn't it? This fucking family!" She started to cry in earnest now. "I can't fucking take it, the noise, the filth, the stupidity. I can't compete."

"With what, the noise?"

"Don't be a fucking jerk daddy, even you're not that stupid. It's the

other students. I'm never going to college. I'm gonna end up here, like you guys, where it stinks like methane and you walk around with a headache all the time."

"But you're an A student."

"A minus, B, you mean. How am I supposed to compete with them? They're rich, they come from quiet homes that aren't dirty and don't stink of shitty diapers, they aren't full of junk, where kids have their own beds in their own rooms."

Now he was pissed. "You should be proud!" But as he said it he cringed and looked at her with shame. He took her hand. "I'm sorry Medear, I didn't mean ta say that. You'd have to be a fucking idiot to live like this if you had a choice."

"They're better than me daddy. I can't compete against smart genes."

"So what about that? Where the fuck you think they got those smart genes? I seen it happen. They get 'em from people like you, they call 'em naturals, smart people who sell their genes so those rich fuckers without a brain in their heads can have smart kids. And there's all kinds of smart. Me, I worked under CO's with all that shit, smart genes and genes for blue eyes and little noses and big dicks. Fuck that. They were morons. No one respected them. Who did all the work? You'll see--you get out there and tell me who does the work. No one's better'n my baby. You're gonna go ta college. I mean, what are they up against? Look at you, you're smart, you're pretty, comin' from a shit hole like this. You ain't failin' nothin'. Don't even think about it." She shrugged and drank her coffee and then looked at him and wiped her tears away with the back of her hand. "I gotta go," he said. "Late."

It bugged him all the way to the office. It wasn't right she had to feel that way but what else was the kid supposed to do? It was true. She couldn't compete with them, not without connections. All that

he and Trinh Ma did was futile. There was no point in telling her that. How could he? And there had to be a way. If she'd made it this far, she could go the distance. He was just running out of things to tell her. He didn't understand. It was scary, throwing them out into the world like that. The world screwed you bad. You love your children and try to protect them and they grow up and go out into the very place that ripped you to pieces. Any minute they could die, or just live out their lives in misery. Marry a wife beater. OD on bad dope in a dirty toilet somewhere or throw tricks for work. Once they were adults it was all over. You got six good years, between the shitty diapers and the hatred. Medea did her best to teach the young ones. She was conscientious and now she was learning it didn't mean a thing if you were good or bad. All the shit you teach them they find out is just that, shit. If he could just get a little more cash. If that meant whacking somebody, then so be it.

Spying on Bryson sucked. What a putz he was to take the bait from Bradlee. The guy was an idiot. Bryson was straight work. The apartment he rented was cold and wet, roach infested. You could hear the rats running in the walls, you could smell the bugs. Flying roaches got tangled in your hair. But she showed up, sat at her computer till she started to sweat, her white hair damp and lank, and she didn't complain. Six or seven hours a day they sat there and not once did she say a thing against Monozone or the boss. All she talked about was the test, or her husband upstate. Sometimes she told him stories about growing up in a castle. She could be very funny. He understood half or less of what she said. It was the brass who had their heads up their asses.

The amphibatrain disgorged him at the Monozone stop and he submitted his hand and eye to the bIoMEtrisCAN at the door and took the packed associate support elevator and two laterals to their offices. It was crazy how simply she lived. She slept on a futon an inch thick with a single black sheet. In the morning he found her

dressed in a tunic and a lab coat, seated at her desk, staring at the streaming data on her screens, speaking in the low, clear voice computers like to hear. And that was how he left her at the end of the day.

They could have done a lot of the work there in the lab but she liked to get out and travel, said she liked the feel of the neighborhood. There was a sort of unease and regret about her. All that money and it was the same deal. It was something he'd never considered before. Maybe she missed her husband. Maybe it was just the usual, bad choices, the death, the rotten world. Money couldn't make that go away, it just padded the cell.

"Morning Boyle," she said without looking away from the screen. "Coffee's strong and fresh."

"I need it."

"I'll bet." She looked up and smiled. "Don't worry. You didn't tell me anything bad, just how much you love your wife."

"How I pay for it! She got me by the balls."

"Sit down. Bradlee wants you to work with him today." He looked away. "Something wrong with that?"

He shook his head. "Nah. I don't give a shit. I mean, I'd rather work with you, but whatever. Forget about it. I can deal."

"Now Boyle," she said seriously, "I can tell something's wrong."

Boyle sat on the edge of her bed and drank his coffee. She turned around in her chair and leaned back, looking at him. Her eyes were like the sky in summer just after sunset. Dark rings surrounded them.

"It's nothing, just Medear is all. My daughter."

"She's the oldest? The one who's in school?"

"That's right. She's so goddamn smart, you know? She freaks me out. I don't understand her. She's always near the top but she's like, it ain't good enough."

"That's how it feels. Tell her she is."

"That's what I said. I say to her all the time, 'Don't sell yourself short, you can do anything.' But I half don't believe it myself."

"She's up against a lot."

"She's afraid she can't compete. We got no connections."

"Well, she's competing. Look where she is."

"That's just what I say."

"You're a good father, Boyle."

He blushed. "It ain't right to say that. Not till they're all grown up. It ain't over till it's over, right? I just hate to see her all upset like that. I mean, those other kids, they got smart genes."

Bryson, upon hearing the words, visibly changed. Her back was up, she became fully engaged. "What bullshit. Tell her that's just a load of shit. You can't genetically manipulate intelligence; it's never been proved. Where do you think they get those 'smart' genes? Dogs? They don't synthesize them in the lab, I can tell you that."

Boyle slapped his leg and sat upright. "That's just what I said!"

"How old is she?"

"Seventeen."

"I'll talk to her. Where's does she want to go to college?"

"She wants to be a doctor."

Bryson nodded her head. "My best friend is Chief of Psychiatric Research at Cornell Medical School. I'll talk to her about Medea, set up a meeting. She doesn't have to worry about a thing. Can she get a hovercraft?"

Boyle wondered if Bryson had lost her mind. He was too embarrassed to say anything but couldn't hide the look on his face.

Bryson sighed. "I'm sorry. Look, has she got some nice clothes?"

"You bet. She dresses like they do on TV. The guys are all over her like flies on shit but she won't have nothing to do with trash."

"She'll have to wear more than that."

"No, I meant she wears shirts and pants and everything, it's just that they're nice, not like crappy suits and shit."

She reached into her tunic, and brought a small sack out from between her breasts from which she pinched something. "Here, take this." Casually she handed him a diamond and replaced the sack. "It's our secret."

"Holy fucking shit," he said, staring at the tiny stone. "You don't mean it."

"It should cover a couple of sets of clothes and a hovercraft rental. Tell her to see Doctor Velodia at Cornell. I'll set it all up. She's gonna get in, I promise. Smart genes. Holy christ, just the limit of human stupidity. There is no bottom to it, it just goes on and on."

Once Boyle was sure she was done he asked, "How do I thank you?"

"That's just fine." She had a look of finality and he knew that conversation was over.

"So, how many today?" he asked.

By how many he meant how many of the guinea pigs had died in the night and would they be picking them up. She swung around in the chair and spoke rapidly to the computer. The screens flashed and cascaded, charts, numbers, maps and faces. She called up Vital Signs. "Five fatalities." She scowled. Early in the morning Gametria loaded the dead into the back of an old green panel van with a donut painted on each side, Bart's Breakfast Wagon written in gold along the top edge. They dumped the bodies around town so there would be no way of knowing where and how they had died. Once they had figured out what was going on Boyle approached the driver and bribed him to sometimes dump the bodies in a vacant lot a few blocks away. Then he and Bryson would drive into town in Bradlee's car and load them into the trunk and back seat if necessary. Not something

Bradlee liked much, either them taking the car without him or having corpses on the upholstery. He was afraid they'd leak but they were always tightly bound and fresh; they didn't even stink yet. Boyle hated the swaddled white figures piled up in the weeds like puppets. Robbing graves was a bottom he had never touched.

"What about 1441?" he asked. Number 1441 had been in their test for ten days. He had very high dose levels, four pills a day, sometimes even five. Field measurements indicated he was a long-term abuser. It was the most hopeful sign yet, exactly what they were looking for.

"Alive and kicking," she said. "That makes it a record."

"Well doc, when do we pick him up?"

She thought about it. "Let's give it time."

"What if he croaks?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. This is all so depressing. I wonder what's the point."

"Doc, you said so yourself. You wanna save lives."

"But isn't it really pride, Boyle?" She turned in the chair to face him. He avoided looking at her directly; there was something disturbing about her eyes. He didn't know what to say. You just did what you had to do, whatever you were good at. She was good at making drugs. Not everything works out. Then the people sold the drugs and they didn't ask questions. Who cared? People got hurt and killed all the time. "Pride? I don't know doc. Ain't there nut cases out there alive because of your drug?"

"I guess." She turned back to the computer. "But not for long. It's all bullshit Boyle. All my life, I've acted the part, pretending I was free. But I'm not. I'm a slave."

Boyle stood. "Whatever you say doc. Thanks for the coffee."

"Sure. When you get back, let's go to the apartment."

Green, red and blue lights wiggled on her face as her wrinkled

hands played over the screens and she spoke softly, eyes open wide and hair hanging down across her cheeks. "Yeah, but no drinks tonight, I gotta fuck my wife."

"Is that a sabbath commandment or something?"

"Nah. My balls hurt. If I don't shoot bullets I feel like shit."

"You're a good man, Boyle."

"And doc. About Medear. I--"

"Forget about it Boyle." She looked up at him and her face changed color, her eyes danced with his. "It's the least I can do."

Bradlee's secretary kept Boyle waiting for ten minutes, so he spent the time looking at her. She was a nice piece of work, young, dark and tall. He wondered what she was doing behind a desk all day. What did a neck like that smell and taste like? Women like that, they were stiffs. She didn't even make his dick hard. Bradlee opened the door. "Well Boyle, just in time. We'll be out most of the morning, Cindy. I'll return calls after my siesta. Let's go, Boyle."

"Where to, boss?"

"Bring my car around. I'll meet you in front."

Bradlee's car freaked him out. It was huge and it smelled of leather. There was something about leather that reminded of things he couldn't remember. War smelled like leather. Not battle, but the officers. Horses and leather and boot polish. And they drove around in staff cars like that at HQ. Motorcades with little flags flapping and self-important old men stepping out into sunny, desolate bases under an adjutant's umbrella. Every time he took it into town Bradlee accused him of messing it up, of getting margarine stains on the steering wheel or changing the controls. He swung the door shut and started it up. That part felt good, the engine's silent power coming to life, the ease with which he backed it out and drove around to the front entrance. Bradlee descended the broad granite steps and rapped on the window. That meant move over. He scooted

into the passenger side and Bradlee got in, checking over the controls. No, Boyle hadn't fucked with anything. There wasn't time. Bradlee and his attitude.

The sun was dying behind thin grey clouds and drizzle. The early warmth faded into chill. Boyle leaned back in the enormous seat.

"Put on the seat belt."

He did as he was told and looked at his ashen, dapper boss. Bradlee never changed. He smelled of lavender water. His hair was perfect, ironed, as was his mustache. He drove into town, turning up Third Avenue. Glass highrises boxed them in. Hovercraft bounced around overhead but the streets were quiet.

"Where are we going?"

"Mt. Sinai, Columbia Presbyterian and then Bellevue."

He wasn't going to start asking questions. The muted world passed by. Bradlee pulled up to the curb in front of the hospital, a forty story ceramic, glass and carbon tower with pink composite facing in the shape of Arabic script. Light raced around on the surface. Guards in CellPack helmets and silver armor with detonator rifles escorted them to the revolving doors.

At the elevators Bradlee said, "This visit is a bit of a surprise, Boyle. You back me up, with a little force if necessary. We're after information here and we want to explain in no uncertain terms that Paregane is safe and effective. You understand?"

"Sure." Don't break anything, just scare the shit out of the bastard.

They got off the elevator and walked down a wood paneled hall with a crushed stone floor, Boyle's gum soled brogues clumping along just behind Bradlee's silent, charcoal crepe slippers. They came to a ten foot silver door with a gold eye unit in the center. Seated before this door, behind a jade wedge with spindly steel legs and a photon cube was a receptionist, a ghostly man with synthetic yellow hair formed into a busy, but contained, hive above his marginal head.

He looked up at them, bored, superior.

Bradlee smiled and waited a beat before saying, in his calmest, most menacingly mellow tone of ingratiation, "Tell Doctor Greaves that Owen Bradlee is here to see him."

The man's expression of disdain hardened. Boyle leaned down onto the narrow stone ledge, rocking it slightly. An inch away from the frail grey face he said, "Mr. Bradlee ain't into waiting."

Boyle's hot breath hit his cheek and the receptionist flinched. "Doctor Greaves is in a meeting."

Bradlee's teeth flashed like marble in the sun. "Well then, Mr. Boyle and I will wait for him in his office. Come Boyle, let the young man catch his breath." Boyle stood erect and loosened his tie.

Doctor Greaves sat at an empty desk speaking into a dictaphone, popping the little white text bubbles with a pencil as they formed on the titanium lip. He stood and glared. "What the hell. Who are you?"

Boyle strode forward, pointed his hand at the chair and said, "Sit." Greaves looked indignant.

Bradlee hung back, hands in his pockets. "Do as he says Doctor Greaves, I'm Owen Bradlee." He drew the terminal syllable out. Greaves' eyes saucered and he fell into the moss-colored, leather wing back chair. He was a man in his sixties, with black hair, healthy caramel skin, a full mouth and a mustache that grew like a hedge up into his large bent nose. His suit cost a week of pay, white silk layered with taupe and charcoal cotton, precious metal cuffs and lapels. Bradlee took out a cigarette and said, "I hope you don't mind if I smoke?" Greaves' eyes spit contempt. "Good." Bradlee sat down in the spare metal client seat and Boyle stood beside him. Bradlee lit the cigarette and took a few drags. He smiled affably and his eyes welled up with water, turning pink. "Doctor Greaves, I'm sorry we haven't met before. I made every effort of course when I first came on board, but we all lead such busy lives. I believe you know Doctor

Bryson?"

"We've met briefly, over the years."

"Ah. But you were both post-docs at Cornell in the thirties."

He rolled his eyes. "Cornell is a big place."

"Of course it is but the field is small."

Greaves conceded the point with a nod. Boyle stared at him but he wouldn't look at Boyle. Scared. He searched his body for a good place to start. The nose was kind of obvious, but noses bleed a lot.

Bradlee continued. "So you know Doctor Bryson personally and you know her reputation. I'm sure you also know that her latest creation, Paregane, is doing bang up business overseas. I'm sure you're very thorough and keep up with the literature."

Greaves made a face that said go on.

"I'm sorry to bore you Doctor Greaves. Now, your department here operates a dozen or so psychiatric facilities, inpatient, outpatient, emergency clinics, mobile therapy and the like; you're under contract to some of our most prominent companies. Why is it then that not one of these facilities is prescribing Paregane?"

"I'll have to look into it." He swallowed.

"I already have."

"We're under no obligation--"

"I disagree." The ash fell off Bradlee's cigarette onto the desk. Greaves frowned and opened a drawer, sliding a shot glass towards Bradlee. "Thank you. Monozone has served you well over the years. You've been invited to all the conferences, every one. We funded your postdoc, and we gave grants to this department on five different occasions. Does that not oblige you?"

Doctor Greaves' face creased. He wiped his forehead. Boyle looked at his ears. Big fleshy handles of nerve and cartilage. "There are...problems, Mr. Bradlee."

Bradlee sat back in his chair. "Hmmm. What sorts of problems."

"Mortality rates! Don't pretend Mr. Bradlee."

"Wherever did you get that idea? Are there any published studies?"

"You know there aren't and what difference would it make if there were? I'm not going to endanger the lives of my patients because a drug salesman tells me to."

Bradlee chuckled and rubbed his mustache. Boyle took his eyes off the man and looked briefly at Bradlee. Uh oh, he thought. Here it comes.

"Drug salesman. One of those worried little men who go from place to place in a shabby hovercraft with a suitcase full of samples?"

"No shame in it, we all have to make a living."

"I see. Well Doctor Greaves, I'd like to make it clear to you that from now on Monozone expects you to show a little more enthusiasm for our product. I'm sure you know we have a council seat."

Greaves was angry now. "Yeah, so what."

"Most people would see the advantage of cooperation. Boyle? Can you try to explain to Doctor Greaves what we mean?"

Boyle's heart beat a little faster. Greaves was a fucking idiot. Here was Bradlee making it easy for him and he has to spit in his face. He looked him over again and assessed what it would take. Sometimes these powerful motherfuckers think they can take pain. No one can take pain. He leaned close to the doctor and said, "It's like Mr. Bradlee says, doc. You owe it to Monozone to cooperate. Be a team player. That way, when the teams wins, you win." He reached out and grabbed Greaves' ear. "But when it loses, so do you." He twisted the ear till it turned bright red and pushed his head down on to the desk, Greaves screaming out Ah and Oh and Help. Boyle twisted harder and crushed him with his elbows. No! No! Stop! Please! Boyle kept

it up till he couldn't talk and was gasping and drooling onto the desk.

"That will do Boyle," Bradlee said, one leg crossed on the other, stabbing out his cigarette on the desk and pushing the shot glass back to Greaves. Greaves panted and felt his mangled ear with a trembling hand. "Well Doctor Greaves. Maybe you'd like to explain why none of the major psychiatric research hospitals are prescribing Paregane."

Greaves tended to his ear and said nothing.

"Well, if there is collusion, Boyle and I will take care of the situation. You see, for the system to work we need an even playing field. You understand? As for mortality rates, you have nothing to fear. There is no probable link between Paregane and any known fatality. The few lawsuits filed have been, er, settled out of court. We'd be happy to help you settle any malpractice dispute that should arise in connection with Paregane."

At Columbia Presbyterian, Boyle had to chase Doctor Dykstra down the hall. He hated going after a woman (an older woman at that) but Bradlee was his paycheck and that was life. She was fast but he was faster. He grabbed her by the hair (natural) and with a good hard twist brought her to her knees. Orderlies and nurses stopped what they were doing and watched him drag her, screaming, into the office where Bradlee again made his sales pitch. Dykstra had a mouth on her and spit venom at Bradlee but the prospect of Boyle's pinch eventually worked and she agreed to resume prescribing Paregane.

"Why did you stop prescribing Paregane?" Bradlee asked.

She breathed heavily through her nose and rubbed her head. "That's obvious. It kills. I don't kill my patients on purpose. The literature from Monozone said it was non-addictive and free of side effects. I think we both know that's a heap of shit. There was a conference in September, the Lackawanna Psychoanalytic Association. It wasn't hard comparing notes."

"But it was just coming on the market then. How could you

compare notes?”

“I don’t remember now. But it was all the buzz.”

“That’s collusion. A violation of interstate commerce.”

“Screw interstate commerce.”

“But you will cooperate?”

“I don’t give a damn, yes.”

Doctor I.V. Bunny Lang at Bellevue began affably enough, quietly eating the crumbs of a corn muffin off a glass napkin. She had big round eyes, a slightly crooked nose and the long, narrow face of a goat. Once she realized what they were after though she turned stone on them.

“Isn’t it true,” Bradlee said, “that you have a synthetic penis attached to your clitoris?”

She looked startled and said, “What’s it to you?”

“Indeed, the real questing is what’s it to you?”

Boyle took out his knife and dropped it point first into the desk, where it stuck and wobbled. “Stop that!” she said. He picked it up and dropped it again.

“Tell me about the Lackawanna conference in September.”

“What’s to tell?” Boyle thunked in the knife a few more times, making a tight circle of holes. “Oh, you mean in Pennsylvania.”

“Why wasn’t Monozone invited? I didn’t even know about it.”

“Why would you? You’re a pharmaceutical. That was a talk therapy conference, you know, Freud, Jung and Lacan. Princeton, Dartmouth, Rutgers and Bowdoin sponsored it I think. I got a call from a colleague suggesting I attend. There were lots of us, from all over the country.”

“What colleague?” Bradlee’s voice was quite low and his eyes were red.

“I told you already, I’ll prescribe the drug.”

“But I can’t help but wonder if we have a bigger problem here.”

“Your problem isn’t with us, it’s with the drug. It’s as addictive as anything out there and it’s killed thousands of people. Fix it and we’ll prescribe it.”

Bradlee looked very sad. Who died, Boyle wondered. “Who invited you?”

“What difference does it make?”

Boyle seized her crotch and felt for the big synthetic cock, crushing it. “It’ll come off in my hand Doc.” She bit her lip so hard it bled and she shut her eyes tight, taking it.

“All right, Boyle.” Boyle released her.

“I want that name.”

“I don’t seem to remember.”

“Cut it off, Boyle.”

Boyle assumed he wasn’t supposed to actually cut it off but he grabbed the knife and tried to pull her out of the chair. As he did so he felt himself being lofted off of his feet and thrown through the air. He landed on his back and all his bones shook and shattered. He looked at the ceiling. It swam around in circles. Doctor Lang stood over him, his knife in her hand, snarling. Oh fuck. His stomach hurt, his head hurt, his back was out.

“You wanna piece of this?” she asked, pointing at her crotch with the knife. “Dream on.”

Boyle stood up and kicked the knife out of her hand. Her green eyes flashed wild and she crouched back like a cat. He kicked at her head and she threw him back on the floor. They wrestled. She was like one big coil of muscle, he couldn’t get a grip. When he finally pinned her down she spat in his face and hissed. Boyle wondered where the fuck Bradlee was.

Bradlee stood by calmly watching. He pulled a gun from his suit



pocket and pointed it at her head. He shut one eye and made as if aiming it carefully. "I want the name." Boyle looked down at Doctor Lang and swallowed hard. Bradlee was a little behind him and he figured if Bradlee wasn't a good shot he was in the line of fire. He hated when people pulled guns on each other. It always ended badly.

"Fuck you!" she said.

What now? Bradlee couldn't just gun her down in her office. It was a stalemate. Bradlee stood down. "Very well," he said. "We'll be back."

They drove for a while in silence, the mood grim. The day had begun with promise but the tactical defeat depressed them both. Boyle's stomach groaned. He wanted to eat something. Violence always made him hungry.

"You did well there. We couldn't possibly know that mousy little shrink was packing a pecker like that."

"Mousy? She looked like a goat."

"Why would she lie?" Bradlee asked.

"You got me boss. I woulda talked." Bradlee glared at him. "Look, no one knows how they'll do."

"You'd think the threat of cutting her cock off...." Bradlee said.

"They ain't as attached to theirs as we are to ours."

Bradlee considered the question and rubbed his chin. "Well, I suppose she could always get another."

"That's just what I mean. Mine is my best friend. You don't get rid of a best friend just because you can always get another."

"That depends on why she got it in the first place."

"You mean if like her girl friend made her get it, she's not as committed."

"Or her boyfriend."

"Why?"

"Think about it Boyle." Bradlee looked over at him and chuckled as Boyle's face soured. Then, abruptly serious, he said, "I think we have a mole."

"Could be." Boyle rubbed his neck. He felt like he'd been broken in a nutcracker.

"Something's wrong Boyle. This conference was arranged by someone. It happened before there were even rumors. Maybe one of the people we transferred to Hong Kong. Someone in marketing. Bryson hasn't said anything, has she?"

Boyle looked away, his eyes dark. "She's straight boss."

"I know, but we've got to cover all our bases. She might have said something to someone else. An indiscretion."

"I ain't heard it." He stretched around. "Fuck, she gave me a work out. I ain't been thrown like that in years."

"You earned your money today Boyle." He chuckled some more. "She really was spirited."

"Like wrestling with a python."

"Hmmm, sounds like fun. If it weren't for that dick of hers I'd ask her out. Sleeping with the enemy, eh? You aren't hurt, are you?"

"My back's a little fucked up."

"Sleep on a board Boyle and no fucking for a week. I need you in good shape."

They crossed the river. He watched the hovercraft bobbing over the water, taking off and landing from roofs scattered around the shore of the East River. Medea had never been in one before. She would probably be excited. The first time he took one was in Azerbaijan when he was her age, or close to it. Scared the shit out of him. They took off into a dust storm, flew under instruments to a small village. His first action was over in twenty seconds. They landed and the commando team went out. Twenty seconds of automatic

weapons fire and a bunch of mortars. They sent him out to set fire to the enemy dead. One of them was still alive; he could see it in his eyes, though he didn't move. When the fire roared up off of his body he arched his back and screamed. Boyle dreamt of it for days, awoke screaming, the smell of cooking human flesh strong in his nose. But that was just every day. The really scary shit were the dogfights with pistols, and playing chicken. That and never knowing when you'd be surrounded by enemy craft. Flying the two man hovercraft was like being swung around on the end of an elastic cord. Bradlee pulled up to the curb in front of Monozone. Boyle decided it would be a good time to ask about a bonus. "I got roughed up pretty bad boss. You guys said something about a bonus."

"Hm?" Bradlee asked.

"You know, making it worth my while."

Bradlee frowned. "We already pay you." He gazed out the window. "I suppose, a hardship bonus. I'll notify HR to add a thousand bucks to your next paycheck."

"Thanks, boss," he said.

Bradlee got out of the car and leaned in at the window. "Bring the keys around to my office."

Boyle watched him go slowly up the stairs. He was not a happy man, Boyle concluded. He looked like someone who knew things were going bad and who had a premonition that they were going to get worse. And Boyle knew what that meant. More work and, hopefully, more bonuses.

Bradlee flopped down in his chair and looked at the t.v. screens. The day's events had exhausted his enthusiasm and he couldn't stand to watch them or even think about what was happening. Things continued to drift into unintended directions.

The stock-still traded high, only not as high as before. That was easy enough to explain, but they had to maintain future earnings

reports. And they had the council seat. He sat behind Fripp at deliberations, feeding him policy positions prepared by his staff. And that gave Valdez an ear and a voice in the room. He was where he always planned on being, in the center. He and Valdez were able to push through plans for the aqueduct out west. Valdez was in talks with Milt Spahn and Jock Two Feathers for finance and political influence with the Haudenosaunee. The profit potential was staggering. But he felt things slipping even so. It was a twitch of the nerve, a tick in the stock price, a word here and there. Bryson feeding Valdez that crap about GMZ loyalty. He couldn't control everything. It wasn't like her to blow a deal, but she was drunk and the place seemed to have an ill affect on her. And she had no patience for the people. Hell is other people. Others around him lacked his discipline even if they shared his agenda. Fripp was dangerously stupid.

Paregane itself could go either way. Legit sales were declining globally. Illegal sales were robust but police, doctors and lawyers were closing in. Some local law enforcement contractors were agitating for a ban. Instead of curing absenteeism Paregane seemed to encourage it. Groups of indifferently jolly users gathered during the day in parks to fish and talk. There were clubs meeting in cafes. Then there were the lucky day parlors scattered around with their own security arrangements. So far only the rich were using it recreationally, and those sales were important, but the situation was unpredictable. It was absolutely necessary that Bryson fix Paregane before it was too late and yet she, who was usually so enthusiastic about work, seemed to be dragging her feet.

He didn't like to see her depressed. The whole point of Bryson was buoyant cynicism. It nagged at him, piqued his desire and always had. In the end she was his greatest investment. Well, she and Valdez. But Valdez was working him as much as he was working her. With Bryson it was personal. She just hit a certain spot no one else did. He didn't know what to call it. The feeling was the one mystery in his

life, a little spark that lived in the endless fog of existence. He could sit still for years watching those around him, till the time was ripe for a move. The corpuscular, grey prospect, the gradient of opportunity, these he moved through by osmosis and motility. Stillness, observation, sudden decisive action. It had played well. But in the fog there was the spark, the white hot of her hair and the blue corona of her eyes flaring over the rim of a martini.

He opened the top drawer of his desk and looked at the electraweave brochure he had received from New Zealand. Mountains, majestic, craggy, covered in snow. Closer views revealed a stone chateau, surrounded by emerald pastures and backed by the white peaks. He smiled, weakly. Well, it was a fallback position, he thought ruefully, eyes swelling. He had never intended to end his days in exile, but the money was there and now he owned a place he could defend, far from the reaches of state or vengeful Monozone and military accomplices. There was room there for Bryson, too. He would not directly ask her to go, but when the time came, she would. That is, if she could be persuaded to leave Leonard behind.

He shut the drawer and the office shrank to the size of a dot and agitated him in the solar plexus. He checked the Dow, Monozone stock. For months it had pulled the Dow higher but now it was down two points in heavy trading. A few big holders had unloaded their shares. If he could find out who they were he might have Boyle break their legs. There was something up, a rat. Whoever it was would pay for it. Chateau or no chateau he was not going to go down without a fight. He would prevail.

The dot pushed in on him, the chatter and glare of the tv's was repulsive. He couldn't follow the data stream. His thoughts became paranoid, chaotic, vengeful. He had to get control. He shut his eyes but the dot was there. There was the spark who was Bryson and the dot. It opened up into a tunnel, a black despair that was the little black dot he walked around with consuming him. Abruptly he stood

up and ahemed loudly, like a horse, which cleared the field of vision and restored his thoughts. He had to unburden himself. He had to do something. Bradlee stood and went to Bryson's small lab.

Boyle was seated at the black counter along the wall eating out of a box of donuts, scattering crumbs on a sheet of gold electraweave spread out before him, and Bryson was at her computer. Bradlee nodded to Boyle. He stood and said, "Hey boss," following him into Bryson's room.

"Good lord," Bradlee said, sitting down on the hard bed. "You've got to do something Bryson. The numbers are alarming."

Bryson didn't even bother looking up from the screen. She didn't give a damn. "I told you so," she said. "Everyone did. Even that big ass from marketing, Martin Bruce, did. But no, you people knew better."

You people knew better. What was he, just one of you people? His throat trembled. Damn, he thought. He hated to feel this way, his body taking on a life of its own. Anger is counter productive, it makes one sloppy. He sniffed hard, gave a dry cough and blinked. "Please Bryson, you must have one person out of all the thousands you've dissected and tracked who might give a clue as to how to fix this thing. Otherwise we might as well hang it up and move to New Zealand."

The lights oozed around on her face. She was implacable. The woman sensed need in others as if it were the smell of shit. Just two microns of fear put on twenty kilos of confidence. She didn't budge but he saw the smile play on her lips, the same one she got when he asked her home with him and they both knew she would come but she was going to jerk him around first.

"What makes you think there'll be one in a thousand?"

It was like walking over slippery stones in a swift river. He got his balance and said, "Because you told me that you could. You begged

to have this. It wasn't my idea, after all."

"No, your idea was to kill ten thousand or so people and walk away with the money."

"This is not the point. The point is that we, together, decided that a back up plan, fixing the er, statistical glitch, would be prudent for many reasons. What I am asking, as your project manager, is, have you made any progress in understanding why a small percentage of Paregane users die for no apparent reason at all?" Bradlee felt himself glaring but he kept his voice even and low.

"Sure," she said. "There's one." She flashed through various screens and said, "Him."

Bradlee got up and leaned over her shoulder, his nose resting near her hair. The fragrance made his heart beat. He looked at the screen at a tall, kindly looking man with dark reddish skin walking into what appeared to be a five-story seashell, a conch. Bryson touched another screen. Now they were in a room decorated like a garden with tables. The man sat down at one of these tables and a naked man with a black waiter's apron stood talking to him. "This is the lucky day parlor?"

"Gametria it's called. This is the cafe. The upper floors have these weird spaces made of rocks and water where people take transcriptasine."

"How ever did you ever get cameras in there?"

Bryson laughed. "Boyle's friend Zack came up with it. We sent synthetic flies and bees in through the windows. Bugs with bugs. They fly in and then we guide each one to a position on the ceiling or a window, some place inconspicuous, and they begin broadcasting."

"It gives one pause to think that the plague of six legged creatures we endure might be alien surveillance devices," Bradlee said. "So who is this man?"

"Number 1441. Ten days ago he showed up and purchased a

supply. He came back three days ago and now here he is again. He's a four pill a day user."

"And he lives there?"

"Nope." She clattered at the keyboard and mumbled. The screen filled with a schematic of Manhattan. "He lives, up here," she said, pointing to the northwest corner of Central Park. That expanded and the cursor blinked in the middle of a wood. "He was last here. Most of them live at Gametria and of those, if they use four times a day, all of them die. Not 1441 though."

"Bring him in then," Bradlee said, standing erect and looking at Boyle, who was munching a chocolate donut back near the bathroom and staring into space.

Boyle shook his head. "Not so fast, boss. We gotta figure out how. Gametria's got security. It would be a gun battle for sure and we'd blow our cover."

"Then take him in the park."

Boyle appeared to shudder. "I ain't takin' him in no park."

"He doesn't look so belligerent. A bit of a mess, a little wild with the beard and hair but the clothes look like a good brand, if stained."

Bryson turned around. "They're very strong. We watched a mugging."

"It was ugly, boss."

"What happened?" Boyle shook his head and got that grim look he got when he didn't like to describe something. "My god Boyle, just say it."

Boyle's face twitched. "I don't like to say it. The guy beat the mugger down. It was like, I dunno. Weird. That's what. I mean, I seen plenya beatings, given a few myself, but this was...."

"Relentless," Bryson said dully. "He just dominated the mugger. Seized him, beat him with one fist while grabbing onto his collar with

the other. His head was crushed by the blows. Then he dropped him to the ground and walked into Gametria.”

“The whole point here boss is we gotta take him alive.”

“We need a strategy,” Bryson added.

“No time for that.” Bradlee folded his arms across his chest and looked at them. “Is that clear? Pick him up and bring him in, sedated. Whatever it is that makes this man live, I want to know.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX SHADOWGRAPHS

Felix left Gametria and headed uptown. It took a little over an hour to get to 110th street. Sometimes he crossed over in the seventies or eighties but now that the weather was better the park could be menacing. He wasn't in the mood to beat back dogs and he certainly didn't want to talk to anyone. He skirted the encampment around the pond. It had a foul odor, like sweaty drunks. Ragged tents and shelters were set up here and there. A big fire burned all day and night, fed with lumber they pulled out of the abandoned buildings on 110th Street and whatever wood they could gather off the ground. The sooty, greasy smoke, stinking of tar and burning hair, drifted around the encampment. Sometimes he would sit down by the pond with a few of the children and tell them stories while they tossed in rocks. They were riveted by his tales of angels; half of it lifted from Milton and the rest a blend of his own experiences and strange memories of the garden. Memories of the garden were sometimes more real than being there and yet he knew the memories weren't real, it was like the only way he could remember what had happened was in a myth. Thus the rivers there always became The Rivers of Paradise, flowing from a jewel in heaven. All of the elements of the garden were resurrected in memory as precious metals and gemstones. The flarings of sunlight were galloping horses of flame trailing manes of molten gold.

The grass was very green and the leaves had just finished opening, pale and vivid when the evening light caught them. He watched the

men and women feeding two-by-fours and big green branches to the fire. They were barely dressed. Their hair was long and their skin was filthy. They passed a brown bottle back and forth. A man squatting down rolled a cigarette. They shit wherever they happened to be. The whole encampment stank of excrement and piss. It kept the dogs away.

He walked in a broad circle away from them but a swarm of children assembled around him, forcing him to sit down on a large rock by the pond.

“Tell a story,” one boy in green shorts said.

“Yeah mister, tell us one.”

Felix gazed at them dully. He looked the water of the pond, black and scalloped with light. There were clumps of rushes. Rats rustled in and out, keeping to the shadows. A red winged black bird settled on a stalk of pampas grass and took off. “O.K.,” he said. “Have you ever heard the one about the devil tricking Jesus into baptism? Once upon a time, The Lord gazed down upon the earth from Heaven and felt great remorse at the turn of events. Had He not created the Heavens and the Earth and all the creatures that crept upon it, there would be no evil, no discord, no need for floods, fire and pestilence or war. For eons he had blamed Man and Man had blamed Him or his proxy, Sammael. It was time to bind up the wound, and so he decided to send one of his two begotten sons, Christ or Satan, to preach a message of love, peace, and forgiveness. He would restore the order of the time before the Beginning, when all was null and void and he had never gazed upon any deep.

“Christ and Satan, or Sammael and Jesus, were born twins, though they were conceived of as One, for God cannot reproduce himself except by means of Opposites. He was divided then between these two Sons in equal measure. Christ was kind, generous, naive, trusting, gracious and truthful. Satan was witty, charming, a skeptic, a cynic,

false and aggressive.

“God struggled to decide which of the two was better suited to go out on a good news mission in the world. He thought Satan much better suited to the world and yet, once before he had spoiled things when he had disguised himself as Sammael, a snake, and crept into the Garden of Eden, where he seduced Eve and impregnated her with Cain, the Murderer. For that he confined Satan in Hell, of which he soon repented. Since then he had proven useful. But he could not be trusted with the Gospel.

“Satan, who is subtle, divined these plans before his brother Christ did and went to Christ one day and said, ‘Christ, Father is going to send you down to earth to go among men and teach them to live in peace. I’m afraid for your safety. These human beings are a vicious bunch. They will murder you before you’re done, and you’ll be lucky to get out of it without being tortured and humiliated first. Lend me your shepherd’s crook. I will fool Father into thinking I am you and go down among them first. I shall be your herald and proclaim your coming among men.’

“Christ saw the sense in this. ‘How shall I know you there?’ he asked. And Satan said, ‘I will baptize them in the river Jordan. The rite of baptism shall be mine, and by that rite you will know me.’

“So Satan was born first among men, and when he discovered the deception the Lord was much overwrought with anger. He went down and into the ear of a maid and placed his seed there in her womb and Christ was born Jesus, to Mary.

“When Jesus was a man he traveled from place to place, to be among people, and search for his Brother Sammael. He came to the river Jordan and found him there, and he was known as John The Baptist. Together they preached the Gospel of Peace, which spread across the land. And everywhere they went, while Jesus preached, Sammael baptized souls, and sent them all to Hell.

"And that is why to this day every baptized baby born goes straight to hell." Felix stretched out his legs and stood. Not far off was the Great North Wood. He climbed a steep hill to a ridge and found his camp. He had no valuables. No one could see it from any direction. He had made his own clearing in dense brush and built a shelter out of branches and impervious fabric he found in dumpsters. He never lit a fire. Inside his shelter was nothing but his bag with his books and Veronica's ashes. There was a water bottle. He created a perimeter some distance off and marked it with urine, going around the circuit each day.

At Gametria a few days earlier he had seen himself for the first time in a week. His hair was all matted and stuck through with dried bits of leaves and twigs. He had a beard. It was a shock. But he didn't care. He washed up and swam in the rock pool, picked up some more Paregane and left. He was nearly out of money but still not dead. It was inexplicable. No one took as much as he did and lived. He had become a legend at Gametria. People offered him money to lie down with them and accompany them to the garden. Maybe he'd have to take them up on it, if things continued in this way. But that would mean not seeing Veronica.

He spent all his time with her now. It took a few days of not looking for her to find her. That was a consequence of the shooting he supposed. For days he could think of nothing else and wished to die on their account. It was as if Veronica didn't exist. Even with the Paregane the last look Promethea had given him would not let him alone. The only reprieve from those images, from his sense of responsibility, was in the garden.

The first night in the park was cold and terrifying. He lay curled up on the damp ground, his joints aching, shivering, till he entered the garden and found himself in an endless field of sunflowers. They stood three, four metres tall, with huge, burning yellow petals and black hearts. Horizon to horizon the golden waves rolled with the

breeze. He laughed and ran about till he felt like a bee and danced strange shapes in the air. He awoke feeling fine but it was not long before he began reliving the shoot out. So it went for days. He took pills every time he awoke to escape. The real world vanished into shadow and became non-linear. Things happened, people died. He envied the dead. Promethea and Peter and Moises and Edsel were lucky. But they weren't calling him. Nothing called to him but the garden. There was light, warmth, definition.

He found Veronica quite by accident, in a part of the garden he had never been to, but which he felt like he knew from his dreams and imaginings, a place whose edges he had sensed but never pierced. It felt archaic, like the beginning. The tree ferns and palms were enormous. There were cycads, strange scrubby looking plants with tiny tufts on top of twenty-foot trunks no wider than his thumb. The land was hilly and the hills were made up of white, honeycombed limestone thickly covered in vegetation. Caves and caverns and grottos opened like mouths into the hills and vines and ferns hung over the lips like hair. Streams poured down in small waterfalls. Solitary men and women stood in the entrances of the caves. Water coursed everywhere yet the land wasn't swampy. There were streams and pools and channels. The grottos dripped and the leaves overhead were always wet. The size of things was exaggerated too, as if he were looking at everything through a magnifying glass. Roots formed thick banks along the creeks.

She was living in a cave, alone. The ground was covered with smashed bones but she didn't know where they came from. It was strange that when he finally found her they fell into living together as if nothing had happened. They went down to the stream to bathe. When hungry they plunged into the water and caught turtles with their bare hands, which they smashed against the rocks and ate raw. They picked fruit, durian, jackfruit, breadfruit, mangosteens, and plantains. They dug gigantic tubers and gathered huge nuts off of the

trees shaped like fertility figures from Mohenjo Daro. These they pounded to a paste. And they made love. Every night they moved to a new locale which was also always the same.

He spent very little time away from the garden but awakening was like being wrenched out of reality and plunged into cold indifference. It was as if she died four times a day. During his waking hours he thought of nothing else but going back. At Gametria he was surrounded by dozens of people in the same condition. They passed each other like shades. Gametria was a hot, humid place of shadows, midway between the two worlds. Entering Gametria was like entering a mouth too, but it was an animal mouth, not a cool earthen one.

Veronica carefully picked up the amber, green and black turtle, about ten centimeters across. Its head and legs retracted. She raised it up over her head and brought it down on the rock in front of their cave and the shell cracked. Liquid squirted out onto the rock. She did it again.

“Turtle?” he asked.

She nodded and picked the shell fragments away. As she smashed the shell he felt pain and pity for the creature but he couldn’t wait to get at the cold raw meat with his fingers. After their long, sweaty fucking on the grotto floor he was ravenous. She handed him his turtle with a smile. He loved her sharp, pointy teeth, the way the canines poked down into her lower lip, and the thick hair on her legs and arms. Her eyes were so warm beneath the low brow, he wanted to howl and bark just looking at her. He was vaguely aware that things had not always been so, but it was reassuring to know that they had become so, for this was where he belonged.

Excitement had eluded her for months now. Stoically she watched her plan unfold. Destroying transcryptasine from within seemed to be working. She’d never seen Bradlee so distraught. There were small but distinct fluctuations in his unflappable demeanor as he tracked

stock prices and reviewed sales data. There were moments when his free-floating suspicions fell on her and then it was a simple matter of going home with him. The trick was to give him just enough to keep him coming back for more. Most nights they retired to The Lounge for burgers and beer but only half the time did she go home with him. She needed it as well but not as badly as he seemed to. There was a new desperation to his clutch when he came, a new intensity to his writhing when she slowly sucked the cum out of him, contraction by contraction. When she said no she could see the small ripple of anger and disappointment go through his indifferent eyes, the deepening pink of the whites, the brightening of the pale blue iris. Then he would brush his mustache with his manicured fingers and smile weakly and say something obscurely trivial.

Bryson’s confidence in her ability to work Bradlee waxed and waned. She, who was usually so well planned, was winging it. From one day to the next she had no idea what she’d do. Her excursions with Boyle felt like theater. It was a pseudoscientific show they were putting on to buy time so that transcryptasine could blow up in their faces. With the rubble of that event for a blind she would find her way out to the GMZ, with a bag full of jewels and her freedom. The money would go a long way there.

The East river swelled and manically lapped against the Manhattan levee, its surface broken into streaks of silver, grey and amber, which skipped across the broad tidal churning. Behind the composite, stone and concrete walls the crystalline buildings looked slick and shiny. The hovercraft swung down towards Midtown and they landed on the roof of the building across the street from Gametria. The decision to go after Felix meant in essence that they were abandoning the larger study; discretion was no longer an issue. Not that their presence had not been noted. The Gametria crowd were both aware of and indifferent to them, but people in the neighborhood were more curious, and, after they started buying the corpses,



superstitiously afraid. It got so that when they pulled the Caddy up to the vacant lot to load bodies into the trunk people gathered distantly to watch and mumble prayers of protection. She could feel a shiver go through them, like leaves shaking in a cold wind on a hot day. It spooked her too and the ride back to Queens was a somber one, Boyle silent and scowling. Their cover was more to avoid the hostility and suspicion towards companies and state on the part of Midtowners, especially the young. Police entered on foot only in large groups. Hovercraft, suits, anything that didn't fit, fired rumors and paranoia and at any minute someone might take a potshot. Yet Boyle assured her it was only by asserting a right to be there that they would be safe. The unofficial mayors, bar and restaurant owners, gang leaders realized a move against them might end a fragile truce and bring military action. So things had gone on for months.

It was a windy, hot April day, 30-C and rising. Below, on the street, people wore shorts and no shirts. Loud music clashed. Junkies in headphones danced in place. Gangs paced impatiently about. Men called after women, asking them if they wanted to fuck, an offer they mostly declined. Boyle hauled a case of gear out of the StowFast compartment behind the seats, sweating heavily and breathing through his mouth.

The apartment was stifling. She looked out the window. Someone had scrawled across the curled pink entrance way the words BOWER OF BLISS. Boyle put down the case and joined her. She wiped the sweat off of her forehead and lit a cigarette.

They checked the monitor. Two people had died. Five new ones had arrived. She inventoried the rooms. No man.

"He's not there," she said.

"So, what else is new. What's wrong with that guy?"

"He lays in a large supply I guess."

Boyle shook his head. "Who can afford it? Is he made of money?"

The room was bare save for their equipment and two folding chairs. The sweet, unpleasant odor of cockroaches, intensified by the heat, pervaded it. She sat back in the chair and looked at Boyle. "Sit down," she said. He did as she told him. "Boyle, we have to get him in the park. It's been too long. Bradlee wants us to do it and I can't put him off anymore."

"You was with him last night then?" There was an edge of jealousy in his voice. She smiled. "We ain't even sure where he is."

She clacked at the keypad and showed him the screen. There was a blinking star over a grid of Central Park. "Of course we do."

Boyle stood and walked back and forth, licking his lips. "I hate the fucking woods, doc. No good can come of it. And up there, we don't know what's going on, who, or what lives there. I ain't fightin' dogs, understand? With all that cover," he wiped his mouth nervously, "I mean no disrespect or nothin', but it ain't you and Bradlee goin' in. And my experience is, you gotta overwhelm 'em with force."

"Now look, it can't be as bad as all that. It's in the middle of the city."

He turned and stared at her, nostrils palpitating. "I don't care what the fuck it's in the middle of. When I was a narc cop we went into places you wouldn't believe. Buildings that were, well it was like they were alive. The shit that goes down, the people. You add a bunch of fuckin' trees, and no sight lines, and a superhuman freak who, let's face it, what's he got to lose? They're lookin' to die, right? Now what happens when you and me come between him and that? I see these angles and say, no, we wait, till he comes here and we can take him on the street. He's gotta run out one a thesedays." Boyle nodded, satisfied by his defense.

