The Collected Stories of LUCIUS SHEPARD

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THE COLLECTED STORIES OF LUCIUS SHEPARD

AN INTRODUCTION TO LUCIUS SHEPARD

by Katherine Dunn

So far as I can tell, Lucius Shepard writes what he is and is what he writes. The many voices of his work—the rhythms and stances of the clinical observer, sardonically twisted wit, enraged cynic, brilliant brooding doubter, keening griever after beauty or at least dignity, humble straight talker, and of course, the thunder—are all his voice. These and all their possible permutations are ways he talks, joking or mortally serious, over a beer or the phone in a bluesy baritone that slides to whiskey bass depending on his mood.

He has the size and general demeanor of a sophisticated Grizzly chuckling mournfully over the omen bones of his latest kill. But he does not rear up in social situations unless riled. In fact he tries to diminish the threat of his physical presence. He stays seated, hunches in and speaks softly, smiling occasionally so as not to petrify the frail bipeds.

He's described himself as looking like a big old biker, and that's true enough, with the beard and pony-tail and the scraggy denims. But there is a calm about him that comes with being too big for anybody sane to mess with.

There are nutcases, naturally, and fools to fray his patience. Drunks, such as the curse-spewing driver who plowed into Shepard's parked car outside a boxing arena one night and then tried to punch him, wake up in the nearest dumpster.

Shepard will tell you he rarely gets into fights anymore—but he's a savage duelist with verbs at ten paces, or adjectival phrases in cyberspace. While these performances can be hilariously entertaining even distant noncombatants may wobble away with singed eyebrows. A large corporation once tried to hire him to flame pests off their web sites but he decided against such abuse of his gift for invective. Shepard strives to use his powers for good.

He's a complicated guy. In a given season he may be ferally reclusive, a suavely mesmerizing raconteur, an eloquently generous teacher, and as funny a pal as ever shared a forty-ouncer in the bleachers. Then he sees some sign of the end times, some flagrant violation of his fierce sense of what's right, and he dives into grim fury.

He's holed up writing for months on end in some musky, rubble-heaped hermitage, then suddenly he's slamming latitudes and time zones in frenetic travel.

The word drifts in. He's on the Mexican border researching something weird and mailing macabre memorabilia to select acquaintances. He's doing readings in Manhattan. He's hopping freight trains on the track of a homicidal hobo brotherhood. Or he's somewhere in the big trees, visiting eco-radicals in their bosky bowers. He's in Montana hanging out with the elephant trainers of a one-ring circus , and freshening his fluent Spanish. He's trying to get into Honduras to find out whether old friends survived a hurricane. He's locked himself into a tiny airstream travel trailer in a backyard in Monterey and won't come out 'til his work is finished. And that's just the last year or so.

I first met him in the early '90s, in a dim Seattle bar where we were introduced as fellow boxing buffs. In the manner of sports fans everywhere, we immediately fell to swapping code and comparing favorites to define each others' identity.

In my ignorance I'd vaguely heard that he was a respected writer, but it was his boxing talk that convinced me of his substance. He is a scholar, a moral historian, a shrewdly observant technical analyst, and a skilled handicapper. As I learned over the ensuing years, he brings the same voracious intellect and encyclopedic memory to team sports, movies, modern music and literature, arcane history, exotic sciences, and whatever subject he's researching for the moment.

At the time my limit was boxing. When I asked for something of his to read, he gave me what would interest me—a tattered photocopy of one story, "Beast of the Heartland." I recognized it as sparked by the infamous case of boxer Sugar Ray Seales, who fought on for years after he was legally blind in both eyes. But Shepard's story went far beyond mere scandal. It plunged into the luminously sharp and fearful mind of the

blind boxer Shepard called Bobby Mears. It explored the mystery of what he saw in the darkness, and why he fought there. The rich language conveyed piercing physicality and a precise understanding of the strange, hard life of the ring and the parasites who surround it. The history of writing about boxing stretches all the way from Homer's Iliad to Norman Mailer and Joyce Carol Oates. In my opinion,"Beast of the Heartland" ranks with the finest.

A few years later Shepard recruited me, among many others, to join his campaign to clean up the regulation of boxing in the state where he was living at the time. He'd discovered that boxers who were suspended for medical problems in other jurisdictions were being shipped in to fight. Ray Seales and Bobby Mears all over again. He refused to tolerate it.

Shepard researched the laws, confronted officials, dragged the news media into blinking awareness, bombarded government agencies with phone calls and letters, and circulated a petition that bounced from coast to coast collecting support and signatures from famous names in journalism, Hollywood, and the fight game. He coaxed, browbeat and inspired his troops to action. He was genuinely furious at the cruel ineptitude that allowed desperate men to be exploited and endangered. He spent months in relentless battle, and he won.

That state is considerably more fastidious now in its safety procedures for boxers.

I'd talked boxing and books and movies for years with Lucius without learning the basics of his history, so in preparing to write this I asked him for a thumbnail sketch. He was swamped with serious deadlines, but he fired back several pithy paragraphs overnight by e-mail.

Lucius Shepard was born in Lynchburg, Virginia, in 1947. He was, he explains, "raised up hard in Daytona Beach, Florida by an old man who beat the shit out of me with considerable relish so as to make me read Thucydides, Shakespeare and such. As a result I hated him and had a pretty fair Classical education by the time I was 12, 13. He was a strange guy, an anglophile brought up in gentry Virginia, about whom I know almost nothing."

He learned to box in a youth program without his father knowing. He ended the beatings by fighting back once, decisively, in his early teens."I got in fights quite a bit in grammar school, high school and for quite some time thereafter," he allows.

His erudite father's insistence on classical music and literature, on all things exquisitely tasteful, Shepard suspects, may be why "I rebelled. I was drawn to rock and roll, and to all things crude, vulgar and unlovely."

His mother was a Spanish teacher. The best part of his childhood was frequent travel to Latin America—to Cuba, where his mother had friends, and to Mexico and Guatemala.

He enrolled at the University of South Carolina at Chapel Hill but dropped out repeatedly for long journeys to Europe and North Africa, Afghanistan, and India.

Shepard's life is dense in incident and his experiences often serve as fuel for his fiction.

During that period, for instance, he worked in the black market in the Khan al Khalili bazaar in Cairo for about a year. Readers will recognize the backdrop for his story, "All the Perfumes of Araby."

Shepard explains, "I was doing stuff for a man who owned several shops in the bazaar that catered to tourists, but whose main business was the money market and smuggling. During the '60s, it was tough to get anything from the West in Egypt. Among the things my friend brought in were good quality women's stockings, hacksaw blades, electronics. He also trafficked in drugs and on occasion I saw uncut diamonds that were moved up through the Sudan. My job initially involved maneuvering wealthy tourists to Affiifi (my boss's name) so he could change their money. He was always engaged in collecting immense sums of Western currency which he then would deliver to countries without a viable currency—Red China and such. My duties never increased to the supremely illegal, but I saw lots of heavy shit and I did a vast quantity of opium."

In 1967, when he returned to the States, he was in bad shape, "pretty much crazy," he says.

"Best thing that could have happened to me was getting busted in NYC for drugs and weapons. I was only in jail about two months waiting for trial, but the experience brought me to my senses."

Released on probation he returned to Chapel Hill and went back to school. He got married, dropped out, and went traveling again.

He and his wife were heading for California when their car broke down in Detroit and they had to get jobs. They dug in and had a son. Shepard played with various rock bands around the mid-West circuit through most of the '70s.

He had always written, but his formal beginning came in 1980. It was almost accidental that he chose fantasy and science fiction.

"A band I had great hopes for broke up. My wife got tired of me moping about the house watching the PTL Club, so she sent half a story I'd written to this workshop (Clarion ?) and I was accepted. It was a genre

workshop, so I had to write the stuff. But I like working with fantasy elements, especially in short forms—it seems to work as amplifier to whatever thing I'm trying to say."

After the workshop came the divorce. Shepard fled to El Salvador, "As hellish a place," he says, "as I've ever seen."

His stories started selling in the early '80s while he was based in New England and New York City.

The grace and authority of his prose, the driving characters combined with zesty invention to demand immediate attention. The stories and novels kept rolling out. The prizes began to heap up.

In the early '90s he moved to Seattle and has been based on the West coast since then.

"I'd have to say that the last eight years have been a kind of healing process and also a reconfiguring of my brain as far as figuring out stuff about writing—I've been a terrible underachiever my entire life, but it's my intention to be one hell of a late-bloomer."

Shepard uses the genre forms for his own literary purposes and he is always chasing the big fish, the central questions. The nature of good and evil, the search for meaning and significance. The Dragon Griaule stories invest grit and physical credibility in high fantasy.

"The Scalehunter's Beautiful Daughter" is as rigorous an exploration as I've ever read of the question of free will. The novel Green Eyes begins by rattling the whole notion of individual identity. Not Cheever or Roth, Bellow or Updike have written more tenderly and acutely about the breakup of a marriage than Shepard does in "The End of Life As We Know It."

I don't think anyone has written more devastating fiction about the human processes of war than Lucius Shepard.

Among other praises, critics have compared Shepard to Robert Stone and called him the " rock and roll Joseph Conrad." This is understandable considering shared skills as well as war and dark hearts as subject matter. And all three writers know what they're talking about. Reality is a powerful launching pad for the imagination.

When Shepard sets a story in a particular locale, I'd bet he's been there, or somewhere very like it. The details of color, smell, and feel are too crisp and vivid not to have solid roots.

I get the same hit of absolute credibility from the intense psychology of his characters. In the stunningly masterful " R & R," the protagonist, Mingolla, flails as his carefully constructed system of superstitions is melted by random horrors. Long after I'd read "R & R," Shepard told me that despite his rational understanding, he himself has a spectrum of idiosyncratic superstitions ranging from obsessive throwing of the I Ching, to being compelled to leave any room where a Steven Segal film is showing on a screen. I should have suspected.

Nobody understands the personal identity of fiction better than Shepard himself. In a piece called "God Is in the Details," he described it this way:

"Writing fiction is like taking a rubbing of your brain. All the bulges and convolutions and fissures will show up in your work whether you want them to or not."

The "rubbings" of Shepard's brain are Rorschach storms. His work is sometimes cruel but it is never cool. In an era when the dispassionate chill of irony is the safe stance, Shepard is fevered, enraptured, infuriated, consumed by passion.

A 1990 Shepard column for Journal Wired was titled "Remedial Reading for the Generation of Swine." In it, Shepard began with a scorching attack on petty bickering among the genre's practitioners, and insisted that there was genuine vileness in the world worth every ounce of human will to combat. The example he chose was the recent news report of six men savagely murdered and de-brained in El Salvador. He proceeded to imagine the exact process of those murders in such emotional detail that, by the end, both reader and writer are sick and exhausted and despairing.

"...I'm going to let this stand unedited, this column," Shepard writes, "with its bitter title and initial venom and its schizoid resolution, because I meant the things I said as I wrote them, because I felt intensely about them, because it's all I know how to say at the moment, because I feel so strongly that something has to be said..."

All of which, to me, seems a decent description of Lucius Shepard. He writes what he is. He is what he writes. He means it.

THE NIGHT OF WHITE BHAIRAB

Whenever Mr. Chatterji went to Delhi on business, twice yearly, he would leave Eliot Blackford in charge of his Katmandu home, and prior to each trip the transfer of keys and instructions would be made at the Hotel Anapurna. Eliot—an angular sharp-featured man in his mid-thirties, with thinning blond hair and a perpetually ardent expression—knew Mr. Chatterji for a subtle soul, and he suspected that this subtlety had dictated the choice of meeting place. The Anapurna was the Nepalese equivalent of a Hilton, its bar equipped in vinyl and plastic, with a choirlike arrangement of bottles fronting the mirror. Lights were muted, napkins monogram-med. Mr. Chatterji, plump and prosperous in a business suit, would consider it an elegant refutation of Kipling's famous couplet ("East is East," etc.) that he was at home here, whereas Eliot, wearing a scruffy robe and sandals, was not; he would argue that not only had the twain met, they had actually exchanged places. It was Eliot's own measure of subtlety that restrained him from pointing out what Mr. Chatterji could not perceive: that the Anapurna was a skewed version of the American Dream. The carpeting was indoor-outdoor runner; the menu was rife with ludicrous misprints (Skotch Miss, Screwdiver); and the lounge act—two turbaned, tuxedoed Indians on electric guitar and traps—was managing to turn "Evergreen" into a doleful raga.

"There will be one important delivery." Mr. Chatterji hailed the waiter and nudged Eliot's shot glass forward. "It should have been here days ago, but you know these customs people." He gave an effeminate shudder to express his distaste for the bureaucracy and cast an expectant eye on Eliot, who did not disappoint.

"What is it?" he asked, certain that it would be an addition to Mr. Chatterji's collection: He enjoyed discussing the collection with Americans; it proved that he had an overview of their culture.

"Something delicious!" said Mr. Chatterji. He took the tequila bottle from the waiter and—with a fond look—passed it to Eliot. "Are you familiar with the Carversville Terror?"

"Yeah, sure." Eliot knocked back another shot. "There was a book about it."

"Indeed," said Mr. Chatterji. "A bestseller. The Cousineau mansion was once the most notorious haunted house of your New England. It was torn down several months ago, and I've succeeded in acquiring the fireplace, which"—he sipped his drink—"which was the locus of power. I'm very fortunate to have obtained it." He fitted his glass into the circle of moisture on the bar and waxed scholarly. "Aimée Cousineau was a most unusual spirit, capable of a variety of..."

Eliot concentrated on his tequila. These recitals never failed to annoy him, as did-for different reasons-the sleek Western disguise. When Eliot had arrived in Katmandu as a member of the Peace Corps, Mr. Chatterji had presented a far less pompous image: a scrawny kid dressed in Levi's that he had wheedled from a tourist. He'd been one of the hangers-on—mostly young Tibetans—who frequented the grubby tearooms on Freak Street, watching the American hippies giggle over their hash yogurt, lusting after their clothes, their women, their entire culture. The hippies had respected the Tibetans: They were a people of legend, symbols of the occultism then in vogue, and the fact that they liked James Bond movies, fast cars, and Jimi Hendrix had increased the hippies' self-esteem. But they had found laughable the fact that Rajneesh Chatterji—another Westernized Indian—had liked these same things, and they had treated him with mean condescension. Now, thirteen years later, the roles had been reversed; it was Eliot who had become the hanger-on.

He had settled in Katmandu after his tour was up, his idea being to practice meditation, to achieve enlightenment. But it had not gone well. There was an impediment in his mind—he pictured it as a dark stone, a stone compounded of worldly attachments—that no amount of practice could wear down, and his life had fallen into a futile pattern. He would spend ten months of the year living in a small room near the temple of Swayambhunath, meditating, rubbing away at the stone; and then, during March and September, he would occupy Mr. Chatterji's house and debauch himself with liquor and sex and drugs. He was aware that Mr. Chatterji considered him a burnout, that the position of caretaker was in effect a form of revenge, a means by which his employer could exercise his own brand of condescension; but Eliot minded neither the label nor the attitude. There were worse things to be than a burnout in Nepal. It was beautiful country, it was inexpensive, it was far from Minnesota (Eliot's home). And the concept of personal failure was meaningless here. You lived, died, and were reborn over and over until at last you attained the ultimate success of

nonbeing: a terrific consolation for failure.

"...yet in your country," Mr. Chatterji was saying, "evil has a sultry character. Sexy! It's as if the spirits were adopting vibrant personalities in order to contend with pop groups and movie stars."

Eliot thought of a comment, but the tequila backed up on him and he belched instead. Everything about Mr. Chatterji—teeth, eyes, hair, gold rings—seemed to be gleaming with extraordinary brilliance. He looked as unstable as a soap bubble, a fat little Hindu illusion.

Mr. Chatterji clapped a hand to his forehead. "I nearly forgot. There will be another American staying at the house. A girl. Very shapely!" He shaped an hourglass in the air. "I'm quite mad for her, but I don't know if she's trustworthy. Please see she doesn't bring in any strays."

"Right," said Eliot. "No problem."

"I believe I will gamble now," said Mr. Chatterji, standing and gazing toward the lobby. "Will you join me?"

"No, I think I'll get drunk. I guess I'll see you in October."

"You're drunk already, Eliot." Mr. Chatterji patted him on the shoulder. "Hadn't you noticed?"

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Early the next morning, hung over, tongue cleaving to the roof of his mouth, Eliot sat himself down for a final bout of trying to visualize the Avalokitesvara Buddha. All the sounds outside-the buzzing of a motor scooter, birdsong, a girl's laughter-seemed to be repeating the mantra, and the gray stone walls of his room looked at once intensely real and yet incredibly fragile, papery, a painted backdrop he could rip with his hands. He began to feel the same fragility, as if he were being immersed in a liquid that was turning him opaque, filling him with clarity. A breath of wind could float him out the window, drift him across the fields, and he would pass through the trees and mountains, all the phantoms of the material world... but then a trickle of panic welled up from the bottom of his soul, from that dark stone. It was beginning to smolder, to give off poison fumes: a little briquette of anger and lust and fear. Cracks were spreading across the clear substance he had become, and if he didn't move soon, if he didn't break off the meditation, he would shatter.

He toppled out of the lotus position and lay propped on his elbows. His heart raced, his chest heaved, and he felt very much like screaming his frustration. Yeah, that was a temptation. To just say the Hell with it and scream, to achieve through chaos what he could not through clarity: to empty himself into the scream. He was trembling, his emotions flowing between self-hate and self-pity. Finally, he struggled up and put on jeans and a cotton shirt. He knew he was close to a breakdown, and he realized that he usually reached this point just before taking up residence at Mr. Chatterji's. His life was a frayed thread stretched tight between those two poles of debauchery. One day it would snap.

"The Hell with it," he said. He stuffed the remainder of his clothes into a duffel bag and headed into town.

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Walking through Durbar Square—which wasn't really a square but a huge temple complex interspersed with open areas and wound through by cobbled paths—always put Eliot in mind of his brief stint as a tour guide, a career cut short when the agency received complaints about his eccentricity. ("...As you pick your way among the piles of human waste and fruit rinds, I caution you not to breathe too deeply of the divine afflatus; otherwise, it may forever numb you to the scent of Prairie Cove or Petitpoint Gulch or whatever citadel of gracious living it is that you call home...") It had irked him to have to lecture on the carvings and history of the square, especially to the just-plain-folks who only wanted a Polaroid of Edna or Uncle Jimmy standing next to that weird monkey god on the pedestal. The square was a unique place, and in Eliot's opinion such unenlightened tourism demeaned it.

Pagoda-style temples of red brick and dark wood towered on all sides, their finials rising into brass lightning bolts. They were alien-looking—you half-expected the sky above them to be of an otherworldly color and figured by several moons. Their eaves and window screens were ornately carved into the images of gods and demons, and behind a large window screen on the temple of White Bhairab lay the mask of that god. It was almost ten feet high, brass, with a fanciful headdress and long-lobed ears and a mouth full of white fangs; its eyebrows were enameled red, fiercely arched, but the eyes had the goofy quality common to Newari gods—no matter how wrathful they were, there was something essentially friendly about them, and they reminded Eliot of cartoon germs. Once a year—in fact, a little more than a week from now—the screens would be opened, a pipe would be inserted into the god's mouth, and rice beer would jet out into the mouths of the milling crowds; at some point a fish would be slipped into the pipe, and whoever caught it would be deemed the luckiest soul in the Katmandu Valley for the next year. It was one of Eliot's traditions to make a

try for the fish, though he knew that it wasn't luck he needed.

Beyond the square, the streets were narrow, running between long brick buildings three and four stories tall, each divided into dozens of separate dwellings. The strip of sky between the roofs was bright, burning blue—a void color—and in the shade the bricks looked purplish. People hung out the windows of the upper stories, talking back and forth: an exotic tenement life. Small shrines—wooden enclosures containing statuary of stucco or brass—were tucked into wall niches and the mouths of alleys. The gods were everywhere in Katmandu, and there was hardly a corner to which their gaze did not penetrate.

On reaching Mr. Chatterji's, which occupied half a block-long building, Eliot made for the first of the interior courtyards; a stair led up from it to Mr. Chatterji's apartment, and he thought he would check on what had been left to drink. But as he entered the courtyard—a phalanx of jungly plants arranged around a lozenge of cement—he saw the girl and stopped short. She was sitting in a lawn chair, reading, and she was indeed very shapely. She wore loose cotton trousers, a T-shirt, and a long white scarf shot through with golden threads. The scarf and the trousers were the uniform of the young travelers who generally stayed in the expatriate enclave of Temal: It seemed that they all bought them immediately upon arrival in order to identify themselves to each other. Edging closer, peering between the leaves of a rubber plant, Eliot saw that the girl was doe-eyed, with honey-colored skin and shoulder-length brown hair interwoven by lighter strands. Her wide mouth had relaxed into a glum expression. Sensing him, she glanced up, startled; then she waved and set down her book.

"I'm Eliot," he said, walking over.

"I know. Ranjeesh told me." She stared at him incuriously.

"And you?" He squatted beside her.

"Michaela."

She fingered the book, as if she were eager to get back to it.

"I can see you're new in town."

"How's that?"

He told her about the clothes, and she shrugged. "That's what I am," she said. "I'll probably always wear them." She folded her hands on her stomach: it was a nicely rounded stomach, and Eliot—a connoisseur of women's stomachs—felt the beginnings of arousal.

"Always?" he said. "You plan on being here that long?"

"I don't know." She ran a finger along the spine of the book. "Ranjeesh asked me to marry him, and I said maybe."

Eliot's infant plan of seduction collapsed beneath this wrecking ball of a statement, and he failed to hide his incredulity. "You're in love with Ranjeesh?"

"What's that got to do with it?" A wrinkle creased her brow: It was the perfect symptom of her mood, the line a cartoonist might have chosen to express petulant anger.

"Nothing. Not if it doesn't have anything to do with it." He tried a grin, but to no effect. "Well," he said after a pause. "How do you like Katmandu?"

"I don't get out much," she said flatly.

She obviously did not want conversation, but Eliot wasn't ready to give up. "You ought to," he said. "The festival of Indra Jatra's about to start. It's pretty wild. Especially on the night of White Bhairab. Buffalo sacrifices, torchlight..."

"I don't like crowds," she said.

Strike two.

Eliot strained to think of an enticing topic, but he had the idea it was a lost cause. There was something inert about her, a veneer of listlessness redolent of Thorazine, of hospital routine. "Have you ever seen the Khaa?" he asked.

"The what?"

"The Khaa. It's a spirit... though some people will tell you it's partly animal, because over here the animal and spirit worlds overlap. But whatever it is, all the old houses have one, and those that don't are considered unlucky. There's one here."

"What's it look like?"

"Vaguely anthropomorphic. Black, featureless. Kind of a living shadow. They can stand upright, but they roll instead of walk."

She laughed. "No, I haven't seen it. Have you?"

"Maybe," said Eliot. "I thought I saw it a couple of times, but I was pretty stoned."

She sat up straighter and crossed her legs; her breasts jiggled, and Eliot fought to keep his eyes centered on her face. "Ranjeesh tells me you're a little cracked," she said.

Good ol' Ranjeesh! He might have known that the son of a bitch would have sandbagged him with his new lady. "I guess I am," he said, preparing for the brush-off. "I do a lot of meditation, and sometimes I teeter on the edge."

But she appeared more intrigued by this admission than by anything else he had told her; a smile melted up from her carefully composed features. "Tell me some more about the Khaa," she said.

Eliot congratulated himself. "They're quirky sorts," he said. "Neither good nor evil. They hide in dark corners, though now and then they're seen in the streets or in the fields out near Jyapu. And the oldest ones, the most powerful ones, live in the temples in Durbar Square. There's a story about the one here that's descriptive of how they operate... if you're interested."

"Sure." Another smile.

"Before Ranjeesh bought this place, it was a guesthouse, and one night a woman with three goiters on her neck came to spend the night. She had two loaves of bread that she was taking home to her family, and she stuck them under her pillow before going to sleep. Around midnight the Khaa rolled into her room and was struck by the sight of her goiters rising and falling as she breathed. He thought they'd make a beautiful necklace, so he took them and put them on his own neck. Then he spotted the loaves sticking out from her pillow. They looked good, so he took them as well and replaced them with two loaves of gold. When the woman woke, she was delighted. She hurried back to her village to tell her family, and on the way she met a friend, a woman, who was going to market. This woman had four goiters. The first woman told her what had happened, and that night the second woman went to the guesthouse and did exactly the same things. Around midnight the Khaa rolled into her room. He'd grown bored with his necklace, and he gave it to the woman. He'd also decided that bread didn't taste very good, but he still had a loaf and he figured he'd give it another chance. So in exchange for the necklace, he took the woman's appetite for bread. When she woke, she had seven goiters, no gold, and she could never eat bread again the rest of her life."

Eliot had expected a response of mild amusement and had hoped that the story would be the opening gambit in a game with a foregone and pleasurable conclusion; but he had not expected her to stand, to become walled off from him again.

"I've got to go," she said, and with a distracted wave she made for the front door. She walked with her head down, hands thrust into her pockets as if counting the steps.

"Where are you going?" called Eliot, taken back.

"I don't know. Freak Street, maybe."

"Want some company?"

She turned back at the door. "It's not your fault," she said, "but I don't really enjoy your company."

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Shot down!

Trailing smoke, spinning, smacking into the hillside, and blowing up into a fireball.

Eliot didn't understand why it had hit him so hard. It had happened before, and it would again. Ordinarily he would have headed for Temal and found himself another long white scarf and pair of cotton trousers, one less morbidly self-involved (that, in retrospect, was how he characterized Michaela), one who would help him refuel for another bout of trying to visualize Avalokitesvara Buddha. He did, in fact, go to Temal; but he merely sat and drank tea and smoked hashish in a restaurant, and watched the young travelers pairing up for the night. Once he caught the bus to Patan and visited a friend, an old hippie pal named Sam Chipley who ran a medical clinic; once he walked out to Swayambhunath, close enough to see the white dome of the stupa, and atop it, the gilt structure on which the all-seeing eyes of Buddha were painted: They seemed squinty and mean-looking, as if taking unfavorable notice of his approach. But mostly over the next week he wandered through Mr. Chatterji's house, carrying a bottle, maintaining a buzz, and keeping an eye on Michaela.

The majority of the rooms were unfurnished, but many bore signs of recent habitation: broken hash pipes, ripped sleeping bags, empty packets of incense. Mr. Chatterji let travelers—those he fancied sexually, male and female—use the rooms for up to months at a time, and to walk through them was to take a historical tour of the American counterculture. The graffiti spoke of concerns as various as Vietnam, the Sex Pistols, women's lib, and the housing shortage in Great Britain, and also conveyed personal messages: "Ken Finkel please get in touch with me at Am. Ex. in Bangkok... love Ruth." In one of the rooms was a complicated mural depicting Farrah Fawcett sitting on the lap of a Tibetan demon, throttling his barbed phallus with her fingers. It all conjured up the image of a moldering, deranged milieu. Eliot's milieu. At first the tour amused him, but eventually it began to sour him on himself, and he took to spending more and more time on a balcony overlooking the courtyard that was shared with the connecting house, listening to the Newari women sing at

their chores and reading books from Mr. Chatterji's library. One of the books was titled The Carversville Terror.

"Bloodcurdling, chilling..." said the New York Times on the front flap; "...the Terror is unrelenting..." commented Stephen King; "...riveting, gut-wrenching, mind-bending horror..." gushed People magazine. In neat letters, Eliot appended his own blurb: "...piece of crap..." The text—written to be read by the marginally literate—was a fictionalized treatment of purportedly real events, dealing with the experiences of the Whitcomb family, who had attempted to renovate the Cousineau mansion during the sixties. Following the usual buildup of apparitions, cold spots, and noisome odors, the family—Papa David, Mama Elaine, young sons Tim and Randy, and teenage Ginny—had met to discuss the situation.

...even the kids, thought David, had been aged by the house. Gathered around the dining room table, they looked like a company of the damned-haggard, shadows under their eyes, grim-faced. Even with the windows open and the light streaming in, it seemed there was a pall in the air that no light could dispel. Thank God the damned thing was dormant during the day!

"Well," he said, "I guess the floor's open for arguments."

"I wanna go home!" Tears sprang from Randy's eyes, and on cue, Tim started crying, too.

"It's not that simple," said David. "This is home, and I don't know how we'll make it if we do leave. The savings account is just about flat."

"I suppose I could get a job," said Elaine unenthusiastically.

"I'm not leaving!" Ginny jumped to her feet, knocking over her chair. "Every time I start to make friends, we have to move!"

"But Ginny!" Elaine reached out a hand to calm her. "You were the one..."

"I've changed my mind!" She backed away, as if she had just recognized them all to be mortal enemies. "You can do what you want, but I'm staying!" And she ran from the room.

"Oh, God," said Elaine wearily. "What's gotten into her?"

What had gotten into Ginny, what was in the process of getting into her and was the only interesting part of the book, was the spirit of Aimée Cousineau. Concerned with his daughter's behavior, David Whitcomb had researched the house and learned a great deal about the spirit. Aimée Cousineau, née Vuillemont, had been a native of St. Berenice, a Swiss village at the foot of the mountain known as the Eiger (its photograph, as well as one of Aimée-a coldly beautiful woman with black hair and cameo features-was included in the central section of the book). Until the age of fifteen she had been a sweet, unexceptional child; in the summer of 1889, however, while hiking on the slopes of the Eiger, she had become lost in a cave.

The family had all but given up hope when, to their delight—three weeks later—she had turned up on the steps of her father's store. Their delight was short-lived. This Aimée was far different from the one who had entered the cave. Violent, calculating, slatternly.

Over the next two years she succeeded in seducing half the men of the village, including the local priest. According to his testimony, he had been admonishing her that sin was not the path to happiness when she began to undress. "I'm wed to Happiness," she told him. "I've entwined my limbs with the God of Bliss and kissed the scaly thighs of Joy." Throughout the ensuing affair, she made cryptic comments concerning "the God below the mountain," whose soul was now forever joined to hers.

At this point the book reverted to the gruesome adventures of the Whitcomb family, and Eliot, bored, realizing it was noon and that Michaela would be sunbathing, climbed to Mr. Chatterji's apartment on the fourth floor. He tossed the book onto a shelf and went out onto the balcony. His continued interest in Michaela puzzled him. It occurred to him that he might be falling in love, and he thought that would be nice. Though it would probably lead nowhere, love would be a good kind of energy to have. But he doubted this was the case. Most likely his interest was founded on some fuming product of the dark stone inside him. Simple lust. He looked over the edge of the balcony. She was lying on a blanket—her bikini top beside her—at the bottom of a well of sunlight: thin, pure sunlight like a refinement of honey spreading down and congealing into the mold of a little gold woman. It seemed that her heat was in the air.

That night Eliot broke one of Mr. Chatterji's rules and slept in the master bedroom. It was roofed by a large skylight mounted in a ceiling painted midnight blue. The normal display of stars had not been sufficient for Mr. Chatterji, and so he'd had the skylight constructed of faceted glass that multiplied the stars, making it appear that you were at the heart of a galaxy, gazing out between the interstices of its blazing core. The walls consisted of a photomural of the Khumbu Glacier and Chomolungma; and, bathed in the starlight, the mural had acquired the illusion of depth and chill mountain silence. Lying there, Eliot could hear the faint sounds of Indra Jatra: shouts and cymbals, oboes and drums. He was drawn to the sounds; he wanted to run out into the streets, become an element of the drunken crowds, be whirled through torchlight and delirium to the feet of an idol stained with sacrificial blood. But he felt bound to the house, to Michaela. Marooned in the glow of

Mr. Chatterji's starlight, floating above Chomolungma and listening to the din of the world below, he could almost believe he was a bodhisattva awaiting a call to action, that his watchfulness had some purpose.

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The shipment arrived late in the afternoon of the eighth day. Five enormous crates, each requiring the combined energies of Eliot and three Newari workmen to wrangle up to the third-floor room that housed Mr. Chatterji's collection. After tipping the men, Eliot—sweaty, panting—sat down against the wall to catch his breath. The room was about twenty-five feet by fifteen but looked smaller because of the dozens of curious objects standing around the floor and mounted one above the other on the walls. A brass doorknob; a shattered door; a straight-backed chair whose arms were bound with a velvet rope to prevent anyone from sitting; a discolored sink; a mirror streaked by a brown stain; a slashed lampshade. They were all relics of some haunting or possession, some grotesque violence, and there were cards affixed to them testifying to the details and referring those who were interested to materials in Mr. Chatterji's library. Sitting amidst these relics, the crates looked innocuous. Bolted shut, chest-high, branded with customs stamps.

When he had recovered, Eliot strolled around the room, amused by the care that Mr. Chatterji had squandered on his hobby; the most amusing thing was that no one except Mr. Chatterji was impressed by it: It provided travelers with a footnote for their journals. Nothing more.

A wave of dizziness swept over him—he had stood too soon—and he leaned against one of the crates for support. Jesus, he was in lousy shape! And then, as he blinked away the tangles of opaque cells drifting across his field of vision, the crate shifted. Just a little shift, as if something inside had twitched in its sleep. But palpable, real. He flung himself toward the door, backing away. A chill mapped every knob and articulation of his spine, and his sweat had evaporated, leaving clammy patches on his skin. The crate was motionless. But he was afraid to take his eyes off it, certain that if he did, it would release its pent-up fury. "Hi," said Michaela from the doorway.

Her voice electrified Eliot. He let out a squawk and wheeled around, his hands outheld to ward off attack.

"I didn't mean to startle you," she said. "I'm sorry."

"Goddamn!" he said. "Don't sneak up like that!" He remembered the crate and glanced back at it. "Listen, I was just locking...”

"I'm sorry," she repeated, and walked past him into the room. "Ranjeesh is such an idiot about all this," she said, running her hand over the top of the crate. "Don't you think?"

Her familiarity with the crate eased Eliot's apprehension. Maybe he had been the one who had twitched: a spasm of overstrained muscles. "Yeah, I guess."

She walked over to the straight-backed chair, slipped off the velvet rope, and sat down. She was wearing a pale brown skirt and a plaid blouse that made her look schoolgirlish. "I want to apologize about the other day," she said; she bowed her head, and the fall of her hair swung forward to obscure her face. "I've been having a bad time lately. I have trouble relating to people. To anything. But since we're living here together, I'd like to be friends." She stood and spread the folds of her skirt. "See? I even put on different clothes. I could tell the others offended you."

The innocent sexuality of the pose caused Eliot to have a rush of desire. "Looks nice," he said with forced casualness. "Why've you been having a bad time?"

She wandered to the door and gazed out. "Do you really want to hear about it?"

"Not if it's painful for you."

"It doesn't matter," she said, leaning against the doorframe. "I was in a band back in the States, and we were doing okay. Cutting an album, talking to record labels. I was living with the guitarist, in love with him. But then I had an affair. Not even an affair. It was stupid. Meaningless. I still don't know why I did it. The heat of the moment, I guess. That's what rock 'n' roll's all about, and maybe I was just acting out the myth. One of the other musicians told my boyfriend. That's the way bands are—you're friends with everyone, but never at the same time. See, I told this guy about the affair. We'd always confided. But one day he got mad at me over something. Something else stupid and meaningless." Her chin was struggling to stay firm; the breeze from the courtyard drifted fine strands of hair across her face. "My boyfriend went crazy and beat up my lover. Whatever. My boyfriend killed him. It was an accident, but he tried to run, and the police shot him."

Eliot wanted to stop her; she was obviously seeing it all again, seeing blood and police flashers and cold white morgue lights. But she was riding a wave of memory, borne along by its energy, and he knew that she had to crest with it, crash with it.

"I was out of it for a while. Dreamy. Nothing touched me. Not the funerals, the angry parents. I went away for months, to the mountains, and I started to feel better. But when I came home, I found that the musician who'd told my boyfriend had written a song about it. The affair, the killings. He'd cut a record. People were

buying it, singing the hook when they walked down the street or took a shower. Dancing to it! They were dancing on blood and bones, humming grief, shelling out $5.98 for a jingle about suffering. Looking back, I realize I was crazy, but at the time everything I did seemed normal. More than normal. Directed, inspired. I bought a gun. A ladies' model, the salesman said. I remember thinking how strange it was that there were male and female guns, just like with electric razors. I felt enormous carrying it. I had to be meek and polite or else I was sure people would notice how large and purposeful I was. It wasn't hard to track down Ronnie-that's the guy who wrote the song. He was in Germany, cutting a second album. I couldn't believe it, I wasn't going to be able to kill him! I was so frustrated that one night I went down to a park and started shooting. I missed everything. Out of all the bums and joggers and squirrels, I hit leaves and air. They locked me up after that. A hospital. I think it helped, but..." She blinked, waking from a trance. "But I still feel so disconnected, you know?"

Eliot carefully lifted away the strands of hair that had blown across her face and laid them back in place. Her smile flickered. "I know," he said. "I feel that way sometimes."

She nodded thoughtfully, as if to verify that she had recognized this quality in him.

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They ate dinner in a Tibetan place in Temal; it had no name and was a dump with flyspecked tables and rickety chairs, specializing in water buffalo and barley soup. But it was away from the city center, which meant they could avoid the worst of the festival crowds. The waiter was a young Tibetan wearing jeans and a T-shirt that bore the legend MAGIC IS THE ANSWER; the earphones of a personal stereo dangled about his neck. The walls—visible through a haze of smoke—were covered with snapshots, most featuring the waiter in the company of various tourists, but a few showing an older Tibetan in blue robes and turquoise jewelry, carrying an automatic rifle; this was the owner, one of the Khampa tribesmen who had fought a guerrilla war against the Chinese. He rarely put in an appearance at the restaurant, and when he did, his glowering presence tended to dampen conversation.

Over dinner, Eliot tried to steer clear of topics that might unsettle Michaela. He told her about Sam Chipley's clinic, the time the Dalai Lama had come to Katmandu, the musicians at Swayambhunath. Cheerful, exotic topics. Her listlessness was such an inessential part of her that Eliot was led to chip away at it, curious to learn what lay beneath; and the more he chipped away, the more animated her gestures, the more luminous her smile became. This was a different sort of smile than she had displayed on their first meeting. It came so suddenly over her face, it seemed an autonomic reaction, like the opening of a sunflower, as if she were facing not you but the principle of light upon which you were grounded. It was aware of you, of course, but it chose to see past the imperfections of the flesh and know the perfected thing you truly were. It boosted your sense of worth to realize that you were its target, and Eliot—whose sense of worth was at low ebb—would have done pratfalls to sustain it. Even when he told his own story, he told it as a joke, a metaphor for American misconceptions of oriental pursuits.

"Why don't you quit it?" she asked. "The meditation, I mean. If it's not working out, why keep on with it?"

"My life's in perfect suspension," he said. "I'm afraid that if I quit practicing, if I change anything, I'll either sink to the bottom or fly off." He tapped his spoon against his cup, signaling for more tea. "You're not really going to marry Ranjeesh, are you?" he asked, and was surprised at the concern he felt that she actually might.

"Probably not." The waiter poured their tea, whispery drumbeats issuing from his earphones. "I was just feeling lost. You see, my parents sued Ronnie over the song, and I ended up with a lot of money—which made me feel even worse... She touched his wrist, reassuring, and the skin remained warm after her fingers had withdrawn. "Anyway," she went on, "I decided to travel, and all the strangeness... I don't know. I was starting to slip away. Ranjeesh was a kind of sanctuary."

Eliot was vastly relieved.

Outside, the streets were thronged with festivalgoers, and Michaela took Eliot's arm and let him guide her through the crowds. Newars wearing Nehru hats and white trousers that bagged at the hips and wrapped tightly around the calves; groups of tourists, shouting and waving bottles of rice beer; Indians in white robes and saris. The air was spiced with incense, and the strip of empurpled sky above was so regularly patterned with stars that it looked like a banner draped between the roofs. Near the house, a wild-eyed man in a blue satin robe rushed past, bumping into them, and he was followed by two boys dragging a goat, its forehead smeared with crimson powder: a sacrifice.

"This is crazy!" Michaela laughed.

"It's nothing. Wait'll tomorrow night."

"What happens then?"

"The night of White Bhairab." Eliot put on a grimace. "You'll have to watch yourself. Bhairab's a lusty, wrathful sort."

She laughed again and gave his arm an affectionate squeeze.

Inside the house, the moon—past full, blank and golden—floated dead center on the square of night sky admitted by the roof. They stood close together in the courtyard, silent, suddenly awkward.

"I enjoyed tonight," said Michaela; she leaned forward and brushed his cheek with her lips. "Thank you," she whispered.

Eliot caught her as she drew back, tipped her chin, and kissed her mouth. Her lips parted, her tongue darted out. Then she pushed him away. "I'm tired," she said, her face tightened with anxiety. She walked off a few steps, but stopped and turned back. "If you want to... to be with me, maybe it'll be all right. We could try."

Eliot went to her and took her hands. "I want to make love with you," he said, no longer trying to hide his urgency. And that was what he wanted: to make love. Not to ball or bang or screw or any other inelegant version of the act.

But it was not love they made.

Under the starlit blaze of Mr. Chatterji's ceiling, she was very beautiful, and at first she was very loving, moving with a genuine involvement; then abruptly, she quit moving altogether and turned her face to the pillow. Her eyes were glistening. Left alone atop her, listening to the animal sound of his breathing, the impact of his flesh against hers, Eliot knew he should stop and comfort her. But the months of abstinence, the eight days of wanting her, all this fused into a bright flare in the small of his back, a reactor core of lust that irradiated his conscience, and he continued to plunge into her, hurrying to completion. She let out a gasp when he withdrew, and curled up, facing away from him.

"God, I'm so sorry," she said, her voice cracking.

Eliot shut his eyes. He felt sickened, reduced to the bestial. It had been like two mental patients doing nasty on the sly, two fragments of people who together didn't form a whole. He understood now why Mr. Chatterji wanted to marry her: He planned to add her to his collection, to enshrine her with the other splinters of violence. And each night he would complete his revenge, substantiate his cultural overview, by making something less than love with this sad, inert girl, this American ghost. Her shoulders shook with muffled sobs. She needed someone to console her, to help her find her own strength and capacity for love. Eliot reached out to her, willing to do his best. But he knew it shouldn't be him.

Several hours later, after she had fallen asleep, unconsolable, Eliot sat in the courtyard, thoughtless, dejected, staring at a rubber plant. It was mired in shadow, its leaves hanging limp. He had been staring for a couple of minutes when he noticed that a shadow in back of the plant was swaying ever so slightly; he tried to make it out, and the swaying subsided. He stood. The chair scraped on the concrete, sounding unnaturally loud. His neck prickled, and he glanced behind him. Nothing. Ye Olde Mental Fatigue, he thought. Ye Olde Emotional Strain. He laughed, and the clarity of the laugh—echoing up through the empty well—alarmed him; it seemed to stir little flickers of motion everywhere in the darkness. What he needed was a drink! The problem was how to get into the bedroom without waking Michaela. Hell, maybe he should wake her. Maybe they should talk more before what had happened hardened into a set of unbreakable attitudes.

He turned toward the stairs... and then, yelling out in panic, entangling his feet with the lawn chairs as he leaped backward midstep, he fell onto his side. A shadow—roughly man-shaped and man-sized—was standing a yard away; it was undulating the way a strand of kelp undulates in a gentle tide. The patch of air around it was rippling, as if the entire image had been badly edited into reality. Eliot scrambled away, coming to his knees. The shadow melted downward, puddling on the concrete; it bunched in the middle like a caterpillar, folded over itself, and flowed after him: a rolling sort of motion. Then it reared up, again assuming its manlike shape, looming over him.

Eliot got to his feet, still frightened, but less so. If he had previously been asked to testify as to the existence of the Khaa, he would have rejected the evidence of his bleared senses and come down on the side of hallucination, folktale. But now, though he was tempted to draw that same conclusion, there was too much evidence to the contrary. Staring at the featureless black cowl of the Khaa's head, he had a sense of something staring back. More than a sense. A distinct impression of personality. It was as if the Khaa's undulations were producing a breeze that bore its psychic odor through the air. Eliot began to picture it as a loony, shy old uncle who liked to sit under the basement steps and eat flies and cackle to himself, but who could tell when the first frost was due and knew how to fix the tail on your kite. Weird, yet harmless. The Khaa stretched out an arm: The arm just peeled away from its torso, its hand a thumbless black mitten. Eliot edged back. He wasn't quite prepared to believe it was harmless. But the arm stretched farther than he had thought possible and enveloped his wrist. It was soft, ticklish, a river of furry moths crawling over his skin.

In the instant before he jumped away, Eliot heard a whining note inside his skull, and that

whining—seeming to flow through his brain with the same suppleness that the Khaa's arm had displayed—was translated into a wordless plea. From it he understood that the Khaa was afraid. Terribly afraid.

Suddenly it melted downward and went rolling, bunching, flowing up the stairs; it stopped on the first landing, rolled halfway down, then up again, repeating the process over and over. It came clear to Eliot (Oh, Jesus! This is nuts!) that it was trying to convince him to follow. Just like Lassie or some other ridiculous TV animal, it was trying to tell him something, to lead him to where the wounded forest ranger had fallen, where the nest of baby ducks was being threatened by the brush fire. He should walk over, rumple its head, and say, "What's the matter, girl? Those squirrels been teasing you?" This time his laughter had a sobering effect, acting to settle his thoughts. One likelihood was that his experience with Michaela had been sufficient to snap his frayed connection with consensus reality; but there was no point in buying that. Even if that were the case, he might as well go with it. He crossed to the stairs and climbed toward the rippling shadow on the landing.

"Okay, Bongo," he said. "Let's see what's got you so excited."

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On the third floor the Khaa turned down a hallway, moving fast, and Eliot didn't see it again until he was approaching the room that housed Mr. Chatterji's collection. It was standing beside the door, flapping its arms, apparently indicating that he should enter. Eliot remembered the crate.

"No, thanks," he said. A drop of sweat slid down his ribcage, and he realized that it was unusually warm next to the door.

The Khaa's hand flowed over the doorknob, enveloping it, and when the hand pulled back, it was bulging, oddly deformed, and there was a hole through the wood where the lock mechanism had been. The door swung open a couple of inches. Darkness leaked out of the room, adding an oily essence to the air. Eliot took a backward step. The Khaa dropped the lock mechanism—it materialized from beneath the black formless hand and clattered to the floor—and latched onto Eliot's arm. Once again he heard the whining, the plea for help, and since he did not jump away, he had a clearer understanding of the process of translation. He could feel the whining as a cold fluid coursing through his brain, and as the whining died, the message simply appeared-the way an image might appear in a crystal ball. There was an undertone of reassurance to the Khaa's fear, and though Eliot knew this was the mistake people in horror movies were always making, he reached inside the room and fumbled for the wall switch, half-expecting to be snatched up and savaged. He flicked on the light and pushed the door open with his foot.

And wished that he hadn't.

The crates had exploded. Splinters and shards of wood were scattered everywhere, and the bricks had been heaped at the center of the room. They were dark red, friable bricks like crumbling cakes of dried blood, and each was marked with black letters and numbers that signified its original position in the fireplace. But none were in their proper position now, though they were quite artfully arranged. They had been piled into the shape of a mountain, one that—despite the crudity of its building blocks—duplicated the sheer faces and chimneys and gentle slopes of a real mountain. Eliot recognized it from its photograph. The Eiger. It towered to the ceiling, and under the glare of the lights, it gave off a radiation of ugliness and barbarity. It seemed alive, a fang of dark red meat, and the charred smell of the bricks was like a hum in Eliot's nostrils.

Ignoring the Khaa, who was again flapping its arms, Eliot broke for the landing; there he paused, and after a brief struggle between fear and conscience, he sprinted up the stairs to the bedroom, taking them three at a time. Michaela was gone! He stared at the starlit billows of the sheets. Where the Hell... her room! He hurtled down the stairs and fell sprawling on the second-floor landing. Pain lanced through his kneecap, but he came to his feet running, certain that something was behind him.

A seam of reddish orange light—not lamplight—edged the bottom of Michaela's door, and he heard a crispy chuckling noise like a fire crackling in a hearth. The wood was warm to the touch. Eliot's hand hovered over the doorknob. His heart seemed to have swelled to the size of a basketball and was doing a fancy dribble against his chest wall. The sensible thing to do would be to get out quick, because whatever lay beyond the door was bound to be too much for him to handle. But instead he did the stupid thing and burst into the room.

His first impression was that the room was burning, but then he saw that though the fire looked real, it did not spread; the flames clung to the outlines of things that were themselves unreal, that had no substance of their own and were made of the ghostly fire: belted drapes, an overstuffed chair and sofa, a carved mantelpiece, all of antique design. The actual furniture—production-line junk—was undamaged. Intense reddish orange light glowed around the bed, and at its heart lay Michaela. Naked, her back arched. Lengths

of her hair lifted into the air and tangled, floating in an invisible current; the muscles of her legs and abdomen were coiling, bunching, as if she were shedding her skin. The crackling grew louder, and the light began to rise from the bed, to form into a column of even brighter light; it narrowed at the midpoint, bulged in an approximation of hips and breasts, gradually assuming the shape of a burning woman. She was faceless, a fiery silhouette. Her flickering gown shifted as with the movements of walking, and flames leaped out behind her head like windblown hair.

Eliot was pumped full of terror, too afraid to scream or run. Her aura of heat and power wrapped around him. Though she was within arm's length, she seemed a long way off, inset into a great distance and walking toward him down a tunnel that conformed exactly to her shape. She stretched out a hand, brushing his cheek with a finger. The touch brought more pain than he had ever known. It was luminous, lighting every circuit of his body. He could feel his skin crisping, cracking, fluids leaking forth and sizzling. He heard himself moan: a gush of rotten sound like something trapped in a drain.

Then she jerked back her hand, as if he had burned her.

Dazed, his nerves screaming, Eliot slumped to the floor and-through blurred eyes-caught sight of a blackness rippling by the door. The Khaa. The burning woman stood facing it a few feet away. It was such an uncanny scene, this confrontation of fire and darkness, of two supernatural systems, that Eliot was shocked to alertness. He had the idea that neither of them knew what to do. Surrounded by its patch of disturbed air, the Khaa undulated; the burning woman crackled and flickered, embedded in her eerie distance. Tentatively, she lifted her hand; but before she could complete the gesture, the Khaa reached with blinding swiftness, and its hand enveloped hers.

A shriek like tortured metal issued from them, as if some ironclad principle had been breached. Dark tendrils wound through the burning woman's arm, seams of fire striped the Khaa, and there was a high-pitched humming, a vibration that jarred Eliot's teeth. For a moment he was afraid that spiritual versions of antimatter and matter had been brought into conjunction, that the room would explode. But the hum was sheared off as the Khaa snatched back its hand: A scrap of reddish orange flame glimmered within it. The Khaa melted downward and went rolling out the door. The burning woman-and every bit of flame in the room-shrank to an incandescent point and vanished.

Still dazed, Eliot touched his face. It felt burned, but there was no apparent damage. He hauled himself to his feet, staggered to the bed, and collapsed next to Michaela. She was breathing deeply, unconscious. "Michaela!" He shook her. She moaned, her head rolled from side to side. He heaved her over his shoulder in a fireman's lift and crept out into the hall. Moving stealthily, he eased along the hall to the balcony overlooking the courtyard and peered over the edge... and bit his lip to stifle a cry. Clearly visible in the electric blue air of the predawn darkness, standing in the middle of the courtyard, was a tall, pale woman wearing a white nightgown. Her black hair fanned across her back. She snapped her head around to stare at him, her cameo features twisted by a gloating smile, and that smile told Eliot everything he had wanted to know about the possibility of escape. Just try to leave, Aimée Cousineau was saying. Go ahead and try. I'd like that. A shadow sprang erect about a dozen feet away from her, and she turned to it. Suddenly there was a wind in the courtyard: a violent whirling wind of which she was the calm center. Plants went flapping up into the well like leathery birds; pots shattered, and the shards flew toward the Khaa. Slowed by Michaela's weight, wanting to get as far as he could from the battle, Eliot headed up the stairs toward Mr. Chatterji's bedroom.

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It was an hour later, an hour of peeking down into the courtyard, watching the game of hide-and-seek that the Khaa was playing with Aimée Cousineau, realizing that the Khaa was protecting them by keeping her busy... it was then that Eliot remembered the book. He retrieved it from the shelf and began to skim through it, hoping to learn something helpful. There was nothing else to do. He picked up at the point of Aimée's rap about her marriage to Happiness, passed over the transformation of Ginny Whitcomb into a teenage monster, and found a second section dealing with Aimée.

In 1895 a wealthy Swiss-American named Armand Cousineau had returned to St. Berenice—his birthplace—for a visit. He was smitten with Aimée Vuillemont, and her family, seizing the opportunity to be rid of her, allowed Cousineau to marry Aimée and sail her off to his home in Carversville, New Hampshire. Aimée's taste for seduction had not been curbed by the move. Lawyers, deacons, merchants, farmers: they were all grist for her mill. But in the winter of 1905, she fell in love—obsessively, passionately in love—with a young schoolmaster. She believed that the schoolmaster had saved her from her unholy marriage, and her gratitude knew no bounds. Unfortunately, when the schoolmaster fell in love with another woman, neither did her fury. One night while passing the Cousineau mansion, the town doctor spotted a woman walking the

grounds: "... a woman of flame, not burning but composed of flame, her every particular a fiery construct..." Smoke was curling from a window; the doctor rushed inside and discovered the schoolmaster wrapped in chains, burning like a log in the vast fireplace. He put out the small blaze spreading from the hearth, and on going back onto the grounds, he stumbled over Aimée's charred corpse.

It was not clear whether Aimée's death had been accidental, a stray spark catching on her nightgown, or the result of suicide; but it was clear that thereafter the mansion had been haunted by a spirit who delighted in possessing women and driving them to kill their men. The spirit's supernatural powers were limited by the flesh but were augmented by immense physical strength. Ginny Whitcomb, for example, had killed her brother Tim by twisting off his arm, and then had gone after her other brother and her father, a harrowing chase that had lasted a day and a night: While in possession of a body, the spirit was not limited to nocturnal activity...

Christ!

The light coming through the skylight was gray.

They were safe!

Eliot went to the bed and began shaking Michaela. She moaned, her eyes blinked open. "Wake up!" he said. "We've got to get out!"

"What?" She batted at his hands. "What are you talking about?"

"Don't you remember?"

"Remember what?" She swung her legs onto the floor, sitting with her head down, stunned by wakefulness; she stood, swayed, and said, "God, what did you do to me? I feel..." A dull, suspicious expression washed over her face.

"We have to leave." He walked around the bed to her. "Ranjeesh hit the jackpot. Those crates of his had an honest-to-God spirit packed in with the bricks. Last night it tried to possess you." He saw her disbelief. "You must have blanked out. Here." He offered the book. "This'll explain..."

"Oh, God!" she shouted. "What did you do? I'm all raw inside!" She backed away, eyes wide with fright.

"I didn't do anything." He held out his palms as if to prove he had no weapons.

"You raped me! While I was asleep!" She looked left, right, in a panic.

"That's ridiculous!"

"You must have drugged me or something! Oh, God! Go away!"

"I won't argue," he said. "We have to get out. After that you can turn me in for rape or whatever. But we're leaving, even if I have to drag you."

Some of her desperation evaporated, her shoulders sagged.

"Look," he said, moving closer. "I didn't rape you. What you're feeling is something that goddamn spirit did to you. It was..."

She brought her knee up into his groin.

As he writhed on the floor, curled up around the pain, Eliot heard the door open and her footsteps receding. He caught at the edge of the bed, hauled himself to his knees, and vomited all over the sheets. He fell back and lay there for several minutes until the pain had dwindled to a powerful throbbing, a throbbing that jolted his heart into the same rhythm; then, gingerly, he stood and shuffled out into the hall. Leaning on the railing, he eased down the stairs to Michaela's room and lowered himself into a sitting position. He let out a shuddering sigh. Actinic flashes burst in front of his eyes.

"Michaela," he said. "Listen to me." His voice sounded feeble: the voice of an old, old man.

"I've got a knife," she said from just behind the door. "I'll use it if you try to break in."

"I wouldn't worry about that," he said. "And I sure as Hell wouldn't worry about being raped. Now will you listen?"

No response.

He told her everything, and when he was done, she said, "You're insane. You raped me."

"I wouldn't hurt you. I..." He had been on the verge of telling her he loved her, but decided it probably wasn't true. He probably just wished that he had a good, clean truth like love. The pain was making him nauseated again, as if the blackish purple stain of his bruises were seeping up into his stomach and filling him with bad gases. He struggled to his feet and leaned against the wall. There was no point in arguing, and there was not much hope that she would leave the house on her own, not if she reacted to Aimée like Ginny Whitcomb. The only solution was to go to the police, accuse her of some crime. Assault. She would accuse him of rape, but with luck they would both be held overnight. And he would have time to wire Mr. Chatterji... Who would believe him. Mr. Chatterji was by nature a believer: It simply hadn't fit his notion of sophistication to give credence to his native spirits. He'd be on the first flight from Delhi, eager to document the Terror.

Himself eager to get it over, Eliot negotiated the stairs and hobbled across the courtyard; but the Khaa was waiting, flapping its arms in the shadowed alcove that led to the street. Whether it was an effect of the light or of its battle with Aimée, or, specifically, of the pale scrap of fire visible within its hand, the Khaa looked less substantial. Its blackness was somewhat opaque, and the air around it was blurred, smeary, like waves washing over a lens: It was as if the Khaa were being submerged more deeply in its own medium. Eliot felt no compunction about allowing it to touch him; he was grateful to it, and his relaxed attitude seemed to intensify the communication. He began to see images in his mind's eye: Michaela's face, Aimée's, and then the two faces were superimposed. He was shown this over and over, and he understood from it that the Khaa wanted the possession to take place. But he didn't understand why. More images. Himself running, Michaela running, Durbar Square, the mask of White Bhairab, the Khaa. Lots of Khaa. Like black hieroglyphs. These images were repeated, too, and after each sequence the Khaa would hold its hand up to his face and display the glimmering scrap of Aimée's fire. Eliot thought he understood, but whenever he tried to convey that he wasn't sure, the Khaa merely repeated the images.

At last, realizing that the Khaa had reached the limits of its ability to communicate, Eliot headed for the street. The Khaa melted down, reared up in the doorway to block his path, and flapped its arms desperately. Once again Eliot had a sense of its weird-old-man-ness. It went against logic to put his trust in such an erratic creature, especially in such a dangerous plan; but logic had little hold on him, and this was a permanent solution. If it worked. If he hadn't misread it. He laughed. The Hell with it!

"Take it easy, Bongo," he said. "I'll be back as soon as I get my shootin' iron fixed."

j

The waiting room of Sam Chipley's clinic was crowded with Newari mothers and children, who giggled as Eliot did a bowlegged shuffle through their midst. Sam's wife led him into the examination room, where Sam—a burly, bearded man, his long hair tied in a ponytail—helped him onto a surgical table.

"Holy shit!" he said after inspecting the injury. "What you been into, man?" He began rubbing ointment into the bruises.

"Accident," gritted Eliot, trying not to cry out.

"Yeah, I bet," said Sam. "Maybe a sexy little accident who had a change of heart when it come down to strokes. You know, not gettin' it steady might tend to make you a tad intense for some ladies, man. Ever think about that?"

"That's not how it was. Am I all right?"

"Yeah, but you ain't gonna be superstud for a while." Sam went to the sink and washed his hands. "Don't gimme that innocent bullshit. You were tryin' to slip it to Chatterji's new squeeze, right?"

"You know her?"

"He brought her over one day, showin' her off. She's a head case, man. You should know better."

"Will I be able to run?"

Sam laughed. "Not hardly."

"Listen, Sam." Eliot sat up, winced. "Chatterji's lady. She's in bad trouble, and I'm the only one who can help her. I have to be able to run, and I need something to keep me awake. I haven't slept for a couple of days."

"I ain't givin' you pills, Eliot. You can stagger through your doper phase without my help." Sam finished drying his hands and went to sit on a stool beside the window; beyond the window was a brick wall, and atop it a string of prayer flags snapped in the breeze.

"I'm not after a supply, damn it! Just enough to keep me going tonight. This is important, Sam!"

Sam scratched his neck. "What kind of trouble she in?"

"I can't tell you now," said Eliot, knowing that Sam would laugh at the idea of something as metaphysically suspect as the Khaa. "But I will tomorrow. It's not illegal. Come on, man! There's got to be something you can give me."

"Oh, I can fix you up. I can make you feel like King Shit on Coronation Day." Sam mulled it over. "Okay, Eliot. But you get your ass back here tomorrow and tell me what's happenin'." He gave a snort of amusement. "All I can say is, it must be some strange damn trouble for you to be the only one who can save her."

j

After wiring Mr. Chatterji, urging him to come home at once, Eliot returned to the house and unscrewed the hinges of the front door. He was not certain that Aimée would be able to control the house, to slam doors and make windows stick as she had with her house in New Hampshire, but he didn't want to take any chances.

As he lifted the door and set it against the wall of the alcove, he was amazed by its lightness; he felt possessed of a giddy strength, capable of heaving the door up through the well of the courtyard and over the roofs. The cocktail of painkillers and speed was working wonders. His groin ached, but the ache was distant, far removed from the center of his consciousness, which was a fount of well-being. When he had finished with the door, he grabbed some fruit juice from the kitchen and went back to the alcove to wait.

In midafternoon Michaela came downstairs. Eliot tried to talk to her, to convince her to leave, but she warned him to keep away and scuttled back to her room. Then, around five o'clock, the burning woman appeared, floating a few feet above the courtyard floor. The sun had withdrawn to the upper third of the well, and her fiery silhouette was inset into slate-blue shadow, the flames of her hair dancing about her head. Eliot, who had been hitting the painkillers heavily, was dazzled by her: Had she been a hallucination, she would have made his All-Time Top Ten. But even realizing that she was not, he was too drugged to relate to her as a threat. He snickered and shied a piece of broken pot at her. She shrank to an incandescent point, vanished, and that brought home to him his foolhardiness. He took more speed to counteract his euphoria, and did stretching exercises to loosen the kinks and to rid himself of the cramped sensation in his chest.

Twilight blended the shadows in the courtyard, celebrants passed in the street, and he could hear distant drums and cymbals. He felt cut off from the city, the festival. Afraid. Not even the presence of the Khaa, half-merged with the shadows along the wall, served to comfort him. Near dusk, Aimée Cousineau walked into the courtyard and stopped about twenty feet away, staring at him. He had no desire to laugh or throw things. At this distance he could see that her eyes had no whites or pupils or irises. They were dead black. One moment they seemed to be the bulging heads of black screws threaded into her skull; the next they seemed to recede into blackness, into a cave beneath a mountain where something waited to teach the joys of Hell to whoever wandered in. Eliot sidled closer to the door. But she turned, climbed the stairs to the second landing, and walked down Michaela's hallway.

Eliot's waiting began in earnest.

An hour passed. He paced between the door and the courtyard. His mouth was cottony; his joints felt brittle, held together by frail wires of speed and adrenaline. This was insane! All he had done was to put them in worse danger. Finally he heard a door close upstairs. He backed into the street, bumping into two Newari girls, who giggled and skipped away. Crowds of people were moving toward Durbar Square.

"Eliot!"

Michaela's voice. He'd expected a hoarse demon voice, and when she walked into the alcove, her white scarf glowing palely against the dark air, he was surprised to see that she was unchanged. Her features held no trace of anything other than her usual listlessness.

"I'm sorry I hurt you," she said, walking toward him. "I know you didn't do anything. I was just upset about last night."

Eliot continued to back away.

"What's wrong?" She stopped in the doorway.

It might have been his imagination, the drugs, but Eliot could have sworn that her eyes were much darker than normal. He trotted off a dozen yards or so and stood looking at her.

"Eliot!"

It was a scream of rage and frustration, and he could scarcely believe the speed with which she darted toward him. He ran full tilt at first, leaping sideways to avoid collisions, veering past alarmed dark-skinned faces; but after a couple of blocks he found a more efficient rhythm and began to anticipate obstacles, to glide in and out of the crowd. Angry shouts were raised behind him. He glanced back. Michaela was closing the distance, beelining for him, knocking people sprawling with what seemed effortless blows. He ran harder. The crowd grew thicker, and he kept near the walls of the houses, where it was thinnest; but even there it was hard to maintain a good pace. Torches were waved in his face; young men—singing, their arms linked—posed barriers that slowed him further. He could no longer see Michaela, but he could see the wake of her passage. Fists shaking, heads jerking. The entire scene was starting to lose cohesiveness to Eliot. There were screams of torchlight, bright shards of deranged shouts, jostling waves of incense and ordure. He felt like the only solid chunk in a glittering soup that was being poured through a stone trough.

At the edge of Durbar Square he had a brief glimpse of a shadow standing by the massive gilt doors of Degutale Temple. It was larger and a more anthracitic black than Mr. Chatterji's Khaa: one of the old ones, the powerful ones. The sight buoyed his confidence and restored his equilibrium. He had not misread the plan. But he knew that this was the most dangerous part. He had lost track of Michaela, and the crowd was sweeping him along; if she caught up to him now, he would not be able to run. Fighting for elbow room, struggling to keep his feet, he was borne into the temple complex. The pagoda roofs sloped up into darkness like strangely carved mountains, their peaks hidden by a moonless night; the cobbled paths were narrow,

barely ten feet across, and the crowd was being squeezed along them, a lava flow of humanity. Torches bobbed everywhere, sending wild licks of shadow and orange light up the walls, revealing scowling faces on the eaves. Atop its pedestal, the gilt statue of Hanuman—the monkey god—looked to be swaying. Clashing cymbals and arrhythmic drumming scattered Eliot's heartbeat; the sinewy wail of oboes seemed to be graphing the fluctuations of his nerves.

As he swept past Hanuman Dhoka Temple, he caught sight of the brass mask of White Bhairab shining over the heads of the crowd like the face of an evil clown. It was less than a hundred feet away, set in a huge niche in a temple wall and illuminated by light bulbs that hung down among strings of prayer flags. The crowd surged faster, knocking him this way and that; but he managed to spot two more Khaa in the doorway of Hanuman Dhoka. Both melted downward, vanishing, and Eliot's hopes soared. They must have located Michaela, they must be attacking! By the time he had been carried to within a few yards of the mask, he was sure that he was safe. They must have finished her exorcism by now. The only problem left was to find her. That, he realized, had been the weak link in the plan. He'd been an idiot not to have foreseen it. Who knows what might happen if she were to fall in the midst of the crowd. Suddenly he was beneath the pipe that stuck out of the god's mouth; the stream of rice beer arching from it looked translucent under the lights, and as it splashed his face (no fish), its coldness acted to wash away his veneer of chemical strength. He was dizzy, his groin throbbed. The great face, with its fierce fangs and goofy, startled eyes, appeared to be swelling and rocking back and forth. He took a deep breath. The thing to do would be to find a place next to a wall where he could wedge himself against the flow of the crowd, wait until it had thinned, and then search for her. He was about to do that very thing when two powerful hands gripped his elbows from behind.

Unable to turn, he craned his neck and peered over his shoulder. Michaela smiled at him: a gloating "gotcha!" smile. Her eyes were dead black ovals. She shaped his name with her mouth, her voice inaudible above the music and shouting, and she began to push him ahead of her, using him as a battering ram to forge a path through the crowd. To anyone watching, it might have appeared that he was running interference for her, but his feet were dangling just off the ground. Angry Newars yelled at him as he knocked them aside. He yelled, too. No one noticed. Within seconds they had got clear into a side street, threading between groups of drunkards. People laughed at Eliot's cries for help, and one guy imitated the awkward loose-limbed way he was running.

Michaela turned into a doorway, carrying him down a dirt-floored corridor whose walls were carved into ornate screens; the dusky orange lamplight shining through the screens cast a lacework of shadow on the dirt. The corridor widened to a small courtyard, the age-darkened wood of its walls and doors inlaid with intricate mosaics of ivory. Michaela stopped and slammed him against a wall. He was stunned, but he recognized the place to be one of the old Buddhist temples that surrounded the square. Except for a life-sized statue of a golden cow, the courtyard was empty.

"Eliot." The way she said it, it was more of a curse than a name.

He opened his mouth to scream, but she drew him into an embrace; her grip on his right elbow tightened, and her other hand squeezed the back of his neck, pinching off the scream.

"Don't be afraid," she said. "I only want to kiss you."

Her breasts crushed into his chest, her pelvis ground against him in a mockery of passion, and inch by inch she forced his face down to hers. Her lips parted, and—oh, Christ Jesus!—Eliot writhed in her grasp, enlivened by a new horror. The inside of her mouth was as black as her eyes. She wanted him to kiss that blackness, to taste the evil she had kissed beneath the Eiger. He kicked and clawed with his free hand, but she was irresistible, her hands like iron. His elbow cracked, and brilliant pain shot through his arm. Something else was cracking in his neck. Yet none of that compared to what he felt as her tongue—a burning black poker—pushed between his lips. His chest was bursting with the need to scream, and everything was going dark. Thinking this was death, he experienced a peevish resentment that death was not—as he'd been led to believe—an end to pain, that it merely added a tickling sensation to all his other pain. Then the searing heat in his mouth diminished, and he thought that death must just have been a bit slower than usual.

Several seconds passed before he realized that he was lying on the ground, several more before he noticed Michaela lying beside him, and—because darkness was tattering the edges of his vision—it was considerably longer before he distinguished the six undulating darknesses that had ringed Aimée Cousineau. They towered over her; their blackness gleamed like thick fur, and the air around them was awash with vibration. In her fluted white nightgown, her cameo face composed in an expression of calm, Aimée looked the antithesis of the vaguely male giants that were menacing her, delicate and finely worked in contrast to their crudity. Her eyes appeared to mirror their negative color. After a moment, a little wind kicked up, swirling about her. The undulations of the Khaa increased, becoming rhythmic, the movements of boneless dancers, and the wind subsided. Puzzled, she darted between two of them and took a defensive

stance next to the golden cow; she lowered her head and stared up through her brows at the Khaa. They melted downward, rolled forward, sprang erect, and hemmed her in against the statue. But the stare was doing its damage. Pieces of ivory and wood were splintering, flying off the walls toward the Khaa, and one of them was fading, a mist of black particles accumulating around its body; then, with a shrill noise that reminded Eliot of a jet passing overhead, it misted away.

Five Khaa remained in the courtyard. Aimée smiled and turned her stare on another. Before the stare could take effect, however, the Khaa moved close, blocking Eliot's view of her; and when they pulled back, it was Aimée who showed signs of damage. Rills of blackness were leading from her eyes, webbing her cheeks, making it look as if her face were cracking. Her nightgown caught fire, her hair began to leap. Flames danced on her fingertips, spread to her arms, her breast, and she assumed the form of the burning woman.

As soon as the transformation was complete, she tried to shrink, to dwindle to her vanishing point; but, acting in unison, the Khaa extended their hands and touched her. There was that shriek of tortured metal, lapsing to a high-pitched hum, and to Eliot's amazement, the Khaa were sucked inside her. It was a rapid process. The Khaa faded to a haze, to nothing, and veins of black marbled the burning woman's fire; the blackness coalesced, forming into five tiny stick figures, a hieroglyphic design patterning her gown. With a fuming sound she expanded again, regaining her normal dimensions, and the Khaa flowed back out, surrounding her. For an instant she stood motionless, dwarfed: a schoolgirl helpless amidst a circle of bullies. Then she clawed at the nearest of them. Though she had no features with which to express emotion, it seemed to Eliot there was desperation in her gesture, in the agitated leaping of her fiery hair. Unperturbed, the Khaa stretched out their enormous mitten hands, hands that spread like oil and enveloped her.

The destruction of the burning woman, of Aimée Cousineau, lasted only a matter of seconds; but to Eliot it occurred within a bubble of slow time, a time during which he achieved a speculative distance. He wondered if-as the Khaa stole portions of her fire and secreted it within their bodies-they were removing disparate elements of her soul, if she consisted of psychologically distinct fragments: the girl who had wandered into the cave, the girl who had returned from it, the betrayed lover. Did she embody gradations of innocence and sinfulness, or was she a contaminated essence, an unfractionated evil? While still involved in this speculation, half a reaction to pain, half to the metallic shriek of her losing battle, he lost consciousness, and when he reopened his eyes, the courtyard was deserted. He could hear music and shouting from Durbar Square. The golden cow stared contentedly into nowhere.

He had the idea that if he moved, he would further break all the broken things inside him; but he inched his left hand across the dirt and rested it on Michaela's breast. It was rising and falling with a steady rhythm. That made him happy, and he kept his hand there, exulting in the hits of her life against his palm. Something shadowy above him. He strained to see it. One of the Khaa... No! It was Mr. Chatterji's Khaa. Opaquely black, scrap of fire glimmering in its hand. Compared to its big brothers, it had the look of a skinny, sorry mutt. Eliot felt camaraderie toward it.

"Hey, Bongo," he said weakly. "We won."

A tickling at the top of his head, a whining note, and he had an impression not of gratitude—as he might have expected—but of intense curiosity. The tickling stopped, and Eliot suddenly felt clear in his mind. Strange. He was passing out once again, his consciousness whirling, darkening, and yet he was calm and unafraid. A roar came from the direction of the square. Somebody—the luckiest somebody in the Katmandu Valley—had caught the fish. But as Eliot's eyelids fluttered shut, as he had a last glimpse of the Khaa looming above them and felt the warm measure of Michaela's heartbeat, he thought maybe that the crowd was cheering the wrong man.

j

Three weeks after the night of White Bhairab, Ranjeesh Chatterji divested himself of all worldly possessions (including the gift of a year's free rent at his house to Eliot) and took up residence at Swayambhunath where—according to Sam Chipley, who visited Eliot in the hospital—he was attempting to visualize the Avalokitesvara Buddha.

It was then that Eliot understood the nature of his newfound clarity. Just as it had done long ago with the woman's goiters, the Khaa had tried his habituation to meditation on for size, had not cared for it, and sloughed it off in a handy repository: Ranjeesh Chatterji.

It was such a delicious irony that Eliot had to restrain himself from telling Michaela when she visited that same afternoon; she had no memory of the Khaa, and news of it tended to unsettle her. But otherwise she had been healing right along with Eliot. All her listlessness had eroded over the weeks, her capacity for love was returning and was focused solely on Eliot.

"I guess I needed someone to show me that I was worth an effort," she told him. "I'll never stop trying to

repay you." She kissed him. "I can hardly wait till you come home."

She brought him books and candy and flowers; she sat with him each day until the nurses shooed her away. Yet being the center of her devotion disturbed him. He was still uncertain whether or not he loved her. Clarity, it seemed, made a man dangerously versatile, his conscience flexible, and instituted a cautious approach to commitment. At least this was the substance of Eliot's clarity. He didn't want to rush into anything.

When at last he did come home, he and Michaela made love beneath the starlight glory of Mr. Chatterji's skylight. Because of Eliot's neck brace and cast, they had to manage the act with extreme care, but despite that, despite the ambivalence of his feelings, this time it was love they made. Afterward, lying with his good arm around her, he edged nearer to commitment. Whether or not he loved her, there was no way this part of things could be improved by any increment of emotion. Maybe he'd give it a try with her. If it didn't work out, well, he was not going to be responsible for her mental health. She would have to learn to live without him.

"Happy?" he asked, caressing her shoulder.

She nodded and cuddled closer and whispered something that was partially drowned out by the crinkling of the pillow. He was sure he had misheard her, but the mere thought that he hadn't was enough to lodge a nugget of chill between his shoulder blades.

"What did you say?" he asked.

She turned to him and propped herself on an elbow, silhouetted by the starlight, her features obscured. But when she spoke, he realized that Mr. Chatterji's Khaa had been true to its erratic traditions of barter on the night of White Bhairab; and he knew that if she were to tip back her head ever so slightly and let the light shine into her eyes, he would be able to resolve all his speculations about the composition of Aimée Cousineau's soul.

"I'm wed to Happiness," she said.

THE JAGUAR HUNTER

It was his wife's debt to Onofrio Esteves, the appliance dealer, that brought Esteban Caax to town for the first time in almost a year. By nature he was a man who enjoyed the sweetness of the countryside above all else; the placid measures of a farmer's day invigorated him, and he took great pleasure in nights spent joking and telling stories around a fire, or lying beside his wife, Encarnación. Puerto Morada, with its fruit-company imperatives and sullen dogs and cantinas that blared American music, was a place he avoided like the plague: indeed, from his home atop the mountain whose slopes formed the northernmost enclosure of Bahía Onda, the rusted tin roofs ringing the bay resembled a dried crust of blood such as might appear upon the lips of a dying man.

On this particular morning, however, he had no choice but to visit the town. Encarnación had—without his knowledge—purchased a battery-operated television set on credit from Onofrio, and he was threatening to seize Esteban's three milk cows in lieu of the eight hundred lempira that was owed; he refused to accept the return of the television, but had sent word that he was willing to discuss an alternate method of payment. Should Esteban lose the cows, his income would drop below a subsistence level and he would be forced to take up his old occupation, an occupation far more onerous than farming.

As he walked down the mountain, past huts of thatch and brushwood poles identical to his own, following a trail that wound through sun-browned thickets lorded over by banana trees, he was not thinking of Onofrio but of Encarnación. It was in her nature to be frivolous, and he had known this when he had married her; yet the television was emblematic of the differences that had developed between them since their children had reached maturity. She had begun to put on sophisticated airs, to laugh at Esteban's country ways, and she had become the doyenne of a group of older women, mostly widows, all of whom aspired to sophistication. Each night they would huddle around the television and strive to outdo one another in making sagacious comments about the American detective shows they watched; and each night Esteban would sit outside the hut and gloomily ponder the state of his marriage. He believed Encarnación's association with the widows was her manner of telling him that she looked forward to adopting the black skirt and shawl, that—having served his purpose as a father—he was now an impediment to her. Though she was only forty-one, younger by three years than Esteban, she was withdrawing from the life of the senses; they rarely made love anymore, and he was certain that this partially embodied her resentment to the fact that the years had been kind to him. He had the look of one of the Old Patuca—tall, with chiseled features and wide-set eyes; his coppery skin was relatively unlined and his hair jet black. Encarnación's hair was streaked with gray, and the clean beauty of her limbs had dissolved beneath layers of fat. He had not expected her to remain beautiful, and he had tried to assure her that he loved the woman she was and not merely the girl she had been. But that woman was dying, infected by the same disease that had infected Puerto Morada, and perhaps his love for her was dying, too.

The dusty street on which the appliance store was situated ran in back of the movie theater and the Hotel Circo del Mar, and from the inland side of the street Esteban could see the bell towers of Santa María del Onda rising above the hotel roof like the horns of a great stone snail. As a young man, obeying his mother's wish that he become a priest, he had spent three years cloistered beneath those towers, preparing for the seminary under the tutelage of old Father Gonsalvo. It was the part of his life he most regretted, because the academic disciplines he had mastered seemed to have stranded him between the world of the Indian and that of contemporary society; in his heart he held to his father's teachings—the principles of magic, the history of the tribe, the lore of nature—and yet he could never escape the feeling that such wisdom was either superstitious or simply unimportant. The shadows of the towers lay upon his soul as surely as they did upon the cobbled square in front of the church, and the sight of them caused him to pick up his pace and lower his eyes.

Farther along the street was the Cantina Atómica, a gathering place for the well-to-do youth of the town, and across from it was the appliance store, a one-story building of yellow stucco with corrugated metal doors that were lowered at night. Its façade was decorated by a mural that supposedly represented the merchandise within: sparkling refrigerators and televisions and washing machines, all given the impression

of enormity by the tiny men and women painted below them, their hands upflung in awe. The actual merchandise was much less imposing, consisting mainly of radios and used kitchen equipment. Few people in Puerto Morada could afford more, and those who could generally bought elsewhere. The majority of Onofrio's clientele were poor, hard-pressed to meet his schedule of payments, and to a large degree his wealth derived from selling repossessed appliances over and over.

Raimundo Esteves, a pale young man with puffy cheeks and heavily lidded eyes and a petulant mouth, was leaning against the counter when Esteban entered; Raimundo smirked and let out a piercing whistle, and a few seconds later his father emerged from the back room: a huge slug of a man, even paler than Raimundo. Filaments of gray hair were slicked down across his mottled scalp, and his belly stretched the front of a starched guayabera. He beamed and extended a hand.

"How good to see you," he said. "Raimundo! Bring us coffee and two chairs."

Much as he disliked Onofrio, Esteban was in no position to be uncivil: He accepted the handshake. Raimundo spilled coffee in the saucers and clattered the chairs and glowered, angry at being forced to serve an Indian.

"Why will you not let me return the television?" asked Esteban after taking a seat; and then, unable to bite back the words, he added, "Is it no longer your policy to swindle my people?"

Onofrio sighed, as if it were exhausting to explain things to a fool such as Esteban. "I do not swindle your people. I go beyond the letter of the contracts in allowing them to make returns rather than pursuing matters through the courts. In your case, however, I have devised a way whereby you can keep the television without any further payments and yet settle the account. Is this a swindle?"

It was pointless to argue with a man whose logic was as facile and self-serving as Onofrio's. "Tell me what you want," said Esteban.

Onofrio wetted his lips, which were the color of raw sausage. "I want you to kill the jaguar of Barrio Carolina."

"I no longer hunt," said Esteban.

"The Indian is afraid," said Raimundo, moving up behind Onofrio's shoulder. "I told you."

Onofrio waved him away and said to Esteban, "That is unreasonable. If I take the cows, you will once again be hunting jaguars. But if you do this, you will have to hunt only one jaguar."

"One that has killed eight hunters." Esteban set down his coffee cup and stood. "It is no ordinary jaguar."

Raimundo laughed disparagingly, and Esteban skewered him with a stare.

"Ah!" said Onofrio, smiling a flatterer's smile. "But none of the eight used your method."

"Your pardon, Don Onofrio," said Esteban with mock formality. "I have other business to attend."

"I will pay you five hundred lempira in addition to erasing the debt," said Onofrio.

"Why?" asked Esteban. "Forgive me, but I cannot believe it is due to a concern for the public welfare."

Onofrio's fat throat pulsed, his face darkened.

"Never mind," said Esteban. "It is not enough."

"Very well. A thousand." Onofrio's casual manner could not conceal the anxiety in his voice.

Intrigued, curious to learn the extent of Onofrio's anxiety, Esteban plucked a figure from the air. "Ten thousand," he said. "And in advance."

"Ridiculous! I could hire ten hunters for this much! Twenty!"

Esteban shrugged. "But none with my method."

For a moment Onofrio sat with hands enlaced, twisting them, as if struggling with some pious conception. "All right," he said, the words squeezed out of him. "Ten thousand!"

The reason for Onofrio's interest in Barrio Carolina suddenly dawned on Esteban, and he understood that the profits involved would make his fee seem pitifully small. But he was possessed by the thought of what ten thousand lempira could mean: a herd of cows, a small truck to haul produce, or—and as he thought it, he realized this was the happiest possibility—the little stucco house in Barrio Clarín that Encarnación had set her heart on. Perhaps owning it would soften her toward him. He noticed Raimundo staring at him, his expression a knowing smirk; and even Onofrio, though still outraged by the fee, was beginning to show signs of satisfaction, adjusting the fit of his guayabera, slicking down his already-slicked-down hair. Esteban felt debased by their capacity to buy him, and to preserve a last shred of dignity, he turned and walked to the door.

"I will consider it," he tossed back over his shoulder. "And I will give you my answer in the morning."

j

"Murder Squad of New York," starring a bald American actor, was the featured attraction on Encarnación's television that night, and the widows sat cross-legged on the floor, filling the hut so completely that the

charcoal stove and the sleeping hammock had been moved outside in order to provide good viewing angles for the latecomers. To Esteban, standing in the doorway, it seemed his home had been invaded by a covey of large black birds with cowled heads, who were receiving evil instruction from the core of a flickering gray jewel. Reluctantly, he pushed between them and made his way to the shelves mounted on the wall behind the set; he reached up to the top shelf and pulled down a long bundle wrapped in oil-stained newspapers. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Encarnación watching him, her lips thinned, curved in a smile, and that cicatrix of a smile branded its mark on Esteban's heart. She knew what he was about, and she was delighted! Not in the least worried! Perhaps she had known of Onofrio's plan to kill the jaguar, perhaps she had schemed with Onofrio to entrap him. Infuriated, he barged through the widows, setting them to gabbling, and walked out into his banana grove and sat on a stone amidst it. The night was cloudy, and only a handful of stars showed between the tattered dark shapes of the leaves; the wind sent the leaves slithering together, and he heard one of his cows snorting and smelled the ripe odor of the corral. It was as if the solidity of his life had been reduced to this isolated perspective, and he bitterly felt the isolation. Though he would admit to fault in the marriage, he could think of nothing he had done that could have bred Encarnación's hateful smile.

After a while, he unwrapped the bundle of newspapers and drew out a thin-bladed machete of the sort used to chop banana stalks, but which he used to kill jaguars. Just holding it renewed his confidence and gave him a feeling of strength. It had been four years since he had hunted, yet he knew he had not lost the skill. Once he had been proclaimed the greatest hunter in the province of Nueva Esperanza, as had his father before him, and he had not retired from hunting because of age or infirmity, but because the jaguars were beautiful, and their beauty had begun to outweigh the reasons he had for killing them. He had no better reason to kill the jaguar of Barrio Carolina. It menaced no one other than those who hunted it, who sought to invade its territory, and its death would profit only a dishonorable man and a shrewish wife, and would spread the contamination of Puerto Morada. And besides, it was a black jaguar.

"Black jaguars," his father had told him, "are creatures of the moon. They have other forms and magical purposes with which we must not interfere. Never hunt them!"

His father had not said that the black jaguars lived on the moon, simply that they utilized its power; but as a child, Esteban had dreamed about a moon of ivory forests and silver meadows through which the jaguars flowed as swiftly as black water; and when he had told his father of the dreams, his father had said that such dreams were representations of a truth, and that sooner or later he would discover the truth underlying them. Esteban had never stopped believing in the dreams, not even in face of the rocky, airless place depicted by the science programs on Encarnación's television: That moon, its mystery explained, was merely a less enlightening kind of dream, a statement of fact that reduced reality to the knowable.

But as he thought this, Esteban suddenly realized that killing the jaguar might be the solution to his problems, that by going against his father's teaching, that by killing his dreams, his Indian conception of the world, he might be able to find accord with his wife's; he had been standing halfway between the two conceptions for too long, and it was time for him to choose. And there was no real choice. It was this world he inhabited, not that of the jaguars; if it took the death of a magical creature to permit him to embrace as joys the television and trips to the movies and a stucco house in Barrio Clarín, well, he had faith in this method. He swung the machete, slicing the dark air, and laughed. Encarnación's frivolousness, his skill at hunting, Onofrio's greed, the jaguar, the television... all these things were neatly woven together like the elements of a spell, one whose products would be a denial of magic and a furthering of the unmagical doctrines that had corrupted Puerto Morada. He laughed again, but a second later he chided himself: It was exactly this sort of thinking he was preparing to root out.

j

Esteban waked Encarnación early the next morning and forced her to accompany him to the appliance store. His machete swung by his side in a leather sheath, and he carried a burlap sack containing food and the herbs he would need for the hunt. Encarnación trotted along beside him, silent, her face hidden by a shawl. When they reached the store, Esteban had Onofrio stamp the bill PAID IN FULL, then he handed the bill and the money to Encarnación.

"If I kill the jaguar or if it kills me," he said harshly, "this will be yours. Should I fail to return within a week, you may assume that I will never return."

She retreated a step, her face registering alarm, as if she had seen him in a new light and understood the consequences of her actions; but she made no move to stop him as he walked out the door.

Across the street, Raimundo Esteves was leaning against the wall of the Cantina Atómica, talking to two girls wearing jeans and frilly blouses; the girls were fluttering their hands and dancing to the music that

issued from the cantina, and to Esteban they seemed more alien than the creature he was to hunt. Raimundo spotted him and whispered to the girls; they peeked over their shoulders and laughed. Already angry at Encarnación, Esteban was washed over by a cold fury. He crossed the street to them, rested his hand on the hilt of the machete, and stared at Raimundo; he had never before noticed how soft he was, how empty of presence. A crop of pimples straggled along his jaw, the flesh beneath his eyes was pocked by tiny indentations like those made by a silversmith's hammer, and, unequal to the stare, his eyes darted back and forth between the two girls.

Esteban's anger dissolved into revulsion. "I am Esteban Caax," he said. "I have built my own house, tilled my soil, and brought four children into the world. This day I am going to hunt the jaguar of Barrio Carolina in order to make you and your father even fatter than you are." He ran his gaze up and down Raimundo's body, and, letting his voice fill with disgust, he asked, "Who are you?"

Raimundo's puffy face cinched in a knot of hatred, but he offered no response. The girls tittered and skipped through the door of the cantina; Esteban could hear them describing the incident, laughter, and he continued to stare at Raimundo. Several other girls poked their heads out the door, giggling and whispering. After a moment Esteban spun on his heel and walked away. Behind him there was a chorus of unrestrained laughter, and a girl's voice called mockingly, "Raimundo! Who are you?" Other voices joined in, and it soon became a chant.

j

Barrio Carolina was not truly a barrio of Puerto Morada; it lay beyond Punta Manabique, the southernmost enclosure of the bay, and was fronted by a palm hammock and the loveliest stretch of beach in all the province, a curving slice of white sand giving way to jade-green shallows. Forty years before, it had been the headquarters of the fruit company's experimental farm, a project of such vast scope that a small town had been built on the site: rows of white frame houses with shingle roofs and screen porches, the kind you might see in a magazine illustration of rural America. The company had touted the project as being the keystone of the country's future and had promised to develop high-yield crops that would banish starvation; but in 1947 a cholera epidemic had ravaged the coast, and the town had been abandoned. By the time the cholera scare had died down, the company had become well entrenched in national politics and no longer needed to maintain a benevolent image; the project had been dropped and the property abandoned until—in the same year that Esteban had retired from hunting—developers had bought it, planning to build a major resort. It was then the jaguar had appeared. Though it had not killed any of the workmen, it had terrorized them to the point that they had refused to begin the job. Hunters had been sent, and these the jaguar had killed. The last party of hunters had been equipped with automatic rifles, all manner of technological aids; but the jaguar had picked them off one by one, and this project, too, had been abandoned. Rumor had it that the land had recently been resold (now Esteban knew to whom), and that the idea of a resort was once more under consideration.

The walk from Puerto Morada was hot and tiring, and upon arrival Esteban sat beneath a palm and ate a lunch of cold banana fritters. Combers as white as toothpaste broke on the shore, and there was no human litter, just dead fronds and driftwood and coconuts. All but four of the houses had been swallowed by the jungle, and only sections of those four remained visible, embedded like moldering gates in a blackish green wall of vegetation. Even under the bright sunlight, they were haunted looking: their screens ripped, boards weathered gray, vines cascading over their façades. A mango tree had sprouted from one of the porches, and wild parrots were eating its fruit. He had not visited the barrio since childhood: The ruins had frightened him then, but now he found them appealing, testifying to the dominion of natural law. It distressed him that he would help transform it all into a place where the parrots would be chained to perches and the jaguars would be designs on tablecloths, a place of swimming pools and tourists sipping from coconut shells. Nonetheless, after he had finished lunch, he set out to explore the jungle and soon discovered a trail used by the jaguar: a narrow path that wound between the vine-matted shells of the houses for about a half mile and ended at the Río Dulce. The river was a murkier green than the sea, curving away through the jungle walls; the jaguar's tracks were everywhere along the bank, especially thick upon a tussocky rise some five or six feet above the water. This baffled Esteban. The jaguar could not drink from the rise, and it certainly would not sleep there. He puzzled over it awhile, but eventually shrugged it off, returned to the beach, and, because he planned to keep watch that night, took a nap beneath the palms.

Some hours later, around midafternoon, he was started from his nap by a voice hailing him. A tall, slim, copper-skinned woman was walking toward him, wearing a dress of dark green—almost the exact color of the jungle walls—that exposed the swell of her breasts. As she drew near, he saw that though her features had a Patucan cast, they were of a lapidary fineness uncommon to the tribe; it was as if they had been refined

into a lovely mask: cheeks planed into subtle hollows, lips sculpted full, stylized feathers of ebony inlaid for eyebrows, eyes of jet and white onyx, and all this given a human gloss. A sheen of sweat covered her breasts, and a single curl of black hair lay over her collarbone, so artful-seeming it appeared to have been placed there by design. She knelt beside him, gazing at him impassively, and Esteban was flustered by her heated air of sensuality. The sea breeze bore her scent to him, a sweet musk that reminded him of mangoes left ripening in the sun.

"My name is Esteban Caax," he said, painfully aware of his own sweaty odor.

"I have heard of you," she said. "The jaguar hunter. Have you come to kill the jaguar of the barrio?"

"Yes," he said, and felt shame at admitting it.

She picked up a handful of sand and watched it sift through her fingers.

"What is your name?" he asked.

"If we become friends, I will tell you my name," she said. "Why must you kill the jaguar?"

He told her about the television set, and then, to his surprise, he found himself describing his problems with Encarnación, explaining how he intended to adapt to her ways. These were not proper subjects to discuss with a stranger, yet he was lured to intimacy; he thought he sensed an affinity between them, and that prompted him to portray his marriage as more dismal than it was, for though he had never once been unfaithful to Encarnación, he would have welcomed the chance to do so now.

"This is a black jaguar," she said. "Surely you know they are not ordinary animals, that they have purposes with which we must not interfere?"

Esteban was startled to hear his father's words from her mouth, but he dismissed it as coincidence and replied, "Perhaps. But they are not mine."

"Truly, they are," she said. "You have simply chosen to ignore them." She scooped up another handful of sand. "How will you do it? You have no gun. Only a machete."

"I have this as well," he said, and from his sack he pulled out a small parcel of herbs and handed it to her.

She opened it and sniffed the contents. "Herbs? Ah! You plan to drug the jaguar."

"Not the jaguar. Myself." He took back the parcel. "The herbs slow the heart and give the body a semblance of death. They induce a trance, but one that can be thrown off at a moment's notice. After I chew them, I will lie down in a place that the jaguar must pass on its nightly hunt. It will think I am dead, but it will not feed unless it is sure that the spirit has left the flesh, and to determine this, it will sit on the body so it can feel the spirit rise up. As soon as it starts to settle, I will throw off the trance and stab it between the ribs. If my hand is steady, it will die instantly."

"And if your hand is unsteady?"

"I have killed nearly fifty jaguars," he said. "I no longer fear unsteadiness. The method comes down through my family from the Old Patuca, and it has never failed, to my knowledge."

"But a black jaguar...”

"Black or spotted, it makes no difference. Jaguars are creatures of instinct, and one is like another when it comes to feeding."

"Well," she said, "I cannot wish you luck, but neither do I wish you ill." She came to her feet, brushing the sand from her dress.

He wanted to ask her to stay, but pride prevented him, and she laughed as if she knew his mind.

"Perhaps we will talk again, Esteban," she said. "It would be a pity if we did not, for more lies between us than we have spoken of this day."

She walked swiftly down the beach, becoming a diminutive black figure that was rippled away by the heat haze.

j

That evening, needing a place from which to keep watch, Esteban pried open the screen door of one of the houses facing the beach and went onto the porch. Chameleons skittered into the corners, and an iguana slithered off a rusted lawn chair sheathed in spiderweb and vanished through a gap in the floor. The interior of the house was dark and forbidding, except for the bathroom, the roof of which was missing, webbed over by vines that admitted a gray-green infusion of twilight. The cracked toilet was full of rainwater and dead insects. Uneasy, Esteban returned to the porch, cleaned the lawn chair, and sat.

Out on the horizon the sea and sky were blending in a haze of silver and gray; the wind had died, and the palms were as still as sculpture; a string of pelicans flying low above the waves seemed to be spelling a sentence of cryptic black syllables. But the eerie beauty of the scene was lost on him. He could not stop thinking of the woman. The memory of her hips rolling beneath the fabric of her dress as she walked away was repeated over and over in his thoughts, and whenever he tried to turn his attention to the matter at hand,

the memory became more compelling. He imagined her naked, the play of muscles rippling her haunches, and this so enflamed him that he started to pace, unmindful of the fact that the creaking boards were signaling his presence. He could not understand her effect upon him. Perhaps, he thought, it was her defense of the jaguar, her calling to mind of all he was putting behind him... and then a realization settled over him like an icy shroud.

