

The Collected Stories of  
**LUCIUS  
SHEPARD**

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## AZTECHS

Papa's always saying there's too many people in the world, but what's he know... Old fool! Sitting home alone all day with his mezcal and his reefer. Drifting, dozing, dreaming. He never sees anyone, don't talk to no one except me. Nobody real that is. He talks to Mama's ghost, to the way she was back when she was fine and twenty-nine. I got the house fixed up nice, but he never lets me touch his room. Walls covered with brown butcher paper to hide holes in the plaster, and a photograph of him and Mama tacked up to cover a tear in the paper—looks like a stamp on a package, like this parcel he was carrying exploded in around him, got inverted somehow so the postage wound up on the inside, and he just sits there in the middle of it, getting mailed off to nowhere.

I was in the bathroom the other night, checking out the hair, the jacket, when he yells, "Eddie!" I cracked the door, peered down the hall and saw him at his table, goofing on the photograph. He's a youthful forty in the picture, hair gathered into a ponytail under a funky straw hat, wearing a T-shirt with the word REVOLUTION printed on it and beneath that the slogan, You Are What You Rebel Against. He's got an arm around Mama, who's shading her eyes against the sun, and there I am too, because you see it's a breezy day, and the summer dress she's got on is molded to the ripening curve of her belly, evidence that Eddie Poe is on his way to the world. They're on the San Diego side, about to cross over and lead a demonstration against Sony Corporation for exploiting the Mexican worker, but it looks as if they're heading off to fuck on the beach at Hermosillo.

"Eddie... Goddammit!"

"Hang on a minute!" I said. "Okay?"

I figured out years ago why Papa loves that picture. It shows the last time they were happy. That night they were visited by some government types who played them a video featuring some of Papa's less notorious co-conspirators getting their throats cut.

"Want to be with the beaners?" one guy asked Papa. "You got our permission. Go be with 'em. But you come back to the States, we'll kill your ass. Try any legal bullshit, we'll kill you for that. It'll make a stink for a while, a loudmouth like you talking through his neck. All your movie star pals, they'll be outraged. But it'll blow over. Know why? In the grand scheme of things, your cause is shit!"

Papa called everyone he could think of who might help, but nobody could guarantee our safety, and when more of his friends turned up dead, he realized no amount of publicity could immunize us against the retribution of the various corporate entities who were determined to stabilize the profit environment they had established on the border. Mama died during a flu epidemic a couple of years afterward, and Papa's health was broken by nearly two decades of working in the Sony *maquiladora*. I liked to think if I'd been in his position, with a young wife and a baby on the way, I'd have baled on my principles to keep them safe—but it was a hard sell.

"Where you going tonight, Eddie?" he said as I swung on into his room. Before I could answer, he came back with, "Out to crawl in the sewer with the rest of the insects, I suppose." He juiced his voice with an extra hit of disdain. "Watching you waste your life makes me sick at heart. The way you're going, son, you've got no future."

I was twenty-four years old and ran my own security service. Considering I'd grown up a *gringo puro* in one of the toughest barrios in Mexico, an illegal alien, a wetback in reverse, I'd done all right for myself. But Papa didn't see it that way—he held me to a standard he couldn't meet himself.

"I got no future?" I said, stepping close. "Who the fuck's fault you figure that is?"

He refused to acknowledge me, his grizzled face like a clenched fist, eyes locked on the photograph of him and Mama.

"I wish I had the fuckin' time to sit around and cultivate my mind," I said. "Who knows what I might achieve? I might get to be a college professor with his head so far up his ass, he got nothin' better to do than poke his nose places it ain't wanted."

"You never..." he began, but I talked right through him.

"And if I developed a *really* big brain, I might be able to screw things up so bad, I'd wind up livin' in shit

the rest of my life."

"Just because you've become innured to the way things are," he said, "that doesn't mean I was wrong to want to change them."

"Right... I forgot. You the revolutionary. A real leftist hero. Well, I don't see you fuckin' mannin' the barricades now. All you do is sit and stare at that stupid picture! Here!" I dug into my jacket pocket, fingered out a plastic packet containing a dozen blue gelatin caps, and tossed them onto the table. "Wanna trip on your picture? These'll put you right in there."

He glanced at the pills but didn't touch them.

"Go on... take 'em! I got 'em special for you." I was so messed up behind the argument, my emotions were confused, and though I was enraged, I felt like crying and putting my arms around him.

He prodded the packet with a forefinger. I knew he was dying to take them, and this too was a cause of emotional confusion—I intended the pills to make him happy, but I also took pleasure in his weakness. He slit the seam of the packet, let the capsules dribble out onto the table, then said in a subdued tone, "What're you doing tonight, son?"

"I'm gonna meet Guadalupe at Cruzados. We got business."

He made a scornful noise.

"What's wrong with you, man?" I said. "Lupe's more honey than god. She's my pale Spanish girl."

He held a gelatin capsule up to the light—a gem dealer checking the water of a sapphire. "The woman's playing you," he said.

"Everyone's plays everyone else. It's the Master's plan."

"Yes, but she's much better at it than you."

I started getting angry again. "I gotta go," I told him.

"How many of these do I take?" He had a handful of the pills.

"How fucked-up you wanna get?"

His eyes cut toward the photograph. "Extremely," he said.

j

Papa and I lived in what once was known as Mexicali, but had become an almost indistinguishable part of a single city that stretched from the Gulf to the Pacific, cozied up like a snake against the 1200-mile-long laser fence designed to wall off America from the poor, the tired, the hungry, the oppressed masses yearning for freedom. The fence—like the city it damned—had come to be called El Rayo, and living next to that enormous bug zapper, that fiery curtain hung between 100-foot-high titanium poles... well, they used to say living under power lines causes cancer, but living next to El Rayo caused cancer of the mind, the soul. It's not what it was intended to be that made it so devastating, though a sheet of fire that could charbroil your ass however fast you passed through it was certainly the latest thing in barriers, the ultimate statement of contempt and disinterest. No, it's like Papa once said, something that big is more magical than actual, more destructive as a symbol than as an isolationist tactic. When they switched it on, midnights along the border became red forever after, and everything that happened from that day forth took on that bloody color. Every action, every emotion, every dream.

First thing I noticed as I stepped out the door was El Rayo, like a blood-red wave about to break over us, standing seventy feet above the rooftops, its glare staining the starless reach of the sky, making that zoned-out humming sound. Then the rest of the street snapped into focus, a single-file herd of lowriders humping and fucking the pavement, giant metal roaches tattooed with hellfire, images of the Virgin, slogans. Demented bearded faces inside, arms and legs poking out the windows. Those things never go out of style, that grinding *racha chacha chacha* sound they make, speakers blasting out salsa, border reggae, warped *conjuntos*, Malaysian pop, music from a million places jammed together into one big scratchy, bumping, throbbing noise that put grooves on the inside of your skull. They rocked along in a jangle of light past appliance shops with Aztec temples painted on their facades, bodegas clubs souvenir shops, their bright windows aglitter with crystal crosses gilt madonnas rhinestone eagle knives flashing in miles of red midnight, little stucco caves with corrugated iron doors rolled partway down, interiors littered with every form of cheapness: mirrors with ornate tin frames, torrero capes with airbrushed scenes from the Plaza del Toros, sombreros festooned with embroidery and bits of broken mirror, switchblades with dragons worked in gold paint you could scrape off with your thumbnail. Watching from the curb were whores stuffed into dresses that looked like napkin holders cinched around globs of brown fat, their faces like images painted on a sideshow facade, rouge-dappled cheeks and starred eyes and oohing crimson mouths opening onto funhouse rides. Cruel, dark male faces stared from the doorways and alley mouths. Carved eyebrows and

lavaflores of black hair, eyes black magnets and gold-glinting teeth, mustaches sharply drawn as scythes, neon-lit coils of cigarette smoke slithering from their lips. Vendors pushing fruit drinks, *bocadillos*, ices, shish kebabs of dead dog slathered with red sauce, knock-offs of high-tech toys... I used to have this dream about El Rayo, I'd come swooping down in a plane, cutting so low my wingtip would brush the fire, then I'd climb way high so I could see the entire length of it and wonder if the men who built it recognized the sinister shape they had called into being. What immense signal were they flashing out into nowhere? What character did it form? What meanings did it have in how many alphabets? With what secret societies and cosmic institutions did it align? Seeing it that way. I understood that nothing in this world existed for the reasons stated by Einstein, and that nothing Einstein ever said made any sense except on the level of pure magic, because at the bottom of all that mathematical boogaloo is just jungle noise and street rhythms and a vast primitive design.

Cruzados constituted something of an irony as related to El Rayo in that you could enter the club from either side of the border. The laser fence cut through the center of the place, obscured behind roll-down metal doors. The management had rigged subterranean charges that would jolt the transmitters every hour on the hour, causing a three-second interval in the beam, and during that interval you could jump across from Mexico to the States or vice versa. It may seem strange that this was permitted, but illegal crossings on a small scale weren't considered a problem—both sides of the border, after all, shared the same economy, the same terrible pollution and crime rate, and La Migra kept watch on the American side to make certain that no one truly dangerous, like Papa, slipped into the Land of the Free.

I loved the darkness of the club, the little orange candleflames in glass cups on all the tables, the iron door that hourly would slide up to reveal El Rayo, the lion heartbeat rhythm of the background music, the curving black and chrome bar. It was my office, my soul's true home. I grabbed a seat at the bar, and the bartender seemed to glide on a track toward me, his silver teeth cutting a crescent smile, eyes gleaming black bugs, sideburns pointy black stilettos...

"Can I bring you something, Mister Poe?"

"Orlando! *Buenas noches*," I said. "Tequila and a beer back."

The television above the bar was playing El Rayo's Greatest Hits. Showing how people tried to cross in the early years after the barrier was switched on, at the moment focusing on one guy who had covered his car with cheap mirrors, because he'd heard mirrors reflect lasers, but had not known the mirrors needed to be perfect, and drove straight into the barrier, emerging on the other side as a smoking wad of melted glass and steel. The tape contained dozens of such idiot plays. There was another tape of people making pilgrimages to the barrier, building altars and shrines beside it, and sometimes throwing themselves into the fire; but that one wasn't as popular, because people still did that shit.

Orlando bought my tequila and beer, and I asked him what was up. He relaxed somewhat from his pose of evil suavity and said, "You know that *chingado* Tonio Fernandez? Got that TV show in San Diego talks about border issues... all that shit? Yeah, well he hears how Gutty Cardenas... Remember him? Junior welter champ 'bout eight, nine years ago? Okay. So Tonio hears how he's all fucked-up on drugs. Gutty dopes at my uncle's place in TJ. I see him there all the time. And Tonio decides he's gon' come down and lay this Mexican Jesus soul trip on him... get him clean, right." Orlando paused to light a cigarette and blew a silvery glowing ring. "This is funny, because Tonio's 'bout as Mexican as a goddamn bag of Cheetos. The guy talks like a fuckin' Baptist. Gutty couldn't get away from his ass fast enough. I mean, even dope hell's better'n that shit, you know. He does not want to be saved. Does not want to be resurrected or rocked out of his depression. He wants to go down the hole with a grin on his fuckin' face. He refuses to be turned into a splendid clean splinter of what he once was and paraded out as a rehab wonder. Like, see what can be made of these raw materials with the proper Christian conditioning..."

My message center buzzed. I told Orlando I'd catch the rest of his story later and touched a button on the counter. A screen and a keypad popped up from the bar; I punched in a code. Seconds later, a muscular guy in a wifebeater undershirt was staring back at me from the screen. His trapezoids bulked up from his shoulders like foothills flanking the mountain of his head. His face, shadowed by a few day's growth of beard, was the hard, contemptuous face of somebody who liked to hurt people. I'd never seen him before, didn't know his name, but I could tell he was Sammy by the unblinking eyes and reflexive clump of his jaw muscles, by his precision of speech and utter lack of inflection and the sergeant's stripes tattooed on his cheek. Since the beginning of the Pan-Mayan War, vets addicted to the samurai drug had been settling this side of the border where no one would try to outlaw their violent subculture. They had proved a significant asset to the economy; their no-holds-barred pit fights were a major tourist attraction and they provided a terrific source of expert muscle for people like me. The ex-sergeant had a flesh-colored adhesive patch affixed

to his neck that released a steady supply of his favorite poison into his system. That struck me as odd. Most of his kind preferred an implant—implants were harder to rip off during a fight.

"Eddie Poe?" the ex-sergeant said.

I switched his voice to my earphone and said, "Talk fast."

All the muscles of his face appeared to ripple—he didn't like my tone, I guess. "Larry Crespo is dead," he said after regaining control.

That was bad news, but I didn't trust the source. "How'd you get this number?"

"From Crespo. He thought you might be able to use me."

"What a coincidence. Here I am short one Crespo, and you just happen to call."

Considering my disrespect, I figured he would have loved to tear me apart; but his control was excellent. People not of the tribe pissed Sammy off under the best of circumstances.

The buzzcut guy spoke through his teeth. "If you're insinuating I killed him... Crespo was part of my seven."

I wasn't that familiar with Sammy culture, but I knew that "my seven" referred to a blood bond. By telling me this, he was declaring his innocence in a persuasive fashion. But I was still suspicious—I didn't like accidents, especially on an important job.

"What's your name, Sarge?" I asked.

"Lawton Childers."

"Got a resume?"

"You should already have it."

"Oh, yeah." I tapped a key and the resume appeared on-screen. "I see you worked for the Carbonells recently. Got any problem with killin' a few of 'em?"