Patiently Bryson smoked her cigarette, never taking her eyes off of him. "He wants to use transcriptasine. We have an unlimited supply. That's the carrot. You suit up in that silver armor and we have the

stick.” He looked at her skeptically. For the first time she felt frustrated. He could be so stubborn. “Look Boyle, I’m sick of this, sick of coming here and sitting in this shit hole watching these people every day. I’m sick of transcryptasine and Bradlee and the whole business. Aren’t you?”

His face fell. “I thought you liked me.”

Bryson groaned and put out the cigarette, resting her head in her hands. “Fucking christ. Of course I like you. But we’re getting nowhere here, Boyle. He’s our only hope and we’re going to lose him.”

He nodded slowly and sat down, scrutinizing the screen. They looked at maps of the park, schematics, photographs, street maps. “See this?” he said, pointing a blunt index finger to a clearing near the blinking star. “There’s a pond there. This here is 110th Street.”

She went to grid. “We could land on the street, here.”

Boyle laughed. “Get off the map and go to an aerial view. See?” The street was actually a dense transitional wood. “The only good place to land is in this clearing. There’s the pond. See these structures? Those are shacks. People. We got no idea how many or what kinda people. And see here? It’s a steep grade up to where he is. Plus we don’t know what he’s doing.”

“He’ll be in range the whole time. He can’t go anywhere. And we’ll know if he’s asleep or not.” Boyle swallowed and lit up a cigarette. He looked sad, almost afraid. He was so easy to read. “Come on now Boyle, I’ve seen you handle yourself. You can do it. I have the tranquilizer. You suit up, carry a good weapon. And I have jewels. If need be, we can buy our way in.”

“I hate fuckin’ woods is all. You don’t know about what happens in the woods.”

She laughed. “My husband lives in the woods. I’ve been camping.”

“Were there insurgents there? Huh?” He snapped the cigarette out

of his mouth angrily and it dropped ash across his fingers. The coal glowed as he drew deeply. “Fuck it, doc, O.K.” He stood and stamped out the cigarette. “Let’s go, get it over with.”

Bryson smiled. “Thanks Boyle. You won’t regret it.”

“You better hang onto those jewels, doc. They weren’t easy to get and if people catch on to it you might find yourself in some shit.”

“You’ll protect me, won’t you?” As she said it she laughed at herself. Flirting again.

“That’s my job.”

“Job only?” She wanted to ingratiate herself.

He scowled. “Nah doc, you’re in deeper’n that with me. I’m fucked is all.”

“You’re a good man, Boyle.” She sort of socked his shoulder and cocked her head as if she were teen-age girl.

“So you say.” He turned to the box of gear and opened it. He took out a black box and opened that. Ensnared in blue velvet lay the pieces of a small, powerful weapon. He screwed the pieces together and while he unpacked the silver suit ran the calibration routine. He jacked implosion rounds into his two handguns, checked the charge on his ParalyPistol. He zipped into the silver armour, put on the close fitting helmet and lowered the EverBeam BioWatch visor. “I hate these things as much as the woods,” he said. “Maybe more.”

The flight up to the park did not take long. The hovercraft went straight to Felix’s coordinates. They were over a dense canopy of trees, mixed hard wood, oak and maple. The new leaves were pale but they could not see down to the ground. They then flew out over the pond and field, not far from the edge of the woods. People ran out of the huts to point and stare. They stood up from around the pond.

“Where should we go down?” she asked. She was hovering about a hundred meters off the ground. The people were small but it was

easy to see that they were mostly men in filthy rags, unshaved, stooped and decrepit.

Boyle's voice, cracked and electronic, came out of the helmet. "Get as close to the woods as you can. This crew is nothing."

They set down on the uneven ground. It was a small meadow, hilly, with outcrops of rock and thick stands of woods and shrubs. The grass had started to grow and was a deep, bright green. They were in shadow. A short walk away was the border of the woods, saplings mostly and undergrowth. They got out and Boyle assumed a defensive posture facing the approaching people. They looked mostly curious, not threatening. Bryson kept her back to the hovercraft and didn't venture forward at all. Boyle, crouched down, swept his gun from left to right and the men, a group of about a dozen, slowed. There was a childish shriek and Boyle stiffened. Bryson whirled about to see what the commotion was. It was a bunch of kids running out of the woods and howling, shooting at them with sticks and laughing. "It's just kids," Bryson said.

"Yeah," Boyle said. "Got it." Then, loudly, over his helmet PA he said, "Stay where you are. Do not approach the vehicle. We mean you no harm. We are here to pick up a man living in these woods."

The men stopped. The kids dropped their sticks and stopped. They stared at Bryson and Boyle. She couldn't see the kids but she felt a sort of awe in the air.

"The man in the woods?" asked one bearded, muddy man, in a loincloth. "The Man Who Can't Die?"

Boyle stood up and lowered his gun. "Approach," he barked.

The man looked around and lowered his head. He approached and stood a little off, humbly, afraid. "You ain't here for us?" he asked.

"No," Boyle said.

"That man in the woods. Up there." He pointed to the trees. "You ain't gone catch no man up in them woods Mister. No."

The kids came closer and closer till she could feel them just feet away.

"Is you a ghost, lady?" asked one. She turned to look at them and they ran off again.

"Booze!" yelled one. "Asshole. That lady not a ghost. She cops."

That made them laugh even more.

"You know where up in them woods he's at?" Boyle asked.

A few of the other men gathered closer to the one who had come forward. Their arms were scabbed and tattooed. They smelled of wood smoke and alcohol and sweat. Bryson looked at their bare feet. They were like tree roots. Their cheeks were sunken and their eyes unhealthy, haunted. Long, densely matted hair fell to their shoulders, of a uniform color, black and greasy. They mumbled together. She couldn't really make out what they were saying. Their accent was strange, one she had never heard before. Finally another spoke up. "No sir. We never been up there, not since he move in. Man sleep a lot."

"He talk to them children though," said one. "Tellin' 'em stories about angels and that he married a dead woman. Sometime he sit up there--" he pointed with his lips to the pond. "Watchin' them birds go by. You know the one I mean? The blue one with the big head. He sure can talk when he want to."

They all laughed.

"That bullshit he tell the kids--"

"That go like from here," said another, indicating a certain height off the ground, "To here," indicating a height higher than he was. They all laughed some more.

The first man to speak looked at Boyle. "It bad to take that man." He shook his head. "You be careful in them woods. Come," he said and the others followed him a short distance. The kids circled around and joined them.

"Well," Bryson said. "He's up there. I've got him."

"I don't like this." Boyle turned around and headed slowly for the trees.

"What about the hovercraft?" she asked.

"Don't worry. They won't touch it." He turned around and said, "Don't touch a fucking thing!"

Bryson followed the silver suit up the incline and into the woods. They climbed a steep, trackless hill. Boyle moved slowly, each step deliberate and measured. She did as he did and divided her attention between the bracken underfoot and the data feed in her hand. They paused. The trunks of the trees were close and wide now and the ground was level. It was dark, and cool, as if the old air had been vented out by wind and rain and the earth was sighing. There was no discernible path and the woods looked the same in all directions, wrinkled bark, rotting litter, vivid saplings. In the soggy hollows the huge leaves of skunk cabbage grew. A swarm of mosquitoes descended on her head and she hit at them in muffled panic. "Shsh," Boyle said.

"Easy for you to say," she mumbled, spitting out the bugs.

"Which way?" he asked.

They looked at the screen. "He should be just up there," she said, nodding in the direction of the star.

'Up there' was no different than anywhere else but they headed in that direction and soon came to what from a distance appeared to be a thicket, but which proved to be a wall of branches and leaves, heaped up to appear natural. Boyle turned to look at her. His face was an illegible greenish black window and yet it looked at her with what she was sure was irritation. He pushed and stomped through and they came to another barrier of brush beyond which lay a space hollowed out of the woods. Their blinking star was coincident with his. They were there. It was a nest of leaves and sticks covering a

shack made of cloth. Boyle cleared his throat and whispered, "What now doc?"

"Is he in there?" It was too quiet. They heard no breathing. There was nothing but the shelter and clearing. No evidence even of a fire. She sniffed the air. It smelled like urine.

Boyle bent down and tried to look into the shelter. It was closed up. "Look doc, we can't kill him, right? What if he comes at me with a gun?"

Bryson handed him a dart gun. "Shoot him with this. In the ass, preferably."

She could hear him sigh over the intercom. "So you say. What if it don't work?"

"Then give it to me. You grab him and I'll shoot him."

Beasts howled. Enormous wings flapped against the canopy, rising in circles upward, over jungled chasms. Nocturnal birds squawked. It was dawn. They were walking through the valley. They shivered in fear as the sky blackened. At the first crack of thunder his bowels shook. The thunder was like a gunshot in a flock of birds. He couldn't speak or think but ran and fell to his knees silently praying for his life.

While chewing the raw gelatinous insides of a turtle he asked her, "With thee conversing I forget all time, all seasons and their change. Sweet is the breath of morn. Are you alive?"

The meat was attached to membranes, translucent, a little fishy, a little sweet. They were squatting on their haunches before the entrance of their cave. Her hair was thick and black and fell disheveled over her naked shoulders and across her breasts. She turned to him and smiled. "Do I look alive?" She raised the shell to her lips and searched the crevices with her pointed red tongue, sucking out the meat.

"Yes, of course."

Then she asked, "Are you alive?"

"Absolutely," he said, having no idea of death.

"Well, I don't know what not alive could be."

Felix thought about this. It was a puzzle how alive could not be. But the self-evident fact was a little disappointing. He felt a twinge or an urge towards working it out. There was something he didn't know; he was unfinished and his knowledge of the world was incomplete. But the drive to answer this question was almost more uncomfortable than the nescience. They were enclosed by a boundary that begged to be crossed but what lay beyond was a menace. If he pushed past it he felt himself evaporate. Slowly the thought formed. He said, finally, "But back there, you're dead."

"Back where?"

"Back where I'm from."

"You mean the lake with the black sand? I didn't like leaving the lake. I think I only came to find you. I'm only with you now." They tossed the empty turtle shells onto a heap and headed down the steep, narrow path to the stream below. They waded out into the cool water and washed their bodies then walked out on the other side.

"Do you think in words?" he asked.

She paused. They were on a path in the forest. "Berries," she said. They picked and ate fat black berries off of a low growing bush. A green tree snake stretched down the ashen trunk of a palm and moved slowly across the ground, its red eyes still. "When I'm with you I think in words but other times I don't think in anything at all, I work."

He felt himself falling out of it. Then the longing began, before he was even done. Time crept up on them. He was going to fade. He reached out and touched her skin and hair. He smelled her, he touched the skin and felt a current of electricity flow from her wrist

into his heart and back. Her breast met his beneath her falling hair. He placed his lips on her ear and whispered, "Just please tell me you're alive here and I'll come and live with you forever." Tears rolled slowly down his cheeks.

"Sad?" she asked, taking him into her arms. "In this place?"

"What if I paid a man to kill me in my sleep, as the others do?" he asked.

She stood back abruptly. "Felix, you mustn't be impatient. One day you'll come here and just stay, I promise. Felix, wake up!"

"But I live without purpose. All my days are spent in longing."

The sky darkened and a cold wind ruffled the leaves. Felix was so afraid he peed against his legs. They heard a noise and Sammael walked towards them. As he approach he grew in stature till he towered over the trees and his eyes were like a mob at night with burning torches. Felix fell face first on the ground, digging at the dirt with his toes and fingers, mashing his nose into the ground.

"Felix," she said gently, "darling, love, wake up. You're in no danger now."

He felt a nut of reason form and peeked over his gripped fingers at the gigantic angel and laughed. As he did so Sammael stood at his normal height, smiling. Then his hairy chest grew into breasts, his huge prick contracted like a turtle's head and in its place a thick red patch of pubic hair grew over a fleshy, protuberant female pudenda. He approached Felix and put his lips on his. Sammael shuddered and stood back, pink and hairy. Then he turned away and crawled off on all fours, his tail a little pink corkscrew, tusks growing up out of his lower jaw and into the top of his head.

"And yet," he said, turning back towards Veronica, "I have this longing. And then, I'm not here with you anymore." He sat down on the ground and stared at his feet, puzzled.

"My love, listen. One day everything will change. There'll be an

end of wandering, of chasing after things.”

He looked up at her and smiled but it wasn't Veronica anymore. He was having a nightmare. This was beginning to happen more and more. Instead of awakening slowly into the fuzzy, ill-defined space of morning or afternoon, where the garden shaded off into his bodily existence, he found himself facing Promethea, just before she pulled the trigger, lips trembling against the barrel of the gun, eyes begging him for some reassurance he couldn't give. Only now he knew what he should have said, could have said, to save her life.

Transitions were never clear. What he saw now wasn't Promethea. And to complicate matters he had started to sleep with Veronica in the garden and there he had dreams of earth and these dreams disturbed his sleep, such that she had to awaken him and they would go to the edge of the cave and look up at the comet streaked sky. Or he would feel suffused with warmth and light and slowly realize that rain was drumming his forehead.

This was different. What he saw now was a knife stabbing him in the solar plexus. The image wasn't clear but the meaning was. He gasped and tried to shut his eyes but the silver helmeted figure reaching in wouldn't disappear and as his mind cleared he saw exactly what was happening. There was a man in armour grabbing his foot and dragging him out of his home. Holy fucking shit! He kicked the figure. What good is armour against that? Ha! Now he was fully engaged. Light flooded his head. He tasted the air. He stood up and burst through his shelter and grabbed the man by the helmet, then realized he had weapons. Shit. The man reached for a gun and he wrenched it from his grip. He took a few punches to the stomach but that only sent the fire surging through him and he let out a roar that paralyzed the silver suited man just long enough for Felix to punch and kick him across the little clearing. The man broke free and tried to run away but Felix pounced on him from behind, searching for his throat.

“Arghgh!” Boyle yelled, making for the perimeter. “Bryson!”

Bryson couldn't get a shot. She didn't want to hit Boyle, it would waste a shot and she only had two. She was sure Boyle would take the man but she could see the man was pursuing him with an unanticipated ferocity. There was something wild about the way he fought. Boyle couldn't get a hand on him, and he couldn't shoot him. Then the man disarmed him. Bryson in a strange calm followed the brawling couple into the woods. The man was on top of Boyle. She had a clear shot at his naked torso. She chose the left cheek of his ass, took careful aim and fired. The tranquilizer dart sank into what she now realized was a beautiful, coppery buttock, and the flexed muscles went slack. Boyle stood up panting and ripped the helmet off. Seething, he patted himself down. “I hate the fucking woods,” he said. “Wahuh.” He shook his head and spit.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN THE BOWER OF COINCIDENCE

Transitions were never clear. It was not a matter of two incommensurate states. Rather he was where the edges of many clouds merged. In the old days he would doze off in the garden, or stand transfixed by a light beam, and awaken gently in his own bed, suffused with warmth and light and a lingering euphoria that lasted till the next excursion. The ripples from the garden moreover rewrote everything in such a way that he relived life as a fantastic story in which defeat was always narrowly avoided. The rose was eternity knotted into coral echoes. The rivers of paradise were liquid sapphire, ruby and emerald descending from a diamond fount, infinity bent by existence into the arc of the rainbow. Since taking to his hut in the woods he had a sense of conscious return. He flew up in the garden towards the canopy, where he entered a liminal zone free of specificity, whence he gazed down upon his sleeping form. He felt in control of this state and could zip around with a giddy abandon above Central Park before finally crashing back into his body. But that was only sometimes and he couldn't ever be sure if it had really happened. At any given moment he was merely where he was and the other moments, provisionally considered to be past or future, were a problem. And of course there was the disappointment waking brought now. His only object in going to the garden was to remain. Paregane was a tantalizing promise. He was always looking into one distant land or another and never getting there. And the bed he had now was neither warm nor dry. His existence was physical. His brute strength prevented his death on earth. What prevented it in the

garden, he couldn't say.

When he entered the gritty transitional zone between garden and earth and descended upon his body, he noticed immediately it was in a peculiar place. Perhaps, he thought as he plunged downward, this is death. Maybe he was dying, but not into the garden. For a bitter moment it seemed as if the whole thing had been a hoax, a tortuous bardo experience. He had followed all of the wrong lights, each a wormhole into a different demon dimension. This one of steel gurneys and dripping IV bottles. Another of ivy and trees in battle, his body consumed by flesh eating flowers or stung by bees. Multi-armed, androphagic Scats with flaming tusks and dorsal fins of azure and beryl, teeth dirtied by the plaque of rotting meat sinking slowly into his belly, and clouds of carnivorous locusts obscuring the sun. He sought extermination and found only an excess of wounds. Finitude was the illusion. He hit his body with a thud and opened his eyes. He wasn't in the garden. And he wasn't in his hut. There was a weird chemical odor. The air was cool and the light was dim. Over him hung a giant unlit light unit. There were instruments. Into his field of vision came a face. Before he could think he screamed, a loud, piercing, terrified scream that filled the room and resounded all the way to the garden, shaking the trees and water there. He tried closing his eyes to the face but they wouldn't let him. It was a woman, a white haired woman with ginger colored skin and awful blue eyes that seemed to swim in from another, more chemical world. They were like planets, gas giants with a crushing gravity that would not release him. She was beautifully murderous, her eyes like scalpels, her lips sensuous, amused and mocking. Then a second, ugly face joined hers. He stopped screaming. This man must be the demon assistant. That explained things. He had seen faces like this in Midtown. Scarred, small, obdurate.

His silence pleased them. They were smiling now. Breath came rapid and hard. He decided not to move or speak. He would lie there

patiently until it was clear what his status was. He might be dead. Maybe the police had seized him. Whatever dead felt like this felt like life. His heart pumped so hard it hurt; it hurt in his ears and chest. Sweat swelled into beads on his forehead and rolled down into his ears. His bowels burned.

The man said, "You awake now?" in a coarse voice.

Felix said nothing.

"He doesn't know where he is," the white haired woman said. She moved her face closer to his and smiled. "You're in my laboratory, Felix. My name is Bryson. I'm a doctor. This is Jacob Boyle. We want to save your life."

"Why?" Felix asked. It was that word again, the one no one ever could answer.

"Because you're a very special person who can help us save other lives."

He laughed weakly. "What's the point?" He turned his head away from her and looked at Boyle. "Most people are better off dead."

"That may be," she said. "But you're useful to us all the same."

The two heads floated around above him. "May I sit up?" he asked.

The man disappeared and returned. "If ya try anything I gotta plug you with this." He held up a red gun. "It won't kill you, so don't get any ideas. It's synthetic--what?"

"Blowfish toxin. You'll be a zombie, Felix."

He sat up. The room swam around woozily. He had vague memories of a fight. There was a man in armor. His knuckles hurt. Everything hurt. "Who the fuck, where the fuck?" He rubbed his eyes and looked around. His bag was on the floor. "What happened?" He was in some sort of a lab, with black counters, sinks and desks, surrounded by machines, big boxy things with dials and

meters and throbbing pulse beams. There were tents of electraweave and BioWatch units. His legs dangled off the bed. The doors were not far off but he eyed the red gun and decided he wasn't ready to bolt yet. As the picture came clear he felt his teeth grow sharp and saliva fill his mouth, bitter and digestive. By the moment he grew more vigilant, taking in details of the room, the number of spigots, their color, the images on the computer screens, the streaming data, the light oscillators, the portable cloud chamber, the glove box. There was a virtual room.

"Let's have a seat, shall we?" Bryson asked, indicating that he should hop down off the bed. The room rocked back and forth a few times. He followed her, Boyle at his back, into her office. Boyle sat on the edge of the spartan black bed, staring at him with mean, narrow eyes, and he sat down next to her desk on a comfortable chair.

She sat down at her desk and said, "We've selected you for a number of reasons, Felix."

"How do you know my name?"

"Fingerprints. But we've been monitoring you for many weeks, ever since you showed up at the lucky day parlor, Gametria."

"I know you," he said slowly. "I saw you in Cafe Bereshit in Midtown once."

"You're--" She hesitated, seemed afraid.

"What frightens you?" he asked. He stared into Bryson's eyes, feeling his strength build. He looked around for a clue as to where he was. "Where am I?"

"When did you start taking transcryptasine?"

"Whom do you work for? You don't look like the police."

Boyle snorted. "Just answer the fucking questions and don't be a nose bag."



"Relax, Boyle," Bryson said. "It must be a little confusing waking up here in our lab."

"I thought maybe I was dead."

"Surely you're not disappointed?"

"Surely I fucking am. Although," he rubbed his lips and arched his eyebrows, "I was not planning on this particular dementia. My wife--" He decided against going into it. "I have some place important to go, let's say. You people, whoever you are, are screwing up my plans."

"Tell us about yourself." She touched the screen and mumbled Felix Clay.

"Why should I?"

"Am I gonna bust your face, or what?"

"Try it," Felix growled. "You're the man in the silver suit. I beat you down once and I can do it again. We'll see who's dead first."

"Calm down, both of you. This doesn't need to be confrontational."

Felix looked at her in a state of incomprehension. "If you knew what I've been through!"

"Well," she said, rubbing her eyes and folding her hands in her lap, "My guess is you were under psychiatric care of some sort, or a malcontent at work, an unhappy person who was prescribed transcryptasine and became an abuser. As you probably know, most people at your level of abuse die very quickly. You did not. We're here to find out why."

"Do you think any of what you just said to me is reassuring? Again, who the hell are you?"

"Monozone," she said. "It's our drug. I invented it. My pur--"

"Monozone!" he roared, standing up. Boyle pushed him back into the chair and gripped his ear with one hand and the fleshy part of his

hand with the other, which he squeezed till white lights flashed in his eyes and he cried out OW.

"Please!" Bryson said. The men stopped. "I'll release you Felix if, after you've heard me out, you still want to go."

Felix stared at her with a hatred so vitriolic it killed every other sensation in the room. No other thoughts remained. "You killed my wife! You did this to me. I was happy."

"Were you?" she asked simply. "I don't think so. No one is. Maybe abject idiots and alcoholics are for an hour or two but even orgasm can't be defined by the word happy, no, we call it a little death. The swoon without finality. You strike me as a being far too intelligent and obstreperous for happiness. How did you come to use transcryptasine, Felix?"

"Are you gonna behave?" Boyle asked, relaxing his grip.

Felix looked at him and smiled. "Getting tired, Boyle?" Boyle's dead eyes didn't leave his. He turned to Bryson. "My wife was sick. Suicidal. She tried to kill herself and the doctor prescribed Paregane. That was last summer. In the fall I started to use it with her. She died and I lost everything."

"Did you initiate legal proceedings against us?"

"Who are you trying to kid? I got a lawyer right away."

Boyle laughed. "Max Mbeke?"

"How do you know?"

Boyle made an ambiguous gesture. "We squashed the lawsuit."

"Now you just want to use transcryptasine and die in paradise. Is that where your wife is?"

Felix shook his head and stared at the floor. He felt himself capitulating to a wave of weakness. "I can't die though. Something always goes wrong."

"That's exactly what interests us. Will you let us study you, Felix?"

You'll be quite comfortable here. All you have to do is take transcriptasine whenever you want and we'll monitor you. You can do that till you die or we're done with you."

"Then?"

"Then you can go end your life however you please."

He looked around. "She was my only joy."

"I'm sorry, Felix."

He was crying now and covered his face with shame. It was all he ever desired, the destruction of whoever or whatever had killed her. But now that chance and choice were one he didn't cry out like a cock, no, he collapsed into tears. "How could you let this happen?"

He wiped his face and looked at her. Her stark, alien features had softened. She blinked and shook her head. "I was weak. I'm trying to put an end to it. Will you help me, please?"

"Once it's started, what's the point of trying to return? This country of ours, in this time and this place, has lost all sense of significance. Everything swims in a universe of strict equivalence. We have no art, no feeling. All the music has been drained out of life. Paregane opens your eyes to it. Everything becomes clear. And it shows you the way out. I wish I had never seen. I would rather have dreamt on about hovercraft and Lucy revivals and clean air systems and CarParks. You opened my eyes, Bryson; and now the world is in ruins. But I'll stay. I'll stay because it doesn't matter one way or another if I do or I don't. And I'll stay for the free Paregane."

Boyle smiled and life flooded his eyes. "I didn't think you was no dummy," he said. "And I even forgive you crackin' me in da ribs there in da park."

"And, of course, we will pay you for your time," Bryson said, turning back to the computer.

"My accounts are all empty. I'm not really a man anymore. I'm a node in a shadowgraph."

"Don't worry. We can reactivate the accounts or pay you in cash or jewels."

Clearly there were forces at work opposed to his will. He had tried to go one place and ended up here. There was no reason but there was probably a cause. It didn't matter one way or another. He was a sort of stooge in his own eyes, a ridiculous man living a ridiculous life. He was even more absurd than the world! Its very emptiness was more appropriate than the ludicrous dreams of freedom he fed himself now. Those he loved most died hideous deaths and all his efforts to join them were thwarted. The wild man attacks him and instead of yielding he beats him to death! Some of these opposing forces appeared to be resident in his own body then. Whoever he was, the Felix, was only nominally in charge. Was he in a lab; was he in a tenement in Midtown, or a car bound for Alaska? The nude woman driving wore sunglasses. At the park the spirit of Veronica took the form of kingfishers skimming the pond. Well, here, anyway, he could be with Veronica all the time. He wouldn't have to go to Gametria, or chase after money, or sell guided tours of paradise. This then was the best of all possible worlds.

"So, when do we start?" Felix asked.

A man came in, tall, suave, and grey, with sad eyes and a weary expression. "Well, well," he said, in a melodious voice.

"Hello, Bradlee," Bryson said with an inflection of sarcasm that Felix read as a past between them. "We've brought in Mr. Clay."

"Shall I call you Felix or Mr. Clay?"

"Felix is fine. So what does testing mean?"

"Ah, so you've already agreed to our proposal. Excellent."

"He has," Bryson said brightly. "I was just about to do the intake and then send him down for the work up. You'll go to a Monozone medical team for a complete physical inventory, fluids and such, and then we'll do some work here. I'd like you to keep a dream journal."

"I don't dream," Felix said, smiling at her confusion.

"What do you mean, you don't dream?"

"I mean, there are disordered transitions between the two bodies but I don't consider them dreams. They seem to me to be recollections."

Slowly she squeezed her lips together and nodded. "You don't go to the garden then?"

"Certainly I go there. I'm in the garden all the time. Except of course when I'm here. I used to sleep my way in but lately I've been flying."

"Well, whatever you want to call it, will you record events that transpire there and any, er, transitional experiences you have?"

Felix nodded. "And what do I do all day?"

"Nothing else, unless you want to."

"I'm used to a certain amount of exercise."

She looked at Bradlee and said, "Maybe the Monozone gym--" Bradlee shook his head grimly. "I'll have weights and a treadmill brought in." He tipped his head almost imperceptibly. "You'll maintain your four times a day dose, go even higher if you like."

"For how long?"

"Until you die or we know something."

Bradlee spoke. "You're doing a great service, Felix." He smiled and pet his mustache like a cat.

People in green paper gowns, eyes above white masks, hair in paper hats, with latex gloves, swarmed over him. He was naked, like a polyp, seated in a shallow ceramic tub with a drain and jets of water pulsing around. They bathed him in blue liquid, scrubbed his body with a stiff brush, scoured his cavities by hand, washed his hair and hosed him off with warm water. Then he stood in a stall under hot red lights and a blower. The space was vast. Figures in white suits

with hoods attached to corrugated hoses bustled in the distance. His area was brightly lit, with chairs, and an exam table. Inane, peaceful music played. The team of doctors were silent, indicating what he should do with nods of the head and hand gestures. They moulded him like hot composite and his body responded as if by training. He sat, stood, turned over as they took their samples. He peed into a jar, coughed up phlegm, spit. They swabbed his cheeks, his throat, his nostrils, eyes and ears. They fired rays into all of these places. They plucked hair from his head, nose, chest, groin and anus. They scraped his armpits, attached a sucking probe to his nipples. He filled five syringes with his blood. They gave him a nasal spray and he got a hard on. He jerked off. They swabbed his urethra and colon, took a prostaglandin read. They drew lumbar fluid, scraped beneath his finger and toenails. Then there were reflex tests and photon diffusion scans of his retina. He stood beneath a screaming light for twenty-five seconds and coughed while they pulled on his balls. Someone looked at his tongue under a microscope. Then they scoped every other orifice. Computers imaged his body. There were bone and muscle scans, nerve inventories, hormonal resonance graphs. He ran on a treadmill, breathed into a tube full of a substance that looked like egg yolk. He looked at dots and named colors. He pointed to the ear in which beeps and whines struck. He opened his mouth and said ahh. He ate a cracker and drank orange juice and they scanned him again. He walked across a sheet of CellPack and spoke to a computer.

"Say Ah," said the computer.

"Ah."

"Say EE."

"EE."

"Say OOO."

"OOO."

"Thank you Mr. Clay. Now, give me a complete medical history."

He had always been healthy, so to each question he answered no, until it got to the contextual history, whereupon he had to recount the illnesses, mental and otherwise, of everyone he had ever known. Each of Veronica's diagnoses and medications was recorded, as well as his father's and mother's dengue fever, malaria, shingles, parasitic infections whose names he couldn't remember, stroke, insanity, suicide.

He put on a green gown. An orderly wheeled him back to Bryson's lab. The way to and from was without orientation. They took a concealed lateral, went up and down. The walls were of an oozy, nonspecific color and texture, as were the ceilings. He was wheeled through a tunnel subject to alteration depending upon mood and space. Others were there who could not perceive their passing. They entered and exited one-way mirrors. The air was cool and the smell more sophisticated than that diffused in most places but it could not conceal the burning, industrial core of it nor did the cool air feel fresh.

Bryson opened the door for them.

"You don't have to sit in that stupid thing," she said. "Follow me." He followed her into her office bedroom. That room was more intimate than the lab space where he had awakened. She had nothing personal in there to speak of but her presence was in some way comforting. There was the coffee mug, the tray of herbal tea and the small stack of books by the bed. Even the scent of soap, normally repellant, made the room human, for humans used their soap to clean. He could smell the blue flush liquid and stale tobacco. "Sit down." He sat in the chair next to her desk and she spent a minute setting her computer up. "Put this on your left hand." She handed him a gold electraweave glove. "Put this on your right foot." She handed him a copper electraweave sock. "I'm going to ask you some questions, and tell you to think about some things, O.K.?" As she spoke to him she was focused intently on the screens, eyes roaming

up and down and back and forth, fingers flying over the keyboard and touching while her voice dropped to a mumble between words addressed to him.

"O.K."

"Think about sex."

He tried. He thought about Veronica but it was Promethea's flesh he kept imagining, her body sweating beneath his, and Moises's face blown out in ecstasy. These then metamorphosed into the terrifying final chrysalis of bloody corpses, empty eyeslits and the lifeless trunk flung against the wall beneath its exploded head. "I can't."

"Oh come on, most people can think of nothing else. You loved your wife? Did you sleep together?"

"Of course."

"Not married long?"

"Almost twenty years."

"Hmmm. How many affairs?"

"None."

"And you found sex with her to be enjoyable?"

"Still do."

"So you do dream. Think of having sex with her in a dream then. What do you typically do to get started? Fondle her breasts? Kiss her ears? Squeeze her ass? Foot massage? Erotic foot massage is quite popular. Maybe you begin with furtive moves in the hallway, frottage, or intercrural intercourse."

"What's that?"

"Thigh fucking."

Felix blushed. "Not since high school."

"You get the idea though? Think dirty. What's the dirtiest, weirdest thing you ever did in bed?"

"I won't say!" But then he began to remember all of their

encounters, in his eyes and ears, in his mouth and nose, synaesthetic love making, gently in the morning, half conscious in the middle of the night, outrageous, violent fucking on cocaine, blow jobs in the shower, cunnilingus in the woods, abject, noble, transcendent, brutal, efficient, lingering, random, purposeful, staring up from all fours at her vagina, standing over her supine body, breasts and nipples, magical, carnal, transformative, the human animal, divine, time destroyed, time redeemed, dripping cocks and cunts, the taste of cum on her tongue, pissy smells, perfumed hair, wet lips slicked together, penetrations without cease, smashed chakras, screwing, fucking.

"That's just perfect, Felix. Now, what about food? What do you like to eat? If you could eat anything right now, what would it be? A greasy hamburger? A bowl of clear soup? Sushi? French fries with mayonnaise and a Belgian ale? Mussels steamed in white wine and garlic? Clams in black bean sauce? Prime rib with horseradish and Yorkshire pudding? Corn bread? Beans'n'greens? Dhal? Souvlaki?"

"Souvlaki. At night there's a vendor on 38th and Eighth who roasts lamb on this giant skewer and slices off thin browned pieces which he mixes with grilled onions, lettuce, tomatoes and tahini in a soft pita."

"Beautiful. O.K. What makes you want to vomit? I mean visceral, violent vomiting. Doesn't have to be a food. It could be an image--"

"Veronica!" He gasped and tears flooded his eyes. "Lying half dead in the bathtub. She's covered in blood and vomit." He began to sob. Damn, he thought, trying to stop. He couldn't stand being so close to the surface.

"Well, that works for sad, not disgust. But that's o.k. Try disgust. Less personal. It's a taste in the mouth. I remember once seeing a man in the street who smelled so bad the molecules diffused on my tongue and I could taste him."

"Bleu cheese crumbled with bacon and sour cream on a baked

potato after drinking cheap red wine all night in Yonkers.... Timmy Blaire puking it up on the back stairs."

"Beautiful gag response! Now, happy. What is joyful?"

"Driving." They drove along in their Studebaker over hundreds of winding miles in New Jersey, no track, no programming, taking turns at the wheel, gunning it to a hundred on the straightaways, april sun hot on their heads.

"You like to drive?"

"It used to be a dream of mine, to own a car. I even studied how to repair them. We were going to drive to Alaska."

Bryson stopped futzing with the computer and looked into his eyes. "You and Veronica?" she asked.

"Of course." She stared into him and moved her head thoughtfully. "Is something wrong?" he asked.

After a pause she said, "No."

Something wasn't right with her. "Do you like to drive, Bryson? Do you like just being out there moving, nothing to keep you back? I used to live for that and then, slowly, my world got smaller and smaller. Remember those old movies where the walls of a room close in? Before she died in the flesh we had been crushed to death. Do you ever feel like that?" Her expression was impossible to read. He felt something coming off of her, a sensation, but it wouldn't resolve.

"Everyone ages Felix. You and Veronica were just becoming middle aged. You would have had kids. Done all the things families do and then in retirement bought yourself a cheap little car, which you would have taken on long drives out west. The walls crush you with boredom and responsibility. In the end, no one is free. There's always someone or something, an expectation, a fear, an enemy forgotten or a commitment made before you were competent to make it that will call you and crush you. The only defense is delay."

"If I'm to be crushed it won't be by an illusion."

“Then what kind of a man would you be? Some new species perhaps.”

“Do you drive, Bryson?”

“No. Not really. When I was a girl. Sometimes Bradlee lets me take his car out of the parking lot. But it would have been my answer too. The locomotive, as a category, is one of the very few answers people give to the question of Joy.”

“What are the others?”

“Oh, various forms of exercise, music, babies, spring. Mountain climbing and swimming are big. Very, very, rarely sex or food.”

“It’s hard to separate Joy from the rest. From relief for example.”

“Emotional and sensual synaesthesia. We know and define things by comparison. To conceive of spatial distance we think of how long it takes to travel across it; to conceive of time we imagine a road, a physical distance to be traveled. I like to think of Joy as a rapture beginning when all want is satisfied. One never selects a PCP or amphibatraine as joyful, it’s only a journey without ultimate goal or purpose that brings joy. What terrifies you?”

Felix didn’t know what terrified him. He was living his terror. And what was he living? A solitary life. “Isolation,” he said.

“Angry?”

“You. This place.”

“And comfort?”

“The dark. Nothingness.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT IN THE ARMS OF JUDAS PRIEST

Bryson was used to administering a large staff that performed all of the tasks she was now performing. She reviewed reports, attended virtual meetings where all of the participants were aliases, was briefed over cocktails, but she rarely if ever laid her hands upon an instrument, administered a pill or monitored a readout. Paradigmatic cases were presented to her by others who had culled them for her review. Plunging herself into the minutiae of working with Felix revitalized her, squashed the melancholy, the feeling of pointlessness that had pulsed through her since she had lost control of transcryptasine, since the evening she had left that final meeting and met Bradlee at The Lounge.

The joy and comfort of work. Work always had a destination, although, like desire, it was a search for what one did not have and would never actually reach. Still, work achieved the result and the best outcome was the unexpected result, the fortuitous surprise, the fruitful blunder, the *felix culpa*. Suspension in desire, disciplined by the routines of the lab and the method, anchored to the material reality, which always seemed to drift free with slight incongruities from established fact, demanding an explanation, was pure joy. The alloy of theory, fact and reality.

She monitored Felix’s sleeping body. Equipment was set up at a discreet distance from the bed and while he wandered the garden his recumbent form was subject to a carefully planned bombardment of electromagnetic fields, secondary harmonic generation scans,

multiphoton microscopic neuronal mapping, magnetic pulse stream analysis, wave interference pattern analysis, tubule calibration. The data stream cascaded, riverine, torrential, through the night, as she searched for the signature wave. It was strange, exacting work, pursuing traces of phantom forces, errant particles, emanations of great subtlety that needed to be identified, separated, measured and correlated. Noise had to be filtered. Her own noise; the noise of the machines; the noise of his stomach growling; the noise of the universe. Each day a different array of instruments was brought to bear upon the different states of his sleeping brain. She spent hours alone in the semi dark staring at the pink and green and orange lights, the oscillations, patterns of activity surging through screens like the aurora borealis. Sunspot activity, pulsars, quasars and black holes of cognition. There were the states: umbra, penumbra, vovulos, flat, tetrahedron, dodecahedron, sphere and the operations, delta, tributary, permutation, chiasmus. Then she spent even more hours in a sort of umbra state of her own with a cup of coffee growing cold in her hand while she stared at his beautiful, serious, deadly still face. The color was so suggestive, the features so gentle. She had never studied a single person so closely. She began to know him physically the way she knew, what? She knew nothing in such intimate detail, nothing real anyway. The theory of the mind, its mathematical dimension as well as the noncomputational Onto, the spectral Grembo, were as familiar, but they were maps and here she was wandering free in the land. All her life she had evaded the familiar by changing places often: at Cornell she moved every year to a new room; when she came to Monozone they bought a home in Great Neck, but she kept it spare and slept at the lab unless Leonard was in town. It was he who filled it with books, cases of insects on pins and tissue samples, his library of bound black journals; artifacts found at country markets or dug up from deposits. Then, when they sold the house and he migrated north to the GMZ, she moved into the lab in

name as well as fact and kept her place with a bar of soap and a roll of toilet paper and some books, all of which vanished with use.

Felix never moved in his sleep. Most people thrash about, they gulp or snore or stretch. Some walk, grip their fists, sit up startled and stare at nothing. Talkers, mumblers, walkers, screamers. But people on transcryptasine were spookily still. And although she called it dreaming she knew it was not in fact dreaming. They were in Umbra, no REM, long regular pulses, synchronized with bang echo Drone, just enough to breathe and beat the heart. On the drug they could enter this state at will. But waking them from it was difficult. It was as if they had to return consciously to their body. This was where the dream journal came in. Dreams bored her. But she wanted to know where he went. She wanted to know everything. She had to find out how he was different.

She came to feel that she possessed him and was possessed by him. His skin, his hair, his eyes were so alive, so vibrant. It was as if he were flooded with light. She studied his fluid profiles, his radiographic call and response, his echolocator graphs. His hormonal profile was that of a pregnant 18 year old. With a little stimulation he would start to lactate. She lifted the sheet of silver electraweave off of his body and examined his chest. She listened to the slow, calm pulse of his breathing and heart beat with a stethoscope, like the breakers at midnight on a desolate beach beneath moon and clouds, the steady humph and hiss and green, phosphorescent radiance of algae dissolving in the foam. She ran her fingers through his rich curled hair, touched his nipples. They were almost like a woman's and yet they were still masculine, as if the two had coincided there. What is that smell, she wondered. It was an alluring, emotional scent, like Julie Fripp's, but stronger. It fruited in her mind, tantalized her at idle moments away from the lab. All of her juice was engaged in this; she felt her own rhythms synchronizing with his, as if his pulse were strong enough to reset the minds around him. But it was antagonistic

too, and intimidating. She sometimes felt totally at odds, as if her definition were achieved against his background. Then it reversed and she was the background static to his aria. Was it just him or the drug?

Eventually, in his sleeping presence, she began to fantasize about fucking him. She became so aroused she would go back to her bedroom and masturbate, but the orgasms were always disappointing and she felt she was neglecting her duty. Something, some scruple prevented her from sitting there in front of him with the vibrator humming in her pants. It was a struggle sometimes not to rip the sheet off of him and mount him right there in his sleep. Bradlee came to get her in the evenings and she would barely notice his presence. She would treat him as a surrogate, take him to his apartment where she banged and pummeled, sucked and stalked and took him to her insatiably. She never wanted to stop studying Felix. He was this radiating node of cosmic energy, the center of a new universe, and he was laid up in her lab.

Awake he was an awkward presence. He was never anything but polite but he couldn't conceal his hatred for Monozone and, by extension, her. She was the author of his misery, the antagonist given a face. She and they deserved it. Now she knew, viscerally, what Leonard meant. There were thousands, tens of thousands of Felix's around the world and they either were or would be dead because of her. Millions if she didn't do something more, and soon.

The ding project was being counteracted. Boyle spent more time with Bradlee and Bradlee was almost mad with preoccupation. Impatient with her, yet totally dependent because he could trust no one else.

Boyle came in one morning, his harsh, frightening face softened with such happiness he was a different man. "Doc," he said, rushing her. "I brought you these." He whipped from behind his back a

bouquet of natural flowers. Before he finished doing so Felix awoke and hopped down off the gurney.

"Flowers," he said.

"They're for the Doc," Boyle said testily.

"Is it Valentines Day or something?" she asked, perplexed but pleased by the red tulips, purple dutch iris, baby's breath and fern. She went to one of the black cabinets along the wall, opened it and selected a beaker that she filled with water. Then she arranged the flowers quickly, setting them on the counter top.

"Dr. Velodia came through for Medear! She read her transcript, met with her here in the city, so we didn't have to get no hovercraft even, then she took her back to Cornell and gave her a campus tour! I mean, she gave her a recommendation, the whole nine yards. Oh Doc--" his eyes reddened and he looked away, "you never seen a kid so happy before. Holy fuck, nothing but grins ear to ear. The last time I seen her like that she was a little girl, and it had snowed and they was playing while it came down in the streetlights. That was back in, I dunno, 70? 69? Oh man, it brings a father to his knees, I'm tellin' you. You saved all of our lives." He kissed her and hugged her awkwardly and wiped the tears away. "Jesus look at me, kissing you and cryin' like a girl. I'm sorry doc. I'm sorry."

"For what?" she asked.

"I shouldn't oughta touch you is all, but she couldna never done it widouch ya, and I just wanted you to know that, that me and Trinh Ma and Medear know what you done for us, and we, we, thank yous for it is all."

She kissed his cheek and smiled. "Don't sweat it, Boyle. You're a good man. She deserves a break if anyone does. Now forget about it."

He shook his head. "Forget about it? Forget about it! I can't, and I ain't a good man. No."



They sat down and drank some coffee. Felix took a shower and started to work out on the bike. Bryson said, "So what's up with you and Bradlee?"

Boyle's face fell. He ground his teeth. He stood up tensely. "He wanted me to shoot some putz lawyer. I mean, I chase the guy down the stairs and into the street and then into the park at 88th and Fifth. Fucking spooky neighborhood and the park there is like a jungle. My gun is out and this guy in a suit's running and screaming and the cops, they come after us in a hovercraft, two bulls on foot, you know. Then Bradlee calls 'em off when he shows him his DOD ID. That badge of his carries some weight I'll tell you cause the cops, they back off right away and by then, I got this guy pissin' his pants, on his knees cryin' and shit. Bradlee tells me if I don't blow his brains out he will. I'm sayin', you don't pay me enough for this. Then he says he'll send my youngest kid to school if I pull the trigger and I'm thinking, is that any way to pay for it? And then I think, fuck it. That lawyer, wouldn't he pull the trigger? Anyone out there not gonna kill me if Owen Bradlee says to? So I'm thinking like this and the lawyer, he cries uncle. Says he'll drop the case and give up the name of his client and the doctor he had locked up for a witness. So today we gotta go to the witness to persuade him not to cooperate with the opposition. If he don't agree, I gotta blow his brains out. It makes me hungry just thinking about it. I don't mind throwin' my weight around but Laraby never said nothing about no killing."

Bryson sipped her coffee. "How much has he found out?"

"About what?" Boyle relaxed a little and sat down.

"These doctors who won't prescribe transcryptasine."

Boyle snickered grimly. "They keep rattin' each other out. They take one look at me and decide to cooperate. They're all over the place. Put out one fire, another flares up."

"So Bradlee's theory that there's a conspiracy--"

"Oh, there's a conspiracy all right. And he's pissed cause he figures it for an inside deal but there's nothing yet, just the Wannalacka something conference they all went to."

Bradlee walked in and they fell silent. "Hello everyone. Good morning. How is our patient this morning?" Felix, biking furiously in place, glared at Bradlee and huffed. "I see. Well, good for the old ticker, eh? Ho ho. Any results yet?"

"Well, interesting observations still."

"But nothing definite? It's a little slow going, wouldn't you say?"

"He could lactate at any minute," she said. "His hormonal profile is that of a pregnant woman. Physically, he appears to be recapitulating the younger phases of human growth, from birth to puberty. The nerves in his brain are remyelinating. Cells are regenerating. Look at his skin and hair, they're thick like a child's."

"But is that why he doesn't he die?"

"Hard to say. He certainly continues to be atypical in just about every way."

Bradlee frowned. "It all seems so very vague. Come on Boyle, we have work to do." He noticed the flowers on the counter. "Flowers, delightful. What's the occasion?"

Boyle started to say something but Bryson interrupted him. "I just picked them up to give to Felix. Remind him that there are other gardens in the world." She stared at Boyle. His eyes were fixed.

"Right boss. Let's go." He looked at Bryson strangely and they left.

As soon as they were gone Felix hopped off the bike. Sweat rolled off of his forehead and his limbs glistened when he stepped through a zone of bright light. The smell diffused through the air and stirred in her gut. She inhaled deeply and blushed. He turned the light down to a deep amber and sat on his bed, facing her, legs dangling. She watched his chest grow still as his breathing slowed, watched his unfocused eyes.