It was commonly held among the Patuca that a man about to suffer a solitary and unexpected death would be visited by an envoy of death, who—standing in for family and friends—would prepare him to face the event; and Esteban was now very sure that the woman had been such an envoy, that her allure had been specifically designed to attract his soul to its imminent fate. He sat back down in the lawn chair, numb with the realization. Her knowledge of his father's words, the odd flavor of her conversation, her intimation that more lay between them: It all accorded perfectly with the traditional wisdom. The moon rose three-quarters full, silvering the sands of the barrio, and still he sat there, rooted to the spot by his fear of death.

He had been watching the jaguar for several seconds before he registered its presence. It seemed at first that a scrap of night sky had fallen onto the sand and was being blown by a fitful breeze; but soon he saw that it was the jaguar, that it was inching along as if stalking some prey. Then it leaped high into the air, twisting and turning, and began to race up and down the beach: a ribbon of black water flowing across the silver sands. He had never before seen a jaguar at play, and this alone was cause for wonder; but most of all, he wondered at the fact that here were his childhood dreams come to life. He might have been peering out onto a silvery meadow of the moon, spying on one of its magical creatures. His fear was eroded by the sight, and like a child he pressed his nose to the screen, trying not to blink, anxious that he might miss a single moment.

At length the jaguar left off its play and came prowling up the beach toward the jungle. By the set of its ears and the purposeful sway of its walk, Esteban recognized that it was hunting. It stopped beneath a palm about twenty feet from the house, lifted its head, and tested the air. Moonlight frayed down through the fronds, applying liquid gleams to its haunches; its eyes, glinting yellow-green, were like peepholes into a lurid dimension of fire. The jaguar's beauty was heart-stopping—the embodiment of a flawless principle—and Esteban, contrasting this beauty with the pallid ugliness of his employer, with the ugly principle that had led to his hiring, doubted that he could ever bring himself to kill it.

All the following day he debated the question. He had hoped the woman would return, because he had rejected the idea that she was death's envoy—that perception, he thought, must have been induced by the mysterious atmosphere of the barrio—and he felt that if she was to argue the jaguar's cause again, he would let himself be persuaded. But she did not put in an appearance, and as he sat upon the beach, watching the evening sun decline through strata of dusky orange and lavender clouds, casting wild glitters over the sea, he understood once more that he had no choice. Whether or not the jaguar was beautiful, whether or not the woman had been on a supernatural errand, he must treat these things as if they had no substance. The point of the hunt had been to deny mysteries of this sort, and he had lost sight of it under the influence of old dreams.

He waited until moonrise to take the herbs, and then lay down beneath the palm tree where the jaguar had paused the previous night. Lizards whispered past in the grasses, sand fleas hopped onto his face; he hardly felt them, sinking deeper into the languor of the herbs. The fronds overhead showed an ashen green in the moonlight, lifting, rustling; and the stars between their feathered edges flickered crazily as if the breeze were fanning their flames. He became immersed in the landscape, savoring the smells of brine and rotting foliage that were blowing across the beach, drifting with them; but when he heard the pad of the jaguar's step, he came alert. Through narrowed eyes he saw it sitting a dozen feet away, a bulky shadow craning its neck toward him, investigating his scent. After a moment it began to circle him, each circle a bit tighter than the one before, and whenever it passed out of view he had to repress a trickle of fear. Then, as it passed close on the seaward side, he caught a whiff of its odor.

A sweet, musky odor that reminded him of mangoes left ripening in the sun.

Fear welled up in him, and he tried to banish it, to tell himself that the odor could not possibly be what he thought. The jaguar snarled, a razor stroke of sound that slit the peaceful mesh of wind and surf, and realizing it had scented his fear, he sprang to his feet, waving his machete. In a whirl of vision he saw the jaguar leap back, then he shouted at it, waved the machete again, and sprinted for the house where he had kept watch. He slipped through the door and went staggering into the front room. There was a crash behind him, and turning, he had a glimpse of a huge black shape struggling to extricate itself from a moonlit tangle of vines and ripped screen. He darted into the bathroom, sat with his back against the toilet bowl, and braced the door shut with his feet.

The sound of the jaguar's struggles subsided, and for a moment he thought it had given up. Sweat left

cold trails down his sides, his heart pounded. He held his breath, listening, and it seemed the whole world was holding its breath as well. The noises of wind and surf and insects were a faint seething; moonlight shed a sickly white radiance through the enlaced vines overhead, and a chameleon was frozen among peels of wallpaper beside the door. He let out a sigh and wiped the sweat from his eyes. He swallowed.

Then the top panel of the door exploded, shattered by a black paw. Splinters of rotten wood flew into his face, and he screamed. The sleek wedge of the jaguar's head thrust through the hole, roaring. A gateway of gleaming fangs guarding a plush red throat. Half-paralyzed, Esteban jabbed weakly with the machete. The jaguar withdrew, reached in with its paw, and clawed at his leg. More by accident than design, he managed to slice the jaguar, and the paw, too, was withdrawn. He heard it rumbling in the front room, and then, seconds later, a heavy thump against the wall behind him. The jaguar's head appeared above the edge of the wall; it was hanging by its forepaws, trying to gain a perch from which to leap down into the room. Esteban scrambled to his feet and slashed wildly, severing vines. The jaguar fell back, yowling. For a while it prowled along the wall, fuming to itself. Finally there was silence.

When sunlight began to filter through the vines, Esteban walked out of the house and headed down the beach to Puerto Morada. He went with his head lowered, desolate, thinking of the grim future that awaited him after he returned the money to Onofrio: a life of trying to please an increasingly shrewish Encarnación, of killing lesser jaguars for much less money. He was so mired in depression that he did not notice the woman until she called to him. She was leaning against a palm about thirty feet away, wearing a filmy white dress through which he could see the dark jut of her nipples. He drew his machete and backed off a pace.

"Why do you fear me, Esteban?" she called, walking toward him.

"You tricked me into revealing my method and tried to kill me," he said. "Is that not reason for fear?"

"I did not know you or your method in that form. I knew only that you were hunting me. But now the hunt has ended, and we can be as man and woman."

He kept his machete at point. "What are you?" he asked.

She smiled. "My name is Miranda. I am Patuca."

"Patucas do not have black fur and fangs."

"I am of the Old Patuca," she said. "We have this power."

"Keep away!" He lifted the machete as if to strike, and she stopped just beyond his reach.

"You can kill me if that is your wish, Esteban." She spread her arms, and her breasts thrust forward against the fabric of her dress. "You are stronger than I, now. But listen to me first."

He did not lower the machete, but his fear and anger were being overridden by a sweeter emotion.

"Long ago," she said, "there was a great healer who foresaw that one day the Patuca would lose their place in the world, and so, with the help of the gods, he opened a door into another world where the tribe could flourish. But many of the tribe were afraid and would not follow him. Since then, the door has been left open for those who would come after." She waved at the ruined houses. "Barrio Carolina is the site of the door, and the jaguar is its guardian. But soon the fevers of this world will sweep over the barrio, and the door will close forever. For though our hunt has ended, there is no end to hunters or to greed." She came a step nearer. "If you listen to the sounding of your heart, you will know this is the truth."

He half-believed her, yet he also believed her words masked a more poignant truth, one that fitted inside the other the way his machete fitted into its sheath.

"What is it?" she asked. "What troubles you?"

"I think you have come to prepare me for death," he said, "and that your door leads only to death."

"Then why do you not run from me?" She pointed toward Puerto Morada. "That is death, Esteban. The cries of the gulls are death, and when the hearts of lovers stop at the moment of greatest pleasure, that, too, is death. This world is no more than a thin covering of life drawn over a foundation of death, like a scum of algae upon a rock. Perhaps you are right, perhaps my world lies beyond death. The two ideas are not opposed. But if I am death to you, Esteban, then it is death you love."

He turned his eyes to the sea, not wanting her to see his face. "I do not love you," he said.

"Love awaits us," she said. "And someday you will join me in my world."

He looked back to her, ready with a denial, but was shocked to silence. Her dress had fallen to the sand, and she was smiling. The litheness and purity of the jaguar were reflected in every line of her body; her secret hair was so absolute a black that it seemed an absence in her flesh. She moved close, pushing aside the machete. The tips of her breasts brushed against him, warm through the coarse cloth of his shirt; her hands cupped his face, and he was drowning in her heated scent, weakened by both fear and desire.

"We are of one soul, you and I," she said. "One blood and one truth. You cannot reject me."

Days passed, though Esteban was unclear as to how many. Night and day were unimportant incidences of his relationship with Miranda, serving only to color their lovemaking with a spectral or a sunny mood; and each time they made love, it was as if a thousand new colors were being added to his senses. He had never been so content. Sometimes, gazing at the haunted façades of the barrio, he believed that they might well conceal shadowy avenues leading to another world; however, whenever Miranda tried to convince him to leave with her, he refused: He could not overcome his fear and would never admit—even to himself—that he loved her. He attempted to fix his thoughts on Encarnación, hoping this would undermine his fixation with Miranda and free him to return to Puerto Morada; but he found that he could not picture his wife except as a black bird hunched before a flickering gray jewel. Miranda, however, seemed equally unreal at times. Once as they sat on the bank of the Río Dulce, watching the reflection of the moon—almost full—floating upon the water, she pointed to it and said, "My world is that near, Esteban. That touchable. You may think the moon above is real and this is only a reflection, but the thing most real, that most illustrates the real, is the surface that permits the illusion of reflection. Passing through this surface is what you fear, and yet it is so insubstantial, you would scarcely notice the passage."

"You sound like the old priest who taught me philosophy," said Esteban. "His world—his Heaven—was also philosophy. Is that what your world is? The idea of a place? Or are there birds and jungles and rivers?"

Her expression was in partial eclipse, half-moonlit, half-shadowed, and her voice revealed nothing of her mood. "No more than there are here," she said.

"What does that mean?" he said angrily. "Why will you not give me a clear answer?"

"If I were to describe my world, you would simply think me a clever liar." She rested her head on his shoulder. "Sooner or later you will understand. We did not find each other merely to have the pain of being parted."

In that moment her beauty—like her words—seemed a kind of evasion, obscuring a dark and frightening beauty beneath; and yet he knew that she was right, that no proof of hers could persuade him contrary to his fear.

One afternoon, an afternoon of such brightness that it was impossible to look at the sea without squinting, they swam out to a sandbar that showed as a thin curving island of white against the green water. Esteban floundered and splashed, but Miranda swam as if born to the element; she darted beneath him, tickling him, pulling at his feet, eeling away before he could catch her. They walked along the sand, turning over starfish with their toes, collecting whelks to boil for their dinner, and then Esteban spotted a dark stain hundreds of yards wide that was moving below the water beyond the bar: a great school of king mackerel.

"It is too bad we have no boat," he said. "Mackerel would taste better than whelks."

"We need no boat," she said. "I will show you an old way of catching fish."

She traced a complicated design in the sand, and when she had done, she led him into the shallows and had him stand facing her a few feet away.

"Look down at the water between us," she said. "Do not look up, and keep perfectly still until I tell you."

She began to sing with a faltering rhythm, a rhythm that put him in mind of the ragged breezes of the season. Most of the words were unfamiliar, but others he recognized as Patuca. After a minute he experienced a wave of dizziness, as if his legs had grown long and spindly, and he was now looking down from a great height, breathing rarefied air. Then a tiny dark stain materialized below the expanse of water between him and Miranda. He remembered his grandfather's stories of the Old Patuca, how—with the help of the gods—they had been able to shrink the world, to bring enemies close and cross vast distances in a matter of moments. But the gods were dead, their powers gone from the world. He wanted to glance back to shore and see if he and Miranda had become coppery giants taller than the palms.

"Now," she said, breaking off her song, "you must put your hand into the water on the seaward side of the school and gently wiggle your fingers. Very gently! Be sure not to disturb the surface."

But when Esteban made to do as he was told, he slipped and caused a splash. Miranda cried out. Looking up, he saw a wall of jade-green water bearing down on them, its face thickly studded with the fleeting dark shapes of the mackerel. Before he could move, the wave swept over the sandbar and carried him under, dragging him along the bottom and finally casting him onto shore. The beach was littered with flopping mackerel; Miranda lay in the shallows, laughing at him. Esteban laughed, too, but only to cover up his rekindled fear of this woman who drew upon the powers of dead gods. He had no wish to hear her explanation; he was certain she would tell him that the gods lived on in her world, and this would only confuse him further.

Later that day as Esteban was cleaning the fish, while Miranda was off picking bananas to cook with them—the sweet little ones that grew along the riverbank—a Land Rover came jouncing up the beach from Puerto Morada, an orange fire of the setting sun dancing on its windshield. It pulled up beside him, and

Onofrio climbed out the passenger side. A hectic flush dappled his cheeks, and he was dabbing his sweaty brow with a handkerchief. Raimundo climbed out the driver's side and leaned against the door, staring hatefully at Esteban.

"Nine days and not a word," said Onofrio gruffly. "We thought you were dead. How goes the hunt?"

Esteban set down the fish he had been scaling and stood. "I have failed," he said. "I will give you back the money."

Raimundo chuckled—a dull, cluttered sound—and Onofrio grunted with amusement. "Impossible," he said. "Encarnación has spent the money on a house in Barrio Clarín. You must kill the jaguar."

"I cannot," said Esteban. "I will repay you somehow."

"The Indian has lost his nerve, Father." Raimundo spat in the sand. "Let me and my friends hunt the jaguar."

The idea of Raimundo and his loutish friends thrashing through the jungle was so ludicrous that Esteban could not restrain a laugh.

"Be careful, Indian!" Raimundo banged the flat of his hand on the roof of the car.

"It is you who should be careful," said Esteban. "Most likely the jaguar will be hunting you." Esteban picked up his machete. "And whoever hunts this jaguar will answer to me as well."

Raimundo reached for something in the driver's seat and walked around in front of the hood. In his hand was a silvered automatic. "I await your answer," he said.

"Put that away!" Onofrio's tone was that of a man addressing a child whose menace was inconsequential, but the intent surfacing in Raimundo's face was not childish. A tic marred the plump curve of his cheek, the ligature of his neck was cabled, and his lips were drawn back in a joyless grin. It was, thought Esteban—strangely fascinated by the transformation—like watching a demon dissolve its false shape: the true lean features melting up from the illusion of the soft.

"This son of a whore insulted me in front of Julia!" Raimundo's gun hand was shaking.

"Your personal differences can wait," said Onofrio. "This is a business matter." He held out his hand. "Give me the gun."

"If he is not going to kill the jaguar, what use is he?" said Raimundo.

"Perhaps we can convince him to change his mind." Onofrio beamed at Esteban. "What do you say? Shall I let my son collect his debt of honor, or will you fulfill our contract?"

"Father!" complained Raimundo; his eyes flicked sideways. "He..."

Esteban broke for the jungle. The gun roared, a white-hot claw swiped at his side, and he went flying. For an instant he did not know where he was; but then, one by one, his impressions began to sort themselves. He was lying on his injured side, and it was throbbing fiercely. Sand crusted his mouth and eyelids. He was curled up around his machete, which was still clutched in his hand. Voices above him, sand fleas hopping on his face. He resisted the urge to brush them off and lay without moving. The throb of his wound and his hatred had the same red force behind them.

"...carry him to the river," Raimundo was saying, his voice atremble with excitement. "Everyone will think the jaguar killed him!"

"Fool!" said Onofrio. "He might have killed the jaguar, and you could have had a sweeter revenge. His wife..."

"This was sweet enough," said Raimundo.

A shadow fell over Esteban, and he held his breath. He needed no herbs to deceive this pale, flabby jaguar who was bending to him, turning him onto his back.

"Watch out!" cried Onofrio.

Esteban let himself be turned and lashed out with the machete. His contempt for Onofrio and Encarnación, as well as his hatred of Raimundo, was involved in the blow, and the blade lodged deep in Raimundo's side, grating on bone. Raimundo shrieked and would have fallen, but the blade helped to keep him upright; his hands fluttered around the machete as if he wanted to adjust it to a more comfortable position, and his eyes were wide with disbelief. A shudder vibrated the hilt of the machete—it seemed sensual, the spasm of a spent passion—and Raimundo sank to his knees. Blood spilled from his mouth, adding tragic lines to the corners of his lips. He pitched forward, not falling flat but remaining kneeling, his face pressed into the sand: the attitude of an Arab at prayer.

Esteban wrenched the machete free, fearful of an attack by Onofrio, but the appliance dealer was squirming into the Land Rover. The engine caught, the wheels spun, and the car lurched off, turning through the edge of the surf and heading for Puerto Morada. An orange dazzle flared on the rear window, as if the spirit who had lured it to the barrio was now harrying it away.

Unsteadily, Esteban got to his feet. He peeled his shirt back from the bullet wound. There was a lot of

blood, but it was only a crease. He avoided looking at Raimundo and walked down to the water and stood gazing out at the waves; his thoughts rolled in with them, less thoughts than tidal sweeps of emotion.

It was twilight by the time Miranda returned, her arms full of bananas and wild figs. She had not heard the shot. He told her what had happened as she dressed his wounds with a poultice of herbs and banana leaves. "It will mend," she said of the wound. "But this"—she gestured at Raimundo—"this will not. You must come with me, Esteban. The soldiers will kill you."

"No," he said. "They will come, but they are Patuca... except for the captain, who is a drunkard, a shell of a man. I doubt he will even be notified. They will listen to my story, and we will reach an accommodation. No matter what lies Onofrio tells, his word will not stand against theirs."

"And then?"

"I may have to go to jail for a while, or I may have to leave the province. But I will not be killed."

She sat for a minute without speaking, the whites of her eyes glowing in the half-light. Finally she stood and walked off along the beach.

"Where are you going?" he called.

She turned back. "You speak so casually of losing me..." she began.

"It is not casual!"

"No!" She laughed bitterly. "I suppose not. You are so afraid of life, you call it death and would prefer jail or exile to living it. That is hardly casual." She stared at him, her expression a cipher at that distance. "I will not lose you, Esteban," she said. She walked away again, and this time when he called she did not turn.

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Twilight deepened to dusk, a slow fill of shadow graying the world into negative, and Esteban felt himself graying along with it, his thoughts reduced to echoing the dull wash of the receding tide. The dusk lingered, and he had the idea that night would never fall, that the act of violence had driven a nail through the substance of his irresolute life, pinned him forever to this ashen moment and deserted shore. As a child he had been terrified by the possibility of such magical isolations, but now the prospect seemed a consolation for Miranda's absence, a remembrance of her magic. Despite her parting words, he did not think she would be back—there had been sadness and finality in her voice—and this roused in him feelings of both relief and desolation, feelings that set him to pacing up and down the tidal margin of the shore.

The full moon rose, the sands of the barrio burned silver, and shortly thereafter four soldiers came in a jeep from Puerto Morada. They were gnomish copper-skinned men, and their uniforms were the dark blue of the night sky, bearing no device or decoration. Though they were not close friends, he knew them each by name: Sebastian, Amador, Carlito, and Ramón. In their headlights Raimundo's corpse—startlingly pale, the blood on his face dried into intricate whorls—looked like an exotic creature cast up by the sea, and their inspection of it smacked more of curiosity than of a search for evidence. Amador unearthed Raimundo's gun, sighted along it toward the jungle, and asked Ramón how much he thought it was worth.

"Perhaps Onofrio will give you a good price," said Ramón, and the others laughed.

They built a fire of driftwood and coconut shells, and sat around it while Esteban told his story; he did not mention either Miranda or her relation to the jaguar, because these men—estranged from the tribe by their government service—had grown conservative in their judgments, and he did not want them to consider him irrational. They listened without comment; the firelight burnished their skins to reddish gold and glinted on their rifle barrels.

"Onofrio will take his charge to the capital if we do nothing," said Amador after Esteban had finished.

"He may in any case," said Carlito. "And then it will go hard with Esteban."

"And," said Sebastian, "if an agent is sent to Puerto Morada and sees how things are with Captain Portales, they will surely replace him, and it will go hard with us."

They stared into the flames, mulling over the problem, and Esteban chose the moment to ask Amador, who lived near him on the mountain, if he had seen Encarnación.

"She will be amazed to learn you are alive," said Amador. "I saw her yesterday in the dressmaker's shop. She was admiring the fit of a new black skirt in the mirror."

It was as if a black swath of Encarnación's skirt had folded around Esteban's thoughts. He lowered his head and carved lines in the sand with the point of his machete.

"I have it," said Ramón. "A boycott!"

The others expressed confusion.

"If we do not buy from Onofrio, who will?" said Ramon. "He will lose his business. Threatened with this, he will not dare involve the government. He will allow Esteban to plead self-defense."

"But Raimundo was his only son," said Amador. "It may be that grief will count more than greed in this

instance."

Again they fell silent. It mattered little to Esteban what was decided. He was coming to understand that without Miranda, his future held nothing but uninteresting choices; he turned his gaze to the sky and noticed that the stars and the fire were flickering with the same rhythm, and he imagined each of them ringed by a group of gnomish copper-skinned men, debating the question of his fate.

"Aha!" said Carlito. "I know what to do. We will occupy Barrio Carolina—the entire company—and we will kill the jaguar. Onofrio's greed cannot withstand this temptation."

"That you must not do," said Esteban.

"But why?" asked Amador. "We may not kill the jaguar, but with so many men we will certainly drive it away."

Before Esteban could answer, the jaguar roared. It was prowling down the beach toward the fire, like a black flame itself, shifting over the glowing sand. Its ears were laid back, and silver drops of moonlight gleamed in its eyes. Amador grabbed his rifle, came to one knee, and fired: The bullet sprayed sand a dozen feet to the left of the jaguar.

"Wait!" cried Esteban, pushing him down.

But the rest had begun to fire, and the jaguar was hit. It leaped high as it had that first night while playing, but this time it landed in a heap, snarling, snapping at its shoulder; it regained its feet and limped toward the jungle, favoring its right foreleg. Excited by their success, the soldiers ran a few paces after it and stopped to fire again. Carlito dropped to one knee, taking careful aim.

"No!" shouted Esteban, and as he hurled his machete at Carlito, desperate to prevent further harm to Miranda, he recognized the trap that had been sprung and the consequences he would face.

The blade sliced across Carlito's thigh, knocking him onto his side. He screamed, and Amador, seeing what had happened, fired wildly at Esteban and called to the others. Esteban ran toward the jungle, making for the jaguar's path. A fusillade of shots rang out behind him, bullets whipped past his ears. Each time his feet slipped in the soft sand, the moonstruck façades of the barrio appeared to lurch sideways as if trying to block his way. And then, as he reached the verge of the jungle, he was hit.

The bullet seemed to throw him forward, to increase his speed, but somehow he managed to keep his feet. He careened along the path, arms waving, breath shrieking in his throat. Palmetto fronds swatted his face, vines tangled his legs. He felt no pain, only a peculiar numbness that pulsed low in his back; he pictured the wound opening and closing like the mouth of an anemone. The soldiers were shouting his name. They would follow, but cautiously, afraid of the jaguar, and he thought he might be able to cross the river before they could catch up. But when he came to the river, he found the jaguar waiting.

It was crouched on the tussocky rise, its neck craned over the water, and below, half a dozen feet from the bank, floated the reflection of the full moon, huge and silvery, an unblemished circle of light.

Blood glistened scarlet on the jaguar's shoulder, like a fresh rose pinned in place, and this made it look even more an embodiment of principle: the shape a god might choose, that some universal constant might assume.

It gazed calmly at Esteban, growled low in its throat, and dove into the river, cleaving and shattering the moon's reflection, vanishing beneath the surface. The ripples subsided, the image of the moon re-formed.

And there, silhouetted against it, Esteban saw the figure of a woman swimming, each stroke causing her to grow smaller and smaller until she seemed no more than a character incised upon a silver plate.

It was not only Miranda he saw, but all mystery and beauty receding from him, and he realized how blind he had been not to perceive the truth sheathed inside the truth of death that had been sheathed inside her truth of another world.

It was clear to him now. It sang to him from his wound, every syllable a heartbeat. It was written by the dying ripples, it swayed in the banana leaves, it sighed on the wind. It was everywhere, and he had always known it: If you deny mystery—even in the guise of death—then you deny life and you will walk like a ghost through your days, never knowing the secrets of the extremes. The deep sorrows, the absolute joys.

He drew a breath of the rank jungle air, and with it drew a breath of a world no longer his, of the girl Encarnación, of friends and children and country nights... all his lost sweetness. His chest tightened as with the onset of tears, but the sensation quickly abated, and he understood that the sweetness of the past had been subsumed by a scent of mangoes, that nine magical days—a magical number of days, the number it takes to sing the soul to rest—lay between him and tears.

Freed of those associations, he felt as if he were undergoing a subtle refinement of form, a winnowing, and he remembered having felt much the same on the day when he had run out the door of Santa María del Onda, putting behind him its dark geometries and cobwebbed catechisms and generations of swallows that had never flown beyond the walls, casting off his acolyte's robe and racing across the square toward the

mountain and Encarnación: It had been she who had lured him then, just as his mother had lured him to the church and as Miranda was luring him now, and he laughed at seeing how easily these three women had diverted the flow of his life, how like other men he was in this.

The strange bloom of painlessness in his back was sending out tendrils into his arms and legs, and the cries of the soldiers had grown louder.

Miranda was a tiny speck shrinking against a silver immensity. For a moment he hesitated, experiencing a resurgence of fear; then Miranda's face materialized in his mind's eye, and all the emotion he had suppressed for nine days poured through him, washing away the fear.

It was a silvery, flawless emotion, and he was giddy with it, light with it; it was like thunder and fire fused into one element and boiling up inside him, and he was overwhelmed by a need to express it, to mold it into a form that would reflect its power and purity. But he was no singer, no poet. There was but a single mode of expression open to him.

Hoping he was not too late, that Miranda's door had not shut forever, Esteban dove into the river, cleaving the image of the full moon; and—his eyes still closed from the shock of the splash—with the last of his mortal strength, he swam hard down after her.

R & R

1

One of the new Sikorsky gunships, an element of the First Air Cavalry with the words Whispering Death painted on its side, gave Mingolla and Gilbey and Baylor a lift from the Ant Farm to San Francisco de Juticlan, a small town located inside the green zone which on the latest maps was designated Free Occupied Guatamala. To the east of this green zone lay an undesignated band of yellow that crossed the country from the Mexican border to the Caribbean. The Ant Farm was a firebase on the eastern edge of the yellow band, and it was from there that Mingolla—an artillery specialist not yet twenty-one years old—lobbed shells into an area which the maps depicted in black and white terrain markings. And thus it was that he often thought of himself as engaged in a struggle to keep the world safe for primary colors.

Mingolla and his buddies could have taken their r&r in Ri6 or Caracas, but they had noticed that the men who visited these cities had a tendency to grow careless upon their return; they understood from this that the more exuberant your r&r, the more likely you were to wind up a casualty, and so they always opted for the lesser distractions of the Guatemalan towns. They were not really friends: they had little in common, and under different circumstances they might well have been enemies. But taking their r&r together had come to be a ritual of survival, and once they had reached the town of their choice, they would go their separate ways and perform further rituals. Because they had survived so much already, they believed that if they continued to perform these same rituals they would complete their tours unscathed. They had never acknowledged their belief to one another, speaking of it only obliquely—that, too, was part of the ritual—and had this belief been challenged they would have admitted its irrationally; yet they would also have pointed out that the strange character of the war acted to enforce it.

The gunship set down at an airbase a mile west of town, a cement strip penned in on three sides by barracks and offices, with the jungle rising behind them. At the center of the strip another Sikorsky was practicing take-offs and landings—a drunken, camouflage-colored dragonfly—and two others were hovering overhead like anxious parents. As Mingolla jumped out a hot breeze fluttered his shirt. He was wearing civvies for the first time in weeks, and they felt flimsy compared to his combat gear; he glanced around, nervous, half-expecting an unseen enemy to take advantage of his exposure. Some mechanics were lounging in the shade of a chopper whose cockpit had been destroyed, leaving fanglike shards of plastic curving from the charred metal. Dusty jeeps trundled back and forth beneath the buildings; a brace of crisply starched lieutenants were making a brisk beeline toward a fork-lift stacked high with aluminum coffins. Afternoon sunlight fired dazzles on the seams and handles of the coffins, and through the heat haze the distant line of barracks shifted like waves in a troubled olive-drab sea. The incongruity of the scene—its What's-Wrong-With-This-Picture mix of the horrid and the commonplace—wrenched at Mingolla. His left hand trembled, and the light seemed to grow brighter, making him weak and vague. He leaned against the Sikorsky's rocket pod to steady himself. Far above, contrails were fraying in the deep blue range of the sky: XL-16s off to blow holes in Nicaragua. He stared after them with something akin to longing, listening for their engines, but heard only the spacy whisper of the Sikorskys.

Gilbey hopped down from the hatch that led to the computer deck behind the cockpit; he brushed imaginary dirt from his jeans and sauntered over to Mingolla and stood with hands on hips: a short muscular kid whose blond crewcut and petulant mouth gave him the look of a grumpy child. Baylor stuck his head out of the hatch and worriedly scanned the horizon. Then he, too, hopped down. He was tall and rawboned, a couple of years older than Mingolla, with lank black hair and pimply olive skin and features so sharp that they appeared to have been hatcheted into shape. He rested a hand on the side of the Sikorsky, but almost instantly, noticing that he was touching the flaming letter W in Whispering Death, he jerked the hand away as if he'd been scorched. Three days before there had been an all-out assault on the Ant Farm, and Baylor had not recovered from it. Neither had Mingolla. It was hard to tell whether or not Gilbey had been affected.

One of the Sikorsky's pilots cracked the cockpit door. "Y'all can catch a ride into 'Frisco at the PX," he said, his voice muffled by the black bubble of his visor. The sun shined a white blaze on the visor, making it seem that the helmet contained night and a single star.

"Where's the PX?" asked Gilbey.

The pilot said something too muffled to be understood.

"What?" said Gilbey.

Again the pilot's response was muffled, and Gilbey became angry. "Take that damn thing off!" he said.

"This?" The pilot pointed to his visor. "What for?"

"So I can hear what the hell you sayin'."

"You can hear now, can'tcha?"

"Okay," said Gilbey, his voice tight. "Where's the goddamn PX?"

The pilot's reply was unintelligible; his faceless mask regarded Gilbey with inscrutable intent.

Gilbey balled up his fists. "Take that son of a bitch off!"

"Can't do it, soldier," said the second pilot, leaning over so that the two black bubbles were nearly side by side. "These here doobies"—he tapped his visor—"they got micro-circuits that beams shit into our eyes. Affects the optic nerve. Makes it so we can see the beaners even when they undercover. Longer we wear 'em, the better we see."

Baylor laughed edgily, and Gilbey said, "Bull!" Mingolla naturally assumed that the pilots were putting Gilbey on, or else their reluctance to remove the helmets stemmed from a superstition, perhaps from a deluded belief that the visors actually did bestow special powers. But given a war in which combat drugs were issued and psychics predicted enemy movements, anything was possible, even micro-circuits that enhanced vision.

"You don't wanna see us, nohow," said the first pilot. "The beams mess up our faces. We're deformed-lookin' mothers."

" 'Course you might not notice the changes," said the second pilot. "Lotsa people don't. But if you did, it'd mess you up."

Imagining the pilots' deformities sent a sick chill mounting from Mingolla's stomach. Gilbey, however, wasn't buying it. "You think I'm stupid?" he shouted, his neck reddening.

"Naw," said the first pilot. "We can *see* you ain't stupid. We can see lotsa stuff other people can't, 'cause of the beams."

"All kindsa weird stuff," chipped in the second pilot.

"Like souls."

"Ghosts."

"Even the future."

"The future's our best thing," said the first pilot. "You guys wanna know what's ahead, we'll tell you."

They nodded in unison, the blaze of sunlight sliding across both visors: two evil robots responding to the same program.

Gilbey lunged for the cockpit door. The first pilot slammed it shut, and Gilbey pounded on the plastic, screaming curses. The second pilot flipped a switch on the control console, and a moment later his amplified voice boomed out: "Make straight past that fork-lift 'til you hit the barracks. You'll run right into the PX."

It took both Mingolla and Baylor to drag Gilbey away from the Sikorsky, and he didn't stop shouting until they drew near the fork-lift with its load of coffins: a giant's treasure of enormous silver ingots. Then he grew silent and lowered his eyes. They wangled a ride with an MP corporal outside the PX, and as the jeep hummed across the cement, Mingolla glanced over at the Sikorsky that had transported them. The two pilots had spread a canvas on the ground, had stripped to shorts and were sunning themselves. But they had not removed their helmets. The weird juxtaposition of tanned bodies and shiny black heads disturbed Mingolla, reminding him of an old movie in which a guy had gone through a matter transmitter along with a fly and had ended up with the fly's head on his shoulders. Maybe, he thought, the helmets were like that, impossible to remove. Maybe the war had gotten that strange. The MP corporal noticed him watching the pilots and let out a barking laugh. "Those guys," he said, with the flat emphatic tone of a man who knew whereof he spoke, "are fuckin' nuts!"

Six years before, San Francisco de Juticlan had been a scatter of thatched huts and concrete block structures deployed among palms and banana leaves on the east bank of the Rio Dulce, at the junction of the river and a gravel road that connected with the Pan American Highway; but it had since grown to occupy substantial sections of both banks, increased by dozens of bars and brothels: stucco cubes painted all the colors of the rainbow, with a fantastic bestiary of neon signs mounted atop their tin roofs. Dragons; unicorns; fiery birds; centaurs. The MP corporal told Mingolla that the signs were not advertisements but coded

symbols of pride; for example, from the representation of a winged red tiger crouched amidst green lilies and blue crosses, you could deduce that the owner was wealthy, a member of a Catholic secret society, and ambivalent toward government policies. Old signs were constantly being dismantled, and larger, more ornate ones erected in their stead as testament to improved profits, and this warfare of light and image was appropriate to the time and place, because San Francisco de Juticlan was less a town than a symptom of war. Though by night the sky above it was radiant, at ground level it was mean and squalid. Pariah dogs foraged in piles of garbage, hardbitten whores spat from the windows, and according to the corporal, it was not unusual to stumble across a corpse, probably a victim of the gangs of abandoned children who lived in the fringes of the jungle. Narrow streets of tawny dirt cut between the bars, carpeted with a litter of flattened cans and feces and broken glass; refugees begged at every corner, displaying burns and bullet wounds. Many of the buildings had been thrown up with such haste that their walls were tilted, their roofs canted, and this made the shadows they cast appear exaggerated in their jaggedness, like shadows in the work of a psychotic artist, giving visual expression to a pervasive undercurrent of tension. Yet as Mingolla moved along, he felt at ease, almost happy. His mood was due in part to his hunch that it was going to be one hell of an r&r (he had learned to trust his hunches); but it mainly spoke to the fact that towns like this had become for him a kind of afterlife, a reward for having endured a harsh term of existence.

The corporal dropped them off at a drugstore, where Mingolla bought a box of stationery, and then they stopped for a drink at the Club Demonio: a tiny place whose whitewashed walls were shined to faint phosphorescence by the glare of purple light bulbs dangling from the ceiling like radioactive fruit. The club was packed with soldiers and whores, most sitting at tables around a dance floor not much bigger than a king-size mattress. Two couples were swaying to a ballad that welled from a jukebox encaged in chicken wire and two-by-fours; veils of cigarette smoke drifted with underwater slowness above their heads. Some of the soldiers were mauling their whores, and one whore was trying to steal the wallet of a soldier who was on the verge of passing out; her hand worked between his legs, encouraging him to thrust his hips forward, and when he did this, with her other hand she pried at the wallet stuck in the back pocket of his tight-fitting jeans. But all the action seemed listless, half-hearted, as if the dimness and syrupy music had thickened the air and were hampering movement. Mingolla took a seat at the bar. The bartender glanced at him inquiringly, his pupils becoming cored with purple reflections, and Mingolla said. "Beer."

"Hey, check that out!" Gilbey slid onto an adjoining stool and jerked his thumb toward a whore at the end of the bar. Her skirt was hiked to mid-thigh, and her breasts, judging by their fullness and lack of sag, were likely the product of elective surgery.

"Nice," said Mingolla, disinterested. The bartender set a bottle of beer in front of him, and he had a swig; it tasted sour, watery, like a distillation of the stale air.

Baylor slumped onto the stool next to Gilbey and buried his face in his hands. Gilbey said something to him that Mingolla didn't catch, and Baylor lifted his hand. "I ain't going back," he said.

"Aw, Jesus!" said Gilbey. "Don't start that crap."

In the half-dark Baylor's eye sockets were clotted with shadows. His stare locked onto Mingolla. "They'll get us next time," he said. "We should head downriver. They got boats in Livingston that'll take you to Panama."

"Panama!" sneered Gilbey. "Nothin' there 'cept more beaners."

"We'll be okay at the Farm," offered Mingolla. "Things get too heavy, they'll pull us back."

"Too heavy?" A vein throbbed in Baylor's temple. "What the fuck you call 'too heavy?' "

"Screw this!" Gilbey heaved up from his stool. "You deal with him, man," he said to Mingolla; he gestured at the big-breasted whore. "I'm gonna climb Mount Silicon."

"Nine o'clock," said Mingolla. "The PX. Okay?"

Gilbey said, "Yeah," and moved off. Baylor took over his stool and leaned close to Mingolla. "You know I'm right," he said in an urgent whisper. "They almost got us this time."

"Air Cav'll handle 'em," said Mingolla, affecting nonchalance. He opened the box of stationery and undipped a pen from his shirt pocket.

"You *know* I'm right," Baylor repeated.

Mingolla tapped the pen against his lips, pretending to be distracted.

"Air Cav!" said Baylor with a despairing laugh. "Air Cav ain't gonna do squat!"

"Why don't you put on some decent tunes?" Mingolla suggested. "See if they got any Prowler on the box."

"Dammit!" Baylor grabbed his wrist. "Don't you understand, man? This shit ain't workin' no more!"

Mingolla shook him off. "Maybe you need some change," he said coldly; he dug out a handful of coins and tossed them on the counter. "There! There's some change."

"I'm telling you..."

"I don't wanna hear it!" snapped Mingolla.

"You don't wanna hear it?" said Baylor, incredulous. He was on the verge of losing control. His dark face slick with sweat, one eyelid fluttering. He pounded the countertop for emphasis. "Man, you better hear it! 'Cause we don't pull somethin' together soon, *real* soon, we're gonna die! You hear that, don'tcha?"

Mingolla caught him by the shirtfront. "Shut up!"

"I ain't shuttin' up!" Baylor shrilled. "You and Gilbey, man, you think you can save your ass by stickin' your head in the sand. But I'm gonna make you listen." He threw back his head, his voice rose to a shout. "We're gonna die!"

The way he shouted it—almost gleefully, like a kid yelling a dirty word to spite his parents—pissed Mingolla off. He was sick of Baylor's scenes. Without planning it, he punched him, pulling the punch at the last instant. Kept a hold of his shirt and clipped him on the jaw, just enough to rock back his head. Baylor blinked at him, stunned, his mouth open. Blood seeped from his gums. At the opposite end of the counter, the bartender was leaning beside a choirlike arrangement of liquor bottles, watching Mingolla and Baylor, and some of the soldiers were watching, too: they looked pleased, as if they had been hoping for a spot of violence to liven things up. Mingolla felt debased by their attentiveness, ashamed of his bullying. "Hey, I'm sorry, man," he said. "I..."

"I don't give a shit 'bout you're sorry," said Baylor, rubbing his mouth. "Don't give a shit 'bout nothin' 'cept gettin' the hell outta here."

"Leave it alone, all right?"

But Baylor wouldn't leave it alone. He continued to argue, adopting the long-suffering tone of someone carrying on bravely in the face of great injustice. Mingolla tried to ignore him by studying the label on his beer bottle: a red and black graphic portraying a Guatemalan soldier, his rifle upheld in victory. It was an attractive design, putting him in mind of the poster work he had done before being drafted; but considering the unreliability of Guatemalan troops, the heroic pose was a joke. He gouged a trench through the center of the label with his thumbnail.

At last Baylor gave it up and sat staring down at the warped veneer of the counter. Mingolla let him sit a minute; then, without shifting his gaze from the bottle, he said, "Why don't you put on some decent tunes?"

Baylor tucked his chin onto his chest, maintaining a stubborn silence.

"It's your only option, man," Mingolla went on. "What else you gonna do?"

"You're crazy," said Baylor; he flicked his eyes toward Mingolla and hissed it like a curse. "Crazy!"

"You gonna take off for Panama by yourself? Uh-unh. You know the three of us got something going. We come this far together, and if you just hang tough, we'll go home together."

"I don't know," said Baylor. "I don't know anymore."

"Look at it this way," said Mingolla. "Maybe we're all three of us right. Maybe Panama *is* the answer, but the time just isn't ripe. If that's true, me and Gilbey will see it sooner or later."

With a heavy sigh, Baylor got to his feet. "You ain't never gonna see it, man," he said dejectedly.

Mingolla had a swallow of beer. "Check if they got any Prowler on the box. I could relate to some Prowler."

Baylor stood for a moment, indecisive. He started for the jukebox, then veered toward the door. Mingolla tensed, preparing to run after him. But Baylor stopped and walked back over to the bar. Lines of strain were etched deep in his forehead. "Okay," he said, a catch in his voice. "Okay. What time tomorrow? Nine o'clock?"

"Right," said Mingolla, turning away. "The PX."

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Baylor cross the room and bend over the jukebox to inspect the selections. He felt relieved. This was the way all their r&r had begun, with Gilbey chasing a whore and Baylor feeding the jukebox, while he wrote a letter home. On their first r&r he had written his parents about the war and its bizarre forms of attrition; then, realizing that the letter would alarm his mother, he had torn it up and written another, saying merely that he was fine. He would tear this letter up as well, but he wondered how his father would react if he were to read it. Most likely with anger. His father was a firm believer in God and country, and though Mingolla understood the futility of adhering to any moral code in light of the insanity around him, he had found that something of his father's tenets had been ingrained in him: he would never be able to desert as Baylor kept insisting. He knew it wasn't that simple, that other factors, too, were responsible for his devotion to duty; but since his father would have been happy to accept the responsibility, Mingolla tended to blame it on him. He tried to picture what his parents were doing at that moment—father watching the Mets on TV, mother puttering in the garden—and then, holding those images in mind, he began to write.

"Dear Mom and Dad,

In your last letter you asked if I thought we were winning the war. Down here you'd get a lot of blank stares in

response to that question, because most people have a perspective on the war to which the overall result isn't relevant. Like there's a guy I know who has this rap about how the war is a magical operation of immense proportions, how the movements of the planes and troops are inscribing a mystical sign on the surface of reality, and to survive you have to figure out your location within the design and move accordingly. I'm sure that sounds crazy to you, but down here everyone's crazy the same way (some shrink's actually done a study on the incidence of superstition among the occupation forces). They're looking for a magic that will ensure their survival. You may find it hard to believe that I subscribe to this sort of thing, but I do. I carve my initials on the shell casings, wear parrot feathers inside my helmet... and a lot more.

"To get back to your question, I'll try to do better than a blank stare, but I can't give you a simple Yes or No. The matter can't be summed up that neatly. But I can illustrate the situation by telling you a story and let you draw your own conclusions. There are hundreds of stories that would do, but the one that comes to mind now concerns the Lost Patrol..."

A Prowler tune blasted from the jukebox, and Mingolla broke off writing to listen: it was a furious, jittery music, fueled—it seemed—by the same aggressive paranoia that had generated the war. People shoved back chairs, overturned tables and began dancing in the vacated spaces; they were crammed together, able to do no more than shuffle in rhythm, but their tread set the light bulbs jiggling at the end of their cords, the purple glare slopping over the walls. A slim acne-scarred whore came to dance in front of Mingolla, shaking her breasts, holding out her arms to him. Her face was corpse-pale in the unsteady light, her smile a dead leer. Trickling from one eye, like some exquisite secretion of death, was a black tear of sweat and mascara. Mingolla couldn't be sure he was seeing her right. His left hand started trembling, and for a couple of seconds the entire scene lost its cohesiveness. Everything looked scattered, unrecognizable, embedded in a separate context from everything else: a welter of meaningless objects bobbing up and down on a tide of deranged music. Then somebody opened the door, admitting a wedge of sunlight, and the room settled back to normal. Scowling, the whore danced away. Mingolla breathed easier. The tremors in his hand subsided. He spotted Baylor near the door talking to a scruffy Guatemalan guy... probably a coke connection. Coke was Baylor's panacea, his remedy for fear and desperation. He always returned from r&r bleary-eyed and prone to nosebleeds, boasting about the great dope he'd scored. Pleased that he was following routine, Mingolla went back to his letter.

"...Remember me telling you that the Green Berets took drugs to make them better fighters? Most everyone calls the drugs 'Sammy,' which is short for 'samurai.' They come in ampule form, and when you pop them under your nose, for the next thirty minutes or so you feel like a cross between a Medal-of-Honor winner and superman. The trouble is that a lot of Berets overdo them and flip out. They sell them on the black market, too, and some guys use them for sport. They take the ampules and fight each other in pits... like human cockfights.

"Anyway, about two years ago a patrol of Berets went on patrol up in Fire Zone Emerald, not far from my base, and they didn't come back. They were listed MIA. A month or so after they'd disappeared, somebody started ripping off ampules from various dispensaries. At first the crimes were chalked up to guerrillas, but then a doctor caught sight of the robbers and said they were Americans. They were wearing rotted fatigues, acting nuts. An artist did a sketch of their leader according to the doctor's description, and it turned out to be a dead ringer for the sergeant of that missing patrol. After that they were sighted all over the place. Some of the sightings were obviously false, but others sounded like the real thing. They were said to have shot down a couple of our choppers and to have knocked over a supply column near Zacapas.

"I'd never put much stock in the story, to tell you the truth, but about four months ago this infantryman came walking out of the jungle and reported to the firebase. He claimed he'd been captured by the Lost Patrol, and when I heard his story, I believed him. He said they had told him that they weren't Americans anymore but citizens of the jungle. They lived like animals, sleeping under palm fronds, popping the ampules night and day. They were crazy, but they'd become geniuses at survival. They knew everything about the jungle. When the weather was going to change, what animals were near. And they had this weird religion based on the beams of light that would shine down through the canopy. They'd sit under those beams, like saints being blessed by God, and rave about the purity of the light, the joys of killing, and the new world they were going to build.

"So that's what occurs to me when you ask your questions, mom and dad. The Lost Patrol. I'm not attempting to be circumspect in order to make a point about the horrors of war. Not at all. When I think about the Lost Patrol I'm not thinking about how sad and crazy they are. I'm wondering what it is they see in that light, wondering if it might be of help to me. And maybe therein lies your answer..."

It was coming on sunset by the time Mingolla left the bar to begin the second part of his ritual, to wander innocent as a tourist through the native quarter, partaking of whatever fell to hand, maybe having dinner with a Guatemalan family, or buddying up with a soldier from another outfit and going to church, or hanging out with some young guys who'd ask him about America. He had done each of these things on previous r&rs, and his pretense of innocence always amused him. If he were to follow his inner directives, he would burn out the horrors of the firebase with whores and drugs; but on that first r&r—stunned by the experience of combat and needing solitude—a protracted walk had been his course of action, and he was committed not only to repeating it but also to recapturing his dazed mental set: it would not do to half-ass the ritual. In this instance, given recent events at the Ant Farm, he did not have to work very hard to achieve confusion.

The Rio Duke was a wide blue river, heaving with a light chop. Thick jungle hedged its banks, and yellowish reed beds grew out from both shores. At the spot where the gravel road ended was a concrete pier, and moored to it a barge that served as a ferry; it was already loaded with its full complement of vehicles—two trucks—and carried about thirty pedestrians. Mingolla boarded and stood in the stern beside three infantrymen who were still wearing their combat suits and helmets, holding double-barreled rifles that were connected by flexible tubing to backpack computers; through their smoked faceplates he could see green reflections from the readouts on their visor displays. They made him uneasy, reminding him of the two pilots, and he felt better after they had removed their helmets and proved to have normal human faces. Spanning a third of the way across the river was a sweeping curve of white cement supported by slender columns, like a piece fallen out of a Dali landscape: a bridge upon which construction had been halted. Mingolla had noticed it from the air just before landing and hadn't thought much about it; but now the sight took him by storm. It seemed less an unfinished bridge than a monument to some exalted ideal, more beautiful than any finished bridge could be. And as he stood rapt, with the ferry's oily smoke farting out around him, he sensed there was an analogue of that beautiful curving shape inside him, that he, too, was a road ending in mid-air. It gave him confidence to associate himself with such loftiness and purity, and for a moment he let himself believe that he also might have—as the upward-angled terminus of the bridge implied—a point of completion lying far beyond the one anticipated by the architects of his fate.

On the west bank past the town the gravel road was lined with stalls: skeletal frameworks of brushwood poles roofed with palm thatch. Children chased in and out among them, pretending to aim and fire at each other with stalks of sugar cane. But hardly any soldiers were in evidence. The crowds that moved along the road were composed mostly of Indians: young couples too shy to hold hands; old men who looked lost and poked litter with their canes; dumpy matrons who made outraged faces at the high prices; shoeless farmers who kept their backs ramrod-straight and wore grave expressions and carried their money knotted in handkerchiefs. At one of the stalls Mingolla bought a sandwich and a Coca Cola. He sat on a stool and ate contentedly, relishing the hot bread and the spicy fish cooked inside it, watching the passing parade. Gray clouds were bulking up and moving in from the south, from the Caribbean; now and then a flight of XL-16s would arrow northward toward the oil fields beyond Lake Ixtabal, where the fighting was very bad. Twilight fell. The lights of the town began to be picked out sharply against the empurpling air. Guitars were plucked, hoarse voices sang, the crowds thinned. Mingolla ordered another sandwich and Coke. He leaned back, sipped and chewed, steeping himself in the good magic of the land, the sweetness of the moment. Beside the sandwich stall, four old women were squatting by a cooking fire, preparing chicken stew and corn fritters; scraps of black ash drifted up from the flames, and as twilight deepened, it seemed these scraps were the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle that were fitting together overhead into the image of a starless night.

Darkness closed in, the crowds thickened again, and Mingolla continued his walk, strolling past stalls with necklaces of light bulbs strung along their frames, wires leading off them to generators whose rattle drowned out the chirring of frogs and crickets. Stalls selling plastic rosaries, Chinese switchblades, tin lanterns; others selling embroidered Indian shirts, flour-sack trousers, wooden masks; others yet where old men in shabby suit coats sat cross-legged behind pyramids of tomatoes and melons and green peppers, each with a candle cemented in melted wax atop them, like primitive altars. Laughter, shrieks, vendors shouting. Mingolla breathed in perfume, charcoal smoke, the scents of rotting fruit. He began to idle from stall to stall, buying a few souvenirs for friends back in New York, feeling part of the hustle, the noise, the shining black air, and eventually he came to a stall around which forty or fifty people had gathered, blocking all but its thatched roof from view. A woman's amplified voice cried out, "*LA MARIPOSA!*" Excited squeals from the crowd. Again the woman cried out, "*EL CUCHILLO!*" The two words she had called—the butterfly and the

knife—intrigued Mingolla, and he peered over heads.

Framed by the thatch and rickety poles, a dusky-skinned young woman was turning a handle that spun a wire cage: it was filled with white plastic cubes, bolted to a plank counter. Her black hair was pulled back from her face, tied behind her neck, and she wore a red sundress that left her shoulders bare. She stopped cranking, reached into the cage and without looking plucked one of the cubes; she examined it, picked up a microphone and cried, "*LA LUNA!*" A bearded guy pushed forward and handed her a card. She checked the card, comparing it to some cubes that were lined up on the counter; then she gave the bearded guy a few bills in Guatemalan currency.

The composition of the game appealed to Mingolla. The dark woman; her red dress and cryptic words; the runelike shadow of the wire cage; all this seemed magical, an image out of an occult dream. Part of the crowd moved off, accompanying the winner, and Mingolla let himself be forced closer by new arrivals pressing in from behind. He secured a position at the corner of the stall, fought to maintain it against the eddying of the crowd, and on glancing up, he saw the woman smiling at him from a couple of feet away, holding out a card and a pencil stub. "Only ten cents Guatemalan," she said in American-sounding English.

The people flanking Mingolla urged him to play, grinning and clapping him on the back. But he didn't need urging. He knew he was going to win: it was the clearest premonition he had ever had, and it was signaled mostly by the woman herself. He felt a powerful attraction to her. It was as if she were a source of heat... not of heat alone but also of vitality, sensuality, and now that he was within range, that heat was washing over him, making him aware of a sexual tension developing between them, bringing with it the knowledge that he would win. The strength of the attraction surprised him, because his first impression had been that she was exotic-looking but not beautiful. Though slim, she was a little wide-hipped, and her breasts, mounded high and served up in separate scoops by her tight bodice, were quite small. Her face, like her coloring, had an East Indian cast, its features too large and voluptuous to suit the delicate bone structure; yet they were so expressive, so finely cut, that their disproportion came to seem a virtue. Except that it was thinner, it might have been the face of one of those handmaidens you see on Hindu religious posters, kneeling beneath Krishna's throne. Very sexy, very serene. That serenity, Mingolla decided, wasn't just a veneer. It ran deep. But at the moment he was more interested in her breasts. They looked nice pushed up like that, gleaming with a sheen of sweat. Two helpings of shaky pudding.

The woman waggled the card, and he took it: a simplified Bingo card with symbols instead of letters and numbers. "Good luck," she said, and laughed, as if in reaction to some private irony. Then she began to spin the cage.

Mingolla didn't recognize many of the words she called, but an old man cozied up to him and pointed to the appropriate square whenever he got a match. Soon several rows were almost complete. "*LA MANZANA!*" cried the woman, and the old man tugged at Mingolla's sleeve, shouting, "*Se gano!*"

As the woman checked his card, Mingolla thought about the mystery she presented. Her calmness, her unaccented English and the upper class background it implied, made her seem out of place here. Maybe she was a student, her education interrupted by the war... though she might be a bit too old for that. He figured her to be twenty-two or twenty-three. Graduate school, maybe. But there was an air of worldliness about her that didn't support that theory. He watched her eyes dart back and forth between the card and the plastic cubes. Large, heavy-lidded eyes. The whites stood in such sharp contrast to her dusky skin that they looked fake: milky stones with black centers.

"You see?" she said, handing him his winnings—about three dollars—and another card.

"See what?" Mingolla asked, perplexed.

But she had already begun to spin the cage again.

He won three of the next seven cards. People congratulated him, shaking their heads in amazement; the old man cozied up further, suggesting in sign language that he was the agency responsible for Mingolla's good fortune. Mingolla, however, was nervous. His ritual was founded on a principle of small miracles, and though he was certain the woman was cheating on his behalf (that, he assumed, had been the meaning of her laughter, her "You see?"), though his luck was not really luck, its excessiveness menaced that principle. He lost three cards in a row, but thereafter won two of four and grew even more nervous. He considered leaving. But what if it *were* luck? Leaving might run him afoul of a higher principle, interfere with some cosmic process and draw down misfortune. It was a ridiculous idea, but he couldn't bring himself to risk the faint chance that it might be true.

He continued to win. The people who had congratulated him became disgruntled and drifted off, and when there were only a handful of players left, the woman closed down the game. A grimy street kid materialized from the shadows and began dismantling the equipment. Unbolting the wire cage, unplugging

the microphone, boxing up the plastic cubes, stuffing it all into a burlap sack. The woman moved out from behind the stall and leaned against one of the roofpoles. Half-smiling, she cocked her head, appraising Mingolla, and then—just as the silence between them began to get prickly—she said, "My name's Debora."

"David." Mingolla felt as awkward as a fourteen-year-old; he had to resist the urge to jam his hands into his pockets and look away.

"Why'd you cheat?" he asked; in trying to cover his nervousness, he said it too loudly and it sounded like an accusation.

"I wanted to get your attention," she said. "I'm... interested in you. Didn't you notice?"

"I didn't want to take it for granted."

She laughed. "I approve! It's always best to be cautious."

He liked her laughter; it had an easiness that made him think she would celebrate the least good thing.

Three men passed by arm-in-arm, singing drunkenly. One yelled at Debora, and she responded with an angry burst of Spanish. Mingolla could guess what had been said, that she had been insulted for associating with an American. "Maybe we should go somewhere," he said. "Get off the streets."

"After he's finished." She gestured at the kid, who was now taking down the string of light bulbs. "It's funny," she said. "I have the gift myself, and I'm usually uncomfortable around anyone else who has it. But not with you."

"The gift?" Mingolla thought he knew what she was referring to, but was leery about admitting to it.

"What do you call it? ESP?"

He gave up the idea of denying it. "I never put a name on it," he said.

"It's strong in you. I'm surprised you're not with Psicorp."

He wanted to impress her, to cloak himself in a mystery equal to hers. "How do you know I'm not?"

"I could tell." She pulled a black purse from behind the counter. "After drug therapy there's a change in the gift, in the way it comes across. It doesn't feel as hot, for one thing." She glanced up from the purse. "Or don't you perceive it that way? As heat."

"I've been around people who felt hot to me," he said. "But I didn't know what it meant."

"That's what it means... sometimes." She stuffed some bills into the purse. "So, why aren't you with Psicorp?"

Mingolla thought back to his first interview with a Psicorp agent: a pale, balding man with the innocent look around the eyes that some blind people have. While Mingolla had talked, the agent had fondled the ring Mingolla had given him to hold, paying no mind to what was being said, and had gazed off distractedly, as if listening for echoes. "They tried hard to recruit, me," Mingolla said. "But I was scared of the drugs. I heard they had bad side-effects."

"You're lucky it was voluntary," she said. "Here they just snap you up."

The kid said something to her; he swung the burlap sack over his shoulder, and after a rapid-fire exchange of Spanish he ran off toward the river. The crowds were still thick, but more than half the stalls had shut down; those that remained open looked—with their thatched roofs and strung lights and beshawled women—like crude nativity scenes ranging the darkness. Beyond the stalls, neon signs winked on and off: a chaotic menagerie of silver eagles and crimson spiders and indigo dragons. Watching them burn and vanish, Mingolla experienced a wave of dizziness. Things were starting to look disconnected as they had at the Club Demonio.

"Don't you feel well?" she asked.

"I'm just tired."

She turned him to face her, put her hands on his shoulders. "No," she said. "It's something else."

The weight of her hands, the smell of her perfume, helped to steady him. "There was an assault on the fire-base a few days ago," he said. "It's still with me a little, y'know."

She gave his shoulders a squeeze and stepped back. "Maybe I can do something." She said this with such gravity, he thought she must have something specific in mind. "How's that?" he asked.

"I'll tell you at dinner... that is, if you're buying." She took his arm, jollying him. "You owe me that much, don't you think, after all your good luck?"

"Why aren't *you* with Psicorp?" he asked as they walked.

She didn't answer immediately, keeping her head down, nudging a scrap of cellophane with her toe. They were moving along an uncrowded street, bordered on the left by the river—a channel of sluggish black lacquer—and on the right by the windowless rear walls of some bars. Overhead, behind a latticework of supports, a neon lion shed a baleful green nimbus. "I was in school in Miami when they started testing here," she said at last. "And after I came home, my family got on the wrong side of Department Six. You know Department Six?"

"I've heard some stuff."

"Sadists don't make efficient bureaucrats," she said. "They were more interested in torturing us than in determining our value."

Their footsteps crunched in the dirt; husky jukebox voices cried out for love from the next street over. "What happened?" Mingolla asked.

"To my family?" She shrugged. "Dead. No one ever bothered to confirm it, but it wasn't necessary. Confirmation, I mean." She went a few steps in silence. "As for me..." A muscle bunched at the corner of her mouth. "I did what I had to."

He was tempted to ask for specifics, but thought better of it. "I'm sorry," he said, and then kicked himself for having made such a banal comment.

They passed a bar lorded over by a grinning red-and-purple neon ape. Mingolla wondered if these glowing figures had meaning for guerrillas with binoculars in the hills: gone-dead tubes signaling times of attack or troop movements. He cocked an eye toward Debora. She didn't look despondent as she had a second before, and that accorded with his impression that her calmness was a product of self-control, that her emotions were strong but held in tight check and only let out for exercise. From out on the river came a solitary splash, some cold fleck of life surfacing briefly, then returning to its long ignorant glide through the dark... and his life no different really, though maybe less graceful. How strange it was to be walking beside this woman who gave off heat like a candle-flame, with earth and sky blended into a black gas, and neon totems standing guard overhead.

"Shit," said Debora under her breath.

It surprised him to hear her curse. "What is it?"

"Nothing," she said wearily. "Just 'shit.' " She pointed ahead and quickened her pace. "Here we are."

The restaurant was a working-class place that occupied the ground floor of a hotel: a two-story building of yellow concrete block with a buzzing Fanta sign hung above the entrance. Hundreds of moths swarmed about the sign, flickering whitely against the darkness, and in front of the steps stood a group of teenage boys who were throwing knives at an iguana. The iguana was tied by its hind legs to the step railing. It had amber eyes, a hide the color of boiled cabbage, and it strained at the end of its cord, digging its claws into the dirt and arching its neck like a pint-size dragon about to take flight. As Mingolla and Debora walked up, one of the boys scored a hit in the iguana's tail and it flipped high into the air, shaking loose the knife. The boys passed around a bottle of rum to celebrate.

Except for the waiter—*a* pudgy young guy leaning beside a door that opened onto a smoke-filled kitchen—the place was empty. Glaring overhead lights shined up the grease spots on the plastic tablecloths and made the uneven thicknesses of yellow paint appear to be dripping. The cement floor was freckled with dark stains that Mingolla discovered to be the remains of insects. However, the food turned out to be pretty good, and Mingolla shoveled down a plateful of chicken and rice before Debora had half-finished hers. She ate deliberately, chewing each bite a long time, and he had to carry the conversation. He told her about New York, his painting, how a couple of galleries had showed interest even though he was just a student. He compared his work to Rauschen-berg, to Silvestre. Not as good, of course. Not yet. He had the notion that everything he told her—no matter its irrelevance to the moment—was securing the relationship, establishing subtle ties: he pictured the two of them enwebbed in a network of luminous threads that acted as conduits for their attraction. He could feel her heat more strongly than ever, and he wondered what it would be like to make love to her, to be swallowed by that perception of heat. The instant he wondered this, she glanced up and smiled, as if sharing the thought. He wanted to ratify his sense of intimacy, to tell her something he had told no one else, and so—having only one important secret—he told her about the ritual.

She laid down her fork and gave him a penetrating look. "You can't really believe that," she said.

"I know it sounds..."

"Ridiculous," she broke in. "That's how it sounds."

"It's the truth," he said defiantly.

She picked up her fork again, pushed around some grains of rice. "How is it for you," she said, "when you have a premonition? I mean, what happens? Do you have dreams, hear voices?"

"Sometimes I just know things," he said, taken aback by her abrupt change of subject. "And sometimes I see pictures. It's like with a TV that's not working right. Fuzziness at first, then a sharp image."

"With me, it's dreams. And hallucinations. I don't know what else to call them." Her lips thinned; she sighed, appearing to have reached some decision. "When I first saw you, just for a second, you were wearing battle gear. There were inputs on the gauntlets, cables attached to the helmet. The faceplate was shattered, and your face... it was pale, bloody." She put her handout to cover his. "What I saw was very clear, David. You can't go back."

He hadn't described artilleryman's gear to her, and no way could she have seen it. Shaken, he said, "Where am I gonna go?"

"Panama," she said. "I can help you get there."

She suddenly snapped into focus. You find her, dozens like her, in any of the r&r towns. Preaching pacifism, encouraging desertion. Do-gooders, most with guerrilla connections. And that, he realized, must be how she had known about his gear. She had probably gathered information on the different types of units in order to lend authenticity to her dire pronouncements. His opinion of her wasn't diminished; on the contrary, it went up a notch. She was risking her life by talking to him. But her mystery had been dimmed.

"I can't do that," he said.

"Why not? Don't you believe me?"

"It wouldn't make any difference if I did."

"I..."

"Look," he said. "This friend of mine, he's always trying to convince me to desert, and there've been times I wanted to. But it's just not in me. My feet won't move that way. Maybe you don't understand, but that's how it is."

"This childish thing you do with your two friends," she said after a pause. "That's what's holding you here, isn't it?"

"It isn't childish."

"That's exactly what it is. Like a child walking home in the dark and thinking that if he doesn't look at the shadows, nothing will jump out at him."

"You don't understand," he said.

"No, I suppose I don't." Angry, she threw her napkin down on the table and stared intently at her plate as if reading some oracle from the chicken bones.

"Let's talk about something else," said Mingolla.

"I have to go," she said coldly.

"Because I won't desert?"

"Because of what'll happen if you don't." She leaned toward him, her voice burred with emotion. "Because knowing what I do about your future, I don't want to wind up in bed with you."

Her intensity frightened him. Maybe she *had* been telling the truth. But he dismissed the possibility. "Stay," he said. "We'll talk some more about it."

"You wouldn't listen." She picked up her purse and got to her feet.

The waiter ambled over and laid the check beside Mingolla's plate; he pulled a plastic bag filled with marijuana from his apron pocket and dangled it in front of Mingolla. "Gotta get her in the mood, man," he said. Debora railed at him in Spanish. He shrugged and moved off, his slow-footed walk an advertisement for his goods.

"Meet me tomorrow then," said Mingolla. "We can talk more about it tomorrow."

"No."

"Why don't you gimme a break?" he said. "This is all coming down pretty fast, y'know. I get here this afternoon, meet you, and an hour later you're saying, 'Death is in the cards, and Panama's your only hope.' I need some time to think. Maybe by tomorrow I'll have a different attitude."

Her expression softened but she shook her head, No.

"Don't you think it's worth it?"

She lowered her eyes, fussed with the zipper of her purse a second and let out a rueful hiss. "Where do you want to meet?"

"How 'bout the pier on this side? 'Round noon."

She hesitated. "All right." She came around to his side of the table, bent down and brushed her lips across his cheek. He tried to pull her close and deepen the kiss, but she slipped away. He felt giddy, overheated. "You really gonna be there?" he asked.

She nodded but seemed troubled, and she didn't look back before vanishing down the steps.

Mingolla sat a while, thinking about the kiss, its promise. He might have sat even longer, but three drunken soldiers staggered in and began knocking over chairs, giving the waiter a hard time. Annoyed, Mingolla went to the door and stood taking in hits of the humid air. Moths were loosely constellated on the curved plastic of the Fanta sign, trying to get next to the bright heat inside it, and he had a sense of relation, of sharing their yearning for the impossible. He started down the steps but was brought up short. The teenage boys had gone; however, their captive iguana lay on the bottom step, bloody and unmoving. Bluish-gray strings spilled from a gash in its throat. It was such a clear sign of bad luck, Mingolla went back inside and checked into the hotel upstairs.

The hotel corridors stank of urine and disinfectant. A drunken Indian with his fly unzipped and a bloody mouth was pounding on one of the doors. As Mingolla passed him, the Indian bowed and made a sweeping gesture, a parody of welcome. Then he went back to his pounding. Mingolla's room was a windowless cell five feet wide and coffin-length, furnished with a sink and a cot and a chair. Cobwebs and dust clotted the glass of the transom, reducing the hallway light to a cold bluish-white glow. The walls were filmy with more cobwebs, and the sheets were so dirty that they looked to have a pattern. He lay down and closed his eyes, thinking about Debora. About ripping off that red dress and giving her a vicious screwing. How she'd cry out. That both made him ashamed and gave him a hard-on. He tried to think about making love to her tenderly. But tenderness, it seemed, was beyond him. He went flaccid. Jerking-ofF wasn't worth the effort, he decided. He started to unbutton his shirt, remembered the sheets and figured he'd be better off with his clothes on. In the blackness behind his lids he began to see explosive flashes, and within those flashes were images of the assault on the Ant Farm. The mist, the tunnels. He blotted them out with the image of Debora's face, but they kept coming back. Finally he opened his eyes. Two... no, three fuzzy-looking black stars were silhouetted against the transom. It was only when they began to crawl that he recognized them to be spiders. Big ones. He wasn't usually afraid of spiders, but these particular spiders terrified him. If he hit them with his shoe he'd break the glass and they'd eject him from the hotel. He didn't want to kill them with his hands. After a while he sat up, switched on the overhead and searched under the cot. There weren't any more spiders. He lay back down, feeling shaky and short of breath. Wishing he could talk to someone, hear a familiar voice. "It's okay," he said to the dark air. But that didn't help. And for a long time, until he felt secure enough to sleep, he watched the three black stars crawling across the transom, moving toward the center, touching each other, moving apart, never making any real progress, never straying from their area of bright confinement, their universe of curdled, frozen light.

2

In the morning Mingolla crossed to the west bank and walked toward the airbase. It was already hot, but the air still held a trace of freshness and the sweat that beaded on his forehead felt clean and healthy. White dust was settling along the gravel road, testifying to the recent passage of traffic; past the town and the cut-off that led to the uncompleted bridge, high walls of vegetation crowded close to the road, and from within them he heard monkeys and insects and birds: sharp sounds that enlivened him, making him conscious of the play of his muscles. About halfway to the base he spotted six Guatemalan soldiers coming out of the jungle, dragging a couple of bodies; they tossed them onto the hood of their jeep, where two other bodies were lying. Drawing near, Mingolla saw that the dead were naked children, each with a neat hole in his back. He had intended to walk on past, but one of the soldiers—a gnomish, copper-skinned man in dark blue fatigues—blocked his path and demanded to check his papers. All the soldiers gathered around to study the papers, whispering, turning them sideways, scratching their heads. Used to such hassles, Mingolla paid them no attention and looked at the dead children.

They were scrawny, sun-darkened, lying face down with their ragged hair hanging in a fringe off the hood; their skins were pocked by infected mosquito bites, and the flesh around the bullet holes was ridged-up and bruised. Judging by their size, Mingolla guessed them to be about ten years old; but then he noticed that one was a girl with a teenage fullness to her buttocks, her breasts squashed against the metal. That made him indignant. They were only wild children who survived by robbing and killing, and the Guatemalan soldiers were only doing their duty: they performed a function comparable to that of the birds that hunted ticks on the hide of a rhinoceros, keeping their American beast pest-free and happy. But it wasn't right for the children to be laid out like game.

The soldier gave back Mingolla's papers. He was now all smiles, and—perhaps in the interest of solidifying Guatemalan-American relations, perhaps because he was proud of his work—he went over to the jeep and lifted the girl's head by the hair so Mingolla could see her face. "*Banditas!*" he said, arranging his features into a comical frown. The girl's face was not unlike the soldier's, with the same blade of a nose and prominent cheekbones. Fresh blood glistened on her lips, and the faded tattoo of a coiled serpent centered her forehead. Her eyes were open, and staring into them—despite their cloudiness—Mingolla felt that he had made a connection, that she was regarding him sadly from somewhere behind those eyes, continuing to die past the point of clinical death. Then an ant crawled out of her nostril, perching on the crimson curve of her lip, and the eyes merely looked vacant. The soldier let her head fall and wrapped his hand in the hair of a second corpse; but before he could lift it, Mingolla turned away and headed down the road toward the airbase.

There was a row of helicopters lined up at the edge of the landing strip, and walking between them, Mingolla saw the two pilots who had given him a ride from the Ant Farm. They were stripped to shorts and helmets, wearing baseball gloves, and they were playing catch, lofting high flies to one another. Behind them, atop their Sikorsky, a mechanic was fussing with the main rotor housing. The sight of the pilots didn't disturb Mingolla as it had the previous day; in fact, he found their weirdness somehow comforting. Just then, the ball eluded one of them and bounced Mingolla's way. He snagged it and flipped it back to the nearer of the pilots, who came loping over and stood pounding the ball into the pocket of his glove. With his black reflecting face and sweaty, muscular torso, he looked like an eager young mutant.

"How's she goin'?" he asked. "Seem like you a little tore down this mornin'."

"I feel okay," said Mingolla defensively. " 'Course"—he smiled, making light of his defensiveness—"maybe you see something I don't."

The pilot shrugged; the sprightliness of the gesture seemed to convey good humor.

Mingolla pointed to the mechanic. "You guys broke down, huh?"

"Just overhaul. We're goin' back up early tomorrow. Need a lift?"

"Naw, I'm here for a week."

An eerie current flowed through Mingolla's left hand, setting up a palsied shaking. It was bad this time, and he jammed the hand into his hip pocket. The olive-drab line of barracks appeared to twitch, to suffer a dislocation and shift farther away; the choppers and jeeps and uniformed men on the strip looked toylike: pieces in a really neat GI Joe Airbase kit. Mingolla's hand beat against the fabric of his trousers like a sick heart.

"I gotta get going," he said.

"Hang in there," said the pilot. "You be awright."

The words had a flavor of diagnostic assurance that almost convinced Mingolla of the pilot's ability to know his fate, that things such as fate could be known. "You honestly believe what you were saying yesterday, man?" he asked. " 'Bout your helmets? 'Bout knowing the future?"

The pilot bounced the ball on the cement, snatched it at the peak of its rebound and stared down at it. Mingolla could see the seams and brand name reflected in the visor, but nothing of the face behind it, no evidence either of normalcy or deformity. "I get asked that a lot," said the pilot. "People raggin' me y'know. But you ain't raggin' me, are you, man?"

"No," said Mingolla. "I'm not."

"Well," said the pilot, "it's this way. We buzz 'round up in the nothin', and we see shit down on the ground, shit nobody else sees. Then we blow that shit away. Been doin' it like that for ten months, and we're still alive. Fuckin' A, I believe it!"

Mingolla was disappointed. "Yeah, okay," he said.

"You hear what I'm savin'?" asked the pilot. "I mean we're livin' goddamn proof."

"Uh-huh." Mingolla scratched his neck, trying to think of a diplomatic response, but thought of none. "Guess I'll see you." He started toward the PX.

"Hang in there, man!" the pilot called after him. "Take it from me! Things gonna be lookin' up for you real soon!"

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The canteen in the PX was a big, barnlike room of unpainted boards; it was of such recent construction that Mingolla could still smell sawdust and resin. Thirty or forty tables; a jukebox; bare walls. Behind the bar at the rear of the room, a sour-faced corporal with a clipboard was doing a liquor inventory, and Gilbey—the only customer—was sitting by one of the east windows, stirring a cup of coffee. His brow was furrowed, and a ray of sunlight shone down around him, making it look that he was being divinely inspired to do some soul-searching.

"Where's Baylor?" asked Mingolla, sitting opposite him.

"Fuck, I dunno," said Gilbey, not taking his eyes from the coffee cup. "He'll be here."

Mingolla kept his left hand in his pocket. The tremors were diminishing, but not quickly enough to suit him; he was worried that the shaking would spread as it had after the assault. He let out a sigh, and in letting it out he could feel all his nervous flutters. The ray of sunlight seemed to be humming a wavery golden note, and that, too, worried him. Hallucinations. Then he noticed a fly buzzing against the windowpane. "How was it last night?" he asked.

Gilbey glanced up sharply. "Oh, you mean Big Tits. She lemme check her for lumps." He forced a grin, then went back to stirring his coffee.

Mingolla was hurt that Gilbey hadn't asked about his night; he wanted to tell him about Debora. But that

was typical of Gilbey's self-involvement. His narrow eyes and sulky mouth were the imprints of a mean-spiritedness that permitted few concerns aside from his own well-being. Yet despite his insensitivity, his stupid rages and limited conversation, Mingolla believed that he was smarter than he appeared, that disguising one's intelligence must have been a survival tactic in Detroit, where he had grown up. It was his craftiness that gave him away: his insights into the personalities of adversary lieutenants; his slickness at avoiding unpleasant duty; his ability to manipulate his peers. He wore stupidity like a cloak, and perhaps he had worn it for so long that it could not be removed. Still, Mingolla envied him its virtues, especially the way it had numbed him to the assault.

"He's never been late before," said Mingolla after a while.

"So what he's fuckin' late!" snapped Gilbey, glowering. "He'll be here!"

Behind the bar, the corporal switched on a radio and spun the dial past Latin music, past Top Forty, then past an American voice reporting the baseball scores. "Hey!" called Gilbey. "Let's hear that, man! I wanna see what happened to the Tigers." With a shrug, the corporal complied.

"... White Sox six, A's three," said the announcer. "That's eight in a row for the Sox..."

"White Sox are kickin' some ass," said the corporal, pleased.

"The White Sox!" Gilbey sneered. "What the White Sox got 'cept a buncha beaners hittin' two hunnerd and some coke-sniffin' niggers? Shit! Every spring the White Sox are flyin', man. But then 'long comes summer and the good drugs hit the street and they fuckin' die!"

"Yeah," said the corporal, "but this year..."

"Take that son of a bitch Caldwell," said Gilbey, ignoring him. "I seen him coupla years back when he had a trial with the Tigers. Man, that guy could hit! Now he shuffles up there like he's just feelin' the breeze."

"They ain't takin' drugs, man," said the corporal testily. "They can't take 'em 'cause there's these tests that show if they's on somethin'."

Gilbey barreled ahead. "White Sox ain't gotta chance, man! Know what the guy on TV calls 'em sometimes? The Pale Hose! The fuckin' Pale Hose! How you gonna win with a name like that? The Tigers, now, they got the right kinda name. The Yankees, the Braves, the..."

"Bullshit, man!" The corporal was becoming upset; he set down his clipboard and walked to the end of the bar. "What 'bout the Dodgers? They gotta wimpy name and they're a good team. Your name don't mean shit!"

"The Reds," suggested Mingolla; he was enjoying Gilbey's rap, its stubbornness and irrationality. Yet at the same time he was concerned by its undertone of desperation: appearances to the contrary, Gilbey was not himself this morning.

"Oh, yeah!" Gilbey smacked the table with the flat of his hand. "The Reds! Lookit the Reds, man! Lookit how good they been doin' since the Cubans come into the war. You think that don't mean nothin'? You think their name ain't helpin' 'em? Even if they get in the Series, the Pale Hose don't gotta prayer against the Reds." He laughed—a hoarse grunt. "I'm a Tiger fan, man, but I gotta feelin' this ain't their year, y'know. The Reds are tearin' up the NL East, and the Yankees is comin' on, and when they get together in October, man, then we gonna find out alia 'bout everything. Alia 'bout fuckin' everything!" His voice grew tight and tremulous. "So don't gimme no trouble 'bout the candyass Pale Hose, man! They ain't shit and they never was and they ain't gonna be shit 'til they change their fuckin' name!"

Sensing danger, the corporal backed away from confrontation, and Gilbey lapsed into a moody silence. For a while there were only the sounds of chopper blades and the radio blatting out cocktail jazz. Two mechanics wandered in for an early morning beer, and not long after that three fatherly-looking sergeants with potbellies and thinning hair and quartermaster insignia on their shoulders sat at a nearby table and started up a game of rummy. The corporal brought them a pot of coffee and a bottle of whiskey, which they mixed and drank as they played. Their game had an air of custom, of something done at this time every day, and watching them, taking note of their fat, pampered ease, their old-buddy familiarity, Mingolla felt proud of his palsied hand. It was an honorable affliction, a sigh that he had participated in the heart of the war as these men had not. Yet he bore them no resentment. None whatsoever. Rather it gave him a sense of security to know that three such fatherly men were here to provide him with food and liquor and new boots. He basked in the dull, happy clutter of their talk, in the haze of cigar smoke that seemed the exhaust of their contentment. He believed that he could go to them, tell them his problems and receive folksy advice. They were here to assure him of the tightness of his purpose, to remind him of simple American values, to lend an illusion of fraternal involvement to the war, to make clear that it was merely an exercise in good fellowship and tough-mindedness, an initiation rite that these three men had long ago passed through, and after the war they would all get rings and medals and pal around together and talk about bloodshed and terror with head-shaking wonderment and nostalgia, as if bloodshed and terror were old, lost friends whose natures

they had not fully appreciated at the time... Mingolla realized then that a smile had stretched his facial muscles taut, and that his train of thought had been leading him into spooky mental territory. The tremors in his hand were worse than ever. He checked his watch. It was almost ten o'clock. *Ten o'clock!* In a panic, he scraped back his chair and stood.

"Let's look for him," he said to Gilbey.

Gilbey started to say something but kept it to himself. He tapped his spoon hard against the edge of the table. Then he, too, scraped back his chair and stood.

Baylor was not to be found at the Club Demonio or any of the bars on the west bank. Gilbey and Mingolla described him to everyone they met, but no one remembered him. The longer the search went on, the more insecure Mingolla became. Baylor was necessary, an essential underpinning of the platform of habits and routines that supported him, that let him live beyond the range of war's weapons and the laws of chance, and should that underpinning be destroyed... In his mind's eye he saw the platform tipping, him and Gilbey toppling over the edge, cartwheeling down into an abyss filled with black flames. Once Gilbey said, "Panama! The son of a bitch run off to Panama." But Mingolla didn't think this was the case. He was certain that Baylor was close at hand. His certainty had such a valence of clarity that he became even more insecure, knowing that this sort of clarity often heralded a bad conclusion.

The sun climbed higher, its heat an enormous weight pressing down, its light leaching color from the stucco walls, and Mingolla's sweat began to smell rancid. Only a few soldiers were on the streets, mixed in with the usual run of kids and beggars, and the bars were empty except for a smattering of drunks still on a binge from the night before. Gilbey stumped along, grabbing people by the shirt and asking his questions. Mingolla, however, terribly conscious of his trembling hand, nervous to the point of stammering, was forced to work out a stock approach whereby he could get through these brief interviews. He would amble up, keeping his right side forward, and say, "I'm looking for a friend of mine. Maybe you seen him? Tall guy. Olive skin, black hair, thin. Name's Baylor." He came to be able to let this slide off his tongue in a casual unreeling.

Finally Gilbey had had enough. "I'm gonna hang out with Big Tits," he said. "Meet'cha at the PX tomorrow." He started to walk off, but turned and added, "You wanna get in touch Tore tomorrow, I'll be at the Club Demonio." He had an odd expression on his face. It was as if he were trying to smile reassuringly, but—due to his lack of practice with smiles—it looked forced and foolish and not in the least reassuring.

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Around eleven o'clock Mingolla wound up leaning against a pink stucco wall, watching out for Baylor in the thickening crowds. Beside him, the sun-browned fronds of a banana tree were feathering in the wind, making a crispy sound whenever a gust blew them back into the wall. The roof of the bar across the street was being repaired: patches of new tin alternating with narrow strips of rust that looked like enormous strips of bacon laid there to fry. Now and then he would let his gaze drift up to the unfinished bridge, a great sweep of magical whiteness curving into the blue, rising above the town and the jungle and the war. Not even the heat haze rippling from the tin roof could warp its smoothness. It seemed to be orchestrating the stench, the mutter of the crowds, and the jukebox music into a tranquil unity, absorbing those energies and returning them purified, enriched. He thought that if he stared at it long enough, it would speak to him, pronounce a white word that would grant his wishes.

Two flat cracks—pistol shots—sent him stumbling away from the wall, his heart racing. Inside his head the shots had spoken the two syllables of Baylor's name. All the kids and beggars had vanished. All the soldiers had stopped and turned to face the direction from which the shots had come: zombies who had heard their master's voice.

Another shot.

Some soldiers milled out of a side street, talking excitedly. "...fuckin' nuts!" one was saying, and his buddy said, "It was Sammy, man! You see his eyes?"

Mingolla pushed his way through them and sprinted down the side street. At the end of the block a cordon of MPs had sealed off access to the right-hand turn, and when Mingolla ran up one of them told him to stay back.

"What is it?" Mingolla asked. "Some guy playing Sammy?"

"Fuck off," the MP said mildly.

"Listen," said Mingolla. "It might be this friend of mine. Tall, skinny guy. Black hair. Maybe I can talk to him."

The MP exchanged glances with his buddies, who shrugged and acted otherwise unconcerned. "Okay,"

he said. He pulled Mingolla to him and pointed out a bar with turquoise walls on the next corner down. "Go on in there and talk to the captain."

Two more shots, then a third.

"Better hurry," said the MP. "Ol' Captain Haynesworth there, he don't have much faith in negotiations."

It was cool and dark inside the bar; two shadowy figures were flattened against the wall beside a window that opened onto the cross-street. Mingolla could make out the glint of automatic pistols in their hands. Then, through the window, he saw Baylor pop up from behind a retaining wall: a three-foot-high structure of mud bricks running between a herbal drugstore and another bar. Baylor was shirtless, his chest painted with reddish-brown smears of dried blood, and he was standing in a nonchalant pose, with his thumbs hooked in his trouser pockets. One of the men by the window fired at him. The report was deafening, causing Mingolla to flinch and close his eyes. When he looked out the window again, Baylor was nowhere in sight.

"Fucker's just tryin' to draw fire," said the man who had shot at Baylor. "Sammy's fast today."

"Yeah, but he's slowin' some," said a lazy voice from the darkness at the rear of the bar. "I do believe he's outta dope."

"Hey," said Mingolla. "Don't kill him! I know the guy. I can talk to him."

"Talk?" said the lazy voice. "You kin talk 'til yo' ass turns green, boy, and Sammy ain't gon' listen."

Mingolla peered into the shadows. A big, sloppy-looking man was leaning on the counter; brass insignia gleamed on his beret. "You the captain?" he asked. "They told me outside to talk to the captain."

"Yes, indeed," said the man. "And I'd be purely delighted to talk with you, boy. What you wanna talk 'bout?"

The other men laughed.

"Why are you trying to kill him?" asked Mingolla, hearing the pitch of desperation in his voice. "You don't have to kill him. You could use a trank gun."

"Got one comin'," said the captain. "Thing is, though, yo' buddy got hisself a coupla hostages back of that wall, and we get a chance at him 'fore the trank gun 'rives, we bound to take it."

"But..." Mingolla began.

"Lemme finish, boy." The captain hitched up his gunbelt, strolled over and draped an arm around Mingolla's shoulder, enveloping him in an aura of body odor and whiskey breath. "See," he went on, "we had everything under control. Sammy there..."

"Baylor!" said Mingolla angrily. "His name's Baylor."

The captain lifted his arm from Mingolla's shoulder and looked at him with amusement. Even in the gloom Mingolla could see the network of broken capillaries on his cheeks, the bloated alcoholic features. "Right," said the captain. "Like I's sayin', yo' good buddy Mister Baylor there wasn't doin' no harm. Just sorta ravin' and runnin' round. But then 'long comes a coupla our Marine brothers. Seems like they'd been givin' our beaner friends a demonstration of the latest combat gear, and they was headin' back from said demonstration when they seen our little problem and took it 'pon themselves to play hero. Wellsir, puttin' it in a nutshell, Mister Baylor flat kicked their ass. Stomped all over their *esprit de corps.* Then he drags 'em back of that wall and starts messin' with one of their guns. And..."

Two more shots.

"Shit!" said one of the men by the window.

"And there he sits," said the captain. "Fuckin' with us. Now either the gun's outta ammo or else he ain't figgered out how it works. If it's the latter case, and he does figger it out..." The captain shook his head dolefully, as if picturing dire consequences. "See my predicament?"

"I could try talking to him," said Mingolla. "What harm would it do?"

"You get yourself killed, it's your life, boy. But it's my ass that's gonna get hauled up on charges." The captain steered Mingolla to the door and gave him a gentle shove toward the cordon of MPs. " 'Preciate you volunteerin', boy."

Later Mingolla was to reflect that what he had done had made no sense, because—whether or not Baylor had survived—he would never have been returned to the Ant Farm. But at the time, desperate to preserve the ritual, none of this occurred to him. He walked around the corner and toward the retaining wall. His mouth was dry, his heart pounded. But the shaking in his hand had stopped, and he had the presence of mind to walk in such a way that he blocked the MPs' line of fire. About twenty feet from the wall he called out, "Hey, Baylor! It's Mingolla, man!" And as if propelled by a spring, Baylor jumped up, staring at him. It was an awful stare. His eyes were like bulls-eyes, white showing all around the irises; trickles of blood ran from his nostrils, and nerves were twitching in his cheeks with the regularity of watchworks. The dried blood on his chest came from three long gouges; they were partially scabbed over but were oozing a clear fluid. For a moment he remained motionless. Then he reached down behind the wall, picked up a double-barreled rifle

from whose stock trailed a length of flexible tubing, and brought it to bear on Mingolla.

He squeezed the trigger.

No flame, no explosion. Not even a click. But Mingolla felt that he'd been dipped in ice water. "Christ!" he said. "Baylor! It's me!" Baylor squeezed the trigger again, with the same result. An expression of intense frustration washed over his face, then lapsed into that dead man's stare. He looked directly up into the sun, and after a few seconds he smiled: he might have been receiving terrific news from on high.

Mingolla's senses had become wonderfully acute. Somewhere far away a radio was playing a country and western tune, and with its plaintiveness, its intermittent bursts of static, it seemed to him the whining of a nervous system on the blink. He could hear the MPs talking in the bar, could smell the sour acids of Baylor's madness, and he thought he could feel the pulse of Baylor's rage, an inconstant flow of heat eddying around him, intensifying his fear, rooting him to the spot. Baylor laid the gun down, laid it down with the tenderness he might have shown toward a sick child, and stepped over the retaining wall. The animal fluidity of the movement made Mingolla's skin crawl. He managed to shuffle backward a pace and held up his hands to ward Baylor off. "C'mon, man," he said weakly. Baylor let out a fuming noise—part hiss, part whimper—and a runner of saliva slid between his lips. The sun was a golden bath drenching the street, kindling glints and shimmers from every bright surface, as if it were bringing reality to a boil.

Somebody yelled, "Get down, boy!"

Then Baylor flew at him, and they fell together, rolling on the hard-packed dirt. Fingers dug in behind his Adam's apple. He twisted away, saw Baylor grinning down, all staring eyes and yellowed teeth. Strings of drool flapping from his chin. A Halloween face. Knees pinned Mingolla's shoulders, hands gripped his hair and bashed his head against the ground. Again, and again. A keening sound switched on inside his ears. He wrenched an arm free and tried to gouge Baylor's eyes; but Baylor bit his thumb, gnawing at the joint. Mingolla's vision dimmed, and he couldn't hear anything anymore. The back of his head felt mushy. It seemed to be rebounding very slowly from the dirt, higher and slower after each impact. Framed by blue sky, Baylor's face looked to be receding, spiraling off. And then, just as Mingolla began to fade, Baylor disappeared.

Dust was in Mingolla's mouth, his nostrils. He heard shouts, grunts. Still dazed, he propped himself onto an elbow. A little ways off, khaki arms and legs and butts were thrashing around in a cloud of dust. Like a comic strip fight. You expected asterisks and exclamation points overhead to signify profanity. Somebody grabbed his arm, hauled him upright. The MP captain, his beefy face flushed. He frowned reprovingly as he brushed dirt from Mingolla's clothes. "Real gutsy, boy," he said. "And real, real stupid. He hadn't been at the end of his run, you'd be drawin' flies 'bout now." He turned to a sergeant standing nearby. "How stupid you reckon that was, Phil?"

The sergeant said that it beat him.

"Well," the captain said, "I figger if the boy here was in combat, that'd be 'bout Bronze-Star stupid."

That, allowed the sergeant, was pretty goddamn stupid.

" 'Course here in 'Frisco"—the captain gave Mingolla a final dusting—"it don't get you diddley-shit."

The MPs were piling off Baylor, who lay on his side, bleeding from his nose and mouth. Blood thick as gravy filmed over his cheeks.

"Panama," said Mingolla dully. Maybe it *was* an option. He saw how it would be... a night beach, palm shadows a lacework on the white sand.

"What say?" asked the captain.

"He wanted to go to Panama," said Mingolla.

The captain gave an amused snort. "Don't we all."

One of the MPs rolled Baylor onto his stomach and handcuffed him; another manacled his feet. Then they rolled him back over. Yellow dirt had mired with the blood on his cheeks and forehead, fitting him with a blotchy mask. His eyes snapped open in the middle of that mask, widening when he felt the restraints. He started to hump up and down, trying to bounce his way to freedom. He kept on humping for almost a minute; then he went rigid and—his gone eyes fixed on the molten disc of the sun—he let out a roar. That was the only word for it. It wasn't a scream or a shout, but a devil's exultant roar, so loud and full of fury, it seemed to be generating all the blazing light and heat-dance. Listening to it had a seductive effect, and Mingolla began to get behind it, to feel it in his body like a good rock 'n' roll tune, to sympathize with its life-hating exuberance.

"Whoo-ee!" said the captain, marveling. "They gon' have to build a whole new zoo for that boy."

After giving his statement, letting a Corpsman check his head, Mingolla caught the ferry to meet Debora on the east bank. He sat in the stern, gazing out at the unfinished bridge, this time unable to derive from it any sense of hope or magic. Panama kept cropping up in his thoughts. Now that Baylor was gone, was it

really an option? He knew he should try to figure things out, plan what to do, but he couldn't stop seeing Baylor's bloody, demented face. He'd seen worse, Christ yes, a whole lot worse. Guys reduced to spare parts, so little of them left that they didn't need a shiny silver coffin, just a black metal can the size of a cookie jar. Guys scorched and one-eyed and bloody, clawing blindly at the air like creatures out of a monster movie. But the idea of Baylor trapped forever in some raw, red place inside his brain, in the heart of that raw, red noise he'd made, maybe that idea was worse than anything Mingolla had seen. He didn't want to die; he rejected the prospect with the impassioned stubbornness a child displays when confronted with a hard truth. Yet he would rather die than endure madness. Compared to what Baylor had in store, death and Panama seemed to offer the same peaceful sweetness.

Someone sat down beside Mingolla: a kid who couldn't have been older than eighteen. A new kid with a new haircut, new boots, new fatigues. Even his face looked new, freshly broken from the mold. Shiny, pudgy cheeks; clear skin; bright, unused blue eyes. He was eager to talk. He asked Mingolla about his home, his family, and said, Oh, wow, it must be great living in New York, wow. But he appeared to have some other reason for initiating the conversation, something he was leading up to, and finally he spat it out.

"You know the Sammy that went animal back there?" he said. "I seen him pitted last night. Little place in the jungle west of the base. Guy name Chaco owns it. Man, it was incredible!"

Mingolla had only heard of the pits third- and fourth-hand, but what he had heard was bad, and it was hard to believe that this kid with his air of homeboy innocence could be an afficionado of something so vile. And, despite what he had just witnessed, it was even harder to believe that Baylor could have been a participant.

The kid didn't need prompting. "It was pretty early on," he said. "There'd been a coupla bouts, nothin' special, and then this guy walks in lookin' real twitchy. I knew he was Sammy by the way he's starin' at the pit, y'know, like it's somethin' he's been wishin' for. And this guy with me, friend of mine, he gives me a poke and says, 'Holy shit! That's the Black Knight, man! I seen him fight over in Reunion awhile back. Put your money on him,' he says. The guy's an ace!' "

Their last r&r had been in Reunion. Mingolla tried to frame a question but couldn't think of one whose answer would have any meaning.

"Well," said the kid, "I ain't been down long, but I'd even heard 'bout the Knight. So I went over and kinda hung out near him, thinkin' maybe I can get a line on how he's feelin', y'know, 'cause you don't wanna just bet the guy's rep. Pretty soon Chaco comes over and asks the Knight if he wants some action. The Knight says, 'Yeah, but I wanna fight an animal. Somethin' fierce, man. I wanna fight somethin' fierce.' Chaco says he's got some monkeys and shit, and the Knight says he hears Chaco's got a jaguar. Chaco he hems and haws, says maybe so, maybe not, but it don't matter 'cause a jaguar's too strong for Sammy. And then the Knight tells Chaco who he is. Lemme tell ya, Chaco's whole attitude changed. He could see how the bettin' was gonna go for somethin' like the Black Knight versus a jaguar. And he says, 'Yes sir, Mister Black Knight sir! Anything you want!' And he makes the announcement. Man, the place goes nuts. People wavin' money, screamin' odds, drinkin' fast so's they can get ripped in time for the main event, and the Knight's just standin' there, smilin', like he's feedin' off the confusion. Then Chaco lets the jaguar in through the tunnel and into the pit. It ain't a full-growed jaguar, half-growed maybe, but that's all you figure even the Knight can handle."