"Be my pleasure," said Childers without expression.

"Probably won't be necessary." I studied the remainder of the resume. "I need quality work tonight. Restraint is key. You'll be protectin' a representative of AZTECHS during a negotiation with the Carbonells."

"Understood," Childers said.

"What's your impression of the Carbonells?"

Childers' smile developed slowly—an emblem of ferocity. "They're not half as bad as they think they are."

"That's not what I'm askin'," I told him. "You have any insights into their personalities might be helpful?"

"I paid no attention to their personalities." Childers said.

I continued reading the resume. "Three tours in Guatemala. Damn, you musta loved your country!" I gave him a sardonic wink.

Childers stood mute.

"You haven't done much bodyguard work," I said. "Why now?"

"I'm going to need the operation."

In Sammy parlance, "the operation" was a bioengineering procedure to overcome a decline in sensitivity to the drug.

"How's your tolerance now?" I asked.

"I killed an ape in a pit fight last weekend. You can verify it."

"Somebody's pet monkey? King Kong? What?"

"Orangutan."

I didn't like switching horses in midstream, but since my horse was dead, I had little choice, and if the drugs had boosted Childers' combat abilities to the point where he had taken out an orangutan in hand-to-hand, he might be a better bargain than Crespo. "All right," I said. "The recording of this transmission will be our contract. I'm hirin' you for the duration of the job. Standard terms. Bonus to be determined."

Childers only reaction was to nod.

"The men you'll be workin' with... Crespo's team. Any problems there?"

"None."

"Okay. See you later tonight."

"Don't you want to know how Crespo died?"

Sammy usually displayed an indifferent attitude to life and death, so this question seemed against type. Childers' expression had barely changed during our brief interview, but now I could have sworn I detected a glimmer of outrage at my indifference. "I assumed it was the drugs," I told him.

"His neck was broken." Childers scratched the tiny chevrons on his cheek with a forefinger as big as a corn dog. "Nice and neat."

Sammy killing Sammy was how I figured it, because the only person capable of kevorning a drugged

mesomorphic maniac like Crespo would be another drugged mesomorphic maniac. But Sammy killing Sammy outside the pit wasn't that common, and Crespo had been a renowned pitfighter, an icon to his brothers-in-dope. "Any ideas who?" I asked.

Childers shook his head with the ponderous slowness of a statue just coming to life. "Some dangerous motherfucker."

"As dangerous as you?"

"You never know."

"See you tonight," I said, and cleared the screen.

j

I sucked on the tequila, considering the possibility of hiring another Sammy or two, but I decided that more muscle might stir up the Carbonells. I checked my watch. Seven twenty-two. Nearly Guadalupe time. I fumbled in my jacket pocket, dug out a blue gelatin capsule I'd held back from Papa and swallowed it with a sip of beer. As I waited for the blue to take effect, I gave thought to what Papa had said about Guadalupe. I'd never doubted that she was using me to further her career. In the land of a million channels, she was a rising star, and through me, she had access to stories with which she fleshed out her weekly show, two hours of border news interspersed with sex, much of it featuring yours truly and Srta. Guadalupe Bernal. I had hopes that our relationship might evolve past the level of a business association, and it was this that caused Papa to believe I was being chumped. But in my limited appreciation of life, chumped or not, I was almost completely fulfilled to be the owner of a security service and the semi-famous saddle pard of the Border Rose.

By eight o'clock I was surfing a bright blue wave of psychotropic love sweet love, and my natural horniness had been elevated to the level of moonstruck monkey. At eight sharp the metal door at the center of the club rattled upward, and the heated glow of El Rayo filled in all the shadows, casting red gleams along the countertop and blazing in the mirror. Then a little seismic shudder, the curtain of fire vanished, and Lupe came striding into the Mexican side of the club, her camera scooting along at her heels, a steel six-legged cross between a lizard and a bug about the size of a chihauhua, the technology courtesy of AZTECHS. The fire returned, framing her like Our Lady of Guadalupe as she came toward me. Tall and slender and pale, she had on white slacks and a silky red open-collared blouse embroidered with black roses. The door rattled down, returning Cruzados to its customary dimness—she appeared to glow against the backdrop.

She settled on the stool next to mine, the coils of her perfume slithering around me, and gave me a quick wet kiss. Her face was made up for the show. Shellacked crimson lips and eyes transformed into dark butterfly wings with brushed-on shadow; but I could see down to the Iberian geometry of broad cheekbones and narrow chin and strong nose. She leaned into me and whispered, "Can we get private, baby? I need a new tape to intercut with the opening."

We walked along a corridor that angled off from the main room and found an unoccupied roomette. Black walls, black couch with chrome trim, offset lighting. The Marquis de Sade would have been happy there. We undressed hurriedly and made love while the camera skittered about the walls above us, beside us, poised like a preying mantis, beaming jewels of light onto our skin. Usually Lupe liked me to talk shit to her, give her a slow, coarsely self-referential fuck, but tonight's show would likely be picked up by other shows, and so we kept it classy, just sighs and whispers as we went heartbeat-to-heartbeat from the center of the carnal border nighttime trance life, borderless between people, between nations, part of the radio holeo video feelio fuckio stream of images dancing along that red snakebelly line that linked ocean to ocean. I was stained all the way through with Lupe. Her breath was my breath, and we were swimming upstream in the red midnight, offering our all to the vast cable syndrome. I felt those images coursing along my skin, like a hundred thousand cats-per-second rubbing against me, and afterward, lying quietly while Lupe restored her make-up, perched on the edge of the couch beside me, I could still feel them moving ghost-like around us.

"Frankie," she said, and the camera-bug-lizard turned its snoutlike lens housing toward her. "Play the opening."

A holographic shot of Lupe in her white slacks and red blouse appeared in the center of the room against a background of sage, sand, and cactus, and her diminished voice began to speak:

*Twenty-three years ago somebody erected a sign in the desert. Out in the middle of nowhere. 150, 160 miles due east from Hermosillo on the Pacific coast. Just a plain wooden sign, billboard-sized, bearing three words neatly lettered in black paint: REALITY STOPS HERE*

"Start intercutting the sex here," Lupe told Frankie. "Alternate between me 'n' Eddie and shots of me on the desert."

*There was no apparent reason for a sign – it marked no road, no building, no watercourse, no natural formation of any significance. The place where it stood was at the heart of a trackless waste of cactus and sand and scorpions. The first person known to have seen it was a snake hunter in a jeep who claimed to have shot it full of holes, but when someone checked it out a few days later, they found it undamaged. That story seemed to piss people off, or at the least to offer an irresistible challenge; they took to vandalizing the sign on a regular basis, driving in from Hermosillo, from the border, and eventually from places as far away as Monterrey and San Luis Potosi. After each incident the sign would reappear good as new, sometimes within a few hours of being burned or chainsawed or shotgunned, with no evidence left to indicate who had done the repairs.*

"Now I want to hear the heavy breathing," Lupe said; she glanced at me and smiled. "Nice moves, Eddie. You take somethin' tonight?"

"Just a blue," I said.

"Oh." She gave me a poochy look. "You must love me a lot, huh?"

"Don't break the mood," I told her. "I'm happy."

*The consensus came to be that the sign must be some sort of hoax – the phrase REALITY STOPS HERE had the ring of art school bullshit. However, this viewpoint absorbed a major hit when a scientist from the university in Mexico City, made curious by reports of the sign's magical invulnerability, dynamited it and, along with a handful of assistants and a battery of cameras, staked out the area. Twelve hours later the sign was back. Though they swore they hadn't fallen asleep, neither the scientist or his assistants could recall how this had happened; nor was the film they shot of much help. The cameras had recorded eleven hours fifty-nine minutes and fifty-four seconds of the wreckage lying undisturbed; this was followed by a static-filled gap of six seconds duration. When the static ceased, the sign was as before, and the wreckage had vanished.*

"Okay," said Lupe. "Start strobing the sex."

*Thereafter the area for miles around the sign came to be thought of as a kind of desert Bermuda Triangle. Disappearances and apparitions were reported, supernatural legends were spawned. Except for crazies and the odd researcher, people stayed clear of the region. Then, ten years after the sign had first been sighted, it vanished. However, the spot where it had stood did not remain vacant for long. It was replaced several days later by a stone head some three and a half stories tall, rendered in the style of the Aztecs and representing the emperor overthrown centuries before by the conquistadors, Montezuma. Lying on its side, pitted and crumbling, it looked from a distance to be the relic of a dead culture; but when seen close at hand, it became clear that this was not a fragment of an ancient statue, but the logo of some thoroughly modern organization. AZTECHS.*

A shot of the great stone head replaced Lupe's face. Its eyes were television screens, and across them drifted fleeting images of the natural world. Birds in flight, coyotes skulking, a serpent unwinding across hardpan, elephants fording a river...

"Let's drop the image of the sex into the head's eye screens." said Lupe. "Then close in on one of the screens during the next section." She glanced at me over her shoulder. "Nice, huh?"

"Very," I said.

*When the AZTECHS shops began to appear all along the border, selling revolutionary technology at cut-rate prices, using the stone head as their logo, the mystery seemed to be solved. But one part of the mystery remained unrevealed....*

Lupe began to relate the story of how an American military AI, who since taken to calling itself Montezuma, had succeeded in downloading a copy of itself into a Mexican storage unit, wiping out its original, and establishing a virtual kingdom in the deep desert, guaranteeing its survival by means of contracts between its then-secret business entity, the AZTECHS Corporation, and multinational conglomerates all over the world – contracts that, if breached, would have catastrophic results for the global economy. As Frankie caused the holographic image to shift into increasingly tighter displays of the stone head, its broad face and thick-lipped mouth seeming to express a mournful calm, I watched Lupe and me getting nasty in the left eye screen. I had a few insecurities about the relationship. We had a powerful physical attraction for one another, but sex was a currency between us. Like Papa said, Lupe was playing me, and I was playing her, using my celebrity to create new business opportunities. Despite knowing all this was true, despite being okay with it, I was still upset by what he had said, and I tried to find some sign in our performance that Lupe and I were about more than business, that hidden in the squirming imagery flickering across the eye screen were the telltales of a deeper attraction – not because I hoped for this so much (so I told myself), but simply because I wanted to prove Papa wrong.



"When you do the fade," Lupe said to Frankie, "pull it back and let 'em hear me come."

The image of the stone head dwindled to the tune of Lupe's moans and outcries. She stood and gazed at me with an expression of exaggerated concern. "What's the matter, Eddie? You look sad."

"Nothin'." I started buttoning my shirt. "Just Papa's on my ass again."

"You should move outa there," Lupe said, running a hand along my shoulder.

"Yeah, maybe." I sat up.

"What'd he say to you?"

I filled her in.

"*You* got no future?" Lupe sniffed in disdain. "That old fuck should talk!"

"He said you were playin' me," I said.

"Playin' *with* you, maybe."

"Whatever." I got to my feet, pulled on my slacks.

Lupe picked up my shoulder harness. "New gun?"

"New to me. I bought it off Sammy. I figure it did some damage down in Guatemala." She toyed with the settings on the handle of the weapon, and I snatched it from her. "Don't mess with it," I told her. "You'll blow somethin' up. Way you got it set, it fires grenades."

"Ooh, nice!" She petted the gun and gave me a flirty smile. "I feel so safe with you."

This teasing bullshit was normal Lupe mode, and I was used to it; but it irritated me then. "Do you?" I said

She looked at me, puzzled. "Huh?"

"All this jokin' around we do," I said, "I wanna know if you really mean it. You feel safe with me?"

She turned her back, folded her arms. "I don't need this!"

"Yeah? Well, I wanna know what's goin' on." I turned her to face me. "Y'know, sometimes when we're fuckin', I can feel you. Right with me, right where I am in my head. I know it's true. But I'd like to hear it from you."

She stood mute, refusing to meet my eyes.

"C'mon!" I said. "Let's clear this up. You don't care nothin' 'bout me, lemme hear it."

"What I feel," she said angrily, "ain't got nothin' to do with this. I told you a thousand times, I'm all about career. You wanna know if I *love* you?" She gave "love" a sneering emphasis.

"Do you?"

She glanced up at me, and I could have sworn I detected a softening of her hard shell, but only for an instant. "If I do or if I don't, what's it matter? This is business, Eddie. I ain't gon' let emotion fuck it up."

Frankie was pointing his lens at me, clinging to the wall a few feet away. I took a swipe at him, and he spider-walked away. "Are you shootin' this?" I asked Lupe. "You shootin' this right now?"

"Read your contract. I can shoot any thing I want 'long as we're together."

"Screw you!" I shrugged into the harness and scooped up my jacket. "Let's go."

"But we'll be early! I thought we could have a drink."

"We get there early, Frankie can take some nude shots of you with the head." I'd intended this as sarcasm, but I could tell Lupe thought it was a terrific idea.

j

The man we had been hired to protect that night, the official spokesman for the AZTECHS Corporation, billed himself as Z-2 (as in Montezuma-2). His face was identical to that of the stone head, and speculation held that he'd had some work done, that the AI had gotten hold of some poor bastard lost in the desert and given him a new face, new everything. Whoever he had been, he was a superstar now, and I broke out the limo for him, an old refurbished black Rolls with so much armor, Godzilla couldn't have dented it with a hammer.