It was hard not to think of him as a stooge and the thought depressed her. For all of his hostility and suspicion he seemed to have no idea what his condition was or who they were. They were the murders of his wife; that much was clear. But in his world that fact seemed to be a mere chorus. He was focused on something else. They were a sideshow. He couldn't be pinned down because essentially he was not there. They were now locked in a dual illusion, where the other was a shadow of a substance hard to believe in.

"Are you going back to sleep now?" she asked. Her question surprised him. "What are you thinking?"

"Hm? Thinking?" he asked.

Whatever he said he said dismissively and yet he obviously was trying to be polite, out of habit. Or was it gratitude? Empathy and gratitude, Julie Fripp had said. But why should he be grateful? Grace was not dependent on any given quality; it was *caritas*, freely given. And she was saying, a penny for your thoughts. A homely phrase, her surrogate used to say that to her when she was seated in a corner alone lost in thought. People in her house never lost themselves in anything other than conversation. Meditation was riding over the rough country alone with a shotgun or a vigorous game of tennis. She knew the secret stairways and empty rooms of the basement, pantries never used. And she knew books. What did he know? "Yes. A penny for your thoughts."

"Penny? Oh, like the coin. I see. No. I'm going to the garden soon. And I was thinking about Promethea."

"The woman whom you lived with?" She had to remember the things he had told her now. To get the electraweave or consult the computer would stopper the flow. His face was deep and disturbed. She could feel depression coming off of him, like heat waves.

"I had nowhere to go. Do you have any idea what that means? No job, no home. It means you live with the dogs. It means police beat

you up and crooks rob you. It means you shit in the street and fuck in the road. You think you know what life is, how things will work out, but in the end you don't know anything at all." He shook his head. "She blew her brains out. That's what we say, blew her brains out. But there's only the one brain, right? I betrayed a friend, a man who took me in. It is a matter of indifference now that they're gone. But it was a place I could have stayed, or so I thought. It was inevitable, wasn't it, that if I came among them then they'd take the drug and once you take it, it naturally follows that you will die in your sleep. But I don't see how it follows that you will inevitably incite the jealousy of a man who saved your life or that you will fail to love a woman who gave you back your sense of self because she simply accepted that one's aspiration is out of whack with reality. She was willing to put on what she couldn't actually feel because it was necessary. And when it came time to start killing, she did; and then, for want of a single word from me, she put the gun in her mouth and pulled the trigger. Veronica is on you. Promethea and Peter and Edsel and Moises, they're on me."

"So you went to the park?"

He shook his head yes. "The people in the park have been there for three generations, did you know that? They came down from the Bronx, where my people come from. Mine have statues and plaques recalling their valor. They have loincloths and skin ulcers to recall theirs." He laughed. "They were afraid of me. So I talked to the children. There were some really beautiful days there." He yawned. "Well, I guess I'd better get back to work."

"Yes," she said, sadly. "Whatever. Felix, I..." she wanted to say something. "I can't really fix what went wrong. I'm, I'm trying to think of some way."

"Well, if you find a way, let me know." He lay down on his back and shut his eyes.

"I'm going to write a report," she said, but he didn't reply. He was sinking through penumbra into umbra. The numbers sank to near zero. Then something unusual happened. He entered a state of Grembo, 'lap', the Zero Point field of mind. There was no machine to map that. There was nothing to map. By all accounts he should be dead. This was it. She sat there stunned. It was always like that. The thing you were looking for is suddenly one day there. She spent the day and the next night searching through all the cases she had studied. And that was it. Everyone who had died in the initial studies had entered Grembo for a moment. LAP. A slip in the data, barely detectable, beneath notice, subliminal. A moment into Grembo and everyone dies, but not Felix.

She was working at her report, assembling initial data into charts, doing the comparisons with controls from her earlier double blind studies. It was evening. She was beginning to make sense of his story. He told in greater detail how it was he had come to live in Midtown. She was trying to fit together the autobiographical facts, the macro life with the micro world of her instruments, correlate the actions with the minute variances in neuroplasticity, temperature, glucose level. Psyche Profile. Subject appeared at first to be psychotic, unable to perceive difference between dreams and waking. Prolonged interviews however reveal subject to be sane and rational albeit with an unconventional explanation of dream life. Problem: subject reports vivid dream experiences during Umbra.

To be safe she was encrypting her notes but still she felt her nerves leap when Boyle and Bradlee came in.

"I hate this," growled Boyle. Blood was splattered on his tan suit.

"Oh grow up, Boyle," Bradlee said, washing his hands in a sink scored with chemicals. "He had it coming and I put you in for a bonus. I thought you'd been a soldier in war."

Boyle said nothing but went to another sink on the other side of

the room to wash up. "You got any donuts?" he asked as he dried his hands on his pants. "I need something to tide me over on the train. My stomach's like a deep fryer."

"There's a muffin in the fridge," she said. "And yogurt."

Boyle made a face. "Plain. That won't do. I'll stop off for a burger. You coming?"

"She is not," Bradlee said, shaking water off of his hands and scanning the lab for a towel. "She's coming with me."

Bryson pushed save and send, which both encrypted and hid the report. "Going with you where?"

"It's been a beastly day, hot and contrary from the start. It feels and smells like the Sundarbans out there. We're going to dinner."

Bryson didn't want to leave Felix. She wanted him to wake up and tell her more. He gave her this delicious feeling of bitter longing and regret, difficult to explain. The closest thing to it was poetry. Eating dinner and letting Bradlee fuck her was distasteful at best.

"Not tonight, Bradlee."

"Now Bryson, I'm afraid I must insist. And we're not going to The Lounge with Boyle either. I want a proper dinner with flunkies and fois gras and caviar. Put on a dress, please, and let's go."

She was too weak to fight. In her small closet she pushed hangers apart till she found a cotton gown, vermillion and green, open at the neck, and slipped on a pair of crepe shoes. She looked good in it, that she knew, and in her present mood a little make believe was o.k.

He had reserved a table at an exclusive dining club overlooking Central Park from the penthouse of the Lamont Building on 72nd and CPW. A valet took the car and they were shown to the elevator by a guard with gold braid on his shoulders. There was only one seating a night. The Maitre D' escorted them to a small table for two next to the window. They watched the park extinguish with twilight, the tops of the trees and the old buildings of Fifth Avenue glowing in

setting sun. It was a dark, comfortable, understated room with sixteen candle lit tables. Couples like themselves were seated at a discreet distance, and there were two larger tables, one with a family and the other with two apparently unrelated couples, perhaps a foursome, but maybe only a bridge partnership. Over cocktails they examined the menu.

"The fish is superb," Bradlee said.

"O.K."

"As is the steak. Kobe beef, you know. They massage the cattle. Actually, everything is good. Nothing pretentious. None of that fancy fussy stuff they do nowadays. God," he blustered. "I feel like I've been beaten about the ears. Valdez is on my ass to do something about the stock price. Fripp is impossible. The man's an idiot. He calls me in, but what am I supposed to do? Incidentally, he's pissed at you." He glared at her over the menu.

"What did I do?" She tried not to appear defensive but he had caught her off guard.

"Don't pretend that you don't know. Your every move is calculated. These little games of yours are quite dangerous. It could get you fired or worse."

"I--"

"Oh, don't worry, I saved your job."

"Bradlee!"

"Good lord, what? More ingratitude?"

"Nothing." She could say nothing. "What did he say I did?"

"The party?"

"What party? I haven't been to a party in ages, not since December."

"Well, ages ago you evidently met with Julie Fripp and told her to ask him about Paregane's side effects."

She put down the menu and grew tight. "He's trying to kill her!"

"She's mentally ill. Even Boyle would be able to see that. You know, it's almost as if you were trying to fuck things up. Honestly, Bryson, I don't know what goes on in your mind sometimes. And Valdez saw right through you."

"I wasn't hiding a thing. We got along beautifully. And again, why now?"

"Your discretion and intelligence were well concealed that night and the lag time, dear, can be months. How many moves ahead do you calculate? You must know that Paregane is your fortune."

"I've got plenty of cash."

"And that's another thing. Unloading your Monozone stock was not good form."

She laughed. "Haven't you sold yours?"

"Not all of it." He glanced around at the other tables. "The way it's done is you sell off ten percent at a time."

"How did you know I sold it? Are you spying on me?"

"If there's anything I don't know, I don't know about it. But you know, greed never got anyone anywhere."

"A fine thing coming from you."

Bradlee smiled. "I didn't say money never got anyone anywhere. But always going for the bucks without considering the long term cost is foolish."

"What did you do with the cash then?"

"Ah," he said, smiling broadly now. "You'll see."

She knew she'd never pick that lock till he was ready. "What about these appetizers?"

"Everything here is flawless. No fireworks, quiet perfection. These scallops for instance. Taste like the sea. If only women were so sweet."

"And the sardines?"

"Grilled with a spritz of lemon and a drizzle of Portuguese olive oil. Fleur de Sel and cracked Tellicherry pepper." He put down the menu. The waiter came to the table. "Bring us some more bread and another round." When the waiter was out of earshot Bradlee looked seriously at her and leaned slightly across the table, his eyebrows arched. "Valdez used to be a partner. Now she treats me like an employee. I ask you, where would she be without me? Or Fripp? I've been doing their dirty laundry for years and now that they have what they want they'll blame me if they lose it. Julie Fripp--"

"Her again."

"I'm not done. The consequences of what is apparently an incident remote in time and significance to you continue to reverberate whether you like it or not. After talking to you she went to her own doctor, who took her off Paregane. Once she had descended back into madness she went and got herself a lawyer, threatened to sue Monozone and divorce her husband. You can imagine the time Boyle and I had. Fripp was livid. Wanted me to kill you at one point."

She didn't know how literally to take this. "Good thing I have Boyle as a bodyguard, then." She had never seen the face he now presented to her before. Only the arrival of the waiter prevented the conversation from going awry. He placed their drinks down and asked if they would like to order.

"What will it be then?" Bradlee asked sternly.

"I've hardly had time." She was hungry. The smell of the bread, the bite of the gin and the olives, stimulated her stomach. She looked up at the waiter and said, "The oysters?"

"We have Kumamotos, Chincoteagues and Wellefleets this evening."

"An assortment of those is fine, say a dozen. And wine."

"Make it Vouvrais," Bradlee said. "I'll have the scallops."

He ordered paillards of venison with a wild mushroom ragout and grilled asparagus. She ordered osso buco with white bean puree and green beans amandine. They sat in hostile silence. She watched him closely. His lips were pursed. She even thought he was grinding his teeth. When the appetizers arrived he seemed to change gears. He didn't mention work and turned the charm up to high, dallied here and there, spoke of his days in India, of fighting. It was a side of him she always forgot about and never would have guessed. When he spoke of the past it was not with nostalgia or regret but as with everything else his take was tainted by his melancholic mood, as if lost worlds were the best one could expect because, after all, they weren't worth saving. Death was the most necessary force of all. Without death there'd be no opportunity.

"I do hope Leonard hasn't been inconvenienced by all the trouble up there."

"We haven't spoken since Felix arrived. I've been too busy. I don't watch the news or read papers even. He gets along fine though. He's got that girlfriend." She couldn't help saying this disdainfully and, seeing the delight spark in his eyes, regretted it.

"The old goat's got himself a young dam and you're still jealous! How long have you known? Almost a year now. I'd never expect that of you my dear. It's almost touching."

She blushed. "You should see her. Innocent as hell, too. And stupid."

"Sounds ideal for a man in his situation. Surely he doesn't--"

"Oh, but he does. Not often. I don't ask. But I believe he has an obsession with her vagina."

"Hmmm." He muttered darkly. "One's obsession should always be with one's own genitals."

"Anyway, he keeps well out of politics, I can assure you."

"Shall we have dessert?" he asked, his face assuming its usual

jocular posture without quite smiling.

"Why not." She was suspended on a plain of endless, successive plateaus of physical pleasure, the kind of warm satiety that invites incremental excess as a means of self-propagation.

They ordered chocolate hazelnut torte, espresso and cognac. "Is he in love with her?"

"No," she shook her head. A forkful of dense fudge and nuts melted on her tongue. "He loves me."

"You've hardly been loyal either." Somehow he managed to eat without smudging his mustache.

"Who are you to point that out?"

"Surely there's love, and companionship, and that sort of thing."

"I just wish I were done with it," she said, sipping espresso and cognac. "I think we'd better go back to the lab." She was starting to feel a little anxious as the buzz of dinner attenuated. He lit a cigar and she smoked a few cigarettes.

"Let's have another drink and look at the night. The view of the park here is so fine. You can even see stars. I love to come here for brunch in October. On a clear day, with the changing leaves, it's just delightful. Have you ever walked in the park?"

"No. Unless you count capturing Felix."

He gazed out the window, in a halo of smoke, mumbled, "You ought to someday." He turned back and looked at her blankly. "Perhaps you could stay the night. Tomorrow we can take the day to stroll through."

"It's too dangerous."

"I'll protect you. I'm armed and familiar with the paths."

She slowly crushed out her cigarette and felt the room drift through the window into the night. Blue lights illuminated darkly the boughs and sidewalks. "Chivalry," she said, not so much with a laugh

but an amused consideration of the word. "I'll go back with you, but I can't stay the night. Felix gets up before dawn and takes another dose. He's up to five a day now."

"There's something contemptible about a man who sleeps so much."

"He works out two hours a day and hardly eats a thing. The food disgusts him. All he can take is plain organic yogurt, with the fat, bananas and sprouts. Sometimes he asks for almonds and pomegranate, or a dish of figs and dates."

"Pomegranates? Figs? Dates? How exotically biblical. It's a wonder we don't go broke barely feeding him."

"He hates us, you know."

Bradlee became indignant. "Why on earth should he?"

"He blames us for his wife. He lost his job, his house, his embryos."

"No one told her to abuse Paregane."

"No one told her not to. The doctor told them it was harmless, without side effects. He holds us responsible."

Bradlee's face dwindled into boredom. "We are only responsible for ourselves. He should just get over it and move on. Anyway, if things don't start picking up we'll have to change tactics. The pressure on me is immense, beyond belief. If he doesn't yield up some sort of useful result soon I want you to euthanize him." He snapped his fingers. "We'll have another round and then the check."

The apartment was cold and metallic. In the restaurant and car she had felt slightly, pleasantly drunk, but now, on the fiftieth floor, in the chilly white room with its cascade of water and scent of wet stone, she was dizzy. It was difficult to think. They didn't speak at all in the car. The word euthanize sat between them. The lights were suspended in her eye like cobalt drops in black ink. The word, the message of the evening, assembled and disassembled in her mind. It

seemed, dimly, that action was required, but she felt lost. She tried to put together the strands: money, she had money; test results, they were interesting but inconclusive. No. Not inconclusive. All the data she had gathered, all of the facts, pointed in one direction. Felix was an anomaly. He was the most highly variant individual she had ever encountered. He was incorrigibly alienated. The whole premise of transcryptasine, its success was in doubt. The report would be totally unacceptable to any of them. But she had to write and publish it now. The likely consequences? They would kill Felix. That left, what means of escape did she have?

They lay down on the bed. The room spun around. He seized her about the waist. His mustache brushed her nipples, he nuzzled the folds of her stomach and spread her legs. Everything pitched around as his tongue opened the lips of her vagina. Now, whatever pleasure there was, was involuntary. They were in rote now. He curled around and his cock filled her mouth. It thrust in and out and she prayed he wouldn't cum. She didn't care how or where else he fucked her, so long as it wasn't finished in her mouth. She hadn't vomited in bed once in a career of drunken fucking that began at thirteen, and she wasn't about to start to now. By his movements she could tell; he was gasping. She stared out between his legs at the sheet. His pubic hair bumped her chin; the flesh smelled faintly of lavender. She let his cock slip out between her lips with a smack and turned around, straddling him. She was just wet and energetic enough to finish him off this way. It hurt a little going in, but once she had the rhythm she played him, taking in the head, rim to rim, and then in three good thrusts he was jelly beneath her. She rolled off and stared up while he fell into a deep snooze. The room stopped turning. It was time to go.

She got up in the dark and as she gathered her clothes noticed his wallet and keys on the steel table. The keys. She could just take off with the car. By the time he woke up she would be hundreds k away, with Leonard. Then the emptiness came. She sat down at the table

and let out the tears, stifling a sob. It was clear. The emptiness was clear. A clear medium that permitted her to see, what she had done, what she had to do. The impulse was true and sane, but she must not follow it, rather amplify its meaning. She could take the car, yes. But not till she was ready. She would need a copy of the keys. She wiped the tears from her eyes and went into the living room. The city was dark. A few buildings looked like amber blobs and there was the glow of midtown, concealed by the glass towers. She took her computer and brought it into the bedroom, laying the key quietly on the screen. Then she whispered, scan.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

### IS THAT ALL THERE IS?

Bryson arrived back at the lab at 3 am. Felix was flat on his back in the muted light. Monitors ticked and scanners hummed, a dull green glow came from the analog displays. He was producing the steady, coordinated activity of Penumbra. She examined his drone and it was invariably odd. In the first weeks she thought it was the equipment, or her or Boyle. There were so many sources of energy but they could easily filter the data to zero and then it remained right where it was, a thrum, a beat in permanent syncopation. It was beautiful, actually.

She pulled up a chair and fell back into it, awake, and finally sober enough to feel. The warm night air, the clean, muddy smelling breeze crossing over the stinking canal, had helped to clear her mind. She decided if she couldn't sleep she would get some work done. She opened his dream journal. It was recorded by hand in a book of paper with a pen.

In the garden, thoughts are actions. Sammael, the angel, and I walk down to the river. The water rushes by, turquoise with whitecaps. Today he has breasts and a tail and looks like a reptilian orangutan. Veronica stays behind in the bushes. Sometimes she is a bird crossing the lake but today she is alone and Sammael tells me to be kind to myself and not worry.

Met Veronica in the primeval place. We live here mostly. Jains say in the Age of Great Sorrow, or the Kaliyuga, men and women will look like dogs and eat raw turtle meat. Today, tomorrow, perhaps

always, this is our fate. We have blue dog faces and fuck like dogs. We sniff each other's butts and run with abandon in the fields after rodents. Then we come to a place of palms and hills perforated with caves. The water purls and the air is cunt. I follow her through the forest till we come to a stream and take turtles that we smash against the rocks and eat raw.

Veronica in flight. I sun myself on hot black sand. Deep, fishy tasting kisses under the willows. Sammael is in the likeness of a man. He complains of too many people. Vision is a gate to the garden. The heart too has a gate into the garden. Where the genitals touch the mind there too is a gate into the garden. Those who come without imagination are seized by their own animal desires and eaten. Those not ready, go back before time was and disappear from creation. There is a great, transforming oscillation at sunset. We make love, briefly. It is so intense I almost vomit. Check penis for blood. Ivory, gold and silver moths fly out and flutter around the sun, dropping in flakes of cinders. It is time to leave and Veronica takes my hand and says, 'You must come back.'

My only thought is death. Death in the beginning, death in the end. In between, thoughts of dying. Life is suspended in death. I only know the dying but it is a sea without a shore. A cliff I am climbing at the edge of paradise. This is a dream I have of transition. Milton at the gates with flaming swords.

Outside of the cave I examine her vagina minutely, eyes like microscopes. I could do this for hours. Veronica's vagina is more interesting than time. We eat fruit, walk along the stonewall beside what I assume to be a building but which I have never actually seen. Have seen a tower and lights flashing off of windows. Here the shadows are cold. I feel the presence of a great and terrible lord and am fortunate to be beneath his notice.

My penis continues to fascinate her. When I lie back in the sun she



takes it up, lifts it, examines my testicles, perineum. Squeezes and pokes and asks what I see. Starfish bursting in three dimensions, polychromatic entrails blooming in the deep. She sticks it in her mouth, her vagina and her ass. Except for the beginning we haven't flown together. The higher I jump the heavier I feel.

I prowl at dusk. There are dangers defined by the light that fade and become more menacing in the shadows. My vigilance is instinctive and necessary. We watch each other defecate. The shit hangs down and drops to the ground where people in the shape of beetles devour it.

A procession of the dead. Beetles, ants and emerald cockroaches watch the robed skeletons pass by, beating on black tambourines. A tall toad standing upright croaks on the side of the path. A man holds his weeping head at his side by the hair. My neck is sore. We are sad now even though it is the garden. There are candles burning, fat bee's wax tapers the color of dead flesh. The night swallows me up and I feel suddenly so good till I spy my body below, in a lab on a gurney. I try to fly away but the higher I jump the heavier I feel and spin slowly downward like a lazy propeller into my body. Stranded here, waking up is the most awful thing I know. Please, Veronica, don't let me go back there. Her hands aren't strong enough.

Scrolls. The poet Shelley has come. We see him cross by Ozymandias and he gets off of his horse and walks away chasing a skylark. He comes back with vials of liquor clear and sweet. He says that the scrolls are kept in a lacquer box in a deep recess of her odorous dwelling. Sounds folded in cells of crystal silence, such as we hear in youth, that die before we are aware and the regret they leave like trash from a receding tide remain alone. The vials are opened one by one, cork stoppered bottles of cut crystal, by Sammael, and ministered drop by drop as I lay thinking. Like a bat she hovers beating her vans against a floating net, woven by love and sick laments.

One hope within two wills, one will beneath  
Two overshadowing minds, one life, one death  
One heaven, one hell, one immortality;  
And one annihilation. Woe is me!  
The winged words on which my soul would pierce  
Into the height of love's rare Universe  
Are chains of lead around its flight of fire--  
I pant, I sink, I tremble, I expire!

That is no dream. I stood full waking and the words of Shelley came and so I wrote them down. The poem is Epipsychidion.

The words of the journal blurred. She could feel herself entering in and out of the words, even as she was aware of his long slow breaths coming and going. He breathed the words in and out of her lungs and her eyes faded in and out of the page. Outlined against the night-lights was his body, recumbent, barely stirring with each breath. Now she could smell his thick, exposed flesh. She stared at his profile, the features totally relaxed, at the curve of his chest and then the sheet draped over his body, just below the nipples, down and over the feet, like a marble garment. His brow, his nose, the full lips and chin. She felt a free floating arousal then, but it wasn't sexual, it was something else, it had to do with the beauty of his form, the beauty of form itself. The body had always been sexual to her, beauty had always to do with physical desire, means and end were one. There was a pleasing simplicity to it. But she became entranced by the shape and color of his skin and features. Human being. Life configured in this shape, this knot of matter, the build of muscle and bone and skin. The arc of his pectorals, the adam's apple punctuating his throat. Her breath became heavy, her eyelids slid down over her eyes. She wanted to have him, to absorb him, to be one with that form. To touch his body. She lifted the sheet gently off of him and discovered his flat belly. The flesh was warm. She felt it vibrate with heat beneath her

hand. The cock was hard, even as he slept. She took it in her hand, felt its soft head, held the shaft, stroked it. He lay so still, so gleaming, muscles defined. She pulled up her dress and rolled her underwear off and started to rub her clit. She was already wet, her whole soul was at a pitch, it had melted inside her and rushed down into her belly and groin, and in a daze she climbed up on the table and it gripped him. She couldn't stop now, she straddled him with her knees, rubbed his cock back and forth over her clit down and up again, each time dipping in deeper till she was ready to bear down. She grunted quietly. The gurney squeaked. She had to put her hand down for support, finding the strength to move harder, up and down. Waves of contractions trembled through her, but she kept at it waiting for the wave to knock her flat on his chest. She lay there, panting. As she recovered she looked at his nipple. It was erect. She put her lips around it and sucked. A few sweet drops of milk filled her mouth.

#### Psyche Report contin'd

Subject's most persistent delusions and suicidal tendencies are traceable to prolonged, unresolved grief over the death of his wife. Revenge fantasies, suicidal thoughts and actions, persistent and vivid dreams about the deceased, are all consistent with this diagnoses, which is also supported by neurophysiological data. Problem: All of these symptoms are supposed to be substantially alleviated if not eliminated by transcryptasine but at these doses they appear to be induced by it.

Physically the subject is more than healthy: he exceeds every measure we have for bone, organ, muscle and nerve function as well as sensory perception which is particularly acute. Ejaculate is 5% above normal volume with unusually numerous and motile sperm. Hormone levels are that of a pregnant adolescent and brain cell development and tissue and organ repair are that of a young child. Overall then the subject's physical sense of self and world ought to

be one of high satisfaction and well-being, but it should be noted that he is extremely hostile and alienated.

The night she betrayed him began as always. He stood on the path beneath the flowering trees. The air was loud with bird song and everywhere he looked life flourished. Strolling along the path, he paused now and then to watch the squirrels race around the trees. He picked and ate a few cherries, the hot skin breaking between his teeth and the sweet flesh dissolving on his tongue. She was not in the courtyard by the fountain so he walked over fields and through a dense forest of pine to the lake. She was not there either. Then he headed for the river and leaned against one of the plane trees, feeling restless. There was a worrisome void in the garden, it was empty of contentment and he began to miss her, fiercely. He always knew that one day he would come to the garden and she would not be there.

It was not far from the river to their primeval haunt. He passed through the autumnal zone. If she were in the cave then everything would be fine. By the river and the lake she was simply there but among the rough old grottos and streams they played and laughed as lovers. It was their ancient world, their umbilicus. But she was not there.

The words lost and out of sorts belonged to the world, not the garden. He was like a child then lost in a crowd. Instinctively he headed to the plain where others gathered. It was a field bound by woods and stonewalls and on the far side by the cliffs and crags from which he had watched the grinning angel swoop down and take off with a writhing human. Beyond lay the mountains. Here he once found a few shepherds piping, swapping rhymes while four nude women with long hair danced. It was also where people came to die, run down by a lion. There were eruptions of savagery and violence. Rough dwellings were built on the edge of the field, beneath moss and lichen covered apple trees.

No one was about. He crossed the open field of lavender, sage and heather, beneath a hot sun in a cloudless sky. A falcon circled overhead, its shadow passing over the ground. He sat down by one of the huts on a rock. The apple trees shaded him from the sun, and there was a wall of brush, flowering shrubs and vines.

He sat there for a long time thinking. He wanted her always. He never wanted to leave. But he was tired. There had to be a reason why he came to this field. But the reason was nowhere in his mind. He was simply alone, in an empty world. Perhaps not alone, longing was there with him, longing for another. That was how it all began, with desire. The universe, no matter how sweet and beautiful, was silent. There was no answering thought, no touch and to touch; himself (which he now did) did not create the relation, it completed nothing.

He heard a rustling not far off and looked up. Something was in the bushes. Felix stood and warily walked towards the sound. Anything could materialize. He was not to assume that, since it was paradise, the noise would be friendly. It was part of the drama of the garden. The bushes, tall and sparsely covered with clusters of scarlet flowers, were moving back and forth. Then he saw a long tail and a pair of greenish brown haunches protruding from the leaves and branches. It was an angel. As he got closer he saw, concealed by the heavy hips and hind legs of the angel, a human buttocks and legs. The feet were digging into the ground. They were grunting. The angel was fucking the human from behind. He stopped to watch, entranced. The angel prick slid in and out; he saw flashes of red. He didn't know whether to be amused or embarrassed. The longer he watched the more he saw and knew. It was Sammael! Felix began to laugh. Sammael was screwing a human in the bushes and thought he was concealed. This was very funny. He laughed harder and harder till he had to sit down on the red dirt.

His laughter disturbed the couple. The fucking stopped. The big

reptilian haunch grew still and the tail swished back and forth in the dirt. The human's feet relaxed and it let out a loud orgasmic cry, shuddering into silence. Felix stopped laughing. Now he really was embarrassed but he couldn't move. He just kept staring, feeling he had seen something he was not supposed to see. Where the hell is she, he thought. And then he knew. He was there because Sammael was his connection to Veronica. He would show him the way when he was done fucking the human, or eating it.

In paradise there is no shame. They could not be hiding. The shame was in Felix.

Sammael pulled out and stood, his long, thin, red prick swinging. He turned around and looked at Felix with a broad smile, becoming in the process human. The haunches shrank into thick legs and the tail vanished into his spine. Now the prick was pink and fat.

"I'm sorry to laugh," Felix said.

Sammael shook his head. "Sorry?" he asked. "How odd."

The woman emerged from the bushes and Felix looked at her, curious. It took a moment to understand what his eyes saw right away. The moment was a long, vertiginous one, the kind of moment that both contains worlds and annihilates them at once. There was a hot flicker in his gut. The whole freight of abandoned feeling, everything banished from paradise into the world burrowed into his heart and exploded.

"Veronica?" he said.

"Felix, you've come."

"What's going on?" he asked.

Sammael and Veronica looked at each other and smiled. "Nothing," she said. Sammael shook his head.

"But you were," Felix swallowed spit but had no stomach to receive it. A terrible rage had engulfed him from within. There was a whirlwind of fire in his gorge. His eyes filled with tears and he

screamed, "God damn you! Fuck!"

"Felix," Sammael said, with a placid smile, "What's wrong?"

"You fuck my wife and ask what's wrong?"

Veronica's face fell into confusion and said, "Felix, calm down."

"Betray me? With that homosaurian monster? Go fuck yourself then! I don't give a god damn!" He stomped his foot and at the instant when his foot struck the ground he felt the universe invert, like a pocket pulled inside out.

He found himself lying face down on the ground. His back was blazing hot. Sweat poured down off of his forehead. His mouth was dry, his throat was sore and his lips were salty and cracked. A painful thirst reached up from his stomach to the top of his head and he was crawling towards a pile of red rocks, which cast the only shadow he could see. When he reached the shade of the rock he rested a minute to catch his breath and then sat up. In every direction, horizon to horizon, was a barren red waste. The sun was straight overhead, small and distant, but intense. There were no clouds. In one direction, on the horizon, was a chain of snow-covered mountains, exactly like those that bordered the lake and the field in the garden. What wouldn't he give to be lying on the shores of that lake, watching Veronica fly out over it with the kingfishers, laughing, loafing, swimming. He rubbed his eye and sand and dust fell across his fingers. He felt like he was made of sand and dust and when he rubbed his skin he was rubbing himself away. The ground was hard and flat, covered with tiny rough stones the color of rust, hot to the touch. Occasionally there were lumps of bigger, rough stones.

His eyes adjusted. There were piles of rocks, stone outcrops, boulders. It was a world of stone and sun. And there were plants. Cactus and mounds of sharp, spiky grass. Crawling on these spikes were tiny red ants. A few crossed over his feet and stung him. Ow! he screamed. His voice evaporated into the hot, endless sky. There was a

lizard with brown dorsal spikes and grey dewlaps eating black scorpions with flicks of its forked tongue. The shade of the rock was small comfort. His skin was blistered and peeling and his feet were covered with wounds and bloody sores. His nails were cracked and dirty from crawling.

He decided two things. One, he would rest till the sun went down. Two, he would try to reach the mountains. If he could reach them he could find the gates, which he would enter. Then he would apologize, make amends for his jealousy.

It was a long wait. Nothing ever seemed to take as long. It gave him a lot of time to consider what had happened. He was contrite, but the contrition was intellectual. In his gut he wanted to murder her. In his gut was nothing but hatred and burning fire. He shouted from his mind, no, but the no had no currency there and burned up along with every other thought he had. The sun never moved. The lizard never moved except to flick its tongue. Each flick was mindlessly precise and the writhing scorpion, stuck on the sticky appendage, zipped into the lizard's mouth in less than a second. But the second played out like a day. There was no wind, no sound, no commotion, just the red ants crawling on his skin. He brushed them away and still they came, each sting like the prick of a needle. The stings then formed a welt that itched. Soon he was covered in these. Ominously, his hand, as if under the control of someone else, went up to scratch. He knew it was the wrong thing to do but then the whole day had been one of acting out things he shouldn't do. He was under the compulsion of a wayward force. He tried rubbing the coarse hot sand into the bites but it just slid off of him. He had no spit. The sweat stopped. Sky and sun, lizard and ants and scorpions swam in and out of his eyes, wobbling in heat waves. Time didn't pass and nothing changed.

He decided to walk. A little way off was another pile of stones. Slowly and painfully he made it to them, cursing Veronica whenever

the pain ceased long enough for him to think in words. The bloody cracks on his feet filled with dirt. He didn't care now. He had no past or future, no wife, no crimes. There were no desires or regrets, only pain. He curled up in the shadow of the stone. There was no lizard here but plenty of scorpions and ants and he thought that he saw the tail of a snake disappear into a hole in the ground. He was swollen, bloody and filthy. Without water it would end here. He had only himself to blame. There was no other. He was the ultimate cause. He shut his eyes and the rage in his belly grew still. It was dark. He felt a comforting presence then, an absorbent nothingness that felt cooler and cooler as he entered it. He was being emptied out into the lab. This he could see now, distantly, like stars in the sky. There was a haze. The lab lay beneath him. He was weak, too weak to remain free of his body, which lay there beneath him, naked and healthy, feeding a steady stream of data to the machines arranged like walls around him. He wanted to be back in himself. He was his own and only womb. He had never been so happy to return.

Dr. Bryson slept in the chair next to him, his dream diary on the floor as if it had fallen from her hands when she fell asleep. He watched her through eyes like apertures; the image entered, his brain processed the visual information, but he felt nothing, knew nothing. Not even the absurdity of life, his life, his self, was apparent. The world was an object, a picture, without dimension or meaning.

The thirst lingered; his feet were sore. Pain gradually spread over his body and he began to relive every bite and sting, every blister. Then he saw Veronica and Sammael fucking. Over and over he saw his long red prick sliding in and out of her, pulling it out till the head just touched the outer lips of her vagina, his hands around her waist, one stretched forward to play with her breasts, hanging like udders beneath her, then driving it in. And as his rage and jealousy and hatred began to consume him again he realized that this was exactly how he had taken Promethea and Moises, and how they had taken

him and each other. There was no escape. Every move he made was preceded or followed by some awful cause or effect. Everywhere there was a massive failure of intention. The harder he tried the worse things got. Even giving up had yielded nothing.

Bryson was the ultimate cause then, not him. He had done nothing at all but follow the rules. It was craven to see himself as the author of the trouble; he was the author of nothing at all. Nothing he could accept. That was his due in the world and he would take to vacuity like a pig to shit. But Bryson, Bryson was the one. He looked at her long haggish white hair, her large head tipped back, sensuous mouth open and boozily snoring. This mundane, sarcastic woman in a lab coat who was testing him like a lab rat and was the cause of all his misery was lying there, asleep. All he had to do was seize hold of her throat and throttle her. He could crush her windpipe, cut off blood and oxygen to the brain with his hands. She would struggle just enough to make it feel like a fight. All at once he would be rid of her, of Monozone, and go off somewhere. But where would he go? And how would he escape the building? He needed clothes first. He couldn't just kill her and leave; he needed a plan of escape.

Felix sat up on the gurney. Something smelled like sex. It was very odd. He hopped down and walked around the lab, looking at the equipment, opening cabinets. He had been there for weeks at least, maybe months. Yet it was like he was seeing it for the first time. One of the screens showed a long, branching pink tunnel with blue entities covered in curved spikes tumbling through and little yellow polyhedrons bouncing off the walls. He touched his head, feeling for lumps, and headed for the shower. There had to be clothes somewhere.

Probably they'd come after him. If he could get to midtown he knew he could disappear there. If he tried to access his money they'd know, so he'd have to find work. Work off the books; if state found out they'd be notified too. He'd have to keep moving. Maybe go

upstate to Iroquoia, pick up work on a salvage crew. He could steal enough Paregane from the lab to keep going back to the wasteland till he could reach the mountains and reenter paradise. He'd deal with the flaming swords when he got to them. The important thing was to get out of this place and back to the garden.

There were no clothes anywhere that would fit him. He couldn't wear her sweats or dresses. The suit he was brought in wearing was vile; it hadn't been cleaned and was stuffed into a sack.

He checked under her bed and found a drawer. The drawer was locked, but he found the key in the top drawer of her desk and slid it open. In there he found his bag, with Veronica's ashes! The sight of the little coffin filled him with a warm longing. He pictured her, healthy and alive, not in the garden but as she had been when they were young, when they were for each other. Her voice was inside of him, trying to tell him something, what, he couldn't be sure of, but it sounded like, I'm coming, I'm coming.

He dressed in his own clothes, put the bag down by the door and walked over to Bryson. She was still sleeping. He felt some resistance but no, he was going to do it, he was going to get it over with and kill her. Nothing could be clearer in his mind than that she deserved to die. He reached out and touched her throat. It was soft. Her neck and throat were soft in his hand. Her hair fell down over his fingers. He could smell her, her human smell of soap and food and glandular secretions. He pressed his hands against the throat, felt the corrugations of her windpipe, interlocked his fingers behind her head and started to squeeze. She gasped. Her eyes popped open. Confusion, panic, terror. Cobalt blue, almost black in the dim light. A dry hissing noise came up through her lips. His hands gripped tighter and then he felt Veronica again, her voice, saw her young in their apartment, reading by the open window and smiling when he handed her a cup of coffee. Tears washed over his eyes. Life, he thought, so tenacious and always at the edge of death. So easily snuffed out and

yet it never lets go. Life, omnipotent, particular, rare. A single breath dwelling in a single body, lost to the air. All that ever was or will be, gone. The immense dimension, the tiny spark, the aspect of all that is and all that is reflected in a spark and that this is all we can know. Veronica spoke to him. Her voice was clear. He squeezed the throat to stop the voice; it was Veronica's throat he was squeezing and her voice hissing, NO. He paused to argue and then his arms dropped to his side, he let go and sat on the gurney. NO, he thought. There's more to me than this. Bryson gulped for air and fell. Felix, as if he'd been in a trance, stared at her in alarm. He got off the gurney and bent down to her but she scuttled away with a shout, gasping and coughing at the floor. "No!" she hissed. "Boyle, help!"

"Please," Felix said, chasing after her. They knocked into a tray of instruments that smashed to the ground. "Please, Dr. Bryson. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you. I didn't mean it."

She cowered under the chairs, stared up at him, rubbing her neck. "Of course you did," she panted. "It's what you've wanted to do from the start."

"No."

"Yes. Christ," she covered her mouth and choked up. "I can't," she coughed and gargled and wheezed. All of her limbs trembled and her eyes jerked back and forth between Felix and the floor. He wanted to help her up, he wanted to make it stop, go back, but she was right. There was no back to go to because he had wanted to throttle someone, murder someone, hang the whole thing around someone's neck and hers was it.

Boyle burst in the room. Seeing the damage, the forceps, tweezers and metal swabs scattered on the floor, the overturned chairs, Bryson rubbing her neck, disheveled, and Felix squatting down beside her, he charged Felix whom he intended to disable with a single blow.

Felix turned on Boyle. Without thinking, he crouched back on his

legs and leapt through the air, bringing Boyle to the ground. Boyle, pinned on his stomach, head flailing, kicked and screamed. Felix took hard breaths. Adrenaline jolted his limbs. He bit Boyle on the back of the neck and tasted blood. Inflamed, Boyle thrust upwards, throwing Felix off balance enough so that he could stand, Felix clinging to him piggyback, teeth still sunk in his neck. They thrashed together. Boyle grunted and barked, punched and kicked and slammed backwards against the counter. Felix's grip broke.

Bryson stood unsteadily, and, as her mind cleared, in dismay, shouted Stop! at the wheeling blur.

The two men turned toward each other and growled and cursed. "Fucker, I ain't givin' you a break," said Boyle, pounding Felix into the counter with roundhouse blows. Felix grabbed him. "Fucker! Let go!"

"Fucker? You little fucker, no!" Felix shouted back, digging his fingers into Boyle's face. Boyle bit his hand and punched his gut and then they were apart, circling each other, dripping blood and sweat.

"Stop, I say!" Bryson threw a chair. It crashed across the floor between them.

"I ain't lettin' this freak killya, doc."

"I'm done being your pin cushion," Felix said.

"You'll do as you're told," Boyle said. He grabbed a syringe off the floor. "I'll stick you with this. I'll pump you full of air, you fucking little guinea pig."

"Try it. Come on. Try it," Felix said, taunting him with his fingers. "Kill me if you can, get it over with."

"Stop," Bryson said again. She touched Boyle's shoulders. "He's all right. I'm fine."

"He ain't backed down, doc. I can see it in his eyes. Those eyes is screwed with murder."

Felix panted. Everything crowded in on him. He flashed through a dozen sensations, each worse than the last. He knew nothing, he saw with perfect clarity. He wanted to die, he wanted to live. He blew wildly about in contrary thoughts till it seemed that the walls and the people were closing in on him tighter and tighter, the focus unbearable. He was known and unknowing, he knew and was unknown. Cracks of clarity obliterated with murderous desire. He searched the room for a weapon, measured the distance to the door, calculated his chances. In a trembling voice he said, "I want out. I'm all done."

"Please just calm down, before security comes," Bryson said.

"I ain't backin' down till he does."

Felix looked at the syringe. "Drop the needle and I will."

"Do it Boyle, please."

Reluctantly, without taking his eyes off of Felix, he dropped the syringe. He rubbed the back of his neck. "What are you, anyway? You fucking bit my neck."

Felix spit blood on the ground. "I don't know what I am. I've been nothing for so long it feels like home." He looked at Boyle. He looked at Bryson. He backed into a chair and lapsed into a near catatonic state. When he could speak again he said, "I'm sorry I hurt you. I'm not in control anymore. All I want to do is die and yet I fight like an animal. It makes no sense. Please," he felt fire and yet he was begging. "You've got to understand. I can't go back there anymore. I can't go back to the garden."

Boyle's eyes narrowed. "I never trusted none of you Paregane freaks. It ain't natural to want to die. I don't like the looks of you. I don't like the way you smell. You're like, like the spoooge-man or something." He rubbed his neck and winced.

"Let me dress that," Bryson said. "Don't touch each other, now," she warned. The two men sat facing each other. Bryson cleaned the

bite with WoundEx and dressed it with NuSkin. “Now, guys, we have to talk. Boyle, can I trust you?”

He scowled. “It ain’t beyond question?” She didn’t understand. He clarified. “You’re the boss, doc.”

She looked around. She’s afraid, Felix thought. There was a dimension to this he didn’t understand. The lab, the building took on a different aspect. He didn’t even know if the door worked for him from the inside. He didn’t know where he was. All he had for things were names. Bryson, Bradlee, Monozone, Boyle. Bryson looked at him. The whites of her eyes were speckled with burst capillaries. Her throat was bruised. He could see the shape of his fingers, a yellow and purple stain. “Listen to me very carefully. Bradlee will kill you as soon as he thinks you’re of no use to him. You know too much. We have to get you out of here, and it won’t be easy. I need to think up something. We can fake it for a few days. I’m working on a report. When that’s done, when I’ve taken care of a few things, we’ll get you out of here.” She looked at Boyle. She took a bag out of an inside pocket of her lab coat. “This is eight million dollars worth of jewels.” She pulled a gold disc out of her side pocket. “This is the proceeds from stock sales. It’s in jewels too, free and clear. There’s enough here for you to get away. Just give me a chance.” Felix had never seen so much money before. He looked at Boyle. Boyle looked at the disc and the sack of jewels. His eyes widened. “Eight million bucks won’t bring back Veronica, I know. But it’s enough for you to start over somewhere. When the report’s done, you can go.” She turned to Boyle. “I know you work for Bradlee. But there’s enough on this disc to send all your kids to school and pay for my retirement in Iroquoia, if you help Felix get away.”

Boyle looked around, calculating. “I guess so. I know a guy. Bradlee will be pissed.”

“I’ll handle Bradlee. He’ll never know you helped.”

Boyle rubbed his mustache and sniffed. His neck stiffened. “Doc, I don’t think I oughta hear nothin’ more. I got your back, but be careful. There’s things I can’t protect you from. Bradlee’s a big man. When dogs hear his whip crack they jump, got it? Don’t forget, I got Laraby on my ass too.” He stood up.

“I won’t be a problem, Boyle,” Felix said.

“You already are,” he replied, sauntering out the door.

When it was closed Bryson picked up her computer and clacked at the keys.

“Is that the report?” Felix asked.

“No. It’s an order for a key. My way out.”

“What will be in the report?”

She smiled. “The truth.”

“That’s all I want,” he said.

“Well, you’re about to get it,” she said.

Report Summary:

Felix Clay, age 42, a man in good health.

Unfortunately, transcryptasine was released before extensive studies could be completed. The following report is based on a comparison of three double blind studies of 1,000 likely candidates for transcryptasine therapy conducted before August 2180, observations made of individuals who frequented a ‘Lucky Day Parlor’ located in a Midtown Manhattan nightclub previously known as Gametria and who were confirmed transcryptasine abusers, and a careful, comprehensive study made of a single individual abuser, Felix Clay, a healthy male subject aged 42.

The initial mortality rate for transcryptasine use was 10%, based upon a single daily dose administered to severely depressed, dysfunctional individuals in immediate danger of committing suicide. It increases to near 100% when taken four or more times a day. With



the exception of Mr. Clay, all inmates of the 'Lucky Day Parlor' observed over several months from winter 2180 to spring of 2181, died. Autopsies conducted on the bodies revealed no obvious cause of death. Moreover, though transcryptasine was found to be non addictive, without withdrawal symptoms or cravings, all evidence indicates that self-medicating patients under normal circumstances will escalate the dosage beyond the recommended level, desiring to prolong the Euphoric Effect. Given this mortality rate at higher dosages and the evident compulsive self-medication involved, it is doubtful transcryptasine could ever be widely used outside of highly controlled, therapeutic settings. Even the safety of this limited use is in question and should be subject to future trials.

Mr. Clay was studied with the hope of finding in him some

#### Conclusion

Ordinarily, even with a low daily dose, transcryptasine affects a 'harmonic convergence' of the various scannable electromagnetic waves of the human brain. Its function is homeostatic in nature, recalibrating tubules on the one hand and stimulating an initial pulse wave in a group of cells located near the pituitary gland known as the alpha group. This pulse then resets the drone wave, which has been shown to be variant in mentally ill, alienated, unhappy, depressed individuals. By restoring the drone wave to an ideal frequency the other waves adjust as well and broadcast and reception improve with an overall dramatic reduction in feedback, white noise, and wave interference. The patient sleeps and enters immediately Umbra, a state of great contentment that carries over to other states. Penumbra and Vovulos dreams are vivid, Flat is productive of increased spiky sexuality, Deltaic yields consistently more uniform data transformations, Tributary sensory activity is < acute, Permutation drives exceed known possible standards, Chiasmus is reduced to a manageable level of productive feedback. The only states unaccounted for are Sphere, Umbra, and Grembo, for obvious

reasons. Yet Umbra, as a gateway to Grembo, would appear to be the key to the mortality rate.

In this subject even with very high dosages drone wave parameters remained highly variant and he consistently entered Grembo where all activity ends. Indeed, drone wave is off both the Zapruder and Heinmach scales exceeding anything researchers have documented in this research team's forty years of work. The conclusion is that subject's resistance to transcryptasine induced mortality is congenital and does not suggest immediate, obvious ways of modifying transcryptasine in such a way as to decrease its mortality or achieve the goal of an over-the-counter Euphoric drug.