The kid paused for breath; his eyes seemed to have grown brighter. "Anyway, the jaguar's sneakin' 'round and 'round, keepin' close to the pit wall, snarlin' and spittin', and the Knight's watchin' him from up above, checkin' his moves, y'know. And everybody starts chantin', 'Sam-mee, Sam-mee, Sam-mee,' and after the chant builds up loud the Knight pulls three ampules outta his pocket. I mean, shit, man! Three! I ain't never been 'round Sammy when he's done more'n two. Three gets you clear into the fuckin' sky! So when the Knight holds up these three ampules, the crowd's tuned to burn, howlin' like they's playin' Sammy themselves. But the Knight, man, he keeps his cool. He is *so* cool! He just holds up the ampules and lets 'em take the shine, soakin' up the noise and energy, gettin' strong off the crowd's juice. Chaco waves everybody quiet and gives the speech, y'know, "bout how in the heart of every man there's a warrior-soul waitin' to be loosed and shit. I tell ya, man, I always thought that speech was crap before, but the Knight's makin' me buy it a hunnerd percent. He is so goddamn cool! He takes off his shirt and shoes, and he ties this piece of black silk 'round his arm. Then he pops the ampules, one after another, real quick, and breathes it all in. I can see it hittin', catchin' fire in his eyes. Pumpin' him up. And soon as he's popped the last one, he jumps into the pit. He don't use the tunnel, man! He jumps! Twenty-five feet down to the sand, and lands in a crouch."

Three other soldiers were leaning in, listening, and the kid was now addressing all of them, playing to his audience. He was so excited that he could barely keep his speech coherent, and Mingolla realized with disgust that he, too, was excited by the image of Baylor crouched on the sand. Baylor, who had cried after the assault. Baylor, who had been so afraid of snipers that he had once pissed in his pants rather than walk from

his gun to the latrine.

Baylor, the Black Knight.

"The jaguar's screechin' and snarlin' and slashin' at the air," the kid went on. "Tryin' to put fear into the Knight. 'Cause the jaguar knows in his mind the Knight's big trouble. This ain't some jerk like Chaco, this is Sammy. The Knight moves to the center of the pit, still in a crouch." Here the kid pitched his voice low and dramatic. "Nothin' happens for a coupla minutes, 'cept it's tense. Nobody's hardly breathin'. The jaguar springs a coupla times, but the Knight dances off to the side and makes him miss, and there ain't no damage either way. Whenever the jaguar springs, the crowd sighs and squeals, not just 'cause they's scared of seein' the Knight tore up, but also 'cause they can see how fast he is. Silky fast, man! Unreal. He looks 'bout as fast as the jaguar. He keeps on dancin' away, and no matter how the jaguar twists and turns, no matter if he comes at him along the sand, he can't get his claws into the Knight. And then, man... oh, it was so smooth! Then the jaguar springs again, and this time 'stead of dancin' away, the Knight drops onto his back, does this half roll onto his shoulders, and when the jaguar passes over him, he kicks up with both feet. Kicks up hard! And smashes his heels into the jaguar's side. The jaguar slams into the pit wall and comes down screamin', snappin' at his ribs. They was busted, man. Pokin' out the skin like tentposts."

The kid wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and flicked his eyes toward Mingolla and the other soldiers to see if they were into the story. "We was shoutin', man," he said. "Poundin' the top of the pit wall. It was so loud, the guy I'm with is yellin' in my ear and I can't hear nothin'. Now maybe it's the noise, maybe it's his ribs, whatever... the jaguar goes berserk. Makin' these scuttlin' lunges at the Knight, tryin' to get close 'fore he springs so the Knight can't pull that same trick. He's snarlin' like a goddamn chainsaw! The Knight keeps leapin' and spinnin' away. But then he slips, man, grabs the air for balance, and the jaguar's on him, clawin' at his chest. For a second they're like waltzin' together. Then the Knight pries loose the paw that's hooked him, pushes the jaguar's head back and smashes his fist into the jaguar's eye. The jaguar flops onto the sand, and the Knight scoots to the other side of the pit. He's checkin' the scratches on his chest, which is bleedin' wicked. Meantime, the jaguar gets to his feet, and he's fucked up worse than ever. His one eye's fulla blood, and his hindquarters is all loosey-goosey. Like if this was boxin', they'd call in the doctor. The jaguar figures he's had enough of this crap, and he starts tryin' to jump outta the pit. This one time he jumps right up to where I'm leanin' over the edge. Comes so close I can smell his breath, I can see myself reflected in his good eye. He's clawin' for a grip, wantin' to haul hisself up into the crowd. People are freakin', thinkin' he might be gonna make it. But 'fore he gets the chance, the Knight catches him by the tail and slings him against the wall. Just like you'd beat a goddamn rug, that's how he's dealin' with the jaguar. And the jaguar's a real mess, now. He's quiverin'. Blood's pourin' outta his mouth, his fangs is all red. The Knight starts makin' these little feints, wavin' his arms, growlin'. He's toyin' with the jaguar. People don't believe what they're seein', man. Sammy's kickin' a jaguar's ass so bad he's got room to toy with it. If the place was nuts before, now it's a fuckin' zoo. Fights in the crowd, guys singin' the Marine Hymn. Some beaner squint's takin' off her clothes. The jaguar tries to scuttle up close to the Knight again, but he's too fucked up. He can't keep it together. And the Knight he's still growlin' and feintin'. A guy behind me is booin', claimin' the Knight's defamin' the purity of the sport by playin' with the jaguar. But hell, man, I can see he's just timin' the jaguar, waitin' for the right moment, the right move."

Staring off downriver, the kid wore a wistful expression: he might have been thinking about his girlfriend. "We all knew it was comin'," he said. "Everybody got real quiet. So quiet you could hear the Knight's feet scrapin' on the sand. You could feel it in the air, and you knew the jaguar was savin' up for one big effort. Then the Knight slips again, 'cept he's fakin'. I could see that, but the jaguar couldn't. When the Knight reels sideways, the jaguar springs. I thought the Knight was gonna drop down like he did the first time, but he springs, too. Feetfirst. And he catches the jaguar under the jaw. You could hear bone splinterin', and the jaguar falls in a heap. He struggles to get up, but no way! He's whinin', and he craps all over the sand. The Knight walks up behind him, takes his head in both hands and gives it a twist. Crack!"

As if identifying with the jaguar's fate, the kid closed his eyes and sighed. "Everybody'd been quiet 'til they heard that crack, then all hell broke loose. People chantin', 'Sam-mee, Sam-mee,' and people shovin', tryin' to get close to the pit wall so they can watch the Knight take the heart. He reaches into the jaguar's mouth and snaps off one of the fangs and tosses it to somebody. Then Chaco comes in through the tunnel and hands him the knife. Right when he's 'bout to cut, somebody knocks me over and by the time I'm back on my feet, he's already took the heart and tasted it. He's just standin' there with the jaguar's blood on his mouth and his own blood runnin' down his chest. He looks kinda confused, y'know. Like now the fight's over and he don't know what to do. But then he starts roarin'. He sounds the same as the jaguar did 'fore it got hurt. Crazy fierce. Ready to get it on with the whole goddamn world. Man, I lost it! I was right with that roar. Maybe I was roarin' with him, maybe everybody was. That's what it felt like, man. Like bein' in the middle of

this roar that's comin' outta every throat in the universe." The kid engaged Mingolla with a sober look. "Lotsa people go 'round sayin' the pits are evil, and maybe they are. I don't know. How you s'posed to tell 'bout what's evil and what's not down here? They say you can go to the pits a thousand times and not see nothin' like the jaguar and the Black Knight. I don't know 'bout that, either. But I'm goin' back just in case I get lucky. 'Cause what I saw last night, if it was evil, man, it was so fuckin' evil it was beautiful, too."

3

Debora was waiting at the pier, carrying a picnic basket and wearing a blue dress with a high neckline and a full skirt: a schoolgirl dress. Mingolla homed in on her. The way she had her hair, falling about her shoulders in thick, dark curls, made him think of smoke turned solid, and her face seemed the map of a beautiful country with black lakes and dusky plains, a country in which he could hide. They walked along the river past the town and came to a spot where ceiba trees with slick green leaves and whitish bark and roots like alligator tails grew close to the shore, and there they ate and talked and listened to the water gulping against the clay bank, to the birds, to the faint noises from the airbase that at this distance sounded part of nature. Sunlight dazzled the water, and whenever wind riffled the surface, it looked as if it were spreading the dazzles into a crawling crust of diamonds. Mingolla imagined that they had taken a secret path, rounded a corner on the world and reached some eternally peaceful land. The illusion of peace was so profound that he began to see hope in it. Perhaps, he thought, something was being offered here. Some new magic. Maybe there would be a sign. Signs were everywhere if you knew how to read them. He glanced around. Thick white trunks rising into greenery, dark leafy avenues leading off between them... nothing there, but what about those weeds growing at the edge of the bank? They cast precise fleur-de-lis shadows on the clay, shadows that didn't have much in common with the ragged configurations of the weeds themselves. Possibly a sign, though not a clear one. He lifted his gaze to the reeds growing in the shallows. Yellow reeds with jointed stalks bent akimbo, some with clumps of insect eggs like seed pearls hanging from loose fibers, and others dappled by patches of algae. That's how they looked one moment. Then Mingolla's vision rippled, as if the whole of reality had shivered, and the reeds were transformed into rudimentary shapes: yellow sticks poking up from flat blue. On the far side of the river, the jungle was a simple smear of Crayola green; a speedboat passing with a red slash unzipppering the blue. It seemed that the rippling had jostled every element of the landscape a fraction out of kilter, revealing each one to be as characterless as a building block. Mingolla gave his head a shake. Nothing changed. He rubbed his brow. No effect. Terrified, he squeezed his eyes shut. He felt like the only meaninful piece in a nonsensical puzzle, vulnerable by virtue of his uniqueness. His breath came rapidly, his left hand fluttered.

"David? Don't you want to hear it?" Debora sounded peeved.

"Hear what?" He kept his eyes closed.

"About my dream. Weren't you listening?"

He peeked at her. Everything was back to normal. She was sitting with her knees tucked under her, all her features in sharp focus. "I'm sorry," he said. "I was thinking."

"You looked frightened."

"Frightened?" He put on a bewildered face. "Naw, just had a thought is all."

"It couldn't have been pleasant."

He shrugged off the comment and sat up smartly to prove his attentiveness. "So tell me 'bout the dream."

"All right," she said doubtfully. The breeze drifted fine strands of hair across her face, and she brushed them back. "You were in a room the color of blood, with red chairs and a red table. Even the paintings on the wall were done in shades of red, and..." She broke off, peering at him. "Do you want to hear this? You have that look again."

"Sure," he said. But he was afraid. How could she have known about the red room? She must have had a vision of it, and... Then he realized that she might not have been talking about the room itself. He'd told her about the assault, hadn't he? And if she had guerrilla contacts, she would know that the emergency lights were switched on during an assault. That had to be it! She was trying to frighten him into deserting again, psyching him the way preachers played upon the fears of sinners with images of fiery rivers and torture. It infuriated him. Who the hell was she to tell him what was right or wise? Whatever he did, it was going to be *his* decision.

"There were three doors in the room," she went on. "You wanted to leave the room, but you couldn't tell which of the doors was safe to use. You tried the first door, and it turned out to be a facade. The knob of the second door turned easily, but the door itself was stuck. Rather than forcing it, you went to the third door.

The knob of this door was made of glass and cut your hand. After that you just walked back and forth, unsure what to do." She waited for a reaction, and when he gave none, she said, "Do you understand?"

He kept silent, biting back anger.

"I'll interpret it for you," she said.

"Don't bother."

"The red room is war, and the false door is the way of your childish..."

"Stop!" He grabbed her wrist, squeezing it hard.

She glared at him until he released her. "Your childish magic," she finished.

"What is it with you?" he asked. "You have some kinda quota to fill? Five deserters a month, and you get a medal?"

She tucked her skirt down to cover her knees, fiddled with a loose thread. From the way she was acting, you might have thought he had asked an intimate question and she was framing an answer that wouldn't be indelicate. Finally she said, "Is that who you believe I am to you?"

"Isn't that right? Why else would you be handling me this bullshit?"

"What's the matter with you, David?" She leaned forward, cupping his face in her hands. "Why..."

He pushed her hands away. "What's the matter with me? This"—his gesture included the sky, the river, the trees—"that's what's the matter. You remind me of my parents. They ask the same sorta ignorant questions." Suddenly he wanted to injure her with answers, to find an answer like acid to throw in her face and watch it eat away her tranquility. "Know what I do for my parents?" he said. "When they ask dumb-ass questions like 'What's the matter?', I tell 'em a story. A war story. You wanna hear a war story? Something happened a few days back that'll do for an answer just fine."

"You don't have to tell me anything," she said, discouraged.

"No problem," he said. "Be my pleasure."

The Ant Farm was a large sugar-loaf hill overlooking dense jungle on the eastern border of Fire Zone Emerald; jutting out from its summit were rocket and gun emplacements that at a distance resembled a crown of thorns jammed down over a green scalp. For several hundred yards around, the land had been cleared of all vegetation. The big guns had been lowered to maximum declension and in a mad moment had obliterated huge swaths of jungle, snapping off regiments of massive tree trunks a couple of feet above the ground, leaving a moat of blackened stumps and scorched red dirt seamed with fissures. Tangles of razor wire had replaced the trees and bushes, forming surreal blue-steel hedges, and buried beneath the wire were a variety of mines and detection devices. These did little good, however, because the Cubans possessed technology that would neutralize most of them. On clear nights there was little likelihood of trouble; but on misty nights trouble could be expected. Under cover of the mist Cuban and guerrilla troops would come through the wire and attempt to infiltrate the tunnels that honeycombed the interior of the hill. Occasionally one of the mines would be triggered, and you would see a ghostly fireball bloom in the swirling whiteness, tiny black figures being flung outward from its center. Lately some of these casualties had been found to be wearing red berets and scorpion-shaped brass pins, and from this it was known that the Cubans had sent in the Alacran Division, which had been instrumental in routing the American Forces in Miskitia.

There were nine levels of tunnels inside the hill, most lined with little round rooms that served as living quarters (the only exception being the bottom level, which was given over to the computer center and offices); all the rooms and tunnels were coated with a bubbled white plastic that looked like hardened seafoam and was proof against anti-personnel explosives. In Mingolla's room, where he and Baylor and Gilbey bunked, a scarlet paper lantern had been hung on the overhead light fixture, making it seem that they were inhabiting a blood cell: Baylor had insisted on the lantern, saying that the overhead was too bright and hurt his eyes. Three cots were arranged against the walls, as far apart as space allowed. The floor around Baylor's cot was littered with cigarette butts and used Kleenex; under his pillow he kept a tin box containing a stash of pills and marijuana. Whenever he lit a joint he would always offer Mingolla a hit, and Mingolla always refused, feeling that the experience of the firebase would not be enhanced by drugs. Taped to the wall above Gilbey's cot was a collage of beaver shots, and each day after duty, whether or not Mingolla and Baylor were in the room, he would lie beneath them and masturbate. His lack of shame caused Mingolla to be embarrassed by his own secretiveness in the act, and he was also embarrassed by the pimply-youth quality of the objects taped above his cot: a Yankee pennant; a photograph of his old girlfriend, and another of his senior-year high school basketball team; several sketches he had made of the surrounding jungle. Gilbey teased him constantly about this display, calling him "the boy-next-door," which struck Mingolla as odd, because back home he had been considered something of an eccentric.

It was toward this room that Mingolla was heading when the assault began. Large cargo elevators capable of carrying up to sixty men ran up and down just inside the east and west slopes of the hill; but to

provide quick access between adjoining levels, and also as a safeguard in case of power failures, an auxiliary tunnel corkscrewed down through the center of the hill like a huge coil of white intestine. It was slightly more than twice as wide as the electric carts that traveled it, carrying officers and VIPs on tours. Mingolla was in the habit of using the tunnel for his exercise. Each night he would put on sweat clothes and jog up and down the entire nine levels, doing this out of a conviction that exhaustion prevented bad dreams. That night, as he passed Level Four on his final leg up, he heard a rumbling: an explosion, and not far off. Alarms sounded, the big guns atop the hill began to thunder. From directly above came shouts and the stutter of automatic fire. The tunnel lights flickered, went dark, and the emergency lights winked on.

Mingolla flattened against the wall. The dim red lighting caused the bubbled surfaces of the tunnel to appear as smooth as a chamber in a gigantic nautilus, and this resemblance intensified his sense of helplessness, making him feel like a child trapped in an evil undersea palace. He couldn't think clearly, picturing the chaos around him. Muzzle flashes, armies of ant-men seething through the tunnels, screams spraying blood, and the big guns bucking, every shellburst kindling miles of sky. He would have preferred to keep going up, to get out into the open where he might have a chance to hide in the jungle. But down was his only hope. Pushing away from the wall, he ran full-tilt, arms waving, skidding around corners, almost falling, past Level Four, Level Five. Then, halfway between Levels Five and Six, he nearly tripped over a dead man: an American lying curled up around a belly wound, a slick of blood spreading beneath him and a machete by his hand. As Mingolla stooped for the machete, he thought nothing about the man, only about how weird it was for an American to be defending himself against Cubans with such a weapon. There was no use, he decided, in going any farther. Whoever had killed the man would be somewhere below, and the safest course would be to hide out in one of the rooms on Level Five. Holding the machete before him, he moved cautiously back up the tunnel.

Levels Five through Seven were officer country, and though the tunnels were the same as the ones above—gently curving tubes eight feet high and ten feet wide—the rooms were larger and contained only two cots. The rooms Mingolla peered into were empty, and this, despite the sounds of battle, gave him a secure feeling. But as he passed beyond the tunnel curve, he heard shouts in Spanish from his rear. He peeked back around the curve. A skinny black soldier wearing a red beret and gray fatigues was inching toward the first doorway; then, rifle at the ready, he ducked inside. Two other Cubans—slim bearded men, their skins sallow-looking in the bloody light—were standing by the arched entrance-way to the auxiliary tunnel; when they saw the black soldier emerge from the room, they walked off in the opposite direction, probably to check the rooms at the far end of the level.

Mingolla began to operate in a kind of luminous panic. He realized that he would have to kill the black soldier. Kill him without any fuss, take his rifle and hope that he could catch the other two off-guard when they came back for him. He slipped into the nearest room and stationed himself against the wall to the right of the door. The Cuban, he had noticed, had turned left on entering the room; he would have been vulnerable to someone positioned like Mingolla. Vulnerable for a split-second. Less than a count of one. The pulse in Mingolla's temple throbbed, and he gripped the machete tightly in his left hand. He rehearsed mentally what he would have to do. Stab; clamp a hand over the Cuban's mouth; bring his knee up to jar loose the rifle. And he would have to perform these actions simultaneously, execute them perfectly.

Perfect execution.

He almost laughed out loud, remembering his paunchy old basketball coach saying, "Perfect execution, boys. That's what beats a zone. Forget the fancy crap. Just set your screens, run your patterns and get your shots down."

Hoops am 't nothm' but life in short pants, huh, Coach ?

Mingolla drew a deep breath and let it sigh out through his nostrils. He couldn't believe he was going to die. He had spent the past nine months worrying about death, but when it got right down to it, when the circumstances arose that made death likely, it was hard to take that likelihood seriously. It didn't seem reasonable that a skinny black guy should be his nemesis. His death should involve massive detonations of light, special Mingolla-killing rays, astronomical portents. Not some scrawny little shit with a rifle. He drew another breath and for the first time registered the contents of the room. Two cots; clothes strewn everywhere; taped-up polaroids and pornography. Officer country or not, it was your basic Ant Farm decor; under the red light it looked squalid, long-abandoned. He was amazed by how calm he felt. Oh, he was afraid all right! But fear was tucked into the dark folds of his personality like a murderer's knife hidden inside an old coat on a closet shelf. Glowing in secret, waiting its chance to shine. Sooner or later it would skewer him, but for now it was an ally, acting to sharpen his senses. He could see every bubbled pucker on the white walls, could hear the scrape of the Cuban's boots as he darted into the room next door, could feel how the Cuban swung the rifle left-to-right, paused, turned...

He *could* feel the Cuban! Feel his heat, his heated shape, the exact position of his body. It was as if a thermal imager had been switched on inside his head, one that worked through walls.

The Cuban eased toward Mingolla's door, his progress tangible, like a burning match moving behind a sheet of paper. Mingolla's calm was shattered. The man's heat, his fleshy temperature, was what disturbed him. He had imagined himself killing with a cinematic swiftness and lack of mess; now he thought of hogs being butchered and piledrivers smashing the skulls of cows. And could he trust this freakish form of perception? What if he couldn't? What if he stabbed too late? Too soon? Then the hot, alive thing was almost at the door, and having no choice, Mingolla timed his attack to its movements, stabbing just as the Cuban entered.

He executed perfectly.

The blade slid home beneath the Cuban's ribs and Mingolla clamped a hand over his mouth, muffling his outcry. His knee nailed the rifle stock, sending it clattering to the floor. The Cuban thrashed wildly. He stank of rotten jungle air and cigarettes. His eyes rolled back, trying to see Mingolla. Crazy animal eyes, with liverish whites and expanded pupils. Sweat beads glittered redly on his brow. Mingolla twisted the machete, and the Cuban's eyelids fluttered down. But a second later they snapped open, and he lunged. They went staggering deeper into the room and teetered beside one of the cots. Mingolla wrangled the Cuban sideways and rammed him against the wall, pinning him there. Writhing, the Cuban nearly broke free. He seemed to be getting stronger, his squeals leaking out from Mingolla's hand. He reached behind him, clawing at Mingolla's face; he grabbed a clump of hair, yanked it. Desperate, Mingolla sawed with the machete. That tuned the Cuban's squeals higher, louder. He squirmed and clawed at the wall. Mingolla's clamped hand was slick with the Cuban's saliva, his nostrils full of the man's rank scent. He felt queasy, weak, and he wasn't sure how much longer he could hang on. The son of a bitch was never going to die, he was deriving strength from the steel in his guts, he was changing into some deathless force. But just then the Cuban stiffened. Then he relaxed, and Mingolla caught a whiff of feces.

He let the Cuban slump to the floor, but before he could turn loose of the machete, a shudder passed through the body, flowed up the hilt and vibrated his left hand. It continued to shudder inside his hand, feeling dirty, sexy, like a post-coital tremor. Something, some animal essence, some oily scrap of bad life, was slithering around in there, squirting toward his wrist. He stared at the hand, horrified. It was gloved in the Cuban's blood, trembling. He smashed it against his hip, and that seemed to stun whatever was inside it. But within seconds it had revived and was wriggling in and out of his fingers with the mad celerity of a tadpole.

"*Tea!*" someone called. "*Vamos!*"

Electrified by the shout, Mingolla hustled to the door. His foot nudged the Cuban's rifle. He picked it up, and the shaking of his hand lessened—he had the idea it had been soothed by a familiar texture and weight.

"*Teo! Donde estas?*"

Mingolla had no good choices, but he realized it would be far more dangerous to hang back than to take the initiative. He grunted "*Aqui!*" and walked out into the tunnel, making lots of noise with his heels.

"*Dete fmsa, hombre!*''

Mingolla opened fire as he rounded the curve. The two Cubans were standing by the entrance to the auxiliary tunnel. Their rifles chattered briefly, sending a harmless spray of bullets off the walls; they whirled, flung out their arms and fell. Mingolla was too shocked by how easy it had been to feel relief. He kept watching, expecting them to do something. Moan, or twitch.

After the echoes of the shots had died, though he could hear the big guns jolting and the crackle of firelights, a heavy silence seemed to fill in through the tunnel, as if his bullets had pierced something that had dammed silence up. The silence made him aware of his isolation. No telling where the battle lines were drawn... if, indeed, they existed. It was conceivable that small units had infiltrated every level, that the battle for the Ant Farm was in microcosm the battle for Guatemala: a conflict having no patterns, no real borders, no orderly confrontations, but like a plague could pop up anywhere at any time and kill you. That being the case, his best bet would be to head for the computer center, where friendly forces were sure to be concentrated.

He walked to the entrance and stared at the two dead Cubans. They had fallen blocking his way, and he was hesitant about stepping over them, half-believing they were playing possum, that they would reach up and grab him. The awkward attitudes of their limbs made him think they were holding a difficult pose, waiting for him to try. Their blood looked purple in the red glow of the emergencies, thicker and shinier than ordinary blood. He noted their moles and scars and sores, the crude stitching of their fatigues, gold fillings glinting from their open mouths. It was funny, he could have met these guys while they were alive and they might have made only a vague impression; but seeing them dead, he had catalogued their physical worth in

a single glance. Maybe, he thought, death revealed your essentials as life could not. He studied the dead men, wanting to read them. Couple of slim, wiry guys. Nice guys, into rum and the ladies and sports. He'd bet they were baseball players, infielders, a double-play combo. Maybe he should have called to them, Hey, I'm a Yankee fan. Be cool! Meet'cha after the war for a game of flies and grounders. Fuck this killing shit. Let's play some ball.

He laughed, and the high, cracking sound of his laughter startled him. Christ! Standing around here was just asking for it. As if to second that opinion, the thing inside his hand exploded into life, eeling and frisking about. Swallowing back his fear, Mingolla stepped over the two dead men, and this time, when nothing clutched at his trouser legs, he felt very, very relieved.

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Below Level Six, there was a good deal of mist in the auxiliary tunnel, and from this Mingolla understood that the Cubans had penetrated the hillside, probably with a borer mine. Chances were the hole they had made was somewhere close, and he decided that if he could find it he would use it to get the hell out of the Farm and hide in the jungle. On Level Seven the mist was extremely thick; the emergency lights stained it pale red, giving it the look of surgical cotton packing a huge artery. Scorchmarks from grenade bursts showed on the walls like primitive graphics, and quite a few bodies were visible beside the doorways. Most of them Americans, badly mutilated. Uneasy, Mingolla picked his way among them, and when a man spoke behind him, saying, "Don't move," he let out a hoarse cry and dropped his rifle and spun around, his heart pounding.

A giant of a man—he had to go six-seven, six-eight, with the arms and torso of a weightlifter—was standing in a doorway, training a forty-five at Mingolla's chest. He wore khakis with lieutenant's bars, and his babyish face, though cinched into a frown, gave an impression of gentleness and stolidity: he conjured for Mingolla the image of Ferdinand the Bull weighing a knotty problem. "I told you not to move," he said peevishly.

"It's okay," said Mingolla. "I'm on your side."

The lieutenant ran a hand through his thick shock of brown hair; he seemed to be blinking more than was normal. "I'd better check," he said. "Let's go down to the storeroom."

"What's to check?" said Mingolla, his paranoia increasing.

"Please!" said the lieutenant, a genuine wealth of entreaty in his voice. "There's been too much violence already."

The storeroom was a long, narrow L-shaped room at the end of the level; it was ranged by packing crates, and through the gauzy mist the emergency lights looked like a string of dying red suns. The lieutenant marched Mingolla to the corner of the L, and turning it, Mingolla saw that the rear wall of the room was missing. A tunnel had been blown into the hillside, opening onto blackness. Forked roots with balls of dirt attached hung from its roof, giving it the witchy appearance of a tunnel into some world of dark magic; rubble and clods of earth were piled at its lip. Mingolla could smell the jungle, and he realized that the big guns had stopped firing.

Which meant that whoever had won the battle of the summit would soon be sending down mop-up squads. "We can't stay here," he told the lieutenant. "The Cubans'11 be back."

"We're perfectly safe," said the lieutenant. "Take my word." He motioned with the gun, indicating that Mingolla should sit on the floor.

Mingolla did as ordered and was frozen by the sight of a corpse, a Cuban corpse, lying between two packing crates opposite him, its head propped against the wall. "Jesus!" he said, coming back up to his knees.

"He won't bite," said the lieutenant. With the lack of self-consciousness of someone squeezing into a subway seat, he settled beside the corpse; the two of them neatly filled the space between the crates, touching elbow to shoulder.

"Hey," said Mingolla, feeling giddy and scattered. "I'm not sitting here with this fucking dead guy, man!"

The lieutenant flourished his gun. "You'll get used to him."

Mingolla eased back to a sitting position, unable to look away from the corpse. Actually, compared to the bodies he had just been stepping over, it was quite presentable. The only signs of damage were blood on its mouth and bushy black beard, and a mire of blood and shredded cloth at the center of its chest. Its beret had slid down at a rakish angle to cover one eyebrow; the brass scorpion pin was scarred and tarnished. Its eyes were open, reflecting glowing red chips of the emergency lights, and this gave it a baleful semblance of life. But the reflections made it appear less real, easier to bear.

"Listen to me," said the lieutenant.

Mingolla rubbed at the blood on his shaking hand, hoping that cleaning it would have some good effect.

"Are you listening?" the lieutenant asked.

Mingolla had a peculiar perception of the lieutenant and the corpse as dummy and ventriloquist. Despite its glowing eyes, the corpse had too much reality for any trick of the light to gloss over for long. Precise crescents showed on its fingernails, and because its head was tipped to the left, blood had settled into that side, darkening its cheek and temple, leaving the rest of the face pallid. It was the lieutenant, with his neat khakis and polished shoes and nice haircut, who now looked less than real.

"Listen!" said the lieutenant vehemently. "I want you to understand that I have to do what's right for me!" The bicep of his gun arm bunched to the size of a cannonball.

"I understand," said Mingolla, thoroughly unnerved.

"Do you? Do you really?" The lieutenant seemed aggravated by Mingolla's claim to understanding. "I doubt it. I doubt you could possibly understand."

"Maybe I can't," said Mingolla. "Whatever you say, man. I'm just trying to get along, y'know."

The lieutenant sat silent, blinking. Then he smiled. "My name's Jay," he said. "And you are... ?"

"David." Mingolla tried to bring his concentration to bear on the gun, wondering if he could kick it away, but the sliver of life in his hand distracted him.

"Where are your quarters, David?"

"Level Three."

"I live here," said Jay. "But I'm going to move. I couldn't bear to stay in a place where..." He broke off and leaned forward, adopting a conspiratorial stance. "Did you know it takes a long time for someone to die, even after their heart has stopped?"

"No, I didn't." The thing in Mingolla's hand squirmed toward his wrist, and he squeezed the wrist, trying to block it.

"It's true," said Jay with vast assurance. "None of these people"—he gave the corpse a gentle nudge with his elbow, a gesture that conveyed to Mingolla a creepy sort of familiarity—"have finished dying. Life doesn't just switch off. It fades. And these people are still alive, though it's only a half-life." He grinned. "The half-life of life, you might say."

Mingolla kept the pressure on his wrist and smiled, as if in appreciation of the play on words. Pale red tendrils of mist curled between them.

"Of course you aren't attuned," said Jay. "So you wouldn't understand. But I'd be lost without Eligio."

"Who's Eligio?"

Jay nodded toward the corpse. "We're attuned, Eligio and I. That's how I know we're safe. Eligio's perceptions aren't limited to the here and now any longer. He's with his men at this very moment, and he tells me they're all dead or dying."

"Uh-huh," said Mingolla, tensing. He had managed to squeeze the thing in his hand back into his fingers, and he thought he might be able to reach the gun. But Jay disrupted his plan by shifting the gun to his other hand. His eyes seemed to be growing more reflective, acquiring a ruby glaze, and Mingolla realized this was because he had opened them wide and angled his stare toward the emergency lights.

"It makes you wonder," said Jay. "It really does."

"What?" said Mingolla, easing sideways, shortening the range for a kick.

"Half-lives," said Jay. "If the mind has a half-life, maybe our separate emotions do, too. The half-life of love, of hate. Maybe they still exist somewhere." He drew up his knees, shielding the gun. "Anyway, I can't stay here. I think I'll go back to Oakland." His tone became whispery. "Where are you from, David?"

"New York."

"Not my cup of tea," said Jay. "But I love the Bay Area. I own an antique shop there. It's beautiful in the mornings. Peaceful. The sun comes through the window, creeping across the floor, y'know, like a tide, inching up over the furniture. It's as if the original varnishes are being reborn, the whole shop shining with ancient lights."

"Sounds nice," said Mingolla, taken aback by Jay's lyricism.

"You seem like a good person." Jay straightened up a bit. "But I'm sorry. Eligio tells me your mind's too cloudy for him to read. He says I can't risk keeping you alive. I'm going to have to shoot."

Mingolla set himself to kick, but then listlessness washed over him. What the hell did it matter? Even if he knocked the gun away, Jay could probably break him in half. "Why?" he said. "Why do you have to?"

"You might inform on me." Jay's soft features sagged into a sorrowful expression. "Tell them I was hiding."

"Nobody gives a shit you were hiding," said Mingolla. "That's what I was doing. I bet there's fifty other guys doing the same damn thing."

"I don't know." Jay's brow furrowed. "I'll ask again. Maybe your mind's less cloudy now." He turned his gaze to the dead man.

Mingolla noticed that the Cuban's irises were angled upward and to the left—exactly the same angle to which Jay's eyes had drifted earlier—and reflected an identical ruby glaze.

"Sorry," said Jay, leveling the gun. "I have to." He licked his lips. "Would you please turn your head? I'd rather you weren't looking at me when it happens. That's how Eligio and I became attuned."

Looking into the aperture of the gun's muzzle was like peering over a cliff, feeling the chill allure of falling and, it was more out of contrariness than a will to survive that Mingolla popped his eyes at Jay and said, "Go ahead."

Jay blinked but he held the gun steady. "Your hand's shaking," he said after a pause.

"No shit," said Mingolla.

"How come it's shaking?"

"Because I killed someone with it," said Mingolla. "Because I'm as fucking crazy as you are."

Jay mulled this over. "I was supposed to be assigned to a gay unit," he said finally. "But all the slots were filled, and when I had to be assigned here they gave me a drug. Now I... I..." He blinked rapidly, his lips parted, and Mingolla found that he was straining toward Jay, wanting to apply Body English, to do something to push him over this agonizing hump. "I can't... be with men anymore," Jay finished, and once again blinked rapidly; then his words came easier. "Did they give you a drug, too? I mean I'm not trying to imply you're gay. It's just they have drugs for everything these days, and I thought that might be the problem."

Mingolla was suddenly, inutterably sad. He felt that his emotions had been twisted into a thin black wire, that the wire was frayed and spraying black sparks of sadness. That was all that energized him, all his life. Those little black sparks.

"I always fought before," said Jay. "And I was fighting this time. But when I shot Eligio... I just couldn't keep going."

"I really don't give a shit," said Mingolla. "I really don't."

"Maybe I *can* trust you." Jay sighed. "I just wish you were attuned. Eligio's a good soul. You'd appreciate him."

Jay kept on talking, enumerating Eligio's virtues, and Mingolla tuned him out, not wanting to hear about the Cuban's love for his family, his posthumous concerns for them. Staring at his bloody hand, he had a magical overview of the situation. Sitting in the root cellar of this evil mountain, bathed in an eerie red glow, a scrap of a dead man's life trapped in his flesh, listening to a deranged giant who took his orders from a corpse, waiting for scorpion soldiers to pour through a tunnel that appeared to lead into a dimension of mist and blackness. It was insane to look at it that way. But there it was. You couldn't reason it away; it had a brutal glamour that surpassed reason, that made reason unnecessary.

"...and once you're attuned," Jay was saying, "you can't ever be separated. Not even by death. So Eligio's always going to be alive inside me. Of course I can't let them find out. I mean"—he chuckled, a sound like dice rattling in a cup—"talk about giving aid and comfort to the enemy!"

Mingolla lowered his head, closed his eyes. Maybe Jay would shoot. But he doubted that. Jay only wanted company in his madness.

"You swear you won't tell them?" Jay asked.

"Yeah," said Mingolla. "I swear."

"All right," said Jay. "But remember, my future's in your hands. You have a responsibility to me."

"Don't worry."

Gunfire crackled in the distance.

"I'm glad we could talk," said Jay. "I feel much better."

Mingolla said that he felt better, too.

They sat without speaking. It wasn't the most secure way to pass the night, but Mingolla no longer put any store in the concept of security. He was too weary to be afraid. Jay seemed entranced, staring at a point above Mingolla's head, but Mingolla made no move for the gun. He was content to sit and wait and let fate take its course. His thoughts uncoiled with vegetable sluggishness.

j

They must have been sitting a couple of hours when Mingolla heard the whisper of helicopters and noticed that the mist had thinned, that the darkness at the end of the tunnel had gone gray. "Hey," he said to Jay. "I think we're okay now." Jay offered no reply, and Mingolla saw that his eyes were angled upward and to the left just like the Cuban's eyes, glazed over with ruby reflection. Tentatively, he reached out and touched the gun. Jay's hand flopped to the floor, but his fingers remained clenched around the butt. Mingolla recoiled,

disbelieving. It couldn't be! Again he reached out, feeling for a pulse. Jay's wrist was cool, still, and his lips had a bluish cast. Mingolla had a flutter of hysteria, thinking that Jay had gotten it wrong about being attuned: instead of Eligio becoming part of his life, he had become part of Eligio's death. There was a tightness in Mingolla's chest, and he thought he was going to cry. He would have welcomed tears, and when they failed to materialize he grew both annoyed at himself and defensive. Why should he cry? The guy had meant nothing to him... though the fact that he could be so devoid of compassion was reason enough for tears. Still, if you were going to cry over something as commonplace as a single guy dying, you'd be crying every minute of the day, and what was the future in that? He glanced at Jay. At the Cuban. Despite the smoothness of Jay's skin, the Cuban's bushy beard, Mingolla could have sworn they were starting to resemble each other the way old married couples did. And, yep, all four eyes were fixed on exactly the same point of forever. It was either a hell of a coincidence or else Jay's craziness had been of such magnitude that he had willed himself to die in this fashion just to lend credence to his theory of half-lives. And maybe he was still alive. Half alive. Maybe he and Mingolla were now attuned, and if that were true, maybe... Revolted by the prospect of joining Jay and the Cuban in their deathwatch, Mingolla scrambled to his feet and ran into the tunnel. He might have kept running, but on coming out into the dawn light he was brought up short by the view from the tunnel entrance.

At his back, the green dome of the hill swelled high, its sides brocaded with shrubs and vines, an infinity of pattern as eyecatching as the intricately carved facade of a Hindu temple; atop it, one of the gun emplacements had taken a hit: splinters of charred metal curved up like peels of black rind. Before him lay the moat of red dirt with its hedgerows of razor wire, and beyond that loomed the blackish-green snarl of the jungle. Caught on the wire were hundreds of baggy shapes wearing bloodstained fatigues; frays of smoke twisted up from the fresh craters beside them. Overhead, half-hidden by the lifting gray mist, three Sikorskys were hovering. Their pilots were invisible behind layers of mist and reflection, and the choppers themselves looked like enormous carrion flies with bulging eyes and whirling wings. Like devils. Like gods. They seemed to be whispering to one another in anticipation of the feast they were soon to share.

The scene was horrid yet it had the purity of a stanza from a ballad come to life, a ballad composed about tragic events in some border hell. You could never paint it, or if you could the canvas would have to be as large as the scene itself, and you would have to incorporate the slow boil of the mist, the whirling of the chopper blades, the drifting smoke. No detail could be omitted. It was the perfect illustration of the war, of its secret magical splendor, and Mingolla, too, was an element of the design, the figure of the artist painted in for a joke or to lend scale and perspective to its vastness, its importance. He knew that he should report to his station, but he couldn't turn away from this glimpse into the heart of the war. He sat down on the hillside, cradling his sick hand in his lap, and watched as—with the ponderous aplomb of idols floating to earth, fighting the cross-draft, the wind of their descent whipping up furies of red dust—the Sikorskys made skillful landings among the dead.

4

Halfway through the telling of his story, Mingolla had realized that he was not really trying to offend or shock Debora, but rather was unburdening himself; and he further realized that by telling it he had to an extent cut loose from the past, weakened its hold on him. For the first time he felt able to give serious consideration to the idea of desertion. He did not rush to it, embrace it, but he did acknowledge its logic and understand the terrible illogic of returning to more assaults, more death, without any magic to protect him. He made a pact with himself: he would pretend to go along as if desertion were his intent and see what signs were offered.

When he had finished, Debora asked whether or not he was over his anger. He was pleased that she hadn't tried to offer sympathy. "I'm sorry," he said. "I wasn't really angry at you... at least that was only part of it."

"It's all right." She pushed back the dark mass of her hair so that it fell to one side and looked down at the grass beside her knees. With her head inclined, eyes half-lidded, the graceful line of her neck and chin like a character in some exotic script, she seemed a good sign herself. "I don't know what to talk to you about," she said. "The things I feel I have to tell you make you mad, and I can't muster any small-talk."

"I don't want to be pushed," he said. "But believe me, I'm thinking about what you've told me."

"I won't push. But I still don't know what to talk about." She plucked a grass blade, chewed on the tip. He watched her lips purse, wondered how she'd taste. Mouth sweet in the way of a jar that had once held spices. She tossed the grass blade aside. "I know," she said brightly. "Would you like to see where I live?"

"I'd just as soon not go back to 'Frisco yet." Where you live, he thought; I want to touch where you live.

"It's not in town," she said. "It's a village downriver."

"Sounds good." He came to his feet, took her arm and helped her up. For an instant they were close together, her breasts grazing his shirt. Her heat coursed around him, and he thought if anyone were to see them, they would see two figures wavering as in a mirage. He had an urge to tell her he loved her. Though most of what he felt was for the salvation she might provide, part of his feelings seemed real and that puzzled him, because all she had been to him was a few hours out of the war, dinner in a cheap restaurant and a walk along the river. There was no basis for consequential emotion. Before he could say anything, do anything, she turned and picked up her basket.

"It's not far," she said, walking away. Her blue skirt swayed like a rung bell.

They followed a track of brown clay overgrown by ferns, overspread by saplings with pale translucent leaves, and soon came to a grouping of thatched huts at the mouth of a stream that flowed into the river. Naked children were wading in the stream, laughing and splashing each other. Their skins were the color of amber, and their eyes were as wet-looking and purplish-dark as plums. Palms and acacias loomed above the huts, which were constructed of sapling trunks lashed together by nylon cord; their thatch had been trimmed to resemble bowl-cut hair. Flies crawled over strips of meat hung on a clothesline stretched between two of the huts. Fish heads and chicken droppings littered the ocher ground. But Mingolla scarcely noticed these signs of poverty, seeing instead a sign of the peace that might await him in Panama. And another sign was soon forthcoming. Debora bought a bottle of rum at a tiny store, then led him to the hut nearest the mouth of the stream and introduced him to a lean, white-haired old man who was sitting on a bench outside it. Tio Moises. After three drinks Tio Moises began to tell stories.

The first story concerned the personal pilot of an ex-president of Panama. The president had made billions from smuggling cocaine into the States with the help of the CIA, whom he had assisted on numerous occasions, and was himself an addict in the last stages of mental deterioration. It had become his sole pleasure to be flown from city to city in his country, to sit on the landing strips, gaze out the window and do cocaine. At any hour of night or day, he was likely to call the pilot and order him to prepare a flight plan to Colon or Bocas del Toro or Penonome. As the president's condition worsened, the pilot realized that soon the CIA would see he was no longer useful and would kill him. And the most obvious manner of killing him would be by means of an airplane crash. The pilot did not want to die alongside him. He tried to resign, but the president would not permit it. He gave thought to mutilating himself, but being a good Catholic, he could not flout God's law. If he were to flee, his family would suffer. His life became a nightmare. Prior to each flight, he would spend hours searching the plane for evidence of sabotage, and upon each landing, he would remain in the cockpit, shaking from nervous exhaustion. The president's condition grew even worse. He had to be carried aboard the plane and have the cocaine administered by an aide, while a second aide stood by with cotton swabs to attend his nosebleeds. Knowing his life could be measured in weeks, the pilot asked his priest for guidance. "Pray," the priest advised. The pilot had been praying all along, so this was no help. Next he went to the commandant of his military college, and the commandant told him he must do his duty. This, too, was something the pilot had been doing all along. Finally he went to the chief of the San Bias Indians, who were his mother's people. The chief told him he must accept his fate, which—while not something he had been doing all along—was hardly encouraging. Nonetheless, he saw it was the only available path and he did as the chief had counseled. Rather than spending hours in a pre-flight check, he would arrive minutes before take-off and taxi away without even inspecting the fuel gauge. His recklessness came to be the talk of the capitol. Obeying the president's every whim, he flew in gales and in fogs, while drunk and drugged, and during those hours in the air, suspended between the laws of gravity and fate, he gained a new appreciation of life. Once back on the ground, he engaged in living with a fierce avidity, making passionate love to his wife, carousing with friends and staying out until dawn. Then one day as he was preparing to leave for the airport, an American man came to his house and told him he had been replaced. "If we let the president fly with so negligent a pilot, we'll be blamed for anything that happens," said the American. The pilot did not have to ask whom he had meant by "we." Six weeks later the president's plane crashed in the Darien Mountains. The pilot was overjoyed. Panama had been ridded of a villain, and his own life had not been forfeited. But a week after the crash, after the new president—another smuggler with CIA connections—had been appointed, the commandant of the air force summoned the pilot, told him that the crash would never have occurred had he been on the job, and assigned him to fly the new president's plane.

All through the afternoon Mingolla listened and drank, and drunkenness fitted a lens to his eyes that let him see how these stories applied to him. They were all fables of irresolution, cautioning him to act, and they detailed the core problems of the Central American people who—as he was now—were trapped between the poles of magic and reason, their lives governed by the politics of the ultrareal, their spirits ruled by myths

and legends, with the rectangular computerized bulk of North America above and the conch-shell-shaped continental mystery of South America below. He assumed that Debora had orchestrated the types of stories Tio Moises told, but that did not detract from their potency as signs: they had the ring of truth, not of something tailored to his needs. Nor did it matter that his hand was shaking, his vision playing tricks. Those things would pass when he reached Panama.

Shadows blurred, insects droned like tambouras, and twilight washed down the sky, making the air look grainy, the chop on the river appear slower and heavier. Tio Moises' granddaughter served plates of roast corn and fish, and Mingolla stuffed himself. Afterward, when the old man signaled his weariness, Mingolla and Debora strolled off along the stream. Between two of the huts, mounted on a pole, was a warped backboard with a netless hoop, and some young men were shooting baskets. Mingolla joined them. It was hard dribbling on the bumpy dirt, but he had never played better. The residue of drunkenness fueled his game, and his jump shots followed perfect arcs down through the hoop. Even at improbable angles, his shots fell true. He lost himself in flicking out his hands to make a steal, in feinting and leaping high to snag a rebound, becoming—as dusk faded—the most adroit of ten arm-waving, jitter-stepping shadows.

The game ended and the stars came out, looking like holes punched into fire through a billow of black silk overhanging the palms. Flickering chutes of lamplight illuminated the ground in front of the huts, and as Debora and Mingolla walked among them, he heard a radio tuned to the Armed Forces Network giving a play-by-play of a baseball game. There was a crack of the bat, the crowd roared, the announcer cried, "He got it all!" Mingolla imagined the ball vanishing into the darkness above the stadium, bouncing out into parking-lot America, lodging under a tire where some kid would find it and think it a miracle, or rolling across the street to rest under a used car, shimmering there, secretly white and fuming with home run energies. The score was three-to-one, top of the second. Mingolla didn't know who was playing and didn't care. Home runs were happening for him, mystical jump shots curved along predestined tracks. He was at the center of incalculable forces.

One of the huts was unlit, with two wooden chairs out front, and as they approached, the sight of it blighted Mingolla's mood. Something about it bothered him: its air of preparedness, of being a little stage set. Just paranoia, he thought. The signs had been good so far, hadn't they? When they reached the hut, Debora sat in the chair nearest the door and looked up at him. Starlight pointed her eyes with brilliance. Behind her, through the doorway, he made out the shadowy cocoon of a strung hammock, and beneath it, a sack from which part of a wire cage protruded. "What about your game?" he asked.

"I thought it was more important to be with you," she said.

That, too, bothered him. It was all starting to bother him, and he couldn't understand why. The thing in his hand wiggled. He balled the hand into a fist and sat next to Debora. "What's going on between you and me?" he asked, nervous. "Is anything gonna happen? I keep thinking it will, but..." He wiped sweat from his forehead and forgot what he had been driving at.

"I'm not sure what you mean," she said.

A shadow moved across the yellow glare spilling from the hut next door. Rippling, undulating. Mingolla squeezed his eyes shut.

"If you mean... romantically," she said, "I'm confused about that myself. Whether you return to your base or go to Panama, we don't seem to have much of a future. And we certainly don't have much of a past."

It boosted his confidence in her, in the situation, that she didn't have an assured answer. But he felt shaky. Very shaky. He gave his head a twitch, fighting off more ripples. "What's it like in Panama?"

"I've never been there. Probably a lot like Guatemala, except without the fighting."

Maybe he should get up, walk around. Maybe that would help. Or maybe he should just sit and talk. Talking seemed to steady him. "I bet," he said, "I bet it's beautiful, y'know. Panama. Green mountains, jungle waterfalls. I bet there's lots of birds. Macaws and parrots. Millions of 'em."

"I suppose so."

"And hummingbirds. This friend of mine was down there once on a hummingbird expedition, said there was a million kinds. I thought he was sort of a creep, y'know, for being into collecting hummingbirds." He opened his eyes and had to close them again. "I guess I thought hummingbird collecting wasn't very relevant to the big issues."

"David?" Concern in her voice.

"I'm okay." The smell of her perfume was more cloying than he remembered. "You get there by boat, right? Must be a pretty big boat. I've never been on a real boat, just this rowboat my uncle had. He used to take me fishing off Coney Island, we'd tie up to a buoy and catch all these poison fish. You shoulda seen some of 'em. Like mutants. Rainbow-colored eyes, weird growths all over. Scared the hell outta me to think about eating fish."

"I had an uncle who..."

"I used to think about all the ones that must be down there too deep for us to catch. Giant blowfish, genius sharks, whales with hands. I'd see 'em swallowing the boat, I'd..."

"Calm down, David." She kneaded the back of his neck, sending a shiver down his spine.

"I'm okay, I'm okay." He pushed her hand away; he did not need shivers along with everything else. "Lemme hear some more 'bout Panama."

"I told you, I've never been there."

"Oh, yeah. Well, how 'bout Costa Rica? You been to Costa Rica." Sweat was popping out all over his body. Maybe he should go for a swim. He'd heard there were manatees in the Rio Dulce. "Ever seen a manatee?" he asked.

"David!"

She must have leaned close, because he could feel her heat spreading all through him, and he thought maybe that would help, smothering in her heat, heavy motion, get rid of this shakiness. He'd take her into that hammock and see just how hot she got. *How* hot *she got, how* hot *she got.* The words did a train rhythm in his head. Afraid to open his eyes, he reached out blindly and pulled her to him. Bumped faces, searched for her mouth. Kissed her. She kissed back. His hand slipped up to cup a breast. Jesus, she felt good! She felt like salvation, like Panama, like what you fall into when you sleep.

But then it changed, changed slowly, so slowly that he didn't notice until it was almost complete, and her tongue was squirming in his mouth, as thick and stupid as a snail's foot, and her breast, oh shit, her breast was jiggling, trembling with the same wormy juices that were in his left hand. He pushed her *off,* opened his eyes. Saw crude-stitch eyelashes sewn to her cheeks. Lips parted, mouth full of bones. Blank face of meat. He got to his feet, pawing the air, wanting to rip down the film of ugliness that had settled over him.

"David?" She warped his name, gulping the syllables as if she were trying to swallow and talk at once.

Frog voice, devil voice.

He spun around, caught an eyeful of black sky and spiky trees and a pitted bone-knob moon trapped in a weave of branches. Dark warty shapes of the huts, doors into yellow flame with crooked shadow men inside. He blinked, shook his head. It wasn't going away, it was real. What was this place? Not a village in Guatemala, naw, un-uh. He heard a strangled wildman grunt come from his throat, and he backed away, backed away from everything. She walked after him, croaking his name. Wig of black straw, dabs of shining jelly for eyes. Some of the shadow men were herky-jerking out of their doors, gathering behind her, talking about him in devil language. Long-legged licorice-skinned demons with drumbeat hearts, faceless nothings from the dimension of sickness. He backed another few steps.

"I can see you," he said. "I know what you are."

"It's all right, David," she said, and smiled.

Sure! She thought he was going to buy the smile, but he wasn't fooled. He saw how it broke over her face the way something rotten melts through the bottom of a wet grocery sack after it's been in the garbage for a week. Gloating smile of the Queen Devil Bitch. She had done this to him, had teamed up with the bad life in his hand and done witchy things to his head. Made him see down to the layer of shit-magic she lived in.

"I see you," he said.

He tripped, went backward flailing, stumbling, and came out of it running toward the town.

Ferns whipped his legs, branches cut at his face. Webs of shadow fettered the trail, and the shrilling insects had the sound of a metal edge being honed. Up ahead, he spotted a big moonstruck tree standing by itself on a rise overlooking the water. A grandfather tree, a white magic tree. It summoned to him. He stopped beside it, sucking air. The moonlight cooled him off, drenched him with silver, and he understood the purpose of the tree. Fountain of whiteness in the dark wood, shining for him alone. He made a fist of his left hand. The thing inside the hand eeled frantically as if it knew what was coming. He studied the deeply grooved, mystic patterns of the bark and found the point of confluence. He steeled himself. Then he drove his fist into the trunk. Brilliant pain lanced up his arm, and he cried out. But he hit the tree again, hit it a third time. He held the hand tight against his body, muffling the pain. It was already swelling, becoming a knuckle-less cartoon hand; but nothing moved inside it. The riverbank, with its rustlings and shadows, no longer menaced him; it had been transformed into a place of ordinary lights, ordinary darks, and even the whiteness of the tree looked unmagically bright.

"David!" Debora's voice, and not far off.

Part of him wanted to wait, to see whether or not she had changed for the innocent, for the ordinary. But he couldn't trust her, couldn't trust himself, and he set out running once again.

j

Mingolla caught the ferry to the west bank, thinking that he would find Gilbey, that a dose of Gilbey's belligerence would ground him in reality. He sat in the bow next to a group of five other soldiers, one of whom was puking over the side, and to avoid a conversation he turned away and looked down into the black water slipping past. Moonlight edged the wavelets with silver, and among those gleams it seemed he could see reflected the broken curve of his life: a kid living for Christmas, drawing pictures, receiving praise, growing up mindless to high school, sex, and drugs, growing beyond that, beginning to draw pictures again, and then, right where you might expect the curve to assume a more meaningful shape, it was sheared off, left hanging, its process demystified and explicable. He realized how foolish the idea of the ritual had been. Like a dying man clutching a vial of holy water, he had clutched at magic when the logic of existence had proved untenable. Now the frail linkages of that magic had been dissolved, and nothing supported him: he was falling through the dark zones of the war, waiting to be snatched by one of its monsters. He lifted his head and gazed at the west bank. The shore toward which he was heading was as black as a bat's wing and inscribed with arcana of violent light. Rooftops and palms were cast in silhouette against a rainbow haze of neon; gassy arcs of blood red and lime green and indigo were visible between them: fragments of glowing beasts. The wind bore screams and wild music. The soldiers beside him laughed and cursed, and the one guy kept on puking. Mingolla rested his forehead on the wooden rail, just to feel something solid.

At the Club Demonio, Gilbey's big-breasted whore was lounging by the bar, staring into her drink. Mingolla pushed through the dancers, through heat and noise and veils of lavender smoke; when he walked up to the whore, she put on a professional smile and made a grab for his crotch. He fended her off. "Where's Gilbey?" he shouted. She gave him a befuddled look; then the light dawned. "Meengolla?" she said. He nodded. She fumbled in her purse and pulled out a folded paper. "Ees frawm Geel-bee," she said. "Forr me, five dol-larrs."

He handed her the money and took the paper. It proved to be a Christian pamphlet with a pen-and-ink sketch of a rail-thin, aggrieved-looking Jesus on the front, and beneath the sketch, a tract whose first line read, "The last days are in season." He turned it over and found a handwritten note on the back. The note was pure Gilbey. No explanation, no sentiment. Just the basics.

I'm gone to Panama. You want to make that trip, check out a guy named Ruy Barros in Livingston. He'll fix you up. Maybe I'll see you.

G.

j

Mingolla had believed that his confusion had peaked, but the fact of Gilbey's desertion wouldn't fit inside his head, and when he tried to make it fit he was left more confused than ever. It wasn't that he couldn't understand what had happened. He understood it perfectly; he might have predicted it. Like a crafty rat who had seen his favorite hole blocked by a trap, Gilbey had simply chewed a new hole and vanished through it. The thing that confused Mingolla was his total lack of referents. He and Gilbey and Baylor had seemed to triangulate reality, to locate each other within a coherent map of duties and places and events; and now that they were both gone, Mingolla felt utterly bewildered. Outside the club, he let the crowds push him along and gazed up at the neon animals atop the bars. Giant blue rooster, green bull, golden turtle with fiery red eyes. Great identities regarding him with disfavor. Bleeds of color washed from the signs, staining the air to a garish paleness, giving everyone a mealy complexion. Amazing, Mingolla thought, that you could breathe such grainy discolored stuff, that it didn't start you choking. It was all amazing, all nonsensical. Everything he saw struck him as unique and unfathomable, even the most commonplace of sights. He found himself staring at people—at whores, at street kids, at an MP who was talking to another MP, patting the fender of his jeep as if it were his big olive-drab pet—and trying to figure out what they were really doing, what special significance their actions held for him, what clues they presented that might help him unravel the snarl of his own existence. At last, realizing that he needed peace and quiet, he set out toward the airbase, thinking he would find an empty bunk and sleep off his confusion; but when he came to the cut-off that led to the unfinished bridge, he turned down it, deciding that he wasn't ready to deal with gate sentries and duty officers. Dense thickets buzzing with insects narrowed the cut-off to a path, and at its end stood a line of sawhorses. He climbed over them and soon was mounting a sharply inclined curve that appeared to lead to a point not far below the lumpish silver moon.

Despite a litter of rubble and cardboard sheeting, the concrete looked pure under the moon, blazing bright, like a fragment of snowy light not quite hardened to the material; and as he ascended he thought he could

feel the bridge trembling to his footsteps with the sensitivity of a white nerve. He seemed to be walking into darkness and stars, a solitude the size of creation. It felt good and damn lonely, maybe a little too much so, with the wind flapping pieces of cardboard and the sounds of the insects left behind.

After a few minutes he glimpsed the ragged terminus ahead. When he reached it, he sat down carefully, letting his legs dangle. Wind keened through the exposed girders, tugging at his ankles; his hand throbbed and was fever-hot. Below, multicolored brilliance clung to the black margin of the east bank like a colony of bioluminescent algae. He wondered how high he was. Not high enough, he thought. Faint music was fraying on the wind—the inexhaustible delirium of San Francisco dejuticlan—and he imagined that the flickering of the stars was caused by this thin smoke of music drifting across them.

He tried to think what to do. Not much occurred to him. He pictured Gilbey in Panama. Whoring, drinking, fighting. Doing just as he had in Guatemala. That was where the idea of desertion failed Mingolla. In Panama he would be afraid; in Panama, though his hand might not shake, some other malignant twitch would develop; in Panama he would resort to magical cures for his afflictions, because he would be too imperiled by the real to derive strength from it. And eventually the war would come to Panama. Desertion would have gained him nothing. He stared out across the moon-silvered jungle, and it seemed that some essential part of him was pouring from his eyes, entering the flow of the wind and rushing away past the Ant Farm and its smoking craters, past guerrilla territory, past the seamless join of sky and horizon, being irresistibly pulled toward a point into which the world's vitality was emptying. He felt himself emptying as well, growing cold and vacant and slow. His brain became incapable of thought, capable only of recording perceptions. The wind brought green scents that made his nostrils flare. The sky's blackness folded around him, and the stars were golden pinpricks of sensation. He didn't sleep, but something in him slept.

A whisper drew him back from the edge of the world. At first he thought it had been his imagination, and he continued staring at the sky, which had lightened to the vivid blue of pre-dawn. Then he heard it again and glanced behind him. Strung out across the bridge, about twenty feet away, were a dozen or so children. Some standing, some crouched. Most were clad in rags, a few wore coverings of vines and leaves, and others were naked. Watchful; silent. Knives glinted in their hands. They were all emaciated, their hair long and matted, and Mingolla, recalling the dead children he had seen that morning, was for a moment afraid. But only for a moment. Fear flared in him like a coal puffed to life by a breeze and died an instant later, suppressed not by any rational accommodation but by a perception of those ragged figures as an opportunity for surrender. He wasn't eager to die, yet neither did he want to put forth more effort in the cause of survival. Survival, he had learned, was not the soul's ultimate priority. He kept staring at the children. The way they were posed reminded him of a Neanderthal grouping in the Museum of Natural History. The moon was still up, and they cast vaguely defined shadows like smudges of graphite. Finally Mingolla turned away; the horizon was showing a distinct line of green darkness.

He had expected to be stabbed or pushed, to pinwheel down and break against the Rio Duke, its waters gone a steely color beneath the brightening sky. But instead a voice spoke in his ear: "Hey, macho." Squatting beside him was a boy of fourteen or fifteen, with a swarthy monkeylike face framed by tangles of shoulder-length dark hair. Wearing tattered shorts. Coiled serpent tattooed on his brow. He tipped his head to one side, then the other. Perplexed. He might have been trying to see the true Mingolla through layers of false appearance. He made a growly noise in his throat and held up a knife, twisting it this way and that, letting Mingolla observe its keen edge, how it channeled the moonlight along its blade. An army-issue survival knife with a brass-knuckle grip. Mingolla gave an amused sniff.

The boy seemed alarmed by this reaction; he lowered the knife and shifted away. "What you doing here, man?" he asked.

A number of answers occurred to Mingolla, most demanding too much energy to voice; he chose the simplest. "I like it here. I like the bridge."

The boy squinted at Mingolla. "The bridge is magic," he said. "You know this?"

"There was a time I might have believed you," said Mingolla.

"You got to talk slow, man." The boy frowned. "Too fast, I can't understan'."

Mingolla repeated his comment, and the boy said, "You believe it, gringo. Why else you here?" With a planing motion of his arm he described an imaginary continuance of the bridge's upward course. "That's where the bridge travels now. Don't have not'ing to do wit' crossing the river. It's a piece of white stone. Don't mean the same t'ing a bridge means."

Mingolla was surprised to hear his thoughts echoed by someone who so resembled a hominid.

"I come here," the boy went on. "I listen to the wind, hear it sing in the iron. And I know t'ings from it. I can see the future." He grinned, exposing blackened teeth, and pointed south toward the Caribbean. "Future's that way, man."

Mingolla liked the joke; he felt an affinity for the boy, for anyone who could manage jokes from the boy's perspective, but he couldn't think of a way to express his good feeling. Finally he said, "You speak English well."

"Shit! What you think? 'Cause we live in the jungle, we talk like animals? Shit!" The boy jabbed the point of his knife into the concrete. "I talk English all my life. Gringos they too stupid to learn Spanish."

A girl's voice sounded behind them, harsh and peremptory. The other children had closed to within ten feet, their savage faces intent upon Mingolla, and the girl was standing a bit forward of them. She had sunken cheeks and deep-set eyes; ratty cables of hair hung down over her single-scoop breasts. Her hipbones tented up a rag of a skirt, which the wind pushed back between her legs. The boy let her finish, then gave a prolonged response, punctuating his words by smashing the brass-knuckle grip of his knife against the concrete, striking sparks with every blow.

"Gracela," he said to Mingolla, "she wants to kill you. But I say, some men they got one foot in the worl' of death, and if you kill them, death will take you, too. And you know what?"

"What?" said Mingolla.

"It's true. You and death"—the boy clasped his hands—"like this."

"Maybe," Mingolla said.

"No 'maybe.' The bridge tol' me. Tol' me I be t'ankful if I let you live. So you be t'ankful to the bridge. That magic you don' believe, it save your ass." The boy lowered out of his squat and sat cross-legged. "Gracela, she don' care 'bout you live or die. She jus' go 'gainst me 'cause when I leave here, she going to be chief. She's, you know, impatient."

Mingolla looked at the girl. She met his gaze coldly: a witch-child with slitted eyes, bramble hair, and ribs poking out. "Where are you going?" he asked the boy.

"I have a dream I will live in the south; I dream I own a warehouse full of gold and cocaine."

The girl began to harangue him again, and he shot back a string of angry syllables.

"What did you say?" Mingolla asked.

"I say," Gracela, you give me shit, I going to fuck you and t'row you in the river.' " He winked at Mingolla. "Gracela she a virgin, so she worry 'bout that firs' t'ing."

The sky was graying, pink streaks fading in from the east; birds wheeled up from the jungle below, forming into flocks above the river. In the half-light Mingolla saw that the boy's chest was cross-hatched with ridged scars: knife wounds that hadn't received proper treatment. Bits of vegetation were trapped in his hair, like primitive adornments.

"Tell me, gringo," said the boy. "I hear in America there is a machine wit' the soul of a man. This is true?"

"More or less," said Mingolla.

The boy nodded gravely, his suspicions confirmed. "I hear also America has builded a metal worl' in the sky."

"They're building it now."

"In the house of your president, is there a stone that holds the mind of a dead magician?"

Mingolla gave this due consideration. "I doubt it," he said. "But it's possible."

Wind thudded against the bridge, startling him. He felt its freshness on his face and relished the sensation. That—the fact that he could still take simple pleasure from life—startled him more than had the sudden noise.

The pink streaks in the east were deepening to crimson and fanning wider; shafts of light pierced upward to stain the bellies of some low-lying clouds to mauve. Several of the children began to mutter in unison. A chant. They were speaking in Spanish, but the way their voices jumbled the words, it sounded guttural and malevolent, a language for trolls. Listening to them, Mingolla imagined them crouched around fires in bamboo thickets. Bloody knives lifted sunwards over their fallen prey. Making love in the green nights among fleshy Rousseau-like vegetation, while pythons with ember eyes coiled in the branches above their heads.

"Truly, gringo," said the boy, apparently still contemplating Mingolla's answers. "These are evil times." He stared gloomily down at the river; the wind shifted the heavy snarls of his hair.

Watching him, Mingolla grew envious. Despite the bleakness of his existence, this little monkey king was content with his place in the world, assured of its nature. Perhaps he was deluded, but Mingolla envied his delusion, and he especially envied his dream of gold and cocaine. His own dreams had been dispersed by the war. The idea of sitting and daubing colors onto canvas no longer held any real attraction for him. Nor did the thought of returning to New York. Though survival had been his priority all these months, he had never stopped to consider what survival portended, and now he did not believe he could return. He had, he realized, become acclimated to the war, able to breathe its toxins; he would gag on the air of peace and home.

The war was his new home, his newly rightful place.

Then the truth of this struck him with the force of an illumination, and he understood what he had to do.

Baylor and Gilbey had acted according to their natures, and he would have to act according to his, which imposed upon him the path of acceptance. He remembered Tio Moises' story about the pilot and laughed inwardly. In a sense his friend—the guy he had mentioned in his unsent letter—had been right about the war, about the world. It was full of designs, patterns, coincidences, and cycles that appeared to indicate the workings of some magical power. But these things were the result of a subtle natural process. The longer you lived, the wider your experience, the more complicated your life became, and eventually you were bound in the midst of so many interactions, a web of circumstance and emotion and event, that nothing was simple anymore and everything was subject to interpretation. Interpretation, however, was a waste of time. Even the most logical of interpretations was merely an attempt to herd mystery into a cage and lock the door on it. It made life no less mysterious. And it was equally pointless to seize upon patterns, to rely on them, to obey the mystical regulations they seemed to imply. Your one effective course had to be entrenchment. You had to admit to mystery, to the incomprehensibility of your situation, and protect yourself against it. Shore up your web, clear it of blind corners, set alarms. You had to plan aggressively. You had to become the monster in your own maze, as brutal and devious as the fate you sought to escape. It was the kind of militant acceptance that Tio Moises' pilot had not had the opportunity to display, that Mingolla himself—though the opportunity had been his—had failed to display. He saw that now. He had merely reacted to danger and had not challenged or used forethought against it. But he thought he would be able to do that now.

He turned to the boy, thinking he might appreciate this insight into "magic," and caught a flicker of movement out of the corner of his eye. Gracela. Coming up behind the boy, her knife held low, ready to stab. In reflex, Mingolla flung out his injured hand to block her. The knife nicked the edge of his hand, deflected upward and sliced the top of the boy's shoulder.

The pain in Mingolla's hand was excruciating, blinding him momentarily; and then as he grabbed Gracela's forearm to prevent her from stabbing again, he felt another sensation, one almost covered by the pain. He had thought the thing inside his hand was dead, but now he could feel it fluttering at the edges of the wound, leaking out in the rich trickle of blood that flowed over his wrist. It was trying to worm back inside, wriggling against the flow, but the pumping of his heart was too strong, and soon it was gone, dripping on the white stone of the bridge.

Before he could feel relief or surprise or any way absorb what had happened, Gracela tried to pull free. Mingolla got to his knees, dragged her down and dashed her knife hand against the bridge. The knife skittered away. Gracela struggled wildly, clawing at his face, and the other children edged forward. Mingolla levered his left arm under Gracela's chin, choking her; with his right hand, he picked up the knife and pressed the point into her breast. The children stopped their advance, and Gracela went limp. He could feel her trembling. Tears streaked the grime on her cheeks. She looked like a scared little girl, not a witch.

"*Pitta!* " said the boy. He had come to his feet, holding his shoulder, and was staring daggers at Gracela.

"Is it bad?" Mingolla asked. "The shoulder?" The boy inspected the bright blood on his fingertips. "It hurts," he said. He stepped over to stand in front of Gracela and smiled down at her; he unbuttoned the top button of his shorts. Gracela tensed.

"What are you doing?" Mingolla suddenly felt responsible for the girl.

"I going to do what I tol' her, man." The boy undid the rest of the buttons and shimmied out of his shorts; he was already half-erect, as if the violence had aroused him.

"No," said Mingolla, realizing as he spoke that this was not at all wise.

"Take your life," said the boy sternly. "Walk away." A long powerful gust of wind struck the bridge; it seemed to Mingolla that the vibration of the bridge, the beating of his heart, and Gracela's trembling were driven by the same shimmering pulse. He felt an almost visceral commitment to the moment, one that had nothing to do with his concern for the girl. Maybe, he thought, it was an implementation of his new convictions.

The boy lost patience. He shouted at the other children, herding them away with slashing gestures. Sullenly, they moved off down the curve of the bridge, positioning themselves along the railing, leaving an open avenue. Beyond them, beneath a lavender sky, the jungle stretched to the horizon, broken only by the rectangular hollow made by the airbase. The boy hunkered at Gracela's feet. "Tonight," he said to Mingolla, "the bridge have set us together. Tonight we sit, we talk. Now, that's over. My heart say to kill you. But 'cause you stop Gracela from cutting deep, I give you a chance. She mus' make a judgmen'. If she say she go wit' you, we"—he waved toward the other children—"will kill you. If she wan' to stay, then you mus' go. No more talk, no bullshit. You jus' go. Under-stan'?"

Mingolla wasn't afraid, and his lack of fear was not born of an indifference to life, but of clarity and

confidence. It was time to stop reacting away from challenges, time to meet them. He came up with a plan. There was no doubt that Gracela would choose him, choose a chance at life, no matter how slim. But before she could decide, he would kill the boy. Then he would run straight at the others: without their leader, they might not hang together. It wasn't much of a plan and he didn't like the idea of hurting the boy; but he thought he might be able to pull it off. "I understand," he said.

The boy spoke to Gracela; he told Mingolla to release her. She sat up, rubbing the spot where Mingolla had pricked her with the knife. She glanced coyly at him, then at the boy; she pushed her hair back behind her neck and thrust out her breasts as if preening for two suitors. Mingolla was astonished by her behavior. Maybe, he thought, she was playing for time. He stood and pretended to be shaking out his kinks, edging closer to the boy, who remained crouched beside Gracela. In the east a red fireball had cleared the horizon; its sanguine light inspired Mingolla, fueled his resolve. He yawned and edged closer yet, firming his grip on the knife. He would yank the boy's head back by the hair, cut his throat. Nerves jumped in his chest. A pressure was building inside him, demanding that he act, that he move now. He restrained himself. Another step should do it, another step to be absolutely sure. But as he was about to take that step, Gracela reached out and tapped the boy on the shoulder.

Surprise must have showed on Mingolla's face, because the boy looked at him and grunted laughter. "You t'ink she pick you?" he said. "Shit! You don' know Gracela, man. Gringos burn her village. She lick the devil's ass 'fore she even shake hands wit' you." He grinned, stroked her hair. " 'Sides, she t'ink if she fuck me good, maybe I say, 'Oh, Gracela, I got to have some more of that!' And who knows? Maybe she right."

Gracela lay back and wriggled out of her skirt. Between her legs, she was nearly hairless. A smile touched the corners of her mouth. Mingolla stared at her, dumbfounded.

"I not going to kill you, gringo," said the boy without looking up; he was running his hand across Gracela's stomach. "I tol' you I won' kill a man so close wit' death." Again he laughed. "You look pretty funny trying to sneak up. I like watching that."

Mingolla was stunned. All the while he had been gearing himself up to kill, shunting aside anxiety and revulsion, he had merely been providing an entertainment for the boy. The heft of the knife seemed to be drawing his anger into a compact shape, and he wanted to carry out his attack, to cut down this little animal who had ridiculed him; but humiliation mixed with the anger, neutralizing it. The poisons of rage shook him; he could feel every incidence of pain and fatigue in his body. His hand was throbbing, bloated and discolored like the hand of a corpse. Weakness pervaded him. And relief.

"Go," said the boy. He lay down beside Gracela, propped on an elbow, and began to tease one of her nipples erect.

Mingolla took a few hesitant steps away. Behind him, Gracela made a mewling noise and the boy whispered something. Mingolla's anger was rekindled—they had already forgotten him!—but he kept going. As he passed the other children, one spat at him and another shied a pebble. He fixed his eyes on the white concrete slipping beneath his feet.

When he reached the mid-point of the curve, he turned back. The children had hemmed in Gracela and the boy against the terminus, blocking them from view. The sky had gone bluish-gray behind them, and the wind carried their voices. They were singing: a ragged, chirpy song that sounded celebratory. Mingolla's anger subsided, his humiliation ebbed. He had nothing to be ashamed of; though he had acted unwisely, he had done so from a posture of strength and no amount of ridicule could diminish that. Things were going to work out. Yes they were! He would make them work out.

For a while he watched the children. At this remove, their singing had an appealing savagery and he felt a trace of wistfulness at leaving them behind. He wondered what would happen after the boy had done with Gracela. He was not concerned, only curious. The way you feel when you think you may have to leave a movie before the big finish. Will our heroine survive? Will justice prevail? Will survival and justice bring happiness in their wake? Soon the end of the bridge came to be bathed in the golden rays of the sunburst; the children seemed to be blackening and dissolving in heavenly fire. That was a sufficient resolution for Mingolla. He tossed Gracela's knife into the river and went down from the bridge in whose magic he no longer believed, walking toward the war whose mystery he had accepted as his own.

5

At the airbase, Mingolla took a stand beside the Sikorsky that had brought him to San Francisco de Juticlan; he had recognized it by the painted flaming letters of the words Whispering Death. He rested his head

against the letter G and recalled how Baylor had recoiled from the letters, worried that they might transmit some deadly essence. Mingolla didn't mind the contact. The painted flames seemed to be warming the inside of his head, stirring up thoughts as slow and indefinite as smoke. Comforting thoughts that embodied no images or ideas. Just a gentle buzz of mental activity, like the idling of an engine. The base was coming to life around him. Jeeps pulling away from barracks; a couple of officers inspecting the belly of a cargo plane; some guy repairing a fork-lift. Peaceful, homey. Mingolla closed his eyes, lulled into a half-sleep, letting the sun and the painted flames bracket him with heat real and imagined.

Some time later—how much later, he could not be sure—a voice said, "Fucked up your hand pretty good, didn'tcha?"

The two pilots were standing by the cockpit door. In their black flight suits and helmets they looked neither weird nor whimsical, but creatures of functional menace. Masters of the Machine. "Yeah," said Mingolla. "Fucked it up."

"How'd ya do it?" asked the pilot on the left.

"Hit a tree."

"Musta been goddamn crocked to hit a tree," said the pilot on the right. "Tree ain't goin' nowhere if you hit it."

Mingolla made a non-committal noise. "You guys going up to the Farm?"

"You bet! What's the matter, man? Had enough of them wild women?" Pilot on the right.

"Guess so. Wanna gimme a ride?"

"Sure thing," said the pilot on the left. "Whyn't you climb on in front. You can sit back of us."

"Where your buddies?" asked the pilot on the right.

"Gone," said Mingolla as he climbed into the cockpit.

One of the pilots said, "Didn't think we'd be seein' them boys again."

Mingolla strapped into the observer's seat behind the co-pilot's position. He had assumed there would be a lengthy instrument check, but as soon as the engines had been warmed, the Sikorsky lurched up and veered northward. With the exception of the weapons systems, none of the defenses had been activated. The radar, the thermal imager and terrain display, all showed blank screens. A nervous thrill ran across the muscles of Mongolia's stomach as he considered the varieties of danger to which the pilots' reliance upon their miraculous helmets had laid them open; but his nervousness was subsumed by the whispery rhythms of the rotors and his sense of the Sikorsky's power. He recalled having a similar feeling of secure potency while sitting at the controls of his gun. He had never let that feeling grow, never let it rule him, empower him. He had been a fool.

They followed the northeasterly course of the river, which coiled like a length of blue-steel razor wire between jungled hills. The pilots laughed and joked, and the ride came to have the air of a ride with a couple of good oF boys going nowhere fast and full of free beer. At one point the co-pilot piped his voice through the onboard speakers and launched into a dolorous country song.

"Whenever we kiss, dear, our two lips meet, And whenever you're not with me, we're apart. When you sawed my dog in half, that was depressin', But when you shot me in the chest, you broke my heart."

As the co-pilot sang, the pilot rocked the Sikorsky back and forth in a drunken accompaniment, and after the song ended, he called back to Mingolla, "You believe this here son of a bitch wrote that? He did! Picks a guitar, too! Boy's a genius!"

"It's a great song," said Mingolla, and he meant it. The song had made him happy, and that was no small thing.

They went rocking through the skies, singing the first verse over and over. But then, as they left the river behind, still maintaining a northeasterly course, the co-pilot pointed to a section of jungle ahead and shouted, "Beaners! Quadrant Four! You got 'em?"

"Got 'em!" said the pilot. The Sikorsky swerved down toward the jungle, shuddered, and flame veered from beneath them. An instant later, a huge swath of jungle erupted into a gout of marbled smoke and fire. "Whee-oo!" the co-pilot sang out, jubilant. "Whisperin' Death strikes again!" With guns blazing, they went swooping through blowing veils of dark smoke. Acres of trees were burning, and still they kept up the attack. Mingolla gritted his teeth against the noise, and when at last the firing stopped, dismayed by this insanity, he sat slumped, his head down. He suddenly doubted his ability to cope with the insanity of the Ant Farm and remembered all his reasons for fear.

The co-pilot turned back to him. "You ain't got no call to look so gloomy, man," he said. "You're a lucky son of a bitch, y'know that?"

The pilot began a bank toward the east, toward the Ant Farm. "How you figure that?" Mingolla asked.

"I gotta clear sight of you, man," said the co-pilot. "I can tell you for true you ain't gonna be at the Farm

much longer. It ain't clear why or nothin'. But I 'spect you gonna be wounded. Not bad, though. Just a goin'-home wound."

As the pilot completed the bank, a ray of sun slanted into the cockpit, illuminating the co-pilot's visor, and for a split-second Mingolla could make out the vague shadow of the face beneath. It seemed lumpy and malformed. His imagination added details. Bizarre growths, cracked cheeks, an eye webbed shut. Like a face out of a movie about nuclear mutants. He was tempted to believe that he had really seen this; the co-pilot's deformities would validate his prediction of a secure future. But Mingolla rejected the temptation. He was afraid of dying, afraid of the terrors held by life at the Ant Farm, yet he wanted no more to do with magic... unless there was magic involved in being a good soldier. In obeying the disciplines, in the practice of fierceness.

"Could be his hand'll get him home," said the pilot. "That hand looks pretty fucked up to me. Looks like a million-dollar wound, that hand."

"Naw, I don't get it's his hand," said the co-pilot. "Somethin" else. Whatever, it's gonna do the trick."

Mingolla could see his own face floating in the black plastic of the co-pilot's visor; he looked warped and pale, so thoroughly unfamiliar that for a moment he thought the face might be a bad dream the co-pilot was having.

"What the hell's with you, man?" the co-pilot asked. "You don't believe me?"

Mingolla wanted to explain that his attitude had nothing to do with belief or disbelief, that it signaled his intent to obtain a safe future by means of securing his present; but he couldn't think how to put it into words the co-pilot would accept. The co-pilot would merely refer again to his visor as testimony to a magical reality or perhaps would point up ahead where—because the cockpit plastic had gone opaque under the impact of direct sunlight—the sun now appeared to hover in a smoky darkness: a distinct fiery sphere with a streaming corona, like one of those cabalistic emblems embossed on ancient seals. It was an evil, fearsome-looking thing, and though Mingolla was unmoved by it, he knew the pilot would see in it a powerful sign.

"You think I'm lyin'?" said the co-pilot angrily. "You think I'd be bullshittin' you 'bout somethin' like this? Man, I ain't lyin'! I'm givin' you the good goddamn word!"

They flew east into the sun, whispering death, into a world disguised as a strange bloody enchantment, over the dark green wild where war had taken root, where men in combat armor fought for no good reason against men wearing brass scorpions on their berets, where crazy, lost men wandered the mystic light of Fire Zone Emerald and mental wizards brooded upon things not yet seen. The co-pilot kept the black bubble of his visor angled back toward Mingolla, waiting for a response. But Mingolla just stared, and before too long the co-pilot turned away.

THE BLACK CLAY BOY

They'd robbed her of her life, sucked out the middle of her joy like marrow-eating ghouls. Memories she had, but they'd drained them of juice and left the husks stuck in her head like dead flies in a web. Left her bitter and dotty, an old cracked hag fit for taunting by the neighborhood children.

Take those Kandell boys.

Always traipsing across her lawn and peeing their initials in the snow-crust, shaking their tiny pale things at her as if the sight would do an injury. There they were now, sneaking up to the house, clumping onto the porch. A piece of notebook paper scrawled with a kid's crooked letters was slipped under the door. Hanging on to the knob for balance, teetering, Willa picked it up and read: "Old lady Selkie is a fuking bitch!"

She snatched open the door and saw them humping toward the fence, two blue-coated wool-hatted dwarfs sinking to their knees in the snow. "You got that right," she squalled. "Fucking with a *C!*" Yelling took the wind out of her, and she stood trembling, her breath steaming in ragged white puffs, her eyes tearing.

The Kandells stopped at the fence-line, and one gave her the finger.

"I see you back there," she shrilled. "I'll go down in my cellar and make me a Black Clay Boy. Jab pins in its eyes, and prick you blind!"

Now where the hell had she gotten that idea? A Black Clay Boy? Some senile trick of broken thoughts happening right for once. Well, maybe she *could* hex 'em. Maybe she'd shriveled up that pure and mean.

She shut the door, leaned against it, her heart faltering. The next second, a snowball splintered one of the side windows, spraying sparkles of glass and ice over her new sofa. She was too weak to shout again.

Smelly little shits!

A Black Clay Boy might be just the ticket, she thought. Might scare 'em. They'd run to their mommy, their father would come over to have a serious talk. She'd pretend to be a tired and desperate old woman, scared to death of his vicious brood.

No need to pretend, Willa.

Muttering under her breath, she hobbled down to the cellar, and with popping joints and many a gasp, she troweled a bucketful of the rich black bottomland that did for a floor. Then she lugged the bucket upstairs to the kitchen and set it on the table. The kitchen whined, buzzed, and hummed with the workings of small appliances and the electric motor inside the cold box... or could be the hum was the sound of her mind winding tight, getting ready to spew out shattered gears and sprung coils.

The wall clock ticked loud and hollow like someone clicking her tongue over and over.

Willa made the Boy's torso first, patting a lump of clay into a fat black lozenge. She added tubular arms and legs, rolling them into shape between her palms the way she did with dough before flattening it into a crust. Finally she added a featureless oval head. The whole thing was about two and a half feet long, and it reminded her of those shapes left by frightened men crashing through doors in the Saturday morning cartoons. Black crumbs of it were scattered like dead bugs on the white Formica. She reached into her apron pocket for a pincushion and... Steam vented from the teakettle with a shriek, stopping Willa's heart for a dizzy split second.

Oh, God! Now she'd have to get up again.

It took her three tries to heave out of the chair. Sweat broke on her forehead, and she stood panting for almost a minute. Once she'd regained her breath, she crossed to the stove and shut off the flame. She kept a hand on the stove, stretched out the other hand to catch the edge of the table for balance, and hauled herself back across. She dropped heavily into the chair and nearly slipped off the edge.

One day soon she'd do that and fracture her damn spine.

She plucked a pin from the pincushion, and, hoping to hear a distant scream, she shoved it into the Boy's face. Pressed it home until the pinhead was flush with the clay, a tiny silver eye. It shimmered and seemed to expand. She blinked, denying the sight. It expanded again. Somehow it didn't resemble an eye any longer. More of a silver droplet, a silver bead. Her memories would be that way, she thought. Hardened into pearls. The bead melted at the edges, puddling outward like mercury (*Don't tell me I need glasses!*), and a memory began to unfold.

It was rich, clear, and full of juice.

"Oh, God!" she said. "It's a miracle."

The recollection rolled out from fifty years ago, during her marriage to Eden McClaren, the wealthiest citizen of Lyman, Ohio. She hadn't wanted to marry him. He was old, fiftyish, and even older in spirit, a dried-up coupon-counter. But her father had persuaded her. *Man's so rich he builds his house on the finest piece of bottomland in the state,* he'd said. *You won't do any better than a man who can afford to waste land like that. Marry him, marry him, marry him.* And her mother, who'd had her doubts, what with Eden being an atheist, had eventually chimed in, *Marry him, marry him, marry him.*

What was an eighteen-year-old girl to do?

Eden courted her in a manner both civil and distant. He'd sit on the opposite end of the porch swing, as far from her as possible, gazing out at the hedge, and say, "I'm quite taken with you, girl."

She would stare at her clasped hands, watching her fingers strain and twist, wishing he'd blow away in a puff of smoke. "Thank you," she'd say.

After their wedding supper of overdone beef and potatoes and stale bread pudding, he sat her down and informed her that she would have to perform her wifely duty once a week. More would fray the moral fiber, and less would be unsalubrious. Then he took her upstairs and deflowered her in a perfunctory fashion, propping himself above her, thrusting in and out, maintaining a rhythm of one, two, one, two, regular as a metronome, until he sighed and gave a quiver and rolled off, leaving her with a fair degree of pain and no pleasure, wondering why people made such a fuss over sex.

But she knew why.

Knew it in her heart, her loins.

She wanted a lover like lightning who'd split her wide open and leave her smoldering. And if Eden couldn't give her that pleasure, she'd pleasure herself. She'd done it a few times before, despite her mother's depiction of the horrid consequences. She didn't care about the consequences. But she had been frightened by having so much pleasure without someone to hold on to afterward, and so she decided to do it in front of the full-length mirror in her bedroom. That way at least she'd have her reflection for company.

She stripped and posed before the mirror. She was a beauty, though she'd never understand how beautiful. Red hair, green eyes, milky skin. Pretty breasts tipped with pink candy, and long legs columning up to that curly red patch a shade lighter than the hair on her head. She cupped the undersides of her breasts, thumbed the nipples hard, and ran her palms down her hips, her flanks. Then she touched the place, already slippery and open to its hooded secret. Her knees buckled, weakness spread through her, and she hung on to the corner post of the mirror stand to keep her feet. Her eyelids fluttered down, her breath came harsh. She forced herself to hold her eyes wide, wanting to see what happened to her face when the pleasure started to take. Her cries fogged the mirror, and her mouth twisted, and her eyes tried to close, tried to squeeze in all that good feeling, and...

"Slut!" Eden shouted from the door. "Bitch!"

Despite his rage, he seemed to have enjoyed the show. His face was flushed, his crotch tented.

"I'll not have it!" he said. "I'll not have you trailing your slime... your filth. Fouling my house!"

For the next three days he railed at her, and on the afternoon of the third day he suffered a coronary and was confined to bed by Dr. Malloy, who tsk-tsked, and warned her to prepare for the worst.

"Curse you!" Eden said when she went into his room. As weak as he was, he warped his mouth into a frown and spat out, "Curse you!"

She wondered then what sort of curse a godless man could lay, but later she concluded it must have been one of rules and joyless limits.

They buried Eden in a comer of the bottomland. In a dream she saw his bones floating in blackness like the strange money of a savage isle. And from that dream she knew him more than she ever had. She followed the track of his blue-faced primitive ancestors with their bone knives and their terrified little gods hiding in the treetops, and she trod the rain-slick stones of Glasgow town, where black-suited Calvinists screwed their souls into twists, and she crossed the great water with a prissy man of God and his widow-to-be, watched their children breed the bloodline thin and down to this miserable cramped sputter of a soul, this mysteryless little man, sad birthright of the clan.

Scratch one McClaren, sound the horn.

Willa wanted to sell the bottomland and move to the city. She wanted to live free, to kick up her heels, to have life take her in its arms and then to a nice restaurant and maybe afterward to a hotel. What harm could come of that? Twenty-two, and she'd never had any fun.

Sell the bottomland? her family said. *That'd be like selling Plymouth Rock! Bottomland's something you hang on*

to, something you cherish. We won't let you do it.

And they didn't.

She did Eden widow's service for a year, and for a year after that she hardly set foot off the land. One day her high-school friend Ellie Shane came to visit and said, "Willa, there's gonna be a party Friday at the old Hoskins place." She glanced left and right as if to defeat the wiles of eavesdroppers. "Gonna be college men and coupla businessmen from Chicago... and every one's a looker. You gotta come."

Willa couldn't say no.

This was in October, the air crisp, the leaves full turned. Bright lights sprayed from the windows of the old house, outshining the moon, and inside couples danced and groped and sought out empty rooms. Willa's man was lean and dark. He had a sharp chin and the Devil's toothy white grin, and he carried a silver pint flask that he kept forcing on her. She saw his thoughts working... He'd get this townie ripped, slip it to her quick, and leave her spinning. But Willa passed on the liquor. He'd read law at Michigan, he said, but had left school to run his father's *nationwide* trucking firm. He tried all night to impress her with his money, never knowing he didn't have to try, that it wasn't his money she wanted. He guided her out onto the porch. A blond man was sitting with a girl on a bottomed-out sofa there, his hand hunching up under her skirt, a rat-sized creature looking for its burrow. Willa stood by the porch rail, gazing at the moon-dappled woods. Her man hemmed her in against the rail, moved in for a kiss. Willa slipped away and went halfway down the steps.

"My kisses are far my husband," she said. "But all the rest is yours." And with that she skipped down from the steps and ran into the woods.

She found an old oak with gnarly bark and a lightning scar, and leaned against it. Moonlight streamed through the webbed branches, illuminating the red-and-yellow leaves... Wind seethed through them, and they looked to be shaking in separate dances, red-and-yellow spearpoints of flame. She undid the top two buttons of her blouse and touched the slope of her right breast. God! The chill of that touch went through her like something sharp and silver. She undid a third button. The wind coiled inside the blouse, fondling her. She lifted her skirt, skinned down her panties, and flung them behind the oak. She could feel herself moist and open. The man's footsteps crunched in the dead leaves. He peered into the shadows, his mouth set grim. Probably angry at her, thinking her a tease. He spotted her and came forward at a slow pace. Dark head, gleaming eyes. When he saw that she had unbuttoned the blouse, he walked faster. Stopped and tipped back the flask. His Adam's apple bobbed twice. He tossed the flask away and reached inside her blouse. His hands moved over her breasts, squeezing, molding, knowing their white rounds from every angle. "Christ," he said. "Oh, Christ." She closed her eyes and arched to his pressure. Moonlight penetrated her lids. After a few seconds she pushed him off and hiked up her skirt.

The man swallowed hard at the sight, made a soft noise deep in his throat. He tore at his buckle, ripped down his zipper, sprung out at her, a needle seeking its pole. He lifted her the necessary inch, settled into place, and plunged into her. She threw her arms back around the oak trunk, dug in with her fingers. Rough bark scraped her buttocks, but even the pain was good. He battered at her. The leaves hissed, the limbs shook, and a vibration went through the oak, as if what was going on between Willa and the man were threatening to uproot it. "Go slow," she said, the words pushed out hoarse by a thrust. "Slow, slow." That made him treat her too gently, and she told him how she needed it to build, guiding his moves. "There," she said. "There... like that." And even before her pleasure came, she cried out just for the joy of finally having a man hot and urgent inside her.

Afterward she went back to the party and paid no attention to him. He couldn't understand her, and his lack of understanding anointed her a mystery. He trailed her around, saying he had to see her again, he'd fly her to Chicago. Willa could have owned him, married him, and secured her future. But she had lights dancing in the miles of her eyes, and she wasn't worried about the future.

More's the pity, Willa.

Ah, God, Willa thought. Why hadn't they let her live? That part of her, that need, it was nothing sinful. How could they have wanted to be with her and not accept her all in all? She shook her head, ruing the wasted years, then glanced at the Black Clay Boy.

Was it her imagination, or was he quivering a little, as if he'd been trying to roll himself off the table?

Calm yourself, Willa... that's just the trembling of your head on its feeble stalk of a neck.

The Boy's silver-dot eye stared up at her. Hmm, Willa said to herself. Wonder what'd happen if I give him another. She plucked out a second pin and rammed it home.

The pinhead shimmered, began to expand into a memory.

"Lord Almighty," said Willa. "I can do magic."

After that night at the Hoskins place, Willa cut a wild track through the tame fields of Ohio possibility.

Roadhouses knew her, hotels took messages for her, and midnight dirt roads where nobody drove echoed to her backseat music. Rumors smoked up from her footprints, and the word went around that while she wouldn't kiss you, you just hadn't lived till Willa McClaren doctored your Charlie. The people of Lyman scandalized her name. That Willa, they said, she wasn't never nothin' more than hips and a hole, and I hear it was her evil needs what put ol' Eden in the ground. Willa didn't care what they said. She was having her life in sweet spasms, and for now that was enough. When the time was right, she'd settle down.

Tom Selkie, a supervisor at the seat-belt factory over in Danton, knew Willa's reputation and asked her out to get himself a sample of that real fine Charlie-doctoring. That was all Willa'd had in mind, but in the back of Tom's Packard they experienced one of those intoxicating mistakes that people often confuse for love, and Willa let him kiss her. His tongue darted into her mouth, and though she liked how that felt, it startled her more than some.

"What's the matter?" Tom asked, and Willa blushed and said, "Me and Eden never did it with tongues."

Well, knowing this innocence in her made Tom feel twice a man, and he asked her straight off to marry. "Yes," said Willa, confident that fate had finally done her a turn by giving her both a good man and the Power of True Romance. But True Romance lasted a matter of weeks. Tom kissed better than he tickled, so to speak, and was more interested in drinking with the boys after work than in getting prone and lowdown with Willa. When she tried to awaken his interest, he rejected her; his rejections grew more and more blunt, until at last he suggested that something must be wrong with her, that her needs were unnatural. Bored with marriage and having little else to engage her, she got pregnant with her firstborn, Annie. The year after Annie, she bore a son. Tom, Too, his proud dad called him. The kids grew, Tom's belly sagged, and life just dragged along.

It was at the age of thirty-six that Willa next had Big Fun. She left the kids with Tom and caught the train to Cleveland to talk with a broker about some stock Eden had hidden under the fireplace bricks. On the train she struck up a conversation with Alvah Medly, a pricey hooker with silkburns on her hips and fingers prone to breaking under the weight of her many diamonds. She was a big sleepy cat of a woman, her languid gestures leading Willa to believe she had syrup instead of marrow in her bones. Voluptuous to the point that it seemed an ounce more weight would cause everything to slump and decay. She had long black hair and big chest problems and a rear end just made for easy motion. But she was no finer a looker than Willa, who had held on to beauty and could still pass for her twenty-two-year-old self.