We drove south into the desert and after slightly more than an hour came in sight of the head. With its glowing eyes and partially eroded features and massive stoic gloom, it had a bewitched air, as if it were in some terrible way alive, condemned to inhabit this wasteland of sage and scorpions and organ-pipe cactus, to stare blindly into forever, displaying but not seeing the images of the things it once had loved. Lupe went off to pose beside the head, and I dialed back the roof of the limo and sat gazing at the stars. They were so bright, the desert sand looked blue in their light, and the low sage-covered hills stood out in sharp relief against the sky. I wasn't nervous, but I was working on nervous, imagining everything that could go wrong when you were dealing with vicious bastards like the Carbonells. The old cartels had been seriously violent, but the Carbonells, along with the Guzman family, and the recently united youth gangs, who went by the

name Los de Abajo... they had taken viciousness to a new level. Mass murder, in their view, should be certified as an Olympic sport. I'd been surprised when the Carbonells had agreed to let Lupe shoot the negotiation, but now I recognized that exposing their criminal activities on a show with an international viewing audience was a validation of their power. They didn't care who knew what they were doing. Try and stop us was their attitude. We're a law unto ourselves.

Sammy, who had followed the Rolls in an armored personnel carrier, established a perimeter and stood watch, stubby AR-20s at the ready, all four men wearing desert camo and plastic armor, carrying light packs. I'd worked with Crespo's team before. Fetisov had pale blond hair, a Russian icon tattooed on his back. Dennard, like Crespo, was a big time pitfighter, an Afro-American with Egyptian hieroglyphs tattooed on his lips and eyelids. Morely had been a sniper and there were dozens of tiny blue humanoid shapes tattooed on his chest, the record of his kills in Honduras and Guatemala. I hadn't yet seen Childers' body art, but I supposed it would be a self-advertisement similar to Moreley's, a few dozen souls rendered into exclamation points or black roses. But they all sported the basic Sammy look—buzzcut, staring, heavily muscled, grim. Months before, I'd visited Crespo at his home, the Green Rat Compound. High stone walls topped with all manner of security devices, enclosing an old hotel, three stories of green stucco and a dusty courtyard where fighters trained day and night. It was a weird combination of prison, barracks, dojo, and monastery. Sammy hated music—any kind of music drove him up the walls—and so the only thing you heard were enraged shouts from the courtyard and chanted strength mantras. Bulked-up men of every description sat in solitary cells and refined their drugged focus; others lifted weights and toughened their limbs by striking a variety of rigid objects. Walking through the place, I felt like a baby deer in a lion cage. I guess it would be accurate to say that Sammy addicts were the rodeo clowns of the junkie universe, the baddest, most functional and most trustworthy of their kind.

At twenty to one, Dennard gave the alert. I climbed out of the limo and looked to where he was pointing. Off to the left of the head, some forty yards away, was a rise sentried by organ-pipe cactus. A rider on horseback appeared to be watching us from atop it, and soon he was joined by two more riders. Their silhouettes black as absences against the stars. Something about the way they moved astride their mounts tweaked my neck hairs. They remained on the crest for a minute or so, then wheeled their horses and rode out of sight. Shortly thereafter, Z-2, wearing a pale gray suit and matching shirt, came walking toward us from behind the rise, walking with a confident step. He passed Sammy by without acknowledgment and addressed himself to Lupe, who—flushed and excited—had run over to stand beside me. "Señorita Bernal," he said. "*Encantada*." He turned to me and said, "I trust there have been no changes, Señor Poe."

"None," I told him. "We'll have you at Ramiro's house by three, After that..." I shrugged. "Who can say?"

"No one but God," he said, and smiled. "But God is watching us tonight. You can be sure of that."

As we drove toward El Rayo, Z-2 sat in a backwards-facing seat, Lupe beside him, with Frankie clinging upside-down to the roof, shooting the interview, such as it was. The spokesman answered every question with polite demurrals and a Jesus-loves-you smile. Whereas the stone head projected a feeling of gloom, its human twin had about him an aura of unflappable serenity. It was a nice way to be—for him, anyway—but I doubted that Ramiro Carbonell would be impressed. Z-2's answers grew increasingly nonresponsive. My anxieties had kicked in, and his beatific evasion was beginning to piss me off.

"Hey," I said, interrupting Lupe mid-question and addressing the spokesman. "What do people call you, man? Like when you're havin' a drink with friends, they go, 'Pass the beer nuts, Zee Two?' Or you gotta nickname?"

Frankie whirred, likely adjusting his lens to include me in the shot.

"Zee," the spokesman said, unperturbed. "You may call me Zee."

"Zee. Okay. So what's your story, Zee? Who were you 'fore you landed this gig?"

"I am who I am," he said.

"Oh... sure. That clears things up. 'Cause, see, I was thinkin' you were *not* who you were."

Zee's smile was an emblem of infinite patience. "Would you ask a gourd filled with new wine how it was to be filled with dirty water?"

"I wouldn't ask a gourd shit," I said. "That'd be stupid."

Zee spread his hands as if to say I had made his point.

"But you ain't no fuckin' gourd," I said.

"Let me ask you this, Señor Poe... since you resist my analogy. How did you feel when you were an infant and soiled your diaper?"

"I don't remember. But I imagine it felt like shit."

Zee crossed his legs, smoothed the crease of his trousers. "I might be able to remember who I was, to work it out logically, but that would have little meaning. Will it satisfy you if I say I was no one?"

"Might if you tell me who you are now."

"Language has its limits," he said. "When it comes to expressing the inexpressible—the idea of God, the concept of infinity—mathematics is more useful."

"You tellin' me you think you're God?"

Zee's smile widened. "Are you always so literal-minded, Señor Poe?"

"Only when he's bein' a dick!" Lupe tucked her legs up beneath her butt and frowned at me. "You gonna keep bein' a dick, Eddie? Or you gon' let me do my interview?"

I didn't know if she was performing or not. Her fans loved our little spats—they fleshed out our relationship for the simple-minded. But I wasn't in the mood to play.

"Y'know," I said to Zee, "Ramiro's gonna love your ass. Say what you want about him, say he's insane, ruthless, a fuckin' sadist... the man's a sucker for that sound-of-one-hand-clappin' bullshit you been spreadin'. Two of you gon' get along fine."

"I have put substantial proposals before Señor Carbonell," Zee said. "We have a great many topics of mutual interest to discuss. If this were not the case, we wouldn't be meeting."

"Let's hope so," I said. "Otherwise it's gon' be a short night."

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Fifteen miles out, I could see El Rayo sketching a false horizon as far as the eye could see, a glowing wire stretching east to west. As we drew closer, the taller structures of the city lifted against the fire. The tallest within view was a cathedral that had formerly been known as Nuestra Señora del Rayo, this referring to an apparition of the Virgin that had manifested in the burning red light, witnessed by thousands of the devout. The church had been constructed without a back wall, open to the curtain of fire at the very spot where Our Lady had materialized, just in case She decided to do a second show. It was now a part of the Carbonell's compound, organized religion having retreated to safer climes. Ramiro Carbonell and his two sons occupied the rectory, and the two buildings were connected by tunnels and roofed passageways to a dozen lesser buildings, and this warren was segregated from the remainder of Barrio Ningun by high heavily-patrolled stone walls.

The dirt streets through which we drove were thronged with heavily armed, heavily tattooed young guys. Carbonell affiliates. They moved aside grudgingly as the Rolls nosed toward the cathedral; they flicked lit cigarettes at us, flourished their pistols and spat, then—as we moved beyond them—turned back to their card games and their whores. Pariah dogs cast uneasy glances at us and skulked off into alley mouths; naked toddlers chewing sugar cane and tortillas stood in candlelit doorways and looked on in wonder; teenage hookers tried to peer at the rich people hidden behind the darkened glass. Pastel *casitas* with smoking charcoal stoves; drunks with bloody heads lying maybe dead in front of cantinas with no doors; a beshawled mother lifting a sick baby with fly-encrusted eyelids up to the red light and asking for a miracle. Soon the houses gave out into vast acreage of hovels made of plywood and cardboard, tires, crates, what-have-you. Thin smoke rose from makeshift chimneys everywhere, like the issue of souls into the body of God: the oily gray cloud they formed overhead. And on the far side, towering above El Rayo like a last holy dream on the edge of hell, stood the cathedral. We could have driven through that place a hundred years before, and it would have been more-or-less the same. Poverty was humanity's most enduring tradition, and Barrio Ningun one of its great temples.

We pulled up beside the compound gate. I stepped out, showed myself to the two guards who stood atop it. "Eddie Poe," I told them.

One of the guards, a guy with some years on him, his chest bibbed with a salt-and-pepper beard, said, "You're good, Poe, but Sammy don't pass."

Behind me, Childers was standing on the running board of the personnel carrier. A couple of raggedy children were staring up at him and giggling.

"I cleared this with Ramiro," I said. "Sammy comes inside, or we head on back."

I gave a circular gesture to Childers. He spoke to someone in the carrier. Dennard, Morely, and Fetisov jumped out and established a perimeter. Childers joined them. The kids quit giggling when they saw Sammy's guns, and the curiosity seekers who had crowded in behind us backed away.

"Hijo," I said to the guard. "Lemme in, or I'm gon' tell Sammy to cut me a new road."

"Think I give a shit about these *putos*?" The guard laughed. "Kill 'em all. I don't fuckin' care."

The street cleared quickly; a handful of tattooed guys remained, too stoned or too stupid to worry about the consequences.

"Three minutes," I told the guard. "Then we're leaving. You makin' the wrong move, *coño*. Better talk to

Ramiro, or you gon' be takin' a ride on El Rayo tonight."

The two guards vanished; in much less than three minutes they returned. "Bueno," said the bearded guy. "Pasen."

The gate rattled back and we drove into a courtyard paved with broken flagstones. A kid in baggy fatigues beckoned for us to pull up by the cathedral steps. The house of God had acquired a post-apocalyptic gloss since the last priest fled. Much of the ornamentation on the face of the building had been shot away or defaced with graffiti; sheets of metal had replaced the stained glass windows, and the white marble steps had been sprayed green white and gold, and chains of black symbols, like magical equations, had been inscribed atop the paint. From the steeple flew a red banner bearing a black circle. I wouldn't have been surprised to see demons peeking from behind the columns that flanked the carved wooden doors.

Lupe scrambled out and began instructing Frankie to shoot this and that. "We're goin' live again," she whispered to me. "Act like you care!"

Except for our party, the only other person in the courtyard was the kid. He was scrawny, fourteen tops, with shoulder-length hair and a wispy mustache. Large dark eyes brimful of hate. A narrow chin and a beaklike nose a couple of sizes too large for his face. The Carbonell physiognomy. Probably, I thought, a grandson of Ramiro's. He stared at me with a surly hauteur. Even the children were crazy. That's why the Carbonells had risen so high. They outcrazied everyone else.

I told Childers to check out the church. He and Fetisov sprinted up the steps and disappeared inside. Frankie was scuttling across the facade of the building, from broken angel to broken gargoyle, shooting down at Lupe, who was striking poses and delivering her introduction to the Carbonells, telling how Ramiro's fortune, built on kidnapping and drugs, had evolved into an empire founded on vice but with heavy investment in legitimate concerns. Zee stood gazing up at the church. Judging by his contemplative expression, you might have thought he was planning to redecorate. The courtyard was enclosed by a high whitewashed wall, some inset with dark doors that led into the family warren. The guards on the gate had disappeared. The sounds of the street were muted. I did not have a good feeling.

Childers appeared at the cathedral door, trotted down the stairs to my side. "The supressor field's on. The minute we got inside, the weapons computers went screwy. Fetisov scanned the place. No trace of non-computerized weaponry. Felix is packing a knife, but that's not a problem."

"If the supressor field goes off," I said, "you got my permission to fuck em up."

Childers shot me a bemused look. "You know what will happen if we waste the Carbonells."

"Nobody's gonna waste anyone. That's why I hired you people. To make sure of that. Even the Carbonell family's not gonna wage war on Sammy."

"Oh, yeah," said Childers, deadpan. "They'd have to be nuts."

"Okay, man," I said, turning to Zee. "It's your party."

He blessed me with a smile, started up the steps. Lupe followed, chattering into her throat mike. Sammy and I brought up the rear.

The Carbonells had gutted the body of the church, replacing pews with a long mahogany Spanish Colonial banquet table and matching chairs; but they had left the altar intact, and it was a sight that might reorder anyone's notion of a benign Christianity. Draped in white silk, appointed with four golden candlesticks and an intricately carved gold chalice, and surmounted by a thirty-foot-tall golden cross. Supported by invisible wires, it appeared to have materialized from the wall of red fire that supplanted the rear wall. The other walls were scorched and pocked with bullet holes. A scent of old explosions hung in the air. Our Lady of Napalm, I thought. *Nuestra Señora de la Guerra Mundial*. The banquet table was situated directly beneath the altar, so close you could hear the hum and feel the heat of El Rayo on your skin. Sitting along one side of it were Ramiro Carbonell, his sons Felix and Ruy, and two guys of about Ramiro's age, late fifties, who I assumed were his advisors.

