

The Last Book

A Novel by Nowick Gray

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Table of Contents

Prefatory Confession.....3
BOOK ONE: THAT DIVINE MOMENT8
BOOK TWO: THE OTHER SIDE OF THE WORLD..... 50
 CHAPTER ONE: THE ASTRAL QUEEN 50
 CHAPTER TWO: EXILE..... 122
 CHAPTER THREE: WHILE WONDERING WHAT IT WAS ALL ABOUT 190
BOOK THREE: UNEARTHLY POWERS 356
 CHAPTER ONE: LIMBO 356
 CHAPTER TWO: THE LAST BOOK 382
 CHAPTER THREE: FROM SUCH A REMOVE..... 567

Prefatory Confession

"It is not without a certain meager trepidation that I set out to record for the reader's considered benefit the events that have occurred since that fateful scene in the living room of the Villa Cacaold, on the Rua João de Castilhos . . ."--or so the original Felix Krull may have expressed it.

From such a remove in time and space as I currently enjoy, I can only attempt to recount to you the denouement of Felix's adventurous pilgrimage in the full spirit of his own manner of speaking, with the full flavor of his own epoch. For this I ask the reader's indulgence, with the promise of an attempt to make amends as my own progress through time allows.

Meanwhile I make no excuses as I confess to a certain lingering tendency, in a more advanced age, to dawdle and divert, to digress and speculate--for the old Felix remains a part of me, in fact the most notable of my former selves.

I should add that I've wondered many times if it was even worth the effort to delve back into the easily forgotten past, back to a story of an old, lost world. I would say that it was the rudeness of the interruption of our story by the scythe-swinging rider of an overly pale horse that motivates me

to take up the tale again--out of spite, as it were. Perhaps I must exercise a playful revenge upon that unwelcome guest. And so, lest the reader be tempted to disbelieve my providential transference across the several planes of life, let me offer the confidence that I have, in the process, exposed the masquerade of that spectral impostor.

If the reader is interested in investigating my early life and career, he or she would do well to read the version entitled Confessions of Felix Krull, Confidence Man, as transcribed by Thomas Mann. I am indebted to that masterful storyteller for the widely known basis of my tale---no, let us admit, for the entire recorded substance of it up to the point at which this chronicle begins.

By way of brief summary:

Born Felix Krull, I was the favored son of a locally prominent turn-of-the-century bourgeois German family. I was quick of wit and tongue, and loath to remain in the social mold into which I was born. My predilection for flattery and deceit landed me, via a series of youthful escapades, in the shoes of a reluctant marquis who, like me, wanted no part of the role in life assigned him so arbitrarily by fate and family. Having switched identities, we parted company in Paris. The ex-marquis went incognito with his lover,

Zaza; while I set out on a world tour which had been arranged to take the marquis first to Lisbon, then onward to Argentina.

On the train to Lisbon, I made the acquaintance of a professor, Dom Antonio José Kuckuck, who invited me to call at his villa and meet his family. In the course of my visits I started to fall in love with the daughter, Zouzou. The first complication was her expected marriage to Dom Miguel Hurtado, a colleague of Professor Kuckuck. Then, with my ship, the Cap Arcona, due to sail in a matter of days, I suddenly found myself in the embrace of Zouzou's mother, Maria Pia.

At this point in the story, we are left hanging by Thomas Mann, or rather by grinning Death, who whisked the writer away before he could relate another word. Thus our motive for revenge.

Now as I take up my pen once again, in my leisure at the end of it all, I would ask to establish a compact with the reader concerning the credibility of the tale about to recommence and to be herein concluded. For not only is one's credence to be taxed concerning my belated reappearance as from a long-moldering crypt; presently we must also become acquainted with a veritable felix anima in the person of Sophie Tucker Vaughan, the first woman President of the United States of America. (It should come as no

surprise that I would consort with one of such rank, to those familiar with my previous exploits, of which I merely need mention the long congenial meeting I enjoyed with King Carlos I, the esteemed monarch of Portugal.) And as if it were not enough to grant me, fate's darling, the benefit of the reader's sympathy in following my charmed footsteps through the chicanery that marked my former career in late nineteenth-century Europe, now I must appeal to those who would be skeptical concerning such powers as became evident to me at a later date--powers possessed for better or worse, and wielded in all good faith on my behalf, by said Ms. Vaughan . . . powers that might even be deemed impossible on this earth, at least at the present time.

Ah, but here is the seed of a dilemma: What is the present time, precisely? Is it this past that I bring forward so glibly, to the juggler of words a mere matter of tense? Is it the time that is present at the other end of the act of writing: that is, when the words are read, or read again, or again? In such cases, which in truth occupy all the available possibilities once the letter is struck and posted, history as we understand it must be reunderstood. Clearly I can provoke no argument in stating that time is all of past, present, and future. Now consider me, looking back on it all--and indeed on a goodly part of my readers, and readers to come. It must be said that I occupy a place in a world not yet arrived, until a certain point is

reached. And even then, I reach ever backward to my past, and thus retain my future perspective forever. . . .

But enough of idle speculation that threatens to lose itself in riddle and mystery. Let us return to that divine moment . . .

BOOK ONE: THAT DIVINE MOMENT

i

In that divine moment, I felt Maria and I were destined for some private measure of greatness. But smothered as I was in her bosomy grasp--even as the realization of my most ardent and secret yearnings was at hand--I was haunted by doubt.

It is clear to me now that neither of us had any thought of Maria's husband, the good Professor Kuckuck, as an obstacle to our enduring love. If we had, it would have been all too easy to believe that he might be swept away by some providential cataclysm, for our sake.

Nor could I have foreseen my own removal to a court of power so far exalted from this minor stage as to reveal my immediate ambitions as the two-bit fantasies of a fin-de-siècle punk. And how could I have imagined, in the throes of such spontaneous passion, that the neck I kissed was, in a manner of speaking, wolf-meat? No . . .

What caused the momentary heat to pass so quickly was no such specific premonition on my part; but rather, a more familiar and generalized trait: a characteristic detachment, an instinctive reluctance to give myself over to any sort of romantic entanglement. Behind me lay my brief career amid the naive bellboys, brass-handled doors and elegantly tiled baths of the Paris hotels. On life's table before me were arrayed the ragouts fins, charred steaks and chocolate soufflés which fed my current life of pretense among the all-too-hospitable upper crust in this charming city of Lisbon. Ahead of me . . . ah, knowing what I now know, would I have chosen differently?-- How useless to speculate! How tempting to revise one's life, when it's too late. . . . No, let's leave awhile what might have been, for the easeful dreams of a more advanced old age. For now I will confine myself to what I was, with my soft fair hair, my blue-gray eyes, my golden brown skin . . .

It was not that I was ungrateful for the genuine friendship of Professor Kuckuck, his wife Maria, and their lovely daughter Zouzou. Rather, I lacked a vision of the course of events that my fortuitously arranged life was to take. It was all very well for a part-time bellboy (never mind small-time jewel thief and gigolo) to step into the shoes of a young marquis about to embark on a world tour. What I missed in the transition was the overriding nobility of purpose that would have made such a tour a significant formative

influence. Once again, I sensed, I was just a part-timer. I was playing at life. I was spoiled by fate, which had granted me the talent of spontaneous improvisation of languages I barely knew, the talent of acting on faith that my field of social intercourse was unlimited, the talent--well, the bare fact was, I began (even with Maria's hand drifting down my back) to question if such talents were of any real use to me; and if so, for what? Still, it seemed as if I could truly have in this generous world whatever I would desire. The memory of Zouzou's feverish kiss still buzzed on my lips.

It was, in short, a feeling of limbo. There was a hitch in my heavy breathing, an ambiguous sigh.

Maria must have sensed my peculiar reticence, for she seized the moment for her own, slightly mysterious purposes:

"Felix, I want you to stay with me."

I cringed inwardly at the mention of my true name. Only later did I find out how she discovered it. Just then my emergency was grave enough to overshadow any thoughts of investigating the leak in my assumed identity. I could only imagine it had to do with Kuckuck's knowledge of the Venosta line. And I wondered what would become of my newly flowering love affair with the daughter.

Maria had leaned away from me, and, holding me back at arms' length, she glared with huge black eyes into mine. Her fleshy nose and lips were quivering, in contrast to the taut tension of her aristocratic cheekbones. For once in my life, I was tongue-tied.

"Well, what's my pretty boy to say for himself? Should I send him back to his godfather Schimmelpreester?" (I cringed again. How in heaven's name--?) "Or should he perhaps attempt to recoup his tarnished image by, say, dueling with Dom Miguel Hurtado for the forbidden hand of my, yes she is, luscious daughter? Hmmm? You understand, of course, that about Susanna I'm making an unsavory joke. Concerning my own desires I'm deadly serious. Your hesitation disturbs me in no small measure."

I stood stock-still, speechless. Her double-barreled recognition of my identity and my godfather had shot down any hopes I'd harbored on the instant for fashioning a creative reply. So I agreed to stay with her.

"Oh, Maria, Maria! No, no, it's just the shock and shame of my exposure to you as who I really am, that's, that's taken me so much by surprise that I--I don't know what to say. . . . Of course, your reference to my godfather, and, without question the duel with Sr. Hurtado that you understandably offer in cutting jest--no, it's out of the question for me to carry on with my ridiculous charade, my selfish wanderlust, and especially

my duplicity in matters of the heart, any longer. You're--how can I begin to tell you what you've come to mean to me? If you can find the wherewithal to see through my boyish errors, my thoroughly deceitful character to the real Felix Krull, the whole person I mean to be if I could only, by the grace of your patience and understanding, reach the maturity you hold out for me, then, my Maria, I cannot refuse you." But even as we embraced once more, I sought a way out, a way to arrange the next tryst with Zouzou.

Again Maria with her perspicacity must have seen through my outward desires to an inner destiny that was bound elsewhere, for again she pulled her little trigger. "I'm overjoyed, my dear Felix. But I trust you understand, that should you even consider, let me emphasize the very forethought of attempting to cultivate any further this romantic 'friendship' with my Zouzou, then you'll be finished, exposed to all of your own shameless relatives as well as to the Venostas, who have served as your unwitting sponsors up until now. I'd only give you undeserved honor to add that all the better families of Europe would know you for what you are--"

"Maria, I can appreciate your sentiments. Let us not dwell on past misunderstandings. If I am to 'stay with you,' whatever you have in mind for that to mean, naturally I will do so with utter devotion. And naturally I

realize the folly of attempting an affair of any sort with your lovely, and let us admit, decidedly flirtatious, yet thoroughly inaccessible--"

"That's quite enough! It's impertinent of you even to discuss my daughter's availability in such a way, in view of her engagement to Dom Miguel. I will hear no more of it. I forbid you to speak of her in my presence!"

Maria's countenance had taken on a dark, elemental beauty during this close exchange, colored by the rising blood of her unreleased passion. For my own part, though I had truly, with some primal necessity, desired her as well, I could not help but convey a blithe calmness--this also despite my fresh unmasking, my precipitous commitment to her, and my impossible love for her daughter. Maria scowled to watch the bright signal-lights of my silent eyes. She clearly didn't know what to make of me, how to move me irrevocably toward her. Finally she turned in a huff and retired through the very door she'd closed so purposefully before, to her inner chamber I supposed, looking back with lowered eyelids and a spiteful, provocative bounce of her matronly hips.

No sooner had Maria gone than a voice chirped in my ear from behind, where the arched dining room doorway had previously stood vacant. "What's it to do now, mon cheri?"

I whirled. My anger and hurt mingled with delight and discovery; my eyes brimmed. From Zouzou's eyes and upon her smiling lips danced childish mirth. She had certainly regained her spirits from the humiliating scene with her mother not twenty minutes before. She beckoned us quickly back outside, then boldly led me to the secluded bower in the garden, the very spot from which her jealous mother had so vehemently banished us. She sat us down firmly on the pretty little bench. There she held my hands, in hers, upon her white-skirted knees.

"Don't worry, marquis. I'm sorry for you, but I'm also glad to know the truth now. Or at least part of it. Who are you, really? Do you yourself know?"

What a time for me to answer that ageless riddle! I wouldn't even attempt it. I took the more direct approach to the issue at hand: "Do you think I love your mother? You said before that you believed as I did that love was a vital potion, a fresh spirit infusing nature, living everywhere that

nature lives, in everyone whose body is not a statue, whose mind is not a closed box. Do you think there is that spirit between your mother and me?"

Zouzou appeared thoughtful, kicking at the pebbles in the walk with her dainty foot. She seemed to take no notice of the odd bits of paper that still lay on the ground--the remains of my sketches that had so embarrassed her and yet at the same time had prompted her to reveal such depths of affection. As I waited for her response I became entranced with her long, fine black curls which wavered delicately in the breath of the fresh October air. Finally she put my hands aside.

"No," she said carefully, "I don't think you love her. And I don't think she really loves you, either; though she may think she does. I know her. It's a way for her to have some kind of power, through independence from my father. Ever since he became chief curator of the museum, he's been gone from her orbit, preoccupied with his work. So she's needed someone else to control. Before you, it was Hurtado. Now, it seems she wants to leave Dom Miguel to me, which of course is all for the best as far as my father is concerned. Who knows--if the picture wasn't clouded by the presence of that 'worthy assistant' of his, my father would just as likely favor matching me with you."

Zouzou sat straight and still before me as she spoke, looking at me with her eyes round, totally honest, knowing, yet innocent. I felt an almost overpowering impulse to seize her, to love her with freshness and also with strength, with graceful force, with mutual bodily desire.

But I held back, arrested by her statuesque and childlike purity. I wondered if she was as innocent as she appeared. What was she trying to accomplish right now--if anything? How could I discover who she really was?

Then she took my left hand, with a hint of hesitation, and brought it briefly to her lips. She looked into my eyes and said, "I shouldn't tell you this, but I'm not marrying that strutting goose Hurtado."

My heart flew up with a flurry of wings. Zouzou blushed as she squeezed my hand; then she scurried off toward the house and the shadow of her mother. I looked up, and to my dismay, saw the grim face of Maria clouding a second-story window. But focusing more clearly, I discerned with some little relief that it was only the tight-lipped servant, Mardou. She quickly drew the shade.

I had to walk somewhere, alone with my thoughts. I slipped past the house and out to the street, then wandered down to the tennis club. No one was there. I paced around the courts at least half a dozen times, eyes on the white line. My mind was in a turmoil; my steps were slow, measured, meditative.

It occurred to me, and I imagined that it may have appeared to certain discerning others, that I was something of a larger-than-life success in my new-found social environment. Yet surely no grand tour is worthy of the name if it doesn't include hobnobbing with royalty, fleeting romantic liaisons, and stimulating conversation with the cognoscenti of the day. All this was as I had intended from the beginning of my conception of the journey. At the same time, I thought, one should not assume that beneath all the show and pomp there can't be a reflective sense as well, a balance provided by gracious humility.

I realized that I had become enamored with the naive belief that after such a promising beginning I could only rise to infinitely greater heights. The very uncertainty of the future at the other end of the world tour had only elevated my youthful hopes--for I was not yet twenty-one. Now my fateful encounter with Maria had revealed my most defenseless position, had

exposed me to myself as well as to her knowing, womanly gaze. It was this naked, vulnerable self that Zouzou, too, was on the verge of discovering.

From drawings of beautiful skin to the deeper urges of the flesh is one shockingly small step (as Zouzou had already found out when I allowed her to behold the marquis's unabashed renderings of his own lithe lover, so like herself). From the flesh to the skeletal bone is the second step, as inexorable as it is unforeseeable. Had I recognized in time the likelihood of my ultimate exposure, I certainly would have taken advantage of my original opportunity for departure. Now that my second chance was approaching--in fact, nigh upon me, I forced myself to realize--I was faced with an agonizing decision. I could attempt to salvage what was left of my transatlantic itinerary, which was already jeopardized by my unmasking. Or I could grasp the slim chance of entering further into Zouzou's good graces--and face then the Scylla and Charybdis of the betrayed Maria and the spurned Hurtado.

Then again, I considered, I could procrastinate further, pushing my luck beyond the bounds of normal reason, by canceling my berth for tomorrow's sailing of the Cap Arcona, and reserving it for the next voyage six weeks hence. Or, if need be, I could try for the Amphitryon in two weeks. I was driven to disregard the common limits of human apprehension

by my consistent and formidable record of success thus far. I had to take heart in my original adventurous resolve--the spirit which for me was more primal than that more common impulse which had led me into the current charade.

It is too easy to intimate that my guiding principles were mischief, status-seeking, or excessive pride; or even, on a deeper level, existential search--the facile psychological label of the century to come. No, I was coming instead to an awareness in myself of an ultimate surety that above void, bone, flesh and human skin lay an aura of anonymous mystery which was to surpass the spurious anonymity of my social appearance as the shaping force of my fortunes. Dare I call it love?

iv

I sat abed, late that night, back in the comfortable haven of my hotel room, pen in hand. I dawdled with it in practical consideration of my dilemma: should I approach Schimmelpreester directly about this matter of Maria's recognition of my true identity? Could I reasonably assume that he was to blame? Did it even matter, now? Perhaps it would be wisest to

retreat immediately to the Paris suburb of Sèvres . . . to search for the real Marquis de Venosta somewhere on the rue Brancas, Seine-et-Oise, and cancel the whole deal. Or should I try to contact him first by mail, or telegraph? Could I simply forget Zouzou and Maria and depart for more familiar--or less familiar--pastures? My elegant hand-luggage stood unpacked but waiting in the half-opened closet, mocking my indecision.

I regarded the splendor around me in this second-floor suite at the justly named Savoy Palace, and felt it all passing away, almost dissolving before my misty eyes. But I was not allowed to shed any actual tears over my predicament, for at that moment came a knock at my outer door: strange at this hour. I had no enemies that I knew of, and so I trustingly bade the visitor enter. From where I sat I had a narrow view of the outer room through the open bedchamber doorway.

It was Mardou, of all people, with a letter in hand. She must have convinced the night clerk--a somber fellow of gravely demeanor and a Moorish cast similar to that of the Kuckucks' maidservant herself--either by persuasion or, more likely, by previous connection, of the urgency, or intimate character, of her mission. Visions of a midnight rendezvous with a desperate Zouzou danced in my head. The messenger swiftly, with lowered eyes and silent tread, crossed my threshold and deposited her cargo on the

foot of my bed, failing to meet my steady glance until the last moment as she twirled in exit through the bedchamber doorway and shot me a dark dart of undeserved reproach. "This letter came for you today after you left," she said in hoarse Portuguese through lips that scarcely moved. "Senhor thought that you should have it before you leave tomorrow."

I thanked her politely, if absently, as she disappeared through the outer chamber and main suite door. Feeling some ironic comfort that someone knew what I was to do--or at least believed in my stated plans--I reached for the envelope. I did wonder, though, how it was that for the professor I was a departing guest, while for his wife I was a prize yet to be enjoyed. . . .

The letter was from none other than Schimmelpreester himself, postmarked in Cologne. The envelope was addressed to the "Marquis de Venosta" in the care of Professor Kuckuck. I was eager to hear about what must have been a previous acquaintance between these two cosmopolitan gentlemen. Taking the cheese knife handy by my bed, I quickly slit open the top of the envelope.

COLOGNE, 22 SEPTEMBER, 1895

My dear Felix:

I'm hoping to catch you before you depart for Argentina. You see, I learned of your novel situation through correspondence with a certain old acquaintance of mine from the University in Cologne, now a professor, who turns out to be host to a guest of such remarkable similarity to you (after the good professor's scientific aptitude for precise description--oh, that I could paint with such faithfulness to nature!) that I knew you'd been up to some interesting business of your own devising. I must say I was impressed, if not too surprised, by your assumed title, knowing your gift for camouflage.

I don't know exactly how the waiter's job went for you; except that when I tried to reach you at the Saint James and Albany, my friend Herr Stürzli had a good report of your efforts there. I can well guess that such an occupation, however helpful to you at your stage in life, was simply no match for your considerable talents. So I'm not offended that it didn't work out. Besides, look at you now!

At any rate, to get to the point: in recent months I've been cajoled by my younger brother Friedrich, the sausage-maker, to abandon the sign-maker's trade and go off in his service to the New World. He figured me for a good German stereotype to drum up new export connections. My new place of residence there is, of all insults to God's good earth, Albuquerque,

New Mexico, USA. I shall spare you the details of such squalid and naked pursuit of wealth as passes for human normality there, only to assure you of the possibility of a cultured intransigence under the otherwise degenerate influence of one's mundane surroundings. I must say, the sausages are moving well already: my sales charts are the envy of Cologne!

Enough of my doings. My intent is to lure you from whatever roguery you have up your sleeve, to come join me in this growing business. This is the same family sausage you used to enjoy so. I know you can speak well for it, and I'm convinced of your potential to make the most of the vast market America represents.

Well--I'll let you decide for yourself. Don't be too disillusioned by my prejudiced distaste for the country. It's large and full of opportunity for a young rake such as yourself. I will, however, counsel you to make the best of your Krull talents in a solid and expansive enterprise like this sausage trade. Do let me know soon, as I'll be traveling back again in a month's time.

With fond regards,
your godfather S.

It was only when I folded the letter and slid it back into the envelope, that I noticed the neat cut in the overleaf beside the wax seal. Somebody--it hardly mattered who--had been into it and then carefully pasted the envelope back together. So. That explained my blown cover with Maria. I still didn't know if my godfather had informed Kuckuck himself about me at this point, but that was immaterial. I was sure the professor would understand, anyway. His cosmic perspective would include and forgive my part in this masquerade in which all energy goes by the name of matter--and for which the particular, arbitrary names don't matter.

However, I was stuck, and had to pick one face to wear, one place to stand in the friendly company of fellow sentient beings. So now what?

As often happens in such situations, the cornered mind searches frantically for an escape route. Or it lashes out at whatever stands before it as a threat.

Or, it calmly accepts the full dimensions of its fate.

I chose a favorite approach: I would come to a firm, if arbitrary, decision and then sleep on it. That way I could at least get my necessary rest; and in the morning I'd know how I stood with that ultimately tentative decision in the light of the unconscious--that unacknowledged arbiter of our destinies.

So I rode on my spinning schemes down the corridors of sleep where the doors to dreamland stood ajar. The hat I carried on the top of my head contained ten gallons of sausage meat. I was bound for Albuquerque. . . .

I heard the sounds of an orchestra tuning up, and saw a bit of light through one half-opened door. As I approached I could distinguish the dark heads of spectators in what appeared to be the top rows of an auditorium. But upon entering, I found the room instead to be a sort of beer hall, with live music on the main floor and tables situated on the mezzanines.

The place was a hubbub of droning voices. I sat at a table where I recognized Stephen Prutedalus, an old school chum, with some friends of his. They were aesthetes talking on and on (hardly recognizing my presence) about double exposures and improvised harmony, about boldness and caution in paint . . .

The concert just beginning below, unseen, was a welcome distraction from their pompous talk. I heard the opening strains of the new Scheherezade suite by Rimsky-Korssakoff--though it was barely distinguishable through the rumbling conversation, scraping of bench legs on floor, and clanking of heavy beer glass on other glasses and on the heavy wood tables.

Our party on the mezzanine was fortunate in having a soloist come up from the orchestra (this was a new, delightful twist) to play right next to our table. The tall, handsome woman was holding her shimmering flute amid swaying strands of long, chestnut-colored hair, looking directly at me, playing without inhibition as she stood by the beer-parlor wall. I was intrigued by her delicate handling of the subtle variations of tone. What was more, the sound appeared to be weaving visually, in the form of the strangely flexible flute--as if the instrument of the snake-charmer had become one with the snake.

Finally recognizing the most poignant melody of the piece, with this enchanting soloist rendering it with living affection, I could no longer contain my own feeling.

I rose out of my chair, emulating her floating notes with my best fluting whistle. Childish as this effort might sound when merely reported, in the live air of the moment my part blended in with a surprisingly pleasing effect, and the flautist flashed her surprised bright eyes at me as she played. The impromptu accompaniment spurred a noticeable power and verve on her part, as we matched tone for tone. I could not stand still as she did, but wove back and forth in front of her with the dancing sound. As the solo part drew to its end, I eased back away from her, until the very last note, holding

it higher and stronger than I believed possible . . . but she followed right along with it, breath lasting longer than the symphony called for, and she knew it but didn't care, with the crowd hushed and wondering, listening, waiting, until finally I stopped and she stopped exactly as one.

Breathless, but beaming, this lovely companion in melody walked up to me, then hesitated, before returning to the orchestra. I drew her close in a melting warm embrace, a full-feeling meeting of moist lips, softer than sound . . . and then she was gone.

v

Morning entered through curtains of violet gossamer. My first thought was of the two o'clock sailing of the Cap Arcona. I reached over to the charming little cherry table by the bedside for my gold pocket watch (I say "my" loosely, as the reader understands that the watch, like everything else I carried with me at the time, bore the initials "L.d.V.": Louis de Venosta). It was only 7:35. I had time to pack my steamer trunk and hand-luggage and have them sent to the dock; to hop down to the Café Borgia to pay my last respects; to stop by the Museum for a departing chat with

Professor Kuckuck (in lieu of a final visit to the female members of his family); and to catch the cable-car to the quay.

The Café Borgia was brimming with morning chatter in the sunlight. I was refreshed with its briskness. After a quick coddled egg, toast and marmalade, and a cup of the excellent cappuccino of which I was so fond for its exquisite preparation in that particularly cosmopolitan establishment, I headed down the splendid bird-infested Avenida da Liberdade toward the Museu Ciências Naturaes. It was only then, amid the remarkable whistling of the autumn thrushes, that I was able to recall the dream I'd had. By this time it was too late for analysis--I'd already set my course, quite naturally, and had slipped into a carefree mood.

I passed the narrow Rua do Príncipe, which led to the great Rossio. I recalled fondly that first acquaintance I'd made, quite unawares, of the two Kuckuck ladies, mother and daughter, beneath the bronze fountain. And I started to falter in my steps.

But I managed to continue to the Rua Augusta. There I knew when I turned to follow it up the slight hill toward the Rua da Prata and the museum, that certain psychic cables were coming into play, cables that led one block further to the line which ascends to the Rua João de Castilhos. It was only by the greatest effort of my stubborn will that I veered to my right

at the junction of the Rua da Prata. With my feet feeling heavy as lead and my brain reeling as if in a numbing fog, I mounted the marble steps of the museum and entered.

The door to the director's office was partly open. I knocked anyway and walked in at the professor's chipper response.

"Why, hello, marquis. What a pleasant surprise to see you here, when I've just been thinking of you. In particular I've been reflecting on your uncanny aptitude for the principles of species development, of universal evolution, of . . . well, I won't go on about your qualifications; the point is--here, here, sit down and be comfortable. It is indeed fortunate that you dropped in; I was wondering how I might find you before you got on that ship. You're scheduled to be off in a matter of hours, is that right?"

"Yes, professor. I've . . ." Still lost in that disorienting fog, I may have kept talking, or apologized for a sudden wave of prescient seasickness, or simply sat silent but normal in appearance while Kuckuck waited for some comprehensible reply. For he didn't interrupt the reverie which clouded my senses. I was imagining an offer to stay on at the museum, in public relations . . . But surely he didn't realize the complication of my arrangement with Maria--or did he? I began to suspect that Maria had somehow wheedled her obtuse husband into shoring up the walls she was

already erecting around the capricious "marquis." But how, then, could I make sense of her forwarding Schimmelpreester's attractive offer to me? I couldn't. Mardou must have acted on her own initiative, hoping to see the last of me. I could not so much as entertain the possibility that Zouzou wanted me gone.

The mahogany paneling of the museum director's office resonated and came back into focus. I admired its fine grain, its rich hue, its oiled finish.

"You look a little wave-weary already, marquis. I want to know if you're determined to go off on this jaunt of yours, leaving us without the further pleasure of your company; and in the case of the museum here--"

"I'm really, as you correctly labeled me once, a sea-lily, professor. I float with the currents and sway with the tides. It's a deplorable condition for a prospective suitor, I know, and yet I--"

"My dear marquis. Though I'm honored to know that you look upon my offspring so favorably, I'm shocked that you would even think to countermand our wishes for the marriage of our daughter to Sr. Hurtado."

"No, no, you misunderstand me. I'm, as you say, fully appreciative of your arrangements for Susanna, to date. Yet I wonder . . . in regard to Dom Miguel, we shall just have to see. Yes . . ." I didn't know what I was saying.

A seed of unknown origin had sprung to life within me, borne no doubt on that alien fog. . . .

The professor was duly taken aback. "I hope, marquis--that is, Felix--I don't care who you are; but that you're willing to abide by our decision for this matter which, to be blunt, concerns you not in the least. If you are leaving our circle, I trust you can do it without further disruption of our familial symphony--or small concerto, be that as it may."

He had properly shamed me back to my senses. I endeavored to make amends. "Professor, I beg your forgiveness. I don't know what's come over me. I think I'm coming down with something." I smiled. "Yes, maybe I am seasick already."

"Here, let me help you." I had stood up at his desk with my last appeal, and now he was easing me back into the red leather chair.

I swooned once more . . .

"And so I can count on you to accept this position and grace the museum with your proven facilities, assisting me in this lifework dedicated to the ennobling of the spirit of human unfoldment in the midst of nature's varied and beautiful forms?"--Such was the offer I only imagined I heard. I found myself responding nonetheless:

"No, I cannot. I fear that your estimation of my capacity for public edification is overgenerous. I feel that Senhor Hurtado, for instance, has far greater qualifications in such a capacity, and that my own true talents are as yet undiscovered even by myself. It would be inappropriate and truly, sir, out of my place to accept such a responsibility when my life is, to be frank, orientated westward, almost beyond the direction of my own will."

I was but dimly aware of the waxen figure of the professor swimming before me as I continued my unbidden speech:

"As a matter of interest, I had been considering seeking a position here in Lisbon in order to prolong my enjoyment of the good welcome extended by you and your family. However, as I say, my spirit is carried over the waves--despite my gratitude for your gracious hospitality, as well as for your present offer. Sir, I must respectfully decline in the interests of my own as yet unknown but imperatively independent destiny."

I was interrupted this time by a splash of cold water on my face, delivered by the surprised-looking professor.

"That was quite a conversation you were carrying on with yourself, my disturbed young friend. In fact," and at this he leaned closer, peering at me intently while I dried my shamed face with a handkerchief, "until you began your confession of illicit covetousness of my betrothed daughter, I

was going to offer you a position in the employ of the Museu Ciências Naturaes. In public relations, as it happens. But now I see your mind is quite made up, if not entirely sound, and I'm relieved while also disappointed to realize that our marriage of professional talents is not to be. It's sad, really. But then I'm sure it will turn out for the best this way."

Professor Kuckuck looked a bit deflated, but also unburdened; as if he'd fulfilled an obligation, and escaped suffering any lasting consequences. It was plain to me then that Maria had sought external means to hold me, her loosely bridled stud, in sway. I wondered if on top of this simple stratagem she'd gone so far as to reason that a resentful Hurtado would balk at the marriage to Zouzou; that my perception of the daughter's availability would thereby increase; and thus, I would have all the more motivation to "stay" with her. I thought of poor Hurtado left to his own devices in such a situation--potentially dangerous in the event of his insight into Maria's manipulations. I could well become the object of his misdirected rage.

It would have been well for me to take my leave at that point . . . but the alien bee in my bonnet stung again: "There is one more small thing."

"Yes, what's that?" There was a glint of suspicion, almost fear, in those starlike eyes.

"Your wife. If she hasn't made it clear to you, let me in all humility confide in you in the open spirit of our friendship. She and Dom Miguel Hurtado . . . well, suffice it to say that the marriage of your daughter is highly questionable in my view, in light of Dona Maria Pia's concern for him as, as . . ."

Professor Kuckuck, his eyes cast down, blanched and sighed with one inbreathing, choked sob. "Enough, enough, I will not hear it! I've suspected as much for months, I tell you. I myself was afraid to admit what my worst fears indicated. But to tell you the truth, I wouldn't have believed Maria would go along with Zouzou's marriage to Hurtado just so that, just to keep him--" Kuckuck broke down with a cascade of hoarse, dry cries.

I felt genuinely sorry for the man, but could not help but enjoy this indirect revenge on Maria, for her attempted entrapment of me. It seemed, further in my defense (and leaving aside the spontaneous and involuntary nature of my disclosure), that all was not well in the first place between Antonio José and Maria Pia. I merely supplied the broom to poke into the interwoven cobwebs of their suspicion, power and jealousy, and to sweep away the last remaining obstacle, if I were lucky and kept my wits about me, to Zouzou's hand and heart.

vi

I left the professor in his office and went out into the street. I lit a cigar under the gaslamp which would later shine forth its contribution to the golden-gray sunset over the city. I took a mule bus back across town to the Café Borgia, asked the waiter for an espresso, a brioche au chocolat and some writing materials, and composed a letter to the real Marquis de Venosta, alias Felix Krull.

I wasn't sure that I actually intended to send such a letter; its composition served more as an exercise of self-discovery. I hoped it might unburden me of the double weight I was carrying, by allowing some interchange between my ever more separate (or were they ever more closely intertwined?) selves. I was still more confused than I had imagined, and sought clarity now with some urgency under the pressure of the two o'clock sailing.

I began:

LISBON, 2 OCTOBER, 1895

Dear "Felix,"

I know we agreed to remain incommunicado throughout our little adventure in deception. But the experiment has failed, my friend.

I was quite convincing, apparently, in letters to your parents. Even King Carlos himself fell for my jokes about your little pooch at home. And I managed a liaison here with a respectable family whose beautiful daughter I've fallen hopelessly in love with, in spite of her consistent avoidance on the grounds of self-prudence--maintaining that love is not beautiful (or some such nonsense I've done my best to subvert, with the inestimable help of those scurrilous drawings of yours). However--

I've been discovered through the mischief of a maidservant, or the pretty young thing who has become the irresistible object of my desires, or her mama who ironically enough is the one who really wants my posterior--who knows? All of this intrigue is getting to be a bit much for me, I must say. Anyway a letter was opened, sent to me here by my good old godfather Schimmelpreester--who happened (sad fortune) to know Professor Kuckuck, the patriarch of the aforementioned family, and who was tipped off when my host's scientific description of me rang all too true. Maybe I'm slipping, in my talent for disguise. In any case I want a hasty end to our arrangement--but not without Zouzou, whom I've got at midcourt.

My godfather's found a new enterprise marketing sausages over in America (North). I can't quite see following through to Argentina at this point, though it still sits under the pillow in my mind. Then again, Zouzou and sausages--I just don't know.

En tout cas: I've had it here, for various more reasons I won't get into now, and I want to arrange with you a rendezvous to discuss what happens next in our jumbled lives. Incredible coincidence, non?--my dream-girl's name being Zouzou, so like your Zaza--ha ha!!

So, Felix de Venosta, write me posthaste, at a neutral destination: how about General Delivery at the main Post Office, Praça do Comércio, Lisbon.

Yours or mine,

Marquis de Krull

The conclusion was as impossible as it was inevitable, and so was no revelation. But I did find myself leaning toward the quick exit.

I flipped the page of the writing pad, ordered another espresso, and immediately plunged into a second letter.

LISBON, 2 OCTOBER, 1895

My dear Godfather Schimmelpreester,

It is by what miraculous sagesse and accident of fate that we correspond again in such circumstances! You found me up to my tricks--that's true. Yet I will say I'm sobered by the experience, learning daily of life's multilayered clothing and occasionally (though not indiscreetly, Godfather) gaining glimpses beneath.

Your work sounds fulfilling and challenging. I'm drawn immediately to say yes to your proposition; and yet I must also instinctively refuse. But I don't mean to put you off, nor your proposal, altogether. As you understand my current status in life, I'm as yet unprepared for the riches of America that you paint before my eager eyes. Yet, too, I realize that someday, and perhaps sooner than later, I'll arrive on the doorstep of respectability and substantial (up to now I think I've known only ephemeral) success. And I may even--who knows?--arrive with bride in tow.

But I've said too much. Your hopes are gratefully acknowledged. I'll keep your offer in abeyance, if I may, and hope in turn that when I face the need for which your commerce supplies the satisfaction--I mean hunger for a

New World market of experience--I'll be there at your service. In the meantime, I remain,

with warmest affection,

your godson Felix

Feeling considerably relieved, I sat with folded hands, interlocking fingers, and declined the waiter's offer of a third coffee. I didn't yet know what I was going to do that afternoon, leaving such a mess with Professor Kuckuck; but at least, I'd ridden my thoughts to find some new directions. While I was at it, I thought I should figure out what to do next about Zouzou, how to convince her to run away with me immediately to Paris or America! Maybe the Marquis de Venosta could cease to exist, and I could assume a wholly new identity. . . .

But I found myself writing,

My dearest Zouzou,

I'm sure you'll be gratified to know that I won't be bothering you with my silly games of reasoning about love and beauty any longer. For by the time you receive this note, I will have gone on to--

At this juncture I hesitated, still not knowing which to choose, between going back to my old world, my old identity, my old tricks perhaps, which seemed so menial now . . . or on to the New World, to uncharted wilds of possibility, to new races of humankind . . . but selling sausages? Surely I could forget that part of the deal. There'd be some other way to get by, there in that "land of opportunity," if millions of others less fortunate in their natural social gifts had so managed.

Well then, I thought, I might reconsider the prospect of having Zouzou there, unpolluted by sausage-stink. I looked at my watch--it was 11:30. The lunchtime patrons were beginning to occupy the nearby tables with increasing frequency. I couldn't think any longer. Merde. I crumpled up the half-started letter and left the café, foregoing the mule bus to stride briskly uphill to the far end of the Rua João de Castilhos. Halfway up the hill, breaking a good midday sweat, I suddenly visualized the coffee waiter smirking after furtively opening the crumpled ball I'd heedlessly left behind.

Coming the roundabout way, I passed the tennis club before reaching the Villa Kuckuck: a welcome diversion, to avoid further my as yet unknown fate. Or so I thought. I found her at tennis with Dom Miguel de Hurtado. I felt somewhat put off, seeing her entertaining herself with her greasy-haired fiancé. Hadn't she told me she was through with him?

They were rapt in their concentration, and didn't notice my arrival until an admirable devil-may-care backhand by Zouzou skipped off the top of the net toward my inconspicuous vantage point beside the small grandstand. Despite her shortness of breath, she greeted me in her characteristically cool manner.

"Why . . . hello marquis." I felt annoyed, even with Hurtado there, that she was keeping up appearances. "I'd decided that you were not coming by after all, to say good-bye. But you are still planning to leave on the ship this afternoon?"

The breeze fondled her hair in precisely the same manner as it had the previous day in the garden.

"Oh yes," I had to say, "I'm still planning to leave. And I wouldn't have missed the opportunity to pay you and your mother my last respects."

Hurtado looked at me sharply.

"As well as your lucky companion, whom I did not expect to have the pleasure of encountering again." Now the vain sculptor smiled in that sickly way of his. I prattled on: "Besides, I thought to myself, as I considered how I might spend a couple of idle hours--what more pleasant place to take my last stroll in your charming city, but along the Rua João de Castilhos? Now forgive me if I've interrupted your game." My eyes must have given away something of a deeper nature than my banter, for the spectacled Hurtado, now done with his unpleasant smile, merely nodded curtly. He flipped his long hair about, motioning with his racket and a fresh ball that he was ready to pick up the game. "Forty-love," he stated in a cracked voice.

I climbed to a bench halfway up the grandstand, where I sat for the remainder of the set, cheering vocally for both players as the quality of the shot demanded. They didn't seem to mind my good-natured whistles and raves, and when he had finished her off, Dom Miguel invited me down.

He put his arm around me and, as Zouzou put her racket in its case and changed her shoes, he pulled me aside, walking me slowly down the side line. I wondered at this apparent change of affection, until he spoke with a patronizing air: "Marquis, I've an idea, a little plot I've just hatched, and I wonder if you might consider being an accomplice." His teeth gleamed and his eyes sparkled merrily.

I wouldn't commit myself easily to such an invitation, and so kept my tongue until he divulged more.

"I'm going to the Praça do Comércio on a special and, let us say, a sacred errand. You see, these sudden wedding arrangements have left me with barely time enough--time which all the same I've managed to squander at a silly game of tennis--even for a most important detail: to buy for Zouzou her engagement ring."

My heart tasted venom for my rival but still I kept my composure. Perhaps, if there was some new role for me, I might yet play it to my advantage . . .

Hutardo carried on: "I was lucky enough to be granted a little holiday of sorts when Professor Kuckuck was too ill to work and suggested I take the day off as well. I saw the most stunning gem in a jeweler's shop on my way here, and after some consideration of its expense, have decided to go back and buy it. Now I wonder if you have an hour to spare--When does your ship leave? Two o'clock, did I hear?--if you'll be good enough to entertain the bride here for me, so she won't be tempted to tag along. Can you do that?"

Though I resented the sculptor's condescending attitude (not to mention the advantageous position it represented), I was cheered by his

presumption of my innocence, or my powerlessness in the present circumstances. In the spirit of good sportsmanship I agreed to do as he'd asked.

"Zouzou," Hurtado crowed, "you'd better change those shoes again, and get out your racket. Our friend the marquis would like to challenge you now to test your true skill, to see if that last set wasn't decided by the ill luck of the wind, which must have been just fickle enough to counteract the benefits of his partisan support." He winked at me.

Zouzou cheerfully accepted: "I'll be glad to see if the marquis's talents include endurance and consistency as well as strong first impressions"--an obvious reference to my previous appearance on the tennis courts. Or, was she perhaps referring to my brush with nobility, my friendship with the King? Or, rather, would she be thinking of our little encounter yesterday on the garden bench?

Her fiancé laughed. "Good. So, I'll be off on some business I have to do. I want an accurate account of the score on my return."

The sun shone a dappled pattern on the smooth green carpet of grass underfoot. My heart pounded up in the lengthening silence, finally

throbbing out of the stillness as two robins flew in a flurry before us.

"Zouzou, I'm going to have to leave, but I want you to come with me. Do you want to come to America with me?"

Her eyes widened. "To America! But, but . . ." She sat down quickly on the bench, put down the tennis shoe she had been holding, and composed herself. Then with admirable alacrity she gathered her thoughts and spoke what had evidently been waiting inside her before I'd inserted my golden key.

"I have been thinking a lot about you, Felix. Especially since yesterday . . . and despite the fact that Mama has just moved up the date of the wedding to a week from Thursday. It's all happening so fast, and there's been so little opportunity to really get to know you, deep down. So little chance for . . . for intimate contact."

Her eyes were becoming moist. I sat down beside her and took her trembling hand in mine. She bravely continued: "I'm still held back by this question in my mind: Who are you? Your name or title means nothing to me. Your philosophy of love and beauty I've heard, and argued with, and have been forced to recognize as somewhat valid. And yet I still wonder--or part of me does--how much of the real you is presenting this philosophy of love, and why? I still wonder if your 'love-potion' theory of nature isn't just

a pretty icing on a much more common cake. In short, I mean to ask, are you sure you know what love is?"

I wasn't ready for that pointed a query. But I prided myself as a master in the art of quick repartee, and so the familiar theme of love wasn't totally daunting. I answered:

"Zouzou, I was immediately attracted to you, I confess, by your beautiful outward nature, your physical appeal, your face, your lips. How could I do otherwise? That's all I knew of you at first. I won't dwell on the importance to me of first impressions--I trust them. If then I proceeded to collect my further impressions of your character alongside the first pretty picture, don't judge me too quickly for bias and preconception. It doesn't always work that way, as you can guess--you've been to enough salon affairs, balls and other haunts of the beautiful people of high society masquerading as gods and goddesses while their lives are petty, deceitful, conniving, pretentious, and self-serving. And so I must admit that at my first impression I did perceive as well some ray of inner light, by which to illuminate my growing knowledge of this being called Zouzou.

"Look, I have my own life to concern me. You realize I can't stay here. Meanwhile I've been fortunate enough to be offered a chance to carry out a sensitive diplomatic mission abroad, not as a marquis but as myself,

Felix Krull. If you can in turn trust your own natural sensibilities to believe in me, I'm trusting my instincts to ask you to accompany me."

I waited for her response, wondering if the word "instincts" was badly chosen. I felt the letters to Schimmelpreester and the marquis still in my coat pockets. I knew that I would have to forget about any plans to reconvene with the marquis; the world would just have to live with two Felix Krulls. Schimmelpreester I could notify later from America, if . . .

"It's all too sudden, Felix. I need more time to know you. It's . . . that's all. I just can't trust myself yet."

I felt futility on every side. I was walled in by Zouzou, by Hurtado coming back soon with a fortune invested in one dire ring, by Kuckuck on his wretched warpath now, by the ex-marquis now no doubt happy as a lark and in no way willing to give up his freedom or borrowed identity in France, and by Godfather Sausages bound for an otherwise alluring New World.

Then Maria appeared on the scene, as if on cue. "I hope you two have finished sweating through this hard-fought game of yours. Because I'm afraid it's over." She was huffing and puffing, red-faced from the fury of her own exertion. "Susanna, I want you back in the house this instant: the gown fitter's arrived, no doubt charging by the minute for her time. As for you, my royal guest"--and she waited until Zouzou's banishment was complete.

"I think that you have but one slim choice remaining. You can stay here with me as I asked previously, but will ask now for the last time. Or you can leave under your own power, but stripped of any title or for that matter any shred of assumed respectability. You see, 'marquis,' I have been given to understand from certain sources that you are considering taking leave of us. Have you forgotten your recent pledge to me?"

Maria had really believed what I had promised her, that I would stay with her in lieu of my appointed rounds of the wide world. She had apparently trusted me on this critical point. Otherwise (I shuddered to think) she might have seen to it that my ticket was cancelled before I could make my departure. So what information had broken her confidence? Everyone else assumed I was leaving. Then I remembered the traitorous waiter who'd served my coffee barely an hour ago. Traitorous? He had no loyalty to me. He lived here.

Still, maybe fate and its pawns were working to my advantage, or so I went on to hope. Maria, too, went on: "While you're searching your memory, I might add that I would sincerely like to trust your motives in this latest tête-à-tête with my daughter. I won't accuse you now of anything more insidious than catering to the last-gasp flirtations of a rebellious, yet still firmly engaged, adolescent."

I kept my composure, despite realizing that Maria was still expecting a response. I could only wonder how I had until only yesterday felt such compelling attraction for her. Now in her spiteful jealousy she had lost whatever noble charm she had once possessed. She waited, then spoke with a final exasperation: "If it's such a matter of life and death, I'll add one more spice to the recipe. Senhor Hurtado once killed a man who played light with his honor. It was at the gates of Paris. It was an honorable duel--and there was considerably less than a marriage at stake. Just be aware of the prospects before you, mon galant."

BOOK TWO: THE OTHER SIDE OF THE WORLD

[BOOK TWO] - CHAPTER ONE: THE ASTRAL QUEEN

i

"Zouzou, I must say, that is an absolutely stunning ring."

She beamed, directly across the table from me. I heaped it on. "In fact, I believe it's the most charming adornment of natural beauty that I've ever laid eyes on." Her eyes flashed now, not just from flattery but with what I read as challenge: first, to know my intention; secondly, to warn me not to persist; and lastly, to dare me to go on.

Maria, seated to my left, looked irritated but managed an agreeable smile in her daughter's direction. Professor Kuckuck looked at me askance, but briefly, from the far end of the breakfast table before looking to the kitchen, where could be heard a clatter of trays and serving utensils. Dom Miguel, seated opposite Maria, simply swelled with pride.

Then, as Zouzou held her tongue, Hurtado responded: "It makes me proud to hear your compliments, marquis. I feel certain that someday before

long you, too, will deserve a prize as lovely as that which I have the fortune to anticipate . . . or which Zouzou has to contemplate on her hand." His gaze fell contentedly on the stone. The diamond truly dazzled.

Mardou came in with sausages, zwieback and black currant jam. She distributed the viands from her silver platter, hesitating when she, too, was arrested by the shimmer of diamond-day. Then, as had become her custom, she left sending me a dark, inscrutable message from her black eyes and tight mouth. I had learned to disregard such looks as her habitual countenance. This grimace, however, which was outwardly no different, struck me at the time with a kind of cautionary disparagement that I took to heart.

I still wasn't sure enough of my own designs, to press my flirtatious luck. Yet I felt charmed, in one way or another, in my oddly chosen course of decision-making: I'd arrived at the quay on schedule, at first planning only to retrieve my luggage and then, at the last minute, deciding to leave. But to no avail, as I found the Cap Arcona was undergoing engine repairs. Or so the boarding officer said, informing me that she'd be ready to steam out on Thursday. Later I would have reason to imagine modifications of a more suspect nature.

At the time, I could only wonder how I might best take advantage of being granted this unasked-for reprieve of sorts, consisting of two more days. Perhaps that was the signal I needed to succumb fully to Maria's final invitation. Was that why, then, I'd arranged through an exchange of messages to come for their late breakfast the following day, after a lonesome night in the small, ordinary room at the Savoy Palace that I was forced to stay in because I'd already checked out of my luxurious suite--to make fast my commitment? Did I really envision sharing Maria's bed, or what? I didn't even know if she and her husband still slept together!

That I retained some measure of sensible reserve was evidenced by the fact that I kept my steamer trunk and most of the smaller bags ready at the dock beside the Cap Arcona; even as I showed up on the Kuckucks' doorstep with my crocodile valise in hand.

"Oh, yes, I'll pick up the rest of it later," I'd told Maria as she'd graciously greeted me in the living room, scene of our first climactic embrace. I felt flushed, standing there alone with her, even to think of it again, that divine moment . . .

"I thought it would show some impropriety on my part to appear at your door with such a permanent-looking pile of baggage, don't you think?"

How are we going to work this out, anyway?" I said this in a low tone near her ear, as the others were close by in the dining room.

She hushed me and sent the valise up to the guest room in the care of Mardou, then ushered me into the dining room. The salient fact that emerged from the mealtime conversation was the fixed date of the wedding, a mere nine days away. Maria asked if I'd had any trouble cancelling my berth. I said I hadn't. At my reply she looked secretly troubled. I wondered if I should mention the delay in the ship's departure, or simply maintain the pretense of a change of plans based on a change of heart, an "overpowering remorse at the thought of leaving my dearest friends, indeed new-found family . . ." I decided to risk being thought less than honest for not bringing up the subject of the ship's repairs in the event one of them caught wind of it from some other source. For against this risk I weighed the security of Maria's confidence in me. Following her comment about canceling my berth, it occurred to me that if she feared a negative change of heart on my part, she might take it into her head to cancel the berth for me. It didn't occur to me that she might have done so already.

"What are your plans, now, marquis, if I may ask?" Kuckuck broke the silence at the beginning of the meal.

"Concerning . . . ?"

"Oh, you know--employment, diversion, study. Now that you've decided to stay, and I'm sure you're welcome here for an indeterminate amount of time"--he looked at Maria--"how do you plan to occupy yourself in our fair city?"

"To begin with, there's this famous wedding afoot, that I'm very much looking forward to attending. Then a long list of historical sites--I feel I've barely scratched the surface, the uppermost strata, over the depths of historical research that one could carry on here. The botanical gardens, meanwhile, I find an inexhaustible source of stimulation . . ."

"Felix," Zouzou intruded, unwilling to perpetuate any longer the illusion of my nobility, "we must get you acquainted with some of the young people in society here. There'll be the ball of the season in about a month's time. If we can't get you matched up before then, well, it'll be a perfect occasion--"

Maria at first gasped with the utterance of my real name from Zouzou's lips, then cut her daughter short: "Zouzou, how boldly and impolitely you're behaving for our guest, once again. I must ask you to desist from this childish prattle. The marquis has better things to do than to consort with your idle friends, who themselves have nothing better to do

than to play tennis, gossip, read romantic novels, and heaven knows what else."

Hurtado snickered and pushed his delicate wire-rimmed spectacles up on his long nose. I guessed by this insipid reaction that he had by now been informed of my unmasking. But then, why the continued pretense on the part of Maria and her husband? Perhaps they had given him to understand--or he merely assumed--that "Felix" was a pet name, a shade more intimate than the more official "Louis." Whatever the degree of his knowledge, he didn't seem to care much; and neither did I. During these idle speculations he was diverting the company with tales of his uninteresting teenage years, which tediously extended for the better part of the breakfast.

I was able to remain blessedly silent until the last of the black currant jam disappeared from my lips. By that time the conversation had been given over to the topic of wedding arrangements: a conversation made paradoxical by the reversal of normally expected tones with which Maria and Zouzou carried out their discourse--the former with the ebullience of the new bride, the latter with the dour submission of the aging mother.

During this exchange, Dom Miguel was consulted on certain details, the carriages to be arranged, the list of honored guests. Professor Kuckuck was lost in abstraction. Mardou came in to clear away the dishes, leaving

without so much as a glance at me. I suddenly realized that I needed time alone somewhere to think.

I eased my chair away from the table and began by addressing myself to no one in particular: "I'm afraid I must beg off with the flower show this morning. The air is calling me outdoors, and I feel that I must go walking where wildflowers grow. Maria, you've told me of some cliffs along the shore not far away. Can you direct me there?"

"Certainly, marquis, if you insist that's what you must do. But I do beg you to reconsider coming with us to the flower show. You could exercise your considerable aesthetic sensibilities for the sake of gracing our wedding in the utmost beauty." I flinched at the words, "our wedding."

"No," I said, "I really must leave such preparations to those more intimately involved." I nodded demurely toward Hurtado and Zouzou on the other side of the table.

"All right," she assented. "Let us go out straightaway, and I'll point you in the right direction." She threw down her napkin with some agitation bordering on excitement, rose to her feet and escorted me out the patio doors.

The patio was alive with Moorish patterns in gaily colored gravels, sparkling in the sun. The sky had an infinite turquoise reach to it today, with

a fresh breeze lifting spirits upward and outward. We walked side by side on the path behind the house, past the garden with its hidden bower. We came to what in the closer environs of the city would have been called an alley; here it was more of an overgrown cart-track, leading off beyond the cluster of villas at the top of the Rua João de Castilhos and winding out of sight toward the cliffs. "There you are," said Maria, waving her arm down the deserted lane. "Enjoy yourself." But I remained standing, and she likewise could not bring herself immediately to leave. So she brought up the latest topic of conversation, again.

"Felix, aren't you happy for our Zouzou?" It irked me how she so quickly dropped the pretense of my nobility in private. "Don't you feel that it's a wonderful occasion for Lisbon society?"

"That may be," I stated flatly. "I really can't say that I have much feeling for the match, however well suited it might be to your wider purposes as a family."

"Do I infer correctly from your tone a hint of jealousy?"

"Maria, why are you baiting me like this? Isn't it enough that I did as you asked, and came back to you? I would be interested to know at this point how we are to continue our liaison in the very household of your good husband--"

She stopped me abruptly, nostrils flaring. "Leave that to me." I could tell she was burning with some inner passion, yet my coolness deterred her from acting upon it. I stood still before her, arms straight at my sides, a soldier awaiting his orders from above. Maria's expression was a puzzled one. "Felix, when I asked you the day before yesterday to stay with me, you gave me to believe that you would, wholeheartedly. The second time, yesterday, you had perhaps even less time for a well-considered choice; yet you stayed, and so far on my terms. Now, let me ask you: over this past month, it has been on your terms as well, am I right?"

I felt her meaning to be clear despite the relative obscurity of her choice of words. It was true; I had to admit, at least to myself, the reality of my lustful ambitions. Yet I could not bring myself to confess to Maria the extent of those fantasies, the depths of my desires during those lonely hotel nights. I told her, instead: "Maria, I'm almost ashamed now to tell you directly, but you've asked. I think, I must say, that I've loved you . . . as a mother--" I stopped when she broke into a fluid mask of confusion, shock, dismay and instinctive gratitude. "Maria . . ." (I waited for a flicker of more receptive attention.) "I still harbor, as would any self-respecting son, a longing to go on my way, even stripped of my untenable facade if necessary--" (here I knew from the dark mask that descended upon her face that I'd

gone too far; so I attempted to backtrack--) "though I know with such options I'd be nothing. Therefore I must ask that you accept me not merely as a lover, but more truly as a loving son, if you can. Perhaps to stand in the place" (though what I thought to say was: "to sleep in the bed") "of the daughter you are about to lose."

"I'm trying to understand you. You say you love me and yet you feel you must, at some point sooner or later, leave me." Her face became momentarily contorted, then was still again. "I don't know if I can live with that sort of expectation. I will have to give it some thought." She half turned away, and said less audibly, as to herself, "So now the choice is mine." She closed her eyes and heaved a huge breath. "But in the meantime, here you are, here we are." She turned back to face me. I saw that queenly bosom rising like an ocean swell. I hesitated . . . and then Maria, with a husky half-sob, turned and faded back to her villa.

I knew, or at least thought I knew, that by Thursday I, too, would have made up my mind: to have escaped with Zouzou, or escaped alone. In effect, I'd already decided. It was decided for me, all along!--such is the fate of those noble of birth. Now in sight was the time when future events would conspire with those past to whittle my hypothetical choice down to one certain option.

ii

My thoughts ran free out on the ragged bluffs above the River Tagus that lovely autumn day. The mild air carried the slightest hint of salt upriver from the ocean, along with the fresh crispness of fall. I can't truly say that I was totally unoccupied with the schemes of my life; that I didn't gaze with some expectancy, albeit vainly, along the far bank's horizon in an attempt to envision the Atlantic and all that it could represent in the way of adventures in distant continents. But I was--unaccountably it seemed--at relative peace with myself. Thus I could meander almost childishly in the windblown grasses, the stolid rocks, the unjudging clarity of the sunshine.

At length I tired from the brisk air and exercise. I'd seen no one at all out here, so close to the great port city. As I gauged it was getting on into the afternoon, yet had no inclination to return to the conundrums of my adopted family circle, I sought a soft resting place in the relative shelter of rocks where I could nap for a while.

I drifted down in sleep amid wildflowers, in a profusion of pale colors--a botanical array the particulars of which I should reserve for such as the professor to cite. . . .

In dreams that flowed as one, varied yet united in a motley arrangement of scene and symbolism, one character stands out. What was more, she seemed to occupy the role of mistress of ceremonies, or director of this series of vignettes staged as if for my private benefit. Her name, she told me at the outset, was Sophie Tucker Vaughan.

I sat beside her on the shore of a lake that glittered jewel-like in the midst of a sylvan scene . . . a wild, remote corner, she informed me, of a future North America. The year, to be exact, was 1994; this information (along with the myriad technological advances and cultural changes it entailed in the dreams that would follow) I accepted with that all-embracing nonchalance intrinsic in the province of dreams. Likewise did I feel myself at ease lounging in the soft grass beside this lovely, mature woman whose age I guessed to be in the mid-forties. She had none of Maria's haughty stiffness, none of Zouzou's childish, pouting impudence. She was dressed informally, in a loose pink velour shirt, and well-fitted denim pants that I took to be ordinary for outdoor fashion in her time and locale. Her moderately long, chestnut-colored hair hung casually into the grass. Her lips

were full and naturally red. Her rich brown eyes as she looked into mine were round and large, and shone like deep pools.

As we talked, a white Persian cat appeared from behind her and approached me for a vigorous rubbing of its head. Its name was Beri, Sophie said. Its opalescent eyes were the very color of the water in the lake--even before it approached the water's edge to drink. Sophie followed her pet with an enameled cup, which she dipped into the water and raised to her lips; then she offered me some. I drank, and immediately fell into a deeper dream, or rather, dream-sequence, that I'm not sure whether properly to call mine or Sophie's. Perhaps more accurately, it was ours.

It began in a schoolroom. Most of the children sat in tense, isolated fear, writing a test. But in one group near the back, hands passed small folded notes, and giggles broke out--until the teacher cracked a yardstick down on the top of her desk. The eyes at the back corner turned sheepish. The teacher strode back, collected their barely started test papers, ripped them into shreds and pointed to the door. One girl closest to the front of the room raised her hand. The teacher smiled and walked to her desk. The little girl's desk had a nametag taped on it--SOPHIE.

She handed the teacher her paper, curtsied, and sat silently again at her desk, eyes to the front. The four misbehaviors slunk out of the room and slammed the door behind them. Their running footsteps, mingled with laughter, pattered down the hall.

*

Sophie appeared in the next scene as a woman perhaps in her late twenties. She sat at a typewriter, stockinged legs pertly together, makeup just so, bright smile. Her boss, a heavy-set man graying at the temples, walked by her desk, dropped an envelope on it, put his hand around her back to grip her under her arm, and leaned close to whisper hoarsely in her ear: "I hope you appreciate this little raise I'm giving you, doll."

She didn't respond, but sat frozen in her chair.

He tried another tack. "How would you like to take in the Dukes tonight? Got some good seats behind home plate."

Still no response.

"I'll call Corrine and tell her I've got a speech to write for tomorrow."

"I don't really care about the minor leagues."

"But Albuquerque's in first place. They've got a hot new pitcher named--"

"No thanks. Try me again on an Orioles game when I get promoted to your office in D.C."

"Ah . . . a woman's ambition . . . I'll see what I can do."

He released her with a nervous huff of a sigh, and walked away, his shoes clicking on the polished tiles.

*

With the scene that followed, I was at first under the confused impression that I had awakened from the dream-within-a-dream, because what I saw took place in the same wild region of mountains and forests as that surrounding the pristine lake.

But I was not present in this part of the dream except as an observer; and Sophie, though she was hiking up a steep trail alongside her white cat, was wearing a different shirt, of green and blue flannel, over her denim pants. As she picked her way up the rocky trail, talking to Beri and adjusting her canvas rucksack, I felt too that she was maybe a little younger. But out of shape nonetheless: she panted for breath and slipped on a root and

finally paused. She looked up at the sky through the trees, a rich blue laced with fluffy white clouds. Suddenly, incredibly, like a deus ex machina in some tawdry opera house, a figure appeared floating down out of the clouds, through the trees, and sat hovering there before Sophie's awestruck gaze. It was clear to Sophie then (though not to me, who needed later clarification from her) that the figure was that of American political matriarch Betsy Ross, complete with rocking chair. She was draped in cloth which she was painstakingly stitching: the navy-blues, the blood-reds, the star-whites of the first American flag. She smiled mysteriously, a Mona Lisa smile, nodded her head meaningfully at Sophie and was gone, vanished in the instant. With her the entire scene folded up like some stage backdrop collapsed in a heap in the dark among unseen cables, ropes, pulleys, curtains, set dividers, silent and shadowy stagehands . . .

*

And the last portion of the dream unfolded. An old woman, still Sophieish, waddled down the aisle of a gigantic, brilliantly lit grocery store, pushing a cart. She arrived at the checkout counter and piled there her

clutch of groceries: lettuce, celery, an artichoke, a loaf of brown bread, a bag of onions, three apples. "Nineteen ninety-five," said the checkout man.

Sophie smiled and said, "Ah, that was a good year"; but then a tear ran down her face. She looked down at the check in her hands. "Will you cash this for me, please? I do have an account here. It's . . . it's my last one." She managed to smile despite her tears, at the coincidence of the amount of the check: \$19.95.

Outside the store, holding tightly her personal grocery bag with its twine handles, Sophie stopped at a silver ladder leaning up against the wall: it had only seven steps and ended at solid brick. She mounted the first step, one foot followed by the other, as would a child. She waited, to catch her breath. She said the name, Betsy Ross, slowly, barely a whisper. Again, she stepped up, scaling two, three, each step to the top. At the seventh step her perch was precarious. She looked up at the sky, and directly above her was one small cloud, through which gleamed what seemed an eye. From somewhere above the cloud the sound of engines could be heard. A single ray of light shone from the eye, directly to a spot in the center of her forehead. Sophie's eyes rolled back and she fell off the ladder as it swayed down toward the pavement. Her grocery bag smashed and scattered out most of its contents: aspirin, tea, coffee, sugar, cigarettes, cola.

There followed an instantaneous fade-out--meaningful, I somehow knew, of the passage of twelve hours' time. Sophie awoke yawning from the pavement. She rose upon wobbly legs and stretched her arms. She brought both hands together behind her head, rocked back on one leg, rotated her body forward again and threw to the plate, a blazing fastball up and in.

An old man who was walking by saw Sophie crouched in her follow-through waiting for the umpire's call, and gave her the most disparaging look, with his bushy eyebrows bunched and eyes rolling. But a boy rode by on his bike and grinned grandly. He wore a cap with the chirping head of an oriole emblazoned on the front. "Hey you, little boy!" Sophie shouted.

"I'm not little, I'm ten years old," he retorted. His legs straddled the bike and stationed him at the curb.

Sophie looked more closely at him. "What's your name?"

The kid flashed his almond eyes and pushed the cap back on his shiny black hair. "Enik," he said. "What's it to ya?"

Sophie had a faraway look on her face. "Oh . . . nothing, that's okay, Enik. Just someone . . . you looked like. . . . Say, you know those Orioles, I see your hat, well I'm a fan of theirs, too. And this year they're gonna win it all!"

"Yeah, but, the thing is, even the years they get there, they usually blow it in the end. I mean, only six World Series titles, and three of those happened before the turn of the century."

"Well, Enik, you seem to know your stuff. Now listen. Remember the '95 season?"

"Sure I do."

"Okay--you know who threw out the first ball Opening Day that year?"

"Uh, I give up . . . the President?"

"Yes, that's right. That was me. Though I hadn't been elected yet. In '95 I was still just the front-running candidate."

His eyes widened at first, then narrowed. "Aw, gwan, gramma. He shook his head, got on his bike and started to ride away, front wheel wobbling. He looked over his shoulder and muttered in Sophie's direction, "Fuckin bag lady"--then whirled off in pedal fury.

I partially awoke, perhaps due to the jarring obscenity of the boy. I held Sophie's black enameled cup, still dripping, in my hand. She sat at my feet, crosslegged, stroking her cat.

Now, need I apologize for the impropriety of such language, perhaps unexpected from the mouth of a would-be marquis? Ah, but that sham is already undone. Let me say next in my defense that the lad's words were not mine, but those I heard and strive only to report with what accuracy I can summon for the reader's considered benefit. Lastly, I must confess a certain secret foreknowledge in this narration, of what, by the very agency of this enchantress, lay in store for me. When that outcome is understood by the patient reader, all may be forgiven--such is my hope!

At this point I might be allowed to confide (just as Sophie helped me through an interpretation of these vignettes) that the message was supposed to prepare me for some destiny as yet unnamed. In short, Sophie informed me as I sat before her, I stood to gain from an understanding that competition, an endless striving for greater success, was woven throughout the fabric of American life. I took this to mean that I was bound for Albuquerque as a scion of the sausage trade. Not so fast, said Sophie. Albuquerque, maybe . . . but her interest in me was more personal yet. Personal--to what extent wasn't clear--and political. When I quizzed her about this business of the President throwing out the first ball, asking if that was really her, who would later become the old woman, she laughed as if to herself, turned away from me and stared out onto the lake. Then she said,

speaking toward the water and placing a hand on my foot, "A lot depends on you."

iii

A cooling afternoon breeze from the River Tagus stirred me awake to the Portuguese day, my own familiar, if rapidly waning century. The dream, or dreams, just passed gave me a sense that I'd experienced something of the fabric of reality itself--as a distant, newly discovered portion of a Persian rug must appear to the baby meandering across it on velvet knees.

I felt compelled to share my revelations, however raw and dimly understood, with someone. Perhaps in the telling, the implications would become clearer. At this juncture in my life the only person I could see as a confidante was Zouzou. The professor, it was true, was one for whom I had great fondness and respect; yet for all his wisdom and charm, I could not see him exactly as a peer. Nor to be sure, was Zouzou a peer in all respects--as our interminable debates about the nature of love and beauty had proved to me. Yet in the exchange of differing opinions a bond is created unlike the more facile sharing of similar views. For me additionally in our

contentiousness lay the challenge of winning her over, and not just point by point. I wanted the whole match.

As I picked my way along the rocky bluffs above the river, homeward to the villas of Lisbon proper, I ran the dream over and over in my memory, the better to preserve its undulating vividness. But I didn't know if I could manage to meet with Zouzou privately, as she was being swept up in a rising wave of wedding preparations.

A path began to form under my feet. A lone figure appeared swaying before me, a gray waif outlined hazily against the dusky bluffs. As we approached I saw that this new apparition was none other than Zouzou.

She looked heartbroken, petals falling from her shoulders and hair. "Felix, oh Felix, we've broken it off, it was so silly--" and then she began to laugh, nearly giggling in her tears, and went on--"He just wouldn't listen, and didn't care at all. I loved those pink gardenias, and the yellowish-gold ones, but he said they were horrid together, and he wanted blue ones and red ones. Oh, but they were so horrid and not at all proper for a wedding and--I know what you're thinking, with your sad understanding eyes that are really unconcerned: what a stupid, trivial little argument to break up an engagement--Mama too could hardly bear it but she didn't like either kind of flowers anyway, and she started to scold herself for letting us choose them

together . . . she was so funny!" And Zouzou howled and sobbed, nearly shrieking, as she fell into my arms.

Even in her weeping, she had shone radiantly of the sun which was brimming big on the western waves, beyond the mouth of the river. And as the sun had already set, yet leaving its image larger than life on the horizon, so Zouzou's radiance lingered before me, even as she cried on my shoulder in diminishing heavens.

Likewise, my dream refused to leave the premises. For Zouzou's misery I was sympathetic, if silent. Now I couldn't contain myself, with my own recent engagement in dreamland so fresh and so real. I had to tell her about it.

"I know, Zouzou, it was silly, and tragic, and yet in your radiance I feel not so much sympathy as love--no, don't reproach me; I'm speaking from the heart of my heart, not as a man but as a fellow human being suffering the distress of circumstance that--well, I can't say much about your calamity. But listen, I must tell you what's happened to me. Besides--who knows?--it may cheer you up."