The recommendation of this report then is that transcryptasine be used as an experimental drug, highly restricted, with strict procedures of informed consent and that this conclusion be released immediately to national and international medical authorities. It is this research team's conclusion that it should be withdrawn from mass production immediately and that all existing stocks be destroyed, except for a small quantity to be confined to legitimate, controlled research facilities until such time as its safety can be guaranteed. Until the properties of transcryptasine are better understood, in a context of improved quantum neurophysiology and quantum psychiatric knowledge and theory, transcryptasine must remain a tantalizing and in the end, failed, instance of mind-altering pharmacology.

## CHAPTER FORTY AT THE LIMIT OF FARFEEZA

Bradlee got off the phone with Priss Valdez and reflected on their conversation. She was unhappy and, as usual, she conveyed her unhappiness in upbeat tones. “I can’t close the deal with Broadway Inc. and Jock Two Feathers if our position is weak.”

Did he have to do everything? Explain everything? “Fripp isn’t interested in pushing the issue. The violence is too much for him. Says he didn’t go into business to fight a war.”

“Who’s running the show over there, Bradlee?”

Rhetorical, provocative, void of importance. “It’s not that simple. You know that.”

“This drug of yours was supposed to fix everything.”

Impertinence. Without Paregane she’d have one paddle in the water. Now she had four. “We didn’t expect it to kill so many people nor did we expect it to have the opposite effect on morale.”

“That’s altogether too much uncertainty. Our surveyors are too afraid to go into the field without major back up. I can’t persuade the others to use remote sensing devices. It’s a mess here. Every dog has its nose in the bowl, understand? The military presence provokes further attacks. GMZers have taken sides with the bloody Indians. Now, listen, there’s more. They’ve been made the eighth nation of the Haudenosaunee. This is a disaster for us and your Bryson is in the thick of it. She’s fucking up Paregane, and now the water deal.”

Hmmmm. Bryson. It was only a matter of time. “Surely not the water deal--”

“No? Then tell me why her husband’s been made one of the eighth nation sachems?”

“Sachem? What on earth is a Sachem.”

“It’s a chief of some sort. You know, an hereditary boss, like a lord.”

The concept was somewhat familiar. He was English.

“There’s--” he heard her shuffling through things, “an Amish fellow named Stoltz, a farmer, some sort of cosmic name, let’s see, yes Borealis Gnomen and a Rastafarian named Jordan. I’ll tell you what else, Bryson’s husband’s girlfriend is their den mother.”

That was funny. He chuckled sourly. “Den what?”

“They’re bloody matriarchal something or other. She and her sisters and their descendants will name the future Sachems, and she’s pregnant.”

This was just speculation. DOD was always prey to bad intelligence. “Astonishing intelligence.”

“It wasn’t easy, I can tell you.”

Stupidity is always more difficult, by definition. But as always, it forced an answer. “Bryson has no idea about any of this.”

“Too brilliant? Where’s the brilliant cure for Paregane then? I thought you had some man on ice, a man who can’t die.”

Was there any order to the list of complaints? He would start to keep a record. “Yes, but the study is going slowly.”

“Well, if Bryson knows what’s good for her she’ll move a little faster. The only reason she hasn’t been picked up by security is you my friend, and I’m the one who has your ass covered.”

Arrogant display of power to mask vulnerability. “I’ll try.”

“Good.”

Then it was his turn. “Valdez, General, you’ve got too many irons in the fire. Put the water on the back burner, till we’ve dealt with

Paregane. Paregane is the key to sales and sales keep the stock price up, which puts us on council. Let me work with Fripp a bit. I'm sure once he's cooled down about his wife he'll come around. Once we make the deal with Two Feathers and Spahn we can drop Paregane and move on to the water."

"It's not just me Bradlee. There's pressure from other DOD members to get going. The army corps needs another project. The west is thirsty. Now's the time to move, before the Haudenosaunee can consolidate. Then they might want in on the deal, or queer it altogether."

The knife is in, now twist. "I can't make any promises."

She laughed brightly. "That's not what I want to hear."

He faced the windows and leaned back in his chair. The screens lit up behind him, views of the lab, her office, building entrances and exits. There were weird little knots of cloud stretching out in long lines over the bay. He called Fripp.

"Bradlee, Julie's a maniac. Without that drug it's bedlam here."

He imagined Julie Fripp screaming in a hallway, kicking in a door. "I've just been on the phone with Valdez, sir."

"That woman is obsessed."

"Which one?"

"All of 'em. Just a moment." Bradlee heard mumbling and then the low buzz of an electric razor. "I haven't shaved yet. Tell Valdez we don't have the votes in council today. I'm getting slammed on Paregane from all sides. Police, lawyers, doctors, diplomats. Jesus Bradlee, Paregane was supposed to solve problems. You've fucked up my marriage, you've up fucked everything."

What does the barber charge to cut the throat of the man he's shaving? "That's not entirely warranted, Fripp."

"Don't you ever crack?"

Weak bastard. "The stock is holding steady."

"The stock is what? Holding steady? A hundred million bucks, that's what I've lost. That bitch Bryson sold her shares. How does that work?"

"You made two hundred million before you lost a hundred. Looks to me like you're a hundred up. And Bryson is a scientist. She needed the cash for her aging husband."

"Oh, horseshit. She turned Julie on me. Did you tell her that? Did you?"

"I delivered the message very clearly. Her explanation is true, if inexcusable. She was drunk."

"We were all drunk."

Distract him. "I'm going to see about the test subject."

"That man who can't die?"

You can give a phrase to a man like a toy to a child and watch him lose himself playing with it. "Yes, that's the one."

"Curious case, that. Well, don't prolong things. At a certain point we ought to cut our losses. Go into illegal sales, make money, sure, but we make no claims for the drug, we abandon everything, the over-the-counter strategy, overseas sales. Terminate the study, euthanize that fellow."

"If it comes to that."

"It only takes one successful lawsuit in this business to bring the whole thing down. It's the avalanche and we end up paying out billions."

"I understand."

It was the kind of morning he hated. He drank black coffee and tried to plot his course. He turned from the windows and said, chateau; aerial views of South Island fjords and grazing sheep popped across the screens.

He called for Boyle. Laraby was so sure of Boyle, but Bradlee had his doubts. His behaviour was erratic. He showed the proper resolve in delicate situations, but he sweated a lot. There were times when Bradlee thought Boyle might be conscience stricken, he had so little gusto for the work. That was o.k. Men like Boyle could be conflicted so long as they were more afraid of him than anyone else. The danger was always that he would strike out on his own, or that he would have an agenda. Well, the doubts remained nebulous. Part of the whole business he found himself in. There was an undetected dimension he had felt all along and Boyle had part of his being in it. What was one to do? Today he felt unusually fatalistic. Bradlee normally scoffed at the idea of fate, one took what one needed; one plotted a course. Wisdom dictated tactical change and revision, there were things beyond one's control, but even in the midst of uncertainty there were always choices to be made and failure was usually a failure to read correctly what was going on. There were times however when he abandoned this belief and felt himself being borne along by forces foreign to his reckoning. It was a feeling he detested but he had to admit that there were times when it became the entire strategy, that one could be carried to a new, unexpected place beyond danger, where a new opportunity lurked. Or it could be a disaster.

Reliance on spies was a necessity yet no single spy could be trusted; one needed a network of spies. He had not been back at Monozone long enough to establish such a thing. He had no one in Laraby's office to check up on Boyle for instance. In fact, when he considered the matter, he himself was the nexus of a network of spies kept by Valdez. She had them everywhere and knew everything. And Fripp probably imagined that Bradlee was his spy in at DOD. And so it went, on and on. Every operator an operand. He would have to keep a close eye on Boyle, that was all. And as long as he needed money, he'd be back for more. He most certainly still did Laraby's bidding,

and whether Laraby had thrown in his lot with Bradlee or not, Bradlee didn't know. He did know that Laraby never threw in his lot with anyone more than provisionally. He was a position player. The design, however, was clear. He and Valdez and Fripp were after bigger things than Laraby's office racket. Laraby in that scheme was nothing but a mite. Yes, but even the biggest game depends upon the details. The fart of a flea could bring them all down and that insight was his alone.

Boyle popped his head in the office door and Bradlee viewed him with the usual combination of grudging admiration and disgust. Weak in so many ways and yet efficient enough with the proper prodding. His protests of vestigial conscience were so easily bought. Why did he bother? Between war and police work the man had to be well beyond even a delusional redemption. He was surprised there was a scrap of scruple left in him.

"Yeah boss?" he asked, face half covered by the door. Bradlee raised his eyebrows and met one eye. Boyle ventured further in. He hovered around the chair, nervous, his mouth tight. Evidently he relaxed around Bryson. Bradlee shared none of her enthusiasm for his small talk. He tolerated it because it was during such sessions that men like him unwittingly divulged any secrets they had.

"Sit down, Boyle. Cigarette?"

"I got my own."

"Let's smoke, shall we?"

They smoked and watched the TV's. "Sheep," Boyle said with a scowl. The screens flipped and showed figures from the world's financial exchanges.

"You see there? Monozone ticked down a point. I thought we'd plugged every last leak. And after sacking that lawyer I'm sure we took the buzz out of any lawsuits. Still, the uncertainty persists." He looked at Boyle, indicating that any response he had he was free to

make, but the man was too obtuse to bite. "How's it progressing over there, have you any sense?"

Boyle nodded and exhaled. "It's too screwy for me to say. There's something fucked up about that guy though. She's nutty about him."

"Ho ho. You sound jealous."

Boyle blanched and swallowed hard. Bradlee ho-hoed some more. "Mr. Bradlee, no. I'm a married man."

"And she's a married woman."

"It ain't like that wid us."

"But you like her."

"Sure. But it ain't, you know, improper."

"Strictly Platonic?"

Boyle's eyes narrowed. "Whatever that is. Sounds dirty to me."

"No no. Jealousy is a feeling that comes up between friends. You've grown close these past few months."

"It's a job's all."

"They certainly keep busy. All those machines." He leaned back and folded his hands across his chest.

"They gimme da creeps. Humming and buzzing and spitting out waves and data. There's the one with da weird pictures. Da brain boss, it's got like these bowling balls with spikes and suction cups rolling around in it, and pink tumble weeds. Sometimes you see this nest, this crazy ball of shit with green and red marbles shooting around and other times, it's like all black except for this, I dunno, you now how dust is in a light? That." Bradlee pretended interest. He cleared his throat and all of the screens became a giant display filled with the visual data they were discussing. "Sheesh boss, don't do that!"

Bradlee chuckled and his eyes misted over. "Bryson's under quite a bit of pressure to get a result here." He blinked at the screens and

they became a checkerboard: financial data, the news, his chateau, the entrances and exits. Boyle said nothing. "She seems," Bradlee paused. "Different. Little things. We've known each other for decades of course. I can't help but sense if something's a little bit off. I'm actually concerned. For her health. Have you noticed?"

"Just that she don't do nothing but work."

"You know that we might, with very little warning, have to close up shop? We'd have to take care of Felix then."

"Take care of how?"

"Well, I won't get too specific, but there are legal complications, trade secrets we'd have to protect."

Boyle shook his head, thinking. "The doc'd never go for that. She really loves this guy. Feels guilty about his wife."

"That's my concern exactly. Bryson's such, er, a passionate person, she might not see the necessity. I've discussed the possibility. Do you share this affection for our test subject?"

Boyle laughed. "Fuck no."

"Good. When the time comes, you'll do what's necessary?" Boyle looked coy, licked his lips and screwed up his eyes. "Of course you'll be paid."

"If I'm goin' ta hell boss, I gotta do some good for it."

Bradlee chuckled. "But Boyle, this is hell."

"We ain't gettin' tortured."

"That's because we're management." He waited for Boyle to laugh and when he didn't, continued. "I wish I could be sure about Bryson. I'm worried."

"She's fine."

"But the temptations can be extreme. There are, rumours. Things I've seen and heard, vague intimations. If we are going to succeed in this very difficult phase of our project I have to be absolutely sure

about her loyalty. You wouldn't, er, hold out on me? If she were say, plotting to get Felix out of here without my knowledge? A quixotic gesture, absurd, but in her mind compelling, perhaps because of its patent absurdity? Because you know, the hand that gives," he opened a drawer of his desk, took out a card and slid it across the shiny, empty top to Boyle, "can also take." He took out a silver .45 revolver from the same drawer and opened it, examining the loaded chambers.

Boyle swelled with indignation. "I ain't gonna fail you boss and I'm tellin' you, she's a good lady. She never says nothing against you or the company. And she's been good to me."

"She's been good to me too," Bradlee observed with a strange smile, one he almost never let play on his lips and which he quickly replaced with one of amused irony.

"No boss, I mean, like, she got my kid into college. That's how good she is. Because of her my kid's gonna be a doctor! She didn't need ta do that, didn't ask for nothing in return, and didn't want me to tell no one cause she was embarrassed. I mean, I'm in despair over this thing and she dragged it out of me one day and just like that, she picks up the phone and calls her friend Doctor Velodia at Cornell and boom, Medear is in. That's good people. It don't get more loyal than that."

Bradlee suppressed, with great effort, the instinct to swallow. He blinked, felt the water fill his eyes and kept his breathing even. He even smiled. "She's certainly very kind. You know, I just had a thought, an inspiration really. Would you get the car Boyle and bring it around front? I feel like taking a drive."

## CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

### WHERE ONE DOES NOT BELONG

As soon as he had said it Boyle knew he'd made a terrible mistake and that Bryson was in trouble. He didn't give a fuck about Felix but he wasn't about to betray Bryson, not unless he had to. Still, Bradlee had made it clear whom he worked for and what price he'd pay for screwing up that end of things. Caught in the middle. Nothing new there. All he had now was luck.

There was enough time to give them the heads up on the way out. Bradlee sat fuming at his desk with that funny look he had. Bradlee was good at self control but the first thing Boyle did was learn to read his eyes. There was a sadness that passed into them when they turned pink and watered up, as if he saw something very clearly, something awful he was hopeless to stop. It was easy to recognize. When Bradlee made him shoot that lawyer it had happened and each time they pried lose a little information from a doctor it had happened too.

Boyle tried not to think about it, he didn't want to make himself sick. Trinh Ma would be able to read his mind. She warned him when he took the job that they only wanted him to do their dirty work and then, when Laraby called about the Bryson job, she warned him again. Then she was a pain in the ass about the money, always buggin him about where is it. Why don't you have any cash. But once he started taking in the bonuses she changed her tune and shook her head and said things like, It ain't right takin' blood money, as if there were any other kind. What did she know? She would say whatever

and leave the details to him. You can't tell a guy to go out and make some money and then get particular about how he does it. You don't say you'd rather die than see your kids sink deeper into the shit they had the bad luck to be born into and not expect some sort of consequences. Money comes hard in this world and unless you're rich it doesn't come from nothing. And he had limited talents and opportunities. Those he had he took.

She was right of course. Laraby and Bradlee were using him. And at first he fell for the money without thinking about it either. He had no idea what was at stake. By the time he figured it out he was too deep in. They could take everything away. They could kill his family.

There was no way he was killing Bryson, not unless he absolutely had to. And even then he wasn't sure. If it came to that, why not just kill Bradlee? Ha, a good fucking joke. He knew exactly why. His life would be worth shit then. So the thing is, is to never let it get to that. That was the plan.

Bryson and Felix were sitting around blowing steam off of their coffee and yacking as usual. Boyle missed the days when it was just him and the doc. Even when Felix played sleeping beauty it was better, they could hang out, go get a bite and a beer. But when he stopped taking Paregane and Bryson started working on the report, everything changed. She got nervous, started to hold back. Well, he could forgive her that. She didn't tell him about the key, he found out about it cause a guy in the tool shop told him about the order. Hiding it from Bradlee wasn't hard. Boyle had been hiding out from guys like Bradlee all his life. Sure, Bradlee made him sweat, but that was nothing.

He entered the lab and their backs went stiff. Felix was reading over some silver electraweave and she was going through another sheet of gold.

Sweaty and short of breath, he looked at him and then at her, his

heartbeat tight and fast. This was the crucial move then. He wasn't sure what to do exactly. Bradlee might be watching them. Bradlee was agitated, and he'd be more agitated as he put it together. He didn't suspect Boyle yet but he was generally suspicious. Boyle had seen it before. Bradlee would cast his net and everyone caught in it would have to go.

"What's wrong?" Bryson asked. Boyle said nothing. Felix lifted his eyes from the electraweave and frowned. "Spit it out, Boyle," she continued. "You're sweating more than I am."

"It's Bradlee," he said. "I'm--" now he realized he felt like a fool. If only he'd kept his mouth shut. But he hadn't, and this was probably his only chance to make good. "I blew it doc, I'm sorry." He was trembling. Fuck! he thought, clenching his teeth and fists, but he couldn't control the tremors shooting through his body. He had to pee. He wanted to cry. Sparks fired off the inside of his skull. He tried breathing slowly. He imagined his heart, which thumped loudly in his ears, slowing down.

"What, Boyle?" Now she was concerned. She put down her coffee and approached him.

Boyle swallowed. Time, he thought, time. Where the fuck is the time? "I meant to defend you doc. He was saying things. That you were fucking up, sabotaging Paregane. I didn't want you to get in trouble, understand? So I defended you, said how good ya been to me and then," he blinked and his face burned, "It just came out of me, I said how you helped Medear and called your friend Velodia."

"Oh my god," she sat down and pushed her hair off of her forehead.

"What? What's wrong with you two?" Felix asked.

"Now we have to send the report," she said in a low voice. "We'll take the hovercraft. Or the car. I've got the keys. Go to Velodia and warn her, then make for Leonard's."

Boyle didn't like it. "Can't take the car. Bradlee asked for it. And you gotta send a message to Velodia now. There ain't time for nothing else."

Bryson nodded. "I'll send a message with the report. I'll send the report to everyone. It doesn't matter what happens now. Everyone will know. Felix, get your bag."

"We're going?"

"Yes," Bryson shrieked. "We're going."

The set up was no good. He watched them work. If Bradlee had them on the screen he'd be coming down to roust him or worse, suspect them all and shut the building down. "Hurry up," he said. Bryson sat at her desk and Felix stood by the door with a funny look on his face.

Bryson yelled, "The hovercraft's too easy to follow."

"Now look doc, you can't take the car--"

"Yes we can," said Felix. He slugged Boyle in the stomach. "Bryson, let's go."

Bryson came out of the office clutching her straw overnight bag and the sack of jewels, which she hung around her neck. She patted down her pockets and then looked at Boyle, wheezing at the ground. "Oh Boyle," she said with a gentle cry. "I'm sorry about this."

Boyle gasped for breath. He grunted, "Hurry."

"I'm sorry too," Felix said, before kicking him in the face. Then he took his gun. They closed the lab door behind them quietly and made for the parking lot. The lateral took forever but next they got on the private express lift down. When they finally opened the doors to the back parking lot it was like letting air into a shuttered house. The dumpsters stank in the hot sun.

"Which one is it?" Felix asked. The running had given him a headache. Vaguely he thought, I've had this headache for days.

"The silver Caddy. Can you drive it?"

"No problem." She tossed him the keys. He opened the hot metal door and swung it closed, settling into the burning black upholstery. She got in beside him and they sped down the service road towards Manhattan.

Bradlee could not believe what he was watching. What on earth was Boyle doing in the lab talking to them? Did he know what he had done? He switched on audio but couldn't make out the conversation. Damn. Then Felix slugged Boyle. That was it. He stowed the .45 revolver and took out two automatics loaded with implosion rounds and headed out the door. They wouldn't get far. He called security as he ran and sent them to the hovercraft lot with orders to detain them. He went straight to the lab to get Boyle. The man was on the floor, his nose bleeding and panting.

"Get up, Boyle," he said, pointing a gun at his head.

"Oh, boss," he grumbled.

Time, Bradlee thought. He would interrogate all three and figure out what was up. But he needed Boyle if Boyle was salvageable. "Get your breath and come into her office, Boyle." He futzed with Bryson's computer and watched the entrances and exits. Security were converging on the hovercraft lot. Then he saw them, entering the rear parking lot. What? he wondered. It was Bryson and Felix. "Boyle, you didn't give them the keys, did you?" he asked, checking the chamber of his gun. He didn't want to kill him here but he would if he gave up the car.

Boyle, wheezing still and coughing, his face smeared with blood and his eyes dazed, stood in the office door. "No boss."

Bradlee turned towards him. His car! They were getting into his car and driving off. They had stolen his car and Boyle had given them the keys. He rarely if ever felt the rage in him but now his eyes and ears were engulfed in flame. He felt like a child about to have a



tantrum. He knew that physically he appeared calm. There was no sweat or even a tightening of his jaw but he could feel it in his eyes, they were molten. His car! He had eaten a lot of shit to get that car. The enormity of their escaping in it was overwhelming. He'd have to tip off the military police or risk losing them. They were totally free to go wherever they wished. The car had top clearance, they wouldn't have to slow down, and it couldn't be monitored or traced. It would probably even block the neuronanobot from transmitting. Shit, they'd be out of range in fifteen minutes anyway. He looked at Boyle. Boyle the traitor, the inconsequential, incompetent, sentimental little shit. Standing there, twitching, rubbing his face. Before he killed him he had to know the details. "Why'd you give them the keys, Boyle? Let's have the whole thing. If you know what's good for you."

"I didn't boss, I didn't do nothing. I came by just to tell 'em I wouldn't be here, that you and me was going out. Then the fucker slugs me. And I never gave 'em no keys." He was cowering. "Don't point that thing at me, boss, unless your planning on using it. Just shoot me now, then. But I swear I never did nothing." He stared at Bradlee with a weird look of hostility and resignation. Then he fumbled in his pocket. "I'm gonna take 'em out now, real slow, so you can see." Bradlee stared him in the eye, aiming the gun at his pupil. The keys jingled. He held out his other hand and lowered the gun.

"Where's your gun, Boyle?"

He patted his pockets and looked sheepishly up at Bradlee, shaking his head. "I guess it ain't my day. They got the gun."

"Come on. We have work to do. Go get that box you use to monitor the neuronanobots and a couple of guns. And don't bring anything fancy, powerful will do. Then meet me at Bryson's hovercraft."

"We're going after them?"

Bradlee took a breath and looked around the lab. An urge to wreck it rippled through his head and vanished. He breathed again, slower. "Not yet. We have other work to do first." Boyle narrowed his eyes. "If you don't want a bullet in the back of the head you'd best get moving and do everything I say." Then, darkly, against his will, he muttered, "You're all I have at the moment."

"Do you know how to drive?" Bryson asked as Felix jerked away from the curb and sped off.

"Sure, I can drive. But I don't know where I am."

"Queens."

"How do I get to the city? How do I navigate this thing?" He searched around for the navigation equipment but every time he took his eye off the street he nearly went off the road. The accelerator, brake and steering wheel were all in place. It had been years since he'd driven a car but he had gotten good at freeform in his twenties. He'd played with cars all his life. He got his first drive simulator for christmas when he was three. He played Race Car and DemoDerb and had RemoteControlPatrol, a fleet of black police cars with yellow bubble lights and tail fins, which he and his father spent a few months racing in the park. Then there was the show Highway Doom, the road movie fad, especially Road Rage 3. He and Veronica used to have sex in cars on weekends. But this was not like that. He was pressed right up against it now, there was nothing between him and it. He had to keep the narrow street in his eyes and drive as fast as he could without crashing into walls that looked like they were about to slice them in half. Then zip, 50 centimeters on either side.

Bryson looked around on the dash and the floor. "These don't have navigation equipment. He just drives it."

"If I can get us into the city I can get us onto the highway to somewhere."

"Follow this street. It gets wider up ahead and feeds onto the

bridge, the Queensboro, into town.”

Felix leaned back in the seat a bit. He checked the mirrors, then sat up straight and started craning his head around. The hood was huge. “Won’t they come after us?”

“I don’t know what he’ll do. Here, take this.” She handed him an ampoule of silver liquid. “It’s BiteStop. For the bugs. We’re going to Leonard’s. I’m not sure he can follow us there. I have to think. I sent her a warning, with the report.”

“What happened?” he asked, facing her briefly. She was grinding her teeth. She looked like a human being now. Scared. Maybe he should be scared too. But his head hurt too much and then there was the road, looming. Nothing mattered. As it always does.

Low industrial buildings with broken windows went by. They shot up a composite ramp onto a metal causeway and then out over the river on the suspension bridge. He had a sense of the wheel now, of the gas. There were other cars on the bridge. He scanned the sky ahead and in the mirrors for police. It will all be over soon. Bryson said, “Bradlee knows we’re old friends. He figured it all out from that. He had it all anyway.”

“All what out? What was Boyle talking about?”

“Velodia is a friend of mine. A psychiatrist. I went to her last year to see if she would help stop transcraptasine. She got doctors not to prescribe it.”

“What doctors?”

“Any she could persuade. There was a conference in Lackawanna PA. She invited psychiatrists, doctors, top people mostly, but it filtered down. Bradlee knows I know Velodia. He’s met her. They hated each other. One of the worst weekends of my life. Leonard was there. Anyway, Bradlee’s first night back on the job he asked me about her and I lied. Then I neglected to tell Boyle not to say anything about helping his daughter get into Cornell. I was

preoccupied.”

“With what?”

They were off the bridge, on the narrow streets between the walls of luxury high rise glass, along the walkways he had haunted while living in Midtown.

“You, things. I wanted, want, out. Everything I’ve done would appear to have been directed toward that end. But I don’t remember now if there was a plan. The intention was, that is, I thought I could manage things, to control events in such a way that people wouldn’t get hurt and I could escape.”

He eructated a laugh. “So, what’s the new plan?”

“Let’s just head west on 80. Figure out from there.”

Boyle sat squashed in the hovercraft. Bradlee was talking to him. He didn’t sneer but Boyle knew an unexpressed sneer when he heard it.

“Let’s just run through the program here, shall we?” said Bradlee. “Then we have an errand in Midtown.”

“What’s that?”

“Your colleague, Zack. Was that his name?” Boyle didn’t answer. Even cramped in the bubble Bradlee hadn’t lost his cool. He didn’t sweat or look inconvenienced, scrunched over reading the list of coordinates. When he reached August he slowed down and said, “That’s it, August 17th. The day she left for the GMZ. She stopped first at Cornell.” He rubbed his forehead, huffed a little and looked out the window. “Call home. Tell them you won’t be home for a couple of nights.”

“But--”

“Shut up and do as I say.”

The hovercraft surged forward and up before Boyle could get his belt buckled. He looked at the East River and felt woozy. He felt

afraid and started to look out the windows for missiles or aircraft. Every boat, every window implied a position, a blind from which to shoot. It could come at them from anywhere. An old man fishing off a boat. A rusty water tanker. A tugboat towing barges.

Soon they were landing on the street, by a pile of garbage, stirring the flies into a hovering black cloud, and a few toothless, filthy men and women sharing a jar of wine.

"Are you sure you wanna do this boss? We took the PCP here."

"We won't be long." He turned to Boyle with a scowl. "Try not to piss me off any more than you already have, Boyle."

Boyle scratched his mustache and sneezed. "What's it we want from Zack, boss? He ain't into unannounced visits."

"He surely won't be into this one."

They got out and the foul smelling drunks stared first at them, then at the hovercraft. Boyle's gut tightened. This was all wrong. Sure, they were weak, easy to dispose of; but as soon as he and Bradlee were out of sight they'd disassemble the hovercraft. What then? Bradlee looked like sharing the air with them was dirty, but he smiled, like he was down right cheery and said, "Good afternoon gentlemen. Ah, and lady."

The tall one in the middle, with long mats of black hair, smiled and started to laugh.

"Toil not nor trouble my friends," Bradlee continued. They moved closer. Boyle swallowed another sneeze, which exploded in his chest. Bradlee the tough guy, holy fucking christ. Brainy bosses. As long as they have their torpedo for back up. Like little dogs in the park, always picking fights with their yapping. Boyle put his hand on the butt of his gun and released the safety. Bradlee cleared his throat. "So you see my friends, you have two choices." Shut up shut up, they don't respect you, they're laughing at us. "You can keep your filthy, stinking paws off of my hovercraft, or you can die." He took out his

gun and pointed it at the big one's head, squeezing his left eye shut to take aim. The man's expression didn't change. His eyes were jaundiced and bloodshot. They swelled a little in his head and sweat beads formed on his upper lip. He looked into the barrel of the gun. Then he stared into Bradlee's eyes and Bradlee's eyes started to water. Bradlee smiled and asked, "Deal then?"

"No problem," the big one said. "We're just having a drink here." He hooked his finger into the handle of the glass jug, hoisted it up and gave it a shake. "Good. When we return, if you have the, er, balls to remain, there'll be a monetary reward for your cooperation. Good day then." He nodded, uncocked the gun and holstered it. "Come Boyle. Which of these, abodes, is Zack's?"

"This way."

They walked slowly up the creaking stairs. The walls of the hallway were just wide enough to walk through without brushing up against the side. Things scurried around past their feet. "Rather dark and noisome. At his prices you'd think he could afford better?"

Boyle panted behind him "Beats me. I'd better go first."

"I was about to propose that. Now, I'll need a word with him before you shoot him."

"Shoot him!"

"Don't act so surprised Boyle, it'll tarnish your image."

"I can't do that."

"Why not?"

"He's my friend."

"A business friend."

"So what."

"There are no friends in business."

They came to the door. Boyle hesitated. How was he ever going to shoot his friend? Zack was a good guy. Poor Zack. So paranoid, so

careful. And he'd given his word. Boyle knocked.

"Who's that with you?" came a child's voice.

"You didn't mention that Zack was a child," Bradlee whispered.

"Would it make a difference? He's my boss, Zack."

"Your boss is a woman."

"He's her boss."

"Sounds serious," said the voice, now deep and smooth. A chorus of hoots and laughs battered the door as it opened. Zack was seated behind the desk sorting through stacks of photographic negatives under a large magnifying glass mounted on a FlexiStem. "What do you need now, Boyle?"

Bradlee smiled and pushed forward, surveying the dark, hot room crammed full of equipment, with feigned interest. A naked bulb dangled from a wire just above his head. When he moved his hair brushed against it and it swung back and forth. "Quite a place you have here."

"I do all right."

"Synthetic voice?"

"Not only that, I've got an electronic turbocharged mAXiflEX RealFluid discharge dildo device with 10 billion synthetic nerve connections in the glans and head." Up popped a steel rod between his legs. "Oh, Bradlee!" he cried, jerking it off.

"I'm amused," Bradlee said. "Tell me. Have you had any occasion to share information about our dealings with anyone in the trade?"

"The man is worried, I can tell. He didn't come here to ask a lot of stupid questions," Zack said.

"Boyle."

Boyle swallowed hard. His breathing was bad. He sniffled and pulled out the gun. He looked at Bradlee's head, at the light bulb turning his hair yellow. There was no way out of this. He took pity

on Zack, who was amusing himself by talking in rapid, squeaky tones back and forth, pretending to be mad, his synthetic eye roving up and down Bradlee's body, clacking his hands and jaw. There was no point in torturing him. Boyle took aim at his head. "I hate to do this, Zack."

Zack swung around to face Boyle and opened his real, human eye wide. "Boyle," he croaked in his own voice. "What are you doing?"

"His job," said Bradlee.

Zack swept the photographs and magnifying glass off of the table and frantically hit at buzzers on his console and desk. Lights popped on and there was a sound of engaging gears, of wheels spinning on wire and pneumatic sighs and puffs. "We trusted you! The war Boyle, the war!"

Before whatever it was he was setting off with the buzzers could happen, Boyle took very careful aim at the human part of Zack's head.

"Get on with it Boyle," Bradlee said.

Bam! The gun had a light snap and wasn't even loud. The charge entered Zack's head and imploded, crushing the flesh and bone inward so that blood poured out of his crumpled face and down his chest while the real parts sagged away from the metal.

"I shouldna done that," said Boyle.

"It does show rather bad character to shoot a friend. Let's go."

Felix arrived at the George Washington Bridge with a banging headache. Every now and then a spark moved around in front of his eyes. There were a few delivery trucks in the commercial lanes but the ramp to the private entrance was empty. Guards manned the old metal turrets and peered out through slits in the composite walls on either side of the approach. Mounted on the walls were curved blades of steel, reflecting glints of sunlight. Blinds above these emitted scatter rays. Eyes in the roadbed registered vehicles. He guided the

car up the ramp and into the tight ceramic and crystal booth wondering if it was going to be the last thing he ever did. They were naked before the law now. If Bradlee had reported the car stolen they would know momentarily. Without incident the car passed through the scanning web and they were going forty above the Hudson. He glanced down at the white wake of the amphibatrains and at little boats. They were airborne, gliding out over the Hudson, arcing to the end of the bridge, where they entered a series of exchanges. In no time they were doing 75 down InterState 80.

"Man!" he said. "I've never done this for real. The highway in Canada is automated. Have you?"

"No. Well, I rode on the back of a motorcycle once on the autobahn and we had cars growing up. Bradlee took me places."

"The car is cleared for travel without a registered route and destination."

"Fully armoured, assassination proof, ElectroShield filtration and deflection devices. We're invisible."

With a pang he recognized this part of Jersey. There was a billboard for the CarPark. Another for the Antique Barn and Cafe. Behind one of the exits lay Pocono Village.

"Isn't this where you and Veronica lived after college?"

She knew so much about him. His whole life, inside and out. There was no part of him she hadn't taken the measure of. But he knew nothing about her. She was this remote anomaly of a human being. There was no evidence she was even real. He had only seen her in the presence of Boyle and Bradlee. They could easily all have been aliases. Except that one time in Cafe Bereshit. Others saw them then. They ate, they drank. They interacted physically. And they had not yet invented substance projection. He said, "Yeah."

"And you were happy here, right?" He nodded. He couldn't take his eye off of one of the sparks. It wanted him to follow it. "Why did

you leave?"

"Money." She nodded and looked out the window at the composite wall, like a dam holding back a green ocean wave of trees, ailanthus, pine and maple wrapped in kudzu. Every kilometre a billboard leered at them, projected out into the road like Wyndham Lewis teeth, withdrawing as they passed. The road was like a hook, the kind Egyptian embalmers used to extract the king's brain through the nose.

The spark shot out to the left, hovered in the distance and then did a few loops before vanishing at the extreme right of his peripheral field of vision. Words bubbled up out of his mouth. "Paregane has nothing to do with Umbra or Grembo or Onto or Vovulos. Umbra and Grembo and Onto are just words. Some elusive totality or hopelessly fragmented entity. So your eye tells you at this energy level or distribution or at the conjunction of these two fields in twelve dimensions this or that occurs. I know all about the wobbles in numbers. It's what I used to do. I had a knack for it. You watch for patterns of the drone and define a threshold. But its not Dodecahedron or Tetrahedron it's the garden, where we don't belong. A glitch, a moment of Grembo, and it's zip, flatline, nothing there. But you don't see a man ripped to pieces by dogs."

"Dogs, or angels?"

A spark skittered down the highway going about twice as fast as he was, but it didn't recede properly, it never changed size nor did it disappear into the vanishing point. She seemed to genuinely like him but what was that desperation and guilt? He did not want to be her moral scourge or aid in her expiation. Their relationship was much more sinister than that of doctor and patient. They were established together by something horrible to each of them. It was not benign happenstance that brought them here. There were agencies involved. Agendas and catastrophes. And if it included as some essential

component the doctor-patient relationship, then where was his aspirin?

The only way he could doctor her sickness was by becoming the medicine himself, the homeopathic dose, hatred diluted to near nothingness, till a mere memory of the ripple remained to induce its opposite. She probed and measured with her eyes and fingers but in her gut she was screaming for punishment and forgiveness. And he had, except for the murder attempt, refused both.

The sun scorched the hills of recombinant pines. Thunderheads were blooming on the horizon. "Angels," he said, "are dogs. Thrones, Dominations, Princedoms, Virtues, Powers. Plastic form amuses them. To them we are the rubes of physical existence. You've opened a door into a dimension where we aren't wanted."

"So you really do believe that Veronica didn't trough out in Grembo. But she wasn't eaten alive by angels either."

"No. She became a bird and flew away. She was mad, right? Lovers, poets and lunatics. Everyone goes to Paradise. Is this your lucky day?"

She winced against the glass briefly and then, after ignoring him for a few minutes, said, "To betray you."

"I've thought that over a lot. In my memory I think of him as weeping but I know this isn't true. He's watching, all the time. Not sad, not happy. not anything at all. His physical and mental awareness are indivisible. Matter, soul, being, endlessly recycled through the universe, dispersed and gathered in again."

They drove along. He relaxed into monotony. She said, "Who's he?"

"He?"

"Yeah, in your story, he."

He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel and stretched his back. "Him I guess is me."

He looked at her. She was affectless. The tinted light brightened and shadowed on her face and her eyes were fixed on the air. Sometimes she became physically agitated, as if she could not contain whatever thought she was having. She wiggled briefly and coughed loudly, mumbling something in the aftermath that he just couldn't make out. Finally, after a bout of agita, she said, "So, do you think we should just go straight to Leonard's? He'll know what to do. That's what Velodia will do when she gets the message."

"They're coming after us."

"Bradlee's very thorough. When he sees she's gone he'll try to track her down and then come for us. It will buy us time."

"How long by hovercraft's the trip?"

"About two hours. If he takes a hovercraft."

"And how far by car to Leonard's?"

"I have no idea. How fast can you drive?"

Felix gave it some more gas. The speedometer went as high as 140. A red line was stretched out beneath the slanted numbers. Assuming the 140 is miles per hour, how many k would that be? Was it 2.2? Or was that pounds to kilos? 1.75. 1.75 k to the mile. Or 9/5ths? Double and add thirty. That's 310 kph. It did not matter, he was having a hard enough time steering at hundred.

He had no sense of connection to the events of the past hours. He had no connection to the events of the past days, weeks, months. When was it he only wanted to die? Now he had no goal, no Paregane. His only feeling was the desire to walk away from things. He had wanted to walk away from the lab but stayed because Bryson said he'd be in danger if he left. But he doubted that would have mattered at all had she not been writing the report. Veronica's ass. So perfect! There simply was no other ass like it anywhere on earth and yet it would always appear now covered by Sammael's reptilian haunches, claws dug into the soil, tail switching back and forth. Stung

by scorpions, creeping like a toad through the red and black wasteland, mountains ever receding. And the man, gazing out at nothing. His life there was really over. He could tell the story over and over and it would only make less sense. Maybe what he had said was right. Death would not reunite them. Everything he learned in the garden could be a lie. The structure of existence, the dimensions of reality, the hosts of intelligences, consciousness pulsing through the universe, the one radiation of being dispersed, the field of love, all a lie. It would never end, this playing of prosecution and defense. Chiasmus. A lifelong trial. Thoughts were in session but there was nothing sweet about it.

Veronica, after all, was innocent. Real or not she had, for whatever reason, stayed. They were no longer the same type of entity. There was only one overlap, his highest touching her lowest. The hem of her garment. They were united and untied by desire. She was free and he was not. He was free and she was not. Chiasmus. Dialect. They performed a play for his benefit, to release him from himself. If he could not die then could he not live? Yes, the longer the life, the longer the dying.

“What?” Bryson asked.

Her voice startled him from the road. Treetops hovered like green clouds above the high concrete and stonewalls of the highways and showers of sparks fell like snow and melted on those treetops. “I didn’t say anything.”

“Yes you did.” She smiled. “I’m going to smoke.” She rolled a cigarette and lit up. An acrid odor filled the car briefly and then was sucked out by the vents.

He had slowed to eighty. He mashed the pedal and they raced forward over the straight, smooth highway. His foot was getting tired. There were unfamiliar pains. How do you stop a car at these speeds? The drive silenced his thoughts.

The first of many roadtrains bore down on them in the rearview. Felix didn’t note the situation till it was well advanced. The highway had a shoulder and two lanes. Straddling the two lanes and coming up behind him was the grill of a six-trailer truck. Its horn blasted them forward in their seats. Felix craned around and the car drifted towards the middle of the road.

“The road!” Bryson yelled.

They were headed towards the wall. He had to speed up and straighten out. The walls were close, the turns tight. The car rocked and screeched, he pulled forward and then swerved onto the shoulder. The truck whipped by. They were walled in by black rubber, engulfed in a cloud of road dirt.

“Oh christ,” she said. “God, I just want to get there.” She blew smoke at the passenger window. It spread out flat and filled the car. “I mean, Velodia wouldn’t wait around for them to show up. Right? She’d read the message and get the hell out. And the only place she could go would be Leonard’s. Velodia has to understand that they are coming to get her.” She looked at him apprehensively but he said nothing.

A car approached. It was small, distant in the rearview mirror. “So, at some point, we have to turn north. Do you know what highway I should take?”

“Beats me.” She rolled down the window and flicked the cigarette butt out. It skittered away. Wind whoomfed into the car and roared in their ears.

“There’s a car behind us. What makes you so sure he won’t report us to the police?”

“Well, it’s like this. Bradlee can’t afford for us to talk to anyone. He’ll want to take care of things because he won’t want the people he works for to think he fucked up. I was supposed to fix transcryptasine if I could, but the important thing is to not have any

contrary finding, nothing in writing or official that could be used as evidence in court. Transcryptasine, for Bradlee, was a just a means to an end, a council seat. He works for this general, Priss Valdez, as well as for Monozone. They're an alliance, a power bloc. Without Bradlee they're nothing, but the power is in their hands. He has no army; he has no money to speak of. Rich, yes. But Fripp controls a fortune. Valdez has ten thousand troops under her command, loyal to her. So if Bradlee fails, they'll kill him. If he kills us first, he can do one of two things: disappear with his money, or, if the situation is salvageable, move onto the next game. But he won't trust anyone else. He won't send the army or police after us."

A red light on the dash flashed and the car said, "Danger. Approaching vehicle." The car slowly filled the rearview. Felix found himself becoming absorbed in the side and rearview mirrors. He watched the curved walls vanish and open. "Why is that car following us? Could he have gotten another car?"

"Sure. But we don't know that it is following us."

The official markings only became clear when it was right on his bumper and moved into the left lane to pass. As it pulled up alongside, Felix pushed down harder on the pedal and they surged ahead to 120. The other car accelerated to keep up. It was a blue car, marked state highway patrol. A uniformed man in the passenger seat was grinning, darkly, behind the tinted glass. When he had Felix's eye he gave him the thumbs up. They slowed down and became a speck in the rearview mirror. Felix swallowed hard. "I thought I was going to throw up," he said.

A sign read, Highway North Next Exit. He hit the brakes too hard. They surged against the seatbelts and took the exit, jerking down through a spiral ramp into a warren of roads and tunnels with scanning devices and speed bumps, electric gates opening and closing behind them. A sign above read, CAUTION Rough Road

Unprotected Boundaries.

It was a rough road. The tires thudded in and out of potholes. There were no walls and the countryside stretched out in all directions. It had been a hot spring in the city but out here it had rained incessantly. The low areas were flooded. He almost wrecked the car hitting a cavernous pothole concealed by water. Water splashed up over the roof and mud poured in streams down the windshield. He slowed down to almost nothing to cross running creak beds. Off to either side were woods and farmland. The high land was ploughed, dark brown, bright feathery green with young corn and soybeans, but the hollows and valleys were tracts of mud, water reflecting broken sun and cloud. The trees awoke in their new leaves, lush and full. Clouds collided in the distance. Rain fell on the hills that marked the horizon.

They came to an enormous sign. Large black letters on a white background, in another language. Underneath, in smaller letters, was the translation:

Welcome to Iroquoia

Land of the Haudenosaunee

Est. 1390

Territory of The Cayuga. Come and Go in Peace.

There were no towns, only stands of trees concealing isolated farmsteads. Enormous roadtrains full of logs lumbered by, burying them in wakes of mud. The farms diminished in size and the road passed over brown, swollen rivers. Raptors and vultures circled overhead. Trees grew up to the edge of the highway. They passed through a village that had been burnt to the ground. All the people were gone. Their homes were piles of wet black wood. Then there were wrecks, of roadtrains, hovercraft and charred trucks under blankets of poison ivy. They slowed and drove around big cracks in the roadbed. Finally they came upon a barrier of parked trucks



parked across the highway. Makeshift guard towers were built on either side. They looked up through the windshield at rifles pointed down at them.

"I can't run it," Felix said.

"No."

Two uniformed men approached. Felix rolled down his window and attempted an affable look, feeling for his innocence. The men were young, under twenty, clean-shaven and very nervous. They smiled, despite the fact that they had drawn their weapons and were pointing them at Felix's head.

"This is an official state car," one of the men said. Felix didn't know how to answer.

The other said, "And a beaut."

"Who do you work for, sir?"

"Uh--"

"Who are you?" asked Bryson.

"Cayuga Militia."

"We're headed to Keuka lake."

"I can't let any state vehicles pass ma'am, unless you state your business."

"It's not actually a state vehicle. And we're here on private business. My husband's a GMZer."

They conferred. "We have to search the car. Go on up ahead. About a quarter mile up the road, past these trucks, is a guardhouse. We need to ask some questions."

The guards got in the trucks and drove them apart so they could pass. The ground about was cratered mud. They parked in front of the guardhouse and were led from the car by two teenagers in clean blue jeans, black t-shirts and blue-visored caps. Clouds of biting black flies descended on their heads. The BiteStop prevented most of them

from stinging. Other guards milled about in partial silver armor and with CellPack helmets. They looked thrown together. An air of informality prevailed.

The guardhouse was made of corrugated composite with a flat, solar-paneled roof and a crooked metal chimney. In the distance windmills turned slowly. Alongside, an elderly man squatted on a slab of concrete, washing out pots and dishes in a blue enamel tub beneath a gushing spigot. He looked up at them briefly and went back to working up a pile of soap bubbles and rinsing them off, setting the clean plates down in a stack.

Inside was a metal desk with a green blotter, two wooden chairs and a pot bellied stove. There was an air conditioning unit with a rattle and a couple of slowly spinning ceiling fans. It smelled of sweat and smoke and frying pork.

At the desk sat a middle-aged man in uniform reading a sheet of gold electraweave. He was big, dark skinned, with long, greyish-black hair spread out on his shoulder. His earlobes were pierced and distended. The uniform was peacock blue, crossed by a crimson sash with gold braid. After a minute he looked up from the desk at them and nodded.

"Sit down," said one of the guards behind them. Felix took the chair on the left and Bryson took the one on the right. The man stared at them with a stern, but not unfriendly face and took out a pouch of dark tobacco. Slowly he rolled a long, thick cigarette, trimmed one end, admired it and applied a flame, which flared up on the loose tobacco threads. He blew smoke at the ceiling and sighed. "We don't get many cars through here and those we do get aren't like yours. You don't look like officials, you look like spies. But spies don't drive up in cars like that either. Spies come on donkey carts, dressed like Amish farmers, you understand? Spies try to fool us and we try to catch them. So I don't know what you are. Fugitives?"