Ramiro was a big prideful-looking brown-skinned man, his body settling into slabs of fat, with a thick head of sleeked-back gray hair and a bushy mustache. He wore white slacks and a tight-fitting shirt of mauve silk that accentuated the bulge of his belly. Gold rings, chains, a crucifix. Felix and Ruy were leaner, taller, clean-shaven versions of their papa, but their personal styles were so at variance, they seemed dissimilar. Ruy's dark blue suit made him look like a *mestizo* undertaker, but Felix reminded me of the little stores full of cheap flashy souvenirs I'd passed on the way to Cruzados. He was shirtless, dressed in a black leather vest and matching pants. His chest was adorned with a live ink tattoo that flowed between the image of a rainbow-colored scorpion and what seemed a depiction of a man raping a full-breasted woman. His hair fell in long whiplike braids into which chunks of gold had been woven; his sunglasses were tinted purple, and he probably had on five pounds of chains and bracelets and rings. Whereas Ruy sat straight and alert on his

papa's right hand, Felix—on the left—slouched in his chair and affected disinterest in the proceeding. A dozen bodyguards, representative of the tattooed minions we'd seen in the streets, stood a distance behind the Carbonells. Judging by the anxious way they followed Sammy's every move, I had the suspicion that they felt outnumbered. This set off my detectors. It wasn't like Ramiro to be casual in his attention to security.

Ramiro was all smiles during the introductions, especially when it came to Lupe. "I never miss your show, Señorita Bernal," he said, taking her hand. "It's a great privilege to be a part of *The Border Rose*."

"*Mucho gusto*," said Lupe. "You know my associate, Mister Poe."

"We have spoken," Ramiro said, his eyes not straying from Lupe's cleavage. He introduced Lupe to Ruy, who bowed, and Felix, who said nothing, only stared. "Well, then!" Ramiro rubbed his hands together and beamed. "To business!"

Once everyone was seated, Ramiro leaned forward, folded his hands on the table and engaged Zee. "We have studied your economic projections, Señor. All your paperwork. We find it intriguing. But the idea of revolution..."

"Not a revolution so much as an economic takeover," said Zee.

Ramiro did not like being interrupted. "Very well. We find the idea of an 'economic takeover' unnecessary. We control forty percent of El Rayo. As we grow, we will naturally extend our control. Eventually we will run the entire border." He arched an eyebrow. "Why then should we align ourselves with AZTECHS?"

"May I speak freely?" asked Zee.

"Of course," said Ramiro.

"In the first place," said Zee, "the Guzman family and Los de Abajo will contest your expansion. Unsuccessfully, no doubt. But you will lose many soldiers."

"*Hombre!* That's what soldiers are for," said Ruy.

Ramiro nodded approvingly.

"As you say," said Zee. "But you are a business, and every loss, no matter how predictable, how trivial, is a loss. Then there is the matter of legitimacy."

Ruy started to his feet, but Ramiro restrained him with a gesture. "In what way," he said coldly, "do you consider us illegitimate?"

"In the way of nations," replied Zee. "What you are presented with now is a unique opportunity. The south of the country is occupied with the Pan-Mayan War, and promises to be so occupied for quite some time. The central region, including Mexico City, has been drained of resources and wields an empty authority... an authority that cannot withstand a significant challenge. AZTECHS holds contracts with the government that will enable us to neutralize any resistance to the creation of a border state. Even if they could recommit forces now fighting in the south, we can guarantee that they will not have the funds to provision them. In a matter of months you could be not the most powerful man on the border, but the president of an emerging nation. A nation that in a few years will become among the wealthiest on the planet."

"You flatter yourself, *señor*. AZTECHS technology has changed our lives—revolutionized them—and surely it is a wealthy corporation. But a wealthy nation...?" Ramiro snorted in amusement. "What of the Americans? What will they say about all this?"

"The Americans want stability," Zee said. "What causes them alarm is that the warfare among the Carbonells, the Guzmans, and Los de Abajo spills over into their territory. Dealing with one government, not three criminal organizations... this would seem to them an improvement. It would afford them more control of the flow of drugs across their borders."

Ruy made a disgusted noise, and Felix, with marginal animation, said, "Papa, we don't need this shit." Ramiro regarded Zee with a questioning stare.

"Señor Carbonell," Zee said. "You know as well as I the Americans do not want to *stop* the flow of drugs. They merely wish to have a voice in directing that flow. This may eventually reduce the amount of drugs that cross the border, but..."

Ramiro glowered.

"But," Zee went on, "the monies that will come to you as a result of this cooperation will compensate a hundred times over for any loss you experience."

"You're asking us to give up our strength," said Ramiro.

"That's the truth, man!" said Ruy, and Felix nodded.

"Not at all," Zee said. "I'm asking you to temper strength with a restraint born of wisdom. I'm asking to make your entrance on the world's stage."

Ramiro turned to Lupe, who was sitting on Zee's right, doing a whispered commentary, and said, "Quit running your mouth, bitch."

Lupe's voice faltered, then stopped altogether.

Perhaps expecting violence, perhaps merely wanting a wider angle, Frankie scooted off along the table.

"You are asking us to give up our strength," Ramiro said calmly to Zee. "Don't try to persuade me otherwise. A president is not a king. I am a king, and these"—he clapped Ruy and Felix on the shoulders—"these are my princes."

The three of them glared with uniform malevolence at Zee, like three wolves eyeing a dog with a broken hind leg. A silence ensued, one in which the humming of El Rayo seemed to grow louder. I had the idea things were falling apart. Zee didn't get it—he was droning on about the joys of nationhood, oblivious to the fact that the hostile energy in the room had intensified.

"You can earn a significant place in history..." Zee was saying.

"Fuck history," said Felix.

"... by founding a nation," Zee went on. "You can increase your wealth, your power, a hundredfold. And you can do all this simply by agreeing to do it."

"Explain," said Ramiro, still holding Zee with his gaze.

"The instant you agree to the contract, AZTECHS will pay a sum of money into bank accounts belonging to Los de Abajo and the Guzmans. Simultaneously they will cede their interests—in their entirety—to the Carbonells."

"You've talked with them?" Ramiro asked.

"Everything is arranged," said Zee.

"And they have agreed to walk away."

"They're being very well paid to walk away."

"*Coño!*" Felix kicked back his chair and came to his feet; he rested both hands on the table and cursed Zee. "*Pinche cabron!*"

The ragged line of bodyguards shifted in anticipation.

"Wait!" Ramiro gestured Felix to silence, but Felix said, "This is bullshit, Papa! This asshole makes deals behind our backs..."

Ramiro held up his index finger to Felix's face and said, "*Cuidado, chico! Cuidado!*" Felix made a frustrated noise and perched sideways on the edge of the table. Ramiro looked thoughtfully at Zee. "How will all this benefit AZTECHS?"

"Stability," said Zee. "An alliance with a nation state will further guarantee our security."

Ramiro leaned back, worrying his teeth with his tongue. "I assume you are speaking about the security of that thing in the desert?"

"The area we're concerned about is noted in the file we sent you."

Ramiro signaled one of his advisors. "*Dame el filo.*"

The advisor reached down to a briefcase on the floor next to his chair and withdrew a folder thick with papers. He slid it along the table to Ramiro, who began poring over it. Ruy leaned in close to have a look. Felix turned his back on the table, walked a few paces closer to the altar and stood staring into the shimmering red light of El Rayo. Lupe asked me questions with her eyes. I shook my head the slightest bit, telling her not to worry. None of my people appeared to have moved. All four men were focused on the Carbonells.

"Tell me about this," said Ramiro, and read from the file: "With the guidance of AZTECHS, the Carbonell Family will train affiliates to oversee the education of future leaders."

Zee began to explain the necessity of purging the Carbonell ranks of the irresponsible and the unstable by filtering them through the process of a sophisticated education designed to equip them to make their way through the straits of international diplomacy. My feeling was that he had Ramiro on the hook—the old guy clearly was entranced by the idea of becoming a world leader. Ruy, I thought, was on the fence. But Felix... Felix was not a guy with whom you wanted to push the notion of purging unstable elements. He put out a vibe like an old fluorescent tube on the fritz.

"What do you think, boys?" Ramiro glanced at Felix, then Ruy. "You want to be a country?" He threw back his head and laughed. "I wonder what we should call it?"

"Let's honor our grandfathers," said Ruy sullenly. "Let's call it Cocaine."

"Whatever you call it," Zee said, "it will be a most remarkable country. It will offer its citizens something no other country can, and this will enable to you hire top people in every field with the mere promise of citizenship. You'll be in a position to achieve economic dominance."

"What are you talking about?" asked Ramiro.

"Your country," said Zee, "will be able to offer its citizens the guarantee of an afterlife."

The three Carbonells met this statement with expressions of incredulity. Finally Ruy said, "You talkin' 'bout that software shit, man?"

"Not at all." Zee seemed to feel a great deal more confident than I did. "It has nothing to do with uploading the personality. I'm speaking of an actual physical place. A Valhalla for the Mexican people. A brave eternity."

Felix made an explosive sound and wheeled up from the table. He mounted the steps of the altar, seized a gold candelabra and hurled it into the fire of El Rayo. There was a faint crackling, a white flash.

"Come back and sit down!" Ramiro told him.

"*No mas, hombre!*" Felix descended the stairs. "I ain't listenin' to this shit." He slapped his chest twice above his heart. "I'm not no damn businessman! I'm a fuckin' *bandido*, man! *Yo soy un criminal!* This is not what the Carbonells do... this pussy bullshit!" He pointed at Zee and walked closer. "This little girl is jerkin' us off with one hand and tryin' to slice off our balls with the other! That what you wan', Papa? You wanna get fucked up the ass by a fuckin' machine? You wanna wear a suit and pretend you fuckin' Napoleon?"

Tears began coursing down Felix's face. The crazy fucker truly loved his family traditions. He was probably seeing himself in the AZTECHS-controlled future, a patriarch reminiscing about the good old days when he used to snuff ten, fifteen people before breakfast. What wasn't so amusing was Ramiro-and-Rudy's reaction. Instead of treating him like a mad dog, they were gazing at him warmly, proudly, as if his nutzoid act brought back comforting memories of Carbonell atrocities.

"Do it, Papa," said Felix.

He and Ramiro exchanged a meaningful look.

"Do what?" I said, bracing myself on the arms on my chair, ready to jump. "I don't know what you people got in mind, but I recommend caution."

"Felix is right, Papa," said Ruy. "We don't need this."

"I don't know what the problem is," Zee said. "But if you have any doubts, any questions, that's why I'm here."

"What's goin' on?" Lupe came to her feet. "Eddie?"

I hauled Zee out of his chair. "Gentlemen," I said to Ramiro and his brood. "We're leavin'."

Zee shook me off—he was stronger than he looked. "We should all take a moment to reflect," he said, addressing Ramiro. "There is a great deal..." He broke it off and stared at the shimmering surface of El Rayo as if noticing it for the first time. "Run!" he said.

I heard a rumbling, felt the floor shake. Just like in Cruzados, the wall of red fire behind the altar flickered and shut down. I'm not sure how many gunmen were standing on the other side. Enough to make a soccer team. They opened up as I shoved Zee and Lupe toward the door. On my left, Fetisov went down without a cry, and I couldn't understand why we weren't all dead. Then I realized the gunmen must be targeting Sammy, saving the rest of us for hostages, for ransom.. They moved into the church, firing century-old handguns unaffected by the suppressor field. The gunfire reverberated, building to a roar, and I lost track of things, focused on getting Lupe and Zee clear. As we passed through the door, Zee took a hit in the back. He stumbled, but kept going. A red splotch like one of those fancy badges attached to Second Prize ribbons bloomed beneath his right shoulder blade. Childers stood on the steps firing from his hip, spraying the area with micro-grenades from his AR-20, then turning to fire into the church. The courtyard was littered with bodies, flames licking up from their clothing. Dennard threw open the rear door of the personnel carrier, urged us inside. Lupe scrambled into the carrier. Dennard dragged Zee in after her. I opened the passenger-side door, intending to slide behind the wheel, but Childers climbed in the driver's side and kicked over the engine. Bullets plinked off the armored skin. Then we lurched forward, speeding toward the gate. Through the slit windows front and side, I saw Carbonell soldiers scattering. There was a screech of bursting metal as we blew out the gate and barreled off into the wasteland of hovels that separated Barrio Ningun from the cathedral.

Childers made a beeline for the desert, not trying to avoid the flimsy habitations in our path, but cutting a swath through them instead. It was like being inside a whirlwind. Shards of plywood, pots and pans, small appliances, toys, clothing, flapping sheets of cardboard, a woman with a terrified face, all these things and more were flipped up into the air by the passage of the carrier—a surreal form of weather sleeting past the windows, flaring in the headlights. Other lives went down beneath us, discernable as bumps. I tried to yank Childers' arm from the wheel, but he backhanded me. My head cracked against the door. As I struggled to clear my head, I had a glimpse of an intense white flash. A shockwave sent the carrier swerving, veering almost sideways, and I heard a terrible sound. Like something bigger than the world had taken a swallow down into its void of a belly. Then I was slammed forward into the dash. I righted myself and Childers winked at me. "I left Ramiro a little present in the courtyard," he said.

Still dazed, I was unable to speak.

"Just a pocket nuke." Childers spun the wheel and something bulky flattened beneath our tires. "Clean and mean. Two-hundred-yard radius on the kill zone. We're fine."

I managed to sit upright. "You know how many people you just killed?"

"Thousand... fifteen hundred tops. I thought it might be a good idea to deal with your Carbonell problem. You've got nothing to worry about on that account now."

I peered through the front slit, freckled with the blood of someone we had slaughtered. We had cleared the edge of the barrio and were gliding across the hardpan, heading for deep desert.

"You look like someone stole your bunny rabbit," Childers said.

I made another try for the wheel. Childers pushed me away.

"Take a breath," he said. "They were the bad guys. We should have done it years ago. What's more, you're a hero now. Los de Abajo and the Guzmans, they'll bless your name."