I should have thought better of that surmise. Should have taken some caution from the trembling grasp of this wastrel-of-a-princess's hands around my shoulder blades. But I was a callous, self-centered fool, and I went on:

"Actually it was only a dream. But it was so lifelike, I'm certain that . . . that there's something more to it. Not really lifelike, in a way that you or I are familiar with; but striking, in a way that you--or rather I; I said 'you' in the general sense--anyway I'm convinced that it's more than symbolic. That this woman--"

And Zouzou turned her wounded eyes to me, glinting with fresh mistrust.

"Sophie, her name was . . ." And I began to lose heart. "Well, it was just a dream, I guess."

"You guess."

"Oh, it's so difficult to explain. I don't pretend to know what it all means. How shall I begin to have you understand? It started and ended beside this absolutely pristine lake in the wilderness. That's where the dreams began--I mean her dreams; or rather the dreams of her life--episodes from different parts of her life. Anyway, waking up from those dreams, and seeing her still there . . . when she looked into my eyes . . ."

"Look, marquis, why are you telling me all this?"

The "marquis" stung. I wasn't sure how to continue without inflicting further damage. I thought of changing the subject, of asking her how she explained to Maria her knowledge of my real name. Just as quickly I knew

what she would have said--simply that I had confessed to her. But this little subterfuge was really the least of my concerns now. And it was too late to leave the more pressing issue of my recent vision; too late in the conversation with Zouzou and too late in my cleaved-open soul.

"Don't worry," I reassured her. "I'm not going to relate to you an erotic dream of mine. This is something altogether different." I placed my hands gently on Zouzou's arms just below the shoulders, and stood there looking intently into her eyes. "Sophie told me that even though we were in a dream I would do well to remember her words, and the experiences she had shared with me. For she was real, she said, if from a different place and time. As real as the sensation in my fingers when I stroked the white fur of her cat . . ."

"Felix, I really--I thought you were going to say something to comfort me. Do you understand what's happened to me today, what I've done? My life is nothing now: dead flowers in the wind. And here we walk, together on this path that I followed with instinct because my eyes were clouded with grief and wild, childish hopes, while you tell me all about this dream-woman and her damned cat, her loving eyes and caressing hands. What are you getting at? Do you want me or not? Am I not real enough for you?"

I didn't know how seriously to take these words, so abruptly and unexpectedly did they come from the quivering mouth that before now had offered such strenuous arguments against love.

I tried my best to console the poor girl. I could understand how vulnerable she must have felt after the episode with the flowers . . . how alone and, perhaps even dependent on me. Had she really cast herself adrift from Hurtado for my sake? I could scarcely believe it. I'd have to see how she felt tomorrow, next week . . . Except I wasn't going to be around that long.

I wanted Zouzou to realize the impact this dream had had on me, to understand with my own dawning comprehension that her dream of a life with me was now just that--an ephemeral dream. But it was painful to contemplate such disillusionment--especially when part of me would die too, in the process.

"This dream is not about love, I'm trying to tell you, Zouzou. You know I love you." At this she looked startled. I continued: "No, it's more than that. It's about the rest of my life--the rest of me, I mean. It has to do with who I am, where I'm going, what I'm doing with my life."

"And does it include me, this life of yours?"

A week ago, even a day ago, such a question would have sent thrilling tremors through me, and I wouldn't have hesitated with my answer. Now, however, I could only, with some calm detachment that took me by surprise, skirt the issue and keep trying to steer the explanation of my change-of-soul on a neutral course.

"I can only trust that you will discover the answer yourself when you hear me out. Nothing's so simple any more . . . if it ever was. Anyway, listen. Come, let's walk this way. No? I thought you wanted to go home."

"No. I don't. I know it's getting dark. I know Mama will be furious, and worried. And Dom Miguel--no, let's walk the other way." And to my astonishment she turned, took my hand in hers, and started us on the path away from the city, away from home, from her mother, from her bed and from the arms of the goose Hurtado. . . .

I floundered for a moment, having lost the thread of my dream-tale, and, perhaps, some of my wits. I bravely--call it blindly, if you will--forged ahead as we walked: "The thing is, I was supposed to learn a lesson about success from this glimpse of Sophie's life. It seems this little trip of hers to the wilderness was just a vacation before a political campaign, the beginnings of a campaign for election to--the Presidency of the United States!"

Zouzou had just settled into a steady walk, with her eyes on the path before us. When she heard my voice take on the excitement of my proximity to fame, she must have been affected in a similar way (if one person removed), because she suddenly looked up at me in childish wonderment.

"This was happening, Sophie told me, in 1994, and I was to believe that it was, or rather will be, or let's just say, is a reality, all that I experienced."

The spark in Zouzou's eyes had quickly passed. "You said that already. And I still don't know what it means."

"I'm not sure yet myself, to tell the truth. It just seems that . . ."

"What do you mean, 'not sure yet'? There's going to be more of this, another nightly visit, or two, from this Scheherezade?"

Suddenly I remembered my dream of two nights ago: the soloist in the beer hall: it was Sophie! Zouzou was going on about her:

"Or maybe every night? With her oh-so uplifting explanations to entice you? Really, Felix, I don't understand this at all. I wish you'd recognize what I thought was a reality between us."

We stopped, and I brought my hands up and placed them on Zouzou's arms as before. "All right. Sophie told me why she appeared to me. She said I could help her."

"How?"

"Wait. And that she could help me. She said that I should not be deterred from the grandeur of her ambitions; and from what she knew of me, that shouldn't be a problem. I couldn't fathom how much she really did know about me, or how she came to know it; so I started to tell her about my acquaintance with your King, and she said she knew all about it. The point was, she said, there was no one around her that she could rely on for sound advice, for real companionship, for--"

"Do go on."

"Oh, um. She was a little fuzzy on the rest. Or maybe my memory . . ."

"Right. And did you accept or refuse?"

"It wasn't as if I exactly had the choice to make."

"She made you accept, with her infinite power and charm?"

"No, Zouzou, it's not like that. It's more a matter of . . . my fate unfolding, is how she put it. Come, let's continue walking, shall we? It will help keep us warm, in this evening breeze." And with that I boldly put my

arm around Zouzou's waist and began walking beside her once again. To my surprise her usual bristling defenses were down. She acquiesced so easily that I felt a flush of joyful confidence in being with her like this, in such innocent intimacy. I knew that she still needed reassurance; in that regard I had behaved poorly indeed. And so I sought to make amends. Whether in the effort I would change my very orientation, so recently drawn as by a powerful magnet to the person of Sophie, I didn't know.

I did, however, continue to try to bring my exploration of the dream and its meaning to some satisfactory conclusion--taking care not to dwell any longer on Sophie's interest in me. I rambled on about Sophie's view of ambition and the challenge of public success, about her need to overcome intimidation, bourgeois reticence, female insecurities, and so on. It was the epitome of the American dream, she'd told me, that every man had the opportunity to become President. And so she was determined that such freedom of possibility should extend to a woman as well.

"Pfui--what self-respecting woman would want such a thankless job?" Zouzou interjected. "I suppose she wore trousers, as well."

"As a matter of fact--now look, Zouzou, you're not being very open-minded. After all, as Sophie herself realized, women have served more than adequately as monarchs in Europe for ages: so why not in America, could

she dream of occupying the highest office in the land? The heart of the matter is this: that in claiming possibility, in the willingness to act on it, comes the power to make it happen. Just so did Sophie divulge that such power--the real precursor to its visible manifestation--had come within her grasp; no, more accurately, it lay within her breast, is how she put it."

Zouzou stumbled on the darkening path and she looked up at me, gently narrowed eyes still patiently smoldering. As she lost her balance, my arm tightened to steady her, and under her arm my hand caught a half-grasp of her own charming breast--a charm with such power as was imputed to the "magic potion" from our customary cerebral sparring.

I presumably would have gone on to elucidate for Zouzou the metaphor of politics that Sophie had used, as she explained to me how necessary were a constant, unswerving perseverance and dedication, a commitment to uncompromising success. Politics was an uphill battle. It could mean lifelong struggle to reach the top, whether of a distant, dominant peak or a closer hill. The competition was stiff, and the laggards dropped back to face unending drudgery as standard bearers in the base camps of the elect. . . .

But in that instant of unintentional bliss, such elaborations became superfluous for both of us. I'd already noticed that Zouzou had become

increasingly limp at my side. Now I was convinced we needed a change of scene. If I had had any qualms about the propriety of stopping in the little shed that had just loomed into view out of the evening's shrouds, my mind was now clear.

I continued to hold Zouzou in my arms, and the longer I did so the more I began to ache with desire. I said to her:

"I'm sorry if all this is so tiresome to you. I should have known better than to expect you to feel its importance, the way it was for me. Maybe you're right, it was just a dream."

And then she kissed me. A kiss that opened my eyes to a wholly new aspect of this enigmatic creature called Zouzou. Her little lips were relaxed, yet urgent as with some insatiable hunger. I could not hold myself back, in fact had no ready reason to, and so gave myself freely to her, responding in kind.

Then it was she who suddenly pulled her lips away from mine but, with both arms locked firmly at the small of my back, said, "Felix, I don't know how long you're planning to stay with us: another day, a month, a year, forever? But right at this moment it means nothing to me. Just as this dream-woman of yours means nothing to me. I want you to know that I do love you, and I want you tonight. I want you right now."

My head swam. This was what I had yearned for, had forced myself again and again to realize was beyond the bounds of possibility. Yet Zouzou's offer was not clear-cut. She had not just said that she would marry me. Suddenly I was the reluctant one. How suddenly she'd turned the tables on me! Would I refuse what every cell in my body cried out to accept? I tossed my head in the direction of the little shed. "Come on," I said, "let's look in this bit of shelter over there."

iv

It wasn't the Ritz, this quaint old feed shed. Yet it beckoned with some benign peace from its tilted perch on the hill alongside the path. Three walls held up a decrepit but intact shed roof that angled up to the ever-darkening sky. Its shape was a living shadow, that with its open arms called in the dimness for love.

Zouzou was now mute, a little wan, and pensive. She still possessed a hint of hesitancy, as she always had at times alone with me, save for the little episode on the garden bench, where she'd paid for her impulsiveness with shame in the sight of her mother. As I thought back to that breakthrough in

our formal relations, I now wondered if once again Dona Maria Pia would appear on the scene to wreak her singular brand of havoc. Certainly she'd known the direction I had followed on my foray along the cliffs. And hadn't Zouzou left a trail of petals strewn behind her--perhaps even knowingly? But it was now quite dark out, and the thought of a lantern-swinging or torch-bearing search party seemed to me uncouth in the very least, unbecoming the dignity of the noble family that had so graciously hosted me; and therefore unrealistic. On the other hand, when I thought of how our dual absence would be perceived back at the Villa Kuckuck, I felt not so very confident of my position, and shuddered at the prospect of our inevitable return--likely put off until morning.

Still hand in hand, we entered the dark shed with tentative steps, until we could discern that it was largely filled with a heap of dry, but still soft and fragrant hay. It took no thought at all to find ourselves quickly tumbling down together on the yielding bed. Zouzou's hands and lips were all over me. My mouth was drawn to encompass hers, as if I were some predatory snake about to swallow her whole. But alas, my jaws were not so hinged; and if my mind was fast becoming unhinged, I yet was reserved in some little portion of my ardor, so that I held Zouzou at breath's length, standing, or rather sprawling, at my last line of defense. I knew that if this had been

my first such experience, I would have seen it through to its inevitable and no doubt speedy conclusion. But it wasn't, and my fresh temptation was tempered by the consideration that Zouzou's judgment in such matters might not be relied upon--that in the light of day, our little adventure would be remembered only as a potent dream, and discarded for the required reconciliation with Hurtado. Which result would leave me in such a state of misery that I might then be prompted to make a drastic appointment with my rival at the figurative gates of Paris.

Still, that face before me, with its soft lips parted and panting with desire, drew me once more into melting union. The lithe little body, a girl even now become woman, covered my independence with a wrapping of firm and vibrant heat. How could I further resist? I was fairly bursting.

But when I closed my eyes and felt in the dark Zouzou's breasts spilling out of her half-opened blouse (whose tying strings had in our tussling come undone) the face that filled my inner vision was that of Sophie: the chestnut hair, straight and silky, replacing Zouzou's black curls; the full and broad lips instead of the girlish pucker; the long-lined nose, not the pert, upturned button that pressed urgently into my cheek. It was Sophie, however distant in her time and space, that held me in her power; and this

nubile waif in my arms was powerless to erase her dominating presence in my soul.

"Zouzou," I began--but she'd already felt the life go out of me . . . to someone else.

"It's that woman, Sophie, isn't it."

I hesitated, then answered, "Yes."

She drew away from me with a deep, poignant sigh. I guessed she was retying the strings of her blouse. Then she said, "Well, I guess I'll leave you two to it, then." And she got up to leave.

I reached out and grabbed onto her skirt. "Zouzou, wait . . ." But my words were halfhearted, perfunctory.

She snatched the bit of cloth out of my flaccid fingers.

And then, without another word, she was gone.

v

It was with an incongruous mixture of feelings that I lay there on that pile of hay, alone, listening to Zouzou's footsteps and then the empty wind. For despite my anxieties of having destroyed my own fondest future--not to

mention the discomfort of the attendant bodily frustration--I felt strangely calm. The vision of Sophie's face stayed with me: until I fell into sleep, and was entertained more vividly yet by a return of her image as she'd appeared in the afternoon's dream, sitting by the jeweled lake, beside me.

"Well," she said matter-of-factly, "do you want to hear more?"

Of course I did. I had one burning question to ask now: Why me? It was not that I was uncomfortable with her notion of getting ahead, seeing what life had to offer and how easily I might sample its multifarious gifts--which presumably included the company of Sophie herself. But with my immediate destiny hanging in a state of limbo, I needed more clarification as to her mysterious purposes. If I were to be completely honest I might admit that with my blunt question I was also pressing her for praise.

She laughed and then, in her irresistible husky voice, told me I was an impudent prick. I was shocked, my pride cut to the quick. No one had ever talked to me like that--not in substance, never mind in such an obscene manner of speaking. Well then--I swallowed my fancy retort and asked her what gave her the gall, and the presumed knowledge of my character, to brand me so.

"You're a self-centered, chauvinist--okay, I won't indulge in name-calling any more. I was just kidding anyway, at least in the way I said it. But it's true." And she laughed again.

I didn't know whether to cry, hit out at her, prepare some witty rebuttal, start calling her names, or what. So I stared at the lake in silence, merely fuming. The emptiness around me was appalling. What if she left me stranded amid such barren, inhospitable beauty? Was the surrounding forest as endless as it appeared, the lake as cold? I blurted out: "What do you want from me, then? Why didn't you just leave me peacefully sleeping in the hay, or on those rocks on the cliffs?"

"Poor boy."

"I'm not a--" She brushed my lips closed with a gentle finger.

"Okay--you're a handsome and charming young man who doesn't know where he's going in the world, or in life. Who's got so much talent he doesn't know how to use it. Who's so concerned about living it up and taking advantage of people on some scam of a world-tour that he'll be blind along the way to real love, affection, understanding . . ."

"So you're trying to tell me I should stay here with Zouzou--assuming I get rid of Hurtado first, oh yes and the father, and the mother--or was it Dona Maria Pia you had lined up for me? Is that what I'm missing by

leaving this place to try my luck elsewhere, 'young man' that I am, who's-- you're right--not willing yet to tie myself down to some future of unknown worth? Why then did you barge into my life now and ruin it all?" Despite my hurt feelings I took some pride in my handling of the English language, neglected since my school days. I found myself, in fact, as fluent in it as if it were my native tongue.

Sophie took no notice of my powers of speech, only my wounded tone of voice. "My, my. Such anger, such self-justification. To be truthful--and I must say I've been watching you for some time now--"

"What are you talking about? Who are you, anyway? Or should I say, what are you?"

"So harsh a vibration, and I only mean to help you. I'd have to say you were wavering pretty wildly of late, regarding the prospect of your precious freedom abroad. I've been rooting for you all the way, hon, but you just keep coming so close to blowing it, that I figure, I'm not gonna leave this kid to chance."

"No? Why not?" And I began to take a closer interest in those long legs clad in tight blue denim. "What's in it for you?"

That got a pause out of her. Moment by moment--maybe it was a trick of that magical boreal light--I began to soften to her, to think of her not as a tormentor but simply as a mentor. Or perhaps, not so simply . . .

"All of this you'll learn in time. But, now I guess you do deserve to know something more of my motives." And she looked directly into my eyes, with an openness I could only associate with love. She took my hands and held them warmly in hers. "Mine too is a solitary life, when it comes right down to what matters: real companionship, with someone who understands me, who is enough like me to relate to this concept of ambition, success, power, without getting carried away with it. It's hard to find people like that who don't get hardened to the softer realities of life. To gentleness, honesty, openness, trust . . ."

"Then what would you want with an unrepentant pri--scoundrel like myself?"

"Ah, I guess that gets down to my real motive. I should add to my list of epithets that you're kind of cute. But no, the real thing is, it's a challenge. Just like you trying to seduce all these women."

"Seduce all these women? Come now. Surely if you've been watching me--"

"All right. I'll give you the benefit of the doubt on that one. And likewise, I'm not really trying to seduce you."

At that I felt a pang of genuine disappointment. I reflected that with her duplicity she was giving me a taste of my own medicine.

"Then, what, exactly, are you doing?"

"You know, getting to know you. Isn't that what you tell them?"

I showed no amusement at her remark, nor for that matter at this entire tack of her conversation. She went on:

"Okay. Serious now. I see in you a great potential as someone to work with, to share confidences with, perhaps even--if we in our imperfect evolution can allow such a phenomenon to blossom of its own organic volution, as your professor might say--as a lover."

My heart started to beat resonantly within the depths of my chest, my very being. Was it with the prospect of power represented by a job with the President, or sharing her bed?

I won't presume now to dissect that particular emotion; for it quickly gave way to the annulling cognizance that all was transpiring in the context of a dream, and was therefore as worthless as chaff in an autumn wind. I consciously (to the extent that consciousness is possible in the context of a dream) wished myself to awaken, at that point, to be rid of the useless

enticements conjured by this temptress, and to recover from the blows she had so mercilessly delivered to my self-esteem. I was confident in this wish: for I had from an early age dabbled in the mystic science of lucid dreaming, to the extent that I could watch myself from a safe distance, unperturbed even in the throes of the most fiendish nightmares. The present instance, however, proved to be an exceptional case.

My hands still lay nestled in hers; the lake still rippled with the reflections of a multitude of trees; the cat still purred at her side. Okay (I found myself saying to myself, in Sophie's vulgar argot), if I can't leave at will, I'll stay with this blooming dream and see what comes of it. Why restrict myself to the pleasures of the mundane, terrestrial plane that usually goes by the name of civilized society?

Then, to Sophie: "Let's get real, Soph--hey, did I say that?" I felt like swatting a pesky insect buzzing around my head. But there was nothing to swat. I tried to ignore the irritating sensation. "What I'd like to know is, are you some kinda witch, or what?"

She giggled as if at some private joke. "All in good time, all in good time. For now, let's just say the short answer is no. The next cheapest goes like this: I'm what you might call astral-wise. Come, let's have a swim."

And in the twinkling of an eye she'd pulled her pink velour shirt over her head, without apparent thought to exposing her bare breasts, so beautifully unbound, to a stranger such as myself. I guessed that meant we weren't strangers any longer. I rose and followed suit, removing my own rather formal garments, beginning with the silk vest. I waited when I got to the trousers, watching her long lithesome legs pull with utmost grace from hers. Never, I must say, had I seen such legs emerge from a pair of pants. There was nothing left for her to remove.

I hesitated still.

"C'mon, silly," she cajoled me, and so I stripped down, too, looking in vain at the curtain of trees for surreptitious witnesses. She plunged in screaming to the frigid waters. I kept my icy decorum as I waded in after her, lips turning bluer by the step. When my head went under I found myself in another of Sophie's dreams.

vi

My presence took no shape in that watery medium but that of an observer, an aloof and innocent bystander. I might add, invisible, because no one in these subsequent dreams took any notice of me. I must conclude

that these dreams were not truly mine in the normal sense, but taking place within Sophie's psyche, and shared with me as one might show a friend, say, sketches of one's naked self.

In the same way as I exercised no voluntary action or speech, I had no complaint about any unfamiliarity of language, custom or technology. These scenes from a foreign world, indeed a future time, held me in no position of awe--I rather took them in as would any tourist. In like manner I present them to the reader, as dreams further shared; the better, as Sophie later explained, to understand her capacity for stoic and cheerful perseverance in the face of daunting odds. But it would be imprudent to dwell too long on dream interpretation before presenting the dreams themselves. So we begin, with my fragmentary but representative rendering:

Sophie stood at the head of a classroom. Her one-room schoolhouse was nothing but an old shack used and abandoned by the company that ran the former trading post. Running water consisted of that which leaked through the roof into buckets placed on the floor. There were no desks, but she had two weather-beaten doors laid across sawhorses to serve as tables, around which sat some dozen Eskimo children, ranging in age from seven to roughly fifteen, by the looks of them. Some toyed with pencil stubs as she

spoke, some scrawled on scraps of water-stained paper. All had straight, black hair. All kept their winter coats on.

Sophie was erasing the blackboard, a dusty slate now smeared with the remains of swastikas and iron crosses. The morning hubbub before lessons had not yet subsided. One little girl slapped her bigger brother with a light backhand across the face and shouted, with a perfect German accent, "You're a liah!"

Sophie whirled around, stunned. "Lizzie! What's going on?"

Lizzie smiled sweetly. "Just joking," she said. "We saw movie last night at the hall."

"Yeah," said her brother, "was really good one. At-at-at-at-at-ataaaa. The Germans were cool. It was called The Longest Day."

"About the Second World War, was it?" asked Sophie.

"Yeah, and now they're talking about World War Three," said one of the older students, a boy with the wispy beginnings of a beard.

"I heard that on the radio this morning, too," chimed in the blossoming girl next to him.

Sophie goaded them for more information. It seemed that Armageddon was imminent--just like the preacher had warned them. The children weren't taking the news lightly.

"Why are they talking like that?" they wanted to know.

"Why do they want to make a war?"

"Those people are crazy!"

"Sophie, why don't you tell them not to? Why doesn't somebody tell them?"

"Some people do," said their teacher. "Some people spend their whole lives telling them."

"Then why don't they listen?"

"Because they're crazy."

"Then why doesn't somebody kill them?"

"Catch-22," Sophie said.

*

Afternoon light shone in the window facing the bay, carrying with it the pearly glow of sea-ice. It shone on Eva's face, a pretty girl of around ten with a slight scar under one eye. Sophie was leaning next to her, helping with math. She noticed Eva's scar for the first time.

"What happened here?" she asked, touching it lightly.

Eva scowled. "Enik did it. Nurse like this, sewing." And she wove her fingers in front of her face.

Sophie looked over at Enik, a boy about Eva's age who was sitting across the table from his victim. I recognized him as the boy on the bicycle from the earlier dream. "Enik," said Sophie, "I can't imagine you doing such a thing to a nice little girl like Eva."

Enik looked sullen, then slipped out of his chair and leapt catlike on top of the table. Fiercely gazing ahead of him, he crouched in fighting poise. His eyes burned like ice through Sophie's astonished gaze. "Enter the Dragon," Enik announced in a solemn voice, and then suddenly he was in motion, his hands, wrists, forearms and elbows slashing the air like deadly scythes, yet still graceful with the spell of his measured stance. After some moments of this performance he jumped down from the table to stand behind Sophie, and as she turned to face him he pulled from his pocket a five-inch jackknife. Click! went the knife in Sophie's astonished face.

"Enik!" she shrieked. Eva scrambled away.

How I wished in vain to come to Sophie's aid! I was, of course, powerless to intervene in the scene, since I wasn't really there. I knew then that I felt for Sophie some personal affection beyond even what I would compassionately expect seeing any fellow human being in such danger. But

enough of me; as I say, my role here is of the utmost insignificance. Sophie cringed but stood her ground.

Enik snarled, "I'm gonna cut you like this, and this, and this"--quick slashes sideways in front of her. He proceeded to outline her breasts for butchery.

Sophie shuddered, then sighed. "Enik, really. Wouldn't a nice caribou do as well?"

"No way. Your breasts for me." He gave way to a giggle.

The rest of the class joined him in nervous laughter.

Sophie was not amused. "Enik," she scolded him, "I think I'm really going to have to go the Parents' Committee about this."

Enik replied, "Bastard committee." He fiddled with his knife.

"Are you finished now?"

"Finished," he said, and he folded the blade back into its sheath, put it into his pocket, turned on his heel and coolly strode out of the classroom, whistling.

*

The whole class, with Sophie included, rode the long wooden sleds drawn by snowmobiles. I was unused to keeping up such a pace, to be sure: dream or no dream. But if Sophie can fly in out of the blue to wreak havoc with my life, I remember thinking to myself, then why can't I expect to go along for the ride at forty or fifty miles an hour in her dreams--especially at her invitation and, so to speak, under her power? Besides, with the weightlessness of an unfettered spirit, space and time alike have this delightful tendency to drop their enchaining hold on us. Having said this, I might mention in passing the deep arctic cold, that I was glad not to have to bear like the others in their bundles of caribou skins and fox furs. They roared along, four machines driven by men of the village and the four kamotiks loaded with bedding, fuel, cookware, fishing and hunting equipment, twelve children and a tall, long-nosed, composed and smiling white woman, toward a bleak but clearing northern horizon.

They ended up spending a lot of time riding around looking at caribou dung, stopping to fix the broken skidoos, getting stuck in the snow, falling through hollow river ice, tinkering barehanded at forty below with carburetors, spark plugs, headlights, wires and clutches. (If I sound like a mechanic, remember: I just swim here, reporting what I see, as I see it, and that includes names for things that I'm not responsible for naming. Don't ask

me how they work--or to fix them in the igloo at night by the light of the propane lantern, as these nomads did.) When they weren't fixing or scouting, they were stopping for tea and fishing--half the group pumping and huddling around camp stoves, the other half plunging long picks through river ice and jigging for char.

At one such stop, Sophie finished her tea and walked over to try her hand at the fishing. Eva, Moses and Lizzie had caught some already. She approached Enik where he was jigging not far from open water. He handed her his line and said to try it. After a minute, Moses sneaked up behind her to trick her by grabbing the stick--but just as he reached for it she felt a tug and pulled in a big speckled trout. Its twitching mouth was hooked on a flashy red and white lure, with no bait.

*

Darkness. The last night of the week-long trip. Outside the two igloos where they'd spent two nights already, empty cans of tinned food lay scattered on the snow. Above the camp the moon rose ivory-full. Voices droned out into the night, muffled by the thick walls of the snow-houses.

I squeezed (unnoticed of course) through the entryway of the igloo Sophie was staying in. An old man was droning on in a language I shouldn't have understood. The words made bewitching, guttural music. Somehow, in the magic of the dream, their meaning was clear:

"It was long ago in the time of wolves. There was no one around to tell you on your radio where you had to move, or when. You went out on the land to eat. The land was strong and the people were healthy. The children would listen to the talk of the day, the tales of the night, with respect and curiosity. In the daytime they lengthened their muscles in play, while the adults made sure that their bellies were full by night. Everyone took care that hearts would be happy. The old people like me sat around day and night listening and watching, taking things as they happened around us, telling advice when needed, offering sometimes some thoughts of our own making. We took it all in as familiar and also new; and then we might have a bit to say ourselves, by the end of the day. Now tonight there's nothing special I want to tell you but to give you a picture of the lives of the people . . . and if you ask me for a story I'll get one. . . ."

The old man looked up, his head cocked. "You hear that?" he asked. No one else had. Then, we heard the howl of a wolf.

*

The idyllic picnic was, in the nature of all idylls, temporary. On returning to town, the tired party found a dozen empty liquor bottles strewn about in the snow, sticking up at odd angles like so many headless glass geese. The flagpole had lost its stars and stripes to the gale-force winds. To the foot of the pole was chained a dead dog stripped of its skin, while a puppy, perhaps the corpse's own, gnawed at the frozen flesh. The school building was a charred shell, with three broken rum bottles gracing its threshold.

If Sophie had learned anything from her just-completed journey, it was the ability to be stoic, even cheerful, in the face of apparent adversity. What could be worse than a broken skidoo at minus forty in the middle of nowhere? There were some scowls, to be sure. The Eskimo preacher said he was glad there was one place he could go without having to worry about having whitemen around. "Where's that?" Sophie asked innocently.

"Heaven," the preacher said.

Sophie was forced to chuckle all the way to her trailer. She wondered if she qualified as a whiteman. In her trailer she found one, and decided not.

"Everything's gonna be all right," he said right off the bat. She had barely entered the door. He was standing in the hallway outside the bathroom, holding a towel around his waist. His jowls were heavily shadowed, and his dark eyes drooped with a certain detached melancholy. He said he had come to keep the peace--indeed, he was wearing a pistol which protruded just out of Sophie's pink towel.

"What are you talking about? What's going on here?" she demanded.

"Name's Andy." He held out his free hand, then gestured toward the living room. "Here, have a seat. Make yourself at home. I'll just get some clothes on."

As Sophie sat, I could sense her mind racing: Must have been some real trouble here, to send the police. Guess they didn't have anywhere else to put him up. What about my school, now?

Andy reappeared, zipping up. From his belt hung an empty holster. "Yah when the cat's away, y'know how it goes. Must've been the ions from that last storm. Makes people go kind of jingo. Seen it all over. Even in classrooms. I'm a teacher, too, by the way--by training, anyway. Yah those fluorescent lights, you gotta put aluminum foil around 'em--at the tops of the windows too. That takes care of some of the positive ions, which sardonically enough are actually the ones doing the psychological damage.

Mind if I put on this tape? It's some good Polish folk music, you'll love it. Yah--and red light helps too. All your light bulbs--well, as many as possible, should be red; burgundy cherry is best, they've found. It's all in a book I read, Nature's Unexplored Mysteries."

"Turn the music down, please," Sophie said in a straining voice.

"The bouzouki's a bit harsh. I just got back from a skidoo trip, and my ears are still buzzing. . . .Thanks. Now tell me, was there a riot or something, or just a big party?"

"Oh, you wouldn't believe what those ions do to some people.

Especially the natives--now I know they're intelligent, you understand, yes I'm sure they can be as intelligent as we are in some respects; but in the presence of these primal energies--take the Sinigak woman, for instance. There was this little party in your schoolhouse--just like you say. Seems after a few drinks one of the men--don't know which one yet--asked this Minnie Sinigak to make him a fur hood for his parka. So she gets right up and goes out and gets her knife and chains up the first dog she sees, cuts its throat and skins it. Meanwhile the others are partying up a storm back in your little schoolhouse there, but in the process maybe some rum gets spilled on the stove and, probably with a cigarette on it, poof, up she goes. It's interesting if you look at Eskimo art you see a lot of this flame-type imagery.

Makes 'em think they're keepin' warm, I guess. And think about it. Must be something in the primitive subconscious, because look at the Indians. They always called alcohol firewater. You see--"

"Was anyone hurt?"

"Nah. They got out. Ions or not, you move fast when the flames start lickin' at your heels."

"So, what about you, then? Is the trouble over with?"

"Well now, two things. I got to investigate a bit more about some rape charges, and from what I conclude from a preliminary visit--I brought some beer along as kind of a calling card, to make things easier--well from my personal investigation I'd say she only has cancer of the uterus. Now being as she's the preacher's wife . . ."

"What was the second thing?"

"Oh. Your job. The school board didn't appreciate your unallocated vacation, so now they've allocated you one permanently. I'm the new teacher. Want to stay for supper? I'll cook a fish for you. Found it inside the porch this morning. But I can't eat it, you see. The taste of fish reminds me of a poison chocolate bar they fed me during the war."

"What war?"

"Oh you know, the big one. W-W Two."

"You don't look that old."

"Why, thank you." Andy struck a mock-starlet pose, eyelids fluttering, one hand on his hips, the other primping his hair.

"Who did you say tried to poison you?"

"Oh, the spies. In Israel. Y'ever wonder why the French call fish poisson?"

*

I was alone, wandering through some nameless boreal forest. Lost. Sophie, I knew, was far away. I knew that she had declined Andy's dinner invitation and spent the night at a fellow teacher's, unburdening herself of her frustration and anger. I knew, too, that she had left the village on the next day's plane feeling confident that, one way or another, her students wouldn't be allowed to suffer long at the hands of their new alleged teacher.

And, with the same inexplicable insight of the dream-state, I came to know that Sophie had gone on to enroll in the Northern Studies program at the University of Saskatchewan in Regina. There she was, plunging into aboriginal history, while I meandered more and more desperately, in the

waning light of an autumn day, through endless bog and brush, without any hope of recovery.

Given my increasingly uncomfortable circumstances, I cared little that Sophie was nursing the seeds of what was to become a pan-continental policy granting all land north of the fifty-second parallel to native peoples to administer, develop and maintain as they wished. Nor that the lands below the boundary would incorporate the ninety percent of the Canadian population that resided there, mostly urban and white anyway, into the enlarged melting pot of the United States and Provinces of Continental America.

I thrashed, I tripped, I wrestled my way through interminable thickets of prickly brush. My feet were soaked, slogging with slower and slower steps through the sticky, marshy mess that passes for earth in such regions. I began to panic, panting with heaves and wheezes of my dandified chest . . .

. . . until I surfaced, still panting, and saw Sophie's gleaming body as she walked out of the lake. A few quick strokes and I was shivering beside her, berating her for attempted murder and reproaching her for not bringing towels. She looked at me as if I were mad--and took me in her arms to rub me vigorously and warm me with her own body heat.

My perhaps childish anger was thus soothed in short order--in proportion, I might say, as my all-forgiving manliness was aroused. But then Sophie left me to fend for myself in the brisk air, turning away with a broad, self-satisfied smile to reclothe her magnificent anatomy.

"Pears?" she said, bending over the rucksack that lay beside her clothes.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Would you like some pears? If you're hungry--I brought some along." She reached into the rucksack with one hand and with the other, stroked the cat, who stood like a rough-hewn sculpture gazing out over the lake. That cat gave me the creeps. I accepted a pear to help slake a sudden hunger. Once fed and freshly clothed, we sat down together on the shore, as we had begun.

"So what do you think?" Sophie asked.

"What do you mean--about those dreams? I still don't know what you're trying to do to me."

"With you. Like making love. You don't make love to me, you make love with me."

"Really?" I reached out tenderly and took Sophie's hands. They were exquisitely slender, graceful, calm.

She tossed her wet hair and laughed. "Not now, silly."

But I could see by the spark in her eyes, could hear by the timbre in her laughter, that she was excited by my interest.

She drew her hands out of mine, then took mine in hers. "The point is, this sharing is for the benefit of both us."

"Do you mean each of us, individually, or both, as in both together?"

"Jesus, you want it all right now, don't you."

I felt chastised, and so patiently asked, "All right then. Can you tell me again what all this is about?"

Sophie sighed and sat back on her heels. She let go of my hands and began to lecture, as it were, about her experiences being lessons in qualities she now found indispensable in the pursuit and exercise of worldly power: patience, perseverance, stoic fortitude, self-confidence . . . I interrupted along the way to ask if the experiences I'd dreamed had actually happened, in her life. More or less, she informed me. Part of the dream I'd had earlier, she added, showed a scene from her future; but that tended to be a more symbolic, more stylized version of reality, since even for her, the future was not fixed but malleable by forces not entirely in her control--and thus not wholly knowable. Yet still she told me that the general direction was clear. She didn't doubt that two years hence she would be in the White House.

And she kept hinting that somehow, in some intimate capacity, I would join her there.

It was all somewhat beyond my grasp. Perhaps I still didn't quite believe--even while dreaming--that Sophie was real, that she was living a real human life somewhere. So I asked her to tell me more about her background, where she grew up, where she went after the University of Saskatchewan.

"Okay. I was born in Indianapolis. 1950. A baby-boom baby--conceived in that extended flush of victory after the war . . ."

I started to ask about the war, then thought better of my curiosity. There would be too much to explain, and I'd be better off keeping my mouth shut and just listening. Sophie no doubt sensed both my impulse to ask questions and my conclusion not to. She went on with her story:

"Then, a relatively uneventful suburban childhood. We moved to Gary when I was eight. My dad got a good job with a steel mill there; he was an accountant. I grew up fast, taller than the boys, grew breasts, all the rest. What do you want to know about?"

"You're doing fine. Go on."

She gave me an engaging little smile. "I learned how to kiss, and how not to. I became a cheerleader. My favorite sport to cheer for was basketball. I played a little field hockey, then gave that up to play the flute in the school orchestra. Soon it was on to college. I wanted a sunnier climate, away from home, so I enrolled in the U. of New Mexico, class of '72. Education major. No more cheerleading. I tried some of the soft drugs--pot, hash, a little local peyote. I got into theatre. With the Vietnam War going on, a bunch of us, senior year, took an interest in street theatre, guerrilla theatre we called it. But we ran out of time spring term, with graduation and all the partying and so on, and never put on anything. I guess I felt guilty about that because soon after I moved to Santa Fe for my first teaching job, I got involved with a political group there and jumped right into directing. It was controversial in that redneck town, too controversial, and it didn't take long before I got canned from my teaching job.

"So, I was out on the street bumming around for a while, until I decided I should get my own act together. Around that time my father died of a heart attack back in Gary. I hitched home for the funeral, got out my old nice clothes for it, you know, and the whole thing kind of made me feel like I wasn't doing anything worthwhile with my life. So I kept my nice clothes on, flew back to New Mexico and looked up a former roommate

living in Albuquerque. She had a friend with a cushy job as a secretary for a New Mexico congressman, and this friend was about to quit. I showed up at the right time and managed to land the job with a dazzling display of typing skills--or maybe it was my skimpy summer outfit. One thing led to another, and, at the tender age of twenty-five I found myself in charge of the constituency office. That meant that when the congressman was in Albuquerque I acted as his personal assistant. I started to dream of a career of power and influence in the Nation's capital.

Well, you got a glimpse of what my boss was like, earlier. I got fed up and quit. I took off for the wild northwest--British Columbia, the Yukon, Alaska. It was an exciting time for me, traveling alone in a VW camper I bought for the trip, seeing all those mountains and rivers and forests. . . ."

"Alone? There were no young--might I say handsome and charming--men in your life?"

"Oh, you know, the usual casual . . . encounter, or romantic friendship, here and there. My first intercourse happened freshman year in college. Big blond guy named Dave. But there was no one very special, no one who lasted longer than a few dates. It was as if I were saving myself. Anyway where was I? Oh yes, Alaska. Finally I ended up on the far western coast, with a teaching job in a little village called Ipiutak. I really

found it beautiful there, in its own arctic way. Anyway you know something about it from the charming little scenes you just witnessed."

I reached for another pear from Sophie's rucksack. "I don't suppose you have anything besides pears to eat."

Sophie looked surprised, almost insulted.

"That's fine," I said to her. "I'm still dreaming, aren't I? Therefore I don't need to feel hungry . . ."

Sophie waited, I wasn't sure for what.

I munched away at the ripe pear and said, "Go on, go on, I'm still listening. What happened next? After leaving me stranded to die in a bog in Saskatchewan, like some wounded moose--"

"Oh that. Don't worry, we won't leave you there forever. Well, I still felt like the Southwest was home. I went back there in '79, worked as a counselor for a year in various Indian settlements--Navaho, Apache, Pueblo, Ute--and then wrote up a proposal for a research and travel grant to study native cultures in Central and South America. So for the next three years that's what I did, even trekking around long after my funding ran out. It was great. I picked up a lot of ancient knowledge about lost cultures as well: the empires of Atlantis, and Lemuria--"

I couldn't contain myself. "You mean you actually believed such legends? An intelligent, educated person like yourself, reared in a scientific age? What is this civilization coming to?" But even as I spoke, I remembered one small item in my own education. Venerable Plato's second- or third-hand (in truth, who could guess how many hands?) description of the sunken continent known as Atlantis.

Sophie called Plato's reference immediately to my attention, along with a raft of scholarly evidence that she'd researched in the Library of Congress several years later. In the interim she'd returned to New Mexico for more teaching, first in a Navaho school and, following two years of that, a junior high school in Albuquerque. The maturing educator soon occupied a position as a school board trustee, then chief administrator. In 1990 she campaigned for Congress on a platform stressing traditional values such as education, sustained economic growth in harmony with environmental considerations, and care of the aged. She won.

She was reelected to the House of Representatives in 1992, whereupon she distinguished herself with service on committees handling such important and diverse matters as foreign affairs and the budget. Concurrent with her campaign for reelection in '94, she'd set her sights on the Presidency.

I definitely felt a personal identification with Sophie's life--foreign as it was to mine in the details of outward circumstance. I was particularly fascinated by her swift rise to power. Not that I had such ambitions myself, exactly. But I sensed that somehow the ingredients of her success, if I could recognize them clearly enough, would serve as well to spice my own taste for worldly fortune. I hasten to qualify that temptation by reminding the casual reader of my true spiritual intention--my desire not for mere riches and status but rather for the sheer delight of participating fully in creation in all its possible forms. In putting my case forward for all to judge, I would plead independence from the more jaded motives of the larger portion of society's hierarchic aspirants, be they the social-climbers or the power-wielders. Yet I am also moved to plead some humility; for at the stage in question, of my continual evolution, I knew my place as a neophyte. I was eager to soak up knowledge and experience from this clearly superior being who had by the grace of the ages seen fit to contact me, to nurture me along in the folds of higher truth than I could yet call my own.

I asked Sophie if she was indeed a fan of the American game of baseball, and if so, how it came to deserve a place in her system of values.

"Oh, baseball," she crooned, "yes, I love the game. We call it our national pastime."

"Really? But surely you have a booming population as well."

"Somehow I knew you'd say something like that. Actually the two favorite sports, baseball and sex, are not as unrelated as you might think. To make good contact swinging the bat, you've got to swing smoothly, follow through, keep your eyes on the ball, and stay relaxed. Now here I am talking like an expert and I've never even played the game. But I do know about these things--they all connect. Same thing with astral travel. You've got to stay with it, the steady breath, the focus of attention. Or fishing, for that matter. Patience, subtle energy matching that of the object, the other--the ball, the lover, the fish. Or education--the teacher and the student. It's a matter of empathy, energy and empathy. Harmony and correspondence. That's also, I might add, the secret of my success in politics. Identifying with the constituency, voicing their concerns for them. You see, it's easy when you start from the right place."

When she brought politics into such a light, my life of pretense by comparison seemed a sham, a low con-game perpetrated on unwitting subjects for my own self-gratification. And yet I too had been a success in my own way; witness my friendship with the King. I had to admit to myself that my prospects were decidedly shaky of late, however. I wondered if I indeed shared some measure of correspondence with Sophie's approach to

life--if the method was the same, only the motives different. Her intention seemed somehow purer, more divorced from self-serving power. And she, perhaps for that very reason, seemed infinitely more assured of success than me in my shallow cockiness.

When it came right down to it, though, I decided she was all talk. Coy and gamy she was, with all her easy pitch about sex and her need for me, right to the end.

There we were, half reclining on the soft grass, facing each other . . .

"So," I said to her, "do you feel that I'm starting in the right place . . . for you?"

She looked a little embarrassed by my question. "Here we are now, Felix. It's the place of my choosing."

Misunderstanding, I moved closer to her, put an arm around her shoulders, started to kiss her . . .

She pecked me on the mouth and brusquely rolled away. Leaning up on her elbows, she shot me a stern sideways glance through tousled hair.

"Wait till we get to where we're going," she cajoled.

"Where are we going?"

"You'll find out when we get there."

"When are we going?"

"You'll know when the time comes. Not now." . . . and three men left on base.

She started buckling up her rucksack. "Should have brought my fishing rod," she muttered. "Oh well, next time. C'mon, Beri." She shouldered her pack and, with her pet trotting past her, walked quickly into the curtain of trees.

I leapt to my feet. She couldn't leave me there in that desolate place alone, to fend for myself . . . forever!

It's only a dream, a distant little voice called from the far edge of my awareness. But I didn't pay it any heed. No more than I was able to take any solace in a promised future rendezvous with Sophie, with her departure so painfully present.

"Sophie, wait! You can't leave me like this! Sophie!"

I ran into the forest where she and the cat had so quickly disappeared. The trail I hoped to find there was nowhere to be seen.

*

Then, it was as if someone had turned the lights out. I was surrounded by darkness, filled with darkness. There was nothing around me; I myself was nothing. In such a place that was no place at all, even my pain was gone, my frantic frustration, my very desire. I did have a sensation of falling--yet no sense of a direction to fall. Movement in void: that was all.

vii

It was then that my eyes were tickled awake by the pale Iberian dawn. I felt the comforting nest of hay around me with some relief, mingled with a sense of wonderment at all that had passed before me. I was not as nonplussed as I might have been, were I not practiced already in the art of belonging out of my element--which amounts to enjoying an element of my own, as it were, a portable and infinitely flexible element of my own making, as I made my way chameleon-like through the jumbled strata of society. No, and on top of it all, it was only a dream--or was it? I didn't really know what to make of my just-vanished, visionary experience. Now the mystery was far deeper than before, if only by virtue of Sophie's demonstrated ability to intrude at will into my psyche.

As for my ongoing relationship with her, I confess that I was indeed shaken by the implications suggested for the direction my life was to take. Yes, truthfully I was baffled by a host of unanswered questions. I didn't know what to make of this spirit-woman, who claimed an existence in a future world ostensibly outside of my dream-state, yet had such power to orchestrate it. At least I wasn't left stranded now in an unfamiliar wilderness . . . or perhaps worse, in a state of unformed chaos.

Beside me in the straw there was nothing but a memory, where Zouzou had lain. Had I dreamed her, too? Painfully, almost wistfully, I knew I hadn't. I looked out past the weathered boards of the shed's entrance, which I now could see was laced with a lush and vagrant grape vine, toward the Rua João de Castilhos. The intervening terrain, over perhaps a half a mile, began to sparkle in the morning sunlight. Especially resplendent appeared the trees: the wild pears, the shapely cork and live oaks, the carobs, stone pines and various evergreen species not found elsewhere on the Continent. I thought again of Zouzou. I hoped, but not without a certain impish reservation, that for the sake of her good standing at home she'd managed to get in unnoticed under her mother's enveloping wings. If not, I was done for. But then, given a certain cheerful stoicism . . .

I got up, stretched, and with a fond tap of my hand on the side of the old feed shed, walked out on the sparkling vista to the west: and thought of Sophie, my life with her in that vast and rich continent across the ocean, our campaign together, our long journey overland, by which we would become intimately acquainted with the soul of a nation, and by which we would become known to its people. Seeing that fantastic array of multitudinous material wealth and natural beauty, we would see through to the heart of things. We would see each other forever, dancing the dance of dreams and reality. We'd ride that dream train knowing we could get off anywhere--yet we'd choose to keep on riding to see all we could and were destined to; to know that land through and through, to have it in our hearts as one; to carry it with us as remembered experience and present constitution at all times thereafter, into far-flung ethereal regions outward, to show to guiding spirits and guardian umpires as mute objective evidence of life on earth however imperfect, saving all we saw to recapitulate on the day of judgment take it or leave it--seeing as it would be such a waste to travel hither to the void empty-handed without further prospect of ironic love, of perverse folly, of wonderful jovial human deadly nature.

Such were my reveries at the start of this fateful, still-waking day. I relieved myself and set off with a spring in my step. Feasting on a perfectly ripe wild pear that I plucked from a gnarled tree along the path, I fixed my sights once more on the Rua João de Castilhos.

[BOOK TWO] - CHAPTER TWO: EXILE

i

In matters of style, I fear I must again appeal to the modern reader's forbearance. I ask, I suppose, an unfair measure--nay, it might be assumed, full scope--in the recapitulation of a passing way of life. In all humility, I can admit that to some extent I am even now caught, as I was in the living out of these final scenes of sordid intrigue in old Europe, within the enmeshing tangles of thought, of speech, of identity.

Can I promise it will pass; that I will learn from my mistakes, the excesses of the very age and cultural value system that produced me and to which I unashamedly paid homage, in my self-serving yet curiously unfocused ambition? Let me only say that the tale as a whole looms larger than my singular heritage yet suggests; and in due course, my paltry pretensions to social preeminence (as to love) would be challenged by all the requirements of a less-forgiving era.

So without further delay, to return, as a sportscaster might put it, to the action:

Humming quietly, I sucked the bone of the last of three excellent grilled pork chops, glanced up to see Maria staring at me again with her baleful and wounded eyes, patted my mouth with my linen napkin and rose to leave the table.

"So that's how it's come to be," Maria stated, and I sought neither to argue with her nor to agree to the bald truth, and went upstairs to retrieve my traveling case from the guest room in which I'd not even set foot. As I first reached the carpeted steps I heard her saying again, as if speaking for me, "Yes, that's how it's come to be." Another couple of steps, nearly to the landing, and her voice became suddenly shrill: "Would you like me to show you to your room, marquis?" Then the good madam's voice broke into a mad cackle. I was almost out of her sight, but not out of earshot, as she continued, louder: "Or would you like me to direct you instead to the boudoir of a certain young lady? Ah, a tender one she is, I'm sure you'd . . ." but then instead of a cackle her self-mockery turned into a bawling lament. Wondering how seriously she may have played her contemptible madam's game with Dom Miguel Hurtado, I had no sympathy either for her humor or her grief. I wondered, in particular, if the night's insomnia were due, not to her fretting over Zouzou and me, but rather to her conceivable consolation of the rejected bridegroom.

* * *

The breakfast had begun with Maria's obligatory cordiality in the role of hostess. Coming in disheveled from my own long night, and apprehensive about the suspicion aroused by Zouzou's untimely arrival home, I was surprised to be greeted with any civility at all, let alone the offer of a hot meal.

I found Maria just sitting heavily down to table, before a steaming platter of golden cutlets. She looked as if she hadn't slept all night. Her usually tight-drawn hair fell in unkempt wisps about her face; her cheeks sagged and tugged at dark circles under reddened eyes. Strong black coffee, half-finished, sat in a couple of china demitasses in the middle of the table, apparently abandoned from an earlier session. I put on a cheerful face and told her that I'd been out on the bluffs all night preparing for my future with the guidance of a marvelous and detailed prophetic dream.

"Oh? Sit down, 'marquis'! We have more pork chops. Mardou!"

When Mardou arrived, Maria snapped: "Let's have a breakfast laid for our inspired guest. And get rid of these coffee cups!" Mardou showed me her

familiar look of contempt; though in this instance, I thought I detected a glimmer of shared indignation over Maria's harsh tone.

I proceeded to summarize for Maria the nature of my dream, in the face of an abstracted indifference on her part, as she dissected her chops.

"Monsieur le marquis," she broke in with a snort of a laugh, "you may be interested to know that Sr. Hurtado is no longer eligible for the hand of my daughter." Her curious twisting of events, backward to a time when she had maintained some control of the situation, amused me. "He is, by the way, to take over, instead, my husband's position as chief curator of the museum."

"Oh? And why is that?" I asked, curtly. I was perturbed that she hadn't responded in the least to my report of an astonishing dream.

"Dom Antonio José has taken ill. He had to leave, suddenly, last evening. He thought it best to spend a period of relaxation away from the rigors of his profession, at a Swiss sanitarium."

Even though I had witnessed Kuckuck's breakdown--what was evidently the precursor to a more serious emotional collapse--in his office only a day ago, I surprised myself by immediately suspecting Maria of some heinous crime. My fears arose from the knowledge that she had long harbored ambitions for Hurtado--who now was available as never before.

How well the turn of events was working out for Maria's secret designs (excepting that portion of them concerning me); indeed, how well prepared she was, despite her apparent distress along the way, to benefit from whatever course fate laid out for her. I felt a twinge of admiration for her now, of respect for that quality that I shared with her, of making the best of opportunities that lay hidden in the unfolding patterns of our lives. No, I decided, she didn't need to resort to murder. She could find an opening in circumstances through which to pursue her desires, without forcing matters in so crude and silly a fashion.

She went on to remind me, lest I take it into my head to revive my own ambitions in the new field of possibilities, that I remained neither eligible nor fit to take court of her daughter. "It's reprehensible," she finally said, "that you've managed to complete your self-destruction at the expense of Zouzou's, and our family's honor."

"What are you talking about?"

"Oh, come now, Felix. I saw Zouzou when she came in last night. She didn't have to spell it out for me. I saw the bits of hay all over her hair, her clothes in disarray, her tears. No, don't tell me what you didn't do. It doesn't even matter to me now, at this point. As for you, it's your sanity I fear for now, I must say, with your delusions of grandeur--hobnobbing with

presidents . . . weren't you satisfied with our King? Don't you realize that your ambitious American friend is probably below your station?"

"Maria, you do injustice to my true humility in relation to that woman. Do I detect some jealousy on your part?"

She sat silent now, with lips pursed.

"As for your daughter, I am compelled to tell you, with complete honesty, of my wholly innocent behavior toward her. She was in a piteous state, it is true: both before and after our encounter out there on the cliffs. I sought only to comfort her in a compassionate, which is also to say, a dispassionate manner. At the same time I was preoccupied, as I have already described to you, with the turmoil of my own disturbing visions. Believe me or not as you wish." I did not feel it necessary to defend myself further by describing Zouzou's behavior toward me.

As Maria seemed to be expecting me to say more, perhaps to reveal what I had already deemed unnecessary to reveal, I continued, but rather toward the more basic conclusion: "I don't know that it matters to you any more--but I have decided to take leave of you tomorrow. The Cap Arcona, as I might have informed you but did not because I feared your hasty intervention, has been delayed for engine repairs. Now my destiny is clear to me, and I can see that I am to venture on to the New World." There. I'd

finally said it. I'd leave her and her European machinations behind forever, leave her to her lover and hope that the professor would have found the primal instincts necessary for surviving whatever affliction had befallen him . . . and I would try to forget about Zouzou.

I searched Maria's eyes for the impact of my finale. But only one eye, the left, quivered slightly. The right eye bore like a drill back at me. "Felix, you won't be going to Argentina tomorrow. I cancelled your berth on the Cap Arcona two days ago, when you made a so-called commitment to me. Since yesterday morning I've been aware that you still, foolishly and deceitfully, planned to leave tomorrow."

Indeed! When I'd scarcely known my own destiny...

"Oh, yes," she chuckled haughtily, "don't look so puzzled, my little puppy. When you said you'd cancelled the berth yourself, I knew you were lying because there was no reservation left to cancel. So, you see, your plans to escape me are not so well thought out. I might add that I cabled your unwitting hosts, the Meyer-Novaros, last evening to inform them that your plans had changed but that, in the event you found your way to their doorstep eventually, they should know they would be in danger of harboring an obscene impostor. But I shouldn't threaten you any more--indeed I think

that there is nothing left for you to lose--so I shall only invite you to stay here under some new conditions."

Now both her eyes glittered like polished ebony. She smiled with wide lips spread over a gap-toothed leer. My gut groaned but I was also perversely mirthful, at the depths of this woman's desperation for me.

In my mind I heard myself whistling a few bars of "Dixie." Dixie was a long way from Argentina, I thought; but then, I had all the time in the world.

ii

With yet some hesitation and doubt at the soured prospects I was leaving behind, and the unknown ones ahead on the vague horizon, I left behind in old Lisbon the collective charms of my past. Maria and her ravishing daughter Zouzou stood on the quay in tears, comforting one another in that maternal embrace whereby all rivalry and contention is overshadowed by the more enduring condition of generational continuity. But now, before I lose myself in such philosophical observations--I shall soon enough have no other recourse by which to convey to the patient reader

my ensuing state of affairs on this madly spinning sphere--I should clear up any lingering queries as to how I was fortunate enough to regain my berth on the Cap Arcona.

It seemed, from a lengthy and amiable chat with the booking agent, that the recently created vacancy was filled immediately; but by a gentleman who in turn cancelled a reservation that he already had on the later ship, the Amphitryon. Now a certain female passenger by the curiously unportuguese name of Vaughan had found this out and decided that she preferred the later sailing. So when I arrived late Wednesday afternoon to see what I could do, I found I could indeed go back on board, in her empty spot. Naturally I amused myself to imagine that I would, in the process, be sleeping in Sophie's bed.

But now as I stood at the railing, watching the two women turn away, I felt an unutterable sadness. Whether for them, or for myself, it wasn't clear. Perhaps it was one of those occasions in a man's life when he says to himself, in poignant self-reflection, I've learned something here. Or, in a less tangible sense, he can feel that he has experienced something basic to the human condition.

Zouzou, I'm sure, experienced something similar. As for Maria, I can't speak with such certainty. She left the house in a screaming rage when she heard her daughter talking with me in the upstairs hallway on my way to the guest room.

Zouzou had evidently rested well, that morning of my departure, until wakened by the voices in the dining room below. I found her standing barefooted, holding a dressing gown around her, leaning casually against a wall in the upstairs hallway. She had been listening to every word that passed between her mother and me. As soon as I approached, she pulled me next to her and whispered in my ear: "That was very kind of you, Felix, not to put the blame on me for what happened last night."

Zouzou's whisper was too loud for her mother's sensitive ears. Not that Maria could likely have heard the words themselves--but the hushed tones and the halting of my steps were enough to set her off.

Zouzou took my hand and led me to her room, where we sat side by side on her bed. She faced me, still holding my hand, and said, "I owe you an apology for my behavior last night. It was unbecoming of a young lady, as my mother would put it; and worse, it was inconsistent and unfair on my part to open myself like that and then desert you so suddenly, just because you remembered a face of some woman who wasn't even real." Her brow

knitted and she began to cry a little. "Now Mama has got what she wants. But look at me. I'm left with nothing, nothing." She looked at me, waiting for me to save her from her fate. Her cheeks were now awash with salt water, running freely. Black, wispy hair fell gently across her eyes. I had no words to solace her. We'd been through enough discussions of love on its philosophic levels, and life with its infinitely debatable options. She still possessed a radiant allure for me, but that was overshadowed by the dark clouds which tossed about the stormy, dominating presence of her mother.

"Zouzou," I had to say at last, "fond as I am of you-- yes, if you will permit me to say so, even as much as I love you--I must tell you that I believe everything has happened for the best. That includes your behavior of last night, all of it. I appreciate your openness of feeling as well as your later change of heart. I don't blame you one bit. I wish I could tell you now what you'd like to hear, and do for you what before yesterday I would have given anything to do. Your mother could not have stood in our way. But that woman I dreamed is more real than you think. I can see that you still don't understand. I suppose you have to experience something like that before you can accept it as real. In any case I have; and while I myself still don't fully understand what it's all about, or what's in store for me, I'm

convinced that I have to leave on that ship tomorrow, to go to America to find out."

"But she was from a hundred years from now, you told me! Is she going to wait for you until you're a hundred and twenty?" She shook her head sadly. She'd stopped crying.

"I don't know. I don't know the details of how it works out. I just have to trust--"

"And what do you mean, 'America'? You're going to Argentina. This Sophie lives--if she lives, or might live some day in the distant future--in the United States, for goodness' sake. Can you imagine how many millions of people will be living in that country a hundred years from now? I just don't get it."

She seemed to me stubborn in her child's lack of understanding of the powers of the dream plane, that I had glimpsed with such shattering clarity. It was useless, I could see, to try to explain further. At the same time I was touched by the practical, as well as the emotional nature of her objections. How indeed could this dreamy rendezvous be brought to pass, in the fleshly constraints of time and space that I, at least, still inhabited? Maybe, it occurred to me, if Zouzou went along to keep me company, until such time as Sophie chose to manifest in the flesh...

"All right. You're right," I said to her. I touched her cheek softly with my palm. I kissed her lips lightly. "Will you come with me, then?"

She stopped breathing. Then she shook her head slowly, and a faint smile appeared on her face. "It's funny, how like tennis it is. Now the ball's back in my court. And do you know what, the last time I faced this question--just two days ago, if you remember--I told you I needed more time to get to know you, or some such schoolgirl's excuse--and I told myself later that night that I might just find a way to do it. And I almost had the courage to carry out my resolution, last night. I don't know if I can find that courage any more."

Not even right now?"

"Certainly not. Do you know what Mama would do if she found us like that?"

"No. Do you?"

"Oh, Felix, it's unthinkable. She'd, she'd disown me, she'd--"

"Tear your eyes out?"

"Now you're making fun of me."

"No, of her."

"Yes, I see your point. You know, I think she's counting on me staying here unattached so as to keep that repulsive Hurtado around. He

didn't waste any time latching on to her, I noticed. Though he vanished quickly enough last night upon my untimely arrival. I almost feel like, no matter what happens, my mother's planned it that way. Do you know what I mean?"

"It wouldn't surprise me in the least. She's a perceptive and strong-willed woman."

We heard the front door slam shut. "Susanna!" echoed through the house, a royal shout. Maria was back. There was only time for one last kiss. I dashed to an open door down the hall where I found my valise, still sitting unopened in the empty guest room.

* * *

All this I ran over again in my mind as I watched the two figures turn and fade into the larger picture of the pink and white stuccoed hillsides. As that picture in its turn faded to a point lost in a fading focus of blue, it became clear to me how the love I'd felt for Zouzou (and, I had to admit, for Maria) had deluded me into forgetfulness of my avowed progress in the world. I had once undertaken as my supreme, even sacred mission to refuse all entanglements offered in whatever tempting or compelling garb in the

name of my partial or temporary happiness, even when these apparent successes were the objects of my own desires. I recalled the origin of the that larger mission: a lesson during my school days, concerning the legend of Orpheus. I had identified with the unfortunate hero and yet felt lucky enough, as a modern youth, to be able to learn from his classic mistake. Not that such gratitude motivated me to attend school with any more regularity . . . but that is ground already covered. I will, however, for the reader's elucidation explain the current relevance of that ancient lesson, at least to me personally--matters personal being ever the anchor of my tale.

Orpheus ventured into the underworld to retrieve his beloved Eurydice, untimely victim of a viper's bite. Playing the lyre like a god, like Hermes himself, Orpheus charmed the lord of the underworld into allowing his bride to go. Orpheus had only to overcome the temptation of his own attachment. "Don't look at her on your way out," the King of Hades had admonished him. That was the one condition needed to rescue Eurydice from death itself. Yet Orpheus failed; he violated the vital stipulation, he succumbed on the doorstep of daylight, on the verge of her freedom and his happiness, and looked back. She was dragged back down.

Don't give in like that, I told myself then, and I'd tried to keep to it ever since. Thus in my most recent masquerade I sought, ultimately, not

deception and its small rewards but escape to greater halls of wonder and possibility.

Grand were my dreams, yet without substance. I'd just now left in the faceless wake of the ship the one who wouldn't be my wife. Just as empty now was the western horizon. I had succeeded; yet somehow, like Orpheus, I'd missed the happy ending. Oh, to be, I thought, like Hermes, a god of both the lyre and the underworld!

Only much later have I discovered that there is a higher stage of justice available to mortals like me--that in fact, even the tale of Orpheus and Eurydice can have a happy ending. All it takes is a different storyteller. In the case of Orpheus, for instance, certain Celtic harpers saw fit to alter the key event of the old Mediterranean myth--old myths are after all nothing if not held in supple human hands. The merry balladeers of Brittany and points northwest let the charmed royal couple return safely from the fairy world, the young queen saved--reborn, as it were--with vitality and love, to inspire anew the joyful celebration of life previously enjoyed by their people.

Had I known then of the newer model for the passage through purgatory, I may have felt more positive about my own long journey into the unknown. As it was, I could really only take comfort from my own

impetuous liberty, as I set out free of my established itinerary. I still had in my possession the marquis's letter of credit, a boon that I relied upon; though I couldn't be sure that Maria in her spite wouldn't contact the Venostas as she'd once threatened, to spoil the whole affair. But if I never saw the Meyer-Novaros, or my godfather for that matter, I would still have my native resources on which to rely. I could assume a wholly new persona, as yet untried. At this point I cared not even to foretell the exact nature of my future successes.

In short, I had capitulated to cast my fate to the east winds, beyond the pillars of Hercules to the New World, where a man or woman can be what one will without mask or pretense: a land where honest refusal to adopt premeditated modes of discourse and intercourse might propel anyone's hopes along infinite alleyways of forgetfulness and renewed innocence. With a harper's faith that the right tune will come to charm even the Devil's ears, I felt I might survive the rigors of a passage through Hell itself. The question remained as to whether I would make it with a suitable queen, or alone.

As land sank from view I could imagine seeing bubbles rising from my silently opened mouth, and I felt that I was a creature truly descended from the primeval organisms scuttling to this day across the oceanic slime. It came to me that I was essentially different from Professor Kuckuck with his vast and relevant knowledge of the secrets of the earth and stars; from the ruler of the country I was leaving forever with his hobbyist's interest in oceanographic lore; yes even, as the perceptive reader no doubt has intimated from time to time in my naive narrative, from the bright-eyed and optimistic, naturally gifted social success that had so convincingly come to be my role before and during my enjoyment of the title, 'Marquis de Venosta.' As I have already tried to make apparent, that distinctive name was not in itself responsible for my immediate reception in the good graces of the higher society of Lisbon during my brief visit. Rather, as the response of my adopted parents to my eloquently forged correspondence explicitly showed, I had outstripped the naturally born social characteristics of the original holder of my title--who by the same token might have floundered in my propitiously temporary position of coffee-waiter in the Hotel St. James and Albany, where we had last parted in excited compact with the prospect of new and flexible identities. The fact was, as my friend the marquis had

observed (and which I am convinced sealed his confidence in the success of the matter), my most basically distinguishing characteristic was a capacity to hold back my innermost identity, as if there was a secret behind even my own name from the beginning.

Now I faced, on the buoyant waves of the Atlantic as I was propelled to the west, a sudden awareness of a truth more intriguing, more powerful in impact than Kuckuck's lecture on the three spontaneous generations of the universe. I was on the threshold of a new spontaneous generation, to be superadded to the birth of Being from Nothingness, the formation of Life from mere substance, and the emergence of reflective Humanity.

But being merely on the verge, or cusp, of such an evolutionary step, I was unable to formulate with any certainty what impact or importance such a realm might have on human existence, beginning with my own. In fact the very darkness of my vision, which in a scientific sense might be construed in a neutral fashion, as the absence of light or distinguishing color, struck me as possibly sinister, if not downright evil. As I refused the disappointed waiter who offered me a second gin-rickey, I felt myself cast into the realm of pure self-reflection, a world populated not by chaotic swarms of atoms, molecules, crystals, vegetable cells, animal individuals, nor even by human

beings considered in a socially ordered sense--no, in this subannuated universe, only vampires, who see nothing in mirrors, must live.

Simple humanity, I thought after seeing that sad waiter's eyes, has built its proud existence atop the bases of the ancient pyramid, atop mere Being and Organism. But Super-Man (as my countryman Nietzsche chose to call the new phenomenon) must, in order to transcend that pointed mountain of limitations, swallow his pride of artful strivings with a healthy dose of desert air, belch them out upon his old lot of liabilities, and move on, out across the vacant sands of pure possibility.

I looked to either side of me. The Cap Arcona's deck was strewn with the flotsam of western civilization. Nearest me on one side was a shriveled dowager with her nose in a book, accompanied by a petrified professor in tweeds; on the other, a middle-aged, middle-class couple, both of ample girth, alongside a bored-looking debutante who held her hair against the sea-breeze, and a waif of ten who stood with a sour expression, manacled by his mother's grip to the lounge-chair's armrest.

Sporadic voices from this collection of ostensibly intelligent beings were muffled under the wind. Their eyes--and perhaps mine, as well--were glazed in the glare of the salty air. Their movements were sparse and choppy. I nodded back to my own world of thought. A twinge of loneliness

struck me: I was not so free yet as I might have liked to think. No, I was merely adrift on the wide oceanic bosom . . . and the heartbeat I imagined I heard therein was merely the throbbing of the ship's engines.

But still I was filled with a peculiar inspiration. I didn't know what to do with myself, in such a state of fresh agitation. So I took out my pen and packet of monogrammed stationery, gifts I'd received in Lisbon early on in my stay from the kind Professor Kuckuck. I began to write:

When roses fade to dust

My hands will clench the wavering lilies

Of a dream we had a century ago

That left our hearts, not in hope

Of a riper season, nor in longing eyes:

But yours, as they shine before me now

My silent reveries call, call:

Your answer, dead, relives

Only in our mind, forever one...

Lost in thought over green waves following these impulsive lines, wondering what had possessed me to take up this lost art for the first time in six years, I heard the ship's engines groan. My own viscera felt a slight grinding vibration. The heavy iron noise passed swiftly into the salt wind, and I looked back down to the page. Inspiration had left me, and I could now only wonder what was to befall a perfectly endowed prince who had lost his only realm, the rich reserves of his confident personage. Yet I knew that my whole life up to this moment had without deviation led precisely and necessarily here, in its own proper stage of development.

I accepted my current course with a strange calm, as if I were proceeding onward into the Nothingness that lay above as well as below. I became apprehensive with a sense behind sense, as the azure of the afternoon sky gave way to a mass of billowing dark clouds, and my nostrils felt the acrid wet. The ship tossed, my head lolled onto my chest, and I slept.

In the dream there were finned, flying craft which darted and floated about me. I was in a small dory, a fishing boat woven of reeds. My mate (the bonafide marquis) and I, both clothed in loose, light robes, rowed

leisurely within sight of a marvelous shining city, out of whose harbor we'd presumably come. I was fascinated with those winged machines. As if in response to my curiosity, one slender ship circled low and hovered near enough for us to see two smiling faces of its pilots, one round and paunchy, the other lean and leathery. They conferred with one another briefly, then turned back to us. The pilot nearest us, the heavier one who looked not dissimilar to my own godfather Schimmelpreester, tossed his head in the direction of the harbor, and the silent but palpable vibration of their craft increased. Then it began slowly to accelerate, and we found ourselves pulled onward with them, skimming wonderfully over the waves as if towed at the end of an invisible cord. As we followed the aircraft, I noticed from within its tail a brilliant, pure crystal glow . . . and then it occurred to me: if Sophie had been right about the lost continent of Atlantis, then we could even now be at the threshold of that ancient kingdom. This revelation was at once so startling and so lucid that I immediately awoke.