Bandits? Fugitives are desperate enough to try this but bandits,” he spread his hands and smiled, “only bandits are smart enough to steal a car like that and stupid enough to think they can get away with it. How’m I doing?”

Felix, squinting at the light, said, “We stole the car but we’re not bandits.”

“Am I supposed to find your honesty refreshing? Whoever you stole it from most likely regards you as a bandit. And consider this. If you stole the car, what else will you steal? No doubt you needed it. But you’ll need other things too, money, food, weapons.”

Bryson said, “I’m sorry officer. My name is Dr. Ruth Bryson. This is my patient Mr. Felix Clay. What is your name sir?”

“Hmm. Always an interesting question. General Black Cloth in my current capacity.”

“General Black Cloth. We are not working for state. We are on an urgent mission. A colleague of mine, Dr. Quap Velodia of Cornell, is in great danger. We are heading up to meet her at my husband’s, Dr. Leonard Bryson, on Keuka Lake. He’s an eighth nation Sachem. Dennis Blanpied can vouch for him.”

General Black Cloth smoked a little and nodded. “Who’s Dennis Blanpied?”

“He’s a sheriff from Salamanca.”

General Black Cloth nodded again. “Send in Baker, will you?” he asked one of the guards. Baker, a middle aged man running to fat, sweating in his shabby silver armor, entered the hut huffing loudly.

“Ja sir?” he asked, coming to attention somewhat and wiping the sweat off of his pale forehead.

“You know the Blanpieds in Salamanca?”

“Ja sir. Ich went to de university mit a couple of ‘em. We were neighbors.”

“You know Dennis the sheriff?”

“Ja sure. Ich went to his wedding. We hunt together sometimes, him und his brothers und me. Ich know him well.”

“Ne. See if you can’t track him down and ask about this Dr. Bryson.” He turned to them and smiled. “This could take a while.”

“Mind if I smoke?” Bryson asked. Felix wished then that he smoked. Maybe it would help the aching in his head and eyes. Maybe it would clear something up. He looked around uneasily. He wasn’t really afraid but he had never been in such a place. It felt rough, thrown together. The police weren’t intimidating at all. Behind General Black Cloth, and mostly blocked by his wide, square body, was a window with a crack in it. It looked out onto a muddy, weedy field. There were wrecked hovercraft and trucks piled up and heaps of garbage. A man ran in.

“We can’t get anything open to search,” he said.

“What’s in the car?” the general asked.

“I don’t know,” Felix answered, squeezing the bridge of his nose. A large blue blob of light passed between them.

“Beats me,” Bryson said.

“What kind of doctor are you?”

“Research scientist. Drugs, the brain.”

“So you don’t do ingrown toenails and that kind of thing?” She shook her head. “I knew it wasn’t my luck day. Here. Have one of mine,” he said, watching her go for a pack of tailor-mades. His face subtly challenged her to take a pinch of the black tobacco.

“I’ve had your tobacco.”

His eyes became bright with surprise and delight. “There’s nothing like it, no?”

“Indeed not. This is your own?”

He shook his head. “No. A neighbor’s been working my field the

past few years. I've got no time. This business with the water is killing us. It never ends, does it? They've been after our water from the start. So you say your husband's a chief? I haven't heard his name." He took a pinch of tobacco and spread it out evenly on a rolling paper.

"Yes. It's all very new."

"I was at the council meeting in Onondaga but I have to say, I can't keep the names straight. Anyway, you ought to know a little more about what's going on here than most folks down there do." He licked the edge and sealed the cigarette, rolling it between his fingers.

"I haven't seen him in months. On the phone we watch what we say." He pinched the end and handed her the cigarette. "Thank you," she said.

"No doubt that's why you're alive. You?" he asked Felix, holding up the pouch.

"No thanks."

He scrutinized Felix for a while. Felix felt that he was being probed. His eyes pinged. His throat caught. He had been feeling relaxed and in no immediate danger. He was watching it all unfold, their flight from the lab, stealing the car, the drive, as a sort of adventure that was happening to someone else. He was just a guy with a headache and lights dancing in his eyes. Some other guy had his foot on the pedal and hands on the wheel. He knew, intellectually, that Bradlee was a threat, that he had wanted to euthanize him, but there was no fear in him. More curiosity than anything. But when the general started to stare at him, narrowing his eyes, practically sniffing the air, he felt himself materialize, as if he were slowly assembling in the air, tile by tile, like a digitalized image.

The general nodded obscurely and said, "My grandmother would have known what to make of you. She had that old fashioned

something or other. Just by being around someone she could tell you all about them. I don't really have it though, just a hunch maybe, about people." He shook his head. "It would come in handy here on the job, wouldn't it? To see with the inner eye, to hear the thoughts of another, to know what goes on behind the face of things. A sense of certainty. Compared to that these feeling I get are very primitive. Still, it seems to me you aren't quite right in some way. And you," he turned to Bryson. "You are a bit of a witch!" He laughed. "Forgive me. It's the white hair. For us, you know, white animals are both holy and terrifying. If you go in for that kind of thing. Up here, the old stories are still true. So. Your husband's a GMZer?"

Bryson looked like she was about to lose her mind. Felix heard her heart pounding. Sweat poured down her temples and she crossed and uncrossed her feet. She sucked down the cigarette and swallowed hard, searched the bare, water stained walls. "Yes," she said, forcing a smile. "He's got an old vineyard up and running."

"Terrible rains last summer. How'd he survive?"

Bryson smiled genuinely now. "Oh, General Black Cloth, you don't expect a wily old witch like me to fall for that? It was a terrible drought till September and then October was dry right through to the end. We irrigated of course and brought in a small but sweet harvest, which he distilled into grappa. Stop by some time for a drink."

He shifted around in his chair and laughed. "I told you I was no good at it!"

Baker came in with the phone, the door slamming behind him. "Here, Ich got him, but der sound's nein gut."

General Black Cloth took the phone and said to Baker, "Get these folks something to drink." Then he shouted into the phone, "Hae'." After talking for sometime he handed Bryson the phone. "He wants to talk to you."

"Hi, Dennis?"

Through the roar of a motorcycle she heard his voice, small and distant. "Ruth, you're in a jam there. I did my best, but you're going to have to pay him. You got any money?"

"Jewels."

"That's even better. He'll want four thousand bucks but don't give him a dime over three. What's going on?"

"I can't explain. Go to Leonard. Tell him Bradlee's coming after me and Velodia."

"Who's that? Vel-what?"

"Velodia. He'll know. Bradlee's after her. I'm in trouble."

"I'm on my way."

She handed the phone back to General Black Cloth, cleared her throat and took a steaming cup of kaffe from Baker. "You know, General, it occurs to me I should have offered to help out here with a little, uh, donation. This place is quite nice for a border crossing, but you fellows could probably use a few things." She reached into her tunic and pulled out the velvet bag. "Would two of these help out?" She placed two tiny diamonds on the desk.

He looked at them with curiosity, picked each one up and examined it against the light. He took out a jeweler's glass from the top drawer of the desk and squeezed it with his right eye. "These are very good. But with four we could totally renovate."

She sipped her coffee and looked at Felix. "I bet a lot of folks cross over through the woods, or fly in."

"If you look out the window behind me you'll see that we have the skies pretty well covered. But the woods are a problem."

"Four thousand's quite a lot for me. I'm just a scientist, after all. But I have a few smaller stones here. Those there are worth about two thousand. This sapphire here goes for at least five hundred. Twenty five hundred is reasonable I think."

He shrugged. "That's a little low for us. We Gayogoho:nq are poor. We have to defend the southern door with whatever we can get. Twenty five hundred isn't an insult, mind, just insufficient. Thirty eight hundred might squeak by."

"That would clean me out, I'm afraid. We've got so many miles to go. There are bound to be other expenses along the way, especially when we cross into Canada. The Ojibwe--"

He snorted. "Dewaganha. They have a lot of toll roads."

"You see. And I know you have no love of state."

"I wouldn't want to clean you out." He scratched his face. "Thirty five hundred."

She drank the coffee and looked at Felix again. "Well, seeing as how I'm in a hurry and all, I'll go as high as twenty eight fifty."

"Where are you headed again?"

"Keuka Lake."

"And your friend, Velodia?"

"She's at Cornell."

"Beautiful campus. I spent four years there as an undergrad. Ag school, rural sociology. I never cared for farming."

"The idiocy of rural life?"

He yielded to an arid chuckle. "Three thousand, not a penny less."

She sighed sadly and looked at the bag of jewels as if it were her last possession on earth. "I suppose that's all right. Yes, three thousand."

She handed him another diamond. He stood and shook her hand, bowing slightly. "Is there anything else I can do?"

"That's fine," said Bryson.

He eyed Felix again. "I can't shake this feeling. Have you been somewhere? Space perhaps? You have an air."

"No sir. Just the city."

General Black Cloth shook his head skeptically. “No, that’s not it,” he muttered. “Be careful on the road,” he said brightly, and then, seriously, “I don’t know what you two are up to. But don’t look for protection around here. Even if your husband’s an eighth nation hoyaneh. That car of yours is big trouble, understand? Anyone comes around looking for it, for you,” he stared at them. “Good luck, anyway.” He escorted them to their car. Two guards got in the trucks blocking the road up ahead and backed them off the highway. Felix eased past them, hitting the gas once they were clear. A sign obscured by vegetation said 81 North.

He couldn’t go as fast now. One by one lights moved around his eyes and vanished. He couldn’t ignore them, they commanded his attention, as if each one was significant, and yet they were nothing, mere sparks of light that vanished as quickly as they appeared.

He had to slow almost to a stop to navigate the washouts and gullies. Soon they hit a graded, dirt section that wound off between the low hills and flooded hollows. There were fields of creamy brown mud and stagnant puddles. Flocks of turkeys scattered at their approach.

“Take this for a while. There’s a turn off for Cornell. I’ve seen it from the air.” She lit a cigarette and rolled down the window. Hot air whipped around.

“Ah, my head,” he muttered. It was like an elastic band squeezing tighter and tighter. Not painful exactly, but almost worse than pain because it had pain as its ultimate end. The pain of pain to come. “Why Cornell? I thought we decided--”

“I know. I just can’t get it out of my head. I keep thinking over and over that we should go and get her before Bradlee does.”

“Look, Bryson, we’ve been over this. I don’t see how it makes sense. Either way, there’s nothing we can do.”

“Christ, it’s just not acceptable.” She was trembling.

“How much time did we lose back there?”

“I don’t know.”

She didn’t look at him. He glanced over at her. The tires thumped. Her eyes were hard and fixed, like copper ore. “He’s got a hovercraft. I think we should stick to the plan.” He looked around for the windshield wipers and pushed the wash button to clean away the dirt and bug grease. That only made it worse. Between the sparks, the smeared glass, and the headache, he could barely discern the road. They came up to a running creek and he slowed to a stop. “I’ve got to wash the windshield,” he said, but she continued to stare out the window. Bryson neither talked nor moved.

Boyle sat cramped and sick. There was a horror about hovercraft he couldn’t name. It was a feeling. It was not the feeling he had of hating Bradlee. That was the sick to your stomach feeling, the feeling that you were gonna puke. That was the dizzy, Bradlee’s smell. Not BO or bad breath or that he was a farting old man. Any cop is used to that, it goes with the bad coffee and sleepless days. The dizzy sick came from the smell of lavender water, cigarettes and tailored clothes. The dizzy sick came from the odor of success.

This other feeling, it was like church. Mostly in church he slept with his eyes open. Mass was the boredom he had to put up with to stay married. But sometimes he walked into church and there was this vacuum that sucked his thoughts out and left him hollow and terrified. That was what the hovercraft did. He couldn’t name it, and that was part of the fear. Things were happening that reminded him of other things.

They were flying over nothing but creepy forests and rivers. Boyle wanted nothing to do with woods and wild animals and bugs. The bugs in the city were bad enough. But at least they mostly didn’t bite. Cock roaches and beetles he was used to. Bats, rats and clouds of gnats/ don’t bother my gal Pat/ just let me eat the seat where she just

sat/ how I love to kiss the piss of her purring little cat. Funny, the songs you remember. Out here, the bugs are meat eaters. Everything out here ate meat, and he was meat. He'd seen it on the nature shows. Scavengers and predators. Wolves, coyotes, bear, cougar. What good was a gun against a three-inch hornet? And those nature shows, they didn't show the half of it. No. Seeing wasn't half of it. He knew his bugs from the Caspian, from Mexico. You think a man is the scariest thing on earth. What a man does to you because he can. At night, in a piece of shit hovercraft some asshole you don't trust has been keeping together with wire and glue, in bad weather. There's just no barrier, no protection. Even if you survive the crash. Cause that was when the animals came and got you. Lying in a wreck with a broken leg, crawling away, waiting for the enemy. The enemy at least will cut your throat after you talk. But a bear rips you to pieces. He felt his gun. He couldn't stand to look at Bradlee or the racing ground underneath. It felt like they were the ones being pursued. It made him want to just shoot Bradlee and get out. He'd never wanted to shoot him more than now, in fact. My friend is that a gun you're aiming at my heart? How did it go after that? Before it was just a fantasy. He'd wanted to shoot all of his bosses and once in the army he did. What a mistake that was. If they hadn't pinned it on another guy, he'd have gone down for it and then what? It's a gun all right but you've got no heart to aim at. That other guy, the Albanian, was a shit. He deserved it more than Boyle did. In the end they just named another lieutenant to break his balls. It was a straight up horizontal exchange. He couldn't shoot them all, so what did it matter? Look a little closer it's beating out your name. Tax rights, that was all a lieutenant was after, that and breaking his balls. There was no end of sons of bitches. So you might as well endure the one you got. It was like the world. Suicide was no way out. He shut his eyes. Geysers of blood burst around in his mind. What was happening? Shit! He imagined a large knife in his hand and he was

stabbing Bradlee in the stomach. The blood pouring over his hands, warm and sticky. And the more Bradlee writhed about the better he felt. He was a killing machine. What he really wanted to do was drop to the ground and round up some sons of bitches and give each one a good prolonged beating. Then he gasped and opened his eyes. There were other hovercraft out there. That was the thing. He looked out in all directions. A bird made him cower and flinch. Any minute now they would explode. He shook his head to clear the noise. Why didn't Bradlee say anything? The air was hot. Ever since they left the city. Zack! He groaned. His friend, boom. No fucking face. Brains, blood, metal. Hearts and bullets don't have names. Why didn't the vents fucking work?

He knew someone was after them, he could feel it. Somewhere in the middle of nowhere reality and paranoia collided. His heart seized up when lights and bleeps and sirens started to go off. He was half asleep, in a world of murder and revenge and exploding hovercraft when he awoke fully to the actual mayhem of the dashboard. He felt himself leaping around in his skin. His real eyes surged into his eyes and he sat upright and alert, searching around for some reason why the panel was going nuts.

"What on earth," said Bradlee. He had been monkeying with the controls of the black box, hoping to pick up Felix's neuronanobot again.

"I don't know!" Boyle shouted.

"Calm down, Boyle. These things have parachutes."

Suddenly they were surrounded by hovercraft. Bradlee sniffed. "What's this?"

"What the fuck do you think it is!" Boyle said, nearly impaling his lip on his teeth.

A loud voice sounded in the air, "Land your craft now or we will shoot you down."

"Land it?" Boyle shouted. He took out his gun and started to wave it around. "Motherfuckers," he growled, taking aim.

"God damn you Boyle, relax. Calm down. Get a hold of yourself." He pushed a button. "I don't know what this is, but let me do the talking. Don't start shooting till I give the order, understand? And when you do, aim for the head."

"You don't needa tell me that," he said, sniffing like a dog and looking back and forth out of the windows at the other hovercraft, at the men hunched in them with helmets and rifles. They sank quickly to a clearing below.

"Indeed. Then what was your dicking with Zack all about?"

"Again boss? Zack was my buddy. Maybe it don't mean nothin' to yous, but to us guys, that's everything. You don't go and shoot a buddy for no reason at all. And even if you got a reason you don't do it without regret."

"Save it for later Boyle. I'm sorry I brought it up." They were surrounded on the ground by blinking bleeping hovercraft and men in mismatched, incomplete body armour pointing assault rifles at them. "Bloody hell," Bradlee mumbled. They got out. Boyle tried to control his hyperventilating. The enemy.

"Hands above your head, now!" They complied. Two men ran in and disarmed them. Then they were led to a guardhouse. Boyle looked at his captors with a disgust born of familiarity. The whole area around the guardhouse was filthy. Men lounged about on wooden crates eating food out of tin pots, playing cards around a composite table and smoking. There was a thin drizzle that no one seemed to mind spritzing the puddles. A waterlogged field of dead weeds and trees stretched out to a line of woods in full leaf. There were trucks blocking off the highway that ran through the camp. It was all the same, like outposts everywhere. The smell of coffee and the latrine and wood smoke, burning wires. Warlords, loyal to no one

but themselves, doing the work of the highest bidder. The Third Caspian War was the worst action he had seen. He had missed the nuclear exchanges of forty years before but the ground was still hot and everyone had birth defects. He hated mud, he hated latrines and he hated retards in uniform.

Immediately they were set upon by a swarm of biting black flies. The first was like a pinprick on the back of his neck, which he slapped, leaving a red mark. "Ow," he said. Then they came like a crescendo, each bite worse than the last. Ten, fifteen bloody bites on his neck, behind his ears and on his forehead. His hand was smeared with blood. Each fly that he smacked and killed stuck to his fingers and one by one he flicked them away. The guards stopped eating and yacking to watch and laugh. Bradlee meanwhile tried not to flinch. Boyle stopped long enough to realize only a couple had landed on Bradlee. What, had he paid them off too? Ow! He slapped again.

By the time they were seated in front of General Black Cloth he was panting from the pain and itch. The bites were swelling up into welts. He could feel them fill with fluid. They were like chicken pox. Bradlee sat fuming next to him. Boyle attempted to sum up their host. The place was an asshole. If Bradlee were smart he'd pay them whatever they asked and get the fuck out of there. They were just a rabble, undisciplined, with a vain general. Then he looked at all of the wrecked and cannibalized hovercraft and trucks strewn about behind the guard house and, more ominously, at a wooden post driven into the ground some distance off, about two and a half meters high, and what looked like fresh graves beneath the windmills.

"Gentlemen. My name is General Black Cloth. Whom do I have the honor of addressing?" He gave them a big, fake smile.

"Boyle," Boyle said.

Bradlee looked indignantly at General Black Cloth and said, "May I retrieve an ID from my pocket?"

General Black Cloth lifted his eyebrows and Baker stepped forward. "Tell Corporal Baker which pocket."

"Upper right, inside."

Bradlee winced a little when Baker inserted his damp, doughy hand into his suit pocket and withdrew the black leather wallet and handed it to the general, who studied all of its contents, including several biometric and photo IDs. "Owen Bradlee?"

"Indeed." Bradlee snapped his fingers and held out his palm. General Black Cloth didn't budge, he didn't breathe, he held his smile and stared at Bradlee. There was a stunned feeling in the room not at all relieved when the General started to laugh, a laugh Bradlee interrupted to ask, "Do you mind telling me what the fuck is going on here?"

"Calm down Mr. Bradlee," the general said in a jovial voice. "No one's looking for an international incident. Our nations, after all, are friends. We got off to a bad start there, and the first five hundred years weren't so wonderful but the past, oh, hundred, hundred and fifty years have been quite good, despite the recent, tragic events. We wouldn't want to spoil that, would we?" Bradlee said nothing but looked obdurate and bored. "Our people enjoy a long and eventful history together. You might say--but, you are a very important man and you didn't come here to discuss the past. I can see that. The problem, if you want me to cut to the quick as it were, is that you've flown into our airspace in an unmarked hovercraft. I'm charged with bringing in all vehicles entering Iroquoia from state."

"General Black Cloth. We are in pursuit of two fugitives. They've stolen my car. We, my partner Mr. Boyle and I, have good reason to believe they came through here."

General Black Cloth nodded sympathetically and rolled a large cigarette. Boyle's neck was on fire. Sweat rolled down his face and dripped off of his nose. He could not stop staring at the stake. If they

blindfolded him and tied him to it, what would he do? Pray? Or cry out for his mother? "We haven't seen any cars today, have we Corporal Baker."

"Nein, general."

"Don't bullshit me. You see who I am. I must find these two and get my car back. When did they leave here?"

General Black Cloth shrugged. "How do I know you are who you say you are?"

"Oh, but this is preposterous. Don't you realize I could get on the phone and in one hour level this place with an air strike?"

General Black Cloth looked startled now. "Level? This place? You mean the hut we're sitting in? Maybe you could flatten the field!" He laughed and all the guards in the room joined in. "I just don't see anything here that isn't already flat."

"Do you think I have all day to listen to your pathetic chatter? Our papers are in order. We're here in pursuit of known criminals. You have neither the right nor the power to detain us. I must insist on the restoration of our weapons and your guarantee of safe passage. Moreover, this is territory in dispute. There is no question of your sovereignty over certain specific areas but you and I both know that state retains an interest and a recognized claim on certain specific lands in this region. Again, I insist that you yield."

"I'm going to have to check out your ID. And these fugitives, I suppose an APB was issued with all of the usual attendant notifications, mutual security operations, extradition applications as well as a biometric profile etc.?"

"But we haven't got the time for all of that. Perhaps they came in on foot. A tall man, quite handsome, dark reddish skin, clean shaven, early forties, and a woman, very striking, older, with white hair, blue eyes, tanned skin. They were driving a silver 1967 repro Cadillac."

"I'm sure I would remember a car like that, if not the people. We



aren't what you'd call terribly busy here. Mostly trucks, you know, shipping manifests, smuggling sometimes, that kind of thing. No, we're just a sleepy outpost, Mr. Bradlee. But let me ask around the room. Anyone seen such a couple? No? Maybe they crossed at another border."

"I picked them up, briefly, at these coordinates."

General Black Cloth leaned back in his chair regally, inhaled and blew smoke at the ceiling and rested his hands on his chest. "I would really like to help you, Mr. Bradlee. In these times of regrettable, mutual tensions, it is incumbent upon both of our peoples to do everything possible, whenever possible, to honor the cooperation and friendship we have traditionally practiced and enjoyed. If such a couple driving such a car comes through here I will certainly detain them and turn them back. Fugitives from state justice will find no safe harbour among the people of the longhouse, no matter what door they try to enter. As an official representative of the Haudenosaunee, you have my guarantee."

Boyle had sunk into a potent miasma of boredom and horror. It was war. War on his skin, war in his heart, war in his mind. And now, Bradlee was making things worse. He never expected that. Fucking soldiers. They take the ID cards and scatter them over the tortured corpses, gunned down into a ditch they themselves are forced to dig. Everything but the images of men gunned down in a ditch, of blood, dirt and hair matted and mingling, of eyes and mouths broken open, angry, of the helplessness of humans shitting themselves with fright and the pain, of the burning itch radiating out of each bite, seemed far away. Life, the real world, was drawn in black specks on the horizon. So he was truly startled when Bradlee, so calm, so sarcastic, so grey, the very definition of chilliness and cool, stood up. Before anyone could react he grabbed Corporal Baker and smashed his head against the desk. The first blow knocked Baker out. The next broke the skin on his forehead and nose open. Blood sprayed everywhere.

The third he aimed at the corner of the desk. That one broke his skull. Bradlee seized Baker's gun and pointed it at General Black Cloth's face. "I want my car back."

Nothing happened. There were just the three blows against the desk, thunk! thunk! thunk!, blood pooling on the green blotter, into his hair and face, and the cocking of the gun. Bradlee held Baker up by the collar of his mismatched body armour. Then, like he was throwing him away, he dropped him to the floor.

General Black Cloth didn't flinch or move. His expression remained the same, benign, controlled, as unflappable as Bradlee. He looked at the gun pointed at his head as if it were nothing at all. Boyle had no time to consider what a colossal miscalculation this was. His instinct was to grab the nearest soldier, disarm him and start shooting. They all had this half a second of calculation. In it Boyle fell out of his chair, lifted it and smashed the soldier to his left over the head. But as he took his guns, an out of date assault rifle and a pistol, all the others, outside and in, reacted. An instant after Bradlee cocked his gun, as Boyle smashed the soldier and disarmed him, every soldier in the outpost mobilized around them and took aim. Boyle was staring down the barrels of twelve machine guns. The puddle of blood under Baker's head thinned out into a stream, flowing into the center of the room.

"I want my car back. Tell your men to stand down."

General Black Cloth said nothing. Boyle figured he could take out half of the guards. They'd be firing at Bradlee. If Bradlee pulled the trigger first their leader would be down. Then it would be easier to shoot his way out. But with all those bullets flying around he'd probably be hit pretty bad. And if they were both organized and loyal then they'd want revenge. It wouldn't matter so much about the general being down. He just didn't know enough about their operation. He had to guess.

Finally General Black Cloth spoke. "You've made your point, Mr. Bradlee," he said quietly.

"You bloody better believe it. You have five seconds to stand down."

He nodded. "Tell Boyle to stand down too."

"No deal, general." Bradlee moved behind the desk. "Up," he said. "Put your guns on the desk." He put them in his pockets.

"I don't think you understand, Mr. Bradlee. My men won't stand down, even if you kill me."

"We'll find out, won't we? Stand up I say."

Slowly he stood. The three of them backed towards the door, the soldiers slowly but deliberately inching away just enough for them to pass. Their half assed appearance had vanished. They were focused, still. Each step they took was through the absolute clarity of certain immediate death. There was then a hail of gunfire, bullets thudding off the composite building.

"Tell them to cease their fire or I'll kill you."

"I can't do that. I won't do that."

"Then you'll die."

"So will you."

"Order your men out then."

"Mr. Bradlee," he said, as if they were seated around gin and tonics in the bar car of an amphibatrain, "let's try to be reasonable. You wish to leave. I have no desire to detain you. Surely we can--"

"Not trust each other. We're going out that door. When I reach the hovercraft I'll release you."

The general took a few deep breaths and licked his lips. "Very well."

"Get the door, Boyle."

Boyle's eyes popped open. "Are you--" he didn't finish the

sentence. "Can't we make one of them?"

"Do it Boyle."

Motherfucker. Gingerly, ducking low, with his hand on the trigger, Boyle reached for the knob and turned it. Again a hail of bullets, which he answered. General Black Cloth spoke in the suspended, smoky silence. "We're coming out. Back off and hold your fire." He spoke to Bradlee. "O.K.?"

Bradlee nodded and pushed the general out first while Boyle held the soldiers in the room. Then Boyle backed away and they crossed the muddy yard to the hovercraft, every gun at the outpost aimed at them. The flies descended again, biting where they had already bitten and Boyle was afraid he might shit his pants. He cursed Bradlee, he cursed the Cayugas, he cursed god. He hoped Trinh Ma would be satisfied.

Bradlee held General Black Cloth while Boyle started the hovercraft. He programmed it to fly straight up and then zig zag and loop away before resuming its course, a basic evasion maneuver he had by heart. Bradlee looked at him and the word passed silently between them. Bradlee kicked General Black Cloth away and slammed the door shut as Boyle hit the take off button and they shot straight up with a beep and a whirr. Bullets whizzed and pinged and smacked off of the scruffy bubble till they were out of range.

Boyle covered his mouth, sick from the speed of the ascent. When he could think a little he said, "Boss, I know I work for Laraby and Laraby works for you and shit, but I gotta tell ya, from now on, it's everyone for hisself. You understand?" He was shaking, trying not to scratch the welts, which he could feel were starting to weep. "That was the fucking craziest--"

"Shut up Boyle. We'd have been there all day."

"All he wanted was a bribe."

Bradlee got the look he always got when his back was up about

something. “Good lord. You don’t expect me to pay those bastards. It’s banditry.”

Boyle got his breath back. He tried flowing with the pain instead of fighting it but it was a little like jumping out of a window into nothing. “Where da hell’d ya learn ta move like that anyway?”

Bradlee was hunched over the black tracking device intent almost to the point of snarling. “English Expeditionary Forces. Five years in India and another five in Ireland. Those bloody Cayuga Indians don’t hold a candle to the Irish. They taught me a thing or two I’ll never forget. And those other bloody Indians, in the Sundarbans--” he looked up from the box at Boyle and his eyes seemed to cloud over before welling up with tears. “Well, it was not a fucking picnic, let me tell you. You don’t know about loyalty and character till you’ve ridden point on the hydrofoils of the Sundarbans. I was a young man then but I still have the dreams that soldiers have. As for your observation that it’s every man for himself now, allow me to point out to you that it is always implicitly that; if you didn’t know that then you’re even stupider than I imagined. Anyway, we’re alive and we haven’t spent a dime and those blokes will remember us! They’ll think twice before fucking with me again.”

Yeah, Boyle thought. They won’t forget.

Bradlee shook the box. “Why did he come in for that hour and now he’s gone? Ah. It must be when he gets out of the car and we happen to be in range. Just my bloody luck. We’ll just have to proceed as planned, get to Cornell and take care of Vadge Velodia. We’ll track them down later.”

The spots displayed more purpose now. They were fuzzy white starsized spots with Brownian movement. If he didn’t stare at a particular one, however, they would assemble together into one big spot and hover just at the edge of his vision. Then a bunch more would swarm, coalesce and hover. If he stared directly at one of the

super spots it broke up into random particles again. As he drove he played a game, seeing how many of these super spots he could assemble. It was a feverish activity and he felt feverish in other ways too. The headache, presaged by the tightening band around his head, had indeed returned. It was different than the one he had earlier. That one had been jagged, a crack. This was more like a pulsing blackness deep in his skull.

The road was all mud, walled in by encroaching woods. They moved slowly so as not to skid out. Water flowed everywhere. It came down in a drizzle, despite the partly cloudy sky. The leaves of the trees were wet and glistened in the filtered light. To either side of the road, through the woods, were gullies, lakes and ponds, streams and gorges. Water splashed and flowed over rocks and fallen trunks, it gurgled and hissed, gathered in watercress and cattail choked ditches full of iridescent frogs, dragonflies and mallard ducks. It stood, pestilential, in fields rotting the hay. Hazy waterfalls gushed down into muddy swollen creeks, bulging up over the banks and into small woods. A pink haze spread out before his eyes. The pulsing headache began to throb rhythmically. Maybe they had poisoned him. Maybe he was mad. Anything was possible. All those weeks asleep in that lab. Bryson could have implanted memories, altered his past and future. She could have poisoned him with a long acting poison that would allow him to drive her away and then eliminate him. Or General Black Cloth might have cursed him. He said himself that the old stories were still true here. What old stories? Were there still stories about places, as he had read about in school and seen on T.V.? “Do you feel strange?” he asked.

“Can’t you go any faster?” Bryson asked, her lips tight.

“No. Do you feel strange?”

“Always. Strange, estranged, deranged. All variations on a well-known theme, induced by life itself, not early childhood trauma. We

are overcoming a congenital human emotional condition. It accounts for the uniformity of myth across cultures, space and time, the details of which differ as one language does from another, but the structure, the substance of which remain the same, whether the account is scientific, religious, cultic or aesthetic. The theme--"

"No. Strange. Physically. Like I think we may have been poisoned, or cursed. I'm seeing spots."

"You were seeing spots before. How's your headache?"

"Worse."

"It's a coincidence. I feel fine."

"But I feel worse, more out of it."

"It's probably a tick, or a mosquito."

"But we took BiteStop."

"One got through. As I said, I feel fine."

"Beware of false prophets." Why did he say that? He hadn't thought it. He didn't even know what it meant. "The Witch of Endor. Samuel resurrected for Saul. It flows from the first divine radiance, into the basin of a fountain. The spray of this fountain plays in the light, each atomized drop a precious jewel. Thence it flows into the four rivers of PaRDeS. These encircle the world. Each river is fed by a jewel and each jewel is a sensual doorway into the garden. The carbuncle is the infernal fire, one enters the garden through the gateway of the flesh and sexual desire: the house of love is built on excrement. The beryl is the river of the earth, eternally young, one enters the garden through the intimacies of smell. The emerald is the sea, giving and receiving, mother of us all and one enters the garden through the doorway of the tongue. The sapphire is the river of sky and air, invisible singer of song and one enters the garden through the labyrinth of the ear. The diamond is the heavenly fire, foot of the throne, the pleroma, it is the highest gateway to the garden, entered through the eyes from above and below.

"Whoever tells you this is a madman and a liar. PaRDeS is a natural place of rivers and fountains. The jewels are simply the fruits of ancient trees."

Bryson didn't appear to be listening. "If there's a store anywhere I'll find you an aspirin. Do you want me to drive?"

Felix lost control of the wheel. The car skidded sideways in a long slow curve coming to rest on a muddy bank by a clearing. He pushed the accelerator but the wheels whined helplessly. There was no cover here but the woods were not far off. The field was covered in standing water, with clumps of green and tan weeds and bales of rotten hay stranded like islands, and clouds, pearly and dim, reflected on the surface.

"We're stuck?" she asked irritably.

"It wasn't my idea to drive."

"You slugged Boyle."

"It seemed like the thing to do. They'd have shot us down in the hovercraft, you said so yourself. And the keys were your copy." His mood flashed hot. "None of this was my idea. One minute I'm sitting at home with my wife and then boom, because of you I'm a fugitive. And," he said, his indignation growing, "not even a fugitive from the law! We are quite literally outlaws. The medieval, feudal order--"

"No one put a gun to your head! No one said, Here, take transcryptasine till you go mad and drop dead."

"That's everyone's answer. No one told you to do it," he said in a mincing voice. "The ethical standard here is basically nonexistent."

"Oh, I see, personal responsibility is abrogated. Only those in authority are to be held to account."

"If those in authority profit by withholding essential information for an exercise of free will, then yes. It isn't a decision if--" he paused to think and looked out the windows, at the partly clouded over sky, the sun lowering as they spoke and the stand of enormous trees that

began just beyond the flooded field and covered the hills for as far as he could see. "A fine mess this is. You forcing me to drive through this miasmic thoroughfare to nothing, to meet up with a friend I've never met or known, at the house of a man who means nothing to me and might turn out to be god knows what, a mutant, or a demon, or a scientist, or just a man, which basically is far worse a prospect than any paranoid fantasy about beings from other worlds holding us to account for the first sin, which we have only participated in by virtue of the river of DNA and flesh whose flow we constitute for a brief interval, for the sake of what? I've always dreamt of travel, of driving across the prairie, of the great out of doors. Then dreams and actuality explode in a living nightmare. Mired down in the mud. I guess it all comes down to this, action in pursuit of survival without purpose or end beyond survival for the present. Like sharks we'd sink and die if we stayed still. At least in the garden simple being was its own reward, love and knowledge of love at once coinciding, the mortal and eternal as one. Let's stop arguing. Let's get out and take a look."

They got out of the car and sank up to their ankles in rust colored mud. Swarms of mosquitoes with their high-pitched buzz flew in on them, repelled to about an inch off of their skin. The clouds were merging and growing dark and dense. A cold wind whipped down from the north cutting across the warm bubble of humid air. They examined the tires. The right side was mired up to the bumper. It was too soupy to gain any purchase.

"Maybe I should try pushing," Felix said.

Bryson scowled. "All right." She got in behind the wheel and started the engine.

"Don't give it any gas till I say," Felix shouted. The engine grunted. He applied his weight to the trunk and yelled, "O.K." She hit the gas and the wheels spun furiously about, covering him with mud. "Ah!"

he screamed. "Stop!" He wiped the mud off of his face and felt his clothes. The water slowly soaked in. Now he was cold and wet as well as hungry. But the headache ceased and the lights were gone.

She got out of the car and stood in front of the open door. When she saw his condition her tense, angry face fell. She smiled a little and looked on him kindly. "What next?"

Felix shrugged. They looked around. The road was between two boggy fields. The woods were a couple of hundred meters away. The clumps of grass were vivid with an inner light as the sky and water darkened. "Let's go to those woods and collect branches. We'll put them under the tires and see if we can get enough traction," Felix said.

"It's getting late," she said, her face and voice touched by concern.

"I'm hungry."

"Yeah. Well, let's go then."

The field was deceptive. What appeared to be a shallow continuous puddle was really varied terrain. There were enough clumps of grass and weed for them to jump to for part of the way, but there were stretches where they had to walk through the water. Under the surface the ground was riven by last year's furrows, which the running water had deepened. There was higher ground cut by rivulets. But there was no real solid ground. The grasses grew in spongy earth that sank beneath their weight and the cold fresh water welled up into their shoes. The deeper parts were up to their knees. Mud sucked at their feet. Across the surface an astonishing variety of bugs skittered, darted and played. Giant dragonflies, indigo, emerald and ruby, took off and landed, water spiders skated in crowds, a calico of giant buzzing bees, wasps and hornets; blue butterflies; pugnacious stink bugs. Schools of fish swished by. And there were birds. Ducks, herons, red winged black birds, canada geese, gulls.

The woods were hardly any better. There was no path, just a wall

of growth, bramble, and then the trees. Skunk cabbage and ferns marked the verge. Just above the bank of the field they found saplings and small trees. Without speaking they ripped down cypress boughs and silver birch branches till they had a decent pile, as much as they could carry, and headed back. The return was both quicker and more arduous. They no longer took care of where they stepped. Flies nipped at their necks before giving up. Their hair was full of ticks. The air was loud with peepers. The smell of the skunk cabbage was still strong in their noses when they reached the car an hour after setting out. They put down the boughs and started to make a bridge of them for the tires to cross. His hands were sticky with sap and cut up. She was scratched on her cheeks and arms. They were wet from the neck down, muddy and soggy and the odor of rotting vegetation, like cow manure, clung to them. She got in the car and this time he was able to rock it just enough to get it started rolling. She pulled up onto the road and sat down, exhausted on the ground. They looked at each other with the vacant weariness of hopeless labor, a little proud of their achievement but both questioning what it had cost. The clouds gathered together some more and the breeze felt fresh.

"Lift your pant's leg," she said, finally. He did as she said. A dozen fat leeches dangled off of his ankles and shins. She pulled up her pant's legs and stared at the engorged black bodies. She ran her hand through her hair and the ticks came off. "Fucking christ."

They burned the leeches and picked as many ticks as they could find. When they were done another hour had passed. It was getting late. They were nowhere.

"Maybe we should just say fuck it," Felix said.

"She's my only friend. And I can't leave you here."

Cornell University, a collection of beautiful old stone buildings on a hill above Cayuga Lake, with many less impressive, ugly buildings dating back to the last century, spread around the ivy covered core,

loomed into sight. Bradlee became excited. "Boyle, I've got them! There's a strong signal. They're less than an hour from here, by hovercraft anyway."

Boyle pretended to care. "I'm hungry, boss."

"We'll stop here for a bite when we're done with our business. How can you think of eating now?"

"It's the violence. Shit like what went down back there always makes me hungry. It's a stress response. And you know what Napoleon said, right? An army lives on its belly."

"He didn't say that."

"Well, who did?"

"I have no idea who said it and he didn't say that whoever did. And, Boyle, it hasn't escaped my notice that you merely pretended to look when I said I'd picked them up again."

"Yeah yeah, so he's stopped."

Bradlee looked at him. "The man slugged you and stole my car. The least you could do is show a little passion for the chase."

Boyle tried to contain himself but he could not. He was like a dam holding back this big, amorphous terror and he had no time for anything else. There was just his tiny little finger in that enormous dike. "I don't give a fuck!" They were cramped. Their knees were always touching. It was hot. His neck and face throbbed and itched. He felt hungry and simultaneously nauseous. High winds buffeted the craft. At any minute it could crash into the woods below, all it would take is a strong down gust. "Look at me!" he yelled. "I'm a fucking mess. What're we doin' here? Who gives a fuck? So they get away. So what. You got money. You're a powerful guy." Boyle instantly regretted saying it. But Bradlee just nodded grimly, as he did when the truth was stated. He looked at the box, cradled between his knees. His eyes welled up. "Indeed, Boyle. Who gives a fuck. Certainly not I. But we must clean up what we started." He shook his

head. "One only has as much power as one uses. To hold back at the wrong time is a fatal resignation to one's natural diffidence. The desire for dark and quiet, to go out silently, without a mark, leaves one open to be mauled, raped and discarded by those who act without hesitation. They both come to the same end but to do so judiciously is to miss out on the opportunities and instant pleasures seizing the moment affords. I've done my life's waiting. We'll act now and rest later, on the profits I have every intention of recovering and retaining from that treacherous bitch. I still have not made up my mind whether to punish or forgive her but either way I will come out on top. Now is not the time to take the finger off of the trigger. In your rude parlance, the stakes have never been higher."

"Phph. The stake's never been higher up my ass, boss. And let me tell you, I had my fucking fill of places like dis twenty years ago. You had your Simperdians and I had my Caspian Sea. Albanian devils, Afghan mercenaries, Turcomen, soviet spies, blah. It'll make a man sick to live in the world! I mean wild."

"Buildings are full of men no less dangerous than those in jungles. Oh yes, land on that roof over there." Just ahead was a large rectangular building with a white ceramic facade and a hovercraft lot on the roof. There were just a few hovercraft anchored in the center. Boyle took it down next to the stairway, an illegal spot. When it finally touched down and he opened the door the relatively cool air rushed in and he fell into a sort of swoon that was half relief and half letting go into madness. Get a grip, he snarled to himself. The hunger was a steadily opening breach in his gut. He swallowed and winced. The periphery was all clear. He bent down and secured the anchor loops and checked his weapon. Bradlee swung down and hurried for the stairs, Boyle in trail.

The campus was incredibly green. The air almost smelled sweet. To the north, thunderheads were bearing down, but directly overhead the sky was patched with satiny blue between the clouds. As the sun

declined into afternoon, there was a hazy weary feel to the air. Students walked aimlessly down the paths, stopping to chat, or reclined under trees reading electraweave. Boyle was entranced by the scene, it was so odd and beautiful and new. He could see Medea here and yet the thought that his child, his daughter, a daughter of Boyles and Trinh's, could be here, among these green lawns and stone facades, no, not just be but belong here, was astonishing. He was proud then, proud for himself and proud for her. Wipe the worry and fear from your face, child, he wanted to say.

Bradlee was searching about, mumbling to himself as if calculating. Boyle followed him along a path till Bradlee, having made his mark, stopped a barefoot man in cutoff linen overalls, with long feathered hair and a chaotic beard, and said, "Excuse me. Where might I find a campus map?"

"Where you going?"

"I'm looking for the Department of Psychiatric Medicine."

"Science Quad. Just follow this path up the hill. When you get to the first road make a right. The quad's just beyond that. Ask someone there for Helen Krasner Hall."

At the science quad they received further directions. Boyle had to trot along to keep up with Bradlee. People were staring at them. They were the only ones in suits and Boyle couldn't stop scratching. He looked like someone had boiled his head.

Helen Krasner Hall was a large, composite brick sculpture in the shape of a bow tie. Other than its shape it had nothing to recommend it. They ascended the crushed stone steps up the middle to the knot and entered the revolving doors. The lobby was dark and cool. Lights came on as they walked and went out after they had passed. A directory informed them that Dr. Velodia's lab was located on the fifth floor of the west wing.

They found Dr. Velodia seated at her desk reading a sheet of silver

electraweave and drinking a steaming mug of coffee. She had been out of her office all day and had only returned to check her messages and do a little busy work before meeting Callista Reubens for drinks, and, hopefully, a long bout of spirited pussy eating, followed by dinner and a movie. But the first message, from Bryson, distracted her from thoughts of Callista Reubens' thighs squeezing her face. She didn't hear Boyle and Bradlee enter and was startled, at first, by the strange men. Dividing her attention between the Bryson's message and them, she said, "How may I help you?"

Boyle had never seen anyone who looked like her, up close. He'd never seen skin so white. He couldn't decide if she were beautiful or not, just that she was strange. She looked like crazy celebrities on t.v., with her sculpted yellow hair, long black eyelashes and ruby red lips.

Bradlee smiled and said, "Dr. Velodia."

Velodia nodded her head and then read some more off the sheet of electraweave. Her face changed. She just got Bryson's message, Boyle thought. Her eyes opened with alarm. She stood up and backed away from the desk, from Boyle and Bradlee. "Owen Bradlee." She glared at him.

"Did I interrupt your reading, Vadge?"

"It's Quap, you bastard. Where's Ruth?" She looked at the electraweave.

"Hm, I was hoping you could tell me that. She stole my car and kidnapped a test subject this morning."

"Well I haven't seen her. Not in years."

He paused, nodded and looked around the office. "Not this past summer?"

"We've both been too busy."

"That's not what I hear." He stepped around the desk and faced her. She moved backwards.

"Don't come any closer."

"Boyle--" Bradlee said.

Velodia looked at Boyle. Now he felt totally ashamed. Why'd Bradlee have to go and call him by his name.

"Are you Medea's father?" she asked.

He nodded. "I'm sorry doc. He's making me do this."

"Making you do what?" She looked at Bradlee. "Oh my god, you're here to kill me. But I haven't done a thing." She dove to the floor and Bradlee caught her by the arm and with a grimace, forced her to her feet. He pulled the gun out of his jacket and waved it around. "Have a seat, Vadge."

Her hair had come undone and parts of it were breaking off and falling to the floor. She was breathing loudly, staring at Boyle. She's already begging, Boyle thought. This is gonna suck.

"I don't know what you want from me," Velodia said.

Boyle wondered how much she'd bargain.

Bradlee said, "I need to know if, when Bryson came to you in August, she told you to sabotage Paregane?"

She shook her head tearfully. "No. I never saw her. There was no conspiracy."

"What about the Lackawanna Psychoanalytic Association conference."

"So, what about it."

"Didn't you there tell other doctors not to prescribe Paregane?"

"I didn't think you were this stupid Bradlee. You're scraping out a new low for yourself."

"You don't recommend Paregane."

"Not as a general Euphoric, no."

"Why?"

Boyle covered his mouth and thought, get on with it. Her face was



now all red. She was looking about frantically, shaking against the calm, quiet demeanor of Bradlee. But Boyle could feel the totally unexpressed maelstrom in the room. As Bradlee spoke, conversationally, the words, despite how soft they were, were aimed at picking her apart. It didn't matter now why she had done anything. He was either going to let her go or not. It was a ritual to him. She leaned back against the desk. Bradlee no longer pointed the gun at her, he was gesturing with it.

Despite the panic it was obvious she was searching the room for an escape. Bradlee was relying upon him to stop her. But Boyle thought if she could make it out the door she might get away. There were people around and Bradlee wouldn't gun her down in front of witnesses. As Bradlee asked her questions, trying to trip her up, Boyle searched for some way to distract him long enough for Velodia to escape.