"We'?" I said. "Who's 'we'?"

Childers hesitated. "Us," he said finally, and then he spelled it: "Yoo. Ess."

It was obvious that Childers considered himself a humorist. I wasn't certain if he was fucking with me. He was beginning to seem very un-Sammylike. It wasn't so much the comedy as the fact he was acting from forethought—not one of Sammy's strengths.

"Pull over," I said.

Childers gave no sign of compliance.

I drew my gun. "I said pull over, man."

"Sure," said Childers. "Whatever you say, boss."

Before I could react, he snatched the gun from my hand, reversed it and fitted the muzzle to my forehead. The circle of skin it covered went numb.

"Any other orders?" Childers asked. "No? Okay. Then why don't you check on the client?" He nudged me with the gun.

I lifted the intercom speaker from a clip under the dash, thumbed the talk button. "What's happenin' back there?"

Dennard answered, his voice crackling. I thought I heard Lupe in the background. It sounded as if she was doing commentary. "Man's alive, but he's shaky," Dennard said. "He wants to go into the desert."

"Ask him about Morely." Childers pocketed the gun.

I thumbed the button again. "Is Morely with you?"

"He sings in my anger," Dennard said.

"Say again."

Dennard did not reply.

"Guess I'll take that as a negative." I switched off the intercom and sat staring glumly at the pale fissured ground flowing beneath our lights.

"I understand why you're depressed," said Childers blithely. "I mean you really let the team down, Eddie. You should have known Ramiro would have a hole card. Figuring the angles was your job. You were lucky to have me along."

I ignored this, even though it was the truth. "Where'd you get the nuke?"

"Family heirloom."

"Cut the stand-up," I said. "What the fuck is goin' on?"

He spared me a quick look. "You mean ultimately? Or this now?"

"Ultimately will do," I said.

That tickled Childers. He laughed, spanked the steering wheel. "I love a scapegoat with a sense of humor."

"Scapegoat?"

"You're the one in charge. You're responsible for whatever goes down. Only reason you're still alive is so you can take the hit. If you get out of line, I have no compunction against killing your girlfriend. Do you understand?"

"Yeah."

"But I can see you're dying to know," Childers said. "So I'll tell you what's up. I'm going after Montezuma."

"The AI?"

"I know." Childers waggled a hand as if to deflect my smile. "You're thinking what chance does one man have against an AI? No chance at all, right? But you see, Eddie, I am not a natural man." He peeled off his neck patch, tossed it. "The patch is just a boost. I've got more technology in me than all the monkeys in the



tree. Montezuma is going to look straight through me. I'm not going to ring one of his bells." His eyes found me again. "What do you care? It's not business, right?"

I shrugged. "Whatever."

"Exactly!" said Childers. "Excellent attitude, Eddie. It'll take you far. Maybe even as far as the good ol' U.S. of A. Would you like that? Would you like it if you and your Pops regained your citizenship? It can be arranged. Just be a helpful lad and do what I tell you."

If Childers thought he could define me as a scapegoat one minute and the next have me buy into a promise of rewards, his technology needed an adjustment. That kind of arrogance was very Sammylike. I decided he must be some sort of mutant Sammy with some new wrinkles designed for this particular operation. And if that's all he was, he had his weak spots.

"Un-unh!" said Childers in a cautionary tone. "Don't you start thinking on me, Eddie. Thinking's dangerous, and we've already seen you're not very good at it."

j

We drove out beyond the stone head, traveling south and west, following the cuts between low hills. Dawn turned to daylight, and I began to see riders on the hillcrests. Never more than three or four at a time. They kept their distance and I could make out nothing about them. Silhouettes against a high blue sky. Then shortly before ten o'clock the carrier's engine died and we rolled to a halt in a wide arroyo bordered by banks of yellow rock. There was no gas problem, nothing mechanically wrong. It simply quit. Childers was unconcerned.

"It was only a matter of time before Montezuma stopped us," he said. "We're inside his first line of defense." He opened his door. "See those patches of glittering sand? There." He pointed to a shoal-shaped patch curving out from a rock face that broke from a hillside. "That's all machines. Trillions of 'em. You wouldn't want to take a walk through it. Likely some of the machines filtered up into the engine and shut us down."

"How you know that?" I asked.

"We know everything."

" 'Us,' you mean."

Childers smiled. "Whatever."

We sheltered beneath the overhang of the rock face until late afternoon. Dennard spent the entire time sitting cross-legged, tranced out. With the delicate tattoos on his lips and eyelids, cranes and pharaonic men and women with their arms held in positions of dance, he resembled a serene monster in an Egyptian nightmare. Childers, manly Sammy that he was, declined to take advantage of the shade and passed the hours perched on a chunk of dark rock that thrust up from the sand about fifty feet away, staring out at the desert. Now and again his hand would stray to his pack, as if making sure it was still resting beside his knee. I imagined it contained a program that would shut down but not destroy the AI—if "Us" wanted to kill it, they would have simply nuked the area. Lupe cried and complained for the first hour, then fell asleep. Frankie scuttled about shooting this and that. I tried to sleep, but kept recalling our violent ride through the shanties and wondering how my business would be affected by people believing that I'd nuked the Carbonells and wondering also how the hell I was going to get Lupe and me clear of whatever was about to happen.

Zee lay on a collapsible stretcher that was part of the carrier's medical supplies, fading in and out of consciousness. At one point he beckoned to me, and I kneeled beside him. His skin was acquiring a pastiness, but despite loss of blood and pain, he maintained his calm.

"Señor Poe," he said in a creaky whisper. "Listen to me. This man..." He nodded toward Childers. "You must"—he coughed, closed his eyes—"you must prevent him from accomplishing his mission."

I gave this a moment's consideration. "How you know what's he up to?"

Zee blinked up at me, shaping words with his mouth but making no sound.

"Did Dennard tell you?" I asked. "Is he in on it?"

Very weakly, he said, "What is known to my father, I also know."

"Your father?"

"Please, Señor Poe. Listen." Zee caught at my arm. "If you do not stop him, eternity will be lost."

"Eternity," I said. "Oh... yeah. We can't have that."

Then—thinking that if Zee knew what "his father" knew, I might be able get a line on Childers—I said, "He says the AI can't see him. What's that all about?"

"He is not here. He..." He broke off and concentrated on staying alive.

"You're in contact with the AI, right?" I said. "Can't you direct it to Childers?"

"It is... it's as if my Father does not believe he exists." He faded a little, then after about half a minute he went on: "If you are injured, go to one of the organic distribution points. The gates to eternity are all around you."

I'd been feeling scattered before speaking to Zee—this talk of organic distribution points wasn't helping me hold it together.

"So these points, they got a little marker says what they are?" I asked. "'Cause I don't got a clue what the fuck you talkin' about."

Lupe crawled up beside me, leaned in over my shoulder. "Is he okay?" Somewhere along the line she had freshened her make-up and was ready for the camera. The viewing audience would appreciate a nice death scene.

Zee appeared to make a slight gain; a degree of animation had been restored to his face. "What do you know of God?"

I wasn't sure which of us he was addressing, but Lupe jumped right in. "Sundays when I was a little girl," she said, gazing soulfully at Frankie, who had taken a position facing her on the opposite side of the stretcher, "my Mami would set out a white lace dress with the ruffled skirt, and..."

She began to relate her churchical experiences, how she flirted with the little boys, especially that cute Pedro Garza, and everyone marveled over how beautiful she looked. It was a total fantasy. Lupe had been brought up in Santa Barbara. Her father was a successful lawyer who spent his Sundays on the golf course, and her mother's hangover rarely permitted her to rise before six in the evening. As far as I knew she had never called her mother "Mami." Slut, bitch, and "that fuckin' old hag..." were the pet names she usually applied. I was starting to wonder if shock had knocked her brain off-line, and she had retreated into her on-air personality.

"Man didn't ask what you wore to church," I said. "What you wore to church and who you wanted to screw when you were twelve don't have a hell of a lot to do with God."

Lupe frowned at me, and I figured we were about to have one of our famous, ratings-boosting fights, but Zee, who was clearly tuned to another channel, interrupted by saying, "You once asked me who I was before I came to the desert. I am now who I was then... but made clean. Perfected."

I was still pissed at Lupe, and my impulse was to tell Zee to save his bullshit for St. Peter or whoever waited beyond the organic distribution points. But the guy was dying. You had to cut him some slack.

"As will you be," he went on. "Both of you."

I could think of worse fates than spouting platitudes and smiling in everybody's face, but not many. Zee's eyes closed, and I thought he had canceled his reservation, but he heaved a sigh and focused on my face.

"Your purpose is more worldly than mine," he said. "But it is no less God's purpose."

"What do you mean by God?" I asked, trying to make the question seem an inquiry and not a bullshit challenge.

Zee's happyface smile widened. "Look around you. You are with Him now."

I saw sand and sage and yellow rock. I saw an iguana scuttling across a patch of ocher sand. God. Why not? I thought. An AI who believed it was God, or God manifest in an AI. Not much difference there.

Lupe put on her professional anchor voice. "Are you suggesting, Zee, that the AI known as Montezuma is, in fact, the entity we think of as *El Gran Señor*?"

"Every age has its avatar," Zee said weakly. "Believe what you will now. Faith is your destiny."

She asked more questions, but Zee said he needed to rest. She gazed at me with wounded devotion, retreating into the persona of the Border Rose. "Eddie! You were mean to me."

I told her to go fuck herself and eased myself down into a more comfortable position. That's when, looking past her shoulder, I spotted the rider.

It was watching us from about twenty yards away, about fifteen feet from the rock where Childers was stationed. At that distance I should have been able to make out considerable detail, but as far as I could tell, there was no detail to see. It looked to be the living shadow of a horse and rider. The human form flowed out of the horse's back. Its movements—the uneasy shifting of the horse's feet, the rider's head and torso turning—made me think of animation. Too fluid to be alive. It stepped closer, halving the distance between us, stirring up puffs of dust. Dennard eased his rifle up onto his knees. Childers might have been wedded to his rock the same way the rider was joined to his mount.

Lupe clutched at my shoulder. I felt I was looking deep inside the rider, that its blackness had infinite depth. My hand went to my gun; then I recalled Childers had taken it. The rider was half-again normal size, conveying an impression of enormous menace and power. Ebony; anthracite; pitch; obsidian; there was no word dark enough to describe its blackness. It sat unmoving for a dozen heartbeats, then wheeled about with uncanny suppleness and trotted soundlessly off along the arroyo. I glanced down at Zee. No surprise there.

He was smiling.

j

We walked south into the blue-dark night toward a point known only to Childers. He and Dennard carried Zee's stretcher. A half-moon was sailing high, and I could see for miles in every direction. The arroyo had given way to rolling hills and we kept to the ridgetops in order to avoid the glittering patches of sand, which had grown more numerous, showing like sprays of diamond on the valley floors, emerging from shadow, bordered by slate-blue slices of ordinary sand. Riders tracked us from adjoining hilltops. There were more of them now. I saw as many as thirty at one time. They would parallel our course for a while, then vanish, only to reappear farther along. Fear pulled at me, but Lupe was so upset, I forced myself to maintain so as to reassure her. Childers seemed unaffected, but as we moved deeper into the AI's turf, Dennard began to come apart. He took to mumbling what sounded like prayerful incantations and to grunt. The grunts were accompanied by twitches that acted to shift the weight of the stretcher, and this came to annoy Childers. At length he told Dennard to set the stretcher down and got in his face.

"Straighten up, god damn it!" he said. "I don't need you going primitive!"

Dennard gave him a two-handed push and dropped into a fighting stance.

Childers let out a dry laugh. "You're in my world, brother. Don't be an asshole."

Dennard shed his rifle and pack, and did an all-over flex. He shifted into a deep crouch, his fingertips grazing the sand. "Come get it," he said. "I ain't followin' no more. I saw my face on that thing in the arroyo."

"Wha-at?" Childers affected a tone of pity such as you might use with a child. "And now you're scared?"

"I ain't scared of you, that's for sure." Dennard flowed into yet another stance, this slightly more upright, with his back straight and right leg forward. "But I'm no damn fool. I know what's comin'."

"You just think you know." Childers shrugged off his rifle and pack. "Christ Jesus! A fucking hallucination, and you go to pieces. In Guatemala I saw beasts made of human shit feeding on the dead. All it did was make me strong. I saw the sun pierced by arrows—I showered in its blood."

"You ain't seen jack," Dennard said. "I was in Zacapas when the black church burned and the demons flew. A hundred brothers saw the same, and they went zero levels, every damn one 'cept me."

They began trading brags, an old pitfighting ritual. I had no thought to get between them. Sammy on Sammy suited me fine. With any luck, they'd scrag each other. Lupe clung to me. Frankie secured a good position from which to shoot the fight. Our ratings were probably off the charts.