Rain had come and gone, lightly soaking my steamer blanket and glazing my face and hands. I rushed over to the side of the ship and looked over the edge. No, I wasn't seasick. I don't know why I was seized with such an impulse--but when I looked down I saw a mass of soggy, beaten reeds floating beside the ship's hull. I won't pretend to postulate the details

of their disposition through the ages--perhaps they were a species of seaweed, drifting from a nearby island or underwater shelf (I was casting about for a plausible explanation); and yet I was convinced, standing there watching this debris follow the ship in its wake (it must have become stuck somehow to an irregularity in the surface of our ship's hull), that its presence there and then was tangible evidence of the reality, in some unknown configuration of that elusive term, of my just-glimpsed, visionary dream. After all, we were sailing in one region rumored to be the site of the legendary sunken continent. And one reason, arguably the primary cause for my presence on this westward-steaming ship, was a similarly lucid and realistic dream I'd recently had involving a certain entity by the name of Sophie Tucker Vaughan. I had by no means forgotten her.

I now had cause to feel I was drawing palpably closer to Sophie; I felt light-headed and somewhat as if I were still dreaming. I returned shakily to my long deck-chair. My eyes feasted on a full and glorious sun which hovered in shimmering gold just above the horizon. It struck me with a sensation I'm tempted to describe as love. I felt a distinct vegetative warmth, or one might venture to say attraction, for the rays of the sun. It was precisely that feeling which one might imaginatively attribute to a plant whose green leaves twist and arch to the source of light.

To call such a response to sunlight "love," even allowing a certain empathy with the vegetable kingdom, is arguably to demean that human ideal, however. So let me affirm only an experience of inner affinity, which the reader may grasp more easily by considering the cat basking in the grass on a hot afternoon, who suddenly is compelled to roll on its back, the better to savor the sunrays which bathe its dark fur.

Again I must ask the reader's indulgence, in following the twists and turns of my emotions that first day out at sea, as I pose once more the question of whether the most fitting means of describing this curious layered sensation of mine is indeed the figure of "love"; for, while the whole affective episode was surely sparked by my vague apprehension of Sophie, my feelings and thoughts in their most vivid form came back to Maria and Zouzou, and even to the generous Louis, Marquis de Venosta. With that radiant brilliance before me, I heard Maria's voice in my inner ear, haunting this moment acutely but with complete grace, whispering throaty promises of eternal devotion. Then Zouzou's girlish sobs drenched her mother's hoarse whispers, and I myself came to the verge of tears--when my overwarmed senses were disturbed by a whiff of fresh coffee. Instantly I pictured the marquis approaching my rear, serving tray in hand, ready to

bow with respectful gaze lowered, prince's finery exchanged for the smart trim of the hotel waiter's uniform.

The young man repeated his question. "Would the marquis desire a cafe-au-port, our liner's own creation, before the meal? I am sorry if I disturbed the marquis's rest."

He was, of course, an ordinary waiter, if offering an unusual drink. I inquired as to the arrangements for dinner, thanked him politely, and turned with steaming glass cup in hand to face the last strands of light still dancing atop the iron waves.

My brief nap and the subsequent refresher served to restore me somewhat to my habitual state of mind, despite the unforgettably transforming influence of my recent revelations. Still I could not help but wonder what noble family would entertain me this night, or for the duration of the voyage; or what fascinating individual would first engage me in long nocturnal conversation, to be followed by direct or indirect discoveries of spontaneously generated love. But this train of thought led to a quick terminus, as again I was launched into the profoundest depths of the intertwined questions: What happens beyond human life? What is our human destiny, if we are to realize it before death most certainly will? And most specifically, what will become of me, neither the Marquis de Venosta

nor truly Felix Krull any more? Though these were the profoundest questions, for which I had no ready answers, merely to ponder them I was filled with a volatile solution of supreme anticipation and anxiety, confidence and doubt, joy and fear without bound.

iv

Dinner in the grand ballroom of the Cap Arcona was like a Christmas feast. Appetizers were smoked salmon and crackers, celery and cream cheese, assorted wines and juices. The main courses were arranged on a series of long tables clad with white tablecloths, and served buffet-style for the free perusal of the patrons. I sampled some of everything: Parisian pea soup, American turkey, Black Forest ham with sauerkraut, mashed potatoes, sweet potatoes, paella, jellied crab salad, crown roast of Argentine beef, broccoli with hollandaise sauce, Russian perogies with sour cream, cranberries, pickles and condiments of every description. Stuffed to the gills, I waited awhile before sampling the desserts: Lady Baltimore cake, plum pudding flambé with hard sauce, raspberry almond ice cream, Bavarian cream pie, gingerbread, pineapple cheese cake, mandarin oranges.

Everyone milled about the serving dishes and sat at the eating tables in what seemed to be quite random fashion. It was disconcerting if one expected an orderly etiquette. But a ship's lieutenant, a handsome Spaniard, informed me between bites of perogi as we stood near the entrance to the bustling hall, that this new, open format was part of the ship line's attempt to appeal to a middle class of clientele, and to display a bit of the informal style of the New World. I wondered then at the baroque elegance of the ballroom's decor, with its gilt embellishments sculpted into the corners of the ceiling, its vast crystalline chandeliers and its rich brocaded tapestries. These latter adornments, two enormous ones in particular, depicted scenes of Crusaders and of Moorish lion hunts. I observed that it was perhaps the same spirit of pluralism which had so infused our contemporary society, that was reflected in the placement of those particular tapestries on opposite walls of the room. The lieutenant offered that no, the two streams of his people's history were integral parts of an organic whole, flowing as one in the blood of Spain today. The so-called pluralism of the new middle class was more a result of commercial diversity, merely inlaid, as it were, on the time-honored, common tradition.

I engaged this person in some further casual conversation through the last of the desserts, but found myself in a mood both too personal and too

satiated to extend the evening much further. It was not my habit in any case to give myself over to the company of travelers and socialites. Professor Kuckuck with his intriguing starlike eyes and unique conversational interests had been an exception to my general rule. And so, as the ballroom was cleared of leftovers, and smaller cabaret tables replaced the long ones of the banquet, I excused myself from further entertainment, and retired early. The remainder of the night passed without event. And so, in fact, passed some ten more days and nights across the incognizant face of the ocean.

v

On the tenth day when I first awoke in my private stateroom, with the gray sunlight muffling the one round window, I felt an impending death of an abstract and generalized sort: the death of western culture and European manners, and the fall of the neatly ordered shelves of useful phrases in four languages in my own memory. Even as I ordered scrambled eggs for breakfast on the deck in the open air, flanked by the same fellow passengers in their customary deck chairs, I felt the filtering down from a new sky of a strange obliterating manna, by which alone I would have to be fed. This

morning, my monogrammed stationery and pen and my letter of credit of twenty thousand francs comforted me not at all in their habitual way, as they hung inside the vest pocket close to my heart.

Again that night, after the usual rich buffet, I felt there was something in the air, some intangible energy that gave me more than the usual interest in partaking of the ship's social life. I stayed around for the cabaret, seeking out my friendly officer for company while the musicians set up for the evening's performance. Lieutenant Reynaldo informed me as to all the fun I had been missing. There was one young lady in particular, quite the gay dancer, he said.

"Yes," I told him, "you're quite right. I seem to be dreaming my life away."

"The ocean seems to have that effect on some people. Ah well. It won't be too much longer. I myself may take a vacation from these interminable crossings. Run my own little cruise boat, around Cuba, say. Have you ever been there? Charming little island. With your Spanish, you could have a good time there."

Then, before I could respond, or change the subject as I would have liked, to the matter of the ship's temporary malfunction, he nudged me with an elbow in the ribs: "Hey, see that one over there just coming in. She's the

one I was telling you about. Tonight, my friend, I will allow you the honor of the first dance with her."

I nodded my thanks and smiled, but I can't say that I was really interested. Her arms, I noticed right away, were a little on the plump side. Her hair, piled all to one side of her head, was a dingy dark brown color and reminded me of a small mammal who might have been nesting there. Her cheeks were glowing with too much rouge.

But I agreed to dance with her, after being introduced by Reynaldo. Then he broke in and I sat down and watched them for a couple of numbers, until Reynaldo's attention was diverted to a more recent arrival in the room. I relieved him, but in short order looked also to the relief of a new partner. I wondered where the shy debutante kept herself in the evenings. In the meantime no one I saw would do. It was no use.

By now the air was stifling in the gaslit cabaret room. Back at our table alone, I loosened the top two buttons of my shirt, following the Spaniard's example. The women sitting at a neighboring table, with the dazzling crystal glow of gems ringed around their rouged necks, smiled at me luridly. I was becoming enveloped in nauseating clouds of cigar smoke, and more was puffing my way from the thick-necked escorts of the ladies. It was time to leave. I drained the last of the murky wine from my glass, rose

from the table and headed for the door, muttering apologies to those I jostled on the way out.

Down the narrow corridor I made my way, catching an irrelevant glimpse inside the gaming room, with its clatter of chips and its smoky, intent murmuring. I reached the exit door, climbed the several steps, and emerged onto the main deck. Immediately I drank in deeply the moist, salty air that blew all around me and buffeted my face. I walked to the railing and looked out at the black waves and sky. The only sound then was the churning of the waves below and the steady rush of the breeze. Of course, ever present was the deep, so deep as to be almost silent, throb of the ship's engines as it steadily swayed onward in its course.

Then, utterly without warning, the ship was heaved up on its side with a thunderous blast. Unable to hold onto the railing, I was violently pitched out into the night, and could then only try my best at a clean entry into the steely water. My bearings were lost; the black of the sky and sea merged, and I lost consciousness as I smacked into the swallowing waves.

That is, I lost normal, waking consciousness. But it seems clear to me now that I actually entered one of Sophie's personally engineered dream-states. For the trauma I re-experienced was not the fall from a doomed ship into the deep, but rather being engulfed by a volcanic eruption. The

mountain I was standing on began to heave with a deep-throated rumble, which grew to a deafening roar. Frantic, I looked at the crumbling ground. Great blocks of earth went tumbling down the slope. I lost my balance and fell, sprawling on the ground and grasping for a secure hold amid the churning rubble. But my hands were burned by the smoking rocks. A hissing sound from beneath increased to a piecing shriek; then a gushing fountain of red molten rock burst into the air, carrying my body with it. I melted utterly into the hot lava stream and flowed with it down the mountainside--no longer enjoying any semblance of individual form or identity. Yet still I could wonder when I would merge, in a hiss of briny steam, with the welcoming sea. Still I could look up in wonder as the first golden rays of the sun streamed across the purple sky.

vi

When I came to, I found myself prone on the floor of the lifeboat, surrounded by eight wet souls who were chattering over my miraculous recovery. I raised my head enough to glimpse over the bulwark only the moonlit bubbles swirling on the waves over the sunken liner. In my

unconsciousness I'd missed whatever drama and clamor that had accompanied the calamity of the ship going down. There were no other lifeboats in view, in the choppy darkness. It was with a disquieting mixture of sadness and gratitude that I found myself among the only survivors.

Shortly the talk around me subsided as we all gave way to some silent moments of grief. Then the more vocal mourning began, and the moaning over various bruises suffered in the incommensurable transition from luxury liner to wooden lifeboat.

We eventually turned to the business of getting acquainted with one another. I looked into each pair of frightened eyes, crouched in the haggard frame of a face, but recognized no one. The death of the debutante struck me in a momentary pique as the most lamentable loss of the hundreds unaccounted for. In a sudden flash the vision of my own volcanic dissolution returned to me. I felt with wondering fingers the solidity of my own flesh and bones, and knew as though for the first time the satisfaction of inhabiting this human form.

"You had a close call there," said the young man hunched beside me. "When we pulled you out of there, I felt sure we'd be throwing you back."

I shuddered at the thought. "I'm infinitely grateful for your efforts," I told him. He smiled at me with kind, downturned eyes. I felt an instant

affinity with him. He appeared about my age, and had spoken to me in Portuguese, with a German accent. "You know," I went on, switching to German, "I myself thought that I had died. But of course, in the thinking of it, lay the contradiction--which, however, didn't occur to me at the time."

"Yes, yes, that's interesting, isn't it? The same thing happened to me once several years ago when I was thrown from a horse, and got knocked on the head. Then in the end, after you've accepted your own death, you wake up."

I looked into those clear gray eyes, so conscious, so alive, and knew I'd found a friend. "What's your name?" I asked.

"Seppl. What's yours?"

I was momentarily stumped. Then, at first with only a glimmer, and finally with full if dim recognition, I was able to recall . . .

"Felix," I told him.

Still, I was somewhat mystified. Then my hand instinctively groped into my inside coat pocket. I felt a pad of stationery, a pen and cigarette case--it was gold, I knew--this was encouraging. Yes! And there, folded behind the pad, was a document, an important, if soggy, document--or no, was it only a worthless poem I'd composed long, long ago? I fished it out for a look and with difficulty in the poor light discovered that my actual

name was Louis, Marquis de Venosta. In the dank recesses of my brain, more rusty bells began to clang.

I realized that Sepl was regarding me strangely. "Oh," I explained, "for a moment there I thought I'd lost the paper which will allow me to draw the funds I need when we reach port. If we reach port. God, I wonder how, or should I say why, it happened." Then with a sickening sensation in the pit of my stomach I thought I almost knew why.

Sepl proceeded to give me an accounting of the catastrophe which properly was still foremost in all our minds. The seven other passengers were engaged in their own conversations, in Portuguese and Spanish, on the same topic. "I don't know why," my companion complained, "the ship's crew didn't have the presence of mind to arrange lifeboats for everyone. It was as if they, and the sleep-walking passengers, as most of them seemed to be, wanted to die with the sinking hulk. 'Come on,' I told a bunch of them standing on the top deck. 'Let's get some lifeboats into the water.' Nobody moved. They were just paralyzed. For my part, I was unwilling to die passively. So I went for the nearest lifeboat chained up over the edge of the deck, and lowered it into the water. Then I looked around to see if anyone was going to come with me. Only then did a couple of them start to move away from the bulkhead--which at the time was listing about forty-five

degrees over their heads. I mounted the rail, held my nose, and jumped. Only a few of that crowd on the deck came after me, though--these folks you see here. The rest I guess were all playing captain, and wouldn't abandon their ship. No sooner had we gone over the rail, and the second explosion hit, sending the whole thing over the other way, and everyone with it. I don't know where you came from, but there you were, already in the water."

"I only heard one explosion, and I was thrown overboard with it. No one else was on deck at the time."

"Well, there were plenty after that, all in a panic, but precious few with any clue as to what to do. Luckily we at least survived it. It didn't take long after that second blast before she went to the bottom."

"How long?"

"Not more than a couple of minutes. I wonder what caused it."

Despite the unhappy subject of his discourse, I was enjoying my new-found acquaintance, and asked to hear more of his life. By what confluence of fate had our paths, both starting out in Germany, crossed on a ship to Argentina? Or rather, not even there, but on this bobbing lifeboat.

Sepl pursed his lip, showing suddenly more grief than he'd exhibited in the tale of the shipwreck. "I was studying guitar," he said. He tried to smear his wet black hair to one side of his forehead.

"Oh. And it's smashed to pieces now, or--"

I looked out across the black waves, strewn here and there with odd bits of floating wreckage.

"I left it locked in the stateroom."

"Too bad."

"Yes, it is too bad. I was studying in Barcelona. I took a brief vacation in Portugal, and in conversation with some musicians I met, got the ridiculous idea in my head that I should go to South America, for a lark. So--"

"That's a rather ambitious journey for such a young man as yourself to take on, so impulsively. Your family must be wealthy . . ."

"My parents are both dead. They left me enough funds to travel on. I figured, why not? You're only young once; why not enjoy it?"

"Yes, but where are these funds now? Did you not lose everything on the ship?"

"Ah, fortunately I wired a large sum ahead to Buenos Aires. These fellows I ran into said I'd like the Latin American music. Not to mention the scenery, the pretty girls. What about you?"

"What, do you mean my background, my plans--"

He chuckled. "Oh, whatever."

As a matter of fact, hearing his plans seemed to have aroused in me a flickering recollection of my own, half-formed itinerary. So I told him that I was going to see the country a bit myself and then perhaps venture north to the States, sightseeing along the way. My godfather had given me some resources to travel with and I thought I'd take advantage of the chance to get out of the old countries while I was, like my compatriot, still young enough to enjoy such liberty.

Our eager conversation ignored the presence of the seven other passengers, who by this time had exhausted the current store of survival talk and were listening by the force of circumstance against their battered wills, while we happy-go-lucky German youths prattled on merrily as if we'd just met on the Champs d'Elyssés.

I won't go on to bore the reader here as we bored those unfortunate passengers on our little boat, but to say that Seppl and I finally agreed to meet for a bona fide planning session over a proper collection of maps, upon reaching port by whatever provident means. We then settled somewhat more appropriately into the general plight--no water, no food, no blankets, no realistic prospects for rescue. A huddled mass of blind hope, we spent a long, restless night on calm waters, enjoying but intermittent moments of sleep in recovery from our shared disaster.

I forgot whatever dreams I might have had when I thought I heard a drone of engines overhead; but by the time I came fully awake in the pale twilight, they were throbbing away softly, into the dim silence of the lapping waves and the deserted salt breeze. I was left to muse about the dream I could remember having the first day out; I thought of its strange, finned flying craft from, I chuckled to think, Atlantis. I thought, too, of Sophie. She I remembered with utter clarity--Sophie Tucker Vaughan and her future world, this New World I had been hoping to encounter. But I wondered now if I would indeed ever arrive safely to fulfill my purpose there, or if I had simply been deluding myself into believing a silly fantasy all along.

Then I thought I heard that low, distant hum again, and I recalled that Sophie had led me to expect that I would come to meet her not only in her realm but in her time. As the drone approached our bobbing lifeboat once again, it occurred to me with sudden certainty that we were to be saved. With considerably less certainly but some corresponding surge of irrational confidence, I went on to suppose that Sophie had found some providential means to bring me forward in time to arrive in that promised future.

Now I could swear I discerned through the wispy and partial overcast a long metallic object the shape of a cigar, coinciding with a definite roar of

engines--or by any account, a sound of unnatural origin. The other passengers had already begun stirring, and a few eyes opened, but too late to see the glimpses of good fortune that had been granted me.

"What's all that noise?" Seppl yawned beside me, as the drone again diminished into oblivion. I didn't know how to answer him, though I was confident now that I knew what it was. I thought I'd be wisest to tell the crazy truth (as I saw it then) and be done with it.

"Oh, that's the aircraft which my guardian angel has sent to deliver us from the depths. It's flying back to Atlantis now to report us, so we should be rescued in no time. Not to worry, my friend; you can go back to sleep." He sneered at me and rolled over.

vii

Within two hours we were steaming toward New Orleans on the David Livingstone, out of Cape Town. It was a grand ship that had appeared out of the distance, some half a mile away in the morning haze. Its gleaming white hull gave it a sleek, ultra-modern quality. Somewhere in the back of my consciousness began to stir the procession of marvels I'd so casually

witnessed in my Sophie-dreams: the automobiles, supermarkets, telephones, radios . . . I surmised that indeed an airplane had spotted us and radioed the ship closest to our location. The others on the lifeboat gaped in open-mouthed awe at the wonder of it all--as, for that matter, did the line of passengers who hung over the railing to gawk at us, in the din of the grinding cables that had been looped under our boat from above. With the final crack of the winch came shouts of approval from the waiting crowd.

That was a scene, and one which disturbed me even with my preparation for its implausibility. Certainly it was becoming clear to the others that all of us on the lifeboat looked like a family in the midst of the large milling crowd of the liner. Though we sported a variety of fashionable ocean-going attire, we suddenly appeared homogeneous. The muffled colors and prints, the browns, grays and dark greens, the subdued russets, the twill and tweed and herring-bone, all looked quaintly dated. For around us now on the vast new deck were dazzling colors and fabrics such as we'd never seen before. So too were the cuts of the fashions outlandish, in our eyes. With collars that splayed out clear to the shoulders, shiny plastic boots, stars and stripes and spangles and satiny scarves, and everywhere bare limbs, it was like a carnival. And the people with their faces, their hair, their adornments, that was another sight. Huge round darkened glasses, and

glasses that curved around to the ears, bowls of frizzed hair or bleached hair chopped short and straight, bright globular earrings, white painted lips: it was beyond imagination. And so, I guess, they were entitled to gawk over us.

I approached a certain middle-aged, rather conservatively dressed woman who had been looking at me vacantly through large, tortoise-shell glasses, holding her arm loosely around a teenaged boy, neither of them knowing what to make of me or my ebullient companions. I brought out my best English greeting.

"How do you do, madam, young sir. I'm certainly happy to be here!" I was indeed grateful; yet I was also nervous about the question I was going to ask. . . .

The woman responded quickly. "Oh, well, yes. I think it's wonderful that we came by when we did. Were you going on to the States in your--I mean the ship that went down?"

"No, actually, we were headed for Argentina. But such is life. I was considering traveling up to America at the first opportunity. And so this turn of events, however unfortunate, has simply compressed my itinerary a bit." She gave me a cold, concerned look. I hastened to add: "I should also say that we are all in a profound state of shock at this disaster that has claimed

so many innocent lives. Now madam, if you could be so kind . . . I wanted to ask--"

"Oh, yes, I think it's horrible. I mean what about their families?" Her brow knitted and her mouth puckered, deepening previously faint wrinkles. I thought her to be around fifty years of age, and not unattractive, with the roundness of her face accentuated by the curled hairdo and small hat, and with her soft, gentle bearing. She hugged the gangly youth to her side a little more tightly, with a sort of a shudder; looking slightly uncomfortable, he gave me a sheepish half-smile. He wore heavy horn-rimmed glasses and his light brown bangs covered his entire forehead. His hair in the back crept down onto his collar in an unsavory fashion that reminded me of someone . . . the animal sculptor, by the name of--Hutardo, was it?--no, Hurtado; by either name, the goose.

"Yes, quite true," I said, trying to keep my thoughts clear, "an unspeakable tragedy for all concerned. Now madam, can you, and you must excuse me, but I think my senses have become a bit skewed from the experience; can you--"

"Oh, my poor man, I'm sure it was so traumatic! I mean when I hear of these jetliners crashing with hundreds aboard . . . of course there no one, or hardly anyone, ever survives, and I suppose that's really for the best, or--I

shouldn't say that. But surely you know what I mean. On the other hand, you've just--"

"What year is it?"

"What--what?"

"What year are we in, right now?" I was trying to keep my voice low.

"Why, '75, of course. That is, if I'm not too senile yet to remember correctly; the years do fly by." The boy had commenced to giggling with the falsetto overtone of the adolescent. His mother wore an expression of extreme puzzlement. "Yes, nearly 1976. Why, that's a strange question. Why do you ask, so very politely? You look so worried. Is something the matter? Do you have amnesia, from your trauma?"

For me, it was an inevitable revelation. That is, inevitable in the general sense of Sophie's plan for me. Yet there'd been a slight mistake, I just as quickly realized--if the matter of being brought up into Sophie's era two decades short can be described as slight.

When my informant said that it was 1975, the three survivors closest to us perked up their ears, cocking their heads and looking closely at us, from her to me and back to her again.

"So that's it!" Sepl shouted. "That explains why everything looks, and even feels so different! Why, even their speech is different, and about

strange things. We've come somehow forward in time. We're eighty years in the future! Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!"

At his laughter the tension of the crowd broke and everyone erupted in loud guffaws, or nervous, high-pitched giggles, depending on one's status in time: that is, we newcomers found ourselves, like Sepl, reeling in the inanity of our apparent position, or juxtaposition; while the rescuers as a body hooted loud and long at his (which was also our) evident dementia. Only the woman with whom I had spoken remained silent, as if respecting me for--strange twist--being the genuine article.

As it transpired, there had indeed been a contemporary shipwreck, a tragedy claiming all on board the maiden voyage of the Carthage Star. All, that is, save those huddled in the anachronistic wooden lifeboat which appeared in that very spot, surviving a similar disaster now eighty years past. Because the distress signal from the floundering Carthage Star was monitored and relayed to a spotter plane, we, the survivors of the Cap Arcona, were rescued--as if we'd been the lucky few to endure the wreck of the Carthage Star.

Thus did the officers as well as the passengers of the David Livingstone persist in the basic premise of their interrogations, whether

formal or casual. The quaint wooden lifeboat was seen in the end as evidence of the shoddy, irresponsible outfitting of the doomed liner, causing speculation as to the questionable quality of her more vital parts. Our story that our ship was the Cap Arcona, out of Lisbon in October of 1895, was simply discounted as a troubling but ridiculous hallucination cooked up in our addled brains as an understandable result of our trauma--a collective delusion. None of us had the luck to have brought our passports or any other dated evidence along for our little swim in the deep--save me and my letter of credit. And while its smeared ink could still be construed in one place to read "1895", I was perversely loath to bring it forward to the officers' attention at that point in the proceedings when it would have been most effective in proving our case. What would have been the point, in establishing in these otherwise rational beings the basis of an unsolvable mystery?

As for the question of our dress, I suppose in their rationalizations the disbelievers could see our garment styles as a kind of cultish nostalgia. Certainly they were quick enough to organize a collection of their spare clothing with which we castaways could clothe ourselves, discarding our salt-sodden garments forevermore in a bizarre ceremony that saw the lot tossed overboard amid a tumult of wild shouts and cheers. Still, even with

the evidence of our eerie journey through time thus disposed of, I imagine that among our benefactors there had to remain some questioning, or wonder, or suspension of judgment, or even some nagging desire to believe Seppl with his mad outburst, in the days and even years that followed this initial circus. But being most comfortable in their habitual illusions, these people of the twentieth century I could see were not unlike my contemporaries: indeed, if I was to carry on in my games of masquerade, I would be as assured as ever of success.

viii

For the remainder of the voyage I made a point of avoiding the woman who had provided me with the salient fact of our true situation. I suppose I was as guilty, in refusing to discuss the apparent time warp, as those who simply labeled Seppl as a raving lunatic. But again, I had to ask myself, what could be gained by such speculation? And I was still touchy about my traveling identity, unsure if I was to go on as Felix, or the Marquis de Venosta, or yet another personage to be assigned me by circumstance--circumstance, in this case, being a likely accessory of my spiritual mentor.

I assumed that Sophie was involved in this whole affair, behind the scenes somewhere, even if twenty years down the road. My original dreams of her were still as clear to me, when I chose to think about them, as if they had happened yesterday. I chided her silently not only for operating behind my back, as it were, but also for drowning all of those innocent people in the service of her schemes.

When I eventually told Seppl about my psychic adventures with Sophie, his eyes lit up and we did delve into some speculation about her possible role in our collective fate, past and future. Would she put us back in the nineteenth century again, after a brief vacation? Would we find ourselves in 1994 when we reached New Orleans? Would we be split up, to journey through separate decades, or centuries, only to return to, say, 1955, to compare notes? In the absence of a clear personal manifestation on her part, we were left without enough evidence to construct a convincing scenario.

Our discussions, however, seemed to have a quieting effect on Seppl. He grew accustomed to our incredible status as time-travelers. I myself was genuinely eager for the challenge of testing the temper of an unfamiliar place and time. The time-factor could be experienced, after all, simply as an extra dimension of one's expected adaptations to a new society.

Indeed, while at sea, our entire contingent had settled into an ostensible normalcy that was both psychological and social. Though I'm certain that deep inside each one of us, we held onto the anomalous truth, we were compelled by the impulse of conformity to resign ourselves to the majority belief. The eighty vanished years sank farther from our consciousness. By the day land first appeared, I was even able to say hello to my woman friend and join her and her son for luncheon. The chief topic of conversation was life back home in Topeka, Kansas.

She told me she had two other children besides Devon, her present companion who complained, "Mom, we're not children anymore." There was Terry, twenty-six and moved out; nineteen-year old Sharon who was still living at home while attending a community college in nearby Kansas City, and Devon, fifteen. Her husband, Mervin, had died two years ago of a heart attack at the premature age of fifty-five. It wasn't as if he was under any great stress like the men who sold their souls to the big corporations, she lamented--he'd enjoyed a nice stable position with Topeka Feed and Fodder for over twenty years. One day he'd just dropped dead. It made her think about life in a new way, she said--that life is short and precious and therefore not to be wasted. When the money Mervin had been saving for his retirement went into her name, she decided to use part of it for something

special, and to give some to each of the three children for something special for them. Terry had gone to flying school; Sharon had put it into an account to finance her own schooling that she hoped would lead her to a career as a nurse; and Devon had bugged her unceasingly--at this Devon wore a large grin that caused most of his numerous pimples to disappear--to take him to Africa. As she was a little afraid of all the blacks, from years of news reports about violence and crime in the big eastern cities back home, and didn't really know any because you didn't see many in Topeka, they'd compromised and settled on South Africa. What she'd seen there, the poverty and discrimination, had caused her to consider personally the concerns for social justice held by a Quaker friend with whom she played bridge.

After a short reflective silence, she perked up and said, "By the way, we don't know each other's names! I'm Margaret Smith; and this is, well, I've already told you that."

Devon and I both laughed. "Felix Krull," I said as I lightly shook her hand. It sounded strange, not quite right, but it would have to do.

"And tell me something about yourself--" Mrs. Smith stopped short. "That is, I don't want to pry. No . . . You're a pleasant young man, though--"

may I ask how old--no, that's all right. Goodness. The food here is delicious, isn't it?"

And she thereby let both of us off the hook, the uncomfortable subject of the mystery that had thrown our fates together. We passed the remainder of the luncheon time with harmless small talk, which featured an innocuous description on my part of the picturesque port of Lisbon, as if I'd been there yesterday, and which ended with a panegyric by Devon on the Kansas City Royals baseball club, that had fallen short of the championship playoffs in 1975 but was endowed with great potential for taking the flag the following year. Although Margaret said not another word about the incongruous nature of my arrival on the David Livingstone, I sensed that the question lived on in the form of a sad and searching flicker in the depths of her eyes.

* * *

In the bright autumn afternoon of that last day, Sepl and I lay sunning on the deck, shirts off in the manner of our new contemporaries. My appreciation for the sun's universal energies was growing to new heights. I recalled for Sepl's benefit Professor Kuckuck's exposition on how solar life sprang from the most elementary union of material being, the hydrogen

atoms boiling in the midst of an inconceivable paradox of attractive and repulsive, of gravitational and explosive forces. I waxed eloquent on the possibility of a personal connection to the cosmos: "You know, Sepl, in regard to this business of fate and fortune we've been talking about, I've just been realizing that even though we claim to be the artful constructors of our own patterns of existence, we're really just good followers of precepts set for us by the chance conditions of our immediate, or who knows, infinitely distant environment."

"Speak for yourself," he quipped from behind his sunglasses.

From the smile that followed I knew he was only ribbing me, and I went on undaunted: "No, really. The histories of invisible stars I'm convinced are directly and inextricably bound by a long and sure chain of causality with our own--okay, my own--evolution, even my own daily moods. And I do suspect that everyone is, so to speak, in the same boat."

"All right, fine. As far as that goes. But does what you say mean that, in turn, your desire to grow, and to improve the conditions of your life, can in fact influence the universe at large in any kind of progressive way?"

"Wait a minute!" I was stunned by the implications. "It's not necessarily that anything tangible will come out of my own trivial self-development . . . but still, maybe it's true that my psychic meanderings could

take place, say, with the sanction of all creation"--and here I thought suddenly and clearly of Sophie--"as if I were acting as its trusted representative, fulfilling a mission of some macrocosmic import . . ."

As this insight of possibility popped forth from my lips I was struck with the attendant question: Was I a fledgling trainee for such a role, with Sophie as my master (as well as mistress)? Did she bring me up twenty years short in order to force me to pass through some sort of initiation?

Seppi meanwhile chuckled in the face of my grandiose speculations, leaned up out of his deck chair and pointed to the land of alligators. I realized, as he lay down smiling with the last of the October sun beating on his bare chest, that he had actually been more ironical than serious in this final, brief session of our abstract ruminations. I should have expected as much intellectual commitment from a musician. As for myself, such awesome responsibility as my theoretical condition implied struck me with a feeling of pride and shame; and I imagined the universe itself in such a state, perceiving its own grandeur and humility.

I was on my own in the milling crowd set to disembark. Seppl and I had made vague plans to rendezvous that night in the Vieux Carée. The noisy bustle of the modern port city meanwhile excited me with a heady sense of anticipation; I felt New Orleans to be palpably alive, ready to offer up its riches of new experience.

As I waited, I took stock of my personal appearance, gathered my sense of self-possession. I felt respectably attired in my second-hand pea-coat, navy mohair sweater and designer bluejeans; I'd managed to hang onto my old saltwatered shoes that still fit like kid gloves. As well as outfitting the destitute survivors of the Cap Arcona with suitable clothing, the patrons of the David Livingstone had had the charitable goodwill to take up a collection of money for us, so that when it was distributed equally we each carried in our pockets nearly three hundred American dollars. In addition I still had the marquis's seal ring, the gold cigarette case and watch, the packet of stationery, and that document for which I still held out some fantastic hope of useful conversion to hard currency, the letter of credit. In a small donated suitcase I carried a change of clothes: a smart checked long-sleeved shirt, a Shetland sweater, dark brown dress pants only a little too large; also some spare underwear and the bottom portion of a pair of pajamas. I

thought I might first check into a modest hotel and then see about clearing some funds through the First National Bank of Louisiana.

Thus prepared, I walked the gangplank down to the dock and began my new life. First stop was customs, manned by an ebony-colored agent of the United States Immigration and Naturalization Service. With gracious foresight, the officers of the David Livingstone had seen to it that the nine castaways were issued with temporary documentation detailing our countries of origin and the circumstances of our passage: that is, our rescue at sea following the unfortunate sinking of the Carthage Star. Still I had to explain it all to the cautious agent, who would hear it again eight times that day, if he hadn't already heard it by prior notification as the officers of the ship had assured us.

Whatever his responsibilities and suspicions, the agent was persuaded, after some minutes of consultation with a superior, to let me pass freely into his country, under a six-month travel visa. Or did I--once again the Marquis de Venosta--wish instead to apply for a work visa?

"No, thank you. I have enough funds, represented by this letter of credit, which you can see . . ."

"Oh, yeah . . . mm-hm . . . now what's this date, here?"

"1975, of course. It got a little wet in the ocean, you see . . ."

"Mm-hm. Oh, yes, I see now, twenty thousand francs, is it? How much is that worth in real money?"

"I haven't been in touch with the rates of exchange while at sea."

"Oh, hm, course not. Well, sounds like a lot. Okay; go on through 'n enjoy your stay now, sir."

I walked off swinging my suitcase gaily--and suddenly despaired at the very real possibility of actually having to work to make my living in this giant, mechanized monster of a land. Huge trucks bore down upon me from every direction, horns blaring. Fast, flashy automobiles darted and wove around me. Somebody yelled at me to get out of the street. I took refuge on a sidewalk corner, where I stood for some moments resting against a building, regaining my composure, catching my breath, and watching the traffic signals and the movement of pedestrians until I figured out how it all worked. Okay, I said to myself at last, mouthing words of current slang: it's no big deal. But let's take it a little more slowly this time.

I was not prepared for the rate at which my small fortune of pocket money would commence to disappear, beginning with the nightly hotel rate of \$42.50, plus tax. That was for what I considered modest accommodations--a small room with attached bath, large and well-made

double bed, full carpeting. I supposed that the presence of a color television, electric air conditioning unit, and telephone were responsible for the exorbitant fee. At any rate I resolved to go out immediately to settle the question of redeeming a portion of that theoretical credit in my officially assumed name.

The marquis's letter of credit, good for twenty thousand francs drawn on the Banque de France, listed the banking institutions I would contact in my principal ports of call. The First National Bank of Louisiana was among them, right here in the lovely old city of New Orleans. But when I found myself at the address given in the letter, I stood before a small glass-walled storefront. Established 1968, said the small white lettering on the glass, under Louisiana Savings and Loan.

I was merely hoping for the best, then, as I entered and asked for an appointment with the credit manager, seaworn document in hand. When I confronted that pink-faced man he shook his shaven jowls with bemusement, looking at me as if I were some kind of carnival freak when I tried to tell him I was the Marquis de Venosta, great-grandson and heir of the financial estate of my forebear.

And I had been so confident that sunny day at sea when I'd found out that the rescuing ship's destination was listed on the Marquis's itinerary; so

confident in my fortunes being overseen by providence that I hadn't seriously considered that the time lapse might thwart the smooth operation of my established destiny. Now my obsolete charms were wasted on the efficient little man in the credit office, who spoke in a drawl so heavy that I could barely understand it even though it was slow as molasses.

"That old banking institution that this heah lettah of so-called credit wants to draw its accounts from is buried right heah undah ouah feet, young man. It wasn't even operating as a bank aftah '29. It was turned into a vaudeville house. Thayin, uh, lemme see . . . it became a tax office; and aftah the woah, a landfill and reconstruction--uh, pardon me--urban renewal project. Thayin, until about, uh, seven yeahs ago, it was a heritage museum. In any event, heah we are now. And this paper says eighteen--are you sure this says eighteen, and not nineteen, ninety-five? Well, I guess you just inherited this old lettah, or found it in somebody's attic."

"Yes, that's right. That's what I'm trying to tell you. I inherited it from my great-grandfather, when my grandfather died recently. It was never used, you see, and--"

"If it makes you feel any better, even if this was the First National Bank of Louisiana--which you could still go to across town in theah new building, by the way, if you don't believe me--this Bank de France heah

couldn't possibly honor an account so far out of date. No sah, this li'l document may as well be made out to the Marquis de Canasta. It isn't worth twenty thousand French kisses from a View Car-ee hoah." He offered me back the letter, taking care as he did so not to handle any more of it than was necessary. It hung from his fingers limp as an old handkerchief. I took it from him and folded it back up into my pocket--for what, I didn't know.

He rose from his chair. I hesitated in my own seat, not knowing where I would go, what I would do when I got up. But I asked him for the address of the new bank, knowing that when I got there I would find no better luck. He complied with my request, then sighed and said, "Good luck and good day to you, uh, sah."

I too finally rose. I smiled lamely through a halfhearted handshake. Then with stinging eyes on the marble tiles, I walked out to lead the life of an independent pauper. I wasn't looking forward to it. I wished that if Sophie had an agenda in store for me she would just come forward with it now and get this monkey business over with. I felt jilted. I went to the First National Bank and came out feeling worse than when I'd gone in. I walked the streets until night came, and then sought out Seppl in the bars for commiseration. I thought we might make exciting new plans for adventures together. But I never saw him again.

I had to wonder, had my luck changed totally for the worse? Maybe-- to give myself the benefit of the doubt--Seppl had literally disappeared, having served his purpose as a mere figment of Sophie's hidden agenda.

* * *

After spending the night in the hotel room that I'd already paid for under the name of the Marquis de Venosta, I secured cheaper accommodations (under the more personal name of Felix Krull) so as to stretch my meager assets. When they ran out I sold for hock the marquis's watch, cigarette case and seal ring, seriously devalued from their bath in the brine.

Now I really had to come to terms with my economic survival. How cocky I'd been in refusing to apply for a work visa! Was it arrogance, the lingering sentiment that I was too good for menial, or too intelligent for honest work? Or was the truth more basic--that I was simply unfit?

Certainly I felt ill at ease with the constant throb of machinery, indoors and out. The ship's engines were one thing, limited and easily put out of mind. But here--the sky, the land, the interior spaces were clogged

with the constant din of gears, engines, friction of moving parts, hum of electric current, whine of pistons and scream of brakes.

I took refuge by spending some of my few remaining dollars in that palace of imaginative technology, the motion picture theatre. I had, it is true, already been introduced to the medium on a small and unimpressive scale aboard the modern ocean liner. Now I was treated to the show of magic in full stereophonic sound, wide screens, popcorn-fragrance and the hushed company of the rapt and youthful audience. My favorite film, it may be prudent to note, was neither the panoramic nor the grotesque, neither Satyricon nor The Exorcist, but the artful intrigue of The Sting. I saw it twice, wincing at the expense, but rationalizing the second viewing, especially, as an investment of sorts.

But then it was back out as always to the light of day, the harsh glare of reality, the land of the automobile. I couldn't believe how much of this city was given over to it: whether for gasoline, parking, repairs, sales, rentals, pavement . . . I wondered about the extent to which the country at large had been taken over by this slick new beast of burden, this mechanical horse with the power of hundreds of living horses. I had seen a few city parks, yes; and I had to wonder if there still might be a few such nature preserves remaining after another hundred, or even just fifty years further

down the road. Was this gaseous sprawl the fault of technology, or simply an inherent drive of humanity as an organism, freed by space and wealth to so develop and expand? From dwindling nature's point of view, what sort of game was civilization running? All this wonderment, and I had yet to know the full extent of the historical chain of causes and effects that had led the world to such a state; had yet to delve into the excruciating knowledge of two World Wars, the Great Depression, the Atomic Bomb . . . these all, for the present, forgotten, or at least overlaid, in the mass consciousness by the latest fashion craze, hair style, blaring of rock music from the souped-up flame-painted sport truck that nearly ran me over with its wild-haired passengers laughing in the face of the westward-sliding sun.

Urban life here and now seemed to consist of the ironic marriage of an orderly regimentation toward work, and a sheer idle chaos of leisure time. With neither work nor practicable funding for recreation, I wandered the streets of New Orleans that rainy November essentially alone, but for the memories and visions of Zouzou, Maria, Sophie, and the Marquis de Venosta more and more obsessively swimming before me. One night after a bad scare weaving through traffic back to my flophouse, I had a particularly disturbing nightmare.

I was standing amidst a herd of snorting and honking automobiles like some cowboy that has been engulfed by his cattle. Each car was trying to push its way forward, so that together they formed a quivering mass of metal. I squinted my eyes in the dazzling glare of a midday sun reflecting from chrome bumpers and glass windshields. Angry drivers inside their vehicles gnashed their teeth and leaned out windows to shout obscenities at me. The spasmodic blinking of the red, green and amber traffic signals hanging overhead added a carnival gaiety to the chaos beneath. I was trying to cross the street, to someone that I had recognized on the other side. It was Zouzou, whose face I could see above the tops of the cars. The light on the corner flashed alternately DON'T WALK and DON'T TOUCH; but seeing my lack of progress, my long-lost lover started out into the street to meet me. She too got nowhere; so, with the same idea, we each climbed atop the nearest car and started approaching each other, stepping from roof to roof of the cars beneath. Only one car now separated us, and we both stepped out to it. But at that instant the car surged forward, leaving nothing but space under our feet, and we plunged to the oily pavement below. Dazed, we slowly got to our feet, but were immediately crushed between what I identified later, in my recollection of the dream, as a Cadillac and a Jeep. The two vehicles pulled apart with a horrible sucking sound. All that was left in the space

between them was a single heap of translucent protoplasm that twitched rhythmically and glowed from within with a strange green light.

Another night on the pavement, I swore I encountered my godfather Schimmelpreester in the guise of a derelict passed out on Bourbon Street. But when I shook the poor bum by the shoulders, he responded only by calling out groggily in a hoarse whisper to a miserable little dog named Fitchie, who trotted over to lick his ruddy face.

I walked away, more disgusted with myself than with these unfortunates, and sought out Lou's Cabane, a lounge four blocks away that I could count on to be open at this ungodly hour of the night. I entered the bitter-breathed darkness and found an empty corner--the place was only about a third full and I was glad to have a relatively private haven for my own thoughts.

Still haunted, I caught a vision of Maria implanted upon the face of the cocktail waitress who took my order for a boilermaker. I was driven to take out my monogrammed stationery and pen, which along with the worthless letter of credit that I kept as a memento of a glorious past, were all that remained of my former possessions.

Boilermaker in hand, I leafed through the stained sheaf of stationery to find my poem again, the one I'd written with a heartache for Zouzou on

the first day out at sea. I was tempted to write her a letter now, then thought myself silly.

The letter of credit was still folded at the back of the sheaf of paper, and a corner of it caught my eye. I took it out and gazed at it again. I thought of my laughable efforts to redeem it that first, hopeful day here in this alien land. Now some bleary weeks later--having come to exist as the bums did, by panhandling and turning the proceeds, as the saying went, into liquid assets (and in my case, by indulging also in a few cheap if comically oversized cigars); by sleeping in harbor nooks with an old blanket I inherited from some nameless predecessor and stashed daytimes in a little chain and anchor shed--I'd come to this again, longing for Zouzou so badly that I thought I could write to her. Oh hell, I thought, what difference does it make anyway, whether it was eighty years ago or yesterday?

So I began, and, quickly lost in the act of writing, felt like myself again--whoever that was:

Dearest Zouzou,

Let me write to you not as an anguished soul, nor as an unfulfilled body, although I may suffer these things; let me write as a present need and let what I write overcome my limitations, by now so familiar to you.

Yes, I remember, after all these years, that we have nothing more to talk about--you have nothing to learn, I have nothing to say. Yet may we simply meet to whisper common talk, over a gone sun?

I still think of you as my lover, my friend, and part of myself, because of who you are. I cannot see you any more, but I still know you. You still fill my dreams.

If you were with me now, in this room, we could talk, perhaps, of love--but chances are, we would stumble, grope in the darkness for words, finally put on our hats, and part, smiling.

And if it turned out to be more lasting, deeper, and free, what then? Would we learn to dream as one, walk the sands of the city beach, share gossip, drink brandy, pick flowers, read Shakespeare, stroll babies, hide from angry clouds, watch clocks at work, attend funerals, daydream, dance, touch tongues, try to fill the half-moon?

We would ignore the revolutions, make fun of communes. Our irony would grow like old ivy. Our drowsy eyes would twinkle like fading stars over the Sunday comics. We would console our aching feet with long, slow evening walks.

Meanwhile, our children would redeem us, like art. Through them we would be creatively fulfilled. They'd give our lives continuance and meaning. They would complete our shortcomings...

Enough! I rose in the fumes of stale whiskey, quickly folded and stuffed the unfinished but clearly degenerating "letter" into my baggy pea-coat pocket along with the rest of the dog-eared stationery, and strode out onto the queasy cobblestones. Across the street I saw a giant fish carcass that gleamed on the moonlit dock and yawned bloodily where its head should have been. I lurched over to examine it and saw at once the easiest way to dispose of the detritus of my past. Grinning with drunken inspiration, I fished the letter out of my pocket and crammed it, cigarette-fashion, into what remained of the piscean gullet. I repeated the act with my once-precious letter of credit. I lit them both along with a gigantic cigar of my own, and then set out to inspect the restless American night.

[BOOK TWO] - CHAPTER THREE: WHILE WONDERING WHAT IT WAS ALL ABOUT

i

It didn't take me long to find myself in jail on a vagrancy charge. I strayed too far from the district where most of the wharf rats hung out; and in the waning daylight of the fifth of December, 1975, as I sat with outstretched hand on a curb in a parking lot in suburban New Orleans, Louisiana, I had the misfortune (or poor judgment, which amounts to the same thing) of encountering an off-duty policeman, who promptly ran me in.

At least now, I consoled myself, I would have a decent residence. Clean, disinfected walls; efficient modern plumbing. Meals served punctually by a pair of rotund servants. Congenial neighbors . . .

My ears rang as the cell-door clanged shut.

"Hey, lookit what we have here. Looks like a dandy." The sneer on the lean one's face, from the top bunk, was most unpleasant.

"I don't know about that," said the other. "Smells like he's down on his luck, if so." As if he could tell, still lying on his bottom bunk, halfway across the room from me. "And the duds don't look so hot, neither."

"Evening, gentlemen," I said with a straight face. "I take it I can have my choice of the other bunks?"

They looked at each other. The fat one snickered. "It's your first time, ain't it?"

I sat down nonchalantly on the bottom bunk of the empty bed across the small cell from them.

"Yes, as a matter of fact, it is."

The lean one started to speak to me--"Say, bud . . ." and his friend cut him off:

"Now Jake, I know what you're thinkin'. Remember the rules, now. We don't want to get too personal on him, just yet. It'll come."

"But Jim, this one's different. Can't ya see it? I'm dying to know--"

Jumbo Jim heaved a melodramatic sigh. "Oh, all right then, go ahead and ast him. What's rules except to be broken?"

Jake looked at me then, with kinder eyes. "Say bud, what'd ya do?"

"Vagrancy, the officer told me. Begging money, is actually what I was about."

"German, are you?"

"Why, yes. At least I was. I plan on staying in this country a while now, however. And you gentlemen: what unfortunate circumstances led you to this state of affairs?"

"'State of affairs?'--Listen to 'im, Jim. Where'd you learn yer English, kid, England?"

I didn't know whether to be flattered, or discouraged at my lack of accustomed powers in adopting the local inflection and vernacular. "No," I said. "As a matter of fact I only had a little instruction in your formidable language during my school days--and that, long ago."

"Well, for that, then, you do a pretty fine job," said Jim.

I nodded in appreciation, then sought to take up the thread of my inquiry. "And so--"

"Ah, the question. The one every first-timer begins with. It's against the rules of the profession, don't ya know. But who gives a shit anyways." He glanced up at Jake, who merely gave a little shrug of assent; a traded favor. Jim proceeded to tell the tale: "This time it was disorderly conduct. The bouncer at the Lion's Gate had a little trouble convincing me the other night--was it last night, Jake?" (Jake nodded) "--to go in a certain direction, like out the door."

"I tried to come to his rescue," added Jake of the leathery face, half the big man's size. Jake had a large nose that was long-bent in the middle, and next to it on one side he sported a blue black bruise, which he nursed from time to time with tender fingertips. "And got cold-cocked for my trouble."

"At least you got to come along wit' me for company, though, hey slugger?"

"Yer right on that one. One big happy family. All two--"

"Three of us," said Jim with a smile toward me. I felt better. I must be doing something right--perhaps just being there constituted an initiation into their fraternity.

"Say, what you do for work?" asked Jake. I regarded his worn leather vest, studded with rivets, and idly wondered what sort of obscenity I might see on the back of it.

"I can't say that I've found any lately," I said. "Have you got any ideas?"

Jake looked at Jim, then back at me.

"Well, that depends. Is it what they call honest labor yer after, or something a little more . . ."

"Creative," Jim finished.

"Yeah, that's it. You seem to have a certain kind of talent, though I don't know's I could put my finger on exactly what it might be. Makes me think you might be a good joe to have along some night when we're . . ."

"Long gone from this goddam tank."

"I've done a bit of this and a bit of that," I offered. "I can't say, in all honesty, that I've held down any job for long. Yet I do, as you say, Jake, seem to have come by a certain, well, knack for being in the right place at the right time." I thought with fond nostalgia of Diane Philibert and her jewels.

"'Cept when you got picked up and hauled in here," Jim added with a chuckle.

"Hey, we haven't even ast him the second question yet. What's yer name, kid?" This from a guy no more than three years older than I.

"Felix," I said, and shook both their hands.

This wasn't the first time they'd been in jail, nor would it be the last. They liked to room together, and the local authorities seemed to cater to them in that respect. They were well-known and well-liked by the guards and even, it seemed, by the cook, judging by the amount of cake Jim was given to satisfy an inordinate craving. I found out that Jake Rubino was

twenty-four, son of a Czech mother and Spanish itinerant factory worker. They had come over to America in 1955. In this country Jake had a rough youth growing up in reform schools, as his father was killed in an accident in a steelyard, and he was removed from the custody of his mother when she took up prostitution. Jim was more close-mouthed about his past and I didn't press him.

We would all three be released from the New Orleans City Jail after a single night there. Quickly enough, for a stay in the tank; but I had first to endure a horrifying dream in which I passed through the very gates of Hell, where the savage three-headed guard dog snarled viciously with apparent thirst for living blood. Yet I slipped past the beast, my hands splayed behind me along the clammy walls. I followed a narrow passageway, a tunnel, until it widened into a bulbous chamber. There I saw the larger of my cell-mates, who in the dim light appeared to me in some intuitive sense as an aspect of myself, albeit in gross exaggeration. The yellow light revealed paunchy cheeks and a swollen neck on a solid, waxen-skinned figure. Indeed it could have been some thug from a wax-museum's rogue's gallery--until the basilisk eyes suddenly lit up, the head raised slightly to glare directly at me, and strangely familiar speech came rattling out of the huge jaws. I was awestruck, because the language spoken by the monster was German--

articulate, yet possessed of a definite strain of abstract buffoonery. I found myself, a visitor to my own private quarter of hell, being lectured in the most cynical, mocking manner on the futility of my old social devices, my witticisms and charming asides, my preference for name-dropping and apt foreign phrases--devices that had once served well my appetite for status and position, but would now fall obsolete on the deafened ears of the cocky multitudes of a brave new world of "equals." Not since my confrontation with Sophie had I been so disparaged--though Maria had done her best at times. It began to occur to me that this prattling hulk was indeed nothing but a gigantic puppet serving as Sophie's mouthpiece, taunting me into humility without offering any constructive avenue of reformation.

But then my lecturer began to choke and to cough up mouthfuls of cake-crumbs; and I realized that before me sat not merely a monstrous mockery of myself (nor even of my snoring cell-mate), but a man surely long dead, a man more fond of cake than any I ever knew: my godfather Schimmelpreester. As I watched in horror, the smothered speech came to a halt, the eyes bulged, and the head sagged down again.

The yellow light faded to darkness. I breathed heavily, sweating coolly from armpits, palms and upper lip. I may have drifted on into more peaceful regions of dreamless sleep. But then a violet light grew from the

blackness until I could discern before me, in that same cavernous cell, another figure, obviously a facsimile of our third fellow prisoner. This one was smaller, leaner--but of a no less disturbing countenance. The mouth was drooling; the eyes were bleary and bloodshot; and ratty hair crawled over the fringes of a dark, leathery face. I had the initial impression that this character could have been a jockey--or a stable boy. He wore a soiled, ornately embroidered vest. He lay sideways on a cot, his head raised and supported by the palm of his hand as he looked at me. When he saw he had my attention he began to speak, with curled lip, in a rasping voice:

"I was born in the Black Forest myself, my friend. They said I was a degenerate bastard, and from the tales they tell, you might say my father was a lone wolf. I never met him, but tales were told. Did y'ever hear of the wolves in that region, you musta. Well they used to tease me that my mother was bit by one--maybe they meant my father--ha! Anyways they called her a bitch, and when I was born they said I was devil's brood. As I grew up they all called me Little Fitchie, in a way like they was callin' a dog: Here Little Fitchie, got a bone for ya! Oh, great fun I gave 'em.

"Hey, whatcha lookin at my vest for? No, I didn't steal it. You probly think I was, what, a organ grinder? No, the monkey? Hey. You know what

I was? A bullfighter. Lisbon, Portugal. Trained in Spain--just like the song. Y'ever heard of the great Ribeiro?"

Ribeiro, my God! Could it have been the very same Ribeiro, the bullfighter that I had witnessed from the grandstand in the company of the Kuckucks, that day now lost in the mouldering past?

"Here," he went on, slithering off his cot and stepping toward me, "I'll show you what happened." As he came closer into the light I saw that his face was nearly covered with a growth of fine hair, that I'd seen until now merely as a rough, dark complexion. His beady eyes glittered with some unearthly light of possession. "It was a big bull. A mad bull. My eye was caught by some little beauty in the crowd. She was sitting beside her mother, but ripe enough, I reckoned. . . . The bull caught me in that one instant, put a horn through my liver--"

And he thrust his bloody side at my face. I turned away, felt like wrenching--and awoke to the clanging of the cell door as the guard came to release us back to the street.

Jake and Jim offered me space in their run-down shack beside the railroad yard, and as I had no other prospects before me, I accepted. It was under their tutelage that I got my first real introduction to refrigerators,

telephones, radio and television, electric razors, and so on--such items having come into their possession by means I didn't question.

Not that any of these gadgets took much intelligence to operate. It would be some time yet before I could feel that I had taken a real jump into the future: I mean by flying. The airplanes that soared overhead were a continual source of amazement and fascination for me--an enchantment stemming at least in part from my glimpses of the alleged aircraft of Atlantis. I resolved to get up there and test my wings at the first opportunity.

In the meantime I felt an obligation to pay my way with Jake and Jim, who bought the groceries with gratifying regularity, and so I took on the job they offered me in their landscaping business. In the evenings Jake gave me instruction in the operation of the automobile, Jim's metallic green, '64 Mercury Comet.

One day at work I discovered the shady underside of J&J Landscaping. It was a one-day contract. The old lady pulled away around mid-morning with a set of golf clubs in the trunk of her Oldsmobile. In no time Jim was wheeling his wheelbarrow full of old leaves close to the house and looking in the windows. He tried to be nonchalant, as we were in partial view of the neighboring suburban estates through the mimosas and weeping

willows that ringed the property. It became obvious to me that he was scoping the place out. This was a phrase I'd heard him use with Jake recently; now I could see what it meant.

At lunch when the talk of my two co-workers turned to jewels and bureau drawers, silverware and china, I tried to ignore it. Then, in the afternoon, Jim disappeared around the side of the house with a ladder while Jake was weeding flower beds and I was pruning lilacs.

Big Jim reappeared a short time later behind a wheelbarrow full of burlap sacks, smiling broadly. He whistled and Jake came walking over at a good clip. I followed suit. Jim gave us peeks at his cargo: silver tea service, china plates wrapped in fine linen, boxes of silverware, and hints of blue velvet that I knew signified jewelry. "Time to kick off work," Jake said. "Let's go home and celebrate."

Celebrate spending the rest of my life with these guys behind bars, is what I thought, all the way home in the back of the van with the tools and the loot. Best get out of this mess, and quickly. When the old lady gets home the law is one phone call away from our doorstep. Maybe they did have a rational plan up their sleeve. But I didn't mean to stick around with them to find out.

I volunteered to go for steaks and wine while they sorted out their booty. On Howard Avenue I turned left and kept on going till I got to the interstate. My heart was pounding as I waited for the light at the entrance ramp to change. Of course I would go through with it. I had nothing to lose by going on--provided I could handle a highway cruising speed twice what I so far was used to--and everything to lose by staying. The light turned green.

I eased the accelerator up to thirty, forty and kept pushing as I eyed a break in the lane of streaking vehicles. Smoothly I entered the flow of traffic and leveled off at a cruising speed of fifty-five. This wasn't so hard as I'd feared. It was easier, in fact, than city driving, with its multitude of intersections, bicycles, driveways, pedestrians, turning lanes, bus stops . . . I leaned my elbow out the open window and thumped on the steering wheel, keeping time to the music from the car radio. The road was smooth, the night endless. This was, I now realized, what American life had become, in essence: sitting back with fingertip control as your mechanical servant carried you at breathtaking speed wherever you wished--to the next city, the next state, even clear across the continent. Why, I could even go to Argentina this way, if I were so inclined, rushing as the kings of old--

perhaps the very gods--would have yearned to do, propelled by the magic of internal combustion over smooth asphalt forever.

Except for one small problem: limited funds. Added to which, no credit card.

ii

I liked the sound of "Mobile, Alabama" so I got off the interstate there. I'd been careful to drive just under the speed limit, and to observe all the other highway regulations so as not to get pulled over for a license and registration check. I doubted if Jim or Jake would feel themselves in a position, under present circumstances, to be reporting a stolen car to the police. But in the event, say, of being apprehended for a minor infraction, an esoteric rule of traffic navigation which my tutor had conceivably neglected to mention, I was, in a word, screwed. I had no driver's license; I'd left my travel visa back in the house in New Orleans, and I carried no other means of identification. I thought of that clammy cell again; my untimely and unsavory visit to "Hell" lay still close in my memory.

I stopped at a food mart first thing in Mobile for a late, take-out supper, to be paid for out of the fifty-dollar bill Jim had given me to go shopping. The Comet needed gas as well and so when I got back on the road, I would have thirty dollars and nowhere to go.

I pulled into a parking spot to eat my hamburger and fries. Out of curiosity I took a look at the vehicle registration, so I'd be minimally prepared if I did get stopped for anything. The Comet was registered in the name of Charles Ready. Was this their friend Chuck who'd they'd talked of upon occasion, the same "Fuckin' Chuck" who'd walked drunk off the pier when his wife had run out on him? I figured that was the case, that Jim had, so to speak, inherited Chuck's car and, in turn, passed it on to me.

I breathed a little easier now. I went back into the store and bought a city map. Would I be Charles Ready now, late of New Orleans, ready to take up a new life in Mobile, Alabama?

No, the association was too sordid for my liking. Let the law suppose what it might; I would remain, as far as I or anyone else was concerned, Felix Krull.

On the map my eyes happened upon an amusement park, and I thought that would be a fitting location in which to muse about an unformed

future--a future defined, for the moment, as the time in which thirty dollars would last.

I wandered among the rides, watching the kids in the kiddie cars, the couples gliding through the tunnel of love in their little rowboats, the families walking hand in hand. None of the rides caught my fancy. I avoided the haunted cave, because it reminded me too much of my nightmare in jail. I watched the ferris wheel for a long time. After the allotted number of revolutions, the attendant brought the wheel to a stop to let each car empty. I looked at the people in the top car patiently waiting to come around to the bottom. That was me as I had been, I thought to myself: riding high, without a thought for the bottom. Now here I was on the ground, and I couldn't see any way to get back up to the top. Oh, sure, I could buy a ticket and ride the damned wheel for a few minutes; but when the ride was over I'd be right back there on the ground where I now stood, watching.

"My God!" I wanted to shout. "What am I doing here? Sophie, where are you? And what do you want from me? What do you want me to do? Come on, this is your turf, isn't it? The world, your amusement park?"

I was too depressed to go on any of the rides. I walked around for a while longer and then retreated to the parking lot. I felt like a sailor who has disappeared over the horizon's edge. Back in the comforting womb of the car, I closed my eyes and felt myself fast growing old. I opened my eyes again, only to shrink from the sight of the human mannikins stalking my desperate solitude. Or was it solitude, in the presence of that smug tormentor Sophie and her demonic agents?

In my private darkness I recalled those hellish incarnations of Jim and Jake, if that's what they were--or, of Schimmelpreester and the bullfighter Ribeiro--or the Bourbon Street bum and his dog. I went so far as to imagine an even more telling correspondence, envisioning the ghastly pair as, on the one hand, the ghost of Friedrich Schlegel, glutton-philosopher of the Romantic Age, and beside him, my own degenerate self. Whatever it all meant, it could surely be attributed to the peevish machinations of a certain frustrated, failed teacher, bent on "educating" me through some indefinable apprenticeship of . . . self-awareness, it must be.

That ounce of revelation sufficed to salve my wounded self-image. I could blame all my troubles on that stuck-up woman President, and console myself with the modest prospects before me in the more immediate future. "I'll get a job, buy a new car, find a girl," I promised myself, brightening.

"I'll even sell sausages at the corner deli. Shine shoes, anything. It doesn't matter where I start. I'll rise to the top with effort, style, a watchful eye, a careful turn of phrase at the appropriate moment . . ."

Just then I heard a gay little song humming past the car window. I lifted my shaggy head to see an attractive young woman carrying a packet of french fries from the snack bar. She opened the passenger door of the little blue pickup truck parked next to the Comet. On the seat were two bags of groceries. She pulled out a can of root beer, popped open the top and took a swig, turning finally to look at me. I felt self-conscious in my baggy pea-coat, my dirty work clothes, my indolent slouch. I'd been too long on the bum, I realized suddenly. And too long without women.

I rose up in my seat, ran a hand across my forehead to push the hair away, and rolled down the window. But I didn't know what to say. I'd lost my charm, my easy social grace. The best I could do was to strike a casual pose by resting my elbow in the open window, and smile at her. Words aren't the only way to a woman's heart; I still knew that much.

My practiced charm, appearing oftentimes, if I may say so, as an innocent intelligence in the eyes, must have still been serviceable.

"Hi," she said, after waiting for me to make the first move and then realizing it was up to her. "Wanna fry?"

I was reminded of Zouzou as I admired her black curly hair, though it was cut short to a trim bob. She had wide round cheeks, a small, delicately upturned nose, and glittering black eyes. She had the kind of active, slightly puckered lips that led me to guess she was an habitual gum-chewer; though at the moment her mouth was merely working on a bite of fried potato. Her tiny chin gave almost the effect of coming to a point under the wide cheeks, an effect that was accentuated as she spoke. She had a mild, pleasing Southern accent. "Sure," I said, plucking a couple of fries from the open packet.

"They make the best ones here. Sometimes I stop by on my way home from work if I have the munchies and don't wanna wait for supper."

"Yeah, I know what you mean."

She took another sip of root beer, eyeing me as she tipped the can back.

"So you came a long ways. Did you know about these french fries, too?" She gave a little laugh.

"How did you know--"

"Your license plates."

"Oh, right. Uh, yeah, just drove in, to, ah . . . actually I'm in transit right now. Looking for a new place, I mean work, you know, and a place to

stay. Do you know of any hot tips for me?" I couldn't help thinking, after I said that, of the hard red nipples on her soft small breasts, which at the moment coyly hid behind a bulky cable-knit sweater.

She eyed me a moment longer, as I put on my best expression of boyish innocence. "Well . . . yeah, actually. There might be something. I waitress at the Riviera--it's a pizza and steak house downtown. They might need a dishwasher soon. I think Darren's about to quit. You might come in and talk to the manager, check it out."

I nodded enthusiastically. "Oh, great. That sounds wonderful. I'll do that--first thing tomorrow."

"As for places to rent, let me see . . . I don't know of anything offhand. There's lots of listings in the paper though. You'll just have to try that, I guess."

"Yeah, I guess so," I said in a dejected tone.

"You get high?" she asked.

I'd heard about recreational drug use, but hadn't yet found the occasion to try it. All the riffraff I'd hung out with so far were strictly boozers. I was ready for a change. "Yeah, sure," I said.

She opened the glove compartment of the pickup and took out a plastic bag and rolling papers, put them into the purse hanging from her arm, and said, "Your car or mine?"

It seemed to me that she'd already chosen mine. "Here, hop in," I said, motioning to the empty seat beside me.

"So why did you choose to come to Mobile?" she asked while rolling a slim marijuana cigarette.

"I liked the name."

"What part of Louisiana you from?"

"I'm not really from there, exactly, but--New Orleans."

"Yeah, you have a kind of accent. Almost Spanish."

"I'm from Europe, actually. Came over a little more than a month ago."

"Flew?" she asked before licking the paper and twisting it tight.

"I wish. No, I came by boat."

"Oh wow! You mean one of those ocean liners?" She took out a book of matches and lit up.

"No, a little reed dory. The Cap Arcana, under Atlantean registry."

A cloud of smoke erupted from her mouth as she laughed and coughed at the same time. She drew another inhalation and held it in this time as she passed the funny cigarette to me.

I followed her example. By the time the joint, as she called it, had burned down to her fingertips, we both were giggling uncontrollably over some nonsense I cannot, for the life of me, remember. I do know that before we parted I'd told her my name was Felix and she'd said her name was Sandy. She also told me I was welcome to follow her to her house and to crash on the floor there. She had a foam mat and sleeping bag I could use.

During the drive to Sandy's house I began whistling, and simultaneously talking to myself. The tune was a slow jazz-blues rendition of "Dixie." The interior monologue went something like this: I will find out in time that my travels have been in vain. I will not have found love on any pedestal in any heaven. I will learn from a talking, whispering bear, a white whispering bear named Seymour who dances with me on a ballroom's marble floor, that Sophie will come to me if I wait at home; that she'll contact me to make firm arrangements for an in-the-flesh meeting in Albuquerque, New Mexico. I will finally be satisfied. I'll discover from her that traveling light of desires but heavy with love will land me in any bed of

any world with any lover I choose, because I will be chosen. Ultimately I will choose only her.

Sandy's turn signal blinked me back to reality. By the time we got to 12A Jackson Street I didn't know what I wanted from Sandy, or what to expect from myself.

Neither of us had anything to worry about. We both were tired from the long day and the marijuana. She laid out my makeshift bed for me in the living room of her walk-up apartment, muttering about what the landlady downstairs would say when she saw me leave in the morning. A light hand on my arm and a brief good-night, and Sandy was gone to her bedroom to sleep alone. Just as well, I thought to myself as I undressed. Better not to rush into anything. The young lady's just being hospitable. If I just have a little more patience . . .

In the morning I awoke late to the aroma of coffee and bacon. I dressed, rolled up the sleeping bag and mat, ran my fingers through my hair and went into the bathroom off the hall. I looked a mess. My clothes had become no cleaner overnight. My hair, that should have presented to the world its fair softness, was in need of washing; my blue-gray eyes were bloodshot. I tried to grin at the mirror. My teeth were yellow. Who'd want

to kiss a seedy-looking character like that? I'd have to change my image. In the meantime I'd need to depend on my old charms. (Just for good measure, I began by enlisting the help of a hot shower, a toothbrush and comb, and a pink safety razor I found in the bathroom.)

"Morning," Sandy greeted me as I walked into the kitchen. "Did you have a good sleep? Wow, you're all spruced up."

"Oh, yes, well. I took the liberty. I hope it's all right."

"Yeah, sure, no problem."

"You're most kind. As for sleep, I was, as they say, dead to the world. I don't even remember dreaming. For me that's unusual. I often have the most vivid recollection of dreams, which capacity I attribute to the lucid state of self-awareness that I've learned to cultivate."

She looked at me strangely while lifting the bacon out of the pan with a fork. "Mmm, right," she said.

I seemed to have put her off somehow. "What about you?" I asked. "Do you have vivid dreams?"