Willa was curious about Alvah's fancyhouse life and asked dozens of questions, and Alvah, perhaps sensing something more than mere curiosity, said, "Honey, if you wanna know all about it, whyn't you give it a whirl?"

Willa was flabbergasted. "Uh," she said, "well..." And then, finding refuge in the dull majority of her life, added, "I'm married."

"Married!" Alvah said the word like it was something you'd scrape off your shoe. "Everybody's been married." She inhaled from a slim black cigar and blew a smoke ring that floated up to the corner of the compartment and spelled out a lie. "The life ain't nothin' but one long lazy lack of limitations."

The train rattled as it went over a crossing, and everything inside Willa's head rattled. Could what Alvah was saying be true? The whole vital world was barreling east, shaking side to side, and blasting out its warning to the sexless villages of the heartland.

"You come on over to Mrs. Gacey's tonight," said Alvah, "and I bet she'll give you a try."

"I don't know," said Willa distractedly.

"'Course you don't, honey," said Alvah. "How you gonna know 'less you explore the potentials?" She chuckled, "And believe you me, there's some mighty big potentials come through the door of Mrs. Gacey's."

Willa couldn't think of anything to say. Her mind was miles ahead in Cleveland, in a room with a dark and faceless stranger.

"You come on over," said Alvah. "Mrs. Gacey'll fix you up with a room and a trick or two."

"Well," said Willa hesitantly. "Maybe... maybe just one."

That night she lay amid perfume and shadow on a harem bed draped in filmy curtains, wearing a scrap of silk and a few of Alvah's spare jewels. The door opened, and a gray-haired monument of a man walked in. His face had a craggy nobility that looked as if it should be printed on money. Willa was tense, but when she saw how the man stared... Oh, she could almost see how she appeared to him. A red-haired, green-eyed bewitchment with her silk pushed up to reveal a hint of that down-pointed curly patch of fire between her thighs. The man parted the curtain and sat on the edge of the bed, drinking her in.

"Good evenin'," he said.

"Evenin'," said Willa, a little confused. She hadn't thought she'd have to talk.

"Now where in the world did Mrs. Gacey find a girl like you?" asked the man.

"Lyman," said Willa.

"Lyman." The man loosened his tie and seemed to be trying to locate the place in some interior atlas.

"It's near Danton... that's the Winton County seat."

"Ah, yes. I carried Winton three to one."

"Whatcha mean you carried it?"

The man looked at her askance. "You don't recognize me?"

"No," said Willa. "You famous or somethin'?"

"I'm the governor," said the man, unbuttoning his shirt.

"You *are?* I voted for you!"

The man unbuckled his belt and smiled a warm professional smile. "I trust your enthusiasm for my candidacy has remained undimmed."

Willa enjoyed her evening with the governor. It gave her a chance to try some things that Eden and Tom had considered either unnatural or unmanning. But there was a distance to this kind of passion that didn't appeal to her, and when Alvah came in to find out how things had gone, she told her she didn't think she had the stuff it took for the life.

"Oh, you got what it takes, honey," said Alvah, sitting beside her. "You just don't know it."

Her robe had fallen partway open, and the globes of her breasts were visible, marble-white and moon-smooth. Looking at them, Willa suddenly perceived in Alvah a kind of sad blankness, as if a greater sadness had been erased or paved over, and she felt a wave of affection for this sculpture of a woman. And maybe her affection washed across the space between them, because Alvah put a hand on Willa's stomach and caressed its curve, resting it on her upper thigh. One of her fingertips brushed the margin of Willa's curly hair.

"You're so beautiful," said Alvah, her voice a tongue of shadow in that perfumed place.

There was a squirmy feeling in Willa's stomach, and she was a bit scared... but not scared enough to ask Alvah to take her hand away. "You're prettier than me," she said meekly, entranced by the desire in Alvah's face and by an anticipation of forbidden fruit.

Alvah eased her hand an inch south and down between. "No, honey," she said. "It's you, it's you."

Willa tried not to respond, but she could feel her pulse tapping out the message, "Yes, I will," against Alvah's fingertip.

"Please," whispered Alvah, and that word was a little wind that went everywhere through Willa, that told her a thousand things no one had ever troubled to tell her, that elevated her to something perfect and needed, that showed Alvah's need to be as strong and unalloyed as her own. *Please, please.* The word lowered over her like a veil, like the veil of Alvah's black hair fanning across her stomach, curtaining her off from the moral precincts of Lyman and her marriage. Willa wouldn't have believed a woman could make her bum, and true, it felt strange to be loved and not have a body covering her upper half, but Alvah's kisses and touches gave a tenderness to pleasure that she had never known from a man's rough bark. And though Willa had dreaded the idea of doing to Alvah what Alvah had done for her, though she set to it out of duty not desire, she came to desire. It seemed she had entered some Arab kingdom of musk and honey, some secret temple where a new god basked in its own heat, and when Alvah's white stomach quaked and her thighs clamped tight, Willa knew for the first time what it was to have the power and pleasure of a man.

For six years thereafter Willa guest-starred at Mrs. Gacey's and passed the idle hours in Alvah's arms. Eden's stocks had proved worthless, but Willa's one-trick stands gave her the profit required to justify her Cleveland weekends to Tom, and she let him think that the stocks were the source of this extra money. Her relationship to Alvah was the closest thing to love she had ever known, soft and slow and undemanding, and she would have told far greater lies to maintain it. But all good things must come to an end, or such was the regulation of Eden's curse. When Tom got fired from the seat-belt factory (*Woman, don't you even think 'bout sellin' that bottomland!*), Willa was forced to take a job, and her weekends were no longer her own.

The memory evaporated, and Willa pinched up a nose from the Black Clay Boy's face. His chest rose and fell rapidly, and breath whined through his tiny nostrils. But no new memory breathed from him. She gouged out a mouth and listened hard. Heard a noise that brought to mind those lumps of sadness often disgorged from her own chest. But maybe that was his first word, because the noise opened just like the widening of a silver eye into a world as fresh as yesterday.

"What's happening?" Willa asked, becoming terrified now of magic and miracles.

The kitchen ticked and buzzed, and the Black Clay Boy lay silent. But Willa thought this absence was an answer all the same.

Willa waited tables at O. V. Lindley's Dirtline Café, its name deriving from the line of dirt that showed on

the wrists of the farm boys who ate there when they took off their work gloves. They would come in drunk and sit swaying at the counter, pawing and teasing Willa, plugging the leaks in their souls with quarters'-worths of country and western philosophy from the glowing sage of the jukebox. She searched among them for a lover, but found no one of the proper measure. Sometimes she would go into the john on her break, skin down her panties, sit on the toilet, and remember Alvah, her hand moving between her legs. Sweat would pour off her, and she would bite back her cry. But even so, they caught her on occasion and would offer to help scratch her itch.

"What I got right here," she'd say, holding up her hand, "can do the job a damn sight better than any one of you."

And because she was still beautiful, they worried that she might be right.

Three years of this.

Time seemed to speed up, to turn a corner on an entire era and accelerate into an unfamiliar country, a place without hope or virtue. Before Willa knew it, she was wrapped in a web of trouble so intricate and thick that her own needs were suffocated. First, Annie—herself a redhead and possessing a streak of Willa's wildness—got pregnant by an unknown agency, her teenage stomach stretched by a baby boy who weighed fourteen pounds on delivery, and whom she was dissuaded from naming Nomad. Bruce, her second choice, was deemed acceptable. Willa went through Annie's high-school yearbook, looking for Bruces. Found two. One deceased, one long departed. After giving birth, Annie took to her room and would pass the days listening to vapid love songs on the radio and gazing out the window, leaving Willa to care for the infant. She spooned jar after jar of purée into its mouth, watching it pale and fatten under the harsh kitchen lights, wondering if this monster child might not be the ultimate credential of the efficacy of Eden's curse. She had begun to believe in the curse, that Eden had breathed some vileness out with the words that enveloped her like an aura and restricted her life—all her pleasures seemed to run a minimal course and span that accorded with Eden's notions of moderation.

Tom developed cancer (*Don't sell the bottomland*), and Tom, Too took something that caused him to vomit blood and avoid mirrors for almost a month. Not long thereafter he ran away from home. Willa found a note on his pillow confessing that he was Bruce's father. From his bed of pain, Tom shouted that all this was the fault of Willa's abnormal sexual urges, and while she did not accept his reasoning, she knew it was her fault in that she had not entered motherhood with love but out of boredom. Four years after his departure, Tom, Too returned, a convert to that mean, squinty-eyed form of Christianity that everywhere spies out its enemies. He begged forgiveness and received his father's blessing. The two of them would go bowling on Wednesday nights and walk home along the river, discussing philosophy (his brush with cancer had provided Tom with the insight that We Are Everyone of Us All Alone) and real estate (Tom, Too's chosen profession). Annie had moved with Bruce into a newly built garage apartment, and Tom, Too would visit them frequently, proclaiming that the boy needed a dad. One night Willa saw him coming down Annie's stairs long after the lights had been switched off. Two weeks later, following a whirlwind courtship, Annie married a fishing-tackle salesman and moved to Akron, vowing never to set foot in Lyman again.

Willa turned fifty-one. Amazingly she looked to be in her early thirties, an age not without a hint of maturity yet nonetheless appealing. However, there was no one in sight who might respond to her appeal, and hoping to subsume her desires in spiritual pursuits, she began attending church with Tom and Tom, Too. And, lo, her faith was rewarded. The new pastor, the Reverend Robert Meister, was a ruggedly handsome man of thirty-five, with piercing blue eyes and a virile physique. A heavenly hunk. But his most attractive feature was his bachelorhood. Willa noticed the tension that flooded his face when he talked to the young girls after services, when they stuck out their gloved hands for him to shake. The poor man, she thought, imagining his solitary bouts of guilt-ridden self-abuse in a dark rectory bedroom. He didn't look at her the way he looked at the younger girls, but she determined that one day soon he would.

With a fervor that even drew grudging praise from Tom, Too, who had become the family's spiritual drill sergeant, Willa threw herself into church work. Nothing was too inconsequential for her attentions. She served on the Ladies' Auxiliary, she taught Sunday School, she organized fund-raisers and baked truckloads of cakes and cookies, all the while carrying on a flirtation with the Reverend, contriving to brush against him, touching his hand in conversation, gradually making him aware of her fundamental charms. And when the Reverend timorously suggested that she accompany him to a church conference on famine in New York, Willa knew that paydirt was near.

But two days passed at the conference, and the Reverend had yet to make his play. At last Willa contrived a trap. She ordered from room service, went to take a shower, and called out to the Reverend—who had at least been sufficiently bold to reserve adjoining rooms—asking him to answer her door when her order arrived. Then when she heard the waiter close the door behind him, heard the Reverend wrestling with the

food cart, she walked buff naked into the room, affecting surprise that he was still there. The Reverend's jaw went slack, his eyes bugged, and turning back to the bathroom, Willa gave him a full view of her pert breasts, her long legs, and thighs undimpled by cellulite.

That evening over dinner, though nothing was said, Willa was, as ever, familiar with the Reverend, touching him often, letting him know that she was not displeased by the afternoon's event. But again he made no move to deepen their relationship. Desperate now, that night Willa disrobed and waited beside the connecting door until the Reverend's light was dimmed. She pressed her ear to the crack, and when she heard the beginning of heavy breathing, of creaking bedsprings, she threw open the door and walked in. The Reverend tried to conceal his actions, pretending to be wrestling with the bedclothes. But Willa was not to be denied. She flung back the covers, exposing the limp yet still tumescent evidence, and then with all the wiles she had learned while in Mrs. Gacey's employ, she proceeded to restore it to its former fisted grandeur.

The Reverend Meister proved Willa's equal in need, and together they explored the realm of Position, tying complex knots of heat and sinew that often took hours to unravel. Once Position had been exhausted, they began a study of Location. There was scarcely a place in Lyman that did not know their clandestine passion, and each grunting thrust, each stifled cry, was a godsend to Willa after those long and joyless years. She came half to believe that the Christian God had truly blessed her. "Hallelujah," she whispered as they lay in sweet congregation beneath the church's midnight altar. "Thank you, Jesus," she sighed as she stood pressed into a comer of the closet below the choir stalls, her skirts lifted high and the Reverend kneeling down to take communion. "Praise the Lord," she breathed, bending over a projector in the darkened Sunday School basement, while the Reverend mounted her from behind, and a dozen children sat in front, munching cookies and ice cream, their eyes fixed on a slide show of the Holy Land *sans* narration.

Willa lived in a green world again, in a world where hope and possibility conjoined. Her relationship with the Reverend was that rarest of commodities—they were friends who could make love and not allow their carnality to lead away from friendship. And in their lovemaking... well, let it suffice to say that the depth of Willa's devotion and the extent of the Reverend's commitment to excellence were compatible in every extreme. But, lo, this too shall pass.

One night at the suggestion of Tom, Too, they had the Reverend over for dinner, and after the dessert dishes had been cleared away, Tom, Too displayed a packet of photographs he had taken, their subject being Willa and the Reverend. "Now this here," he said, handing one around, "it'll blow up real nice for the church newsletter. And this here"—he handed over another displaying a complex tangle of flesh, half of which comprised an illegality in the state of Ohio—"I was figurin' to do up some eight-by-ten glossies."

The Reverend lowered his eyes, and Willa shut hers.

"This has really got to stop," said Tom, Too. "Right, Dad?"

Tom was trembling, apoplectic, squeezing the arms of his chair.

Tom, Too held up yet another photograph that showed the lovers beneath the altar, the moonlit shadow of the cross thrown across them. "This one's got dandy symbolic value. Oughta raise a few eyebrows in the bishop's office." He searched among the remaining photographs. "Hey, Dad," he said breezily, picking one and sliding it over. "Check that out... Never woulda thought Mom was so limber."

Despite his choler, Tom looked broken, frail, on the verge of passing out, and two weeks later, he suffered a stroke that left him paralyzed and requiring constant nursing.

"Wouldn't sell the bottomland if I were you," Tom, Too advised Willa, reminding her of the leverage of his photographs. "I been considerin' puttin' up a shoppin' mall... after it's mine legal, of course. I 'spect the state'll take care of Dad if you can't."

That tore it for Willa. She crumbled all at once. It was as if her beauty had been its own self, had been hanging on for hope of some lasting appreciation, and now had just given up. By the time she reached the age of sixty, she looked it. At seventy, she looked a spry seventy-five, and at seventy-eight, morticians would perk up when she passed, clasp their hands and say, "How you feelin' today, Mrs. Selkie," in a tone that made clear they really wanted to know.

Tom died nine years after the disclosure of the photographs, having never spoken another word, and after the funeral, the Reverend Meister dropped over to see Willa. He had married a mousy little woman, and had written a book that everyone said was going to make him famous. Willa had never expected him to stay alone and didn't resent his marriage. In truth, she rarely thought about him anymore, being already a little distracted, halfway to dotty. But she was pleased about his book, and even more pleased when he told her that she was partly responsible for his writing it.

"Me?" she said. "What'd I do?"

"It was your intensity," he said. "When you made love, it was pure, an expression of something that had to come out. It was all of life you were taking in your arms. And if you'd been allowed to express it fully, it

would have taken other forms as well. You made me want to find a way to express my own truth, to equal that intensity."

She often thought she might have done something with her life, but was glad to hear it from somebody else. "That's the second nicest thing anybody ever said to me," she told him.

"What was the nicest?"

" 'Please,' " she said, remembering.

He didn't press for clarification, and for a while they talked about trivial matters.

"How's it being married?" she asked.

"I don't love her," he said. "I just..."

"I know," she said. "What's it like?"

He thought a second or two. "It's like being sick... nothing serious. Like being in mild constant pain, and having a nurse and air conditioning."

For some reason that started her crying. Maybe it was because having him near made her notice her old-lady smell. Because he still looked young and she looked like death warmed over. He put an arm around her, but she shrugged it off. "Leave me be," she said.

"Willa..."

"You can't help me," she said. "I'm crazy."

"You're not crazy."

"Not now," she said. "But the minute you go, I'm gonna be wanderin' around the house, talking to myself, thinking all kinds of crazy thoughts. Now you get outta here and leave me to it."

He got to his feet, pulled on his coat, looking helpless and grim. "God bless you, Willa," he said.

"Ain't no such thing as God," she told him. "And don't argue with me 'bout it, 'cause I can feel the place where he ain't."

"Maybe you can at that," he said glumly.

When he closed the door, she had the idea that he stood outside for a long time... or could be he'd just left a thought leaning against the door, a wish for her, like an umbrella he had forgotten.

Night had fallen. Out the window, bare trees cast blue shadows on the rippled snow, and the air was so crystal clear it seemed you might be able to reach out and break off a chunk with a star inside it and put it in the fridge to save for Christmas. Oh, God... but it was a lonely clarity. And oh, God, there was life in the old girl yet, and wouldn't she love to move her hips again, and wouldn't it be more than love to know that sweet feeling of being filled, of being needed, instead of sitting here with liver spots a plague on her hands, with her son a Christian villain, and her daughter estranged, and her grandchild a hulking teenage monster who visited once a year and stole money from her purse. With no future and all her memories played, all her lovers dead...

Not all, whispered the Black Clay Boy.

Yes, all! Even the Reverend Meister gone, a victim of that new disease taking the gay boys. Who'd have thought it? If she'd have stayed with him, she'd bet he wouldn't have strayed that far from heaven.

The Black Clay Boy seemed to smile at that.

"Quit makin' fun of me!" she said. "You're worse than them Kandell brats."

Much worse, Willa.

Lewd little bastard! I hear that sly tone, I know what you want!

And what's wrong with that? It's what you want, too.

She made a disparaging noise. "A runt like you couldn't give me a tickle."

You might be surprised, Willa.

Willa studied him. With his silver eyes and gouged mouth, he looked like a surreal Little Black Sambo. And, she realized, he favored Eden some. Eden had had that same unfinished look. She could, she supposed, give him hands and feet. But then he'd be traipsing his footprints all over her nice carpet, strewing black crumbs everywhere. Crazy old bat, she thought.

But he *did* look unfinished. And of course she knew just what he needed.

What we both need, Willa.

"Do you really think..."

I'm absolutely sure.

"I don't know, I..."

How you gonna know 'less you explore the potentials?

"Well," she said hesitantly. "Maybe just once."

More would be unsalubrious, said the Black Clay Boy.

She came to her feet effortlessly, as if the idea was a power, and she went rummaging through the kitchen drawer until she found the perfect accessory, long and sharp and silver. She wedged the handle into the crotch of the Black Clay Boy, jammed it in, and tried to wiggle it... It held firm. She'd always hated the bottomland for the hold it exerted, but now she was grateful for this quality.

God! She felt twenty-two again, all heart and hip, all nudge softness and clever muscle.

She picked up the Black Clay Boy, held him at arm's length, and went whirling into the living room, each whirl bringing her hot thoughts closer to a boil. Oh, she was mad, mad as the pattern on the wallpaper, mad as the wind shaping her name from the eaves, saying *Willa, Willa, Willa,* with each and every spin, mad and whirling among the dark armoires and the huge iron-colored sideboard and the Victorian mahoganies. The shadows watched her, and the furniture was leaning together, gossiping, and in the folds of the drapes were cores of indigo that she recognized to be the cores of ghosts waiting to live their wispy lives once she had done.

"Won't be a minute," she told them gaily, and went whirling into the bedroom where the Black Clay Boy would have her once and silent, where love would once more be red and biting. She lifted him high. His silvery member was God's measure of a man, flashing with moonlight, tipped with pure charge... and the measure, too, of Eden's curse.

She knew that clear, now. Knew that Eden's bones and dry flesh and even drier spirit infused this little devil she held in her hands. She could smell his meager scent of talcum powder and stale sweat, could sense his spirit hovering inside this loamy shell, and she knew she could expect only an Eden's worth of pleasure from his embrace, but that was so much more than she had for years, well...

She not fell but floated down onto the bed, sinking into its bridal deep, and oh, she was eager, and oh, she could scarcely wait.

"Love," she said.

You never had it, Willa, whispered the Black Clay Boy.

"Love!" she cried. "Love, love, love."

Forever, said the Black Clay Boy, his voice acquiring a male sternness, a tone of command.

Forever, she thought she said, the word soft as a pillow. *Love forever, Love for now, pin me deep and darling into the bottomland. Split me wide, and take me where the pleasure lies.*

Lies, echoed the Black Clay Boy.

He quivered in her hands, wanting her, but she held him off, tasting the delicious anticipation of the pure silver moment of going inside.

Now, Willa, now!

"When I'm ready," she said, laughing, teasing. "When I'm ready and not a moment before."

Now!

"Yes!" she said, arching toward him, her eyelids fluttering down. "Yes, now!"

With the powerful thrust of a man, with all the violent sweet force of a man's need, she pulled him to her hard, and there was pain, yes, there was pain, but it was filling and deep and real, and if she'd had the strength, she would have plucked him out and pulled him in again and again and again. Forever. The perfect companion of that perfect gentleman, that perfect lover, the Black Clay Boy.

His strange blank face was inches away, his eyes appeared to widen. Maybe, she thought, this was the beginning of another memory.

Not hardly.

"Oh," she said sadly, and she could see the word come white from her lips like a spirit, like the white poor thing of her life, her need, her sorrowful ending. Like a blown kiss.

Better luck next time, he told her.

"Next time?" she said, hopeful. "You mean..."

Just kidding, Willa, said the Black Clay Boy as he winked shut first one silver eye and then the other.

THE ENDS OF THE EARTH

Those whose office it is to debunk the supernatural are fond of pointing out that incidences of paranormal activity most often take place in backwaters and rarely in the presence of credible witnesses, claiming that this in itself is evidence of the fraudulent character of the phenomena involved; yet it has occurred to me that the agents of the supernatural, especially those elements whose activities are directed toward evil ends, might well exhibit reticence in appearing before persons capable of verifying their existence and thus their threat to humankind. It seems surprising that such shadowy forces—if, indeed, they do exist—choose to appear before any witnesses at all, and equally surprising—if their powers are as vast as described in popular fiction—that they do not simply have done with us. Perhaps they are prevented from doing so by some restraint, a limit, say, on how many souls they are allowed to bag, and perhaps the fact that they manifest as they do is attributable to a binding regulation similar to the one dictating that corporations (shadowy forces in themselves) must make a public notice of the date and location of their stockholders' meetings. In order to avoid scrutiny of their business practices, a number of corporations publish these notices in shoppers' guides and rural weeklies, organs unlikely to pass before the eyes of government agencies and reporters, and it makes sense that the supernatural might emulate this tactic as a means of compliance with some cosmic rule. That supposition may seem facetious, but my intent is quite serious, for while I cannot say with absolute certainty whether the circumstances that provoked my interest in these matters were in essence supernatural or merely an extraordinary combination of ordinary people and events, I believe that six months ago in Guatemala, a place notable for its inaccessibility and unreliable witnesses, I witnessed something rare and secret, something that may have reflected the exercise of a regulatory truth pertaining to both the visible and invisible worlds.

Prior to leaving for Guatemala I had been romantically involved for the preceding three years with Karen Maniaci, a married woman who managed a Manhattan art gallery, and it was our breakup, which was marked by bitterness on my part and betrayal on hers, that persuaded me I needed a drastic change in order to get on with living. This process of persuasion lasted several months, months during which I wandered gloomily about New York, stopping in my tracks to stare at dark-haired women of approximately five feet nine in height and 120 pounds; and at length I concluded that I had better get out of town... either that or begin to play footsie with mental illness. I was thirty-seven and had grown too cautious to want to risk myself in a dangerous enterprise; yet there is a theatricality inherent in being jilted, a dramatic potential that demands resolution, and to satisfy it, I chose that other option of the heartbroken: a trip to some foreign shore, one isolate from the rest of the world, where there were no newspapers and no reminders of one's affair. Livingston, Guatemala, seemed to qualify as such. It was described in a guidebook that I happened upon in The Strand bookstore as "... a quiet village at the egress of the Río Dulce into the Caribbean, hemmed in against the sea by the Petén rain forest. Settled by black Caribes and the descendants of East Indian slaves brought by the British to work the sugar plantations upriver. There are no roads into Livingston. One reaches it either by ferry from Puerto Morales or by powerboat from Reunión at the junction of the Río Dulce and the Petén highway. The majority of the houses are neat white stucco affairs with red tile roofs. The natives are unspoiled by tourism. In the hills above the village is a lovely tiered waterfall called Siete Altares (Seven Altars), so named because of the seven pools into which the stream whose terminus it forms plunges on its way to the sea. Local delicacies include turtle stew..."

It sounded perfect, a paradise cut off from the grim political realities of the mother country, a place where a man could go to seed in the classic style, by day wandering the beach in a Bogart suit, waking each morning slumped over a table, an empty rum bottle beside his elbow, a stained deck of cards scattered around him with only the queen of hearts showing its face. A few days after reading the guidebook entry, following journeys by plane, train, and an overcrowded ferry, I arrived in Livingston. A few days after that, thanks to a meeting in one of the bars, I took possession of a five-room house of yellow stucco walls and concrete floors belonging to a young Spanish couple, doctors who had been studying with local *curanderos* and wanted someone to look after their pets—a marmalade cat and a caged toucan—while they toured for a year in the United States.

I have traveled widely all my life, and it has been my experience that guidebook descriptions bear little relation to actual places; however, though changes had occurred—most notably the discovery of the village by the singer Jimmy Buffett, whose frequent visits had given a boost to the tourist industry, attracting a smattering of young travelers, mainly French and Scandinavians who lived in huts along the beach—I discovered that the guidebook had not grossly exaggerated Livingston's charms. True, a number of shanty bars had sprung up on the beach, and there was a roach-infested hotel not mentioned in the book: three stories of peeling paint and cell-sized rooms furnished with torn mattresses and broken chairs. But the Caribe houses were in evidence, and the turtle stew was tasty, and the fishing was good, and Siete Altares was something out of a South Seas movie, each pool shaded by ceiba trees, their branches dripping with orchids, hummingbirds flitting everywhere in the thickets. And the natives were relatively unspoiled, perhaps because the tourists kept to the beach, which was separated from the village by a steep drop-off and which—thanks to the bars and a couple of one-room stores—provided them with all the necessities of life.

Early on I suffered a domestic tragedy. The cat ate the toucan, leaving its beak and feet for me to find on the kitchen floor. But in general, things went well. I began to work, my mind was clearing, and the edge had been taken off my gloom by the growing awareness that other possibilities for happiness existed apart from a neurotic career woman who was afraid to trust her feelings, was prone to anxiety attacks and given to buying bracelets with the pathological avidity that Imelda Marcos once displayed toward the purchase of shoes. I soon fell into a pleasant routine, writing in the mornings, working on a cycle of short stories that—despite my intention of avoiding this pitfall—dealt with an unhappily married woman. Afternoons, I would he in a hammock strung between two palms that sprouted from the patio of the house, and read. Evenings, I would stroll down to the beach with the idea of connecting with one of the tourist girls. I usually wound up drinking alone and brooding, but I did initiate a flirtation with an Odille LeCleuse, a Frenchwoman in her late twenties, with high cheekbones and milky skin, dark violet eyes and a sexy mouth that always looked as if she were about to purse her lips. She was in thrall—or so I'd heard—to Carl Konwicki, an Englishman of about my own age, who had lived on the beach for two years and supported himself by selling marijuana.

By all reports, Konwicki was a manipulator who traded on his experience to dominate less-seasoned travelers in order to obtain sex and other forms of devotion, and I couldn't understand how Odille, an intelligent woman with a degree in linguistics from the Sorbonne, could have fallen prey to the likes of him. I spotted him every day on the streets of the village: an asthenic olive-skinned man, with a scraggly fringe of brown beard and a hawkish Semitic face. He commonly wore loose black trousers, an embroidered vest, and a Moroccan skullcap, and there was a deliberate languor to his walk, as if he were conscious of being watched; whenever he would pass by, he would favor me with a bemused smile. I felt challenged by him, both because of Odille and because my morality had been enlisted by what I'd heard of his smarmy brand of gamesmanship, and I had the urge to let him know I saw through his pose. But realizing that—if Odille was involved with him—this kind of tactic would only damage my chances with her, I restrained myself and ignored him.

One night about two months after my arrival, I was going through old notebooks, searching for a passage that I wanted to include in a story, when a sheet of paper with handwriting on it slipped from between the pages and fell to the floor. The handwriting was that of my ex-lover, Karen. I let it lie for a moment, but finally, unable to resist, I picked it up and discovered it to be a letter written early in the relationship. A portion read as follows:

> *...When I went to the therapist today (I know... I'll probably tell you all this on the phone later, but what the hell!), I told her about what happened, bow I almost lost my job by making love to you those days in the office, and she didn't seem terribly surprised. When I asked her how a responsible adult who cares about her job could possibly jeopardize it in such a way, she simply said that there must have been a great deal of gain in it for me. It seems she's trying to lead me toward you—she's quite negative about Barry. But that's probably just wishful thinking—what she's doing is trying to lead me toward what I want. Of course what I want is you, so it amounts to the same thing.*

It was curious, I thought, scanning the letter, how words that had once seemed precious could now seem so vapid. I noted the overusage of the words *terribly* and *terrible*, particularly in conjunction with the words *surprising* and *surprised*. That had been her basic reaction to falling in love, I realized. She had been terribly surprised. *My God,* she'd said to herself. *An emotion! Quick, I'll hie me to the head doctor and have it excised.* I read on.

> *...I can't imagine living without you, Ray. When you said something the other day about the possibility of getting hit by a bus, I suddenly got this awful chill. I had a terrible sense of loss just hearing you say that. This is interesting in that I used to try to figure out if I loved Barry by imagining something awful happening to him and seeing how I*

felt. I usually felt bad, but that's about it...

I laughed out loud. The last I'd heard on the subject was that Barry, who bored Karen, whom she did not respect, who had recently gotten into rubber goods, was back in favor. Barry had one virtue that I did not: he was controllable, and in control there was security. She could go on lying to him, having affairs with no fear of being caught—Barry was big into denial. And now she was planning a child in an attempt to pave over the potholes of the relationship, convincing herself that this secure fake was the best she could expect of life. She was due fairly soon, I realized. But it didn't matter. No act of hers could bring conscience and clarity into what had always been a charade. Her lies had condemned the three of us, and most of all she had condemned herself by engaging in a kind of method living, chirping a litany of affirmation. "I think I can, I think I can," playing The Little Adultress That Could, and thus losing the hope of her heart, the strength of her soul. I imagined her at sixty-five, her beauty hardened to a grotesque brittleness, wandering through a mall, shopping for drapes thick enough to blot out the twenty-first century, while Barry shuffled along in her wake, trying to pin down the feeling that something had not been quite right all these years, both of them smiling and nodding, looking forward to a friendly gray fate.

The letter brought back the self-absorbed anguish that I'd been working to put behind me, and I felt—as I had for months prior to leaving New York—on the verge of exploding, as if a pressure were building to a hot critical mass inside me, making my thoughts flurry like excited atoms. My face burned; there were numbing weights in my arms and legs. I paced the room, unable to regain my composure, and after ten minutes or so, I flung open the door, frightening the marmalade cat, and stormed out into the dark.

I did not choose a direction, but soon I found myself on the beach, heading toward one of the shanty bars. The night was perfect for my mood. Winded: a constant crunch of surf and palm fronds tearing; combers rolling in, their plumed sprays as white as flame. A brilliant moon flashed between the fronds, creating shadows from even the smallest of projections, and set back from the shore, half-hidden in deep shadow among palms and sea grape and cashew trees, were huts with glinting windows and tin roofs. The beach was a ragged, narrow strip of tawny sand strewn with coconut litter and overturned cayucos. As I stepped over a cayuco, something croaked and leaped off into the rank weeds bordering the beach. My heart stuttered, and I fell back against the cayuco. It had only been a frog, but its appearance made me aware of my vulnerability. Even a place like Livingston had its dangers. Street criminals from Belize had been known to ride motorboats down from Belize City or Belmopan to rob and beat the tourists, and in my agitated state of mind I would have made the perfect target.

The bar—Café Pluto—was set in the lee of a rocky point: a thatched hut with a sand floor and picnic-style tables, lit with black lights that emitted an evil purple radiance and made all the gringos glow like sunburned corpses. Reggae from a jukebox at the rear was barely audible above the racket of the generator. I had several drinks in rapid succession and ended up out front of the bar beside a toppled palm trunk, drinking rum straight from the bottle and sharing a joint with Odille and a young blond Australian named Ryan, who was writing a novel and whose mode of dress—slacks, shirt, and loosened tie—struck an oddly formal note. I was giddy with the dope, with the wildness of the night, the vast blue-dark sky and its trillion watts of stars, silver glitters that appeared to be slipping around like sequins on a dancer's gown. Behind us the Café Pluto had the look of an eerie cave lit by seams of gleaming purple ore.

I asked Ryan what his novel was about, and with affected diffidence he said, "Nothing much. Saturday night in a working-class bar in Sydney." He took a hit of the joint, passed it to Odille. "It wasn't going too well, so I thought I'd set it aside and do something poetic. Run away to the ends of the earth." He had a look around, a look that in its casual sweep included the sea and sky and shore. "This is the ends of the earth, isn't it?"

I was caught by the poignancy of the image, thinking that he had inadvertently captured the essence of place and moment. I pictured the globe spinning and spinning, trailing dark frays of its own essential stuff, upon one of which was situated this slice of night and stars and expatriate woe, tatters with no real place in human affairs... Wind veiled Odille's face with a drift of hair. I pushed it back, and she smiled, letting her eyelids droop. I wanted to take her back to the house and fuck her until I forgot all the maudlin bullshit that had been fucking me over the past three years.

"I hear you're doing some writing, too," said Ryan in a tone that managed to be both defiant and disinterested.

"Just some stories," I said, surprised that he would know this.

" 'Just some stories.' " He gave a morose laugh and said to the sky, "He's modest... I love it." Then, turning a blank gaze on me: "No need to hide your light, man. We all know you're famous."

"Famous? Not hardly."

"Sure you are!" In a stentorian voice he quoted a blurb on my last book. "'Raymond Kingsley, a mainstay of American fiction.'"

"Uh-huh, right."

"Even the Master of Time and Space thinks you're great," said Ryan. "And believe me, he's sparing with his praise."

"Who're you talking about?"

Ryan pointed behind me. "Him."

Carl Konwicki was coming down the beach. He ambled up, dropped onto the fallen palm trunk, and looked out to sea. Odille and Ryan seemed to be waiting for him to speak. Irritated by this obeisance, I belched. Konwicki let his eyes swing toward me, and I winked.

"How's she going?" I took a man-sized slug of rum, wiped my mouth with the back of my hand, and fixed him with a mean stare. He clucked his tongue against his teeth and said, "I'm fine, thank you."

"Glad to hear it." Drunk, I hated him, my hate fueled by the frustration that had driven me out of the house. Hate was chemical between us, the confrontational lines as sharply etched as the shadows on the sand. I gestured at his skullcap. "You lived in Morocco?"

"Some."

"What part?"

"You know... around." The wind bent a palm frond low, and for an instant, Konwicki's swarthy face was edged by a saw-toothed shadow.

"That's not very forthcoming," I said. "Do questions bother you?"

"Not ones that have a purpose."

"How about light conversation... that a worthwhile purpose?"

"Is that *your* purpose?"

"What else would it be?"

"Wow!" said Ryan. "This is like intense... like a big moment."

Odille giggled.

"I got it," I said. "What would *you* like to talk about? How about the translation you're doing... what is it?"

"The *Popol Vuh*," said Konwicki distractedly.

"Gee," I said. "That's already been translated, hasn't it?"

"Not correctly."

"Oh, I see. And you're going to do it right." I had another pull on the rum bottle. "Hope you're not wasting your time."

"Time." Konwicki smiled, apparently amused by the concept; he refitted his gaze to the toiling sea.

"Yeah," I said, injecting a wealth of sarcasm into my voice. "It's pretty damn mind-bending, isn't it?"

The surf thundered; Konwicki met my eyes, imperturbable. "I've been looking forward to meeting you."

"Me, too," I said. "I hear you sell great dope." I clapped a hand to my brow as if recognizing that I had made a social blunder. "Pardon me... I didn't intend that to sound disparaging."

Konwicki gave me one of his distant smiles. "You're obviously upset about something," he said. "You should try to calm down."

I sat close beside him on the palm trunk, close enough to cause him to shift away, and was about to bait him further, but he stood, said, "Ta ra," and walked into the bar.

"I'd score that round even," said Ryan. "Mr. Kingsley dominating the first half, the Master coming on late."

Odille was gazing after Konwicki, wrapping a curl of hair around one forefinger. She gave me a wave, said, "I'll be back, okay?" and headed for the bar. I watched her out of sight, tracking the oiled roll of her hips beneath her cutoffs, and when I turned back to Ryan, he was smiling at me.

"What is it with them?" I asked.

"With Odille and the Master? Just a little now-and-then thing." He gave me a sly look. "Why? You interested?"

I snorted, had a hit of rum.

"You can win the lady," said Ryan. "If you've a stout heart."

I looked at him over the top of the bottle, but offered no encouragement.

"You see, Ray," said Ryan, affecting the manner of a lecturer, "Odille's a wounded bird. The poor thing had a disappointment in love back in Paris. She sought solace in distant lands and had the misfortune of meeting the Master. It's not much of a misfortune, you understand. The Master's not much of a Master, so he can't offer a great deal in the way of good or ill. But he confused Odille, made her believe he could show her how to escape pain through his brand of enlightenment. And that involved a bit of sack time."

Given this similarity in history between Odille and myself, I imagined fate had taken a hand by bringing us together. "So what can I do?"

"Things a bit hazy, are they, Ray?" Ryan chuckled. "Odille's grown disillusioned with the Master. She's looking for someone to burst his bubble, to free her." He reached for the bottle, had a swig and gagged. "God, that's awful!" He slumped against the toppled palm trunk, screwed the bottle into the sand so that it stood upright. The surf boomed; the wildfire whiteness of the combers imprinted afterimages on my eyes.

"Anyway'" Ryan went on, "she's definitely looking for emotional rescue. But you can't go about it with *déclassé* confrontation. You'll have to beat the Master on his own terms, his own ground."

Perhaps it was the rum that let me believe that Ryan had a clear view of our situation. "What *are* his terms?" I asked.

"Games," he said. "Whatever game he chooses." He had another pull off the bottle. "He's afraid of you, you know. He's worried that you're into disciples, and all his children will abandon him for the famous writer. He realizes he can't befuddle you with his usual quasi-erudite crap. So he'll come up with something new for you. I have no idea what. But he'll play some game with you. He's got to... it's his nature."

"How's he befuddled you? You seem to have a handle on him."

"He's got no need," said Ryan. "I'm his fool, and a fool can know the king's secrets and make fun of them with impunity."

I started to ask another question, but let it rest. The wind pulled the soft crush of the surf into a breathy vowel; the moon had lowered behind the hills above the village, its afterglow fanning up into the heavens; the top of the sky had deepened to indigo, and the stars blazed, so dense and intricate in their array that I thought I might—if I were to try—be able to read there all scripture and truth in sparkling sentences. And it was not only in the sky that clarity ruled. What Ryan had said made sense. Odille was testing me... perhaps unconsciously, but testing me nonetheless, unwilling to abandon Konwicki until she was sure of me. I didn't resent this—it was a tactic often used in establishing relationships. But I was struck by how dear its uses seemed on the beach at Livingston. Not merely the social implications, but its elemental ones: the wounded lovers, the shabby Mephistophelian figure of Konwicki with his sacred books and petty need to exercise power. Man, woman, and Devil entangled in a sexual knot.

"Did I ever tell you my theory of the Visible?" I asked Ryan.

"We only just met," he reminded me.

"God, you're right. And here I've been under the illusion we're old pals."

"It's the sea air. Affects everyone dele..." Ryan hiccuped. "Deleteriously."

"Well, anyway." I plucked the rum bottle from the sand and drank. "In places like this, I've always thought it was possible to see how things really are between people. To discern relationships that are obscured by the clutter of urban life. The old relationships, the archetypes."

He stared blearily up at me. "Sounds bloody profound, Ray."

"Yeah, I suppose it is," I said, and then added: "Profundity's my business. Or maybe it's bullshit... one or the other."

"So," he said, "are you going to play?"

"I think so... yeah."

"Beautiful," said Ryan. "That's really beautiful."

A few moments later Konwicki and Odille came out of the bar and walked toward us, deep in conversation.

Ryan laughed and laughed. "Let the games begin," he said.

We talked on the beach for another hour, smoking Konwicki's dope, which smoothed out the rough edges of my drunk, seeming to isolate me behind a thick transparency. I withdrew from the conversation, watching Konwicki. I wasn't gauging his strengths and weaknesses; despite my exchange with Ryan, I had not formalized the idea that there was to be a contest between us. I was merely observing, intrigued by his conversational strategy. By sidestepping questions, claiming to know nothing about a subject, he managed to intimate that the subject was not worth knowing and that he possessed knowledge in a sphere of far greater relevance to the scheme of things. Odille hung on his every word for a while, but soon began to lose interest, casting glances and smiles at me; it appeared she was trying to maintain a connection with Konwicki, but was losing energy in that regard.

For the most part, Konwicki avoided looking at me; but at one point, he cut his eyes toward me and locked on. We stared at each other for a long moment, then he turned away with acknowledgment. During that moment, however, the skin on my face went cold, my muscles tensed, and a smile stretched my lips. A feral smile funded by a remorseless hatred quite different from the impassioned, drunken loathing I originally had felt. This emotion, like the smile, seemed something visited upon me and not an intensification of my

emotions, and along with it came a sudden increase in my body temperature. A sweat broke on my forehead, on my chest and arms; my vision reddened, and I had a peculiar sense of doubled perceptions, as if I were looking through two different pairs of eyes, one of which was capable of seeing a wider spectrum. I decided to slack off on the rum.

At length Konwicki suggested we get out of the wind, which was blowing stronger, and go over to his place to listen to music. I was of two minds about the proposal; while I wasn't ready to give up on Odille, neither was I eager to mix it with Konwicki, and I was certain that if I went with them there would be some bad result. The dope had taken the edge off my enthusiasm. But Odille took my hand, nudged the softness of her breast into my arm.

"You *are* coming, aren't you?" she said.

"Sure," I said, as if a thought to the contrary had never occurred.

We walked together along the beach, trailing Konwicki and Ryan, and Odille talked about taking a trip to Esquipulas someday soon to see the Black Christ in the cathedral there.

"Women come from all over Central America to be blessed," she said. "They stand in line for days. Huge fat women in white turbans from Belize. Crippled old island ladies from Roatán. Beautiful slim girls from Panama. All waiting to spend a few seconds kneeling in the shadow of a black statue. When I first heard about it, I thought it sounded primitive. Now it seems strangely modern. The New Primitivism. I keep imagining all those female shadows in the bright sun, radios playing, vendors selling cold drinks." She gave her hair a toss. "I could use that sort of blessing."

"Is it only for women?"

She held my eyes for a second, then turned away. "Sometimes men wait with them."

I asked if what Ryan had told me about her love affair in Paris was the truth. I had no hesitancy in asking this—intimacies were the flavor of the night. A flicker of displeasure crossed her face. "Ryan's an idiot."

"I doubt he'd argue the point."

Odille went a few steps in silence. "It was nothing. A fling, that's all."

Her glum tone seemed to belie this.

"Yeah, I had a fling myself right before I came down here. Like to have killed me, that fling."

She glanced up at me, still registering displeasure, but then she smiled. "Perhaps with us it's a matter of... She made a frustrated gesture, unable to find the right words.

"Victims recognizing the symptoms?" I suggested.

"I suppose." She threw back her head and looked up into the sky as if seeking guidance there. "Yes, I had a bad experience, but I'm over it."

"Completely?"

She shook her head. "No... never completely. And you?"

"Hey, I'm fine," I said. "It's like it never happened."

She laughed, cast an appraising look my way. "Who was she?"

"This married woman back in New York."

"Oh!" Odille put a hand on my arm in sympathy. "That's the worst, isn't it? Married, I mean."

"The worst? I don't know. It was pretty goddamn bad."

"What was she like?"

"Frightened. She got married because she had a run of bad luck... at least, that's what she told me. Things started going bad around her. Her parents got divorced, her dog ran away, and that seemed a sign something worse might happen. I guess she thought marriage would protect her." I walked faster. "She's a fucking mess."

"How so?"

"She doesn't know what the hell she wants. Whenever she doubts something, she'll broadcast an opinion pro or con until the contrary opinion has been shouted down in her own mind." I kicked at the sand. "The last time we talked, she explained how she was happy in her marriage for the same reasons that she'd once claimed to be miserable. The vices of this guy whom she'd ridiculed... she told everyone how much he bored her, how childish he was. All those vices had been transformed into solid virtues. She told me she knew that she couldn't have the kind of relationship with Barry—that's her husband—that we'd had, but you had to make trade-offs. Barry at least always wore a neatly pressed suit and could be counted on not to embarrass—though never to scintillate—at business functions." I sniffed. "As a husband he made the perfect accessory for evening wear."

"You sound bitter."

"I can't deny it. She put me through hell. Of course I bought into it, so I've got no one to blame but myself."

"She was beautiful, of course?"

"She didn't think so." I changed the subject. "Was yours married?"

"No, just a shit." Her expression became distant, and I knew that for a moment she was back in Paris with the Shit. "For a long time afterward I threw myself into other relationships. I thought that would help, but it was a mistake... I can see that now."

"Everything seems like a mistake afterward," I said.

"Not everything," she said coyly.

I wasn't sure how to take that, and it wasn't just that her meaning was vague; it was also that I was put off by her coyness. Before I could frame a response, she said, "Talking to Carl has helped me a great deal."

"Oh, I see." I tried to disguise my disappointment, believing this to be a sign that her connection with Konwicki was still vital.

"No, you don't. Just having someone to talk to was helpful. Carl's a fraud, of course. Nothing he says is without guile. But he does listen, and it's hard to find a good listener. That's basically all there was between us. I helped him with his work, and... there was more. But it wasn't important."

I wondered if she was playing with me, making me guess at her availability, and was briefly angered by the possibility; but then, recalling how uncertain my own motivations and responses had been, I decided that if I couldn't forgive her, I couldn't forgive myself.

"What are you thinking about?" Odille asked.

Her features, refined by the moonlight, looked delicate, etched, as if a kind of lucidity had been revealed in them, and I believed that I could see down beneath the games and the layers of false construction, beneath all those defenses, to who she most was, to the woman, no longer an innocent in the accepted sense of the word, but innocent all the same, still hopeful in spite of pain and disillusionment.

"Konwicki," I lied. "You helped him translate the *Popol Vuh?*"

"He was being discreet. He's acquired an old Mayan game and some papers that go with it. That's what he's translating."

"What sort of game?"

"From what I've been able to gather, it's a role-playing game. The papers seem to imply that it has to do with spirit travel. The gods. All the old cultures have myths that deal with that. It might be something that the priests used to evoke trances... something like that."

For no reason I could determine, this news made me edgy.

"Is that really what you were thinking about?" Odille asked.

"I was being discreet," I said, and she laughed.

Konwicki's place was a thatched hut with one large room and a sand floor over which a carpet of dried palm fronds had been laid, and was a scrupulously neat advertisement for his travels. Wall hangings from Peru, a brass hookah, a Japanese scroll, a bowl holding some Nepalese jewelry—rings of coral and worked silver, pillows embroidered in a pattern of turquoise thread that I recognized as being from Isfahan. Gourd bowls and various cooking implements hung from pegs, and a hurricane lantern provided a flickering orange light. An old Roxy Music album was playing on a cassette recorder, Bryan Ferry's nostalgia seeming more effete than usual in those surroundings. In one corner was an orange crate containing a stack of papers covered with Mayan hieroglyphs. I started to pick up the top paper, and Konwicki, who was sitting against the rear wall, rolling a joint, said, "Don't touch that... please!"

"What's the problem? My vibes might unsettle the spiritual fabric?"

"Something like that." He licked the edge of the rolling paper.

Ryan had stretched out on his back between Konwicki and a cardboard box that held some clay figurines, a comic book spread over his eyes; Odille was on her knees facing Konwicki, watching him roll.

"Why don't you tell me what else is off-limits?" I said.

He lit the joint, let smoke trickle from his nostrils. "Did you come here just to be contentious?" he asked.

"I'm not sure why I came," I said. "I figured you'd tell me."

He gave a shrug, blew more smoke. "Why are you so hostile?"

I dropped down cross-legged next to Odille. "You know what's going on here, man. But for one thing, I don't like guys like you... guys who want to grow up to be Charles Manson, but don't have the balls, so they hang out and maneuver weaker people into fucking them."

I said this mildly, and that was not a pose; I felt calm, without malice, merely making an observation. My dislike of Konwicki—it appeared—had shifted into a philosophical mode.

"And what sort of person are you?" he asked with equal mildness.

"Why don't you tell me?"

He made a show of sizing me up. "How about this? A horny, lonely man who's having trouble adjusting to the onset of middle age."

"Gee, Carl," I said. "I like my kind of guy a lot better than I do yours."

He sniffed, amused. "There's no accounting for taste." He passed me the joint, and in the spirit of the moment, I took a hit, let it circulate, then took another, deeper one. Seconds later I realized that Konwicki had exercised the home-field advantage in our little war and pulled out his killer weed. Even though I was already ripped, I could feel its effects moving through me like a cool, soft wind; it was the kind of weed that immobilizes, the kind with which you need to plan where you want your body to fall. My thoughts became muddled, my extremities felt cold. Yet when the joint was passed to me again, I had still another hit, not wanting to seem a wimp.

"Good shit, huh?" said Konwicki, watching Ryan suck on the joint.

"Gawd!" said Ryan, leaking smoke. "What clarity!"

I'm not sure why I reached for the clay figurines in the box next to Ryan—the need to hold on to something, probably. The wind tattering the thatch made a sound like something huge being torn apart. The inconstant wash of orange light along the walls mesmerized me, and the lantern flame itself was too bright to look at directly. In every minute event I perceived myriad subtleties, and I could have sworn I was floating a couple of inches above the ground. Perhaps I thought the figurine would give me ballast, bring me back down, because I was blitzed, wrecked, fucked-up. My hand moved in slow motion, effecting a lovely arc toward the box that contained the figurines. But the second I picked one up, I was cured of my sensory overload and felt stone-cold sober, in absolute control.

"Christ!" said Konwicki with annoyance. "Put that down!"

The figurine was a pre-Columbian dwarf of yellowish brown clay with stumpy legs, a potbelly, a hooked nose, and thick brutish lips. The eyes were slitted folds. About the size of a Barbie doll. Ugly as a wart. Holding it gave me focus and made me feel not merely whole, but powerful. The only remnant of my buzz was a sense that the figurine was full of something heavy and shifting, like a dollop of mercury. It seemed to throb in my hand.

"Put it down!" Konwicki's tone had become anxious.

"Why? Is it valuable?" I turned the figure, examining it from every angle. "Don't worry, man. I won't drop it."

"Just put it down, all right?"

Holding the figurine in my left hand, away from Konwicki, I leaned forward and saw that the cardboard box contained five more figurines, all standing. "What are they? They look like a set."

Konwicki held out his hand for the figurine, but I was feeling more and more in control. As if the figurine were a strengthening magic. I wasn't about to let it go. Odille, I saw, was regarding Konwicki with distaste.

"I'm not going to drop it, man. You think I'm too stoned or something? Hey"—I flashed him a cheery grin—"I feel great. Tell me what they are."

Ryan, too, was staring at Konwicki; he laughed soddenly and said in an Actors' Equity German accent, "Tell him, Master."

Konwicki grimaced like a man much put upon. "They're part of a game. An old Mayan game. I bought it off a *chiclero* in Flores."

"Really?" I said. "How do you play?"

"I can set the figures up, but I don't know what happens after that."

"If you know how to set them up, you must know something about it."

An exasperated sigh. "All right... I'll set them up, but be careful."

A long piece of plyboard was leaning against the wall to his left; it was stained a rusty orange and marked with a mosaic of triangular zones. He laid the board flat and arranged the five figures, three at the corners, the other two at the center edge opposite one another. The corner nearest me was vacant, and after a brief hesitation I set the dwarf down upon it.

"What next?" I said.

"I told you. I don't know. Whoever's playing picks one of the figures to be his corner. But after that..." He shrugged.

"How many can play?"

"From two to six people."

"Why don't you and I give it a shot?" I said.

It was curious how I felt as I said that. I was giving him an order, one I knew he'd obey. And I was eager for him to obey. I wanted him on the board, vulnerable to my moves, even though I didn't know what moves existed. That animal grin that had first manifested itself in front of the Café Pluto once again spread across my face.

"Come on, Carl," I said mockingly. "Don't you want to play?"

He pretended to be complying for the sake of harmony, giving Odille a glance that said, *What can I do?* and stretched out his hand, letting it hover above the figurines as if testing a discharge that issued from the head of each. At last he touched a clay warrior with a feathered headdress and a long spear. I felt less competent, and my thoughts frayed once again; it appeared that my relapse had boosted Konwicki's spirits. His bland smile switched on, and he leaned back against the wall. The noise of wind and sea smoothed out into a slow oscillating roar, as if something big and winged were making leisurely flights around the outside of the hut.

On impulse, I picked up the dwarf, and, suddenly brimming with gleeful hostility, I set it down beside a figurine at the center of the board, a lumpy female gnome with a prognathous jaw and slack breasts. Konwicki countered by moving a figurine resembling a squat infant to the side of his warrior. Thereafter we made a number of moves in rapid succession using the same four figurines. Complex moves, each consisting of more than one figurine, sometimes in tandem, utilizing every portion of the board. The entire process could not have taken more than a few minutes, but I could have sworn the game lasted for an hour at least. The room had been transformed into a roaring cell that channeled the powers of wind and sea, drew them into a complex circuit. A weight was shifting inside me, shifting just as the interior weights of the figurines seemed to shift, as if some liquid were being tipped this way and that, guiding my hand. Along with the apprehension of strength was the feeling of a separate entity at work, a quick, nasty brute of a being with a potbelly and arms like tree trunks, grunting and scuttling here and there, stinking of clay and blood. And yet I maintained enough sense of myself to be afraid. Things were getting out of hand, I realized, but I had no means of controlling them. As I stared at the board it began to appear immense, to exhibit an undulating topography, and I could feel myself dwindling, becoming lost among those rust-colored swells and declivities, coming closer to some terrible danger.

And then it was over... the game, the feelings of power and possession. Konwicki tried a smile, but it wouldn't stick. He looked wasted, worn-out. Exactly how I felt. Despite the intensity and strangeness of what I had experienced, I blamed it all on substance abuse. And I was sick of games, of repartee. I struggled to my feet, held out a hand to Odille. "Want to take a walk?" I asked.

I'd expected that she would look to Konwicki for approval or for some sort of validation; but without hesitation she let me help her to stand.

"Carl," I said with my best anchorman sincerity. "It's been fun."

He kept his face deadpan, but in his eyes was a shine that struck me as virulent, venomous. "That's how it is, huh?" he said, directing his words, I thought, to neither me nor Odille, but to the space between us.

"Night, all," I said, and steered Odille toward the door. I kept waiting for Konwicki to make some hostile remark; but he remained silent, and we got through the door without incident. We went along the edge of the shore, and after we had gone about thirty yards, Odille said, "You don't want to walk, do you, Raymond? Tell me what you really want."

"This how it is in Paris?" I said. "Everything made clear beforehand?"

"This isn't Paris."

"How are you with honesty?" I asked.

"Sometimes not so good." She shrugged as if to say that was the best she could offer.

"You're a beautiful woman," I said. "Intelligent, appealing. I'm tired of being in pain. Whatever possibilities exist for us... that's what I want."

She made a noncommittal noise.

"What?" I said.

"I thought you'd say you loved me."

"I want to love you, and that's the same thing," I said. "What the depth of my feelings are at this moment doesn't matter. One thing I've learned about love... you're a fool if you judge it by how dizzy it makes you feel." To an extent this was a lie I was telling myself, but it was such a clever lie that it came cloaked in the illuminative suddenness of a truth recognized, allowing me to adopt the role of a sincere man struggling to be honest... which was the case. Perhaps we are all such fraudulent creatures at heart that we must find a good script before we can successfully play at being honest.

"But the dizziness," said Odille. "That's important, too."

"I'm starting to get dizzy now. How about you?"

"You're a clever man, Raymond," she said after a pause. "I don't know if I'm a match for you."

"If I'm so damned clever, don't try and baffle me with humility."

She said nothing, but the wind and surf and the thudding of coconuts falling onto the sand seemed an affirmation. At last she stood on tiptoe, and her lips grazed my cheek. "Let's go home," she whispered.

Late that night Odille came astride me. Her skin gleamed palely in the moonlight shining through the window, her black hair stuck to the sweat on her shoulders in eloquent curls, and each of her rapid

exhalations was cored with a frail note as if she were singing under her breath. Her breasts were small and long and slightly pendulous, with puffy dark areolae, reminding me of *National Geographic* breasts, shaped something like the slippers Aladdin wears in illustrations from *The Arabian Nights*; and her features looked so cleanly drawn as to appear stylized. Her delicacy, its exotic particularity, inspired desire, affection, passion. And one thing more, an emotion that underlay the rest: the need to degrade her. Part of my mind rebelled against this urge, but it was huge in me, a brutish drive, and I dug my fingertips into her thighs, gripping hard enough to leave bruises, and began to use her roughly. To my surprise she responded in kind; her fingernails raked my chest, and soon our lovemaking evolved into a savage contest that lasted nearly until dawn.

I slept no more than a few hours, and even that was troubled by a dream in which I found myself in a dwarfish, heavily muscled body with ocher skin, crouching on the crest of a dune of rust-colored sand, one that overlooked a complex of black pyramids. A hot wind blew fans of grit into the air, stinging my face and chest. The complex appeared to be a mile or so away, but I knew this was an illusion created by the clarity of the air, and that it would take me hours to reach the buildings. I knew many things about the place. I knew, for instance, that the expanse of sand between the dune and the complex was rife with dangers, and I also knew that there was life within the complex... a form of life dangerous to me. I understood this was a dream, albeit of an unusual sort, and that awareness was, I thought, a kind of wakefulness, leading me to believe that the dangers involved were threats not only to my dream self but to my physical self as well. Yet despite this knowledge, I was moved to start walking toward the complex.

I walked for about an hour, growing dehydrated and faint from the heat. The buildings seemed no nearer to hand, and the sun was a violet-white monster seething with prominences that looked much closer than the sun with which I was familiar, and although great banks of silvery-edged gray clouds were crossing the sky with the slowness of cruising galleons, they never once obscured the sun, breaking apart as they drew near to permit its continued radiance, re-forming once they had passed. It was as if the light were a solid barrier, an invisible cylindrical artifact around which they were forced to detour. Crabs with large pincers, their shells almost the same color as the sand, burrowed in the dunes; they were quite aggressive, occasionally chasing me away from their homes... or hunting me.

After another hour I came to an exceptionally smooth stretch of sand, lying flat as a pond, in this wholly unlike the rest of the desert, which wind had sculpted into an infinite sequence of undulations and rises, and in color a shade more coppery. The world was so quiet that I could hear the whine of my circulatory system, and I was afraid to step forward, certain that the sand hid some peril; I supposed it to be something on the order of quicksand. At last, deciding to give it a test, I unbuckled the belt that held my sheathed knife (I was not in the least surprised to discover that I had a knife), and removing the weapon, I tossed the belt out onto the sand. For a moment it lay undisturbed. But then the sand beneath it began to circulate in the manner of a slow whirlpool. I sprang back from the edge of the sand, retreating into the lee of a dune, just as the whirlpool erupted, spraying coppery orange filaments high into the air, filaments that were—I realized as they fell back to earth around me—serpents with flat, questing heads, the largest of them seven or eight feet in length. The pit from which they had been spewed was expanding. I scrambled higher on the dune, clawing at the sand, and gazed down into a vast maw, where thousands of white sticks—human bones, I saw—were being pushed up and then scattered downward as if falling off the shoulders of a huge dark presence that was forcing its way up through them from some unimaginable depth...

At that moment I waked, blinking against the sunlight, still snared by the tag ends of the dream, still trying to climb out of danger to the top of the dune, and discovered Odille propped on an elbow, looking down at me with a concerned expression. The sight of her seemed to nullify all the fearful logic of the dream, and I felt foolish for having been so caught up in it. The corners of Odille's lips hitched up in a faint smile. "You were tossing about," she said. "So I woke you. I'm sorry if..."

"No," I said, "I'm glad you did. I was having a bad dream." I boosted myself to a sitting position. My muscles ached, and dried blood striped my chest. "Jesus Christ!" I said, staring at the scratches; I remembered how it had been the previous night and was embarrassed.

"Are you all right?" Odille asked.

"I don't know," I said. "You... did I... ?"

"Hurt me? I have some bruises. But it looks to me"—she pointed at my abrasions—"that you lost the battle."

"I'm sorry," I said, still flustered. "I don't know what got into me. I've never... I mean, last night. I've never been like that... not so..."

She put a forefinger to my lips. "Apparently it's what we both wanted. Maybe we needed it, maybe..." She made an angry noise.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm sick of explaining myself in terms of the past."

I thought I knew her meaning, and I wondered if that was what it had been for both us—a usage of each other's bodies in order to inflict pain on phantom lovers. I pulled her down, let her rest on my shoulder; her hair fanned across my chest, cool and heavy and silky. I wanted to say something, but nothing came to mind. The pressure of her body aroused me, but I felt tender now, empty of that perverse lust that had enlivened me hours before. She shifted her head so she could see my eyes.

"I won't ask what you're thinking," she said.

"Nothing bad."

"Then I will ask."

"I was thinking about making love with you again."

She made a pleased noise. "Why don't you?"

I turned to face her, drawing her against me, but as we began to kiss, to touch, I realized I was afraid of making love, of reinstituting that fierce animalism. That puzzled me. In retrospect, I had been somewhat repelled by my behavior, but in no way frightened. Yet now I had a sense that I might be opening myself to some danger, and I recalled how I'd felt while playing the game with Konwicki—there had been a feeling identical to that I'd had during our lovemaking. One of helplessness, of possession. I forced myself to dismiss all that, and soon my uneasiness passed. The sun melted like butter across the bed, and the sounds of morning, of birds and the sea and a woman vendor crying, "*Coco de aguas,*" came through the window like music to flesh out the rhythm that we made.

For a month or thereabouts, I believe that I was happy. Odille and I began to make a life, an easy and indulgent life that seemed in its potentials for pleasure and consolation proof against any outside influence. It was not only our sexuality that was a joy; we were becoming good friends. I came to see that like many attractive women she had a poor self-image, that she had been socialized to believe that beauty was a kind of cheapness, a reason for shame, and that her disastrous affair might have been a self-destructive act performed to compensate for a sense of worthlessness. Saying it like that is an oversimplification, but it was in essence true and I thought that she had known her affair would be ill-fated; I wondered if my own affair had been similar, a means of punishment for a shameful quality I perceived in myself, and I wondered further if our budding relationship might not have the same impetus. But I should have had no worries in that regard. Everything—sex, conversation, domestic interaction—was too easy for us; there was no great tension involved, no apprehension of loss. We were healing each other, and although this was a good thing, a healthy thing, I missed that tension and realized that its absence was evidence of our impermanence. I tried to deny this, to convince myself that I was in love with her as deeply as I had been in love with Karen, and to an extent my self-deception was a success. Atop the happiness we brought to one another, I installed a level of passionate intensity that served to confound my understanding of the relationship, to counterfeit the type of happiness that I believed necessary to maintain closeness. Yet even at my happiest I had the intimation of trouble hovering near, of a menace not yet strong enough to effect its will. And as time wore on, I began to have recurring dreams that centered upon those black pyramids in the rust-colored desert.

At the outset all the dreams were redolent of the first, dealing with dangers overcome in the desert. But eventually I made my way into the complex. The pyramids were enormous, towering several hundred feet high, and as I've said were reminiscent of old Mayan structures, with fancifully carved roof combs and steep stairways leading up the faces to temples set atop them, all of black stones polished to a mirror brilliance that threw back reflections of my body—no longer that of a dwarf, but my own, as if the dwarf were merely a transitional necessity—and were joined with incredible precision, the seams almost microscopic. The sand had drifted in over the ebony flagstones, lying in thin curves, and torpid serpents were coiled everywhere, some slithering along leisurely, making sinuous tracks in the sand. Here and there I saw human bones half-buried in the sand, most so badly splintered that it was impossible to tell from which part of the body they had come. Many of the buildings had been left unfinished or else had been designed missing one or more outer walls, so that passing beside them, I had views of their labyrinthine interiors: mazes of stairways that led nowhere, ending in midair, and oddly shaped cubicles.

Before entering the complex I had been visited with certain knowledge that the buildings were not Mayan in origin, that the Mayan pyramids were imperfect copies of them; but had I not intuitively known this, I might have deduced it from the nature of the carvings. They were realistic in style and depicted nightmare creatures—demons with spindly legs, grotesque barbed phalluses, and flat snakelike heads with gaping mouths and needle teeth and fringed with lank hair—who were engaged in dismembering and otherwise violating human victims. In a plaza between two pyramids I came upon a statue of one of these creatures, wrought of the same black stone, giving its skin a chitinous appearance. It stood thirty feet in height, casting

an obscenely distorted shadow; the sun hung behind its head at an oblique angle, creating a blinding corona of violet-white glare that masked its features and appeared to warp the elongated skull. But the remainder of its anatomy was in plain view. I ran my eyes along the statue, taking in clawed feet; knees that looked to be double-jointed; the distended sac of the scrotum and the tumescent organ; jutting hipbones; the dangling hooked hands, each finger wickedly curved and tipped with a talon the length of a sword; the belly swollen like that of a wasp. I was mesmerized by the sight, ensnared by a palpable vibration that seemed to emanate from the figure, by an alluring resonance that made me feel sick and dizzy and full of buzzing, incoherent thoughts. From beneath heavy orbital ridges, the eyes glinted as if cored with miniature suns, and my shock at this semblance of life broke the statue's hold on me. I backed away, then turned and sprinted for my life...

I came back to consciousness thrashing around in the dark, hot bedroom. Odille was still asleep, and I slid out from beneath the sheet, being careful not to wake her. I crossed to the door that led to the living room, my heart pounding, skin covered with a sheen of sweat. The room beyond was slashed by a diagonal of moonlight spilling through the window, and the furniture cast knife-edged shadows on the floor. I wiped my forehead with the back of my arm and was startled by the coldness and smoothness of my skin. I looked at my arm, and the feeling of cold ran all through me—the skin on my wrist and hand was black and shining like polished stone, channeling streams of moonlight along it. I let out a gasp, and holding the arm away from me, I staggered into the living room and onward into the kitchen, the arm banging against the door, making a heavy metallic sound. I tripped, spun around, trying to keep my balance, and fetched up against the sink. I didn't want to look at the arm again, but when I did I was giddy with relief. Nothing was wrong with it; it was pale and articulated with muscle. A normal human arm. I touched it to make sure. Normal. I leaned against the sink, taking deep breaths. I stayed there for another fifteen minutes, trying to counter the dream and its attendant hallucination with rationalizations. I was smoking too much dope, I told myself; I'd lived for too long under emotional pressure. Or else something was terribly wrong.

Houses and intricate buildings in dreams, says Freud, signify women, and for this reason I supposed that the pyramids might be related to my experiences with Karen—a notion assisted by the patent sexuality of the serpent imagery. There was no doubt that I had been damaged by the affair. For a year and a half prior to falling in love with her I had been forced to watch my father die of cancer, and had spent all my time in taking care of him. My resources had been at a low ebb when Karen had come along, and I'd seen her as a salvation. I'd been obsessed with her, and the slow process of rejection—itself as lingering as a cancer—had turned the power of my obsession against me, throwing me into a terrible depression that I had tried to remedy with cocaine, a drug that breeds its own obsessions and eventually twists one's concept of sexuality. I wondered if I was still obsessed, if I was sublimating the associated drives into my dream life. But I rejected that possibility. All that was left of my feelings for Karen was a vengeful reflex that could be triggered against my will, and it occurred to me that this was a matter of injured pride, of anger at myself for having allowed that sad woman to control and torment me. The dreams, I thought, might well be providing a ground for my anger, draining off its vital charge. And yet I couldn't rid myself of the suspicion that the dreams and the game I had played with Konwicki were at the heart of some arcane process, and one morning as I walked along the beach, I turned my steps in the direction of Konwicki's hut, hoping that he might be able to shed some light on the matter.

I hadn't spoken to him since the night of the game, and I had seen him only twice, then at a distance; in the light of that, it was logical to assume that he had come to terms with what had happened. But the instant his but came into view I tensed and began to anticipate a confrontation. Ryan was sitting outside, dressed with uncharacteristic informality in cutoffs and a short-sleeved shirt; his head was down, knees drawn up. When he heard my footsteps, he jumped to his feet and stood in front of the door.

"You can't go in," he said as I came up.

I was taken aback by that, and also by his pathetic manner. His eyes darted side to side as if expecting a new threat to materialize; nerves twitched in his jaw, and his hands were in constant motion, plucking at his cutoffs, fingers rubbing together. He looked paler, thinner.

"What's the problem, man?" I asked.

"You can't go in," he said stubbornly.

"I just want to talk to him."

He shook his head.

"What's the hell wrong with you?"

Konwicki's voice floated out from the hut. "It's all right, Ryan."

I brushed past Ryan, saying, "You better get yourself together," and went on in. The light was bad, a brownish gloom, and Konwicki was sitting cross-legged against the rear wall; beside him was something bumpy covered by a white cloth, and noticing a corner of orange wood protruding from the cloth, I realized

that he had been fooling around with the game.

"What can I do for you?" he said in a dry tone. "Sell you some drugs?"

I sat down close to him, off to the side, so I could watch the door; the dried palm fronds crunched beneath my weight. "How you been?"

He made a noise of amusement. "I've been fine, Ray. And you?"

I gestured at the covered board. "Playing with yourself?"

A chuckle. "Just studying a bit. Working on my project, you know."

I didn't believe him. There was a new solidity to his assurance, and I suspected it had something to do with the figures and the board. "Are you learning how to play it?" I asked.

After a silence, framing his words with—it seemed—a degree of caution, he said, "It's not something you can learn... not like chess, anyway. It's more of a role-playing game. It's essential to develop an affinity with one's counter. Then the rules—or rather, the potentials—become evident."

The light was so dim that the details of his swarthy features were indistinct, making it difficult to detect nuances of expression. But I had the feeling he was laughing at me. I didn't want to let him know that I was leery about the game, and I changed the subject. "Sounds interesting. But that's not why I came here. I wanted to"—I pretended to be searching for the right words—"clear the air. I thought we could..."

"Be friends?" said Konwicki.

"I was hoping we could at least put an end to any lingering animosity. We're all going to be living here for a while, and it's pointless to be carrying on petty warfare... even if it's only giving each other the cold shoulder."

"That's very reasonable of you, Ray."

"Are *you* going to be reasonable? You and Odille were done before I came along. You must be aware of that."

"If you knew me, you wouldn't approach me this way."

"That's why I'm here... to get to know you."

"Just like a Yank, to think he can know something through talking." Konwicki's hand strayed toward the board as if by reflex, but he did not complete the movement. "I don't let go of things easily. I hang on to them, even things I don't really want. Unless I'm made to let go."

I ignored the implicit challenge. "Why's that?"

Konwicki leaned back and folded his arms, a shift in posture that conveyed expansiveness. "I've traveled in America," he said. "I've seen slums in Detroit, New York, Los Angeles. Ghastly ruins. Much more terrible in their physical entity than anything in England. But there's still vitality in America, even in the slums. Some of the slums in London, they're absolutely without vitality. Gray places with here and there a petunia in a flowerpot brightening a cracked window, and old toothless women, and children with stick arms and legs, and women whose bodies are too sallow and sickly to sell, and men whose brains have shrunk to the size of their balls. All of them moving about like people in a dream. Bending over to sniff at corpses, poking their fingers in a fire to see how hot it is. So much trash and foulness lying about that the streets stink even when they're frozen. To be born there is like being born on a planet where the gravity is so strong you can't escape it. It's not something you can resist with anger or violence. It's like treacle has been poured over you, and you crawl around in it like a fly with your wings stuck together. I've never escaped it. I've run around the world; I've cultivated myself and given myself an education. I've developed refined sensibilities. But everywhere I've gone I've carried that gravity with me, and I'm the same ignorant bloody-minded sod I always was. So don't you tell me something's not good for me. I'll want it more than ever. Things that aren't good for me make me happy. And don't say that something's done. I'm too damn stupid to accept it. And too damn greedy."

Despite its passion, there was a hollowness to this statement, and after he had done I said, "I don't believe you."

He gave a caustic laugh. "That's good, Ray. That's very perceptive. I've other imperatives now. But it used to be true."

I let his words hang in the air for a bit, then said, "Have you been having odd dreams lately?"

"I dream all the time. What sort of dreams are you talking about?"

"About the game we played."

"The game? This game?" He touched the cloth covering the board.

I nodded.

"No... why? Are you?"

His mocking voice told me that he was not being direct, and I realized there was no use in continuing the conversation; either he was lying or else he was running yet another game on me, hoping to make me think

he knew something by means of arch denial. I tried to dismiss the importance of what I'd said. "A couple... just weird shit. I haven't been sleeping well."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

If Konwicki was dreaming of that strange desert, if there was an occult reality to the game we'd played, I knew—because of my partial admission—I must look like a fool to him; to me, with his arms folded, half-buried in the dimness, he seemed as impenetrable as a Buddha. The thatched roof crackled like a small fire in a gust of wind, and behind Konwicki, mapping the darkness of the wall, were tiny points of lights, uncaulked places between the boards through which the day was showing; they lent the wall the illusion of depth, of being a vast sky mapped with stars, all arranged in a dwindling perspective so as to draw one's eyes toward a greater darkness beyond them. I began to feel daunted, out of my element, and I told myself again that this was the result of manipulation on Konwicki's part, that by intimating through denial some vague expertise he was playing upon my fears; but this was no comfort. I tried to think of something to say that would pose a counterspell to the silent pall that was settling over me. I had a great faith in words, believing that their formal noise elegantly utilized could have the weight of truth no matter how insincere had been the impulse to speak, and so when words failed me, I felt even more at sea. I looked away from Konwicki, gathering myself. The doorway framed a stretch of pale brown sand and sun-spattered water and curving palm trunks, and the brilliance of the scene was such a contrast to the gloom within, I imagined that these things comprised a single presence that was peering in at us like an eye at a keyhole, and that Konwicki and I were microscopic creatures dwelling inside the mechanism of a lock that separated dark and light.

The weight of the silence forced me to stand and squeezed me toward the door. "We haven't settled anything," I said, brushing off my trousers, making a bustling, casual business of retreat. "But I hope you understand that I don't need any aggravation. Neither does Odille. If you want to make peace, we're open to it." I stepped into the doorway. "See you around."

Once outside under the sun, breathing the salt air, I felt easier, confident. I had, I thought, handled things fairly well. But as I turned to head back to the house, I tripped over Ryan, who had reclaimed his place beside the door, sitting with his knees drawn up. I went sprawling, rolled over, intending to apologize. But Ryan didn't appear to have noticed me. He continued to sit there, staring at a patch of sand, fingers plucking at a fray on his cutoffs, and after getting to my feet, watching him for a second or two, I started walking, maintaining a brisk pace, feeling a cold spot between my shoulder blades that I imagined registered the pressure of a pair of baleful eyes.

That same night, following a bout of paranoid introspection, I dreamed that I went inside one of the pyramids, a structure not far from the statue of the snake-headed creature that I had encountered in earlier dreams. Leery about entering, watching for signs that would warn me off, I passed through a missing wall and climbed a stair that ended several hundred feet above in midair and was connected to a number of windowless cubicles, all of the same black stone. I considered exploring the cubicles, but when I put my hand to the door of one, I heard a woman's muffled voice alternately sobbing and spewing angry curses; I pictured a harpy within, some female monstrosity, and I withdrew my hand. On every side a maze of other stairways lifted around me, rising without apparent support like a monumental fantasy by Escher or Piranesi, reducing perspective to a shadowy puzzle, and I felt diminished in spirit by the enormity of the place. Snakes lay motionless on the stairs, looking at a distance like cracks admitting to a bright coppery void; black spiders, invisible until they moved, scuttled away from my feet, and their filmy webs spanned between each step. From a point three-quarters of the way up, the desert appeared the color of dried blood, and set at regular intervals about the complex were five more colossal statues, each similar to the first in its repulsive anatomy, but sculpted in different poses: one crouching, one with its head thrown back, and so on. I couldn't help wondering if these six figures were related to the counters of Konwicki's game.

I had intended to go all the way to the top, but I grew uncomfortable with the isolation, the silence, and started back down. My progress was slowed by an attack of dizziness. I could still hear the woman crying, and the percussive effect of her sobs made me dizzier. The spaces beneath were swelling upward like black gas, and afraid that I would fall, overcoming my nervousness concerning the cubicles, I flung open the door to one, thinking I would sit inside until my vertigo had passed. A fecal stink poured from the cubicle, and something moved in the darkness at the rear, startling me.

"Who's there?" called a man's voice.

There was something familiar about the voice, and I peered into the cubicle. A pale shape was slumped against the far wall.

"Come on out," I said.

The man shifted deeper into the comer. "Why are you here?"

"I'm dreaming all this," I said. "I don't have much choice."

A feeble, scratchy laugh. "That's what they all say."

I stepped inside, closing until I had clear sight of the man. For a moment I failed to recognize him, but then I realized it was Ryan—Ryan as he might have looked after a hard twenty years, his blond hair grayed and the youthful lines of his face dissolved into sagging flesh. The creases in his skin had filled in with grime and looked to be deep cuts. His clothes were in tatters. "Jesus, Ryan!" I said. "What happened?"

"I'm in jail." Another cracked laugh. "I have to stay put until..."

"Till what?"

He shook his head.

I knelt beside him. "Where are we, Ryan?"

He giggled. "The endgame."

"What the hell's that mean?"

"The game," he said, "is not a game."

I waited for him to continue, but he lost his train of thought. I repeated the question.

"The game is just a way of getting here. You've already done playing, and now you have to wait till all the moves have been made."

I asked him to explain why—if I'd done playing—moves were still to be made, and he replied by saying that a move wasn't a move until it had been made everywhere. "It's like this place," he said. "A place isn't really a place. One place leads to another, and that place leads to another yet, and on and on. There's nothing that's only itself." That thought seemed to sadden him, and he said, "Nothing."

The woman let out a piercing scream, and her curses echoed through the pyramid.

I tried to pull Ryan to his feet, thinking that there might be some more pleasant place for him to wait; he struck at my hands, a flurry of weak blows that did no damage, but caused me to release him.

"Leave me alone," he said. "I'm safe here."

"Safe from what?"

"From you," he answered. "The Master thinks he's the dangerous one, but I know it's you. He's made the wrong move. Sooner or later he'll see I'm right, and he'll try and stop it. But you can't stop it. The travelers have to come and go; the transitions have to..." His speech became incoherent for a few seconds; then he snapped out of it. "Of course there are no right moves. Even the winner pays a price once the game is done. But not to worry, Ray," he said with a flash of his old cockiness. "It'll hurt, but it'll be a much cheaper price than the one the Master has to pay. Or else you can always keep playing if you want to be noble and take the risk."

He lapsed into incoherence once again; I attempted to bring him to his senses, but all he would say was to repeat that "it" couldn't be stopped, "it" had to happen, and to ramble on about "exchanges, necessary transitions." Giving up on him, I left the cubicle and went out onto the sand. The sun was low, its violet-white disk partially down on the horizon, and the shadows had grown indistinct. I strolled about the complex, feeling for the first time at ease among the buildings; I was comfortable even in proximity to the snake-headed statue. I stepped back from it, admiring its needle teeth and flat skull, all its obscene proportions, and although I felt as before a sense of resonant identity with it, on this occasion I was not frightened by the feeling, but rather was pleased. Indeed, I found the entire landscape soothing. The snakes, the crabs scuttling down the sanguine faces of the dunes, the black silence of the complex... all this had a bleak majesty and seemed the product of a pure aesthetic.

On waking and remembering the dream, however, I was more disturbed by my acceptance of that bizarre landscape than I had been by my fear of it. It was still dark, and Odille was asleep beside me. I eased out of bed, pulled on jeans and a shirt, and went into the patio. The edges of the tile roof framed a rectangle of stars and dark blue sky, with the crowns of palms showing half in silhouette, the ragged fronds throwing back pale green shines from the lights of the house next door. I dropped onto a lawn chair and lay back, trying to settle my thoughts. After a few minutes I heard the whisper of Odille's sandals on the concrete; she had thrown on a bathrobe, and her hair was in disarray, loose about her shoulders. She sat opposite me, put a hand on my knee, and asked what was wrong.

I had previously told her that I'd been having bad dreams, but had not been specific; now, though, I told her the entire story—the game, the feelings I'd had, the dreams, and my meeting with Konwicki. Once I had done, she lowered her head, fingering the hem of her robe, and after a pause she asked, "What are you worried about? The game... that it's real?"

I was ashamed to admit it.

"That's ridiculous!" she said. "You can't believe that."

"It's just the dreams... and Ryan. I mean, what's the matter with him?"

She made a noise of disgust. "He's weak. Carl's found a way to undermine him with drugs or something. That's all."

We were silent for several seconds; a palm frond scraped the roof, and the surf was a distant hiss.

"I knew something was bothering you," she said. "But..." She got to her feet, walked a couple of paces off, and stood with her arms folded. "Carl's getting to you. I wouldn't have thought it possible." She sighed, jammed her hands in the pocket of the robe. "I'm going to see him."

"The hell you are!"

"I am! And if *he* believes there's anything to the game, I'll find out about it." I started to object, but she talked over me. "You aren't worried about me, are you? About my going back to him?"

"I guess not."

"That doesn't sound like a vote of confidence." She knelt beside my chair. "Don't you understand how much I hate him?"

"I never understood why you were with him in the first place."

"I was vulnerable. He took advantage of my confusion. He confused me even more. He violated my trust; he weakened me. If I could, I'd..." She drew a deep breath, let it out slowly. "Don't tell me you haven't ever done anything that you knew was bad for you even when you were doing it."

"No," I said, surprised by her vehemence. "I can't tell you that." I stroked her hair. "What did he do to you?"

Her face worked, suppressing emotion. "The same sort of thing he's trying to do to you... except I didn't have anybody to tell me what was going on. Listen! Nothing's going to happen. I'm just going to talk to him. He'll lie, but I know when he's lying. I'll be able to tell whether he's concerned for himself or looking for a way to hurt you. And that'll put your mind at ease."

"It's not necessary."

"Yes, it is!" She put her arms around my neck. "I want you to get past this so I can have your undivided attention."

There was an edge to her intensity, a hectic brightness in her eyes, that quieted my objections, and later that night when she said she loved me, I believed her for the first time.

Two nights later as we sat at dinner in a small restaurant, a one-room place of stucco and thatch lit by candles, Odille told me that she had spoken with Konwicki. "You don't have to be concerned about the game," she said. "Carl's only trying to unnerve you." She had a forkful of rice, chewed. "I told him all about your dreams... everything. You should have seen him. He was like a starving man who'd been handed a steak. He said, Yes, yes, it was the same for him. Dreams, odd intuitions. Then I described your last dream, the one with Ryan, and what he'd said about Carl's making the wrong move. He loved that. He said, Yes, that was true. And he didn't know how to stop it from happening. After that, he offered an apology for everything that had happened between us. He said the game had changed him, that he could see now what a reprehensible sort he'd been."

"A reprehensible sort?" I said. "Were those his words?"

"I believe so."

"Reprehensible... shit!" I stared at her over the rim of my coffee cup. "It sounds to me like he's corroborating the dreams. Why else would he admit that he'd made a bad move?"

"Because," said Odille, "he knows if he were to deny it, he'd have no way of affecting you. But now, claiming that it's all true, especially the part about him possibly losing, he has an excuse to talk to you, to play with your mind. He can pretend to be your ally. You watch. He'll come to see you. He'll try to align himself with you. He'll have a plan that'll involve the two of you working together to save each other from the game... its perils. Then he'll start manipulating." She had another bite, swallowed. "He thought he was fooling me, but he was transparent."

"Are you sure about all this?"

"Of course. Carl's a greedy little man who thinks he's smarter than the rest of the world. He can't imagine that anyone could see through him. If there was anything to the game, he never would have told me." She took my hand. "Just wait. Watch what happens. You'll see I'm right."

Odille's reassurances had not convinced me of the fecklessness of my fears. Recalling Konwicki's statement that familiarity with one's counter was important, I set out to reinhabit the feelings I'd had while playing, to recall the moves that had been made. It was not hard to recapture those feelings; they returned to me every night in dreams. But the moves were a different matter. Other than the first, I could remember only the last two: one in which all four figurines had been placed in close proximity, and another in which the figure of the infant had been placed in a zone adjoining that of the dwarf. I asked Odille what she could recall about the counters from working on the translation, and she said that all she knew was what Konwicki

had told her.

"He used to joke with me about them," she said. "He identified himself with the warrior, and he said my counter was the female... the one you moved during the game. He described her to me. A real maniac, a terrible creature. Sluttish, foul-mouthed, vile. She was always throwing tantrums. Physically abusive."

"Maybe he was trying to demean you by describing her that way."

"I'm sure he was. But once he did show me some of the translation he'd done about her, and it looked authentic."

"What were they... the counters? Did he ever tell you that?"

"Archetypes," she said. "Mayan archetypes. Spirit forms... that was the term he used. I'm not sure what that meant. Whoever made the figures, whoever assigned them their characters, had a warped idea of human potential. All the characters were repellent in some way... I remember that much. But when he told me all that, I was trying to pull away from him, and I didn't pay much attention."

A week went by, and I made no further progress. I was spinning my wheels, wasting myself in futile effort. Then I took stock of the situation, and suddenly all my paranoia seemed ludicrous. That I could have even half-believed I had been possessed by a Mayan spirit in the shape of a dwarf was evidence of severe mental slippage, and it was time to get a grip. The dreams must have some connection to the abuses I had suffered during the past few years, I thought, and to be this much of a fool for love was debasing, particularly in the face of the abuses I met with every day in Livingston. Malnutrition, tyranny, ignorance. I determined that I was going to take a hard line with my psyche. If I had dreams, so what? Sooner or later they would run their course. And I also determined to grant Odille's wish, to give her my undivided attention; I realized that while I hadn't been neglecting her, neither had I been utilizing the resources of the relationship as a lover should. Things were changing between us in a direction that I would never have predicted, and I owed it to her, to myself, to see where that would lead.

Our lives were calm for the next couple of weeks. The dreams continued, but I refused to let them upset me. Odille and I fell into the habit of taking twilight walks along the beach, and one evening after a storm, with dark blue ridges of cloud pressing down upon a smear of buttermilk yellow on the horizon, we walked out to the point beyond the Café Pluto, a hook of land bearing a few palms whose crowns showed against the last of sunset like feathered headdresses. Nearby stretches of cobalt water merged with purplish slate farther out, and there were so many small waves, it looked as if the sea were moving in every direction at once. We sat on a boulder at the end of the point, watching the light fade in the west, and after a minute Odille asked if I had ever been to Paris.

"A long time ago," I said.

"What did you think?"

"It was the winter," I said. "I didn't see too much. I had no money, and I was staying in a house that belonged to this old lady named Bunny. She was straight out of a Tennessee Williams play. She'd been Lawrence Durrell's lover... or maybe it wasn't Durrell. Somebody famous, anyway. She was an invalid, and the house was a mess. Cat shit everywhere. There was a crazy Romanian who was printing an anarchist newsletter in the basement. And Bunny's kids, they were true degenerates. Her fifteen-year-old raped the maid. The twenty-year-old was dealing smack. Bunny just lay around, and I ended up having to take care of her."

"God, you've lived!" said Odille, and we both laughed.

I put an arm around her. "Are you homesick?"

"Not so much... a little." She leaned into me. "I was just wondering how you'd like Paris."

We had talked about the future in only the most general of terms, but I felt comfortable now considering a future with her, and that surprised me, because even though I was happier than I'd been in a very long time, I had also been nervous about formalizing the relationship.

"I suppose we're going to have to leave here eventually," I said.

She looked up at me. "Yes."

"It doesn't matter to me where we go. I don't have to be any particular place to do my work."

"I know," she said. "That's your greatest virtue."

"Is that so?" I kissed her, the kiss grew long, and we lay back on the boulder. I touched her breasts. In the darkness the whites of her eyes were aglow; her breath was sweet and frail. Waves slapped at the rock. Finally I turned onto my back, pillowed my head on my hands. Icy stars made simple patterns in the sky, and it seemed to me at the moment that everything in the world had that same simplicity.

"Someday," Odille said after a long silence, "I'd like to go back to Paris... just to see my friends again."

"Want me to go with you?"

She was silent for a bit; then she sat up and stared out to sea. I had asked the question glibly, thinking I

knew the answer, yet now I was afraid that I'd misread her. At last she said, "You wouldn't like it. Americans don't like Parisians."

"The way I hear it, it's mutual," I said, relieved. "But there are exceptions."

"I guess so." She glanced down at me and smiled. "Anyway, we don't have to stay in Paris. We could come to the States. I wouldn't mind that." She tipped her head to the side. "You look puzzled."

"I wasn't sure we'd get around to talking about this. And even if we did, I thought it would be awkward."

"So did I for a while. But then I realized we were past awkwardness." With both hands she lifted the heft of her hair and pushed it back behind her head. "Sometimes I've tried to imagine myself without you. I can do it. I can picture myself living a life, being with someone else. All that. But then I realized how artificial that was... that kind of self-examination. It was as if I were wishing for that prospect, because I was afraid of you. To end doubt, or to learn whether my doubts were real, all I had to do was stop thinking about them. Just give in to the moment. That was easier said than done, I thought. But then I tried it, and it *was* easy." She ran a hand along my arm. "You did it, too. I could tell when you stopped."

"Could you, now?"

"Don't you believe me?"

Before I could answer, there was a crunching in the brush behind us, and two figures emerged from shadows about thirty feet away. It took me a second to identify them against the dark backdrop—Konwicki, with Ryan hanging at his shoulder. I stood, wary, and Odille came to her knees. "What the fuck are you doing?" I asked them. "Tracking us?"

"I have to talk with you," said Konwicki. "About the game."

"Some other time, man." I took Odille's arm and began steering her back along the point, giving Konwicki and Ryan a wide berth, but keeping an eye on them.

"Listen," said Konwicki, coming after us. "I'm not after mucking you about. We're in serious trouble." I kept walking, and he grabbed my shoulder, spun me around. "I've been having dreams, too. They're different from yours. But they're indicators all the same."

His face betrayed anxiety, but I wasn't buying the act. I shoved him back. "Keep your hands off me!"

"The game's a conduit," he said as we walked away. "A means of transport to another world, another plane... something. And to another form as well." He caught up with me, blocked our path; Ryan scuttled behind him. "I don't know how the Mayans discovered it, but it was a major influence on their architecture, on every facet of their culture. The ritual cruelties of their religion, the—"

"Get out of my way." I was cold inside—a sign that I was preparing for violence. My senses had grown acute. The slop of the waves, Konwicki's breathing, the leaves rustling—all were sharp and distinct. Ryan's pale face, peering from behind Konwicki, seemed as bright as a star.

"You're a fool if you don't listen to me," Konwicki said. "The game we played was real. I admit I wouldn't be here if I didn't think I was in danger, but there's—"

"You made the wrong move, that it?" I said.

"Yes," said Konwicki. "I didn't know it at the time. I didn't know we were actually playing. And later, after I realized something strange was happening, I didn't see the mistake I'd made." He wagged both hands as if dismissing all that. "We've got an option, man... I think. The winner can keep the game going for one more move at least. It'll be a risk, but a relatively minor one." He looked as if he were about to grab me in frustration, doing a fine imitation of a desperate man. "That way we have a chance of figuring out what else we can do."

"I'm not one of your goddamn chumps!" I said. "I know Odille told you about my dream. You're trying to use it against me."

"Yes, yes, you're right," he said. "I *was* using it. I wanted to fuck with you. I admit it. But after Odille talked to me, I began thinking about some of the things she'd told me. And some of the things you'd said, too."

I made a derisive noise.

"I'm telling the truth. I promise you!" he said. "After I talked to her, I had another look at the game... at the papers. Some of the things she'd told me gave me new insights into the translation." His words came in a rush. "You see, I believed that the figures—the dwarf, the warrior—that they were the entities involved. I thought they were conveyances that carried you to the pyramids. And they are. One of us was going to be transported. That much was certain. I thought it would be me, but it's not... it's you. And I'd overlooked the obvious." A dismayed laugh. "It's a matter of elementary physics. For every action there's a reaction."

He paused for breath, and having heard enough, I said, "Odille told me you'd come up with something clever. Guess she was wrong about that."

I started to push past him, but he shoved me back. "For God's sake, will you listen?"

"I'm going to tell you once more," I said. "Keep your hands off me."

"That's right, you stupid clot!" he said. "Just go home and bugger your stupid whore and don't worry about a bloody thing!"

"Such talk," I said; my arms had begun to tremble.

"Let's just go!" Odille pulled at me, and I allowed myself to be hauled along; but Konwicki planted a hand on my chest, bringing me up short.

"I'm trying to save your sodding life, you ass!" he said. "Are you going to listen to me, or..." He was, judging from his disdainful expression, about to deliver some further pomposity.

"No," I said, and nailed him in the stomach, not wanting to hurt my hand. He caved in, went to his knees, then rolled up into a fetal position, the wind knocked out of him. Ryan darted toward me, then retreated into the shadows; a second later I heard him running off through the bushes.

It had been years since I'd hit anyone, and I was ashamed of myself; Konwicki had been no threat. I dropped to my knees beside him, counseled him to take shallow breaths, and once he had recovered somewhat, I tried to help him up. He pushed my hands away and fixed me with a hateful stare.

"Right, you bastard!" he said. "I warned you, but that's all right. You'll have to take what comes now."

After that night on the point I concluded that Livingston had lost its charm; I wanted to avoid further conflicts, and I was certain more would arise. Odille was in accord with this, and we planned to leave as soon as I could find someone responsible to take over the Spanish doctors' house. We decided to settle in Panajachel near Lake Atitlán until I finished my current writing project, and then to visit New York City en route to Paris; almost without acknowledging it, we had made an oblique, understated commitment to each other, one that by contrast to our pasts and the instability around us was a model of rigor. Perhaps our relationship had begun as an accommodation, a shelter from the heavy weather of our lives, but against all odds something more had developed; although I wasn't ready to admit it to her, unwilling to risk a total involvement, I had fallen in love with Odille. It wasn't any one instance or event that had brought this home to me, but rather a slowly growing awareness of my reactions to her. I had begun to focus more and more upon her, to treasure images of her. To savor all the days. And yet I detected in myself a residue of tension, one I also detected in her, and this was evidence that we were afraid of the obsessive bonding that had occurred and were preparing for disappointment, obeying the conditioning of our pasts.

Ten days passed, and I hadn't found anyone to take the house. I wrote to the Spanish doctors, telling them that an emergency had come up, that I had to leave and wanted to delegate my responsibilities to the local priest, who had become something of a friend, and who—aside from his clerical duties—maintained a small museum that displayed some Mayan artifacts of indifferent value. I began to pack my papers in anticipation of their response. Early one evening I went to the telegraph office to call my agent in the States and tell her about the move, to see if she had money for me. The office was a low building of yellow stucco next to the generator that provided the village's power, and was manned by a harried-looking clerk who was arguing with an Indian family, and was guarded by a soldier wearing camouflage gear and carrying a machine gun. The phones lined the rear wall of the office, and choosing the one farthest from the argument, I put in the call. Five minutes later I heard my agent's voice through a hiss of static, and after we had taken care of business, I asked what was new in the big city.