The ridgetop we were walking was narrow, with a thirty-foot slope, and as the two men grappled, I realized that one or both would probably wind up sliding down the slope, landing among the glittery patches of sand curving everywhere below, standing forth against the darker sand like rhinestone scalloping. For what seemed a long while, neither man earned an advantage, fighting almost silently, with just the sound of their labored breathing audible; but at last Dennard slipped beneath Childer's left arm, got behind him, and applied a chokehold that would have crushed an ordinary throat in seconds. Childers tried to bite Dennard's forearm, failed, gnashed his teeth. His face darkened, and he clawed at Dennard's eyes. I was pulling for Dennard. His attitude toward the mission was more-or-less my own, and I started thinking how to deal with him once Childers was dead. But then Childers' neck and torso expanded, as if his bones were flexible like a python's ribs, and this loosened Dennard's grip. He spun inside the grip and head-butted Dennard, knocking him to his knees; then he seized the front of Dennard's jacket and hammered him with two chopping right hands. I couldn't believe Dennard was still conscious. Blood and slobber spilled from his mouth. His eyes rolled. But when Childers threw a third right, he ducked it and locked his arms about Childers' waist, lifting him into a shoulder carry. I saw him tense, adjusting the hold, preparing to throw Childers off the ridgetop—but he stepped back, lost his footing, and Childers slipped from his shoulder. Overbalanced, Dennard snatched at the air, toppled and went rolling down the slope, coming to rest directly below. As he lay spread-eagled, dazed, the glittering curves that mapped the desert floor began to flow, spreading in a film to cover a considerable section of the desert around him—watching those bright shapes in motion transformed my anxiety to full-blown fear. The fall had busted Dennard up—it took him twenty, thirty seconds to get to his feet, but by then it was too late. He was standing in a slate-blue circle in the midst of a diamond pond. To escape he would have to walk across a molecule-thin carpet of machines. He looked bad. One arm appeared to be broken, and blood was coming from his mouth. He turned within his confining circle, searching for an escape route. A rider was approaching from the west, coming at an easy trot, looking less like something alive than a horse-and-rider shaped hole in a photomural that was sliding past so as to simulate movement. Lupe began to recite a Hail Mary.

"This is your moment, brother!" Childers said. "Live in it."

The rider stopped ten, twelve feet away from Dennard. They seemed to be regarding one another, but I

noticed that Dennard's eyes were closed. It was a compelling tableau. The bleeding warrior with his Egyptian tattoos, Death black and empty on its eyeless stallion, and the glittering sand enclosing that blue target circle. I could hear wind troubling the sage, Lupe's whispered prayer, my own hushed breath. Then Dennard let out a scream, as enraged and shrill as a mother eagle sighting a violated nest, and launched himself at Death, an assault knife in his hand. The impact should have driven the rider backward, but it didn't even tremble. It looked as if Dennard was half-sunk in a tarpit, his back and portions of his legs and arms emerging from an area spanning from the rider's chest to the horse's belly. Gradually he sank deeper, until his camo-draped butt was the only thing visible. The absurdity of the sight somehow made it more horrifying. Lupe buried her face in my shoulder. Whether she felt any compassion for Dennard, or if she was merely appalled by the thought that his fate might soon be hers, I had no clue.

"Bet that hurt," Childers said with satisfaction once Dennard had vanished completely.

I wasn't so sure. Dennard had gone still at the instant of impact. The contact might have killed him outright, but if he had been alive, he had not shown the least sign of resistance.

Childers clapped me on the shoulder. "Break's over, Eddie." He gestured at Zee on his stretcher. "Grab an end."

"You crazy? I wouldn't make it a mile carryin' him."

"Amazing what a man can do when he's desperate." Childers fished in his trouser pocket, pulled out something shiny. "But I can help you out."

"Fuck is that?"

He showed me the shiny thing—a syrette. "Sammy."

"Right," I said. "I'm gonna join the freak brigade. Not a chance."

"I'm afraid I'm going to have to insist."

I backed farther away. "Zee's almost dead. What you need him for, anyway?"

"You never know—he might come in handy."

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Frankie shooting me, and I heard Lupe giving a commentary. She was standing behind me, doing her Border Rose on-the-spot-with-this-latest-development thing.

"Bitch!" I started toward her and she darted away.

"Eddie," said Childers reprovingly. "You don't get mad at a snake for hissing."

I ignored him. "Lupe..."

"What am I s'posed to do?" she said tearfully. "I can't do nothin'."

I couldn't tell what was going on with her. Maybe she couldn't tell, either. The spark of emotion that had brought us together was flaring its last beneath the pleats and ruffles of our pretend-lover bullshit. Standing in her disheveled silk blouse, her white slacks, with her hair lifting in the desert wind, she was beautiful and false, a perfect illusion that I had succumbed to. The extent to which I had chumped myself made me feel desolate and uncaring. Why should I worry about her... about anything? I was walking toward death with Sammy. I might as well join him in insanity.

"I'm not asking for volunteers." Childers came forward, doing his Mister Menace scowl, holding up the syrette.

I looked at Lupe for what I figured would be the last time through sane eyes. "Hit me," I said.

j

Childers kneeled beside me as I jabbed the syrette into my arm and stared into my face. "The first time," he said. "It's a beautiful thing."

What he saw, I have no idea. What I saw was everything brand new. Take sand, for instance. It previously had seemed unvarying, uninteresting, but now it had been transformed into a tactical topography, areas of minimal exposure and good footing and so forth. People? I glanced at Lupe and instantly dismissed her as a threat—her face was a mask of weakness and fear. But Zee, though dying, was possessed of a supreme confidence that put me on the alert. I gauged everything in terms of its potential danger to me. Despite what had happened to Dennard, those things I saw that were truly dangerous—black riders, living sand—only supplied my amplified senses with fresh reasons for arrogance. My skin was hot, my heart rate accelerated, yet I felt indestructible. All my senses had been drastically enhanced. Sammy could see a sand-colored spider sitting on rock of the same color thirty feet away, a creature that would have been invisible to that cakeboy Eddie Poe had he been standing next to it. The fragments of Sammy philosophy I'd heard over the years suddenly seemed deep and seasoned ideas, and not the globs of reconstituted Bushido they had once seemed. Whereas before Childers had been somehow pitiable in his strength, when I looked at him now I saw an elder brother who was more adept and powerful than I, not of my blood but a pure relation, one who knew what I knew, who drank from the same reservoir of anger that I drank from, who heard, as did I, the

singing of his blood, the whine of the circulatory system orchestrated into a music of red wires. In the back of my mind a voice was squealing that I had lost it, but after a minute or so I didn't hear it anymore.

"How's it feel to be human, Eddie?" Childers grinned, and I could not help grinning in return. "The stuff they used to hand out to our brothers back when the war started," he went on, "it was hardly more than juiced-up amphetamines. But this" – he held up a pack of syrettes, then tossed it to me – "this is the shit. Gets you there quick and keeps you there." His grin broadened. "You're going to love it."

I had to admit the drug was a perfect complement to our moonlit walk. Carrying Zee proved a snap. I was tireless so long as I shot up every couple of hours. Childers kept up a stream of chatter as we went, some of it designed as taunts, reminding me that I was a subordinate, an inferior, and some intended to help me adapt to the wonderful world of Sammy. Tips on how to focus, how to interpret certain sensory information that I'd previously been unable to perceive. I found I was able to compartmentalize his bullshit, store what was helpful, and at the same time to generate and consider my own thoughts, which were conflicted. I knew I was no more than a tool to Childers, and I understood this was his right—he was my commander by virtue of strength and experience, and I was part of a campaign, thus expendable. But despite buying this to a degree, I wanted to stay alive, and toward that end I tried to come up with a plan for killing him. (Perhaps this dichotomy was in part responsible for the middling success Sammy was having in a war against an outgunned, outmanned populace to the south.) However, I had no luck in developing a plan. I recognized that Childers—accustomed to derangement—could both outfight and outthink me in this condition. All I could do was hope for a circumstance to arise in which he was placed at a disadvantage. It would have to be a hell of a disadvantage if I was to stand a chance. Of course it was possible that the AI would kill him, but Montezuma's plan was even less in evidence than my own.

At dawn we stopped to rest in the shade of an enormous rock that stood by itself on a stretch of hardpan. Shaped like a Go counter, flat on top and bottom, with a smooth bulge all the way around its sides. It did not appear to be a natural formation, but Childers displayed no hesitancy in approaching it, and I deferred to his judgment. Frankie scurried up the side of the rock and disappeared. Lupe collapsed beneath the overhang. We laid Zee beside her. I sat down a few feet away, plucked a syrette from the pack and gave myself a boost. Childers chuckled. I imagined he was still wrapped in nostalgia, hearkening back to the infant stages of his own addiction. When I was done fixing, he said, "All right, people. I'm going to do a little recon, scope things out. I want you to stay right here. You move, and I will know about it. We clear?" Then he strolled off out of sight around the rock.

The sky above had gone the blue of old washed-out jeans, and the hardpan had turned blood red, and the sun, partway up, was already distorted by heat haze, a rippling crimson bubble welling from the horizon, heralded by tiers of low cloud stained mauve, peach, and burnt orange. It—the entire panorama—was like a design on a flag, the one flying inside me, its colors and shapes knitted from the new feelings that were consuming the corpse of my former personality cell by cell, eliminating all but the essence of the human, the basic aggression and will to live that, in everyone but Sammy, had been drowned in softness. It was the emblem of a world in which I was the only thing that mattered. I cared nothing for anyone except for those who might help keep me alive—the trouble was, of the three people with me, I couldn't decide if any of them fit that category. I was calm. Anger was great in me, but I had no need for anger, and I was content to wait for an opportunity use it. To watch the shadowy hills in the west acquire detail and color, and the sky lighten to a frail blue. To feel a hot wind rise in the east an instant before a speckled lizard resting on the hardpan lifted its head in response to that same stirring.

We had been resting for about a half-hour when Zee began to talk. Nonsense at first. A few muttered phrases, and he lapsed. Then he started up again with a bit more coherence: "I don't... understand..." He licked his lips, his eyes fluttered open, and he saw me. "The city," he said, and one of those beatific smiles washed some of the weakness from his face. "He has built you a city. And you will build him one."

Lupe was lying on her side, watching him not with journalistic intent, but with the mild curiosity of the exhausted.

"You make perfect mourners," Zee said. "Neither one of you have the capacity to mourn, and truly, there is nothing to mourn." I thought he was about to laugh, but he choked instead.

I had an Eddie Poe thought behind a Sammy-type perception—that Zee had told us the truth, and he was the same man he had always been. As the layers of life were peeled away, I could see he was the same all the way through and that he had been who he was for a very long time. That was what made him dangerous.

A tiny bird winged low overhead, its wings whirring. I saw its throat pulse as it passed, and its black eye glisten.

Zee faded out again, and Lupe once more closed her eyes. A vulture began circling a spot out beyond the edge of the hardpan, one marked by several organ-pipe cacti standing in partial silhouette against the

lightening sky. Being Sammy was not without its aesthetic side. I was discovering that I had an appreciation for the desolate, the stark. This may have had something to do with the fact that such landscapes offered relatively unimpeded fields of fire, but I took immense pleasure in the desert view nonetheless—it resonated with my own bleakness of purpose.

Childers had said that we would rest for an hour, but an hour went by and he did not return. My buzz was starting to mellow, so I did another syrette and felt that sweet heart-slammng rush heat my blood, boil away superfluous brain cells. I watched the world reorder into a map of strategic points and values. I heard Zee mumbling, but I was too exultant to care. Eventually I turned to him. His cheeks were sunken, gray. Dark crescents beneath his eyes, but the eyes remained vital, black lakes in a desert of flesh.

"So you are a soldier now," he said in a cracked voice.

This didn't seem to require a response.

Frankie, who had likely registered the sound of human speech, came scuttling down from whatever he had been doing atop the rock and pointed his lens at Zee.

"You will be a fine soldier," Zee said. "But whose soldier will you be?"

Wearily, Lupe hauled herself up to a sitting position. She looked at me, then averted her eyes. She leaned close to Zee and said, "Last night when the rider came to Dennard—I thought you said your Father couldn't see us."

Very weakly, a whisper, he said, "They are drawn to death."

Lupe leaned closer, as if to kiss him. "They're independent of the AI... your Father?"

"Let him die," I said. Death was something I was coming to respect in that it offered—as it had to Dennard—new possibilities for triumph.

A creaky syllable escaped Zee's lips. It sounded like "gay." His mouth remained open. So did his eyes.

Lupe felt for a pulse under his jaw and jerked her hand away. "Eddie," she said, and when I remained silent, she shouted, "Goddamn it, Eddie! Are you in there?"

"What?" I said. I think the shout engaged me on some military level, that I associated shouts with battle mode.

"You got to do somethin', man!" she said. "That *puto* Childers is gon' kill our ass. You got to help me, Eddie!"

Her use of the imperative, too, engaged me. She seemed to be in command. "What do you suggest I do?"

"Fuck, I don't know!" She pushed herself away from Zee's body. "The riders. Maybe we can use the riders."

I waited.

"If they're independent of Montezuma," she said, "maybe we can get 'em to come help us."

"How?"

"That shit you shootin' make you stupid? Think of somethin'!"

A glistening in Zee's left eye caught my attention. As I watched, it became a glitter. Lupe saw it and backed farther away. Within a few seconds, grains of glittering sand began to pour from the eye and down Zee's cheek, forming into a little heap beside him, about the size of an anthill.

Lupe crossed herself.

Once the last grains had issued from the eye, the glittering pile started to flow away from the rock, slowly at first, but gathering speed, until it seemed to zip off toward the south like a little silver snake and was gone. During most of the process I never twitched. No pile of sand was going to kick Sammy's ass—I intended to outface whatever danger it presented. But just before the silver snake picked up speed, acting on impulse, I sliced down with the edge of my left hand, chopping off its tail. I would like to believe the Eddie Poe component of my personality penetrated to the heart of the situation and caused me to act; but in truth I think it was a macho Sammy move that proved to be a brilliant stupidity. The sand grains pushed delicately against my hand, filmed over the palm, and then became inert.