He stared at her, tried to catch her eye. She was afraid of him. She was a person in collapse. They all did it. Small time, one-time chisellers were like that. They didn't really know the stakes in their gut because they were new to the game. They had never faced a gun, hadn't looked their own murderer in the eye. They had lied to themselves just enough to feel sufficient confidence to launch their plan. And they built it up on this puff of hot air. When the failure came, they knew suddenly that everything was just so much crap. All you are is a lucky chance. A body at the mercy of other bodies. Your voice, your spirit, your god and your prayers were worthless. Whoever pulls the trigger first, and pulls it last, and never stops shooting in between, walks away, and probably with nothing to show for it.

Boyle fired orders at her with his eyes: look at me! don't be stupid. Finally, her face hardened. She took a deep breath. Her lips trembled. She made a fist. He noticed then on her desk, the cup of coffee. It was still hot.

"That's enough, Bradlee." She stood up straight. Bradlee was taken aback, he seemed to have forgotten he had a gun. "I've said all I'm going to say. You and your sick, greedy, self serving hacks from state can go around killing tens of thousands of people to make a buck but I won't go along with it. Ruth never said a word to me. She didn't have to. I've spent my entire life trying to avoid lifeless bastards like you. You're like a mushroom, sucking all of the life out of us. You can't reduce life to a throbbing blood vessel or two and money in the bank. Too late I discovered there is simply no escaping this condition. The worst is the defining limit, not the best. The world is only as good as the evil we permit to breed in its interstices and thrive at our expense. There's no destroying you and we can't ignore you either. The best we can hope for is a sort of spiritual castration, to watch you slowly atrophy in a dark chamber buried deep in the mind where all you can disturb and control are the dreams of children." As she spoke she gazed directly into his blue and pink eyes and when she was done she picked up the mug of coffee and tossed it into them. Then she dove to the floor.

Bradlee didn't react though the coffee was hot enough to scald flesh but he did drop the gun, which went off, and blustered, wiping at his face. The black coffee soaked into his mustache. "B-boyle!" he spluttered. Boyle did nothing but pray she would reach the door. GO! "Stop her!" It was too late. She had reached the door, still on her hands and knees, and had opened the knob and was out in the hall. "God damn it, you're useless."

"Sorry, boss."

Bradlee found his gun and ran out into the dark hall. She was running now. The lights snapped on and off, following her. He took careful aim and squeezed the trigger three times. The shots sounded hollowly, striking her in the back, shoulder and butt. Velodia twisted as each one imploded after contact and fell with a shriek. "Help! Murder! God! No!"

Bradlee walked slowly towards her. "You shouldn't have done that, Vadge."

She crawled away from him, in agony, blood smearing out beneath her knees and thighs and hands. "Please," she coughed up blood and gurgled, "don't. I won't tell a soul. I didn't mean what I said."

"I think that you did," Bradlee said. She crawled slower and slower, dragging herself forward with one hand and pushing with one foot that slipped in the blood. Boyle caught up with them and drew his gun. His face was hot and he was panting. Poor Dr. Velodia, he thought. "You hurt my feelings," Bradlee said. Boyle was fed up. He aimed at her head. "What are you doing Boyle?"

"I'm sorry doc," he said. "I didn't mean for none of this to happen, and I gotta tell you, it's my fault. I shouldn't never have involved yous. It don't mean nothin now, to thank you, but," he took aim at the back of her head and squeezed the trigger. The yellow hair crumpled into a mass of blood, skull and brain. Her body twitched and was quiet.

"Boyle. We weren't done talking."

"Don't you think we oughta beat it?" he asked.

"After a quick perusal of her files."

She couldn't explain it to Felix but Felix understood why they were going to Cornell. "It's just a feeling, Felix. Please just let's go. She needs me, I know. She's in danger. It's my fault."

"So what, we shoot our way out, against Bradlee and Boyle?"

"No, of course not."

Well, it made no less sense than anything else. He was driving the car but she was still playing all the hands. At the same time he had a sense of desperation. The whole day had been a slow revelation of Bryson. She radiated feeling but the feelings swung about from extremes of contempt, certainty and hope on the one hand and self-recrimination, despair and a sort of stoical futility on the other. Well,

they were going with time's arrow anyway. Whichever way they went there was no center, no up and down, there was only the next thing. The sign said Cornell University 20 K. The road onto campus was paved and broad enough to accommodate the road train caravans delivering goods from the railheads at Albany and Scranton. Bryson sat low in her seat, grinding her teeth and checking the time, fitfully avoiding Felix. She was in full collapse, he thought. Or on the verge. That was it. A person in full collapse is relaxed. She was watching it approach.

Felix tried to concentrate on the road. The headache had returned, the radiating one, the nuclear one pulsing in his brain core. Without warning his vision would constrict to a tunnel of clarity surrounded by an ill-defined granular grey, as if the visual field were disintegrating at its edges. It seemed to affect his thoughts but he wasn't so sure of that. Perhaps his self-perception was disintegrating at the edges too. Self as object of perception versus perceiving self. He felt cognitively disordered. Further more, emotions would rage and ebb. He couldn't concentrate on a line of thought. He couldn't even tell if he was silent or speaking his thoughts aloud. So he tried to make conversation.

"Tell me about Velodia."

"She's my best, only friend."

It struck him that the last time he had a best or only friend was high school. Veronica had been everything. "I know that. How did you meet?"

Bryson stared at the rain. The wet trunks and leaves of trees and the fields, dry now that they were on higher ground, glowed. The sun was close to the horizon, shining out from behind clouds. Insect swarms knocked into and bloodied the windshield. "At Cornell. She and I started at the same time. She was in quantum psychiatry and I was studying the mathematics of twelve dimensional molecules. Our ideas just clicked. I don't remember now if it was a seminar or what.

We had other interests of course. We both liked to hit the bottle and fuck our brains out when we weren't working. For ten years we did everything together. And we wrote those theoretical papers which pretty much map out everything I've done, including transcriptasine."

"And Bradlee?"

"Oh, Bradlee. He was at Monozone when I went there. Project supervisor. You know, the moneyman. Eyes of management." She laughed. "Boy, they only met a couple of times, when Leonard and I had the house on the Island, but did they ever hate each other. Poor Quap and her principles. She gave it to him good, two or three times. You understand, with Bradlee, it was pure lust. It took me years to even respect him. I thought he was easy to control. Right up until yesterday."

"No doubt he thought the same about you."

"Why would you say that? Owen Bradlee never controls anything, not directly. He's always the middle man, taking a cut."

"We're almost there?"

"Those are the gates, up ahead."

They entered the campus between two huge, ruined stone columns. Vines and trees grew up through the sidewalks. The remains of old businesses lay where they had collapsed, by half broken walls of brick. Hunks of concrete impaled with rusty reinforcing rods were obscured by heavy vegetation. Steel I beams rose at angles across the trunks and branches of the woods. There was a block long warehouse with loading docks. The road went around a massive parking lot full of tractor-trailers, dump trucks and bulldozers, and then a small area for cars. They pulled into two spaces between a couple of grey, utilitarian vehicles, boxes on wheels. They got out, stretched, and headed wearily up a narrow path through a garden. Cherry, dogwood and lilac had dropped the last of

their blooms but the azaleas were covered in crimson flowers. Ferns stood tall, in bright young green, along the running creek. Felix took a deep breath. The headache faded a little. The smell of the earth and water stirred up memories of the garden. But this is real. Yes, and the other wasn't? He felt odd, almost sexually stimulated by the odor, and sad. The smell, the sounds of evening birds singing in the treetops made him wonder about what Veronica was doing right now. He expected to see her at any moment, seated by the brook, walking up ahead on the path.

The trip was dangerous and futile but there was no way to stop it. They crossed over broad, sloping lawns and then through level quads of carefully trimmed grass and hedges, bisected by paths over which the students bustled and milled. Then they arrived at a building like a bow tie. Bryson was practically running now. No one was about. There was an emptiness beyond the lack of people. Empty buildings, empty sidewalks. That was so much of the world. But here, in the quad before the building, was a vacuum of feeling. It all looked painted on. Inside it was dark and smelled of polished stone and old wood. The lights popped on and off as they walked. The closer they got the stranger he felt. He didn't know or care about Velodia but he knew that she was trying to do the right thing, that she wanted to stop Paregane and that that was why Owen Bradlee wanted to kill her. But it also didn't seem to matter anymore. The emptiness he felt outside grew bigger and engulfed the building and then it grew cold, slowing everything down. Night had descended on the day. All of the warmth and life had escaped the earth and disappeared into space where it would disperse forever and yet always remain in some tenuous sense connected. The web could be stretched to near nothing without quite reaching it.

Bryson burst out of the elevator and he followed her. They went straight to Velodia's office. It was empty. The desk was a mess. Bryson picked up the electraweave and reviewed all of the indices of

stored text. “She got the report at least. Yes, and she sent it on to everyone. My god, even the press.” Nothing else was disturbed. Then Bryson looked at the floor and her face grew pallid, and she mumbled, “No.” Felix looked down. There was a broken coffee mug. There was a splash of coffee on the desk.

They went to the hall. Down at the end, three metres from the exit and the stairs, was a black form barely distinguishable from the shadows. They walked and then ran towards it, through circles of soft yellow light. Bryson, seeing her friend’s mangled corpse, sank to her knees and gripped the air in her fists and let out a cry of pure pain, piercing through the dark and bringing tears up in Felix’s eyes. There was nothing to say to her now, she had become the instrument of the oldest fear and want, the cry that finds no answer. All he could do was stand by her till it ended.

“You said we could get something to eat. It’s like my stomach is roaring.”

“Like, or is?”

“Whatever.”

“How can you think of food at a time like this?”

Boyle skipped a little to catch up with Bradlee’s long, relentless stride. “I told you, it’s da violence. It makes me hungry. Ever since I was a kid. And it’s late. I ain’t eaten in like a day. Even widout da violence, it’s time to strap on a feedbag.”

“Lovely anachronistic colloquial locutions will not endear you to me. She’s just done us all in now. And for what? For what?”

“She wanted out.”

He stopped and punished Boyle with a look of seething contempt. “You know about this? I ask you how many times to tell me what’s going on with her and it’s always ‘Nuttin’ boss.’?”

“She never said so. I’m just speculatin’ is all. You axed the question.”

“Leave speculation to those who won’t go mad in the process.”

“Da food boss.”

“I don’t suppose it matters now,” he said quietly to himself, gazing off across the campus. The sun was peaking out between purple and white piles of cloud. “We need a plan. Damn! How could I be so stupid? To think I got her all that money--over fifty million in the end. Is this how she repays me? No--Velodia died too good a death.” He stared at Boyle. “And don’t think I don’t blame you for it. If it were up to me you’d be there on the floor with her too, in your own blood and feces!” His skin was red. He exhaled through his nose and faded back to grey. “Sorry Boyle. That was uncalled for. I’m a little upset. There’s a restaurant around here somewhere, on a terrace. Perhaps a bite will do us both good.”

The restaurant, on the top floor of a building that looked to Boyle like a castle, with turrets and stained glass windows depicting biblical scenes in medieval dress, was cavernous, dark, built like a Viking meadhall, with an arched, oak ceiling. Red and purple banners with gold braid and fringe and a lion in profile hung down off the rafters, each end of which was carved into the head of an eagle, a dragon or a griffin. Two giant iron chandeliers with fake candles lit the hall. The Maitre D’ didn’t want to seat Boyle. He looked like garbage. Huge red welts weeping clear fluid rose up off of the back of his neck. His eyes were nearly swollen shut. His suit was a mess too. Bradlee somehow looked totally unruffled. His grey linen pants and jacket fell without a fold or wrinkle and still held their crease. Even the coffee didn’t get on it, nor did it burn his eyes. Bradlee eased them in with a little palm scratch and soon Boyle was struggling to read the menu by the light of a single candle.

“I can’t make any of this shit out,” he said. Bradlee looked around. I’ve embarrassed him, Boyle thought. Good. Bradlee deserved it. He had embarrassed him with Velodia. It was wrong to kill her.

"Do I need to read it to you?" Bradlee asked.

"Don't sneer at me boss. And I only gave it to her like that in the head cause she was suffering. It ain't right to make civilians suffer."

Bradlee put down his menu. "It most certainly is right. It's also necessary. Now, what is it that you like to eat?"

Boyle worriedly moaned. "I don't know."

"Well, the food here is probably first rate. They've a hotel school you know. Perhaps if you told me what you eat at home."

"Ah. Trinh Ma makes da usual stuff. Fried vegetables with garlic and ginger when she can get 'em. Hot dogs. A lotta dose, and da blue paste. We eat that all da time. What else. Cereal. Yogurt. We eat burgers. Da kids love burgers. Any kinda meat. We eat meat, maybe three times a week." Now he was bragging. He hated the implication that he was too poor to eat well.

"As often as that? Then I pay you too much. Remind me when we get back and I'll have Laraby cut your salary."

"Dat ain't what I meant."

"A joke Boyle! Lighten up. Tonight, dinner's on me. How about a big porterhouse steak, pomes frites, er, french fries and a salad?"

Steak. He'd had it in the army whenever they could kill a cow. And on his honeymoon. They had two nights in the Poconos and ate steak and baked potatoes and shrimp cocktail. Trinh Ma was a real beauty then. He never thought he'd ever get a chance with a woman like that. He only ever fucked whores for ten years. But she was so young. Her skin was firm and smooth, the light played in her black eyes like stars on a moonless night. They fucked like he'd never fucked before. It was like they were two flames consuming one branch. Six weeks later she started puking in the toilet. That was Medea.

"Steak's good, boss."

"Is something wrong Boyle? Your face is a fright. They almost didn't seat us. It's positively medieval, a sort of pustulence, if you'll allow the pun."

Boyle felt awful. He was hoping it was just hunger. His head pounded, his joints ached, his throat was sore and he felt chills and spacey, as if he were drifting free of his body. "I'm allergical to da flies. What is it with you, they don't make you swell up?"

"In India I was exposed to a plethora of lethal insects. Ever since they've left me alone. I believe I'm slightly cold blooded. They just don't like it."

"Lucky you."

The waiter took their order.

"And to drink?" Bradlee asked. The waiter was going through him, after a less than successful initial exchange with Boyle.

"I don't give a fuck. Yeah. Beer. Whatever. Maybe whiskey first. That's it. A shot." He addressed the waiter directly. "None of that cheap watered down shit either. Whiskey from Scotland."

Bradlee frowned. "Make it blended, waiter, off the speed rack. I'll take a Manhattan, dry, two cherries. With dinner bring a bottle of...." he looked over the wine list. "This St. Estephe. The '76 will do, two glasses. And bottled water, actual ice, no RealIce."

"I don't like wine, boss. Make it a lager with dinner. Nothin' fancy, so long as it ain't light or dry. Dry beer, that's stupid, right? It ain't dry, it's wet and light's even stupider. Light's the stupidest thing I ever heard of. I mean, why don't ya just drink half?"

"I'll remember that the next time I'm grunting over sausage on a bun in a crowded, sunny stadium."

They buttered and munched on poppyseed and pumpernickel rolls. The rolls and butter calmed his stomach. At first he wolfed them down so fast he didn't even taste them. Bradlee was evidently preoccupied. He smoked, silently sipping his drink, left hand

covering his mouth, finger tapping his chin. Boyle didn't like it when Bradlee was thinking. He was beginning to understand that Bradlee's thoughts, so calm in their gestation, were mayhem when put into action.

He sawed away at the steak with the biggest steak knife he'd ever seen. It was big enough and thick enough to stab a man to death. The meat was chewy, charred on the outside and bloody in the middle. The blood flooded his plate and soaked into the thin crispy fries. Bradlee picked at something weird. A chop of some sort. He drank the entire bottle of wine. His eyes were really red now, the color of raw meat.

"So, we head back now boss?" Boyle was suffused with a sense of well-being. His tongue was covered in a slick of flavourful fat. His extremities tingled with pleasure.

"Hm?"

Boyle decided not to spoil the mood by asking again. Instead he said, "How about a little dessert?"

"Indeed," Bradlee said, brightening a bit, like the moon under thinning cloud. He snapped for the waiter. "Two chocolate tortes, armagnac for me, any reserve will do, bring my friend here a brandy, and two coffees. I'd like a cigar too, if you can produce a good Havana." The waiter handed him the cigar menu. He glared at Boyle and Boyle could see him relent. "What the hell. Bring two Havana Hidalgo Grandes. You did good work Boyle."

He handed Boyle the cigar and Boyle watched Bradlee carefully and did everything he did, snipping off the tip, sniffing the length, squeezing it gently and then, gently again, puffing it till a plume of smoke rose to the rafters. The cake, coffee, brandy and cigar were a concert of flavours Boyle recognized as the music of heaven without ever having heard it before. If only women smelled and tasted so good!

Felix and Bryson stood outside of Helen Krasner Hall in the approaching dusk. The sky overhead was broken up. Chunks of black cloud turned purple on the western horizon and where the sky showed through it was a glowing bluish green. The campus was on high ground and heavily sprayed so there were few insects. The lawns were deep and sweet. Flowering trees perfumed the air. Students sat on the grass eating and talking and napping. They walked along, hand in hand, thoughtlessly. A wave of intense eros washed over Felix. Their hormones, at full flood, like the swollen creaks and streams, were thrown off in a mist, which he inhaled and set his mind buzzing. It was impossible not to look at their legs and bellies and breasts. Even the plainest, dullest woman was enlivened by the late spring light and air. An enormous longing opened up in him, a longing for youth, for sex, for his own younger self. Time as it went took something from him that was, and replaced it with something that wasn't, cell by cell, so that now he felt the accumulation of forty years of nothingness. Maybe he and Veronica had filtered out the feeling of this loss from each other. Love was a madness that appeared to reverse the flow of being into nothingness. A little bit of being diverted each time into a battery kept alive between them and parceled out in love acts. How long could two people pass the same thing back and forth without diminishing it? And then, with a single bullet it all rushes out. Chuang Tzu's empty sack of rice.

Bryson stood by him, her face rigid.

He said, "The report went out. She died, but you succeeded."

"Succeeded in what? Killing her? For what?"

"Look. I'm starving. Let's find some food and make a plan."

"Eat?"

"We've been going all day. My head is killing me. I'm exhausted. You're in no condition to do anything."

"Food--"

"Just let me get something. You wait here."

She looked at him with red, swollen eyes. Fat tears formed along the lower lid, held on the lash like dew and fell down her cheek. "Don't go anywhere! I know a place, here on campus."

They walked off of the science quad along a crushed stone path between some buildings and onto the arts quad, a broad rectangle of lawn crossed by walkways and framed by stone, brick and concrete buildings. They came to a stone building with flying buttresses, turrets and a high pitched slate roof.

"It's in here," she said, holding open the tall metal doors. They stood then outside of the restaurant by a lectern manned by a severe Maitre D', who scrutinized them through old fashioned reading glasses.

"The service entrance is in the rear."

"Excuse me," Bryson said, rising to the insult with imperious indignity. "Maybe your service entrance is in the rear but mine's in the front and I want a table."

He softened, a little, hearing her accent. "I'm afraid we have minimum standards of decency here, including cleanliness and dress."

Felix looked at Bryson and then himself and started to laugh. "I'm sorry sir, we've had car trouble."

"Evidently."

Bryson was about to speak but Felix backed her away from the lectern. "Come," he said, leading her by the hand to the bathroom. There, in the synthetic sun light and gold tinted mirrors he said, "Look at us."

She looked at him and then herself in the mirrors and slowly they started to laugh together. They were covered head to toe ins mud. It was in their hair, dry and gritty, dangling down in lumps. It was in their fingernails. Their clothes were filthy and wet. Their arms and hands were covered with small cuts and scratches. They looked like

they had climbed up out of their own graves on a rainy night.

"Come on," Bryson said. "I need a drink. There's a convenience store down the road."

At the BritoMart they bought a loaf of bread, tins of sardines, potato chips, aspirin, water, beer, a bottle of whiskey, a pack of cigarettes and a lighter.

In the car Felix swallowed four aspirin and asked, "Where to now?"

"I don't think it matters. He'll find us anywhere we go. I suppose we should still get to Leonard's, but I'm afraid of leading him there." She covered her face with her hands and rubbed her eyes.

Felix started the car and they drove slowly back down the paved road to the dirt highway. It was twilight. The headlights played over the mud and trees. Bats circled in and out of the beams. Four legged creatures with glowing yellow eyes ran across the road. A raccoon thumped off the bumper and flew through the air into the bush. "Do you have any idea where we are?" he asked. She shook her head. "Look, this is a college town. There's got to be a hotel or a dorm we can stay the night in. Let's stop."

"No! Too dangerous."

"Why?"

"Because it is. Keep driving. I'll think of something."

After an hour during which it got darker and darker, till he was driving through a black tunnel of trees and night which seemed to absorb the headlights, sparks dancing in and out of his field of vision, and clouds of nocturnal insects bombarding the windshield, he said, "This is crazy. I can't go more than ten. I can't see a thing. The windshield looks like pizza." He put on the wipers. They pushed the red, brown and yellow bug crap back and forth.

"There's a trail along here somewhere that goes through the forest and comes out just north and east of Seneca Lake."

"Forest? How the hell am I gonna find a trail through a forest?" Up ahead they saw a spotlight playing over the road and trees. "Jesus! What's that?"

"Fucking bloody christ, it's a hovercraft. Hit the lights."

He stopped driving and turned the lights off. "Now we're fucked," he said. They couldn't even see each other. All they saw were fireflies and the searchlight jerking around the woods and road. "It's a left, marked by a green sign."

"This car's too wide for a trail."

"The trail's wide, like a road. The tree cover's so thick you'd never be able to see us from above. If we can reach Ganudasaga I can find people there to get word to Leonard to meet us somewhere. Niagara Falls maybe."

The light passed alongside them and then disappeared. He put on the low beam and started to drive slowly, looking out to the left for a green sign. He opened the bag of potato chips, put them in his lap and started to munch away. Why didn't he just leave her here? He had money in the bank, Veronica's ashes and a change of clothes. She could do fine without him. Hadn't she gotten them through the border crossing? He could just walk away in the dark. Sleep on the ground. Make his way to Canada and out west. When he imagined western Canada he saw a paved highway passing through small mountain villages, chilly nights, meadows full of wild flowers covering the foothills of snowy mountains. She started to weep quietly. Bryson was devastated, lost. She was the kind of person who was fine as long as things went her way, which they always did. But once they started going wrong, everything else fell apart and she was helpless. He had been that way once. Everything gone. Then Peter took him in and gave him a home, family, friends. They drove past the sign.

"That was it!" she exclaimed, sniffing. "Back up."

"O.K.," he mumbled through a mouth full of greasy, salty starch, backing up to the sign:

INTERLAKEN TRAIL

DEYOTAHAKDONYO:GWEH KAGO

He turned onto the trail, between two boulders. Now there was no sky overhead. It was darker than he had ever seen it. They went down a steep embankment and onto a rutted dirt path meandering through the towering trees. They rolled up and down bumps. Fallen trees and brush scraped the doors of the car. After a while it widened out some.

"Look up there. It's a sort of clearing. Pull off and we'll check it out for water," she said. There was an opening between the trees large enough to drive the car into. The ground scraped the undercarriage. It felt like they were sinking. They came to rest with a groan and a crack.

They got out and stretched. The air was loud with shrill dithyrambic peepers. Felix peed and got a torch out of the boot. He shined it around on some rocks and what looked like water. "Let's eat up there, by the stream."

"We'll have a fire," she said.

They gathered wood by torchlight and tried to light a fire but the wood was wet and it smouldered. He was excited now, by the woods, by the smell of mushrooms and leaf mold. Leaning back on his elbows to avoid the steaming, smoky, mess he opened the tins of sardines and ate with his fingers, licking the oil off hungrily. He took a slug of beer. "God this tastes good."

Bryson swigged the whiskey and handed him the bottle. "Try this." Felix swallowed a shot and leaned back again. "We shouldn't stay long," she said.

"Why?"

"Too dangerous."



"Well, let's just enjoy it for a while. This is what they go to so much trouble to try to synthesize. I never want to live with a synthetic odor unit again. For all the years we lived in that subterranean pod I thought it smelled like the real world. You know the ad, Bring the Country Home with SynAire? Then I went to the garden. Ruined the 'real' world for me."

"Like the difference between a real strawberry and strawberry chew."

"I've never had a real strawberry."

"The last time I was in these woods was with Velodia. We planned our campaign against transcryptasine. We knew the danger. We said the words. But I didn't really understand what it meant."

"I still don't understand the danger. I feel great. Except for this headache and the stars."

"You still have the headache?"

"Comes and goes."

She sighed and took a drink. "That's not good."

"I'm not worried for some reason."

"It's the transcryptasine. It's still in your system."

"But it's been a while."

"After Veronica died, and you stopped taking it, you must have noticed that things were still different, even if you stopped going to the garden."

"But I was so crazy. I'm still crazy. As long as you have the garden it doesn't matter how crazy you are and then, when you lose the garden, it doesn't matter either. I tried so hard to die the only way I knew how. Something kept me alive, I don't know what, but it wouldn't let me be, it kept fighting for my life. I thought to let the angels take me. Veronica could have had me too. But she chose Sammael, or so it seemed at the time. I'm sure she did it for me, to

make me free. Whatever that is."

She drank the whiskey. "Well, I guess one way to think of freedom is the power to choose who or what you'll serve. Velodia could have come with me to Monozone. They offered her a contract." She did something between a snort and a laugh. "God how we plotted and planned the future as if it were ours to grow and feast on. In those days she completed my thoughts and I started hers. We were like one mind, complimentary, strong where the other was weak, yielding where the other was stubborn. We lived together, sat up all night drinking and talking and then got up with the dawn to work. People thought we were lovers but we were so much more than that. We shared the one idea and found peace in exhilaration, creating with our eyes and hands whole worlds. The power was amazing and it amazed all those who came within our orbit. As the years passed by we attracted older colleagues who had no business feeding off the work of two young women, but they couldn't resist us. Leonard used to laugh. Even after we were married it was always Ruth and Quap. No one else knew me by my name, only Leonard and Velodia. One night I remember Leonard saying that time would eat us up, that we would see."

"Ruin hath taught me thus to ruminate/That time will come and take my love away."

They sat quietly watching the smouldering, sputtering sticks and listening to the peepers. Felix stirred the sticks up and added a few others and the flame caught. "Can you tell me something? I don't want to offend you but how on earth could you have been lovers with Owen Bradlee?"

She looked at him and thought about it, as if she had often done so. "I would have to understand myself better than I do to answer that. Velodia could never figure it out, Leonard is apoplectic at the thought. Funny, it's not really sexual jealousy with him. Oh, maybe a

little. I feel it for him, when I've had my face rubbed in the young women he's always gone for. I believe you're addressing the issue of character, his and mine. To say it is simple lust isn't much of an answer. That could be satisfied by anyone, by myself even. But consider that lust is never quelled by masturbation, only another body can quiet the need. It isn't even excess. Maybe I just felt comfortable being around a man who could never take anything from me. I needed someone I could hate if I felt like it and not stop wanting. What more does a slave deserve than a master? What is the first act of a slave with power but to enslave the master and make him pay for her servitude? That's too abstract, it gets away from the cocktail lounges and the big dick nearly splitting me in two. It isn't what is needed but it will do in a pinch. Owen Bradlee, when I met him, was charming, funny, cheap. There was no depth to him, and certainly no danger that he would fall in love with me. But I can't justify it. If I'd had a noble lover would that have been any better? Would Leonard have understood? Velodia would have preferred it but look at who she took into her bed, any sweet muscular thing with a crew cut and a flat chest. We all have our types."

"You don't see it, do you? It's so obvious to me that he loves you. I see it in his eyes when he looks at you, the way he tries to anticipate what you'll do, the way he tries to please you."

She made squealing laugh. "That's just nuts. The man is devoid of strong emotion or attachment. I'd say he's a corporate sociopath."

"But you use his love to control him."

"No no no. His desire, yes. We both know how to twang that string. But love? The only thing Owen Bradlee loves is himself and the only man I ever loved is Leonard."

Felix threw a bigger piece of wood on the fire and the smoke rose in a column. "If you love Leonard so much why didn't you go with him to the GMZ? I'd have followed Veronica anywhere."

"The contract. It's signed in blood, after all. Monozone bought it off of Genetel when I was sixteen. They have scouts you know. And I was one bad kid, let me tell you. There wasn't another hellcat like me around in all of Switzerland. I believe if the lowest piece of shit Frenchman yodeled for me I'd have crawled twenty miles to get him drunk and fuck him. Anything to piss my parents off. I just wanted to get pregnant and pass these genes along illegally to some bum, give his lineage an illicit boost of longevity/blond/blue/big tit/smart and subject my family to the shame of bastardy and cacogenesis. Smart. Do you know what that means for me, what the big secret is, why they own me? I'm a trade secret. A suite of variant genes. And I can visualize 12 dimensions. I can see things others don't. Abstractions. Every thought, every idea, every hunch I have is intellectual property. It wasn't planned that way. It might have been a dud. Or maybe 'it' has nothing to do with that at all. It's me, and what am I? Or you? At sixteen they sent in some Monozone bozo, someone like Owen Bradlee, who said, Well, she's a bit of a slut but boy can she do math! It's a stupid as that. So even if I'd wanted to go live up there with Leonard, Monozone wouldn't let me retire yet. Actually, I thought transcriptasine would be my last big hit and then they'd let me move on. But I'm only sixty-seven and they want you till you're within an inch of death.

Maybe it was the country. I don't know. I just couldn't stand the country. And he was too restless for suburbia. Put the man in a cube and he starts to pace. At my place in Nassau, when he was there, I literally couldn't breathe. All of his huffing and puffing overwhelmed the system. The city, that was another story. Even if we had the money...he's a native New Yorker. He hates the place. You know he came from one of those spooky families that live on the park. Central Park West. Not a mile from where we found you. As a child, he spent so much time in The Museum of Natural History, they could have dressed him up and put him in a diorama. The city was a trap for

him. In suburbia he huffed and puffed. In the city he snarled. Transcriptasine changed everything. By the time we were done I'd lost all contact with the lab. I used to befriend them--they were work friendships--but real. I got remote. Theory, number crunching, schmoozing with the money people. Everyone was afraid of me, or they hated me. I lived in the lab growing fat and bitter. When we were finally done, instead of heading off to some island I went up to Leonard's and fell in love with the place, and with him again."

"Well, now we're going back. That should be a good thing." He looked at her face, red from the firelight. The blue eyes, shadowed, had big bags under them. Her lips were turned down. The skin around her neck sagged. She inhaled deeply off a cigarette and drank some whiskey with a wince. "Isn't it?" he asked.

"Who gives a shit, Felix. Dreams are nothing at all."

They watched the fire in silence. He felt himself drifting off to sleep. The headache was gone but the lights were still there. He hadn't the energy to chase or coalesce them, they just drifted in and out of the fire, merging with the real sparks flying up into the trees. An owl hooted. Not far off he could hear animals moving through the woods. "I think I'll sleep for a little while."

"You take the back seat. I'll sit out here for a while. I'm not tired."

"I think I'll just sleep right here. The air is fresher."

"Don't do that," she said in a stern voice.

"Why?"

"What if it rains?"

"I'll get wet."

"But the animals," she pleaded.

"I have a gun."

"Felix, you can't."

He stood. "What is it? What is it about that car?"

Bryson looked at him oddly. "Felix, there's something I have to tell you. We shot you with a neuronanobot. That's how we found you. It's in your brain."

"You shot me with a what?"

"A neuronanobot. It's a molecule-sized device programmed to enter your brain and broadcast a signal to a tiny booster in the back of your neck. It transmits information."

"You can read my thoughts?" he had a look of disgust and horror, contemplating the as yet undetermined extent of this latest indignity.

"No, not your thoughts, though we could deduce your emotional state. What's relevant here is that it broadcasts your position."

The information worked its way through his brain like a termite through wood. There was something about this news that was enormous. Voice rising with each syllable he said, "What happens to me now? They can follow me around forever? Till I die?"

"No. It breaks down, decays. Sometimes it just malfunctions."

"What's the difference? What happens to me then? Do I just shit it out?"

"Usually."

"Usually."

"Usually the body absorbs it. There is a slight chance in the case of malfunction that radiation will be released. There could be some cell damage."

"Cell damage."

Her voice grew weaker and more fearful. "In the brain. In a tiny number of cases the result is paralysis, blindness or death from stroke. Depends on where it has lodged. I'm sorry Felix."

He glared at her and she looked away. Angrily he threw another log on the fire, sending up a bloom of sparks. "When were you planning on telling me? I mean, is there anything you haven't done to me

now? Anything you haven't robbed me of? What exactly am I to you?" She said nothing. "I have a right to an answer from you. What else is there?"

"Nothing. I'm sorry. I was trying to save lives."

"Trying to save your own life you mean! Shit! Jesus!" He stamped his foot and paced about, eyes burning. "I've always been a stooge." He picked up a big stick and swung it into the palm of his hand like a bat. "What's to prevent me from beating your brains out now?"

"Felix, please--" she said, rising.

"I should kill you and take the car. It's not just me they're after. I can throw you to them like meat and put them off the trail."

She was raw, defenseless. Her white hair glowed orange in the firelight. She looked haggard and weak, old. "You're not a stooge, Felix."

"Nor a murderer." He dropped the stick and crouched down. A torrent of fear poured down from his brain, through his gullet and heart and into his bowels. He screamed and gripped his head in his hands. "I'll tell you what. I'll drive you to your beloved husband's tomorrow. I'll do that for you but after that, you're on your own. Then I take off with the car."

"O.K.," she whispered. "And Felix. We need to keep an eye on those headaches and the spots."

He laughed and spat on the ground. "Is there anything you can do?"

"No."

"So let's just say fuck it then. I'll sleep in the front seat with the window cracked for air."

"Sure."

"I take it the car blocks the signal?"

"Yes. But if it's breaking down, or malfunctioning, then the signal

would come and go."

"I'll take my chances. If I can find fuel I'll head up to Canada. They won't cross the border to get me."

"Leonard can help get you across."

"I've had enough help already." He turned his back on her and the fire and got into the front seat of the car, which smelled like mud and sweat and fell into an uneasy sleep.

"Boss, that was great," Boyle said, and then, thinking Bradlee would appreciate the comparison, observed, "I wish women smelled and tasted so good."

"I find it hard to believe you'd make love to a woman who smelled and tasted like a cigar."

"Well, you know what I mean."

"Rarely, and when I do I almost always regret it. As the divine Donne wrote, Leave her, and I will leave comparing thus, She, and comparisons are odious."

They headed for the hovercraft. It was dark out and the quad was lit by only a few cobalt light towers. Boyle looked up at the sky and saw some stars between the clouds. "So, we'll go back now?"

"Back where?"

"The city."

"A joke I hope." Boyle felt around in the dark for the anchors and released them. They got into the hovercraft and it sagged a little beneath their weight. The repast had not only sated Boyle's hunger but also enervated him. His brains were in his feet. But Bradlee seemed to be recharged. He bustled with energy. "Let's see if we picked them up anywhere." He bent close to the box and read the data. The lights flashed on his nose and eyes. His expression was grim. "Hmm. They got out of the car about ten k from here. Then nothing." He grimaced. "Goddamnit. Stupidity! Damn stupidity. I

should have known.”

“What--what?”

“They were here, Boyle, in this very place! While we ate they came and went. Headed north most likely. They won’t be stupid enough to go to Leonard, not now anyway. That is, if my assumption that they visited Velodia is correct.” He pondered. “They can’t have gotten far on these roads. I say we look around for a while and then--then we drop in on Leonard. That’s a plan.”

“But it’s late. And dark.” Then Boyle thought of the one argument he had, the indisputable fact. The hovercraft could only fly so long on a battery at night. It depended on solar power. “And boss, this thing can’t fly long at night, it needs the sun for the battery. It’s a piece of junk, you know that.”

He plugged the box in. “I’m going to download Leonard Bryson’s coordinates and we can continue on foot if need be. And nine o’clock isn’t late Boyle. It’s dinner time in the city.”

“Dinner time? By nine o’clock most nights I’ve thrown up and gone to bed.”

The craft ascended. Boyle swooned as they entered the dark. He leaned against the door but still touched shoulders with Bradlee. He had to fart. “Boss, you’re gonna kill me, but I feel a fart coming on.”

Bradlee opened the vent. Air flew into the tiny cabin. “It’s just nature, Boyle.”

“Trinh Ma kicks me outta da bed.”

“Another reason not to get married.”

“She has a point boss, stinking up the bed like that ain’t polite.”

Bradlee rubbed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Could we not discuss this? Where are the damn lights on this thing?”

“That’ll only run it down more.”

“Well it’s bloody better than crashing into the trees!” He switched

on the exterior landing lights, a bright beam for unplanned night landings. They were over a road partly covered by the crowns of trees. “Let’s slow down here and have a look.” He dropped to the tree line. There was a scraping sound.

“Bradlee! Boss!”

“Relax, Boyle.” Boyle was writhing around gnashing his teeth. “Are you afraid?”

“It’s heights! Ever since the war. Getting shot down in these things is the scariest fucking thing.”

“War inures most men and women to danger.”

“It manured me to nothing at all but a warm bed and a woman’s arms,” Boyle shouted.

The trees buffeted the bottom of the hovercraft and the AutoDrive lifted them abruptly up three meters. Bradlee forced them down again and in the tug of war their flight path became chaotic. “There’s the road. Keep your eye on it while I try to pilot this thing.”

Boyle tried to look. His vision was blurry and he couldn’t stand the thought of looking but there indeed was the road, the landing lights were swinging over the trees as they careened about. Up ahead he saw light. “Look,” he said. “Are those headlights?”

“I’ll be damned. Come on,” Bradlee goaded the controls. They raced up above the road and he tried to tip the hovercraft to shine the spot on the vehicle but it went black and they knocked into a tree. The hovercraft rocked out and straight up again. They lost the road. “Where’s the road?”

“I don’t know boss.”

“Shit.” Bradlee looped around and went back and forth. The road came into view again but there was nothing there. He hovered in place. “I don’t know how far we’ve come. But that had to be them.”

Boyle said nothing. His mouth was dry. He felt like he had a hot

poker up his ass. Cold sweat coated his brow and upper lip. It was a struggle just to stay conscious. But he was too afraid to fall asleep. He kept thinking of tossing prisoners out of hovercraft. It was a great way to make a man talk.

Bryson couldn't sleep. She was drunk and exhausted. Only inertia prevented her from getting up. She tossed sticks on the fire and leaned back on her elbows, grew uncomfortable, sat up and hugged her knees. The whiskey made her wince and spin but she drank it down in timid sips. She wanted to feel bad. She wanted to remember her friend with tears. Recall days together long past. But the past remained as dead to her as Velodia was and no tears came. She was inert.

The woods were quiet and the fire was down to a bed of coals hot enough to dry and consume wood quickly. Everything was dark and bleary. The creek gurgled gently. Lightning flashed on the crowns and thunder grumbled distantly. The storm was getting closer but it didn't feel like rain. There was no breeze and the air was warmer than before. She could just make out the hum of a hovercraft. Bradlee, searching, even at night, even after losing them on the road. He'd never give up.

It was Felix she had to save now. Felix. Even though he hated her. That he should hate her was not surprising. But she could at least get him to Leonard. Even if he didn't want his help she would get it for him. Her own life wasn't worth it.

Her insignificance saddened her a little, even though it was the universal condition of living things only to have significance to themselves. Just as Velodia went out so would she and every other thing, leaving behind husks, excrements and dwellings for others to occupy for a while. She drank. Finally, when the tears did come, she had no idea for whom she shed them. Perhaps they were only drunken tears of self-pity.

Bryson had intended to sleep in the car but sank deeper and deeper into a stupor and eventually passed out on the ground.

"I just know they're here somewhere," Bradlee said. "But it's useless. If we at least had a moon. This cloud cover and wind are damnably inconvenient and this little bucket does no better than sputter about." Boyle said nothing. "Boyle?" He looked over at him. Asleep. Mouth agape, breathing labored. "Boyle!" Boyle didn't budge. "Thick skinned, slow, and now, unreliable!" Bradlee muttered, "Reptilian." A gust of wind pushed him wide of his track and when he tried to get back he felt he didn't have the power to go directly into a head wind. Rain splashed onto the bubble and thunder and lightning got closer. He was getting tired himself. The woods were endless, black. The spotlight passed over the trees but it was swallowed up by the foliage, tiny, without the power to illuminate. The monitor reported no signal. Briefly it had a position down in the forest but the signal flickered, weakened, surged and died. He searched the map for Keuka Lake. The hovercraft could take him straight to Leonard Bryson's but given the distance he doubted he had the power to get there. And he might lose Bryson and Felix. It was all beginning to look pointless. Well, once he took care of Felix he could just run off to New Zealand with Bryson. Some of the rage had abated. In the night he felt second thoughts form, and he was in a more forgiving mood. She had money. Her betrayal was stupid but probably, he saw now, inevitable. He had been warned and had been willfully blind but that was in the past. She was playing the best hand she had. And he felt himself missing her. She would have turned that dinner into a grand occasion and he knew just how it would have ended, in a jolly hotel room with a big doughy bed and champagne brunch on the balcony. No. He could not, would not forgive her. Her motivations weren't important.

More lightning. A storm would be quite bad. Hovercraft were not designed for heavy weather. He tried to determine the distance of the

storm. It was hard to read the screen and steer. He put it on auto and circled around. The storm was not far. Then, something else flashed, not lightning, but lights, blinking in the distance. The hovercraft lurched and bounced around on air rolling like rough water. He scraped the tree line and again shot straight up. Every time it did that he thought he'd throw up. Then the bottom dropped out and he sank, shot up and out again. The controls were over compensating. The computer was blinking, shutting down peripheral systems. The battery light glowed green to blue to purple and started to redden at one end. He elbowed Boyle. "Boyle, I need your eyes. There, out there, at ten o'clock, do you see lights?"

Boyle snored. He opened his eyes and looked lifelessly at Bradlee. "Boss," he groaned, "I don't feel so good. I think I got fever. I can't breathe."

"You're just drunk, Boyle."

Boyle mumbled incoherently. Bradlee looked around and yelled at the computer. There were lights approaching from three directions. They were converging on his position. Three hovercraft. He dove towards the tree line and skimmed the leaves, forcing the controls, and the three hovercraft shot by overhead. He killed the lights and slowed down so he could navigate. The three hovercraft, 2k distant, returned and surrounded him. He shot straight up eighteen meters, the engine whined, and they followed. Their spots came on, blinding him. He pulled out his gun, aimed it out the vent and shot. "Bastards!" He could make out the markings. They were Cayuga Militia. There was a huge clap of thunder and a cold gust of wind that blew them apart. A lightning bolt struck a tree and flamed out. Water gushed down and thunder shook the hovercraft. "Boyle!" The hovercraft came in again. Bullets bounced off of clear walls. He fired out the vent. "Boyle, wake up." Boyle didn't move. The three hovercraft flew alongside but the wind scattered them and he could see their lights blink away through the dense rain. The dashboard was

lit up and a siren like a whistle was going off. He couldn't control it anymore. The downdrafts bounced him on the trees like a basketball. He calmly recalled Keuka Lake coordinates. The rain was too thick to see through and up and down had lost all distinction. If he could only hold a course he would reach Leonard Bryson in an hour. For a minute the hovercraft seemed to recover and the storm abated to a heavy, pounding rain with less wind. But the engine whined again and then hummed. The lights went off. They were silent, sinking straight down. He couldn't see the dash to deploy the parachute. They crashed through some branches and landed with a jarring thud. He swallowed and felt his heart beating. Now he was afraid. It was over. They were safe. He wondered what they had landed on. It was impossible to see. The only thing to do was to wait. So he sat just as he was, shoulder touching Boyle, until he fell asleep.

Only gradually did Felix realize something was wrong. He had fallen asleep in the front seat of the car snoring, sweating into the upholstery. He dreamt of Veronica. They were sitting in their apartment uptown drinking coffee but they were middle aged. "You're still dead then?" he said to her. "I want you to come with me," she said. "There's something I have to show you." It was night. The sparks were out and one hovered just before them which they followed through the woods till they came to the bronze Alice in Wonderland statue in Central Park. The park was different, it wasn't overgrown. The lawns were cut, the paths weeded and the trees orderly. Children with old faces climbed up and down the figures. Felix watched them and then he turned to Veronica and said, "I wish we had children." But she was gone and he was walking a white cat on a leash. One of the children looked at him. He had the face of an old man. Felix followed him to a campfire where other old men a half a meter tall were seated roasting meat and laughing at a joke. The little person he had followed pointed off into the woods and then joined the others.

He half awoke, disturbed by the dream, though why he was disturbed he didn't know. Thunder shook the ground. Bryson wasn't in the car. Her absence alarmed him and he woke up more. A chill spread out across his neck and face. He trembled. Something was wrong. The air coming in from the window smelled strange. He couldn't place the smell. It was vaguely familiar and disconcerting in the way events that seemed to have happened first in dreams are. He was then very awake and his awareness expanded. It was an exciting state to be in. It was as if he was in a state of awareness in which all things existed in potential, that things about to happen unalterably had a mutable moment. Not really a moment since a moment is in time and this state, this feeling, was distinctly out of time. The smell grew stronger. He looked out the window. Everything was clear. The thick bark of the oak trees. The thinner, smoother boles of beech. The underbrush they had driven over. He heard the stream splashing over the rocks and eruptions, concussions of thunder distantly ripping the sky apart. Inside of his body he felt energy uncoil and stretch out. Then, things happened all at once. He had that moment, he was able to watch what was happening and still slow it down enough to act quickly. So quickly he could not possibly have taken the time to consciously understand what was required, what his or Bryson's predicament was. And if he had been aware he might just have stayed in the car or fired shots out the window. But by the time Bryson screamed he already had the door open and was crouching by the car like an animal.

Bryson's scream was loud and primal, the sustained sound of pure pain and terror. It didn't fade but came again and again. Her arms thrashed about and she kicked at the air. The mountain lion, growling, flanks flexing, was poised to leap on her neck. Felix was transfixed. A rage transformed him as if the cry had entered him from below and he stood over the giant cat, gun in his hand. Bryson was cowering by some rocks. The panther leapt onto her and had her

by the neck. As it did so Felix dropped the gun and seized it by the loose folds of skin on the shoulders and pulled. He kicked it, he punched it as Bryson cried out in helpless pain and her thrashing became weaker. The smell of the cat filled his nostrils. He pounded and pulled but could not get any kind of a hold or shift its weight. But it did a strange thing then, it released Bryson and turned on Felix. It crouched back on its haunches and menaced him with its paw, swiping his cheek, and watched him with its vigilant hungry eyes. Felix stood his ground. His eyes burned in his face, he bared his teeth and fixed the eye of the cat with his own. Bryson, panting, had gotten up on her hands and knees but collapsed. Felix didn't flinch or move or even blink but determined to kill the cat with his bare hands. It was much bigger than he was, four meters at least, nose to tail, and its weight was suffocating, its pelt, its saliva, stinking and palpable. The cat could kill them but Felix stood his ground because he knew the cougar would see him for what he was, a predator. Felix emitted a deep, guttural cry and lunged at the animal. It inched back, pawing the air between them, not yet conceding the fight but giving ground. It was a little confused. Hypnotized by the eyes and teeth and by the murderous power he felt emanating both from himself and the panther, Felix stepped closer. The cougar stepped back again and opened its jaws to emit a heart breaking, terrifying squeal, like a lost, injured child. He didn't want to kill it. It was a beautiful animal. As it cried out and backed off he realized he was in the presence of something great and rare. He couldn't stand the idea of watching it shrink into nothing at his feet. He took another step forward and it was gone, as quickly as it had come. A creature so big and powerful slipped off into the shadows as easily as a sparrow in a shrub.