"The usual," she said. "Boring parties and editors playing musical chairs. You're better off down there... as long as you're working. Are you working?"

"Don't worry," I said.

My agent let some dead time accumulate, then said, "I guess I should tell you this, Ray. You're going to find out sooner or later."

"What's that?"

"Karen had her baby."

For an instant I felt strangely light, free of some restraint. "I didn't think she was due this soon."

"There were complications. But she's all right. So's the baby. It's a boy. It's really cute, Ray. A little doll. It just lies there and squeaks."

I let out a nasty laugh. "Just like his mama."

"I thought you went down there to let go of her. You don't sound like you're letting go."

"Must be the connection." I stared at the pocked, grimy wall, seeing nothing.

Another pause. "What're you working on, Ray?"

"You'll see it soon," I said. "Look, I've got to go."

"I didn't mean to upset you."

"I'm not upset. I'll call you in a couple of weeks, okay?"

I walked outside, cut down onto the beach. Dusk had given way to darkness, and the jungled shore was picked out by shanty lights; there was also a scattering of lights on the hills lifting behind the village,

showing the location of small farms and platanals. The moon, almost full, had risen to shine through a notch between the hills, paving the chop of the water close to shore with silvery glitter; but threatening clouds and dark brooms of rain were visible farther out—a storm would be hitting the coast within a matter of minutes. I was angry as I walked, but my anger was undirected. Karen was no longer an object of hatred, merely a catalyst that opened me to violent emotion, and I realized that part of the reason she had maintained a hold over me for so long was due, not to any real feeling, but to my romantic nature, my stubborn denial that the light in the heart could be snuffed out. I had hung on to the belief that—despite Karen's betrayal—the good, strong core of my feelings would last; now I was forced to face the fact that they were dead, and that made me angry and caused me to doubt everything I felt for Odille.

A voice called to me as I was passing a stand of palmettos. I ignored it, but the voice continued to call, and I whirled around to see Ryan running down the beach, his blond hair flying, dressed in the cutoffs and soiled shirt that had become his uniform. He staggered to a halt a few feet away, gasping.

"What do you want?" I asked.

He held up a hand, trying to catch his breath. "Gotta talk to you," he managed. He looked alien to me, a pale little twist of a creature, and I felt vastly superior. Stronger, more intelligent. The fierceness of the loathing that fueled these feelings didn't strike me as unusual.

"Talk about what?" I said.

"Odille... you have to break it off with her."

"You jealous, Ryan?"

"Konwicki..."

"Fuck Konwicki!" I gave Ryan a shove that sent him reeling backward, catching at the air with his hands. "If he's got a problem, tell him to come talk to me himself."

"You have to stop seeing her," said Ryan defiantly. He slipped a hand beneath his shirtfront as if soothing a stomachache and kept his eyes lowered. "I'm warning you... bad things are going to happen if you don't."

"Goodness me, Ryan," I said, taking a little walk around him, examining him contemptuously, as if he were an unsightly objet d'art. "I wonder what they could be."

Ryan's chin quivered. "He's... he's..."

"C'mon, man! Spit it out!" I said. "Has he been doing bad things to *you?* He must have been doing something nasty, mighty bad to turn you into such a twitchy little toad. Is it drugs? Is he feeding you bad drugs, or..."

Anger came boiling out of him. "Don't talk to me like that!"

I knew at that moment that Ryan had a weapon. The way he kept shifting his right hand under his shirt as if adjusting his grip, keeping his weight back on his heels, balanced, ready to strike. And I wanted him to strike.

"I got it," I said. "Konwicki's into boys now. That's it, right? And you're his boy! That explains why I've never seen you with a girl."

"Stop it!" He set himself, the muscles of his right forearm flexing.

"What's it like with him, man? He make your little doggy sit up and beg?"

"You better stop!"

"Does he make a lot of noise, Ryan?" I laughed, and the laugh startled me, sounding too guttural to be my own. "Or is he the strong, silent type?"

With a shout, he pulled a knife from beneath his shirt and slashed at me. I caught his wrist, gave it a sharp twist. He cried out, the knife fell to the sand, and he backed away, cradling his wrist, his expression shifting between panic and anguish. "I'm sorry," he said. "I'm sorry. He told me I had to..." Then he broke into a stumbling run and went crashing through the palmettos. I scooped up the knife and began to hunt him. That was how it seemed. A hunt. One in which I was expert. I've never been much of an athlete, yet that night I ran easily, with short chopping strides that carried me in a zigzagging path among the palmettos. I kept pace with Ryan, running off to his left and a little behind, intending to harry him until he dropped. He glanced back over his shoulder, saw me, and ran faster, frantically calling out to Konwicki.

On hearing that, I slowed my pursuit. It was Konwicki I really wanted, and since Ryan had been his messenger, it was likely that he was now going to see him. And yet we were heading away from the beach, away from Konwicki's house. I decided to trust my instincts. If Konwicki had somehow convinced Ryan to kill me—and I thought that must be the case, that he'd hoped to evade the judgment of the game by eliminating me—after the deed he would have wanted Ryan to meet him somewhere out of the way. I dropped back a bit, letting Ryan think he had lost me, keeping track of him by ear, picking out the sound of his passage through the foliage from the noises of insects and frogs and wind. We were moving onto the slope of one of the hills behind the village, and despite the uphill path, I was still running easily, enjoying

myself. The musky scents of the vegetation were as cloying as perfume; clouds flowing across the moon, driven by a gusting wind, made the world go alternately dark and bright with an erratic rhythm that added to my excitement. I exulted in the turbulent weather, in my strength, and I threw the knife into the brush, knowing that I wasn't going to need it.

As I passed through a banana grove, a flickering yellow light penetrated the bushes to my left from one of the farmhouses. The wind was rapidly gaining in force, tattering the banana leaves, lifting them high like the feathery legs of giant insects, and something about their articulated shapes fluttering in a sudden wash of moonlight made me uneasy. I began to have an inconstant feeling in my flesh, a dull vibration that nauseated me; I tried to push it aside, to concentrate on the running, but it persisted. I estimated that I must be a quarter of the way up the hill, and I could hear Ryan jogging along almost parallel to me. He had stopped calling out to Konwicki, but now and then he would cry out, perhaps because of the pain in his wrist. I was having some pain myself. Twinges in my joints, in my bones. Growing sharper by the moment. And there was something wrong with my eyes. Every object had a halo, the veins of leaves glowed an iridescent green, and overhead I could see dozens of filmy layers between the clouds and the earth, drifting, swirling, coalescing. I shook my head, trying to clear my vision, but if anything it grew worse. The halos had congealed into auras of a dozen different colors; hot spots of molten scarlet and luminous blue were insects crawling in the dirt. The pain kept growing worse, too. The twinges became jolts of agony shooting through my limbs, and with the onset of each I staggered, unable to stay on course. Then a tremendous pain in my chest sent me to all fours, my eyes squeezed shut. I tried to stand, and in doing so caught sight of my left hand—gnarled, lumpy fingers thick as sausages, clawing at rusty orange sand, lengthening and blackening. A fresh surge of pain knocked me down, and I twisted about and gouged at the earth for what seemed a very long time. Rain started to fall, and another burst of pain dredged up a bassy scream from my chest that merged with the wind, like the massive flat Om of a foghorn wedded to a howl. One instant I felt I was splitting in half, the next that I was growing huge and heavy. I receded from the storm and the world, dwindling to a point within myself, and from that moment on I was incapable of action, only of mute and horrified observation as another "I" took control of my thoughts, one whose judgments were funded by an anger far more potent and implacable than my own.

I lashed out with my left arm, clutched something thin and hard, tore at it; the next second a banana tree fell across my chest. But the pain was diminishing rapidly, and after it had passed, rather than feeling exhausted, I felt renewed. I climbed to my feet and looked out over the treetops. The storm that during transition had seemed so chaotic and powerful now seemed inconsequential, hardly worth my notice. Lightning scratched red forking lines down the sky; inky clouds rushed overhead. A flickering nimbus of bluish white overlaid the jungle, and beneath it, the lights of the houses ranging the hill were almost too dim to make out. I could find no sign of the defeated. Frustrated, I moved toward the nearest house—a structure with board walls and a roof of corrugated metal—knocking away branches, pushing masses of foliage aside, my hair whipped into my eyes by the wind. When I reached the house I stood gazing down at the roof, trying to sense the occupants. The energy flows binding the metal, stitchings of coruscant lines and dazzles, could not hide the puny lives within: shifting clots of heat and color. My quarry was not there, but in a fury I swung my arm and tore a long rip in the roof, delighted by the shriek of the tortured metal. Dark frightened faces stared at me through the rip, then vanished. A moment later I spotted them running out the door and into the jungle, becoming streaks of red beneath the ghostly luminescence of the leaves. I would have enjoyed pursuing them, but my time was limited, and I was concerned that the completion of my task would be hampered by the victor—I felt him lodged like a stone in my brain—whose pitiful morality was a nagging irritant. I wondered at his motives for entering the contest. Surely he must have known what was at stake. There is no morality in this darkness.

I comforted myself with the thought that before too long the victor would have his due, unless—and I thought this unlikely—he chose to renew the challenge; and I pressed on through the jungle. Something ran across my path—an animal of some sort. It swerved aside, but before it could escape I grazed it with a claw, tearing its belly and flipping it into the air. The kill improved my temper. I had never relished employing my license here. The weak strains of life are barely a music, and the walls that hold back death are tissue-thin. But I was pleased to see the blood jet forth. I watched the animal's essence disperse, misting upward in pale threads to rejoin the Great Cloud of Being, and then continued on my way.

At the crest of the hill I paused and gazed back down the slope. From this vantage the landscape of that soft female world seemed transformed, infused with new strength. Great smoking clouds streamed from the sea, and the jungle pitched and tossed as if troubled by my sight. The souls of the trees were thin gold wires stretched to breaking. The thunder was a power, the lightning a name. I stood attuning myself to the night, absorbing its black subtleties and cold meanings, and thus strengthened, restored to the fullness of purpose, I went along the crest, searching the darkness for the defeated, listening among the whispers of the dead for

the sound of one soon to die, for that telltale dullness and sonority. At last I heard him venting his rage against one of the alternates in a house a third of the way down the hill. His obvious lack of preparation dismayed me, and once again I felt less than enthusiastic about my duty. It would be a mercy to end these intermittent rituals of violence and let the brood come as an army to urge on this feeble race to the next plane.

The house was a glowing patch in the midst of a toiling darkness and was made of sapling poles and thatch; orange light striped the gaps between the poles and leaked from beneath the door. I called to the defeated. The angry conversation within was broken off, but no one came out. Perhaps, I thought, he had mistaken my call for an element of the storm. I called again, a demanding scream that outvoiced the thunder. Still he remained within. This was intolerable! Now I would be forced to instruct him. I ripped aside the poles at the front of the house, creating a gaping hole through which I saw two figures shrinking back against the rear wall. I held out my hand in invitation, but as the alternate collapsed to the floor, the defeated went scuttling about like a frightened crab, running into the table, the chairs. Disgusted, I reached in and picked him up. I lifted him high, looked into his terrified face. He struggled, prying at my claws, kicking, squealing his fear.

"Why do you struggle?" I asked. "Your life is an exhausted breath, the failure of an enervated creation. You are food with a flicker of intelligence. True power is beyond you, and the knowledge of pain is your most refined sensibility." Of course he did not understand: my speech must have seemed to him like a tide roaring out from a cave. But to illustrate the point I traced a line of blood across his ribs, being careful not to cut too deeply. "Your ideas are all wrong," I told him. "Your concept of beauty a gross mutation; your insipid notions of good and evil an insult to their fathering principles." Once again I made him bleed, tracing the second line of instruction, slitting the skin of his stomach with such precision that it parted in neat flaps, yet the sac within was left intact. "Evil is as impersonal as mathematics. That its agencies derive pleasure from carrying out its charge is meaningless. Its trappings, its gaud and hellish forms, are nuance, not essence. Evil is the pure function of the universe, the machine of stars and darkness that carries us everywhere." At the third fine I saw in his face the first light of understanding, and in his shrieks I detected a music that reflected the incisiveness of my as-yet-incomplete design. His eyes were distended, bloody spittle clung to his lips and beard, and there was a new eagerness in his expression; he would—had he been able to muster coherent thought—have interpreted this eagerness as a lust for death, yet I doubted he would be aware that to feel such a lust was the signature of a profound lesson learned. I thought, however, that once we returned to the desert, once I had time to complete the design, our lessons would go more quickly. I traced a fourth line. His body spasmed, flopping bonelessly, but he did not lose consciousness, and I admired his stamina, envied him the small purity of his purpose. The bond that held me in that place was weakening, and I grasped him more tightly, squeezing a trickle of darkness from his mouth. "You and I," I said, slicing the skin over his breastbone, "are gears of the machine. Together we interlock and turn, causing an increment of movement, a miniscule resolution of potential." With the barest flick I laid open one of his cheeks, and he responded with a high quavering wail that went on and on as if I had opened a valve inside him, released some pressure that issued forth with a celebratory keening. Beneath the wash of blood I had a glimpse of white. "I can see to your bone," I said. "The stalk of your being. I am going to pare you down to your essential things, both of flesh and knowledge. And when we return to the temples, you will have dear sight of them, of their meaning. They, too, are part of the machine." His head lolled back; his mouth went slack, and his eyes—they appeared to have gone dark—rolled up to fix on mine. It was as if he had decided to take his ease and bleed and study his tormentor, insulated from pain and fear. Perhaps he thought the worst was over. I laughed at that, and the storm of my laughter merged with the wind and all the tearing night, making him stiffen. I bent my head close to him, breathed a black breath to keep him calm during the transition, and whispered, "Soon you will know everything."

That is a mere approximation of what I remember, an overformal and inadequate rendering of an experience that seems with the passage of time to grow ever more untranslatable. Trapped by the limitations of language, I can only hint at the sense of alienness that had pervaded me, at the compulsions of the thing I believed I had become. I woke on the beach before dawn not far from Konwicki's house, and I thought that after the possession—or the transformation, or whatever it had been—had ended, in the resultant delirium I must have wandered down from the hillside and passed out. No other possibility offered itself. My muscles still ached from the experience, and my memories were powerful and individual and sickening. I remembered how it felt to have the strength to tear iron like rotten cloth; I remembered a cold disdain for a world I now embraced in gratitude and relief; I remembered the sight of a black hand wicked with curved talons closing around Konwicki and lifting him high; I remembered intelligence without sentiment, hatred without passion; I remembered a thousand wars of the spirit that I had never fought; I remembered killing a hundred brothers for the right to survive; I remembered a silence that caused pain; I remembered thoughts

like knives, a wind like religion, a brilliance like fear, I remembered things for which I had no words. Things that made me tremble.

But as the sun brought light into the world, light brought doubt into my mind and caused the memories to diminish in importance. Their very sharpness was a reason to doubt them; memories, I believed, should be fragmentary, chaotic, and these—despite their untranslatable essence—were a poignant, almost physical, weight inside my head. Their vividness seemed a stamp of fraudulence, of the manufactured, and thus my problems with interpreting what had happened became complex and confusing. How much, for instance, had Odille known? Had she, out of hatred for Konwicki, manipulated me? Had she known more than she had said, trying to encourage a deadly confrontation? And if so, what sort of confrontation was she trying to encourage? And what about coincidence? The coincidence of so many elements of those days and the dreams and the game. Was it really coincidence, or could what seemed coincidental have been a matter of selective memory? And Konwicki... had he been honest with me that night on the point, or had he, too, been engaged in manipulation? Could Odille's desertion have left him more bereft than he had allowed, and was that a significant motivation? I wished I had let him finish speaking, that I had learned what he meant by the phrase "for every action there's a reaction." Was that merely another coincidence, or did it refer to an exchange of travelers between this world and that desert hell? And most pertinently, had my deep-seated anger against an old lover been a sufficiently powerful poison to cause me to imagine an unimaginable horror, to erect an insane rationalization for a crime of passion? Or had anger been the key that opened both Konwicki and me to the forces of the game? Each potential answer to any of these questions cast a new fight upon the rest, and therefore to determine an ultimate answer became a problem rather like trying to put together a jigsaw puzzle whose pieces were constantly changing shape.

The sun had cleared the horizon, shining palely through thin gray clouds; clumps of seaweed littered the beach, looking at a distance like bodies washed up by the surf, and heaps of foam like dirty soapsuds demarked the tidal margin. My head felt packed with cotton, and I couldn't think. Then I was struck by an illumination, a hope. Maybe none of it had happened. A psychotic episode of some kind. I went stumbling through the mucky sand toward Konwicki's place, growing more and more certain that I would find him there. And when I burst into the darkened shack, I saw someone asleep on an air mattress against the wall, a head with brown hair protruding from beneath a blanket.

"Konwicki!" I said, elated.

The head turned toward me. A tanned teenage girl propped herself on an elbow, the blanket slipping from her breasts; she rubbed her eyes, pouted, and said grouchily, "Who're you?"

The air in the room stank, heavy with the sourness of sexual activity and marijuana. I couldn't tell if the girl was pretty; her environment suppressed even the idea of prettiness. "Where's Konwicki?" I asked.

"You a friend of Carl's?"

"Yeah, we're soul mates." Being a wiseass helped stifle my anxiety.

The girl noticed her exposure, covered herself.

"Where is he?" I asked.

"I dunno." She slumped back down. "He went somewhere with Ryan last night. He'll probably be back soon." She shaded her eyes, peered into the thin light. "What's it like out there? Still drizzling?"

"No," I said dully.

The girl shook her hair back from her eyes. "I think I'll catch a swim."

I stood looking down at the cardboard box that contained the Mayan figurines.

"That means I'd like to put on my suit," said the girl.

"Oh... right. Sorry." I started out the door.

"After I'm dressed," said the girl, "you can wait here if you want. Carl's real free with his place."

I stood outside, uncertain what to do. While I was considering my options, the girl came out the door, wearing a red bikini; she waved and walked toward the water's edge. I stared in through the door at the cardboard box. Konwicki would not be returning, I realized, and the answer to all my questions might he in that box. I checked to make sure that the girl wouldn't be a problem—she was splashing through the shallows—and darted inside. I picked up the box, then remembered the papers; I stuffed as many of them as possible in among the figurines, stuck some more under my arm, and went jogging along the shore toward home.

These were the facts, then. Konwicki was missing. The police were indifferent to the matter. Gringos were prone to make unannounced exits of this sort, they said. Likely he had gotten a girl in trouble. Ryan had been found on the hill, incapable of rational speech, his wrist broken; I saw him once before he was flown home under sedation, and he looked very like the Ryan of my dream. Drugs, said the local doctor. An Indian family with a small farm claimed that a demon had torn a hole in their roof and chased them through the jungle; but

the sightings of demons were commonplace among the hill people, and their testimony was disregarded, the hole in the roof chalked up to storm damage—a ceiba tree had fallen onto it. A deer had been found disemboweled in the jungle, but the wound could have been made by a machete. A shack had been destroyed, apparently by the wind. As the days passed and the memories of that night grew faint, I came to see this combination of facts as an indictment against myself. It was conceivable that in chasing Ryan I had frightened an Indian family who had already been terrified by a tree crashing down upon their roof, and that in my rage, a rage funded by the bizarre materials of Konwicki's game, I had erected a delusionary system to deny my participation in a violent act. Having reached this conclusion, I became desperate to prove it wrong. I refused to accept that I was a murderer, and I pored over Konwicki's notes, trying to legitimize the game. I discovered what he had meant by saying that the game could be prolonged; according to his notes, the winner could choose to continue alone for one more move and thereby negate the penalties that accrued to both winner and loser... though why anyone would choose this option was beyond me. Perhaps the Mayans ranked their priorities differently from those of our culture, and personal survival was not high among them. The fact that Konwicki had not told me that I, the winner, could save him and risk myself by continuing seemed to testify that he had been trying to trick me into going on. However, that wasn't sufficient proof. Even if he had not given the game any credence, he might—as Odille had suggested—have said the exact same thing in order to gain a hold on me. The events of that night lay on an edge between the rational and the irrational, and the problem of which interpretation to place upon them was in the end a matter of personal choice.

Yet I was obsessed with finding a solution, and for the next month I pursued the question. I no longer had dreams of the pyramids and the desert, but I had other dreams in which I saw Konwicki's tormented face. From these dreams I would wake covered with sweat, and I would go into my study and spend the remaining hours of the night staring at the four counters that had been employed in the game: the dwarf, the warrior, the woman, the infant. I grew distracted. My thoughts would for a time be gleefully manic, sharp, and then would become muzzy and vague. I was afflicted by the smell of blood; I had fevers, aural hallucinations of roaring and screams. And I fell into a deep depression, as deep as the one that had owned me in New York, unable to disprove to my own satisfaction the notion that I had killed a man.

Throughout this period, Odille was loving and supportive, exhausting herself on my behalf, and during moments of clarity I realized how fortunate I was to have her, how much I had come to love her. It was this realization that began to pull me out of my depression... that, and the further realization that she was beginning to fray under the pressures of dealing with my breakdown. Over the span of a week she grew sullen and short-tempered. I would find her pacing, agitated, and when I would try to console her, she would often as not react with hostility. Usually I was able to break through to her, to bring her back to normalcy. Then one night, returning from the corner store, where I had gone to buy olive oil, matches, some other things for the kitchen, as I came into the living room I heard Odille out on the patio, sobbing, cursing, her voice thickened like a drunkard's. It was the voice I'd heard in my dream, coming from one of the cubicles in the pyramid. I stopped in my tracks, and as I listened, a dissolute feeling spread through my guts. There was no doubt about it. Not only were the timbre and rhythms identical, but also the words.

"Bastard," she was saying. "Oh, you bastard. God, I hate you, I hate you! You..." A wail. "Dead man, that's what I'll call you. I'll say, 'How are you, dead man?' And when you ask what I mean by that, I'll say that I'm just anticipating... you fucking bastard!"

I went out onto the patio, walking softly. It was hot, and a few drops of rain were falling, speckling the concrete. Sweat poured off my neck and chest and back; my shirt was plastered to my skin. The lights were off, the moon high, printing a filigree of leaf shadow on the concrete, and Odille was perched on the edge of a chair in the shadows, her head down and hands clasped together—a tense, prayerful attitude. It seemed hotter the nearer I came to her. "Odille," I said.

She threw back her head, her strained face visible through strands of hair; she looked like a madwoman caught at some secretive act.

I started toward her, but she jumped up and backed away. "Don't touch me, you bastard!"

"Jesus, Odille!"

I moved forward a step or two, and she screamed. "You lied to me! Always lies! Even in Irún... even then you were lying!"

She had told me enough about her affair in Paris to make me think it was her old lover—and not me—that she was addressing. "Odille," I said. "It's me... Ray!" She blinked, appeared to recognize me; but when I came forward again, she said, "I won't listen to you anymore, Carl. Everything you say is self-serving. It has nothing to do with what I'm feeling, what I'm thinking."

I took her by the shoulders. "Look at me, Odille. It's Ray."

"Oh, God... Ray!" The tension drained from her face. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry!" Her mouth twisted into an expression of revulsion, and she pushed me back. "Sitting there mooning about that bitch in New York. You think I don't know? I do... I know! Every time you touch me, I know!"

"Odille!"

Again her face grew calm, or rather, registered an ordinary level of distress. "Oh, God!" she said. "I feel out of control, I feel... !"

I tried to embrace her, and she slapped me hard, knocking me off-balance. She came at me, shouting, slapping and clawing, and I went backward over the arm of a chair. My head struck the concrete, sending spears of white light shooting back into my eyes. I grabbed at her leg as she stepped over me, but I was stunned, my coordination impaired, and I only grazed her calf with my fingernails. By the time I managed to stand, Odille was long gone.

I went into the living room and stood by a table that I had marked into zones like the game board; the four counters were set upon it, and on the floor was the box containing the remaining two counters. In the pool of lamplight the rough brownish orange finish of the clay had the look of pocked skin; shadows had collected in their eye sockets, making them appear ghoulish. I would have liked to break them, to scatter them with a sweep of my hand and dash them to the floor; but I was frightened of them. I recalled now what Ryan had said in my dream about the victor paying a price, and I also recalled Konwicki's description of the female counter. A maniac, Odille had said. Foulmouthed and physically abusive. It was possible to dismiss the evidence of dreams, to blame Odille's emotional state on stress, on the turbulent emotional climate of her past, to dissect experience and devise a logical system that would explain away everything inexplicable. But there had been one too many coincidences, and I knew now that the game and all its hallucinatory consequences had been real, that the potency of the game was in part due to the fact that this world and the one from which the game derived were ultimately coincidental, lying side by side, matching one another event for event; the game was a bridge between those worlds, allowing the evil character of one to tap into and transform the weak principles of the other. Maybe the Mayans had played the game too often; maybe it had infected them and they had fled their cities, looking for someplace untainted by that other world. Maybe that ominous vibration of the old ruins, of Tikal and Palenque and Cobán, was a remnant of the power of evil, a lingering pulse of the ancient machinery. The theory was impossible to prove or disprove, but I had the feeling that I was not far from right. And what was to happen now? Was I to lose Odille, watch her decline into a madness that accorded with the character assigned her counter by some impersonal agency, some functionary of a universal plan?

So it appeared.

It was curious, my calmness at that moment. I had no idea whether or not there was a remedy to the situation. I thought about Konwicki's notes, his declaration that the game could be prolonged if the winner chose to put himself at risk for one more move, and I remembered, too, how Ryan had hinted at much the same thing in the dream; but there was nothing in Konwicki's notes that explained how one should initiate the tactic. Still, I acted as if there was remedy, as if I had a decision to make. I sat down in a straight-backed chair, staring at the counters, and thought about what we make when we make love, the weave of dependencies and pleasures and habituations that arise from the simple act of bestowing love, which is an act of utter honesty, of revelation and admission, of being innocent enough to open oneself completely to another human being and take a step forward into the dangerous precinct of their wills, hoping that they have taken the same immeasurable step, hoping they will not backtrack and second-guess what they know absolutely—that here is a rare chance to deny the conventional wisdom, to attempt an escape from the logics that supposedly define us. Karen Maniaci had taken that step and then had become afraid. It was not blameful, what she had done; it was only sad. And perhaps her rejection of love, her sublimation of desire, and her decision to view the life of her heart in terms of an emotional IRA, a long-term yuppie investment, choosing the security of what she could endure over the potentials of hope—maybe that was all of which she was capable. But that was the imperfect past. I thought of Odille then—her childhood of white lace and Catholic virtue, her intelligence and her ordinary passage through schools and men and days to this beach at the ends of the earth, this place where one thing more than the expected had happened—and I thought of the risk we had taken with one another without knowing it... to begin with, anyway. At some point we must have known, and still we had taken it. As it had been with Karen, it was now—I did not understand how to step back from that commitment, even though it was clear that the prospect of yet another risk lay before me.

Perhaps the game was—as Konwicki had suggested—merely a matter of attunement, not of rules; and perhaps once I'd entered the game's sphere of influence, I had only to acknowledge it, to make a choice, and then that choice would be actualized within its boundaries. Whatever the case, I must have reached a decision that bore upon the game, because I realized that the table and the counters had undergone a

transformation. The surface of the table had become an undulating surface of rusty orange upon which the counters stood like colossi, and in the distance, apparently miles and miles away, was a complex of black pyramids. It was as if I were a giant peering in from the edge of the world, looking out over a miniature landscape... miniature, but nonetheless real. The wind was blowing the sand into tiny scarves, and hanging above the pyramids was a fuming violet-white sun. Acting without thought, feeling again that sense of power and possession, I removed three of the counters, leaving the dwarf to stand facing the black buildings alone. After a moment I took one of the two remaining two counters from the cardboard box and set it close to the gnome. The figure depicted a youth, its proportions less distorted than those of the dwarf, yet with muscles not so developed as those of the warrior. I leaned back in my chair, feeling drained, wasted. The table had returned to normal, a flat surface marked with lines of chalk.

I was more than a little afraid. I wasn't sure what exactly I had done, but now I wanted to retreat from it, deny it. I pushed back my chair, becoming panicked, darting glances to the side, expecting to see an immense black talon poking toward me from window or door. The house seemed a trap—I remembered Konwicki and Ryan in the hut on the hill—and I scurried out into the night. It was spitting rain, and the wind was driving in steadily off the sea, shredding the palms, breaking the music from a radio in the house next door into shards of bright noise. I felt disoriented, needing—as I had that first night at Konwicki's—something to hold, something that would give me weight and balance, and I sprinted down onto the beach, thinking that Odille would be there. At the Café Pluto or one of the other bars. Maybe now that the game had been joined once again, she would have grown calm, regained her center. The moon flashed between banks of running clouds, and chutes of flickering lantern light spilled from shanty windows, illuminating patches of weeds, strips of mucky sand littered with fish corpses and offal and coconut tops. In the darkness above the tossing palms I glimpsed a phantom shape, immense and snake-headed, visible for a fraction of a second, and I picked up my pace, running now out of fear, the salt air sharp in my lungs, expecting a great claw to lay open my backbone. Then I spotted Odille—a shadow at the margin of the sea, facing toward the reef. The tide was going out, leaving an expanse of dark sand studded with driftwood and shells. I ran faster yet, and as I came near, she turned to me, backed away, saying something lost in the noise of the wind and surf. I caught her by her shoulders, and she tried to twist free.

"Let me go!" she said, pushing at my chest.

I glanced behind me. "Come on! We've got to get out of here!"

"No!" She broke loose from my grasp. "I can't!"

Again I caught hold of her.

"Leave me alone!" she said. "I'm..." She brushed strands of wet hair away from her face. "I don't know what's wrong with me. I must be crazy, acting like that."

"You'll be all right."

"You can't know that!"

I pulled her close, pressed her head onto my shoulder. She was shaking. "Calm down, just calm down. You're all right. Don't you feel all right? Don't you feel better?" I stroked her hair, my words coming in a torrent. "It's just the pressure, all the pressure. We've both been acting crazy. But it's over now. We have to leave; we have to find a new place." I searched the sky for signs of the monster I'd seen earlier, but there was only the darkness, the rushing moon, the lashing fronds. "Are you okay, are you feeling okay?"

"Yes, but—"

"Don't worry. It's just the pressure. I'm surprised we both haven't gone nuts."

"You're not going to leave me?" Her tone was similar to that of a child who'd been expecting a beating and had been granted a reprieve.

"Of course not. I love you. I'm not going to leave you... ever."

Her arms tightened around my neck, and she said that she couldn't stand the idea of losing me; that was why, she thought, she'd lost control. She just couldn't bear going through the same heartbreak again. I reassured her as best I could, my mouth dry with fear, continuing to look in every direction for signs of danger. The sea rolled in, smooth swells of ebony that detonated into white flashes on the reef.

"Come on," I said, taking her hand, pulling her along. "Let's go back to the house. We have to get out. This place, it's no good anyway. Too much bad shit has happened. Maybe we can find a boat to take us upriver tonight. Or tomorrow morning. Okay?"

"Okay." She forced a smile, squeezed my hand.

We went stumbling along the shore, beating our way against the wind. As we were passing close to a clump of palms, their trunks curved toward the sea, a figure stepped from behind them, blocking our path, and said, "Dat's far as you go, mon!"

He was standing barely a dozen feet away, yet I had to peer in order to make him out: a cocoa-skinned boy

in his teens, about my height and weight, wearing jeans and a shirt with the silk-screened image of a blond woman on the front. In his hand was a snub-nosed pistol. His eyes looked sleepy, heavy-lidded—Chinese eyes—and he was swaying, unsteady on his feet. His expression changed moment to moment, smiling one second and the next growing tight, anxious, registering the chemical eddies of whatever drug he was behind.

"Gimme what you got, mon!" He waggled the pistol. "Quickly, now!"

I fumbled out my wallet, tossed it to him; he let it slip through his fingers and fall to the sand. Keeping his eyes on me, the gun trained, he knelt and groped for the wallet. Then he stood, pried it open with the fingers of his left hand, and removed the contents. My vision was acting up; superimposed on the boy's face was another face, one with coarse features and pocked ocher skin—the image of the counter depicting the youth.

"Shit... boog muthafucka! Dis all you got? Quetzales all you got? I want gold, mon. Ain't you got no gold?"

"Gold!" I said, easing Odille behind me. To the surprise of half my mind, I felt in control of the situation. The bastard planned to kill me, but he was in for a fight. I was in the game again, flooded with unnatural strength and cold determination, my fear dimmed by my partnered consciousness with a muscular little freak who thrived on bloodlust.

"Ras clot!" said the boy, his face hardening with rage, jabbing the gun toward me, coming a few steps closer. "Gold! American dollars! You t'ink I goin' to settle fah dis?" He waved the fistful of Guatemalan currency at me.

The rain had let up, but the wind was increasing steadily; all along the beach the bushes and palms were seething. The sky above the hills had cleared, and the moon was riding just high enough so that the tip of the highest hill put a black notch in its lowest quarter. With ragged blue clouds sailing close above, their edges catching silver fire as they passed, it was a wild and lovely sight, and my heart stalled on seeing it. I felt suddenly calm and alert, as if attentive to some call, and I watched the tops of some silhouetted acacias inland swaying and straightening with a slow ungainly rhythm, bending low all to one side and lurching heavily back to upright again, like the shadows of dancing bears. At the center of the wind, I heard a silence, a vast pool of dead air, and I knew that other world, that place half my home, was whirling close, ready to loose its monsters upon whoever failed this test. I was not unnerved; I was empowered by that silence, unafraid of losing.

"Didn't you hear me, mon?" said the boy. "T'ink I foolin' wit' you? I ast if you got gold."

"Yeah, I got gold," I said coolly. "I got more gold than you can handle. Look in the secret compartment."

"What you mean?"

"There's a seam inside the billfold," I said, gloating over what was to come. "An inner flap. You have to look real close. Slit it open with your fingernail."

The boy stared into the wallet, and I flew at him, driving my shoulder into his abdomen, my arms wrapping around his legs, bringing him down beneath me. I clawed for his gun hand, caught the wrist as we went rolling in the wet sand left by the receding tide. I butted him under the jaw and smashed his hand against the sand again and again, butting him once more, and at last he let the gun fall. I had a glimpse of a dagger falling onto the rust-colored sand, and as we grappled together, face-to-face, in his eyes I saw the shadowy, depthless eyes of the counter, the coarse slitted folds, the hollowed pupils. I smelled cheap cologne, sweat, but I also smelled a hot desert wind. The boy spat out words in a language that I didn't recognize, tearing at my hair, gouging at my eyes; he was stronger than he had appeared. He freed one hand, punched at the back of my neck, brought his knee up into my chest, sending me onto my back. Then he straddled me, twisting my head, forcing my face into the sand and flailing away with his fist, punching at my liver and kidneys. There was sand in my nose and mouth, and the pain in my side was enormous. I couldn't breathe. Black lights were dancing behind my eyes, swelling to blot out everything, and in desperation I heaved up, unseating the boy, grabbing at his legs; I saw leaden clouds, a boiling sun, and then darkness filmed across the sky once again. The boy broke free, coming to his knees. But in doing so he turned away from me, and that was his undoing. I knocked him flat on his stomach, crawled atop him, and barred my forearm under his neck, locking him in a choke hold by clutching my wrist. We went rolling across the sand and into the water. A wave lifted us, black water coursed over my face, the moon blurred into a silver stream like the flashing of a luminous eel. I surfaced, sputtering. I was on my back, the boy atop me, humping, straining, his fingers clawing. His Adam's apple worked against my arm, and I tightened the hold, digging into his flesh with a twisting motion. He made a cawing noise, half gurgle, half scream. I think I laughed. Another wave swept over us, but we were anchored, heels dug into the sand. I heard Odille crying out above the tumult of wind and waves, and suddenly my glee and delight in the contest, the sense of possession, of abnormal strength... all that was gone.

The boy spasmed; his back arched like a wrestler bridging, trying to prevent a pin, then he went stiff, his muscles cabled. But I could feel the life inside him flopping about like a fish out of water, feel the frail tremor

of his held breath. I didn't know what to do. I could release him... I doubted he would have any fight left, but what if he did? And if he lived, wouldn't he continue to be a menace, wouldn't the game be unresolved, and—if not the boy—would not some new menace arise to terrorize me? I didn't so much think these things as I experienced a black rush of thought of which they were a part, one that ripped through me with the force of the tide that was sucking us farther from the shore, and once this rush had passed, I knew that the choice had already been made, that I was riding out the final, feeble processes of a death. Even this realization came too late, for at the moment the boy went limp and his body floated up from mine in the drag of the tide.

Horrified, I pushed him away, scrambled to my feet, and stood in the knee-deep water, fighting for balance. For the briefest of instants I spotted something huge, something with needle teeth and a flat skull, bending to the boy. Then Odille was clinging to me, dragging me away from the shore, saying things I barely heard. I turned back to the boy, saw his body lifting, sliding down the face of a swell, almost lost in the darkness. I searched the sky and trees for signs of that other world. But there was nothing. The game was over. Whatever had come for the boy already had him, already was tormenting the last of him in that place of snakes and deserts and black silences. That place forever inside me now. I looked for the boy again. He had drifted out of sight, but I knew he was there, and I would always know how his body went sliding into the troughs, rising up, growing heavier and heavier, but not heavy enough to prevent him from nudging against the reef, his skin tearing on the sharp rocks, then lifting in the race of outgoing tide and passing over the barrier, dropping down and down through schools of mindless fish and fleshy flowers and basking sharks and things stranger and more terrifying yet into the cold and final depths that lay beyond.

When I returned to the house, I discovered that the figurines depicting the youth and the warrior had been shattered. The marmalade cat fled from our footsteps and peered out from beneath a chair with a guilty look. I didn't puzzle over this; I was for the moment unconcerned with validation and coincidence... except for my comprehension that the life of one world was the shade of another, that the best and brightest instances of our lives were merely functions of a dark design. That and the memory of the boy dying in the shallows colored everything I did, and for a very long time, although I went about the days and work with my accustomed verve, I perceived a hollowness in every incidence of fullness and was hesitant about expressing my emotions, having come to doubt their rationality. Odille, while she had not been aware of the undercurrents of the fight on the beach, seemed to have undergone a similar evolution. We began to drift apart, and neither of us had the energy or will to pull things back together.

On the day she left for Paris, I walked her to the dock and waited with her as the ferry from Puerto Morales unloaded its cargo of fat black women and scrawny black men and chickens and fruit and flour. She leaned against a piling, holding down the brim of a straw hat to shield her eyes from the sun, looking very French, very beautiful. However, I was no longer moved by beauty. Some small part of me regretted her leaving, but mostly I was eager to have her gone, to pare life down to its essentials once again in hopes that I might find some untainted possibility in which to place my faith.

"Are you all right?" she asked. "You look... peculiar."

"I'm fine," I said, and then, to be polite, I added, "I'm sorry to see you go."

She tipped back her head so as to better see my face. "I'm sorry, too. I'll never understand what went wrong, I thought..."

"Yeah, so did I." I shrugged. "*C'est la vie.*"

She laughed palely, turned to the ferry, obviously nervous, wanting to end an awkward moment. "Will you be all right?" she asked suddenly, as if for an instant she were reinhabiting the depth of her old concern and caring. "I'll worry about you here."

"I'm not going to stay much longer... a couple of weeks. The doctors will be back by then."

"I don't know how you can stand to stay a minute longer. Aren't you worried about the police?"

"They're tired of hassling me," I said. "Hell, one of the lieutenants... you remember the one with the waxed mustache? He actually told me the other day that I was a hero." I gave a sarcastic laugh. "Like Bernhard Goetz, I'm keeping the city clean."

Odille started to say something, but kept it to herself. Instead, she let her fingers trail across my hand.

At last the ferry was empty, ready for boarding. She stood on tiptoe, kissed me lightly, and then was gone, merging with the crowd of blacks that poured up the gangplank.

The ferry veered away from the dock, venting black smoke, and I watched until it had rounded a spit of land, thinking that the saddest thing about Odille and me was that we had parted without tears. After a minute or so I headed back to the house. I had planned to work, but I was unable to concentrate. The inside of my head felt like glass, too fragile to support the weighty process of thought. I fed the cat, paced awhile; eventually I went into the living room and gazed down at the cardboard box that contained the four remaining figurines. I had been intending to destroy them, but each time I had made to do so, I'd been

restrained by a fear of some bad result. It occurred to me that I enjoyed this irresolute state of affairs, that I found it romantic to cling to the belief that—mad from unrequited love—I had done terrible violence, and that I'd been shying away from anything that might prove the contrary. I became enraged at my self-indulgence and lack of fortitude; without thinking, I picked up a figurine and hurled it at the wall. It shattered into a hundred pieces, and to my astonishment, a stain began to spread where it had struck. A spatter of thick crimson very like a smear of fresh blood. I tried to blink the sight away, but there it was, slowly washing down the wall. I was less afraid than numb. I looked into the box and saw that the figurine I'd broken was the infant. Ryan. I glanced again at the wall. The stain had vanished.

I started laughing, infinitely amused, wondering if I should call New Zealand and check on the particulars of Ryan's health; but then I realized that I would never pin down the truth, that his health or illness or death could be explained in a dozen ways, and I was afraid that I might not stop laughing, that I would continue until laughter blocked out everything else. Everything was true. Insanity and the supernatural were in league. Finally I managed to get myself under control. I packed my papers, a few clothes, and after wrapping the three remaining figurines in crumpled newspaper, I carried them to the house of a local priest and donated them to his museum. He was delighted by the gift, though puzzled at my insistence that he not allow them to be handled, that they be treated with the utmost care. Nor did he understand my hilarity on telling him that I was placing my fate in God's hands.

At the jetty, I found a swarthy white-haired East Indian man with a powerboat who said he would transport me up the Río Dulce to the town of Reunión for an exorbitant fee. I did not attempt to haggle. Minutes later we were speeding north through the jungle along the green river, and as the miles slipped past I began to relax, to hope that I was putting the past behind me once and for all. The wind streamed into my face, and I closed my eyes, smiling at the freshness of the air, the sweetness of escape.

"You look happy," the old man called out above the roar of the engine. "Are you going to meet your sweetheart?"

I told him, no, I was going home to New York.

"Why do you want to do that? All those gangsters and slums! Don't tell me New York is as beautiful as this!" He waved at the jungle. "The Río Dulce, Livingston... nowhere is there a more lovely place!"

With a sudden jerk of the wheel, he swerved the boat toward the middle of the river, sending me toppling sideways, balanced for an instant on the edge of the stem, my face a foot above the water. Something big and dark was passing just beneath the surface. The old man clutched at my arm, hauling me back as I was about to overbalance and go into the water. "Did you see?" he said excitedly. "A manatee! We nearly struck it!"

"Uh-huh," I said, shaken, my heart racing, wondering if the priest had mishandled one of the figurines back in Livingston.

"I would wager," said the old man, unmindful of my close call, "that there are no manatees in New York. None of the marvelous creatures we have here."

No manatees, I thought; but dark things passing beneath the surface—we had plenty of those. They came in every form. Male, female, shadows in doorways, rooms in abandoned buildings with occult designs chalked on the walls. Everywhere the interface with an uncharted reality, everywhere the familiar world fraying into the unknown.

Escape was impossible, I realized. I had always been in danger, and I always would be, and it occurred to me that the supernatural and the ordinary were likely a unified whole, elements of a spectrum of reality whose range outstripped the human senses. Perhaps strong emotion was the catalyst that opened one to the extremes of that spectrum; perhaps desire and rage and ritual in alignment allowed one to slide from light to light, barely noticing the dark interval that had been bridged. There was a comforting symmetry between these thoughts and what I had experienced, and that symmetry, along with my brush with drowning, seemed to have settled things in my mind, to have satisfied—if not resolved—my doubts. This was not so simple an accommodation as my statement implies. I am still prone to analyze these events, and often I am frustrated by my lack of comprehension. But in some small yet consequential way, I had made peace with myself. I had achieved some inner balance, and as a result I felt capable of accepting my share of guilt for what had happened. I had, after all, been playing head games with Konwicki before taking up the counters, and I had to shoulder responsibility for that... if for nothing else.

"Well, what do you say?" the old man asked. "Have you anything in New York to rival this?"

"I suppose not," I said, and he beamed, pleased by my admission of the essential superiority of the Guatemalan littoral.

We continued along the peaceful river, passing through forbidding gulfs bordered by cliffs of gray stone, passing villages and reed beds and oil barges, and came at last to Reunión, where I parted company with the old man and caught the bus north, sadder and wiser, free both of hate and love, though not of trouble,

returning home to the ends of the earth.

BARNACLE BILL THE SPACER

The way things happen, not the great movements of time but the ordinary things that make us what we are, the savage accidents of our births, the simple lusts that because of whimsy or a challenge to one's pride become transformed into complex tragedies of love, the heartless operations of chance, the wild sweetness of other souls that intersect the orbits of our lives, travel along the same course for a while, then angle off into oblivion, leaving no formal shape for us to consider, no easily comprehensible pattern from which we may derive enlightenment... I often wonder why it is when stories are contrived from such materials as these, the storyteller is generally persuaded to perfume the raw stink of life, to replace bloody loss with talk of noble sacrifice, to reduce the grievous to the wistfully sad. Most people, I suppose, want their truth served with a side of sentiment; the perilous uncertainty of the world dismays them, and they wish to avoid being brought hard against it. Yet by this act of avoidance they neglect the profound sadness that can arise from a contemplation of the human spirit *in extremis* and blind themselves to beauty. That beauty, I mean, which is the iron of our existence. The beauty that enters through a wound, that whispers a black word in our ears at funerals, a word that causes us to shrug off our griever's weakness and say, No more, never again. The beauty that inspires anger, not regret, and provokes struggle, not the idle aesthetic of a beholder. That, to my mind, lies at the core of the only stories worth telling. And that is the fundamental purpose of the storyteller's art, to illumine such beauty, to declare its central importance and make it shine forth from the inevitable wreckage of our hopes and the sorry matters of our decline.

This, then, is the most beautiful story I know.

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It all happened not so long ago on Solitaire Station, out beyond the orbit of Mars, where the lightships are assembled and launched, vanishing in thousand-mile-long shatterings, and it happened to a man by the name of William Stamey, otherwise known as Barnacle Bill.

Wait now, many of you are saying, I've heard that story. It's been told and retold and told again. What use could there be in repeating it?

But what have you heard, really?

That Bill was a sweet, balmy lad, I would imagine. That he was a carefree sort with a special golden spark of the Creator in his breast and the fey look of the hereafter in his eye, a friend to all who knew him. That he was touched not retarded, moonstruck and not sick at heart, ill-fated rather than violated, tormented, sinned against.

If that's the case, then you would do well to give a listen, for there were both man and boy in Bill, neither of them in the least carefree, and the things he did and how he did them are ultimately of less consequence than why he was so moved and how this reflects upon the spiritual paucity and desperation of our age.

Of all that, I would suspect, you have heard next to nothing.

Bill was thirty-two years old at the time of my story, a shambling, sour-smelling, unkempt fellow with a receding hairline and a daft, mooney face whose features—weak-looking blue eyes and Cupid mouth and snub nose—were much too small for it, leaving the better part of a vast round area unexploited. His hands were always dirty, his station jumpsuit mapped with stains, and he was rarely without a little cloth bag in which he carried, among other items, a trove of candy and pornographic VR crystals. It was his taste for candy and pornography that frequently brought us together—the woman with whom I lived, Arlie Quires, operated the commissary outlet where Bill would go to replenish his supplies, and on occasion, when my duties with Security Section permitted, I would help Arlie out at the counter. Whenever Bill came in, he would prefer to have me wait on him; he was, you understand, intimidated by everyone he encountered, but by pretty women most of all. And Arlie, lithe and brown and clever of feature, was not only pretty but had a sharp mouth that put him off even more.

There was one instance in particular that should both serve to illustrate Bill's basic circumstance and provide a background for all that later transpired. It happened one day about six months before the return of

the lightship *Perseverence*. The shift had just changed over on the assembly platforms, and the commissary bar was filled with workers. Arlie had run off somewhere, leaving me in charge, and from my vantage behind the counter, located in an ante-room whose walls were covered by a holographic photomural of a blue sky day in the now-defunct Alaskan wilderness, and furnished with metal tables and chairs, all empty at that juncture, I could see colored lights playing back and forth within the bar, and hear the insistent rhythms of a pulse group. Bill, as was his habit, peeked in from the corridor to make sure none of his enemies were about, then shuffled on in, glancing left and right, ducking his head, hunching his shoulders, the very image of a guilty party. He shoved his moneymaker at me, three green telltales winking on the slim metal cylinder, signifying the amount of credit he was releasing to the commissary, and demanded in that grating, adenoidal voice of his that I give him "new stuff," meaning by this new VR crystals.

"I've nothing new for you," I told him.

"A ship came in." He gave me a look of fierce suspicion. "I saw it. I was outside, and I saw it!"

Arlie and I had been quarreling that morning, a petty difference concerning whose turn it was to use the priority lines to speak with relatives in London that had subsequently built into a major battle; I was in no mood for this sort of exchange. "Don't be an ass," I said. "You know they won't have unloaded the cargo yet."

His suspicious look flickered, but did not fade. "They unloaded already," he said. "Sleds were going back and forth." His eyes went a bit dreamy and his head wobbled, as if he were imagining himself back out on the skin of the station, watching the sleds drifting in and out of the cargo bays; but he was, I realized, fixed upon a section of the holographic mural in which a brown bear had just ambled out of the woods and was sniffing about a pile of branches and sapling trunks at the edge of a stream that might have been a beaver dam. Though he had never seen a real one, the notion of animals fascinated Bill, and when unable to think of anything salient to say, he would recite facts about giraffes and elephants, kangaroos and whales, and beasts even more exotic, all now receded into legend.

"Bloody hell!" I said. "Even if they've unloaded, with processing and inventory, it'll be a week or more before we see anything from it. If you want something, give me a specific order. Don't just stroll in here and say"—I tried to imitate his delivery—" 'Gimme some new stuff'."

Two men and a woman stepped in from the corridor as I was speaking; they fell into line, keeping a good distance between themselves and Bill, and on hearing me berating him, they established eye contact with me, letting me know by their complicitor's grins that they supported my harsh response. That made me ashamed of having yelled at him.

"Look here," I said, knowing that he would never be able to manage the specific. "Shall I pick you out something? I can probably find one or two you haven't done."

He hung his great head and nodded, bullied into submissiveness. I could tell by his body language that he wanted to turn and see whether the people behind him had witnessed his humiliation, but he could not bring himself to do so. He twitched and quivered as if their stares were pricking him, and his hands gripped the edge of the counter, fingers kneading the slick surface.

By the time I returned from the stockroom several more people had filtered in from the corridor, and half-a-dozen men and women were lounging about the entrance to the bar, laughing and talking, among them Braulio Menzies, perhaps the most dedicated of Bill's tormentors, a big, balding, sallow man with sleek black hair and thick shoulders and immense forearms and a Mephistopholean salt-and-pepper goatee that lent his generous features a thoroughly menacing aspect. He had left seven children, a wife and a mother behind in São Paolo to take a position as foreman in charge of a metalworkers unit, and the better part of his wages were sent directly to his family, leaving him little to spend on entertainment; if he was drinking, and it was apparent he had been, I could think of nothing that would have moved him to this end other than news from home. As he did not look to be in a cheerful mood, chances were the news had not been good.

Hostility was thick as cheap perfume in the room. Bill was still standing with his head hung down, hands gripping the counter, but he was no longer passively maintaining that attitude—he had gone rigid, his neck was corded, his fingers squeezed the plastic, recognizing himself to be the target of every disparaging whisper and snide laugh. He seemed about to explode, he was so tightly held. Braulio stared at him with undisguised loathing, and as I set Bill's goods down on the counter, the skinny blond girl who was clinging to Braulio's arm sang, "He can't get no woman, least not one that's human, he's Barnacle Bill the Spacer."

There was a general outburst of laughter, and Bill's face grew flushed; an ugly, broken noise issued from his throat. The girl, her smallish breasts half-spilling out from a skimpy dress of bright blue plastic, began to sing more of her cruel song.

"Oh, that's brilliant, that is!" I said. "The creative mind never ceases to amaze!" But my sarcasm had no effect upon her.

I pushed three VR crystals and a double handful of hard candy, Bill's favorite, across to him. "There you are," I said, doing my best to speak in a kindly tone, yet at the same time hoping to convey the urgency of the situation. "Don't be hanging about, now."

He gave a start. His eyelids fluttered open, and he lifted his gaze to meet mine. Anger crept into his expression, hardening the simple terrain of his face. He needed anger, I suppose, to maintain some fleeting sense of dignity, to hide from the terror growing inside him, and there was no one else whom he dared confront.

"No!" he said, swatting at the candy, scattering much of it onto the floor. "You cheated! I want more!"

"Gon' mek you a pathway, boog man!" said a gangly black man, leaning in over Bill's shoulder. "Den you best travel!" Others echoed him, and one gave Bill a push toward the corridor.

Bill's eyes were locked on mine. "You cheated me, you give me some more! You owe me more!"

"Right!" I said, my temper fraying. "I'm a thoroughly dishonest human being. I live to swindle yits like yourself." I added a few pieces of candy to his pile and made to shoo him away. Braulio came forward, swaying, his eyes none too clear.

"Let the son' beetch stay, man," he said, his voice burred with rage. "I wan' talk to heem."

I came out from behind the counter and took a stand between Braulio and Bill. My actions were not due to any affection for Bill—though I did not wish him ill, neither did I wish him well; I suppose I perceived him as less a person than an unwholesome problem. In part, I was still motivated by the residue of anger from my argument with Arlie, and of course it was my duty as an officer in the Security Section to maintain order. But I think the actual reason I came to his defense was that I was bored. We were all of us bored on Solitaire. Bored and bad-tempered and despairing, afflicted with the sort of feverish malaise that springs from a sense of futility.

"That's it," I said wearily to Braulio. "That's enough from all of you. Bugger off."

"I don't wan' hort you, John," said Braulio, weaving a bit as he tried to focus on me. "Joos' you step aside."

A couple of his co-workers came to stand beside him. Jammers with silver nubs protruding from their crewcut scalps, the tips of receivers that channeled radio waves, solar energy, any type of signal, into their various brain centers, producing a euphoric kinaesthesia. I had a philosophical bias against jamming, no doubt partially the result of some vestigial Christian reflex. The sight of them refined my annoyance.

"You poor sods are tuned to a dark channel," I said. "No saved by the bell. Not today. No happy endings."

The jammers smiled at one another. God only knows what insane jangle was responsible for their sense of well-being. I smiled, too. Then I kicked the nearer of the in the head, aiming at but missing his silver stub; I did for his friend with a smartly delivered backfist. They lay motionless, their smiles still in place. Perhaps, I thought, the jamming had turned the beating into a stroll through the park. Braulio faded a step and adopted a defensive posture. The onlookers edged away. The throb of music from the bar seemed to be giving a readout of the tension in the room.

There remained a need in me for violent release, but I was not eager to mix it with Braulio; even drunk, he would be formidable, and in any case, no matter how compelling my urge to do injury, I was required by duty to make a show of restraint.

"Violence," I said, affecting a comical lower class accent, hoping to defuse the situation. "The wine of the fucking underclass. It's like me father used to say, son, 'e'd say, when you're bereft of reason and the wife's sucked up all the cooking sherry, just amble on down to the pub and have a piss in somebody's face. There's nothing so sweetly logical as an elbow to the throat, no argument so poignant as that made by grinding somebody's teeth beneath your heel. The very cracking of bones is in itself a philosophical language. And when you've captioned someone's beezer with a nice scar, it provides them a pleasant 'omily to read each time they look in the mirror. Aristotle, Plato, Einstein. All the great minds got their start brawling in the pubs. Groin punches. Elbows to the throat. These are often a first step toward the expression of the most subtle mathematical concepts. It's a fantastic intellectual experience we're embarking upon 'ere, and I for one, ladies and gents, am exhilirated by the challenge."

Among the onlookers there was a general slackening of expression and a few titters. Braulio, however, remained focused, his eyes pinned on Bill.

"This is ridiculous," I said to him. "Come on, friend. Do me the favor and shut it down."

He shook his head slowly, awkwardly, like a bear bothered by a bee.

"What's the point of it all, man?" I nodded at Bill. "He only wants to vanish. Why don't you let him?"

The blond girl shrilled, "Way you huffin' this bombo's shit, you two gotta be flatbackin', man!"

"I didn't catch your name, darling," I said. "Tarantula, was it? You'd do well to feed her more often, Braulio. Couple of extra flies a day ought to make her more docile."

I ignored her curses, watching Braulio's shoulders; when the right one dropped a fraction, I tried a round

kick; but he ducked under it and rolled away, coming up into the fluid, swaying stance of a *capoeirista*. We circled one another, looking for an opening. The crowd cleared a space around us. Then someone—Bill, I think—brushed against me. Braulio started what appeared to be a cartwheel, but as he braced on one hand at the mid-point of the move, his long left leg whipped out and caught me a glancing blow on the temple. Dazed, I reeled backward, took a harder blow on the side of my neck and slammed into the counter. If he had been sober, that would have done for me; but he was slow to follow, and as he moved in, I kicked him in the liver. He doubled over, and I drove a knee into his face, then swept his legs from under him. He fell heavily, and I was on him, no longer using my techniques, but punching in a frenzy like a streetfighter, venting all my ulcerated emotions. Somebody was clawing at my neck, my face. The blond girl. She was screaming, sobbing, saying, "No, no, stop it, you're killin' him." Then somebody else grabbed me from behind, pinned my arms, and I saw what I had wrought. Braulio's cheekbone was crushed, one eye was swollen shut, his upper lip had been smashed into a pulp.

"He's grievin', man!" The blond girl dropped to her knees beside him. "That's all he be doin'! Grievin' his little ones!" Her hands fluttered about his face. Most of the others stood expressionless, mute, as if the sight of violence had mollified their resentments.

I wrenched free of the man holding me.

"Fuckin' Security bitch!" said the blond. "All he's doin's grievin'."

"I don't give a fat damn what he was doing. There's no law says"—I labored for breath—"says he can exorcize it this way. Is there now?"

This last I addressed to those who had been watching, and though some refused to meet my eyes, from many I received nods and a grumbling assent. They cared nothing about my fate or Braulio's; they had been willing to witness whatever end we might have reached. But now I understood that something had happened to Braulio's children, and I understood too why he had chosen Bill to stand in for those who were truly culpable, and I felt sore in my heart for what I had done.

"Take him to the infirmary," I said, and then gestured at the jammers, who were still down, eyes closed, their smiles in place. "Them, too." I put a hand to my neck; a lump had materialized underneath my right ear and was throbbing away nicely.

Bill moved up beside me, clutching his little cloth sack. His smell and his softness and his witling ways, every facet of his being annoyed me. I think he was about to say something, but I had no wish to hear it; I saw in him then what Braulio must have seen: a pudgy monstrosity, a uselessness with two legs.

Get out of here!" I said, disgusted with myself for having interceded on his behalf. "Go back to your goddamn crawl and stay there."

His shoulders hitched as if he were expecting a blow, and he started pushing his way through the press at the door. Just before he went off along the corridor, he turned back. I believe he may have still wanted to say something, perhaps to offer thanks or—just as likely—to drive home the point that he was dissatisfied with the quantity of his goods. In his face was a mixture of petulant defiance and fear, but that gave me no clue to his intent. It was his usual expression, one that had been thirty-two years in the making, for due to his peculiar history, he had every cause to be defiant and afraid.

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Bill's mother had been a medical technician assigned to the station by the Seguin Corporation, which owned the development contract for the lightship program, and so, when his pre-natal scan displayed evidence of severe retardation, she was able to use her position to alter computer records in order to disguise his condition; otherwise, by station law—in effect, the law of the corporation—the foetus would have been aborted. Why she did this, and why she then committed suicide seventeen months after Bill's birth, remain a mystery, though it is assumed that her irrational actions revolved around the probability that Bill's father, a colonist aboard the lightship *Perseverence*, would never more be returning.

The discovery that Bill was retarded incited a fierce controversy. A considerable plurality of the station's work force insisted that the infant be executed, claiming that since living space was at a premium, to allow this worthless creature to survive would be an affront to all those who had made great personal sacrifices in order to come to Solitaire. This group consisted in the main of those whose lives had been shaped by or whose duty it was to uphold the quota system: childless women and administrators and—the largest element of the plurality and of the population in general—people who, like Braulio, had won a job aboard the station and thus succeeded in escaping the crushing poverty and pollution of Earth, but who had not been sufficiently important to have their families sent along, and so had been forced to abandon them. In opposition stood a vocal minority comprised of those whose religious or philosophical bias would not

permit such a callous act of violence; but this was, I believe, a stance founded almost entirely on principle, and I doubt that many of those involved were enthusiastic about Bill in the specific. Standing apart from the fray was a sizeable group who, for various social and political reasons, maintained neutrality; yet I would guess that at least half of them would, if asked, have expressed their distaste for the prospect of Bill's continued existence. Fistfights and shouting matches soon became the order of the day. Meetings were held; demands made; ultimatums presented. Finally, though, it was not politics or threats of force or calls to reason that settled the issue, but rather a corporate decision.

Among Seguin's enormous holdings was a company that supplied evolved animals to various industries and government agencies, where they were utilized in environments that had been deemed too stressful or physically challenging for human workers. The difficulty with such animals lay in maintaining control over them—the new nanotechnologies were considered untrustworthy and too expensive, and computer implants, though serviceable, inevitably failed. There were a number on ongoing research programs whose aim it was to perfect the implants, and thus Seguin, seeing an opportunity for a rigorous test, not to mention a minor public relations coup that would speak to the deeply humane concerns of the corporation, decided—in a reversal of traditional scientific methodology—to test on Bill a new implant that would eventually be used to govern the behavior of chimpanzees and dogs and the like.

The implant, a disc of black alloy about the size of a soy wafer, contained a personality designed to entertain and jolly and converse with its host; it was embedded just beneath the skin behind the ear, and it monitored emotional levels, stimulating appropriate activity by means of electrical charges capable of bestowing both pleasure and pain. According to Bill, his implant was named Mister C, and it was—also according to Bill—his best friend, this despite the fact that it would hurt him whenever he was slow to obey its commands. I could always tell when Mister C was talking to him. His face would empty, and his eyes dart about as if trying to see the person who was speaking, and his hands would clench and unclench. Not a pleasant thing to watch. Still I suppose that Mister C was, indeed, the closest thing Bill had to a friend. Certainly it was attentive to him and was never too busy to hold a conversation; more importantly, it enabled him to perform the menial chores that had been set him: janitorial duties, fetch and carry, and, once he had reached the age of fifteen, the job that eventually earned him the name Barnacle Bill. But none of this assuaged the ill feeling toward him that prevailed throughout the station, a sentiment that grew more pronounced following the incident with Braulio. Two of Braulio's sons had been killed by a death squad who had mistaken them for members of a gang, and this tragedy caused people to begin talking about what an injustice it was that Bill should have so priviledged an existence while others more worthy should be condemned to hell on Earth. Before long, the question of Bill's status was raised once again, and the issue was seized upon by Menckyn Samuelson, one of Solitaire's leading lights and—to my shame, because he was such a germ—a fellow Londoner. Samuelson had emigrated to the station as a low temperature physicist and since had insinuated himself into a position of importance in the administration. I did not understand what he stood to gain from hounding Bill—he had, I assumed, some hidden political agenda—but he flogged the matter at every opportunity to whomever would listen and succeeded in stirring up a fiercely negative reaction toward Bill. Opinion came to be almost equally divided between the options of executing him, officially or otherwise, and shipping him back to an asylum on Earth, which—as everyone knew—was only a slower and more expensive form of the first option.

There was a second development resulting from my fight with Braulio, one that had a poignant effect on my personal life, this being that Bill and I began spending a good deal of time together.

It seemed the old Chinese proverb had come into play, the one that states if you save somebody's life you become responsible for them. I had not saved his life, perhaps, but I had certainly spared him grievous injury; thus he came to view me as his protector, and I... Well, initially I had no desire to be either his protector or his apologist, but I was forced to adopt both these roles. Bill was terrified. Everywhere he went he was cursed or cuffed or ill-treated in some fashion, a drastic escalation of the abuse he had always suffered. And then there was the blond girl's song: "Barnacle Bill The Spacer". Scarcely a day passed when I did not hear a new verse or two. Everyone was writing them. Whenever Bill passed in a corridor or entered a room people would start to sing. It harrowed him from place to place, that song. He woke to it and fell asleep to it, and whatever self-esteem he had possessed was soon reduced to ashes.

When he first began hanging about me, dogging me on my rounds, I tried to put him off, but I could not manage it. I held myself partly to blame for the escalation of feeling against him; if I had not been so vicious in my handling of Braulio, I thought, Bill might not have come to this pass. But there was another, more significant reason behind my tolerance. I had, it appeared, developed a conscience. Or at least so I chose to interpret my growing concern for him. I have had cause to wonder if those protective feelings that emerged from some corner of my spirit were not merely a form of perversity, if I were using my relationship with Bill to

demonstrate to the rest of the station that I had more power than most, that I could walk a contrary path without fear of retribution; but I remain convinced that the compassion I came to feel toward Bill was the product of a renewal of the ideals I had learned in the safe harbor of my family's home back in Chelsea, conceptions of personal honor and trust and responsibility that I had long believed to be as extinct as the tiger and the dove. It may be there was a premonitory force at work in me, for it occurs to me now that the rebirth of my personal hopes were the harbinger of a more general rebirth; and yet because of all that has happened, because of how my hopes were served, I have also had reason to doubt the validity of every hope, every renewal, and to consider whether the rebirth of hope is truly possible for such diffuse, heartless, and unruly creatures as ourselves.

One day, returning from my rounds with Bill shuffling along at my shoulder, I found a black crescent moon with a red star tipping its lower horn painted on the door of Bill's quarters: the symbol used by the Strange Magnificence, the most prominent of the gang religions flourishing back on Earth, to mark their intended victims. I doubt that Bill was aware of its significance. Yet he seemed to know instinctively the symbol was a threat, and no ordinary one at that. He clung to my arm, begging me to stay with him, and when I told him I had to leave, he threw a tantrum, rolling about on the floor, whimpering, leaking tears, wailing that bad things were going to happen. I assured him that I would have no trouble in determining who had painted the symbol; I could not believe that there were more than a handful of people on Solitaire with ties to the Magnificence. But this did nothing to soothe him. Finally, though I realized it might be a mistake, I told him he could spend the night in my quarters.

"Just this once," I said. "And you'd better keep damn quiet, or you'll be out on your bum."

He nodded, beaming at me, shifting his feet, atremble with eagerness. Had he a tail he would have wagged it. But by the time we reached my quarters, his mood had been disrupted by the dozens of stares and curses directed his way. He sat on a cushion, rocking back and forth, making a keening noise, completely unmindful of the decor, which had knocked me back a pace on opening the door. Arlie was apparently in a less than sunny mood herself, for she had slotted in a VR interior of dark greens and browns, with heavy chairs and a sofa and tables whose wood had been worked into dragons heads and clawed feet and such; the walls were adorned with brass light fixtures shaped like bestial masks with glowing eyes, and the rear of the room had been transformed into a receding perspective of sequentially smaller, square segments of black delineated by white lines, like a geometric tunnel into nowhere, still leading, I trusted, to something resembling a bedroom. The overall atmosphere was of one of derangement, of a cramped magical lair through whose rear wall a hole had been punched into some negative dimension. Given this, I doubted that she would look kindly upon Bill's presence, but when she appeared in the far reaches of the tunnel—her chestnut hair done up, wearing a white Grecian-style robe, walking through an infinite black depth, looking minute at first, then growing larger by half with each successive segment she entered—she favored him with a cursory nod and turned her attention to me.

" 'Ave you eaten?" she asked, and before I could answer she told me she wasn't hungry, there were some sandwiches, or I could do for myself, whatever I wanted, all in the most dispirited of tones. She was, as I have said, a pretty woman, with a feline cast of feature and sleek, muscular limbs; having too many interesting lines in her face, perhaps, to suit the prevailing standards of beauty, but sensual to a fault. Ordinarily, sexual potential surrounded her like an aura. That day, however, her face had settled into a dolorous mask, her shoulders had slumped and she seemed altogether drab.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

She shook her head. "Nuffin'."

"Nothing?" I said. "Right! You look like the Queen just died, and the place is fixed up like the death of philosophy. But everything's just bloody marvelous, right?"

"Do you mind?" she snapped. "It's personal!"

"Personal, is it? Well, excuse me. I certainly wouldn't want to be getting *personal* with you. What the hell's the matter? You been struck by the monthlies?"

She pinned me with a venemous stare. "God, you're disgustin'! What is it? You 'aven't broken any 'eads today, so you've decided to bash me around a bit?"

"All right, all right," I said. "I'm sorry."

"Nao," she said. "G'wan with it. Oi fuckin' love it when you're masterful. Really, Oi do!" She turned and started back along the tunnel. "Oi'll just await your pleasure, shall Oi?" she called over her shoulder. "Oi mean, you will let me know what more Oi can do to serve?"

"Christ!" I said, watching her ass twitching beneath the white cloth, thinking that I would have to make a heartfelt act of contrition before I laid hands on it again. I knew, of course, why I had baited her. It was for the same reason that had brought on her depression, that provoked the vast majority of our aberrant behaviors.

Frustration, anger, despair, all feelings that—no matter their immediate causes—in some way arose from the fact that Solitaire had proved to be an abject failure. Of the twenty-seven ships assembled and launched, three had thusfar returned. Two of the ships had reported no hospitable environments found. The crew of the third ship had been unable to report anything, being every one of them dead, apparently by each others' hands.

We had gotten a late start on the colonization of space, far too late to save the home planet, and it was unclear whether the piddling colonies on Mars and Europa and in the asteroids would allow us to survive. Perhaps it should have been clear, perhaps we should have realized that despite the horror and chaos of Earth, the brush wars, the almost weekly collapse of governments, our flimsy grasp of the new technologies, despite the failure of Solitaire and everything else... perhaps it should have been more than clear that our species possessed a root stubbornness capable of withstanding all but the most dire of cataclysms, and that eventually our colonies would thrive. But they would never be able to absorb the desperate population of Earth, and the knowledge that our brothers and sisters and parents were doomed to a life of diminishing expectations, to famines and wars and accidents of industry that would ultimately kill off billions, it caused those of us fortunate enough to have escaped to become dazed and badly weighted in our heads, too heavy with a sense of responsibility to comprehend the true moral requisites of our good fortune. Even if successful the lightship program would only bleed off a tiny percentage of Earth's population, and most, I assumed, would be personnel attached to the Seguin Corporation and those whom the corporation or else some corrupt government agency deemed worthy; yet we came to perceive ourselves as the common people's last, best hope, and each successive failure struck at our hearts and left us so crucially dismayed, we developed astonishing talents for self-destruction. Like neurotic Prometheans, we gnawed at our own livers and sought to despoil every happy thing that fell to us. And when we grew too enervated to practice active self-destruction, we sank into clinical depression, as Arlie was doing now.

I sat thinking of these things for a long while, watching Bill rock back and forth, now and then popping a piece of hard candy into his mouth, muttering, and I reached no new conclusions, unless an evolution of distaste for the corporation and the world and the universe could be considered new and conclusive. At length, weary of the repetitive circuit of my thoughts, I decided it was time I tried to make my peace with Arlie. I doubted I had the energy for prolonged apology, but I hoped that intensity would do the trick.

"You can sleep on the couch," I said to Bill, getting to my feet. "The bathroom"—I pointed off along the corridor—"is down there somewhere."

He bobbed his head, but as he kept his eyes on the floor, I could not tell if it had been a response or simply a random movement.

"Did you hear me?" I asked.

"I gotta do somethin'," he said.

"Down there." I pointed again. "The bathroom."

"They gonna kill me 'less I do somethin'."

He was not, I realized, referring to his bodily functions.

"What do you mean?"

His eyes flicked up to me, then away. "'Less I do somethin' good, really good, they gonna kill me."

"Who's going to kill you?"

"The men," he said.

The men, I thought, sweet Jesus! I felt unutterably sad for him.

"I gotta find somethin'," he said with increased emphasis. "Somethin' good, somethin' makes 'em like me."

I had it now—he had seized on the notion that by some good deed or valuable service he could change people's opinion of him.

"You can't do anything, Bill. You just have to keep doing your job, and this will all wash away, I promise you."

"Mmn-mn." He shook his head vehemently like a child in denial. "I gotta find somethin' good to do."

"Look," I said. "Anything you try is very likely to backfire. Do you understand me? If you do something and you bugger it, people are going to be more angry at you than ever."

He tucked his lower lip beneath the upper and narrowed his eyes and maintained a stubborn silence.

"What does Mister C say about this?" I asked.

That was, apparently, a new thought. He blinked; the tightness left his face. "I don't know."

"Well, ask him. That's what he's there for... to help you with your problems."

"He doesn't always help. Sometimes he doesn't know stuff."

"Try, will you? Just give it a try."

He did not seem sure of this tactic, but after a moment he pawed at his head, running his palm along the

crewcut stubble, then squeezed his eyes shut and began to mumble, long pattering phrases interrupted by pauses for breath, like a child saying his prayers as fast as he can. I guessed that he was outlining the entire situation for Mister C. After a minute his face went blank, the tip of his tongue pushed out between his lips, and I imagined the cartoonish voice—thus I had been told the implant's voice would manifest—speaking to him in rhymes, in silly patter. Then, after another few seconds, his eyes snapped open and he beamed at me.

"Mister C says good deeds are always good," he announced proudly, obviously satisfied that he had been proven right, and popped another piece of candy into his mouth.

I cursed the simplicity of the implant's programming, sat back down, and for the next half-hour or so I attempted to persuade Bill that his best course lay in doing absolutely nothing, in keeping a low profile. If he did, I told him, eventually the dust would settle and things would return to normal. He nodded and said, yes, yes, uh-huh, yet I could not be certain that my words were having an effect. I knew how resistant he could be to logic, and it was quite possible that he was only humoring me. But as I stood to take my leave of him, he did something that went some ways toward convincing me that I had made an impression: he reached out and caught my hand, held it for a second, only a second, but one during which I thought I felt the sorry hits of his life, the dim vibrations of all those sour loveless nights and lonely ejaculations. When he released my hand he turned away, appearing to be embarrassed. I was embarrassed myself. Embarrassed and, I must admit, a bit repelled at having this ungainly lump display affection toward me. Yet I was also moved, and trapped between those two poles of feeling, I hovered above him, not sure what to do or say. There was, however, no need for me to deliberate the matter. Before I could summon speech he began mumbling once again, lost in a chat with Mister C.

"Good night, Bill," I said.

He gave no response, as still as a Buddha on his cushion.

I stood beside him for a while, less observing him than cataloguing my emotions; then, puzzling more than a little over their complexity, I left him to his candy and his terror and his inner voices.

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Apology was not so prickly a chore as I had feared. Arlie knew as well as I the demons that possessed us, and once I had submitted to a token humiliation, she relented and we made love. She was demanding in the act, wild and noisy, her teeth marked my shoulder, my neck; but as we lay together afterward in the dark, some trivial, gentle music trickling in from the speakers above us, she was tender and calm and seemed genuinely interested in the concerns of my day.

"God 'elp us!" she said. "You don't actually fink the Magnificence is at work 'ere, do you?"

"Christ, no!" I said. "Some miserable dwight's actin' on mad impulse, that's all. Probably done it 'cause his nanny wiped his bum too hard when he's a babe."

"Oi 'ope not," she said. "Oi've seen their work back 'ome too many toimes to ever want to see it again."

"You never told me you'd had dealings with the Magnificence."

"Oi never 'ad what you'd call dealin's with 'em, but they was all over our piece of 'eaven, they were. 'Alf the bloody houses sported some kind of daft mark. It was a bleedin' fertile field for 'em, with nobody 'avin' a job and the lads just 'angin about on the corners and smokin' gannie. 'Twas a rare day the Bills didn't come 'round to scrape up some yobbo wearing his guts for a necktie and the mark of his crime carved into his fore'ead. Nights you'd hear 'em chantin' down by the stadium. 'Orrid stuff they was singin'. Wearin' that cheap black satin gear and those awrful masks. But it 'ad its appeal. All the senile old 'ooligans were diggin' out their jackboots and razors, and wantin' to go marchin' again. And in the pubs the soaks would be sayin', Yes, yes, they do the odd bad thing, the Magnificence, but they've got the public good to 'eart. The odd bad thing! Jesus! Oi've seen messages written on the pavement in 'uman bones. Colored girls with their 'ips broken and their legs lashed back behind their necks. Still breathin' and starin at you with them 'ollow eyes, loike they were mad to die. You were lucky, John, to be living up in Chelsea."

"Lucky enough, I suppose," I said stiffly, leery of drawing such distinctions; the old British class wars, though somewhat muted on Solitaire, were far from dormant, and even between lovers, class could be a dicey subject. "Chelsea's not exactly the Elysian Fields."

"Oi don't mean nuffin' by it, luv. You don't have to tell me the 'ole damn world's gone rotten long ago. Oi remember how just a black scrap of a life looked loike a brilliant career when Oi was livin' there. Now Oi don't know how Oi stood it."

I pulled her close against me and we lay without speaking for a long while. Finally Arlie said, "You know, it's 'alf nice 'avin' 'im 'ere."

"Bill, you mean?"

"Yeah, Bill."

"I hope you'll still feel that way if he can't find the loo," I said.

Arlie giggled. "Nao, I'm serious. It's loike 'avin family again. The feel of somebody snorin' away in the next room. That's the thing we miss 'avin here. We're all so bloody isolated. Two's a crowd and all that. We're missin' the warmth."

"I suppose you're right."

I touched her breasts, smoothed my hand along the swell of her hip, and soon we were involved again, more gently than before, more giving to the other, as if what Arlie had said about family had created a resonance in our bodies. Afterward I was so fatigued, the darkness seemed to be slowly circulating around us, pricked by tiny bursts of actinic light, the way a djinn must circulate within its prison bottle, a murky cloud of genius and magic. I was at peace lying there, yet I felt strangely excited to be so peaceful, and my thoughts, too, were strange, soft, almost formless, the kind of thoughts I recalled having had as a child when it had not yet dawned on me that all my dreams would eventually be hammered flat and cut into steely dies so they could withstand the dreadful pressures of a dreamless world.

Arlie snuggled closer to me, her hand sought mine, clasped it tightly. "Ah, Johnny," she said. "Toimes loike this, Oi fink Oi was born to forget it all."

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The next day I was able to track down the villain who had painted the menacing symbol on Bill's door. The cameras in the corridor outside his door had malfunctioned, permitting the act of vandalism to go unobserved; but this was hardly surprising—the damned things were always failing, and should they not fail on their own, it was no great feat to knock them out by using an electromagnet. Lacking a video record, I focused my attention on the personnel files. Only nine people on Solitaire proved to have had even minimal ties with the Strange Magnificence; by process of elimination I was able to reduce the number of possible culprits to three. The first of them I interviewed, Roger Thirwell, a pale, rabbity polymath in his mid-twenties who had emigrated from Manchester just the year before, admitted his guilt before I had scarcely begun his interrogation.

"I was only tryin' to do the wise and righteous," he said, squaring his shoulders and puffing out his meager chest. "Samuelson's been tellin' us we shouldn't sit back and allow things to just happen. We should let our voices be heard. Solitaire's our home. We should be the ones decide how it's run."

"And so, naturally," I said, "when it came time to let your majestic voice resound, the most compelling topic you could find upon which to make a statement was the fate of a halfwit."

"It's not that simple and you know it. His case speaks to a larger issue. Samuelson says..."

"Fuck you," I said. "And fuck Samuelson." I was sick of him, sick of his Midlands accent, sick especially of his references to Samuelson. What possible service, I wondered, could a dwight such as he have provided for the Magnificence? Something to do with logistics, probably. Anticipating police strategies or solving computer defenses. Yet from what I knew of the Magnificence, it was hard to imagine them putting up with this nit for very long. They would find a hard use for him and then let him fall off the edge of the world.

"Why in hell's name did you paint that thing on his door?" I asked. "And don't tell me Samuelson ordered you to do it."

The light of hope came into his face, and I would have sworn he was about to create some fantasy concerning Samuelson and himself in order to shift the guilt to broader shoulders. But all he said was, "I wanted to scare him."

"You could have achieved that with a bloody stick figure," I said.

"Yeah, but no one else would have understood it. Samuelson says we ought to try to influence as many people as possible whenever we state our cause, no matter how limited our aims. That way we enlist others in our dialogue."

I was starting to have some idea of what Samuelson's agenda might be, but I did not believe Thirwell could further enlighten me on the subject. "All you've succeeded in doing," I told him, "is to frighten other people. Or is it your opinion that there are those here who would welcome a chapter of the Magnificence?"

He ducked his eyes and made no reply.

"If you're homesick for them, I can easily arrange for you to take a trip back to Manchester," I said.

This elicited from Thirwell a babble of pleas and promises. I saw that I would get no more out of him, and I cautioned him that if he were ever to trouble Bill again I would not hesitate to make good on my threat. I then sent him on his way and headed off to pay a call on Menckyn Samuelson.

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Samuelson's apartment, like those belonging to most corporate regals, was situated in a large module adjoining the even larger module that housed the stations propulsion controls, and was furnished with antiques and pictures that would have fetched a dear price back on Earth, but here were absolutely priceless, less evidence of wealth than emblems of faith... the faith we were all taught to embrace, that one day life would be as once it had been, a vista of endless potential and possibility. The problem with Samuelson's digs, however, was that his taste was abysmally bad; he had assembled a motley collection of items, Guilford chests and blond Finnish chairs, a Jefferson corner cabinet and freeform video sculptures, Victorian sideboard and fiberoptic chandelier, that altogether created the impression one had stumbled into a pawn shop catering to millionaires. It may be that my amusement at this appalling display showed in my face, for though he presented a smile and an outstretched hand, I sensed a certain stiffness in his manner. Nevertheless, the politician in him brought him through that awkward moment. Soon he was nattering away, pouring me a glass of whiskey, ushering me to an easy chair, plopping himself down into another, giving out with an expansive sigh, and saying, "I'm so awfully glad you've come, John. I've been meaning to have you in for a cup of reminiscence, you know. Two old Londoners like ourselves, we can probably find a few choice topics to bang around."

He lifted his chin, beaming blandly, eyes half-lidded, as if expecting something pleasant to be dashed into his face. It was such a thespian pose, such a cliched take on upper class manners, so redolent of someone trying to put on airs, I had to restrain a laugh. Everything about him struck me as being just the slightest bit off. He was a lean, middle-aged man, dressed in a loose cotton shirt and moleskin trousers, alert in manner, almost handsome, but the nose was a tad sharp, the eyes set a fraction too close together, the cheekbones not sufficiently prominent, the chin a touch insubstantial, too much forehead and not enough hair. He had the essential features of good breeding, yet none of the charming detail, like the runt of a pedigreed litter.

"Yes," I said, "we must do sometime. However, today I've come on station business."

"I see." He leaned back, crossed his legs, cradled his whiskey in his lap. "Then p'rhaps after we've concluded your business, there'll be time for a chat, eh?"

"Perhaps." I had a swallow of whiskey, savored the smoky flavor. "I'd like to talk with you about William Stamey."

"Ah, yes. Old Barnacle Bill." Samuelson's brow was creased by a single furrow, the sort of line a cartoonist would use to indicate a gently rolling sea. "A bothersome matter."

"It might be considerably less bothersome if you left it alone."

Not a crack in the veneer. He smiled, shook his head. "I should dearly love to, old fellow. But I'm afraid you've rather a short-sighted view of the situation. The question we must settle is not the question of Bill *per se*, but of general policy. We must develop clear guide..."

"Come on! Give it up!" I said. "I'm not one of your damned pint and kidney pie boys who get all narky and start to drool at the thought of their rights being abused. Their rights! Jesus Christ! The poor scuts have been buggered more times than a Sydney whore, and they still think it feels good. You wouldn't waste a second on this if it were merely a question of policy. I want to know what you're really after."

"Oh my God," Samuelson said, bemused. "You're not going to be an easy lay, are you?"

"Not for you, darling. I'm saving myself for the one I love."

"And just who is that, I wonder." He swirled the whiskey in his glass, watched it settle. "What do you think I'm after?"

"Power. What else is it makes your toby stiffen?"

He made a dry noise. "A simplistic answer. Not inaccurate, I'll admit. But simplistic all the same."

"I'm here for an education," I told him, "not to give a lecture."

"And I may enlighten you," Samuelson said. "I very well may. But let me ask you something first. What's your interest in all this?"

"I'm looking after Bill's interests."

He arched an eyebrow. "Surely there's more to it than that."

"That's the sum of it. Aside from the odd deep-seated pyschological motive, of course."

"Of course." His smile could have sliced an onion; when it vanished, his cheeks hollowed. "I should imagine there's an element of noblesse oblige involved."

"Call it what you like. The fact remains, I'm on the case."

"For now," he said. "These things have a way of changing."

"Is that a threat? Don't waste your time. I'm the oldest slut on the station, Samuelson. I know where all the big balls have been dragging, and I've made certain I'm protected. Should anything happen to me or mine, it's your superiors who're going to start squealing. They'll be most perturbed with you."

"You've nothing on me." This said with, I thought, forced confidence.

"True enough," I said. "But I'm working on it, don't you worry."

Samuelson drained his glass, got to his feet, went to the sideboard and poured himself a fresh whiskey. He held up the bottle, gave me an inquiring look.

"Why not?" I let him fill my glass, which I then lifted in a toast. "To England. May the seas wash over her and make her clean."

He gave an amused snort. "England," he said, and drank. He sat back down, adjusted his bottom. "You're an amazing fellow, John. I've been told as much, but now, having had some firsthand experience, I believe my informants may have underestimated you." He pinched the crease of one trouserleg. "Let me put something to you. Not as a threat, but as an item for discussion. You do understand, don't you, that the sort of protection you've developed is not proof against every circumstance?"

"Absolutely. In the end it all comes down to a question of who's got the biggest guns and the will to use them. Naturally I'm prepared along those lines."

"I don't doubt it. But you're not seeking a war, are you?"

I knocked back half my whiskey, rested the glass on my lap. "Look here, I'm quite willing to live as one with you, no matter. Until lately, you've done nothing to interfere with my agenda. But this dust-up over Bill, and now this bit with your man Thirwell and his paint gun, I won't have it. Too many people here, Brits and Yanks alike, have a tendency to soil their nappy when they catch a scent of the Magnificence. I've no quarrel with you making a power play. And that's what you're doing, old boy. You're stirring up the groundlings, throwing a few scraps to the hounds so they'll be eager for the sound of your voice. You're after taking over the administrative end of things, and you've decided to give climbing the ladder of success a pass in favor of scaling the castle walls. A bloodless coup, perhaps. Or maybe a spot of blood thrown in to slake the fiercest appetites. Well, that's fine. I don't give a fuck who's sitting in the big chair, and I don't much care how they get there, so long as we maintain the status quo. But one thing I won't have is you frightening people."

"People are forever being frightened," he said. "Whether there's a cause for fear or not. But that's not my intent."

"Perhaps not. But you've frightened the bejesus out of Bill, and now you've frightened a good many others by bringing the Magnificence into the picture."

"Thirwell's not my responsibility."

The hell he's not! He's the walking Book of Samuelson. Every other sentence begins, 'Samuelson says... ' Give him a pretty smile, and he'll be your leg-humper for life."

"Leg-humper?" Samuelson looked bewildered.

"A little dog," I said impatiently. "You know the kind. Randy all the time. Jumps up on you and goes to having his honeymoon with your calf."

"I've never heard the term. Not British, is it?"

"American, I think. I heard it somewhere. I don't know."

"Marvelous expression. I'll have to remember it."

"Remember this, too," I said, trying to pick up the beat of my tirade. "I'm holding you responsible for any whisper I hear of the Magnificence. Before we had this heart-to-heart I was inclined to believe you had no part in what Thirwell did. Now I'm not altogether sure. I think you're quite capable of using fear to manipulate the public. I think you may have known something of Thirwell's history and given him a nudge."

"Even if that were true," he said, "I don't understand the depth of your reaction. We're a long way from the Magnificence here. A daub of paint or two can't have much effect."

My jaw dropped a fraction on hearing that. "You're not from London. You couldn't be and still say that."

"Oh, I'm from London all right," he said coldly. "And I'm no virgin where the Magnificence is concerned. They left my brother stretched on Kings Road one morning with the Equation of Undying Love scrawled in his own blood on the sidewalk beneath him. They mailed his private parts to his wife in a plastic container. But I've come a very long way from those days and those places. I'd be terrified of the Magnificence if they were here. But they're not here, and I'll be damned if I'll treat them like the bogeyman just because some sad little twit with too much brain and the social skills of a ferret paints the Magelantic Exorcism on somebody's door."

His statement rang true, but nevertheless I made a mental note to check on his brother. "Wonderful," I said. "It's good you've come to terms with all that. But not everyone here has managed to put as much distance between themselves and their old fears as you seem to have done."

"That may be, but I'm..." He broke off, clicked his tongue against his teeth. "All right. I see your point." He tapped his fingers on the arm of his chair. "Let's see if we can't reach an accord. It's not in my interests at the moment to break off my campaign against Bill, but"—he held up a hand to stop me from interrupting—"but I will acknowledge that I've no real ax to grind where he's concerned. He's serving a strictly utilitarian

purpose. So here's what I'll do. I will not allow him to be shipped back to Earth. At a certain juncture, I'll defuse the campaign. Perhaps I'll even make a public apology. That should help return him to grace. In addition, I'll do what I can to prevent further incidents involving the Magnificence. Frankly I very much doubt there'll be further problems. If there are, it won't be because I'm encouraging them."

"All well and good," I said. "Very magnanimous, I'm sure. But nothing you've promised guarantees Bill's safety during the interim."

"You'll have to be his guarantee. I'll try to maintain the temper of the station at a simmer. The rest is up to you."

"Up to me? No, you're not going to avoid responsibility that way. I'll do my best to keep him from harm, but if he gets hurt, I'll hurt you. That much I can guarantee."

"Then let's hope that nothing happens to him, shall we? For both our sakes." His smile was so thin, such a sideways stretching of the lip muscles, I thought it must be making his gums ache. "Funny. I can't decide whether we've established a working relationship or declared war."

"I don't think it matters," I said.

"No, probably not." He stood, straightened the fall of his trousers, and again gave me that bland, beaming, expectant look. "Well, I won't keep you any longer. Do drop around once the dust has settled. We'll have that chat."

"About London."

"Right." He moved to the door.

"I don't know as I'd have very much to say about London," I told him. "Nothing fit for reminiscence, at any rate."

"Really?" he said, ushering me out into the corridor. "The old girl's petticoats have gotten a trifle bloody, I'll admit. Terrible, the things that go on nowadays. The hunting parties, hive systems, knife dances. And of course, the Magnificence. But here, you know"—he patted his chest—"in her heart, I firmly believe there's still a bit of all right. Or maybe it's just I'm the sentimental sort. Like the song says, 'call 'er a satan, call 'er a whore, she'll always be Mother to me'."

j

Unlike Samuelson, I no longer thought of London as mother or home, or in any framework that smacked of the wholesome. Even 'satan' would have been a euphemism. London for me was flurry of night visions: a silhouetted figure standing in the window of a burning building, not waving its arms, not leaning out, but calm, waiting to be taken by the flames; men and women in tight black satin, white silk masks all stamped with the same feral, exultant expression, running through the streets, singing; moonlight painting the eddies of the Thames into silk, water lapping at a stone pier, and floating just beyond the shadow of the pier, the enormous bulk of man I had shot only a minute before, nearly four hundred pounds of strangler, rapist, cannibal, brought down by a bullet weighing no more than one of his teeth; the flash of a shotgun from around a dark corner, like the flash of heat lightning; the charge of poisonous light flowing along the blade of a bloody macro-knife just removed from the body of a fellow detective; a garbage bag resting on a steel table that contained the neatly butchered remains of seven infants; the facade of St. Paul's dyed into a grooved chaos of vermillion, green, and purple by stone-destroying bacteria released by the artist, Miralda Hate; the wardrobe of clothing sewn of human skin and embroidered in gilt and glitter with verses from William Blake that we found in a vacant Brixton flat; the blind man who begged each evening on St. Martin's Lane, spiders crawling in the hollow globes of his glass eyes; the plague of saints, young men and women afflicted by a drug that bred in them the artificial personalities of Biblical characters and inspired them to martyr themselves during certain phases of the moon; the eyes of wild dogs in Hyde Park gleaming in the beam of my torch like the flat discs of highway reflectors; those and a thousand equally blighted memories, that was my London. Nightmare, grief, and endless fever.

It was Solitaire that was home and mother to me, and I treated it with the appropriate respect. Though I was an investigative officer, not a section guard, I spent a portion of nearly every day patrolling various areas, searching less for crime than for symptoms of London, incidences of infection that might produce London-like effects. The station was not one place, but many: one hundred and forty-three modules, several of which were larger than any of the Earth orbit stations, connected by corridors encased in pressure shells that could be disengaged by means of the Central Propulsion Control and—as each module was outfitted with engines—moved to a new position in the complex, or even to a new orbit; should the CPC be destroyed or severely damaged, disengagement was automatic, and the modules would boost into pre-progammed orbits. I hardly ever bothered to include places such as the labs, tank farms, infirmaries, data management centers, fusion modules, and such on my unofficial rounds; nor did I include the surface of the station, the

electronic and solar arrays, radiator panels, communications and tracking equipment; those areas were well maintained and had no need of a watchman. I generally limited myself to entertainment and dwelling modules like East Louie, where Bill's quarters and mine were located, idiosyncratic environments decorated with VR scenarios so ancient that they had blanked out in patches and you would often see a coded designation or a stretch of metal wall interrupting the pattern of, say, a hieroglyphic mural; and from time to time I also inspected those sections of the station that were rarely visited and were only monitored via recordings several times a day—storage bays and transport hangars and the CPC (the cameras in those areas were supposed to transmit automatic alarms whenever anyone entered, but the alarm system was on the fritz at least half the time, and due to depleted staff and lack of materials, repairs such as that were not a high priority).

The CPC was an immense, white, portless room siuated, as I've said, in the module adjoining that which housed Samuelson's digs and the rest of the corporate dwelling units. The room was segmented by plastic panels into work stations, contained banks of terminals and control panels, and was of little interest to me; but Bill, once he learned its function, was fascinated by the notion that his world could separate into dozens of smaller worlds and arrow off into the nothing, and each time we visited it, he would sit at the main panel and ask questions about its operation. There was never anyone else about, and I saw no harm in answering the questions. Bill did not have suffcient mental capacity to understand the concept of launch codes, let alone to program a computer so it would accept them. Solitaire was the only world he would ever know, and he was eager to accumulate as much knowledge about it as possible. Thus I encouraged his curiosity and showed him how to call up pertinent information on his own computer.

Due to Arlie's sympathetic response, Bill took to sleeping in our front room nearly every night, this in addition to tagging along on my rounds, and therefore it was inevitable that we became closer; however, closeness is not a term I happily apply to the relationship. Suffice it to say that he grew less defiant and petulant, somewhat more open and, as a consequence, more demanding of attention. Because his behavior had been modified to some degree, I found his demands more tolerable. He continued to cling to the notion that in order to save himself he would have to perform some valuable service to the community, but he never insisted that I help him in this; he appeared satisfied merely to hang about and do things with me. And to my surprise I found there were some things I actually enjoyed doing with him. I took especial pleasure in going outside with him, in accompanying him on his rounds and watching as he cleared barnacles away from communications equipment and other delicate mechanisms.

Sauter's Barnacle was, of course, not a true barnacle, yet it possessed certain similarities to its namesake, the most observable of which was a supporting structure that consisted of a hard exoskeleton divided into plates so as to allow movement. They bore a passing resemblance to unopened buds, the largest about the size of a man's fist, and they were variously colored, some streaked with metallic shades of red, green, gold, and silver (their coloration depended to a great extent on the nature of the substrate and their nutrient sources), so that when you when you saw a colony of them from a distance, spreading over the surface of a module—and all the modules were covered by hundreds of thousands of them—they had the look of glittering beds of moss or lichen. I knew almost nothing about them, only that they fed on dust, that they were sensitive to changes in light, that they were not found within the orbit of Mars, and that wherever there was a space station, they were, as my immediate superior, the Chief of Security, Gerald Sessions, put it, "thick as flies on shit". Once it had been learned that they did no harm, that, indeed, their excretions served to strengthen the outer shells of the modules, interest in them had fallen off sharply. There was, I believe, some ongoing research into their physical characteristics, but it was not of high priority.