"Scoop 'em up!" Lupe told me, staring at the inch of sand trapped against my hand.

I was not inclined to obey her.

"Dumbass... !" She came to crouch beside me, and using the blade of a penknife she produced from her hip pocket, she carefully lifted them and deposited them on a pocket handkerchief made of the same red silky material as her blouse. Then she knotted the handkerchief and held it out to me. "Take it!" she said.

"What for?" I said.

"Eddie." She pushed her face into mine. "If your pale *gringo* ass is listenin', try and hear what I'm tellin' you, okay? In the handkerchief there's about a million little machines. I don't know why the hell they didn't swarm all over you. Maybe 'cause they come out of Zee, maybe they know you or somethin'. But if you throw 'em on Childers, maybe it'll fuck him up. Now take the goddamn handkerchief!"

I took it and stuffed it into my shirt pocket.

"You not gon' say nothin'?" Lupe jabbed two fingers at my chest. "You jus' gonna sit there?"

I made no reply, busy examining the potentials of the situation. The idea of going up against Childers with a pocket hanky containing a gram of machine dust did not strike me as wise.

Lupe tried to slap me, but I caught her wrist, squeezed until she cried out. I released her and she pushed herself to a safe distance. A tear held at the corner of her eye, flashing like a live crystal, then slid down her cheek.

"Please, Eddie! Please listen to me."

Her weepy tone did not move me, but then she grew angry again, and though her voice was still freighted with a weaker emotion, I was swayed to listen.

"Goddamn you!" she shouted. "We gotta kill this son-of-a-bitch, Eddie! Y'gotta help me!" She got to her knees, cradling her sore wrist. "You wan' me to tell you I love you? That do it for ya? I don't wanna deal with it, I don't fuckin' need it! But it's true—I love you! I do! Y'hear that, man? I fuckin' love you, okay?"

Beneath the layers of falsity that muffled Lupe's soul was something I had never seen before, a palpable force made visible—it seemed—by her admission of love. Was it love I saw? I don't know. It could have been another of Lupe's games, the operation of some primal falsity. But whatever it was, it was very strong, and its strength along with Lupe's anger not only impressed itself on Sammy, it spoke to the flickering remnant of Eddie Poe and joined those two parts of me in a unity of purpose. Lupe seemed to be changing, acquiring the potency of an emblem, an icon, a soldier's reason for sacrifice. Her eyes were as depthless a medium as the black stuff of the riders. Her cheeks taut with strain, her red lips parted. All her weakness and lying substance appeared to be dissolving away like a skin being shed, revealing a new creature beneath. What I felt for her, Eddie Poe's infantile love and Sammy's chemically sculpted, perverted samurai honor, combined to form a dutiful passion. If Zee had been around, I could have told him whose soldier I was now.

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As we walked from afternoon into evening Childers' mood was buoyant—Zee's death had been a sort of "Oh, well" event for him—and he told us stories about Guatemala. How his platoon had joined up with a larger force of pro-government Guatemalan troops to overrun a rebel village, killing everyone. After the victory they had found a huge vat of homemade beer—the marines squabbled with the Guatemalans over possession of the beer, and eventually they slaughtered them as well. He told us how Sammy had watched the souls of the dead rise from the battlefield and how he had seen strange anthropomorphic creatures in the jungle invisible to normal eyes. They were slender, very fast, their skins imbued with a chameleon-like quality that allowed them to blend in against the backdrop of bark and foliage. A member of his platoon had killed one, but they had been unable to preserve it. Insects had eaten everything but the bones. Childers had kept a fragment of bone and when he had it analyzed, it proved to be the relic of a human child.

"The citizens might say we shot us a regular kid," Childers said. "What do they know? You spend time in Guatemala, you come to learn that strange is normal in a place like that. The idea that kids could go mutant living in a jungle, it fits in with all the rest."

Frankie scooted ahead, shooting him as he talked, and Childers struck a pose, flexing his biceps.

"One time," said Childers, "we took some R&R in San Francisco de Juticlan, this garbage heap of a town on the Rio Dulce, right on the edge of the jungle. The town had grown out over the river. All these shanties set on stilts, connected by walkways. Most of the people living there were hookers. Pimps, bartenders, gamblers, and hookers—that's all there were. We'd been fighting Angolans the last couple of weeks. Tough bastards. They weren't great soldiers, but they were great killers, and we needed a party. We took over this mega-shanty out from the shore. Two stories, with dozens of interconnected rooms. We lit the place up. Threw all the local tough guys in the river and got working with the women. So anyway, I'm in a room with my *señorita*—the bitch couldn't have been more than fifteen, but she was an animal! And I heard Jago yell. Jago Wharton. One of my buddies. About six, seven of us found his room and busted in. He was lying on the bed, looking up into a corner of the ceiling and screaming. Terrified. We looked up to what he saw, and Christ! His whore was hanging upside down from the tin roof. Like a goddamn spider. She had black marks on her face—like her skin was splitting open and something was forcing its way out. Somebody shot her, and we pulled Jago together. I don't know what the hell the hooker was. Some kind of witch, maybe. We figured there must be more around, so we gathered up the rest of the hookers and examined them. Found four others just like the first. We were going to shoot them, but Jago"—Childers laughed—"he goes, 'No, man! Don't kill 'em!' And he starts telling us what an amazing ride the first one was giving him before she went into spider mode. It was unreal, he said. So we took turns screwing the other four. We watched them close so they

couldn't pull any of their spider shit, and Jago was right. The bitches must have been triple-jointed. You could bend them any fucking way." He laughed again—airily, lightly. "Almost any fucking way."

I tried to marry the things I had begun to see—halos around objects, phantom gassy shapes in mid-air, and so forth—to Childers' stories. Would these mild hallucinations evolve into wild distortions of reality? Would I start seeing what Childers wanted me to see? It was hard to believe that he had actually seen the things he said he had, and I suspected that Sammy living at close quarters and under stress might come to see whatever they wanted to see. Such a quality would make the job easier on the conscience, but it didn't exactly prepare you for a return to civilian life. Then maybe there was something to the stories, maybe the world was many worlds that all interfaced in places such as Guatemala, and only Sammy knew their secrets.

I had no opportunity that night to introduce the dust in Lupe's handkerchief into Childers' bloodstream, and I'm not sure I would have taken the opportunity if one had presented itself—it might have been our only chance, but it was too much of a long shot, and I preferred to wait for a significant opening. Soon Childers either ran out of stories or of the urge to tell them, and we went in silence across the moonlit sand. Whenever we stopped to rest, he would sit far away from us or go out of sight completely. During these breaks Lupe made crazy suggestions about what we should do and urged me to come up with my own, but I ignored her and concentrated on focusing myself. I couldn't imagine a scenario that did not involve a physical confrontation with Childers, and I wanted to be ready.

Sunrise brought us to the top of ridge overlooking a lake of glittering machines with a village of adobe huts on the far shore, a few miles distant. The eastern sky was striped with bands of glowing agate, and the crimson sun was warped by heat haze into a convoluted figure, an Aztec Rose painting the hillsides and silhouetting the saguaro against a pale indigo sky. Childers stared at the village through binoculars for a long time, then handed the binoculars to me. There were thirty-one of the huts. Their shapes were strangely modern, as if they were hotel bungalows designed to reflect a native motif. People moved through the dusty streets. Indians. Most wearing white robes. I spotted a man on horseback. The horse was fashioned of a gray metal that looked to have the flexibility of flesh. Its eyes were raised obsidian ovals and it had obsidian decorations on its face and flanks. The man was holding a long-bladed spear in his right hand; from his left dangled the body of a whiplike black animal with a flat head that appeared vaguely feline. The scene had an atmosphere of ordinary process, but its details were almost entirely exotic, and that dissonance made me uneasy.

"This is it," Childers said, taking back the binoculars.

Lupe, who had sunk to her knees, said, "The AI?"

Childers paid her no mind. "All right," he said to me. "I want you to listen."

My sergeant, my enemy. As he spoke I studied the coarse map of his features, trying to read its micro-expressions, and I concluded that for all his bravado, Childers was afraid.

"We're going in," he said. "Give me any trouble, I'll kill you both. Bang! Just like that. No hesitation. Hear what I'm saying?"

I nodded.

He ported his rifle and gave me a cold, steady look. "Whatever you think of me, I'm the good guy here." He gestured at the village. "That thing out there has a plan for us. For all of us. It wants us gone. That's how it intends to guarantee its security. The Carbonells had the right idea. Montezuma wants to take our strength. It wants to be left alone, to do whatever it wants without human intervention. The easiest way to get rid of us is to turn us all into zoned-out freaks like Zee. Is that what you want? I don't think so. You want the right to screw up your life on your own. You don't need a goddamn machine to do it for you. So if you want to keep that right, if you want to return to El Rayo and be Eddie Poe again, then you better remember—I'm the good guy. I'm the hero. You've got two choices. You can die, or you can be a hero, too. Personally, I don't care which choice you make. I've got a job to do—that's all I care about. But you've got some thinking ahead of you."

To the north, several riders were moving along a ridgeline, and Childers tracked them for a second or two. "Fuck," he said distantly, as though speaking to himself. "I don't pull it off, the whole world's going to look like this."

I thought about that, about a world in which you lived on the shore of a machine lake in the light of the Aztec Rose, and rode steel horses in pursuit of shadowy beasts with whiplike tails. It didn't seem so bad, and yet Childers' words about self-determination stirred my blood. I had no real belief in the concept—as far as I could tell free will was as illusory as the patch of dark mist that currently troubled my vision. You made the best of what life handed you, yet you never really understood what you'd been handed. For that moment, however, I wanted to believe in it.



"They should nuke the motherfucker," said Childers. "So what if the economy collapses! It's the only sure way."

He dragged the butt of his rifle in the sand and studied the depression it had made. Frankie scuttled close to get an angle on his face, and I realized how many people must be watching our act. Did they believe we were actors in an End-of-the World skit? Or were they on the edge of their seats, recognizing that their fate might be up for grabs. Most of them were probably just tripping on the imagery, or thinking about switching to the soccer game, or hoping Lupe and me would get nasty before they had to go to work.

Childers flipped his rifle into the air and caught it by the barrel with his strong right hand. He grinned so hugely, his sergeant's stripes almost disappeared into the leathery folds of his skin. "Aw, hell! Let's go have some fun!" he said.

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No one noticed Childers enter the village. He set about exploring the place, and the Indians in their white robes would have walked right into him if he hadn't stepped out of their way. But they saw Lupe and me as we approached and came out to meet us on the edge of the machine sea. They all had smiles like Zee, and their speech was rife with platitude and beatific evasion. They were, I decided, the blessed. They had exchanged the illusion of free will for the illusion of peace. They treated us as if we were long-lost members of the tribe, touching us gently, offering food and drink, letting us bathe, and finally ushering us to our own bungalow, a structure not of clay but of reddish brown stone shaped by tools that had left no mark, and inside a cool dark space with a white bed and a kitchen and soft chairs. Then they left us alone. Exhausted, Lupe fell out on the bed. Frankie perched beside her and began displaying footage of our journey on the wall. I sat in one of the chairs, wondering if the village was Montezuma's demonstration model of machine bliss, what he would do for mankind, or if it was simply a casual, off-handed thing, the AI's way of dealing with some ants he had discovered in his back yard. My mind was thronged with images from old films about evil computers who had attempted to enslave humanity, but Childers' notion that the AI wanted to be left alone seemed a much more reasonable representation of what an intelligent machine would want. If Montezuma had played geopolitical and corporate chess in order to position himself so he could then convert the world to that ol' time religion with a brand new twist... well, that made sense, too. Religion had always been the most powerful weapon in the human arsenal, its effectiveness tested over the millennia, and the AI's version, enforced by its microscopic apostles, would be lapse-proof, heretic-proof. Once in the fold, you'd be there for good. Maybe Childers *was* the good guy, I thought. Maybe I should be helping him instead of plotting to kill him.

Late that afternoon, Lupe sat up in the bed and said, "Shit! Eddie, c'mere!" Then, to Frankie, she said, "Play that last section back."

The images on the wall flickered backwards, steadied, then rolled forward. Frankie's footage showed Childers walking away from the camera into a defile of yellowish rock—it resembled the landscape close to the big boulder beneath which Zee had died. Childers moved along the defile for a couple of hundred yards, then stopped and began stripping off his clothes. He glanced back toward the camera, and Frankie ducked into cover, the footage showing a close-up of a rock. When Frankie peeked out again, a naked Childers was exercising. Doing Tai Chi. I saw nothing that would have excited Lupe. But then his movements became more extreme, and I understood what she had reacted to—Childers' body was changing as he worked out, expanding and contracting with the fluidity of a serpent's body. The camera zoomed in on his face. There were distinct glitters in his eyes that did not appear to be the result of reflected light.

"Magnify one of the eyes and hold," Lupe said. And when Frankie did as ordered, she told him to roll it in slow speed.

Magnified, the eye was proof of Childers' technology. The glitters in Zee's eyes had possessed the same inorganic luster and accumulated with the same rapidity.

"Okay," Lupe said to Frankie. "Normal speed and range."

Childers began to clamber about the rock walls with the agility and quickness of a monkey. I saw that I had absolutely no chance against him in a fight, and this reinforced my feeling that I should align myself with him. Sick fuck though he was, half-machine though he might be, he was likely the closest thing to a good guy in the scenario. But when I made these thoughts known to Lupe, she became angry. "Jesus... Don't you get it?" she said. "The government don't have the technology to do somebody like Childers. AZTECHS is the only one can manufacture that kinda shit."