"No, as a matter of fact, I have a hard time remembering them at all. I think it's the pot. You get all your cartoons while you're awake, stoned, and then the dream-machine shuts down for the night. That's my theory anyway.

Do you want some toast, coffee? The bacon's ready. Help yourself." She sat down at the breakfast table, forcing a smile.

I took a seat in the light blue plastic-upholstered chair opposite her and sipped coffee. I suddenly saw this fledgling relationship in the most banal light. This, I reflected, is what one would expect to feel on the morning after a one-night stand. We haven't even got that far yet. Nothing significant has passed between us. Why should I be expecting anything, or feeling that I even need to pursue some grail of intimacy? Then it occurred to me that Sandy was probably following the same train of thought in her own mind.

I took some bacon and toast from the serving tray onto a plate, and began to butter my toast, not knowing what to say next.

Sandy sipped her coffee testily and said, "So, you still want to come to work with me today and tell the manager you're interested in that job if it comes open? Or if you want I could mention to him that I know someone who's interested."

"No, no, I'll go in person. I've found that to represent oneself directly, with the force of commitment behind one's desires, is by far the more effective approach when dealing with business people."

"I'm sure." There I'd gone and shut her up again. She nibbled at her toast, reached once more for her coffee cup and tipped it over. "Oh, now look what I've done."

I was up in an instant, grabbing a dishtowel from a rack beside the sink and mopping up the puddle.

"Not with the dishtowel, you idiot!" she exploded. She grabbed it out of my hand and tossed it into the sink, getting the dishrag instead to swab the mess off the plastic tablecloth. The spilled liquid had done it no harm at all. But meanwhile I'd backed off toward the kitchen doorway.

"Hey, I'm sorry," she said, wringing the rag out in the sink. "I don't know what got into me. The stupid dishtowel's not that important. And there's plenty of coffee; I'll just pour another cup. Sit down, finish your breakfast." She sat back down and brooded over a fresh cup of coffee.

"All right," I said calmly. We finished eating in silence. Then I tried to break the ice that had formed between us. "Is this your chosen career, this job as a waitress? I worked as a waiter once myself."

"No, no, not for me. The money's not bad for now, with tips and all . . ."

I thought of those breasts again (Zouzou's breasts), now clothed loosely in the folds of a nightgown and bathrobe.

She continued, "But I couldn't hack it for too long"--apparently oblivious to my common fantasies.

"So what else would you like to do?"

She put down her cup and held her chin in her hands. She gazed into space, or at least to a point behind me high on the wall over the door. "Oh, I've been thinking of going up north, to Alaska or Canada or maybe just to the coast of Washington somewhere, maybe go fishing for a living, or sailing for an adventure, or just hang out in the rocks and tide pools, or on the glaciers. Watch icebergs and whales, you know. I think it'd be fun."

Wanna come with me? I wanted her to say. But she didn't. At least not yet, anyway. The stars in her eyes faded to the shimmering haze of the northern lights, curtains wavering over her inner thoughts. Was it love I was feeling for this woman I'd just met and hardly knew at all?

I imagined Zouzou scoffing at me almost a century and more than an ocean away. "Scoff all you want," I silently answered her. You didn't have enough faith in love to come with me."

To Sandy I responded, "Well if I may have a small contribution to make, I should tell you that I hope you're not planning to go on your solitary adventures before I have the pleasure of a little more of your acquaintance."

She wrinkled her brow at me. "What are you talking about?"

Now I could see that I'd painted myself into a corner with my own eloquence; unfortunately the only remedy I could see was to paint myself out. "Forgive me if I've offended you. I meant not to be so forward as merely to indicate my humble appreciation of your friendship."

"Man, this is bizarre. Are you putting me on, or what?"

Only then did it dawn on my thick head that she wasn't offended so much by what I was saying, as by my formal manner of speaking. Then how to come clean, as the vernacular would have it, without giving my whole story away?

I retreated to the casual, clipped American speech I'd learned from the bums. "Oh, I'm really sorry, Sandy. You're right--I just got carried away. I studied Shakespeare once, y'see. Played a few roles on stage with that kind of jive. Sometimes it just comes back."

She tilted her head, gauging this frequency switch in her audio reception. "O-kayy. I was wondering, is this guy weird, or what? Shakespeare, huh? Was that in high school?"

"High school? No, I didn't finish school at the upper level. This was . . . with a theatre troupe in . . . Munich."

"You mean they do Shakespeare in Germany?"

"Oh, you bet. It was very popular. In translation, of course."

"Mmm, interesting. So you're German, are you?"

"Well, originally. I prefer to think of myself as American, now."

"That's nice. Look, Felix, I've got to get dressed and go downtown pretty quick to do some errands before work. You're welcome to come along with me if you like--we can have lunch together, and you can go in to work with me later on." She'd risen from the table and now began clearing dishes away. "You could check out a newspaper, if you wanted, for rentals, or other jobs, though I wouldn't expect much there. You're welcome to stay here another night if you like, until you find something."

One night at a time, was it?--or did I just hear an open invitation? Probably a noncommittal mixture of both.

"I really appreciate your hospitality, Sandy." She shyly kept her eyes averted, arranging dishes on the counter. I pressed my luck with a little comic relief. I stood swelling my chest and raised my voice to a near-bombastic pitch: "Certainly, I accept most humbly. My financial status, it is true, dictates an imminent return to the positive side of the ledger. I shall indeed look forward to furthering our as yet nascent acquaintance au déjeuner, et jusque ce soir.

"Hey, that's French," Sandy said with a giggle. "I thought you said you were German."

"Ah, I am many things," said the booming voice of wisdom.

"I'll bet. Now tell me something. What's 'nascent' mean?"

"Ah, it is indeed significant that you should ask. A propitious word to serve as the key to a hidden doorway of a deeper level of inquiry . . ."

"Hold on," Sandy said. "I think I need to get high before I hear any more of this. My poor brain's too small right now. It needs enlarging. Wanna help?--or maybe yours'll shrink, and we'll have lost the thread of some great revelation. I know that one, myself."

She led us into the living room, took an oriental water pipe out of a cabinet, and filled the bowl with green hemp from a lacquered box. "Not the best stuff in the world," she said, "but it'll do." She sat beside me on the couch.

When the smoldering bowl was finished I returned to the explanation of nascent. "It means just emerging, coming into being. Like the true dimension of human experience, the opening of the perceptions and heart to the floodtides of the cosmos. Like what separates us--with our infinite capacity for self-discovery and sharing of our inner resources and spiritual gifts, as well as appreciation of all the other gifts of the physical and psychic worlds--from bare existence, from mere Nothingness, Being and Organism. Call it love."

"And what play is that speech from?"

"Oh, some beggar's opera I saw in a dusty village in Portugal, many years ago. I'll tell you more about it sometime. But we should get going, now, right? To do your errands?" I sat upright, ready to stand up.

Sandy held me firmly with her languid gaze. She was lounging back on the couch, far from thoughts of worldly responsibilities. Her bathrobe fell open at the chest. She reached for my hand.

* * *

I trust the video-age reader will forgive me for not wallowing at length in the graphic depiction of sexual desire and gratification--even in the case of this healthy young man and woman both too long in conditions of abstinence. (Though for Sandy, that creature of the nineteen-seventies, "too long" was only a matter of weeks since her previous consort.) For myself, suffice it to say that I was not keen on waiting twenty more years for the esoteric pleasures of Sophie Tucker Vaughan. Life must go on.

My nights at the Riviera Pizza and Steak House were, if anything, tantalizing. I would stand over the great foaming sinks; Sandy would scurry about the dining room, and each time she popped into the kitchen, we would

exchange loving glances--or, if the manager wasn't around, a quick embrace. "Oh, Felix," she'd invariably say, "keep your wet hands off the back of my dress. What will the customers think?" I learned to make do with a passing brush of our lips.

Without these brief flashes of romance, the job would have meant unutterable drudgery for me. Now, if I could have been paid by the dish, it might have been a different story. I could have used my talents to devise an efficient system of operation so as to reap the maximum profit from the enterprise. Instead, I was just putting in time, and unevenly at that. It was either feast or famine. I would be standing around taking an idle inventory of the kitchenware, a study in stainless steel, and the next thing I knew I'd be fighting to keep up with stacks of dirty dishes piled before me like a small metropolis.

Then Sandy would appear, and go away again, and the dishes would as good as vanish. I thought I was in love.

I should have wondered why the discos became boring after the first time under the throbbing colored lights and jackhammer beat. I couldn't stand to watch television with her either, even while we fondled one another on her couch. Sandy's stereo provided more interesting fare, especially

enhanced by the effects of the drug we constantly smoked together.

Eventually that, too, became empty entertainment. As empty as our attempts at intimacy over candlelight suppers, whether at a fancier restaurant or in Sandy's apartment. Something was missing, all along, and I was too thick to realize it. Once I did realize it, I didn't know what to do about it, so I continued pretending that we were perfect lovers, made for each other. Even when she turned her back to me all night; even when she stopped coming by for kisses at the sink in the Riviera.

Finally Sandy made the decisive move, the night before Christmas. It was nothing personal, she assured me. It was just that she'd been offered a better job, as head waitress at the Café Champignon, a restaurant in Montgomery that was owned by the same management as the Riviera's. I was not quite despondent as I sat beside her in her blue Mazda, outside the drab house at 12A Jackson Street at midnight, looking at her as she stared straight ahead through the windshield at the rainy night. But I was truly sad.

Why wasn't it working?, I wanted to know. Why--when I'd said no problem, I'll come with you--had she said no?

That's just the way it is, she told me. No big deal. It happens all the time.

Not to me, I told her.

Okay, she said, welcome to the new world. And she got out and slammed the truck door behind her.

I slept that night, or tried to, on the couch in the living room, staring at the ridiculous silver tree in the corner. When morning came I had to wonder what had become of Christmas.

Sandy was half-apologetic. We tried to smile at one another as we exchanged the gifts we'd already bought for each other. We had a quiet little breakfast and then spent the early part of the day walking around the neighborhood in a drizzling rain, trying to talk. I could keep the rental, Sandy suggested. Yeah, I agreed--with money to pay for it as long as I could stand to keep washing dishes, alone.

The Comet was falling apart, I considered; but I could afford at least a new muffler and rebuilt carburetor, which, from what I could tell of the rough running condition, were the most essential repairs to begin with . . .

Nothing like car problems to get a man's mind off his other troubles.

By the first of the year Sandy had moved out.

* * *

By the fifteenth I was beside myself with loneliness, boredom and despair. The rent was due, and I decided for lack of any other visible options to go ahead and pay it.

It was the first time I'd actually met my landlady, Elena, who lived alone in the large downstairs part of the house. A woman I guessed to be in her late forties, she greeted me pleasantly at the door and invited me in.

"I was just about to have some tea," she said. "Would you care to have a cup with me?"

"Oh, sure," I said.

I knew, from comments of Sandy's, that the tea she served would be chamomile. I also knew that Elena was a recent divorcee, and former schoolteacher, that she'd had Sandy as an student in tenth-grade art class. Elena wore her hair in a bun.

As I admired the brightly colored paintings on her dining room and living room walls, she informed me that yes, they were all hers. Puttering in the kitchen, she stuck her head in the doorway every few moments to check where I was standing, or maybe it was merely to punctuate her comments. She preferred still lifes, she said, of all possible subjects, since they stayed put, and didn't present any arguments.

Tea was served. We sat at opposite ends of a small, tightly stuffed sofa, turned to face one another. Holding her cup and saucer in front of her, Elena eyed me unashamedly from head to toe. I began to feel uneasy. After my experience of quick success and quick failure with her tenant, I was in no mood for a repeat performance with the landlady.

Right away she started to talk about marriage, her former husband. I sipped my tea, admiring Elena's finely drawn eyebrows, her elegant Roman nose, and the faintly graying hair which hung in wisps around her head like an aura against the sunlit bay window behind her.

"At forty-six, I feel like I'm just beginning to live," she confided. "Getting out of that trap is the best thing I ever did."

"Oh? You don't find it too hard living alone now?"

"Oh, no. Not at all. Not at all. I have all the time I want for painting, and . . . well, it's just so freeing not to have to pick up someone else's dirty socks, if you know what I mean."

"I'm not sure I do."

"Oh, well, forgive me. How old are you, if I may be so bold?"

"Twenty-four," I lied.

"Pash. You know nothing of love, and its ridiculous consequences. How many women have you had?" She smiled at me impishly.

"Ma'am, really." I put down my teacup, and reached a nervous hand to my pants pocket. "If I could just give you the rent money . . ."

She laughed. "Oh, please forgive me. I'm getting too personal, now, too soon. And I wanted to ask what became of you two in the little love-nest upstairs."

Now I was almost getting angry. But I so little expected such treatment, at the hands of such a bold woman, that I didn't know how to defend myself, and instead simply fumed, turning several shades of red. Then I stood up to leave. To hell with politeness.

She grabbed my hand, quick as a wink, and pulled me back down, closer to her.

"Listen to me," she said in a passionate whisper. "Don't get so upset by my forward manner. What is there to hide, anyway? I'm not going to eat you up."

I won't go into all the sordid details of the affair, but to say at the outset that it convinced me of the importance of good grooming. Since for the first time in America I was able to appear in the company of others with clean body and clothes, hair and teeth, even fingernails, I exuded a more

natural confidence in the impression I was making. The results were dramatic in this first test case in my new milieu.

As for my social and romantic skills, Elena continued to turn my expectations topsy-turvy. She took the initiative in every aspect of our first sexual encounter on her enormous, silk-sheeted bed. When it was over she told me that she didn't care how many women I had screwed; of her men I was the best.

"And how many . . ." I started to ask.

"Now, now," she chided. "Tit for tat." And with a husky laugh she thrust a large breast into my mouth.

But I persisted. After gobbling the breast for a moment, I asked, innocently enough, "Do you think you'll ever marry again?"

"Don't talk to me about marriage," she spat, bristling. She pulled the sheet tight around her chest. "After that jackass I put up with for seventeen years."

"Let's see, then; you were what, twenty-eight, twenty-nine when you got married? That's rather late, isn't it? Did you suspect then that marriage wasn't for you?"

"Of course. We'd been sleeping together, illicitly, as it was described back then, for four years before he forced me to sign on the dotted line."

"Forced you?"

"Yes. He said he'd leave if I didn't commit to him. So I had no choice."

"But surely if he'd wanted you badly enough he could have compromised his morals in that respect."

"Oh, morals had no part in it. He was involved with two other women at the same time. He just wanted some insurance on me."

"I see. So what happened?"

She burst out: "He ended up after seventeen years, running off with one of the same fucking bitches he'd been going with when I married him. He'd been going at her all that time, behind my back. And she was married, too. To his best friend, yet."

"Goodness. I'm beginning to see what you mean."

"You're lucky you're still young enough not to have fallen for that trap yet. There're plenty of women who do the same thing to their so-called husbands."

"Including you, may I ask?"

"Oh, you brash young god. Me? No, never. Until now."

Just as precipitous as my seduction, was my fall from Elena's mature grace. She wasn't pleased, for instance, when I insisted on maintaining my

independent lodging after two weeks of lovemaking with her. She wasn't pleased when I continued working every night, away from her clutches, refusing even her offer of financial support. And she was especially displeased when I took the new Riviera waitress out dancing late one night after work.

She appeared at the door of my apartment early the next morning, waking me from four hours' sleep.

"Your headlights woke me up," she said. "I'm a light sleeper and can't have that. If you're going to be renting from me--"

"Don't give me that," I shot back. (I'd quickly learned to be as blunt and caustic as she.) "You have some nerve standing there when it's barely light out waking me from a sound sleep and complaining about my life. Now, do you mind?" And I started to close the door in her face.

"I think we need to talk about this."

"What? Elena, can't it wait? Christ."

"Christ has nothing to do with it. May I come in?"

A witch, I said to myself, she must be a witch. Her sudden gentle manner convinced me to let her in. Ten minutes later we were crawling around together under the covers.

Ten minutes more and we were lying side by side, her head resting on my arm, talking about marriage again.

"Elena, I keep trying to tell you, I'm not your husband. Why is it you keep putting me in his shoes? Can't you just let me be who I am, my own person?"

And in the end she was actually asking me to marry her. The nerve.

It's not that I was worried about Sophie's potential jealousy over these little escapades of mine. After all, what did she expect me to do, plunked down in this backwater society, left to take care of my own human needs and desires without the slightest trace of further concern on her part?

No, it seemed to me that my declaration of independence stemmed from my own instinctive sense of propriety for what best suited me in the long-term. True, I never told Elena about Sophie; but with or without a clearly envisioned destiny, I never forgot that I was headed elsewhere, farther down the road of running time.

* * *

The rest of the winter passed, inevitably, and left me in the shadow of struggling poverty. I'd had to find another apartment when Elena gave me

one day's notice. The rent for the new place was double what I'd been paying Elena. And the interminable boredom of the job at the Riviera finally caught up with me. I managed to keep afloat by means of a series of fleeting odd jobs in the high-turnover professions: gas-pumping, car-washing, car-parking, more dishwashing. These jobs were relatively easy to come by--though my chances were reduced when a prospective employer would discover that I had no social security number, no work visa. Some, however, seemed to prefer to pay me in cash, at a reduced rate.

When I was down and out I thought of Jake and Jim, doubtless in jail again by now. I hoped they were all right, knew they would be. My present condition made me second-guess my accelerated departure from their company. But basically I was glad I had left. Now I could (any day now) start to experience fully that American ideal called freedom.

An uneventful spring followed in the soggy footsteps of winter. Uneventful, that is, save for a certain prophetic dream I had one night late in May--the day, as it happened, that my long-gone travel visa expired. In the dream it was still Februaryish. I walked off my job at the gas station, going home with the excuse that I had a headache. I neglected to tell the boss that I didn't expect to be back. Actually, I had this inexplicable compulsion to start rebuilding the old cellar floor under the house on Jackson Street. I

wanted to turn it into a root cellar. I thought I would plant a big garden for the coming year, put up a lot of food, and not have to work so much at these deadening jobs.

Elena, an old woman with a head full of white hair, told me I had to get approval for the renovations from the actual owner of the house, who lived in Germany. I was not surprised by this. But when I asked to see the lease it turned out she was wrong. It was written in the lease that improvements could be undertaken at the discretion (and expense) of the lessee.

I got to work immediately, wrenching up the first gray board from the joists rotting over the exposed dirt of the cellar floor. I discovered a cavity of less than a foot between the joists and the foundation soil. As I pried and pounded and cleared away the rotten joists and floorboards, I wondered about the support of the boards I was standing on; but I continued working until I was left on a triangular platform in the southeast corner of the cellar. Around me the dirt stretched, cleared of the old joists, yet still a foot lower than the remaining boards on which I stood. I got down on my hands and knees once more to peer under the platform, but I saw only the ends of the remaining joist segments, hovering over the ground. I shook my head and decided to quit for the day.

It was dark outside. The moon was full. Elena was gone. I was thirsty. I went to her refrigerator and poured myself a large glass of tomato juice. I gazed out at the moon. Refreshed, I returned to work in the cellar, carrying more nails.

I drove nails into the last gray boards in the corner, rocking them and hammering again until they were tight and wouldn't rock any more. Then I stepped out onto the dirt, took three measured steps in a direct line to the opposite, northwest corner, and stopped. I stood in the center of the floor. I pounded a single nail there, its shiny head flush in the hard clay, crossed myself backwards, and waited.

The phone rang, upstairs. I ran up to answer it.

"You are invited to a ball at midnight on the twenty-second in Albuquerque, New Mexico," the female voice sang. I was taken aback. I'd heard something about this somewhere before . . . Right!--on the drive that first night to Sandy's apartment, to this house, back in December. But it wasn't quite right. Wasn't there supposed to be a bear, some kind of white, whispering bear? As the voice continued, I noticed that the wall clock over the phone read five past midnight. "The Silver and Turquoise Merchants' Association is hosting the gala event for all retailers from across the Southwest. Formal wear is not required; this is a costume ball, and your

imagination is welcome. Come, for example, as a white, whispering bear. See you there."

I finally recognized the voice as Sophie's. But by the time I blurted out, "Sophie, is that you? Where are you? Sophie--" the line had clicked silent.

iii

By mid-June the summer heat was stifling. I could no longer bear it. In order to make up for lost time, as I thought of it now, I decided I had better make a change in my life immediately. First I paid a visit to the Army-Navy surplus store. I found a durable canvas rucksack on a wooden frame, a sleeping bag, a poncho that could double as a rain shelter, an all-purpose pocket-knife, lightweight cookware and decent walking boots. Thus prepared, I quit my latest dishwashing job in Mobile, packed the camping gear with enough dried foods to get me through a month or so, abandoned the failing Comet with a farewell kiss on the hood ornament, hiked six blocks and stuck out my thumb on the highway to New Orleans.

I felt nervous at first. Jake and Jim had imparted to me, in my "basic training" for life here, the admonition that it was unwise to pick anyone up because, on one hand, you never knew what some mental case might spring on you, and on the other, the law could choose to bust you for picking up a hitchhiker. If these fears were the common mind-set of drivers, then I might be standing out there a long time--perhaps until the law came down on me for soliciting rides. My now-illegal status in the country didn't help my cause. But as I lacked any other means of personal identification, to pin me with an expired visa left in a house in New Orleans would be a feat.

My savvy advisors had also told me that when they didn't have wheels, they hitched all the time. In any case I felt that my appearance of boyish innocence, my hopeful expression and confidence would work in my favor.

I stood in the same spot for an hour and a half with no luck. I walked down the highway a half a mile to where another road brought more traffic into the westbound lane. Still I had no luck. I began to question my innate knack for influencing people to do my will, to trust me. It's one thing, however, to engage a person in conversation face-to-face, eye-to-eye; it's quite another to see them whizzing by at sixty miles an hour in their glass

and metal enclosures, insulated from the finer and subtler essences of human interaction that had always been my stock in trade.

Nevertheless, a car did finally stop for me. A skinny man with checked coat, crew cut and horn-rimmed glasses, whose back seat was full of all kinds of brushes, said he could take me all the way to New Orleans. He made a space on the back seat for my pack; I jumped in the front seat gratefully and we were off. He proceeded to talk my ear off for the next two hours, giving me his whole life story--which I will spare the reader from hearing, in the interest of proceeding with my own all-too-lengthy tale.

When we reached the harbor in New Orleans, I politely thanked my driver, refusing his offer of dinner together and a shared motel room. With a sad little smile he thanked me for my company and slowly drove off. I ate in blessed anonymity at a hamburger stand, and retired that night in one of my old dockside nooks. I found there a dogeared copy of Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn and went to sleep dreaming of rafting up the Mississippi, then flying to Albuquerque--no plane, just arms gliding. The next day I took a walk down the tracks to a spot at a safe distance where I'd be able to see Jim's and Jake's shack, out of some silly nostalgia for my first real home here in America.

It was gone, the whole area leveled and a chain link fence put up with a large sign advertising planned construction of a high-rise office building. I shouldered my pack and walked on, to begin my journey by foot up the great river.

By the end of the first day I was out of the urban sprawl and into the lush wild growth of the riverbank. Weary from my blistering pace in the heat of the day, I set up a quick, makeshift campsite, smoothing down a bed of long grass that would be sheltered by high overhanging brush from the morning sun. Too tired to bother with a campfire, I ate the one can of beans I'd brought along as a luxury for just such an occasion, took a long drink of river water, and lay down to enjoy the cool and starry vista of night. I was too exhausted to sleep quickly; my legs ached too badly. I found my evening's entertainment in the varied calls of the birds. The owls put lesser birds of fancy to an early flight, the jays retiring last with their caustic, futile rasps of protest. When the chiggers found me I pulled the sleeping bag over my head and slept peacefully the rest of the night in my cocoon.

The next day I came across a discarded spool of fishing line, which put me in a mind to try my luck at that most ancient of arts. I cut a long willow branch for a pole, tied on little loops of the line to hold the length of

it along the pole, and then bought a bobber and hooks at a roadside market. In the heat of the afternoon I stopped along the riverbank, and under a large flat stone found a good supply of grubs for bait. That day I only had bites, good enough to nibble away the bait. But the following day I caught two fat little catfish. I knew, from watching the dockside bums, that I would have to skin the ugly creatures. It was a difficult, slimy chore, which, lacking pliers, I had to use my teeth to accomplish. I was soon rewarded, however, with the tantalizing aroma of my catch roasting over the fire, and finally the unmatched taste of their creamy flesh. Fish became the fresh staple of my diet, to supplement my portable store of almonds and raisins, granola, dried apples, and quick-cooking bulgur. I added to these foods what wild greens--chickweed, purslane, dandelion, chicory--I could recognize from experience on my native soil, as well as the occasional treat from a riverside garden: young carrots, lettuce, early tomatoes, strawberries.

I meandered with the river by day, fishing lazily during the hottest mid-afternoons, and eased into restful sleep each night, my dreams following also the curves and flows of the river. I found myself rising regularly to the pale dawn ruled by the morning star, Lucifer. Why was it called Lucifer, I wondered, if it also was Venus, the goddess of love?

In a couple of days I had my answer. A wandering missionary crossed my path, enjoining me to take up the ways of the Lord. I listened politely, watching his fervent gestures as he spoke. In his waving hands he held a tattered Bible. He spoke to me about the end of the world, the salvation of my soul in the coming times of tribulation. I told him I'd been through my fair share of tribulation already, lately.

"Boy," he replied, "you hain't seen nothin' yet. Why, when the Lord Jesus decides to move on this sorry world agin, we won't know what hit us. Unless we're prepared. I'd advise you to take seriously the word of the Lord and to take Jesus Christ as your personal savior." I remained calm and gave him no argument, though I wondered at the logical selfishness of taking Jesus for my very own. He stopped talking, finally, watching my line in the river silent and still in its passive search for fish. His slick black hair shone in the sun.

Finally he rose to leave. "Whew, it's hot as the blazes here, i'n it?"

"That it is," I agreed.

"Here, boy, I'll leave this with you." He handed me his little Bible.

"Oh, no," I protested. "You'll need it. That's okay, really. I appreciate your generosity, though. You're a true Christian."

But he just stood there, immobile, the book held out to me.

"All right, if it makes you feel better, thank you, kind sir." I took the Bible and laid it down beside me.

I felt a tug on my line, looked to the water, and then it went slack again. I turned to the stranger and he was gone.

That night during catfish dinner I wondered again about the story of Lucifer, the fallen angel. But where in the vast book was the reference I wanted? No biblical scholar, I had no idea.

So before putting out my campfire I let my Bible fall open at random-to let, as it were, the voice of the universe speak. It opened to Isaiah, the fourteenth chapter. I didn't even have to read: the words "O Lucifer" jumped out at me from the sea of print. Immediately in the back of my mind grew an uneasiness that had to do with Sophie. Was she responsible for this apparent coincidence? For the appearance of the itinerant preacher? Was she connected in some way, not with benevolent astral forces dedicated to my spiritual advancement, but rather with a sinister cult of the devil? I read the text with a zeal to find out:

Hell from beneath is moved for thee to meet thee at thy coming: it stirreth up the dead for thee, even all the chief ones of the earth; it hath raised up from their thrones all the kings of the nations.

All they shall speak and say unto thee, art thou also become weak as we? art thou become like unto us?

Thy pomp is brought down to the grave, and the noise of thy viols: the worm is spread under thee, and the worms cover thee.

How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! how art thou cut down to the ground, which didst weaken the nations!

For thou hast said in thine heart, I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God: I will sit also upon the mount of the congregation, in the sides of the north:

I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the most High.

Yet thou shalt be brought down to hell, to the sides of the pit.

Shuddering, I snapped the book shut. For an instant I imagined that I saw Sophie sitting opposite me, across the campfire with her sphinx-like cat.

The vision of Sophie got me to wondering what I was really doing on this childish adventure. But I had to answer with the attendant question, what difference does it make how I lead this present life in the absence of any clearer direction from her? In this ongoing internal dialogue of mine,

that I was frankly getting sick of repeating over and over like an obnoxious pop song on AM radio, I was almost coming to the conclusion that I had best forget about this chimera called Sophie, that I should resign myself to the fact that I'd dropped through a crack in the fabric of time, was as good as lost to the etheric manipulator on high, and should get on with living my life in the manner to which I'd once been accustomed. But of course, I didn't realize then that that conclusion was pretty close to the message that was expected to emanate with the fluctuating transmissions of my brain.

* * *

One day about a week out of New Orleans, I parked my willow pole in the bushes and walked into a dusty little town on whose post office was lettered the name St. Francisville.

Charming name that--and one that I'd heard before from the lips of my old pals Jake and Jim. They'd spoken of it with a special fondness, as a place where they dreamed of retiring. The more I thought about it, and the more I saw of the little town with its slow-motion, straw-hatted octogenarians, the more I recalled that it wasn't the town itself they had spoken of so wistfully, but rather, "the country around St. Francisville."

I hadn't noticed any particular improvement in the geography thereabouts, and the town impressed me not in the least. As I finished my cooling milkshake at the soda fountain next to two giggling teeny-boppers and a couple of aged ex-farmers, I resolved to keep a fresh eye open for the special beauty of the countryside further north. The only traffic I had to dodge on my way out of town was a slow-motion police car. I waved good-naturedly to the driver and received for my efforts a sour frown. I concluded that either jaywalking was against law or custom in St. Francisville, or the sheriff preferred my face without its week's growth of beard, what I had imagined until then as developing into a rather stylish goatee.

In any case, I again found no particular attraction for the countryside to the north: the same riverbank vegetation, lush though it was, that I'd encountered from the outset of my trip; the same gentle contours, the same silty earth sloping into the river. Before dusk I was far enough outside of town and its fenced-off parcels of shoreline to begin looking out for a suitable campsite. Just as I'd settled on a nicely cleared, flat area I noticed an old cabin half-hidden in the woods. It seemed from a distance to be abandoned.

I walked by for a closer look. The windows were intact, but showed darkness within. The front door was locked, since who knew how long ago.

The yard enclosed within a half-collapsed fence was completely overgrown. So I returned to the clearing where I'd set down my pack, confident that I could stay there unchallenged.

As I kicked my foot around in the long grass I hit a solid object and discovered, on closer inspection, an overgrown pile of railroad ties. Aha--it occurred to me at once--just what I need to make that raft! With cedar trees right at hand in the neighboring woods to supply bark strips for lashings, I'd be all set for my Huck Finn adventure.

Immediately I began pulling ties out of the disordered pile and laying them aside in a neat row for the next day's work. The space left in the grass would be a ready-made bed for the night, cleared and flat.

Actually the ground was not as smooth as I had hoped. I found a flat rock to scrape some of the high humps down. As I lifted the rock I suddenly remembered that I'd forgotten to retrieve my fishing pole from where I'd left it, in the bushes outside St. Francisville. I reproached myself for the lapse but had other things to occupy my attention at the moment. It was not, after all, a great material loss.

I proceeded with my task, leveling tool in hand. The dirt was surprisingly soft. Then, to my surprise, I found the edge of the rock scraping at a fold of burlap. Great, I thought, a campsite right on somebody's refuse

dump. With a final disgusted swipe of the rock, something clicked--as I hit something metallic inside the burlap.

I looked around to make sure I was alone and proceeded to excavate my find with new energy. The bags--there were three of them--contained silver tea service, china, wooden boxes of silverware, velvet jewelry boxes.

Long distance thanks to Jake and Jim aside, the problem immediately presented itself to me: what was I going to do with all these hot valuables? I could just imagine seeking out a pawnbroker back in St. Francisville, probably the local sheriff moonlighting.

Then I had it: the raft, of course. But this bright idea faded as quickly as it had come, for the towns downriver could conceivably be on the alert for the stolen goods, and to float all the way back into the harbor of New Orleans with it was out of the question. Nevertheless, I envisioned my abandoned niche in the old dock area, and it seemed to me that a way might be found to unload and stash the bags somewhere, given a good moonless night and a bit of luck that the cop on his beat, or a welcoming party of the wise old wharf rats, wouldn't relieve me of my cargo as soon as I touched land.

Then again, I could put the bags right back in the ground here where I had found them, and wash my hands (as I once thought I had) of the whole

dirty business. But hadn't fate--or Sophie--planted these valuables in my path again as a sign that they were meant for me? Or was it, rather, a temptation, only to be overcome?

Darkness was not far off. I decided I was too tired and hungry to think straight. I would rebury the loot, cook a little supper--no, better do without a fire tonight. I would eat trail mix and chew over my options while I did so, then lay out my bedding and, as the saying goes, sleep on it.

That night I had a crazy dream in which I played the central character--my old friend Friedrich, the philosopher-ghost. With Friedrich's awareness, I felt that at the best of times, everything was an illusion. The workmen calling to one another on the building under construction high above the sidewalk, for instance: that was a phenomenon which served merely as a metaphor, linked with the spontaneous construction of an ant colony, to take another instance; both then serving on a common plane of existence to manifest a universal principle, the spontaneous and organic translation of a given form of essential being into, perhaps quite gratuitously, a different form; while neither particular example could be taken truly to represent the pure and secret--

CLAAANNNNGGGGG!

In the midst of his reflections Friedrich found himself virtually lifted from the sidewalk when a steel girder hurtling downward with an acceleration through twenty floors of sheer airy height landed on the sidewalk behind him. A construction worker on the skeleton of the building twenty floors up called down to him:

"Jesus mister, couldn't you hear us yellin' at ya? That sucker just about--"

Friedrich craned his neck upward and said loudly, "Yes I know, well it's done, you can go back to work now, you don't have to worry about me, we'll just everybody be a little more careful next time, eh?" and stepped off the curb onto a glossy black ant on his way home from work with a message for his queen about a fascinating new bakery down on Craven Avenue where there seemed to be an unlimited supply of fresh bread crumbs, and even sometimes sugary cake. . . .

Late in the night I was awakened by the sound of a car engine, tires crunching on gravel, and the flashing beam of headlights through the trees and out over the clearing. I lay perfectly still, with my heart pounding, instantly wide awake. I heard a car door slam shut, footsteps on the cabin's porch, a man's muttered cursing, and finally the cabin door closing.

Now the question became, do I move on now, or wait until morning? It was likely late enough at night that this fellow would sleep in, allowing me a little time in the early morning . . . but I lay there looking up at the stars and listening to the crickets, thinking that I wasn't going to be able to get to sleep again anyway...

The next thing I knew, it was nearly light out and I was being soaked by a fine drizzle. A cloud bank thick as cotton wool had rolled in and I could barely see the cabin through the mist. I got up quickly, ate a few handfuls of trail mix and headed to the trees for some strips of cedar bark. In a matter of minutes I had enough to work with and set about lashing the timbers together.

That job took me most of an hour; when I was done, there was still no sign of life from the cabin. I looked with pride on my simple craft, and then, with great effort lifting and sliding a corner at a time, managed to move it to the immediate riverbank and tilt one corner of it into the water. At that point it occurred to me that a long pole would be useful for navigation in the shallows. So I scouted in the woods again until I came up with a relatively straight ten-foot pole. Still no stirrings from the cabin.

Lastly I set to work digging up and hauling out the burlap bags, carrying them one by one to the river. As I made a final trip to the clearing

for my pack, I saw what I'd been dreading: a light on in the cabin, a wisp of smoke from its chimney. I hurried to my pack and ran with it to the riverbank. With a final look over my shoulder I saw a man's silhouette in the cabin's long window.

In a panic I pushed the raft fully into the water, trailing on the ground the long strip of bark intended for mooring. I balanced myself with one foot on the raft and one on the slippery, high bank as I reached for the first of the bags and brought it onto the raft. Naturally my lower foot had the effect of pushing the raft away from the shore, so I had to stop and tie the makeshift tether from a spike on the raft, to a bush. I heard the slam of the cabin door and the sound of curses shouted toward me through the mist.

I just managed to finish loading and cast off, then looked up to see a shabby cracker standing on the bank pointing a squirrel-gun at me.

"Jes' what in the hell d'ye think yer doin' with all them bags, and them timbers I was savin'?"

"I . . . uh--"

"What, do I have to stay 'roun' day and night, not even go out for a few beers and some squattin' bastard like you come along and think y'own the place?"

"Yes, sir, you're quite right, I have to agree. I can only plead ignorance, thinking that I'd stumbled on an old garbage dump, and--"

"What? I din't unnerstand ye. Where you from, boy?" He peered at me with the small red eyes of a pig. He had a salt-and-pepper bristle of a beard, a thick misshapen nose, and a splotched complexion that made him appear as if he'd just walked through a fire. He held the ancient rifle aimed at my chest.

"I've just been traveling upriver on my summer vacation; I'm a student, you see"--I motioned to my pack--"and now I'm heading back down--"

"You ain't headed nowhere with them there goods you dug up from my field. Now you jes pole yerself right back in here to showre."

I had held the craft steady, eight feet out. Now I lifted the pole slowly off the bottom--or started to--then stopped, making out as if it were stuck. I pulled and pulled, grunting and straining.

"Ah, come on," said the cracker. "Fuckin' greenhorn. Yank on the damn thing."

I did. The end of the pole jerked clear out of the water, straight for the cracker. He backed out of the way, lost his balance on the mud, slipped and dropped his gun. It went off aimed wildly. Birds screamed and scattered. I

pushed off the bank with the pole. The cracker took up his gun again and reloaded, cursing all the while. The raft was too ponderous to make the distance I needed quickly to get out of his range. It was time to abandon ship. I dove off the far side, tipping the raft as I went. Just before entering the water I saw the heavy bags rolling into the water behind me. I swam underwater as far as my lungs could stand it. When I resurfaced, the cracker resighted but fired late as I kicked down under for another long stretch. I repeated this tactic, varying my course, until I'd reached the wooded bank of an island several hundred yards out in the river. I could still see the empty raft floating lazily away. It was tempting to think of swimming back out to retrieve it, but the cracker stood his ground on the far bank, firing at me until he ran out of ammunition. By the time he stalked away back to the cabin, the raft had vanished in the fog downriver.

It was not far to the other side of the island; but from there I could see it was another long swim to reach the far shore of the river. I was not eager to repeat that exhausting feat right away. I also didn't know what to expect when I got to the western bank. Would the cracker have called the police--or worse, a gang of his friends--to meet me when I climbed ashore? There

was no telling; and yet I also felt I could not remain long on the island before pursuit would arrive by boat.

Since the cracker had not immediately come after me, and since I actually doubted he would dare to put the law on my tail, I felt safe enough to rest awhile in a bed of long grass.

My head spun over the predicament I was in now. I had no change of clothes, no sleeping bag, no food. No fishing gear. I'd lost the raft, and along with it, the ambition to make another. I wouldn't cross back to the cracker's territory, couldn't stay on the island, didn't know where to go further west . . . but fatigue got the best of my anxieties and I fell asleep, the dry heat of New Mexico burning through all these sodden, dead-end feelings of despair.

I dreamed--if I may be permitted the impertinence once again to intrude such unconventional narrative into my otherwise pedestrian American travelogue--I dreamed, I say, and in so doing I should further remark that in reporting such, it is not so much to impose a subjective interpretation, as a literate reader might expect; but rather to remind my expectant audience as I myself was reminded each time, of Sophie's looming presence, just, as it were, offstage. Be that as it may, this is where I found myself:

I was a clerk in an Indian craft store in Albuquerque, which sold mostly cheap jewelry imported from Taiwan, along with some Mexican and some local native handiwork. An old Indian, a Navaho, came into the store and asked to see what we had in medicine bracelets. I took out the appropriate tray from under the counter and let the customer see them. "Some of these are original handworkings we've collected from our own contacts," I proudly advised him, as if it were any tourist buyer I was addressing.

The Indian ignored me and made me feel that I'd said something wrong, or at least something not quite right. His wrinkled gaze had rested on one particular item more tarnished in its silverwork than the others, with several chips gone out of the side of an ovoid centerpiece of otherwise exquisite turquoise. He reached into his pocket and brought out for my eyes only a leathery palm containing several chips of turquoise. His eyes squinted as he looked up at me and said in a richly hollow bass, "How much for that one?"

He had never actually pointed out the bracelet which held his interest, but he seemed to know that I knew which one.

"Um well that's quite a bargain considering its antique value now in the market; you know these people want authentic pieces . . . Um, let's see, you look like you know what you're after--thirty-nine dollars?"

The Indian pulled out a dusty twenty and five from his other pocket and laid them on the table, separate and still crumpled. I gave him the bracelet; the Indian smiled and put it on; an iguana raced past the doorway with a silvery snake in its mouth--and I could swear the snake's eyes were turquoise.

I awoke after maybe an hour, opening silver eyes to a turquoise sky . . . and then I turned and saw the muddy Mississippi. I got to my feet and stood on the bank, stretching and taking in several deep breaths. There was nothing to do, really, but take the inevitable plunge. I decided first, however, to peel off my clothing and tie it in a bundle, boots and all, around my back.

Even so, I was not in good swimming shape, and my arms and legs felt like lead after only fifty yards. I briefly considered turning back--but would still have that distance to reswim; and for all the effort I would gain no improvement in my situation. Fifty more ahead and I'd be the greater part of the way to the western bank. So I plodded on, slowing my frantic pace to a more sustainable crawl. Eventually, after a grueling eternity, my

fingers touched mud, and I slithered onto the bank like some antediluvian--or postdiluvian--creature carrying on its throbbing shoulders the entire weight of future evolution.

I lay there panting, feet still in the water, in a state of semi-conscious exhaustion. I was not bothered by the close sound of traffic, as I was screened from view of the highway by a border of trees along the riverbank. I did, however, take notice when I heard the sound of a motor launch just out of view around the south point of the island. I quickly got to my feet and scrambled into my wet clothes in the shelter of the trees, then headed out to the road without waiting to see who it was that might be coming to look for me.

Fortunately the boat did not put ashore on my side. After cruising the bank slowly, it circled back toward the north around the island. This I could tell from my vantage point in the trees across the road, with glimpses not sufficient to identify clearly the boat's pilot.

But I smelled police. It was time to get moving again. I groomed my hair with my fingers as best I could, tucked my shirt in neatly, and stepped out onto the road. My boots were still squishy, but respectable enough in appearance. My clothes, unfortunately, made me look just like what I was--a fugitive. But they dried out well enough in the mid-morning sun. I stood

there watching occasional traffic go by for half an hour, until a farmer in an old truck picked me up. When he asked me where I was headed, I said "West"--then thought I'd better make it more specific: "Albuquerque."

He was only going into the nearest town, called New Roads. When he let me out at the south edge of town he told me that Route 1 continued south to US 190; there I could turn west to Opelousas, then south again toward New Iberia. I'd hit Interstate 10 and could take that west. I thanked him and watched him turn and drive back into town.

New Iberia had a certain tantalizing ring to it. Was that where I should be heading? Was there some modern Zouzou--or Maria--in wait for me there, if only I would take the cosmic hint and go there with both eyes open, heart ready, freedom now well-tempered, spirit and flesh willing to settle into their good graces in a new context, here on American soil? I didn't know.

I did know that I was starving to death, that if I got rides to Albuquerque at the present rate I'd arrive there a virtual skeleton. I had not even a solitary, soggy dollar bill, since I'd left my wallet in the now-drowned pack.

But I didn't have to worry long about my plight, because inside of twenty minutes a police cruiser pulled to a stop beside me. On the door

around the official crest were the words, "St. Francisville Sheriff's Dept."

The all-too-familiar driver leaned over and said through the open passenger-side window, "Get in."

I childishly hoped that the sheriff would give me a warning against hitchhiking. In a gesture of even more ill-founded self-confidence, I started to open the front passenger door--daring to hope that, having recognized me, the sheriff might have decided to offer me a ride. I was wrong, on both counts.

"What the hell you doing?" he exploded, reaching for his sawed-off shotgun. "Get in the back!"

I obeyed quickly. The locks on the rear doors clicked down by some remote control mechanism.

The cop, I thought to myself, looks like a well-shaven, heftier version of the cracker who'd tried to kill me. I started to form a plan to complain to this officer of the law about that recent threat to my personal safety.

"You're under arrest," he informed me. "You enjoy your little swim?"

"Oh-ho," I managed to laugh. "You mean it's against the law to swim without clothes here, officer? I'm awfully sorry. If I had known--"

"Shut the fuck up," he snarled, cheeks bulging with his chew. He maneuvered the car around on the highway to go back in the direction from which he'd come. I was separated from the front seat by a sturdy wire screen. He spat tobacco out the window and, with bulging cheek, continued talking to me out of the side of his mouth, keeping his eyes on me through the rear-view mirror. "You have the right to remain silent," he said. "You have the right to a lawyer and when we get to the station to book you, you are allowed one phone call."

I certainly didn't want to remain silent. "Officer, sir, am I permitted to ask the nature of the offense with which I am to be charged?"

Now my captor laughed, in the process coughing up a wad of phlegm which he had to expel out the window. "I can see I'm gonna need a lawyer myself to interrogate you. Listen, buddy. You're in for high and low larceny, at least two counts. There's those bags you sent to the bottom which we are in the process of recovering, and the railroad ties you filched from my brother Lindy's field. That enough for ya? If you want we can tack on the hitchhiking, vagrancy, trespassing, disturbing the peace, ah, let's see-- how 'bout we throw in the indecent bathing, for free?" I could see even from my limited view of his face that he was smiling broadly, enjoying himself.

That rankled, but I didn't immediately respond. My mind was racing over a connection that cropped up in my memory from something he'd said. Lindy--I'd heard that name before, and as I thought about it I recalled that I'd heard it from Jake's and Jim's conversation in the van on the way home from their robbery that last day of work. Something fleeting, muted and vague, about "gettin' the stuff up to Lindy." Could I use that remembered bit of information--along with my previous peek at their loot--in my defense? Or would it only strengthen the case against me? I didn't relish the prospect of blowing the whistle on my old friends. But it might come down to a matter of survival, them or me.

We'd turned right in New Roads and were quickly back at the river, rolling up a ramp onto a free highway ferry, which a sign said would land us right back in good old St. Francisville. I kissed the West good-bye.

So what about Lindy himself? Couldn't I get off the hook by pinning the goods on him? Certainly his brother the sheriff would not take kindly to this stratagem. But then, the wheels in the machinery of justice would likely move me beyond his little sphere of influence before I could present my final case in court.

Indeed, I was only in St. Francisville overnight before finding myself on a plane to Chicago for indictment relating to a whole series of thefts over

several states. So much for my dream of flying--stuck in an aisle seat while handcuffed to a joyless lawman. And so much for my faith in a so-called lawyer, a seedy little rat-faced man in a checked suit who interviewed me for five minutes while I devoured a plate of fried potatoes and boiled beans in the St. Francisville jail. I never got a chance to plead my case before a jury; the lawyer said he had an associate in Chicago who would work out a deal for me with the judge.

Some deal: I found myself at the end of a six-day chain of holding pens and summary hearings trundled along to a palatial cell-block in a federal penitentiary in Marion, Illinois, where I well imagined I could spend the rest of my days. Yet, even as the impassive guards led me in my gray and numbered togs to my gray and numbered cage, I planned the execution of my life story, one might say in an expectant mood anticipating the years of leisure and solitude so conducive to such a task.

But alas! That project had to wait for quite some time before I could turn my energies to its final accomplishment. To begin with, there was the immediate distraction of the riffraff who formed my present company: who cajoled me in the manner of all men kept together in segregation from their better halves; who chattered like drugged magpies, some with slurred speech

and some with hyperactive frenzy, all the day and night; who leered at me, solicited indecent favors, and made increasingly violent threats upon my undefiled person.

Out of this brackish sea of doomed humanity bobbed one day a relatively welcome sight: Jake Rubino, eating alone and dejected across the vast cafeteria. Instantly I was at his side, pumping his hand like the best of friends. No matter that it was his crime that had put me behind bars--he was a friend in a place where to be without friends is to be a fox thrown in with dogs.

"Hey, Felix!" Jake said warmly, brightening instantly at my appearance. He pushed away his half-finished plate of cardboard meat and pasty potatoes and extended his hand. "What's a nice guy like you doing in a place like this?"

"Please," I said in a low voice, "call me Chuck." I shook his hand and sat down in the empty chair next to him. He had a puzzled expression on his face, but before he could protest I went on: "It's a long story, but I think you know most of it. In essence, I found your stash at Lindy's place, by accident--"

"Ah, come on, quit pullin' my leg."

"No, really," I said, and I told him what had happened.

Jake listened carefully, shaking his head from time to time.

"Amazing, you guy. And I thought Lindy had it all together. Untouchable. With his brother the sheriff looking the other way, totally. Just goes to show ya. But, hey, what's this Chuck business? . . . ah, I know: that no-good tourist visa you left at the place . . . was it in exchange for Jim's car, we was wonderin?"

"You get the idea. I hope they never found the real Mr. Ready, by the way. It might make it awkward for there to be two of us around."

"No, kid, I think you'll be all right there. Even so, what'd you put down for the vital statistics? Wait, let me guess: Charles Ready, Jr., born, what, nineteen-fifty--"

"Five . . . Mainz--"

"Germany, son of Sgt. Charles Ready of the U.S. Army, and--"

"Genofeva Schimmelpreester . . ."

"Not bad, not bad. I like that." Jake took up his fork and began toying with a congealed lump of potatoes.

I felt like breaking the law again: "So then, what, if I may ask, are you doing here?"

Jake brightened suddenly. "Oh, you don't think we quit with that job do ya? After all, we hadn't even cashed in our chips yet. Had to make a livin' in the meanwhile, y'know."

"So where's Big Jim?"

Now Jake looked sad again, with downcast eyes and a thin-lipped frown. "Ah, they got him over'n New Mexico after he did a solo at some jewelry convention. I told him, I says, 'Jim, we don't do good separated like that, and I'm not comin' wit' ya to that job because it's too goddam risky.' Can you imagine the heat they had surroundin' that place? 'But the loot,' he says, stars in his big stupid eyes. 'Think of all that loot!' 'Yeah, you can think about it for the rest of your life in the New Mexico pen,' I says to him; and look who's got the right line on that one, now, huh? Anyways, I'm still hopin' we'll end up, through some dumb luck, together again so's we can play out our days playin' crib together, like the old days, like a coupla old maids, I guess. . . . Say, you play crib?"

To relate with telling detail the interesting but ultimately irrelevant entirety of my brief stay in this higher institution of justice would be, frankly, somewhat humiliating. It may be pertinent to mention, however, that under Jake's tutelage I learned to play cribbage, and to beat him two out

of every three. We played for cigarettes, which he greedily consumed on the spot if he won, and which I hoarded as favors to keep the cell-block bullies off my back. Having Jake on my side in the dog-eat-dog pecking order helped my cause, meanwhile, to an immeasurable degree; for what he lacked in size and age he made up for in experience and rough intelligence. A Vietnam war veteran, he showed me once the scar on his right side where he'd been hit by shrapnel from a claymore mine.

And it was under that rib cage, twisted into his old wound, that Jake caught a knife thrust while interceding on my behalf against a gorilla-like aggressor, one otherwise uneventful afternoon while we toweled off in the shower room. The mixture of gratitude and distress with which I witnessed this noble sacrifice, and the subsequent carrying off of its groaning, blubbering victim is indescribable.

I was not allowed to see Jake after that, whether alive or dead--nor was I informed whether he was still in this world. I only heard through a cell-mate that he'd been hit in the liver. I assumed the worst. Four days I spent in mourning, with even the head gorilla and his henchmen keeping their respectful distance--not, I might add, under any evident disciplinary restraint on the part of the prison authorities. During this time I was brought around by grief, shock, horror and desperation to the conclusion that if I ever

got out of this tank alive I would truly reform and leave behind forever any shady dealings that, no matter how innocently fallen into, could run me afoul of the law.

As if in answer to this unspoken pact between myself and my higher fate, I was soon released, and allowed to go free without trial. All the charges had been dropped. I was flabbergasted. By what providence, I demanded of my guard as he led me away from this hell, was I being delivered to the land of the living once again?

"Sheeit," he snickered, talking as if to an invisible third party. "Listen to this guy. Haven't they reamed his ass out of all that crap yet?" Then he half turned to me and spoke more directly, though out of the side of his tobacco-bulged mouth in a way that reminded me of Sheriff Harper Elkin of St. Francisville, Louisiana. "Y'know your friend's crony over New Mexico way? A Big Jim?"

"Yeah . . ."

"Scuttle has it that when he heard through the grapevine of your little sweetie's death--and his little sweetie too whadya bet--he took pity on you and confessed to the job you were up for. Said you had nothin' to do with it."

"Big Jim . . . wow, that's wonderful of him." I hesitated to get myself in hotter water now while on my way out--but I had to know how his confession had overcome the weight of circumstantial evidence against me. I turned on my chummiest tone for this bear of a guard walking at my side: "I don't know how much you know about it; but, it's funny, there was all this stuff they claimed I was caught with. I wonder why they saw fit to clear me of it."

"Yeah I heard about it. There's no secrets around this place, lemme tell ya. They never found the goods. Dredged and dived, nothin'. So they had nothin' on you anyway. But you're lucky someone spoke up for you, because otherwise they woulda chalked that one up to you anyhow and I coulda thrown away this here key. Hope you enjoyed your vacation, sister. Come back and see us, now, y'heah?" He tittered like a schoolgirl as he shuffled away back into the block.

I walked out into the care of another deputy of the state, who led me into the sickly fluorescence of an office cubicle to sign a series of documents, then to a room where I changed back into my mud-shined suit of civilian clothes. I was Charles Ready no more. I looked proudly down at my old self, then tried on a smile in the change-room mirror which I wore

for the unsmiling secretary on my way out the door into the blazing light of day. I was a free man again, penniless but free.

iv

I was back on the road again, thumb out, headed for Albuquerque. Whether I was bound only for a token look at the sausage business, a hopeless hunt for Sophie in some Indian village in the New Mexico desert (or, worse, an unknowable destination further south), or a fate as yet undreamed of, it didn't much matter. Albuquerque would serve as a dim beacon offering some tenuous connection to me, Felix Kruller, in a vast unwelcoming sea.

When my second ride, an air-conditioned semi that rode, it seemed, three stories high above the road, took me west from St. Louis toward Kansas, I thought it would be a minor detour from my southwesterly destination. The driver dropped me off in Lawrence, Kansas five hours later; it was past midnight and still prairie-hot. I hadn't eaten a decent meal in months, and my mouth was puckered and dry from the salty potato chips the kind truck driver had shared with me on the way. I knew from his map

that Lawrence, not far out of Kansas City, was but "a stone's throw" from Topeka. A stone's throw on the map still meant thirty-five miles of highway yet to cover, however, and at this hour my chances of getting a ride to anywhere but the nearest jail seemed slim.

I considered calling Margaret Smith, collect. Surely she would remember me from the David Livingstone and give me shelter for the night--perhaps even a sample of her home-cooking.

After half a dozen rings of the phone, she answered in a sleepy, worried voice.

I spoke directly. "Hello, Mrs. Smith. This is Felix Kruller. Remember, from the cruise ship?"

"Yes, yes, I remember."

"I'm very sorry to bother you at this time of night."

"No, that's all right. I'd only just barely gotten to sleep after watching a late movie on TV. Goodness, I thought something had happened to Terry."

"Forgive me. The thing is, I'm in Lawrence. I've been hitchhiking, and it seems I'm kind of stranded for the night, and . . ."

"Well, you're certainly welcome to come stay here. I could bring the station wagon out to get you if you like."

"I know this is quite presumptuous of me to ask."

"Not at all. When a person's in trouble, to help as one is able is the only thing."

"I really appreciate it, Mrs. Smith."

"Please, it's Margaret. Think nothing of it. I'll be out there in, oh, forty-five minutes. Where are you exactly?"

In that forty-five minutes I was filled with the renewed glow of friendship with this kind woman. She picked me up outside the Seven-Eleven, greeting me with a warm squeeze of her delicate hand. I noticed that she'd lost a little weight since I'd last seen her; her hair was also different, straighter and cut short. She wore a blue, flowered print, cotton dress, and low-heeled, brushed leather shoes.

She asked how I'd been enjoying my stay in her country. I hesitated to tell her just yet that I'd spent my most recent chunk of it behind bars, and a good part of the rest on the bum. I also resisted my old temptation to embellish the truth with fancy rhetoric about the quaint charms of the Vieux Carré, the pleasant grandeur of the Mississippi, the marvel of the interstate highway system, and so on. Yet there I sat, dirty, hungry and broke, and I had to say something. So I started at the beginning, or as close to it as I could with the respectable truth.

"I decided early on that to truly appreciate this 'land of opportunity,' as it is justifiably known abroad, I should work shoulder to shoulder with its common people--both to know them and to find the natural avenue for whatever talents I proved to possess . . ." No, no, this approach was all wrong; it didn't suit my listener. Margaret was looking at me with quick sideways glances, brows knitted just as Sandy's had when I'd come on to her with my highfaluting nonsense. I tried another tack:

"So I worked at this and that, y'know: washed dishes here, pumped gas there, parked cars . . . wasn't too bad. I was starting to make a living, anyway. This was in Mobile, Alabama. Then after awhile I got bored with mindless jobs for low pay, took what little money I'd managed to save and started on a camping trip up the Mississippi."

"Oh, that sounds interesting. Our family used to take camping trips in the fall; Mervin was great for fishing."

"Yes, well, this one didn't work out. You see, I found this pile of railroad ties, perfect for building the raft I'd dreamed of since reading some of that classic of your early literature, Huckleberry Finn."

Margaret said with a little laugh, "Oh how fascinating. I remember that character. Wasn't he in the movie about Tom Sawyer?"

"I wouldn't be surprised. The trouble was, under these railroad ties . . .
." and I proceeded to relate to her the whole sad tale. I concluded by stating
that I was bound for Albuquerque to look up a relative who might be able to
offer me a job.

She thought none the worse for me. On the contrary, upon arrival at
her modest yet ample suburban house, she immediately fetched a leftover
pot roast from the refrigerator and warmed a goodly chunk of it, along with
the accompaniments, in the countertop electric oven. Though it was getting
on two o'clock in the morning, we both properly accepted my need for a
nourishing meal before the night's sleep. "Pot roast was Mervin's favorite
dish," my hostess said.

Margaret buttered bread for me and poured a tall glass of milk while
the rest of the meal was heating. Then she sat across the kitchen table from
me while I ate, telling me of her doings in the past year, and those of her
family. She'd regaled her bridge-playing friends with the story of the rescue
at sea--without, I presume, covering the whole picture. Following her
experience of apartheid in South Africa, she'd been led to join the local
Quaker meeting, where she found a solid sense of connection with others of
like mind, and a new sense of peacefulness in her own life. She got along
better than ever with Devon, for instance, even though, at sixteen now, he

was still in the stage of rebelling, no doubt missing the stabilizing influence of his father. Terry was doing fine as always. In fact he'd become such a skillful pilot that he'd started a barnstorming act at the state fairgrounds, flying "loop-de-loops and that kind of thing" in an old fashioned biplane that had Margaret scared to death. She would never dare go watch him perform. And of course he stubbornly refused to listen to her complaints about such a dangerous career. Terry had his own mind--always had--just like his father. Margaret looked sad again, her watering eyes magnified by the large lenses of her glasses, as I'd noticed at each mention of her departed husband.

This time, my lovely meal just finished, I reached my hand across the quarter of the table that separated us and took her hand. At my touch a tide of tears was unloosed, but without any great noise, because, as Margaret managed to splutter, she didn't want to wake Devon or Sharon. She pulled me toward her with a gentle pressure. I leaned toward her in my chair, then stood and walked to her side, where I stooped, then kneeled, and comforted her with an arm around her shoulder. She lay her head against my chest and quietly sobbed for some minutes, still holding my left arm tightly to her.

It was apparent to me that I was fulfilling a role that none of her children had adequately managed, to allow Margaret to release her grief. It was also becoming evident, through the warm contact of my arm against the

poor woman's breast, that there had been, since her husband's death, a particularly poignant void in her life. For my part, I was aware in myself of reawakening feelings, notably a kind of filial attraction which was by now familiar through my relationships with Elena, Maria, even the Krull housemaid Genofeva, or--for those who like to trace such impulses to infancy--my nursemaid. Which is to say, that this so-called filial attraction was not wholly innocent. Yet, if anything, the human animal is supremely capable of learning, and most directly, learning from mistakes. I resolved firmly to maintain a dignified sense of self-possession with this woman, whatever the nature of her need.

She stood, we both stood, embracing in the stillness of the night. She looked up at me, and sniffling, said, "I'm sorry, Felix, if I've embarrassed you."

"No, you haven't. It's all right. I don't mind at all."

She rested her head against my chest again and breathed deeply.

"Come," she said finally, taking my hand. "I'll show you where you can sleep. We crept upstairs silently. We passed two closed bedroom doors and came to two open doors at the end of the hall. "This is Terry's old room--" she pointed to the right--"but Felix," and I knew what was coming, "will you to stay with me tonight?"

If she'd let me answer then, I would probably have refused. But she added, still whispering, "Don't think badly of me. I'm not an immoral woman. I would just like to have you by my side. Would you do that?"

"Yes," I whispered.

We undressed in the dark. Margaret put on a nightgown. I had no such luxury, and plunged under the light covers nude beside her. There I entered into the most exquisite experience of intimacy I had yet experienced—yet without the usual fiery splendor of the sexual drama. We simply lay side by side, clasped in one another's languid arms, even feeling, in a casual and utterly marvelous manner, the tenderer parts of our respective anatomies upon occasion, with neither an undue upsurge of passion nor skittish withdrawal of the soothing touch. I wondered if Margaret had ever experienced such bliss in all her years of making love to Mervin Smith, and could only doubt it. I wondered if I would again, and somehow knew that until I did, I would aspire to it. But not here, not in Margaret's, Mervin's bed again, not in Topeka, Kansas. All the same, I fell asleep contented as a newborn babe, with Margaret beside me softly sighing, lightly kissing, then drifting off in silent and pure repose.

In the morning she left me sleeping while she got up at the sound of the alarm to make breakfast for Devon and Sharon, both of whom were off

to catch buses for school. She stayed up making a package of sandwiches, cookies and blueberry pie for me to take with me on the road. She knew that I would leave, without any need for us to discuss a change in plans.

When I got up I noticed that Margaret had had the sense of propriety to close the guest room door.

"Devon was sorry he missed you," she told me over a hearty breakfast of pancakes and scrambled eggs. "He wanted to tell you his predictions for the baseball season this year. You may remember how crazy he is about the Royals. Well, he said to tell you they're going to win the pennant this year."

"That's great. You tell him for me that I hope they beat the Yanks in the playoffs."

"I didn't know you followed baseball."

"Oh, not really. I kind of go by the names of the teams, more than anything else."

"Also it would have been nice for you to meet my daughter Sharon. I knew you needed your sleep, though. Here, I'll show you her picture."

Margaret went to the living room and retrieved a color portrait of Sharon, taken with cap and gown signifying her graduation from high school, and brushed with the skillful strokes of the touch-up artist to make her nearly attractive. She appeared too plump for my taste, her smile too

close to a grimace. Her mother ventured, "Of course, if I could convince you to stay another night, you'd have a chance to meet her--and maybe catch a Royals game on TV if you're so inclined . . ." The latter option was offered I thought too artificially, as if to couch the former in innocence--but then maybe I was being unfair, my perceptions colored by reminiscence of a past complication.

"No, really, Margaret, you've been too kind to me."

"You know you're welcome to stay," she went on, "another day, or longer if you like. You know you're welcome any time."

"Thank you, Margaret."

"Felix, about last night . . ."

"It was absolutely exquisite."

"Yes, it was. I have to thank you. I wish I could tell you what you've given me."

"I know. I feel the same. I think we may have shared something, well, perhaps not unique, but certainly divine."

"It will be unique in my life," she said with a wistful expression, half-sad. There followed some moments of peaceful reflection; then she brightly said, "Now tell me, are you really determined to go on to Albuquerque, of all places?"

I laughed, out of nervous uncertainty. I was no longer inclined to pursue the false excuse of a relative with a possible job there. I'd already lived out that story in one form (in Paris), and was eighty-one years too late to take advantage of Schimmelpreester's second offer. I must be slipping, I thought to myself. I had to tell Margaret something plausible. It would have been impossible to convey my true sense of mission in the vicinity of Albuquerque, raising the whole improbable issue of my relationship with Sophie. Yet without such justification my journey must have seemed to this housewife and mother of three as little more than the adolescent wandering of an aimless drifter. Behold Felix Krull--a genuine Bohemian!

No. I would have to do better than that. I longed for a contemporary, if not transcendent, purpose more in keeping with my original intentions. Suddenly, it came, and at the same time strangely left me aching for Sophie. It was as if the night's enchantment with Margaret were transferred in an instant to her--smug, pretentious bitch, or witch, that she was. I willed my fuzzed head to clear.

"Margaret, I just had an idea. Could you tell me how to get in touch with your son Terry?"

"Why, certainly. But whatever for?"

"I'd like to learn how to fly."

"Oh, you're joking!"

"No, not at all. Ever since I arrived on this vast continent I've aspired to see it with more of an overview, the perspective that was in former times reserved for the gods."

"Or fools with wax wings, as I remember."

"True enough, but times have changed. Humanity, it seems, has overcome previous limitations. More is possible to us now. We owe it to the spirit of evolution that has produced such clever, conscious animals as ourselves in the first place, to keep apace."

"You sound very much like Terry. I'm sure you two will get along well together, if nothing else." And with a resigned sulk she got Terry's address and phone number for me.

"Hutchinson--where's that?"

"About a hundred and fifty miles southwest of here. It's where the state fairgrounds are. You could take Interstate Thirty-five to Emporia, if you don't get picked up by the police, and then Route Fifty, which will have less traffic but at least you'll be legal, hitchhiking."

I rose to leave. "You've been very good to me, Margaret. I will remember you, and this time together, always. Who knows, perhaps some day fate will bring me to your door again."

"Or me to yours."

"Y'never know."

"No."

"Good-bye, Margaret."

"Good-bye."

* * *

Five weeks later I stood in a field at the Kansas state fairgrounds, accepting a little silver pair of wings which the instructor was pinning on the lapel of my flight jacket. Not only had I learned to fly in record time; I'd also mastered a handful of barnstorming stunts that Terry Smith had personally taught me--and which the instructor himself had tried to talk me out of. The couple of other pilots and mechanics on hand broke into a sparse and choppy applause. I stood there proudly beaming, thinking of myself as coming closer to Sophie, with new powers to approach her heights, her territory--even if by means that to her may have been crude and antiquated.

Naturally I myself didn't think of the technology as crude and antiquated. On the contrary, for me it was a means of transcendence only dreamed of for countless ages. To soar above the patchwork of farms,

gamboling through the clouds, diving and rising at will like any feathered denizen of the air, worked as leavening for a soul otherwise freighted with earthly cares. How trivial the pursuits of the human personality, when viewed from the angle of the gods and goddesses, from above. How narrow and tortuous our two-dimensional travels upon the fabric of the globe! It took me but one flight to realize the futility of my self-serving quests for advancement while limited to the horizontal plane, and to surrender to the ineffable possibilities offered by the vertical.

That sensation I could appreciate even as a mere passenger. When I took the controls of the craft for the first time, it was yet another revelation that was visceral as well as--to me, at least--spiritual. By subtle manipulations of wings and tail, by varying my speed and trajectory, I found I had virtually unlimited movement. I had evolved beyond the normal range of human experience, become almost as another species of being. I had virtually acquired another body.

* * *

Until the day the sky fell.

Terry invited me on the fateful October morning to come back with him after the fair to Topeka for a visit--his mom would make chicken dinner, I could finally meet his sister Sharon, and if it got too boring we could watch the playoffs with Devon.

Butch, Terry's wolf-like Malamute, stood beside him wagging his tail, looking up at us as if listening. I still had reservations about ever seeing Margaret again, and especially in Terry's presence. Her blond, crew-cut son had been gracious enough in taking me under his wing, setting me up with a job cleaning stalls at the fairgrounds and a basement room to rent nearby, not to mention letting me pilot his plane for the stunt show. I'd told him the partial truth about Margaret and myself--that I'd met her and Devon last year on the cruise ship, and that on my way out west I'd stopped by to say hello. I was living like many young people in America seemed to be doing, seeing the country while traveling light, working as needed to get by. All of this had gone over well enough; now I didn't want to stretch my luck with a reunion à trois.

But in the weeks after that night with Margaret, I'd missed her, what we had experienced and what we had yet to experience. In an impulsive moment I overrode my misgivings with an old confidence that anything was possible, and agreed to go. As soon as I said this, Butch put his tail between

his legs, grunted and lay down looking up at me with a baleful expression. I gave the dog credit for understanding what I hoped his master didn't.

The afternoon's stunt flight over the usual large audience began normally enough. I thought Butch was still acting rather moody, but he willingly jumped in the back seat of the plane's open cockpit as we prepared to take off. I gained altitude and speed, circled and began my routine. I zipped and looped to the oohs and aahs of the crowd. Shot off low and came back high, then dove again, pulling out at the last possible second. Butch hung in there waiting to play his part. I gave him the signal: "Okay, Butch, go!" I held a straight, horizontal trajectory. The dog jumped onto the wing. I banked slightly that way, giving with the extra weight, then stabilized, then banked the other way. People in the crowd were waving their hats at us. I was in my element.

Yes, why not pay Margaret a sociable visit again? "Felix, about last night . . . You know you're welcome any time."

Then I heard Butch growl. I looked over my shoulder to see a toothy grimace, almost a dog-smile, a wolf-grin. He leapt. I ducked, and Butch flew past me only to land on the opposite wing. With the sudden shift in weight the plane jerked over, so that we were nearly in a roll, and with a frantic scrabbling of blunt claws on taut canvas, Butch went down.

I screamed. The dog hit the ground nose first, tumbling over and over in a flurry of fur.