Except with Bill.

To Bill the barnacles were purpose, a reason for being. They were, apart from Mister C, the most important creatures in the universe, and he was obsessive in his attentiveness toward them. Watching him stump about over the skin of the station, huge and clumsy in his pressure suit, a monstrous figure made to appear even more monstrous by the light spraying up around him from this or that port, hosing offending clumps of barnacles with bursts of oxygen from the tank that floated alongside him, sending them drifting up from their perches, I had the impression not of someone performing a menial task, but of a gardener tending his prize roses or—more aptly—a shepherd his flock. And though according to the best information, the barnacles were mindless things, incapable of any activity more sophisticated than obeying the basic urges of feeding and reproduction, it seemed they responded to him; even after he had chased them away they would bobble about him like strange pets, bumping against his faceplate and sometimes settling on him briefly, vivid against the white material of the pressure suit, making it appear that he was wearing jeweled rosettes on his back and shoulders. (I did not understand at the time that these were females which, unable to effect true mobility, had been stimulated to detach from the station by the oxygen and now were unable to reattach to

the colony.)

With Bill's example before me, I was no longer able to take the barnacles for granted, and I began reading about them whenever I had a spare moment. I discovered that the exoskeleton was an organic-inorganic matrix composed of carbon compounds and silicate minerals, primarily olivine, pyroxene, and magnetite, substances commonly found in meteorites. Changes in light intensity were registered by iridescent photophores that dotted the plates; even the finest spray of dust passing between the barnacle and a light source would trigger neurological activity and stimulate the opening of aperture plates, permitting the egress of what Jacob Sauter, the barnacles' Linnaeus, an amateur at biology, had called the "tongue", an organ utilized both in feeding and in the transmission of seminal material from the male to the female. I learned that only the males could move about the colony, and that they did so by first attaching to the substrate with their tongues, which were coated with adhesive material, then detaching at one of their upper plate segments, and finally re-attaching to the colony with the stubby segmented stalks that depended from their bottom plates. "In effect," Sauter had written, "they are doing cartwheels."

The most profound thing I discovered, however, had nothing to do with the barnacles, or rather had only peripherally to do with them, and was essentially a rediscovery, a rewakening of my wonderment at the bleak majesty surrounding us. The cold diamond chaos of the stars, shining so brightly they might have just been finished that day; the sun, old god grown small and tolerable to the naked eye; the surreal brilliance and solidity that even the most mundane object acquired against the backdrop of that black, unvarying distance; that blackness itself, somehow managing to seem both ominous and serene, absence and presence, metal-hard and soft as illusion, like a fold in God's magesterial robe; the station with its spidery complexes of interconnecting corridors and modules, all coated with the rainbow swirls and streaks of the barnacles' glittering colors, and beams of light spearing out from it at every angle, like some mad, gay, rickety toy, the sight of which made me expect to hear calliope music; the Earth transport vessels, gray and bulky as whales, berthed in the geometric webs of their docks; the remote white islands of the assembly platforms, and still more remote, made visible by setting one's faceplate for maximum visual enhancement, the tiny silver needle we were soon to hurl into the haystack of the unknown. It was glorious, that vista. It made a comprehensible map of our endeavors and led me to understand that we had not botched it completely. Not yet. I had seen it all before, but Bill's devotion to the barnacles had rekindled the embers of my soul, restored my cognizance of the scope of our adventure, and looking out over the station, I would think I could feel the entire blast and spin of creation inside my head, the flood of particles from a trillion suns, the crackling conversations of electric clouds to whom the frozen seas of ammonia above which they drifted were repositories of nostalgia, the endless fall of matter through the less-than-nothing of a pure anomaly, the white face of Christ blurred and streaming within the frost-colored fire of a comet's head, the quasars not yet congealed into dragons and their centuries, the unerring persistence of meteors that travel for uncounted millennia through the zero dark to scoot and burn across the skies onto the exposure plates of mild astronomers and populate the legends of a summer night and tumble into cinders over the ghosted peaks of the Karakorum and then are blown onto the back porches of men who have never turned their faces to the sky and into the dreams of children. I would have a plunderous sense of my own destiny, and would imagine myself hurtling through the plenum at the speed of thought, of wish, accumulating a momentum that was in itself a charge to go, to witness, to take; and I was so enlivened I would believe for an instant that, like a hero returning from war, I could lift my hand and let shine a blessing down upon everyone around me, enabling them to see and feel all I had seen and felt, to know as I knew that despite everything we were closer to heaven than we had ever been before.

It was difficult for me to regain my ordinary take on life following these excursions, but after the departure of the lightship *Sojourner*, an event that Bill and I observed together from a catwalk atop the solar array in East Louie, it was thrust hard upon me that I had best set a limit on my woolgathering and concentrate on the matters at hand, for it was coming more and more to look as if the Strange Magnificence had gained a foothold on Solitaire. Scraps of black satin had been found tied to several crates in one of the storage bays, one of them containing drugs; copies of *The Book of Inexhaustible Delirium* began turning up; and while I was on rounds with Bill one day, I discovered a cache of packet charges in the magnetism lab, each about half the size of a flattened soccer ball, any one of which would have been sufficient to destroy a module; Gerald Sessions and I divided them up and stored them in our apartments, not trusting our staff with the knowledge of their existence. Perhaps the most troubling thing of all, the basic question of whether or not the Magnificence had the common good to heart was being debated in every quarter of the station, an argument inspired by fear and fear alone, and leading to bloody fights and an increase in racial tension and perversion of every sort. The power of the Strange Magnificence, you see, lay in the subversive nihilism of their doctrine, which put forward the idea that it was man's duty to express all his urges, no matter how dark or violent, and that from the universal exorcism of these black secrets would ultimately derive a pure consensus, a vast

averaging of all possible behaviors that would in turn reveal the true character of God and the manifest destiny of the race. Thus the leaders of the Magnificence saw nothing contrary in funding a group in York, say, devoted to the expulsion of Pakistanis from Britain by whatever means necessary while simultaneously supporting a Sufi cult. They had no moral or philosophical problem with anything because according to them the ultimate morality was a work-in-progress. Their tracts were utter tripe, quasi-intellectual homily dressed up in the kind of adjective-heavy, gothic prose once used to give weight to stories of ghosts and ancient evil; their anthems were even less artful, but the style suited the product, and the product was an easy sell to the disenfranchised, the desperate and the mad, categories into one of which almost everyone alive would fit to some extent, and definitely were one or another descriptive of everyone on Solitaire. As I had promised him, once these symptoms started to manifest, I approached Samuelson again, but he gave every evidence of being as concerned about the Magnificence as was I, and though I was not certain I believed his pose, I was too busy with my official duties and my unofficial one—protecting Bill, who had become the target of increased abuse—to devote much time to him. Then came the day of the launch.

It was beautiful, of course. First a tiny stream of fire, like a scratch made on a wall painted black, revealing a white undercoat. This grew smaller and smaller, and eventually disappeared; but mere seconds after its disappearance, what looked to be an iridescent crack began to spread across the blackness, reaching from the place where *Sojourner* had gone superluminal to its point of departure, widening to a finger's breadth, then a hand's, and more, like an all-colored piece of lightning hardened into a great jagged sword that was sundering the void, and as it swung toward us, widening still, I thought I saw in it intimations of faces and forms and things written, as one sees the images of circuitry and patterns such as might be found on the skin of animals when staring at the grain of a varnished board, and the sight of these half-glimpsed faces and the rest, not quite decipherable yet familiar in the way a vast and complex sky with beams of sunlight shafting down through dark clouds appears to express a familiar glory... those sights were accompanied by a feeling of instability, a shivery apprehension of my own insubstantiality which, although it shook me to my soul, disabling any attempt to reject it, was also curiously exalting, and I yearned for that sword to swing through me, to bear me away into a thundering genesis where I would achieve completion, and afterward, after it had faded, leaving me bereft and confused, my focus upon it had been so intent, I felt I had witnessed not an exercise of intricate technology but a simple magical act of the sort used to summon demons from the ready rooms of Hell or to wake a white spirit in the depths of an undergound lake. I turned to Bill. His faceplate was awash in reflected light, and what I could make out of his face was colored an eerie green by the read-outs inside his helmet. His mouth was opened, his eyes wide. I spoke to him, saying I can't recall what, but wanting him to second my amazement at the wonderful thing we had seen.

"Somethin's wrong," he said.

I realized then that he was gazing in another direction; he might have seen *Sojourner's* departure, but only out of the corner of his eye. His attention was fixed upon one of the modules—the avionics lab, I believe—from which a large number of barnacles had detached and were drifting off into space.

"Why're they doin' that?" he asked. "Why're they leavin'?"

"They're probably sick of it here," I said, disgruntled by his lack of sensitivity. "Like the rest of us."

"No," he said. "No, must be somethin' wrong. They wouldn't leave 'less somethin's wrong."

"Fine," I said. "Something's wrong. Let's go back in."

He followed me reluctantly into the airlock, and once we had shucked off our suits, he talked about the barnacles all the way back to my quarters, insisting that they would not have vacated the station if there had been nothing wrong.

"They like it here," he said. "There's lots of dust, and nobody bothers 'em much. And they..."

"Christ!" I said. "If something's wrong, figure it out and tell me! Don't just blither on!"

"I can't." He ducked his eyes, swung his arms in exaggerated fashion, as if he were getting ready to skip. "I don't know how to figure it out."

"Ask Mister C." We had reached my door, and I punched out the entry code.

"He doesn't care." Bill pushed his lower lip to cover the upper, and he shook his head back and forth, actually not shaking it so much as swinging it in great slow arcs. "He thinks it's stupid."

"What?" The door cycled open; the front room was pitch-dark..

"The barnacles," Bill said. "He thinks everything I like is stupid. The barnacles and the CPC and..."

Just then I heard Arlie scream, and somebody came hurtling out of the dark, knocking me into a chair and down onto the floor. In the spill of light from the corridor, I saw Arlie getting to her feet, covering her breasts with her arms. Her blouse was hanging in tatters about her waist; her jeans were pushed down past her hips; her mouth was bloody. She tried to speak, but only managed a sob.

Sickened and terrified at the sight of her, I scrambled out into the corridor. A man dressed all in black was

sprinting away, just turning off into one of the common rooms. I ran after him. Each step spiked the boil of my emotions with rage, and by the time I entered the common room, done up as the VR version of a pub, with dart boards and dusty, dark wood, and a few fraudulent old red-cheeked men slumped at corner tables, there was murder in my heart. I yelled at people taking their ease to call Security, then raced into the next corridor.

Not a sign of the man in black.

The corridor was ranged by about twenty doors, the panel of light above most showing blue, signalling that no one was within. I was about to try one of the occupied apartments when I noticed that the telltale beside the airlock hatch was winking red. I went over to the hatch, switched on the closed circuit camera; on the screen above the control panel appeared a grainy black-and-white picture of the airlock's interior; the man I had been chasing was pacing back and forth, making an errratc humming noise. A pale, twitchy young man with a malnourished look and bones that seemed as frail as a bird's, the product of some row-house madonna and her pimply king, of not enough veggies and too many cigarettes, of centuries of a type of ignorance as peculiarly British as the hand-rolled lawns of family estates. I recognized him at once. Roger Thirwell. I also recognized his clothes. The tight black satin trousers and shirt of the Strange Magnificence, dotted with badges proclaiming levels of spiritual attainment and attendance at this or that function.

"Hello, Roger," I said into the intercom. "Lovely day for a rape, isn't it, you filthy bastard?"

He glanced around, then up to the monitor. Fear came into his face, then was washed away by hostility, which in turn was replaced by a sort of sneering happiness. "Send me to Manchester, will you?" he said. "Send me down the tube to bloody Manchester! I think not! Perhaps you realize now I'm not the sort to take threats lying down."

"Yeah, you're a fucking hero! Why don't you come out and show me how much of a man you are."

He appeared distracted, as if he had not heard me. I began to suspect that he was drugged; but drugged or not, I hated him.

"Come on out of there!" I said. "I swear to God, I'll be gentle."

"I'll show you," he said. "You want to see the man I am, I'll show you."

But he made no move.

"I had her in the mouth," he said quietly. "She's got a lovely, lovely mouth."

I didn't believe him, but the words afflicted me nevertheless. I pounded on the hatch. "You beady-eyed piece of shit! Come out, damn you!"

Voices talking excitedly behind me, then somebody put an arm on my shoulder and said in a carefully enunciated baritone, "Let me handle this one, John."

It was Gerald Sessions, my superior, a spindly black man with a handsome, open face and freckly light complexion and spidery arms that possessed inordinate strength. He was a quiet, private sort, not given to displays of emotion, understated in all ways, possessed of the glum manner of someone who continually feels themselves put upon; yet because of our years together, he was a man for whom I had developed some affection, and though I trusted no one completely, he was one of the few people whom I was willing to let watch my back. Standing beside him were four guards, among them his bodyguard and lover, Ernesto Carbajal, a little fume of a fellow with thick, oily yet well-tended black hair and a prissy cast to his features; and behind them, at a remove, was a grave-looking Menckyn Samuelson, nattily attired in dinner jacket and white trousers. Apparently he had been called away from a social occasion.

"No, thank you," I told Gerald. "I plan to hurt the son of a bitch. Send someone round to check on Arlie, will you?"

"It's been taken care of." He studied me a moment. "All right. Just don't kill him."

I turned back to the screen just as Thirwell, who had moved to the outer hatch and was gazing at the control panel, burst into song.

"Night, my brother, gather round me,
Breed the reign of violence,
And with temptations of the spi-i-rit
Blight the curse of innocence.
Oh, supple daughters of the twilight,
Will we have all our pleasures spent,
when God emerges from the shadows,
blinding in his Strange Magni-i-fi-i-cence..."

He broke off and let out a weak chuckle. I was so astounded by this behavior that my anger was muted

and my investigative sensibilities engaged.

"Who're your contacts on Solitaire?" I asked. "Talk to me, and maybe things will go easier for you."

Thirwell continued staring at the panel, seemingly transfixed by it.

"Give it up, Roger," I said. "Tell us about the Magnificence. You help us, and we'll do right by you, I swear."

He lifted his face to the ceiling and, in a shattered tone, verging on tears, said, "Oh, God!"

"I may be wrong," I said, "but I don't believe he's going to answer you. You'd best brace it up in there, get your head clear."

"I don't know," he said.

"Sure you do. You know. It was your brains got you here. Now use them. Think. You have to make the best of this you can." It was hard to make promises of leniency to this little grout who'd had his hands on Arlie, but the rectitude of the job provided me a framework in which I was able to function. "Look here, I can't predict what's going to happen, but I can give you this much. You tell us what you know, chapter and verse, and I'll speak up for you. There could be mitigating circumstances. Drugs. Coercion. Blackmail. That strike a chord, Roger? Hasn't someone been pushing you into this? Yeah, yeah, I thought so. Mitigating circumstances. That being the case, it's likely the corporation will go lightly with you. And one thing I can promise for certain sure. We'll keep you safe from the Magnificence."

Thirwell turned to the monitor. From the working of his mouth and the darting of his eyes, I could see he was close to falling apart.

"That's it, there's the lad. Come along home."

"The Magnificence." He glanced about, as if concerned that someone might be eavesdropping. "They told me... uh... I..." He swallowed hard and peered at the camera as if trying to see through to the other side of the lens. "I'm frightened," he said in a whispery, conspiratorial tone.

"We're all frightened, Roger. It's shit like the Magnificence keeps us frightened. Time to stop being afraid, don't you think. Maybe that's the only way to stop. Just to do it, I mean. Just to say, the hell with this! I'm..."

"P'rhaps if I had a word with him," said Samuelson, leaning in over my shoulder. "You said I had some influence with the boy. P'rhaps..."

I shoved him against the wall; Gerald caught him on the rebound and slung him along the corridor, holding a finger up to his lips, indicating that Samuelson should keep very quiet. But the damage was done. Thirwell had turned back to the control panel and was punching in the code that would break the seal on the outer hatch.

"Don't be an ass!" I said. "That way's no good for anyone."

He finished punching in the code and stood staring at the stud that would cycle the lock open. The Danger lights above the inner hatch were winking, and a computer voice had begun repeating, Warning, Warning, The outer hatch has been unsealed, the airlock has not been depressurized, Warning, Warning...

"Don't do it, Roger!"

"I have to," he said. "I realize that now. I was confused, but now it's okay. I can do it."

"Nobody wants this to happen, Roger."

"I do, I want it."

"Listen to me!"

Thirwell's hand went falteringly toward the stud. "Lord of the alley mouths," he said, "Lord of the rifles, Lord of the inflamed, Thou who hath committed every vileness..."

"For Christ's sake, man!" I said. "Nobody's going to hurt you. Not the Magnificence, not anyone. I'll guarantee your safety."

"...every sin, every violence, stand with me now, help me shape this dying into an undying love..." His voice dropped in volume, becoming too low to hear.

"Goddamn it, Thirwell! You silly bastard. Will you stop jabbering that nonsense! Don't give in to it! Don't listen to what they've taught you. It's all utter rot!"

Thirwell looked up at the camera, at me. Terror warped his features for a moment, but then the lines of tension softened and he giggled. "He's right," he said. "The man's dead on right. You'll never understand."

"Who's right? What won't I understand?"

"Watch," said Thirwell gleefully. "Watch my face."

I kept silent, trying to think of the perfect thing to say, something to foil his demented impulse.

"Are you watching?"

"I want to understand," I said. "I want you to help me understand. Will you help me, Roger? Will you tell me about the Magnificence?"

"I can't. I can't explain it." He drew a deep breath, let it out slowly. "But I'll show you."

He smiled blissfully at the camera as he pushed the stud.

Explosive decompression, even when viewed on a black-and-white monitor, is not a good thing to see. I looked away. Inadvertantly, my eyes went to Samuelson. He was standing about fifteen feet away, hands behind his back, expressionless, like a minister composing himself before delivering his sermon; but there was something else evident in that lean, blank face, something happening beneath the surface, some slight engorgement, and I knew, knew , that he was not distressed in the least by the death, that he was pleased by it. No one of his position, I thought, would be so ingenuous as to interrupt a security man trying to talk in a potential suicide. And if what he had done to Thirwell had been intentional, a poorly disguised threat, if he had that much power and menace at his command, then he might well be responsible for what Thirwell had done to Arlie.

I strolled over to him. His eyes tracked my movements. I stopped about four feet away and studied him, searching for signs of guilt, for hints of a black satin past, of torchlight and blood and group sing-alongs. There was weakness in his face, but was it a weakness bred by perversion and brutality, or was it simply a product of fear? I decided that for Arlie's sake, for Thirwell's, I should assume the worst. "Guess what I'm going to do next?" I asked him. Before he could answer I kicked him in the pit of the stomach, and as he crumpled, I struck him a chopping left to the jaw that twisted his head a quarter-turn. Two of the guards started toward me, but I warned them back. Carbajal fixed me with a look of prim disapproval.

"That was a stupid damn thing to do," said Gerald, ambling over and gazing down at Samuelson, who was moaning, stirring.

"He deserves worse," I said. "Thirwell was coming out. I'm certain of it. And then this bastard opened his mouth."

"Yeah." Gerald leaned against the wall, crossed his legs. "So how come you figure he did it?"

"Why don't you ask him? Be interesting to see how he responds."

Gerald let out a sardonic laugh. "Man's an altruist. He was trying to help." He picked at a rough place on one of his knuckles. "The real question I got is how deep he's in it. Whether he's involved with the Magnificence, or if he's just trying to convince everyone he is. I need to know so I can make an informed decision."

I did not much care for the edge of coolness in his voice. "And what decision is that, pray?"

Carbajal, staring at me over his shoulder, flashed me a knowing smile.

"He already don't like you, John," said Gerald. "Man told me so. Now he's gonna want your ass on a plaque. And I have to decide whether or not I should let him have you."

"Oh, really?"

"This is some serious crap, man. I defy Samuelson, we're gonna have us one helluva situation. Security lined up against Administration."

Samuelson was trying to sit up; his jaw was swollen and discolored. I hoped it was broken.

"We could be talkin' about a war," Gerald said.

"I think you're exaggerating," I said. "Even so, a civil war wouldn't be the worst thing that could happen, not so long as the right side won. There are a number of assholes on station who would make splendid casualties."

Gerald said, "No comment."

Samuelson had managed to prop himself up on an elbow. "I want you to arrest him," he said to Gerald.

I looked at Gerald. "Might I have a few words with him before you decide?"

He met my eyes for a few beats, then shook his head in dismay. "Aw, fuck it," he said.

"Thanks, friend," I said.

"Fuck you, too," he said; he walked a couple of paces away and stood gazing off along the corridor; Carbajal went with him, whispered in his ear and rubbed his shoulders.

"Did you hear what I told you?" Samuelson heaved himself up into a sitting position, cupping his jaw. "Arrest him. Now!"

"Here, let me help you up." I grabbed a fistful of Samuelson's jacket, hauled him to his feet, and slammed him into the wall. "There. All better, are we?"

Samuelson's eyes darted left to right, hoping for allies. I bashed his head against the wall to get his attention, and he struggled against my hold.

"Such a tragedy," I said in my best upper crust accent. "The death of young Thirwell, what?"

The fight went out of him; his eyes held on mine.

"That was as calculated a bit of murder as I've seen in many a year," I told him.

"I haven't the foggiest notion what you're talking about!"

"Oh, yes you do! I had him walking the tightrope back. Then you popped in and reminded him of the

consequences he'd be facing should he betray the Magnificence. God only knows what he thought you had in store for him."

"I did no such thing! I was..."

I dug the fingers of my left hand in behind his windpipe; I would have liked to squeeze until thumb and fingers touched, but I only applied enough force to make him squeak. "Shut your gob! I'm not finished." I adjusted my grip to give him more air. "You're dirty, Samuelson. You're the germ that's causing all the pale looks around here. I don't know how you got past the screens, but that's not important. Sooner or later I'm going to have your balls for breakfast. And when I've cleaned my plate, I'll send what's left of you to the same place you chased Thirwell. Of course you could tell me the names of everyone on Solitaire who's involved with the Magnificence. That might weaken my resolve. But don't be too long about it, because I am fucking lusting for you. I can scarcely wait for you to thwart me. My saliva gets all thick and ropy when I think of the times we could have together." I gave him a shake, listened to him gurgle. "I know what you are, and I know what you want. You got a dream, don't you? A vast, splendid dream of men in black satin populating the stars. New planets to befoul. Well, it's just not going to happen. If it ever comes to pass that a ship returns with good news, you won't be on it, son. Nor will any of your tribe. You'll be floating out there in the black grip of Jesus, with your blood all frozen in sprays around you and your hearts stuffed in your fucking mouths." I released him, gave him a cheerful wink. "All right. Go ahead. Your innings."

Samuelson scooted away along the wall, holding his throat. "You're mad!" He glanced over at Gerald. "The both of you!"

Gerald shrugged, spread his hands. "It's part of the job description."

"May we take it," I said to Samuelson, "that you're not intending to confess at this time?"

Samuelson noticed, as had I, that a number of people had come out of the common room and were watching the proceedings. "I'll tell you what I intend," he said, pulling himself erect in an attempt to look impressive. "I intend to make a detailed report concerning your disregard for authority and your abuse of position."

"Now, now," Gerald said, walking toward him. "Let's have no threats. Otherwise somebody"—his voice built into a shout—"somebody might lose their temper!" He accompanied the shout by slapping his palm against the wall, and this sent Samuelson staggering back another dozen feet or so.

Several of the gathering laughed.

"Come clean, man," I said to Samuelson. "Do the right thing. I'm told it's better than sex once those horrid secrets start spilling out."

"If it'll make you feel any easier, you can dress up in your black satins first," Gerald said. "Having that smooth stuff next to your skin, that'll put a nice wiggle on things."

"You know, Gerald," I said. "Maybe these poofs are onto something. Maybe the Magnificence has a great deal to offer."

"I'm always interested in upgrading my pleasure potential," he said. "Why don't you give us the sales pitch, Samuelson?

"Yeah," I said. "Let's hear about all the snarky quivers you get from twisting the arms off a virgin."

The laughter swelled in volume, inspired by Samuelson's expression of foolish impotence.

"You don't understand who're you're dealing with," he said. "But you will, I promise."

There, I said to myself, there's his confession. Not enough to bring into court, but for a moment it was there in his face, all the sick hauteur and corrupted passion of his tribe.

"I bet you're a real important man with the Magnificence," said Gerald. "Bet you even got a title."

"Minister of Scum and Delirium," I suggested.

"I like it," said Gerald. "How 'bout Secretary of the Inferior?"

"Grand High Salamander," said Carbajal, and tittered.

"Master of the Excremental."

"Stop it," said Samuelson, clenching his fists; he looked ready to stamp his foot and cry.

Several other titular suggestions came from the crowd of onlookers, and Gerald offered, "Queen of the Shitlickers."

"I'm warning you," said Samuelson; then he shouted, "I am warning you!" He was flushed, trembling. All the twitchy material of his inner core exposed. It had been fun bashing him about, but now I wanted to put my heel on him, feel him crunch underfoot.

"Go on," Gerald said. "Get along home. You've done all you can here."

Samuelson shot him an unsteady look, as if not sure what Gerald was telling him.

Gerald waved him off. "We'll talk soon."

"Yes," said Samuelson, straightening his jacket, trying to muster a shred of dignity. "Yes, indeed, we most

certainly will." He delivered what I suppose he hoped was a withering stare and stalked off along the corridor.

"There goes an asshole on a mission," said Gerald, watching him round the bend.

"Not a doubt in my mind," I said.

"Trouble." Gerald scuffed his heel against the steel floor, glanced down as if expecting to see a mark. "No shit, the man's trouble."

"So are we," I said.

"Yeah, uh-huh." He sounded unconvinced.

We exchanged a quick glance. We had been through a lot together, Gerald and I, and I knew by the tilt of his head, the wry set of his mouth, that he was very worried. I was about to make a stab at boosting his spirits when I remembered something more pressing.

"Oh, Christ!" I said. "Arlie! I've got to get back."

"Forgot about her, huh?" He nodded gloomily, as if my forgetfulness were something he had long decried. "You know you're an asshole, don't you? You know you don't deserve the love of woman or the friendship of man."

"Yeah, yeah," I said. "Can you handle things here?"

He made a gesture of dismissal. Another morose nod. "Just so you know," he said.

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There were no seasons on Solitaire, no quick lapses into cold, dark weather, no sudden transformations into flowers and greenery; yet it seemed that in those days after Thirwell's suicide the station passed through an autumnal dimming, one lacking changes in foliage and temperature, but having in their stead a flourishing of black satin ribbons and ugly rumors, a gradual decaying of the spirit of the place into an oppressive atmosphere of sullen wariness, and the slow occlusion of all the visible brightness of our lives, a slump of patronage in the bars, the common rooms standing empty, incidences of decline that reminded me in sum of the stubborn resistance of the English oaks to their inevitable change, their profuse and solemn green surrendering bit by bit to the sparse imperatives of winter, like a strong man's will gradually being eroded by grief.

War did not come immediately, as Gerald had predicted; but the sporadic violences continued, along with the arguments concerning the true intentions and nature of the Strange Magnificence, and few of us doubted that war, or something akin to it, was in the offing. Everyone went about their duties hurriedly, grimly—everyone, that is, except for Bill. He was so absorbed by his own difficulties, I doubt he noticed any of this, and though the focus of hostility had shifted away from him to an extent, becoming more diffuse and general, he grew increasingly agitated and continued to prattle on about having to "do something" and—this a new chord in his simple symphony—that something must be terribly wrong because the barnacles were leaving.

That they were leaving was undeniable. Every hour saw the migration of thousands more, and large areas of the station's surface had been laid bare. Not completely bare, mind you. There remained a layer of the substrate laid down by the females, greenish silver in color, but nonetheless it was a shock to see the station so denuded. I gave no real credence to Bill's contention that we were in danger, but neither did I totally disregard it, and so, partly to calm him, to reassure him that the matter was being investigated, I went back to Jacob Sauter's notes to learn if such migrations were to be expected.

According to the notes, pre-adult barnacles—Sauter called them "larva"—free-floated in space, each encapsulated in its own segement of a tube whose ends had been annealed so as to form a ring. Like the adult barnacle, the exterior of the ring was dotted with light-sensitive photophores, and when a suitable place for attachment was sensed, the ring colony was able to orient itself by means of excretions sprayed through pores in the skin of the tube, a method not dissimilar to that utilized by orbital vessels when aligning themselves for re-entry. The slightest change in forward momentum induced secretions to occur along the edge of the colony oriented for imminent attachment, and ultimately the colony stuck to its new home, whereupon the females excreted an acidic substrate that bonded with the metal. The barnacles were hermphroditic, and the initial metamorphitosis always resulted in female barnacles alone. Once the female colony grew dense, some of the females would become male. When the colony reached a certain density it reproduced en masse. As the larval tubes were secreted, they sometimes intertwined, and this would result in braided ring colonies, which helped endure variation in the gene pool. And that was all I could find on the subject of migration. If Sauter were to be believed, by giving up their purchase on the station, the barnacles were essentially placing their fate in the hands of God, taking the chance—and given the vastness of space, the absence of ring secretions, it was an extremely slim chance—that they would happen to bump into

something and be able to cling long enough to attach themselves. If one were to judge their actions in human terms, it would appear that they must be terrified of something, otherwise they would stay where they were; but it would require an immense logical leap for me to judge them according to those standards and I had no idea what was responsible for their exodus.

Following my examination of Sauter's notes I persuaded Gerald to accompany me on an inspection tour of Solitaire's surface. I thought seeing the migration for himself might affect him more profoundly than had the camera views, and that he might then join me in entertaining the suspicion that—as unlikely a prospect as it was—Bill had stumbled onto something. But Gerald was not moved to agreement.

"Man, I don't know," he said as we stood on the surface of East Louie, looking out toward the CPC and the administration module. There were a few sparse patches of barnacles around us, creatures that for whatever reason—impaired sensitivity, some form of silicate stubbornness—had not abandoned the station. Now and then one or several would drift up toward the glittering clouds of their fellows that shone against the blackness like outcroppings of mica in anthracite. "What do I know about these damn things! They could be doing anything. Could be they ran out of food, and that's why they're moving. Shit! You giving the idiot way too much credit! He's got his own reasons for wanting this to mean something."

I could not argue with him. It would be entirely consistent with Bill's character for him to view the migration as part of his personal apocalypse, and his growing agitation might stem from the fact that he saw his world being whittled down, his usefulness reduced, and thus his existence menaced all the more.

"Still," I said, "it seems odd."

" 'Odd' ain't enough. Weird, now, that might carry some weight. Crazy. Run amok. They qualify for my attention. But 'odd' I can live with. You want to worry about this, I can't stop you. Me, I got more important things to do. And so do you."

"I'm doing my job, don't you worry."

"Okay. Tell me about it."

Through the glaze of reflection on his faceplate, I could only make out his eyes and his forehead, and these gave no clue to his mood.

"There's not very much to tell. As far as I can determine Samuelson's pure through and through. There's a curious lack of depth to the background material, a few dead ends in the investigative reports. Deceased informants. Vanished employers. That sort of thing. It doesn't feel quite right to me, but it's nothing I could bring to the corporation. And it does appear that his elder brother was murdered by the Magnificence, which establishes at least one of his *bona fides.*"

"If Samuelson's part of the Magnificence, I..."

" 'If', my ass!" I said. "You know damned well he is."

"I was going to say, his brother's murder is just the kind of tactic they like to use in order to draw suspicion away from one of their own. Hell, he may have hated his brother."

"Or he may have loved him and wanted the pain."

Gerald grunted.

"I've isolated fourteen files that have a sketchiness reminiscent of Samuelson's," I said. "Of course that doesn't prove anything. Most of them are administration and most are relatively new on Solitaire. But only a couple are his close associates."

"That makes it more likely they're all dirty. They don't believe in bunching up. I'll check into it." I heard a burst on static over my earphones, which meant that he had let out a heavy sigh. "The damn thing is," he went on, "Samuelson might not be the lead dog. Whoever's running things might be keeping in the shadows for now."

"No, not a chance," I said. "Samuelson's too lovely in the part."

A construction sled, a boxy thing of silver struts powered by a man in a rocket pack, went arcing up from the zero physics lab and boosted toward one of the assembly platforms; all manner of objects were lashed to the struts, some of them—mostly tools, vacuum welders and such—trailing along in its wake, giving the sled a raggedy, gypsy look.

"Those explosives you got stashed," Gerald said, staring after the sled.

"They're safe."

"I hope so. We didn't have 'em, they might have moved on us by now. Done a hostage thing. Or maybe just blown something up. I'm pretty sure nothing else has been brought on station, so you just keep a close watch on that shit. That's our hole card."

"I don't like waiting for them to make the first move."

"I know you don't. Was up to you, we'd be stiffening citizens right and left, and figuring out later if they guilty or not. That's how come you got the teeth, and I'm holding the leash."

Though his face was hidden, I knew he was not smiling.

"Your way's not always the right of it, Gerald," I said. "Sometimes my way's the most effective, the most secure."

"Yeah, maybe. But not this time. This is too bullshit, this mess. Too many upper level people involved. We scratch the wrong number off the page, we be down the tube in a fucking flash. You don't want to be scuffling around back on Earth, do you? I sure as hell don't."

"I'd prefer it to having my lungs sucked out through my mouth like Thirwell."

"Would you, now? Me, I'm not so sure. I want a life that's more than just gnawing bones, John. I ain't up to that kind of hustle no more. And I don't believe you are, either."

We stood with speaking for a minute or so. It was getting near time for a shift change, and everywhere bits of silver were lifting from the blotched surface of the station, flocking together in the brilliant beams of light shooting from the transport bays, their movements as quick and fitful as the play of dust in sunlight.

"You're thinking too much these days, man," Gerald said. "You're not sniffing the air, you're not feeling things here." He made a slow, ungainly patting motion above his gut.

"That's rot!"

"Is it? Listen to this. 'Life has meaning but no theme. There is no truth we can assign to it that does not in some way lessen the bright flash of being that is its essential matter. There is no lesson learned that does not signal a misapprehension of our stars. There is no moral to this darkness.' That's some nice shit. Extremely profound. But the man who wrote that, he's not watching the water for sharks. He's too busy thinking."

"I'm so pleased," I said, "you've been able to access my computer once again. I know the childlike joy it brings you. And I'm quite sure Ernesto is absolutely thrilled at having a peek."

"Practice makes perfect."

"Any further conclusions you've drawn from poking around in my personal files?"

"You got one helluva fantasy life. Or else that Arlie, man, she's about half some kind of beast. How come you write all that sex stuff down?"

"Prurience," I said. "Damn! I don't know why I put up with this shit from you."

"Well, I do. I'm the luckiest Chief of Security in the system, see, 'cause I've got me a big, bad dog who's smart and loyal, and"—he lifted one finger of his gauntleted hand to signify that this was key—"who has no ambition to take my job."

"Don't be too sure."

"No, man, you don't want my job. I mean, you'd accept it if it was handed to you; but you like things the way they are. You always running wild and me trying to cover your ass."

"I hope you're not suggesting that I'm irresponsible."

"You're responsible, all right. You just wouldn't want the kind of responsibility I've got. It'd interfere with your style. The way you move around the station, talking bullshit to the people, everything's smooth, then all of a sudden you go Bam! Bam!, and take somebody down, then the next second you're talking about Degas or some shit, and then, Bam!, somebody else on the floor, you say, Oops, shit, I guess I messed up, will you please forgive me, did I ever tell you 'bout Paris in the springtime when all the poets turn into cherryblossoms, Bam! It's fucking beautiful, man. You got half the people so scared they crawl under the damn rug when they see you coming, and the other half loves you to death, and most all of 'em would swear you're some kind of Robin Hood, you whip 'em 'cause you love 'em and it's your duty, and you only use your powers for goodness and truth. They don't understand you like I do. They don't see you're just a dangerous, amoral son of a bitch."

"Is this the sort of babble that goes into your personnel reports."

"Not hardly. I present you as a real citizen. A model of integrity and courage and resourcefulness."

"Thanks for that," I said coldly.

"Just don't ever change, man. Don't ever change."

The sleds that had lifted from the station had all disappeared, but others were materializing from the blackness, tiny points of silver and light coming home from the assembly platforms, looking no more substantial than the clouds of barnacles. Finally Gerald said, "I got things to take care of." He waved at the barnacles. "Leave this shit alone, will you? After everything else gets settled, maybe then we'll look into it. Right now all you doing is wasting my fucking time."

I watched him moving off along the curve of the module toward the airlock, feeling somewhat put off by his brusque reaction and his analysis. I respected him a great deal as a professional, and his clinical assessment of my abilities made me doubt that his respect for me was so unqualiifed.

There was a faint click against the side of my helmet. I reached up and plucked off a barnacle. Lying in the palm of my gauntlet, its plates closed, its olive surface threaded with gold and crimson, it seemed cryptic,

magical, rare, like something one would find after a search lasting half a lifetime, a relic buried with a wizard king, lying in his ribcage in place of a heart. I had shifted my position so that the light from the port behind me cast my shadow over the surface, and, a neurological charge having been triggered by the change in light intensity, some of the barnacles in the shadow were opening their plates and probing the vacuum with stubby gray "tongues", trying to feed. It was an uncanny sight, the way their "tongues" moved, stiffly, jerkily, like bad animation, like creatures in a grotesque garden hallucinated by Hawthorne or Baudelaire, and standing there among them, with the technological hodge-podge of the station stretching away in every direction, I felt as if I were stranded in a pool of primitive time, looking out onto the future. It was, I realized, a feeling akin to that I'd had in London whenever I thought about the space colonies, the outposts strung across the system.

Gnawing bones.

As my old Classics professor would have said, Gerald's metaphor was "a happy choice".

And now I had time to consider, I realized that Gerald was right: after all the years on Solitaire, I would be ill-suited for life in London, my instincts rusty, incapable of readjusting to the city's rabid intensity. But I did not believe he was right to wait for Samuelson to move against us. Once the Magnificence set their sights on a goal, they were not inclined to use half-measures. I was too disciplined to break ranks with Gerald, but there was nothing to prevent me from preparing myself for the day of judgment. Samuelson might bring us down, I told myself, but I would see to it that he would not outlive us. I was not aware, however, that judgment day was almost at hand.

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Perhaps it was the trouble of those days that brought Arlie and I closer together, that reawakened us to the sweetness of our bodies and the sharp mesh of our souls, to all those things we had come to take for granted. And perhaps Bill had something to do with it. As dismal an item as he was, it may be his presence served—as Arlie had suggested—to supply us with some missing essential of warmth or heart. But whatever the cause, it was a great good time for us, and I came once again to perceive her not merely as someone who could cure a hurt or make me stop thinking for a while, but as the embodiment of my hopes. After everything I had witnessed, all the shabby, bloody evidence I had been presented of our kind's pettiness and greed, that I could feel anything so pure for another human being... Christ, it astounded me! And if that much could happen, then why not the fulfillment of other, more improbable hopes? For instance, suppose a ship were to return with news of a habitable world. I pictured the two of us boarding, flying away, landing, being washed clean in the struggle of a stern and simple life. Foolishness, I told myself. Wild ignorance. Yet each time I fell into bed with Arlie, though the darkness that covered us seemed always imbued with a touch of black satin, with the sickly patina of the Strange Magnificence, I would sense in the back of my mind that in touching her I was flying away again, and in entering her I was making landfall on some perfect blue-green sphere. There came a night, however, when to entertain such thoughts seemed not mere folly but the height of indulgence.

It was close upon half-eleven, and the three of us, Bill, Arlie, and I, were sitting in the living room, the walls playing a holographic scenario of a white-capped sea and Alps of towering cumulus, with whales breeching and a three-masted schooner coasting on the wind, vanishing whenever it reached a corner, then reappearing on the adjoining wall. Bill and Arlie were on the sofa, and she was telling him stories about Earth, lies about the wonderful animals that lived there, trying to distract him from his obsessive nattering about the barnacles. I had just brought out several of the packet charges that Gerald and I had hidden away, and I was working at reshaping them into smaller units, a project that had occupied me for several nights. Bill had previously seemed frightened by them and had never mentioned them. That night, however, he pointed at the charges and said, "'Splosives?"

"Very good," I said. "The ones we found, you and I. The ones I was working with yesterday. Remember?"

"Uh-huh." He watched me re-insert a timer into one of the charges and then asked what I was doing.

"Making some presents," I told him.

"Birthday presents?"

"More like Guy Fawkes Day presents."

He had no clue as to the identity of Guy Fawkes, but he nodded sagely as though he had. "Is one for Gerald?"

"You might say they're all for Gerald."

He watched me a while longer, then said, "Why is it presents? Don't 'splosives hurt?"

"E's just havin' a joke," Arlie said.

Bill sat quietly for a minute or so, his eyes tracking my fingers, and at last he said, "Why won't you talk to Gerald about the barnacles? You should tell him it's important."

"Give it a rest, Billy," Arlie said, patting his arm.

"What do you expect Gerald to do?" I said. "Even if he agreed with you, there's nothing to be done."

"Leave," he said. "Like the barnacles."

What a marvelous idea! We'll just pick up and abandon the place."

"No, no!" he shrilled. "CPC! CPC!"

"Listen 'ere," said Arlie. "There's not a chance in 'ell the corporation's goin' to authorize usin' the CPC for somethin' loike that. So put in from mind, dear, won't you?"

"Don't need the corporation," Bill said in a whiney tone.

"He's got the CPC on the brain," I said. "Every night I come in here and find him running the file."

Arlie shushed me and asked, "What's that you said, Bill?"

He clamped his lips together, leaned back against the wall, his head making a dark, ominous-looking interruption in the path of the schooner; a wave of bright water appeared to crash over him, sending up a white spray.

"You 'ave somethin' to tell us, dear?"

"Be grateful for the silence," I said.

A few seconds later Bill began to weep, to wail that it wasn't fair, that everyone hated him.

We did our best to soothe him, but to no avail. He scrambled to his feet and went to beating his fists against his thighs, hopping up and down, shrieking at the top of his voice, his face gone as red as a squalling infant's. Then of a sudden he clutched the sides of his head. His legs stiffened, his neck cabled. He fell back on the sofa, twitching, screaming, clawing at the lump behind his ear. Mister C had intervened and was punishing him with electric shocks. It was a hideous thing to see, this enormous, babyish man jolted by internal lightnings, strings of drool braiding his chin, the animation ebbing from his face, his protests growing ever more feeble, until at last he sat staring blankly into nowhere, an ugly, outsized doll in a stained white jumpsuit.

Arlie moved close to him, mopped his face with a tissue. Her mouth thinned; the lines bracketing the corners of her lips deepened. "God, e's a disgustin' object," she said. "I don't know what it is about 'im touches me so."

"Perhaps he reminds you of your uncle."

"I realize this is hard toimes for you, luv," she said, continuing to mop Bill's face. "But do you really find it necessary to treat me so sarcastic, loike I was one of your culprits?"

"Sorry," I said.

She gave an almost imperceptible shrug. Something shifted in her face, as if an opaque mask had slid aside, revealing her newly vulnerable. "What you fink's goin' to 'appen to 'im?"

"Same as'll happen to us, probably. It appears our fates have become intertwined." I picked up another charge. "Anyway, what's it matter, the poor droob? His best pal is a little black bean that zaps him whenever he throws a wobbler. He's universally loathed, and his idea of a happy time is to pop a crystal and flog the bishop all night long. As far as I can tell, his fate's already bottomed out."

She clicked her tongue against her teeth. "Maybe it's us Oi see in 'im."

"You and me? That's a laugh."

"Nao, I mean all of us. Don't it seem sometimes we're all 'elpless loike 'im? Just big, loopy animals without a proper sense of things."

"I don't choose to think that way."

Displeasure came into her face, but before she could voice it, a loud buzzer went off in the bedroom—Gerald's private alarm, a device he would only use if unable to communicate with me openly. I jumped to my feet and grabbed a hand laser from a drawer in the table beside the sofa.

"Don't let anyone in," I told Arlie. "Not under any circumstances."

She nodded, gave me a brisk hug. "You 'urry back."

The corridors of East Louie were thronged, hundreds of people milling about the entrances of the common rooms and the commisaries. I smelled hashish, perfume, pheromene sprays. Desperate with worry, I pushed and elbowed my way through the crowds toward Gerald's quarters, which lay at the opposite end of the module. When I reached his door, I found it partway open and the concerned brown face of Ernesto Carbajal, peering out at me. He pulled me into the foyer. The room beyond was dark; a slant of light fell across the carpet from the bedroom door, which was open a foot or so; but I could make out nothing within.

"Where's Gerald?" I asked.

Carbajal's hands made delicate, ineffectual gestures in the air, as if trying to find a safe hold on something with a lot of sharp edges. "I didn't know what to do," he said. "I didn't know... I..."

I watched him flutter and spew. He was Gerald's man, and Gerald claimed he was trustworthy. For my

part, I had never formed an opinion. Now, however, I saw nothing that made me want to turn my back on him. And so, of course, I determined that I would do exactly that as soon as a suitable opportunity presented itself.

"You gave the alarm?" I asked him.

"Yes, I didn't want anyone to hear... the intercom. You know, it... I..."

"Yeah, yeah, I know. Calm down!" I pushed him against the wall, kept my hand flat against his chest. "Where's Gerald?"

His eyes flicked toward the bedroom; for an instant the flesh of his face seemed to sag away from the bone, to lose all its firmness. "There," he said. "Back there. Oh, God!"

It was at that moment I knew Gerald was dead, but I refused to let the knowledge affect me. No matter how terrible the scene in the bedroom, Carbajal's reactions—though nicely done—were too flighty for a professional; even considering his involvement with Gerald, he should have been able to manage a more businesslike facade

"Let's have a look, shall we?"

"No, I don't want to go back in there!"

"All right, then," I said. "You wait here."

I crossed to the bedroom, keeping an ear out for movement behind me. I swallowed, held my breath. The surface of the door seemed hot to the touch, and when I slid it open, I had the thought that the heat must be real, that all the glare off the slick red surfaces within had permeated the metal. Gerald was lying on the bed, the great crimson hollow of his stomach and chest exposed and empty, unbelievably empty, cave empty, with things like glistening, pulpy red fruit resting by his head, hands and feet; but I did not admit to the sight, I kept a distant focus. I heard a step behind me and turned, throwing up my guard as Carbajal, his face distorted by a grimace, struck at me with a knife. I caught his knife arm, bent the elbow backwards against the doorframe; I heard it crack as he screamed and shoved him back into the living room. He staggered off-balance, but did not fall. He righted himself, began to move in a stealthy crouch, keeping his shattered elbow toward me, willing to accept more pain in order to protect his good left hand. Disabled or not, he was still very fast, dangerous with his kicks. But I knew I had him so long as I was careful, and I chose to play him rather than end it with the laser. The more I punished him, I thought, the less resistant he would be to interrogation. I feinted, and when he jumped back, I saw him wince. A chalky wash spread across his skin. Every move he made was going to hurt him.

"You might as well hazard it all on one throw, Ernesto," I told him. "If you don't, you're probably going to fall over before I knock you down."

He continued to circle me, unwilling to waste energy on a response;

his eyes looked all dark, brimming with concentrated rage. Passing through the spill of light from the bedroom, he seemed ablaze with fury, a slim little devil with a crooked arm.

"It's not your karate let you down, Ernesto. It's that ridiculous drama queen style of acting. Absolutely vile! I thought you might start beating your breast and crying out to Jesus for succor. Of course that's the weakness all you yobbos in the Magnificence seem to have. You're so damned arrogant, you think you can fool everyone with most rudimentary tactics. I wonder why that is. Never mind. In a moment I'm going to let you tell me all about it."

I gave him an opening, a good angle of attack. I'm certain he knew it was a trap, but he was in so much pain, so eager to stop the pain, that his body reacted toward the opening before his mind could cancel the order. He swung his right leg in a vicious arc, I stepped inside the kick, executed a hip throw; as he flew into the air and down, I wrenched his good arm out of the socket with a quick twist. He gave a cry, but wriggled out of my reach and bridged to his feet, both arms dangling. I took him back down with a leg sweep and smashed his right kneecap with my heel. Once his screaming had subsided I sat down on the edge of a coffee table and showed him the laser.

"Now we can talk undisturbed," I said brightly. "I hope you feel like talking, because otherwise..."

He cursed in Spanish, spat toward me.

"I can see there's no fooling you, Ernesto. You obviously know you're not leaving here alive, not after what you've done. But you do have one life choice remaining that might be of some interest. Quickly"—I flourished the laser—"or slowly. What's your pleasure?"

He lay without moving, his chest heaving, blinking from time to time, a neutral expression on his face, perhaps trying to think of something he could tell me that would raise the stakes. His breath whistled in his throat; sweat beaded his forehead. My thoughts kept pulling me back into that red room, and as I sat there the pull became irresistable. I saw it clearly this time. The heart lying on the pillow above Gerald's head, the other organs arranged neatly beside his hands and feet; the darkly crimson hollow with its pale flaps. Things

written in blood on the wall. It made me weary to see it, and the most wearisome thing of all was the fact that I was numb, that I felt almost nothing. I knew I would have to rouse myself from this spiritual malasie and go after Samuelson. I could trust no one to help me wage a campaign—quick retaliation was the best chance I had. Perhaps the only chance. The Magnificence had a number of shortcomings. Their arrogance, a crudeness of tactics, an infrastructure that allowed unstable personalities to rise to power. To be truthful, the fear and ignorance of their victims was their greatest strength. But their most pertinent flaw was that they tended to give their subordinates too little autonomy. With Samuelson out of the picture, the rest might very well scatter. And then I realized there was something I could do that would leave nothing to chance.

"Ernesto," I said, "now I've considered it, there's really not a thing you can tell me that I want to know."

"No," he said. "No, I have something. Please!"

I shrugged. "All right. Let's hear it."

"The bosses," he said. "I know where they are."

"The Magnificence, you mean? Those bosses?"

A nod. "Administration. They're all there."

"They're there right this moment?"

Something must have given a twinge, for he winced and said, "*Dios*!"

When he recovered he added, "Yes. They're waiting..." Another pain took him away for a moment.

"Waiting for the revolution to be won?" I suggested.

"Yes."

"And just how many bosses are we speaking about?"

"Twenty. Almost twenty, I think."

Christ, I thought, nearly half of the administration gone to black satin and nightmare.

I got to my feet, pocketed the laser.

"What..." Ernesto said, and swallowed; his pallor had increased, and I realized he was going into shock. His dark eyes searched my face.

"I'm going, Ernesto," I said. "I don't have the time to treat you as you did Gerald. But my fervent hope is that someone else with more time on their hands will find you. Perhaps one of your brothers in the Magnificence. Or one of Gerald's friends. Neither, I suspect, will view your situation in a favorable light. And should no one come upon you in the forseeable future, I suppose I shall have to be satisfied with knowing you died a lingering death." I bent to him. "Getting cold, isn't it? You've had the sweet bit, Ernesto. There'll be no more pretending you've a pretty pair of charlies and playing sweet angelina to the hard boys. No more gobble offs for you, dearie. It's all fucking over."

I would have loved to hurt him some more, but I did not believe I would have been able to stop once I got started. I blew him a kiss, told him that if the pain got too bad he could always swallow his tongue, and left him to what would almost certainly be the first of his final misgivings.

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When I returned to my quarters Arlie threw her arms about me and held me tight while I gave her the news about Gerald. I still felt nothing. Telling her was like hearing my own voice delivering a news summary.

"I've got work to do," I said. "I can't protect you here. They're liable to pay a visit while I'm away. You'll have to come with me."

She nodded, her face buried in my shoulder.

"We have to go outside," I said. "We can use one of the sleds. Just a short hop over to Administration, a few minutes there, and we're done. Can you manage?"

Arlie liked having something solid underfoot; going outside was was a dread prospect for her, but she made no objection.

"What are you intendin'?" she asked, watching me gather the packet charges I had left scattered about the floor.

"Nothing nice," I said, peering under the sofa; I was, it appeared, short four charges. "Don't worry about it."

"Don't you get cheeky with me! Oi'm not some low-heel Sharon you've only just met. Oi've a right to know what you're about."

"I'm going to blow up the damned place," I said, moving the sofa away from the wall.

She stared at me, open-mouthed. "You're plannin' to blow up Admin? 'Ave you done your crust? What you finkin' of?"

I told her about the suspicious files and what Ernesto had said, but this did little to soothe her.

"There's twenty other people livin' in there!" she said. "What about them?"

"Maybe they won't be at home." I pushed the sofa back against the wall. "I'm missing four charges here. You seen 'em?"

"It's almost one o'clock. Some of 'em might be out, Oi grant you. But whether its twenty or fifteen, you're talkin' about the murder of innocent people."

"Look here," I said, continuing my search, heaving chairs about to bleed off my anger. "First of all, they're not people. They're corporation deadlegs. Using the word 'innocent' to describe them makes as much sense as using the word 'dainty' to describe a pig's eating habits. At one time or another they've every one put the drill to some poor Joey's backside and made it bleed. And they'd do it again in a flicker, because that's all they fucking know how to do. Secondly, if they were in my shoes, if they had a chance to rid the the station of the Magnificence with only twenty lives lost, they wouldn't hesitate. Thirdly"—I flipped up the cushions on the sofa—"and most importantly, I don't have a bloody choice! Do you understand me? There's no one I can trust to help. I don't have a loyal force with which to lay seige to them. This is the only way I can settle things. I'm not thrilled with the idea of murdering—as you say—twenty people in order to do what's necessary. And I realize it allows you to feel morally superior to think of me as a villain. But if I don't do something soon there'll be hearts and livers strewn about the station like party favors, and twenty dead is going to seem like nothing!" I hurled a cushion into the corner. "Shit! Where are they?"

Arlie was still staring at me, but the outrage had drained from her face. "Oi 'aven't seen 'em."

"Bill," I said, struck by a notion. "Where he'd get to?"

"Bill?"

"Yeah, Bill. The fuckwit. Where is he?"

"E's away somewhere," she said. "'E was in the loo for a while, then Oi went in the bedroom, and when Oi come out 'e was gone."

I crossed to the bathroom, hoping to find the charges there. But when the door slid open, I saw only that the floor was spattered with bright, tacky blood; there was more blood in the sink, along with a kitchen knife, matted hair, handfuls of wadded, becrimsoned paper towels. And something else: a thin black disc about the size of a soy wafer. It took me a while to absorb all this, to put it together with Bill's recent obsessions, and even after I had done so, my conclusion was difficult to credit. Yet I could think of no other explanation that would satisfy the conditions.

"Arlie," I called. "You seen this?"

"Nao, what?" she said, coming up behind me; then: "Holy Christ!"

"That's his implant, isn't it?" I said, pointing to the disc.

"Yeah, I s'pose it is. My God! Why'd he do that?" She put a hand to her mouth. "You don't fink 'e took the charges..."

"The CPC," I said. "He knew he couldn't do anything with Mister C along for the ride, so he cut the bastard out. And now he's gone for the CPC. Jesus! That's just what we needed, isn't it! Another fucking maniac on the loose!"

"It must 'ave 'urt 'im somethin' fierce!" Arlie said wonderingly. "I mean, he 'ad to 'ave done it quick and savage, or else Mister C would 'ave 'ad time to stop 'im. And I never heard a peep."

"I wouldn't worry about Bill if I were you. You think twenty dead's a tragedy? Think what'll happen if he blows the CPC. How many do you reckon will be walking between modules when they disengage? How many others will be killed by falling things? By other sorts of accidents?"

I went back into living room, shouldered my pack; I handed Arlie a laser. "If you see anyone coming after us, use it. Burn them low if that's all you can bear, but burn them. All right?"

She gave a tight, anxious nod and looked down at the weapon in her hand.

"Come on," I said. "Once we get to the airlock we'll be fine."

But I was none too confident of our chances. Thanks to the greed of madmen and the single-mindedness of our resident idiot, it seemed that the chances of everyone on Solitaire were growing slimmer by the second.

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I suppose some of you will say at this juncture that I should have known bad things were going to happen, and further will claim that many of the things that did happen night have been forestalled had I taken a few basic precautions and shown the slightest good sense. What possessed me, you might ask, to run out of my quarters leaving explosives scattered about the floor where Bill could easily appropriate them? And couldn't I have seen that his fascination with the CPC might lead to some perilous circumstance? And why had I not perceived his potential for destructiveness? Well, what had possessed me was concern for a friend, the closest to a friend that I had ever known. And as to Bill, his dangerous potentials, he had never displayed

any sign that he was capable of enduring the kind of pain he must have endured, or of employing logic sufficiently well so as to plan even such a simple act as he perpetrated. It was desperation, I'm certain, that fathered the plan, and how was I to factor in desperation with the IQ of a biscuit and come up with the sum of that event? No, I reject guilt and credit both. My part in things was simpler than demanded by that complex twist of fate. I was only there, it seems, to finish things, to stamp out a few last fires, and—in the end—to give a name to the demons of that place and time. And yet perhaps there was something in that whole fury of moments that was mine. Perhaps I saw an opportunity to take a step away from the past, albeit a violent step, and moved by a signal of some sort, one too slight to register except in my cells, I took it. I would like to think I had a higher purpose in mind, and was not merely acting out the imperatives of some fierce vanity.

We docked the sled next to an airlock in the administration module, my reasoning being that if we were forced to flee, it would take less time to run back to administration than it would to cycle the CPC airlock; but instead of entering there, we walked along the top of the corridor that connected administration and the CPC, working our way along molded troughs of plastic covered with the greenish silver substrate left by the barnacles, past an electric array, beneath a tree of radiator panels thirty times as tall as a man, and entered the emergency lock at its nether end. There was a sled docked beside it, and realizing that Bill must have used it, I thought how terrified he must have been to cross even that much of the void without Mister C to lend him guidance. Before entering, I set the timer of one of the charges in the pack to a half-second delay and stuck it in the hip pouch of my pressure suit. I would be able to trigger the switch with just the touch of my palm against the pouch. A worst case eventuality.

The cameras inside the CPC were functioning, but since there were no security personnel in evidence, I had to assume that the automatic alarms had failed and that—as usual—no one was bothered to monitor the screens. We had not gone twenty feet into the main room when we saw Bill, dressed in a pressure suit, helmet in hand, emerge from behind a plastic partition, one of many which—as I have said—divided the cavernous white space into a maze of work stations. He looked stunned, lost, and when he noticed us he gave no sign of recognition; the side of his neck was covered with dried blood, and he held his head tipped to that side, as one might when trying to muffle pain by applying pressure to the injured spot. His mouth hung open, his posture was slack, and his eyes were bleary. Under the trays of cold light his complexion was splotchy and dappled with the angry red spots of pimples just coming up.

"The explosives," I said. "Where are they? Where'd you put them?"

His eyes wandered up, grazed my face, twitched toward Arlie, and then lowered to the floor. His breath made an ugly, glutinous noise.

He was a pitiable sight, but I could not afford pity; I was enraged at him for having betrayed my trust. "You miserable fucking stain!" I said. "Tell me where they are!" I palmed the back of his head with my left hand; with my right I knuckled the ragged wound behind his ear. He tried to twist away, letting out a wail; he put his hands up to his chest and pushed feebly at me. Tears leaked from his eyes. "Don't!" he bawled. "Don't! It hurts!"

"Tell me where the explosives are," I said, "or I'll hurt you worse. I swear to Christ, I won't ever stop hurting you."

"I don't remember!" he whined.

"I take you into my house," I said. "I protect you, I feed you, I wash your messes up. And what do you do? You steal from me." I slapped him, eliciting a shriek. "Now tell me where they are!"

Arlie was watching me, a hard light in her eyes; but she said nothing.

I nodded toward the labyrinth of partitions. "Have a fucking look round, will you? We don't have much time!"

She went off, and I turned again to Bill.

"Tell me," I said, and began cuffing him about the face, not hard, but hurtful, driving him back with the flurries, setting him to stagger and wail and weep. He fetched up against a partition, eyes popped, that tiny pink mouth pursed in a moue. "Tell me," I repeated, and then said it again, said it every time I hit him, "Tell me, tell me, tell me, tell me...", until he dropped to his knees, cowering, shielding his head with arms, and yelled, "Over there! It's over there!"

"Where?" I said, hauling him to his feet. "Take me to it."

I pushed him ahead of me, keeping hold of the neck ring of his suit, yanking, jerking, not want to give him a second to gather himself, to make up a lie. He yelped, grunted, pleaded, saying, "Don't!", "Stop it!", until at last he bumped and spun round a corner, and there, resting atop a computer terminal, was one of the charges, a red light winking on the timer, signalling

that it had been activated. I picked it up and punched in the deactivation code. The read-out showed that

fifty-eight seconds had remained before detonation.

"Arlie!" I shouted. "Get back here! Now!"

I grabbed Bill by the neck ring, pulled him close. "Did you set all the timers the same?"

He gazed at me, uncomprehending.

"Answer me, damn you! How did you set the timers?"

He opened his mouth, made a scratchy noise in the back of his throat; runners of saliva bridged between his upper and lower teeth.

My interior clock was ticking down, 53, 52 51...Given the size of the room, there was no hope of locating the other three charges in less than a minute. I would have risked a goodly sum on the proposition that Bill had been inconsistent, but I was not willing to risk my life.

Arlie came trotting up and smiled. "You found one!"

"We've got fifty seconds," I told her. "Or less. Run!"

I cannot be certain how long it took us to negotiate the distance between where we had stood and the hatch of the administration module; it seemed an endless time, and I kept expecting to feel the corridor shake and sway and tear loose from its fittings, and to go whirling out into the vacuum. Having to drag Bill along slowed us considerably, and I spent perhaps ten seconds longer opening the hatch with my pass key; but altogether, I would guess we came very near to the fifty second limit. And I am certain that I as I sealed the hatch behind us, that limit was exceeded. Bill had, indeed, proved inconsistent.

As I stepped in through the inner hatch, I saw that Admin had been transformed into a beautiful starfield spread across a velvety black depth in which—an oddly charming incongruity—fifteen or twenty doors were visible, a couple of them open, slants of white light spilling out, it seemed, from God's office space behind the walls of space and time. We were walking on gas clouds, nebulae, constellate beings. Then I noticed the body of a woman lying some thirty feet away, blood pooled wide as a table beneath her. No one else was in sight, but as we proceeded toward the airlock, the outlines of the hatch barely perceptible beneath the atsronomical display, three men in black gear stepped out from a doorway farther along the passage. I fired at them, as did Arlie, but our aim was off. Strikes of ruby light smoked the starry expanse beside them as they ducked back into cover. I heard shouts, then shouted answers. The next second, as I fumbled with the hatch, laser fire needled from several doorways, pinning us down. Whoever was firing could have killed us easily, but they satisfied themselves by scoring near misses. Above Bill's frightened cries and the sizzle of burning metal, I could hear laughter. I tossed my laser aside and told Arlie to do the same. I touched the charge in my hip pouch. I believed if necessary I would be able to detonate it, but the thought made me cold.

A group of men and women, some ten or eleven strong, came along the corridor toward us, Samuelson in the lead. Like the rest, he wore black satin trousers and a blouse of the same material adorned with badges. Creatures, it appeared, wrought from the same mystic stuff as the the black walls and ceiling and floor. He was smiling broadly and nodding, as if our invasion were a delightful interlude that he had been long awaiting.

"How kind of you do your dying with us, John," he said as we came to our feet; they gathered in a semi-circle around us, hemming us in against the hatch. "I never expected to have this opportunity. And with your lady, too. We're going to have such fun together."

"Bet she's a real groaner," said a muscular, black-haired man at his shoulder.

"Well, we'll find enough soon enough, won't we?" said Samuelson.

"Try it," said Arlie, "and Oi'll squeeze you off at the knackers!"

Samuelson beamed at her, then glanced at Bill. "And how are you today, sir? What brings you along, I wonder, on this merry outing?"

Bill returned a look of bewilderment that after a moment, infected by Samuelson's happy countenance, turned into a perplexed smile.

"Do me a favor," I said to Samuelson, moving my hand so that the palm was almost touching the switch of the charge at my hip. "There's something I've been yearning to know. Does that gear of yours come with matching underwear? I'd imagine it must. Bunch of ginger-looking poofs and lizzies like you got behind you, I suppose wearing black nasties is *de rigeuer*."

"For somebody who's 'bout to major in high-pitched screams," said a woman at the edge of the group, a heavyset blond with a thick American accent and an indecipherable tattoo on her bicep, "you gotta helluva mouth on you, I give ya that."

"That's just John's unfortunate manner," Samuelson said. "He's not very good at defeat, you see. It should be interesting to watch him explore the boundaries of this particular defeat."

My hand had begun to tremble on the switch; I found myself unable to control it.

"What is it with you, Samuelson?" said the blond woman. "Every time you chop someone, you gotta play

Dracula? Let's just do 'em and get on with business."

There was a brief argument concerning the right of the woman to speak her mind, the propriety of mentally preparing the victim, of "tasting the experience", and other assorted drivel. Under different circumstances, I would have laughed to see how ludicrous and inept a bunch were these demons; I might have thought how their ineptitude spoke to the terminal disarray back on Earth, that such a feeble lot could have gained so much power. But I was absorbed by the trembling of my hand, the sweat trickling down my belly, and the jellied weakness of my legs. I imagined I could feel the cold mass of explosives turning, giving a kick, like a dark and fatal child striving to break free of the womb. Before long I would have to reveal the presence of the charge and force a conclusion, one way or another, and I was not sure I was up to it. My hand wanted to slap the switch, pushed against, it seemed, by the all the weighty detritus of my violent life.

Finally Samuelson brought an end to the argument. "This is my show, Amy. I'll do as please. If you want to discuss method during Retreat, I'll be happy to satisfy. Until then, I'd appreciate your full cooperation."

He said all this with the mild ultra-sincerity of a priest settling a squabble among the Ladies Auxilliary concerning a jumble sale; but when he turned to me, all the anger that he must have repressed came spewing forth.

"You naff little scrote!" he shouted. "I'm sick to death of you getting on my tits! When I've done working over your slippery and that great dozy blot beside you, I'm going to paint you red on red."

I did not see what happened at that moment with Arlie. Somebody tried to fondle her, I believe, and there was a commotion beside me, too brief to call a struggle, and then she had a laser in her hand and was firing. A beam of crimson light no thicker than a knitting needle spat from the muzzle and punched its way through the temple of a compact graying man, exiting through the top of his skull, dropping him in a heap. Another beam spitted the shoulder of the blond woman. All this at close quarters, people shrieking, stumbling, pushing together, nudging me, nearly causing me to set off the charge. Then the laser was knocked from Arlie's hand, and she was thrown to the floor. Samuelson came to stand astraddle her, his laser aimed at her chest.

"Carve the bitch up!" said the blond woman, holding her shoulder.

"Splendid idea," Samuelson said, adjusting the setting of his laser. "I'll just do a little writing to begin with. Start with an inspirational saying, don't you think? Or maybe"—he chuckled—"John Loves Arlie."

"No," I said, my nerves steadied by this frontal assault; I pulled out the packet charge. "No, you're not going to do that. Because unless you do the right thing, in about two seconds the best part of you is going to be sliding all greasy-like down the walls. I'll give you to three to put down your weapons." I drew a breath and tried to feel Arlie beside me. "One." I stared at Samuelson, coming hard at him with all the fire left in me. "You best tell 'em how mad I am for you." I squared my shoulders; I prayed I had the guts to press the switch on three. "That's two."

"Do it!" he said to his people. "Do it now!"

They let their weapons fall.

"Back it off," I said, feeling relief, but also a ghostly momentum as if the count had continued on in some alternate probability and I was now blowing away in fire and ruin. I picked up my pack, grabbed Samuelson by the shirtfront as the rest retreated along the corridor. "Open the hatch," I told Arlie, who had scrambled up from the floor.

I heard her punching out the code, and a moment later, I heard the hatch swing open. I backed around the door, slung Samuelson into the airlock, slamming him up against Bill, who had wandered in on his own. At that precise moment, the CPC exploded.

The sound of the explosion was immense, a great wallop of pressure and noise that sent me reeling into the airlock, reeling and floating up, the artificial gravity systems no longer operative; but what was truly terrifying was the vented hiss that followed the explosion, signalling disengagement from the connecting corridors, and the sickening sway of the floor, and then the roar of ignition as the module's engines transformed what had been a habitat into a ship. I pictured the whole of Solitaire coming apart piece by piece, each one igniting and moving off into the nothing, little glowing bits, like the break-up of an electric reef.

Arlie had snatched up one of the lasers and she was now training it at Samuleson, urging him into his pressure suit—a difficult chore considering the acceleration. But he was managing. I helped Bill on with his helmet and fitted mine in place just as the boost ended and we drifted free. Then I broke the seal on the outer hatch, started the lock cycling.

Once the lock had opened, I told Arlie she would have to drive the sled. I watched as she fitted herself into the harness of the rocket pack, then I lashed Samuelson to one of the metal struts, Bill to another. I set the charge I had been carrying on the surface of the station, took two more out of the pack. I set the timers for 90

seconds. I had no thought in my head as I was doing this; I might have been a technician stripping a wire, a welder joining a seam.

Yet as I prepared to activate the charges, I realized that I was not merely ridding the station of the Strange Magnificence, but of the corporation's personnel. I had, of course, known this before, but I had not understood what it meant. Within a month, probably considerably less, the various elements of the station would reunite, and when they did, for the first time in our history, Solitaire would be a free place, without a corporate presence to strike the fear of God and Planet Earth into the hearts and minds of the workers. Oh, it was true, some corporates might have been in other modules when the explosion occurred, but most of them were gone, and the survivors would not be able to wield much power; it would be six months at least before their replacements arrived and a new administration could be installed. A lot could happen in that time. My comprehension of this was much less linear than I am reporting; it came to me as a passion, a hope, and as I activated the timers, I had a wild sense of freedom that, though I did not fathom it then, seems now to have been premonitory and inspired.

I lashed and locked myself on to a strut close to Arlie and told her to get the hell gone, pointing out as a destination the web of a transport dock that we were passing. I did not see the explosion, but I saw the white flare of it in Arlie's faceplate as she turned to watch; I kept my eyes fixed for a time on the bits and pieces of Solitaire passing silently around us, and when I turned to her, as the reflected fire died away and her eyes were revealed, wide and lovely and dark, I saw no hatred in her, no disgust. Perhaps she she had already forgiven me for being the man I was. Not kindly, and yet not without kindness. Merely someone who had learned to do the necessary and to live with it. Someone whose past had burned a shadow that stretched across his future.

I told her to reverse the thrusters and stop the sled. There was one thing left to do, though I was not so eager to have done with it as once I had been. Out in the dark, in the nothing, with all those stars pointing their hot eyes at you and trying to spear your mind with their secret colors, out in that absolute desert the questions of villainy and heroism grow remote. The most terrible of sins and the sweetest virtues often become compressed in the midst of all that sunless cold; compared to the terrible inhumanity of space, they both seem warmly human and comprehensible. And thus when I approached the matter of ending Samuelson's life I did so without relish, without the vindictive spirit that I might have expressed had we been back on Solitaire.

I inched my way back to where I had tied him and locked on to a strut; I trained the laser on the plastic rope that lashed him to the sled and burned it through. His legs floated up, and he held on to a strut with his gauntleted hands.

"Please, God! Don't!" he said, the panic in his voice made tinny and comical by my helmet speaker; he stared down through the struts that sectioned off the void into which he was about to travel—silver frames each enclosing a rectangle of unrelieved black, some containing a few scraps of billion-year-old light. "Please!"

"What do you expect from me?" I asked. "What do you expect from life? Mercy? The accolade? Here." I pointed at the sweep of stars and poetry, the iron puzzle of the dock beginning to loom, to swell into a massive crosshatching of girders, each strung with white lights, with Mars a phantom crescent below and the sun a yellow coal. "You longed for God, didn't you? Where is He if not here? Here's your strange magnificence." I gestured with the laser. "Push off. Hard. If you don't push hard enough, we'll come after you and give you a nudge. You can open your faceplate whenever you want it to end."

He began to plead, to bargain. "I can make you wealthy," he said. "I can get you back to Earth. Not London. Nova Sibersk. One of the towers."

"Of course you can," I said. "And I would be a wise man, indeed, to trust that promise, now wouldn't I?"

"There are ways," Samuelson said. "Ways to guarantee it. It's not that difficult. Really. I can..."

"Thirwell smiled at me," I reminded him. "He sang. Are your beliefs so shallow you won't even favor us with a tune?"

"Do you want me to sing? Do you want me to be humiliated? If that's what it'll take to get you to listen, I'll do it. I'll do anything."

"No," I said. "That's not what I want."

His eyes were big with the idea of death. I knew what he was feeling: all his life was suddenly thrilling, precious, new; and he was almost made innocent by the size and intensity of his fear, almost cleansed and converted by the knowledge that all this sensey splendor was about to go on forever and ever without him. It was a hard moment, and he did not do well by it.

When he began to weep I burned a hole in his radio housing to silence him. He put a hand up to shield his face, fearing I would burn the helmet; I kicked his other hand loose from the sled, sending him spinning

away slowly, head over heels toward the sun, a bulky white figure growing toylike and clever against the black ground of his future, like one of those little mechanical monkeys that spins round and round on a plastic bar. I knew he would never open his faceplate—the greater the villain, the greater their inability to accept fate. He would be a long time dying.

I checked on Bill—he was sleeping!—and returned to my place beside Arlie. We boosted again toward the dock. I thought about Gerald, about the scattered station, about Bill, but I could not concentrate on them. It was as if what I saw before me had gone inside my skull, and my mind was no longer a storm of electric impulse, but an immense black emptiness lit by tiny stars and populated by four souls, one of whom was only now beginning to know the terrible loneliness of his absent god.

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We entrusted Bill to the captain of the docked transport, *Steel City* , a hideous name for a hideous vessel, pitted and gray and ungainly in form, like a sad leviathian. There was no going back to Solitaire for Bill. They had checked the recordings taken in the CPC, and they knew who had been responsible for the break-up of the station, for the nearly one hundred and thirty lives that had been lost, for the billions in credit blown away. Even under happier circumstances, without Mister C to guide him, he would not be able to survive. Nor would he survive on Earth. But there he would at least have a slight chance. The corporation had no particular interest in punishing him. They were not altogether dissatisfied with the situation, being pleased to learn that their failsafe system worked, and they would, they assured us, see to it that he was given institutional care. I knew what that portended. Shunted off to some vast dark building with a Catholic statue centering a seedy garden out front, and misplaced, lost among the howling damned and terminally feeble, and eventually, for want of any reason to do otherwise, going dark himself, lying down and breathing, perhaps feeding from time to time, for a while, and then, one day, simply giving up, giving out, going away on a rattle of dishes on the dinner cart or a wild cry ghosting up from some nether region or a shiver of winter light on a cracked linoleum floor, some little piece of brightness to which he could attach himself and let go of the rest. It was horrible to contemplate, but we had no choice. Back on the station he would have been torn apart.

The *Steel City* was six hours from launching inbound when Arlie and I last saw Bill. He was in a cell lit by a billious yellow tray of light set in the ceiling, wearing a gray ship's jumpsuit; his wound had been dressed, and he was clean, and he was terrified. He tried to hold us, he pleaded with us to take him back home, and when we told him that was impossible, he sat cross-legged on the floor, rocking back and forth, humming a tune that I recognized as "Barnacle Bill the Spacer". He had apparently forgotten its context and the cruel words. Arlie kneeled beside him and told stories of the animals he would soon be seeing. There were tigers sleek as fire, she said, and elephants bigger than small towns, and birds faster than rain, and wolves with mysterious lights in their eyes. There were serpents too, she said, green ones with ruby tongues that told the most beautiful stories in the world, and cries so musical had been heard in the Mountains of the Moon that no one dared seek out the creature who had uttered them for fear of being immolated by the sight of such beauty, and the wind, she said, the wind was also an animal, and to those who listened carefully to it, it would whisper its name and give them a ride around the world in a single day. Birds as bright as the moon, great lizards who roared when it thundered as if answering questions, white bears with golden claws and magical destinies. It was a wonderland to which he was traveling, and she expected him to call and tell us all the amazing things that he would do and see.

Watching them, I had a clearer sense of him than ever before. I knew he did not believe Arlie, that he was only playing at belief, and I saw in this his courage, the stubborn, clean drive to live that had been buried under years of abuse and denial. He was not physically courageous, not in the least, but I for one knew how easy that sort of courage was to sustain, requring only a certain careless view of life and a few tricks to inspire a red madness. And I doubted I could have withstood all he had suffered, the incessant badgering and humiliation, the sharp rejection, the sexual defeats, the monstrous loneliness. Years of it. Decades. God knows, he had committed an abysmal stupidity, but we had driven him to it, we had menaced and tormented him, and in return—an act of selfishness and desperation, I admit, yet selfishness in its most refined form, desperation in its most gentle incarnation—he had tried to save us, to make us love him.

It is little enough to know of a man or a woman, that he or she has courage. Perhaps there might have been more to know about Bill had we allowed him to flourish, had we given his strength levers against which to test itself and thus increase. But at that moment knowing what I knew seemed more than enough, and it opened me to all the feelings I had been repressing, to thoughts of Gerald in particular. I saw that my relationship with him—in fact most of my relationships—were similar to the one I'd had with Bill; I had

shied away from real knowledge, real intimacy. I felt like weeping, but the pity of it was, I would only be weeping for myself.

Finally it was time for us to leave. Bill pawed us, gave us clumsy hugs, clung to us, but not so desperately as he might have; he realized, I am fairly certain, that there would be no reprieve. And, too, he may not have thought he deserved one. He was ashamed, he believed he had done wrong, and so it was with a shameful attitude, not at all demanding, that he asked me if they would give him another implant, if I would help him get one.

"Yeah, sure, Bill," I said. "I'll do my best."

He sat back down on the floor, touched the wound on his neck. "I wish he was here," he said.

"Mister C?" said Arlie, who had been talking to a young officer; he had just come along to lead us back to our sled. "Is that who you're talkin' about, dear?"

He nodded, eyes on the floor.

"Don't you fret, luv. You'll get another friend back 'ome. A better one than Mister C. One what won't 'urt you."

"I don't mind he hurts me," Bill said. "Sometimes I do things wrong."

"We all of us do wrong, luv. But it ain't always necessary for us to be 'urt for it."

He stared up at her as if she were off her nut, as if could not imagine a circumstance in which wrong was not followed by hurt.

"That's the gospel," said the officer. "And I promise, we'll be takin' good care of you, Bill." He had been eyefucking Arlie, the officer had, and he was only saying this to impress her with his humanity. Chances were, as soon as we were out of sight, he would go to kicking and yelling at Bill. Arlie was not fooled by him.

"Goodbye, Bill," she said, taking his hand, but he did not return her pressure, and his hand slipped out of her grasp, flopped onto his knee; he was already retreating from us, receding into his private misery, no longer able to manufacture a brave front. And as the door closed on him, that first of many doors, leaving him alone in that sickly yellow space, he put his hands to the sides of his head as if his skull could not contain some terrible pain, and began rocking back and forth, and saying, almost chanting the words, like a bitter monk his hopeless litany, "Oh, no... oh, no... oh, no..."

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Some seventy-nine hours after the destruction of the CPC and the dispersal of Solitaire, the lightship *Perseverance* came home... came home with such uncanny accuracy, that had the station been situated where it should have been, the energies released by the ship's re-entry from the supraluminal would have annihilated the entire facility and all on board. The barnacles, perhaps sensing some vast overload of light through their photophores... the barnacles and an idiot man had proved wiser than the rest of us. And this was no ordinary homecoming in yet another way, for it turned out that the voyage of the *Perseverance* had been successful. There was a new world waiting on the other side of the nothing, unspoiled, a garden of possibility, a challenge to our hearts and a beacon to our souls.

I contacted the corporation. They, of course, had heard the news, and they also recognized that had Bill not acted the *Perseverance* and all aboard her would have been destroyed along with Solitaire. He was, they were delighted to attest, a hero, and they would treat him as such. How's that, I asked. Promotions, news specials, celebrations, parades, was their answer. What he really wants, I told them, is to come back to Solitaire. Well, of course, they said, we'll see what we can do. When it's time, they said. We'll do right by him, don't you worry. How about another implant, I asked. Absolutely, no problem, anything he needs. By the time I broke contact, I understood that Bill's fate would be little different now he was a hero than it would have been when he was a mere fool and a villain. They would use him, milk his story for all the good it could do them, and then he would be discarded, misplaced, lost, dropped down to circulate among the swirling masses of the useless, the doomed and the forgotten.

Though I had already—in concert with others—formed a plan of action, it was this duplicity on the corporation's part that hardened me against them, and thereafter I threw myself into the implementation of the plan. A few weeks from now, the *Perseverance* and three other starships soon to be completed will launch for the new world. Aboard will be the population of Solitaire, minus a few unsympathetic personnel who have been rendered lifeless, and the populations of other, smaller stations in the asteroid belt and orbiting Mars. Solitaire itself, and the other stations, will be destroyed. It will take the corporation decades, perhaps a century, to rebuild what has been lost, and by the time they are able to reach us, we hope to have grown strong, to have fabricated a society free of corporations and Strange Magnificences, composed of those who have learned to survive without the quotas and the dread consolations of the Earth. It is an old dream, this

desire to say, No more, Never again, to build a society cleansed of the old compulsions and corruptions, the ancient, vicious ways, and perhaps it is a futile one, perhaps the fact that men like myself must be included on the rosted, violent men, men who will do the necessary, who will protect against all enemies with no thought for moral fall-out, perhaps this pre-ordains failure. Nevertheless, it needs to be dreamed every so often, and we are prepared to be the dreamers.

So that is the story of Barnacle Bill. My story, and Arlie's as well, yet his most of all, though his real part in it, the stuff of his thoughts and hopes, the pain he suffered and the fear he overcame, those things can never be told. Perhaps you have seen him recently on the HV, or even in person, riding in an open car at the end of a parade with men in suits, eating an ice and smiling, but in truth he is already gone into history, already part of the past, already half-forgotten, and when the final door has closed on him, it may be that his role in all this will be reduced to a mere footnote or simply a mention of his name, the slightest token of a life. But I will remember him, not in memorial grace, not as a hero, but as he was, in all his graceless ways and pitiable form. It is of absolute importance to remember him thus, because that, I have come to realize, the raw and the deformed, the ugly, the miserable miracles of our days, the unalloyed baseness of existence, that is what we must learn to love, to accept, to embrace, if we are to cease the denials that weaken us, if we are ever to admit our dismal frailty and to confront the natural terror and heartbreak weather of our lives and live like a strong light across the sky instead of retreating into darkness.

The barnacles have returned to Solitaire. Or rather, new colonies of barnacles have attached to the newly re-united station, not covering it completely, but dressing it up it in patches. I have taken to walking among them, weeding them as Bill once did; I have become interested in them, curious as to how they perceived a ship coming from light years away, and I intend to carry some along with us on the voyage and make an attempt at a study. Yet what compells me to take these walks is less scientific curiosity than a kind of furious nostalgia, a desire to remember and hold the center of those moments that have so changed the direction of our lives, to think about Bill and how it must have been for him, a frightened lump of a man with a clever voice in his ear, alone in all that daunting immensity, fixing his eyes on the bright clots of life at his feet. Just today Arlie joined me on such a walk, and it seemed we were passing along the rim of an infinite dark eye flecked with a trillion bits of color, and that everything of our souls and of every other soul could be seen in that eye, that I could look down to Earth through the haze and scum of the ocean air and see Bill where he stood looking up and trying to find us in that mottled sky, and I felt all the eerie connections a man feels when he needs to believe in something more than what he knows is real, and I tried to tell myself he was all right, walking in his garden in Nova Sibersk, taking the air with an idiot woman so beautiful it nearly made him wise. But I could not sustain the fantasy. I could only mourn, and I had no right to mourn, having never loved him—or if I did, even in the puniest of ways, it was never his person I loved, but what I had from him, the things awakened in me by what had happened. Just the thought that I could have loved him, maybe that was all I owned of right.

We were heading back toward the East Louie airlock, when Arlie stooped and plucked up a male barnacle. Dark green as an emerald, it was, except for its stubby appendage. Glowing like magic, alive with threads of color like a potter's glaze.

"That's a rare one," I said. "Never saw one that color before."

"Bill would 'ave fancied it," she said.

"Fancied, hell. He would have hung the damned thing about his neck."

She set it back down, and we watched as it began working its way across the surface of the barnacle patch, doing its slow, ungainly cartwheels, wobbling off-true, lurching in flight, nearly missing its landing, but somehow making it, somehow getting there. It landed in the shadow of some communications gear, stuck out its tongue and tried to feed. We watched it for a long, long while, with no more words spoken, but somehow there was a little truth hanging in the space between us, in the silence, a poor thing not worth naming, and maybe not even having a name, it was such a infinitesimal slice of what was, and we let it nourish us as much as it could, we took its luster and added it to our own, we sucked it dry, we had its every flavor, and then we went back inside, arm in arm, to rejoin the lie of the world.

CROCODILE ROCK

You must not think of me as a reliable witness, as someone immune to bias and distortion. Every story, of course, should by rights be introduced by such a disclaimer, for we are none of us capable of a wholly disinterested clarity; but though it is my intention to relate the truth, I am persuaded by the tumult of my recent past to consider myself a less reliable witness than most.

For several months prior to receiving Rawley's phone call, I had been in a state of decline, spending my grant money on drink and drugs and women, a bender that left me nearly penniless and in shaky mental health. It seems that this downward spiral was precipitated by no particular event, but rather constituted a spiritual erosion, perhaps one expressing an internalized reflection of war, famine, plague, all the Biblical afflictions deviling the continent—it would not be the first time, if true, that the rich miseries of Africa have so infected an expatriate. Then, too, while many American and overseas blacks speak happily of a visit to the ancestral home, a view with which I do not completely disagree, for me it was an experience fraught with odd, delicate pressures and a constant feeling of mild dislocation—these things as well, I believe, took a toll on my stability. Whatever the root cause, I neglected my work, traveling with less and less frequency into the bush, and sequestered myself in my Abidjan apartment, a sweaty little rat's nest of cement block and stucco with mustard-colored walls and vinyl-upholstered furniture that would have been appropriate to the waiting room of a forward-thinking American dentist circa 1955.

The morning of the call, I was sitting hung over, watching my latest live-in girlfriend, Patience, make toast. Patience was barely two weeks removed from her home village; city ways were still new and bright to her, and though she claimed to have previously observed the operation of a toaster, she'd never had any hands-on experience with the appliance. Stacks of buttered to ast, varying in color from black to barely browned, evidence of her experiments with the process, covered half the kitchen table. The sight of this lovely seventeen-year-old girl (the age she claimed), naked except for a pair of red panties, staring intently at the toaster, laughing when the bread popped forth, breasts jiggling as she laboriously buttered each slice, glancing up every so often to flash me a delighted smile... it was the sort of thing that once might have stimulated me to insights concerning cultural syncretism and innocence, or to a more personal appreciation of the moment and my witness of it. Now, however, this sort of insight only made me feel weary, despairing of life, and I had grown too alienated to keep a collection of intimate mental Polaroids—and so I was glad when the ring of the telephone dragged me away into the living room.

"My God, man!" Rawley said when I answered. "You sound awful." His tone became sly and knowing. "What can you have been doing with yourself?"

"Business as usual," I said, more brusquely than I'd intended. "What's on your mind?"

A pause, burst of static along the long distance wire, after which Rawley's voice seemed tinier, flatter, less human. "Actually, Michael, I've some work to toss your way... if you're interested. But if this is a bad time..."

I apologized for being short with him, told him I'd had a rough couple of nights.

"Not to worry," he said, and laughed. "My fault for calling so early. I should have remembered you're a bit of a cunt before you've had your coffee."

I asked what kind of work he was talking about, and there was another pause. A radio was switched on in the adjoining apartment; a soukous tune blasted forth, lilting guitars and Sam Mangwana chiding an unfaithful lover. From the street came the spicy smell of roasting meat; I was tempted to look out the window and see if a vendor had set up shop below, but the brightness hurt my eyes, and I closed the blinds instead.

"I've been put in charge of a rather curious case," Rawley said. "It's quite troubling, really. We've had some murders up in Bandundu Province that have been attributed to sorcery. Crocodile men, to be specific."

"That's hardly unusual."

"No, no, of course it isn't. Not a year goes by we don't have similar reports. Sorcerers changing into various animals and doing murder. Although this year there've been considerably more. Dozens of them. Hang on a second, will you?"

I heard him speaking to someone in his office, and I pictured him as I had seen him three months before—blond Aryan youth grown into a beefy, smug, thirtyish ex-swimmer given to hearty backslapping

and beery excess. Or, as a remittance man of our mutual acquaintance had described him, "... halfway through a transformation from beautiful boy to bloated alcoholic."

"Michael?" Patience stood in the kitchen doorway; the room behind her was wreathed in smoke.

"The bread won't come out the slots." She said this sadly, her head tilted down, gazing up at me through her lashes—an attitude that suggested both penitence and sexual promise.

"I'll be there in a minute," I told her. "Just pull the plug out of the wall."

"Sorry about that, Michael." Rawley was back, his manner more energized, as if he'd received encouraging news. "This particular case I mentioned. We have a witness who's identified three men and two women he claims turned into monsters. Half man, half croc. He says he saw them kill and eat several people."

I started to speak, but he cut me off.

"I know, I know. That's not unusual, either. But this fellow's testimony was compelling. Described the beasties in great detail. Human from the waist up, croc from the hips down. Skin in tatters, as if they were undergoing a change. That sort of thing. At any rate, arrests have been made. Four of them deny everything. As you might expect. Under ordinary circumstances, I'd let them go. Despite the superstition rampant in these parts, prosecuting a case based entirely on an accusation of sorcery would be a ludicrous exercise. But in this instance, one of the accused has confessed."

I had been stretching the phone cord to its full extension, peering around the corner of the doorway to see how Patience was doing with the toaster cord. Now Rawley had won my complete attention.

"He confessed to killing and eating people?"

"Not only that. He confessed to killing them while in the form of half man, half crocodile."

I took a moment to consider this, then said, "The police must have tortured him."

"I don't believe so. I've spoken with him in the jail at Mogado, and he's not in the least intimidated. On the contrary, I have the sense he's laughing at us. He seems amused that anyone would doubt him."

"Then he must be insane."

"The thought did occur. Naturally I had him examined by a psychiatrist. Clean bill of health. Of course, I'm not altogether sure of either my psychiatrist's competency or his motives. His credentials are not of the highest quality, and there's a great deal of political pressure being exerted to have the case brought to trial. The big boys in Kinshasa don't enjoy the notion that someone out in the provinces might be practicing more effective juju than they themselves."

"It all sounds intriguing," I said. "But I don't understand how I can help."

"I want someone I trust to have a look at this fellow. A practiced observer. Someone with expertise in the field."

"I'm scarcely an expert in human behavior. Certainly not by any academic standard."

"True enough," said Rawley. "But you do know a thing or two about crocodiles. Don't you?"

This startled me. "I suppose... though I haven't kept up with the literature. Snakes are my thing. But what possible use can you have for an expert on crocodiles?"

Again Rawley fell silent. I had another peek in at Patience. She was sitting by the table, staring glumly out the window, the black toaster plug protruding from her clasped hands—like a child holding a dead flower. She did not turn, but her eyes cut toward me and held my gaze—the effect was disconcerting, like the way a zombie might glance at you. Or a lizard.

"I realize this may sound mad," Rawley said, "but Buma... That's the man's name. Gilbert Buma. He's an impressive sort. Impressive in a way I can't put into words. He has the most extraordinary effect on people. I..." He made a frustrated noise. "Christ, Michael! I need you to come and have a look at him. I can get you a nice consulting fee. We'll fly you into Kinshasa, pay all expenses. Believe it or not, there's a decent hotel in Mogado. A relic of empire. You'll be very comfortable, and I'll stand for the drinks. It shouldn't take more than a week." I heard the click of a cigarette lighter, the sound of Rawley exhaling. "C'mon, man. Say you'll do it. It makes an excellent excuse for a visit if nothing else. I've missed you, you old bastard."

"All right. I'll come. But I'm still not sure what exactly it is you want from me."

"I'm not entirely clear on the subject myself," said Rawley. "But for the sake of the conversation, let's just say I'd like you to give me your considered opinion as to whether or not Buma might be telling the truth."

j

Patience wept when I left. We had only been together a few days, and our relationship had acquired no more than a gloss of emotional depth; yet judging by her display of tearful affection, you might have thought we were newlyweds torn apart in the midst of a honeymoon. I gave her enough money to last a couple of weeks and instructed her in the use of the apartment. Frankly, I didn't believe I would see her again; I assumed that I would return home to find the place trashed, and myself in need of a new toaster. The tears, I suspected, were

the product of her fear at being left alone in the city, a situation she would address the minute I was out the door. But despite this cynical view, I was moved and tried to reassure her that everything would be fine. I told her I would call from Mogado and gave her Rawley's office number. Nothing served to placate her. As I rattled about in the cab on the way to the airport, peering out at dusty slums through the mosaic of decals and fetishes that almost obscured the rear window, I felt a twinge of remorse at leaving her so bereft, and I wondered if by conditioning myself to expect the worst of people, I had also blinded myself to their potentials. Perhaps, I told myself, Patience was something other than the typical village girl driven from home by poverty, on her way to death by knife or beating or STD; perhaps she was offering more than I had taken the trouble to notice. But the sentimentality of this idea was off-putting. I pushed it a side and turned my thoughts to what lay ahead, to Mogado and Gilbert Buma, and to Rawley.

My friendship with James Rawley had been launched under the banner of political correctness. Though not so obnoxiously pervasive as it had become in the States, the politically correct mentality was nonetheless in vogue during my year at Oxford, and I believe Rawley perceived that friendship with a black American would effect a moral credential that would immunize him against the stereotyping reserved for white Africans, thereby assisting his student career—and it was for him a career in the purest sense of the word, a carefully crafted accretion of connections and influence. I doubt he was aware of this choice; it was more a by-product of natural craftiness than of any conscious scheme. But I also doubt he would have denied the fact had I brought it to his attention—he had an intuitive self-knowledge and blunt honesty that made it difficult for him to harbor illusions regarding his motives. For my part, it was not so different. Rawley's acceptance helped to ease my path at Oxford, and though the artificial character of the relationship was always a shadow between us, we never discussed the subject; we had sufficient affinities and commonalties of interest to allow us to finesse this potential problem.

For a long while, I considered the friendship abnormal, and I suppose it was to a degree, since from its onset it had not been informed by real affection; but as I grew older, I came to recognize that friends, like lovers, have their honeymoons, and that affection, like passion, lasts only for a season unless sustained by concerns of mutual advantage. Rawley and I had manufactured a friendship based on those concerns without the attendant warmth; yet over the years, our orbits continued to intersect, and a genuine warmth evolved between us. It was as if because we had never bought into the illusion of friendship, because we had initiated our bond on the basest of levels, an enduring and dynamic friendship became possible. Whenever I stopped to analyze the relationship, I couldn't be certain that I even liked Rawley; yet time and experience had inextricably woven together the threads of our lives, and our dependency on one another for counsel, money, a shoulder to cry on, and so forth had grown so deep-seated, we might have been an old married couple.

j

Though I had never been to Mogado, I knew what to expect. All African provincial capitals are much the same, both in essence and particulars, and Mogado's downtown area of dusty, potholed streets, a scattering of leafless, skeletal trees, and shabby buildings with cracked stucco facades, was not in any wise distinctive. Just enough people about to give the impression of squatters in a ghost town: a barefoot woman in a faded dress peering from a dark doorway; three skinny kids squatting in the dirt, tormenting a captive mouse snake; a toothless old man sitting at a window, gazing blankly into the past. Everyone else hiding from the heat. In the central square, dominated by a plaster fountain decorated with faces from which all feature had eroded, a pariah dog with a pelt the color of blanched almonds was poking about for bugs in a patch of sere grass. When my car passed close to him, he skittered away sideways, dragging behind him a shadow as thin as a wire animal.