He went to Bryson. She lay on the ground in a fetal position, dead or close to it. The enormity of that had not rushed in yet. He simply had to do things. Always one did things.

"Bryson?" he asked gently, afraid to touch her. She looked so



small, crumpled on the ground, covered in mud. Her white hair was matted and stained with dark blood. Blood soaked her shirt. “Bryson?” He touched her lightly and she flinched. Her breath came in little short puffs. She was trembling. “Bryson, can you speak?” He wasn’t sure if he should move her or not. If her spine was injured he should leave her be. He searched her neck and back. There were four deep cuts as far as he could see, bleeding heavily, two on her head and two on her neck, but no artery or vein appeared to be hit and the blood was welling up slowly, not gushing or spraying. She was very cold and wouldn’t answer him. He lifted her and carried her to the car as best he could. She cried out when he put his hand under her head and back. He tried to soothe her. The woods were dark and impenetrable. They were aliens here. It was no paradise. The wild world in all its uncanny brutality, the world people had slowly destroyed in their mastery of it, had returned. On their own, they were nothing.

He laid her down on the back seat of the car. The wounds needed to be cleaned and stitched. He got out his old linen clothes and bandaged her head and neck as best he could to stanch the blood. There was a loud crack of thunder and a strong wind. Shit. Shit. It came. The storm eased in overhead. Thunder shook the earth and lightning bolts shattered trees. Rain pounded the ground into mud.

Still Bryson didn’t speak. She had seemed so powerful. Inhuman: intelligent, sexy, strong, in command of people and the elements. Now she was a quivering, frightened animal dying of its wounds. He started the car and tried to back it up the embankment but the wheels spun around uselessly. He squeezed into the back seat and arranged her head onto his lap, pressing the suit and shirt into the cuts and held her shivering body to his own while the rain drummed on the roof and water gushed over the windows. He was cold too. Feeling an itch he touched his cheek and his hand came away covered in blood.

## CHAPTER FORTY-TWO THAT HOME ACROSS THE ROAD

Leonard Bryson looked at the sandwich he had prepared for lunch with distaste. He was eating because he must but there was no pleasure in it. The cold venison and mustard had a harsh, unpleasing flavor. The bread itself was good; sour dough baked by Sky’s brother. Unfinished work depressed him. There was weeding to be done, hoeing, tilling. That is on the few fields dry enough to plant. Winter storms had wrecked his vines and now the rain had washed away precious soil. His whole world had turned to mud, as it was wont to do. Wayward reality, the gross errancy of things! He laughed and bit the sandwich, chewed. Sasha stood up from the corner of the verandah and approached, wagging her tail. He took out a piece of venison and tossed it to her.

Sky came in carrying a book, her finger marking the page, and put her hand on his shoulder. She was with him all the time now. She looked like she had swallowed a melon. He felt the smooth skin of her belly with his fingers and lips. “Is it kicking?” he asked.

“She.”

“We don’t know.”

“Oh yes we do. Egehjih Jisdoda’sha is never wrong about these things.”

He bit off some sandwich and chewed. His teeth were sore. “These old Indian women think they know everything.”

“Well they do. About some stuff anyway. Most of what I know about midwifery comes from them.”

Leonard scoffed without aggression. "I grew up in a matriarchal clan. I know all about it. They're as arrogant as any synod of men, let me tell you. The piss drinking, menstrual blood smearing, feather swearing, drum beating nonsense...."

"Well, she says I'm carrying low and she can tell by the heart beat."

"Empirical, fine. Will it ever stop raining, can she tell us that? After forty days of rain even the frogs are tired of water." He held her closer and sniffed the air. Mud. And her sweat. They had not had sex in weeks. Her blood pressure had gone up a bit and she needed to rest. He did all of the chores and hence was letting them slip. There was a knock at the door.

"Oop," she said.

"Put a shirt on, I'll get it." He watched her pull on a green tank top. Her nipples had grown wide and bumpy and her breasts were swollen. The shirt rested just above her vanishing navel.

Dennis Blanpied stood in the door, road dusty, with a cigarette dangling out of his mouth.

"Dennis. We were just sitting down to lunch."

He pushed by Leonard and paced around the entranceway. "Your wife's in trouble, Leonard."

"What do you mean?"

Sky stood in the door of the kitchen.

"She called from a border crossing on old route 81. That Gayogoho:nq Militia General Black Cloth was holding her and some man. They were driving a Cadillac, a stolen car."

Leonard didn't understand what he was hearing. He didn't know what to say. "What strange man?"

"Some Felix Clay."

"Never heard of him."

"She wouldn't tell me what was what but she said someone named

Velodia would be coming and that she was in trouble. Said you'd know what to do. Anyway, I called back there and they had left, heading north towards Cornell. But," he took a drag off the cigarette. "A little while later two men, an Owen Bradlee and a guy named Jacob Boyle, arrived in a hovercraft looking for them."

"Can we sit down?" Leonard asked. It was unreal. The air around him churned. He looked at Sky and she followed them into the living room. He sat down on the couch and stared at his books, the black binders lined up evenly on several shelves, then at all the bindings of his collection, some tall, some wide, in leather, cracked paper, scrolls of electraweave. He looked out the window at the valley and the lake.

"You know these two?"

"Owen Bradlee. She works for him, I guess. The other she may have mentioned."

"Well it was Bradlee's car they stole. He's some sort of DOD heavy. And I'll tell you what. Black Cloth is no idiot but he underestimated this guy. Cause he was holding him, (he didn't say a thing about the car by the way,) and this Bradlee fellow murders one of his men and takes Black Cloth hostage. It's a shoestring operation there, understand? The Gayogoho:nq haven't got much but they're pretty fierce about hanging onto what they do have. Anyway, this Bradlee guy holds an entire outpost at bay with two guns and takes off in the hovercraft. Said he was tracking them. But Black Cloth told me they were gonna go after the men. Everyone's on it now. If they try to escape they'll be picked up. The Ganyegeho:nq, the Onqdagehonq, us."

Leonard rubbed his face and tried to think. "What should I do?"

Dennis shook his head and dragged on the cigarette. "I don't know."

"If they come here they can hide out with us," Sky said.

"O.K.," Dennis said. "That's a start. Then we can move them up

to the Hertzler's place maybe and then on to Tganahwai. I have people there who can get them across the border into Ontario."

"But we don't know where any of them are now."

"No."

"So we'll have to wait?" Leonard asked. He looked at Dennis and then at Sky, embarrassed by his helplessness.

"I'll make some coffee," Sky said.

Felix and Bryson huddled, wet and cold, in the back seat, till the rain let up, excitedly babbling about their encounter with the mountain lion.

"You seem better now," he said. "Sleep helped. The bleeding's stopped."

She laughed giddily. "It's unnatural. I feel awful. Like something the cat dragged in!"

"I guess that's funny."

"Did you see that thing? I thought I was dead, that he'd crushed my vertebrae. You know how they kill you? They sever your spinal cord with their incisors. Then they eat you ass first."

"It was unbelievable. I mean, the thing was so big." Outside was light enough to make out shapes as dawn brightened in the sky above the canopy. The birds were awake, crying, singing, squawking in the trees. He could still feel the fear and energy, still smell the fur in his head. "Leonard will be just so happy that you didn't kill it."

"I wanted to kill it, I could taste the blood in my mouth."

"Why didn't you? Were you too afraid? It literally paralyzed me at first."

"No, not exactly. Certainly I was afraid, but I think it was awe. I've never been in such a powerful presence, such immense beauty, such an alien mind. Its eyes were like whirlwinds. I felt myself tracking into a void and then, killing it would have been like trying to kill life itself.

It studied me. I could feel it thinking about who I was and what I meant. We sized each other up. All I can think now is that we stumbled into its world and it let us pass."

"If you hadn't pulled it off of me I'd be a turd on the ground."

"Well, I'd rather not hang around these woods waiting for what's next."

"Bears, wolves and coyotes," Bryson said. "And then there's Owen Bradlee."

"Let's go. I'm no Samson."

He managed to back the car up onto the path and they drove off slowly through the mud. They reached the end of the trail at daybreak and found the road to Ganudasaga, Old Geneva Landing.

Ganudasaga was a small village laid out on either side of a dirt road at the north end of Seneca Lake. It had a weekly market, a school and a medical clinic run by two doctors and a nurse. Up the road was a sawmill. Houses and buildings were arranged haphazardly with big gardens in the back, long driveways, barns and outbuildings in states of decline. Dogs ran about behind crazy fences made of split rails, chain link, pickets and barbed wire, depending. In the long driveways, in barns and in sheds were parked boats, pedal cars, motorcycles, bikes, pick up trucks, horse, mule and ox carts, black Amish buggies. At the edge of town was a restaurant and inn, closed. The sun was just above the horizon and the valleys were filled with a white fog. Water ran in streams along the road and out of drainage pipes into creaks that emptied into the lake. The window was down and he could smell the cows and horses in the fields even when he couldn't see them. The ground was wet and the grass sparkled between the long cold shadows cast by trees and woodpiles. Lights were on in a few houses. Out back of them people were up slopping pigs and milking cows, scattering corn for chickens. The lake was still, stretching as far as they could see, metallic dim, the warm rays of

light spread out in washes of vermillion and pink.

They arrived at the front of the Ganyodae' Bar and Grille, pulled over and stretched their legs. It was a long, low, white clapboard building with an old thatched roof. A metal chimney puffed smoke. Bryson leaned against the car, her skin and lips pale, neck and head wrapped up in bloody clothes. The cut on Felix's cheek has clotted over. There was a smell of bacon and coffee on the air. Through the screen door Felix could see a woman at the grill and another behind the counter filling pitchers with cream, both dressed in white aprons over blue jeans and black t-shirts. He banged gently and the women looked up. When they didn't recognize Felix they became wary. The one filling pitchers said, "Who are you? We ain't open."

"We're driving through," Felix said, his stomach growling at the smell of frying bacon. She came out from behind the counter and stood at the screen door to look them over. "Please. We've had some trouble."

She was a short, heavy woman with two chins and a stoic mouth. Her hair was cut to just below her ears, a greyish blond with dark streaks and she had four hoops in each ear. She wore no make up other than mascara and pink lipstick.

Bryson came over. "I'm Dr. Ruth Bryson. My husband is Leonard Bryson."

"Leonard Bryson's your husband you say? Ain't heard of him." She yelled to the other woman, "Ginny! Babe! You know a Leonard Bryson?"

"Sure. Ain't he that old man living down on Keuka Lake? The one they made chief of the whites?"

"Oh yeah, that one." She turned back to them. "It ain't like there a lot of Leonard Bryson's running around or nothing, but I can't remember a name. So what do you want?"

Felix said, "Just some coffee and something to eat."

"What happened to her?" she asked, looking at the improvised bandages.

"I can explain," Bryson said, weakly. "Please can't we have a little coffee and food?"

The woman rubbed her chin and spent a good moment studying the question. "I suppose. We ain't open yet. You hurt?"

"She's hurt pretty bad," Felix said. "A lion got us."

"Well good lord why didn't you say so at first?" She opened the door. "Come in, sit down then." They sat down on padded stools at the counter. She poured out coffee into two mugs.

"We stayed the night on the Interlaken Trail," Felix said.

"Coming up from Cayuga Lake," Bryson added. "Cornell."

The woman looked out the window and nodded. "That's some car you got there."

"Thank you," Bryson said.

"The lion that attacked us was huge," Felix said.

"You saw the big cat?" she asked, now genuinely impressed. "Ginni, they saw the ga:syoje:tha. Looks like she jumped her!"

Ginny pushed the bacon onto the cool part of the grill and lay out sausage links in a line. She had black hair tied back in a ponytail, was younger and thinner than the woman talking to them. She joined them at the counter, poured a cup of coffee and sipped it. Her face was long, work-battered but kind. Her eyes were dark and unhappy, with beautiful lashes. "Nice to meet you," she said. "Don't any cat look big when it's on you?" They looked at Felix and Bryson suspiciously. Ginny scratched her hair. "That ga:syoje:tha ain't killed no one yet, Fran."

"No it ain't," Fran agreed. She was leaning on her elbows now, sipping a cup of coffee. "You two say you're hungry?"

"Yes," Felix said.

"Well, we can fry you up some fry bread if you like. And there's eggs and bacon, or fish. Lake salmon, trout. I ain't got home fries yet or pancakes. We ain't open."

"No we ain't," said Ginny. "But I'll be happy to fry you up whatever you want."

"Bacon and eggs sound great," Felix said.

"Me too," said Bryson.

"Well, you want fry bread or an old corn muffin with that? We ain't got our bread in yet from the baker."

"I got some bread for toast, Fran. Don't be hard on them now."

"I ain't bein' hard, hun."

"You hurt bad?" Ginny asked, returning to the grill. She turned the sputtering sausage over, scraped a section of grill down, ladled on some melted butter and cracked six eggs open. The whites spread out and grew opaque. The smell rose up over the slightly sour sausage fat. She put four slices of white bread in the toaster.

"I don't know," Bryson said. "It bit my neck and head."

Fran lifted her eyebrows and looked the bandages over. "You're one lucky woman."

Felix said, "I couldn't see well in the dark but I think she needs stitches. And I didn't clean it out."

"Ts ts ts. Well, that you got to do or it'll go septic. You up to date on your tetanus?"

"I don't know," Bryson said.

"Don't mess in no woods without a medical kit. Well, we can fix you up here in town I suppose."

The village was coming to life. Doors opened and slammed shut. The cockcrows were joined by men clearing their throats. An outboard motor revved and vanished down the lake trailing a wake of silver bubbles. An old man came into the restaurant, with white hair

clipped short, terra cotta skin and blue eyes. His lips were thin and tight. He wore blue overalls, black work boots, a red plaid shirt and a baseball cap that said Martini Time, the middle of the M shaped like a cocktail glass with three olives on a toothpick. "You're open early," he said, looking at Felix and Bryson. "You don't never do that for me."

"You ain't an injured stranger," Fran said, handing him a mug of coffee and an ashtray.

He rolled a skinny cigarette, lit it up and winked at Felix. "I ain't strange enough for you Fran?"

"Shut up you old man. You strange enough all right, you just ain't big or strong enough."

Ginny shouted, "That little thing dangling on your nuts never made no woman cry or sing, you just stick it in and cough, same as all the rest."

"Well I guess you'd know Ginny what all the rest does, or what they does with you."

"They don't do nothin' with me no more. I don't let 'em. I'm on gals now, you know that."

"Cat food," he said, grinding out the cigarette and rolling another.

Ginny put the plates down in front of Felix and Bryson and said to Fred, "And what wouldn't you give to try some, eh? Ha." She returned to the grill, threw some bacon and sausage on a plate, added a couple of scrambled eggs and a corn muffin. These she gave to Fred with a bottle of ketchup.

"Where you folks from," he asked, taking bites off of a sausage speared on his fork.

Felix felt the warm yolk on his tongue. They tasted nothing like the eggs he was used to. They weren't sulfury. It was like he had never eaten before. He didn't answer Fred's question but wolfed down the food. Fran laughed. "At the rate you're goin', them chickens don't lay

fast enough.”

“These are just amazing,” Felix said. The food, the light, the air were like fuel. A strength, missing for so long, spread out from his stomach through his limbs. The headache was gone. He didn’t see spots. He felt good. Not Paregane good, just good, normal.

“Ma’am,” Bryson said.

“Just call me Fran.”

“Fran then. Where can I go to clean up these cuts? I can get the tetanus shot at my husband’s, but I’m afraid of infection. It’s already been several hours.”

Fred ate the rest of the sausage off the fork and shoveled in some eggs. “You hurt?” he asked.

“They was attacked by that mountain lion. Say it’s the big one.”

“Ga:syoje:tha. Almost killed an Amish boy a ways back.”

“That’s the one.”

“I’ll see to it. Can we use the sink, Fran?”

Fran looked wearily and then said, “I suppose you can, but it ain’t that clean.”

“Just give me some bleach and I’ll clean it out.”

Fran said to Bryson, “You go with him then. He ain’t a doctor but he done some doctoring along the way. A coot like that’s seen more injury than your big city doctors do, at least more animal bites.”

Ginny said, “He sure has skinned a lot of deer.”

“Stop that babe, you’re gonna scare these folks,” Fran said, touching Bryson’s hand. “It hurts a lot?”

“Yes.”

“It’s a good thing we ain’t open. It’s a good thing Fred come by early.”

The stainless steel utility sinks were deep. To the left was a small prep area scrubbed clean, chopping boards stacked neatly against the

wall. On the floor was a bucket with a stinking rag mop and a push broom and a squeegee. Under the counter was a work stool, a 25-kilo mesh bag of spanish onions and paper sacks of potatoes. Bryson sat down on the stool and lay her head across her folded arms while Felix and Fred went about cleaning the sink and area. Fred moved slowly and deliberately. He rolled his sleeves up and flexed his fingers. His arms were strong, the muscles and sinew like ropes, and covered with faded green tattoos. He opened a utility closet and got out new sponges and latex gloves sealed in cellophane, a four-litre glass jug of bleach, and a glass spray bottle. Felix ran hot water into the two sinks and started to scrub them out with an old brush and detergent liquid. He scrubbed the drain, the plugs and the sides, washing the dented metal down with the spray hose. Then Fred carefully wiped all the surfaces with bleach. He filled the spray bottle and spritzed and sponged the faucets, spigot, plugs and the rubber gloves.

“O.K. ma’am. Let’s scoot you over and take a look.” They positioned the stool next to the sink and she straddled it, facing down. As he pulled away the crusted pants and shirt from around her head and neck she flinched, the clotted blood pulling free of the cuts. Each was about four centimeters long. Blood welled up out of the crimson slashes. Ginny waddled in carrying a giant pot of boiling water and rags. He poured in some bleach and stirred the rags with a wooden spoon, then reached his gloved hand in and wrung one out. This he applied to the back of her head and neck, pressing it. Then he threw the rag into the sink and took out another, again pressing it to the cuts. The blood soaked into the rag and the coagulated blood in her hair softened. With the next rag he started to wipe her entire neck. Then he washed it with hand soap, working up a red lather.

“Bend forward, that’s right,” he said, spraying warm water down on her neck and hair, washing the suds out and into the sink. The water swirled up and over her head, dripping down in a long bloody,

sudsy stream into the drain. She was panting, gripping the sides of the sink, knuckles white. "These are deep but not so big. You're lucky. I'm just gonna keep on washing them for a while." He scrubbed her hair, behind her ears and carefully rinsed the soap out each time. Then he took another hot rag and put it over the wounds. Ginny handed him a razor. He shaved the hair around the cuts, wiping the blood away with the rag as he worked. Ginny left for the kitchen and Fran came in with sterile bandages and a bottle of alcohol. "Now ma'am, this gonna hurt some. I'm sorry, but I got to disinfect it and all we got right here now is alcohol. Your gonna feel like I just lit you on fire and you go on ahead and scream if you must." Before he was done with his sentence he poured the alcohol out and she stiffened, jerked her head forward and groaned, the groan swelling larger and higher. She let go of the sink, hands shaking and pounded her fists, hissing through her teeth. She whimpered and cried then and released her fists. "O.K. We're done with that." He unwrapped the bandage, a thick white pad large enough to cover all four cuts and pushed in against her head and neck. "I ain't sure how to secure this. It's a funny spot. Well, I got no choice but to tape up around your neck. Tell me if it's too tight."

"Go ahead."

He ripped the tape off of the spool and put it on as best as he could. "That'll do then," he said.

She sat up and hopped down of the stool. "How do I look?" she asked, touching the tape on her throat.

Back at the counter they had another cup of coffee. Felix whispered to Bryson, "This place." He felt like a child. "These people."

Bryson laughed. "You'd never know any of this existed, huh?"

"Where are we?" he asked.

"Ganudasaga. Old Geneva Landing. It's just a town. There's an

ancient burial mound around here somewhere. People have lived here for twenty thousand years. In the seventeenth century they had a fortified town nearby." She turned on the stool and faced Fred. "How do you get to Keuka Lake from here, by road?"

"That car is a beaut. You wanna be careful on the road with it. There's plenty around here won't mind killing you for it."

"We'll take our chances," Felix said.

"Yes," he said. "O.K. You just stay on this road. Don't take no turns till you get to the next lake over, that's Keuka. Make a left there, down 54. There's a sign says South. And another buried in the trees that says 54."

"I don't know how to thank you," Bryson said.

Fran, wiping the counter, looked up and said, "He ought to thank you for letting him wash that hair of yours."

Fred smiled, "You ain't told the truth till now, Fran." Bryson and Felix stood. "Well, you folks take it easy, drive safe."

"Thank you all, very much." Ginny came in from the kitchen drying her hands on her apron, and pushed the hair from her eyes. "Thank you, Ginny, Fran."

"See you later then."

As the sun rose the air inside the hovercraft grew warm and the clear walls steamed up. Bradlee could not remember the last time he had endured such discomfort. Probably in the Sundarbans action of 2130. He never wanted to suffer anything like it again. In the foul mood of the morning he turned once more against Bryson. She would pay for this when he caught her. They all would. But how exactly they'd pay he didn't consider. For the moment the chase was all that mattered.

He got out and looked around. They had actually landed in a small clearing in thick woods. He pissed against a tree, lit a cigarette and walked down a little hill to what looked like a dirt road. It was

actually quite wide and straight, bumpy with rocks, potholes and tree roots. The mud was rutted by wagon and buggy wheels. There were piles of decomposing horseshit and hoof prints. The road vanished into the woods. How inconvenient, he thought. He heard water and walked further. His feet sank into the mud and cold water filled his shoes. Damn! Down the other side of the road was a stream. He would have to take a chance and drink. Anything nasty could be treated later. It was cold and good. He splashed some on his face and sat down on a rock. There was no point in wandering around looking for them. He would do what he had set upon doing that evening and go straight to Leonard Bryson's. There were clear skies. They should get there in an hour and then he and Boyle could go about making Leonard talk.

The problem with that plan was the hovercraft. No doubt General Black Cloth's Cayuga Militia would be out looking for him. By day they'd be an easy target. They probably didn't have missiles. They probably didn't even intend to bring him down with gunfire. Most likely they wanted force him to crash. An unfortunate accident, not the treacherous murder of an important state citizen. That's how he would have proceeded in their circumstances.

But then there was no taste of revenge in that. And they were angry.

He returned to the hovercraft. Boyle was slumped forward, asleep. Bradlee pondered his rumpled, sweaty, swollen form. His neck was disgusting, blistered. He nudged him but Boyle didn't move. He pulled him upright. Boyle's head rolled forward. He lifted it. The face was disgusting too, blistered and his forehead was cut and bruised where he had struck the dash when they crashed. He felt his pulse. It was weak but steady enough. His breathing was labored. Hm. He needed Boyle but he would obviously have to live without him. He left him a gun (it was the least he could do), took the black monitor and began walking through the woods. Alligator shoes were not great

for this kind of thing, the mud sucked at his soles. As the sun rose higher it got warm and he began to sweat. Black flies harassed his neck. Mosquitoes needled his wrists.

Why would she do it? Yesterday it made sense, her only option, but now her betrayal looked monstrous. Unmotivated evil. There was no other explanation. She was insane. They had everything going for them. It was crushing. He had never in all his life placed so much trust in anyone. But there was something else. Something difficult to possess. He had placed hope in her. The future in her. Things were going to be different. The last decades of his life he had planned on spending with her in a degree of leisure. And she seemed ready to agree to this. Or so she strongly implied. Leonard was an absurd diversion. Her idiotic midlife schoolgirl crush would have faded, at least with his death. They had both miscalculated badly.

He had never expected anything of the world beyond what he could get by cunning and wit. The truth of this approach, though, never pleased him. Nothing ever pleased him. But he did take comfort in the outward form of things, rituals observed. Even the melancholy recognition of the rottenness of existence was a comfort. And who else was able to share the savour of this sour drink but Bryson? Only she had the understanding of the unstated but omnipresent truth. Only she could chuckle over drinks at things that drove others out of windows and into walls.

It seemed he had been walking for a long a time when the horse cart approached and slowed. It was driven by a boy dressed like an old man. He was frightful, repugnant in his serious clothes, like a nineteenth century undertaker. He wore a black hat, white shirt, black pants and black suspenders. He was hauling a big mound of hay. Bradlee smiled and hailed the boy. "Excuse me young man. Can you tell me where it is I am and where it is I am headed?"

The boy whistled and pulled back on the reins. "Ja. This is the



Interlaken Trail. It goes to Old Geneva Landing,” he said in a strange accent. “Ich can give you a ride.”

Bradlee smiled some more and said liquidly, “That would be ever so helpful.” He climbed up next to the boy. The horse was quite large, a grey and brown clydesdale. Its tail swished between the hitch. The boy whistled again and the horse drew forward, the wooden cart creaking. “Tell me young man, what is your name?”

“Hertzler. Shem Hertzler. Little Shem. Mein cousin Shem is seven foot tall.”

“I see, that’s er, how many meters?”

“Can’t say.”

“Well, it’s quite tall, I’m sure. Tell me, how far is it from Old Geneva Landing to Keuka Lake?”

“Well, by buggy it’s faster than horse cart. Ich got cousins over that way.”

“The seven foot one?”

He shook his head. “Nein. Ich just come from them to haul this hay. All ours is rotted und we got to feed the horses und the cows.”

“I’m looking for an old friend. Dr. Leonard Bryson.”

The boy smiled. “Doctor? At Old Geneva Landing you can hire a ride over to Keuka Lake.”

“How far are we then?”

He shook his head. “Some time. We come out at der trailhead, then it’s a while past that. You can hire a boat or take the road down.”

It was nearly noon when they reached the trailhead. The last part of the journey, endless, hot, buggy, had been silent. The boy was not a great conversationalist. There was something maddening about his poise. Eventually Bradlee decided on what he had to do. When the town was in sight he cleared his throat and said, “Do you mind

young man? I have to relieve myself.”

“What’s that you got to do?”

“Er, piss.”

The boy laughed. “Ja. O.K.” He whistled and the horse stopped. Bradlee got down, walked to a clump of trees behind the cart so the boy wouldn’t be able to see him and pissed. When he was done he returned to the cart, facing the back of the boy. He won’t know what hit him, Bradlee thought, taking out his gun. He shot him three times, in the back twice and then the back of the head. The shots panicked the horse and it raced off neighing wildly, getting tangled in the hitch and reins. The wagon tipped over, dumping out the straw and pulling down the horse, which lay on its side kicking the air. Bradlee trotted after it and shot it twice in the head, leaving them where they were, in a muddy field by the side of the road. He walked into town. It was about noon.

Bradlee was tired, hungry and thirsty. He was weary of ruminating about what he would actually do when he found them. Weary of Bryson. At a certain point words and planning come to an end. Only time would reveal the true dimensions of the catastrophe.

Bradlee surveyed the houses he passed with disdain. He disliked curs running about and half naked children. Actually, he disliked children of any kind and there seemed to be scores of them in shorts, bare-chested, barefoot, deeply tanned, running about, shouting after various balls. Barking, laughter and argument filled the air. It smelled of wood smoke and shit.

He came to the white clapboard building with old thatch, sniffed the air and resigned himself to eating whatever meal he could get there. The screen door dinged and banged behind him and he stood in the hot room waiting for someone to offer him one of the old tables by the windows.

Fran glared at him and said, “You a state cop? We don’t serve no

cops from state.”

Bradlee looked offended. “Indeed not. I’ve just had some hovercraft trouble. I’ve been walking all morning looking for a town.”

“Hovercraft, huh? Don’t see a lot of those. What kind of a funny accent is that?”

He cleared his throat and smiled icily. “Never mind about that. You understand me well enough. Might I see a menu?” He sat down on the nearest stool.

“Sure. Where you headed?”

“Oh, Keuka Lake. To see my old friend Leonard Bryson.”

She sucked her teeth and said, “Uh huh.”

“You don’t know him by any chance?”

She shook her head. “Don’t know no one from those parts. My people is up at Niagara and Ontario.”

“I’ll take black coffee and juice. Do you have grapefruit?”

Fran snickered. “Apple cider, grape or tomato.”

“Hmm. Cider, if it’s cold. And a chicken salad sandwich with fries.”

“Wheat or white?”

“Er, white.” He sipped the black coffee and felt his insides break up like pack ice in spring. The dull throbbing fatigue faded some. He didn’t know how long he had before someone discovered the horse and the boy. The clarity brought on uncertainty and loss of focus. The door dinged and a group of men in khaki took a booth by the windows. Bradlee turned away from them so they wouldn’t see his face.

“Fran,” one called out.

“Catch anything?” she asked.

“Five salmon.”

“Well, I’ll buy three.”

“Buy two and throw in lunch?”

“Deal.”

Bradlee said, when she was done, “Would it be possible to hire a ride over to Keuka Lake?”

“Roads ain’t fit for cars, mostly. The mud’s murder this time of year.”

“Would a boat be faster then?”

She thought about it, weighing the pros and cons of boats and cars and nodded slowly. “I guess so, if the boat is fast.” A bell from the kitchen rang. She went in and returned with the sandwich.

“Tell me,” he said. “Did a man and a woman by any chance come through here in a car?”

“No.”

“Are you sure? It might have been quite early, even in the middle of the night.”

“Well, most of us is asleep at night. Boys, you heard a car come through at all last night?” The men shook their heads no. “We ain’t seen no cars or strangers.”

He ate the sandwich quickly, washed it down with the cider, which was fizzy and warm and then slowly picked at the french fries, dipping them in ketchup. Fran wiped down the counter, carried a bus pan into the kitchen and set a pot of coffee down in the center of the table, giving each man a mug. She went back behind the counter and slowly got place settings together. “Is it possible then for me to hire a boat to Keuka Lake today?”

“Floyd,” she yelled.

“Ja,” one of the men in khaki said. Bradlee flinched. There was no choice but to face them now. Refusal to do so would incite suspicion. He put his hand on the gun in his pocket, found the trigger and

looked up and smiled affably.

"Anyone got a boat for hire?" she asked.

"I'll pay well," Bradlee said.

"You need a pilot too?" asked Floyd, an elderly man with a few deep wrinkles on his face and creases around his dark eyes. His skin was like mahogany and his white hair was braided neatly, under a dirty tan baseball cap with a swordfish embroidered on the front.

"I suppose so, yes," said Bradlee.

Floyd nodded. "Been up since four this morning."

"A regrettable hour," Bradlee said.

The man nodded. "Ja. When you're done, will you need a ride back?"

"That won't be necessary. I'm staying for the weekend. We have a lot of catching up to do, old Leonard and I." He dabbed at his mustache with the cloth napkin and ate a few more french fries. He sipped the coffee and then lit a cigarette.

The men sat in silence. When Bradlee was finished smoking Floyd said, "I'll take two hundred bucks then, before we go."

The men started to mumble together and Bradlee had another cup of coffee. "Is there a rest room?" he asked.

Fran stopped counting out change and snarled. "What?"

"I'd like to wash up and use a toilet."

"Oh. Out back's the latrine. There's a sink you can use in the shed next to it."

Stoically, but with some dread and regret he was unable to repress, he headed out back. There were cans of garbage against the back of the building. Swarms of flies and hornets dove around them. He crossed a muddy yard. The air was hot now and thick. An unpainted shack stood next to an unpainted outhouse with vents near the roof. Between the two was a pile of cracked solar panels and plywood

boards. As he approached it he could smell the waste. He opened the door and a cloud of black flies rose and buzzed about. The seat was clean enough but the odor was nauseating. There was a bucket of ashes and newspaper cut into squares impaled on a nail. The walls were carved with graffiti, the usual viciousness and depravity. Had he any desire to suck a big one the crude cartoons of what this entails would have squelched it. The newspaper was worse than inadequate but the flies crawling all over his ass and legs drove him out. The shed was a little better. An overhead, chain pull tank delivered cold water that smelled of rotten eggs. He washed his hands and face and patted them dry with a hand towel that was actually clean. This he threw into a laundry bag. He straightened his tie in the mirror and touched his mustache. Well, it was time to go.

Floyd was waiting for him outside the front door, and on the dock they met one of the men who had been sitting at the table, young, thin and muscular with an intense, angry look on his face. His eyes were drilled into his head, frozen and hard. He had a scraggly mustache and some growth on his chin. His hands and arms were tattooed with Egyptian hieroglyphs. He stripped off his khaki shirt and untied the ropes on a seven meter black AeroFleet hydrofoil. The muscles popped up on his back and shoulders as he worked. Floyd stood next to Bradlee and said, "My nephew, Mad Beaver. For security." Bradlee raised his eyebrows and petted his mustache with his index finger.

Mad Beaver stood erect and looked at Bradlee. He smiled and said, "You go in the middle, I'll ride in the bow and pops runs the engine." They climbed in. The boat sat low in the water. Bradlee's seat was cushioned with a comfortable back. Mad Beaver sat in the bow and swiveled around to face Bradlee. A fresh breeze rippled the blue water of the lake. White clouds drifted across the sun, darkening the lake water to purple. There were old men fishing off of a wooden pier just down the shore from the dock. Children tossed rocks at the

water. Floyd started the boat and the fans roared as he accelerated out onto the lake, piloting them up the center. Bradlee didn't relax back into the cushion but sat erect, maintaining a vigilant posture, trying to control the twitch he always got in his neck when someone was seated directly behind him. Most of the time he kept his eyes trained on Mad Beaver's face. When they got there, he'd have to be quick. There was no room for error now.

"Where to?" Floyd asked.

Bradlee bent over the black monitor and read through maps and coordinates. "I don't suppose I could download the location to your boat's computer?"

"You don't suppose right. Where on Keuka you heading?"

"Well, you just get me to the west shore and I'll figure out where to land." There was a red flash on the map. Felix.

Dennis Blanpied arrived back at Leonard Bryson's place dirty, hot and tired. He got off the bike, pants legs stiff with mud and road dirt, legs buzzing and achy from the long ride, and walked up to the house through the pack of dogs. "Leonard? Sky?" he called. It was afternoon. They ought to be up from their nap. He knocked on the door. More barking. The dogs crowded his ankles, snuffed at the ground and struggled to get near him. Unconsciously he reached down to pet the nearest one. "Just a minute," came Sky's voice. The door opened. She was dressed in a muslin skirt and blouse buttoned to where her belly swelled. Her hair was down, unbrushed, her face was full and relaxed. "Hi," she said. He followed her in and she shut the door on the dogs. "You stay out," she said, and then yelled, "Leonard? He's back."

Leonard, in an orange sarong with purple fringe, the hair on his chest in white swirls against bronze skin came up carrying a hunting rifle in one hand and a shotgun in the other. "What do you hear?"

"There's trouble," he said, after a pause. The word trouble had

taken on deeper and deeper meaning over the months, as attacks by state security grew more severe. Trouble meant violence. Bombings, assassinations, search and destroy operations, over flights. It meant house-to-house searches of Haudenosaunee homes and illegal detentions of young Indian men and women. Some Amish families had picked up and moved north to Ontario. Some GMZers had betrayed their neighbors out of fear and were in turn driven off their land at gunpoint. Every escalation compromised the patient work of elders, the stitching together of alliances, the give and take of the powerful on both sides, the sustaining accommodations. Trouble was a new outrage, an unacceptable retreat, a loved one under suspicion or a deal.

"They haven't arrived yet?" he asked. Leonard shook his head no. "Well, I've been all over the place, on the phone, talking to people. And this is how it looks. Black Cloth and his men were in a fury. After yelling at each other for two hours they buried their man and called in an elder for a condolence ceremony. Then they sent a patrol of three hovercraft out after Bradlee and found him near Cornell. Their plan was to make it look like an accident but a storm blew up and they lost him over the woods. They figured him for dead and headed back. That was when they got word to turn around and go back to Cornell, where a professor was found shot to death outside of her office."

Leonard opened his mouth and silently said the word no. His eyes watered up. He walked away, leaned the guns against the wall and went over to the living room windows. Sky stood by him and Dennis, following them in, continued. "There's more. An Amish boy was murdered outside of Ganudasaga, three shots to the back and head. There was a police report just now, so my guess is Bradlee survived the crash. I can't get through to anyone up there. I thought I should come here first and let you know what was up."

"I'm going out to find them," Leonard said.

"I wouldn't do that. She's bound to come here."

"I can't stand this waiting, this doing nothing."

"I'm sorry. You were friends with Velodia?"

Leonard turned around, his face fallen. "She was Ruth's best friend. She and I are responsible for all of this I'm afraid. If we hadn't encouraged Ruth to go against Bradlee none of it would have happened. She'd be downstate right now in her lab, working."

"As far as we know she's alive. And it doesn't seem that difficult to take two men, even if they are armed. Just let's get those guns cleaned and loaded. I'm gonna head out and see what else I can hear. Maybe up at Penn Yan the English will know something."

Felix gripped the wheel of the car, the thrill of driving long worn out. Now it was hard work. His headache had returned and his vision was through a tunnel. Periodically, static and visual hiss occluded the road, but he was going so slowly, it didn't seem to matter. Any faster than thirty miles an hour and they started to fishtail in the mud. Any slower and they couldn't get good traction. They were on hydrogen power now. The car rolled up and down ruts and hills. To save fuel they turned off the air conditioning and rode with the windows down.

Looking at the countryside through blur he thought of how much Veronica would have loved it. The whole thing, the whole adventure. It was her country after all. Sometimes late at night, when they were young, in a certain mood, she told him stories about living on the boat. There was a tone in her voice when she spoke of her parents and the past, of summers on Lake Superior, that she didn't have at other times. She was not given to nostalgia but the tone was one of longing.

Despite all that had happened he felt that he was heading towards something for the first time in his life. He wasn't running from something, or drifting about following the currents of whatever. He

had a purpose, survival, and a destination, freedom, wherever that would be. He was making choices. He had a sense of possibility, a sense of belonging. It was the land. He knew these hills, these farms, because he had known Veronica and in her death all of her potential resided in him. Then the headache crippled him. He winced.

"What's wrong?" Bryson asked.

"Nothing. Headache."

"At Leonard's I may be able to give you something for it."

"Aspirin did nothing. It just comes and goes, with my vision. How are your cuts?"

"Sting and ache."

"So, when we get there, what next?" They came to a high plain, black earth on either side, with clumps of trees and a couple of Amish men working two horse ploughs back and forth. They passed a group of white houses and weathered log cabins shaded by oaks and pines at the end of a long driveway near a crossroads. There was a collapsed red barn and a paddock under water, the color of sky. Horses stood not far off on a hill above the paddock, chewing the dark grass.

"I thought you'd had it with me," she said.

"I said that when I was mad."

"You have every right to be mad."

"I don't know. What I wanted from life was to be left alone. If anything you've demonstrated to me the impossibility of that desire. Do you think a company man, a plain guy like me, could make it up here? I feel like I'm meant to be here, with you. This is something I'm supposed to be doing."

"Anyone who can face down a mountain lion will do fine just about anywhere."

Suddenly a lake came into view, a shimmering cobalt and jasper

stretch of water through trees. "This is the next big lake," he said. "I don't see so well, so look out for that sign." He slowed down. They rolled up an incline and started to slide a little, one wheel spinning and then catching on the brown mud. Puddles fanned out like waves on either side. The underbelly crunched on gravel and dirt.

"That's it," she said, pointing to a rusty, half buried sign obscured by poison ivy vines. Felix turned the wheel and they were driving along the ridge above the lake, which twinkled in the sun below. The road was drier, narrower than the other and they drove a little faster, slowing down for black horse buggies. Bryson waved to each one they passed and said good morning to the children who, in their turn, pointed excitedly at the silver car while the men and women driving them nodded sternly.

"Maybe I'll just settle in here somewhere," he said.

"Don't be fooled. Life here is as heartbreaking as anywhere else. Probably more so."

"It can't be worse."

"All that beautiful green you see out there? Poisonous vines and thorns. Every year you have to hack the wall of vegetation back. Things drop dead, people die of weird diseases. The insects are overwhelming and the weather sucks. Me, it's Canada or nothing." She began to scrutinize the land very carefully. It would be easy to miss the house. It was enough below the ridge to be invisible from the road. The fields all looked alike but she knew there was a distinct pile of rocks to mark the driveway, and the field above it had its own face, the tree line at a specific distance, the stand of locust trees within the field and the pitch of the ground and the view to the left, out over the lake. "Stop," she cried. "Now go on a bit further. See that break in the weeds?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"Go down there."

Carefully he drove up over the sward and onto the steep, curved driveway down to the property. He eased up to the house and stopped. A pack of dogs surrounded the car, yapping, yelping and barking, charging around in circles, tails wagging.

"It's O.K.," she said. "They won't bite."

"What's the point then?" He opened his door. A white, pink and grey pit bull and a filthy white poodle wiggled against his leg, sniffing and barking. Felix stood stiffly, pressed flat against the door hoping all they were going to do was smell him. They were seemingly vicious and they stank of offal. A mixed something or other nosed his belly, barked at him while another wiry one growled. The poodle and pit bull backed off.

"Down boys, down," Bryson said, squatting to pet them. "Yes, yes." She stood. "They used to drive me nuts. But then I started to feed them." A big red chow walked slowly up and the other dogs cleared away. "Sasha!" she said.

Leonard, Sky and Dennis ran out of the house. Leonard grabbed her, looked her in the eyes. "Are you all right? No," he said, seeing the tape on her throat. "What happened?"

She put her head on his chest and said, "Oh Leonard, they killed her, they killed Velodia."

Sky stood off uncertainly, watching them.

"I know. We haven't time. Sky's to take you up to her place."

She joined them at the mention of her name and the five stood in a circle. The dogs milled between their legs, agitated by the strong smell of mountain lion. A cock crowed. Blue jays screamed in the treetops. The sun was high overhead, hot on the skin but a cool breeze blew intermittently off the lake. Big buzzing flies started to zoom around like electrons, attracted to sweat, repulsed by swatting hands. The light stabbed at Felix's eyes. He looked at the unfamiliar faces, the house and the outbuildings, everything washed out and

drained of color. There was an old man, strong and crooked like a distressed tree, and a younger man, his own age, dressed in khaki, with a badge and two holstered guns. And then there was the woman. He looked at her, tried not to stare, but he could not help it, she filled his eyes. With time she took on color and depth. Now it was his heart that was stabbed through. He felt he was going to sob. It rolled up through him, visceral, and stung his eyes. She was still. Her blond hair fell in a tangle off of her head and framed her face, lifting in the gusts of wind. She cleared it away from her eyes and looked at him. She was so serious; they all were. He felt a radiance pierce through the pain in his eyes and head and flood his body with warmth. She smiled. The others talked rapidly, quietly, making plans, drawing circles in the dirt with their feet. She was tall, almost stately, but relaxed. The smile on her lips came and went like light and shadow on water. Her eyes were different, complicated, not the usual placid blue but changeable. Her front teeth were crooked. Her skin was tanned but she wore no makeup. He looked at her body, sheathed in a tight fuchsia blouse, breasts swelling and belly bulging out like a ball. Was she fat? No, it was taut, a hard bowl of muscle and flesh, the cross hatches of reddish hair disappearing into the muslin skirt which fell over two long, caramel legs, barefoot and unshaved. He was embarrassed to linger so long on her flesh but he could smell and taste it. He swallowed the ache he thought had disappeared with Veronica. Then, mastering himself, he tried to follow the conversation. The names were unfamiliar. And the woman would not be swallowed, she dented space. They gravitated towards each other and started to turn in orbit. She made no effort to look away.

Bryson said, "This is Felix."

"Hi Felix," Leonard said. "I'm Ruth's husband, Leonard, and this is Dennis and Sky."

They shook hands. "Let's go inside," Dennis said.

They sat in the living room. Leonard paced around with a rifle in each hand. Sky lay back on the couch and Felix sat down by her feet. Bryson sat upright in a chair facing them and Dennis paced about in counterpoint to Leonard, the two men exchanging comments seemingly addressed only to themselves.

"We have to get you stitched up," Leonard said. "Let me see." Bryson leaned forward. He lifted off the bandages. Dennis bent down to look. "My god, that cat was huge. And you didn't kill it?"

"No," Felix said.

Leonard grunted and looked at Felix. "Why not?"

"Don't know. It didn't feel right."

Leonard grunted again. "Well, the clean up's crude."

Sky sat upright and said, "I can stitch her up. I just have to get my bag."

"No, you sit. I'll get it."

She gave him a look like, you don't have to do everything, and as it passed between them, the intimacy of it registered around the room. Felix looked at Bryson. She didn't know. She wasn't paying attention. Or hadn't been till the look, the solicitation. Leonard left and while he was gone Bryson became conscious and stared now at Felix, now at Sky, her eyes widening and narrowing.

Dennis said, "As soon as she's done stitching you up you three better beat it. The last place I have Bradlee is the dead boy in Ganudasaga. I'm waiting on calls to see what he did next. But we can't risk him calling in an air strike."

Leonard put down a large black leather bag and Sky opened it between her feet. She pulled out a suture kit, sterile paper, disinfectant and self-adhesive bandages. Then she pulled out a package of syringes. Leonard brought in a table and she set up her instruments on top of the blue paper. Rapidly she filled four syringes. Ruth looked at her work, her face set and angry. She was so tense

ripples passed through her muscles and her face twitched. "I can't stand it!" she said finally. "You're bloody pregnant."

"Ruth," Leonard said.

"Do you want me to leave?" Sky asked, putting down a syringe.

"How the fuck do I know?" Bryson asked, tears starting into her eyes. "Forty years of marriage and this is what's left?" No one answered her question. "I don't care about the sex but this is going too far."

"She wanted a child. It's a beautiful thing," Leonard said.

"It's a bloody nasty thing!" She searched the room. Dennis drifted towards the windows.

"I'm sorry Ruth. It's my fault. Ours--" she stuttered. "Nothing I say could be right. Don't forgive me, hate me if you must. Do I go on?"

"What?" Bryson asked. "This?" she pointed to her wounds. "Christ. If you must."

Leonard knelt down beside her and took her hand. She snapped it back and refused to look at him. "Please," he said. "We can't end things here, like this. There's too much to do."