I pulled the biplane sharply up to level over the gasping crowd; then up and out for a return loop. I didn't want to land again. I pictured the S.P.C.A. arriving in force to lead me away to a cage of my own for perpetrating such an act of unspeakable cruelty on a dumb brute. Butch had earned his wings riding planes at Midwestern fairgrounds for eight years--outliving, in the process, his previous owner, a Hollywood stunt pilot; but that would just count against me now.

I turned the nose of the plane in a tight roll that looped back down over the crowd in a last flourishing somersault (a stunt that had something of an operatic twist of grief along with its usual suicidal abandon), caught a glimpse of an ambulance crew scraping Butch off the packed earth runway, and gunned the throttle full forward. I flew away and out of sight aimless and uncharted, wanting the stratosphere or beyond. In the end, with a falling fuel-gauge needle, I settled for Kansas dirt. I landed the craft softly in a field of alfalfa, then just sat in the dusty heat, watching the gnats inspect this gigantic newcomer. My goggles made me look like King Gnat himself. And that's exactly who I felt like.

An hour later, I was still sitting there in the cockpit. Hearing a snuffling sound at the rear of the plane, I turned to see an ancient English setter wagging his hairy tail and slobbering over the tail stabilizer.

"Here, pooch. Nice doggy, come on--"

The dog whined affectionately and clambered up to the cockpit, forgetting about rabbits for his new-found friend.

"Come on, come on up here, that's right, yeah . . ."

The dog jumped up clumsily, then settled down on the wing to my right. In my state of grief and shock I imagined the newcomer wanting to say to me, as I looked in his liquid eyes, "Forget that old dead mutt, man; now you've got me! Let's get going! And don't you worry, neither, 'cause I've got nothin' to lose but a few poor rabbits!"

I smiled at him, and the dog seemed to smile back, his tongue beating like a heart as it lolled amid the shiny canine teeth. In his eagerness for my affection, he was pussyfooting on the wing and drooling from his ample red gums.

I patted and stroked the dog's head and he immediately curled up prone on the canvas, resting his head on his front paws and continuing to gaze at me fondly and expectantly. I was tempted to take off again, to get over the barrier of fear created in me by Butch's fall. But I had no heart for

flying now. The fact that I was short of fuel merely confirmed my deeper, intuitive feeling that I was grounded for good.

I walked for miles and miles, into the nearest town, with my new-found friend at my side. He had hesitated as we passed the driveway of the first farm; then he had continued on with me, tail wagging as carefree as ever.

I had a terrible thirst by the time the dusty trek was over. I stopped in at a roadside tavern for a cooling brew. As I swung the screen door open with a tinkling of bells, the bartender immediately looked at me and said, "No dogs allowed." He pointed over his shoulder to a sign on the wall stating the same. Unfortunately my thirst couldn't wait, so the dog would. He sat down obediently outside the door. I patted his head and walked in. The TV on the wall carried the drone of a baseball announcer's voice into the room.

"That's Frederickson's dog," a man in a green cap said to me. He was sitting on the barstool closest to the door. The very smell of cold beer was intoxicating. I walked past the man without responding and sat next to him at the bar. He turned to me again and asked somewhat brusquely, "What's he doing with you?"

"I'll have a draft," I said quickly to the bartender, glad that my stint at the flying school had provided me also with a part time job as groundskeeper, and thus a new wallet with a little cash. To my neighbor sitting at the bar I said, "The dog? I don't know. He followed me into town."

"Into town? You mean you was on foot? Where were you at then, when you started?"

"That, my good man, is a long story." I sipped the cold beer like nectar from heaven. He finished his glass and asked for another. From his girth I guessed he did so with fair regularity.

"Well, gawd, I don't have time for a long story, the Royals is comin' to bat. You ain't a Yankee fan, I hope. Where'd you say you was from?"

"Mobile, Alabama, last. Since then I've been on the road, oh, I guess-
_"

"Sshh . . . let's go, George, baby!"

I sat at the bar and watched the ninth inning end. The American Revolution, a rerun: the Royals had lost to the Yankees. No one said anything. The man in the green hat looked as if all the beer he'd drunk could well reemerge in the form of tears. The bar closed and all the sad-eyed men

filed out. I was the last to leave. Finally the bartender said, "Maybe next year, huh?"

Outside the bar the dog was gone. Despondent, not over the fate of the local baseball club but at my own swift and yet also gradual and extenuated demise, I walked down the road a little ways, waiting until the traffic died down, and slept that night in a ditch.

I usually have no trouble sleeping. When I do toss and turn, the dreams come thick and fast, and are invariably vivid and memorable--at least for my own psychic interest. In this case I am happy to report even the unpleasant episodes that I experienced in that dormant state; because they comprise a chapter in my life that I was, by virtue of the dreaming, able to bypass in the living.

I was once again Friedrich the doomed sage, that hulking ghost from the past. I sat in solitude at an outdoor picnic table of a McDonald's restaurant in Boulder, Colorado, writing in the tail end of a diary as I munched tunafish sandwiches out of a lunch bag. In those investigations, this day, I chose to take a philosophical look at the act of writing. I was struck, for example, with the absolutely arbitrary correspondence between letters and sounds, sounds and meanings, meanings and necessities. A

possible exception was the letter-sound-meaning I, which carried its own necessity with a boundless dimension of extended reference to universal identity.

In the heart of this written reflection, a bird passing overhead chose to deliver a calling card of sorts which dropped onto the page precisely at the terminus of the last sentence.

I (or Friedrich) abruptly rose from the table, grabbed my paper and pen along with the half-full lunch bag, and hurried back to work at the car wash down the street.

I waited at the crosswalk for the light to change. It was just another day. All days were taking the same course for me now, regardless of first impressions. Always my hopes and ambitions were stimulated by the prospects offered up by the latest scenes and characters of my life; yet always I ended up bemused by my own tunnel-vision that led me to see such experiences as somehow important or unique. In actuality, I realized as the light turned green and I entered the crosswalk amid the bustling noonday crowd, my experiences were not unique, but were swirled in a general soup pot which dissolved them as part of the all and everything. What was more, when that universal swill was ever spilled or even carefully poured, it was sure to cascade outward to swallow every elusive possibility.

So this was Colorado, it occurred to me: the ultimate landscape, mile-high clean atmosphere, refreshing outdoors-loving people. No matter. I saw myself as a rat in a maze where the corridors converge, dumping rats from everywhere together, all jumping their respective sinking ships in a blind search for an opening, a way up, a way out.

In the face of this numbing revelation, I took to drink. That is, on this particular, agonizingly hot day at an unspecified time of year, I decided that no work could be done. I walked right past the carwash, waved at my boss (in the dream, it was Terry) and went home to my apartment. There I drank up seven vodka and lime coolers, and went to bed at five o'clock.

*

Felix again: I was moving into a new apartment. I had morning coffee with the young, attractive, single landlady, lunched alone amid bare walls and half-opened boxes, was invited back for a lovely zucchini-and-cheese casserole, and that night was all moved in.

*

Now, with a disturbing change of costume, I was wretched Ribeiro, alias Little Fitchie. The landlady didn't give me the time of day. That was fine with me; she was now an old hag herself, scrubbing floors. With the hope of meeting congenial companions and appeasing my benefactor and godfather, the venerable Schimmelpreester (alias Friedrich), I enrolled in four courses at a local college of spiritualism: The Politics of X-rays, Existentialist Microbiology, The Arcane Structure of Silent Films, and Surrealistic Psychoanalysis. As I walked out of the registration hall with a horde of other new students, it occurred to me that I would like to try heroin, just once.

*

I (alias Felix) took a bus to the airport and bought a ticket for Albuquerque. Over the shoulder of the ticket agent I saw a sign that read--

The carrier shall not be liable for loss, damage, delay or other result caused by acts of God, perils of the air, public enemies, public authorities acting with actual or apparent authority, authority of law, quarantine, riots, strikes, civil commotions, or hazards incident to a state of war.

I got cold feet and asked for my money back.

*

I headed south on the interstate highway on horseback. Cars and trucks honked and veered, their drivers cursing me with angry expressions and obscene gestures. I clopped slowly on my way, a modern Don Quixote in search of a windmill named Sophie. On my own lean and raggedly armored hack (alias Rocinante) I weaved down the highway, bound, of course, for Albuquerque. I knew it would take ages to get there; I knew just as clearly that I had nothing else to do, lose, or win that was of any consequence next to my immediate and everlasting task--to live, evolve, and ride astride this old horse death who could be beat forever to plod or gallop according to one's whim. At the moment, my faithful steed chose only to plod.

Ahead of me I saw nothing unusual, but I heard the strains of a distant pied piper. No, it was more: a personal, if invisible, fife-and-drum corps,

sporting an invisible flag as they rambled over this latest version of a lost continent; luring me yet farther on down the road.

v

All roads in America lead to California. I took heed of my forewarning about more lost time at intermediate stops along the way, took advantage of a friendly trucker going all the way to Oakland, and soon settled in for the winter in a cozy coastal community in the north, complete with a cheap hotel room and a job in the health-food store. By now I felt I had learned to forget what might have been in favor of what was.

Margaret, Elena, Sandy, Zouzou and Maria were all forgotten for now, or nearly so, as I preferred to concentrate on present candidates for my enduring love . . . such as they were. What it boiled down to was Glenda, mousy Glenda at the health-food store. I could imagine Friedrich sneering and muttering to himself in German at the thought of consorting with this plain, boyish non-wench, with her bangs cut straight across above her eyes in the manner of a Munich schoolgirl, pigtails at the sides, and a dark growth of hair on her upper lip. Beside her unseductive appearance, exaggerated

still further by the baggy overalls she habitually wore to work, I had to consider her attitude, which was not merely stand-offish to me, but, I observed, on the verge of rudeness to all men.

I had my eyes open for others, but the population was small and there were few young ladies around who appeared to meet my modest qualifications: pleasing figure, fine features, a taste for clothes that accentuated and complemented the above characteristics, and of course an openness of spirit to allow some genial interaction with a man of good breeding such as myself. Alas, I was haunted day and night by a melody of the old south, that played regularly on the local FM radio; a raw, off-key blues that could have come from a destitute black man with a rusty harmonica:

Well, that weeping willow,
that lonesome turtle dove,
Weeping willow, lonesome turtle dove,
Life ain't worth living
If you're not with the one you love.

Then one day my lonely existence veered out of its rut of normality. I was walking down the street minding my own business. I was in the middle of town on my way to work, scowling no doubt, albeit innocently, when a dumpy woman with a strange face coming toward me reached up and tweaked my nose and said, "Such a cute nose!" I was too astonished to defend myself. To my great relief, my assailant continued on her way past me and down the sidewalk.

Feeling my nose and glancing behind me every other step, I took note of a startling fact. Silk-screened on the back of the woman's white T-shirt was a logo of a large stitched ball, along with the words,

ALASKA OR BUST!

Sophie's Softballers

Now what was this, out of the blue--I asked myself with some familiar, almost humorous chagrin--but another disquieting intrusion by that will o' the wisp, Sophie, into the stagnating tidal pools of my life? And what exactly did she mean to convey to me by such a message, this time? Was it any more than before, with her white whispering bear, her luminous god Lucifer? Again I was without any direct evidence of Sophie herself. Yet I

was left standing there, staring at the woman's lettered back as she waddled away, with an unformed but volatile sense of sexual connotation, frontier adventure, and sporting challenge.

After another drab day at work, however, with the dour Glenda in her baggy overalls and caustic comments, it was back home again to the grungy hotplate, guarded by the scrawny cat--apparently, judging by a pervasive smell, the permanent tenant of this particular room in the Arcata Hotel. It was early to bed, with a hot bath first to counteract the cold fog rolling in from the ocean.

That night was anything but restful. I dreamed of an old warlock in a Black Forest niche--a hut of tiny dimensions whose black cat guarded seven square cubits of forest. The warlock stood at his door leaning crookedly over his bleary-eyed pet. The wind howled outside like a large wolf on the move in a season of waning heat. The warlock glowered, eyes of unearthly light, in the dark doorway; eyes green beams, the green of translucent jade. His eyes bathed the cat in green, while an unseen camera whirred.

Above, through dark firs, the slivered moon was rising. The howls of the wolf-wind increased, then suddenly ceased--as I felt in the flesh of my face the claws of my own, all-too punctual cat. It was seven-fifteen, and time to get up for work.

I stood at the window, dressing halfheartedly. My waking life had become one of bland austerity, days spent weighing out pinto beans and wheat bran. My social life was nonexistent at this point. I was uninterested in the laid-back company afforded by these semi-rural, ex-urban, not-quite-suburban Californians; and they, it seemed, got on quite happily without me. I was feeling, in fact, more and more estranged from society in general. I was perched on the outpost of the frontier, here on the west coast of America, where I could look back and reflect on it all. The lapping perspective of the gray Pacific was indeed prone to lay folks back from the mad drive of history that had gotten us there, with so much pride and waste, so much greed and industry, such perseverance and forgetfulness.

I looked out my window through the fog, imagining ocean forever, paradisiacal islands in perfect sea-breeze and teeming with elemental life . . . but knew such utopias were reached nowadays by special jet excursion rates to Hawaii, four-day round trip junkets complete with hotel accommodations, grand island tours, buffet luaus every night, and express limo service to seven spectacular golf courses on any of the five main islands. Where, when it came right down to it, could I go, where would I have to go next?

Mexico was no doubt crisscrossed with legions of battered jeepsters, Vegas, Pintos, Mustangs, Capris, Toyotas, Datsuns, LeManses, GTOs,

Impalas, Sprites and Bultacos. Canada, Alaska were more promising, with what I imagined (from my sneak preview, courtesy of Sophie) to be pure wilderness forests, sparkling rivers, magnificent mountains, vast wheat fields, perhaps even clean cities . . . and mosquitoes big as baseballs, instead of baseball, but that was all right. And of course the whole imperial American nation bursting at the seams and ready to expand to the north.

For that matter, China, India, Europe, all the great cities on every continent--I saw us all in the same boat, as I stood there at the window in my unbuttoned shirt and underpants, stroking the cat in my arms and gazing into the fog. Every last patch of level dirt was crammed with teeming bodies, all hungry, all restless, all searching, struggling for the light which filters down through miles of fecal air to the rooftops and sidewalks of the world.

Where city shadows waned, the starving farmers scratched a beaten soil for a few grains of life, and quickly sold the meager yield, if they were lucky and if it were theirs to sell, for worthless money offered them by the dealers at the exchange. . . .

All this I knew without a marquis's grand tour; for every day's news and advertisements carried the same story. I didn't yet know that my own dreams would continue to reflect this deteriorating state of the world. That I would dream that very night, of the earth as woman beaten and brutalized,

raped and rendered into shock by a raging man-beast, with thunderous curses and snorting laughter, with glassy eyes that shone bleak and clouded, with the fixed stare of the possessed, seeing nothing. Eyes that were mirrors turned inward to a naked hairy figure standing somewhat uncertain on crooked legs, blinking bewildered around him in a daze. Or that on the following night, I would dream of the very apocalypse: watching from some privileged perch while asphalt streets upheave high in the air, and high-rises crumble into glassy heaps; while every steel automobile shatters, and every gallon of gasoline ignites; while the ultimate disaster proceeds to pull every plane out of the sky, collapse every balcony, crack every home, burn every shirt and skirt, explode every AM and FM radio, melt every breadbag and bicpen and lightbulb and earplug and eyeglass and throwaway Christmas tree and sailboat and camera and shoelace and toy gun and high fashion fur coat, every last knife fork and spoon, melting all of it down into one, large, stinking, smoking, glittering ball of material dung, drying and sputtering down the mad flaming streets, falling ever downward, growing as it goes, collecting every last particle of human waste until it reaches its ultimate destiny, the sea, and spins around in a giant whirlpool that sucks it down to drown with a last, deafening, metallic shriek.

When I awoke in a cold sweat from that particular dream, I pondered how far I'd come from the carefree youth who'd once seen the world-- particularly the social and cultural world of human devising--as his oyster. Now faced with such a disheartening vision of doom, I could only take refuge in the hope that after such a catastrophe, the human drama would begin again. But I had to wonder if, given a few hundred thousand years for the natural balance to be restored, the ironic laws of historic inevitability would also reassert themselves, so that the whole pattern of blind, explosive excess would be repeated.

On that later morning I lay abed with such ruminations until the cat sank its needy claws into my face, then bolted up to shave quickly in the red-eyed mirror. I looked neither refreshed, nor ready for work. I felt near the end of a tether.

My nights, I have the duty to tell you now, would continue to be haunted by all manner of zombies, trolls, ghouls and witches--from the depths of the Black Forest, or the boreal bogs, or points unknown--gnashing bloody teeth and screeching through my skull. My days would continue uneventful and brooding. It was perhaps fortunate that no one else was close to me at this time. I indeed felt lucky to hold down a job. The dingy

storeroom at the health-food store was about all I could handle. At least I had nothing to spend my wages on, so began to put some savings by for a better day. I might best conclude this episodic trough in my life-story by saying that somehow, with an irrational faith commensurate with the irrational terror stalking my soul, I got by.

* * *

In April, 1977, I picked up a newspaper that would change my life--or so I would express it if I were to give full credit to fated things, rather than to the willing flesh that follows these synchronistic signposts appearing so fortuitously along life's dim-lit path.

It was a little wire-service item on the second page:

WEREWOLF IN LISBON?

Lisbon, April 1--Rumors are rampant in this port city today about a werewolf on the loose. Susanna Kuckuck, two days short of her one hundredth birthday, was found in her bed with her throat torn out.

The case has locals buzzing with speculation because in 1915, Ms. Kuckuck's bridegroom, Dom Miguel Hurtado, allegedly fell to a similar

fate on their wedding night. In shock at the time, the bride was unable to relate how the grisly murder had occurred. Curiously, her mother, Dona Maria Pia Kuckuck, had at the same time gone missing and indeed was never found.

According to sources acquainted with the family of the deceased, the widowed bride had kept her maiden name because, she always maintained, the marriage was never consummated.

Reading this alleged news report was, to risk an understatement, highly disturbing to me. Besides recoiling from the allegedly supernatural and unquestionably horrific nature of the crime, I was struck with a more subtle uneasiness concerning the identities of those involved--as if their good names had been somehow crudely defamed. And I was mad with curiosity, morbid as it may have been, to know the whys and wherefores of the twenty-year delay in the arranged marriage. As for Hurtado, I felt no particular sadness upon hearing of his demise, however gruesome.

But really, now, what was this, an April Fool's joke? The wire services were not beyond such tomfoolery. I tried to dismiss it as such, to put it out of my mind. With a mixture of disgust over some ghoulish reporter's playing fast and loose with the reputation of my would-be lovers,

and dread over the possibility of truth in the ghastly dispatch (otherwise how could any reporter have dreamt up such a tale involving the actual Kuckuck family?), I turned the pages rapidly until I came to a stop in the travel section.

There I was confronted with a second, counteractive jolt: a display ad touting the beauties of Alaska, featuring a bikini-clad model cleverly superimposed on a glacial background. Of course!--it occurred to me with sudden lucidity. Why hadn't I thought before to go there? Forget Albuquerque; Sophie wasn't even in the country now. She would be, if my rusty memory served me correctly, in Saskatchewan pursuing "Native Studies."

Now a new agenda formed itself in my mind. The natural allure of the northern landscape aside, I could perhaps profitably explore Sophie's old stomping grounds with a more personal object: to substantiate, if I could, her very claim to existence in the waking world.

My old feelings of inertial frustration, and my fresher feelings of disgust and dread upon reading the dispatch from old Lisbon, were now quickly overshadowed by joy at a new, exciting prospect. I had some money saved. The advertised tour package included a fare by boat from mainland Alaska to Kodiak Island, hotel accommodations in the city of Kodiak for

two weeks, and a guided tour (which I felt confident I could forego). It would be a start. From there I could see about excursions to the village where Sophie had taught. I didn't recall the name but thought it would come to me if I consulted a map of Alaska's west coast. After mulling it over for an hour or so to be sure that my excitement was justified by some grounds of good sense, I decided to quit my job and go.

Again I would take to the open road, my sails full of freedom both physical and spiritual. I might even run into some random luck hitchhiking, plunging into unforeseen adventures on the ragged road of whatever it is that's usually called life, or time burning.

vi

My primary destination was Seward, Alaska, where I would board the chartered ferry for passage to Kodiak. I could imagine Sophie waiting there for me at the dock, fishing pole in hand, cat on shoulder; polar bear lurking behind, about to whisper in her ear. Then a candy-apple green '49 Chevy screeched to a stop past me on the shoulder of the Coast Highway. I picked

up my brand-new, bright red, aluminum-frame backpack, and a black woman hollered out for me to come on and get in.

Her face had a striking kind of beauty--a radiant expression produced by high gleaming cheeks, a polished forehead exposed by ebony hair pulled tightly back with a turquoise headband, clear, round, alert eyes and a full set of ruby lips.

She laughingly called her jalopy the Backtime Rhythm Mobile. She gave me a furrowed look when I told her I once lived in Mobile. But I told her I was just passing through there, on my way to see the country, and now was headed to Alaska. She told me she was from Alabama, a little town called Hastings, where she once was a drag race queen (1967). Her name was Ophelia Eurydice Jones, and she was driving home to Vancouver, Washington.

I thought with this kind of luck that maybe I could hitch all the way to Prince George, British Columbia and take the bus from there, with more cash held back for future contingencies. If things got rough out on the road I could always take the bus sooner.

As we entered the little house on the edge of town, I hesitated, feeling some dark force pulling me in, a force that would keep me from my proper

destination if I gave into its power and let it unduly influence my life.

"What you waitin' for, Felix? Come ohn in. I ain't gonna bite you."

As I crossed the threshold with my backpack I bemusedly thought of the gates of Hell. I looked back over my shoulder. The sun was going down and the street was quiet. "It's small, but comfortable; I guarantee it."

Ophelia, smiling with big teeth and what may have been evil intent, beckoned me further in. I proceeded through the living room, and at the inner hall I looked back again, to the still-sunny front entranceway where the long green leaves of plants were hanging, where the subdued tones of the green painted wood walls were stretching toward the light, where the black triple-tray of small cactus and rubbery-leaved plants posed eloquently, where the rumpled rug lay, the door still gaped, and where a hundred years ago in the mornings a rooster could be heard to crow from the neighbor's yard. We walked on down the hall.

The next morning as I was about to get out of bed to leave for the bus station, Ophelia casually mentioned that a friend of hers, a Sam Jibson, was driving all the way to Fairbanks, Alaska, leaving around noon the next day, so what was my hurry? Her body was persuasive, as she wrapped firm thighs around my lower back, and rubbed her breasts on the back of my

head. True, I'd had a good time with Ophelia that night just past. She wasn't all business, either, but laughed all the while--between, that is, the necessary screams of ecstasy. She made liberal use of a potent aphrodisiac she called Panama Red. I suspected that somehow Mr. Red would be coming along on the ride to Alaska. That was fine by me, as long as my driver knew how to handle the customs agents at the border. I wasn't eager to spend more time in prison for somebody else's crimes.

"Ophelia, tell me straight," I said. "I don't want to get mixed up in any illegal activities. I'm here under an expired visa as it is. Is this fellow Sam . . . I mean, can I trust him--"

"You mean, is he clean? Well, no. I might as well tell you. I can see you're all right. Look, he got a coupla pounds of the stuff in an inflated spare tire in his car, and he makes that run across the border all the time. Easy as pie."

"All the way to Alaska?"

"No, course not. But there's plenty of hippies in B.C. that don't grow their own, least not the Red."

I liked Ophelia, and didn't mind spending another day, and another night, with her. We lay around all day in bed, smoking and talking and

eating the occasional fried eggs or burritos, drinking coffee and then beer and then tequila, smoking cigarettes and hash pipes and reefers. She was so open about her life, from black prom princess of the truck farm shanties, to a dope runner for Sam, that I was moved to tell her, as I had no one else, the entire implausible tale of my adventures on both sides of the Atlantic, even both sides of the apparent jump across time. She took it in without batting an eye. Even that early in my story we were fairly blitzed on the magic weed, so I suppose that if I'd said I was from Mars she might have nodded and given a little laugh just as she did.

Ophelia's family was all back in Alabama. "They stuck in the mud," was her way of putting it. She had no family here, but spent a fair bit of time with Sam and his crowd. She'd come out west, to San Francisco, in '69 and met Sam there. He was a good blues harp player that she met in a club and they'd been together, more or less, ever since. But not living together: "Oh, I could never do that! He'd be jealous of all you white boys I take in."

And somehow I had allowed myself, or Orphelia had allowed me to think, that I had earned her intimate pleasures by my own unique charms.

"I ain't sayin' I don't like you, Felix, don't get me wrong. But you ain't the first, believe me."

"But are you and Sam still lovers? What will he do to me?"

"Aah, he's used to it by now. We get it on now and then. But he's got plenty of company of his own over there to keep him busy. The way it is, he don't worry about it, and I don't, so you needn't be uptight. You two's like blood brothers now."

Sam's place was around the corner and two blocks down, a dingy brown house with blinds on the windows. Sam wasn't home, so I parked my backpack and waited on the doorstep. Some four hours later, Sam showed up in a cream-colored, early sixties Olds. He was full of flashing smiles and somber haste alternating like the quick hand and arm movements he used to illustrate his remarks.

"Yeah, O.E. sent you, it's fine by me. No hassle, no hassle. Hop in, I'll be right there." Forty minutes later Sam loped out of the house carrying a trenchcoat and small suitcase: an unlikely commuter, in his wide bellbottom bluejeans and rainbow skullcap. He threw his coat and satchel in the back seat next to my pack, jumped in behind the wheel, and we took off.

"So, O.E. tells me you're headed north."

"That's right. Not quite as far north as you, but far enough."

Sam chuckled gruffly. When he took off his hat to uncover a close-cropped head of wooly hair, and peered intently at the road, he looked older

than I had guessed at first. His face was lined and weathered. If he'd been a woman, I reflected, I would have thought of him as a tall Mardou.

Sam wasn't much of a talker, for all the hyperactivity of his limbs that I'd observed earlier. As we drove north in the waning light I delved back into ancient speculations about Mardou's role in my exit from old Lisbon. I never could figure out whose side she was on, whose interest she was serving. Perhaps she merely bore a personal grudge against me; perhaps she was Sophie's accomplice. It was impossible to know for certain. I wished I could apply some reliable insight to my present circumstance. Would this be a straightforward hop to my true destination, or was I in for some new form of foul play, tainted by astral intervention? Eventually the long ride through the state of Washington lulled me to sleep (I had much to catch up on) and the night passed quickly and silently.

At one point I dreamed I was back with Ophelia, rolling in the sack. Just at the point of entering the figurative garden gate, I heard a man's voice.

"Hi there. Got anything to declare?"

"Naw, just my friend here--haw! No, just kidding."

"You American citizens?"

"Yes sir."

"Your friend here, too?"

Sam spoke for me--"Ah-huh." I kept my eyes closed, breathing slowly and heavily.

"Well, we won't wake him, I guess. How long will you be staying in Canada?"

"Oh, um, yeah, that depends. But probly about three-four weeks. We're going up to 'Laska. Say about a week or two to get up there . . . goin' to a weddin', y'see; my brother who's in the service in Anchorage is gettin' married, and--"

"And then you'll be coming right back?"

"That's right, officer."

"I'm not--well, that's fine. Okay, go on through. G'night to you."

By now I was awake. "Anchorage?" I said sleepily. "I thought you were going to Fairbanks."

"Yeah, well, I thought a weddin' in Anchorage would sound more respectable than a coke deal in Fairbanks. Anyhow I do have a brother in the service there. There's a big military base near Anchorage."

"I guess I'll need to keep to the south, get off at some point and head down to Seward."

"Whatever."

"What's your brother do there, in the service?"

"Oh, he's a air mechanic. But what he usually does is go huntin' and fishin'. Free guns and ammo, y'see. Lots o' game. And women, too, lots o' native hides. He's having his fun."

"Sounds like it. And perpetual readiness for war?"

"What you mean by that?"

"Oh, nothing; just, it was just a kind of an expression."

"You one o' those pussy-fists? Man, it ticks me off. My brother's out there, sacrificin' hisself for his country, and guys like you is sittin' back here crackin' jokes behind his back. You never been in the army?"

"Well, no, as a matter of fact I was disqualified for service when I was nineteen."

"Based on what? You a homo, man, or what?"

I tried to keep a civil tone. I didn't relish the prospect of walking north from the border through uninhabited wastes in the dark and the drizzle for who knew how long. "No, I flunked the physical. Some sort of heart murmur or some technicality like that. I told them I was eager to enter the forces and felt myself to be entirely fit for service . . ."

"Yeah, okay, okay. Just don't you go cuttin' down my brother, man. When there's things going on all the time--Nicaragua, Angola, there's always somethin' brewin' somewhere, and you never know when you gonna get the

call. I was in Nam myself, so I know what's what. You ever seen one of your buddies' heads get blowed off?"

"No."

"Awright." He didn't seem to want to talk about it any more, which was fine with me. It struck me, though, in my silent reflections which followed this disturbing exchange, how tragic was our condition, in which one man's horrible end spawns a seed in another man's heart, by which to perpetuate the horror, in a chain without end . . .

I drifted off to sleep again. Back in Ophelia's bed. This time a door opened and there stood Sandy, double workshirts shrinking over a swelling belly. Angry reproach in her wounded eyes. Ignoring Ophelia, she said to me, "I've brought you a present." Then she pointed behind her past the door: "Some cases of tuna from the packing plant. Free, the way you like it. See you in September. In my dreams, you bastard."

Then she disappeared through the door, and O.E. and I lay peacefully together, buoyant black and white swans nudging feathers on a satin pond. The Olds was a smooth ride, all right. When I woke up it was well into the morning and I discovered that we were headed east on Route 3 towards Castlegar.

"Hey," I ventured. "Where are we going now?"

Sam just smiled at me. "Gotta get the goods," he said sweetly.

"But I thought you were going to Alaska."

"I am, I am. Patience, my boy. Patience. There's a profit to be made in the exchange of goods. The wheels of commerce, and all that jazz.

Turning weeds into diamonds, if you like."

"Ah. So then we'll head north again, from--"

"Nelson, my map says. That's the plan."

I sighed and relaxed back into the plush cushioned seat, watching the new world go by. It didn't really matter if I caught one ferry, or another. Except . . . I thought of Sophie waiting, the white bear gone. I thought of Mardou at the second-story window, and of the morning the ship went down.

I did a lot of thinking, the kind of vague thinking that has no focus or result, for the next week. Because when we got to Nelson, Sam's man had "split his fuckin' connection." Sam gritted his teeth and slammed his palms against the steering wheel. We got out and spent a week waiting for the guy to show up, sitting around a stale apartment shared by two large white lesbians and a tiny black baby. Still there was no action. My thoughts and fantasies turned more and more to Ophelia. Finally we packed up and

headed back west on Route 3, with Sam in a morose mood and I merely sleepy, in the sullen gray of a late afternoon.

"So are we heading home, then?" I was almost afraid to ask, fearing the answer.

"Cain't go to no 'Laska without no damn score."

Maybe this was all working out for the best, because it was meant to happen this way, I tried to tell myself. Still, I had the option to get out and ride on the bus. But Sam was busily rolling reefers with one hand as we drove. I started toking with him and by the time the turnoff came to go south again, I was rooted to the seat, resigned to my fate.

I dreamt again that night of Ophelia; but this time I was my old self-nemesis, Friedrich. We were sitting at her kitchen table, having a midnight snack.

I wolfed down another hot dog, padded with vinegary sauerkraut. Ophelia stared at me fondly, chin in hand. I was telling her about a dream I never had, in which I left town on a battery-powered skateboard, uphill on a highway paved with pumpernickel. Ophelia stretched and yawned, then said "Come on Fred, let's go to bed." I swallowed my Rhine wine straight from the bottle and put out my last cigar.

In no time I was back in the flesh on Ophelia's doorstep. "Have fun, y'all," Sam cackled. Then he left a patch of rubber in his wake as he roared away. I knocked and waited. It was just before dawn. A light went on and Ophelia appeared with sleepy eyes and filmy negligee. "Why, Felix--" We embraced. My body, my soul ached against the thrust of those welcoming thighs, those pendulous, dark-pointed breasts.

"Hello, O.E., baby. I'm back for another go. I missed you."

"You didn't go to Alaska and back already, did you?"

"No, Sam got stood up in Nelson."

"Oh, my, that Sam, not agin! Ha, ha; Felix, come on in. I'm still in bed." She took my hand and I followed her into the house.

As I crossed the threshold I bemusedly thought once more of the gates of Hell. Was this to be my home, then, at the end of it all; my final prison? Or was it merely another form of purgatory? I looked back over my shoulder. The sun was not yet up and the street was still quiet. I put my backpack down. Ophelia towed me further in. We proceeded through the living room, and at the hall I looked back again, to the dim front entranceway where the long green leaves of plants were hanging, where the subdued green tones of the painted wood walls were stretching toward the air, where the black triple-tray of small cactus and rubbery-leaved plants

posed so eloquently, where the rumpled rug lay, the door still gaped, and a rooster was heard to crow from the neighbor's yard. I dropped Ophelia's hand, walked back to the front door and closed it. And we walked on down the hall.

I was glad to see no other man, white or black, dreamed or real, in Ophelia's bed.

* * *

As spring wore on into summer, I let the vision of a new life in Alaska slip further and further away. Ophelia was more than hospitable, encouraging my lust-laden inertia in place of my disabled ambition.

She didn't, however, believe in supporting me; so I was obliged to go looking for work. I had some luck, if one could be so cruel as to call it that. A typical day found me waking with a hangover while Ophelia slept, and shambling out of the house feeling no better for a quick solo coffee and toast. Two bus rides later, I would arrive at Roth's Delicatessen, where I would spend the morning sweeping the floor and stocking shelves. A sandwich on the house, and then I'd walk down the street to a day-labor office where I'd sit and gab with an old prospector who hung around looking

for news of gold strikes. I'd perhaps get sent out with him or some other loser for the afternoon to shingle somebody's garage roof, or to collect trash from some godforsaken alleyway.

Then, in the blind pursuit of a few extra bucks, I'd go out for a cheap supper and head to the site of my next job, a bar where I could sit with the boys and down a few draft at half-price before mopping up at closing time. Then I'd be free to go home to O.E. The reader would rightly question my judgment at this point, balancing the price of a meal and half a dozen glasses of beer against an hour's wage. True, the economics of my evening activities made little sense. Per chance there is more to the picture, however: another factor in the equation.

Ophelia had a pretty cushy life with her part in the Panama Red trade. A trip once a month to Oakland and back, and Sam and his connections did the rest. She had her own crowd of women to socialize with, afternoons and evenings. Shopping, driving around town, smoking up, partying with the guys . . . I was left out of all that, by the nature of things. She was nice to me when I got back at night, if she was there; we gave each other credit for our differences and for our independence.

I still harbored longings to try for Sophie again, one way or another. Some nights I'd awake for no apparent reason at four a.m., sit up in bed and

smoke a cigarette, and muse about my lost direction, my atrophied sense of destiny; the muddying, or crumbling, or cracking under heat, of this finer clay I once thought I was made of.

One such night I became determined that I'd go on to Alaska after all, in the fall. When morning came, my resolution was reduced to a maybe; but I let on as much to Ophelia that afternoon as we lounged on the couch, enjoying my day off.

"What? I thought you'd given up on that iceberg idea, now what you talkin' about, agin?" Her brow furrowed tightly as she awaited an answer.

I searched for a way to explain myself without hurting her. "Oh, O.E., you remember me telling you that story of what happened to me before I came here, and on the way, on that ship? It's just my, sort of, um . . ."

"Yeah I remember somethin' about a ship. Some ghost ship, some ghost woman. What you really mean is, it's cuz I'm black."

"Oh, no, you got it wrong, there. Listen, we've been lovers too long for that."

"Oh sure, I'm good enough for you in bed, all right. What about downtown? How many times you take me out, downtown, huh? Be seen with a niggah woman on your arm. Huh?"

"Jesus, Ophelia. You've been plenty busy running around with your own gang of friends. And you've told me lots of times not to get any ideas about us being a couple. Now it sounds like you want it both ways."

"So what is it that you want? You tryin' to pick up some high-yellah trash down there at that bar you drink at ever' night?"

"No, look; are you kidding? And this business about the color of your skin, you can just put it out of your head. I've got no family, no society here, to care about that for. No, it's all in my own head, and it has nothing to do with you, or my being white, or any of that tired old stuff. You should know me better than that by now."

She pouted and looked down at her nails, then out the window, then at me. "Yeah, I guess I believe you, Felix. It's just hard to get rid of all that 'tired old stuff,' as you call it, when you've spent your whole life livin' with it, and livin' it down, down, down into the goddam ground--"

"I know, I know."

"You don't know! You're white! How can you know?"

"You're right. I'm sorry. What I mean is, I think I understand what you're saying."

"Shit."

* * *

Life went on. Ophelia and I got along with an improved understanding of one another's hangups and pushbuttons. Still, something was missing. The same was true of my jobs, which I'd reduced to the one at Roth's in order to have more time with Ophelia. Finally the day came, in September, when I woke up and went to work, to the same sordid corner delicatessen, with the same stinking displays of sausages in the hot window, and knew after ten minutes that I couldn't stand it there any more.

I walked over to the counter where the stocky, balding Mr. Roth was holding forth to a customer about the care with which his sausages were made, using only the freshest ingredients and so on and so forth, and I calmly leaned the broom against the counter and said, "I quit." Before the man could close his mouth to form words I was out the door.

When I turned the corner with a jaunty, self-satisfied step, a wizened old bum retched all over my shoes. With a disgusted gurgle he muttered something about those fucking rotten sausages and the state of Mr. Roth's soul. I fought a wave of nausea myself as I looked around for something I could use to wipe off my shoes. Spying a dead cat sprawled between the garbage cans at the back of the store, I rejected the cat outright as shoeshine

material, but was forced to consider this new evidence that perhaps Mr. Roth actually did discard old meat. To hell with the shoes, I thought--they'll never be the same. I worked them off and left them beside the garbage cans, then walked down the alley in my stocking feet to the bus stop on the next block.

A bus was just pulling up to the curb. I boarded it, weathering the disapproving stares that the driver and several interested passengers directed at my feet. As I took an empty seat by the window I glanced out to see the bum strolling down the alley sporting my shoes, freshly polished. I fought a final wave of nausea until the bus pulled away.

A portable tape player in the seat behind me suddenly blasted on. Synthesized rhythms made way for a rasping tenor:

It's labor day

A child is born

The child is mother to the lame.

The sheep ride in wolf clothes,

And nothin' is the same.

Oh no,

Nothin' is the same.

A loud female whisper interceded--"Hey Jerry, not here; give the people a break." The machine was clicked off.

I turned back to smile thanks at the mid-teen blonde. Her pimply faced companion blushed and looked down. I turned again to face forward, beginning to bask in a new sense of serenity. I looked out the window and saw a street sign, Seward Ave.

I didn't have to sleep to dream. First I closed the outside. Then I saw a bright light within, shining like a brittle arctic sun. It glared back off the broad and coarse-grained sides of icebergs which were slapped with the uneven motion of that chill green cocktail, the sea. The ferry swung past rocky islands to a narrow inlet I was going to call my home. Lean gulls wheeled hesitantly over the dock. Beyond, mounted the hills of Kodiak, specked with buildings and motley vegetation exposed by the brief summer. No matter that the icebergs were creatures of my imagination; or that the actual Kodiak would be situated on a broad bay rather than an inlet. This was my destination, a town at the end of a ferry, an island in unwelcoming waters, whose reason to be was for coming and going, for paying stoic homage to ice, and for harboring gulls before the next launching.

I felt myself glowing with a new-found heat and light. I was the ferry, was the bus to Seward, was the bus I was on, my mercurial body in motion through mutable time and space forever.

I contemplated for a moment the mundane image of my backpack, stashed away in the closet in Ophelia's house, and thought how representative it was of the contradictory standards of my new culture: both mobility, and the security of material close comforts. Contradictory or not, these were the standards of which I would now again be the proud bearer. I, Friedrich-like, lit a last figurative cigar, then promptly fell asleep amid coughing bus-ferry-body-soul-world passengers, until the cigar burned down to our hairy fingers.

vii

A long interior silence had guarded my passage here--a calm sureness, a determination that I was on my path. Ophelia, Margaret, Elena, Sandy, Zouzou and Maria . . . their voices had rung far off in the distance but were muffled by the more immediate roar of bus engines and high winds, the chuff-chuffing of the long ferry-boat ride into the night, the lap-lapping of

waves and the raucous screech of gulls. Still, despite the positive tack my course was taking, I felt the pangs of an unfulfilled destiny.

My memory banks were like shoals once stocked with fish but now barren; my consciousness, a ragged reef composed of coral skeletons, brine-washed and bleached to a petrified state of mere existence, pushed upon by waves without effect, lurking out of sight to wreck ships while feeling nothing, giving dry suck to barnacles who couldn't care. What was there left but hope--no, a slow, tidal certainty--that a better life, a life not simply "meaningful" but charged with a ruling purpose, loomed somewhere near, perhaps just over the misty horizon.

I had watched, in my three full years here in twentieth-century North America, my old social talents fall into disuse. My few attempts at flattery or embellished expostulation had fallen on ears deadened to Old World charms, ears tuned instead to the frequencies of copper, nickel, silver and their bogus replacements; ears dulled with the simplicities of commerce and work, of television and fast foods. The confidence game was taken over by the boys from Madison Ave. How could anyone with real potentials, with God-given graces such as I had once possessed, hope to benefit from them, when the only advancement possible above the ranks of the lowly workers in

the high-turnover professions was that owing to money and its many-fingered manipulation?

I found solace in the beauty of the wilderness through which I had passed, and which I found all around me here, both on Kodiak Island and in the many directions I yearned to explore. The trackless forests and mountains, the awe-inspiring snowy peaks and glaciers, the raging rivers and unspoiled lakes, all supplied a balm to my soul. I had been blind to such beauty in Europe, whittled away as it was by man's encroachments, and preoccupied as I was by my own supercilious and picayune desires.

It is fortunate that I felt so blessed by my new surroundings, for when I stepped off the M.V. Tustumena with the other hundred-and-fifty passengers at eleven o'clock at night on the twenty-sixth of September, I had to realize that it was the last ferry of the season. When the hulking vessel disappeared with chalky wake into the slate-sea horizon, what I guessed to be three mongrel sled dogs on the hills above the city set to a blood-chilling baying, like wolves.

In two weeks, the snow fell like soggy manna from wooly skies and covered the island. At a ranch near Beaver Lake where I went to find work as a cowboy, the cattle pawed at the ground and snuffled up frozen bluegrass

with glistening pink and brown nostrils. As I was honest and told the rancher I had no experience in such work, I didn't get the job. I was already weary of job-hunting in the town. I had enough savings to survive the winter in a frugal fashion if necessary; but the truth was, after those two weeks I was already bored to tears by the country-and-western bars, the square dances and the stuffed Kodiak brown bears, the bearded fishermen, clean-cut pistol-packing military men, and the homestead divorcees who came to town for a little fun.

I would pass a sign posted on glass, on a cold street, a gray day:

WAITERS: INQUIRE WITHIN.

I would wait, thus gaining the first qualification. I would stand in front of the sign for twenty seconds or so, long enough for my inner inquiry to produce the usual result, and then I would have to walk on.

There wasn't much else I could do for a living. I wasn't exactly a concert guitarist in this low-key orchestra of trade. I didn't even play the guitar. But somehow my days hummed by. I continually wondered how I would continue. I took long walks on windy days out beyond the town. When the wind came down the pass rattling past rocks and whistling through

eagle's nests, I was reminded of an old song; but I couldn't remember its name. No matter, I thought. The wind knows my song, my name; it won't forget me.

As each day passed, each day mattered less and less, despite my fundamental frustration. Alaska was to have been a retreat of sorts, but also an advance of my life further into new and virgin territory. Now, in the dull glare of this daily reality, I fumed and flustered silently against an invisible enemy, a demon who spoke no evil, a wall with nothing on the other side.

It was time to go see about Sophie. Studying a map of this vast Alaskan wilderness in which I had gained a mere toehold, I found the village of Ipiutak, an outpost flung into the Chukchi Sea in the far northwest corner of Alaska's wilderness rim--not far, interestingly enough, from a "Cape Lisburne," and in fact situated next to an even more promising location, Point Hope.

A visit to the Board of Education office in Kodiak provided me with a phone number in Kotzebue, the Bureau of Indian Affairs district office operating some ten village schools in the region. But a week's attempted phone calls failed to get through. I went back to the office in Kodiak to ask

why. The pretty young Eskimo receptionist shrugged and simply replied, "Did you know that Kotzebue is the polar bear capital of the world?"

What the hell, I thought as I stormed out, licking my lips and unable to get those of the receptionist out of my mind; I'll go there myself to find out what's going on, why the phone lines are out. I'd find out if there really are any polar bears there . . . and if Sophie Tucker Vaughan is nothing but a foolish fancy, a cruel cosmic joke.

* * *

The round-trip plane tickets to Kotzebue via Anchorage--after the purchase of a down parka with fur-lined hood, and the earmarking of enough funds for an excursion to Ipiutak--wiped out my savings and made it imperative to find work upon my return. I had good clear, frosty weather for flying, allowing spectacular views of Mt. McKinley and the Alaska Range just out of Anchorage, and a wonderful panorama of a seemingly limitless wilderness of peaks all the way to Kotzebue Sound, on the Arctic Circle, in the Chukchi Sea. Just two hundred miles farther offshore in the ice-misted horizon lay the Soviet Union, a land route back to my homeland . . . but to consider such was folly. Here on the outermost edge of the western world,

where to cross an imaginary line means to jump through time, from one day to the next in an instant, or through space from west suddenly to east--from a jet plane into a sod hut--the mind is tempted by such illusions, by the mirage of yet another new continent in the distance; and then the feet touch down on frozen sand.

I walked with my backpack the mile into town, to stretch my air legs and take in the invigorating arctic atmosphere. If I were a painter or photographer, I would have rejoiced, or despaired, at the elusive, magical and unforgettable quality of pale light and pastel colors which swam around me, over the water, on the frosted tundra, in the roseate air. Pickup trucks, vans and snowmobiles passed me on the road with their cargo of airplane passengers and their baggage. I carried with me everything I owned, in preparation for I knew not what new twist in my twisted fate. Though I had in my pocket the ticket for a return trip to Kodiak, I had checked out of the hotel there and had no certain intention of ever returning. My brief glimpse of Anchorage, a prosperous city of some two-hundred thousand enterprising souls, gave me the idea that I might do better to settle in there for the winter after this jaunt to the end of the world.

There isn't much to the town of Kotzebue, sitting as it does on a little spit in the middle of nowhere. I found the BIA office with no trouble and

arranged an interview with an administrator through his pretty, young Eskimo receptionist who could have been the sister of the one in Kodiak-- the same soft, inviting lips, the same Mona Lisa smile. I sat in the outer office reading brochures from a rack, wondering on the one hand how I would ask about a woman who probably never existed, and imagining, on the other, what it would be like to spend the rest of my life here in the warm embraces of one whose people had successfully inhabited this place thousands of years before the dawn of so-called civilization.

A buzzer sounded on the receptionist's desk.

"Mr. Krull, Mr. Wilson will see you now."

Mr. Wilson was a portly man seated comfortably behind a large desk. He had pale pink, clean-shaven jowls, reminding me of that jocular bearer of bad news at Louisiana Savings and Loan, what seemed like eons ago. He wore round glasses and a jovial expression. "Yes, Mr. Krull," Mr. Wilson said in a merry, high-pitched voice. "What can I do for you today?"

I took a seat without invitation and gathered my thoughts. "I'm wondering if you have records of a woman I'm looking for, who taught at one of your schools, last year, I believe."

Mr. Wilson's pleasant demeanor took a sudden turn for the worse. "Oh? And may I ask the nature of your inquiry? Are you with the police?"

I had to laugh. "No, no, nothing like that. It's strictly personal. Sophie's--she's a good friend of mine, and I'm trying to find out where she is."

"Sophie, is it. That woman gave us no end of trouble, I don't mind telling you. Look, I'm sorry to offend you, if you're, as you say, a friend of hers. But from the Bureau's point of view, it . . . well, it just didn't work out. She complained from day one after she got to our village--Ipiutak it was, a brand-new village at that. Then she took off with her students on some adventure holiday, totally unauthorized I might add . . . a classic, if accelerated, case of going native. Does this interest you? You wanted to know where she is now. Frankly, I couldn't tell you."

"Yes, please do go on. But this business about Ipiutak--I thought her village was the oldest continuously inhabited site in North America."

"No, look, you're confusing things. You must have got that from our brochure out in the office."

"Yes, exactly."

"Right. Well, if you had read more carefully, you would know that that distinction belonged to Point Hope, the original village site on the point of the same name. But it's sloughing into the sea, you see" (oh, what a charming, self-satisfied little smile returned momentarily to the man's lips

with this utterance) "and we've had to move the old village a little ways up toward the Marryatt Inlet, where the land is more stable."

"So it's not really a brand-new village, then, but simply a very old village, one might even say an ancient village, crumbling away, as you say, and yet surviving from the old whaling culture; and it is this older village which has simply been transplanted--"

"All right, yes, the more solid, the plywood buildings were moved. Including the school, already supplied with materials and so on. I don't know why I have to get into this again. Anyway, your friend Ms. Vaughan behaved in a thoroughly unprofessional manner, I don't mind telling you. Though there was, young man, to your credit . . . I might say . . . something about her, something definitely enchanting . . ."

And Mr. Wilson's tiny eyes behind his large spectacles took on a dreamy cast as he gazed past me at the wall which I noticed, as I thanked him on my way out, was a veritable gallery of polar bear paintings and photographs.

"Staying long?" the receptionist asked me as I passed her desk again.

"I don't know," I answered. "Should I?"

My return ticket was good for any day that week. The memo pad on the receptionist's desk reminded me that this was only Wednesday.

Meanwhile, I realized, Sophie indeed lived and breathed, that very moment, somewhere in Saskatchewan. Still, I had a sickly prescience that I had the better part of twenty years left to live--according to her dreamtime biography--before I would actually be permitted to reach her in the flesh.

"We got lots to do here," the Eskimo lass said sweetly. "You gotta place to stay?"

"I was thinking of the Nul-Luk-Vik Hotel," I stumbled, a Demosthenes with too many pebbles in his mouth. "That one of your brochures talks about, native-run or something . . ."

"Fleabag hotel," she tittered. "I could put you up, if you like."

So this was the famous northern hospitality in action. I couldn't believe my luck--though in retrospect such an easy success with the female race was thoroughly consistent with my personal history up to that point. The fact that I was down on my luck in terms of career pursuits, or had crossed an inner threshold in terms of my quest for the living, breathing Sophie, mattered not a whit to this fair maid of the north.

When Mr. Wilson's buzzer rang her back to her duties, she sent me on a selective tour of the town's attractions and said she'd meet me after work. I carried my backpack along, wondering at one point if I should just keep walking to the airport and fly right to Saskatchewan: but I had neither the

money for that nor the guarantee that that was indeed what Sophie wanted. Then hell, I argued with myself, how about what I want? But the money problem still stood in the way. I could have cursed myself for not gambling on Saskatchewan instead of Alaska in the first place. But gradually such thoughts gave way to an ease with my present fate, an appreciation of the tour I had chosen and my prospective, temporary mate who had so fetchingly, so recently chosen me. She was here, now.

I followed her suggestion and entered the new Living Museum of the Arctic, which housed a menagerie of stuffed wild animals peculiar to the area, and featured an excellently crafted diorama show. In side rooms I watched living, breathing old native women demonstrate skin-sewing, and real, actual Chukchi Sea-faring men carving ivory cribbage boards and soapstone seals.

It was dark at quarter-to-five when I met Alicie in the lobby of the Nul-Luk-Vik, as we had arranged. She wore a beautiful embroidered navy-blue parka, trimmed with white fox fur that highlighted her jet-black hair and eyes perfectly. We had a drink in the hotel bar and then walked down Front Street along the frozen water of the sound, to a restaurant where we dined on filet mignon and Alaskan king crab legs. For me it was like the old

days, the old-old days, yet in a setting utterly exotic by European standards, with a "date" who had grown up in an ancient whaling village called Wevok--otherwise known as Cape Lisburne.

She had come to Kotzebue at fifteen to attend the high school there. She learned enough secretarial skills to complement her good looks and earn her a job in the BIA education office at seventeen, a year ago . . . and I realized that this child was Zouzou's age when I had left her crying on the dock. Perhaps I wouldn't make the same mistake again--if it was a mistake. After all I'd been through, I still had second thoughts, now and then.

I was full of questions not only about Alicie but about her people.

"We're not really Eskimos," she politely informed me as she deftly picked crabmeat out of the long, tubular leg-shells.

I followed her example. "Oh really. Then what do you call yourself, just 'a person,' or 'people'?"

She laughed, showing a set of strong, even, white teeth. "Oh, no, that's too boring! We're Inuit, or, further down the coast, Yu'pik or Aleut. Around here we go way back to the beginning, from the other land, when we called ourselves Yuit. That was, oh at least, thousands of years ago."

"Yes, so I understand. What do these names mean, then?"

"You mean, like, 'Inuk'?"

"Yeah."

"It means, 'a person.'"

"I get it. So 'Inuit' means 'people.' Very interesting." I gave her a sly smile.

She said, "Touché." Then she blushed and broke into a girlish giggle, covering her mouth with her hand.

When Alicie took me home that evening I was surprised to find that she lived with an older brother, his wife and a sister of hers, and a number of small children, a variable number that seemed to change every time I looked around. Repeated questions gave me no clarity as to whose children they were.

The brother, Samwillie, his wife, Kinia, and the sister-in-law, Susie, all greeted me cordially, all smiled as if knowingly, and I wondered how often this particular scene was enacted with Alicie as host. Finally as one little girl came to her more often than to the others, to show her cloth scraps she'd picked up from the floor, or to be comforted when one of the boys playfully bit her, I surmised that this was Alicie's child. But it didn't really matter. I was here a day at a time, or a night, and would be gone tomorrow, or the next day.

The tiny shack had two bedrooms, that we retired to after chatting and playing cards for a couple of hours. Alicie and I had the benefit of one room to ourselves, while the married couple took the other, and Susie and the children all slept in the main living room on the couch and various mats of foam, hide and woven willow.

Never in my life had I been transported to such ecstasies of love--and love I certainly would call such tender appreciations of the human temple, the soft body of warmth that fends off loneliness and arctic cold for the pleasure of its devout supplicants. Oh, the velvet landscapes, the gentle hills I gloried in, there with raven-haired Alicie on that single bed. In the morning we snuggled together while our breath formed clouds in the air and we heard the children giggling in the front room. We made a promise for more the next night.

Leaving my backpack behind in the house, I took a long hike down the narrow peninsula during the day, pondering my fate and enjoying the grand desolation of the country, the sparse, stunted trees, the spreading ice, mist raised on the water by a barely rising sun . . . Yes, I resolved, I would enjoy one more night with my nubile native mistress, and then I would return . . . to what? The fleabag hotels, the drunks and airmen, the quake-scarred streets of Anchorage? The hopeless island of Kodiak again? Good

God, it was Sophie I wanted, nothing else. The higher life she had promised me--that was the life for me, nothing short. I was made of finer stuff than to be sleeping around like this with drug-dealers and juvenile secretaries, when I could be ensconced in the White House with the first woman President, at the very pinnacle of earthly power!

Maybe, if I could get back to Anchorage and make enough money this winter to get out to the University of Saskatchewan and make contact with Sophie before she left there, I could plead my case personally. Surely she could not refuse me . . .

Then I had a horrible realization. What was I thinking? If Sophie were indeed living somewhere now in 1977, chances were, she wouldn't even know who I was! Maybe she herself was still undergoing some sort of apprenticeship, living meanwhile in innocence of her future powers and destiny. I couldn't be sure of anything, except the bare consolation at last that I was not insane. Not yet, anyway.

I settled for another night with Alicie. After all, my backpack was still there. I arrived in time for muktuk and frozen caribou. We all sat on the floor to eat, slicing chunks piece by piece with several knives from a whole common haunch.

The second night was as good as the first; but in the morning she walked with me to the airstrip and we said good-bye, and I kissed her and wiped away a tear on that lovely high, olive-brown cheek so that it wouldn't freeze there. The wind ruffled the fox fur around her stoic face as she looked out to sea impassive as a carved statue, and I turned and walked away to my plane.

* * *

I knew that it would be futile to return to Kodiak at least until tourist season started again, and so I stayed in Anchorage hoping to find work there. I checked into a modestly priced hotel, where the low winter rates partially compensated for the lull in the job market. And then I did land a job as a night-shift clerk in a pinball arcade, where I watched the teenagers spend their allowances and court one another in public as they seem to be driven to do. That situation me through a lonely December while I dreamed of saving my meager earnings for a trip to Saskatchewan in the spring. I also dreamed of better jobs: bush pilot, hunting outfitter, even coffee waiter in the finest hotel, or maker of quality sausages . . . but nothing came of such fantasies.

I did follow up on a New Year's resolution to find a better-paying job by joining the Allied Tourism Workers' Union; which meant paying a membership fee and entering my name on a waiting list for available work come spring. It also meant I had a congenial hangout at the union hall where I could spend my afternoons, shooting pool and smoking cigars, making friends among the seasonally unemployed.

Most of the guys (and nearly all of them were men) enjoyed stipends from the government in the form of unemployment insurance, which they fondly called "pogie." At first they were slow to accept me into their ranks. A few grumbled about the fact that I had a job, and a non-union job at that. Others called me a "lightweight," since I lacked the big beard and belly that seemed to describe the more common male form in this region of the world. I had a short, neat growth of beard and was slim as ever. There was no way I could keep up their pace when it came to guzzling beer.

But a quickly learned facility with the pool cue earned me some respect. I even started taking in some regular spending money that way, which one of the friendlier guys, a long-nosed old lumberjack they called Sneaky Pete, suggested I might invest in the odd case of beer or box of cigars for "the boys." "Hey, this Felix guy ain't all bad," was the greeting I received when I followed through. Big Ed, the ex-Minnesota Viking, and

Moses, the hulking native, had both clapped me on the back (even though Moses was not drinking anymore), and I was nearly felled by the impact.

It was that day that I discovered I was actually allowed to talk politics with these overgrown "boys."

The long, dingy hall had its usual crew: a dozen or fifteen plaid-shirted characters sitting on wooden benches and plastic chairs, playing pool and watching around three tables, drinking soft drinks and beer, smoking cigarettes and cigars. The smoke was thick in the flat fluorescent light but you got used to it. Or hooked on it; I'd taken up smoking cigars, Friedrich-like, myself.

Pete and Ed popped open their cans with the usual speed. I racked up the balls for a game of eight-ball with Ed. It didn't take him long to start in on one of his stories.

"I ran for mayor once in a little town down on the Kenai," Ed boasted to an audience at large. "Against a little twerp that looked kinda like Felix here--" he glanced at me with the flash of a smile out of the corner of his mouth--"and I almost beat the sucker."

"Yeah?" said Pete, taking the bait. "How many votes did ya buy?"

Ed just missed a tough bank shot and stood up looking at Pete with narrowed eyes. "Oh, Peter, we don't do stuff like that out here in God's country--now do we, Felix? Anyways, no, come on, I came close."

I made an effort to say, "Nice attempt, Ed," but couldn't be heard over a tremendous crashing from the Coke machine as Moses tried to batter his change through the works. I thought about launching into an analysis of politics as nothing but one big confidence game, but stuck to my pool game instead and sank the five in the corner.

"Awright," Moses joined in, sweeping the long black hair out of his face with a walrus-like toss of his huge head, and then taking a swig from his fizzing prize. "What was the final score?"

"Two to one," said Ed. "And that's not perportion, that's totals."

Everyone laughed. In went the four ball.

Then Moses spoke up again, in a more serious tone. "Guy on council in Mekoruk, he went around and gave a fish to everyone who said they'd vote for him. Only trouble was, he had to buy the fish from the co-op, which was the fish that most of these people had caught in the first place."

"Did he win?" I inquired, lining up the one on a long angle shot. The ball would rattle around the corner pocket for a while but end up dropping in.

"Course he won. He was the only one around who didn't spend most of his time huntin' and fishin', and the only one who could speak English with the bureaucrats."

"Y'know," I observed, pausing for a moment with my cue stick in hand, "it seems to me like politics in Alaska is like politics anywhere. Ethics versus power, is what it boils down to. And money against people. Take this Shorter dude down in Kodiak. He runs the show. When there're no jobs to be had, he's not hurting. He flies off to Hawaii, or New Mexico, or holes up in his log palace down in Cape Chiniak." I was on a run. I stopped talking long enough to sink the six, three and seven in quick succession. The other three men were still as they watched my performance; I sensed the attention also of the men at the neighboring table, perhaps everyone in the hall that day. "All we need down there," I went on, "is some fresh blood to shake things up, some new choices for the electorate; not the same tired faces, but some lively opposition to rock that mother out of office." I missed the next shot but I think my audience remembered this little speech when April came around. By that time I could almost call myself one of the boys.

In the meantime a job came up that no one else wanted, so it went down the list to my name, and I became a taxi driver. It didn't take me long to learn the city streets, nor to learn why everyone else had passed up the

job. It was bitter cold! I had to keep the heater running all the time and even so, had to wear two layers of long underwear and double woolen socks to keep my legs and feet from freezing off. But I resigned myself to it: I had a mission, and I was dedicated to carrying it out, no matter what the sacrifice.

* * *

When spring came I hankered for Kodiak again, away from the hustle and bustle of the big city. I also had in the back of my mind a vague desire to look up the receptionist at the Board of Education office who reminded me so much of Alicie. My companionship in Anchorage had been virtually all male. The hungry widows I drove in the taxi from time to time, I didn't count. As for my mission, my sacrifice--how could I so readily give in to my intervening lust (I hear the reader complaining) for every loose lady that came my way?

I plead no excuse, good jury of my peers, other than my humanity, that so readily buys what's here and now instead of waiting forever for what is imagined to be the ideal. In further defense, I can state that I never acted on that impulse to look up Alicie's near-sister. Which is not to say that I

regretted the romantic liaison in Kotzebue--on the contrary, I can truthfully say that I do not regret any of the variety of pleasures, or burdens, that I have herein related.

The final impetus for a move back to Kodiak was a job opening, selling hot dogs in the softball park there. Again, I can sense an unfavorable opinion of my judgment in accepting the offer. Well, Sophie was still ensconced in her university program at least until the coming February, by my calculations; and I had not yet managed to lay away a large enough nest egg to gamble on a trip halfway across the continent, not even by bus. Besides, that new job, lowly as it was, meant more than a direct advancement in my checkered career. The Kodiak chapter of the Allied Tourism Workers' Union needed a new shop steward, and the fellows in the Anchorage union hall in their rough wisdom had seen some talent in my speech, my eyes, my character--and so had steered me toward what turned out to be a dual position.

They held a straw vote right there in the hall, one afternoon in April, while the ranks of the tourism workers in Kodiak were still moribund. As new shop steward I rated a flight to Kodiak and my two new jobs: one paying cash in hand, with the added pleasure of roaming the stands in the open air of the softball "stadium," and the other paying in prestige and self-

confidence, as I prepared to represent my fellow workers in the upcoming contract negotiations.

It is so tempting to go on at great length in describing this phase of my life, reveling in the memory of those days in which I first experienced a small kind of power that was not of my usual, personal kind. But even more pressing is the urge for me to move on with my tale to greater things--namely, my predestined and now virtually imminent rendezvous with Sophie.

So I will advance through the relatively minor excitement of the softball season, my weekends of salmon fishing that summer, the petty backbiting that threatened my hastily contrived election as shop steward over some of the more senior (if less qualified in other ways) members of the union local . . . yes, and a near-romance with the ballgirl for the champion Kodiak Bruins . . . and move to more significant matters, that transpired in the fall of 1978.

In the city of Kodiak, elections were drawing near. Big Huey Shorter was the reigning kingpin of Kodiak politics, and his victory in the race for mayor was as assured as those which had put him in office twenty years

before and kept him there ever since. His chief rivals, who as usual were determined, in their perverse lust for power, to split the opposition vote, were a black militant from Georgia who had worked his way north and west from an unpromising career digging peanuts, and a self-styled communist technocrat recently graduated from the school of dentistry at a prestigious eastern university. The bread and butter issue, as chief economic staple of the island, was tourism. Both of Shorter's opponents wanted to turn over ferryboat, hotel and gift-shop franchise operations to "the people," while Shorter and Co. held firm control of all of the above (including, not least, "the people"). The work force was racially mixed (white, black and Aleut), predominantly male, and their political energies were largely absorbed in haggles against each other. When election time approached, and Anchorage union leadership managed to call off the near-open warfare in the cause of temporary solidarity--they backed the dentist--Huey was ready with a promise of more overtime pay and pension benefits (which promise he had no intention of honoring when actual contract negotiations came around).

Into this fray I strode. I gamely made the rounds as a canvasser to drum up support for the united stand against Huey Shorter's monopoly of island business and government. Our coalition's carefully reasoned arguments for solidarity made obvious sense to me. Yet when I confronted

the rotund, bespectacled Misak Inukpa, the token Aleut on Kodiak City Council who was the most reliable indicator of the crucial Aleut vote, I got nowhere.

"Look here," I was told with a bold tone as Inukpa rose from his Naugahyde armchair to lean over his desk, balancing his compact bulk on ivory-ringed knuckles. Inukpa looked me sharply in the eye. "Our people have been struggling a long time against the control of our lives by white people. That Huey, he's the same as before, only maybe a little worse. But if we fight him we lose everything we've gained the last twenty years. Who are you, who just got here on the last boat and most likely will leave on the next, to tell our people what to do? We were born here. We've lived here for generations, thousands of years. It's we who will decide what politics we need on this island." The councilor was so pleased with his speech that he broke into a broad grin, showing the gaps of more teeth missing than I cared to count.

I quipped, "Well how do you like my man as a dentist, then?"

"Just fine, just fine," Inukpa said calmly, shutting his trap and escorting me, his impertinent, white-mouthed visitor, to the door.

The outcome of the island election in November was a foregone conclusion. But negotiations with the Small Business League were still to come near the end of the month, and the union was bristling for another fight.

Similar negotiations had yielded a pittance at best, in past years. It was hoped that my fresh perspective as a newcomer could break some ice, supply perhaps a new insight or angle that the old union hacks were too hardened to see, jaded as they were by banging their heads against the wall of Shorter's little empire. And despite the negative results of our electioneering efforts, my energy, enthusiasm and grasp of the issues had brought me into favor with the Anchorage union brass who had been on hand to help out. As a result I was chosen as part of the negotiating team.

I strolled briskly up the steps of the Kodiak City Hall, feeling official as I toted the obligatory briefcase, and joking with the two other union reps who accompanied me. We were a bit late; we hurried down the hall to the council chambers where negotiations were to be held, entered the room as heads turned and conversation subsided, and quickly took our seats. In the pregnant pause I saw some advantage in taking the initiative, and so began, "Let's get down to business, gentlemen."

I could barely hear a man at the end of the table grumbling to his neighbor, "Who's this goddamned upstart?"

I took no notice. No one else said anything, so taken aback were they by my unexpected lead. So I continued: "Shall we introduce ourselves, or . . ." (deciding against it as the others looked at each other in evidence of obvious acquaintance) "shall we just go on to air the respective points of view in the matter at hand, namely the question of growth in our common industry." More murmuring from the heads on the other side of the table. "I'll be frank about the union membership's demands, gentlemen: our number one priority is to increase job security with work guarantees. Let's get that settled first; then we can go on to your offers, the overtime pay increases, pension boosts, and so on."

At this, a near uproar. But it needed to be said, sooner or later. Everyone knew what the respective demands were. Protocol or not, it was best to get our real differences aired from the start.

And so negotiations began in earnest: the old-timers from the Small Business League gradually immersing themselves in the murky waters to which they were accustomed; my cohorts letting me carry on with the presentation of our case. They did stop me at times to advise me of some intricacy of a past contract, or to explain an opponent's intransigence.

"Kerwood doesn't believe in overtime since he found his wife with another man when he worked late one day," said a scrawled note passed my way at one sticky point in the negotiations.

When it came right down to it, the union was willing, I said, to offer concessions on overtime pay rates if another ferry run could be arranged for later in the fall. Such a compromise, I explained, would be not only practical but a gesture of goodwill in cooperating to improve the health of the slumping industry.

Huey would have none of it, said Shorter's chief bargainer, Dan Kush. "More tourists mean more workers, and more workers mean a bigger union, and a bigger union will demand higher salaries--if only to pay their fat-cat union bosses who have to pay dues to Moscow."

I took a puff on my cigar and took the liberty of reminding Huey's stalwart representative of something he seemed to have forgotten. "While masquerading as the friend of small businesspeople, your benevolent dictator Mr. Shorter not only extorts unreasonable fees from them, but garners a comfortable stipend from a somewhat larger stateside enterprise, in order to keep the smaller fish in line both in wage levels and in political preferences. I won't venture to speculate on the further implications of such collusion, at this time. Nevertheless . . ."

And then came the red palm of Kush's beefy hand against the cigar in my mouth. I must have looked a funny sight, with smoldering tobacco leaves splayed around my face, but I simply got up with a condescending smirk and walked out, my men behind me.

The negotiations got nowhere after that. After two more scheduled sessions where neither side even showed up, the process went by law to compulsory arbitration. The nearest arbitration court was in Juneau, but Shorter's parent firm, being located in New Mexico amid its mining concerns, insisted on a hearing at the district court in Albuquerque. I conferred with my advisors and figured that the judge there would likely be bought, or at least under heavy influence. The trouble was, our own union had no comparable sponsor elsewhere, and in such a case, the party seeking a hearing in the district of its parent home office was granted that prerogative. We could only hope to salvage some strategic consolation from the new arrangement: the connection between the so-called Small Business League and its parent body would become more public.