The street sign on the corner nearest the jail was dented and weathered, almost unreadable. Peering closely, I saw it was inscribed with a date; I could just make out the month, November, and the slightest suggestion of a numeral—doubtless commemorating some brilliant revolutionary passage whose spirit had suffered a comparable erosion of clarity. The jail itself occupied the basement and ground floor of the provincial offices, which were housed in a four-story edifice of pastel green stucco. A potbellied Congolese policeman with blue-black skin, a presidential air of self-importance, and a wen under his left eye sat in the anteroom behind a flyspecked desk, reading a French-language newspaper whose headline proclaimed afrry disaster on the Kilombo River, the same muddy watercourse that flowed past Mogado. The crack-webbed wall at his back was figured by a large rectangle paler by several degrees than the remainder of its dingy surface; I took this to be the space wherefor three decades a portrait of the late unlamented dictator, Mobutu Sese Seko, had hung. A ceiling fan stirred the air, but the faint breeze it created served merely to make me more aware of the humidity and the acrid stench of cleaning agents mixed in with a mustier scent, one I

imagined to be that of blood and urine and sweat, the smell of old sufferings.

Rawley, the policeman told me, had been detained; he would join me that evening at the hotel. However, I could see the prisoner now if I wished.

I had presumed that Rawley would want to speak to me before my initial meeting with Buma; but now I suspected that his absence was by design, that he preferred to have my first impressions of the man be untainted by any further briefing on the case. I was tired from the flight and the drive, but I decided there was no point in putting things off.

A second policeman accompanied me down the stairs to a freshly whitewashed interrogation room at the rear of the building, furnished with a rough wooden table and two folding chairs. As I waited for Buma, I picked at the whitewash with my fingernails and succeeded in scraping away a sizable flake, revealing a dark undercoat dappled with rust-colored spots that were almost certainly dried blood. It would be nice, I thought, if Mobutu were doing time someplace a touch more tropical than Mogado, capering madly about in a red-hot iron cell, with snakes' heads protruding from his eyes and rats playing tug-of-war with bloody strips of his tongue.

The door creaked back, and the policeman, wearing an agitated expression, ushered an elderly white-haired man into the room and locked the door behind him. The man was dressed in a tattered shirt and trousers of flour sacking, his arms and legs in manacles. His head was down, and he did not look at me. He stepped behind the chair opposite, repositioned it so that it was sideways to the table, and sat, affording me a view of his left profile. Only then did he dart his eyes toward me, engaging my stare for a few beats before fixing his gaze on the wall. He smiled, showing a sliver of discolored teeth—or perhaps it was not a true smile, for the expression held, as if this were the natural relaxed position of his jaws. His skin was coffee-colored, so crisscrossed with wrinkles that I initially assumed him to be in his eighties; but his musculature gave the lie to this impression. His forearms and biceps were those of someone who had thrived on a lifetime of physical labor, and his features were firmly fleshed and strong. It seemed that age had merely laid a patina upon him, and that if you could erase the wrinkles, you would be face to face with a man of hale middle age.

"Mister Buma," I said. "My name is Michael Mosely. I'd like to ask you some questions."

He was slow to respond, but at length, as if it had taken several seconds for my words to penetrate his cerebral cortex, several more for the brain to interpret them, he said in a baritone of such resonance he might have been speaking through a wooden tube: "They tell me you are another doctor."

"Yes," I said. "But not the same sort of doctor who interviewed you previously. My discipline is herpetology. The study of snakes. To be precise, I'm an ethologist specializing in the behavior of pythons."

This appeared to interest him. He turned the full force of his liverish eyes on me—when I say "force," I am being literal, for I could have sworn I felt a sudden cold pressure on the skin of my face. That and his thin, false smile combined to instill in me a sense of unease.

"Pythons," he said, and gave an amused grunt. "You will learn nothing about pythons from me."

"As you probably know," I said, "that's not the subject of my inquiry."

He lifted his large head a few degrees and appeared to be studying something in the corner of the ceiling. The most interesting thing about him to this juncture, I thought, was his stillness. After each movement, he seemed to freeze, not a muscle or a nerve twitching, and I wondered if this might not be the symptom of some pathology.

"Where were you born?" I asked.

"Along the river. A few days from here."

"What's the name of your village?"

"It no longer exists," he said. "It has no name."

Mobutu, I thought. Under Mobutu, many things in the Congo had ceased to exist.

"I'm going to assume," I said, "you committed the murders you've been accused of. If that's the case, why did you confess?"

He lowered his gaze to the wall. "Because I wished to announce myself. Because I am not afraid of what may follow."

From his answer, I thought I understood him. Either he had participated in the murders, or else they had been done by someone else, and he had seen them as an opportunity. He was a witch man. A member of a crocodile cult. He wanted an acknowledgment of his power; once that acknowledgment had been made, and the cult's authority affirmed, he believed that no Congolese court would have the courage to convict him—they would be intimidated by the threat posed by his sorcery. The entire process of accusation and confession had in effect been a public relations stunt designed to elevate the cult from a bush league operation, so to speak, to a place of honor in the complicated hierarchy of witches and sorcerers that had

always flourished in the country, no matter what political regime occupied the halls of power. While Mobutu was in office, this sort of stratagem would have been met with swift violence—no one was permitted to practice greater juju than the president-for-life; but now, with lesser monsters in control, it stood a chance of success. What I didn't understand, however, was whether he was a con man or if he actually believed his own bullshit.

"Would you mind telling me how you acquired the ability to transform yourself?" I asked.

He seemed not to have heard me, continuing to stare at the wall.

I found this intriguing—it was my experience that most witch men would leap at an opportunity to present their magical credentials, to boast of their connections with various gods and elementals, to go on and on about the trials they had endured in their spiritual quests.

"The killings," I said. "Were they somehow related to the ritual that permitted you to transform yourself? Or were they merely... coincidental?"

He let out a heavy sigh, and his mouth remained open, as if it had been a last breath; but then he blinked, and his eyes cut toward me again.

"These questions," he said, "they hide another question. The thing you truly wish to know is whether I am a liar or a fool. If I were a fool, I would have no answer. If I were a liar, I would not tell you the truth."

"You underestimate yourself..." I began, but he gave a dismissive wave.

"I have no need to ask whether you are a fool," he said. "You claim to be a doctor who studies snakes, yet your questions are the same as that other fool's. You think to trick me into revealing myself. Yet you are such a great fool, you can't see that I have already done so."

"All men are fools one way or another," I said. "But I'm willing to accept your judgment. Why don't you enlighten me?"

To this point, his movements had been measured and slow, something I attributed to the weight of the manacles. Now he whirled about and brought both fists down upon the center of the table, splintering it. This movement was so quick and fluid, I did not even have time to flinch, but was frozen by the violence; and as he leaned toward me, pinning me with his angry yellow gaze, I realized that the manacles would not be much of an impediment should he choose to attack.

The policeman's voice came from beyond the locked door, asking if everything was all right. Before I could respond, Buma told him to leave us alone. Immediately thereafter, I heard footsteps in retreat along the corridor.

"I wonder what's gotten into him?" I said to Buma, tamping down the coals of an incipient panic. "Whatever you're trying to sell, it seems you've found at least one idiot who's swallowed it."

He said nothing, remaining motionless; but I sensed a trivial relaxation in his tense posture.

I shifted to a more comfortable position, trying to present an image of cool indifference. "You were going to say... ?"

Buma dropped his eyes to the iron cuffs encircling his wrists; after a bit he let out another sigh and shifted back about to face the wall. "It would be best for you to return to Abidjan," he said.

I was for the moment confounded that he knew where I lived, but then realized there was an obvious explanation.

"I'm not impressed," I said. "It's likely that Mister Rawley told you about me. If not Rawley, then one of your guards."

This time, I thought, his peculiar thin smile was in actuality a smile. "If you travel upriver five days," he said, "you'll come to a place marked by a ferry landing that was burned by the soldiers. Walk into the jungle straight back from the landing until you see a giant fig tree. It's not far. There you will find what you have been seeking."

"And what exactly is that?"

"A python," Buma said. "A white one."

I was almost certain I had told Rawley that I was searching for an albino rock python—a healthy specimen would be worth six figures, and if it could be bred, I could make even more from the first litter. The money would free me from writing more grant proposals, from tedious research. From Africa. Yet I couldn't imagine Rawley being so chummy with Buma that he would let slip this piece of information—if I had told him, I had done so only in passing; it would not have been in character for me to dwell on such a quixotic enterprise. Still, this was the only possible explanation.

"I suppose the snake's just hanging around the fig tree, waiting for me to catch it."

Buma shot me an icy glance. "If you go there, you will find it."

"Golly, thanks. I'll get right on it," I said. "And here I thought you told me I'd learn nothing about pythons from you."

"Then it seems you must assume I am a liar," said Buma. "Not a fool."

I had to laugh at this. Rawley had been right—the man was clever; but I remained convinced that everything about him, from his reptilian mannerisms to his cryptic dialogue, was part of an act. Better conceived than others I'd seen, but an act nonetheless.

"Do you truly want answers to your questions?" Buma asked.

"Of course I do."

He turned to me again, slowly this time, and gave me an assessing look; he nodded. "It will be difficult, but you may be able to understand," he said. "Very well." He reached out and clasped my right wrist with his left hand.

In reflex, I tried to pull away, but my hand might have been stuck in an iron wall—his strength was irresistible. He closed his eyes, squeezed my wrist until my fist opened; then he leaned forward and spat into my palm. With his free hand, he closed my fingers around the spittle, so that it smeared into the flesh.

"There," he said, releasing me. "My brothers and sisters will not harm you now."

"I thought you were going to answer my questions."

"Words can never convey the truth." he told me. "Truth must be revealed. And so it will be revealed to you."

He settled back in his chair, let out a hissing sigh.

"That's it? That's your answer? The truth must be revealed?"

Buma's eyelids were half-closed; his chest rose and fell, but very, very slowly, as if he were asleep. "Tomorrow," he said in dusty, barely audible whisper. "We will talk more tomorrow."

j

The town was tucked into a notch between low green hills, beyond which lay deep jungle, and it stretched for nearly a quarter mile along the banks of the Kilombo, thinning out to the west into a district of thatched huts and shanty bars. Farther to the west, separated from this district by mud flats, lay the hotel Rawley had mentioned, the Hotel du Rive Vert, a venerable structure dating from the 1900s, when European traders had plied the river, exchanging cheap modernities for skins and ivory. The rive was no longer vert, the grounds having deteriorated into patches of parched grass crossed by muddy tracks, sentried here and there by dying, sparsely leaved eucalyptus. Standing isolate amid this desolation, the building itself, a rambling white stucco colonial fantasy of second-story balconies and French doors and a red tile roof, had the too-luminous incongruity of a hallucination, a notion assisted by the presence next to the front entrance of a lightning-struck acacia with a hollow just below its crotch that resembled an aghast mouth—it looked to be pointing at the hotel with a forked twig hand and venting a silent scream.

There was no sign of Rawley at the hotel, no message. The hotel bar, gloriously dim and cool and rife with mahogany gleam, was a temptation, but I didn't want to be drunk when Rawley arrived. I set out walking along the riverbank, thinking I might stop in at one of the shanty bars for a beer or two—no more than two. The beer, I thought, would provide a base for the heavier alcohol consumption that would likely ensue once Rawley and I finished our business and got down to reminiscence.

This was toward the end of the dry season, and while the better part of the days were sunny—as it was that day when I left the hotel—the late afternoon rains were lasting longer and longer, often well into night. The land was so thirsty that by mid-morning of the following day, the streets were parched again, and wind blew veils of dust up from the flats; but there was a new heaviness in the air, and in the mucky soil at the edge of the water, you could see shallow troughs where crocodiles had lain motionless during the downpour, steeped—or so I imagined—in a kind of bleak satisfaction, as if they believed that the mud and the river and the wet darkness were merging into a single medium, one perfect for their uses. Curiously enough, I did not see a single crocodile during the first portion of my walk. The flats reeked of spoilage and were strewn about with cattle bones and skulls, empty bottles, paper litter and fruit rinds; occasionally I passed a dead tree or a mounded puzzle of sun-whitened sticks and twigs that once had been a shrub of some sort. The river was a couple of hundred feet wide at this juncture, roiled and muddy, and the far side of the bank was occupied by secondary growth jungle, leached to a pale green by the summer drought—from it came the sound of a trillion exquisitely unimportant lives blended together into a seething hum, just audible above the idling wash of the water. Flies buzzed about my head, and at my feet I saw the delicate tracks of crabs. But no crocodiles, no significant animal life of any kind.

On rounding a bend, however, I was brought up short by the sight of more crocodiles than I could have reasonably expected. Less than ten yards from where I stood, a wide, flat spur of tawny rock extended out from the Mogado side of the bank some twenty-five feet over the river, and upon it, slithering atop one another, stacked almost to the height of a man, were dozens of crocs, perhaps more than a hundred. Hissing,

snapping, exposing their ghastly discolored teeth, groping with their clawed feet for purchase. A great humping mass of gray-green scales and turreted eyes and dead white mouths. I backed off a few paces, daunted by the closeness of so many predators, and by the strangeness of the scene. Not that it was entirely strange. During droughts, it sometimes happens that crocodiles will crowd together like this, pressing against each other in order to snare whatever moisture might have collected on the hides of their fellows; but in this instance, the drought had passed, and there was abundant water available. As I watched, one of the crocs dropped off the pile and went with a heavy splash into the murky water. Instead of making its way back up onto the rock, which I would have expected, it allowed itself to be carried off downstream, barely submerged, letting the current take it sideways, rolling it over partway to expose its pale, slimed belly, as if the thing were dead or moribund. Soon other crocs followed suit. This behavior was strange, indeed. I could think of no reason for it, except perhaps that toxic chemicals were responsible.

Before long, several dozen crocodiles had gone into the water—the narrows just beyond the bend was thronged with bodies, but once past that point, the current picked up speed and scattered them out across the breadth of the river, carrying them along more smoothly, so it appeared they were all arrowing toward the same destination, like an amphibious hunting pack. The scene was disturbing, unsettling, and not simply because I had no good explanation for it. I could not, you see, accept that it had a rational explanation; there was about the crocs' actions a quality of purposefulness, of surreal functionality, that caused me to think I was witnessing something to which rationality as I knew it did not apply. Though I had been trained as an academic, I was not the sort to be troubled by slight shifts in the alignment of reality—my personal life had been fraught with lapses into substance abuse and depression and various other altered states. But this particular shift seemed to embody a powerful, unfathomable value that outstripped my experience, and I was shaken by it.

I had lost my taste for native beer, but not my thirst, and I hurried back to the hotel, where I immersed myself in a large whiskey, and in the illusion of Europe granted by the beveled mirror behind the bar, with its deep reflection of dark wood, candlelit tables, and plush red carpeting. Two whiskeys more, and the potential threat posed by afflicted crocodiles receded into a blurry inconsequentiality.

The barman, a slender, dignified East Indian named Dillip, with pomaded gray hair, and a crimson sash accenting his white shirt and trousers, was watching television at the end of the counter: a news program from Kinshasa. Bodies were being hauled from a river. I asked him if this footage related to the ferry disaster reported in the morning headlines.

"No, sah. Somebody just kill these boys and throw them in the Kilombo." He shook his head ruefully. "Mobutu."

Mobutu, I reminded him, was dead.

"Even dead, he make trouble for this place. Many people along the river were not his friend. They try to assassinate him." He started to unload cutlery from a dishwasher." You see, sah, at the end Mobutu was crazy from his cancer and the drugs. He does many crazy things. One thing, he tell his sorcerer to lay a curse upon the river. And now every town, every village along the Kilombo is poisoned by it."

"Poisoned?"

"Yes, sah. They say the sorcerer take a scrap of Mobutu's spirit and send into the river. Now nothing good can happen here." He made a gesture of regret." Nothing good can happen anywhere. You see, the Kilombo it flows into the ocean. And since the ocean goes everywhere, Mobutu's curse have poisoned all the waters."

Despite the woeful character of this information, he imparted it with the air of a man glad to be helpful to a stranger, as if warning of a dangerous stretch of road ahead. Thus do most Africans, be they black or white or any shade in between, approach the subject of sorcery—it is a simple conversational resource, no more extraordinary than talk of politics and the weather; and as is the case with those topics, though the news concerning sorcerous activity is generally bad, it's simply a fact of life, and nothing to get upset about.

I was about to ask Dillip more about Mobutu's relationship with the region, but Rawley chose that moment to put in an appearance. The next few minutes were occupied by a backslapping embrace and an exchange of crude pleasantries. And following that, I filled him in on my interview with Buma.

"So you think he's a talented thespian." Rawley had a sip of beer. "I must admit that was my impression at first. And perhaps first impressions are the most accurate in this instance. The longer I spoke with him, the more persuaded I was that something else was going on. Magic. Sorcery. That's why I wanted your opinion. Being born here makes me somewhat susceptible to these old frauds."

He didn't seem convinced of this, however.

"I want to talk to him again, if only to watch him work," I said.

"Yes, yes... absolutely. Talk to him as often as you like." Rawley gazed at his reflection in the mirror. On the face of things, he looked the same as always, but now I noticed that his trousers and polo shirt were

rumpled, and his hair had been hastily combed—a far cry from his normal pathological neatness. Dark puffy half moons under his eyes gave evidence of sleeplessness, and his ruddy tan was undercut by the sort of pallor that comes with illness or overwork.

"Fuck me," he said wearily, as if he'd heard my thoughts. "This business is sending me round my twist." He signaled Dillip, pointed to my empty glass, and held up two fingers. "I'm getting it from both ends. Kinshasa wants me to prosecute, but the locals are terrified that if I do, Buma's minions will slaughter them in their beds."

"Buma has minions?"

"He's never mentioned any. But then, as you yourself observed, he conveys a certain menace." The whiskeys arrived, and Rawley knocked back half of his; he lit a cigarette, leaned back and regarded me fondly. "I'm glad you're here, Michael. I really needed someone to get pissed with."

"Then it's not my vast wisdom you were interested in."

He laughed. "Strictly a ruse."

An accomplished drinker, Rawley knew how to pace himself for a long evening. Though I had a head start, I slowed my own pace and fell into his rhythm of sips and swallows, and before long we had achieved a relatively equal level of inebriation. Other patrons entered the bar. A distinguished, white-haired African gentleman in a dark blue suit sat alone at a corner table, sipping a brightly colored drink decorated with a tiny paper parasol, and stared into the middle distance. His face betrayed no expression, but I imagined I could hear the memory tunes playing in his head. A young French couple—fieldworkers with a relief agency—littered the opposite end of the bar with government forms and talked earnestly. Two bearded thirtyish men in jeans and T-shirts took a table by the door; they downed beer after beerin rapid succession, their mule-like laughter at odds with the atmosphere of colonial decorum. Germans, probably.

When not busy serving his customers, Dillip continued to watch the TV, which now offered a discussion amongst three government officials concerning the troubles along the Kilombo, and since Rawley and I had for the moment exhausted our store of reminiscences, I told him what Dillip had said about Mobutu and his curse.

"Yeah, I've heard that story," Rawley said. "It's true enough the region has been going through hell since he died. But it's impossible to tell which came first, the trouble or the story." With the tip of his forefinger, he smeared a puddle of moisture around on the polished surface of the bar. "The old boy was mad, there's no doubt of it. And not just at the end. When I was a boy I met him with my father. Tiny fellow with outsized spectacles. Wearing a leopard-skin hat, and carrying a fetish stick. Young as I was, I could feel his insanity. Like some kind of radiation." He clicked his tongue against his teeth, a disappointed sound. "I used to think I understood this place, but lately... I don't know. Perhaps things have just gotten so bloody awful, I tend to complicate them. Make them into something they're not. Oh, well. I won't have to deal with it much longer."

"Oh," I said. "Why's that?"

He hesitated. "I was planning to tell you this tomorrow; I thought it might make an effective cure for a hangover." A pale smile. "I'm getting married next month. Beautiful girl named Helen Crowley. Extremely intelligent. Attached to the British embassy. She can't abide Africa, however, so we're going to live in London."

"Damn! When did all this happen?"

"I met her last year, but things didn't heat up until a couple of months ago."

I was startled. More than startled, actually. Rawley was the whitest African of my acquaintance, but he was nonetheless African through and through, and I couldn't imagine him being happy anywhere else. I asked if he was looking forward to living in England and he said, "You must be joking! A Third World country with a Second World climate. I can't fucking wait!" He fiddled with his cocktail napkin. "But she's... she wants... . Hell, you know how it goes."

I told him that I did, indeed, know how it went.

Rawley began to extol Helen Crowley's many virtues, and it struck me that he was attempting to excuse himself for running out on me, as if he believed that by marrying and exiling himself to Europe, he was effectively ending our relationship. Which was probably the case. My plans for the future, albeit sketchy, did not include a sojourn in England. I felt a childish resentment toward him. Though we only saw each other half a dozen times a year, he was the one real friend I had, and I had come to rely on his accessibility.

He tried to play to me, asking about my love life, suggesting that it was time for me to find someone as he had. My responses were terse and unaccom-modating. With part of my mind, I recognized what an asshole I was being, but I was too drunk to censor myself. Not long afterward, I made my own excuses, told him I would meet him in the hotel bar the next evening after I talked with Buma, and staggered off to bed.

The drumming of the rain against the window in the darkened room caused me to feel dizzier, less in

control, and thus I can't be sure what moved me to call Patience; but I think it may have been that Rawley's betrayal—so my drunken brain characterized it—inspired me to attempt to counterfeit a romantic relationship for myself; that would have been in keeping with the infantile tenor of my thoughts.

To my surprise, she picked up on the third ring. "Michael! I'm so happy to hear you! When you coming home?"

My toaster, I thought. Still mine.

All during the call, Patience urged me to hurry home, saying the Congo was a dangerous place and she was worried about me. This was, I assumed, her loneliness speaking. But her expression of concern suited my fantasies, and I found myself murmuring endearments, making the kind of assurances that should never be made drunkenly or lightly; and when she offered similar assurances in return, rather than retreating from the edge of this moral precipice, I let her voice comfort me and fell asleep with the phone pressed to my ear.

j

Usually after drinking to excess, I sleep fitfully, tossing about, waking every so often, plagued by stomach pains and anxiety dreams; but that night I slept soundly and the only dream that came was not the typical helter-skelter of surreal adventures and circumstances, but had a clarity and mental coloration unlike that of any dream I had theretofore experienced. I was moving rapidly through shallow water, not swimming so much as being carried along by the current. Clouds of brownish yellow sediment stirred up by the passages of others before me obscured my vision, yet I could still make out reeds undulating on the river bottom, wedges of stone extruded from the bank. Within minutes, the water became cooler, deeper, greener, and I could no longer see the bottom. I was being drawn toward something, but what exactly that thing was, I did not know. While it was not in my nature to be afraid, I had a sudden comprehension of fear, of its potentials, and this caused me to become more alert to my surroundings, as might happen when food was near. But this knowledge was unimportant, for even had I been capable of fear, I somehow trusted the thing toward which I was being drawn; I understood that it was not inimical.

The current grew faster, the water darkened to a cold blue, and I was overcome by a great lassitude. All my strength was draining from me, yet at the same time I sensed that I was accumulating new strength of a sort I could not fully understand. A subtler form of power than my old strength, but no less serviceable. In the distance I saw aglowing patch of brighter blue, barely a spot, but increasing in size with every passing second, and I knew that this brightness was the signal fire of my destination...

I'm not certain what woke me, but I believe it must have been a lightning strike, for I heard thunder, and lightning forked down the sky, illuminating tracers of rain. I was still half involved in the tag ends of the dream—it had been so compelling, it seemed to pull at me as inexorably as had that glowing patch of blue. Yet at the same time I was terrified, and my heart raced. Rain was pouring down my face, into my eyes, matting my hair, and I was utterly disoriented. The last thing I remembered of the waking world was Patience's voice in my ear, a pillow beneath my head. I hugged myself against the chill, and realized I was outside, wearing only a pair of briefs. A flicker of distant lightning showed my immediate surroundings. I was standing atop the rock where that afternoon I had seen the crocodiles at their strange enage. Beneath me, water churned against the bank, and on the far side of the river, the shadowy crest of the jungle trees swayed against the lesser darkness of the sky, bending all to the left, then straightening, with the ponderous rhythm of a dancing bear. On every side, the crunch and tatter of windy collisions, and from above, the constant battering of thunder.

Even after I had recognized my location, I remained terrified. I had no idea what could have happened. The idea of somnambulism had not yet entered my mind; instead, it seemed I had been spirited from my bed by the force of a dream to a place referenced by the dream; though confused, I was not confused about that—whether a product of my drunken imagination or of something more inexplicable, I had been dreaming a crocodile dream. I began to shiver, and this was not entirely due to the cold. The toiling dark was full of dangers, and I would have to negotiate nearly a mile of it before reaching the hotel. But no other option was open to me. I shuffled about, afraid of turning abruptly and losing my balance, and as I took my first step toward the hotel, a deafening crack of thunder—like the parting of some fundamental seam—shredded the clouds overhead, and I was knocked onto my back by a blast of vivid red light. A foundry color, like the molten shell that encases a white hot core of liquefied steel. It was as if I'd been cupped in a fiery hand for a split-second and then cast aside. For several seconds thereafter, I was dazed by the concussion, blinded, my nostrils stinging with the reek of ozone; when my vision cleared, I saw that a dead tree close by the rock had been struck by the lightning and was ablaze, serving as a torch to illumine a considerable portion of the flats, causing puddles to glitter and shining up all the slick muddy skin of the place. At the landward end of the rock, no more than twenty feet away, blocking my exit, was a crocodile.

This was no ordinary crocodile, but one of nature's great criminals, as unruled in its own place and time as the tyrannosaur. A creature, a beast, a monster. Fully sixteen feet long, I reckoned it. The top of its massive head at rest was parallel with the mid-point of my thigh, and its open jaws could have accommodated an oil drum. With its scales gilded by the firelight, its pupils cored with orange brilliance, it would have been at home by Cerberus's side, an idol of pure menace guarding a portal into hell—that was my first thought (if I can call those chill lancings of affrighted, garbled language that shot through my brain "thoughts"), that beyond the portcullis of stained and twisted teeth, deep in its hollow tube of a belly, lay a gateway opening onto some greater torment.

The largest branch of the burning tree broke off and fell with a hiss into the river. In the diminished light, the croc's aspect changed from that of demiurge to the purely animal. A bloated grayish green lizard with a pale, thick tongue and cold mineral eyes and corrosive, rotting breath, a creature that would chew through my torso as though it were an underdone strip of bacon, then lift its head and, utilizing its powerful throat muscles, shift me down into its stomach, where—coated in sticky acids—I would quietly dissolve over a period of days, sharing the ignominy of a partly consumed river bass, its glazed eyes contemplating me with doting steadfastness as we lay together in our cozy, messy little cave.

To this point, disorientation had dominated my fear, but now my uncertainty as to what had happened was washed away by a single horrid certainty, and the disabling weakness that accompanies deep terror infused my limbs. My instinct was to throw myself into the water, but there I would be totally helpless. Instead, I tried to prepare for a quick sprint, a leap. If I jumped toward the bank at an angle from the middle of the rock, I might be able to gain a foothold and scramble up and make my escape. The odds of success were not good, but then the odds favoring any other course of action were far worse. It would have been helpful if the crocodile had bellowed, made a violent noise that outvoiced the wind—that might have acted upon me like a starter's pistol and given me a boost of energy. But crocs only bellow when their territory is threatened, and I was no threat, I was mere prey. Its baleful regard was more enfeebling than any sound could have been, and I knew that at any second it would lunge forward and take me.

In the moment before I jumped, I had an incidence of perfect clarity. It was if I were receding from the world, leaving the body behind. I saw myself, a black, insignificant figure, a human scrap on a splinter of rock above turbulent water, facing a slightly less tiny creature with a tail, and the entire dark geography of the flats, with its one torched tree and a few smaller, flickering lights in the distance that might have been lanterns in the windows of shanty bars. I saw stitchings of lightning fencing the river valley, casting the hills in brief silhouette, bringing up the boxy shapes of Mogado from the shadows. I did not see my life pass before my eyes, but rather saw the sum of my life imprinted upon that unimportant landscape, and understood that in this cunning design with its drear prospect and trivial monster, all the wastage and impotence of my days, all my misused intellect and defrauded ambitions, all my torpid compulsions and arousals, all my puerile dreams and dissipated hopes and contemptible passions had found their proper resolution. And it was this sorry recognition, this abandonment of last illusions, that bred in me a liberating fatalism and freed my limbs from the grip of fear and let me jump.

I hit the side of the bank hard and slipped back. My feet touched the water, but I managed to claw out a handhold in the mud and hauled myself up onto level ground. Lightning strobed as I rolled away from the water's edge, and in those bright detonations I caught sight of the crocodile. Just a glimpse. It was in the process of turning toward me. Jaws agape. I flung myself away, and came to my feet running. Thunder obscured all other sound, but I could have sworn I felt the croc close behind, the awful gravity of the beast swinging its head round to bite. As I ran, as it became apparent that I was not going to die, I began to laugh. I stumbled, I fell half a dozen times, I tore my skin on stones, on dead branches, but I continued to laugh until I was too exhausted to do more than breathe. It seemed ridiculous that I should have survived. Silly. Life itself seemed silly, when there was so much death to be had. The average human activity in Africa was dying, or so I perceived it then, and to be spared in this situation abrogated at least the law of averages, if not other, more consequential laws.

I burst through the hotel doors, somehow failing to wake the African teenager behind the reception desk, and went into the bar, empty and lightless now, and helped myself to a bottle of whiskey; I sat down at one of the tables and had a restorative drink. Then I had another. I started laughing again, and this served to wake the kid at the desk. He peeked in the doorway, a startled look on his face; then he vanished, and I heard his footsteps moving away. Not long afterward, Dillip—wearing a fetching bathrobe of embroidered green silk—made his appearance. His manner was at first stern, but on seeing my condition—all but naked, streaked with mud, bleeding, wild of countenance—he stopped short of rebuking me. He went behind the bar, picked a glass from the rack and, with an air of prim disappointment, brought it to me. I thanked him and poured the glass half full.

"What can have happened to you, sah?" Dillip asked, hovering by the table.

I did not know how to tell him and only shook my head.

He drew up a chair and sat opposite me, adjusting the fall of his robe to cover his bony knees. From his expression, I gathered that he had not yet decided whether to be reproving or indulgent of my curious behavior.

"Do you require medical assistance?" Dillip asked.

"No," I said. "No, just a drink or two."

This did not sit well with him. "Sah, you must tell me what has happened. If something has happened to you in the hotel, I must report it."

"Nothing happened in the hotel." I pointed with the whiskey bottle. "Out there."

"Ah!" said Dillip. "You have been robbed, then. Bandits!"

I considered accepting this judgment; it would be easier than trying to explain the events of the evening. But when I put everything together in my head—my sleepwalking, the storm, the crocodile, Buma—I did not arrive at an American conclusion, but an African one.

"Not bandits," I said. "Mobutu."

j

African politics are frequently intertwined with the cult of personality. Perhaps because the land is vast, the men who pretend to rule it must proclaim their own vastness, each in a highly individual way... ways that are rarely beneficial to those whom they have been elected to serve. For instance, not far from Abidjan lies the village of Yamosoukra, the birthplace of Felix Houphouet-Boigny, the former president of the Ivory Coast. Upon his ascendancy to the office, the president initiated a building program designed to turn Yamosoukra into a new capital, one that would rival Brasilia. He had long held an admiration for St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, and so nothing would do but that he erect a copy of the church half again aslarge as the original close to the village, and to provide better access to this newly historic area, he ordered the construction of a six-lane highway. The need for six-lane highways in West Africa is slight, if not nonexistent. The first time I drove along the highway, at what ordinarily would be considered rush hour, I encountered only one other person, an old man in a shabby brown suit riding a bicycle. That this building program nearly bankrupted the country was of secondary importance to President Houphouet-Boigny and his supporters; of primary importance was that in their minds this spanking new, empty, purposeless city and its various accessories established to the world the greatness of the man and suggested that he was not someone to be trifled with.

Mobutu Sese Seko favored more of a minimalist approach to achieving this same effect. It suited him to create a fearsome ring of security about himself and throughout Kinshasa, and to permit the remainder of the Congo (which he renamed Zaire) to fall into ruin. Beyond Kinshasa, the jungle overran the outlying highways, and the infrastructure crumbled, leaving a poverty-stricken populace without any resources other than the sweat of their brows. Did not this cruel policy express a godlike indifference to suffering? Was not a reign of more than thirty years funded by this unvarying indifference evidence of the man's invulnerability and power? Might not such a man use his dying strength to visit some final and lasting pain upon his people by means of a curse? And might not the people, disposed to belief in his godhood by thirty years of oppression, be so psychologically in thrall to him that by dint of national will they had managed to make the curse manifest, or—put more basically—they had caused it to come true?

This last was one of the questions I put to Buma the next afternoon. I was not in the best of shape. I felt cracked, things broken inside my head, the shape of my faith in logical process gone lopsided, and my hands trembled from fatigue and alcohol. Nothing I saw that day helped to right me. At the jail, the desk officer's newspaper told of a village twenty miles downriver destroyed by fire—lightning or tribal violence, no one could say, for there were no survivors—and a small headline below the fold reported that fish were dying by the thousands in a lake fed by the Kilombo. The cause was unknown.

"As long as you ask these questions," Buma said, "you will never know the answers." He was, as before, sitting sideways to me, gazing at the whitewashed wall, maintaining his customary reptilian poise." Yet if you learn not to ask them, someday the knowledge will come."

"Yeah, uh-huh," I said. "If you sit perfectly still, the world will move through you, and everything is everything else. I've heard the same crap from slicker hustlers than you."

"You're angry because your dream was interrupted." He turned his head to me, his seamed face calm, that thin smile in evidence. "Don't worry. You'll finish it tonight. Then you will understand."

I didn't want to give him the satisfaction of asking how he knew about my interrupted dream; but I couldn't stop myself.

"Because it is my dream," he said. "Because I gave it to you." He refitted his gaze to the wall, and I

imagined he was seeing through the whitewash to the bloodstained surface beneath, the dark Mobutu skin that stretched across the entire country—it could be covered up, but never truly obscured.

I didn't know what more to ask—most of the questions crowding my brain were those I needed to ask of myself. Questions relating to my behavior with Rawley, my overall stability. I had never before walked in my sleep, and though I had no knowledge concerning the causes of somnambulism, I assumed they must be pathological.

In spite of my confusion, my self-absorption, I managed to frame a question for Buma. Not a particularly intelligent question, but it would serve to occupy him while I thought of a better one.

"Who are you?" I asked him. "Who do you think you are?"

"Do you see, Michael? It is always best to be direct. All your previous questions have begged the issue. But this... this is to the point."

"Then why don't you answer it?"

"Sometimes I think I am a man." His smiled widened. "But then I remember that I am not."

"This non-responsive style of yours," I said, "it's the classic tactic of the charlatan. The cryptic answer, the knowing nod. All it suggests is that you have nothing salient to tell me. It's obvious that you're a clever man, that you're using what you've deduced about me from our conversations to try and persuade me of your supernatural abilities. But I'm not buying it."

Buma let out a hissing breath, a sign—I thought—of exasperation. "Your assumption seems to be that by answering you I will be helping myself, and you further assume that I am not answering you. In the first place, I do not need your help. In the second, I have given you a dream, and I have confessed to murder. If you wait and listen and watch, you will learn the rest. You must have patience, Michael."

The word "patience" startled me. "What do you mean by that?" I asked.

He eyes swung toward me. "Have you ever watched crocodiles hunt? How they wait and wait, how they persevere. Time and again they will attack and fail, yet they remain persevering. Because they have patience. If I were the king of the crocodiles, I would be the king of patience. Patience is much more than a simple virtue, Michael. Surely you know that?"

He was doing exactly what I had said—probing, making rudimentary deductions, then using my reactions against me. But though I thought I understood him, this talk of patience led me to suspect that he had some connection with my Patience, or that he knew about her. A hundred wild suppositions contended in my brain, along with fantasies about crocodile kings with thin, false smiles and women who sat sideways and cut their eyes toward you rather than turning their heads; but I refused to give in to them.

"What..." I began, and then forgot the question I'd intended to ask; I searched for another and asked, for no particular reason, simply because it was the only thing that occurred: "The river... Is there something wrong with the river?"

Buma got to his feet. He stepped to the wall, knocked against it with the sides of his iron cuffs, dislodging a roughly triangular section of flaking whitewash, revealing a large dark patch beneath. "Do you see this?" he asked. "This is what is wrong with the river. With all things. No matter how pure the surface, beneath it lies insanity and dread. Some will tell you it is Mobutu who is to blame. Others will say something different. They are each right in their own way. Mobutu. Poison. Bacteria. Curses. These are merely names for the incurable cancer spreading from the heart of the world, the terror from which life itself springs. We are all fleeing it. We try to swim away, we travel far from home, we tell ourselves it is a dream, we imprison ourselves in palaces, we speak to God on the mountain top. We can never escape it, however, because we are part of it. Yet we must try, because that is our nature." He sat back down, making a dull rattle with his chains. "Crocodiles understand this more clearly than do men. They are simple creatures, and simple answers do not elude them."

I was dancing with him now, he was playing me and logic could not stand against him. His words, though scarcely original, a medley of bleak cliches, had tapped into the core of my weakness, and all the fear I had nourished over long years in Africa, all the peculiarly African fear, the apprehension of spirits, of lion ghosts and magical presidents and the long-legged, licorice-skinned, lickety-split demons of the talking drum dancing with arms akimbo on the margins of one's campfire light, ready to pounce with their red-hot spears and golden teeth... all this was loose in me, raving like a storm inside my skull, and I had the unshakable presentiment that if I didn't move I would be trapped with this man who claimed not to be a man in that little white cell forever. I scraped back my chair, staggered against the wall, the wall infected with blood and darkness, and as I moved haltingly toward the door, Buma smiled at me. The cracks in his wrinkled, youthful face seemed to deepen so drastically, I thought his skin would fly apart into a kind of weathered shrapnel, releasing the all-consuming, crocodile-reeking blackness beneath.

"Remember, Michael," he said. "Have patience. No matter what befalls the world, whether fire or ice, if you

have patience, you will thrive."

j

Dusk came suddenly as I left the jail, dragged in—it appeared—by flights of crows that swooped just above the rooftops, screaming down harsh curses on the people below. I badly wanted a drink, and since I was now persona non grata with Dillip, I headed for the nearest shanty bar, a construction of warped boards alternately painted pink and yellow and blue, furnished with picnic-style tables and lit by a kerosene lantern. All topped off by a rust-scabbed tin roof. The bartender, an enormous woman in a flowered dress, her hair wrapped in a white cloth, provided me with a bottle with a Jim Beam label that did not contain Jim Beam, but something yellowish-brown and vile and strong as poison. I drank it gratefully. Soon the woman came to resemble a deity, marooned by a spill of lantern light in the soft darkness behind a two-plank countertop, her shiny black plump breasts the source of all fecundity, her broad round face as serene as those faces at the corners of antique maps that signify the east wind. At another table sat three men, all young, muscular, two of them wearing polo shirts and jeans, the other jeans and a pink T-shirt decorated with the image of a pony. Pink T-shirt was fiddling with the dials of a transistor radio, bringing in static-filled reggae. Now and then he would glance sternly at me, as if he disapproved of my presence. But I didn't care. I was ablaze with the happiness that only a satisfied drunk can know, liberated from yet not unmindful of my troubles. They seemed manageable now. Even the pronounced possibility that I was experiencing mental slippage seemed a trivial matter, one that could be reconciled in due course. And what if I was perfectly healthy? That was a possibility, I realized, that I had not given sufficient credence. It was not utterly beyond the pale to think that Buma was the king of the crocodiles, or that Mobutu's curse was despoiling the Kilombo, or that Patience was more than a simple virtue. Then, too, it might be true both that I was slipping and that the world was mad enough to support crocodile kings and rule by voodoo. But it was unlikely that anyone could decide these questions, so why worry about them?

"You are an American Negro, I believe," said Pink T-shirt, who without my notice had come to stand by my table, his pals at his shoulder. I could not deny the fact, though I found the word "Negro" rankling. Pink T-shirt introduced himself as Solomon, and he and his friends, whose names I promptly forgot, joined me.

"Are you a student of history?" Solomon asked, enunciating his words with the profound dignity and slow precision of the very drunk. His friends did not appear capable of speech. Drifting, eyes rolling, almost on the nod. I told Solomon I was a student of snakes, but he did not respond to this; his impassively handsome face was arranged in a contemplative mask. "I am a student of history," he said. "At the university in Kinshasa. I have studied the history of the American Negro."

"I see," I said. "And what have your studies taught you?"

He nodded, as if I had made a statement and not asked a question. Tiny yellow circles of reflected lantern light lensed his pupils. "I am curious about the American Negro's perspective on Africa."

Having been elected the American Negro for purposes of the conversation, I felt a responsibility to offer something cogent in reply. "It's a complex subject," I said. "After all, Africa is not one thing, but many. And the American Negro is a term that embodies a number of perspectives."

In the gathering dark outside, two little girls in pale smocks came chasing after a huge sow, one of them flicking at her rump with a long switch.

"It is my thesis," Solomon said, regarding me with what I suspected he thought was an imperious stare, "that because he both venerates and despises the African, the American Negro stands closer to a white perspective on the continent than to the African. In effect, he is no longer part of the black race."

The black race, I thought. A mystery novel. A description of the River Styx. A nighttime cycling event. I wanted to feel respect for Solomon... or if not respect, then sadness. I suppose I felt a little of both. He had, after all, managed a university education—not the easiest thing to achieve in the Congo—and his simplistic take on his subject implied an unfruitful and outmoded agenda that was, in its historical context, sad. It was also sad that Solomon was apparently unaware of his subtext, in which—if he examined it—he would find reflected a specific variety of self-loathing endemic among failed or inadequately prepared African intellectuals. But what I mainly felt was annoyance. I had been involved in far too many of these spurious philosophical discussions to feel challenged by them, as Solomon—I believed—wanted me to feel. Though it was possible to gain insights from indulging in such quasi-intellectual pissing matches, the type of insights one gained were in essence judgmental and inclined to make you feel superior to the Solomon-of-the-moment. And even if those judgments were relevant, even if they illuminated some twist of African behavior, some intricate contradiction that in turn illuminated a fragment of colonial history or post-colonial politics, they tended to make you think that you understood Africans... and if you believed that, then you had fallen into the same sort of simplistic trap as had Solomon. As had many journalists and sloppy novelists, who

transformed such encounters into pithy anecdotes. It was impossible to avoid making judgments, but why bother to deify them? No, annoyance was the proper reaction. Solomon was spoiling my drunk.

"You know," I said, as one of his friends slumped against the wall and began to snore. "I used to believe in approaching subjects like the American Negro and his perspective on Africa from an academic standpoint. But now, I guess I think that all this shit—y'know, life, Africa, the rules of chess, love, all that—I guess I think the best way to understand it is just to feel it along your skin."

Solomon took a moment to absorb this. "You are laughing at me," he said.

"Not at all. I'm speaking to you exactly as I would speak to anyone who said what you said to me. If what I say doesn't validate you in the way you'd like, I'm sorry."

Two young women entered the bar and began chatting with the bartender. One was pretty, wearing a simple yellow dress; she looked over to our table and smiled.

"Whores," said Solomon, following my gaze. "Perhaps you would rather talk to whores."

"I'm only human," I told him; then I asked: "Here's something I can approach from an academic stance. Tell me what you think of Mobutu."

Solomon pursed his lips. "I'm not disposed to discuss this with you."

"That's fair." The woman in the yellow dress was peeking at me over her friend's shoulder; she caught my eye, covered her mouth to hide a smile, and whispered in her friend's ear.

Solomon now began discussing American Negro writers he admired. In his opinion, James Baldwin, though a degenerate, was the most African of them all. I couldn't decide if this bespoke a startling new comprehension on his part, or was absolute bullshit. Soon, accepting that I did not want to play, Solomon and his friends left the bar, but not before the man who had been asleep, who had heard nothing of the conversation, turned back to the table and with shy formality, extended his hand to be shaken.

A few minutes later, the woman in the yellow dress—Elizabeth by name—was sitting beside me and had placed my hand between her legs, separated from her secret flesh by a thin layer of cotton. "Do you feel it?" she whispered. "Beating like the heart of a little bird?" Her eyes were large and beautifully shaped, her features delicate, her small breasts perfectly round. She had a strange spicy scent. The rains had begun—late, that day—and the drops drew a tremulous droning resonance from the tin roof; the bartender switched on her radio, and a man with a hoarse romantic tenor sang in French, a song about a boy torn between lust for a city woman and longing for his village sweetheart. At that instant, my perspective on Africa was pervaded by dizziness and desire. Even when Elizabeth asked me for money ("You know, you will have to give me a present."), she did so sweetly, almost apologetically, in keeping with my mood, with the mood of that place and moment. And when I gave her more than the present she had expected, she slipped my hand beneath the yellow cotton and offered me access to the proof of her own desire.

There was a room attached to the back of the bar, just big enough for a cot and a table bearing a lantern, with a window covered by a plastic curtain imprinted with red roses. When the curtain was pulled back, you could see a banana frond caressing the pane, like the green foreleg of some large, gentle insect. Fucking Elizabeth made me think of Patience, though not with guilt or any negative emotion. She simply reminded me of Patience in her playful exuberance and—all things being relative—her guilelessness: I didn't doubt that she might try to rob me, yet I knew that if she did it would not be premeditated, but the result of a whim, an irresistible impulse. One way or another, I wasn't concerned. She already had almost all of the cash I'd brought from the hotel. And so, once I was happily spent, I felt not the least compunction against falling asleep in her arms.

If I had remembered Buma's promise that I would finish my interrupted dream, I might have fought off sleep; but I did not, and the dream took me unawares. The glowing patch of blue in the depths of the river toward which I had been heading... I was past it, I had gone through it and was swimming up toward the surface. Swimming had always been second nature to me, but now it took all my strength, and I found I could not breathe, that it was necessary to hold my breath as I strained toward the light. I couldn't remember very much of what had happened to me within the patch of glowing blue, but I did recall that it had been painful, and I was certain that whatever had happened was responsible for the physical changes I was experiencing.

At last I broke the surface, sputtering and coughing, so weak I could barely swim to shore. When I reached the bank, I scrambled up the side and to my amazement, I discovered that I was standing on my hind legs. Standing upright as did those slight dark creatures upon whom I sometimes fed. Then I glanced down at my body. My arms were smooth and unwrinkled, my hands clawless, and my chest was smooth, covered with a fuzzy growth. Tatters of my old familiar skin clung to my hips and legs, but it was apparent that my legs were much longer than they had been. I let out a bellow of fear and rage, and was stunned by the frailty of my voice. Then I noticed others of my kind ranged along the bank, their condition the same as mine—changed, enraged, frightened. And hungry. I had never been so hungry in my life—it was as if I had never eaten. I

bellowed again, and my brothers and sisters joined me, making an outcry that altogether might have equaled in volume the cry that one of us could have sounded before the change. But it was loud enough to attract the attention of creatures like ourselves yet not like us. Five of them. Fishermen on their way home.

We ran them down in the bush and threw them to the ground and fed. My mouth was not wide enough for proper biting, my teeth too small and blunt, but I managed; and as I fed, fear vanished, and in its place came understanding... understanding such as I could never have imagined. The world, it seemed, was larger and stranger than I had known, and now that my home had been corrupted by dark forces, I would have to leave it behind and seek another home—it was for this reason I had been changed. But changed by whom? By what? That knowledge was gone from me; though I believe I once had understood it, the space in my head where it had been seated was now filled with curious information, theories, schemes, languages, and systems, things I would not have believed existed. Yet my grasp of them was total, and I realized that armed with this knowledge, and with my old knowledge that—though I had forgotten much of it—still empowered me, I had the opportunity not merely to survive, but to rule. Men, I perceived, were not only frail of body, but of mind, easily swayed and easily broken, and I was convinced that I could dominate them.

There were six of us on the bank, one a young woman—with my human eyes I saw that she was lovely. Five of us understood all that had happened and what we must now do, but the woman was so young, so new not only to this world, but to the previous one, she remained confused. I instructed her to go into the city and to find someone who would take her to a safe place. In my mind's eye I saw a man from a distant country. I described him to her, told her where he lived, and sent her on her way. Then I, along with my four brothers and sisters, set out into the country we could not have imagined, but that we now meant to make our own.

I woke from the dream to find Elizabeth straddling me, holding me down by the shoulders, a terrified look on her face. She told me I had tried to leave the room while still asleep, but she had pushed me back down. I assured her that I was fine, but I was not fine. I could taste blood in my mouth, I remembered the sensation of ripping off a strip of human flesh and chewing it juiceless, I heard again the crack of a neckbone. These things, and not the mad logic of the dream, the idea that crocodiles were changing into men in order to escape some magical pollution of the Kilombo, persuaded me of the dream's validity. Even the irrational notion that Buma, newly human, had sent me a crocodile girl to protect seemed possible in light of these horrible memories. I could not overlook the possibility that Buma's power was merely the power of suggestion, or that my mind had been wired for madness by my years in Africa, conditioned to accept the most insane of propositions and to create improbable scenarios from the materials provided by a fraudulent witch man so as to explain away dysfunction. But for the time being I preferred the prospect of supernaturally transformed crocodiles to that of insanity, and I let Elizabeth console me.

I was thoroughly involved in the process of consolation when I heard voices raised in anger from the bar, and shortly thereafter the door to the little room swung open, and Rawley—his face flushed, his shirt and hair drenched with rain—stepped into view. "My God, Michael!" he said, averting his eyes. Elizabeth squealed, rolled off me and covered herself. "Are you mad?" Rawley said." You know these women are all fucking diseased! What the hell were you thinking?"

I sat up, pulled on my briefs, and said sullenly, "Don't worry about it."

"Fine! I won't worry. But we did have a meeting scheduled. I trust you won't mind too much if I express some concern over the fact that you fucking failed to show up!"

I buckled my belt, shrugged into my shirt. "Just go easy," I said. "I've had a rough day."

"Oh, really? Yes, I suppose you have. Few of life's difficulties compare to the arduous nature of an evening spent drinking and whoring."

It was amazing, the amount of loathing I felt toward him—this bloated blond bug in his signature golf shirt and chinos, with his political dabbling and his tight-ass fiancee, who was he to berate me? "I don't think," I said tightly, "that my information has been degraded by tardiness."

"Degraded," he said. "Interesting choice of terms, that."

I finished buttoning my shirt; behind me, Elizabeth struggled into her dress. "Gee, what crawled up your ass, Jimmy? No, don't tell me. I bet the lovely Helen has something to do with it. What's the problem? She having trouble prying her knees apart?"

"You bastard!" He glared at me, puffed up with anger. "Here I throw you a bone for friendship's sake, and what do you do? You..."

"A bone?" I said. "I'm not your fucking dog, Jimmy. I'm your boy. Whenever you get into trouble, you come running to rub my nappy head for luck. You did it at Oxford, and you're doing it now. Trouble with a Classics exam? Hey, Michael! Mind coming over and letting me knuckle your headbone. I'll stand for the drinks."

Rawley composed himself—he was above all this, he refused to get down in the gutter with me. "I'm not going to hold this against you. You're drunk. We'll talk in the morning, when you're capable of reason."

With a worried glance at me, Elizabeth squeezed past Rawley and vanished into the bar.

"Let's talk now," I said. "In the morning I'm gone."

He appeared to take this as a surrender, an admission on my part of wrong-headedness. "Very well. But let's go back to the hotel. We might be overheard here."

"It's your game," I said. "We might as well play on your home court."

"Can we stop this?" He spread his hands as if to demonstrate he was holding no weapons. "Christ, Michael. We have ten years of history together, and this isn't the first time we've fought. If you want me to apologize for breaking in on you and the girl... I apologize. I've been under so much pressure, perhaps I haven't been sensitive to the fact that you're under pressure, too. If so, I apologize for that as well." He stepped forward, extending the hand of friendship. "Come on, man. What do you say?"

I had always been a chump for his diplomatic side, even though I knew it was entirely tactical, and that it came as easily to him as eating bananas to a monkey. I took his hand, I accepted his clumsy embrace, but I knew in my heart that we were finished.

"No problem," I said.

j

I bought a bottle of yellowish brown poison from the bartender, and we set out toward the hotel. The rain had diminished to a drizzle, and as we crossed the pitch-dark flats, Rawley shined a flashlight ahead to show obstacles in our path, the beam sawing across broken glass and stumps and once a scurrying rat. I was very drunk, but my drunkenness was cored by a central clarity, and though my coordination was not good, my mind was charged with a peculiar energy that permitted me to think and speak with no sign of affliction. Between pulls on the bottle, I told Rawley about my conversations with Buma, the dreams, Mobutu's curse, and my encounter with the crocodile, the odd behavior of the crocodiles I had witnessed on the day of my arrival in Mogado. I gave it to him flatly, as if it were all plain fact, with no mention of my self-doubts or any other of my reservations.

"That's absolute nonsense," Rawley said; then hurriedly, not wanting to risk—I supposed—reinstituting an adversarial atmosphere: "I mean it sounds like nonsense."

"Like you said—Buma's impressive. He's obviously expert at mind-fucking people. Whether or not there's something more arcane behind that... It's not really important. Your problem is to decide whether you can successfully prosecute him. My feeling is that you can't. Imagine what he could do with a jury. Or with the court, for that matter."

Two young men passed us in the dark, walking in the opposite direction; they shielded their eyes against Rawley's flash and offered a polite greeting.

"I may have no choice," Rawley said. "I'm getting increasing pressure from Kinshasa. My ultimate problem may lie in trying to shift the blame for his acquittal away from me and onto the court."

"Why is this important? You're going to England. One trivial defeat won't spoil your entire record."

"My family will still be here. These bastards are capable of anything. If they get all in a twist about Buma, they might threaten our business interests. They might do more than that." He swung the flashlight in a short arc, the beam whitening the trunk and upswept branches of a dead tree, making it look for an instant like the skeleton of a strange animal, frozen forever in an anguished pose. "God, sometimes I hate this country."

We walked in silence a few paces; finally I said, "If I were you, I wouldn't mess with Buma. Suppose he's acquitted. Let's not even talk about whether he used to be a crocodile. Let's just say that he's a member of a cult, and once he's acquitted, the cult gets a lot of ink. A lot of power. He could be more dangerous than your friends back in Kinshasa."

"Unfortunately," Rawley said, "you're not me. And I'm not you. I have responsibilities I can't dodge."

And fuck you, too, I thought; I hope the son of a bitch bites you in half.

We were passing a point parallel to the rock where I had been trapped by the big crocodile. I mentioned this to Rawley, suggested he might want to have a look.

"Why not," he said.

We angled toward the river, walked along it for a minute or so, then Rawley's flash picked out that tooth of dark rock extending out over the Kilombo.

"No action tonight," said Rawley as he stepped out onto it. I remained on the bank. "Not a sign of a fucking croc," he went on. He swung the flash across the surface of the water and laughed."Buma must have given them marching orders."

The clouds broke, and a thin silver moon like a fattened hook sailed up from behind them. Rawley came

back onto the bank, shot me an amused glance. "Are you sure you weren't drunk?"

"You know me, boss," I said coldly. "I can't scarcely see nothin' 'less I's drinkin'."

In the weak silvery light, with a blond forelock drooping over his forehead to touch an eyebrow, his face looked oddly simple, childlike. "We have a few things to work out, don't we?" he said."I understand that, Michael. God only knows who we were back at Oxford. I can't even remember those people, except that they were complete fucking idiots. But I'm certain they weren't you and me. They weren't us the way we are now." He twitched the beam of the flashlight off along the bank. "Despite the shit people do to one another, we've stuck it out together. Perhaps not always for the purest of motives. But we have done, and I can't help but believe there's some good reason we've come this far. Don't you think that's a possibility worth exploring?"

His words were so unexpected, I couldn't muster a response; but I was, against my will, touched by them. Embarrassed, he turned toward the town and swept the flashlight inland; as the beam traveled across the ground, the light reflected off what appeared to be a row of yellow-orange jewels set atop a semicircle of dead logs. Logs with wrinkled, leathery bark and weird turreted structures atop their narrow snouts. Rawley let out a little gasp, as if he'd taken a playful blow to the belly, and focused the beam on the log closest to us. A crocodile. Not a very big one, maybe eight feet long. But some of its friends were bigger. There must have been fifteen or twenty of them, maybe more. Just sitting. Watching. Forming a barrier in every direction except one.

Rawley took a step backward onto the rock. "Jesus," he said. "Oh, Jesus." Another croc let out a ghastly hiss.

I was not afraid... not for myself, at any rate. It was as if the electric arc of fear had gapped and failed to engage my nerves. Perhaps I was too drunk to feel fear. Yet I was afraid for Rawley. He took another backward step, stumbled, and in doing so, went farther out onto the rock.

"No!" I shouted, beckoning to him. "Run! You've got to run! This way!"

I sprinted toward the crocodile closest to the bank. It was strange. I ran, it seemed, not fired by an instinct for self-preservation, but by the need to demonstrate to Rawley the proper method of escape. I may have felt a touch of fright as I hurdled the croc—it snapped at me half-heartedly—but it was nothing compared to the terror I had experienced the previous night. I landed awkwardly on one foot, spun half about, and fell hard on my chest. For the space of a few seconds, perhaps a bit more, I lost my wind. When I regained it, I came to one knee and looked back at Rawley. He had not followed my example. He was standing near the riverward end of the rock, made to seem small by the vastness of the sky that had opened up above him, with its scattering of wild stars and silver cicatrice of moon. His pale hair flew in the breeze, and the tail of his shirt fluttered; the beam of the flashlight struck downward from his left hand like a frail gold wand, his only weapon against the crocodiles massed and slithering toward him from the landward end of the rock. There was no way he could hurdle them now. Our gazes met. He said nothing, and at that distance, his expression was unreadable; but he must have known he was doomed. I called out his name and came a step toward him, thinking there must be something I could do. I screamed at the crocodiles, but they were intent upon him, crawling over one another in their eagerness for his blood.

Rawley whirled about, the flashlight beam drawing a yellow stripe across the bright water. He glanced back at me once more, a mere flicking of his eyes, not a signal or message so much as a reflex, a last hopeful engagement of life, and then he dived into the Kilombo, a racer's dive learned in his shining youth and practiced in the green pools of Oxford. The crocodiles surged forward. Rawley surfaced about twenty feet from the bank, just as the first of the crocs went into the water; he headed down river, stroking a racing crawl, aiming for a place some fifteen yards away where the bank jutted out. I didn't think he had a chance—a dozen crocs were in the water now, arrowing after him, their bodies only partially submerged, moonstruck eyes aglitter. But Rawley was making decent headway, and I began to hope for him. Then the croc nearest him submerged completely. A moment later he screamed and came twisting high out of the water, clawing at the air, a dark stain on his lips and chin. And then the croc took him under. The other crocodiles converged on the spot where Rawley had vanished, and the surface was transformed into a mule of thrashing tails and rooting snouts, a raft of scaly, undulating bodies, all splashing and bumping and skittering half out of the water as one croc slid up and across another's back in a display of murderous frolic. But there was no sign of the man they had killed.

I backed away from the bank; I felt unsound, unclear. Rawley's death had been real enough while it was occurring, but now it seemed I had imagined it, that I would have to re-imagine it in order to make it real. I was still holding my bottle, and now I hurled it into the river, as if it were damning evidence. And wasn't I culpable for having hated him, even if the hatred was transitory and the event itself a dire form of coincidence? Hadn't I brought him to the rock with murder in my heart?

The crocodiles began to swim away from the spot where Rawley had disappeared. Their fun was over. I sank to my knees, suddenly overcome by loss, and by the gruesome manner of his passing. I bent my head,

pressed the heels of my hands against my brow, as if to compress the memory of what I had seen, to flatten it and make it so thin it would slip into a crack in my brain and never be found. The hypocrisy of my grief, coming as it did in such close conjunction with my internalized expression of loathing for Rawley, caused his death to weigh more heavily upon me than it otherwise might. Though I truly grieved, at the same time my tears seemed a form of indulgence, as if I were grieving for myself, for my own frail transgressions, or else trying to present a false appearance to whatever deity was watching, to convince him that I was sorry for my part in what had happened. And this duality of grief, this fictive quality overlaying the real, this sense of innermost duplicity, made my thoughts scamper and collide like confused rabbits on a killing ground. I thought my head would burst, I wanted it to burst, and I was disappointed when it did not.

At last I lifted my eyes. Not ten feet away along the bank, a crocodile was watching me. A smallish one, perhaps the same upon which Rawley had first shined his flashlight. Its jaws were slightly parted, its snaggled teeth in plain view, lending it a goofy look. A comical little death poised to pounce. My normal reactions were dammed up, and I could only stare at the thing. Numb, hopeless, and uncaring, I waited to die. Seconds ticked past, slow as water from a leaky tap. The croc began to seem familiar, almost human. Mad hilarity lapped the inside of my skull. I noted the croc's resemblance to George Bush. A distant relative, perhaps. An outside child conceived during a state visit. Then it bellowed, a glutinous, hollow noise—like a troll roaring in a cave—and that restored my natural animal terror. Its head jerked sideways, and it regarded me for a few beats with one cold gray eye, as if marking me for future reference. Then it whipped about, and moving in the ludicrous yet oh-so-efficient Chaplinesque paddling run of its species, it scuttled off into the shadows, leaving me to seek another solution to my misfortunes.

j

When I reported Rawley's death, the police in Mogado detained me; later that night, they charged me with his murder. There was no body, no evidence of any sort, except for the fact that I had been seen arguing with him, then walking with him in the direction of the river. No one reported seeing him afterward. Men had been convicted and executed for less in the Congo. I neither disputed nor affirmed the charge.

In truth, I could not dispute or affirm it. Rawley's death lay at the center of a web of circumstance and possibility that could never be untangled. Unless one were to accept the explanation of my dream... or rather, Buma's dream. My three improbable escapes from the crocodiles of the Kilombo lent credence to this explanation, for had not Buma spat on my palm to protect me from his "brothers and sisters"? But I was not prepared to accept it.

Later that morning, the potbellied desk officer entered my cell and informed me that I was no longer under suspicion—I could leave; if I wished, I could return to Abidjan. I was in a state of shock and disbelief. "What do you mean?" I asked him. "I thought I was to be arraigned?"

He hesitated. "We've been told to let you go."

"By Kinshasa?"

The policeman dropped his eyes, as if embarrassed. "You are free to leave."

I considered the length of time it would likely take for the police to communicate with Kinshasa, then how much longer it would be before Kinshasa could get through their ritual rounds of squabbling and communicate an official reaction. "It wasn't Kinshasa who gave the order, was it?"

The policeman beckoned to me peremptorily. "Come along now. I have your possessions at the desk."

"Buma," I said "The crocodile man. It was him, wasn't it? He gave the order."

"If you refuse to come with me," said the policeman, "I will have you dragged from the cell."

It was clear what must have happened. With Rawley no longer serving as a buffer between them and Buma, the police—with their superstitions, their belief in sorcery—would have been easy prey for Buma's mind games. In fact, they probably had never thought that I was a real suspect in the murder. I was only a bone they intended to throw to Kinshasa, a stand-in for Buma, whom they were too afraid of to prosecute. What I didn't understand was why Buma would have me set free. "Where is he?" I asked. "Where's Buma?"

The policeman gazed stonily at me. "He is gone."

"You released him?"

"He is gone."

'"Where... Where did he go?"

The policeman shrugged. He half-turned, then glanced back at me. "He left you a message."

I waited, and after checking the hallway to make sure no one else was listening, the policeman provided me with the final piece of the puzzle.

"Have patience," the policeman said. "That is all he told me to tell you. Have patience."

It is as I said at the outset, you must not think of me as a reliable witness. Instead, you must read what I have written as you would testimony in a murder trail. You must weigh it and make a judgment according to the dictates of your experience.

There is, I believe, one way to determine whether it is I who am mad, if—to justify my sins, perhaps even to hide a murderous act—I have conjured this story out of hints and intimations and a handful of anomalies; or if madness has infected the entire world, if the dying curse of a tiny African giant has poisoned all the waters, if crocodiles are fleeing that curse by becoming men, and if James Rawley was executed by means of witchery because he refused to drop his prosecution of Gilbert Buma. In order to make that determination, I would have to travel five days upriver from Mogado to a spot marked by a ferry landing burnt by Mobutu's soldiers; I would have to walk inland until I came to a giant fig tree, and if then I were to find an albino rock python, it would be reasonable to conclude that magic and witchery have won the day. At the time of these events, I was not prepared to make that trip, and I remain unprepared to do so—the Kilombo is not a place to which I ever care to return. But perhaps a different kind of proof will be forthcoming.

Upon my return to Abidjan, I secured a visa for Patience and together we flew back to the States. Shortly thereafter we married and settled outside Ann Arbor, Michigan, not far from the Huron River.

Patience likes being close to a river; she says it reminds her of home. Sometimes she will sit with me on the banks of the Huron, humming under her breath, and when she feels my eyes on her, she will cut her own eyes toward me and hold my stare just as Buma was in the habit of doing. I don't spend a great deal of time wondering about her origins; that would be fruitless. Though I may not have taken her seriously if it hadn't been for Buma's message and all that attended it, I try not to question either my mental state or the happiness that has come my way. I teach at the university, I come home at night to Patience, to love, and despite the fact that our immediate world appears to be in a state of collapse, with political scandal and murder and random violence reaching epidemic proportions, we have managed to find a degree of contentment.

Lately, however, something has been happening that, I think, bears upon the matter at hand.

Each weekend I drive to Detroit to teach a class at the science museum. The freeway, I-95, is a curving stretch of concrete along which flow thousands of cars, rather like the Kilombo both in form and in usage, and sometimes as I drive, a dreamlike feeling steals over me, I become distant from human thoughts and desires, tranquil in the face of the unknown, and I see myself gliding along that white riverine strip, a soul and flesh encased in steel, one of thousands of such entities, and we are all moving inexorably toward a far-off patch of glowing red, brilliant and flickering like fire, drawn to it by a force beyond our comprehension, but confident that when we reach it we will be transformed in a fashion that will allow us to survive the great trouble that afflicts us all, clear in the truth of our salvation... not the much advertised salvation of religion, but salvation through the processes of nature, which often manifest in arcane ways and seem as wildly illogical as the consequences of a magic spell.

I recognize that there are at least two possibilities here. Either there is a natural process that is triggered by devastating environmental perils, one by which various of the imperiled are forced along a fast evolutionary track, crocodiles evolving into men, men into... some speculative form; or else my subconscious has constructed this entire scenario as a mechanism of penance and punishment for my self-perceived crimes, and the patch of fiery, cataclysmic red—to which I draw nearer each Saturday—promises the ultimate in transformations.

A rationalist would favor the second possibility, but then of all humankind, rationalists are the most vulnerable to the effects of magic, the most confounded by the magical expressions of nature. As for me, I have no opinion, I am content to wait and learn, to have patience, to ask no questions, to accept what comes.

For though you may not understand how this story ends, whether love is disproved by death, whether truth is revelatory or merely deductive, whether life itself is an elastic energy, a pure informality with the infinite potential of a charm, or a sad interlude enclosed by black brackets, one way or the other, I will soon know for certain.

ROMANCE OF THE CENTURY

a GORP Visionary Adventure

Let's say you're born in the year 2000, one of the first children of the new millennium. You spend a great deal of your childhood reading about the legendary adventurers—the Marco Polos and the Richard Burtons and the like-and this breeds a desire for adventure in your heart. But you're living in an age in which the possibilities for this sort of trailblazing experience have been severely delimited. The attraction of adventure-travel has always been funded partly by the notion of testing oneself, partly by the allure of mystery, the unknown, and there seems little mystery left in the world. The managed nature areas of the twenty-first century provide a thin illusion of the original wild; the risk factor in such areas is almost nonexistent, though an element of danger is injected when one of the first models of robotic caretakers mistakes a sleeping camper for debris and renders him recyclable. The space program offers new frontiers, but your chances of becoming an astronaut are miniscule. Eventually you gravitate toward journalism, a profession that will allow you to indulge your passion for travel, if not for real exploration, and this leads you, in the autumn of 2026, to a place 560 miles off the coast of South Florida...

Mitchell is the biggest tropical storm of the season, a Force 5 hurricane, 700 miles wide and more than 30,000 feet high.

The radar image they showed you in Miami resembled an enormous throwing star with a hole at its center, spinning across the Caribbean. Up close, it's considerably more daunting, especially to someone cruising toward it in a twelve foot microjet, a tapered cylinder of spun glass composites so narrow, you're less flying the aircraft than wearing it. The outer wall of the storm, a patchwork of roiling gray and black cloud, looks as solid as a tidal wave and is lit from within by blooms of lightning. Bolts of red plasma rip from the cloud tops, fanning outward as they sheet toward the troposphere, leaving afterimages that hang for a second or two against the night sky like immense plumes of dark blood.

The computers have taken control of the microjet. You couldn't possibly manage the split-second maneuvers necessary to survive the windshifts inside Mitchell, but the sense of helplessness that comes with being a passenger and not a pilot amplifies your anxiety.

Your mouth is cottony, your heart is doing a speed-metal riff. But then the nose of the aircraft drops, arrowing downward, and as you penetrate the outer wall, adrenaline flushes away the chemicals of fear, and a shout is torn from your throat, merging with the whine of the jets and the roaring wind. Diving toward the eye is like being trapped inside a splinter of ice in a blender set on high and filled with whirling gray stuff-vibration is bone rattling. Detonations of lightning burn through the clouds on every side, and once a bolt shears through the hull inches from your face. If you were grounded, you'd be charcoal. For half a second the microjet appears encased in liquid light; the hull darkens automatically, preserving your eyesight.

Nearly a minute later, a period of time that seems much longer, you're spat forth into the eye and go sailing off into calm air 5,000 feet above the choppy, slateblue waters of the Caribbean.

The small jet engines beneath your wings, capable of providing upward and downward-as well as forward-thrust, cut back to minimum. Several dozen aircraft similar to yours are soaring about within the eye: transparent cylinders with swept-forward wings, their visibility enhanced by colored designs on the tail sections that identify the individual pilots. They look incredibly fragile against the massif of the storm wall. One by one they begin diving back toward the wall, or more precisely, toward the transition zone formed by turbulent wind and cloud grinding against the bubble of high pressure that forms the eye. The idea is to slip into the zone, much as a bodysurfer would propell himself into a cresting wave, and ride the nearly 250-mph wind that circulates within it.

Mitchell's transition zone is about 400 meters wide, a murky area filled with clouds that resemble gray floss, and slipping into it is roughly analogous to standing by a railroad track and grabbing onto a speeding train.

The instant you enter the zone, the cross-shear knocks you a thousand feet downward, and you come

within a hair of going into a spin. The computers stabilize the craft at 3,800 feet. After thirty seconds of relatively uneventful flight, you guide the craft into the edge of the storm wall, a maneuver similar to that of a surfer shooting the curl. You ride the inner wall long enough to gain momentum, then slip back into the zone at 225 mph. Seconds later, another microjet breaks from the wall directly ahead of you, causing your craft to veer sharply away in order to avoid a collision. A green slash on the tail section identifies the pilot as Maiko Tachibana, the beautiful Japanese girl with whom you've been involved for the past six months. The computerized programs would not permit such a close call, thus you know she must have switched off her computers and buzzed you on purpose.

Furious, you disengage your own computers and follow her downward. You're thoroughly committed to paying her back in kind, and you ignore the warning light on the altimeter signifying that you've breached the 1500-foot mark.

You finally come to your senses when you see her dip below the three-hundred-foot mark, a height at which even the slightest cross-shear can send you into the waves below. You relinquish control to the computers, let them take the aircraft up to 2,000, and spend the rest of the flight taping your experience of the storm.

That night you're sitting at a corner table in the Last Supper Club, a storm surfer hangout in South Beach-its decor lent a morbid touch by the recordings of pilot fatalities that play over the walls-Maiko drops into the chair opposite. You've been dictating a voiceover to add to the tape you made inside Mitchell. Maiko hits the playback button and listens as you hold forth on your conviction that the concept of adventure has been pared down to risk-taking and many of those who call themselves adventurers are on a death trip. A smile touches the corners of her mouth. At length she turns off the recorder and says, "It must be tiresome... having all that perspective."

You disregard the comment. "What the hell were you trying to do out there?"

"Playing," she says. "I thought you wanted to play. Sorry."

You tell her that your notion of play doesn't include tempting fate unnecessarily. That while death is a potential consequence of the things you've chosen to do, you don't have a need to constantly flirt with dying.

The argument that ensues is vicious, vituperative, and ends with her storming off into the night. Even though you're still angry, you figure you'll work things out back at the hotel; but when you enter the room you've been sharing with her, you find a note.

It's quite a lengthy note, and it states that a relationship with you will prohibit her from exploring her limits, from experiencing things she needs to understand. She loves you, she says, but that's just not enough. She says you were right about her attitude toward death-there's something in her that yearns toward death, that makes her want to brush against it. But it's not, she claims, the morbid preoccupation you might suspect. It's something that nourishes her, something she requires in order to live. She's sorry, and she'll miss you.

You think that her position is thoroughly unreasonable, possibly psychotic, but as you sit there, feeling the dark particularity of her absence and the beginnings of a depression far more severe than you might have expected, you wish you were a bit more unreasonable yourself.

It's a long while before you see Maiko again. You spend the intervening years reporting on the various pastimes that have supplanted the previous century's forms of adventure travel. Most notable-at least with regard to its beneficial effect upon your career-is your coverage of the superbear hunts in the Alaskan wilderness. Thanks to Michael Crichton, humanity has been dissuaded from recreating dinosaurs; however, someone has been foolhardy enough to play around with grizzly DNA, creating an animal that is not only larger than ursus horriblis, but has cheetah-like speed. Despite all manner of high-tech protection, at the time you travel to Alaska, the score stands at superbears 212, humans 23. Though the sight of a fourteen-inch-long claw ripping through steel plate is undeniably exhilirating, few protests are raised when the creatures are isolated and rendered sterile.

Every so often, Maiko leaves a message on your computer and you respond, but nothing ever comes of this. Now and again you have news of her. She's doing 100,000-foot sky dives, surfing gigantic artifically induced waves in the Pacific, going caving in the pelagic depths. One day you learn that she's running marathons on the dark side of the moon, bounding 250 miles in a specially designed and exceptionally frail vacuum suit. Perhaps because you still associate the moon with romance, you book a flight the next day, hoping to catch up with her; but by the time you arrive she has gone back to Earth.

You've reserved an expensive, specially shielded suite on the surface, and that night you sit at the window, gazing at the sky. With nothing to dim and distort their brightness, the stars in their serene trillions are an incredible sight, here and there forming curdled masses of cold fire; but since you have no one to share the experience with, the moon seems a sterile place, and you don't stay long.

In the spring of 2054, shortly after your second rejuvenation treatment, you're invited to join an American

Museum of Natural History's expedition to the vent fields adjoining the Axial Seamount Volcano, located 270 miles off the Oregon coast. It's the first such expedition to include non-scientists, and the idea has been floated that this might be the prelude to tourism on the ocean floor. When you arrive at the base that has been established at the 800-meter depth, you're surprised to find Maiko there. She, too, has received an invitation, courtesy of an uncle who chairs the museum board, and you have no doubt that she's been instrumental in your selection.

It's been twenty-eight years since you've seen her, but she looks about thirty. The training program, during which you adapt to breathing a liquid fluorocarbon compound (this prevents oxygen poisoning and the absorption of free gases, and allows you to descend to great depths and ascend with relative quickness), leaves little spare time, but nonetheless you manage to rekindle the relationship, and you begin to think there might be a future for the two of you.

The base of the volcanic slope is 8000 feet down and rises to a height of 4000 feet. As you descend to the ocean floor, you recieve intermittent injections of a compound containing trimethylamine oxide (TMAO), a substance found in deep-sea fishes that helps maintain water balance against the high salinity of the ocean and also assists pressure-sensitive proteins in your cells in overcoming pressure inhibition by removing dense water from charged molecules.

As you ascend, the compound will be extracted from your body by dialysis equipment aboard the cramped submersible that accompanies the expedition. But the breakdown product of TMAO, the substance that causes marine life to smell fishy, will remain in your system for several weeks thereafter until it is metabolized, thus ensuring that you will not be popular at parties.

Much of the descent is negotiated within the submersible, though at certain stages you are permitted outside, wearing a suit of layered kevlar and reinforced plate. It's a vast relief when the ocean bottom is reached and you're free to explore the hydrothermal vents at the base of the volcano. The vent that the scientists are most interested in is a black smoker called the Toadstool. Smokers are formed when the hot water issuing from a hydrothermal vent comes in contact with cold ocean water; the minerals contained in the vent water precipitate and form deposits on the surrounding rock. In the case of the Toadstool, these precipitates have created a mushroom-shaped chimney more than 100 feet tall, comprised largely of iron, copper, zinc, silver, lead, cobalt, and sulphur, from which a stream of dark particles is constantly spewing.

Lights have been set up all around the vent field at the base of the volcano. The helmet of your suit is designed to compensate for the hue of the fluorocarbon compound that fills it, and you've been told that what you will see is more or less natural color. Natural or not, what you're seeing is something right out of Jules Verne.

The twisting axial valley in which the vent field lies is a tortuous and hallucinatory terrain figured by caverns and expanses of rubble and smoking pillars, the Toadstool being the largest of these. Mussel beds encroach upon ivory-colored mats of bacteria that swirl gently in the current. Colonies of giant tubeworms, some of them eight feet long with bloody red palps at their tips, sprout from the sides of the smokers; clams the size of dinner plates are tucked into cracks. Amphipods (beach hoppers) scuttle about, feeding on the bacteria. Here and there you see pale octopi, crabs, and flat fish, probably members of the sole family. In sum it has the effect of a horrid yet beautiful garden in an outlying precinct of Hell. The silvery clad members of the expedition are busy with their various tasks, and you half-expect to see Nemo's *Nautilus* hovering nearby. Enhancing the otherworldliness of the place is the fact that whenever you move your hand in front of your face, you disturb the bioluminescent plankton that enrich the water and create a luminous track.

You're so absorbed in contemplation of the valley, you at first fail to notice that the keypad on your arm is registering a message—the head of the expedition is asking if you have seen Maiko; she's not responding.

The entire party begins to search for her, peering into caverns, up the sides of smokers. But knowing Maiko's lack of concern for limits, you make your way toward the nether reaches of the valley, to an area where the slope of the volcano planes away into a tumble or rocks and sand. With only your helmet light for illumination, your visibility is not good, maybe thirty feet.

Here in the open, as you plod up the slope of the volcano, you think you can feel something of the enormous weight of 250 atmospheres, and the gray murk around you seems an ominous curtain hiding unimaginable terrors. You tap out messages to Maiko, but there's no response. Then you spot a silvery figure in the dimness above. Crouched in a narrow cave mouth.

Maiko indicates that the send button on her keypad has malfunctioned, then gestures toward the deep, signaling that she's seen something. When you ask what it is she's seen, she holds her hands wide apart like a fisherman describing the one that got away. Through the face plate, her expression is charged with anxiety. A thrill runs across the muscles of your back, and you crouch down beside her, searching for movement in the featureless murk that surrounds you. It's nothing, you think. She was imagining things.

You send a message to the expedition head, saying that you've found Maiko and giving your location. You're just about to get to your feet when an enormous face-rather like a bulldog's face, flat, but with a mouth full of needle teeth-punches toward you out of the darkness, and you scramble back into the cave, electrified with fear. The body of the creature undulates past the cave mouth. An eel of some sort. It might have been a wolf eel, but they generally don't exceed ten feet in length, and this thing must be fifty feet long with a head the size of a living room. The eel makes another pass, and this time you're almost certain it's a wolf eel, one grown to mutant proportions.

Its face now reminds you of those fierce Tibetan deities hidden behind wooden screeens in temples in Kathmandu. You gather yourself and message the expedition head, telling her what has happened and warning her to keep away. The helmet of your suit contains a module that separates oxygen from carbon dioxide. Unlike the scrubbing systems of earlier decades, the module is able to reclaim the oxygen and it's not necessary to carry an extra oxygen supply. But the cadmium battery that powers the module needs to be recharged every three hours, and by your reckoning you and Maiko have been out nearly two and a half hours.

You'll need at least fifteen minutes to get back to the submersible-you hope the eel isn't too persistent.

The eel stays out of sight for the next twenty minutes, and with seventeen minutes of battery life remaining, you have no choice-you urge Maiko to her feet and begin the walk downslope to the valley and the submersible. It's scarcely a pleasant walk.

There's not much point in looking behind you-even if you saw the eel you could never avoid it in the open. Every step of the way you expect to feel those rapier teeth spitting your flesh. A chill articulates your spine, and you can hear the high-pitched whine of your circulatory system. But the eel doesn't put in a reappearance, and with three minutes to spare, you crawl through the submersible's lock and hook your suit up to the recharger.

Back at the 800-meter base, everyone's angry at Maiko. The various members of the expedition take turns chewing her out. She defends herself by saying that they knew who she was when they invited her along-it's not much of a defense, and though you keep your mouth shut, it's obvious to her how you feel.

Three nights later you're sitting in her cabin on the surface vessel that transported the two of you out from Seattle. You're holding another note, one you haven't bothered to read-you know more-or-less what it will say. You're not sure how you're going to handle this breakup. It hurts worse than the first time.

You're alone, you're in love, and you smell like a fish.

Forty-six years pass like forty-six heartbeats. You traverse the Martian poles, you spend a sixteen months with a crew building a colony in the asteroid belt, you sail the subterranean oceans of Europa. Maiko has utilized her fame as a daredevil to become a wealthy woman, marketing hundreds of products under the Tachibana name. You never stop thinking about her, but the thoughts are less urgent, more reminiscence than longing.

You've had your last rejuvenation treatment and you can expect another thirty, thirty-five years of hale life, then a swift decline-you're not sure how you want to spend those years. Some maniacs are attempting to surf giant storms in the atmosphere of Jupiter, but you're no longer attracted to this sort of thing. Maybe, you think, it's time to write the memoirs. Then you receive a message from Maiko, asking you to come to Phoebos, one of the moons of Mars. You're hesitant at first, but it's not as if you have anything better to do.

Maiko looks to be a beautiful woman in early middle age, and it's apparent that the old chemistry between you and her is still working. She intends to attempt the first circumnavigation of the Martian orbit in a solar sailer, and you're invited. The voyage will last more than six months, and the two of you will be isolated in a control cabin suspended from the join of the wings, a space not much larger than an old minivan. Sleeping cocoons double as mist showers-the entire cabin is a marvel of microengineering.

The sails, which have been constructed on Phoebos, are a latticework of reflective kevlar mounted on spines of wound carbon monotubing-like tens of square kilometers of silver blinds, paper-thin silvered strips about a half inch wide and a couple hundred yards long.

Microcomputers adjust each strip to optimize the amount of solar wind bouncing off them; this allows the pilot to tack against the solar wind by moving a simple control stick. The carbon monotubing is incredibly light and hundreds of times stronger than steel, consisting of molecular tubes of carbon atoms hundreds of times smaller than a human hair. Thousands of tubes are wound together into ropelike segments so that the supports resemble deep black laminated leather, but are rigid like a beetle shell-you could easily hold a 500foot rod of this material in one hand. These monorods form a structure similar to the skeleton bones of immense bat wings, with the kevlar strips stretched between them.

On paper, the voyage promises to be uneventful, six months of solitude and silence, but you realize that sooner or later Maiko will find a way to break the envelope. Once again you're hesitant, but only for a

moment-it's time, you decide, to test your own limits, to learn what you've been missing.

A few minutes before midnight, A.D. 2199, the solar sails unfurl, invisible at first against the caliginous dark of space, but then, as the kevlar strips turn flat against the sun for maximum thrust, they seem to materialize from nowhere, surrounding you like walls of blinding ice. Mars recedes to a nearly featureless disc behind you-it might be the red seal on an enormous black document... a testament relating to some cosmic finality... a finality you feel in your heart.

A few ticks of the clock and you will have lived a century, and it occurs to you that you have misapprehended a good many things, that-for one-the difference you perceived between you and Maiko was merely a difference in terms. You recall a night beneath the ice of Europa; an hour spent on a rocky promontory in Alaska, listening to the rumbling of a hungry bear below; a drilling accident in the asteroid belt. At each of these times and others you were terrified, but over the years you have become familiar with the dimensions of terror, you have learned something of the black ground upon which it and all our illusions breed, and you think that this knowledge must be the same as what Maiko has been seeking-but she was a pilgrim in pursuit of it, while you were a simple student.

As you sit beside Maiko at the controls, the array of stars ahead look in their unwinking brilliance to be fragments of a design too large to discern, a diamond sutra written across the void and across every sand grain, every moment, every thought, an endless rhythm and its perfect resolve that repeats itself in the arc of each life. Part of what you're feeling, you recognize, is the high attendant upon the launch, but that doesn't invalidate it—the feeling is always there, waiting to be grasped. Maiko smiles.

You wonder at the strange history that has led you to this place and you want to tell her things she probably already understands. Then a soft gong sounds in the cabin. The century begins, and it seems you are born with it.

RADIANT GREEN STAR

Several months before my thirteenth birthday, my mother visited me in a dream and explained why she had sent me to live with the circus seven years before. The dream was a Mitsubishi, I believe, its style that of the Moonflower series of biochips, which set the standard for pornography in those days; it had been programmed to activate once my testosterone production reached a certain level, and it featured a voluptuous Asian woman to whose body my mother had apparently grafted the image of her own face. I imagined she must have been in a desperate hurry and thus forced to use whatever materials fell to hand; yet, taking into account the Machiavellian intricacies of the family history, I later came to think that her decision to alter a pornographic chip might be intentional, designed to provoke Oedipal conflicts that would imbue her message with a heightened urgency.

In the dream, my mother told me that when I was eighteen I would come into the trust created by my maternal grandfather, a fortune that would make me the wealthiest man in Viet Nam. Were I to remain in her care, she feared my father would eventually coerce me into assigning control of the trust to him, whereupon he would have me killed. Sending me to live with her old friend Vang Ky was the one means she had of guaranteeing my safety. If all went as planned, I would have several years to consider whether it was in my best interests to claim the trust or to forswear it and continue my life in secure anonymity. She had faith that Vang would educate me in a fashion that would prepare me to arrive at the proper decision.

Needless to say, I woke from the dream in tears. Vang had informed me not long after my arrival at his door that my mother was dead, and that my father was likely responsible for her death; but this fresh evidence of his perfidy, and of her courage and sweetness, mingled though it was with the confusions of intense eroticism, renewed my bitterness and sharpened my sense of loss. I sat the rest of the night with only the eerie music of tree frogs to distract me from despair, which roiled about in my brain as if it were a species of sluggish life both separate from and inimical to my own.

The next morning, I sought out Vang and told him of the dream and asked what I should do. He was sitting at the desk in the tiny cluttered trailer that served as his home and office, going over the accounts: a frail man in his late sixties with close-cropped gray hair, dressed in a white open-collared shirt and green cotton trousers. He had a long face–especially long from cheekbones to jaw–and an almost feminine delicacy of feature, a combination of characteristics that lent him a sly, witchy look; but though he was capable of slyness, and though at times I suspected him of possessing supernatural powers, at least as regards his ability to ferret out my misdeeds, I perceived him at the time to be an inwardly directed soul who felt misused by the world and whose only interests, apart from the circus, were a love of books and calligraphy. He would occasionally take a pipe of opium, but was otherwise devoid of vices, and it strikes me now that while he had told me of his family and his career in government (he said he still maintained those connections), of a life replete with joys and passionate errors, he was now in the process of putting all that behind him and withdrawing from the world of the senses.

"You must study the situation," he said, shifting in his chair, a movement that shook the wall behind him, disturbing the leaflets stacked in the cabinet above his head and causing one to sail down toward the desk; he batted it away, and for an instant it floated in the air before me, as if held by the hand of a spirit, a detailed pastel rendering of a magnificent tent–a thousand times more magnificent than the one in which we performed–and a hand-lettered legend proclaiming the imminent arrival of the Radiant Green Star Circus.

"You must learn everything possible about your father and his associates," he went on. "Thus you will uncover his weaknesses and define his strengths. But first and foremost, you must continue to live. The man you become will determine how best to use the knowledge you have gained, and you mustn't allow the pursuit of your studies to rise to the level of obsession, or else his judgment will be clouded. Of course, this is easier to do in theory than in practice. But if you set about it in a measured way, you will succeed."

I asked how I should go about seeking the necessary information, and he gestured with his pen at another cabinet, one with a glass front containing scrapbooks and bundles of computer paper; beneath it, a marmalade cat was asleep atop a broken radio, which–along with framed photographs of his wife, daughter, and grandson, all killed, he'd told me, in an airline accident years before–rested on a chest of drawers.

"Start there," he said. "When you are done with those, my friends in the government will provide us with your father's financial records and other materials."

I took a cautious step toward the cabinet–stacks of magazines and newspapers and file boxes made the floor of the trailer difficult to negotiate–but Vang held up a hand to restrain me. "First," he said, "you must live. We will put aside a few hours each day for you to study, but before all else you are a member of my troupe. Do your chores. Afterward we will sit down together and make a schedule."

On the desk, in addition to his computer, were a cup of coffee topped with a mixture of sugar and egg, and a plastic dish bearing several slices of melon. He offered me a slice and sat with his hands steepled on his stomach, watching me eat. "Would you like time alone to honor your mother?" he asked. "I suppose we can manage without you for a morning."

"Not now," I told him. "Later, though..."

I finished the melon, laid the rind on his plate, and turned to the door, but he called me back.

"Philip," he said, "I cannot remedy the past, but I can assure you to a degree as to the future. I have made you my heir. One day the circus will be yours. Everything I own will be yours."

I peered at him, not quite certain that he meant what he said, even though his words had been plain.

"It may not seem a grand gift," he said. "But perhaps you will discover that it is more than it appears."

I thanked him effusively, but he grimaced and waved me to silence–he was not comfortable with displays of affection. Once again he told me to see to my chores.

"Attend to the major as soon as you're able," he said. "He had a difficult night. I know he would be grateful for your company."

Radiant Green Star was not a circus in the tradition of the spectacular traveling shows of the previous century. During my tenure, we never had more than eight performers and only a handful of exhibits, exotics that had been genetically altered in some fashion: a pair of miniature tigers with hands instead of paws, a monkey with a vocabulary of thirty-seven words, and the like. The entertainments we presented were unsophisticated; we could not compete with those available in Hanoi or Hue or Saigon, or, for that matter, those accessible in the villages. But the villagers perceived us as a link to a past they revered, and found in the crude charm of our performances a sop to their nostalgia–it was as if we carried the past with us, and we played to that illusion, keeping mainly to rural places that appeared on the surface to be part of another century. Even when the opportunity arose, Vang refused to play anywhere near large population centers because–he said–of the exorbitant bribes and licensing fees demanded by officials in such areas. Thus for the first eighteen years of my life, I did not venture into a city, and I came to know my country much as a tourist might, driving ceaselessly through it, isolated within the troupe. We traversed the north and central portions of Viet Nam in three battered methane-powered trucks, one of which towed Vang's trailer, and erected our tents in pastures and school yards and soccer fields, rarely staying anywhere longer than a few nights. On occasion, to accommodate a private celebration sponsored by a wealthy family, we would join forces with another troupe; but Vang was reluctant to participate in such events, because being surrounded by so many people caused our featured attraction to become agitated, thus imperiling his fragile health.

Even today the major remains a mystery to me. I have no idea if he was who he claimed to be; nor, I think, did *he* know–his statements concerning identity were usually vague and muddled, and the only point about which he was firm was that he had been orphaned as a young boy, raised by an uncle and aunt, and, being unmarried, was the last of his line. Further, it's unclear whether his claims were the product of actual memory, delusion, or implantation. For the benefit of our audiences, we let them stand as truth, and billed him as Major Martin Boyette, the last surviving POW of the American War, now well over a hundred years old and horribly disfigured, both conditions the result of experiments in genetic manipulation by means of viruses–this the opinion of a Hanoi physician who treated the major during a bout of illness. Since such unregulated experiments were performed with immoderate frequency throughout Southeast Asia after the turn of the century, it was not an unreasonable conclusion. Major Boyette himself had no recollection of the process that had rendered him so monstrous and–if one were to believe him–so long-lived.

We were camped that day near the village of Cam Lo, and the tent where the major was quartered had been set up at the edge of the jungle. He liked the jungle, liked its noise and shadow, the sense of enclosure it provided–he dreaded the prospect of being out in the open, so much so that whenever we escorted him to the main tent, we would walk with him, holding umbrellas to prevent him from seeing the sky and to shield him from the sight of god and man. But once inside the main tent, as if the formal structure of a performance neutralized his aversion to space and scrutiny, he showed himself pridefully, walking close to the bleachers, causing children to shy away and women to cover their eyes. His skin hung from his flesh in voluminous black folds (he was African-American), and when he raised his arms, the folds beneath them spread like the wings of a bat; his face, half-hidden by a layering of what appeared to be leather shawls, was the sort of

uncanny face one might see emerging from a whorled pattern of bark, roughly human in form, yet animated by a force that seems hotter than the human soul, less self-aware. Bits of phosphorescence drifted in the darks of his eyes. His only clothing was a ragged gray shift, and he hobbled along with the aid of a staff cut from a sapling papaya–he might have been a prophet escaped after a term in hell, charred and magical and full of doom. But when he began to speak, relating stories from the American War, stories of ill-fated Viet Cong heroes and the supernatural forces whose aid they enlisted, all told in a deep rasping voice, his air of suffering and menace evaporated, and his ugliness became an intrinsic article of his power, as though he were a poet who had sacrificed superficial glamour for the ability to express more eloquently the beauty within. The audiences were won over, their alarm transformed to delight, and they saluted him with enthusiastic applause... but they never saw him as I did that morning: a decrepit hulk given to senile maundering and moments of bright terror when startled by a sound from outside the tent. Sitting in his own filth, too weak or too uncaring to move.

When I entered the tent, screwing up my face against the stench, he tucked his head into his shoulder and tried to shroud himself in the fetid folds of his skin. I talked softly, gentling him as I might a frightened animal, in order to persuade him to stand. Once he had heaved up to his feet, I bathed him, sloshing buckets of water over his convulsed surfaces; when at length I was satisfied that I'd done my best, I hauled in freshly cut boughs and made him a clean place to sit. Unsteadily, he lowered himself onto the boughs and started to eat from the bowl of rice and vegetables I had brought for his breakfast, using his fingers to mold bits of food into a ball and inserting it deep into his mouth–he often had difficulty swallowing.

"Is it good?" I asked. He made a growly noise of affirmation. In the half-dark, I could see the odd points of brilliance in his eyes.

I hated taking care of the major (this may have been the reason Vang put me in charge of him). His physical state repelled me, and though the American War had long since ceased to be a burning issue, I resented his purported historical reality–being half American, half Vietnamese, I felt doubly afflicted by the era he represented. But that morning, perhaps because my mother's message had inoculated me against my usual prejudices, he fascinated me. It was like watching a mythological creature feed, a chimera or a manticore, and I thought I perceived in him the soul of the inspired storyteller, the luminous half-inch of being that still burned behind the corroded ruin of his face.

"Do you know who I am?" I asked.

He swallowed and gazed at me with those haunted foxfire eyes. I repeated the question.

"Philip," he said tonelessly, giving equal value to both syllables, as if the name were a word he'd been taught but did not understand.

I wondered if he was–as Vang surmised–an ordinary man transformed into a monster, pumped full of glorious tales and false memories, all as a punishment for some unguessable crime or merely on a cruel whim. Or might he actually *be* who he claimed? A freak of history, a messenger from another time whose stories contained some core truth, just as the biochip had contained my mother's truth? All I knew for certain was that Vang had bought him from another circus, and that his previous owner had found him living in the jungle in the province of Quan Tri, kept alive by the charity of people from a nearby village who considered him the manifestation of a spirit.