"I came here to be with you, not to play grandma to some bastard."

"No," Leonard said. "You came to save your life and that's what we'll do."

"This first shot's an antibiotic," Sky said. "Then I'm giving you a tetanus and a rabies shot just to be safe." Bryson stood up and Sky pulled her pants down and stabbed the needle into her butt. Then she injected her shoulder. "Lie down on the couch and take a deep breath." Bryson lay back and Sky took one of Bryson's hands into hers, gripping it tight. Then she plunged the syringe into her stomach and slowly pressed the vaccine home. Bryson gasped. "That's fine

now," Sky said. "Breathe deeply. I won't let you go. When you're ready, we'll stitch you up." Bryson stood uneasily and sat in the chair. Sky put on latex gloves and bathed her neck and head in iodine. "Whoever cleaned this did a good job." She examined each of the cuts and quickly anesthetized each one. "If the Novocain wears off just tell me."

It took about an hour to stitch her up. Sky worked quietly and quickly, eyes intent, hands firm but gentle. She pulled the sutures through with a forceps and tied each knot. As blood formed around the sutures or in the wound she dabbed it up with gauze. If Bryson twitched she paused. By the end Bryson sat in a relaxed daze, her breathing slow and regular. "Now, before I put on the bandages you take a hot shower and put on some clean clothes. You too Felix."

Felix stood under the shower. The water smelled like mud. It pulsed against his head and shoulders. The grime dissolved from his skin, from his hair. Dirt, blood, bugs, seeds, grass. He inhaled the steam, stamped around, and washed himself. He never wanted to leave. Finally he conceded and stepped steaming out into the wooden bathroom and toweled off. There were a white button down shirt and a pair of grey pull on pants hanging from a hook. They were a little big. He tightened the drawstring and walked barefoot up to the living room. Sky was applying the last of the bandages. Bryson's hair was wet, shaved raggedly in the back, hanging straight down to her shoulders, and her skin glowed from the shower. He sat down on the couch and Sky sat down next to him. Leonard picked up the bandage wrappers and wadded them up with the syringes and suture needles in the stained blue paper.

"So what's the plan then?" Leonard asked.

"Canada," Bryson said, glaring at him. "I'll go alone, or with Felix."

"Don't be ridiculous," Leonard said. "You won't make it. We've got to do this right."



Dennis cleared his throat. "Look, we don't have time for this. Sky, you take Felix home. Go straight there and avoid being out in the open. I'll go up to Jordan's. He and his family will meet up with us at your place. Leonard, you and Bryson stay here to pack. You'll need weapons, ammo, money and food for three days. Take two dogs. Drive it up in that silver car to Jason and Sky's. From there the four of you'll drive to Hertzler's. Park in the barn and leave that night for Tganahwai."

Sky stood and took Felix by the hand. Dennis left with them. In the driveway he paused for a minute to admire the Cadillac. Even caked in mud it was a beautiful thing. He put his boot up on the chrome fender and pressed his weight down on it. "Man! Look at this. Must be something to drive."

Felix winced and said, "Out on the open road it's like heaven. I did a hundred no problem."

"K?"

"No, miles per hour."

Dennis whistled. "I've never done that on the ground. Not on these roads. What kind of gun you got?"

Felix shrugged. "I have no idea." He popped the trunk and took out his black duffel bag, put it down and unzipped it. They watched him move the coffin aside and pull out the revolver. "It's this," he said.

Dennis took the gun and turned it over, inspected the chambers and then took aim at a tree. He pulled the trigger and the report was dull, startling nonetheless. He handed it back. "That's a good gun. Implosion rounds. Be careful with it. Don't go sticking it in your waistband like you're Billy the Kid or you'll blow your dick off." He laughed.

Sheepishly Felix put it back in the bag and put the shoulder strap across his back. "I'll just bring it like this."

"Good. Can't tell you how often that happens." He laughed again. "Sky, my brothers up at Ganaweta will see you across into Canada. You're gonna have to keep this crew together, understand? I'm worried about them going five rounds here. If they don't get up to your place soon, come down and get them, but keep Felix in the storm cellar."

They could hear shouting in the house. Sky took his hand again. She had long, muscular arms and strong hands with calluses and broken fingernails. She smelled so good, grassy, of hot skin and hair. They went into the shed next to the house and she handed him a pair of shoes. "The path's kinda rough. We should wear shoes. When we get there we have to check for ticks."

He followed her around the house, down a steep hill and through acres of wrecked grape vines and broken trellises. The vines were unpruned and climbed up over the old wooden posts.

"What are these?" he asked. The ground was soft and wet, the air loud with insects.

"Grapes."

"For wine?"

"Last year he made grappa, a kind of hooch made from grapes. It's like wine but much better. Strong."

"And they just grow here like this?"

She laughed. "These are a mess. You can't get a good harvest off of vines like these. They need to be pruned and trained along the wire between these posts. He just let it go this year."

The vineyard descended in terraces down the hill. They came to a dense wall of vegetation with a doorway cut into it. The path was like a hallway as wide as a mower. It was high enough to create some shade and Felix could see better. Sparks scattered on the ground and hopped up and down like popcorn. "Can we go to the lake?" he asked.

She stopped. "Dennis said not to."

"How far off the path is it?"

"That's not it. It's just down there. But then we're out in the open."

"Well, can't we just go and look and then head on? It's so beautiful."

"Why not. Come on. They'll be at it for a while I think."

He watched her back and shoulders and feet as she pressed forward. There was so much energy in her. It was as if she were throwing off the sparks. "Keuka's the most beautiful lake in all of Iroquoia. Do you want to swim?"

"Sure."

"It's a little cold yet, but the sun is hot. It'll be nice. We'll take a short swim and then head up to my place. And the weeds haven't come in yet so it doesn't stink." They came out onto a path through dense woods that thinned out into a bog. Here they walked side by side, under tall ferns like ostrich plumes at court. "Where are you from?" she asked.

"Uh...that's hard to say."

"How can that be hard to say?"

"I've been so many places. I guess New York. The area of New York. I lived for years in Rockland with my wife."

"You're married too?"

"She's dead."

"Oh."

"I could explain, but I'd rather not just now."

"I'm sorry. That's fine. I don't need to know. New York. You know what the Cayuga call New York? Ganonyo, expensive place. The English say it's evil. I've never been there. Is it scary?"

"Expensive place, that's funny."

"It helps to have a sense of humor."

"Who are the English?"

"That's what the Amish call us. English. But we call the Christians English, not each other. The Christians at Penn Yan. Those Christians think everything's evil, so I don't believe what they say about the city. Still, I'm scared to go."

A woodpecker tocked at a tree. A snake sunned itself on a rock and slithered away when they approached. Frogs plopped into the water. They climbed an embankment. "A snake," Felix said.

"We got plenty of those," she said. "They eat rats."

"How far are we?"

"We're here," she said. The bog had turned into a stream and they came out on a shore lined with ancient willow trees, fat around, and leaning down into the water on huge knots of root. The lake was still. They climbed over rocks and fallen trees along the shore till they came to the boat landing. There she sat down on the ground in the sun. He set his bag down and gazed out at the water. It faded in and out, now brilliant purple, black and green, now dim, like a negative. His heart was a glissando of glass and rain. Two kingfishers, chattering loudly, dropped from the trees and raced out over the water. Felix took off his shoes. Now he was hot. She said, "See over there, across the way on the other shore?"

"I don't see so well right now. What am I looking for?"

"A group of rocks. That's kingfisher's point. A hundred years ago some Seneca boys came down there to camp and fish. The English got word they were there and a company of men, all drunk, from Watkins, came up in the night and killed them in their sleep. The oldest was fifteen. Next day, when they didn't come home, their families set out to find them. The bodies were gone but there were five kingfishers no one had ever seen before fishing right there. Well, the end of it was they went down to Watkins and killed the men and

drove their families out. This is the best fishing around. I once caught ten salmon in a morning. They were this big," she said, indicating with her hands a meter long fish. "So your cheek's cut. The cougar got you too?"

"When I pulled her off of Bryson she must've swiped me."

"Healed fast."

"Oh, that would be the drug I've been on."

"That drug that Ruth is working on?"

"Yes."

"You were one of the guinea pigs?"

"What does that mean?"

"That's what Leonard calls you. The ones she experiments on."

"Well, I was a lab rat, yes." Thinking about it darkened his mood. The sky and water spiraled together and into her eyes. Their two energies, his and hers, met and spun down. He felt her womb, the weight, the fullness, and thought of the word gravid. As he looked out over the water he saw babies rising up, nude and purple and descending all the paths to the lake. Naked bodies rose and plunged and bubbled on the water. Boys and girls swung out on rope swings over the lake and leapt-in shrieking while babies cried from the shadows for their mothers. They jumped rope and danced in circles singing nonsense songs. Future babies, ancestor babies. He looked at her abdomen, the skin with its fine white down, breathing up and down. Slowly, gently he placed his head upon it and said, "In think I'm going blind." She stroked his head. "Is this all right?" he asked.

"Yes. I think I have to revise a few ideas I have about what kind of world I live in."

"In what way?"

"They never included you."

"You know all about this place."

"I've lived my whole life here. And I'm a midwife."

"Really? Is that why you have that bag?"

"I don't do much stitching, not if I can avoid it. I was taught well. My grandmother taught my mother and she taught me. Both sides we have doctors and midwives. I get the Indian lore from my mother's side. I'm a kind of sponge, you know? Everything I read, whatever anyone tells me, I absorb. I know stories from every hill around here. Up near our house is a hill where they killed a witch in 1803. Over there is where the fifty-year-old Mohawk woman gave birth to twins in 2142. A two-headed cow died on Yoder's pasture three years ago because of cold. Do you want it in German?"

"I don't speak German."

"I don't really either, just enough to make my Amish clients feel easy. I got some Quebecois, a bunch of Iroquois dialects."

"You get around."

"Birth 'em and bury 'em. It freaks 'em right out till they're in need. I can even do the Kaddish prayers. Jewish farmers down in the Catskills taught me that. I was there for a lying-in and the grandfather dropped dead of congestive heart failure. I didn't like the cough he had but there wasn't time. Anyway, I stayed the week to sit Siva and learned the Kaddish. I do all right."

They lay in silence like that for a while and the only time was of birds and clouds passing overhead. Then they stripped off their clothes and dove into the cold dark water. They splashed around, spouting water, kicking, swimming and floating on their backs. They lay back in the sun and talked forgetfully for what seemed like hours. Their words were like blossoms of a day, opening, closing and falling in such profusion they never lasted and were never gone.

The sound of the hydrofoil roaring up the lake didn't reach them at first. It was distant, alien. But as it approached, the high loud fans drifted free of the cicadas and hornets and interrupted their

conversation.

“What’s that I hear?” Felix asked, sitting up suddenly. “I can’t see a thing clearly.” He’d squint and the world would pour in on him, dense with detail, only to wash out again in blur.

“It’s just a boat.”

It was moving very fast. They had no time to react. It got larger and larger. They stood to leave but before they could go the boat had docked and Bradlee was throwing a line over the old grey piling. A body bled heavily into the bottom of the boat and Bradlee hopped lightly up onto the landing, clutching a black box and a gun.

“Ah, how convenient,” he said, aiming the gun at them. “And who is your lovely friend, Felix? You must introduce us.”

Sky bit her lip and squeezed Felix’s hand but he said nothing.

Boyle awoke several times but never to full consciousness. It was like being underwater. Consciousness was way above, refracting on the surface like sun, but unreachable. All around him was a luminous, impenetrable silence. His thoughts were like air bubbles rising to the surface, strange sounds and sensations he emitted but did not fully perceive. As the day wore on the sun charged the solar batteries and heated up the compartment. Eventually he awoke enough to realize he was not underwater but drenched in sweat and in great need of pissing. He was in pain, feverish, bleary eyed, dehydrated and alone. It was a calamitous state to be in. He staggered out into the clearing, searched about wildly, thinking he might be dead, or captured by the Cayugas. He patted himself down for gun shot wounds. There were none. Nothing apparently was broken. His face hurt badly. His throat was dry and swollen shut, like he’d been eating dust. His eyes burned. He stared out through two bloody swollen slits at the woods. Bradlee was nowhere. He’d abandoned him to wild animals, bandits and the elements.

There was little he could remember about the night before. Just

pitching around in the air thinking he might vomit and pass out. He didn’t have the flu and he hadn’t been drunk, or at least he didn’t think so. He hallucinated. His dreams felt like reality and reality felt like a dream. The ground was solid enough but everything else looked flat and corpuscular. Trees, shrubs, grasses, hissed and drifted about his field of vision. He peed where he stood, all over his feet. It dribbled on his pants. Then, like a dowsing rod, he headed for water. There had to be water nearby. More than anything else he was thirsty. It led the way. He felt his pockets for his gun. It was there. Good. He was scared. The woods scared him. He had been hunting. He hated it. Killing animals to eat them sucked. It was the way they looked at you. People never looked so innocent. People were bad mostly, killers, at least the ones he shot. Even Velodia. Velodia was good but mixed up in something bad. She lost and paid the price, just as he would. But animals were just in the world. The wild ones anyway.

They crept up on you. In the woods everything watches you and you can’t tell one thing from another. In the war, if there was woods or jungles or forests they burned them down whenever they could. Fuck the greenhouse gases. Who was there to tell them what to do. But then they said it was bad and they couldn’t do it. The leaders. What did they know? After that they just conceded the woods to the enemy. The feeling was, let them have the woods then, we’ll take the towns. What good was a jungle without a town to serve? If they wanted to live like monkeys in the trees, then that was their victory. He said let them have it.

The trees scared him with their bark and high boughs. Big vegetation was still and silent and threatening. They were like soldiers who never died, the trees. All that wood, that weight, that height, darkening the sky, sucking all the air down. And then there were wolves and panthers and bears. A bear doesn’t care for explanations. It will kill you for going near its young whether you know it or not. Well, who could blame them. He would do the same thing. Fuck

anyone who got near his kids. What they know doesn't matter. In that he was like nature. Nature does. It doesn't fuck around with why.

He turned around to see the way he'd come. Getting lost would suck. Then he was dead, even with the gun. It was a dirt road in the woods. The trees were so big he couldn't put his arms around them. They say there used to be trees in California so big you could drive through them. These were almost that big. He looked up and down the road. There was no way to tell where he was and there was no one or thing about, no houses or huts, no traffic. There weren't even any fucking birds singing. He walked along, trying not to lose track of time, till he heard water. Glancing this way and that, sure he hadn't been followed, he climbed the side of the trail and saw that not far off was a stream. Without compunction he ran over soggy ground, tripping and tearing clothes on thorns and vines, oblivious to swarms of flies and mosquitoes, to the coursing water. He ripped off his suit jacket and shirt and plunged his face into the stream, splashing the cold water over his head, neck and shoulders, scooping it into his mouth. It put out the fire in his throat. It ran up into his eyes and sinuses. Breath came easier. Things cleared. He could think some. His stomach growled. Strength returned to his limbs. He still felt feverish but not like he was dying. He stretched out, took a deep breath and bent down to drink again. It was actually a pretty spot. There were moss-covered stones and plants along the banks of the stream, little orange flowers and ferns, like in a movie. This is what they say the garden of eden was like, without the bugs.

Letting his guard down made him nervous. He mustn't be fooled. There were snakes and spiders and vampire bats. Even drinking the water was dangerous. It might have that snail parasite that eats your brains and makes you crazy.

Refreshed, he headed back to the hovercraft. Along the way he sat down to have a smoke. Once he was dry he put the shirt back on. It

stank of stale sweat. The jacket he left off. He wasn't working for anyone anymore and it didn't matter how he looked, not here. He lit another cigarette and tried to figure out why Bradlee had left him and how long had he been there. Probably he had left him for dead. He had no idea where they were upstate but leaving him for dead was stupid. How was Bradlee supposed to make it out there alone? Whatever.

Back at the hovercraft he looked things over. It was scraped up from hitting the trees. An antenna was broken and so were the taillights, but the canister, hateful as it was, looked o.k. Maybe it was just a dead battery.

The black box was gone. He ran a hardware and software test and everything checked out. The sun had recharged the battery. Woozy and hungry as he was he had to keep moving. This was no place to be. Every instinct told him to go, so he did.

He didn't fly back to the city. He felt he had left things undone. He ran through the destination codes and selected Keuka Lake, Leonard Bryson's vineyard. Someone'd be there. If that's where everyone was headed, that's where he'd go too. The time display read 57 minutes. Airborne, he passed out again. He didn't even awaken when he landed, gently, in the clearing below the road by the rhododendron trees.

"How can you do this to me, Leonard? How? She's just a child." They were in the living room. "These past few months, thinking of you has kept me going, what we had here in the fall. Was it just me who felt we found something together?"

"Of course not. I felt it too."

"Let me finish! I wrote that report. Do you know how that felt? Signing my death warrant? Was I afraid? I was proud. I thought finally I'd done something worthy of you and Velodia. I imagined coming up here and escaping with you into the north, into Canada, a

new life free of all this crap.”

Standing over her, he asked, “How was I supposed to know?” He sank down to join her on the floor. Books lay about where she had thrown them, spines cracked open, pages bent. The windows were full of blue, afternoon shadow. “It’s been a long time Ruth. And weren’t you with Bradlee? When I call, you’re not there. Tell me you haven’t been sleeping with him.”

“I can’t tell you that. It’s not the same.”

“No, it’s not the same. No two things are ever the same. What I feel for you I don’t feel for anyone else, not Sky, not anyone. I just don’t see what difference it makes if I father her child.”

“You’re in love with her. You gaze upon her, wait on her hand and foot, eyes full of wonder and pity. A heart broken old man. Did you ever look at me that way? Little pussies to play with, fine. But love?”

“I’m all talked out about love. I don’t know what it is or where it comes from or where it goes. I know it’s here now between us. If it hasn’t always been it is now. It’s the one thing we divide between us that isn’t diminished by division. The more of love there is the more of us there is. We have things to do. We have to pack up this stuff. Let’s get squared away with each other and move on. If you really must leave me, fine, my life is almost over anyway. This place is a wreck and now they’ll come in and bulldoze it. I’ll go with you to Canada and we can split-up there. But that’s not what I want. Not now, not ever. So let’s get our things packed and up to Jason’s. We’ll sort our lives out on the road.”

She stared at the floor, her eyes hard, till tears came to them and she began shake. “She was lying there, smashed to pieces, bloody and broken and alone in the dark. What was her last thought? What did she feel? Did she see it coming? Did he torture her first? Were the final moments terror and agony, time to sum the whole thing up, bitter and pointless? Her last words lost, uttered to herself or a killer

standing there? Did he even look her in the eye? She was shot in the back, running for her life.”

He scooted over next to her and took her in his arms. “And what did you feel when the cougar had you in its jaws?”

“Oh, it was beyond words. Terror, and stillness. There was purity at the center of this howling tumult, and I thought...I thought of you, of all that wouldn’t be and then, nothing. I was just watching.”

“I’m sorry,” he said. Then he stood up, his knees creaking. “Have you any money?”

“These jewels, and a disc.” She patted the pocket of her tunic.

“Then can Sky have the disc you gave me? You and I can start over on what you have.”

“You would leave her?”

“Of course .” He picked up a rifle, cocked it. He rifled drawers for boxes of bullets and loaded the other rifle. These he leaned up against the red couch and approached her again. “I’m sorry I hurt you. You’ve hurt me pretty bad in the past but we’ve always stuck together. What we had this fall, that was more than I ever had before and all that I could ask for.”

She took him to her. “We’ll go together. Take care of Sky and Felix till the baby’s born, then make our way. Have you got a pistol or something for me?”

“In the hall.” They cocked and loaded three more rifles and two pistols and piled them up on the table.

Bradlee held the gun on Sky and Felix. “Let’s go, take me to the house.”

“That man in the boat,” Sky said.

“Don’t bother about him my dear, he’s had all the favors he can handle for one day. Ho ho. Now move it.”

Bradlee followed them back the way they had come. Felix could

feel the gun pointed at his back, it was like a pencil pushing him forward through the blur, following the bouncing image of Sky's shirt, sparks shooting off of things. It seemed that he had memorized the way in his ears and nose and now, on the return, every detail was familiar. He was in a different time zone. There was only the gun in his bag. Bradlee hadn't searched him. The main thing was to not show fear. Wasn't that what Promethea had said? He trembled like a dog in thunder and tightened his grip on the duffel bag. It brushed against his legs and swished through the grape vines as they walked up through the vineyards. He was sweating now. The handle of the bag was slippery in his hand. If his opportunity should arrive, it would be brief.

The house was within view now, three stories of weathered board with huge windows, the roof a dull yellow fading into washed out sky. She was so relaxed, walking as if nothing were happening. But he couldn't see her face.

It was almost possible to forget that Bradlee was there, he was so quiet. It was as if he walked on a thin layer of ice in crepe shoes. His approach was like that of an August thunderstorm. When he entered a room the temperature dropped. Just looking at him made his nose run.

Sky opened the downstairs door and they were inside. The dogs out front started to yap and yowl. She mounted the wooden stairs slowly. If he could just get the bag unzipped without making a noise.

"That you Sky?" Leonard called out.

"Easy now," Bradlee hissed softly.

"Yes," she said, quavery but in control.

Felix swung the bag forward and held it against his chest. Sky stepped onto the second floor landing and started up to the first. Footsteps came towards them. Bradlee cocked the gun. It was aimed at the back of his head, but they were his shields as well. He wouldn't

waste them on going in. At the top of the stairs Felix opened the bag, and as they stepped into the kitchen and faced the front door, he let it swing to his side.

Bryson stared out the little windows on either side of the front door. The glass was opaque and pebbled. It was the time of day when bright shafts of sun struck the floor behind her. If Bradlee came up to the door she wouldn't necessarily know it was him. The one thought kept going round, what does he want? There were few things she was sure of and one of them was that Bradlee always wanted something. He always had an objective one could further or impede, depending. And Bradlee had his desire too. Even if he was furious with her, he would let Felix go if she offered to leave with him. But she did not know how to do that without devastating Leonard, whom she had just promised--the door up from downstairs in the kitchen squeaked opened. She turned. Her eyes felt dark, like deep water, and still.

She stared into two rooms, the kitchen straight ahead, and the living room to the right. Leonard was in the kitchen, armed with a rifle. All the other guns were stacked against the couch and piled up on the table in the living room. Leonard strode towards the door. She didn't want him to do that. She felt dizzy. The light in the living room was strange. It was like a luminous shadow shining in from the windows, bluish gray, and the sun from behind was creeping towards it, every second discretely closer.

Sky tripped a little and said, "Leonard, he has a gun."

She was watching now. Everything was still. She was seeing the room the way she saw other things, ideas, structures. Something is happening.

Leonard pointed his rifle at Felix.

"No," Felix said.

Leonard's shoulders dropped slightly. The barrel of the gun swung

away from Felix's face and hovered for a moment.

Then Bradlee stepped lightly forward, into focus, using Felix for a shield. "Drop the gun, Leonard," he said.

"No," Leonard said.

She was trying to put thoughts in his head. Don't say no. He hated Bradlee. He'd make wrong assumptions. Except, he was also a hunter.

Bradlee took aim at Bryson. She tried to comprehend the gun. Owen Bradlee had a gun on her. It was hard to take seriously, but she knew she must. The fear did not descend on her yet. She looked at the spines of the books on the floor where she had thrown them. It was a terrible, peevish thing to do. He loved his books and there they were, fighting like they were twenty. Boswell, Darwin, Gibbon, Browne, Wallace, she knew where the heart was and had hit at it as he had hit at hers. What if that's the last--oh--but that can't be, please no.

She walked away from the front door and through the hall towards them. Sky ran out of the kitchen and brushed by her. She squatted down by the front door and thrust her hand up to grab the knob. Bradlee said, "Stop." Sky turned her back to the window, blotting the light.

"All right," Bradlee yelled, "Everyone into the hall." His pistol was pointed at her head, just beyond reach. Leonard backed into the living room, his rifle aimed at Bradlee's head. And there was Felix, near the kitchen, clutching the bag he always carried under his left arm.

"Well," said Bradlee. "Here we all are. Hello Bryson."

Despite the gun, once she heard his voice, strained as it was, she felt relaxed. His eyes were pink, his hair was out of place and there was dried blood on his impeccable mustache. "Bradlee," she said. "What's gotten into you?"

"I should think it would be me asking you that question. Undeniably your actions today have compromised my position with Monozone. It seemed prudent to wrap things up."

"Where the hell is Boyle? Did you kill him too?"

Bradlee thought for a moment and said, "As a matter of fact he was alive when I left him, but in a rather bad way. We had an accident in the woods."

"So you just left him--"

"With a gun!"

"Bradlee," Leonard said, "If you put the gun down I'll let you escape."

"Ah. I'm in a position to make the same offer."

"At least let Sky go. She knows nothing about this."

Bradlee aimed at Sky but kept his eye on Leonard. "She's a lovely creature. Ephemeral, gossamer, glowing, fecund, full of womanly ardour. A pity to destroy her."

"She's pregnant," Bryson said. "You wouldn't shoot a pregnant woman, Bradlee. This, this is ridiculous."

"Pregnant? How beastly. Your doing, Leonard? Didn't know a man your age had motile sperm." He looked at each of them. "I'll tell you what, Leonard. Lay down your rifle and she can go."

"Let her go first."

"Stop your stupid bargaining," Bryson said. She had no idea of what was happening. She tried to see it. Bradlee looked at her very closely, listening. "Bradlee, let them all go. I'm the only one who's harmed you."

"Ruth," Leonard said. "Don't--"

"I'm not saying kill me. I'll go with you Bradlee. We can--" She was interrupted by a bout of furious barking. It startled Bradlee. The gun went off, a loud whap. She was certain the gun had been pointed



at her but then she watched Leonard's leg flinch and implode. Leonard dropped the rifle and fell to the ground, his thigh crushed. He lay there seething between clenched teeth. Bryson screamed and rushed towards him. Felix dropped to the floor and tossed his bag over to Leonard. For a moment they all looked each other in the eye. She had no idea of what was being said. Felix and Leonard looked at the bag. The dogs barked. Bradlee, almost yelling, waved his gun around to regain control. "What is that infernal barking?"

After lying slumped against the controls for a while Boyle got out of the hovercraft, stretched and looked around. Another goddamn woods. Maybe the coordinates had been wrong. He checked the chamber of his gun for rounds and walked on, the rhododendron closing in over his head. The path had to lead somewhere.

It came out on a driveway. He passed the orchard, and then her bathtub. There were the sheds. He recognized all of it from her stories. Explosive barking broke out. Shit! Dogs! He watched them charge. Maybe ditch for the tree, he thought. Then the shot was fired. He had to run now. They were almost on him. A whole pack of dogs, slathering and hackled. He looked around on the ground. There were two-by-fours piled up by the shed. He grabbed one and began to smack heads. A dog leapt up and seized his arm in its jaw, another fastened on his leg. "Arghgh!" he yelled, swinging the two-by-four, sending each one howling away with a busted muzzle, dragging the others forward with his leg. "Let go goddamn it!" In this way he made it to the front door, beating them off and cursing.

"Who's at the door?" Bradlee asked. He turned to the door. "Sky, see who's at the door."

"It's some man I don't know," she said, peeking through the peephole.

"Not a cop?" he sneered.

Boyle, she thought. Maybe it's Boyle. That would alter everything.

Leonard grabbed the gun out of the bag. No! The air froze into a block. His hand was covered in blood, trembling. He could barely hold himself upright. Please don't, she thought. She wanted to take him out of it, bring him out by the back door. They could run to the orchard and then down to the lake. The dinghy would be tied up at the dock. The water was so quiet in the afternoon. Time, she would stir up time, form an eddy and ride the swirl out of this point. Bradlee swung around. He looked at Bryson and then at Leonard, and shot him three times, twice in the chest, once in the head. The bullets imploded. They crushed him from within. Leonard collapsed into blood and bone. The door opened.

Bradlee's face was still and grey. He slowly glanced at the door, not taking the gun off of her. There gathered in her a momentum to move, which she somehow dammed, thinking that she must be very careful. But there Leonard lay and there was nothing left of her. Whether he would shoot her or not didn't enter into it. "Oh, hello Boyle."

Bryson couldn't hold back; she let out a cry and fell on Leonard's body, the dark red blood soaking into her shirt. It was the last warmth of him, ebbing into her. She pounded the floor till her fist broke and cursed. She kicked her legs and groaned. "Owen Bradlee! What have you done?" she shrieked.

Boyle lurched into the room, breathing loudly through his nose. Oh, Boyle, she thought. His face was blistered. He was hunched over, panting. She looked for Felix. He was picking the gun up. Boyle was sweating hard. He wiped his forehead and looked around at everyone. She dropped Leonard's hand and smiled. Boyle had a certain annoyed and confused look in his eye. He was trying to figure the angles out, but she was sure of him, he would protect her now.

"Boss," Boyle said. "Boss, what's going on? Why'd you leave me there for dead?"

"Don't distract me Boyle. Can't you see we have business here?"

"But why'd ya just leave me? It ain't right."

"Was I supposed to lug you out on my back? Christ, bloody hell, you ass. Look now. My car's out front. I think it's time we all got going. Boyle, take Felix and the girl out and shoot them."

"He's got a gun, boss."

Sky had sunk to the floor by the door. Some filter had descended over her. She wept softly, trembled, but stifled her fear and tried to rest within. Her life was wrapped around this other life, satellite to herself, her moon, her always. Budding within, so close to being in the world. She couldn't look at Bryson, at Leonard. She couldn't look at anything. Yes, gone.

Felix licked his lips and tried to focus. Bradlee cleared his throat. "Boyle, get to work."

Boyle aimed his gun at Felix. What? Bryson had to stop it. She stood up, smeared with blood. It was drying on her face, a smudge from her eye to her lips, on her chin. Her hands, her shirt were soaked in blood. She stood and stared at them, stark, red and white, her face crippled and bony, bent around a fury. "Boyle, let them go. Can't you see he'll kill you next?"

"Yeah doc. But I got no choice here. Boss, I'll shoot Felix, but you gotta let the doc go."

"Don't worry about that, just get busy shooting them."

She had to stop it, now. But the words wouldn't come at first. She tried to say them, but her body wouldn't let her. Finally she said, "Bradlee, you mustn't kill anyone else. I'll go with you. We can start over somewhere."

"That would please you now, would it?" he asked. "As a matter of fact, I did purchase a retirement home, and until recently, considered it to be our little getaway. I didn't bring the brochure, but it's a gorgeous place, a mountain fast on the South Island of New Zealand.

The alps for you, and a two-island nation for me. I am sorry about Leonard. I had no reason to kill him really."

"I can't let you kill Felix and Sky," she said. "I can give you things Bradlee, I have money, and I know what you like. We can have a good time."

"This is all very tempting Bryson, but I'm afraid it's too late."

Her voice became cold and still. "He was all I cared about in the world. Leonard," she said, looking at him. He was not there. Where had he gone? Who could she talk to now? Bradlee's eyes swelled with water and turned pink. "You never loved that dodgy old man. It was always me."

"You must be fucking kidding--"

"Boyle! Take them out of here! Everything I did for you Bryson. You've ruined me, and I let you. For what? My life!"

Bradlee's face got hard and his eyes narrowed. She thought, but he was never going to shoot me. "Boyle!" she screamed. He fired the gun. The sound was far away. It bobbed on a fireball of pain. She was hit in the shoulder and she moaned, her eyes widening. She thought of her surrogate, Lena. The long white hair in her brush. Chestnut trees in the fall. Apples on the quilt and t.v. Three more times she heard the sound and the eruptions in her seemed to ripple out in time. She collapsed on top of Leonard. He was there, just beneath her. The blood filled her mouth. She wanted to lie on her back. It was always more comfortable that way.

Boyle screamed, "No!" Good Boyle, she thought. She opened her eyes and looked around.

"Boyle, get out, I said." She was counting now. Dimensions. There was the dimension of height, the dimension of width, and the dimension of depth. Then there was time. The dimension of desire, of ascension, of grace, when the winter sun warms the back of your head.

"You killed her, boss," Boyle said, his voice creaking and tears streaming down his swollen cheeks. She shut her eyes, for a bit. She couldn't see Boyle now, but she heard him. "Bryson, doc," he said gently. He was stroking her head. She wanted to tell him she was not dead but it was hard to speak. She shuttled between Penumbra and Sphere. There were no dreams in Umbra and she kept dreaming. Oh, and sometimes it was Sphere, because she could see the room, the lake, the earth entire. She didn't want him to stop stroking her head.

"It's o.k. doc. You ain't alone. I won't leave you." He looked up at Bradlee, staring at him through his tears. Bradlee was smiling slightly, back on top of the world.

"Boyle, take the jewels and get rid of these two already, or I'll kill you too."

Boyle snarled. "She was a good woman, Bradlee. You didn't have ta kill her. No one ever treated me like a man before. Look at her. What you done, it ain't right. Fuck." He bit his hand.

"Spare me, Boyle. Let's move." Boyle pointed his gun at Bradlee. "What the fuck, Boyle. Now we're in a stand off? But you can't win."

"Bullshit, boss." Boyle squeezed off six shots, hammering Bradlee to the floor. He stood up and walked over to Bradlee's imploded body. He felt savage, like war. He wanted to eat part of him. The liver, the heart, the brain. He aimed at the grey face, contemptuously dead, smirking from the other world. He pulled the trigger and obliterated it. Then he stood and aimed at Felix and the girl. "Are we all done now, or what?"

Felix dropped the gun. "Boyle," he said. "She's gone."

Boyle slowly lowered the gun and knelt down beside Bryson. "I'm sorry doc. I tried to protect you but I wasn't good enough." He mumbled for a while, and cried softly, touching her hair, looking at her face, trying to figure it out.

He stood and said to Felix, "I woulda killed you but I knew she wouldn't approve. It ain't personal." He gave a little sob. The air stank of cordite and blood. The shafts of low afternoon sun had crept deeper into the room. Boyle reached into Bryson's tunic and pulled out the bag of jewels and stood. "I'm takin' these and the hovercraft. You can have the car." He searched for her front pocket and pulled out the disc, covered in blood. "I'm takin' this too."

"How will you access it?" Felix asked.

"Forget about it. I know a guy." He turned, walked out the front door and got in the hovercraft. He punched in the coordinates to Jersey and smiled as he took off, thinking what his neighbors would say when he landed that thing in his driveway with twenty million bucks in his pocket.

Sky sat on the floor, speaking silently to her self, eyes fixed. Felix found her and said, "It's o.k. He's gone." They heard the ringing bleep of the ascending hovercraft and then, a moment later, the long whiney growl of a motorcycle enter the driveway. Dennis Blanpied opened the door and stood in a halo of orange sun. "Felix, where's Sky? No one's up at the house...." Sky stood. Dennis looked around, saw the bodies and said, "Oh my," very quietly. Leonard on his back, Bryson on her back draped over him, Bradlee in a slowly merging puddle of blood. There were books all over the living room floor. "Well, let's see. Shit. Leonard." He shook his head and walked slowly over to Bryson and Leonard. Felix stood next to him. "What the fuck happened?"

"We'd better get out of here," Sky said. She came up behind the two men. They were staring at the bodies, rubbing their chins.

"She's right," Dennis said.

"We have nothing," Felix said. "Just the car."

Sky walked into the living room and scanned the remaining volumes of Leonard's journal till she found the one he had shown

her. She took it down and opened it and pulled out the gold disc. "He said this was money. Millions of dollars."

Felix could barely make her out. The light was bright in the windows. He saw a smudge of fuchsia and a limb raised. "It's a disc?"

"Yes."

"Well, I can get the money off of it no problem, but I don't think I can drive."

Sky came back to his side. "I can drive anything."

Dennis said, "Get going. Drive fast. I'll take care of things here and join you at the border, get you across." Two men entered from outside, Jordan's sons. "Take the bodies out back and burn them. Dump the remains in the lake."

## CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

### ARCADIA

The northeast coast of Lake Superior was wild land. They drove for days without seeing a soul. It was the end of the day, the sun low in the sky around nine o'clock. The road was slow going. Every few k they had to clear debris, or drive around on open country. They carried extra fuel and water. They were both tired and ready to stop. She was near her time and they were trying to make an Ojibwe settlement where a midwife was supposed to be, but that was at least a day off and even then it wasn't a sure thing, just something a cousin of a friend of a brother had said. There was an old roadway down to the lake, washed out but navigable, and they turned down it. She drove slowly but had a feel for things, a feel for the road he never had. She seemed to know where the holes were, how to skirt the rim of a crater or ride on top of two ruts. They got as close to the lake as possible and got out. She led Felix down the path; it was steep and narrow and thickly wooded with birches and aspens. Then it widened and they were on the shore. There were huge pink boulders and scrub pines and sand. She seated him on a rock by one of these boulders.

"The ground here is soft," he said. "It'll be a good night's sleep."

She went back to the car and hauled their gear down, their bags, a tent and cooking supplies. Not far off was the lake, cold even in summer, no shore beyond, like an ocean. They were at the head of a little cove. Sky put up the tent and then gathered some wood for a fire. She lit paper and twigs and lay on some branches. They crackled

and smoked. A rock popped in the heat. They settled back together on a cushion and watched the flames, wincing as the smoke turned over them.

"It will be any day now," she said. "I don't want you to be nervous."

"I'm not nervous."

"But you've never been at a birth before. It freaks some men out. I've seen them cry and vomit. They watch the child come out and never want to touch the woman again."

"I won't be seeing much."

She laughed. "No, but look, you have to understand. We may not make it. I've been having Braxton-Hicks contractions for days now. My cervix is softening. I have no way of knowing what I'll be like when I'm in labor. There are things you have to know."

"What haven't we been over?" All day in the car she told him birth stories.

"Those are just stories. Every story is different. The birth story is a genre, understand? We collect and tell them but in the end every birth adds a new story. Now, my blood pressure's only a little high, so I'm not worried, but blood pressure's one of the big three. Fetal distress, cord around the neck and eclampsia." She got her bag out of the trunk and took something out. He watched her move and thought about climbing into the tent with her. All he wanted to do was fuck, there was no other way of putting it. All day long, in the passenger seat, while she talked about this and that, he thought about her body. It was embarrassing. What was it about cars? Cars are the only true aphrodisiac. He had never made love to a pregnant woman before. It was a little odd and he was afraid of hurting her but her body was so soft, her cunt a warm puddle. It flooded at his touch. She grunted quietly as they lay curled up on their sides, his front to her back, slipping in and out.

"This is a stethoscope. You don't need eyes for it. During labor you'll have to monitor my heartbeat and the baby's heart beat. Put these in your ears." He put on the stethoscope and she lay back on the cushion and lifted the loose shirt up over her belly. "Now, press it up on my abdomen here and there till you hear two heart beats." He listened for the heartbeats. Hers was strong and squishy, fwump fwump fwump. "Do you hear them?"

"Just yours."

"Listen carefully. Mine is big, bump bump bump," she said, imitating it perfectly. "Then there's a higher faster one. Pshs pshs pshs pshs." It was hard to hear them both at the same time. But there were two pulses, one faster and higher than the other. He pressed it into her warm flesh. "When I'm in labor you'll need to check every fifteen minutes. If when I'm having a contraction the fetal heart beat stops or races you've got to tell me. Now, the head is engaged, I can feel that, and the cervix is soft. The cervix is a canal between the uterus and the vagina. It's tissue and muscle. There's a mucus plug in it. As the baby lowers down the head goes into position and that puts pressure on the cervix. It's like a pinprick normally. It goes from that to ten centimeters. You understand? That's a contraction, that muscle opening a millimeter at a time. You can feel." She pulled her pants down and raised her legs a little. "Put your finger inside me and feel all the way, it's maybe as deep as your middle finger. Put on a glove from the bag and smear on some lubricant. That's right." Felix stretched on the glove and put a dollop of lubricant on his finger, looking at everything very closely, an inch or two from his eyes. He put his finger inside of her and felt up and back. It was all soft. "Now, how much of your finger can you get in there?"

"Just the tip. It gives a little and I feel the tip of my finger surrounded."

"Well you see, I've dilated some. It could go on for weeks like this. You can take your finger out now."

"It's better without the glove."

"Not for this. Pay attention." He pulled the glove off and lay back besides her. She pulled on her pants. "Now I have to piss again." She sighed and stood. "At least it isn't in my pants. Maybe I should wear a diaper." He listened to her pee hit the sand and watched her return. "I may want to start pushing before it's time. Until I'm fully effaced and dilated to ten centimeters it's a waste of energy. Now, I may be a screamer, or a moaner. You may not like what you hear. I'll be meditating but that doesn't mean it doesn't hurt like hell. And I'm gonna look terrible, like I have no idea what's going on. I may yell at you or call you names. Don't worry. You're here to help. I can have water but no food. When it starts, if we're out here, you'll need to set up a clean area. I can give birth on all fours, it's better that way, or with my legs up. Put down several of those sterile blue sheets. When I start pushing I may defecate. Don't worry, just wipe my butt with the sheet, wad it up and keep going."

"You may defecate? Shit?"

"That's right."

"That can't be good for the baby."

"My germs are o.k. You can't get hung up on these things. It happens, you keep moving. Now, after transition, you'll think I'm dying. Watch me. You'll know when I'm having a contraction. Don't let me push till one begins. My labia will be all swollen up, you won't recognize anything down there. When the head enters the vagina, the tip of it will show through the opening. Fluid and blood will start to well up. It's covered in mucus and hair usually, dark. Take your time here. We'll push a couple of times then, and it will slowly emerge and you'll see the face, a little, serious face, eyes, nose and mouth. The baby is all compressed, squeezing out. You'll need to support the

head then and help it along. Don't pull, I'll push her out. Once the head is out she'll come quickly. Hold the baby in your hand, clear the mouth with the siphon, gently, and then lay her on my belly and breasts."

The sun was low. He stood. "Is something wrong?" she asked.

"Don't worry," he said. "I heard everything."

"But you seem upset."

He didn't know how he felt. He wasn't scared but things weren't right. He wanted to walk. He wanted to do something. He grabbed his bag and said, "Walk me down to the lake?"

"Are you all right?"

"Stop asking that. I'm fine. I need to be alone for a minute, o.k.?"

Now she sounded nervous. "Normally I don't give it all at once."

"It's not that." He touched her cheek and tried to smile. "I'm just suddenly, I don't know. Sad. Or burdened. I want to take Veronica down to the lake and be with her a moment."

She led the way down to the lake, between the pink boulders and bent pine trees encrusted with balsam. He sat down in the sand, the cold water pulsing against his feet and felt the sun, warm on his face. He could see washes of color in the sky and the water, a gauzy dark plane with ripples of blazing light. He relaxed and let the light open and bloom on his eyes and face and listened to the water. There were kingfishers chattering and fighting. He kicked at the sand. This was the lake she had spent her childhood on. She used to tell stories about the barge and the men and women who worked on it, her first boyfriend, on the opposite shore somewhere. There were the cliffs they had run free on and this was the water she had fished and swum. He remembered the way her father strode across the deck of a boat as if he were commanding it with his feet, his free and happy face. Her mother, blond and muscley and tall, at the steering wheel guiding them out onto the Hudson the first time they met. Then Veronica,

like a child, showing him their cabin below deck, a tiny hold with a mattress just big enough for the two of them and a porthole that splashed with water when they had speed up. Lying there on a rainy weekend making love, afraid to make a noise her parents might hear above the groaning of the engine. This was where she ran free and barefoot as a child. The kingfishers splashed in the water. Evening birds were calling in the trees. He couldn't see them but he knew swifts would be scissoring the air. This is where she came from, this is where she belongs. He stood. It was the water's edge. He picked up the bag and got out the box of her ashes and held them to him, a little apprehensive. He looked up and down the lakeshore, through the muzzy fading light. And then, he saw. Standing next to him, perfectly clear, was Sammael, gazing out at the sun, his face painted in the colors of dusk. He turned to Felix and said, "Hello."

"Sammael. What are you doing here? I'm not in the garden, am I?"

"Would you like to be?"

"No," he said, moving the sand around with his feet.

Sammael took a deep breath and smiled. "It's been a while since I've been here. My, but it is beautiful."

"Yes."

"Would you like to see her again?" he asked, rubbing his chin, his eyes sort of twinkling.

"No, I said no. But I don't know what I'm supposed to do."

"Do? What do you mean by do?"

"With myself."

"She's really something, that one there."

"Sky?"

"Yes."

"Well, it's not real somehow. Sometimes I think she's just another thing that happened to me. And I'm afraid I'm going to kill her.

Everyone I love dies."

Sammael nodded and looked back out on the lake. "I'm afraid that's how it goes. Well, I'll be going now." He turned to look at Felix. "You know, love her Felix. Take care of each other. Love your children and try to die well if you can. I'll see you around." And he was gone.

Felix opened the miniature casket and dumped the ashes out into the water. They hissed going into the waves and when the box was empty he tossed it out into the lake, turned around and made his way through the fog carefully. The light of the fire was a warm orange and he headed for that. He bumped his foot against a rock. She was sipping a mug of tea. The ashes were drifting grain by grain out into the lake, mixing with the sand and sediment. He sat down next to Sky and felt the fire hot on his face.

"Who were you talking to?"

"No one," he said, embarrassed. And then, "Sammael."

"The angel? You aren't losing your mind are you?" Her voice sounded jolly.

"No," he smiled.

"Don't worry. My family's been talking to spirits for generations. Now, there's just one other thing."

"O.K. You're all business aren't you?"

"Well, I just need to be sure. If I haven't gone into labor in two weeks we'll have to induce. I have Black Cohosh and Blue Cohosh. There's also mineral oil or an enema, high hot and sudsy as my mother used to say. Or I have prostaglandin gel. I'll smear that inside me and hope for the best."

"In two weeks. None of those sound pleasant."

"Yeah. So did you do it? Pour out her ashes?"

"Yes."

“How did it feel?”

“Like nothing at all, actually. It was all the anticipation.”

She stretched her legs out and shifted uncomfortably and groaned.

“I wish this baby would come.”

“Is it moving?”

“Not anymore, not with the head engaged. I just feel like a whale. Anyway, there is one other way to induce labor.”

“What’s that?” It was almost dark. He rubbed her belly.

“Well,” she said in a low voice, “ejaculate contains prostaglandin.” She faced him and stroked his head. “We can just, you know, have a good hard fuck.”

He laughed. “You’d like that?”

“What did the angel say?”

“To love you.”

“Well you see? It’s divinely inspired, sanctioned by the gods.”

He felt her back and kissed her on the lips. And then he relaxed and let the light of the fire fill his eyes. The wind picked up and blew the flames flat, scattering some sparks. The birds stopped singing, one by one and he could hear the pulse of the surf mix in with her breathing. They lay together like that and by the time the moon rose over the lake they had fallen asleep. The first light of morning awoke them and they packed the car and drove off, into the open air of Canada.