Best of all--and this I harbored in private excitement, awaiting my selection as sole union representative--I'd have a free ride to Albuquerque, where I figured with some smugness I might just stay, camping out on Sophie's doorstep, so to speak, awaiting her arrival. Oblivious, naturally, to

the odds against an actual or meaningful encounter with her upon her arrival somewhere in the state of New Mexico sometime in the coming winter . . . for after all (I had long ago learned from Sophie herself) what good is worldly success without love?

For his side of the negotiations, Shorter had decided to let the big boys handle the action down home. I was chosen to represent the union. Following a quick plane trip to Anchorage, I boarded a chartered Lear jet with two union lawyers, and I was bound at last for Albuquerque.

The coastal mountains were brilliant as we went down. The starboard engine had gone in a flameout. Now we drifted and dove, in the gray clouds that spun through the peaks. The lawyers were pale, choking on their gin-and-tonics. I felt strangely calm, with a sense of *déjà vu*; and with an even more compelling sense of necessity, correctness, and certainty, I had the distinct intimation that Sophie was playing her trump card.

The lawyers hunched in fetal positions, one praying, one cursing his fate. I gazed out my window at the landscape looming up with, yes I admit, frightening speed right until the end.

And then in slow motion I saw Sophie, standing beside a jeweled lake where she'd been flicking a turquoise rod. Her eyes swam into my soul like silvery fish.

Sophie said, "Felix, what shall my platform be?"

I said "You're asking me, who've walked the slim plank of fortune my whole life? All right, I'll tell you. I've just refused to look at either side. Mind you, I know that sea's down there. I know that pirate's behind me with a pointed scimitar. Yes I know that hot sun's overhead and I've got to keep walking; yes, I know that plank is short and the end is near; and yes I know that old crocodile is just ticking down there in those waves waiting for his next juicy meal--but I'll tell you: I don't have any choice but the one which is mine . . . to will, rather than to choose what to do. Or, it's like a dream and each time something new happens: the pirate turns back, the plank goes on endlessly, it becomes a ballroom floor, the crocodile is my mother, the sea is soft snow, I stand and take root--each time I survive somehow by not deciding any of those terrible options: I let destiny take its course, trusting it with me. Of course, I've got to talk fast sometimes, but words come . . ."

Then suddenly everything vanished, and all was silent.

After a moment, a hazy vision took shape, a derelict sprawled up against the bricks by gaslight on--Bourbon St., was it? Or was it in another city--Paris, Lisbon, Munich, Albuquerque? It was impossible to tell.

"Yah they all think it's the end of world," said the gravelly voice from the grizzled face. "Each time is the end of the world. And you think it's just an old man rambling before he kicks off, but someday it will be, why not you, why not now? Ha.

"Repent, they used to say. But the kids got me rolling one morning, a Sunday it was, in the alleyway by the old vaudeville arena garbage can pickup, they got me started in good an' I ain't quit since.

"Them kids in those days would throw apples at every old rummy in sight, jes' any old rotten apples or fruit of whatever kind, and you know, you know, they jes'--you know how kids are . . ."

The figure was fading. Before he disappeared, a spotty mongrel came up and began to lick his face; and then as the bum stroked the mutt, the dogskin began to peel away.

Everything vanished again.

I saw a hundred cities fall, their teeming millions strangled--falling, dying, screaming to the pit--while all around the vast dark walls (midnight

blue the canyon walls), the great ravine shuddered with the weight of the falling cities. Limbs and cries were scattered downward in a giant explosion of death; while above, atop the canyon walls, the dark deep forest slept. The moon clouds roamed, silent in the smoky sky; the dimming stars drifted far from sight; and the hundred cities died, with a dusty, gasping heave, down on the soft unknown of the canyon floor.

I tumbled silently onto the fragile snow, snow over thin broken ice, my skidoo careening wildly across the river. My mind was at rest with my fate as my mittens filled with snow, then water . . . palms wet and heels of hands turning softly blue, this year any event was welcome, and not least an otherwise minor catastrophe, no reservations required for private tours in the foundry of earthly knowledge, what we call by a quiet name, death.

BOOK THREE: UNEARTHLY POWERS

[BOOK THREE] - CHAPTER ONE: LIMBO

Virtual diary entry: Woke up in a bog.

It seemed familiar . . . too familiar. What a stench: marsh gas, I thought to myself--the stuff of which flying saucers are made. I was stewing in a primal soup full of the death of rotted things--of which life also is made. I began to sweat, looking down, seeing I was rooted in muck up to my knees, and sinking.

I shook my befuddled head. Cobwebs cleared. I slogged out by pulling my way up the branches of an otherwise wasted willow. I sat in a nest of dead branches, tugging mud from my beard. No plane wreckage around. Where was I? How old? I might have been forty, eighty, or still twenty-three. Or, burbling up at a blue sun, just born . . .

Was this Sylvan Lake? I'd caught a glimpse of it, in my fall from the heavens. Had it overgrown, become choked with weeds and slime? Had I sunk to its bottom, and pulled the drain-plug up to leave myself mired in its muck? Was I now long dead, so long the lake had drained in its own slow

pace of evolution? The dreams pulled me, up the branches of the willow to a blue sun choked with laughter . . . at me, or with me, I couldn't tell; though this much I knew: I heard no laughter from my lips.

*

Vidcam take ex: I'm out for a walk, a little Harry . . . out for air in the stroller my mother pushes me in; five months old. My mother, the dour candy merchant of Harbin Street, wheels me along in the shade of the palisade of oaks and suburban bungalows, greeting neighbors who, every one, comments about the bright April sunshine.

Now there's Mister Fennigan.

"H'lo, Fenny," my mother chirps. "Beautiful out today for your walk, isn't it?"

The old geezer groans merrily. "Yes, but nothin' like it must be for you and yer young un, I can tell."

I'm meanwhile rapturously watching the birds play in the branches above. It's a mating dance: the male ruffling his feathers as he steps in elaborate circles and spins in loops across the lattice of branches that's becoming their nest, the female following him, backing up toward him,

hopping straight up, thrilling the air with subtle warbles of indescribable flavor. I turn my eyes on Mr. Fennigan.

His old eyes sparkle, so brightly that I'm as if were drawn right up out of my stroller into them, passing through them as if they were tiny telescoping windows beyond which are no longer the gently swaying oaks but rather the sheen of ochre drapes in the soft luminescence of an apartment.

*

Her eyes were warm and open, gentle and reassuring. I was not in a hospital, not on a cloud. I was sitting across the dinner table from a beautiful woman who softly chewed her sauteed goose liver as she listened. My plate was as yet untouched. I was making a confession of sorts, remembering scenes from my travels in America, right up to the time of apparent death when the most bizarre series of dreams began . . . while still unclear how I'd escaped the bog, or that former life; if indeed I had. And it seemed important to tell her what I remembered; so important, in fact, that I didn't take much notice or thought of my new surroundings, or of my companion. But I did notice that the dinner candles had plenty of life left.

I rambled on until I'd come to the vision of ochre drapes, and then, seeing them wavering imperceptibly behind this woman so patiently listening, I realized at last who she was. I didn't recognize her in a physical sense, in that first moment of recognition. Yet I knew in an instinctive way that this was indeed Sophie.

She spoke with a voice that was full of depth and resonance, almost as if with a lulling echo. I don't recall her words, except that they seemed like small fish which swam toward me in a watery medium. I, too, was swimming in the palpable air, and with a net stretched over my lips, was trying without success to swallow her word-fish. Instead, out from my mouth and through the net-mesh came another, more disturbing series of dream images, which I can with some dreadful hesitation recall as something like the following:

I was sitting in a Javan dive across from old Schimmelpreester. It seemed so long ago--early twentieth century, I guessed. He kept calling me Frank. I felt sorry to see my godfather like this. He was on some kind of a binge, evidently, ordering Singapore sling after sling. "You're probably wondering, Frank, why your once-respectable benefactor has exiled himself to the shoals of civilization. Well let me tell you, tell you Frankie, I wanted

to, got the chance to reconcile my ailing body and soul--gracias waiter--with the regenerative nourishment of flourishing nature, here in the southern seas, where the trade winds . . . oh so gently blow." At that he slopped some of the colorful drink over his jowls, so that a rivulet formed down his chin and neck and disappeared under a sweat-stained collar. He looked at me out of the corner of his eye and wiped his face with the back of his hand. "Say what you doin' here yerself, Frankie boy?"

I told him I'd come on a mission to sell horse semen to the Peruvian ambassador in Java. He laughed bitterly, and then coughed twice.

"Y'oughta go up to Paree and see a friend of mine. He was in the French cavalry. Name of Armand. Didn't think they still ran horses, eh Frank? Say waiter--"

I was off on the next steamer and eventually found myself face to face with a robust, I might say corpulent, Armand Kroull, alias the Marquis de Venosta. My erstwhile alter ego was now comfortably established as the Directeur d'hôtel (the very establishment which hosted our initial roguery, the Saint-James and Albany). He talked nonstop: kidding me by offering me my old job back; complaining about an impudent busboy who'd made him spill a half-cup of tepid café-au-port on his silk socks (by the device of

extending a pair of bandy busboy's legs in the aisle between tables, I imagined); and relating other such amusing tales of the hotel trade . . .

I was driven on by more urgent business, I explained, and took my leave. Armand smiled timidly, and as I backed out of the big glass doors of the lobby, I saw him looking down past his rotund belly to inspect his socks.

With my relative proximity to Lisbon, I wished to attempt a surprise reunion with Zouzou. Making my way by horseback over the border and through the countryside, I encountered among the Basques unsettling rumors about supernatural foul play down Lisbon way. So when I reached my destination I headed first for the cemetery grounds in search of wolfbane and wild garlic. It was there that I indeed was to find Zouzou, mournfully sobbing in the evening fog at the grave of her recently wedded Hurtado. I kissed her wet face and she fainted dead away in my arms.

When I revived her with the help of cold water from a brook running nearby, I received some insight into the denouement of that family's ill fortunes. Zouzou spoke with a quavering voice; I could see the blue veins standing out on her white face, and felt sorry for the trauma she had endured, that caused such black circles to appear under her reddened eyes. She told me that Maria's jealousy of her had continued unappeased by my absence of twenty years, so that the long-delayed marriage had ultimately been

consummated not by love, but by gory death. To come to the point, crazy old Maria had bitten Dom Miguel on the neck, and sucked out all the blood she could before she was torn from her swooning daughter's marriage bed by the aroused household servant, who quickly cried werewolf throughout the town. Whether Mardou really believed Maria to be so possessed, or merely blamed an inhuman culprit in an attempt to mitigate the damage to her own reputation, could only be guessed.

"The worst of it," Zouzou said, trembling, "is that my mother is still alive out there, somewhere, and I think she'll take me next . . . if the wolves don't get to her first."

"What do you mean, the wolves? What wolves?"

"There have been murders in the villages near here every night during the past week. No one has any more peace. The households are armed to the teeth, everyone sleeping with lights on and one eye open."

I looked up to see small clouds scathe the face of the moon. The trees whispered, their voices hidden in the rustling leaves. I had a fleeting vision of a sunlit garden, a charming little bench . . . and then the stillness of the night was broken by the howling of wolves in the cold distance. A shriek cut through the air . . .

And was itself drowned in a rattle of gunfire, a rumbling of tanks.

This I knew was the German town in which I grew up--as I sat up straight in my bed awakened by the unearthly noise. I heard the front door break down, the wolves rush in, up the stairs in jackboots clomping; I could envision their facial fur fluttering in the night wind entering the house, and prayed--to who or what I didn't know--that I was still dreaming. But still they came, bursting in until at the last my eyes closed on wet fangs and fur and I knew the smell of my own blood.

In the closet Zouzou hid, waiting for dawn. She held a cross and clutched a silver stake. At the first dawn's breaking she felt the new fur on her face, her lengthening ivory fangs, and yelled her mother's name, impaling herself with the stake.

In gasps the wolves fled the village. They'd tarried too long. As the sun peeped over the mountains, they staggered and fell, blood draining on the stump-sharps they fell on. Zouzou's cries had become a song that continued to carry over the fields, into the still woods of daylight. The cleansed moon rode on.

*

Why this torment, Sophie?--that was my protest, but to no avail. I could neither hear nor see her any longer, and in my darkness I had to resign myself to suffering whatever she had in store for me. It wasn't enough to have lived through three years of ridiculous real-life predicaments; now I had to witness and experience the tortures of the damned. And she was not through with me yet; no, I would not have been happy then to realize that her abominable dream machine was just warming up.

I lay in a dark prison cell, writing out these Confessions as I did every day, eighteen years running, to make my stay there more interesting--and to make my stay on earth more meaningful than it would otherwise have been--when the specter of Death came calling. I was unfrightened as the hooded figure inserted a bone finger into the lock on my cage and calmly entered. He didn't bother to introduce himself but explained, as he sat down on the stool opposite the bed where I lay (pen still in hand), that he'd come for a little chat. For all his easy manner one might have taken him for the prison chaplain.

We went over the events that had led to my arrest upon debarking in Argentina. He informed on my informers, telling of the connections of a certain wealthy toilet merchant whose wife had lost some jewels in a Paris

hotel. Said merchant (from Strassburg) had given up on the police and all too willingly sold his soul to hire this gaunt interloper to track down the thief, namely me. But along with his fee, cunning Death had taken the man's body to be drowned and eaten by rats in the sewers beneath the streets of Paris. Meanwhile he'd let me go unscathed, albeit under lock and key, until this moment. "I've had better things to do," he said with a smile.

Then I watched his bare gums clack and his hollow eyes gleam, as he told me that this visit was no more real than the stone of my prison walls or the iron of my manacles; and that--I brightened at the revelation--I was not to die just yet; after all, this very episode was only a figment of a forgotten past, a part of my history that, thanks to his "good friend" Sophie, had been averted in favor of, "let us say, more opportune circumstances." Why I had been thus favored, I was not able to learn from him.

Then as I smiled back at his grinning beneficence, he switched on his grim look and said, "Okay, friend, I'll give you one more chance in your new life. Oh, you've died several times already, I know--and I wish I'd worked out the details better with your grande dame. I think it's your attitude I like, though; it keeps me coming back for more. It is good sport to try the spirits of you proud cattle, you human race, and I must say you're a particularly spunky specimen--you don't scare too easily. Well, watch this and I'll see

you around, as they say in what goes in some circles as 'the latter part of the twentieth century'--ah ha-ha-ha-ha ha-ha-hah . . ."

Death vanished and I tumbled into another dream, or another distant region of the same dream. I was in the middle of a car chase around a city, driving a brand-new '55 Chevy convertible with a flat tire. Close behind me through the streets was a Willys wagon. I parked and ran up the steps of an elaborate, chilling edifice of brickwork. The doors were locked. I saw that this castle-like building was faced with a monumental wall with a gutter at its foot that would serve, late at night when the bars closed, as a public urinal. Others came, being chased. The Willys had disappeared, but sirens told us that police were on their way. We fugitives found another entrance in the vast wall to the interior of the building and slipped inside.

We found ourselves in a living room area, and got to talking. It seemed we were all stockbrokers, now being implicated in a jewel robbery ring. But we enjoyed the company, made friends, and, when the police drove up and came to the door, we acted innocent. Nevertheless, they took us all away.

There followed a comical sequence of escapes and recaptures through the city streets. I kept making my way back to that building faced with a

urinal, making rendezvous with cohorts in parking lots along the way, switching cars and drivers, being intercepted again by police photographers in the middle of the night, and on and on.

At some point around dusk, I managed to arrange a nice spot for sleeping: snug in a corner of the living room of the old building, where, alone in the gathering dark, I felt inconspicuous. But more fugitives arrived, only serving to set me up for the inevitable next police raid. We decided that a safe diversion would be to go to the hot new play that was appearing in another part of the sprawling brick building.

We filed into the auditorium and found seats. About forty to fifty people were there--and I had the oddest sensation that we as the latest arrivals were the last pieces of a puzzle. Everyone's faces lit up with mutual recognition: all these recurrent acquaintances, fellow fugitives and passersby were in it together.

Then (still chilled to the bone of the top of my skull, I remember) Death came clattering in on a pale, thin horse. He waved his long flashing scythe before him. People panicked and fled from the murderous swings and the rushing hooves of his charge. He swung round to the back now where I was.

He pulled up on the reins of his mount, smiled sardonically and said to me in a calm, almost friendly voice, "I see that we meet again."

I faced him upright with complete confidence that I could not escape. I was thinking that I should stand up there and get my share of dying over with fast, rather than watching and waiting for my part of the general carnage.

At my audacious, brazen pose, Death looked at me askance and then turned away, muttering something about how he would come back for me in a moment. Then he quickly veered off to reap some more lively human wreckage from the frantic souls scampering toward the exits. Little help the exit doors would do them. They all ran out the door, those who could still run, with his bloody scythe after them, and I was left to contemplate the slaughter, my temporary salvation in its wake.

*

There was time yet to live. I found myself in a baseball stadium, gaze fixed on the green field. It was Kodiak, I noticed, but now they were playing hardball. The Major League variety. I was there with Sophie--she the candidate for the first woman President, I her advisor. I had but a hazy

memory of the game's beginning: it had been announced as Opening Day of the 1995 season, and the future President had thrown out the first ball.

My daydreaming and popcorn-munching ended abruptly when I glanced at the double row of goose eggs on the scoreboard and realized that it was now the ninth inning, the home half, and the game was on the line--as the batter swung at a fat one and sent a drive off into the mottled blue and gray sky toward Anchorage.

What went up . . . would come down a quite a different egg.

Into plain view high over the stadium came an ancient, droning bomber, of Second World War vintage. "B-26," Sophie said, matter of factly. She'd been briefed on military history somewhere along the line. There were bound to be some of these old junkers still around, in air base museums or on overgrown runways somewhere . . . but airborne? "Must be out for a joyride," Sophie guessed.

"But who in their right mind--"

"Oh, it's probably a relative of some colonel at the Kodiak air base . . . a drunken stunt." On the other hand, I wondered, did a B-26 have the range to fly from Siberia?

Whatever its origin, the bomber was circling in lower, for another pass directly over the stadium. I pictured, as pilot, Dom Miguel Hurtado. I

imagined him in the cockpit grinning, and then in his mouth the fly ball, red seams running down from needle-sharp fangs.

I looked over at Sophie. She was pale and expressionless. She knew what was coming, though the crowd roared. The crowd still tried to follow the batted ball, the ball that never came down. Sophie turned to look straight at me. "Felix, remember our platform? Your brave little speech about pirates and destiny? Now is the time for good words. Can we lobby ourselves into heaven?"

"What's the problem?" I hear the skeptic rationalizing. "It's only a dream."

Perhaps so, but try telling that to the boggy dreamer--or the dying soul grasping with weak fingers to hold onto the last of this dream of life, as he prepares to enter the deeper dream that lies beyond.

My mind, my mouth, my chest were empty. My stomach was full of too much popcorn and crabcake. I felt descended back into Fitchie, suddenly, and almost drooled. Spittle flecked my flaccid lips. The plane now was blessedly gone from view but still audible as it circled beyond the stadium for a third and what I knew would be a final pass.

As I said, or implied in so many words, the ball went up, and the bomb was indeed destined to come down. Shall I describe in gory detail the unflensing of some of the blameless spectators in the stands that day? Digress to the unspeakable obscenities that would take place in the rubble streets at the very moment, and in the moments immediately following the very moment of Apocalypse? Explain in conscientious fashion the geophysical links between the detonation of a single nuclear device at this location and the onslaught of earthquakes and tidal waves which would suddenly begin careening around the globe? Explore in purely speculative fashion the whys and wherefores of this particular, as opposed to any other, version of events that may or may not have happened in 1995? In a matter so grave, perhaps I should, at the very least, delineate the subplot responsible for the factitious and improvident appearance of the B-26 in our otherwise pristine ball-day skies. I could backtrack much further, of course, to make up for lost time . . . say to the Garden of Eden where all earthly delights are discovered, witnessed and enjoyed, if not without consequences.

I can state for certain that we shall not bother to inspect the hotel rooms of all the visiting teams playing throughout the Major Leagues this Opening Day, thereby merely substantiating perennial rumors with exclusive, candid interviews. With even less reason should we detour to the

Child-Molesters' Club under the basement of Saks Fifth Avenue where a select number of the well-heeled-and-hung upper crust of New York's swish society burn their lengthy cigarettes in the ears of innocent babes and butter the thighs of Bowery bums yanked off the alleystones for breakfast.

No, it would be more prudent, though it may indeed be diversion from death that we seek (and I assume, while I am yet among the living, that it is), to elucidate in more complete fashion the mythological, and at the same time doom-bound digressions served up in the brain of our select protagonist during these moments that were ostensibly his (that is, my) last on earth.

I imagined, in my fate-flooded skull, that Mercury had come down from Heaven to deliver a message of urgency. But the pulp and paper industry was on strike, so no one was going to hear the news. Yet every brain had to absorb the line that was written in every stream: there were to be no more fish in the sea.

Short notice, it was, but the trusty wing-footed god delivered his decree, in person if it had to be.

In four minutes following, the world would end.

He was met with silence, then chaotic shouts.

An old rummy named Jesse walked out mumbling. "Guy in the bar sez we gotta pray or drink or hide our brains or some goddam thing cuz it's

all gonna come down on our heads! Like the sky fallin', if you can believe that." Jesse stared straight ahead, walking slower. "No lie, fellas, he said it didn't he?" No one at his side. "Well he did!"

The newspapers two and a half weeks old and tan and weightless flew around the corner, heralding sales for Christmas still a month away.

Philosophers halfway around the world tossed in their stormy sleep, wracked with visions of battleships stormily reeling around Monopoly boards marked with ten-foot one-way signs toward "Go."

There was someone now walking beside old Jess. "Gimme two hundred, Jesse, I owe it to Martha before she dies. I gotta do it before Christmas; I'll slip on the ice or somethin' beforehand if I don't get it to her now."

"What're you askin' me for, you blitz-head? I ain't no Santa Claus, and no Jesus neither, but I tell you, you better forget yer two hundred bucks and look for a watch cuz we got maybe two minutes left."

The sky looked down, looked black.

The philosophers gasped.

The rain started and the monstrous presses, unmanned, began to hum, to crush all language and trees on earth beneath their unbearable weight onrolling.

In another part of the world, a few hours earlier, it was just before dawn. The sky was pregnant with a mercury boil, ready to rain with metallic sheen on the white pages of yesterday's unread newspapers on the world's doorsteps.

One Hans Dunkendorfer awoke and headed for the front door. At its opening he saw a ghostly figure ten feet tall, who commanded him with silence to silence. Hans got the message.

He dashed quickly and as quietly to the pantry shelf, downed a long one and then rang up Fritz. "Hey we got a hot one for the late-morning run. Can you get it out in time?"

The reigning neighborhood philosopher next door meanwhile tossed stormily in his bedship, dreaming of Monopoly played one-way, never passing Go looking backwards, but he just did. What he saw stood him straight up in bed with the chicken feathers taut on his back.

The presses rolled. The late-morning edition came slithering out early under the weight of the gigantic and imperturbable rollers, declaring too late that four minutes still remained in the world of children, of plants and animals, of water and stone.

Afterwards, the rivers ran in mercury. The pulp and paper industry could cry no more that trees were growing faster than they could be cut

down. The fish complained no more about the level of mercury in their water. No trees, no industry; no fish.

Across whole oceans the weightless news flew. Everyone read it at once: but skimming, without comprehension. The airwaves were thick with the choking fumes of final understanding, alas too heady to breathe. Hans lolled in his last pose, drunk as a skunk. Fritz wallowed inside the heedless presses, squashed to a carelessness that he felt to be divine deliverance. No one, ultimately, knew what happened or why.

The ball must have continued somewhere in its flight, because it was nowhere to be seen. The B-26 droned into view again low over the left-centerfield fence. Did I just see the bomb bay doors swing open?

The crowd was still roaring, but a distant roar, like ocean waves breaking. I had the sensation of being in a giant cooker, a popcorn popper, in which we were all about to be popped . . . or, we were a glittering beach, alive with golden seeds seething slow, down, easy to the warming waves-- but then when the surf crashed down, the real heat would come; and we'd toss and churn and burn till a frenzied POP! turned us inside out to an ocean of cloud. There we'd stand, a frothy white sea of a billion (or fifty-five

thousand, or five billion, what's the difference?) soft feathery bubbles, angel wings, dry husks . . .

I thought with a choke of the broken potential of human civilization. It was no longer my own skin that concerned me. I found myself, somewhere deep inside, still holding on to a fragment of a dream of transformation. But even the dream had become misshapen.

In the new order, I thought, things will be different. Streams will rise and fall on the marketplace; dreams will be outlawed. We are at the beginning. We are already past the end. Mercury serves as our messenger. He rides into our brains, as we stare straight ahead, throwing bums dimes for deliverance. Our minds are numbed by the collective suffering. We listen to him coldly. As the trees whisper, we listen but hear dimly.

"Four minutes left," he says, "and counting." We go out for a fast one. We run back home.

"Martha," we say (or "Sophie"), "there's a man out there; he's ten feet tall--"

"Aw, it's all in your head."

Backed up a one-way street. The sky boils, the curtains poise. We warm up for lightning. The bar is full of the usual din; in dim light, no one listens.

We hide our heads. It's happening now.

In the future, we think, things will be different. Streams will rise and fall, but spawning will be obsolete. There will be no drugs, no psychology; our brains will be taken care of at birth.

We hold our breaths.

Still, it hasn't happened yet.

We can dream no more.

It will be very different.

He didn't say how things will be. I guess they'll be different.

But maybe it's always the same. Maybe it's always been . . . like this.

I live in a cave. At least, that's where I sleep. In here the world is alive and growing. There is movement, and there is space. A stream rushes down, underneath silent snow. A bird drifts high, then lights to peck on brown patch earth. Green buds pop and spread awake. The sun shines.

Down at the foot of my mountain, there is a broad plain. The mountain casts a shadow from the wandering sun, and clouds collect above. Down there roaming hordes chase each other for their flesh, into the dusk.

They are armed with chainsaws, and they hack their victims into bite-sized pieces, roast them over open fires, and feed the bones and scraps to blood-crazed dogs. Flames raze the open fields while city rubble smolders.

The night burns with a red-orange glare. Against a smoky midnight sky, I can see on the next mountain a lone figure stoop, drop to its knees, and offer up to the moon a tortured howl that rings hideously as if from some deep and blood-charred cavern . . . and I slink back to my dreams.

Nevertheless, here we are still in the ninth inning of this senseless game dignified a hundred years earlier in order for grown men in pajamas to run around chasing each other, waving big sticks and throwing their balls around. People have paid billions to watch this nonsense, so I can assume the paying customer expects a full and fair account of it here.

However, it is my duty to remind the reader that my name is still Felix; not Joe Garagiola, nor Thomas Mann. Though one is tempted to imagine what ironic panegyrics that august personage might have employed were he to share the broadcast booth with Joe G., the balding and expert pundit of the past pastime of a nation on the greasiest of skids, at this particular moment in its never quite well enough footnoted history.

The bomb did come down, landing with a perceptible thud as it embedded itself in the turf just beyond second base. It was now in undeniable public view as it stood there, obscenely upright and ticking--silently, to be sure, but undoubtedly ticking.

The players on the field, even the three men who'd been on base, had fled to their respective dugouts. From there they were last seen, like so many rodents, scrambling into the underground passageways leading to their clubhouses. The umpires remained, however, conferring in a businesslike manner between second base and the mound.

"The game must go on," Sophie quipped at my side. But I heard no humor in her voice. I looked around behind me at the general melee, people swarming to the exits. When I turned back to Sophie I found that she was gone. Had she realized our danger so suddenly and decided to run for it? Had to make a quick trip to the bathroom, the hot dog stand? I scanned the crowd at the nearest exit and saw no sign of her. With considerable anxiety I stuck to my seat, taking some thin measure of solace from the thread of official continuity being carried out on the field.

From the umpires' gesticulations (and for umpires, gesticulations are part of the business), it was apparent that their conference was about the home run call that seemed the obvious one to make. Yet not one of the men

in blue (I for one felt sure) could testify that he'd actually seen the fly ball traverse the outfield wall. In addition, there was now the matter of the ground rules, taking into account the arrival of a foreign object on the playing field. Would the home team have to forfeit the game unless said object was removed? Was it necessary, or possible, in this case, to call time out--perhaps retroactively?

The conscientious reader may here object that the foregoing is immaterial--perhaps justifiably so. I only knew then that I wished I hadn't let Sophie leave without me. As a result, I was alone in the midst of a larger nightmare than I cared to imagine. If only she could have left me with a mystic tip for lifting oneself out of one's own dream--

But she was gone, and there was nothing I could do about it any more; and the bomb ticked on, and there was nothing to be done about that either.

I could only hope that I was a dream of some other living dreamer; or that I was that dreamer himself who would somehow awake from this madness.

I guessed that in either case the dream would go on, without any concept of victory, of winning or losing. My only remaining question was this: if I perished, in this final solitude, would the sun of my burning essence

continue to shine, somewhere in this universe or another, in fiery, sacred splendor?

The light on the plum blossoms beyond center field became useless. The sun didn't care, but stared and rode on. The sun, the ball, the world, the game, all passed, a mere meditation flickering across the unknowing face of the void.

*

To be perfectly frank about it, I'll be happy that things happened in that particular way (not any way, but afterwards, in that particular way), namely what you see and hear, what you share of what I saw that day.

No bodies, dreams, or heart-attacks, not that way, but what the pebbles mark, what the waters say. In the end it was a normal day, sun gone on to rounds, wolf-moon slinking behind.

Dredged out of the hillside much-time later, I was found, leg bones missing, wolf-tracks along the pebbles.

[BOOK THREE] - CHAPTER TWO: THE LAST BOOK

i

"You can come up for air, now," Sophie warbled.

Then Sophie's apartment, with its ochre drapes and soft white light, came into sudden focus, with Sophie herself in the foreground. The calendar behind her on the wall proclaimed the impossible: November 2035.

I must still be dreaming, I distinctly thought. But the very distinctness of my thought jarred me further awake.

Sophie smiled at me, her chin resting on her hand, her arm supported by the resting of her elbow beside an empty plate, on a table, on a solid floor.

I was refreshed, and felt like shaking myself all over to spray out the last lingering droplets of my past, or of my imagined future, which now also seemed past. To my surprise I found I was wearing a confining, padded, body-length suit of some synthetic material, a garish bright red in color. I immediately stood up and stripped out of it and hung it over my chair, so that, taking my seat again at the table, I was clad in a more comfortable pale green leisure-suit. I smiled a little sheepishly at Sophie. She stifled a giggle.

I caught a faint whiff of tobacco from somewhere. Unconsciously my hand went to my face and I discovered that my beard was gone. I looked down at the cold goose liver on my plate.

"Well," I said, testing my powers of speech, "I'm here. Am I here?"

"I'd have to say so."

"I can hardly believe it. Here with you . . . finally, at last." My words seemed so inadequate. I wanted to reach out and take her hand; to hold her whole body close to me, to make sure . . . but I didn't dare; not yet. I didn't know what she would expect of me--actually here, in the flesh.

Sophie appeared much the same as I'd remembered her: the slightly wavy chestnut hair, those sensual, strikingly red lips, the straight long nose, and the large, round, rich brown eyes. If anything, she looked five years younger. She obviously had the power--or was under the control of some power--to move through decades, or centuries, without showing the effects of time. Yet she was, I trusted, a living human being, who must have been born, suckled and fed. Yes, now I remembered the scenes I'd once witnessed from her past--and those of her future as an old woman. But those were dreams, even dreams within dreams. Then again, she had told me her life history, there by the shores of Sylvan Lake. Had she made it all up?

Was she indeed an astral witch who would, even now, dissolve to dust at the first touch of my hot fingers, my searching lips?

She could just as well have been an Egyptian--or Lemurian--princess, clothed in her satiny, brightly hued garments, enthroned in this white-walled apartment amid the potted palms and ferns and dwarf cedars, with the muted light filtering through long narrow windows screened by blinds made of-- was it papyrus, or just rice-paper? There were definitely modernistic paintings, of brilliant color in simple abstract shapes, hung on the wall over what I took to be a cotton-padded couch; apricot shades on lampstands of polished tubular brass; and simple woven rugs, cushions, and Scandinavian-style wood chairs on a parquet floor.

2035, the calendar maintained. The furnishings truly could not be said to indicate any period different from the era in which I'd just lived (since by that time in the world's, or at least North America's, cultural history, all fashions were permissible, and evident, at once). I wondered if the calendar was a joke. Or if this really was just another, all-too-vivid dream spawned by my lingering, tireless death.

Sophie read my expression and the morbid thought behind it. "You didn't die, dear one. That is, not completely. And this is not a dream. It just

finally worked out that the time was right for our present task to begin--now eat, will you?"

The goose liver was just fine, cold, especially with the white wine. I couldn't say as much for the pasta. But really, all this was too strange, even for me.

"I feel as if I've been here before," I said between bites. And yet . . . I was in this baseball stadium--what, forty years ago; and you were there, and then you weren't; but I was also here, telling you about all these dreams, and . . . Sophie, what happened?"

"A lot--in fact, more than I care to think about. Remember, I was there, too, in some of those dreams of yours, and so I realize it was no picnic. But I don't even know how to begin to explain it all to you. I only know how anxious I've been to have you with me here finally, after so long."

"Why did you leave me, then, at the stadium?"

"That wasn't my doing."

"Whose, then?"

She hesitated; then, in a flat voice, she replied, "I may as well set you straight right now. The Hierarchy."

"The Hierarchy'? What hierarchy?"

"The same one that sent me for you in the first place."

I heard her words with a slow sinking feeling. If I'd been somewhat in awe of her powers, and she was simply a puppet on somebody else's string . . .

It was too much. If this was the truth, I couldn't handle it. I tried to believe she was joking, or lying. I began to resent, with a vengeance, having gone through what I had for anyone other than Sophie.

"Look, can you just tell me what happened?"

"Starting when?"

"Well, since you ask--how about 1895."

Her deep sigh held all the cares of the world. Her dark eyes, deep and shining, reached far away through the ages. In this instant, I felt that in the next, I would be in love with her. Again I wanted to reach for her hand, but stopped short at the stem of my wine glass. There was still a bone to pick. I waited to hear what she had to say.

"I tried to bring you through, Felix, but I botched it, as you know from your little misadventures beginning in New Orleans, or should I say Mobile--"

"Now wait a minute. If you think . . . If you're referring to my libido, or whatever you call it in this century . . . I mean, what did you expect me to do?" While making an emphatic gesture I pulled my hand abruptly away

from my glass and slopped a little wine on the polished wood of the table in the process. Not my old coordination, I thought.

"All right," she said, "you're right, I'm hitting below the belt. The dishcloth's in the sink."

"To hell with the dishcloth." Now I felt wounded again from that extended period of agonizing limbo that she'd put me through.

"Now you feel wounded again from that period of agonizing limbo that I put you through, don't you?"

Unearthly powers, this woman had. Positively unearthly.

"Yes, I do," I said, somewhat calmer. Then what she had admitted to me sank in, and those old wounds continued to burn. "Sophie, I want to get clear on this. Do you mean to tell me that stranding me twenty years short--or, wait a minute, if I can believe your calendar there, it would be sixty years short by now--it was all a mistake?" I had guessed as much, back in '75, when I thought Sophie had wanted me to join her for the 1995 campaign. But now the truth was hard to accept. "All that bullshit I had to go through, wondering if you were real or not, who I was and what I was supposed to be doing with my ridiculous life--and on top of it all, up until a few minutes ago, not knowing if I was even alive or dead--it was all for nothing, one big astral mistake?"

She nodded. And I thought then not only of my own tribulations, but of all those suffering souls who had perished for nothing in the wreck of the Cap Arcona; and yes, as if that wasn't enough, also the Carthage Star. And the poor union lawyers, and the pilot of the jet that went down. Jake Rubino with a knife in his back; Big Jim with another decade added to his sentence; a half-dozen broken hearts along the way, all for her sake--

I dumped it all in her lap.

She heard me out, with a compassionate grace. "I'm afraid so, Felix. I'm so sorry."

"Well, so am I. . . ." Her lack of defensiveness was disarming.

"If it makes you feel any better, the Hierarchy felt it was for the best; and so even though they were upset with my bungling, they allowed you to stay there for some necessary acclimatization, if I was determined to have you in the end."

It didn't make me feel better; it made me feel worse. It sounded fishy, if she really wanted to know. But I'd had my say about the past and now preferred to respond to the moment at hand: "To have me?"

"Yeah." I felt flattered to see a dreamy expression on Sophie's remarkable face. Her tan, almost swarthy skin was smooth and serene, her

roundly arched eyebrows relaxed and open. "I've felt kind of like a talent scout attached to seeing her bonus-baby make it in the big leagues."

I slipped both my hands around hers now as they rested before me on the table. No smoke, no dust. Without batting an eye she slipped her hands out of my grasp and then enclosed my hands with them. I felt as if we were playing a child's game, but was willing to indulge her.

"What about you?" I wanted to know. "What happened to you, then, at the end of that ball game?"

"They yanked me here, forty years ahead, where they said I belonged. Where I'd have a better chance to make things go the way they wanted them. Too much was happening then, out of the blue."

"Like that ancient bomber, for instance?"

"You got it. They don't have control over everybody; just the adepts, like me, and the natural prospects they have files on, like you."

"Only you weren't so adept as they thought."

"Well, you learn from your mistakes. Are you ready to make a go of it now, with me? My campaign is starting to roll, and I need your support."

"Oh, Sophie, I don't know. You're going to have to let me get my bearings here; all right?" I had merely picked at my food--what should have been a nice dish complete with brussels sprouts and buttered linguini, and a

garnish of cherry tomatoes--with not much of an appetite for my fifty-seven years on the astral highway. Maybe it was all the popcorn.

"Yes," said Sophie, "I suppose it wouldn't be very helpful for you to enter the political arena with me until you've recovered sufficiently from your nightmares. I'm just a little impatient, is all. What took you so long to get around to that plane trip?"

"You're forgetting--that three years of hell wasn't my idea." And then it occurred to me, from the little edge in her voice, that she had in mind more specifically my extended delay in Washington State, thanks to Sam and, more to the point, Ophelia. "If you were so anxious," I countered, "couldn't you have just blown up a bus or a ferry, or just plucked me clean out of there?"

She laughed and said, as if making a private joke, "Oh, how I tried. But no, you misunderstand. It was important for you to complete the progress you made while in Alaska. I was referring to the period of time just before then."

"I know you were." Then something clicked. "Sophie, that newspaper article, about werewolves . . . and the travel ad--was that your doing?"

"I had to try something. I couldn't reach you clearly by dreams, as I had at first. So, you use the resources you have at hand."

"What about all these nightmares I've just managed to survive, on my way here--if I can so express it. You weren't responsible for them?"

"Not me, exactly. Listen, what happened is this: I tried to get you straight through from 1978 to 1994, just as I had earlier on the jump from 1895 to 1975. Even though that first one had come up short, at least I got all of you through."

"All of me?"

"Just wait, I'm talking now. The second attempt also worked, thanks to some last-minute help from an unforeseen source, but only for a brief time. You came through in November of 1994. You probably don't remember much now, but we had a good go of it until the following April. Then came the bomb, and I got yanked, and you got left behind. Now I wanted you here, in this century with me, just the way we were. There were a lot of problems with doing that, however. I won't go into it all now. What it boils down to is that your body, as you knew it, couldn't make it through."

This struck me as an affront to my innate capabilities to travel freely in realms seemingly beyond my ken. True, my body had a strangely stodgy feel to it--but I had "made it through," after all, hadn't I? Inside, I felt more

or less the same, if a little shopworn. Putting my hands in my pockets and finding there what felt like a couple of soiled handkerchiefs, I asked Sophie to be more specific about the nature of my physical inadequacy.

"Oh, it wasn't your fault," Sophie consoled me. "It's just that the traffic was too dense. It was November at the time of your plane crash in '78, but April when the bomb hit in '95. Although I got here in April of this year, I couldn't get the program clearance to bring you through just then. So I had to wait until this month, November, when I could try for another jump from November of '78. But as I said, by then the astral traffic was too dense in '94-'95, and you were caught in the shuffle. All I managed to get was your twenty-three-year-old spirit, so to speak, in an older body."

She said this with an obvious tone of disappointment.

I silently commiserated with her for a moment, not fully comprehending the mechanics of my transportation, while also trying to dampen a sudden craving for a cigar. Then I had to ask, "What's this about a program, that prevented my jump in April . . .?"

"Well, the Hierarchy did not appreciate my unauthorized use of their quick-lift codes when I first brought you through in November of '94. So I think what happened is that they switched codes on me."

"I'm afraid I still don't understand. I've assumed that this Hierarchy was some spiritual body of elders or whatever. So what's all this about programs and codes? What kind of codes?"

"Access codes for the computer files, based on star-coordinates. That's how the Hierarchy keeps track of the lifelines."

"Hold it. Lifelines, star-charts, maybe. Time-tested techniques for determining human fate. But computers? You mean these Hierophants or whatever they are don't know their astrology by heart?"

"Oh, no. Are you kidding? That's why they're so much more powerful now than ever before. The computers make the calculations so much easier, and so much more comprehensive. Programs being used today take into account regions of the heavens unknown to previous ages--regions lying at the very edge of the universe, the light from which originates virtually at the beginning of time."

She held me speechless. But there was more.

"And with the aid of computerized astral calculations, the state of fate-engineering today is so advanced that the Dark Forces are virtually on the run."

Now this was too much. First the computerized Masters of the Universe, and now their evil nemesis, the Dark Forces. "Sophie, what do

you take me for? I don't know what cult you've got yourself involved in, but it's not for me. Did you really expect me to buy into all this science fiction and occult mumbo jumbo?"

But she had the trump card, the one I could not escape: "You're here, aren't you? Now you tell me how you got here."

"A fake calendar, that's all. Furniture just like in 1975. Cars outside I bet the same as I saw before--" Then I knew what she was going to say before she said it. I, too, had become psychic.

"1975, did you say? And how--"

"--do I think I got there. Right." Maddeningly right.

I pushed my plate away and took a healthy slug of soothing wine, to cool my thoughts. Sophie got up and cleared the dishes from the table, carrying them into the kitchen and returning with the wine bottle, from which she refilled our goblets.

"Oh, guess what?" she said in a cheery voice as she took her seat again. Somehow it was too cheery.

"What next?"

"I've thought of a new name for you."

"Godzilla, Sophie! A new body--which turns out to be an old body . . . a new life; this isn't enough?"

"Oh, come on. What's in a name? How about Seymour? Seymour Katz? Do you like it?"

"No. I don't see more cats. Where's yours, by the way?"

"Left behind in the last jump, sadly. I've been lobbying to bring him through, but I think they have a point to prove with me now. I don't dare try it. Not now that I've got you, and the campaign's about to start. Seymour, I was serious: do you think you can handle a new name? A good confidence man like yourself?"

"Seymour Katz, eh? Sounds . . . advisorly enough. It would take some getting used to."

"Of course. The thing is, 'Felix Krull' is still just a little too notorious, thanks to your overzealous biographer. Besides that, the pronunciation is tricky; it definitely wouldn't do to have such a close associate of the President confused with the English word "cruel"--or worse yet, some kind of pastry."

"Very funny."

"Seriously now, you do have a prison record that someone might look up."

"Yeah, sure. Talk about ghosts. Listen, I covered myself on that one by registering as a Mr. Charles Ready. Didn't you know that?"

"Of course I knew it. But some records go a little deeper than the official layer of data current at the time."

"All right, but so what? It's ancient history now, right? That would make me, what, about eighty years old now? Do I look that bad? Now tell me: how old am I, anyway?"

"That depends. There was a large cluster of your lifelines around in 1995, and--"

I cut her off, suddenly sorry I asked. "Oh right, right. The cosmic shuffle. The astral jitterbug. The dance of the damned, is more like it. You, them, it: whoever it was, I hope I never have to go through anything like that again."

"No, I don't think so. You're here now, fully qualified as far as I'm concerned; and I'm the one calling the shots now. So what do you think? Will you be ready to start the campaign soon?"

Somehow I didn't yet feel comfortable committing myself. I needed to know more about what I was getting into. "So you've cleared all their hurdles, have you? Does that mean you're one of them, now, part of the Hierarchy?"

She didn't--wouldn't or couldn't--answer. Instead she sat swirling the wine in her glass, gazing into it pensively. I wondered if the glasses were crystal.

"Maybe I'm getting too personal. But I have another question: you mentioned my support. What exactly did you have in mind?"

She laughed like a teenager. I liked her when she was like that, with her high and mighty crown off. "Oh, you know," she said, "both political and, well, you know." Her lips looked delicious. But I was still too disoriented to make any advances, just yet. And hovering at the far edge of my addled brain was a dim memory of a woman and a cat disappearing into a dark wood.

"How about you?" I asked, finally. "Are you sure you're ready for me?"

She sat reflecting for a moment, then answered calmly, "I'm ready to give it a try."

"Do you think I've changed enough for you, or learned enough, or experienced, or suffered, or loved enough?"

Sophie retreated behind her official, one might say, presidential voice. "There was some disagreement among the Hierarchy, it's true. But I felt clear that your lessons were complete. Naturally you didn't realize it at the

time. Now, I'm not saying you have nothing left to learn--but it's just as well you completed the first stage of initiation as well as you did on your own. All the better, in fact, in the eyes of some key observers in the Hierarchy."

I didn't like the sound of this Hierarchy business, no matter how well I had performed for them. It pricked my pride and satisfaction over a mission I would have preferred to take full credit for accomplishing. But even as she spoke so impersonally, Sophie had begun stroking my calf under the table with her unslippered foot, and this simple gesture comforted me. "Well, great," I said, with some sincerity. "I look forward to having you nearby, now--in my second stage, is it?--to guide me through your hoops."

Here I was, plunked (yet again) into a time and place beyond my comprehension, and on top, or underneath, or behind it all, I was on the verge of a love affair with a woman I could hardly say I knew, whom in fact I still had to rely on faith to recognize. I had all along, with a kind of spiritual certainty, felt a certain respect for her; and now I understood dimly that she needed my support. To make matters more difficult to understand, I didn't know much of my new self. In fact, I still had no clear idea even how old I was.

But I was too weary to ask any more questions.

* * *

Sophie put me to bed beside her that night. I was out like a light. In the morning after a fairly normal, blessedly dreamless sleep, and a light breakfast of soft-boiled eggs and English muffins with jam, she told me more about how we both had got here.

"Where is here?" I had asked during breakfast. I should have known, though nothing but shaded daylight appeared through the tinted windows.

"Albuquerque," she'd replied.

"And you've only been here yourself since April?"

"Yes and no."

"I was afraid you were going to say something like that. Now, Sophie, I've been wanting to ask you, but didn't dare--"

"I was getting to that. With the last jump I came through clean--that is, as I was, or as you did the first time. That is, unaged. I was forty-five in '95, and I'm forty-five now."

"Amazing. And you don't look a day over forty."

"Thank you for the compliment. But I can't really take credit for the cosmetic job. The truth is, when I arrived, I had a forty-year-old-body already here to occupy, along with the apartment."

"Wait a minute, now. Do you expect me to believe . . . all right, all right: I'm in no position to disbelieve. But I thought you just told me you were forty-five, the same as before."

"I did. But I was referring to my astral body or spirit, which was freed from the physical body that was carrying it at the time of the bomb in '95. With that death my new ka also began life--this ka which by now has grown to the age of forty. Last April the astral body was brought forward to merge with the newer receptor-body."

"Good God, Sophie, this is incredible. You reincarnated, in other words, in 1995, and have been growing up ever since, living recently in this apartment; and your previous soul or spirit or whatever also made it here, but on the express, so to speak, only to join up with this younger body . . ."

"You're a quick learner, Seymour."

"You wouldn't know it from that three-year probation period you and your gang put me through. Which brings up the point--if you had to leave your, how shall I say, your original body behind, how come I got to bring mine along with me when I made my first jump, to 1975?"

"Because, strictly speaking, you didn't die at the point of the jump. You were rescued at sea. It was very convenient for the Hierarchy to arrange, like that. For you the lack of a past identity or physical record in the intervening period was a minor handicap to overcome. I needed to die, however, so that this new 'me' could grow up with a real identity in this twenty-first century. It wouldn't have worked to have plunked this hotshot Presidential candidate in from nowhere. There would have been too many questions. Whereas you, being a relative nobody . . ."

"Thanks a lot."

"'Relative,' I said."

"Still."

"Okay, okay. You get my point, anyway. Now, it just so happened that you did have a new twenty-year-old astral body to merge with you."

"Oh, God. So this other guy is, I suppose, another version of what you called a 'ka'?"

"If you like."

"I don't give a damn what you call it. I'm just trying to figure out what's going on."

"All right, take it easy. Your story's a bit longer. This new ka of yours was born in 1955, when one of your previous ones died."

I held my head in my hands, to try to hold it down, as it felt as if it might spin away to be lost forever. I needed to calm myself. "How about some brandy, Sophie? Have you got any brandy to put in this coffee?"

"Sure. In the sideboard there. Do you want to talk about something else, do something else now? Watch television? There are some fourteen hundred channels to choose from now."

"No, no, that's all right. I want to hear more about what supposedly happened to me way back when."

I got the brandy, poured more coffee and settled back down onto the couch in the living room. I sat beside Sophie, at a comfortable conversational distance.

"Okay," she continued. "So, according to my research--"

"Wait a sec. How did you find out all this supposed history of me, my former selves, kas, whatever you call them?"

"'LIFELINES.' That's the name of the file directory we have on computer. It's all there. In your first life, you went on to Argentina, where you were imprisoned until 1913, and nearly died. Then, after an intercession by your godfather, you were released, and returned to Germany--only to be killed in a wayward bomb attack near the French border, in 1915, at the age of forty."

"I'm beginning to feel thankful to you for your interest in me, after all."

"Don't mention it. There's more, however. In the second version of what happened, your second lifeline, we'll call it, your ship was wrecked but you didn't make it through the planned time-warp. Instead you landed in New Orleans in 1895, then went on to Albuquerque with a foot in the door of a rising sausage business. Eventually you moved on to more challenging pursuits, and died of natural causes shortly after your eightieth birthday."

"That would have been . . . 1955?"

"Yes. It was at that point that your new ka began life, reaching the age of twenty by the time of your arrival as you remember it in 1975."

"I see. That is, I'll take your word for it. So this new ka, he--I--it had its own life, mother and father and all that, up until that point?"

"Not exactly."

"What do you mean, 'not exactly'? Either a birth takes place or it doesn't; correct?"

"It's not that simple. There are various levels of existence besides the physical plane. There's only room for one physical ka in a given time or place. The rest take more etheric forms. These can merge with kas of

different weight, so to speak, and they can coexist in their own nonphysical lifelines, branching still further whenever there's a death."

"A death in the family, you might say."

"Sure."

"Okay, then what about this previous death, in 1915? Did I sprout a new ka then, as well?"

"You certainly did. He would have been forty in 1955, sixty in 1975, sixty-three at the time of your plane crash, and, depending on what happened then, and again in 1995, would now be either, let's see, forty more years . . . sixty-three, eighty, a hundred and three or a hundred and twenty by now."

"Well which is it, then?"

"Whichever you like. They are all possibilities. The "ors," I'm trying to tell you, are actually "ands." By the way, we forgot the one spawned by your jump in 1895, who would have been eighty--"

"Hold on. That's enough already! Let me get this straight. What you're getting at, is that all of the above options are true, are somehow simultaneously real?"

"You're catching on. The revolution in so called particle-physics in the latter part of the twentieth century really began this new science of fate-engineering. It's based on probability and possibility. Human beings, like

the subatomic entities that make up all matter and energy, cannot be pinned down to definite tracks of destiny. They have too many choices, options, decisions to make, at every instant, most of them unconscious. At each decision point a wave of possibility is generated that carries the spark of that person's life.

"Either you got on that plane or you didn't. Either it crashed or it didn't. Either you died in it or were saved. What it comes down to is this: one of you lived a normal life in the following seventeen years; one started life then as a result of your death; and one came through unchanged, unaged, to November of 1994."

"Okay. I'm trying to follow you. But how does that older, sixty-three-year-old me, for instance, come into it when the twenty-three year old goes down in a plane crash?"

"He was part of you, Seymour. Part of the complex of probabilities that make up who you are."

"You say probabilities, and also possibilities. How do they compare, in this lifeline system you're describing?"

"Given the person you are, and the choices you've made, the situation at any point in time favors the likelihood of certain paths and decreases the likelihood of others. To follow all the infinite possibilities would be

senseless. But it's worth, we've found, keeping track of the more major probabilities in the lifelines."

"Do you keep track of everyone like this?"

"I suspect so, at some level. I personally don't. I've been concentrating on you." She looked at me with such a fixed expression that I felt the urge to interrupt our chat and went to relieve myself. On the way back I refilled our coffee cups. Meanwhile the quick look in the bathroom mirror (were there more gray hairs than before breakfast?) had revived my most pressing curiosity.

"All right," I started in again, "please explain to me. How old am I, exactly, right now?"

"A ripe old forty," she said with an ironic sigh. "I suppose it wouldn't really have worked out to have you here at the elbow of the President at the tender age of twenty-three--yes, yes, I know you were a rising union bigshot, on your way here on your own steam. To let you in on a little secret, I tried to get that younger body of yours straight through, but--"

"You told me that secret already, yesterday."

"There's more to it. Before the actual '94 jump I fed the star-coordinates into your file for a dry-run. I didn't like what I saw. You died in the plane crash, and what I got was the leftovers: an alternate ka who never

got on the plane or who got on and made it to Albuquerque when the plane didn't crash, and in either case lived on to become a yuppie union-man who played a pretty good game of golf and enjoyed the occasional vacation, and native mistress, in beautiful Alaska."

"I see what you mean."

"You don't know the end of it yet. I had a hunch that the Hierarchy wanted this more conventional, more mature Felix to join me for the run at the Presidency. But there was another alternate ka who showed up on the screen just before I signed off. Called himself "Harry the Hacker"; but he was a Felix-ka, the one arising from the ashes of the plane-crash--"

"You mean the bubbles."

"Don't interrupt. I was wondering why I hadn't been able to call this one up. He was filed under another name. In fact, he told me that the Hierarchy had tried to delete him from your file. But he knew a little something about computers himself, and had put some insurance into his own file, encrypting himself, as it were, so that he could live on, invisibly . . ."

". . . in binary code. Right. Is this ever getting bizarre."

"Hey, how come you know so much about computers?"

"Oh, you pick up a little here and a little there," I heard my voice explaining. "I wasn't a complete idiot during my 'apprenticeship,' you know." The fact remained, I knew next to nothing about computers.

A suspicious glint appeared in Sophie's eye; but she went on with her story: "So this new entity, just sixteen years old, whom I knew only from his communication with me on the computer screen, gave me the quick-lift code from the classified files of the Hierarchy."

"By quick lift you mean a direct time-jump, saving me from a fiery death?"

"Or watery grave, take your pick."

"Touché."

"It was very noble of him, don't you think?"

"Except it didn't work."

"Oh, but it did--for a while. But in the process, you see, there was no death by plane-crash, and so no physical rebirth as Harry the Hacker. A virtual self-sacrifice."

"Easy come, easy go," I remarked.

"I can't believe your flippancy. Do you realize we're going to be running this country, in a very short time, managing all the serious affairs of

state, international trade and development, the exploration of outer space . . .
."

"Rolling in bed together . . . whoops, I've gone too far. Just kidding. No, really. You know me, blithe spirit and all, just a twenty-three-year-old at heart."

I was glad to see a smile replace the stormy expression that had crossed Sophie's face at my impertinent flirtation. I wondered what route feminism had taken in these sixty years.

Undaunted, she continued, "Now, where were we? Ah, yes. As I was going to say, our reunion was short and sweet. April 10, 1995 was Opening Day of the baseball season. You were not yet twenty-four. A young strong body you had then, and yes, my friend, we had our good times together in bed. But the Hierarchy was not pleased. They did not appreciate my customizing their retrieval program, is how they put it. The fact was, they thought this young rogue I was consorting with would destroy all the practical chance I had as a Presidential hopeful."

"So they lifted you, and axed me."

"Yes, and when I tried again the Hacker was no longer there at my fingertips. The only way I could have tried to get him back would have been to kill you off in the '78 plane crash, in which case I'd have taken the chance

of being left either with the young Hacker himself or his fifty-six-year-old cousin. The Hierarchy would have liked the latter option, I think."

"But not the first."

"His skills would have come in handy for them, if they could have broken him of his rebellious spirit."

"Okay, so this forty-year-old body I inherited comes from this older me, the surviving union executive?"

"I'd prefer to think of your present body as the one spawned at the same time as mine, when that bomb went off. But because you never materialized until yesterday, I think your case is more complicated than that."

"Why? We both have new forty-year-old bodies: you have an astral spirit that came in five years older, and mine came in at twenty-three. Nothing wrong with that."

"No. Except that my body has lived in the physical world these last forty years, and yours hasn't. I've relived, basically, a career similar to my previous one, with a little earlier start in Congress; while you've been hanging out in some astral state of limbo."

"Oh." I couldn't argue. I was alive now, it seemed, but I had no other evidence to support my claim for a personal history of any kind after 1995.

No real memory, no respectable career, no family. "Do you have a mother, a father?" I asked.

"I did," said Sophie. "They're both dead now."

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Don't be sorry. We all die."

"In a manner of speaking. But apparently we're not all born. How come my new body wasn't awarded the pleasure of a rebirth, a second childhood, too?"

"I'm not sure, but my theory is that there was too much interference from that other ka of yours. You see, the trouble is, your union bigwig also died in 1995, in a skidoo accident; this created a twin rebirth situation. Either ka could have made it alone with a new physical life, but because there were two so close together, both were too diluted. It was like a terminal case of double vision. The image was blurred to the point where there wasn't any definite image. And the same goes for your two resulting astral bodies, I suspect. So in effect you've got four insubstantial kas all blending together here. But the combined weight of them all together created a sufficient density to allow you to come into physical form."

"And I thought trying to be a two-bit marquis was challenging. But I suppose I can handle it. At least I don't need to feel obligated to identify too exclusively with that golf-playing union guy."

"Once we get you some new duds, that is."

She had a point. I had only the clothes I'd arrived in: the red snowsuit, and the rumpled green leisure-suit that I'd worn again today, with its soiled handkerchiefs, some obsolete union memos and, I'd discovered, a couple of cigars still in the pockets.

"By the way, Sophie--if this gentleman died in a skidoo accident, unlike my poor self who died with you when the bomb went off, what did actually happen, back in 1995? Did the bomb go off or didn't it? Was there a nuclear war, Armageddon, or what? Isn't it history, now?"

"Ah--one person's history is another person's myth."

"Yeah, right. Or perhaps nothing but a dream--is that what you're trying to tell me? A blown-up world is nothing but a collective dream? Come on."

"Not quite. It was always a possibility, and it probably always will be--if not from some military madness, then from an eco-catastrophe or cosmic joke, some unlikely collision with a wandering comet. But that little terrorist escapade you're referring to was a one-shot deal. A crude device,

with only a couple of kilotons, at that. And even it didn't have to happen.

Which is to say, maybe it didn't."

Exasperated, I asked then, "All right, I see what you're getting at, in theory. Just tell me this: did the Carthage Star sink or didn't it?" As soon as I'd asked it I knew I'd chosen the wrong ship.

"Yes."

"Good. There is something to rely on. Okay, now what about--"

"But it's not certain in which year the disaster actually took place. It was October of 1994 when I first tried to bring you forward, and I was counting on using the imminent wreck of the Carthage Star to account for the appearance of your lifeboat; but as I said, something went wrong and it went to the bottom on its maiden voyage in 1975 instead."

"Oh, I see. . . . That is, no, I don't. You say the shipwreck was 'imminent.' How could you plan on a disaster at sea before it has occurred?"

Sophie said, in a low voice as if she'd rather not have said, "Information in another file."

"You mean you arranged for this liner to do down with all its passengers, on the basis of some computer's prediction?"

"The probabilities were strongest on that line."

"Jesus, Sophie. And the Cap Arcona?"

"It might have been saved. Then again, when it went down, all on board might have been lost."

She had a point there. "Well, we can thank the Hierarchy for small favors."

"You should realize, Seymour, that by the same token, a doomsday scenario in our future is not inevitable. There are many choices to be made before we bring that on ourselves."

With all of these variable fates floating around, both personal and collective, I no longer felt sure which, if any, deserved first rank as "reality" or "history." Sophie had nearly convinced me of the validity of her theories. In any case I had lost the heart to pursue her slippery logic any further. We both sat quietly for once--peaceful and, I was happy to realize, at home together. After a few moments Sophie reached a hand out and placed it gently on my arm, saying, "Come with me now, back to bed, and make love with me, will you?"

That first time was wondrous. The best part of it for me was that we were as equals.

Afterwards, I reflected that I was content with my fate. I didn't feel like a collection of warring zombies; I felt like my old self--that is, my

young self, mellowed with age. I was satisfied with the survival of my sexual powers, and evidently Sophie was, too. But when our couple of hours of amorous, languorous bliss had subsided, when we had, in effect, returned to our separate bodies, I found I was still preoccupied with questions needing answers. For the most part these questions involved the Hierarchy, and I knew that asking them would bring up some undercurrents of resentment on my part. But they could not be avoided.

"So tell me," I said finally to the half-dozing Sophie, as I still lay at her side. "What does this Hierarchy of yours want to accomplish? What is their plan for the world?"

"Well, it's not their plan, exactly. They are only a body of overseers--bureaucrats on the etheric plane--who are trying to carry out the Akashic plan."

"The what?--oh never mind."

"No, that's fine, it's a basic question." But she hesitated before answering.

I seemed to have intimidated her, but instead of responding sensitively I kept my cynic's air, saying: "Or, maybe, as a good politician, you're not at liberty to say--at least, not at this point in time."

She looked at me with a hurt expression, saying, "Look, I don't know what your problem is with them." Then she rattled off the answer like an automaton: "The Hierarchy is serving the cause of spiritual evolution. Their necessary mission is to combat the Dark Forces, so that human potential has the chance to be realized."

"And if there were no benevolent hierarchy, if we poor creatures wallowing here in our own muck on earth were left to our own desires and devices, we wouldn't stand a chance: is that it?"

"I'm afraid it is."

"Does the plan say we'll make it, or not?"

"It could go either way. It depends on what we humans decide to make of our possibilities."

"Then it's up to us, after all! What good is this Hierarchy, then?"

"To remind us of the path we're on, the probable outcomes of our actions, our true goals and our temporary illusions. And sometimes we need a little divine intervention to give us a chance to make up for our mistakes, so that we don't get ourselves killed in the process of learning."

"Though, of course, many do make fatal mistakes. And sometimes those mistakes are fatal for others."

Sophie's brow darkened and she turned quickly away.

* * *

Later we went out shopping for, among other things, a new wardrobe for me. From the elevator in Sophie's apartment building we entered a short tunnel that took us to a subway. Sophie told me on the ride that I would need a pair of sunglasses for above-ground travel. At first I thought she had in mind my new role as a political aide. But then she explained that people for the most part avoided the daylight because of the widespread thinning of the earth's ozone layer. I recalled the tinted windows of Sophie's apartment, and had to look forward to our sojourn in an underground mall with some wistful sadness over the sorry fate of the planet. Not that the planet was sorry. We had done it to ourselves.

I found the human world not so very different from the one I had left behind. People of all kinds still strolled past the shops, carrying bags of purchases, eating snacks, stopping to talk to acquaintances, walking dogs, and so on. The Muzak was maddeningly unchanged, as if the same interminable tape had been running continuously, and would continue whispering through its auto-reverse cycles forever. Fashions were no more

outlandish to me than those that first met my astonished eyes on the deck on the Cap Arcona.

I let Sophie choose for me a most respectable blue suit, and a tan one with a muted check pattern, along with dress shirts, ties, slacks, shoes and socks, underwear, and an assortment of casual wear. Then it was on to the drugstore to make up the articles of a proper toilet kit. I was eager to shave and to change into a presentable suit of clothes, both to feel more myself and to stop people I passed from giving me strange looks. Though maybe it wasn't so much my face or style of clothing but the tobacco smell lingering about me, that drew attention. I noticed nobody smoked.

We went out for an intimate candlelight dinner in a posh downtown restaurant that night. Sophie didn't have a private car, so we rode on a sleek, marvelously quiet elevated rail-bus over the downtown streets. There was little traffic below; the automobile had evidently reached prohibitive expense levels for the bulk of the population, due both to the relative scarcity of metals and the depletion of fossil fuels. Vehicles were now constructed of synthetic alloys and organic plastics, Sophie informed me, and they ran on a combination of synthetic hydrocarbon and plant-derivative alcohol fuels. She pointed out a couple of fancy-looking jobs that could have driven out of

the old Batman comic strips, and said that these were largely in the hands of a few superstar athletes, entertainers, and industrialists.

"Isn't this supposed to be a post-industrial age?" I asked, precociously.

Sophie smiled and said, "Yes, you might say that, in terms of a general shift in employment trends over the last fifty years. But these guys are in charge of the industry that remains; those industries, for example, which are producing the new hybrid materials, and making the few ritzy models of cars still available. Somebody has to drive them. And there aren't that many folks around who are rich enough to afford it."

The rail-bus whispered to a stop. We got out and walked the last couple of blocks. I reveled in the starry sky, the clear cold air that I attributed to the surrounding desert. It was the first of December, and the streets were decked out with all the reds and greens of the coming holiday. I remarked to Sophie that I thought it rather odd, in retrospect, that the mall had been undecorated, that we'd heard no carols on the Muzak system. Sophie explained that December first marked the official opening of the Christmas season, but not until 6 p.m.

"Oh, good lord," I said. "Is that what government has come to, now? Where they have to tell people when they can put up a Christmas tree? What's the point of that?"

Sophie was usually patient with me when I asked such questions. "Something had to be done," she said. "It had become a race among the merchants to see who could 'beat the Christmas rush' by putting up the first tinsel. Trees and wreaths were going up at the end of July."

"Yeah, but--"

"Look, don't blame me, or the Congress. All we did was legislate the right for local jurisdictions to make their own rules about it."

Somehow we couldn't get away from politics, whether the astral variety or the more conventional sort. After all, I had to reason, that was why I was here. But I found myself wondering, is this what I really want? I was definitely attracted to Sophie--but wasn't yet sure about the package deal.

Over a nice, prettily arranged, but overpriced quail albuquerquise, Sophie filled me in on the current political scene at the national level. I liked to think of it as my first official 'briefing,' as the next day we had a meeting scheduled, one of a series of weekly strategizing sessions over lunch with the Party brass. From the sound of it, the electoral system ran much the same as before, despite the merger of the Republican and Democratic parties. There were still several months of primaries coming up

in the first half of the new year, followed by a nominating convention at the end of July. But the position of Vice President had been done away with at the time of the party merger. And the Electoral College had also been ditched, gone the way of the eagle and the Edsel.

One candidate would come out of the convention and go before the people for a final election. To win, to be officially voted into office, the candidate had to capture a majority of the popular vote. That is, more people voting "yes" than those voting "no."

"But what if, say, fifty-one percent of the people don't vote at all?" I wanted to know.

"Of course," Sophie said, while vigorously chewing, "then it's up to the handful of eligible voters who actually turn out on Election Day. That's always been the case in principle. It's the responsibility of the voters. If twenty percent, or even two percent, of the electorate chooses to exercise their right, and the rest sit on their asses, it's the ass-sitters' own problem. Nobody's going to hold their hands and . . ." Sophie paused to swallow the tough wad of masticated meat.

"Walk them to the polling booth," I foolishly interrupted.

"Oh, silly, are you kidding? All they have to do is punch a button on their TV console. And even so, the last election where there was anything

resembling a real choice, under the old party system, only twenty-nine percent of the eligible voters saw fit to wiggle their little fingers in the direction of the designated button."

"Maybe they thought it might blow up the world."

"Very funny. Have you finished with your quail? I wouldn't mind some more. They're awfully small."

I gave her a barbecued drumstick no larger than my thumb. The restaurant was divided into little rooms separated by Japanese-paper partitions, so I didn't have to worry about any presidential-level etiquette.

Nor did Sophie. She started right in, gnawing on her new bone. "So when it came time to write the new act, the savants who did so knew enough not to require an absolute majority. Politicians are, above all, realists, you know."

"Well, sure; and especially when there's not even any choice left."

"Seymour, do I have to go through this again? You can call up the congressional records if you really want to get into the arguments. If you're going to make any kind of contribution to American political history you'll have to understand the background. There was virtually no difference between the two old parties anyway; the elections were no more meaningful

than they would be if I ran against a clone of myself; the real battles took place in the primaries and on the floor of the convention."

"And that's still the case, with competition inside the Party?"

At this Sophie patted her mouth with a linen napkin, took a deep breath and settled back in her chair. "Not really," she said with a somewhat pained expression on her face. "I can't quite figure it out. It's as if--and I don't know if this is because of, or simply coincidental--but as soon as the parties merged, a warring spirit seemed to go out of politics. Offices at the local level, where issues were live and current, suddenly became hotly contended, by the brightest new, charismatic people. Somehow it seemed as if national politics just kind of withered, without the intensity of the old party rivalries."

"But you're still committed to it."

"Yeah. But I must say, not like I was, back in '94, '95. It's not quite the same."

"But there must be some compensations, some challenges to make it worthwhile, personally--or are you just doing it for the Hierarchy?"