Once he had finished his rice, I asked him to tell me about the war, and he launched into one of his mystical tales; but I stopped him, saying, "Tell me about the real war. The war you fought in."

He fell silent, and when at last he spoke, it was not in the resonant tones with which he entertained our audiences, but in an effortful whisper.

"We came to the firebase in... company strength. Tenth of May. Nineteen sixty-seven. The engineers had just finished construction and... and... there was still..." He paused to catch his breath. "The base was near the Laotian border. Overlooking a defoliated rubber plantation. Nothing but bare red earth in front of us... and wire. But at our rear... the jungle... it was too close. They brought in artillery to clear it. Lowered the batteries to full declension. The trees all toppled in the same direction... as if they'd been pushed down by the sweep... of an invisible hand."

His delivery, though still labored, grew less halting, and he made feeble gestures to illustrate the tale, movements that produced a faint slithering as folds of his skin rubbed together; the flickerings in his pupils grew more and more pronounced, and I half-believed his eyes were openings onto a battlefield at night, a place removed from us by miles and time.

"Because of the red dirt, the base was designated Firebase Ruby. But the dirt wasn't the color of rubies, it was the red of drying blood. For months we held the position with only token resistance. We'd expected serious opposition, and it was strange to sit there day after day with nothing to do except send out routine patrols. I tried to maintain discipline, but it was an impossible task. Everyone malingered. Drug use was

rampant. If I'd gone by the book I could have brought charges against every man on the base. But what was the point? War was not truly being waged. We were engaged in a holding action. Policy was either directionless or misguided. And so I satisfied myself by maintaining a semblance of discipline as the summer heat and the monsoon melted away the men's resolve.

"October came, the rains slackened. There was no hint of increased enemy activity, but I had a feeling something big was on the horizon. I spoke to my battalion commander. He felt the same way. I was told we had intelligence suggesting that the enemy planned a fall and winter campaign building up to Tet. But no one took it seriously. I don't think I took it seriously myself. I was a professional soldier who'd been sitting idle for six months, and I was spoiling for a fight. I was so eager for engagement I failed to exercise good judgment. I ignored the signs, I... I refused... I..."

He broke off and pawed at something above him in the air–an apparition, perhaps; then he let out an anguished cry, covered his face with his hands, and began to shake like a man wracked by fever.

I sat with him until, exhausted, he lapsed into a fugue, staring dully at the ground. He was so perfectly still, if I had come across him in the jungle, I might have mistaken him for a root system that had assumed a hideous anthropomorphic shape. Only the glutinous surge of his breath opposed this impression. I didn't know what to think of his story. The plain style of its narration had been markedly different from that of his usual stories, and this lent it credibility; yet I recalled that whenever questioned about his identity, he would respond in a similar fashion. However, the ambiguous character of his personal tragedy did not diminish my new fascination with his mystery. It was as if I had been dusting a vase that rested on my mantelpiece, and, for the first time, I'd turned it over to inspect the bottom and found incised there a labyrinthine design, one that drew my eye inward along its black circuit, promising that should I be able to decipher the hidden character at its center, I would be granted a glimpse of something ultimately bleak and at the same time ultimately alluring. Not a secret, but rather the source of secrets. Not truth, but the ground upon which truth and its opposite were raised. I was a mere child–half a child, at any rate–thus I have no real understanding of how I arrived at this recognition, illusory though it may have been. But I can state with absolute surety why it seemed important at the time: I had a powerful sense of connection with the major, and, accompanying this, the presentiment that his mystery was somehow resonant with my own.

Except for my new program of study, researching my father's activities, and the enlarged parameters of my relationship with Major Boyette, whom I visited whenever I had the opportunity, over the next several years my days were much the same as ever, occupied by touring, performing (I functioned as a clown and an apprentice knife thrower), by all the tediums and pleasures that arose from life in Radiant Green Star. There were, of course, other changes. Vang grew increasingly frail and withdrawn, the major's psychological state deteriorated, and four members of the troupe left and were replaced. We gained two new acrobats, Kim and Kai, pretty Korean sisters aged seven and ten respectively–orphans trained by another circus–and Tranh, a middle-aged, moonfaced man whose potbelly did not hamper in the slightest his energetic tumbling and pratfalls. But to my mind, the most notable of the replacements was Vang's niece, Tan, a slim, quiet girl from Hue with whom I immediately fell in love.

Tan was nearly seventeen when she joined us, a year older than I, an age difference that seemed unbridgeable to my teenage sensibilities. Her shining black hair hung to her waist, her skin was the color of sandalwood dusted with gold, and her face was a perfect cameo in which the demure and the sensual commingled. Her father had been in failing health, and both he and his wife had been uploaded into a virtual community hosted by the Sony AI–Tan had then become her uncle's ward. She had no actual performing skills, but dressed in glittery revealing costumes, she danced and took part in comic skits and served as one of the targets for our knife thrower, a taciturn young man named Dat who was billed as James Bond Cochise. Dat's other target, Mei, a chunky girl of Taiwanese extraction who also served as the troupe's physician, having some knowledge of herbal medicine, would come prancing out and stand at the board, and Dat would plant his knives within a centimeter of her flesh; but when Tan took her place, he would exercise extreme caution and set the knives no closer than seven or eight inches away, a contrast that amused our audiences no end.

For months after her arrival, I hardly spoke to Tan, and then only for some utilitarian purpose; I was too shy to manage a normal conversation. I wished with all my heart that I was eighteen and a man, with the manly confidence that, I assumed, naturally flowed from having attained the age. As things stood I was condemned by my utter lack of self-confidence to admire her from afar, to imagine conversations and other intimacies, to burn with all the frustration of unrequited lust. But then, one afternoon, while I sat in the grass outside Vang's trailer, poring over some papers dealing with my father's investments, she approached, wearing loose black trousers and a white blouse, and asked what I was doing.

"I see you reading every day," she said. "You are so dedicated to your studies. Are you preparing for the

university?"

We had set up our tents outside Bien Pho, a village some sixty miles south of Hanoi, on the grassy bank of a wide, meandering river whose water showed black beneath a pewter sky. Dark green conical hills with rocky outcroppings hemmed in the spot, and it was shaded here and there by smallish trees with crooked trunks and puffs of foliage at the ends of their corkscrew branches. The main tent had been erected at the base of the nearest hill and displayed atop it a pennant bearing the starry emblem of our troupe. Everyone else was inside, getting ready for the night's performance. It was a brooding yet tranquil scene, like a painting on an ancient Chinese scroll, but I noticed none of it–the world had shrunk to the bubble of grass and air that enclosed the two of us.

Tan sat beside me, crossed her legs in a half-lotus, and I caught her scent. Not perfume, but the natural musky yield of her flesh. I did my best to explain the purpose of my studies, the words rushing out as if I were unburdening myself of an awful secret. Which was more-or-less the case. No one apart from Vang knew what I was doing, and because his position relative to the task was tutelary, not that of a confidante, I felt oppressed, isolated by the responsibility I bore. Now it seemed that by disclosing the sad facts bracketing my life, I was acting to reduce their power over me. And so, hoping to exorcise them completely, I told her about my father.

"His name is William Ferrance," I said, hastening to add that I'd taken Ky for my own surname. "His father emigrated to Asia in the Nineties, during the onset of *doi moi* (this the Vietnamese equivalent of *perestroika*), and made a fortune in Saigon, adapting fleets of taxis to methane power. His son–my father–expanded the family interests. He invested in a number of construction projects, all of which lost money. He was in trouble financially when he married my mother, and he used her money to fund a casino in Danang. That allowed him to recoup most of his losses. Since then, he's established connections with the triads, Malaysian gambling syndicates, and the Bamboo Union in Taiwan. He's become an influential man, but his money's tied up. He has no room to maneuver. Should he gain control of my grandfather's estate, he'll be a very dangerous man."

"But this is so impersonal," Tan said. "Have you no memories of him?"

"Hazy ones," I said. "From all I can gather, he never took much interest in me... except as a potential tool. The truth is, I can scarcely remember my mother. Just the occasional moment. How she looked standing at a window. The sound of her voice when she sang. And I have a general impression of the person she was. Nothing more."

Tan looked off toward the river; some of the village children were chasing each other along the bank, and a cargo boat with a yellow sail was coming into view around the bend. "I wonder," she said. "Is it worse to remember those who've gone, or not to remember them?"

I guessed she was thinking about her parents, and I wanted to say something helpful, but the concept of uploading an intelligence, a personality, was so foreign to me, I was afraid of appearing foolish.

"I can see my mother and father whenever I want," Tan said, lowering her gaze to the grass. "I can go to a Sony office anywhere in the world and summon them with a code. When they appear they look like themselves, they sound like themselves, but I know it's not them. The things they say are always... appropriate. But something is missing. Some energy, some quality." She glanced up at me, and, looking into her beautiful dark eyes, I felt giddy, almost weightless. "Something dies," she went on. "I know it! We're not just electrical impulses, we can't be sucked up into a machine and live. Something dies, something important. What goes into the machine is nothing. It's only a colored shadow of what we are."

"I don't have much experience with computers," I said.

"But you've experienced life!" She touched the back of my hand. "Can't you feel it within you? I don't know what to call it... a soul? I don't know..."

It seemed then I could feel the presence of the thing she spoke of moving in my chest, my blood, going all through me, attached to my mind, my flesh, by an unfathomable connection, existing inside me the way breath exists inside a flute, breeding the brief, pretty life of a note, a unique tone, and then passing on into the ocean of the air. Whenever I think of Tan, how she looked that morning, I'm able to feel that delicate, tremulous thing, both temporary and eternal, hovering in the same space I occupy.

"This is too serious," she said. "I'm sorry. I've been thinking about my parents more than I should." She shook back the fall of her hair, put on a smile. "Do you play chess?"

"No," I admitted.

"You must learn! A knowledge of the game will help if you intend to wage war against your father." A regretful expression crossed her face, as if she thought she'd spoken out of turn. "Even if you don't... I mean..." Flustered, she waved her hands to dispel the awkwardness of the moment. "It's fun," she said. "I'll teach you."

I did not make a good chess player, I was far too distracted by the presence of my teacher to heed her lessons. But I'm grateful to the game, for through the movements of knights and queens, through my clumsiness and her patience, through hours of sitting with our heads bent close together, our hearts grew close. We were never merely friends–from that initial conversation on, it was apparent that we would someday take the next step in exploring our relationship, and I rarely felt any anxiety in this regard; I knew that when Tan was ready, she would tell me. For the time being, we enjoyed a kind of amplified friendship, spending our leisure moments together, our physical contact limited to hand-holding and kisses on the cheek. This is not to say that I always succeeded in conforming to those limits. Once as we lay atop Vang's trailer, watching the stars, I was overcome by her scent, the warmth of her shoulder against mine, and I propped myself up on an elbow and kissed her on the mouth. She responded, and I stealthily unbuttoned her blouse, exposing her breasts. Before I could proceed further, she sat bolt upright, holding her blouse closed, and gave me a injured look; then she slid down from the trailer and walked off into the dark, leaving me in a state of dismay and painful arousal. I slept little that night, worried that I had done permanent damage to the relationship; but the next day she acted as if nothing had happened, and we went on as before, except that I now wanted her more than ever.

Vang, however, was not so forgiving. How he knew I had taken liberties with his niece, I'm not sure–it may have been simply an incidence of his intuitive abilities; I cannot imagine that Tan told him. Whatever his sources, after our performance the next night he came into the main tent where I was practicing with my knives, hurling them into a sheet of plywood upon which the red outline of a human figure had been painted, and asked if my respect for him had dwindled to the point that I would dishonor his sister's daughter.

He was sitting in the first row of the bleachers, leaning back, resting his elbows on the row behind him, gazing at me with distaste. I was infuriated by this casual indictment, and rather than answer immediately I threw another knife, placing it between the outline's arm and its waist. I walked to the board, yanked the blade free, and said without turning to him, "I haven't dishonored her."

"But surely that is your intent," he said.

Unable to contain my anger, I spun about to face him. "Were you never young? Have you never been in love?"

"Love." He let out a dry chuckle. "If you are in love, perhaps you would care to enlighten me as to its nature."

I would have liked to tell him how I felt about Tan, to explain the sense of security I found with her, the varieties of tenderness, the niceties of my concern for her, the thousand nuances of longing, the intricate complicity of our two hearts and the complex specificity of my desire, for though I wanted to lose myself in the turns of her body, I also wanted to celebrate her, enliven her, to draw out of her the sadness that sometimes weighed her down, and to have her leach my sadness from me as well–I knew this was possible for us. But I was too young and too angry to articulate these things.

"Do you love your mother?" Vang asked, and before I could respond, he said, "You have admitted that you have but a few disjointed memories of her. And, of course, a dream. Yet you have chosen to devote yourself to pursuing the dictates of that dream, to making a life that honors your mother's wishes. That is love. How can you compare this to your infatuation with Tan?"

Frustrated, I cast my eyes up to the billow of patched gray canvas overhead, to the metal rings at the peak from which Kai and Kim were nightly suspended. When I looked back to Vang, I saw that he had gotten to his feet.

"Think on it," he said. "If the time comes when you can regard Tan with the same devotion, well..." He made a subtle dismissive gesture with his fingers that suggested this was an unlikely prospect.

I turned to the board and hefted another knife. The target suddenly appeared evil in its anonymity, a dangerous creature with a wood-grain face and blood-red skin, and as I drew back my arm, my anger at Vang merged with the greater anger I felt at the anonymous forces that had shaped my life, and I buried the knife dead center of the head–it took all my strength to work the blade free. Glancing up, I was surprised to see Vang watching from the entrance. I had assumed that, having spoken his piece, he had returned to his trailer. He stood there for a few seconds, giving no overt sign of his mood, but I had the impression he was pleased.

When she had no other duties, Tan would assist me with my chores: feeding the exotics, cleaning out their cages, and, though she did not relish his company, helping me care for the major. I must confess I was coming to enjoy my visits with him less and less; I still felt a connection to him, and I remained curious as to the particulars of his past, but his mental slippage had grown so pronounced, it was difficult to be around him. Frequently he insisted on trying to relate the story of Firebase Ruby, but he always lapsed into terror and

grief at the same point he had previously broken off the narrative. It seemed that this was a tale he was making up, not one he had been taught or programmed to tell, and that his mind was no longer capable of other than fragmentary invention. But one afternoon, as we were finishing up in his tent, he began to tell the story again, this time starting at the place where he had previously faltered, speaking without hesitancy in the deep, raspy voice he used while performing.

"It came to be October," he said. "The rains slackened, the snakes kept to their holes during the day, and the spiderwebs were not so thick with victims as they'd been during the monsoon. I began to have a feeling that something ominous was on the horizon, and when I communicated this sense of things to my superiors, I was told that according to intelligence, an intensification of enemy activity was expected, leading up to what was presumed to be a major offensive during the celebration of Tet. But I gave no real weight to either my feeling or to the intelligence reports. I was a professional soldier, and for six months I'd been engaged in nothing more than sitting in a bunker and surveying a wasteland of red dirt and razor wire. I was spoiling for a fight."

He was sitting on a nest of palm fronds, drenched in a spill of buttery light–we had partially unzipped the roof of the tent in order to increase ventilation–and it looked as if the fronds were an island adrift in a dark void and he a spiritual being who had been scorched and twisted by some cosmic fire, marooned in eternal emptiness.

"The evening of the Fourteenth, I sent out the usual patrols and retired to my bunker. I sat at my desk reading a paperback novel and drinking whiskey. After a time, I put down the book and began a letter to my wife. I was tipsy, and instead of the usual sentimental lines designed to make her feel secure, I let my feelings pour onto the paper, writing about the lack of discipline, my fears concerning the enemy, my disgust at the way the war was being prosecuted. I told her how much I hated Viet Nam. The ubiquitous corruption, the stupidity of the South Vietnamese government. The smell of fish sauce, the poisonous greens of the jungle. Everything. The goddamn place had been a battlefield so long, it was good for nothing else. I kept drinking, and the liquor eroded my remaining inhibitions. I told her about the treachery and ineptitude of the ARVN forces, about the fuck-ups on our side who called themselves generals."

"I was still writing when, around twenty-one hundred hours, something distracted me. I'm not sure what it was. A noise... or maybe a vibration. But I knew something had happened. I stepped out into the corridor and heard a cry. Then the crackling of small arms fire. I grabbed my rifle and ran outside. The VC were inside the wire. In the perimeter lights I saw dozens of diminutive men and women in black pajamas scurrying about, white stars sputtering from the muzzles of their weapons. I cut down several of them. I couldn't think how they had gotten through the wire and the minefields without alerting the sentries, but then, as I continued to fire, I spotted a man's head pop up out of the ground and realized that they had tunneled in. All that slow uneventful summer, they'd been busy beneath the surface of the earth, secretive as termites."

At this juncture the major fell prey once again to emotional collapse, and I prepared myself for the arduous process of helping him recover; but Tan kneeled beside him, took his hand, and said, "Martin? Martin, listen to me."

No one ever used the major's Christian name, except to introduce him to an audience, and I didn't doubt that it had been a long time since a woman had addressed him with tenderness. He abruptly stopped his shaking, as if the nerves that had betrayed him had been severed, and stared wonderingly at Tan. White pinprick suns flickered and died in the deep places behind his eyes.

"Where are you from, Martin?" she asked, and the major, in a dazed tone, replied, "Oakland... Oakland, California. But I was born up in Santa Cruz."

"Santa Cruz." Tan gave the name a bell-like reading. "Is it beautiful in Santa Cruz? It sounds like a beautiful place."

"Yeah... it's kinda pretty. There's old-growth redwoods not far from town. And there's the ocean. It's real pretty along the ocean."

To my amazement, Tan and the major began to carry on a coherent–albeit simplistic–conversation, and I realized that he had never spoken in this fashion before. His syntax had an uncustomary informality, and his voice held the trace of an accent. I thought that Tan's gentle approach must have penetrated his tormented psyche, either reaching the submerged individual, the real Martin Boyette, or else encountering a fresh layer of delusion. It was curious to hear him talk about such commonplace subjects as foggy weather and jazz music and Mexican food, all of which he claimed could be found in good supply in Santa Cruz. Though his usual nervous tics were in evidence, a new placidity showed in his face. But, of course this state of affairs didn't last.

"I can't," he said, taking a sudden turn from the subject at hand; he shook his head, dragging folds of skin across his neck and shoulders, "I can't go back anymore. I can't go back there."

"Don't be upset, Martin," Tan said. "There's no reason for you to worry. We'll stay with you, we'll..."

"I don't want you to stay." He tucked his head into his shoulder so his face was hidden by a bulge of skin. "I got to get back doin' what I was doin'."

"What's that?" I asked him. "What were you doing?"

A muffled rhythmic grunting issued from his throat–laughter that went on too long to be an expression of simple mirth. It swelled in volume, trebled in pitch, becoming a signature of instability.

"I'm figurin' it all out," he said. "That's what I'm doin'. Jus' you go away now."

"Figuring out what?" I asked, intrigued by the possibility–however unlikely–that the major might have a mental life other than the chaotic, that his apparent incoherence was merely an incidental byproduct of concentration, like the smoke that rises from a leaf upon which a beam of sunlight has been focused.

He made no reply, and Tan touched my hand, signaling that we should leave. As I ducked through the tent flap, behind me the major said, "I can't go back there, and I can't be here. So jus' where's that leave me, y'know?"

Exactly what the major meant by this cryptic statement was unclear, but his words stirred something in me, reawakened me to internal conflicts that had been pushed aside by my studies and my involvement with Tan. When I had arrived to take up residence at Green Star, I was in a state of emotional upheaval, frightened, confused, longing for my mother. Yet even after I calmed down, I was troubled by the feeling that I had lost my place in the world, and it seemed this was not just a consequence of having been uprooted from my family, but that I had always felt this way, that the turbulence of my emotions had been a cloud obscuring what was a constant strain in my life. This was due in part to my mixed heritage. Though the taint associated with the children of Vietnamese mothers and American fathers (dust children, they had once been called) had dissipated since the end of the war, it had not done so entirely, and wherever the circus traveled. I would encounter people who, upon noticing the lightness of my skin and the shape of my eyes, expressed scorn and kept their distance. Further fueling this apprehension was the paucity of my memories deriving from the years before I had come to live with Vang. Whenever Tan spoke about her childhood, she brought up friends, birthdays, uncles and cousins, trips to Saigon, dances, hundreds of details and incidents that caused my own memory to appear grossly underpopulated by comparison. Trauma was to blame, I reckoned. The shock of my mother's abandonment, however well-intended, had ripped open my mental storehouse and scattered the contents. That and the fact that I had been six when I left home and thus hadn't had time to accumulate the sort of cohesive memories that lent color to Tan's stories of Hue. But explaining it away did not lessen my discomfort, and I became fixated on the belief that no matter the nature of the freakish lightning that had sheared away my past, I would never find a cure for the sense of dislocation it had provoked, only medicines that would suppress the symptoms and mask the disease–and, that being so masked, it would grow stronger, immune to treatment, until eventually I would be possessed by it, incapable of feeling at home anywhere.

I had no remedy for these anxieties other than to throw myself with greater intensity into my studies, and with this increase in intensity came a concomitant increase in anger. I would sit at Vang's computer, gazing at photographs of my father, imagining violent resolutions to our story. I doubted that he would recognize me; I favored my mother and bore little resemblance to him, a genetic blessing for which I was grateful: he was not particularly handsome, though he was imposing, standing nearly six and a half feet tall and weighing–according to a recent medical report–two hundred and sixty-four pounds, giving the impression not of a fat man, but a massive one. His large squarish head was kept shaved, and on his left cheek was the dark blue and green tattoo of his corporate emblem–a flying fish–ringed by three smaller tattoos denoting various of his business associations. At the base of his skull was an oblong silver plate beneath which lay a number of ports allowing him direct access to a computer. Whenever he posed for a picture, he affected what I assumed he would consider a look of hauteur, but the smallness of his eyes (grayish blue) and nose and mouth in contrast to the largeness of his face caused them to be limited in their capacity to convey character and emotional temperature, rather like the features on a distant planet seen through a telescope, and as a result this particular expression came across as prim. In less formal photographs, taken in the company of one or another of his sexual partners, predominantly women, he was quite obviously intoxicated.

He owned an old French Colonial in Saigon, but spent the bulk of his time at his house in Binh Khoi, one of the flower towns–communities built at the turn of the century, intended to provide privacy and comfort for well-to-do Vietnamese whose sexual preferences did not conform to communist morality. Now that communism–if not the concept of sexual morality itself–had become quaint, a colorful patch of history dressed up with theme-park neatness to amuse the tourists, it would seem that these communities no longer had any reason to exist; yet exist they did. Their citizenry had come to comprise a kind of gay aristocracy that defined styles, set trends, and wielded significant political power. Though they maintained a rigid exclusivity, and though my father's bisexuality was motivated to a great degree–I believe–by concerns of

business and status, he had managed to cajole and bribe his way into Binh Khoi, and as best I could determine, he was sincere in his attachment to the place.

The pictures taken at Binh Khoi rankled me the most–I hated to see him laughing and smiling. I would stare at those photographs, my emotions overheating, until it seemed I could focus rage into a beam and destroy any object upon which I turned my gaze. My eventual decision, I thought, would be easy to make. Anger and history, the history of his violence and greed, were making it for me, building a spiritual momentum impossible to stop. When the time came, I would avenge my mother and claim my inheritance. I knew exactly how to go about the task. My father feared no one less powerful than himself–if such a person moved against him, they would be the target of terrible reprisals–and he recognized the futility of trying to fend off an assassination attempt by anyone more powerful; thus his security was good, yet not impenetrable. The uniqueness of my situation lay in the fact that if I were able to kill him, I would as a consequence become more powerful than he or any of his connections; and so, without the least hesitancy, I began to plan his murder both in Binh Khoi and Saigon–I had schematics detailing the security systems of both homes. But in the midst of crafting the means of his death, I lost track of events that were in the process of altering the conditions attendant upon my decision.

One night not long after my seventeenth birthday, I was working at the computer in the trailer, when Vang entered and lowered himself carefully in the chair opposite me, first shooing away the marmalade cat who had been sleeping there. He wore a threadbare gray cardigan and the striped trousers from an old suit, and carried a thin folder bound in plastic. I was preoccupied with tracking my father's movements via his banking records and I acknowledged Vang's presence with a nod. He sat without speaking a while and finally said, "Forgive my intrusion, but would you be so kind as to allow me a minute of your time."

I realized he was angry, but my own anger took precedence. It was not just that I was furious with my father; I had grown weary of Vang's distant manner, his goading, his incessant demands for respect in face of his lack of respect for me. "What do you want?" I asked without looking away from the screen.

He tossed the folder onto the desk. "Your task has become more problematic."

The folder contained the personnel file of a attractive woman named Phuong Anh Nguyen whom my father had hired as a bodyguard. Much of the data concerned her considerable expertise with weapons and her reaction times, which were remarkable–it was apparent that she had been bred for her occupation, genetically enhanced. According to the file her senses were so acute, she could detect shifts in the heat patterns of the brain, subtle changes in blood pressure, heart rate, pupillary dilation, speech, all the telltales that would betray the presence of a potential assassin. The information concerning her personal life was skimpy. Though Vietnamese, she had been born in China, and had spent her life until the age of sixteen behind the walls of a private security agency, where she had received her training. Serving a variety of employers, she had killed sixteen men and women over the next five years. Several months before, she had bought out her contract from the security agency and signed on long-term with my father. Like him, she was bisexual, and, also like him, the majority of her partners were women.

I glanced up from the file to find Vang studying me with an expectant air. "Well," he said, "what do you think?"

"She's not bad-looking," I said.

He folded his arms, made a disgusted noise.

"All right." I turned the pages of the file. "My father's upgrading his security. That means he's looking ahead to bigger things. Preparing for the day when he can claim my trust."

"Is that all you're able to extract from the document?"

From outside came voices, laughter. They passed, faded. Mei, I thought, and Tranh. It was a cool night, the air heavy with the scent of rain. The door was cracked open, and I could see darkness and thin streamers of fog. "What else is there?" I asked.

"Use your mind, won't you?" Vang let his head tip forward and closed his eyes–a formal notice of his exasperation. "Phuong would require a vast sum in order to pay off her contract. Several million, at least. Her wage is a good one, but even if she lived in poverty, which she does not, it would take her a decade or more to save sufficient funds. Where might she obtain such a sum?"

I had no idea.

"From her new employer, of course," Vang said.

"My father doesn't have that kind of money lying around."

"It seems he does. Only a very wealthy man could afford such a servant as Phuong Anh Nguyen."

I took mental stock of my father's finances, but was unable to recall an excess of cash.

"It's safe to say the money did not come from your father's business enterprises," said Vang. "We have good information on them. So we may assume he either stole it or coerced someone else into stealing it." The

cat jumped up into his lap, began kneading his abdomen. "Rather than taxing your brain further," he went on, "I'll tell you what I believe has happened. He's tapped into your trust. It's much too large to be managed by one individual, and it's quite possible he's succeeded in corrupting one of the officers in charge."

"You can't be sure of that."

"No, but I intend to contact my government friends and suggest an investigation of the trust. If your father has done what I suspect, it will prevent him from doing more damage." The cat had settled on his lap; he stroked its head. "But the trust is not the problem. Even if your father has stolen from it, he can't have taken much more than was necessary to secure this woman's services. Otherwise the man who gave me this"–he gestured at the folder–"would have detected evidence of other expenditures. There'll be more than enough left to make you a powerful man. Phuong Anh Nguyen is the problem. You'll have to kill her first."

The loopy cry of a night bird cut the silence. Someone with a flashlight was crossing the pasture where the trailer rested, the beam of light slicing through layers of fog, sweeping over shrubs and patches of grass. I suggested that one woman shouldn't pose that much of a problem, no matter how efficient she was at violence.

Vang closed his eyes again. "You have not witnessed this kind of professional in action. They're fearless, totally dedicated to their work. They develop a sixth sense concerning their clients; they bond with them. You'll need to be circumspect in dealing with her."

"Perhaps she's beyond my capacity to deal with," I said after a pause. "Perhaps I'm simply too thickheaded. I should probably let it all go and devote myself to Green Star."

"Do as you see fit."

Vang's expression did not shift from its stoic cast, but it appeared to harden, and I could tell that he was startled. I instructed the computer to sleep and leaned back, bracing one foot against the side of the desk. "There's no need for pretense," I said. "I know you want me to kill him. I just don't understand why."

I waited for him to respond, and when he did not, I said, "You were my mother's friend–that's reason enough to wish him dead, I suppose. But I've never felt that you were *my* friend. You've given me... everything. Life. A place to live. A purpose. Yet whenever I try to thank you, you dismiss it out of hand. I used to think this was because you were shy, because you were embarrassed by displays of emotion. Now, I'm not sure. Sometimes it seems you find my gratitude repugnant... or embarrassing in a way that has nothing to do with shyness. It's as if"–I struggled to collect my thoughts "–as if you have some reason for hating my father that you haven't told me. One you're ashamed to admit. Or maybe it's something else, some piece of information you have that gives you a different perspective on the situation."

Being honest with him was both exhilarating and frightening–I felt as though I were violating a taboo–and after this speech I was left breathless and disoriented, unsure of everything I'd said, though I'd been thoroughly convinced of its truth when I said it. "I'm sorry," I told him. "I've no right to doubt you."

He started to make a gesture of dismissal such as was his habit when uncomfortable with a conversation, but caught himself and petted the cat instead. "Despite the differences in our stations, I was very close to your mother," he said. "And to your grandfather. No longer having a family of my own, I made them into a surrogate. When they died, one after the other... you see, your grandfather's presence, his wealth, protected your mother, and once he was gone, your father had no qualms against misusing her." He blew out a breath, like a horse, through his lips. "When they died, I lost my heart. I'd lost so much already, I was unable to bear the sorrow I felt. I retreated from the world, I rejected my emotions. In effect, I shut myself down." He put a hand to his forehead, covering his eyes. I could see he was upset, and I felt badly that I had caused these old griefs to wound him again. "I know you have suffered as a result," he went on. "You've grown up without the affection of a parent, and that is a cruel condition. I wish I could change that. I wish I could change the way I am, but the idea of risking myself, of having everything ripped away from me a third time... it's unbearable." His hand began to tremble; he clenched it into a fist, pressed it against the bridge of his nose. "It is I who should apologize to you. Please, forgive me."

I assured him that he need not ask for forgiveness, I honored and respected him. I had the urge to tell him I loved him, and at that moment I did–I believed now that in loving my family, in carrying out my mother's wishes, he had established his love for me. Hoping to distract him from his grief, I asked him to tell me about my grandfather, a man concerning whom I knew next to nothing, only that he had been remarkably successful in business.

Vang seemed startled by the question, but after taking a second to compose himself, he said, "I'm not sure you would have approved of him. He was a strong man, and strong men often sacrifice much that ordinary men hold dear in order to achieve their ends. But he loved your mother, and he loved you."

This was not the sort of detail I'd been seeking, but it was plain that Vang was still gripped by emotion, and I decided it would be best to leave him alone. As I passed behind him, I laid a hand on his shoulder. He

twitched, as if burned by the touch, and I thought he might respond by covering my hand with his own. But he only nodded and made a humming noise deep in his throat. I stood there for a few beats, wishing I could think of something else to say; then I bid him good night and went off into the darkness to look for Tan.

One morning, about a month after this conversation, in the little seaside town of Vung Tao, Dat quit the circus following an argument with Vang, and I was forced that same evening to assume the role of James Bond Cochise. The prospect of performing the entire act in public–I had previously made token appearances along with Dat–gave rise to some anxiety, but I was confident in my skill. Tan took in Dat's tuxedo jacket a bit, so it would hang nicely, and helped me paint my face with Native American designs, and when Vang announced me, standing at the center of our single ring and extolling my legendary virtues into a microphone, I strode into the rich yellow glow of the tent, the warmth smelling of sawdust and cowshit (a small herd had been foraging on the spot before we arrived), with my arms overhead, flourishing the belt that held my hatchets and knives, and enjoying the applause. All seven rows of the bleachers were full, the audience consisting of resort workers, fishermen and their families, with a smattering of tourists, mainly backpackers, but also a group of immensely fat Russian women who had been transported from a hotel farther along the beach in cyclos pedaled by diminutive Vietnamese men. They were in a good mood, thanks to a comic skit in which Tan played a farm girl and Tranh a village buffoon hopelessly in love with her, his lust manifested by a telescoping rod that could spring outward to a length of fourteen inches and was belted to his hips beneath a pair of baggy trousers.

Mei, dressed in a red sequined costume that pushed up her breasts and squeezed the tops of her chubby thighs like sausage ends, assumed a spread-eagled position in front of the board, and the crowd fell silent. Sitting in a wooden chair at ring center, Vang switched on the music, the theme from a venerable James Bond film. I displayed a knife to the bleachers, took my mark, and sent the blade hurtling toward Mei, planting it solidly in the wood an inch above her head. The first four or five throws were perfect, outlining Mei's head and shoulders. The crowd oohed and ahhed each time the blade sank into the board. Supremely confident now, I flung the knives as I whirled and ducked, pretending to dodge the gunshots embedded in the theme music, throwing from a crouch, on my stomach, leaping–but then I made the slightest of missteps, and the knife I hurled flashed so close to Mei, it nicked the fleshy portion of her upper arm. She shrieked and staggered away from the board, holding the injury. She remained stock-still for an instant, fixing me with a look of anguish, then bolted for the entrance. The crowd was stunned. Vang jumped up, the microphone dangling from his hand. For a second or two, I was rooted to the spot, not certain what to do. The bombastic music isolated me as surely as if it were a fence, and when Tranh shut it off, the fence collapsed, and I felt the pressure of a thousand eyes upon me. Unable to withstand it, I followed Mei out into the night.

The main tent had been erected atop a dune overlooking a bay and a stretch of sandy beach. It was a warm, windy night, and as I emerged from the tent the tall grasses cresting the dune were blown flat by a gust. From behind me, Vang's amplified voice sounded above the rush of the wind and the heavier beat of the surf, urging the audience to stay seated, the show would continue momentarily. The moon was almost full, but it hung behind the clouds, edging an alp of cumulus with silver, and I couldn't find Mei at first. Then the moon sailed clear, paving a glittering avenue across the black water, touching the plumes of combers with phosphorous, brightening the sand, and I spotted Mei–recognizable by her red costume–and two other figures on the beach some thirty feet below; they appeared to be ministering to her.

I started down the face of the dune, slipped in the loose sand and fell. As I scrambled to my feet, I saw Tan struggling up the slope toward me. She caught at the lapels of my tuxedo for balance, nearly causing me to fall again, and we swayed together, holding each other upright. She wore a nylon jacket over her costume, which was like Mei's in every respect but one–it was a shade of peacock blue spangled with silver stars. Her shining hair was gathered at the nape of her neck, crystal earrings sparkled in the lobes of her ears, her dark eyes brimmed with light. She looked made of light, an illusion that would fade once the clouds regrouped about the moon. But the thing that most affected me was not her beauty. Moment to moment, that was something of which I was always aware, how she flowed between states of beauty, shifting from schoolgirl to seductress to serious young woman, and now this starry incarnation materialized before me, the devi of a world that existed only for this precise second... No, it was her calmness that affected me most. It poured over me, coursing around and through me, and even before she spoke, not mentioning what had happened to Mei, as if it were not a potentially fatal accident, a confidence-destroyer that would cause me to falter whenever I picked up a knife–even before that I was convinced by her unruffled manner that everything was as usual, there had been a slight disruption of routine, and now we should go back into the tent because Vang was running out of jokes to tell.

"Mei..." I said as we clambered over the crest of the dune, and Tan said, "It's not even a scratch." She took my arm and guided me toward the entrance, walking briskly yet unhurriedly.

I felt I'd been hypnotized–not by a sonorous voice or the pendulum swing of a shiny object, but by a heightened awareness of the ordinary, the steady pulse of time, all the background rhythms of the universe. I was filled with an immaculate calm, distant from the crowd and the booming music. It seemed that I wasn't throwing the knives so much as I was fitting them into slots and letting the turning of the earth whisk them away to thud and quiver in the board, creating a figure of steel slightly larger than the figure of soft brown flesh and peacock blue silk it contained. Dat had never received such applause–I think the crowd believed Mei's injury had been a trick designed to heighten suspense, and they showed their enthusiasm by standing as Tan and I took our bows and walked together through the entranceway. Once outside, she pressed herself against me, kissed my cheek, and said she would see me later. Then she went off toward the rear of the tent to change for the finale.

Under normal circumstances, I would have gone to help with the major, but on this occasion, feeling disconnected and now, bereft of Tan's soothing influence, upset at having injured Mei, I wandered along the top of the dune until I came to a gully choked with grasses that afforded protection from the wind, which was still gusting hard, filling the air with grit. I sat down amidst the grass and looked off along the curve of the beach. About fifteen meters to the north, the sand gave out into a narrow shingle and the land planed upward into low hills thick with vegetation. Half-hidden by the foliage was a row of small houses with sloping tiled roofs and open porches; they stood close to the sea, and chutes of yellow light spilled from their windows to illuminate the wavelets beneath. The moon was high, no longer silvery, resembling instead a piece of bloated bone china mottled with dark splotches, and, appearing to lie directly beneath it among a hammock of coconut palms was a pink stucco castle that guarded the point of the bay: the hotel where the tourists who had attended our performance were staying. I could make out antlike shapes scurrying back and forth on the brightly lit crescent of sand in front of it, and I heard a faint music shredded by the wind. The water beyond the break was black as opium.

My thoughts turned not to the accident with Mei, but to how I had performed with Tan. The act had passed quickly, a flurry of knives and light, yet now I recalled details: the coolness of the metal between my fingers; Vang watching anxiously off to the side; a fiery glint on a hatchet blade tumbling toward a spot between Tan's legs. My most significant memory, however, was of her eyes. How they had seemed to beam instructions, orchestrating my movements, so forceful that I'd imagined she was capable of deflecting a blade if my aim proved errant. Given my emotional investment in her, my absolute faith–though we'd never discussed it–in our future together, it was easy to believe she had that kind of power over me. Easy to believe, and somewhat troublesome, for it struck me that we were not equals, we couldn't be as long as she controlled every facet of the relationship. And having concluded this, as if the conclusion were the end of all possible logics concerning the subject, my mind slowed and became mired in despondency.

I'm not certain how long I had been sitting when Tan came walking down the beach, brushing windblown hair from her eyes. She had on a man's short-sleeved shirt and a pair of loose-fitting shorts, and was carrying a blanket. I was hidden from her by the grass, and I was at such a remove from things, not comfortable with but accepting of my solitude, I was half-inclined to let her pass; but then she stopped and called my name, and I, by reflex, responded. She spotted me and picked up her pace. When she reached my side she said without a hint of reproval, merely as if stating a fact, "You went so far. I wasn't sure I'd find you." She spread the blanket on the sand and encouraged me to join her on it. I felt guilty at having had clinical thoughts about her and our relationship–to put this sort of practical construction on what I tended to view as a magical union, a thing of fate and dharma, seemed unworthy, and as a consequence I was at a loss for words. The wind began to blow in a long unbroken stream off the water, and she shivered. I asked if she would like to put on my tuxedo jacket. She said, "No." The line of her mouth tightened, and with a sudden movement, she looked away from me, half-turning her upper body. I thought I must have done something to annoy her, and this so unnerved me, I didn't immediately notice that she was unbuttoning her shirt. She shrugged out of it, held it balled against her chest for a moment, then set it aside; she glanced at me over her shoulder, engaging my eyes. I could tell her usual calm was returning–I could almost see her filling with it–and I realized then that this calmness of hers was not hers alone, it was ours, a byproduct of our trust in one another, and what had happened in the main tent had not been a case of her controlling me, saving me from panic, but had been the two of us channeling each other's strength, converting nervousness and fear to certainty and precision. Just as we were doing now.

I kissed her mouth, her small breasts, exulting in their salty aftertaste of brine and dried sweat. Then I drew her down onto the blanket, and what followed, despite clumsiness and flashes of insecurity, was somehow both fierce and chaste, the natural culmination of two years of longing, of unspoken treaties and accommodations. Afterward, pressed together, wrapped in the silk and warmth of spent splendor, whispering the old yet never less than astonishing secrets and promises, saying things that had long gone

unsaid, I remember thinking that I would do anything for her. This was not an abstract thought, not simply the atavistic reaction of a man new to a feeling of mastery, though I can't deny that was in me–the sexual and the violent break from the same spring–but was an understanding founded on a considered appreciation of the trials I might have to overcome and the blood I might have to shed in order to keep her safe in a world where wife-murder was a crime for profit and patricide an act of self-defense. It's strange to recall with what a profound sense of reverence I accepted the idea that I was now willing to engage in every sort of human behavior, ranging from the self-sacrificial to the self-gratifying to the perpetration of acts so abhorrent that, once committed, they would harrow me until the end of my days.

At dawn the clouds closed in, the wind died, and the sea lay flat. Now and again a weak sun penetrated the overcast, causing the water to glisten like an expanse of freshly applied gray paint. We climbed to the top of the dune and sat with our arms around each other, not wanting to return to the circus, to break the elastic of the long moment stretching backward into night. The unstirring grass, the energyless water and dead sky, made it appear that time itself had been becalmed. The beach in front of the pink hotel was littered with debris, deserted. You might have thought that our lovemaking had succeeded in emptying the world. But soon we caught sight of Tranh and Mei walking toward us across the dune, Kim and Kai skipping along behind. All were dressed in shorts and shirts, and Tranh carried a net shopping bag that–I saw as he lurched up, stumbling in the sand–contained mineral water and sandwiches.

"What have you kids been up to?" he asked, displaying an exaggerated degree of concern.

Mei punched him on the arm, and, after glancing back and forth between us, as if he suddenly understood the situation, Tranh put on a shocked face and covered his mouth with a hand. Giggling, Kai and Kim went scampering down onto the beach. Mei tugged at Tranh's shirt, but he ignored her and sank onto his knees beside me. "I bet you're hungry," he said, and his round face was split by a gaptoothed grin. He thrust a sandwich wrapped in a paper napkin at me. "Better eat! You're probably going to need your strength."

With an apologetic look in Tan's direction, Mei kneeled beside him; she unwrapped sandwiches and opened two bottles of water. She caught my eye, frowned, pointed to her arm, and shook her forefinger as she might have done with a mischievous child. "Next time don't dance around so much," she said, and pretended to sprinkle something on one of the sandwiches. "Or else one night I'll put special herbs in your dinner." Tranh kept peering at Tan, then at me, grinning, nodding, and finally, with a laugh, Tan pushed him onto his back. Down by the water Kai and Kim were tossing pebbles into the sea with girlish ineptitude. Mei called to them and they came running, their braids bouncing; they threw themselves bellyfirst onto the sand, squirmed up to sitting positions, and began gobbling sandwiches.

"Don't eat so fast!" Mei cautioned. "You'll get sick."

Kim, the younger of the sisters, squinched her face at Mei and shoved half the sandwich into her mouth. Tranh contorted his features so his lips nearly touched his nose, and Kim laughed so hard she sprayed bits of bread and fried fish. Tan told her that this was not ladylike. Both girls sat up straight, nibbled their sandwiches–they took it to heart whenever Tan spoke to them about being ladies.

"Didn't you bring anything beside fish?" I asked, inspecting the filling of my sandwich.

"I guess we should have brought oysters," said Tranh. "Maybe some rhinoceros horn, some..."

"That stuff's for old guys like you," I told him. "Me, I just need peanut butter."

After we had done eating, Tranh lay back with his head in Mei's lap and told a story about a talking lizard that had convinced a farmer it was the Buddha. Kim and Kai cuddled together, sleepy from their feast. Tan leaned into the notch of my shoulder, and I put my arm around her. It came to me then, not suddenly, but gradually, as if I were being immersed in the knowledge like a man lowering his body into a warm bath, that for the first time in my life–all the life I could remember–I was at home. These people were my family, and the sense of dislocation that had burdened me all those years had evaporated. I closed my eyes and buried my face in Tan's hair, trying to hold onto the feeling, to seal it inside my head so I would never forget it.

Two men in T-shirts and bathing suits came walking along the water's edge in our direction. When they reached the dune they climbed up to where we were sitting. Both were not much older than I, and judging by their fleshiness and soft features, I presumed them to be Americans, a judgment confirmed when the taller of the two, a fellow with a heavy jaw and hundreds of white beads threaded on the strings of his long black hair, lending him a savage appearance, said, "You guys are with that tent show, right?"

Mei, who did not care for Americans, stared meanly at him, but Tranh, who habitually viewed them as potential sources of income, told him that we were, indeed, performers with the circus. Kai and Kim whispered and giggled, and Tranh asked the American what his friend–skinnier, beadless, dull-eyed and open-mouthed, with a complicated headset covering his scalp–was studying.

"Parasailing. We're going parasailing... if there's ever any wind and the program doesn't screw up. I

woulda left him at the house, but the program's fucked. Didn't want his ass convulsing." He extracted a sectioned strip of plastic from his shirt pocket; each square of plastic held a gelatin capsule shaped like a cut gem and filled with blue fluid. "Wanna brighten your day?" He dangled the strip as if tempting us with a treat. When no one accepted his offer, he shrugged, returned the strip to his pocket; he glanced down at me. "Hey, that shit with the knives... that was part of the fucking plan! Especially when you went benihana on Little Plum Blossom." He jerked his thumb at Mei and then stood nodding, gazing at the sea, as if receiving a transmission from that quarter. "Okay," he said. "Okay. It could be the drugs, but the trusty inner voice is telling me my foreign ways seem ludicrous... perhaps even offensive. It well may be that I am somewhat ludicrous. And I'm pretty torched, so I have to assume I've been offensive."

Tranh made to deny this, Mei grunted, Kim and Kai looked puzzled, and Tan asked the American if he was on vacation.

"Thank you," he said to Tan. "Beautiful lady. I am always grateful for the gift of courtesy. No, my friend and I–and two others–are playing at the hotel. We're musicians." He took out his wallet, which had been hinged over the waist of his trunks, and removed from it a thin gold square the size of a postage stamp; he handed it to Tan. "Have you seen these? They're new... souvenir things, like. They just play once, but it'll give you a taste. Press your finger on it until it you hear the sound. Then don't touch it again–they get extremely hot."

Tan started to do as he instructed but he said, "No, wait till we're gone. I want to imagine you enjoyed hearing it. If you do, come on down to the hotel after you're finished tonight. You'll be my guests."

"Is it one of your songs?" I asked, curious about him now that he had turned out to be more complicated than he first appeared.

He said, yes, it was an original composition.

"What's it called?" Tranh asked.

"We haven't named it yet," said the American; then, after a pause: "What's the name of your circus?"

Almost as one we said, "Radiant Green Star."

"Perfect," said the American.

Once the two men were out of earshot, Tan pressed her fingertip to the gold square, and soon a throbbing music issued forth, simply structured yet intricately layered by synthesizers, horns, guitars, densely figured by theme and subtle counter-theme, both insinuating and urgent. Kai and Kim stood and danced with one another. Tranh bobbed his head, tapped his foot, and even Mei was charmed, swaying, her eyes closed. Tan kissed me, and we watched a thin white smoke trickle upward from the square, which itself began to shrink, and I thought how amazing it was that things were often not what they seemed, and what a strange confluence of possibilities it had taken to bring all the troupe together–and the six of us *were* the entire troupe, for Vang was never really part of us even when he was there, and though the major was rarely with us, he was always there, a shadow in the corners of our minds... How magical and ineluctable a thing it was for us all to be together at the precise place and time when a man–a rather unprepossessing man at that–walked up from a deserted beach and presented us with a golden square imprinted with a song that he named for our circus, a song that so accurately evoked the mixture of the commonplace and the exotic that characterized life in Radiant Green Star, music that was like smoke, rising up for a few perfect moments, and then vanishing with the wind.

Had Vang asked me at any point during the months that followed to tell him about love, I might have spoken for hours, answering him not with definitions, principles, or homilies, but specific instances, moments, and anecdotes. I was happy. Despite the gloomy nature of my soul, I could think of no word that better described how I felt. Though I continued to study my father, to follow his comings and goings, his business maneuvers and social interactions, I now believed that I would never seek to confront him, never try to claim my inheritance. I had all I needed to live, and I only wanted to keep those I loved safe and free from worry.

Tan and I did not bother to hide our relationship, and I expected Vang to rail at me for my transgression. I half-expected him to drive me away from the circus–indeed, I prepared for that eventuality. But he never said a word. I did notice a certain cooling of the atmosphere. He snapped at me more often and on occasion refused to speak; yet that was the extent of his anger. I didn't know how to take this. Either, I thought, he had overstated his concern for Tan or else he had simply accepted the inevitable. That explanation didn't satisfy me, however. I suspected that he might have something more important on his mind, something so weighty that my involvement with his niece seemed a triviality by comparison. And one day, some seven months after Tan and I became lovers, my suspicions were proved correct.

I went to the trailer at mid-afternoon, thinking Vang would be in town. We were camped at the edge of a hardwood forest on a cleared acre of red dirt near Buon Ma Thuot in the Central Highlands, not far from the

Cambodian border. Vang usually spent the day before a performance putting up posters, and I had intended to work on the computer; but when I entered, I saw him standing by his desk, folding a shirt, a suitcase open on the chair beside him. I asked what he was doing and he handed me a thick envelope; inside were the licenses and deeds of ownership relating to the circus and its property. "I've signed everything over," he said. "If you have any problems, contact my lawyer."

"I don't understand," I said, dumfounded. "You're leaving?"

He bent to the suitcase and laid the folded shirt inside it. "You can move into the trailer tonight. You and Tan. She'll be able to put it in order. I suppose you've noticed that she's almost morbidly neat." He straightened, pressed his hand against his lower back as if stricken by a pain. "The accounts, the bookings for next year... it's all in the computer. Everything else..." He gestured at the cabinets on the walls. "You remember where things are."

I couldn't get a grasp on the situation, overwhelmed by the thought that I was now responsible for Green Star, by the fact that the man who for years had been the only consistent presence in my life was about to walk out the door forever. "Why are you leaving?"

He turned to me, frowning. "If you must know, I'm ill."

"But why would you want to leave? We'll just..."

"I'm not going to recover," he said flatly.

I peered at him, trying to detect the signs of his mortality, but he looked no thinner, no grayer, than he had for some time. I felt the stirrings of a reaction that I knew he would not want to see, and I tamped down my emotions. "We can care for you here," I said.

He began to fold another shirt. "I plan to join my sister and her husband in what they insist upon calling–" he clicked his tongue against his teeth "–Heaven."

I recalled the talks I'd had with Tan in which she had decried the process of uploading the intelligence, the personality. If the old man was dying, there was no real risk involved. Still, the concept of such a mechanical transmogrification did not sit well with me.

"Have you nothing to say on the subject?" he asked. "Tan was quite voluble."

"You've told her, then?"

"Of course." He inspected the tail of the shirt he'd been folding, and finding a hole, cast it aside. "We've said our goodbyes."

He continued to putter about, and as I watched him shuffling among the stacks of magazines and newspapers, kicking file boxes and books aside, dust rising wherever he set his hand, a tightness in my chest began to loosen, to work its way up into my throat. I went to the door and stood looking out, seeing nothing, letting the strong sunlight harden the glaze of my feelings. When I turned back, he was standing close to me, suitcase in hand. He held out a folded piece of paper and said, "This is the code by which you can contact me once I've been..." He laughed dryly. "Processed, I imagine, would be the appropriate verb. At any rate, I hope you will let me know what you decide concerning your father."

It was in my mind to tell him that I had no intention of contending with my father, but I thought that this would disappoint him, and I merely said that I would do as he asked. We stood facing one another, the air thick with unspoken feelings, with vibrations that communicated an entire history comprised of such mute, awkward moments. "If I'm to have a last walk in the sun," he said at length, "you'll have to let me pass."

That at the end of his days he viewed me only as a minor impediment–it angered me. But I reminded myself that this was all the sentiment of which he was capable. Without asking permission, I embraced him. He patted me lightly on the back and said, "I know you'll take care of things." And with that, he pushed past me and walked off in the direction of the town, vanishing behind one of the parked trucks.

I went into the rear of the trailer, into the partitioned cubicle where Vang slept, and sat down on his bunk. His pillowcase bore a silk-screened image of a beautiful Vietnamese woman and the words HONEY LADY KEEP YOU COMFORT EVERY NIGHT. In the cabinet beside his bed were a broken clock, a small plaster bust of Ho Chi Minh, a few books, several pieces of hard candy, and a plastic key chain in the shape of a butterfly. The meagerness of the life these items described caught at my emotions, and I thought I might weep, but it was as if by assuming Vang's position as the owner of Green Star, I had undergone a corresponding reduction in my natural responses, and I remained dry-eyed. I felt strangely aloof from myself, connected to the life of my mind and body by a tube along which impressions of the world around me were now and then transmitted. Looking back on my years with Vang, I could make no sense of them. He had nurtured and educated me, yet the sum of all that effort–not given cohesion by the glue of affection–came to scraps of memory no more illustrative of a comprehensible whole than were the memories of my mother. They had substance, yet no flavor... none, that is, except for a dusty gray aftertaste that I associated with disappointment and loss.

I didn't feel like talking to anyone, and for want of anything else to do, I went to the desk and started inspecting the accounts, working through dusk and into the night. When I had satisfied myself that all was in order, I turned to the bookings. Nothing out of the ordinary. The usual villages, the occasional festival. But when I accessed the bookings for the month of March, I saw that during the week of the 17th through the 23rd–the latter date just ten days from my birthday–we were scheduled to perform in Binh Khoi.

I thought this must be a mistake–Vang had probably been thinking of Binh Khoi and my father while recording a new booking and had inadvertently put down the wrong name. But when I called up the contract, I found that no mistake had been made. We were to be paid a great deal of money, sufficient to guarantee a profitable year, but I doubted that Vang's actions had been motivated by our financial needs. He must, I thought, have seen the way things were going with Tan and me, and he must have realized that I would never risk her in order to avenge a crime committed nearly two decades before–thus he had decided to force a confrontation between me and my father. I was furious, and my first impulse was to break the contract; but after I had calmed down I realized that doing so would put us all at risk–the citizens of Binh Khoi were not known for their generosity or flexibility, and if I were to renege on Vang's agreement they would surely pursue the matter in the courts. I would have no chance of winning a judgment. The only thing to do was to play the festival and steel myself to ignore the presence of my father. Perhaps he would be elsewhere, or, even if he was in residence, perhaps he would not attend our little show. Whatever the circumstances, I swore I would not be caught in this trap, and when my eighteenth birthday arrived I would go to the nearest Sony office and take great pleasure in telling Vang–whatever was left of him–that his scheme had failed.

I was still sitting there, trying to comprehend whether or not by contracting the engagement, Vang hoped to provide me with a basis for an informed decision, or if his interests were purely self-serving, when Tan stepped into the trailer. She had on a sleeveless plaid smock, the garment she wore whenever she was cleaning, and it was evident that she'd been crying–the skin beneath her eyes was puffy and red. But she had regained her composure, and she listened patiently, perched on the edge of the desk, while I told her all I'd been thinking about Vang and what he had done to us.

"Maybe it's for the best," she said after I had run down. "This way you'll be sure you've done what you had to do."

I was startled by her reaction. "Are you saying that you think I should kill my father... that I should even entertain the possibility?"

She shrugged. "That's for you to decide."

"I've decided already," I said.

"Then there's not a problem."

The studied neutrality of her attitude puzzled me. "You don't think I'll stand by my decision, do you?"

She put a hand to her brow, hiding her face–a gesture that reminded me of Vang. "I don't think you have decided, and I don't think you should... not until you see your father." She pinched a fold of skin above the bridge of her nose, then looked up at me. "Let's not talk about this now."

We sat silently for half a minute or thereabouts, each following the path of our own thoughts; then she wrinkled up her nose and said, "It smells bad in here. Do you want to get some air?"

We climbed onto the roof of the trailer and sat gazing at the shadowy line of the forest to the west, the main tent bulking up above it, and a sky so thick with stars that the familiar constellations were assimilated into new and busier cosmic designs: a Buddha face with a diamond on its brow, a tiger's head, a palm tree–constructions of sparkling pinlights against a midnight blue canvas stretched from horizon to horizon. The wind brought the scent of sweet rot and the less pervasive odor of someone's cooking. Somebody switched on a radio in the main tent; a Chinese orchestra whined and jangled. I felt I was sixteen again, that Tan and I had just met, and I thought perhaps we had chosen to occupy this place where we spent so many hours before we were lovers, because here we could banish the daunting pressures of the present, the threat of the future, and be children again. But although those days were scarcely two years removed, we had forever shattered the comforting illusions and frustrating limitations of childhood. I lay back on the aluminum roof, which still held a faint warmth of the day, and Tan hitched up her smock about her waist and mounted me, bracing her hands on my chest as I slipped inside her. Framed by the crowded stars, features made mysterious by the cowl of her hair, she seemed as distant and unreal as the imagined creatures of my zodiac; but this illusion, too, was shattered as she began to rock her hips with an accomplished passion and lifted her face to the sky, transfigured by a look of exalted, almost agonized yearning, like one of those Renaissance angels marooned on a scrap of painted cloud who has just witnessed something amazing pass overhead, a miracle of glowing promise too perfect to hold in the mind. She shook her head wildly when she came, her hair flying all to one side so that it resembled in shape the pennant flying on the main tent, a

dark signal of release, and then collapsed against my chest. I held onto her hips, continuing to thrust until the knot of heat in my groin shuddered out of me, leaving a residue of black peace into which the last shreds of my thought were subsumed.

The sweat dried on our skin, and still we lay there, both–I believed–aware that once we went down from the roof, the world would close around us, restore us to its troubled spin. Someone changed stations on the radio, bringing in a Cambodian program–a cooler, wispier music played. A cough sounded close by the trailer, and I raised myself to an elbow, wanting to see who it was. The major was making his way with painful slowness across the cleared ground, leaning on his staff. In the starlight his grotesque shape was lent a certain anonymity–he might have been a figure in a fantasy game, an old down-at-heels magician shrouded in a heavy, ragged cloak, or a beggar on a quest. He shuffled a few steps more, and then, shaking with effort, sank to his knees. For several seconds he remained motionless, then he scooped a handful of the red dirt and held it up to his face. And I recalled that Buon Ma Thuot was near the location of his fictive–or if not fictive, ill-remembered–firebase. Firebase Ruby. Built upon the red dirt of a defoliated plantation.

Tan sat up beside me and whispered, "What's he doing?"

I put a finger to my lips, urging her to silence; I was convinced that the major would not expose himself to the terror of the open sky unless moved by some equally terrifying inner force, and I hoped he might do something that would illuminate the underpinnings of his mystery.

He let the dirt sift through his fingers and struggled to stand. Failed and sagged onto his haunches. His head fell back, and he held a spread-fingered hand up to it as if trying to shield himself from the starlight. His quavery voice ran out of him like a shredded battle flag. "Turn back!" he said. "Oh, God! God! Turn back!"

During the next four months, I had little opportunity to brood over the prospect of meeting my father. Dealing with the minutiae of Green Star's daily operation took most of my energy and hours, and whenever I had a few minutes respite, Tan was there to fill them. So it was that by the time we arrived in Binh Khoi, I had made scarcely any progress in adjusting to the possibility that I might soon come face-to-face with the man who had killed my mother.

In one aspect, Binh Khoi was the perfect venue for us, since the town affected the same conceit as the circus, being designed to resemble a fragment of another time. It was situated near the Pass of the Ocean Clouds in the Truong Son Mountains some forty kilometers north of Danang, and many of the homes there were afforded a view of green hills declining toward the Coastal Plain. On the morning we arrived those same hills were half-submerged in thick white fog, the plain was totally obscured, and a pale mist had infiltrated the narrow streets, casting an air of ominous enchantment over the place. The oldest of the houses had been built no more than fifty years before, yet they were all similar to nineteenth century houses that still existed in certain sections of Hanoi: two and three stories tall and fashioned of stone, painted dull yellow and gray and various other sober hues, with sharply sloping roofs of dark green tile and compounds hidden by high walls and shaded by bougainvillea, papaya, and banana trees. Except for street lights in the main square and pedestrians in bright eccentric clothing, we might have been driving through a hill station during the 1800s; but I knew that hidden behind this antiquated façade were state-of-the-art security systems that could have vaporized us had we not been cleared to enter.

The most unusual thing about Binh Khoi was its silence. I'd never been in a place where people lived in any considerable quantity that was so hushed, devoid of the stew of sounds natural to a human environment. No hens squabbling or dogs yipping, no whining motor scooters or humming cars, no children at play. In only one area was there anything approximating normal activity and noise: the marketplace, which occupied an unpaved street leading off the square. Here men and women in coolie hats hunkered beside baskets of jackfruit, chilies, garlic, custard apples, durians, geckos, and dried fish; meat and caged puppies and monkeys and innumerable other foodstuffs were sold in canvas-roofed stalls; and the shoppers, mostly male couples, haggled with the vendors, occasionally venting their dismay at the prices... this despite the fact that any one of them could have bought everything in the market without blinking. Though the troupe shared their immersion in a contrived past, I found the depth of their pretense alarming and somewhat perverse. As I maneuvered the truck cautiously through the press, they peered incuriously at me through the windows–faces rendered exotic and nearly unreadable by tattoos and implants and caps of silver wire and winking light that appeared to be woven into their hair–and I thought I could feel their amusement at the shabby counterfeit we offered of their more elegantly realized illusion. I believe I might have hated them for the fashionable play they made of arguing over minuscule sums with the poor vendors, for the triviality of spirit this mockery implied, if I had not already hated them so completely for being my father's friends and colleagues.

At the end of the street, beyond the last building, lay a grassy field bordered by a low whitewashed wall.

Strings of light bulbs linked the banana trees and palms that grew close to the wall on three sides, and I noticed several paths leading off into the jungle that were lit in the same fashion. On the fourth side, beyond the wall, the land dropped off into a notch, now choked with fog, and on the far side of the notch, perhaps fifty yards away, a massive hill with a sheer rock face and the ruins of an old temple atop it lifted from the fog, looming above the field–it was such a dramatic sight and so completely free of mist, every palm frond articulated, every vine-enlaced crevice and knob of dark, discolored stone showing clear, that I wondered if it might be a clever projection, another element of Binh Khoi's decor.

We spent the morning and early afternoon setting up, and once I was satisfied that everything was in readiness, I sought out Tan, thinking we might go for a walk; but she was engaged in altering Kai's costume. I wandered into the main tent and busied myself by making sure the sawdust had been spread evenly. Kai was swinging high above on a rope suspended from the metal ring at the top of the tent, and one of our miniature tigers had climbed a second rope and was clinging to it by its furry hands, batting at her playfully whenever she swooped near. Tranh and Mei were playing cards in the bleachers, and Kim was walking hand-in-hand with our talking monkey, chattering away as if the creature could understand her–now and then it would turn its white face to her and squeak in response, saying "I love you" and "I'm hungry" and other equally non-responsive phrases. I stood by the entranceway, feeling rather paternal toward my little family gathered under the lights, and I was just considering whether or not I should return to the trailer and see if Tan had finished, when a baritone voice sounded behind me, saying, "Where can I find Vang Ky?"

My father was standing with hands in pockets a few feet away, wearing black trousers and a gray shirt of some shiny material. He looked softer and heavier than he did in his photographs, and the flying fish tattoo on his cheek was now surrounded by more than half-a-dozen tiny emblems denoting his business connections. With his immense head, his shaved skull gleaming in the hot lights, he himself seemed the emblem of some monumental and soul-less concern. At his shoulder, over a foot shorter than he, was a striking Vietnamese woman with long straight hair, dressed in tight black slacks and a matching tunic: Phuong Ahn Nguyen. She was staring at me intently.

Stunned, I managed to get out that Vang was no longer with the circus, and my father said, "How can that be? He's the owner, isn't he?"

Shock was giving way to anger, anger so fulminant I could barely contain it. My hands trembled. If I'd had one of my knives to hand, I would have plunged it without a thought into his chest. I did the best I could to conceal my mood and told him what had become of Vang; but it seemed that as I catalogued each new detail of his face and body–a frown line, a reddened ear lobe, a crease in his fleshy neck–a vial of some furious chemical was tipped over and added to the mix of my blood.

"Goddamn it!" he said, casting his eyes up to the canvas; he appeared distraught. "Shit!" He glanced down at me. "Have you got his access code? It's never the same once they go to Heaven. I'm not sure they really know what's going on. But I guess it's my only option."

"I doubt he'd approve of my giving the code to a stranger," I told him.

"We're not strangers," he said. "Vang was my father-in-law. We had a falling-out after my wife died. I hoped having the circus here for a week, I'd be able to persuade him to sit down and talk. There's no reason for us to be at odds."

I suppose the most astonishing thing he said was that Vang was his father-in-law, and thus my grandfather. I didn't know what to make of that; I could think of no reason he might have for lying, yet it raised a number of troubling questions. But his last statement, his implicit denial of responsibility for my mother's death... it had come so easily to his lips! Hatred flowered in me like a cold star, acting to calm me, allowing me to exert a measure of control over my anger.

Phoung stepped forward and put a hand on my chest; my heart pounded against the pressure of her palm. "Is anything wrong?" she asked.

"I'm... surprised," I said. "That's all. I didn't realize Vang had a son-in-law."

Her make-up was severe, her lips painted a dark mauve, her eyes shaded by the same color, but in the fineness of her features and the long oval shape of her face, she bore a slight resemblance to Tan.

"Why are you angry?" she asked.

My father eased her aside. "It's all right. I came on pretty strong–he's got every right to be angry. Why don't the two of us... what's your name, kid?"

"Dat," I said, though I was tempted to tell him the truth.

"Dat and I will have a talk," he said to Phuong. "I'll meet you back at the house."

We went outside, and Phuong, displaying more than a little reluctance, headed off in the general direction of the trailer. It was going on dusk and the fog was closing in. The many-colored bulbs strung in the trees close to the wall and lining the paths had been turned on; each bulb was englobed by a fuzzy halo, and

altogether they imbued the encroaching jungle with an eerily festive air, as if the spirits lost in the dark green tangles were planning a party. We stood beside the wall, beneath the great hill rising from the shifting fogbank, and my father tried to convince me to hand over the code. When I refused he offered money, and when I refused his money he glared at me and said, "Maybe you don't get it. I really need the code. What's it going to take for you to give it to me?"

"Perhaps it's you who doesn't get it," I said. "If Vang wanted you to have the code he would have given it to you. But he gave it to *me,* and to no one else. I consider that a trust, and I won't break it unless he signifies that I should."

He looked off into the jungle, ran a hand across his scalp, and made a frustrated noise. I doubted he was experienced at rejection, and though it didn't satisfy my anger, it pleased me to have rejected him. Finally he laughed. "Either you're a hell of a businessman or an honorable man. Or maybe you're both. That's a scary notion." He shook his head in what I took for amiable acceptance. "Why not call Vang? Ask him if he'd mind having a talk with me."

I didn't understand how this was possible.

"What sort of computer do you own?" he asked.

I told him and he said, "That won't do it. Tell you what. Come over to my house tonight after your show. You can use my computer to contact him. I'll pay for your time."

I was suddenly suspicious. He seemed to be offering himself to me, making himself vulnerable, and I did not believe that was in his nature. His desire to contact Vang might be a charade. What if he had discovered my identity and was luring me into a trap?

"I don't know if I can get away," I said. "It may have to be in the morning."

He looked displeased, but said, "Very well." He fingered a business card from his pocket, gave it to me. "My address." Then he pressed what appeared to be a crystal button into my hand. "Don't lose it. Carry it with you whenever you come. If you don't, you'll be picked up on the street and taken somewhere quite unpleasant."

As soon as he was out of sight I hurried over to the trailer, intending to sort things out with Tan. She was outside, sitting on a folding chair, framed by a spill of hazy yellow light from the door. Her head was down, and her blouse was torn, the top two buttons missing. I asked what was wrong; she shook her head and would not meet my eyes. But when I persisted she said, "That woman... the one who works for your father..."

"Phuong? Did she hurt you?"

She kept her head down, but I could see her chin quivering. "I was coming to find you, and I ran into her. She started talking to me. I thought she was just being friendly, but then she tried to kiss me. And when I resisted"–she displayed the tear in her blouse–"she did this." She gathered herself. "She wants me to be with her tonight. If I refuse, she says she'll make trouble for us."

It would have been impossible for me to hate my father more, but this new insult, this threat to Tan, perfected it, added a finishing color, like the last brush stroke applied to a masterpiece. I stood a moment gazing off toward the hill–it seemed I had inside me an analog to that forbidding shape, something equally stony and vast. I led Tan into the trailer, sat her down at the desk, and made her tea; then I repeated all my father had said. "Is it possible," I asked, "that Vang is my grandfather?"

She held the teacup in both hands, blew on the steaming liquid and took a sip. "I don't know. My family has always been secretive. All my parents told me was that Vang was once a wealthy man with a loving family, and that he had lost everything."

"If he is my grandfather," I said, "then we're cousins."

She set down the cup and stared dolefully into it as if she saw in its depths an inescapable resolution. "I don't care. If we were brother and sister, I wouldn't care."

I pulled her up, put my arms around her, and she pressed herself against me. I felt that I was at the center of an enormously complicated knot, too diminutive to be able to see all its loops and twists. If Vang was my grandfather, why had he treated me with such coldness? Perhaps my mother's death had deadened his heart, perhaps that explained it. But knowing that Tan and I were cousins, wouldn't he have told us the truth when he saw how close we were becoming? Or was he so old-fashioned that the idea of an intimate union between cousins didn't bother him? The most reasonable explanation was that my father had lied. I saw that now, saw it with absolute clarity. It was the only possibility that made sense. And if he had lied, it followed that he knew who I was. And if he knew who I was...

"I have to kill him," I said. "Tonight... it has to be tonight."

I was prepared to justify the decision, to explain why a course of inaction would be a greater risk, to lay out all the potentials of the situation for Tan to analyze, but she pushed me away, just enough so that she could see my face, and said, "You can't do it alone. That woman's a professional assassin." She rested her

forehead against mine. "I'll help you."

"That's ridiculous! If I..."

"Listen to me, Philip! She can read physical signs, she can tell if someone's angry. If they're anxious. Well, she'll expect me to be angry. And anxious. She'll think it's just resentment... nerves. I'll be able to get close to her."

"And kill her? Will you be able to kill her?"

Tan broke from the embrace and went to stand at the doorway, gazing out at the fog. Her hair had come unbound, spilling down over her shoulders and back, the ribbon that had tied it dangling like a bright blue river winding across a ground of black silk.

"I'll ask Mei to give me something. She has herbs that will induce sleep." She glanced back at me. "There are things you can do to insure our safety once your father's dead. We should discuss them now."

I was amazed by her coolness, how easily she had made the transition from being distraught. "I can't ask you to do this," I said.

"You're not asking–I'm volunteering." I detected a note of sad distraction in her voice. "You'd do as much for me."

"Of course, but if it weren't for me, you wouldn't be involved in this."

"If it weren't for you," she said, the sadness even more evident in her tone, "I'd have no involvements at all."

The first part of the show that evening, the entrance of the troupe to march music, Mei leading the way, wearing a red and white majorette's uniform, twirling–and frequently dropping–a baton, the tigers gamboling at her heels; then two comic skits; then Kai and Kim whirling and spinning aloft in their gold and sequined costumes, tumbling through the air happy as birds; then another skit and Tranh's clownish juggling, pretending to be drunk and making improbable catches as he tumbled, rolled, and staggered about... all this was received by the predominantly male audience with a degree of ironic detachment. They laughed at Mei, they whispered and smirked during the skits, they stared dispassionately at Kim and Kai, and they jeered Tranh. It was plain that they had come to belittle us, that doing so validated their sense of superiority. I registered their reactions, but was so absorbed in thinking about what was to happen later, they seemed unreal, unimportant, and it took all my discipline to focus on my own act, a performance punctuated by a knife hurled from behind me that struck home between Tan's legs. There was a burst of enthusiastic cheers, and I turned to see Phuong some thirty feet away, taking a bow in the bleachers–it was she who had thrown the knife. She looked at me and shrugged, with that gesture dismissing my poor skills, and lifted her arms to receive the building applause. I searched the area around her for my father, but he was nowhere to be seen.

The audience remained abuzz, pleased that one of their own had achieved this victory, but when the major entered, led in by Mei and Tranh, they fell silent at the sight of his dark, convulsed figure. Leaning on his staff, he hobbled along the edge of the bleachers, looking into this and that face as if hoping to find a familiar one, and then, moving to the center of the ring, he began to tell the story of Firebase Ruby. I was alarmed at first, but his delivery was eloquent, lyrical, not the plainspoken style in which he had originally couched the tale, and the audience was enthralled. When he came to tell of the letter he had written his wife detailing his hatred of all things Vietnamese, a uneasy muttering arose from the bleachers and rapt expressions turned to scowls; but then he was past that point, and as he described the Viet Cong assault, his listeners settled back and seemed once again riveted by his words.

"In the phosphor light of the hanging flares," he said, "I saw the blood-red ground spread out before me. Beyond the head-high hedgerows of coiled steel wire, black-clad men and women coursed from the jungle, myriad and quick as ants, and, inside the wire, emerging from their secret warrens, more sprouted from the earth like the demon yield of some infernal rain. All around me, my men were dying, and even in the midst of fear, I felt myself the object of a great calm observance, as if the tiny necklace-strung images of the Buddha the enemy held in their mouths when they attacked had been empowered to summon their ribbed original, and somewhere up above the flares, an enormous face had been conjured from the dark matter of the sky and was gazing down with serene approval.

"We could not hold the position long–that was clear. But I had no intention of surrendering. Drunk on whiskey and adrenaline, I was consumed by the thought of death, my own and others', and though I was afraid, I acted less out of fear than from the madness of battle and a kind of communion with death, a desire to make death grow and flourish and triumph. I retreated into the communications bunker and ordered the corporal in charge to call for an air strike on the coordinates of Firebase Ruby. When he balked I put a pistol to his head until he had obeyed. Then I emptied a clip into the radio so no one could countermand me."

The major bowed his head and spread his arms, as though preparing for a supreme display of magic;

then his resonant voice sounded forth again, like the voice of a beast speaking from a cave, rough from the bones that have torn its throat. His eyes were chunks of phosphorous burning in the bark of a rotting log.

"When the explosions began, I was firing from a sandbagged position atop the communications bunker. The VC pouring from the jungle slowed their advance, milled about, and those inside the wire looked up in terror to see the jets screaming overhead, so low I could make out the stars on their wings. Victory was stitched across the sky in rocket trails. Gouts of flame gouged the red dirt, opening the tunnels to the air. The detonations began to blend one into the other, and the ground shook like a sheet of plywood under the pounding of a hammer. Clouds of marbled fire and smoke boiled across the earth, rising to form a dreadful second sky of orange and black, and I came to my feet, fearful yet delighted, astonished by the enormity of the destruction I had called down. Then I was knocked flat. Sandbags fell across my legs, a body flung from God knows where landed on my back, driving the breath from me, and in the instant before consciousness fled, I caught the rich stink of napalm.

"In the morning I awoke and saw a bloody, jawless face with staring blue eyes pressed close to mine, looking as if it were still trying to convey a last desperate message. I clawed my way from beneath the corpse and staggered upright to find myself the lord of a killed land, of a raw, red scar littered with corpses in the midst of a charcoaled forest. I went down from the bunker and wandered among the dead. From every quarter issued the droning of flies. Everywhere lay arms, legs, and grisly relics I could not identify. I was numb, I had no feeling apart from a pale satisfaction at having survived. But as I wandered among the dead, taking notice of the awful intimacies death had imposed: a dozen child-sized bodies huddled in a crater, anonymous as a nest of scorched beetles; a horribly burned woman with buttocks exposed reaching out a clawed hand to touch the lips of a disembodied head–these and a hundred other such scenes brought home the truth that I was their author. It wasn't guilt I felt then. Guilt was irrelevant. We were all guilty, the dead and the living, the good and those who had abandoned God. Guilt is our inevitable portion of the world's great trouble. No, it was the recognition that at the moment when I knew the war was lost–my share of it, at least–I chose not to cut my losses but to align myself with a force so base and negative that we refuse to admit its place in human nature and dress it in mystical clothing and call it Satan or Shiva so as to separate it from ourselves. Perhaps this sort of choice is a soldier's virtue, but I can no longer view it in that light." He tapped his chest with the tip of his staff. "Though I will never say that my enemies were just, there is justice in what I have endured since that day. All men sin, all men do evil. And evil shows itself in our faces." Here he aimed the staff at the audience and tracked it from face to face, as if highlighting the misdeeds imprinted on each. "What you see of me now is not the man I was, but the thing I became at the instant I made my choice. Take from my story what you will, but understand this: I am unique only in that the judgment of my days is inscribed not merely on my face, but upon every inch of my body. We are all of us monsters waiting to be summoned forth by a moment of madness and pride."

As Tranh and I led him from the tent, across the damp grass, the major was excited, almost incoherently so, not by the acclaim he had received, but because he had managed to complete his story. He plucked at my sleeve, babbling, bobbing his head, but I paid him no mind, concerned about Tan, whom I had seen talking to Phuong in the bleachers. And when she came running from the main tent, a windbreaker thrown over her costume, I forgot him entirely.

"We're not going directly back to the house," she said. "She wants to take me to a club on the square. I don't know when we'll get to your father's."

"Maybe this isn't such a good idea. I think we should wait until morning."

"It's all right," she said. "Go to the house and as soon as you've dealt with your father, do exactly what I told you. When you hear us enter the house, stay out of sight. Don't do a thing until I come and get you. Understand?"

"I don't know," I said, perplexed at the way she had taken charge.

"Please!" She grabbed me by the lapels. "Promise you'll do as I say! Please!"

I promised, but as I watched her run off into the dark I had a resurgence of my old sense of dislocation, and though I had not truly listened to the major's story, having been occupied with my own troubles, the sound of him sputtering and chortling behind me, gloating over the treasure of his recovered memory, his invention, whatever it was, caused me to wonder then about the nature of my own choice, and the story that I might someday tell.

My father's house was on Yen Phu Street–two stories of pocked gray stone with green vented shutters and a green door with a knocker carved in the shape of a water buffalo's head. I arrived shortly after midnight and stood in the lee of the high whitewashed wall that enclosed his compound. The fog had been cut by a steady drizzle, and no pedestrians were about. Light slanted from the vents of a shuttered upstairs window, and beneath it was parked a bicycle in whose basket rested a dozen white lilies, their stems wrapped in

butcher paper. I imagined that my father had ridden the bicycle to market and had forgotten to retrieve the flowers after carrying his other purchases inside. They seemed omenical in their glossy pallor, a sterile emblem of the bloody work ahead.

The idea of killing my father held no terrors for me–I had performed the act in my mind hundreds of times, I'd conceived its every element–and as I stood there I felt the past accumulating at my back like the cars of a train stretching for eighteen years, building from my mother's death to the shuddering engine of the moment I was soon to inhabit. All the misgivings that earlier had nagged at me melted away, like fog before rain. I was secure in my hatred and in the knowledge that I had no choice, that my father was a menace who would never fade.

I crossed the street, knocked, and after a few seconds he admitted me into a brightly lit alcove with a darkened room opening off to the right. He was dressed in a voluminous robe of green silk, and as he proceeded me up the stairway to the left of the alcove, the sight of his bell-like shape and bald head with the silver plate collaring the base of his skull... these things along with the odor of jasmine incense led me to imagine that I was being escorted to an audience with some mysterious religious figure by one of his eunuch priests. At the head of the stair was a narrow white room furnished with two padded chrome chairs, a wall screen, and, at the far end, a desk bearing papers, an ornamental vase, an old-fashioned letter opener, and a foot-high gilt and bronze Buddha. My father sat down in one of the chairs, triggered the wall screen's computer mode with a penlight, and set about accessing the Sony AI, working through various menus, all the while chatting away, saying he was sorry he'd missed our show, he hoped to attend the following night, and how was I enjoying my stay in Binh Khoi, it often seemed an unfriendly place to newcomers, but by week's end I'd feel right at home. I had brought no weapon, assuming that his security would detect it. The letter opener, I thought, would do the job. But my hand fell instead to the Buddha. It would be cleaner, I decided. A single blow. I picked it up, hefted it. I had anticipated that when the moment arrived, I would want to make myself known to my father, to relish his shock and dismay; but I understood that was no longer important, and I only wanted him to die. In any case, since he likely knew the truth about me, the dramatic scene I'd envisioned would be greatly diminished.

"That's Thai. Fifteenth century," he said, nodding at the statue, then returned his attention to the screen. "Beautiful, isn't it?"

"Very," I said.

Then, without a thought, all thinking necessary having already been done, and the deed itself merely an automatic function, the final surge of an eighteen-year-long momentum, I stepped behind him and swung the statue at the back of his head. I expected to hear a crack but the sound of impact was plush, muffled, such as might be caused by the flat of one's hand striking a pillow. He let out an explosive grunt, toppled with a twisting motion against the wall, ending up on his side, facing outward. There was so much blood, I assumed he must be dead. But then he groaned, his eyes blinked open, and he struggled to his knees. I saw that I'd hit the silver plate at the base of his skull. Blood was flowing out around the plate, but it had protected him from mortal damage. His robe had fallen open, and with his pale mottled belly bulging from the green silk and the blood streaking his neck, his smallish features knitted in pain and perplexity, he looked gross and clownishly pitiable. He held up an unsteady hand to block a second blow. His mouth worked, and he said "Wait..." or "What..." Which, I can't be sure. But I was in no mood either to wait or to explain myself. A clean death might not have affected me so deeply, but that I had made of a whole healthy life this repellent half-dead thing wobbling at my feet–it assaulted my moral foundation, it washed the romantic tint of revenge from the simple, terrible act of slaughter, and when I struck at him again. this time smashing the statue down two-handed onto the top of his skull, I was charged with the kind of fear that afflicts a child when he more or less by accident wounds a bird with a stone and seeks to hide the act from God by tossing his victim onto an ash heap. My father sagged onto his back, blood gushing from his nose and mouth. I caught a whiff of feces and staggered away, dropping the Buddha. Now that my purpose had been accomplished, like a bee dying from having stung its enemy, I felt drained of poison, full of dull surprise that there had been no more rewarding result.

The penlight had rolled beneath the second chair. I picked it up, and, following Tan's instructions, I used the computer to contact a security agency in Danang. A blond woman with a brittle manner appeared on the screen and asked my business. I explained my circumstances, not bothering to characterize the murder as anything other than it was–the size of my trust would guarantee my legal immunity–and also provided her with the number of Vang's lawyer, as well as some particulars concerning the trust, thereby establishing my bona fides. The woman vanished, her image replaced by a shifting pattern of pastel colors, and, after several minutes, this in turn was replaced by a contract form with a glowing blue patch at the bottom to which I pressed the ball of my thumb. The woman reappeared, much more solicitous now, and cautioned me to

remain where I was. She assured me that an armed force would be at the house within the hour. As an afterthought she advised me to wipe the blood from my face.

The presence of the body–its meat reality–made me uncomfortable. I picked up the letter opener and went down the stairs and groped my way across the unlit room off the alcove and found a chair in a corner from which I could see the door. Sitting alone in the darkness amplified the torpor that had pervaded me, and though I sensed certain unsettling dissonances surrounding what had just taken place, I was not sufficiently alert to consider them as other than aggravations. I had been sitting there for perhaps ten minutes when the door opened and Phuong, laughing, stepped into the alcove with Tan behind her, wearing a blue skirt and checkered blouse. She kicked the door shut, pushed Tan against the wall, and began to kiss her, running a hand up under her skirt. Then her head snapped around, and although I didn't believe she could see in the dark, she stared directly at me.

Before I could react, before I could be sure that Phuong had detected me, Tan struck her beneath the jaw with the heel of her left hand, driving her against the opposite wall, and followed this with a kick to the stomach. Phuong rolled away and up into a crouch. She cried out my father's name: "William!" Whether in warning or–recognizing what had happened–in grief, I cannot say. Then the two women began to fight. It lasted no more than half a minute, but their speed and eerie grace were incredible to see: like watching two long-fingered witches dancing in a bright patch of weakened gravity and casting violent spells. Dazed by Tan's initial blows, Phoung went on the defensive, but soon she recovered and started to hold her own. I remembered the letter opener in my hand. The thing was poorly balanced and Phuong's quickness made the timing hard to judge, but then she paused, preparing to launch an attack, and I flung the opener, lodging it squarely between her shoulderblades. Not a mortal wound–the blade was too dull to bite deep–but a distracting one. She shrieked, tried to reach the opener, and, as she reeled to the side, Tan came up behind her and broke her neck with a savage twist. She let the body fall and walked toward me, a shadow in the darkened room. It seemed impossible that she was the same woman I had known on the beach at Vung Tau, and I felt a spark of fear.

"Are you all right?" she asked, stopping a few feet away.

"All right?" I laughed. "What's going on here?"

She gave no reply, and I said, "Apparently you decided against using Mei's herbs."

"If you had done as I asked, if you'd stayed clear, it might not have been necessary to kill her." She came another step forward. "Have you called for security?"

I nodded. "Did you learn to fight like that in Hue?"

"In China," she said.

"At a private security company. Like Phuong."

"Yes."

"Then it would follow that you're not Vang's niece."

"But I am," she said. "He used the last of his fortune to have me trained so I could protect you. He was a bitter man... to have used his family so."

"And I suppose sleeping with me falls under the umbrella of protection."

She kneeled beside the chair, put a hand on my neck, and gazed at me entreatingly. "I love you, Philip. I would do anything for you. How can you doubt it?"

I was moved by her sincerity, but I could not help but treat her coldly. It was as if a valve had been twisted shut to block the flow of my emotions. "That's right," I said. "Vang told me that your kind were conditioned to bond with their clients."

I watched the words hit home, a wounded expression washing across her features, then fading, like a ripple caused by a pebble dropped into a still pond. "Is that so important?" she asked. "Does it alter the fact that you fell in love with me?"

I ignored this, yet I was tempted to tell her, No, it did not. "If you were trained to protect me, why did Vang discourage our relationship?"

She got to her feet, her face unreadable, and went a few paces toward the alcove; she appeared to be staring at Phuong's body, lying crumpled in the light. "There was a time when I think he wanted me for himself. That may explain it."

"Did Phuong really accost you?" I asked. "Or was that...

"I've never lied to you. I've deceived you by not revealing everything I knew about Vang," she said. "But I was bound to obey him in that. As you said, I've been conditioned."

I had other questions, but I could not frame one of them. The silence of the house seemed to breed a faint humming, and I became oppressed by the idea that Tan and I were living analogs of the two corpses, that the wealth I was soon to receive as a consequence of our actions would lead us to a pass wherein we would

someday lie dead in separate rooms of a silent house, while two creatures like ourselves but younger would stand apart from one another in fretful isolation, pondering their future. I wanted to dispossess myself of this notion, to contrive a more potent reality, and I crossed the room to Tan and turned her to face me. She refused to meet my eyes, but I tipped up her chin and kissed her. A lover's kiss. I touched her breasts–a treasuring touch. But despite the sweet affirmation and openness of the kiss, I think it also served a formal purpose, the sealing of a bargain whose terms we did not fully understand.

Six months and a bit after my eighteenth birthday, I was sitting in a room in the Sony offices in Saigon, a windowless space with black walls and carpet and silver-framed photographs of scenes along the Perfume River and in the South China Sea, when Vang flickered into being against the far wall. I thought I must seem to him, as he seemed to me, like a visitation, a figure from another time manifested in a dream. He appeared no different than he had on the day he left the circus–thin and gray-haired, dressed in careworn clothing–and his attitude toward me was, as ever, distant. I told him what had happened in Binh Khoi, and he said, "I presumed you would have more trouble with William. Of course he thought he had leverage over me–he thought he had Tan in his clutches. So he let his guard down. He believed he had nothing to fear."

His logic was overly simplistic, but rather than pursue this, I asked the question foremost on my mind: why had he not told me that he was my grandfather? I had uncovered quite a lot about my past in the process of familiarizing myself with Vang's affairs, but I wanted to hear it all.

"Because I'm *not* your grandfather," he said. "I was William's father-in-law, but..." He shot me an amused look. "I should have thought you would have understood all this by now."

I saw no humor in the situation. "Explain it to me."

"As you wish." He paced away from me, stopped to inspect one of the framed photographs. "William engineered the death of my wife, my daughter, and my grandson in a plane crash. Once he had isolated me, he challenged my mental competency, intending to take over my business concerns. To thwart him, I faked my suicide. It was a very convincing fake. I used a body I'd had cloned to supply me with organs. I kept enough money to support Green Star and to pay for Tan's training. The rest you know."

"Not so," I said. "You haven't told me who I am."

"Ah, yes." He turned from the photograph and smiled pleasantly at me. "I suppose that would interest you. Your mother's name was Tuyet. Tuyet Su Vanh. She was an actress in various pornographic media. The woman you saw in your dream–that was she. We had a relationship for several years, then we drifted apart. Not long before I lost my family, she came to me and told me she was dying. One of the mutated HIVs. She said she'd borne a child by me. A son. She begged me to take care of you. I didn't believe her, of course. But she had given me pleasure, so I set up a trust for you. A small one."

"And then you decided to use me."

"William had undermined my authority to the extent that I could not confront him directly. I needed an arrow to aim at his heart. I told your mother that if she cooperated with me I'd adopt you, place my fortune in the trust, and make you my heir. She gave permission to have your memory wiped. I wanted you empty so I could fill you with my purpose. After you were re-educated, she helped construct some fragmentary memories that were implanted by means of a biochip. Nonetheless, you were a difficult child to mold. I couldn't be certain that you would seek William out, and so, since I was old and tired and likely not far from Heaven, I decided to feign an illness and withdraw. This allowed me to arrange a confrontation without risk to myself."

I should have hated Vang, but after six months of running his businesses, of viewing the world from a position of governance and control, I understood him far too well to hate–though at that moment, understanding the dispassionate requisites and protocols of such a position seemed as harsh a form of judgment as the most bitter of hatreds. "What happened to my mother?" I asked.

"I arranged for her to receive terminal care in an Australian hospital."

"And her claim that I was your biological son... did you investigate it?"

"Why should I? It didn't matter. A man in my position could not acknowledge an illegitimate child, and once I had made my decision to abdicate my old life, it mattered even less. If it has any meaning for you, there are medical records you can access."

"I think I'd prefer it to remain a mystery," I told him.

"You've no reason to be angry at me," he said. "I've made you wealthy. And what did it cost? A few memories."

I shifted in my chair, steepled my hands on my stomach. "Are you convinced that my... that William had your family killed? He seemed to think there had been a misunderstanding."

"That was a charade! If you're asking whether or not I had proof–of course I didn't. William knew how to disguise his hand."

"So everything you did was based solely on the grounds of your suspicions."

"No! It was based on my knowledge of the man!" His tone softened. "What does it matter? Only William and I knew the truth, and he is dead. If you doubt me, if you pursue this further, you'll never be able to satisfy yourself."

"I suppose you're right," I said, getting to my feet.

"Are you leaving already?" He wore an aggrieved expression. "I was hoping you'd tell me about Tan... and Green Star. What has happened with my little circus?"

"Tan is well. As for Green Star, I gave it to Mei and Tranh."

I opened the door, and Vang made a gesture of restraint. "Stay a while longer, Philip. Please. You and Tan are the only people with whom I have an emotional connection. It heartens me to spend time with you."

Hearing him describe our relationship in these terms gave me pause. I recalled the conversation in which Tan had asserted that something central to the idea of life died when one was uploaded into Heaven–Vang's uncharacteristic claim to an emotional debt caused me to think that he might well be, as she'd described her parents, a colored shadow, a cunningly contrived representation of the original. I hoped that this was not the case; I hoped that he was alive in every respect.

"I have to go," I said. "Business, you understand. But I have some news that may be of interest to you."

"Oh?" he said eagerly. "Tell me."

"I've invested heavily in Sony, and through negotiation I've arranged for one of your old companies–Intertech of Hanoi–to be placed in charge of overseeing the virtual environment. I would expect you're soon going to see some changes in your particular part of Heaven."

He seemed nonplussed, then a look of alarm dawned on his face. "What are you going to do?"

"Me? Not a thing." I smiled, and the act of smiling weakened my emotional restraint–a business skill I had not yet perfected–and let anger roughen my voice. "It's much more agreeable to have your dirty work handled by others, don't you think?"

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On occasion, Tan and I manage to rekindle an intimacy that reminds us of the days when we first were lovers, but these occasions never last for long, and our relationship is plagued by the lapses into neutrality or–worse–indifference that tend to plague any two people who have spent ten years in each other's company. In our case these lapses are often accompanied by bouts of self-destructive behavior. It seems we're punishing ourselves for having experienced what we consider an undeserved happiness. Even our most honest infidelities are inclined to be of the degrading sort. I understand this. The beach at Vung Tau, once the foundation of our union, has been replaced by a night on Yen Phu Street in Binh Khoi, and no edifice built upon such imperfect stone could be other than cracked and deficient. Nonetheless, we both realize that whatever our portion of contentment in this world, we are fated to seek it together.

From time to time, I receive a communication from Vang. He does not look well, and his tone is always desperate, cajoling. I tell myself that I should relent and restore him to the afterlife for which he contracted; but I am not highly motivated in that regard. If there truly is something that dies when one ascends to Heaven, I fear it has already died in me, and I blame Vang for this.

Seven years after my talk with Vang, Tan and I attended a performance of the circus in the village of Loc Noi. There was a new James Bond Cochise, Kai and Kim had become pretty teenagers, both Tranh and Mei were thinner, but otherwise things were much the same. We sat in the main tent after the show and reminisced. The troupe–Mei in particular–were unnerved by my bodyguards, but all in all, it was a pleasant reunion.

After a while I excused myself and went to see the major. He was huddled in his tent, visible by the weird flickerings in his eyes... though as my vision adapted to the dark, I was able make out the cowled shape of his head against the canvas backdrop. Tranh had told me he did not expect the major to live much longer, and now that I was close to him, I found that his infirmity was palpable, I could hear it in his labored breath. I asked if he knew who I was, and he replied without inflection, as he had so many years before, "Philip." I'd hoped that he would be more forthcoming, because I still felt akin to him, related through the cryptic character of our separate histories, and I thought that he might once have sensed that kinship, that he'd had some diffuse knowledge of the choices I confronted, and had designed the story of Firebase Ruby for my benefit, shaping it as a cautionary tale–one I'd failed to heed. But perhaps I'd read too much into what was sheer coincidence. I touched his hand, and his breath caught, then shuddered forth, heavy as a sob. All that remained for him were a few stories, a few hours in the light. I tried to think of something I could do to ease his last days, but I knew death was the only mercy that could mend him.

Mei invited Tan and me to spend the night in the trailer–for old times' sake, she said–and we were of no

mind to refuse. We both yearned for those old times, despite neither of us believing that we could recapture them. Watching Tan prepare for bed, it seemed to me that she had grown too vivid for the drab surroundings, her beauty become too cultivated and too lush. But when she slipped in beside me, when we began to make love on that creaky bunk, the years fell away and she felt like a girl in my arms, tremulous and new to such customs, and I was newly awakened to her charms. She drifted off to sleep afterward with her head on my chest, and as I lay there trying to quiet my breath so not to wake her, it came to me that future and past were joined in the darkness that enclosed us, two black rivers flowing together, and I understood that while the circus would go its own way in the morning and we would go ours, those rivers, too, were forever joined–we shared a confluence and a wandering course, and a moment proof against the world's denial, and we would always be a troupe, Kim and Kai, Mei and Tranh, Tan and I, and the major... that living ghost who, like myself, was the figment of a tragic past he never knew, or–if, indeed, he knew it–with which he could never come to terms. It was a bond that could not save us, from either our enemies or ourselves, but it held out a hope of simple glory, a promise truer than Heaven. Illusory or not, all our wars would continue until their cause was long-forgotten under the banner of Radiant Green Star.

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