Sophie looked at me with piercing black eyes, her chestnut hair now raven-black in the shadows. She was hauntingly, bewitchingly beautiful. She must have read my thoughts because she said, "I know you asked that as

an honest, objective question. And it's a good one. I'm not sure how to answer."

Our waitress picked this moment to ask if we wanted anything else. We said no and she disappeared again.

Sophie had gathered a few of her thoughts and was able to continue: "I must tell you that I share some of your, how shall I say, healthy skepticism about the Hierarchy's aims. Certainly I've had my share of run-ins with them. Generally I believe in their higher purposes. They still seem to believe in me, as the person best able to carry out the larger plan. In relation to some of what we've been discussing--the state of political evolution in this country at the moment--I think we are at a kind of crossroads. The rest of the world has gone on from the great power blocs that you remember from the last two--you might say four--centuries, and devolved in scale to a more diverse, more decentralized model in which the power is also dispersed. The United States of America is the last holdout as a continental-scale power, along with our Canadian cousin, really part of the same empire together. Personally I'm a little uncomfortable with this situation, in the global community. But it's clearly where the American, and I presume the Canadian people want to remain, and as their highest political

representative I am bound to serve that interest. I have no doubt, by the way, that it is the Hierarchy's interest as well."

"That seems odd to me. I thought you described their objectives in terms of human betterment, not national aggrandizement."

"Yes, but you see, we in America are the keepers of the plan, the embodiment of the collective political destinies of the human race."

"Sophie, you sound as if this were 1776. Has power gone to your head already?"

"No, you have to understand that I'm not speaking so much on the literal level, here, as about the working out of the various ray energies of the race; the primary currents of spiritual evolution through the great civilizations of the past; the revealed prophecies of seers century after century . . ."

"Sounds pretty hokey to me. I hope you know what you're talking about. And I also hope you don't try to sell it to the American people, because I don't think they'd buy it."

"Oh, you're absolutely right--on one level. I wouldn't express it in terms like those I used just now. That's getting too close to the esoteric level of knowledge reserved for the adepts. No, but translated into everyday political language, about the strength and moral purpose, you know, of this

most favored nation in the history of the world--they'll lap that sort of thing right up."

I had to admit to myself that Sophie appeared to have what it took to be a successful politician. Still I wanted to know more of her personal agenda.

In response to my further questioning, she claimed an ambition to succeed even in conventional terms: to hold the center, subject to the various tides of interest-group pressure that gave the Nation its character. In order to offset the relative lassitude that marred political life in the capital these days, she held the hope that in her hands, "the country could be unified in its sense of purpose and hope for the future."

"Spoken like a politician," I said to her. We got up to leave. She paid the check.

Next day I had to get my own political feet wet, testing the unfamiliar waters of the twenty-first century. The Szechwan smorgasbord was good; the conversation depressing. The topic of the day would turn out to be the dismal state of history in which we found ourselves, the distressing lack of light on viable cures for the cancerous diseases of a world largely gone mad.

There were five of us: Dennis McElroy, Lenore Kane, and Jeff Willoughby, along with Sophie and myself. Dennis was the Party chief. He looked like a swollen Jimmy Cagney--though I would come to know him as a somewhat more amiable variety of Irish political sergeant. Lenore, braceleted and owl-eyed, served as Party secretary; while Jeff of the lanky frame and sand-blond hair was our media liaison. Sophie introduced me as Seymour Katz, expert on labor law, longtime friend and confidant, and her choice for campaign speechwriter. And where did I live?, Lenore Kane wanted to know.

"Um, with her," I answered uncertainly, pointing a thumb toward Sophie.

With that I noticed a few eyebrows go up. I felt my reception overall at this affair to be cold, if distantly respectful. There had to be some misgivings about my credentials as speechwriter and personal advisor (not to mention prospective constant companion) of the Presidential candidate. I was a newcomer, an unknown; that was reason enough to have to undergo careful scrutiny.

Meanwhile discussion turned to the more important issues at hand. None of us was able to come up with any coherent strategy for extricating ourselves, as a nation or a larger global society, from the whirlpool of our

collective destiny. Yet, as Jeff pointed out with the soft voice of a college sophomore, we had to present some kind of platform to the public; we had to appear, at least, capable of providing solutions for the undecided if they were to trust us with the reins of power.

Quite a hard-boiled view of politics, I thought to myself, for such a downy-cheeked youth. What did they teach them in college these days? I found out later he was thirty-seven.

All the others echoed Jeff's realism, as they called it, about our task in the world. I wondered where each of them (and then I thought--us) stood in the strata of the Hierarchy.

Finally I felt compelled to observe that there was another, perhaps broader kind of realism needed in the situation, which would not merely appear to grapple with the difficult choices ahead, but which would actually address the root causes of the world's problems.

Dennis McElroy began questioning me most incisively following this little platform pitch. For the better part of an hour, I parried his rhetorical thrusts around the concept that our civilization perched precariously on the edge of history.

Finally, he put it to me, and I thought I was exposed, that it was all over. "I wonder, Seymour, if you could tell us what you see as the major

trend that got us where we are, over the last thirty-five years, or even going back as far as, say, the nineteen-seventies--I mean the currents of feeling in the general population as you see it."

I began to blush, knowing I'd have to fake it on piecemeal information gleaned second-hand from my brief contact with Sophie. On a deeper level, though, I felt an innate confidence in such matters, having gained, I suppose, a unique perspective of the flux that the decades present in their passing.

"Okay," I began, "let's start with the seventies. That was a time of gradual awakening, with increasing public awareness that the old way of life, the old traditions and institutions and lifestyle patterns would not survive much longer. With a further decrease of resources, combined with higher inflation and population density, most people came by the end of the century to realize that drastic change was inevitable. If any world was to survive the tumult of the nineties it would be a new world replacing the old. But more likely in the minds of many was the looming global disaster which threatened from every corner. While we have been lucky enough to avoid that terminal cataclysm in the thirty-five years since the turn of the millennium, it is more than ever our responsibility, I believe, to fulfill the uncompleted imperative of fundamental change as a matter of planetary

survival--as well as of national security--or succumb to the inevitability of apocalypse."

I don't think my appraisal was anticipated in its starkness. Jeff cleared his throat and excused himself from the table then and there. Lenore, who up to then had been rather cheery, succumbed to quiet tears. Dennis was satisfied, at least for the time being, and sat immobile with his arms crossed on the table, his eyes now lowered. Sophie, sitting next to me, reached a hand to mine and squeezed gently.

It was only the next day that Sophie chided me for giving way to such a pessimistic view of the world's prospects--an interpretation of my remarks which I felt to be wholly unjustified. Nor did I understand Sophie's more general characterization of me as "negative." I told her that she must have been thinking of my former, lower or less-evolved selves, the ones who lived in the era of self-involvement and disillusionment, the nineteen-seventies. And that more fundamental to my character, going back to my Old World self, was an unshakable faith in success based on the judicious exercise of personal power. But maybe she was just mad because the afternoon gathering had broken up quickly after my contribution, in a mood more imbued with philosophical contemplation than with the more

conventionally jocular brand of campaign strategizing. We even forgot what she referred to as the customary snifter of brandy.

Or she might have thought that I had taken a liking to Lenore Kane. She took issue, for example, with my manner of stating my place of residence, saying it was "out of line."

In response, I snapped, "So honesty is out of line, is it? Is that what this game of diplomacy is all about? Well, then, maybe you're right. And maybe this job, this life, is not for me."

That softened her a bit, even though she knew I didn't really mean it. We sorted things out with an assortment of kisses. Then we got down to work, as Sophie introduced me to the remarkable world of the computer.

What realms of power and knowledge undreamt of by previous generations! What nerve, to attempt--and largely succeed--in creating the semblance of an intelligent being, from a few bits of copper and silicon! I was truly awed, and more and more so the deeper I got into the menus, the programming routines and sub-routines, and eventually, the customizing paths. Sophie had personal files covering everything from political history to economic theory, from wallpaper designs to quiche recipes--all imported from her collection of 1995. No matter the size or extent of the hypothetical

holocaust: for what is a terrestrial firestorm to a field-protected disc in digital code, cached in an underground vault?

Not that it was the quiche recipes that were so important to save. The prototype of the LIFELINES file was under development then, and all of Sophie's program data were stored along with it, under similar protection for later retrieval.

These sensitive files, or rather the far more sophisticated offspring of the early prototype, were not even listed in Sophie's current directories. Upon questioning, she gave me to understand that she had access to them via an encoded connection to what she called "Mainframe Alpha." I would not, for some time yet, be considered a good enough security risk to be granted such access.

"By whom?" I was naive enough to ask.

As a mere computer trainee, I refused to let this top-secret business bother me. Instead, in the weeks to come, I plunged merrily ahead in such pursuits as graphing logarithms, studying recent world history, starting a personal dream-journal, and playing computer baseball between (to take one from a virtually infinite number of possible matchups) an all-star team from the 2020's and one from the 1970's. My next project would be to create a dream-team for the 2040's based on current career trends and minor-league

talent, and adding a couple of ringers I was fond of remembering from the Kodiak Bruins--extrapolating, in the latter case, from known deviations between baseball and softball statistics. All the data, file space, graphic options and formulae I needed for the above pursuits, whether trivial or profound, were but a keystroke away--with an infinitude more only to be imagined and executed at the mere tapping of my idle fingers.

Naturally, Sophie had better things to do than to lead me by the hand through all the above-mentioned program functions. It is a credit both to the inboard tutorials and, I was pleased to discover, my own innate affinity for the medium, that mastery of it came so easily.

* * *

Mucking around in the computer directory one dreary December day, I pressed an otherwise innocent combination of keys that let me in on one of Sophie's diary files. Not being one to turn a blind eye to the opportunities that generous fate offers up, I went ahead and read some of my mistress's hastily recorded thoughts concerning yours truly, circa 1895:

I don't know what got into me the day I decided to let that cad get under my skin but when I get to him next time I'm going to make it clear to

him: no, wait, there won't be a next time, exactly. I'll do it the symbolic way, the way where his unconscious'll have to make the connections. Now: for the meantime, I don't know if he will take me up on this implicit offer I made to him, my own life at the moment being inconsequential enough. I haven't really done anything with it really, schoolteaching and school boards beside the point; I've never really been in love; and he is kind of cute. Then again, who needs a man? A president should be his, I mean her, own man, er, I mean . . . well, anyway, I don't know if this is such a great idea to import this German chap who--hey he probably doesn't even know English! Though he's picked up Portuguese easily enough, when he saw some advantage in it for him. He really is a self-centered son of a bitch, if you ask me. He sure seems to be stuck on that Zouzou, though. If he doesn't decide to ditch her I'll have to set up something, a little accident....see if you can beat that, ZZ....Now, where was I? Ah, yes, my platform for the rearrangement of continental North America. Now, in the first place--Shit, I'm really not in the mood to do this kind of macho work this early in the morning. Where's my vibrator. No, sigh, where's Felix. But goddamnit he's not ready yet, he's such a sot, a big-headed wagging-tongue cad. Why him? Answer: I spotted him in one of my astral portait scans one night, he just came to me and I liked his looks right away. What

can I say? Now that's not enough to sway the H., of course, though I can make his case on his knack for instilling confidence, the way he charms the ladies, the very esteemable monarch for godssake--and the way jewels seem to fall into his lap...why not me?

Why not, indeed.

I read the above, I must say, with mixed feelings. Yet overall I felt flattered. If, despite Sophie's negative observations, she'd gone to all this trouble to get me here to be with her, surely my good qualities had carried the day.

That night in bed, my own responses to Sophie quickened noticeably. I found her ravishingly beautiful. I felt deeply challenged to have been chosen by this remarkable woman; proud and yet strangely humble to have been singled out for this unique role in her life, and in the life of a nation. I valued her own skills and abilities in the carrying out of her mission, and felt all the more honored to be thought of as bringing a useful complement of talents to the task ahead. I had come to believe, in other words, that we were in love; and at times like this, the magic of our union seemed absolute.

But I pushed my luck too far when, in the throes of our passionate lovemaking, I asked Sophie, "Why did you choose me, out of all the men

you could have had?" I wanted to hear the words direct from those luscious lips.

She smiled condescendingly and said, in the sweetest voice, "Because that is the nature of benevolent bodhisattvas: to take under their wing some poor lost soul who thinks he's got it all together, but in reality is going nowhere."

Disheartened, I added, "That is, until the higher contact is made."

"Exactly." And then her kisses made me feel somewhat better.

I knew we were going to start formal tantric practice soon.

"Love me with your soul," she would say, "as well as with your body."

"That's no problem."

"Let's try to look at sex as the prelude to spiritual communion."

"Oh good; this sounds exciting. When do we begin?"

"Hold on, Seymour. We have a way to go yet with the toning of the chakras."

"I'm game. So what if it's only two o'clock in the morning?"

*

"With the advanced instruction, you can expect to have a most reliable command of your sexual mechanism. Not to mention an improved understanding of its female counterpart, which, you will find, can be so much more refined, the orgasm so much more transcendent, than the primitive male version."

"Uh-huh."

*

"Sophie, do you expect it to go perfectly every time? What kind of lovers are you used to having?"

"You're the first since . . . since Jarold."

"Jarold, eh. Who's Jarold?"

*

"Uh, Sophie . . . I read in one of the files something about the AIDS epidemic, and the development of a vaccine for it. Shouldn't I be getting vaccinated, at some point?"

"Thatt's already done. In your wine, that first night. I couldn't take any chances, with you coming hot out of the late seventies, with your habits."

*

"Seymour, come to me, closer; I want you."

"Are you sure this time? Am I on the right track?"

"Yes . . . yes . . . no, wait--let's bring it down for a bit. Breathe.

Breathe with me."

"I'm breathing, I'm breathing."

* * *

In this same period of time before the primaries, Sophie began informally to guide me in the art of conscious intervention into the dream state--that being the elementary training ground for those destined for the higher arts of fate-engineering. When dream-control was mastered, we would go on to astral projection. From there, to contact with other dreaming astral bodies. From there . . . truthfully, I was almost afraid to contemplate

the limits of such instruction; though it was perhaps more awful to conjecture that there were no limits. Naturally the dream training and sexual training overlapped to a large degree; and by the same token, all our spiritual exercises could be considered, as a methodology of control and inroad to power, an essential preparation for the coming entry into the political arena.

I had once, while still in my teen years, become practiced in the art of lucid, or what may be called conscious dreaming. Since then, however, I had been less than diligent in maintaining the necessary breathing exercises, and thus had let my dream-life slip back into the more common realms of nightmare and symbolic sideshow. (Which is not to say that I had lost the capacity for near-complete recall of dreams, a fringe benefit of my early self-training.) Now I found that I was quickly able to learn the techniques that Sophie taught me. Within a short time I could move from subconscious to lucid dreaming almost at will. I say almost, because conscious dreaming was subject to more than mere will; it occurred spontaneously, in flashes at first, and gradually in longer periods. Once the flash of awareness came, it was theoretically a simple matter to sustain it, enhancing the initial thrust of fate with a boost of agreeing power, directed from within. The whole procedure was highly delicate, however, and, as Sophie cautioned me, subject to instant dissolution at the first hint of morbid motives, greedy

curiosity, or even aloof detachment. When that happened I slipped back into a land of slumbering images, where dreams could be dark and empty places, unrecognizable then or after.

So, under Sophie's tutelage, I began intensifying the nightly exercises: practicing special breathing routines, twisting myself into a variety of sacred postures, telling myself by repetitions of certain Sanskrit murmurings that I was increasing my vibration rate, that I was progressing, that I was about to leave my poor fleshly shell of a body behind to embark on a journey which would lead me, among other destinations, directly into avenues of genuine world power.

Lest the reader be misled by a claim of such ambition, conjuring the trappings of political hierarchy by whatever name, I must qualify my goal in its true perspective. The truth is that by now I was at least relatively free of selfish motives.

I was not content, for instance, merely to pursue this love affair which Sophie had dropped in my lap gratis, without a full understanding of its place in my spiritual journey. I was also not interested in the worldly worship which accrues to positions of power, but rather chose to merge my own resources with the wider sources of power in society, in the world, and

to be fully honest, in the universe at large. In short, I was not after the power that corrupts, but the power, if I may say so, that uplifts.

During the time of dream-training I was largely free of the nightmares that had dogged my heels into the twenty-first century. Largely, but not completely.

Take, for instance, the little horror nesting within the fortune cookie I ate at a breakfast in the Chinese embassy. Not satisfied with the insipid little epigrams I'd received in my first three cookies, I'd reached for a fourth one over the protests of the Bulgarian diplomat at my side, and read with a prickling dread: "You will dream of a fireball dropping from the sky. Do not act, for the wolves are waking." This message had remained an enigma for two weeks, and then I had the predicted dream:

I was waiting in center field to catch the long fly ball that would have been the last out of the World Series. The ball rose and rose, and I lost it in the sun. I rose up after it, gliding far enough even through the stratosphere to watch the ball's tail like that of a comet streaming opposite the sun. Chasing it for some time, I soon lost interest and gave up. I worked my finely tuned dream-controls to get me back to the ballpark, where I landed roughly in a center field box seat. It was occupied already by none other

than the Marquis de Venosta, with a big smile on his face and the ball full in his mouth. He smiled wider. The ball dropped toward the field, floating as if weightless, but still dropping. His mouth showed four needle-sharp fangs. I looked up, and saw a red-eyed raven fly overhead. It dropped an egg down toward my head. The egg had seams on it. I awoke in a cold sweat.

Somewhere in the psychic universe, still to be reckoned with, were what I now had learned to call "the Dark Forces": the lurking menace in the world, bad luck, evil in human nature, the wild untamable aspect of nonhuman nature, the mythic dimension of history, the terror of darkness--that conspiracy of mysteries unknowable to the literal human mind. We grope for it, we try to hunt it down in the night and see nothing until it springs upon us from the bushes. We use crosses and moonstones to try to govern it, silver daggers to try to kill it. We run, we hide, we turn on the light . . .

At least, this is how I thought of those so-called Dark Forces. I wasn't sure if Sophie or her Hierarchy had any more specific cabal in mind, and the subject was not an easy one to bring up. Even if a neat collaboration of enemy forces were described to me, I would have taken it with a few large grains of salt. Isn't it only natural to impute characteristics of the human

psyche, an imagined purpose and order, to such elemental forces of sky or lair? And conversely, to speak of one's rivals as terrorists, or agents of the underground?

I appeal to the reader's judgment in such matters, because with Sophie I could get nowhere.

"You're denying the unpleasant facts of the real world," she'd answer to my speculations. "There are real enemies out there, evil people in the actual world, and if we're not prepared to defend ourselves against such people we might as well jump ship right now, because they'll run right over us."

Mixed metaphors aside, her point of view had a certain validity. But so did mine. I could accept the conclusion that we just didn't think in the same way about such matters. It was her attitude that irritated me, her acting as if she had all the answers and I was the neophyte. It seemed that she couldn't let go completely of her distance as teacher, as mother superior in the astral hierarchy. But maybe it was I who was judging our relationship from a biased perspective, conditioned by the passing of a century in the role of a questing apprentice.

When at last one drinks from the Grail, does it cease to be holy?

"Love ain't easy," Sophie said to me during a low time in that depressing period between Christmas and New Year's. "It changes; it requires the same sort of ongoing attention and care as a good disguise does for its successful manipulation. This is the essence of what life is all about against death."

This was somehow comforting advice for me; Sophie obviously had a knack for expressing some truths in terms I could relate to. Yet I never heard her say anything about marriage, or even a long-term arrangement for living together. Initially I found this strange, because I thought it would have helped her political fortunes to be seen as a conventional female. But Sophie took care to inform me that the conventional female these days was single, likely as not; at least one had the freedom of choice in her relationships, without undue moral judgment from society. Though I had become accustomed to this new morality during my brief sojourn in the twentieth century, I was secretly disappointed that Sophie thought of me in such terms--what might turn out to be little more than a casual, open-ended affiliation. I understood her wariness of commitment better when she told me about Jarold, the man she'd married, and divorced, earlier in this reincarnation.

She talked about him one morning as we lay in bed, hoteled in Palo Alto during the national Party conference early in the new year. He was a rancid figure by her account; who knows what the truth is?

I was more interested to know that Sophie had had a child by him. Two years later, she'd had her tubes tied, deciding to trade future motherhood for a career in politics.

The birth experience was revealing, both of Sophie's independent character and of the wonderful world of modern medical care: "Okay, so I was going to have this baby. I went to the hospital simply to ask if a doctor could be available in case I had trouble. I just wanted to use one of their rooms, you know, myself, to be there since I lived so far out of town at the time. And midwives were still illegal then. I wanted to walk around a bit, as I had been, helping the baby to move gradually into position. I felt the time was near, and so I came to the hospital feeling like, even though I wanted just to have the baby myself, I could also have the security of a doctor nearby, just in case.

"Well, the flak I got from this nurse. 'No, the hospital doesn't operate like that; we'll have to sign you in. Do you have medical coverage?' Etcetera. Meanwhile I'm really contracting. I mean crowning and starting to do it right there and then. I stooped down right in the lobby, holding the

baby's head as it moved out dropping down with its own live weight . . . and this nurse is yelling at me, 'But I told you, you can't do that here, like that! You can't be admitted on your own terms, it's an institution after all; if you want our help you have to sign in, you can't, you have to do it our way--my goodness stop you can't have it right on our carpet!!! Doctor! Police!'"

I had to laugh, though I doubted if things had changed much since then. I asked Sophie what had become of her child.

"Jarold has him."

"All the time? You never see him?"

Sophie looked down in her lap for a moment and then said, "Okay, it happened like this: we were already starting to live separate lives by then. I was on my own for the birth and the time with Kashi, that darling, curly haired boy, most of the first year, while nursing. But then when we started divorce proceedings, all of a sudden Jarold started claiming rights to his son. I couldn't believe it. But around that time I was going back to work for a congressman in Washington, who I was getting more interested in--"

"I thought you told me there was nobody else."

"Oh silly, we weren't lovers. Just because I said I was interested--"

"So what happened, then?"

"Oh, it just didn't work out. I had this larger ambition, you see, to enter a congressional race in another district; one thing led to another, and-- where was I?"

"Your child."

"Oh yeah. So it began to seem maybe not a bad idea, if Jarold wanted custody so badly. But still I couldn't bring myself to agree to it, all at once like that."

"So how did it happen, then, that Jarold got permanent custody?"

With a large sigh, Sophie answered: "The random dictates of the justice system."

Or, I was moved to reflect, the not-so-random dictates of another agency with some future interest in Sophie's career at stake.

* * *

By mid-January my love life had come to match the state of my dreams: sour and elusive. Sophie was naturally unhappy with the situation and came home from a meeting one day with an ultimatum. If I expected to get any further with her, personally or professionally (and any further with my sorry self, according to her assessment) I had no choice but to embark on

a stricter program of dream-control. This more disciplined course--which Sophie, of course, intended personally to oversee--would alone furnish the avenue to life-control. To enact my desires as they unfolded in my imagination, she claimed, would help me to clearly identify them. Then, as within, so without. "And it's the without," she said, "that concerns me right now."

She was bothered particularly by our wrangling the previous week in Palo Alto. We had been engaged in conversation one night with the chargé d'affairs from the Russian embassy, who had been a guest of the Party at one of the social functions. He had politely inquired as to Sophie's electoral ambitions, including platform specifics in the area of defense. In doing so he also made the point that while his country still called itself Russia, as a sovereign republic it had none of the imperial ambitions of either the Russian or Soviet empires of earlier eras. Nevertheless, Sophie hedged on the question of first-strike capabilities and verifiable arms reductions. I tossed down my fourth or fifth vodka martini and amused myself with a private game I more and more liked to play in political circles. Wandering around the room among the powdered and manicured elite, I attempted to fit them all into Hierarchic rank and file according to subtle tipoffs such as brightness of eyes, tone of voice, or key conversational words such as

"spiritual," "ray," or even "humankind." Finally I'd returned to Sophie's side where she still held court with the esteemed gentleman from the Independent Republic of Russia. I blurted out my bottled-up opinions about how we shouldn't wait any longer for these futile negotiations, but should proceed unilaterally to disarm entirely and replace our sense of apocalyptic security-read-insecurity with a new national confidence founded on an alternative, nonmilitary system of civilian-based social defense. If that was unworkable, then the American nation itself was perhaps an unworkable concept. Finally I said "I'm with you, friend," and I put my arm around his shoulder. He opened his red muttonchops and laughed uncomfortably, thinking my outburst a joke. "No, really, I said. You know, the good old declaration of independence. That's the way to go. To hell with these evil empires, am I right?" Or some such bombastic remarks, that however inspired by too much vodka, brought some latent sparkle to the good man's eyes.

Sophie was speechless. She glared at me with such intensity as to shut me up (I'd had my say anyway), and fast changed the subject to wheat genetics.

All the way home in the car she'd berated me for my lack of diplomatic prudence, considering my official role as her advisor. If I had such revolutionary advice, I might have the kindness to work out a coherent

strategy with her in private before announcing it to the capitals of the world. I'd defended myself loudly and violently, pontificating on the madness of nuclear and particle-beam weapons, the twisted logic of mass destruction for mass defense. The argument continued until bed, where I'd debated whether to rape her, to demand that she rape me, to apologize and make sweet love together, or to get up and walk out. Instead I'd followed her suit, and lay in stone state until morning.

My reaction to her subsequent ultimatum was one of grudging acceptance and submission. Even with my tarnished pride I could recognize that I was ripe for spiritual improvement, and I was not too proud to undertake any means available. For her part, Sophie was naturally interested in my continued development as it could strengthen her own political fortunes. At the same time, I believed that she was unselfish enough in her educational intentions to care about my growth independent of its advantages to her career.

We started in the living room at 5:30 a.m. Sophie laid out a beautiful Persian rug, which I was amused to think of as a magic carpet as she instructed me to lie down on it, face up, head to the north. She sat in a lotus position past my feet on a small blue cushion, not facing me but rather perpendicular, facing east.

Her voice was immediately soothing, as if it could massage with palpable fingers the length of my prone body:

Just relax there, stretch out and feel the carpet softly accept all of your muscles . . . your bones . . . your internal organs . . . your hair . . . your skin.

I adjusted my pants so as not to bind; wiggled my arms a bit and flopped my palms up loosely; nestled my head to lie straight and face directly up. The ceiling's acoustic tiles formed an interesting abstract pattern of mystic swirls with a grid of rational pattern superimposed, or perhaps it was the other way around. I'd lost her voice already. Get back to it. Stay with it.

. . . to concentrate, not to drift aimlessly, but to maintain a calm awareness of everything that your senses feel, also everything that your mind surveys. But don't get lost in your thoughts. Let them pass, and keep attention, relaxed, to your body, the air, my words, the images that I give you. I'm going to travel with you, and what I see you'll see.

I closed my eyes. Could I learn control by following her? Anyway, I'm supposed to try. She knows what she's doing, I'm sure. She is manipulating me this way, I guess. But I don't have much to lose. And what to gain? Well, we'll see.

Reality is composed of possibility and probability. Your aim is to gain control through more awareness of your own possibilities, so as to increase their probability. Then you can experience greater ranges of being. Your mind is filled with random images, those it collects on its perpetual scavenger hunt. We'll be selective and take only what we need. If we look hard enough for a certain image, we are certain to find it. Then we'll always know where it is. Then one possibility will have been transformed to certainty.

Despite her abstract speech, a flood of images cascaded before me. I was wandering on the rocky coast of a desolate island--taking measurements, chipping samples, examining fragments of stone under a field microscope. I watched snow crystals melt, little dying leaves on the glass pane of the winter sun. These snow-leaves swirled, blew away and then danced one by one back under the microscope: becoming a pop-can, a beer-bottle cap, a pitted old die from some discarded game, a rusty condenser, a bedspring, a fragment of unruined iron, a list of flights on Tuesdays, a shopping receipt, a radio call sheet, a broken doorknob, a dirty snowball, a poem in sloppy handwriting, a thousand grains of sand, ten stalks of grass, a piece of rubber tire, a Portuguese coin, a dead gold bug, and an assortment of other crazy things, too numerous to mention, unsuitable

for framing, yet plenty for future listmakers to make lists out of, find origins for, or lost uses, or present categories, or imagined destinies.

When one learns to leave the unnecessary images behind to glide free out over the dreamscape, one learns control of fate. The next step is awareness of the same kind during waking hours. This journey brings us into the realm where dreaming and waking are the same, where our control is constant. The forces of the subconscious we can bring into play to assist the conscious imagination. In full awareness of the present moment as a dream-like state timeless and pregnant with possibility, these image-making desires can call into being the most probable of events, which one both intuits and causes by one's predisposition. To extend these powers leads in the extreme to knowing what will happen in the world, to letting things happen in accordance with one's finely tuned desires. Ultimately our desires are the desires of the universe.

I dreamed of a dreamer, an explorer, a roving and rambling lover who rides on winds of change to new lands, new discoveries, new dimensions of love.

I saw myself as a smaller man, in the inner ring of my telescope, wandering through magical countries, across new seas and into the unfolding skies. My fuel was a volatile essence obtained by distillation from the

crudest components: heated with matches in thimbles, giving rise to a purer heat when collected in larger vials, thrown away when transformed, with the gaseous effluent saved. My self-ship ran on fuel garnered this way from the dross of distraction and gross endeavor. My philosophy rode along in its wake, otherwise stagnant in the pool of conventional wisdom but now exhilarant in the jet streams of my centrifugal passage.

I aspired to further heavens to see what lies by way through, the other side of what is here and gone already. My telescope scanned; my engines droned in idle; I flew away joysticking until only shades of different blues surrounded my path.

In this higher state of the fully conscious being, oceanic love overflows all boundaries of physical flesh and sensory experience. Nature is God is transcendent music; where spheres of psychic influence merge with social and etheric awarenences into one Being of Being. One stays here in a state of readiness to fly, back to the body or out to the stars, meeting anywhere anyone in a spirit of detachment and simultaneous excitement. The society of souls convenes in devotion to All, mutually identifying selves as Self in empathetic rapport. Love is the thrust of their planetary politics, their scientific endeavors, yes even their eating, sleeping and daily work.

Their love manifests as devotion to the divine interplay, dramatized in the sharing of bodily energies that sustain the soul in the name of life.

I was back in my body, but changed with the certainty of that plateau we'd just explored together. It was out there somewhere, I knew where it was, and it was here.

I opened my eyes to find Sophie's face poised inches over my own, her full red lips offering a smile. She leaned down to kiss me; her chestnut hair sprayed silkily across my neck. I reached up my arms to encircle her in a simultaneous stretch and embrace. We kissed for long, long, timeless minutes.

The twin black limousines of politics and love passed in the night of her enveloping hair. Then I saw us riding in one of them, though I was unsure which it was. The lights on anonymous city streets flickered past; the tires swished on rainy pavement; the driver was mute and unrecognizable. We were on that journey known in the popular press as "the campaign trail."

Sophie was pensive in the plush red leather. I sought direction, buoyed aimlessly by the last kiss. "Will the campaign strengthen our love or pull us apart, do you think?"

She remained impassive. Then she turned halfway to look at me. I couldn't tell if it was love I saw, or merely more of the same objective lights

so meaningless on the anonymous street beyond the window. She turned back the other way, looked out her window, and finally spoke.

"It will bring us closer together. But then, in the end it might tear us apart." She softly wept. My throat constricted, and I sank so deep against the red leather seat that my very blood seemed to merge with the dead hide.

ii

There was work to do, on the worldly plane, and so we soon enough had to put our differences behind us for the sake of the common objective: victory on November fourth.

In whatever bedroom we called home on the road, Sophie would spend more and more time in private meditation or focused dream-state-- whether simply "centering," or, as she once admitted, "receiving instruction from the higher planes."

I maintained my own spiritual exercises to a degree, usually in private when Sophie had meetings or press conferences to attend. My psychic

development had progressed rapidly to the point where I could guide myself quite easily alone to "the golden temple of the eighteenth dimension," as Sophie laughingly referred to it--and I was beginning to be able to bring its clarity into instantaneous focus at will. But I was still "not quite ready" for the advertised trips to Andromeda, Canopus, Sirius, or the other closest stars; I was led to believe that I just wasn't hot enough yet at the astral joystick. Consequently, since I had yet to be contacted by any higher powers, I was losing interest and began to regard such sessions as little more than a relaxing pastime. If there was a Hierarchy with big plans for us, Sophie was obviously the key contact, and I was left in her control as a mere accessory. Or maybe, I began to wonder, the metaphysics were all in her head, and she was simply very good at what she did.

Meanwhile we were winning primaries hand over fist. I took some pride in my role as advisor and speechwriter, having achieved a good grasp of the issues and of the temper of public opinion. While I had taken an increasing personal interest in political matters, however, I don't think our success went to my head. I was satisfied with Sophie's popularity and with our genuine closeness to each other. When differences of opinion arose (we still disagreed about national defense, for instance), we sought solutions in a spirit of mutual creativity.

We only had one potentially big argument in that period; and it wasn't even personal. It was the week before the California primary, the one that offered the most competition for us. We were both a little edgy and took some time off to go sailing off the coast of the Monterey Peninsula. I remember us talking in a low-key sort of way about the international whaling conventions, with an incidental eye out for the creatures. We didn't see any, but a figurative behemoth raised its head from the deep when I suggested, I'm sure it was tongue-in-cheek, that if whales had been properly managed for a long-term sustainability of harvest, before reaching virtual extinction, whale meat might by now be available to help solve the protein shortage in Third World countries.

"Don't give me that protein bullshit," Sophie exploded. "Aside from the innate intelligence of those poor creatures, which in many ways surpasses that of man . . ."

"You mean humans."

She looked at me sharply, but with a twinkle in her eye, and left this item open for some future debate. Then she continued: "You're talking whalemeat, you're talking eighteen million pounds a year of bullshit. Twenty million in grain fed to U.S. cattle, two million in meat left for us people: that leaves eighteen million pounds of protein gone to manure, fat,

and delicate flavor, commanding a premium price in the marketplace. We use--"

"Hold, on, wait a minute. That twenty million figure, is that pounds of grain, or pounds of protein, in grain? It could make quite a difference."

"Uh, good point. I'll have to check my figures on that. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to practice this tirade on you. We use as much fertilizer for golf courses and lawns as India needs for all its food. We import from Peru as much fish-food for livestock as protein they need for their whole population."

"Protein they need'?"

"All right, all right. 'As they need in protein.'"

"Well . . . okay; go on."

"Coffee and chocolate, the same story; tea, bananas and pineapples--traded for hardware and technical software, for money, uniforms, missiles and riot-gear. Eighteen million pounds a year of brain-needed protein: the prerequisite--"

"Too long a word."

"Gotcha. The first requirement--that better?--of infant education, turned into bullshit by the self-chosen governments of the world.

Whalemeat, bullshit."

"They'll eat it up."

There really wasn't much competition out there in most of the states holding primaries. In truth, some analysts called Sophie the only legitimate national candidate. Maybe the local talents no longer liked to travel, or to stand in the limelight of the national media. Or maybe this country had been infected by the mood of decentralism that had swept the rest of the world, so that anybody with a decent following on home turf no longer cared to woo a continent-wide constituency.

So in most cases beating the bushes on the primary circuit was akin to a couple of star major-league ballplayers barnstorming through the minors. I thought of my old friends the Kodiak Bruins, for instance, while following a back road in Alberta that we'd taken as a scenic, roundabout route from North Dakota to Spokane, Washington. On that particular occasion we got stuck on the highway for three and a half hours behind a caravan of two hundred and twenty-two (by my unofficial count) slowly rolling Airstream trailers. I had a thing about getting in planes, now, and so whenever possible we traveled by train or rented car. I didn't even care to learn how to drive the jet-like vehicles on the road these days, especially the ones with the hover option. So when we didn't have the luxury of a chauffeur, I left the

driving to Sophie. On this particular journey we rode in a late-model, turbocharged, red-and-black sport-limo, with a tinted bubble-top. Somewhat less advanced, alcohol-burning vehicles towed the aluminum dinosaurs down the road. How nostalgic it was for me to see this snaky column of antique trailers, their silver aerodynamic shapes seeming nearly a hundred years ago to epitomize the modern age--now, quaint relics held together by duct tape and spray paint and the fanatic devotion of their owners.

When we arrived, the rival speaker, looking seedy and flashy at the same time with his checked sport coat and wraparound shades, was still rambling. The crowd had largely dispersed; it was a dusty day in the parking lot on the edge of town. Handfuls of patient people remained holding onto straw and plastic hats in the buffeting breeze. The portable loudspeaker crackled.

"Government is biological; therefore it is doomed to extinction or evolution. The Government we see in office today is a species of organized crime, running a glorified confidence-game through their fronts in the mass media. This Government thrives on special interest groups, whose specialty is interest . . ."

Sophie eyed me as we closed the car doors and shuffled out on the dusty gravel. "Pretty catchy stuff for an improvisation. He used to be the local Party organizer, until he developed bigger ambitions."

The voice droned on: "Government is a union of public businesspeople. Government today is neither of the people, by the people, nor for the people." A family with puckered faces passed us and headed for their car. A fat man got up, jangling keys in his pocket. "And so my friends I say to you today . . ." The speaker stopped when he recognized Sophie. Perhaps he also realized, as we took our seats in the clackety folding chairs, that most of the crowd was drifting away. He scowled helplessly and Sophie smiled at him.

"Can't convince 'em all, all of the time!" she called out.

With our platform, we advanced proposals which dynamically addressed the pressing issues of the time, in terms the lay person could understand. That was our hope, anyway, which proved to be reasonably well accomplished. The process was simple. We discussed in advance the issues and specific topics. I wrote a draft of a speech; then Sophie edited it, after more consultation with me or our small working group. Dennis and Jeff traveled with us or met us at many of our destinations, usually joined by

one or two local contacts (Sophie having wisely appointed the capable Lenore Kane to mind the campaign headquarters in Albuquerque). Finally Sophie would reduce the speech to outline and note form for final delivery. Her oral style was unflamboyant, unselfconscious, direct and from the heart.

Concord, New Hampshire, March 6:

"Natural growth--it's a far cry from force-fed industries, curriculum disciplines and the unchecked sprawl of bureaucracy. In the economy it means helping farmers and small businesspeople, inventors and researchers, teachers and learners, artists and toolmakers to do what they do best, in their own places of work. It also means reevaluating mining, logging, and fuel extraction for long-term use, and at the same time it means advancing technologies of renewable energy. In education it means learning these things in the schools, putting the schools in the homes and villages and out in the places of work, letting people learn from each other what we need to live. As long as we can build and maintain a life-giving culture and keep our numbers down, growth can continue in the cycles we live by."

Bluefield, West Virginia, March 14:

"Freedom of choice: it goes beyond personal lifestyle and includes whatever exists in the soil, water, air and food. But no one can enjoy the choice to live free from chemical pollutants once they're put into the life-chains, where they spread, even over the whole earth, concentrating to cancerous dosages at the top of the line in predators like human beings, and accumulating even in the genes of unborn generations.

"There is no longer--if there ever was--a simple question of individual rights and freedoms, since no one is free from the earth's environment. There is, as always, a responsibility everyone needs to face for caring about human life and the life of our planet. Today, as many people have always known, caring for people and caring for the earth are synonymous, since we all share one life.

"This life gives us freedoms, but if we are free to disrupt its genetic processes, we only destroy ourselves. Some commercial and technological freedoms take away biological freedoms to live lives as healthy as we choose, as best as we can manage with the earth. I aim to guarantee us the freedom to live healthy lives."

Racine, Wisconsin, March 22:

"You know, my friends, it seems the problems all revolve around money. Inflation, strikes, cost-effectiveness, energy development. Everything is traded off for the almighty dollar. This is no cliché but a real religion which is married to every state.

"Is it in the realm of personal decision, in this day and age, to live by less dependence on money? By degrees, yes. But only by degrees, it seems. In governments, whether municipal or international; in businesses from corner markets to multinationals; in the arts, sports, in education, yes and I'm afraid even in religions, everything turns to money.

"Could it be the direction that's wrong? Maybe turning to money as the problem and solution every time is the wrong way to turn. Maybe money is best treated as means to worthy ends, instead of an end in itself. Maybe if we can turn away from the blind pursuit of money and turn instead to things money can't buy, to family values, to the appreciation of our land, air, and water . . . If we can turn to enjoy these gifts of creation (as I see all around me here in your beautiful state), then money solutions will not be the only answers to money problems."

After that particular speech, Sophie and I relaxed with a beer in a nearby corner tavern. It was a rough crowd that day. People had been

impatiently stamping their feet in the slush of the shopping plaza parking lot, wondering (as we were) why the event had been scheduled outdoors in March. The ward incumbent who had set up our Racine engagement joined us, explaining with ruddy fervor how Wisconsin people were used to long, cold winters and were glad to show their appreciation for the visiting candidate by standing outside for an hour and a half listening to speeches. Besides, it was a beautiful warm day, above freezing, even!

At this point a portly fellow from a neighboring table who'd been sitting alone slid out of his chair and waddled over to our small round table. "Hey mind if I sit down-- youse at that rally or whatever today? Huh, well I tell ya."

Sophie helped pull out the fourth chair for him, and he settled into a grizzled monologue of his own. It seemed he didn't recognize who we actually were; it was questionable if he'd even been there himself.

"Jeez I wish they'd just shut off them big politicians sometimes with their power trips or whatever it is keeps 'em goin' besides my tax money. 'Course I collect a little pogie now and then but these guys got it comin' steady long as they can look good and talk big and sell their souls to the corporations. They get their rocks off against the workin' man so's they can drink martinis 'stead of this piss I drink all day; ride around in Hoverlas with

these foreign diplomats and their floozy wives; say it must get addictive after a while, whadya think?

"Now I'm not sayin' nobody's perfect but I mean they make a profession out of it! What's that?--yeah, I guess I might be a professional guzzler but shit, I sure as heck ain't gettin paid fer it--well like I said 'cept fer a few unemployment checks now and then but y'see that's my tax money in the first place--

"Yeah honey give us four more."

It was obvious that Lincoln had been right about some of the people some of the time. But our overall success showed in the predominant applause and congratulations, the handshakes and smiles, the news reports and polls. Sophie of course got all the credit, all the praise. No matter that the speeches were primarily my own handiwork. She jokingly blamed me only when she was criticized for being, say, too much like an old-fashioned traveling evangelist, or when our platform was discussed, in certain financial circles, as an empty scaffolding of idealistic platitudes. To our joint credit, however, let it be said now that we would conscientiously set out after the election victory to follow up in Congress our every campaign promise. Not that complete results were to be instantly forthcoming . . .

* * *

We acted upon one plank before the nominating convention: demonstrating to ourselves the benefits of an expense-free vacation in the wilderness. We couldn't get enough of it, going from desert mountains, to the rain forests of the northwest coast, to raw bush and wilderness wherever we could find it from Mexico to Alaska . . .

Of course we wouldn't have thought to finance such adventures from the pot of campaign funds. Plane travel was out of the question, as far as I was concerned. And we had precious little time for camping trips. So, we took the astral route, programming our dreams together nightly.

In the far north the night stayed light; our dreams within dreams slipped into daydreams and back into dreams again, without clear shadows, without defined traces. Our sex play softened in twilight, and was later transformed into quasi-political banter over barrel-stove campfire pancake breakfasts . . .

"It was good last night. We're getting there, aren't we?"

"You have beautiful breasts."

"Oh, that's not the point. You--"

"I know. I was just kidding."

"Hmm. You mean, I don't have beautiful breasts?"

"Of course you do. Probably more beautiful than those of any other President."

"Now look. Do you want to talk politics, or what?"

"Only if you'll promise to give me the official title of First Man. Or, instead of First Lady, would it be instead, First Gentleman?"

"But you're not the first; you're the last."

"You mean I was, before I met you!"

"Oh come on, now that's a snide remark. What did you mean by that?"

Giggles, and so on . . .

Underneath such banter lay the undeniable waking fact that I was beginning to resent Sophie's monopoly of power, or monopoly of the world's recognition of it (which amounted to the same thing, in my eyes). This jealousy, even before the White House: because I knew victory was coming, and so did she; and I started to notice, or to imagine, that Sophie's attitude was becoming haughtier as her political standing became more exalted.

It didn't stand between us, though, my half-realized resentment. I had no choice but to accept it, really. I was lucky to be where I was, who I was. Being so close to the center of worldly power didn't mean that I had to get even closer--to usurp it if necessary. . . . No, I had to swallow the stale ambition, the obsolete pride of a former age, and share in the present gifts of creation.

In imagined Oregon hot springs Sophie told me she'd traveled to south of Andromeda the night before, and never even smelled the burning tent I carried her out of. But she did see a fiery moon rise over the planet she'd strayed onto, flying.

Accidents sometimes happen, it seemed, even on the astral plane. Sophie had left a candle burning at the foot of my sleeping bag as we smothered our eyes shut with kisses that night. And the candle flame had eventually burned its way into the bag as we tossed oblivious in sleep.

We saved the remaining scrap of that tent as a talismanic groundcloth for its replacement, a pyramid tent, authentically sand-colored and printed with a pattern of stonework evocative of the passing of the centuries. Indeed, it almost survived the remaining weeks of our imagined summer, but

in the end was torn up by a grizzly cub with a Greek's taste for the feta cheese that we carelessly left inside.

Our astral camping gave balance to our lives, being the opposite of a campaign: a refuge from refugees, a haven from hostage incidents, a respite from wily Rasputins who courted Sophie body and harlequin soul. It gave us blessed space from the daily grind of meetings and interviews, public appearances and press conferences, strategy sessions and constant highway travel. In order to arrange such exotic vacations we had to insist on our sleep, at the generous rate of twelve hours a night--depending on what one calls night, and what one calls sleep.

We'd evolved together a theory that the mind deserves equal time in its unconscious and conscious regions of awareness, in order to develop its full potential range in the possible realms of experience. Sophie's sleeping practice, revealed soon enough during a talk-show interview, came to be mocked in the storefronts and churches, legions and union halls, chambers of Congress, wherever people drink coffee . . .

In an earlier era, partisan issue-mongering and vicious personality attacks could have conspired in the usual fashion to destroy a Presidential hopeful on the grounds of doziness ("What if the Russians attacked while

she was sleeping?!"). But since the unification of the parties, a growing tolerance had spread in the land for personal freedom of habits, especially the non-toxic variety--among which sleep could certainly be counted.

So the ribbing was good-natured, by and large, and Sophie took it all in stride. She even paid homage to this minor fad, in the form of a punch-line concluding her acceptance speech at the Party convention in August:

"My friends, supporters and workers and contributors in every one of your ways, I would like to thank you from the bottom to the top of my heart for the honor and responsibility you have bestowed upon me tonight. At the same time I would like to thank those who were running for this office beside me for their valuable stimulus and challenge, for making me responsive to their positions and to the people they represent. Now that you have entrusted me with the Party leadership and thus the reins of the Government, I pledge to fulfill to the utmost of my ability the duties of the office of President.

"When this campaign began with a small caucus in Albuquerque, I heard some complaints about my background as a schoolteacher, some doubts about the relevance of grade-school education to the issues of national concern. Even the legendary name of Spiro Agnew, who had once chaired a PTA, was brought forward as a specter to frighten; to make suspect

the field of public education. Now I can say to you as I once said to my classes, don't ask what I'm to teach you; tell me what you are learning! And I can say to you about my leadership role, and your capacity as a productive, creative people--look not to what I can give you, but where we may travel together. All of us are going to have to wake up" (a pause for increasing, appreciative laughter) "to the present realities of the world situation" (another pause for silence) "and I don't need to spell it out here. I'll just say to you, my friends: Let's do it together. Good morning, America!"

Sophie neglected, of course, to pay homage to her speechwriter. I suppose I was best left on the sidelines, in the wings, in the kitchen cabinet, the bedroom closet. Not that I wasn't visible--the public knew about me. Hell, in the talk-show interview Sophie had even said we had no plans for marriage but that she did intend to continue living and yes, sleeping with me in the very White House. Thankfully she didn't get onto the subject of astral travel, or I may have come under more suspicion as a latter-day Rasputin myself. No, to the media I was just her handsome, if by now properly tightlipped, boyfriend. Without the innate glamor of a First Lady (or official Prince of the realm) I was in time blithely ignored by political analysts contending with their own spate of more fertile topics.

The convention consisted of all the usual hoopla, mock-exciting and shimmering with surface cheer, like puffy cereal covered with white sugar. Sophie won hands down.

* * *

The election likewise was a foregone conclusion, with all the work done by the advertising branch: "Just walk your little finger over the keys to the one marked E. Then it's up to you: you can press the Y or the N. Do you want a bright future, a future where your freedom of choice is protected, where our children and our seniors are looked after and where America remains strong in a changing world? Then vote yes, on November fourth."

So the ticker-tape parade down Pennsylvania Avenue proceeded on schedule: Sophie giving the people the Queen's wave from a bat-black, bubble-topped limo, me smiling at her side and thinking that all those people in sunglasses looked like so many cheering insects, and what a shame it was that such a carnival atmosphere had to be viewed on an otherwise crystalline day through an imposed filter of darkness.

According to the insensible customs of protocol, the White House was still occupied by the geriatric couple who had spent the last eight years there

wishing it would become their perpetual mausoleum. So Sophie and I retired on election night to the Presidential suite of the capital's finest hotel, where we made sweetest love till the middle of the night and I fell into dreams of being chased by our own Secret Service.

Sophie was dressed in canvas and wool and sucked on a large cigar. We sat together beside a gentle creek and fished all morning, with no success. (By this time in the history of the no longer New World, I should point out, fish were nearly extinct from the continental interior; but, as the contemporary sportsperson had come grudgingly to accept as fact, it was in the experience that the true sport lay, not in the material product. The rarer the catch, the finer the challenge.) A huge tug pulled Sophie's line almost double. She spit out her cigar and gritted her teeth, reeling mightily.

A great flapping splash sprayed us; then we saw the sleek head of a frog-man emerge in front of us from the water. He stood up--we recognized through his goggles the same Secret Service man who'd escorted us to the door of the hotel that very evening. But he carried a submachine gun, pointed directly at us. We dropped everything and scrambled back through the scrub alder, for tangled miles.

Upon awakening, I didn't know what to make of this dream. It was disappointing to have put so much effort into the dreaming process and still come up against these enigmatic symbols and scenarios calling for the same purely speculative interpretation as the dreams of the uninitiated. It was true, to a certain degree Sophie had taught me how to ride my dreams, to steer them where I would. It was funny, though--no matter how much control I could feel I was gaining, something always stayed out of my reach. Key events of the dreams, the exact directions of my psychic travels, the ultimate purposes and causes, came from beyond my powers. I never was sure if the same was true for Sophie. She let on that complete control could be had--but I suspected that even she fell short of it.

iii

When January came we finally moved into the White House. I felt immediately at home in our new, palatial surroundings. Ironic it was that in the bastion of democracy the leader should be housed like royalty. But no matter--the masses are entitled to their gods; and after all, wasn't it within every American's enshrined reach to scrimp and save and clutch and crawl to

a salary scale making such opulence affordable? Yes, I concluded; come to think of it, even the relatively modest decor of the Villa Kuckuck aspired to the finer styles of gentry, with that perpetual pretension of the middle class.

And so I was neither unused to nor offended by the noble architecture, the luxuriant drapes, the exotic carpets, the ornate mahogany desks and ebony chairs. The greater attraction for me lay at the window, to which I was drawn in the early morning as Sophie still slept.

Stretched out before me was the vast lawn with its neat clusters of shrubbery and deliberate perimeter of tall, arching trees shading the continuous barrier of wrought iron fence. Through its graceful bars I watched the dutiful minions of the state hastening to work, to be swallowed by the massive Government office buildings which lay beyond, still shrouded in the gloom.

Sophie was stirring in the canopied bed behind me. She rustled her feet in the morning-cool, satiny sheets. Her hair lay spread over nearly the width of the king-sized bed. Her eyes opened; she looked over to where I was standing and said in a sultry voice, "Hey, hon, come back to bed. Hmmm . . . that black leopard, and the white, whispering bear . . ."

I lingered a moment longer by the window; then, by the time I crawled in beside her, Sophie had fallen back asleep.

* * *

The reader may well be startled to hear that I would go to work that day as a mail-clerk. While this position may sound at first glance to be one beneath my station, demeaning my proper role in this new Government, in fact I'd volunteered, feeling it to be entirely consonant with my ongoing roles as Presidential advisor and speechwriter.

I'd requested an office in the White House, preferring to work at home. So I inherited the professorial cubicle of the former press secretary, the desk and walls of which were presently littered with his flotsam and jetsam. On top of it all was plunked a bundled stack of mail the size of a large garbage can, with another, similar stack propped up against the wall by the door. After the Secret Service and the receiving secretaries had finished with the incoming tide of largely worthless paper, it fell to me to sort through the remains, skimming and bringing it to the President's busy attention as I saw fit. It was also my job to compose replies to routine letters needing a quick, personal response.

Much power accrued to such a position. For the screener of information is to the executive what the senses and their concomitant analysis are to the faculty of will. To put it bluntly, I could let Sophie know

what I wanted her to know. Right from the start, however, I caught myself in the first flush of adrenaline that such awareness of power produces. I didn't want to use--no, I had to use--I didn't want to misuse my power for selfish ends. But how to prevent such abuse in its subtle ways? How to monitor my own prejudices and biased judgments, myself? In other circumstances I could have utilized Sophie's perspective. But in this case, wouldn't that just defeat the purpose of my role? I didn't want to bother the President about every little thing I came across in the course of my duties; she wouldn't have time to carry out the important functions that were hers as head of state.

Putting aside such reflections as I bent to the work at hand, I quickly discovered that the mail was backlogged from the past three months. And that there was plenty of chaff even in these prescreened bales. I could imagine what the battery of secretaries must have had to go through, and throw out. I was happy to discover, after an hour or so of despair, that buried in the heap on the desk was a retractable computer console, with which I could scan and file all this unmanageable paper in digital notation. Then it would be a simple matter for me to handle the vast majority of responses with a set of form letters that could be arranged in the directory, both by issue and by a brief profile of the correspondent. Still, the

inefficiency was galling. Over half a century into the computer age, and the population at large still hadn't realized that you could send letters to the President directly on the keyboard instead of through the mail.

Near mid-morning I sauntered down to the staff lounge for a cup of coffee, mentally drafting the list of issues I might use for my filing system. It was a little early yet for an official coffee break and no one else was there. I filled a mug that had been personalized for me with the name "Seymour" on it--and carried it back in the direction of my office, musing about my having, in effect, a pet name.

I thought I might peek in and see how Sophie was doing in her first morning on the job, if she wasn't too busy before her eleven o'clock briefing with the National Security Council. But as I passed by the Oval Office I caught a glimpse of her--leaning back, feet propped on the massive desk--holding forth with a white-haired gentleman from the old continent (I surmised from his Bavarian accent) about the organic nature of the cosmos. ". . . and so these particles, my dear Wolfgang, which you've so elegantly described--am I supposed to actually feel them in my body? I suppose that you must be able to feel them too, having studied them with such devotion."

"Naturally the molecular structure is basic to the life processes as it is the inorganic systems, comprising the successively non-entropic cellular and organ-bodies which we know--"

"No, no, now come on, Wolfgang, tell me. Do these bits and pieces strike you as relevant to my line of work, for instance? I mean do they resonate with the cries of ambition, competition, collective aggressions and defensive manipulation that fill my world and yours, human beings that we are after all?"

My footsteps had paused in the hallway shortly past the door. I had to wait a few moments more before the old man's voice groaned and creaked again.

"Eh-er, well yes you could, I--perhaps in the physiognomy of love, one might say, could be inferred a, how would one call it, an evolutionary device--a biology of matter not too far removed from, say, the digestive processes, shall we suppose . . ."

"Wolfgang, I must apologize for leading us past comfortable barriers of reason--this realm of speculation I find fascinating! I see by your track of thinking that there is an avenue of progression for our little friends, the psis. You lead me to believe that they enjoy the greatest harmony of vibration, if you will, with the manifestation of the more noble human qualities--in

devotion and service to others, for example; in empathy, and rapport--yes certainly even, in such cases, passing between and among individuals through so-called 'inorganic' space; and that such cosmic particles may even be said to commune among themselves as a society, mirroring the convolutions of societies of a larger scale--of people, of stars we could guess--let's go on to include . . ."

"Yes, yes, my dear--music, oceans, the emotional ha-ha-ha ecstasies of orchards in bloom . . ."

I smiled sweetly to myself and padded on down the hall.

Then it suddenly occurred to me that this distinguished scientist, or philosopher, or eccentric old idiot who had somehow gained the privilege of first audience with the new President, might be an actual, in-the-flesh representative of the Hierarchy--perhaps the big cheese himself! Sophie, after all, enjoyed an existence well-blessed with tangible flesh and blood; why not others from that exalted priesthood? As for this character engaged with her at the moment . . . I just didn't know.

My first task after entering the computer's database was to delete the morass of now-meaningless press releases kept on file by my predecessor. Reading one, I felt, was as good as reading them all, and made me feel in

contrast the pride and confidence in being part of a more exciting team than that last lot.

Several levels deep into the directory structure, I noticed settings for connection to all sorts of other terminals: in the Pentagon, a variety of strategic bunkers and aircraft located in this country and around the world, the offices of all the members of the Cabinet and all the state governors, and so on. I was pleased to see an entry labelled "OO"--which I guessed signified the Oval Office. Perhaps Sophie and I could amuse ourselves with games of computer tic-tac-toe between her appointments.

And then it struck me that if I were to sit tapping on the keys for an eternity, like some simian Shakespeare, I might one day chance upon the code that would enable me to program my lifeline to take any course I chose. To live in any land on earth, at any point in the long history of humankind. I could give myself any opportunity, any lover, any challenge. I could put myself in the position of most propitious influence to seek the betterment of our struggling life form, this human race. But when I realized how far I'd come, my present position, my partner and the power I shared with her, I could not have asked for anything more. I set about my work then with a great sense of contentment charged with purpose.

* * *

Sophie didn't appear at the lunch table, so I sat by the empty silver candlesticks alone. Halfway through the meal a page came to say that Sophie had a luncheon engagement elsewhere. I felt stood up on my first date. In a sullen mood I finished my lunch and went back to work. I didn't touch the computer all afternoon, just absently skimmed through the mail and sorted it into piles for processing another day.

That evening we dined together, and I let Sophie dominate the conversation with tales of her first day's work. She skipped right past the early morning visitor and began instead with the phone calls from foreign dignitaries, going on to describe the impromptu luncheon with a delegation of Japanese business people at the grand opening of an exclusive Japanese restaurant downtown (she just couldn't pass it up), a meeting in the afternoon with Cabinet, the informal briefing of the White House press corps . . .

Something bothered me about her glib summary and I felt it necessary to quiz her about that mysterious gentleman.

"Oh, Wolfgang," she said with a laugh that I could have sworn quavered with sudden nervousness. "He's an old friend."

"I gathered that."

Then she turned surly. "What are you doing prowling the halls spying on me? Do you want to keep my appointment calendar for me, too? I'm sorry about the lunch, okay?"

"No, now wait a minute; I just asked. But let me put it to you bluntly. Was he a member of the Hierarchy?"

"Oh, God, are you ever being ridiculous. I told you, the Hierarchy is a body of overseers existing on the astral plane. They don't run around in the capitals of the world lobbying like lesser beings."

"No, just in Washington."

"Je-sus. I can't believe you." She flung down her linen napkin and stalked out.

I didn't know what to make of her reaction. Was I really off the mark, or had I zeroed in too close to the truth? Maybe I'd inadvertently cracked open this esoteric concept of an incorporeal elite ensconced upon some heavenly tier of thrones, or around some hoary and immaterial Round Table.

In Sophie's favor, however, was the little fact that when I happened by, the door of her office had been left partially open. If matters of deep state secrecy were being discussed they certainly would have arranged a more private setting.

I spent the rest of the time before bed browsing in the White House library. In addition to the excellent selection of literary classics and seminal works of philosophy, history, and political science, there was a surprising selection of lighter reading, in the more popular genres: mysteries, thrillers, science fiction. I grabbed a slim paperback entitled The Day the Insects Devoured the World. Just the thing to put me to sleep, make me forget all the world's real problems.

In the President's bedroom, Sophie was still stonewalling. She sat clothed in her black nightie in bed, propped against all the pillows, with her reading glasses on and holding a thick, loosely bound document from the Department of Mines. She glanced at me briefly, coldly, then went back to her book.

All right, I said to myself, I can wait this one out, too.

Sophie only wore a nightie if we were quarreling. She gave me a perfunctory glance as I climbed into bed nude beside her.

"Mind if I have a pillow?" I said.

"Here." Eyes on her document, she handed me one from behind her back.

I tucked it behind me and started to read of our insectoid doom. The farmers went first, as they ran out to defend their vanishing crops. One old blisterer, screaming out at the attacking hordes with hoe in one hand and fist in the other, was silenced when he swallowed a cluster of grasshoppers the size of a softball.

The insects themselves, of course, had no conception of the inherent drama of their conquest. They simply grouped themselves in hordes, as the probabilities say all things will do, and took it from there. A cloud of grasshoppers, a swarm of wasps or ants, an army of beetles would form around a local food source such as a tree or hitchhiker, would grow as the spreading scent of fresh food attracted the masses, and then would quickly leave bare branches and bones in search of more. They collected in ever-growing multitudes-- collaborating across species lines, defeating every known pesticide through genetic selection in their exploding populations, leaving whole towns decimated in their wake.

The news developed that the entire human species could be doomed; so said the Government research people looking desperately into microscopic weaponry at the time. The scientists didn't bother with the corresponding prediction that along with mighty humanity, all land-based life might perish.

I skipped to the end to find out what would happen. I knew that Sophie hated it when I did that with a book, but I didn't care. This was a matter of global survival.

The insects' strength became their fatal liability: an exponentially increasing population. In the end there was simply no more food to be had. It came down to sixteen climactic seconds of starving, swarming, suffocating death, punctuated with the clash of frantic claws on battle-shells; the rasping of legs, dry wings and empty mandibles becoming a deafening roar over the dusty lands. Broken fragments of exoskeletons littered the beaches; the skies were filled with clouds of insect-junk drifting inevitably to the stubble and to the waves. The sun alone was left to send its rays again to warm seeds and soft eggs.

How evocative, how poignant! These scenes struck me to the quick.

I closed the book, leaned back and uttered a sigh for the cyclical fate of the world.

Then Sophie deigned to speak to me: "What have you been reading?"

"The Day the Insects Devoured the World."

"Good grief. Don't you have anything better to occupy your hollow skull?"

"Like that fascinating work of intellect and imagination that you're occupying yourself with at the moment?"

"There's a bill coming up from the last session of the legislature . . ."

"Don't bother explaining. I was just fighting back."

My honesty caught her off guard.

We were both silent for a moment, regaining our senses. Under the covers she slipped a hand over my knee. Then she looked at me and said, "What a way to start our first term in office."

Though I slept beside a President, I was not to dream that night of mega-deals and multilateral master-plans. My heart was in the realm of evolutionary survival, where I witnessed a strange elaboration of the one unfoldment, the confrontation of destruction and creation.

My field of vision was suffused with the color yellow. A figure appeared floating alone, lost in the limbo of transition, in the yellow sea of the passing of the ages. The background became reticulated; the individual went scurrying through a maze of spontaneously lighted passageways and opening doors.

(Basking as an onlooker in the yellow light of my well cultivated, lucid dream-awareness, I wondered, Was this me? "Maybe so, maybe not," my dream shot back. "Why don't you just stay where you are and watch?")

The darting figure turned up one-way blind alleys and back into throngs of queuing, curious would-be onlookers; leaped in desperation over back-yard fences, socking dogs, flying, squeezing through mouseholes, cracks and false closets, oozing at times osmotically through the presupposed solid matter of walls. He found, here and there, other individuals in similar states of search, self-rescue, self-destruction and nakedness . . .

I was given a glimpse, at the end, of the joining together of the scrambling souls. As they reached the new soil formed from the crumbling walls of the dream cityscape, they took up stationary poses to watch the arrival of the last stragglers. Already their naked toes began to sprout and grow; and so they made for the hills as quickly as they could and there took collective root: there, in the shelter of the hills that remained of the world.

* * *

At breakfast the next morning, I was more tired than hungry. But I had to sample the charming culinary bouquet--yogurt, plums, melon balls, delicate rice cakes and pale violet tea--as we shared our dreams. Sophie's fancy had painted sand-gardens in Japan. Pictures of transcendence, they were, full of chrysanthemums and framed in backdrops of misty precipices, lofty in the clouds of her free-flying soul.

Then I asked Sophie why I'd seen the impression of a gone world, a world crumbled and unknown.

She answered: "It's a variation of history. One that, thankfully, we've managed to bypass. Or maybe we just haven't got there yet."

"This sounds familiar. Lifelines, on a collective scale. Do you mean to say that the world of my dream is a possible variant of actual history?"

Sophie merely nodded.

"Do you mean there can be a planetary ka, or any number of them, existing simultaneously as a result of potential catastrophes throughout history?"

"Well, yes; though it's certainly been getting more crowded with such possibilities lately."

"Lately'--how recently are you talking about?"

"Oh, since the advent of atomic energy, anyway."

"So do you mean that this very existence that we take to be real, actual, physical--never mind how substantial we are as personal entities--it all might be simply an illusion, a world-ka gone adrift through the mists of time?"

"Well," said Sophie, "that's a poetic way of putting it. You might think of your dream, though, as coming out of a collection of planetary kas, expressing itself, so to speak, through your consciousness. Your ability to observe and control your awareness in such dreams gives you a perspective that's a little different from what people called it before: prophecy, sorcery, or, in the last century, tapping into the collective unconscious."

"It must get pretty complicated when the planetary lifelines get twisted up with the personal ones."

"That's you and me, babe."

Sophie slipped another melon ball into her mouth. I thought of the dog I'd punched in the nose and knocked cold. The violet tea was nice and fragrant but it wasn't doing a very good job of waking me up. I started to recall more and more images of my dream, and felt irrationally afraid that if I fell back into to it, I might drag the whole world with me, in a free-fall into the gaping void . . . but I managed to blink my eyes vigorously enough to regain my waking senses. Just as I finally focused clearly, Sophie snapped,

"Goodness, what a sleepyhead you are this morning! And here I am gabbing away, almost late for my briefing with the National Security Council. Come on, we've got work to do."

Our White House maid must have thought she was being chided by her new mistress, because she hurried in to clear our dishes, and with a shy curtsy and "Sorry, missus," whisked them off to the kitchen. Sophie looked baffled for a moment, then smiled at me with playful guilt as the woman (who could have been a younger Mardou) disappeared again through the swinging door to the kitchen.

"Why didn't you tell her you were talking to me, not her?"

Sophie decided to play defensive. "Forget it. It's no big deal. She reacts in her role as she will. It doesn't make any difference, really."

Sophie's callous response only served to heighten my own sense of mission in this matter of small justice.

"Well now, wait a minute, just because she's paid to do a job to help us, doesn't mean you can just forget about common human decency." I was beginning to forget my own place, I realized, yet went on preaching. "It's easy for you to say it's no big deal. But how's it going to be if you conduct international relations that way?"

"Oh come on, Seymour, you're really going off on the deep end on this one. It was just a joke to start with. You can't be responsible--I'm not willing to be responsible for everyone else's paranoias and misconceptions. I've got better things to do. When the whole world's perched on the brink of calamity every second, I can't go around coddling people about every word I say to everybody else."

Her reference to calamity provoked not only my uneasiness over the concept of the variant apocalypse, but also our old antagonism over defense policy. I felt like I had to lecture this lady of vaster cosmic experience than myself on the simple essentials of right human relationships as the foundation of peacemaking. Was she too much a high and mighty astro-politician to realize such humble truths?

Was I, on the other hand, harboring too much old-fashioned sentimentality?

I did feel with some certainty that even if Mardou (as I unconsciously thought of the maidservant) had to remain hurt, at least Sophie and I should be able to come to some peace ourselves about this issue, the very issue of peace, as I saw it, on any scale.

All these thoughts ran through my head, before I was able to say anything. Sophie abruptly burst out again, "If you care so much about it,

why don't you just go in the kitchen and explain it all yourself for the next three hours? I'm going to my briefing." And she rose and stalked off. The National Security Council, one could assume, didn't like to waste time.

I didn't either. I drained my tea and resolved to take on the responsibility that Sophie had abdicated, in order to clear up the misunderstanding. I pushed the swinging door open enough to insert my head, almost called out "Mardou," and instead said, "Imma?"

She was putting dishes in the sink, talking to Fred, the cook, who was standing beside her. She looked my way and smiled with great white teeth, while Fred busied himself with the dishes. "Don't you worry yourself, Mista Katz. I heard all about it. You the one that was spose to wake up! It's all right. Thank ya anyhow." I smiled meekly and turned to go. Just as the door was closing again, I heard Imma call out: "But hey Mista Katz--"

I looked in again. This time Fred turned to look at me too, watching with benign interest. He winked at me as she finished--"You keep dreamin' them dreams."

I spent a desultory morning in my office sorting more mail and beginning to set up my database. I couldn't forget about the morning's argument, despite Imma's letting Sophie off the hook. I kept stewing over

Sophie's attitude of self-righteousness and superiority in matters both spiritual and political. The fact was, I hadn't had any sort of spiritual instruction from her in a long time. We'd both gotten so wrapped up in the campaign, the election, the move to Washington, that we'd nearly tuned out of the higher frequencies altogether. I now began to question Sophie's real inner resources, her qualifications as a spiritual, or any other kind, of mistress. Her quick temper, her stubbornness on certain questions of policy, her preoccupation with the superficial trappings of her new role, had seemed to swamp whatever leading inner lights she possessed.

Perhaps it was unfair of me to judge so critically my partner and mentor, as she was beginning to deal with the inevitable pressure of this most extraordinary of human burdens, the Presidency of . . . if not the greatest, in every sense of the word, let us say simply the most materially powerful empire in the history of the race.

In fact, I realized, I might be accused of some of the same shortcomings--a pompous self-righteousness as well as a forgetfulness of divine guidance. Here I was, a mail-boy in the great estate, without any real sense of transcendental, or even personally meaningful, purpose or direction. And only yesterday I'd felt so important, such a meaningful cog in such a great machine. Once a sea-lily . . .

I could only trust, as always, in fate--with the reinforcement that the trust itself always managed to provide for the unknown outcome of circumstance.

When lunchtime came I found Sophie snacking in the kitchen with the help, Fred and Imma, as they sliced cucumbers and celery and carrot sticks to accompany the soup course. As I approached the kitchen I heard Imma's laughing, lilting voice: "Yeah, Soph, I got one for you when the hard times really hit. Jes' throw this at 'em--an ad for Penny Soup! Ha ha ha. You can say, 'Save, these depression days! Recycle your old pennies! One hunnert percent gov'ment inspected copper alloy, contains one of nature's essential minerals! It's delicious hot or chilled, as a first course or refreshing after-dinner drink! And it costs only--yes--only pennies a serving! Well, soup's on, Seymour gets here, prob'ly in there daydreamin'."

More laughter faded as Sophie backed through the swinging door from the kitchen, carrying a tray of crisp vegetables. When she turned and saw me standing there she stopped dead for an instant--then smiled a little sheepishly, then tittered again.

I couldn't resist: "Did you iron out all the world's problems this morning, dear?"

"In the meeting with those deadheads? Are you kidding? Listen, we have our work cut out for us. Those generals and ex-bank presidents don't give a hoot about conflict resolution. Their priority is peace that pays. If it doesn't pay, and pay well, they'd just as soon put their considerable capital and expertise to work for someone else. And they're dead serious, let me tell you."

"Well I see you've made some new friends, anyway." I nodded in the direction of the kitchen.

"Oh, I told you it was nothing this morning. We did get to talking a little, though. Fred told me a great story about this pet turtle he had when he was kid. We're talking about world peace, remember. There was a pile of brush they'd throw sticks and stuff on, and the turtle would crawl under there like it was a great shelter. With each new branch or pile of leaves, that turtle would just burrow deeper and deeper in the pile, as if she might like to have a nest there--probably thinking it was great, like being under a bigger turtle shell."

Imma brought the soup in, handing the brown bowls down with potholder-gloves on oven-hot handles. "Watch it, now, it's hot."

I said, "Smells good, Imma. What kind is it?"

"Turtle."

"Anyway," Sophie went on in a louder voice, leaning toward me to regain my full attention, "one day they set fire to that brushpile. And the poor turtle had thought she was the best-protected turtle in the world. She burnt right up. They couldn't even make soup out of her."

I shuddered. I pictured little Fred standing by the brushpile, tears running down his little black face. I heard the Air Force jets roar overhead protecting us, and ate my soup.

"What's the matter?"

"What, me? What do you mean?"

"Well, you don't seem to be in the cheeriest mood. How'd the mail-sorting go, too deadly for you?"

"No, it was okay. A lot of junk; you have your fans, but there are a lot of crazies out there. Also quite a few who would try to govern without the benefit of being elected by competent juries of their peers."

Sophie snickered into her soup.

"So tell me more about the state of our National Security," I asked with a bit of a slurp.

"Oh, well, it looks just dandy on the surface. Except that there's this strange dichotomy--I mean half the time they were telling me how all-powerful we are, nothing to worry about, no enemy would stand a chance,

and so on; and then they'd come right back and say we had to shore up this or that weakening bulwark in the Nation's defense, the enemy could walk right in at any moment, you know."

"So what's your conclusion?"

"Oh, I don't know. Like I say, I tend to feel like we're fairly well sitting pretty. Though I'm sure we need to upgrade constantly, and not let the whole thing get out of balance on the other side."

"What other side?"

"The enemy side."

"What enemy?"

"Oh, that's not important. What's important is that there could be one."

"I see."

"Anyway, we've got kind of a sticky problem coming up. We're trying to get French warships outfitted with some of our nukes, so that they will be under our ultimate command--my command, I'm beginning to realize!--but the French are balking. They want to retain an independent role; it's all the socialists in their government, you know. Some of my generals think their refusal could tip the whole balance of power the other

way. And if that happened we'd be in a position to have to take action immediately, in order to pre-empt--"

"Wait a second. Action--what--do you mean start a war? A nuclear war, a laser war?"

"Well, not exactly. That is, we wouldn't really be starting it. The French would, by their own defection.. There would be a flare-up somewhere like Tonga, or Madagascar, you see. They've got these things all worked out. That's what they get paid for. And what with French agents running around, and the CIA, and Interpol--don't you ever watch television, or keep up with the latest spy novels? Just like that. Non-nuclear, at first, of course. We'd only use them if the battle plan dictated their exigency, was the way the Secretary of Defense put it."

"Good God, Sophie, they've got you in army fatigues already, and you never even went to boot camp."

"Naw, I'll just sit in my office, with my finger on the trigger, waiting for the red telephone to ring. Come on, let's go try out the squash courts across the street before my next meeting starts."

As the winter days and nights flew by, we both became acclimated to the pressure-thick atmosphere of the Presidency. I worked on Sophie, quietly, steadily about America's readiness--it seemed almost eagerness--for war. In the face of our pervasive peril, I retained a, shall we say, cosmic optimism (because there was nothing limited to this world which warranted optimism!), combined with a simple-minded day-to-day pleasure in my work that was reminiscent--I thought with a time-rosied nostalgia--of the days of gasoline and dish detergent. How far I'd come, and yet how not-so-far.

It was still hard for me to refuse gilt-edged opportunity. And who could have passed up the chance, that I had, to enjoy the company of the world's most notable dignitaries, the leaders of the leaders, the most finely polished social ornaments of the most cultivated societies, orbiting with such stately decorum in the governmental circles of the world? Even if I had seen it all before . . .

I even met the hereditary, but no longer titular king of Portugal, one mild February evening at a modest White House banquet. He was seated to my left, and the Portuguese he spoke to the Brazilian coffee scientist opposite him rang in my ears like an ancient wind chime. My own limited

proficiency in that tongue was dulled with considerable rust, so I inquired, in politely paced English, about the man's position. He seemed shy in being so slow to respond, and the Brazilian jumped to his rescue.

"Why, this is, please me to interrupt but the old king of Portugal, herself. Yes." And a toothy grin.

Another toothy grin, quickly covered with tight red lips, from the king himself. He was actually not very old in years, maybe forty-two. I almost told him I remembered his ancestor, whom I still remembered. I told him instead that an intimate friend of mine had once met the king of Portugal, Dom Carlos I, perhaps his great-great-great-grandfather. But then I thought I'd better be more unsure, for credibility's sake.

"I mean, I think my friend met him. But maybe it was Carlos the Fifth. Or, come to think of it, maybe it was my friend's great-great grandfather, or the great-great grandfather of a friend of my friend. Or I mean perhaps a friend of the great-great grandfather of my friend. Um . . ."

I was not doing well. The Brazilian and the king were exchanging funny glances. I changed the subject:

"I'm sorry," I said to the king. "You do speak English, don't you?"

"Why, yes. Yes, of course. Do you?"

Great hilarity followed.

Not to mention the prime rib sliced thick and perfectly rare, the broccoli and hollandaise, the roast potatoes, the light Caesar salad, the trifle and café Hapsburg. Yes, we still ate traditionally; Fred was well-trained and despite Sophie's granola days, her tofu experiments and sproutarian binges, state dinners were definitely basic luxurious carnivore's fare. I didn't complain. Like everything in this life, it was free.

And like everything, it was as quickly gone as it had arrived.

Having spent most of the supper exchanging "Knock-knock" jokes with the king and the coffee-scientist, I escaped to more serious conversation after dessert and coffee. Silently weaving my way through the crowd, I caught drifting snatches of chatter and chose what I wanted to hear.

Not ". . . and then the horses took the final jump," nor "you should have seen her laugh when I took it out from under her," nor "the interesting thing about these chips is their essential disilicone compartmentalization, in terms of data preselection, in the . . ."

No, I found myself finally drawn to Sophie. I stationed myself behind her right shoulder contemplating the freckles, as she spoke. The thin white strap of her dress was tied neatly on top, and I kept tempting myself to untie it in impish fun. It may have helped her in a tough spot, actually. She was arguing with a Frenchman, the alliance attaché. There was another

eavesdropper behind them, who tried to look disinterested when he noticed that I noticed him.

The talk was about defense arrangements, buying and selling old warships and planes, along with other current considerations such as treaty commitments to third-party areas, and last but not least, the controversial ship-based nuclear strikeforce allocations, comprised of depth charges, the latest high-tech robot missiles, artillery shells and submarine-launched "Dart"-type missiles.

Sophie was in one of her stubborn moods, which seemed to attach with some regularity to the question of advanced weapons (whether nuclear, particle-beam, or laser-based) for so-called defense.

"Mr. Pinchot, your country must realize the importance of the long-standing tradition of friendship between our two nations. Together we've maintained a mutual spirit of commitment to the protection of the free world, which I know you'll agree--"

"But madame, Tonga and the Canary Islands are quite another matter. They have themselves free and provincially independent populations, who have, by grace of their proper decrees, decided to become weapons-free zones. That does not mean we cannot station our own older warships there;

and we still have rights to the airstrips for at least the token protection of the people within the broader confines of the alliances of France."

"But can't you at least guarantee that those warships and planes will be equipped to handle American nuclear deterrent force-operatives?"

"You mean bombs?"

"Yes."

"Mais, non."

"Shit."

The other eavesdropper moved away. Sophie realized I was standing behind her. She turned and said, "Oh, you again." Then in a whisper, "It looks like the French aren't with us." Monsieur Pinchot was looking at us. Out of a stupid, by now automatic sense of diplomatic politeness, I tried to smile for him, but couldn't.

It looked like war, wasn't. The ships of diplomacy groaned and creaked, their ragged rigging flapping in the starless night, until they were gone from view. We stood on the lawn and watched our White House start to glow.

"Tell me what your vision of psychic energy is," I queried Sophie as I stood swaying with her there, holding her in my arms. A Secret Service man

stood discreetly at a distance, smoking in the shadows. The moon was just rising, a fertile crescent.

"It's not matter, per se, though matter is certainly part and parcel of energy. It's not spirit, either; it's what joins them together, flows between them, allows them to coexist. It's the peacemaking principle, if you will, between gross limitations and infinite possibility. It's to physical reality what nonviolent political action is to oppression. And so different from obvious or violent forms of energy. It's more subtle--and at the same time, more immediate, more human in scale. It's our power."

And I'd thought I had to convert her.

Which is not to say that Sophie and I were free of the little jealousies that infect humankind, in the realm of intimate relations. I would sometimes joke with her, for instance, about her faithful squad of boyfriends, particularly one of whom, it seemed to me, never left her side: Ronald the Secret Service man. On one such occasion, seated together at a tennis match with Ronald nearby, Sophie responded to a pointed jibe of mine with an offhand remark: "Yeah, just like you and Imma in the kitchen."

"What? Sophie, what are you talking about?"

"Oh, don't play dumb with me. Don't I lay open enough for you?"-- delivered with embarrassing volume, so that the stern and dapper Secret Service man looked at us with a professional interest. I might have wondered if Sophie was playing up to him with that remark. But I didn't really think so. Nor did I care what he was hearing. Because for my part, I was innocent.

So what if I'd come to finishing my mail pile fifteen, or twenty or thirty minutes early, so I could go and help out peeling carrots in the kitchen? I could make a pretty tasty salad myself, in my day. And Fred was almost always there anyway; and besides, I was in sufficient control of my tantric energies to be perfectly satisfied with my nightly pleasures with Sophie: lying close beside her, sharing caresses and--when the energies were properly attuned--reverent, spontaneous entries into the realms of mystic oneness that we perceived as light . . .

No, our arguments were based on nothing substantial, but must have been driven from this imaginary cause, this groundless jealousy hidden deep within the all-too-human recesses of Sophie's otherwise transcendent heart; by the pressures of her office, the demands placed upon her daily by generals, executives, environmental fanatics, duck-hunters and legal-aid activists, schoolchildren touring the house; not to mention the endless parade

of banquets and convocations, policy briefs, Party strategy sessions, and legislative conundrums . . . all winding their way inexorably through her consciousness, like so many snakes.

I seemed to have taken a backseat role in the formulation of policy. The new slate of bills being drafted for Congress smacked to me of an insidious paranoia that I had no choice but to attribute to the Hierarchy. Take the bill regulating the science of fate-engineering, for instance. As law, the bill would make it a Federal crime to produce software with the intent of rewriting history, writing new history, exploring past lives, or projecting future lifeline scenarios. Behind such legislation, according to Sophie, lay the well-grounded fear that the programs might infect the official LIFELINES program somewhere in the Hierarchy's program network. If that happened, either indiscriminately or with the premeditated use of custom alteration codes, undesirable changes could appear in individual and collective destinies.

There was another proposed Act to Regulate Dreams and Spiritual Practices, with the chief object of prohibiting astral travel through time or beyond the borders of one's own Federal electoral district. This bill's supporters claimed the need to prevent revolutionary networking. Again,

Sophie admitted to me the underlying rationale of such legislation: to restrict interference with the Hierarchy's psychic airspace; and to protect the predictable evolution of the kas now copyrighted within LIFELINES.

Enforcement would be in the hands of a new, covert Federal agency only obliquely alluded to in the language of the bill. These "Astral Police," as an FBI memo referred to them with clarifying bluntness, would work with the aid of computer-tracked energy fields strung, so to speak, with trip wires activated by certain vibration rates of astral and etheric bodies in motion.

Both of these bills were presented to the Congress, as the saying went, "under the table," so as to secure passage without the harsh investigative light of public scrutiny. While I felt myself unqualified to take a strong stand on either piece of legislation, I took an active role in Sophie's lobbying campaign to speed passage of an amendment to the Truth in Advertising Act. The new regulations would proceed on the philosophic grounds that the truth is an abstract and relative concept, supported by the empirical evidence that the consumer expects fiction in advertising. Thus it would be an offense for any advertisers to claim that they were presenting the truth.

The public limelight was reserved for the so-called "marijuana bill," a hotly-contested item on the floor of the House. This was a long-delayed piece of complicated legislation waiting thirty years for a Presidential

signature. The bill Sophie signed had ten fresh riders--regulating the production, transport and sale of coffee, tea, sugar, chocolate, tobacco, beer, wine, distilled spirits, aspirin, and cola. In plain language, the bill tacitly acknowledged that the American public was almost universally stoned on some substance or other. Three days after the law's passage, the bill's two staunchest opponents in the Senate were arrested in an underground parking lot, attempting to wash down a handful of 222's with some contraband cola secured by certain connections in the D.C. police force.

That night Sophie and I had a good laugh as we climbed into bed. The offending Senators were part of the Party's old guard that Sophie said she would be glad to see put out to pasture. Then, as I pulled out my latest sci-fi thriller, she snapped, "Aren't you supposed to have a summary of the Party caucus ready for me tomorrow?"

"Yeah but this is a really exciting book--and I think it's relevant to our historical epoch. There's a real--"

"Seymour, I need that summary tomorrow. What did you do all morning, slice carrots?"

"Tell you what. I'll dream about it tonight and write out my dream in the morning."

"We were going to start doing astral refreshers in the morning. Or have you lost interest in your training now, too?"

"What do you mean, 'too'?"

She turned over, her back to me, and kept silent. I was in no mood for further argument, so just went to sleep.

I dreamed of an assembly of pigeons. They all shat in their places, kept up continual pandemonium, then stood at silent attention when a white raven strutted into the front of the chamber and rapped on the podium with one long claw.

The raven held up a slim paperback book for all to see: it was The Day the Insects Devoured the World. But as the bird railed with a rasping voice in bird-language, I couldn't decipher the point of the tirade. At length the feathered demagogue hurled the book the length of the assembly hall. The book flapped in flight like a giant insect before falling to the floor with a crash. At that point I woke up, turned off Sophie's reading light, softly stroked her back and her hair so raven-smooth in the moonlight, and then joined her in sleep again.

Silence, night. Another dream which I will relate shortly. In the morning, her arms were around me, lips on the back of my neck. Astral refreshers, before coffee and eggs.

We were out of practice, our backs and legs stiff as we sat crosslegged on the floor, facing one another. We spent a few minutes bending forward and massaging muscles to limber up. Then, after some preliminary deep-breathing, we chanted the names of God--that is, godness as revealed to us in our own divinity, our realized psychic energy. In the chanting, we gave this entity power, helped it help us (to help it, to help us, and so on) . . . "Njom, Andriamanitra, Ngai, Yaris, Wakonda, Oki, Manitu, Mulungu, Wong, Churinga, Zogo, Wakan, Mana, Tondi, Atua, Ani, Han, Kasinge, Kalit, Anut . . ."

We followed the chanting with several more vigorous breathing exercises, pranayamas. All of this infusion of oxygen had the effect of clearing the mental and physical channels, and I welcomed the return to our neglected practice. I was rendered clear that morning to the chimes of heaven. Unfortunately, as my ears rang, I was reminded of the previous night's dreaming, part two.

There was a shiny black snake, with gold and silvery-yellow markings. But with the face of a bat, round ears. It pursued me up and around a jeep full of people. A police car stood nearby. I wanted the police to shoot the snake-bat. They gave me a quarter instead, showing me how to pinch it very tightly at the very edge, between thumb and half-moon of

forefinger. The vibrations from the proper tilt of the coin would drive the snake away. It worked--the beast was gone before I even realized it, nowhere in sight. That was how, I was given to understand, St. Patrick drove the snakes out of Ireland.

That's also how the white man habitually took care of the natives of the north, I gather. I bring this issue in because most of the rest of the day I spent with Sophie in policy formulations regarding her so-called Continental scheme for resolving all outstanding aboriginal land claims in North America. The idea was to grant all land north of the fifty-second parallel to native peoples to administer, develop, and maintain as they wished. In return, the United States and Provinces of Continental America would gain absolute sovereignty over all native lands and reservations south of that line. The reparations and resettlement problems alone were staggering. But the advantages were obvious. The oil concerns who had to sell out from northern Alberta could move into coal in the Black Hills. Loggers could transfer from Lac St-Jean to the wood-rich Grassy Narrows reserve. The Hopi and Navaho could square off across the Nahanni River in the Yukon. Problems, sure. There would be plenty of griping about the forced removal

from "ancestral lands." But those famous ancestors had come to those lands for the first time themselves, once upon a time.

The biggest plum of all was the excuse such a plan would provide for the final push to assimilate southern Canada's manufacturing and resource sectors once and for all into the hungry American economy, with no more funny-sounding strings (GATT, NAFTA) attached.

We were learning fast to become hardened politicians, to deal with the pressure-ridden realities of interest-group dominance in the legislative process. Yes, and to treat people as economic pawns in the grander strategies of nationhood.

But as it turned out, by spring . . . after all winter of planning and policy-making, of research and heated late-night lobbying, of cocktails and tête-à-têtes, of diplomats and chauffeurs, of toasts and trade talks and eloquent addresses to eminent assemblies, of handshakes, and midnight milkshakes in the kitchen with Imma, of rain-pattered snow on the sidewalk outside the Oval Office, of train rides into the high Alleghenies, and yacht parties on the silver Potomac . . . it was Sophie's last act in Washington to notify the State Department of the new U.S.P.C.A. to carry out the relocation of natives and whites who desired or were ordered to move--before the unthinkable happened.

v

I was at my work with the morning's mail, the middle of March: tabulating opinions on the controversial merger with Canada, revising drafts of speeches to take into account the arguments raised in the letters, sending memos summarizing the drift of public opinion to congressional leaders. Before exiting the menu that listed connections with other terminals, my eye caught a flashing entry at the end of the list, one I hadn't previously noticed. The entry was "MA." I didn't know what I was supposed to do. Was this an incoming call--from my long-dead mother in Germany? I pressed "Enter."

"MA," it turned out, meant Mainframe Alpha. My heart started beating furiously as I read the opening menu. I chose "Directory." Immediately I saw LIFELINES listed as a subdirectory and was tempted to enter to see if I could find my former self--or selves, as the case might turn out to be. Perhaps in doing so I could retrace my steps, maybe start all over again, for instance, with an unsuspecting Zouzou . . .

If I wanted to do so legally, I considered with some perverse pragmatism, I had better act fast. But the prospect was too overwhelming. I

scanned the list and saw many other intriguing code-names that signified nothing to me. I wanted to try them all. I felt like the proverbial kid in a candy-store--or bull in a china-shop. I saw "HISTORY/ALT" and, with some trepidation at what I was getting into (Could I alter history with a touch of the wrong key? Could I wipe myself out of existence, or send myself--along with everyone on the planet--into some far corner of hell with an errant little finger?), I decided to have a look. In the file listing under that subdirectory I chose the provocative entry called "LASTBOOK." Had I seen the entry flash before I touched the key? I wasn't sure. But it was too late to go back. The monitor screen lit up with the following title:

THE LAST BOOK:

FOOTNOTES TO THE HISTORY OF HUMANKIND

Eagerly I scrolled down through its contents. Its scope was true to its title. The sweep of its vision was planetary and almost timeless. I had to wonder right from the outset, whose perspective engendered the writing of such a critique, and from what possible--or impossible--remove? Of course the very existence of this digital variety of "book" implied a contradiction of the main title: if this book, why not another? I wondered, then, if subtitle of

this computerized reference work referred, rather, to an actual printed book, The History of Humankind.

On the other hand, perhaps the documentary voice actually did address its subject directly. History itself was the book, in a figurative manner of speaking--and this scrolling text consisted of the "footnotes" to that "book."

Then there was the appendage on the directory listing, "/Alt." Did this file describe merely one possible version of human history, and not necessarily what did or would happen? It was all very enigmatic; but my abstruse speculations paled beside the stark catalogs of human experience contained within, once I began reading.

Naturally I can't justify encumbering the reader of my personal history with the entire length of this fascinating tome, this pearl in my pigpen--though it might appeal well enough to the historically curious. So I shall confine the excerpted portion of the book to that section in the final chapter which most arrested my avid eyes, with its insight into where we were in the present world and how we'd got there. For despite my recent record of achievement (which in all humility, I admit was gained largely by association), I was still a novice at this time in what I thought of as

history; and I still had some dozens of doublings of human knowledge during the last hundred and forty years to catch up on.

Technology and specialization developed hand in hand and together were responsible for the spectacular success, and correspondingly spectacular failure, of the machine called civilization. This historical irony was borne out on three key fronts, which manifested in their terminal stages as overpopulation, social alienation, and ecological destruction.

The driving force in the machine's progress was the impulse to populate; the fuel for which was provided by the development of medical technology and an ethics of unlimited growth. Higher birth-survival rates and lower death rates were the direct result. Scientific and technological developments meanwhile made possible greater success in providing the necessities of a healthy life for increased numbers in society as a whole.

The upward curve of the population rates reached precipitous heights, however, by the mid-twentieth century. In the respective realms of rats, bacteria, or numbers on a graph, when the overpopulation curve becomes vertical, a catastrophe occurs. For rats, reproduction halts; for bacteria, the supportive organism dies, starving the parasitic culture which for a brief time has become dominant; on the graph, time stops. Survival past such

circumstances depends on a dramatic shift in the predominant paradigm, into new modes of being. The number line stops trying to live in time and instead stretches upward and downward for eternity. The bacteria culture atrophies and dies, unless another nutritive environment chances upon it. The rats eat each other, primarily the newly born, until their usual rations can be restored. It is clear from these cases that "survival" does not imply an unbroken continuation of history, or of the life pattern.

The human race shared characteristics of all three nonhuman models: conceiving of eternity, while approaching it with the power to end history; falling prey to new epidemics and diseases, cancers and radiation sickness, allergies and heavy-metal toxicity--and meanwhile jeopardizing the earth's capacity to support further life, by decimating forests, acidifying and poisoning water, depleting the ozone, and forcing erosion of fertile soil; and finally, slaughtering its own kind by the billion. As of this writing, it cannot be determined whether a successful revivification of human culture is possible.

This authorial stance, as I'm certain the discerning reader may now appreciate, was unnerving. Who was the author, anyway--some alien correspondent reporting to some distant galactic superior? A militant

anarchist theoretician from Georgetown University? The alien reporter writing on some astral channel through the local academician? "As of this writing . . ." indeed. To continue:

The second theme, alienation, stemmed from a historical process with its roots in the drive to populate and to succeed scientifically at all costs. It began to manifest on the historical plane when overpopulation took the form of imperial colonization. The early European empires gave rise to a cosmopolitanism that destroyed tribal identities in favor of individual hybrids. These new strains seemed to have an adaptive advantage in outlying environments; for, while the centuries following the collapse of the Roman Empire saw the establishment of superficially distinct nation-states, the mark of Rome was upon all the governments, and they came to play little more than the roles of rival factions in a newer European Empire.

Technology, medicine and social philosophy were proceeding apace.

Nations eager to play out the advantages of specialization and mechanization entered a competitive race for efficiency and dominance in agriculture, industry and war. The new industries, cosmopolitan tastes, and growing numbers of the Europeans demanded new resources--from gold, to coffee, to land. Even the churches had developed an insatiable need for more souls to

save. And so the European human group overflowed to reap even more of the earth's bounty on the other five continents, looking beyond even to Antarctica for the needs of the future.

The confrontation of the expanding white culture with the indigenous peoples and cultures of its exploited colonies produced disastrous results for the latter which were obvious and immediately apparent. In addition to the large-scale genocide practiced in many areas in the early periods of world-wide imperialism, cultural genocide was the de facto result of sustained contact and assimilation even when the subjugated peoples were protected on reservations or given home-rule status under the aegis of the controlling government.

Yet despite the inherent racism of the colonizers, they served in their empire-stretching to hybridize further the white race and culture. The amalgam which civilization had already become was colored by ever-new and diverse racial and cultural elements. The "melting-pot" syndrome found its apogee in the mass culture of the United States, itself a direct outgrowth of the European expansion.

The resultant hybrid culture, however, tended toward a new monoculture rather than a true diversity of integral traditions. It was as if the white race had forced distinctive, vibrant colors back through a prism to

emerge in blinding, indistinct white light. The historical tribes had been fused into a gigantic metatribe, inhabiting a new, electronic "global village."

Certain moral principles were fulfilled in the historical process which seemed to the conquerors and their assimilated subjects to justify the new world order. The ideal was expressed via different and sometimes conflicting ideologies; yet the fallacy was common. Whether by Christian love, or manifest destiny, or economic solidarity, it was expected that all people could share a common identity, as they had previously only within tribal groups. But however noble the concept, it was an abstract one when enforced on the national scale, alien to concrete human nature on an organic social scale.

Traditionally, tribal groups had relied not on the imaginary unity of specialized, autonomous strangers, but on the actual daily cooperation of congenial, well-rounded members of ancestral communities. Individual success was not narrowly specialized, but depended on a complete range of living skills. Group strength was a resilient one based on the broad abilities of its members, and did not rest therefore on spectacular material achievements.

For centuries, advances in technology allowed the white-hybrid culture to conquer the human and natural world; but simultaneously its very

foundations, in social structure and resource extraction, were slowly crumbling. The initial population booms and consequent expansion, along with the extermination, exploitation and assimilation of other peoples, delivered only an elementary and superficial judgment of white success.

Within the exploding empire, alienation was the price of specialization. The successful individuals that made up the increasingly megalomaniacal machine, while losing contact with their own primary survival skills, were estranged as well from the wholeness of natural life. The same factors that helped the individual to survive as a cog in the machine caused the population as a whole to boom; but the result was a silent, poisonous backfire in the form of individual alienation from the faceless crowd.

The price paid for individual and technological success proved to be more than the twin diseases of overpopulation and alienation, and more than that paid by indigenous peoples facing imperial subjugation. The final price would be the viability of the biosphere as a whole. By the late twentieth century, it was becoming apparent even in the halls of empire that unlimited growth was impossible. Overpopulation was reaching discernible proportions; alienation was both more widespread than ever and more understood (ironically by means of specialized academic education); and

energy sources for advanced technology were no longer easily or cheaply available for the taking. The so-called energy crisis took until then to reveal itself in its full implications, owing to previously abundant supplies in the ever-father-flung hinterlands, and to the continued capacity of science to devise new methods of resource extraction. But finally the ends of the once-seemingly-bottomless pits of the fossil fuels came into view--recalling for some observers the last great race of masters of the earth, the Saurians, themselves doomed to extinction.

The chief replacement for fossil fuels promised, for a time, to be uranium. But twenty years of experimentation with nuclear energy instead convinced enough people of its dangers to halt its continued growth. Similar disappointments were played out in most areas of resource extraction and heavy industry: growing numbers of people, and the regulatory bodies of their governments, began to see the counter-productive by-products and side effects (including huge financial liabilities) of such activity. The pollution of other natural resources, such as air and water, reached untenable proportions, so that it threatened the very human organisms the new energy and industry were meant to sustain.

Frontiers were growing too scarce and isolated to be efficiently exploited in the accustomed manner of the European industrial-military

machine. At the same time, the empire's population, in its pervasive social disaffection, was becoming less eager to sanction unlimited exploitation at its own (and the rest of the planet's) expense. A turning point of a kind occurred when the American citizenry refused to continue its support for a government engaged in a futile military adventure in Southeast Asia. The ensuing frustration of this great power's expansionist aims represented the forging of a new link in the chain of imperial power extending back from the United States to England, and from England to Rome.

In each case the colony responsible for the turning back of the empire became the next great world power. And so from the U.S.A. the mantle of earthly power passed to the Vietnamese people, and indeed perhaps to the American people who dared to affirm the principle of self-determination: in either case, a people whose reign may be seen not in the same terms of material expansion embraced by the imperial lineage, but rather as a symbolic coming of age of the downtrodden, a harbinger of the pregnant upsurge of the Third and Fourth Worlds.

When I read these words I began to sweat, for immediately I thought of the new rivals to our ruling Party lately springing up from the grassroots. Not exactly a party, not content with building a base of support among

voters for the next federal election three and a half years hence, the "Decentralists" were rather a broad-based, loosely affiliated movement engaging in every form of rebellious action against the central Government: declarations of independence, Constitutional challenges, tax revolts, protest marches, rail-bus blockades, flag-burnings, and other sundry acts of civil disobedience and sabotage. Until now I had thought of such opposition as merely irksome, and normal--to be expected in the course of running a modern government on a scale such as ours. Now I realized that perhaps mine was an institution whose time of glory was past, and that this decentralist movement was the wave of the future.

When I looked up from the computer screen, distracted by a finch tapping at the windowpane of this cell I called my home and place of work, it was with new eyes that I saw the world. I wished in a nostalgic way that I could have preserved my relative innocence about what I'd considered to be the troubled drift of western civilization. Yet, even now, while I had at my fingertips not exactly a futuristic Apocalypse, nor a convincing prescription for human survival, this Last Book sowed the seeds within me of what I already felt (in my opportunistic way) might become a program of true global leadership for constructive, decentralized change, to be initiated and sponsored by none other than my employer, my lover, my guardian angel,

cosmic nemesis, mistress and friend (and, not to shortchange her, empress of my world), Sophie Tucker Vaughan.

Even judging solely by the weight of public outrage against our pet project, Continentalism, I had reason to believe that a program of decentralization would be popular, perhaps wonderfully successful. After all, even most critics of the "imperialistic" merger of the U.S. and southern Canada were applauding the granting of self-determination to the northern and native peoples. Now the thing would be to follow that policy success with attractive programs in our own, larger Nation. I could see it now: local governments could be further subsidized; folk art revivals funded; village markets refurbished; neighborhood dance halls erected; solar, wind, tidal and geothermal power sources developed to perfection. It would be, I unthinkingly imagined, the modern, political equivalent of the Roman aqueducts.

But immediately doubt set in. Wasn't it the most pompous contradiction on my part to swallow--hook, line and sinker--this thesis of an anonymous overseer, and then to propose in the name of its critical truths a program of remedies to be controlled by the central heart and head of the most far-flung, gigantic and powerful, "successful" but doom-bound empire

the world had ever seen . . . and all the while thinking that the contradiction could be erased by the fine concept of "decentralization?"

I began to sweat afresh, looking around me at the mess of opened and unsorted mail, that had been languishing in its state of disarray while I'd so eagerly devoured this mysterious tome. The awesome responsibility of my job suddenly had become a burden of enormous weight. How could anyone function creatively in the very bowels (never mind the heart and head) of the leviathan? To ride along with its predominant movement would, at best, do nothing to curb its destructive progress, but would instead lend validity and credence to its professed aims. I pushed my smooth-wheeled chair away from the desk and went to the window, pacing off my dilemma. To work from within to subvert, or even just to slow down, the operations of this juggernaut would likely lead only to consequences of a personal nature--accusations of hypocrisy, reprisals, job redesignation, harassment, dismissal . . . "accidental" assassination. I had a fair idea, by now, of how my personal conversion would be received by the Hierarchy.

I wondered how Sophie would cope with the awareness of her role in the unflattering portrayal of the world I'd seen painted before me that morning. Or maybe she had such awareness already; I couldn't say. If so, I

wondered how she could justify her own position of power now. "As of this writing," indeed . . .

I wanted to look again at the end of the book, and then perhaps to go back to the introduction. When I sat back at the desk, however, I found to my dismay that the computer screen had gone blank and dark. Had it gone off on a timer? Had I inadvertently shut it off when I got up to go to the window? I pressed "Enter" and the screen lit up; but the text was gone, and I was back at the main directory menu. "OO" was still there, but not "MA." Curious. Had I unknowingly pressed a hot-key earlier enabling the encrypted entry to appear? If so, I hadn't a clue how to get it back. Like a lost child, I thought to myself with some foolish amusement, I wanted my Ma, and I had the childish urge to call up Sophie on the "OO" line to ask her how to get back home.

I looked at my watch; it was noon already. I decided I wasn't yet prepared, because I hadn't yet come to terms with The Last Book's implications, to bring it to Sophie's attention. But I also didn't know how I could keep it from her.

I shut the machine down. I had a final thought to try rebooting it to see if "MA" would appear again. It didn't. I turned away in disgust and got up to go to lunch. On my way out of the sordid trashbin I called my office, I

absently knocked onto the floor the stack of miscellaneous mail I'd piled on the corner of the desk; and then I stumbled over the resulting heap as I walked out the door.

* * *

Fortunately Sophie was out for lunch that day and I didn't have to face her. Over supper I let her carry the conversation as usual with tales of her busy day. When she observed my reticent mood and asked if something was the matter, I told her only how public opinion was growing against the Continentalist policy. There were just too many problems for too many people--it would never work. "I think," I concluded, "that we should consider shelving it."

"Shelving it? At this late date? Christ, we've already cleared the first category of relocation grants for next month's budget. You don't just back out of something like this. All the companies with applications for the reserve lands . . ."

"Fuck the companies," I said, too impulsively.

Sophie stopped chewing and looked at me with genuine concern.

"What's got into you, Seymour? You helped formulate this policy. It would help the native peoples, you agreed. You don't have to convince the electorate--that's my job, and one I'm fully prepared to do. With or without your help."

I was almost ready to concede her point about the natives; but her last statement sent me into a purely defensive reaction: "Right. And then you can have your nice new empire all to yourself. Fine by me. You go right ahead, and see what happens. I'm getting out."

And I did. Right out the front door, where I brushed past Ronald. He looked at me with a smirk, smoothing back his slick, black hair. I stormed right up to the iron fence . . . and turned back. Looking at the house all lit up in the deepening night, I knew that it didn't have to end like this. But how could I convince Sophie of the danger, the folly of her position when it lay so deeply within the very structure of the machine she happened to "control" at the moment?

She would have to see The Last Book for herself. There was no other way now.

I caught her on the stairway, reaching an arm out to her elbow. She turned on me, crying--"Let me go, you . . . you spineless bastard. I should have known from the beginning that you wouldn't be able to stick with anything worthwhile for long. Now that this act is over, you can go on to some other charade."

I did let go of her arm, and then it just spilled out: "Sophie, have you ever heard of anything called The Last Book?"

"No," she said, and I knew she was telling the truth. "Why? Is it supposed to make any difference to us? You pick a strange time to give a book report from your profound little collection of fantasies in the White House library."

I saw hope in her continued willingness to talk, as she lingered there a step or two above me. I found the courage to say to her then, "Sophie, come on, I have to tell you about this--it's no fantasy." As I said so, I had to hope I was right--yet at the same time I hoped that she was right, and that this earthshaking prophecy was nothing but a work of science fiction. Either way, I wanted to heal the fresh wounds we had opened. She still stood stiffly on the stair. "Sophie," I said, "I'm sorry."

"So am I. I shouldn't have said what I did."

"It's all right. We can breathe through it."

She smiled, at last, and said, "Let's go up to bed. You can tell me all about your book."

We undressed in silence. I held her body close, feeling a mutual tenderness comparable to the first time our skins enjoyed full contact. We did breathe deeply together, stroking away the rough edges of our painful dissonance. Finally I lay beside her looking up at the ceiling in the dark, ready to speak my truth.

"Somehow I got into Mainframe Alpha today."

Sophie's hand spontaneously tightened on my leg, and she gave a little gasp.

"And there was a document, listed under 'HISTORY/ALT,' entitled The Last Book: Footnotes to the History of Humankind. It was rather apocalyptic in its perspective."

"It sounds ominous all right. But how did you get in there? Mainframe Alpha--"

"It was listed as Ma: M-A."

"Yeah, I know that. But MA has a classified entry code. There's no way you can tap into it without the code."

"Not even by accident?"

"No way. The odds against a random discovery and entry of the seven-level code are virtually impossible. Which means there's some foul play going on, and the Hierarchy's gonna shit bricks over it."

"How can a spiritual Hierarchy shit bricks?"

"Okay, okay. What expression shall I use . . ."

"How about, 'There'll be hell to pay'?"

"Perhaps. But listen. The listing shouldn't even be displayed in the main directory like that. It's completely protected by the encoding shell."

"Evidently not."

"Well, something's not right. I don't know about your doomsday insects, but here's a bug that's got to be worked out."

"Well what is MA, anyway? If the Hierarchy's a strictly astral body, how or should I say why do they bother to operate the thing?"

"You realize this is totally classified information. I mean, Government classified is one thing. That's for my eyes at least. But this is different. There are plenty of files and programs in MA that I'll never touch."

"Unless you move up in the Hierarchy."

"Oh, not in this lifetime. The Akashic records, for instance, draw from the accumulated wisdom of the ages, all that has been thought, all that will be done . . ."

"On earth as it is in Heaven?"

"Something like that."

"So where is MA, then? In some underground bunker somewhere? In the inner pentagon of the Pentagon?"

"I don't even know that. But probably, yes, in some secret, sheltered location."

"Or maybe it exists as a kind of astral version of computer. You know, a meta-computer, with programs located in bits and pieces all over in actual computers here and there."

"An intriguing idea, but I don't think that computer science has quite reached the stage of your science fiction, yet. More likely it exists as a program structure within another mainframe unit: disguised, as it were. What I don't get is why I haven't seen this Last Book. Did you say it was listed in a subdirectory?"

"Yeah, History-slash-Alt."

"I know that section, but I never saw your book there. Maybe it's a new entry. I'd like to have a look at it. I'll give it a try tomorrow."

"Why not now? Can't you get into MA from the Mini?" This little portable lived in the drawer of Sophie's bedtable, close at hand for emergencies.

"I don't even know. Probably so. But it's late. It can wait till tomorrow. So you broke in and read a file. It's not the end of the world." With that she turned out the light on the bedtable, lay with her arms held loosely around me, and fell silent. Now I sensed she was being less than truthful--or for some reason not willing to hear the truth.

I lay there and brooded awhile, trying to consider if I had overreacted to the stimulus of The Last Book--but feeling rather that it had been purposely placed before me at this critical point in history, while there was still time. Should I launch into a summary of it myself, forcing her to hear me out right now? No, I couldn't do it justice if she wasn't in the mood to hear it.

But why this stubborn resistance on her part? I realized with a cool and distasteful insight that our entire legislative program was just that: a program, engineered in the computers of the Hierarchy to further their aims and protect their secret position of virtually unlimited power. Sophie must be in on these plans, I concluded, and that is why she resents my interference.

I determined that more useful information might well be gleaned from MA. I might need to be more daring in my manipulation of its files, to the extent that such meddling was technically possible.

Sophie was right. It was late. And I, too, would go to work tomorrow.

* * *

I punched in my user code and entered the main directory. Again, no MA . . . and then, there it was, flashing merrily away at the bottom of the list, in bright green letters. I went into the subdirectory, and this time chose to have a look into LIFELINES.

I got yet another subdirectory listing, by century. I chose the present, the twenty-first. There was a long list of names to scroll through; I looked for the K's. I found Katz with an asterisk, prompting me with a choice to enter for more information: "[Krull/20...Krull/19]." I entered the latter and received the following information:

Krull, Felix. 1875-1895*1975-1978*<1994-1995>*2035_[katz/21].
Ref. @-1915...@-1955...@-1978*/...@@@1995/*[del].

Not a whole lot of help there. I would have to know how to use further code-entries for more information. Would I then receive what I already knew? I could see it now: "Krull, Felix: Confidence-Man. Alias Marquis de Venosta. Rogue, swindler, jewel-thief and would-be gigolo. Stealer of hearts. * Shipwrecked * return-Krull. New Orleans City Jail, 1975. Federal Prison, alias Charles Ready, Marion Illinois 1976. Gas jockey, stunt pilot, clerk, stadium vendor. Union negotiator...Deleted 1978/1995." Not very flattering. I didn't want to give them the satisfaction. I was tempted to delete the whole entry. Out of spite, as it were, for all their shenanigans with my body and soul. The screen cursor flashed over the end of the actual coded entry, where it said "[del]." What the hell, I thought, it won't kill me--and if it does, it will prove this present existence was merely a dream anyway, a statistical probability. I pressed the keyboard "delete" button.

The screen went blank, but I didn't feel a thing. That didn't hurt at all, I thought to myself with some smugness. Let them try to mess with me now. But then the coded lifeline returned to the screen. There was one change at the end. Where it had read "[del]," now it read "_[hacker/20-21]." How about that! Instead of deleting the whole entry, I'd apparently

undeleted a temporary deletion of one of my former selves. With the cursor still flashing on the new item, I pressed "Enter."

--Hi, there, "Seymour." HH here. Glad you figured out a way to get me online. Pretty difficult, when they try to wipe out your existence with the stroke of a key. I was prepared, however, with this program loop you twigged onto. Guess I knew a little something about how your brain works, too.

Enough chit-chat. I'm here to help, now, if I can. What can I do for you today?

Astonishing. The Hacker was back. At least, he'd left a living legacy in binary code, if not a surviving body. I was eager to ask him what he knew . . . but where to start?

I typed in:

--What do you know about the Hierarchy?

Harry answered:

--Can you be more specific?

--OK. Are they real?

--You need to do better than that.

--Do they occupy human bodies now, on the earth?

--Sure they do. They'd like us to think otherwise.

--Can you think? Do you occupy a body now?

--Ah, a trick question. How much do you know about so-called artificial intelligence? About astral memory?

--Are you capable of giving me a straight answer?

--What do you think? How long can we go on answering questions with questions?

This was ridiculous, sitting here arguing with this computerized imp.
I decided not to play any more games with him.

--About the Hierarchy: please tell me who they are and what they're
trying to accomplish.

--Are you prepared to deal with the knowledge I give you?

This gave me pause. But I wanted to know:

--Yes.

--They are an imperialist clique, using President Vaughan (with your
help, I might add) to advance their aims of continued world domination by
the United States of America.

Oh, my God, I thought--it's worse than I imagined. On the other hand,
if the Hierarchy was merely human . . .

--Where are they located?

--Hard to say.

--Are you hiding something from me?

--Who, me? Never. Don't you realize we're on the same team? We're family!

--What exactly do you mean? That you're one of my kas?

--Oh, closer than that. I suppose you need some updating. So here goes.

I helped your lady friend out with a little technical difficulty she was having, and as a result I nullified my own bloody existence. That was when you got the quick-lift from '78 before going down in that plane. But that's all right; I got to come along for the ride, so to speak. Now, when you yourself--or shall I say the body you remember in 1994-95--got snuffed in that little geostrategic event as they called it, it brought things back to square one as far as I was concerned. That is, it made your jump a theoretical one and

your death in the plane crash heavier on the probability scales. Thereby reactivating myself. And because I carried on the physical weight of your lifeline, you had no other new ka to jump into in 2035. Follow?

--Wait a second. Sophie told me the reason I didn't have a body waiting here for me--a receptor-ka, I think she called it--was that I had two half-reincarnations contending for one space, kind of like a case of double vision.

--A charming theory, but untrue--or I should say, not the whole picture. Things got pretty jumbled in there for a while, she's right. But your present form doesn't represent the merger of only those two new forty-year-old kas. It also includes a good part of the frequencies of my own well-aged ka, fifty-seven years of age at your point of entry, and, as you know, the astral ka surviving the 1995 debacle unaged at twenty-three. The latter two kas averaged in at forty along with the other two forty-year-olds, so you can understand perhaps why you had somewhat of an unstable identity there for a while.

--What about you, then? What's your current status?

--I share a little of myself around. When you came in a year and a half ago, I no longer had enough weight to support a physical body. So I went underground, so to speak. Back to the lifeline I encrypted for myself in the original LIFELINES prototype, way back when.

--You mean when you were only sixteen?

--Well, I did have a knack for programming. In the high school I went to, it was either that or football; and as I say, I didn't pack a lot of weight . . .

--I still would like to know more about the Hierarchy. Their base of operations. Do you know or don't you?

--I'm afraid I don't. It works in large part as a network, I know that much from the computer logs. Involving many individuals, on many levels, right down to the bevy of terminal keyboardists working at MA.

--So MA is one mainframe unit somewhere?

--It's likely programmed within a mainframe somewhere, but it actually exists only on the programming level. Consequently it operates within many smaller systems as well, including this one we're using at the moment.

--It doesn't have a kind of base-program location?

--Not necessarily. If so, I haven't been able to find it.

I almost didn't want to know the answer to my next question; but I had to ask it.

--How closely is Sophie involved in the plans of the Hierarchy?

--She's right there at the top. She's their main agent right now.

--Agent--but she's not calling the shots?

--Oh, no. Are you kidding? The way they've manipulated her the whole way? She's powerful on the world-plane, all right, but she's still the Hierarchy's puppet. She doesn't know half of it, how they've jerked her around.

--What are you talking about?

--You ought to know; they've tossed you around along with her.

--All right, so I'm stupid. Do you want to let me in on it or not?

--Sure, no problem. You know how they told Sophie it was her fault you didn't make it all the way to 1994 on the first jump?

--How did you know that?

--It all happened right out my window, if you want to know.

--But you weren't even around, then!

--No, but computer operations leave tracks. Lines in the palms. All the records were kept, right here in the program file-storage. You can look them up.

--All right, so what happened?

--Well, the Hierarchy messed with Sophie's quick-lift code so you'd get left in the low minors for some seasoning, if you get my drift. Say, with the Kodiak Bruins. When you want to play hardball with the big boys . . .

--Cut the crap, will you?

--Touchy bastard, aren't you. Anyway they wanted you seasoned--aged and experienced. You would have lived to a nice mature forty if left to your own devices; but Sophie got impatient for your youthful little body.

What? No delete key? Okay:

Then, when I helped her out with a good code for the next jump, '78 to '94, the Hierarchy got hot. They didn't like this peachfuzzed consort of hers one bit. Using the excuse that political conditions were too unstable, they

nixed the whole history-line, which meant both yours and Ms. Vaughan's lifelines in the bargain.

I had to shake my head at the extent of the Hierarchy's petty vindictiveness. But there was more.

Then there's this little business of your new name. It wasn't just a political convenience for Sophie. It was also insurance to keep your present lifeline clearly distinguished, in the computer's file-memory, from the Kruller who'd died in the '95 bombing.

--Why did Sophie lie to me about that?

--I don't do psychological readings, you know. I just work here. But I'd give her the benefit of the doubt on that one. I think she told you what she accepted as valid reasons.

--Does she know about The Last Book?

--No.

--Why not?

--It doesn't exactly put the Hierarchy's imperial ambitions in a good light.

--Then why the hell are they ignoring what it's crying out to tell them?

--They just chuck it in the alternate history file and forget about it.

Discard one, draw another.

--But you said they're human. How can they have such power to alter history?

--We all do, don't we? They happen to be more organized, and more determined than most. Also better equipped. And they do, by the way, have enough savvy to be playing around in the astral big leagues. Strings can be pulled. Fate can be leaned on.

--In that case I'd want to see Sophie have access to that book. Are they able to keep it from her?

--So far, yes. When she punches in her user code, access to certain files can be automatically denied in the directory listing.

--Then how come I got to see it?

--I overrode the restriction loop and let you in.

--You knew me by my code.

--Of course.

--Then how about if Sophie entered my user code? Or couldn't you override when she punched in her own?

--People get shot for less.

--What are you worried about? You're nothing but an overgrown virus!

No response. Now I'd done it. Hurt the feelings of a nonentity. And he'd taken his ball and gone home.

I tried one more time:

--Harry, please. Whose side are you on, anyway? We need you!

But it was no use. I exited MA and shut the machine down.

* * *

This time I wanted to make sure I could talk with Sophie in private. Of course Ronald, the Secret Service agent on duty at the time, had to shadow us even to the squash courts. Sophie was able to send the smiling man back to his post then, as we were in a "safe" area; his argument over my entry to Sophie's quarters were cursorily dismissed. It wasn't until we actually got to Sophie's private dressing room that I could tell her of my

interview with the Hacker. She didn't seem surprised at all by my discovery, and she brushed aside the new revelations that had come out of it.

It was then she told me how she had signed on herself to see if she could locate The Last Book. It was there all right, thanks to the Hacker's personal efforts on her behalf.

"What?" I exclaimed, amazed.

"Yes, when I asked for the program shell to try to figure out where this Last Book had been hiding, he sent up a little personalized message saying what an interesting, if somewhat rude, fellow he'd just been talking to on the other line, and also that he hoped I didn't mind terribly much not getting first crack at this earthshaking document, but blood was thicker than water, or some such drivel. Anyway, yes--the book was interesting as a fictional extrapolation from current trends; but it all needs to be taken with a large dose of salt, since it is, remember, only an alternate history to our own."

And Sophie continued nonchalantly undressing and changing into her squash togs all the while. Preoccupied as I was with the substance of our conversation, and distracted as well by the sight of her marvelous, sunlamp-tanned and freckled body (she never failed to enthrall me, with her firm and

mature grace), I had sat on the dressing-room bench without thinking of my own need to change.

Finally Sophie said, "Now are you going to play in those clothes or what? I don't have all day." She stood all ready, twirling a racquet in her hand.

"Yeah, sure--but Sophie," I said as I began hurriedly undressing, "we have to talk about this. It's a matter of national survival, of personal survival, of . . . of integrity. Sophie, I'd like to know where you stand."

"Right here."

"Oh, come on. How do you respond to the Hacker's allegations about the Hierarchy's intervention into those astral jumps of mine, for instance? Or their plans to use us to further their imperial ambitions?"

"What is this, a press conference? You sound like some lefty reporter out of the nineteen-seventies. Do you want to play squash or not?"

"And you sound like some yuppie bitch who needs to wake up to what you're involved in. You know damn well how the Hierarchy's reacted to your attempts to get me here. You're also intimately familiar with their legislative program, their so-called defense planning, their power to manipulate history; but all the while in your pride at being the first woman President, you let them convince you that these are your programs, your

ideas. You conveniently forget how they convinced you that the time-jump leaving me twenty years short was your mistake. I don't know why you take it all on. Why are you so loyal to them?"

Sophie's face was flushed as she heard me out. She put her racquet down on the bench with a trembling hand and sat down next to me. I put my arm around her and held her while she cried.

After some moments of release, she stopped crying and leaned back against me as I continued to hold her.

"You're right; I know what you say is right. But I still have to believe in them. The company of Masters; the continuity of culture and civilization; the Akashic Plan. I know there's an outer astral intelligence at work. It's not possible that such power and wisdom and love can flow from some merely human 'imperialist clique.' Maybe the Hacker's got his signals crossed and is mistaking elements of the Dark Force for the Hierarchy."

"Sophie, be realistic!"

She tightened up and I recognized that I needed to be more tender with her now.

I tried again: "I'm sorry, love. But I have a hard time with this superstitious belief of yours--all right, to me it seems like nothing but superstition. Can you at least consider the possibility that the Hacker is

right, and that this Dark Force is only a straw man set up by the Hierarchy to divert attention from its own plot to dominate the world?"

To this Sophie did not answer, and I knew that was a good sign.

* * *

We actually managed to play squash together that afternoon. I felt that day to be a turning point; and though in the days to come we made little concrete progress on the exposure of the Hierarchy and its plans, I could sense a critical change within Sophie. For the first time I started to believe that she didn't actually belong to them. And while I would never have thought of this strong and independent woman as belonging to me, I could now feel a new sense of commitment on her part, to me as a person, as a colleague, yes even as a lover. That night Sophie reduced us both to tears with the power of her love.

Then, in the middle of the night, she woke up screaming. "Hurry children! This way! Come on!"

There was so much panic in her voice that I shook her awake and asked her to tell me about it. Her tears flowed and her voice trembled as she related the nightmare.

She'd been at a theatre watching a science fiction movie. Several machine-gunners entered the theatre, whereupon she heard a loud voice in the movie soundtrack yelling, "Save the live ones . . . save the children!" The voice had come from one of a group of alien invaders who wanted to capture human young as specimens to take back to their home planet. The machine-gunners began herding the children in the audience out into the lobby. Sophie for a moment was confused and thought the gunmen were acting on behalf of the aliens, taking the children away. Then she decided that such a notion was preposterous, and that the gunners were humanely getting the children out of the way before moving back in on the adult victims still in the theatre. She jumped up and began helping to herd the children away.

"But now," she sobbed piteously, "I don't know if that was the right thing after all. Maybe they wanted the children out in the lobby as hostages. Oh Felix . . ."

It was a revelation to hear my name again.

"I mean--" she started to say, but I sealed her lips shut with a kiss.

When morning came we lay together in bed in the most compassionate state of union, bodies and souls fused by our sense of

common purpose and destiny. And in such a context Sophie was moved at last to tell me the story of her initial involvement with the Hierarchy.

"It began with a professor of mine in the northern studies program, back in '77, '78. She invited me to a meditation group that met at her house. Doing simple sitting practice, you know, breathing, chanting and so on. I met a native student there who introduced some of his tribe's rituals into our practice. He was involved in a solidarity network that extended throughout the Americas, for support of indigenous peoples. He inspired me to apply for the travel grant to study the ancient and surviving cultures. And when I got it, and went down there, I discovered a rich spiritual tradition full of unexplained mysteries, of miraculous healing powers, of ancient knowledge and wisdom transmitted through these cultures down through the ages. In some of the locations more exposed to western tourists, some of the older legends and practices had started to mingle with western new-age beliefs, which also drew from quasi-scientific findings, like archaeological evidence for visitors from space, for instance, or the existence of the lost continents of Atlantis and Lemuria.

"Anyway I had some contact with some of these western elements, these hangers-on, in a little Guatemalan village where I was gathering research. We did a guided meditation once--there were some of the young

people from the local Indians involved too, you know, even though their elders kind of sneered at these newcomers--and we all did these past-life regressions. I had a vision of myself as an empress of some kind in Lemuria, at the time of migration to South America just before the cataclysm. It was quite vivid. Ruby headdress, fan-waving servants, the works. I was impressed that this existence was real, an actual past life of mine. When we shared our visions around the circle at the end, the leader of the group--who looked like just another hippie on the run from real life, except for the stern purity of his eyes--told us that our visions were real, and that we should listen to what they were trying to tell us. He seemed to focus particularly on me."

"I don't wonder at that."

Sophie gave me the benefit of a quick smile and went on: "When the circle was over, he came up to me and asked about my career plans, and suggested again that I should pay heed to my vision. I kind of laughed and said, 'Yeah, like go back and run for Empress?' He just smiled at that, a very wise and enigmatic smile that haunted me for the next, oh, almost ten years until I decided to run for Congress.

"And then, when that time came, I remembered this guy in the jungle even more vividly, because I had a dream where I was an empress and he

was my high priest. In the dream he was the source of my power, my access to the Akashic records. The funny thing was, when I was looking around for a campaign manager, up pops this guy again, short hair now, no beard, snazzy dresser, at a Party social function--I recognized the eyes. And the guy was a wizard. We won going away."

"Why didn't you hold onto him? Instead of trading him in for me?"

"Ah, he was a jerk, as far as personality goes. It wasn't worth it. Once I got my start, I could make it on my own--for a while." Sophie gave my hand a little knowing squeeze; then continued, "He was pissed off when I let him go. He never did make it into bed with me. I suspect he's right up there in the top levels of the Hierarchy by now. I can just see him, an old man jealous of our youth that he helped create."

"Sophie, why would they have even bothered to groom you for this job, if this guy you're talking about has some kind of vendetta against you? Couldn't they have installed one of their own people?"

"Well, the thing is, I think they still considered me one of them, and I'll have to say that I was. This guy, Peter, doesn't hold all the aces, I'm sure. Besides, who could they have found as good for the job as me?"

"You're so right." I cupped her breasts, snuggling up against her back. I listened to Sophie's voice traveling through her rib cage.

"You know, when I met Peter again, we started going to more group meditation sessions. He wasn't the leader of the group in Albuquerque. Though he did run us through some more past-life regressions. I had some other lives that weren't nearly so interesting as being a Lemurian empress. Anyway, most of these people had lives like that--generals, priestesses, financiers, astronomers, conquerors, overlords of various kinds--all people with great power. At the time I thought it was a matter of ego, personal delusion or wish-fulfillment. Now I suspect that we were all gathering as an earthly manifestation of an actual clique of souls who've lived such lives at past times on the earth. They didn't get enough, somehow, and they want these surviving kas to keep working at their age-old imperial designs."

"But you don't consider yourself in that category?"

"Actually," Sophie said, and she turned to look me in the eye, "I do."

"You mean there's this astral Sophie up there, frustrated Empress or whatever, who wants her realm back, and is directing you to do it for her in the good old U.S. of A.?"

"Or better yet, the new improved U.S.P.C.A. Yes, I suspect so. But--" and at this she planted a kiss in my ear, and squeezed the back of my thigh--
-"I'm not, we're not gonna let her do it."

It was spring, 2036. I was fortunate at this time in history to hold not only the President's ear, but her hand, as well. For in short order the time for flight would be evident. And accomplished companions are preferable, I thought to myself with some confidence, than solo flying through the sloughs and eddies of the eighteenth, or even the fourth, dimension.

vi

Sophie's first plan of action was to have us stop meditating. That way we could cut off mental direction from sources in the Hierarchy. It wasn't that meditating in itself was bad, she explained to me; but that the Hierarchy could exploit our altered states of consciousness with programmed instruction when we were in that vulnerable state.

Perhaps not coincidentally, she was paid a visit the very next day by her old friend, Wolfgang. I wasn't in on the meeting, of course, but it sounded, from her account, most unpleasant. He'd made several veiled threats in the course of the interview, but without effect. She told him straight out that she was no longer the Hierarchy's lackey. He fumed and blustered, talking of "dire consequences," and "the gravest repercussions" from the upper echelons if she did not reconsider.

We quickly made plans for a trip to the Presidential retreat at Camp David--we needed to buy time, to escape from the crammed daily schedule and somehow to figure out a strategy of independent action.

That night Sophie intentionally dreamed of her Empress, ruler of all Lemuria in an ancient time. In the dream the Empress seemed to Sophie to be "not all that bad." Her mission had been to prevent the annihilation of her people at the hands of the imperial Atlantean culture, through timely dispersal to South America. The dream had ended in the middle of a state crisis, with the Empress conferring with her council of advisors.

Sophie was prompted by this incomplete, but somewhat engaging picture of a former self, to look into the LIFELINES file for more information about the politics of that era, on the morning of our departure. But her personal entry had already been encrypted beyond recognition, and so she had no recognizable name to go by; she also lacked a close enough time-coordinate to look up the events in HISTORY/ALT. She did, however, in making tracks on these sensitive pathways, stir up the Hacker, who came on line with a disturbing piece of news: the Hierarchy was planning to put the quick-lift on Sophie and transport her back to Lemuria--where he told her she would be killed attempting to hold off the conquering forces from Atlantis.

I went into a near-panic at this information, desperately holding onto Sophie in the back of our limousine enroute to Camp David. The apple blossoms were in gorgeous full bloom; but they only made me more miserable in the face of my impending desolation.

"I want to go with you!" I impulsively said, as if I had a choice.

"Don't be ridiculous," she told me.

Then I was struck by an irrational pang of jealousy. "It's that Peter guy, isn't it? Your old high priest. I would just be in the way, wouldn't I?"

"Seymour, get hold of yourself. You know I'm going to do everything in my power to keep us together. Now listen."

It was difficult, but she managed to reassure me and settle me down. I leaned my head against her shoulder and held my arm tightly around her.

"It could be worse," she said. "Harry went on to say that the Hierarchy had contemplated a present-day assassination, but ruled it out on the grounds that my death now would only serve to regenerate my ka as before, as in the bombing of '95. Forty years down the road they'd be right back where they started, with a new Sophie to contend with. Better, they figured, to send me back to antiquity, where I could merge with my original mainline ka and thus stay out of trouble for a comfortable number of

millennia. But not to worry, said the Hacker. He has a few tricks up his sleeve, and he'll see what he can do."

"Like what? Lifting us both to some safe haven? Some Eden existing before the time of power-mad conquerors and robot bureaucrats?"

"I wish. Unfortunately, Harry can't actually operate certain program functions, such as the lifts. But he does have access to the database, and so he can alter the results of a program by manipulating the information it uses."

"So what good does that do? Rearranging deck chairs--"

"He said he could program an alternate vector for me, so that when the lift to Mu is activated, my present ka, instead of going there . . ."

Sophie's words were drowned in the blare of sirens. Our driver was forced to a stop. I realized in horror that Sophie was no longer there beside me. It was too late.

* * *

They threw me in a posh prison, where I got to hear about myself on TV every day for over a week. "Agent of the Dark Forces," I was, implicated in the kidnapping of President Vaughan. The Government was in

good hands, the newscasters assured me, under the experienced leadership of Peter Green. Working faithfully within the ranks of the Party for many years, President Green had been judged in an emergency meeting of Party caucus to be the man best suited to hold the reins of the Presidency in Ms. Vaughan's absence. From the intent and piercing gaze that bore out of his aged face, I had no doubt that the Nation would do his bidding . . . for a while.

As it turned out, my indefinite detention lasted only five months. I was liberated in time to enjoy the fruits of the apple harvest. The Decentralists gained power of the central Government swiftly enough; but that power, once in hand, was deemed necessary to hold onto only long enough for the new anti-party to disperse it, in turn, to the various states and regions of the continent. In any case, their brief but compassionate reign was long enough for me.

I was free to roam the doomed land at my pleasure for forty more years.

[BOOK THREE] - CHAPTER THREE: FROM SUCH A REMOVE

And now, 2075 already. I'm a little past eighty. You see me in my decrepit old age, worn out, unusable. I have more tales to relate, but without taking too much more of your time; for I feel the end is near. How shall I pick it up again?

The bomb came down, the bomb went off, and all the children died. Was that it? Forgive me, no. That was a mere jest of history--only one way of putting it, not entirely true. I, for instance, child of experience that I still am, still am able to sit here in my ease of retirement, telling the tale. As for Sophie, my dear, poor Sophie--ah, there I go again, getting maudlin and sentimental, when I should be rejoicing for her eternal salvation from this earthly web. There she is up there on an astral playground somewhere, cackling at my crotchety means of expression, my crocodile tears, while she swings on stars, moonbeams, whatever it is that they swing on up there . . .

And that pretty picture, that, too, is not entirely true; but even so I cannot prove to you otherwise.

All right--I can say this much, concerning my career out of the prison gates: I survived, unlike far too many. It was a hot time, then, with guerrilla factions from both sides sweeping the countryside. Blessed with a new measure of social consciousness, I undertook to become part of a wandering theatre troupe engaged in political satire. When the former central Government's gas troops arrived for one of our charming little entertainments one sultry afternoon, I kept my disguise but gave up the profession, letting the others go to jail--or to some computerized purgatory--for it if they wished; I'd served my time. Eventually I found my wandering way to this little cabin, this old woodcutter's hut in this remote forest where a little wood might still be cut, and where the widows from the nearby village still come to buy for winter warmth. I wasn't much interested in them, if that's what you're thinking. No--I've become, so to say, a regular hermit.

Now, looking back at the glory days, it is somehow most vividly the dreams that I remember, the dreams that we two world-wise rulers dreamed, before we awoke to the insufficiently hidden Last Book, and the wolf-ridden moons of eco-catastrophe. Need I spell out those particulars? The further dissolution of the remaining layer of ozone, the simultaneous heating of the

atmosphere so that agricultures all over the globe were sent reeling into irreparable states of havoc; the final depletion of minerals, fossil fuels and forests; the death of the very oceans . . .

It is painful, I am aware, to relate such tragedies, especially with their attendant casualties among our own beloved human populations--but it makes me realize in the comfort of retrospection that perhaps our grandiose civilization was, after all, but a sham, itself no more than an elaborate confidence game played at Nature's--and of course this necessarily means also our own--expense.

Thus I sit, from such a remove, here by the shores of old and now merely swampy Sylvan Lake, on a trail in the woods once hiked by woman and cat, just up from Running Wolf Canyon.

Last night I had that dream again:

Bounding up the babbling stream in the canyon, I look up often at the golden cliffs, down more often at the ground, feet flying, and wonder, as I go, against stumbling.

I cannot stop, but only go with what I know. The trail I make is left behind, of no more need to be followed than the one ahead.

The sky listens earnestly, without care. I run, and breathe deep; I run, rouse pebbles out of sleep; I run, and trees go by; I run, and the stream goes on past, by my new trail, from my trail-to-be.

I cannot stop, unwilling. The legs, the feet, the blood are listened to, without care. I run, the trail yields to trail, from unknowledge. Blissfully it becomes footed, allowing my grace on its. Awaiting further air, my lungs go, I run, they blow big and low, I run.

The back path is forgotten, the new one yields. The quickness of it sets it to music, the sound of feet, pads on pebbles, the stream rushing past, the other way. I stumble up the canyon path, wondering: when winter comes, different streams will rise.

For now, I run, the stream beside me and I are one, it runs, we pass each other almost nonchalantly. It runs, I rush by.

The sky sends wind to fill my lungs. I breathe, the wind goes down the cool canyon, water beads my face. My feet run dry, send sand alongside water's worming way. Birds cannot know this, flying. They only hopple when they try. Likewise for us, flying--we only hope, dreaming at the best of times. Angels fear to tread our earth, where animals roam. We keep the peace between them, running. Me and my wondering, the stream and I. The wind, wandering, the wind and sun passing by, we run.

There are blanks in thought, running--as rocks in stream--until rapids overcome their aimless resistance, wandering. The easiest path is chosen, quickly, without thought. The true footing gains itself. Watchfully the sky waves on. I dream some, forgetting yester-pebbles, aware of not-the-stream, the stream aware of not-me. Awaiting sun of tomorrow is too long, for now, so we-I-you say okay, let's keep on, what were we talking about?

Our old conversations roam wildly through many worlds, having lost their homes into ashes, dust, dry air and realms of voicelessness. Their shouts are sometimes heard echoing from the rocks in the stream, but where that echo comes from and where it goes I don't have time to stop and question. There will be more besides, so I run on, they shout and die away it seems further down the stream, repeating themselves as my feet must seem to do, to the pebbles cast once and for all time aside.

The stream voices no learned opinion. It listens; what it hears I hear, above the shouting rocks. Human voices are indistinguishable in such a roar, the pounding hum.

I run on, still up, sometimes stumbling. When the stream stops, I will. When I will, it will go on again. I will not decide. The stream will not. The wind will not decide. The sun will not. The pebbles are left behind. They will not be forgotten, hard as they try. Their opinion will be voiced in the

end, and I'll be too far up the trail to hear them. I'll be going on, running, listening to all these things, hearing nothing.

Life ending where it began, in a bog--how ironic, and how just. Such powers, such pretenses as I affected, all to be brought back to one's knees in the mud. Alas, have I wandered these last forty years in the wilderness to arrive at just this noble truth of human nature? Animus, anima, animal . . .

No, I might say more, if the reader in deference to a wayward old man may permit me. For it did unfold that, after a fashion, I have reencountered my Sophie, albeit on terms unfamiliar to most dwellers in the bog.

Yea, the astral realm is one hell of a place to make love in, but at my age . . . well, never mind that. Am I really eighty now? It may be said to be so. Indeed I might have said it before: in 1955, for example, to take one of many.

And what does one such as I, with such an illustrious career behind me, do with myself in my rustic hermitage, my one-man retirement home in the woods, me with my flock of hens and my fancied lifemate?

Did I say I cut wood? Once, yes; and now I whittle birch lengths into chairs, for the provisional gentry of the nearest town, which after all is not so near, but well-removed past the borders of this blackened forest. I say

blackened, as opposed to Black--one can draw one's own conclusions as to the eco-specific causes and effects, my exact bioregional whereabouts. 2075 . . . that is enough, certainly, to coordinate the search on one axis, without giving away the game altogether and bringing the world to my humble and sweetly solitary doorstep.

Looking for Sophie? She's inside.

THE END