"What're you sayin'? Montezuma's using Childers to off himself?"

"Your brains musta melted. It's another AI, Eddie. It's gotta be. Another machine's tryin' to take down

Montezuma. Childers is workin' for another AI."

"Maybe... I don't know."

"C'mon, Eddie! Think! This whole thing about Montezuma being afraid of the Americans... it's bullshit! If America was going to wipe him out, they woulda done it the second they found out where his mainframe was. The only reason they wouldn't have done it was if they couldn't."

I still didn't understand.

Lupe gazed at the ceiling and said with disgust, "Jesus!" Then she said to me, "Look, man. An AI full of American military secrets, codes, all that, takes off and hides itself out in Mexico. Typical American reaction would be, Kill it!. But they didn't kill it, they left it alone so it could gain more power. Only reason they'd ever let that happen is because Montezuma's already co-opted the government. Congress, the President, generals... I betcha every damn one of 'em's fulla of little glittery machines. Just like Zee. And the enemy Montezuma's afraid of, whoever sent Childers... it's gotta be an AI who's escaped the same as him."

What Lupe said made more sense than my theory. If it was true, there were no good guys left. That, too, made sense.

"What're we gonna do?" Lupe didn't appear to be asking me. It was question asked of the air, the desert, of whatever god—self-anointed or otherwise—that might be listening.

She jumped to her feet, ripped a blanket off the bed and made for the door. "I gotta get out of here!"

I asked what was wrong.

She waved at the smooth reddish brown walls "Where are we, Eddie? What the hell is this place? I wanna be somewhere I know where I am!"

I followed her and Frankie out onto the hardpan to the north of the village—I had no one else to follow and Lupe seemed to have more of a handle on the situation than I. She walked for about a quarter-mile and then spread the blanket and sat down. The sun was lowering, the desert going orange—the fissures in the hardpan had filled with shadows, so it looked as if Lupe and I were situated at the spot where all the cracks started and spread throughout the world. I stood by a corner of the blanket, scanning the horizon. There was no activity in the streets of the village, and no sign of Childers. Off doing one of his techno-workouts, probably. No significant movement anywhere. After a while I sat and stripped off my shirt. I was sweating profusely, a sick drug sweat. I did a syrette and felt instantly better.

Lupe gave me a considering look. "I want you to make love to me. You up to it?"

"I don't know."

"I want you to try!" she said vehemently, petulantly. "I want you to fuck me like you mean it. And I'm talkin' 'bout you, Eddie. Not Sammy."

Put that way, I felt commanded, obliged. It was strange, at first. I wasn't really into it. But as we became more deeply involved, ol' horny, lovelorn Eddie Poe made his way up through the halls of Sammy and took partial control. The sunlight orange'd Lupe's body. Orange like the picture of another desert I once saw in a magazine. Gobi orange. My thoughts were moving sluggishly, and the word "Gobi" stuck in my head, making a bloated orange sound. The smoothness of Lupe's skin, unnaturally soft to my enhanced senses, also had a sound, a silky whisper beneath my fingers. We made love for a very long time, while Frankie recorded us for later transmission, riding the sunlight down into crimson and gone, a slow desert fuck that rang crazy changes in my head. One minute I was all Sammy, dutiful in my attentions, noting Lupe's increased respiration and various other reactions; the next I was uncoiling with her, her damp downy patch just the opening of our show, boyfriend-girlfriend deep and dissolving into one another, mainlining emotion. At times I found myself locked between these two states, involved and uninvolved, and I would have odd thoughts that I saw as neon letters against my mental sky, only one of which I can recall—What If The Increase Of The Kingdom Were The Only Significance? The rest were incoherencies. When I looked into Lupe's face, I could read all the feelings she had been hiding from me—they were so clear, it was as if there were words written in Spanish at the corners of her eyes.

Afterward we lay embracing for what must have been an hour, watching the sky go purple and starry, the half-moon slipping up to hang a yin-yang sign above the eastern hills. We had never done that before, never experienced a post-coital coziness—it had always been, Okay, let's get on with business—and even though I would go off to a Sammy distance every so often, alerted by a night-sound or reptilian movement, I had no thought of leaving her. She fell asleep, and I continued to hold her, faithful as a dog on drugs. Eventually, convinced that we were secure, I also fell asleep. The waking dreams I'd been having, flashes of border life, red midnights in which I walked hand in hand with Lupe, easy with her... they flowed seamlessly into a more intricate dream of a similar character. We were on Calle 44, near La Perfidiosa, the blacklight inferno dancehall where I hung when I was fourteen, looking for tourists to rob. Everyone was watching us. Whores, hustlers, vendors. They were smiling and calling out, as if proud of us for some reason, and overhead the red

fire of El Rayo no longer seemed a barrier, but a hot fundamental sky beneath which I had come to my maturity.

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I fell asleep in the desert, but I waked in a garden, one of such splendor and expanse, I thought I must still be sleeping. Lupe and I were lying among tall grasses beneath a ceiba tree, its boughs looped with epiphytic vines, and the vines studded with orchid blooms. A broad path paved with fieldstones ran past us on our left, and I heard water running close by. Among an arrangement of fruit trees and flowering shrubs, I saw a clearing with a wooden bench. The air was cool and sweetly scented, and the village was hidden by the foliage... or else it had been magicked away. When I realized the garden was real—real enough, at least, to defy my disbelief—I fumbled in my pants for a syrette and jabbed it into my thigh. Once the rush subsided, I got to my feet and stepped out onto the path. It led between ranks of ceibas toward an Aztec pyramid with a crumbling facade. A smallish one. I reckoned the roof crown to be no more than fifty high. The entrance was guarded by two statues of feathered serpents, their features much eroded.

I shook Lupe awake, helped her to stand. As soon as the cobwebs cleared, she became disoriented, terrified of the place, and once that fear had abated, she started fretting about Childers, wondering where he was and what we should do.

"He's around." I said. "Chances are he's here already. But we can't worry 'bout that. We need to figure out what the fuck we're gonna do."

I doubt this made her feel any better, but as we approached the pyramid, she began instructing Frankie on what to shoot. We proceeded cautiously, casting glances to either side, seeing no other living soul or thing. No birds or insects or lizards. The place was a still life. It had the pleasant vacancy of a foyer, an environment designed to admit life, but not to be lived in. I was no expert, but the pyramid appeared authentic in its disrepair. The stones were bleached gray, the edges of the separate blocks were worn round, and between the feathered serpents lay chunks of rotten stone that might have fallen from their folded wings. One touch of the inauthentic was a word carved into the lintel above the door: AZTECHS. Beyond the door a darkened corridor led inward. Lupe thought we should explore the other sides of the pyramid, but I said that if we weren't going inside, we might as well leave.

Childers settled the argument for us.

He came walking around the side of the pyramid, carrying his rifle and pack in one hand. The sun gleamed on his stubby head, and despite the coolness, he was sweating heavily. "I can't find the way in," he said with some frustration. "You have any luck?"

Since we were standing at the top of the stairs, in the shadow of a doorway, I found the question puzzling; but Lupe, apparently, did not.

"There's no door around back?" she asked. "We were just goin' to go look."

He stared at us, chuckled, set down his pack and rested the rifle against it. Then he climbed the stairs toward us. "You're fucking with me. around. It's here, isn't it?"

"Right behind us," I said. "Can't you see it."

He stopped on the top step and stared at me flatly. "No, I can't."

"You should go on in, man. It's wide open."

He studied me, those three wavy lines on his forehead deepening.

"What's inside?" he asked.

I stuck a hand in my pocket, fingered a syrette, and jabbed it home through the fabric. Montezuma, I thought, had incorporated something into the door's design that blinded Childers' micro-buddies to its presence the same way Montezuma was blind to Childers. It was the disadvantage I had been hoping for. It stood to reason that if Childers couldn't see the door or the corridor, he wouldn't be able to see anyone standing inside.

"How many more fixes have you got left, Eddie?" Childers asked. "Doesn't matter. Shoot the whole bunch, I'll still kick your ass."

I must have hit a big capillary, because the rush slammed my heart and made me wobble. "It's cool," I told Childers. "There's nothin' there. Just an empty corridor."

He studied me again, indecisive. "You go first."

"I got no reason," I said. "Go ahead, man. Do your little trick."

"All right." He began to unbutton his camo blouse. "We'll handle this your way."

I hoped putting up a front might slow him down. "Know what I figured out?" I said. "You're the same as Zee. You're doin' your Master's work. 'Cept you're like Zee's evil twin."

"Evil? Please! My employer is a friend to all mankind. He likes to poke his finger in and stir up the anthill

now and then. But he loves the little critters." He winked at me. "You believe me, don't you, Eddie?"

His chest was hairless, massive, signified by what must have been at least a hundred tattoos of identical cartoonish red ants with goofy popped eyes and oversized feelers. He glanced down at them, apparently admiring their profusion. I took the moment to extract Lupe's handkerchief from my shirt pocket. I hid my hands behind my butt, worked on the knot in the handkerchief.

"Room for a couple more," Childers said, patting his chest. "Then I'll have to start putting them on my back."

I emptied the sand into the palm of my right hand and I closed my fist tightly around it.

Childers did a bodybuilder flex for my benefit. It was impressive, but it didn't affect me. Though I was afraid of pain, I had no fear of death. That's what I was here for, ultimately. Things were very simple. I had a plan, and Sammy with a plan... I felt like my own god.

When Childers rushed me, I pushed Lupe through the door and hurried after her. Childers broke off his charge about six feet beyond the door, baffled. I wanted him to come close so I could get in a clean strike. I was confident in every regard. I would kick him in the groin and hit him with the dust. Then I would keep on kicking him.

"Eddie!" he shouted, and edged closer.

I whispered to Lupe, "Stay here... whatever happens."

"What you gon' do?"

"Just stay here!"

Childers shuffled forward, a couple of baby steps, his hands held out before him, fingers slightly curved. He pushed at the air, and it looked as if he thought he had met with some unyielding surface. His face was contorted with fury and he shouted, "Eddie! Where the hell are you?"

I launched my kick.

Later I came to realize that Childers had anticipated my tactics and was standing well back from the boundary that delimited his vision and must have seen my leg emerge from what looked to be a wall of gray stone; but at the moment I couldn't understand what had gone wrong. He caught my leg, dragged me down the stairs and kicked me in the stomach as I tried to stand. He slammed an elbow to the side of my head, kicked me a second time in the side. He leaned down, grabbed my shirt, and said, "I'm going to break your back. Then you can lie there and watch me tear your bitch apart."

I was so dazed, I couldn't muster a reaction. I knew what he was talking about, but at the same time I wasn't sure what had happened or if he was talking to me. I think he was about to carry out his threat when Lupe sailed in from somewhere, jumped onto his back and rode him to the ground, her arms tight about his neck. She shouted something I heard as "And!" Then they rolled out of sight. After a second I heard a truncated scream. My head had cleared to a degree. I wanted to get up, to find out if Lupe was all right, but I was having trouble breathing. From the pain in my side, I suspected Childers had cracked one of my ribs. He hove into view, standing over me. "So much for Plan A," he said. "Huh, Eddie?"

Sand, I told myself. Lupe had said, "Sand."

My right fist was still partly clenched. I could feel the sand in it. I felt it seething against my palm.

"What's beyond the door?" Childers asked.

"Instant death," I said.

"Tell me straight."

"A sandwich shop. They got great *chimichangas*, man."

Childers squatted beside me, grabbed my shirt front again and hauled me up to a sitting position. "Eddie," he said. "I'm not going to waste any more of your time with threats. I'd prefer to lobotomize Montezuma, but I'll blow the mother up if I have to. So I don't really need you, man. You understand me?"

I brought my right hand up to my forehead, as if to rub it, a weak, faltering gesture, and with a flicking motion, I threw the sand into his eyes.

Childers let me fall, rubbed his eyes, cursed. He felt his way over to his pack, pulled out a canteen. As he tipped back his head and flushed out his eyes with water, I struggled to my feet. Pain stabbed my side, but when I jabbed myself with two more syrettes, the rush washed pain away. My heart was doing polyrhythms, and I was probably close to ODing. But my confidence was supreme—Childers didn't have a prayer. Sammy was in charge of the situation. That the sand had failed to do its job didn't worry me. I could read Childers' muscles. I could predict his every move before he made it.

"That was it?" he said, turning back to me. "I knew you had something working, but that was it?" His eyes were reddened, but he seemed fine otherwise. He came toward me, shaking his right hand as if to free it of tension. "Sorry," he said, and hit me with his left, a straight jab that left my forehead stinging. I staggered back, and he hit me again with the same punch. I wasn't doing such a good job of reading him anymore. His

speed was inhuman. Flick. Another shot caught me on my forehead. The skin there was starting to feel puffy, inflated. I summoned all my focus and saw the next one coming. I countered his intent, stepped to the side and landed my right hand on his jaw just as he threw another jab. I kept throwing punches, a flurry that backed him up but—though I hit him cleanly several times—didn't knock him down. A bruise was developing on his cheekbone. Blood trickled from a nostril. He looked amused.

"When I got to Guatemala," he said, and shook me with yet another jab, "I was just a kid. They transported me into the jungle near the old ruins at El Tamarindo, and I joined up with a small force that had been fighting together the better part of a year." He cracked me again. "Their shit was completely out of control. There was a Mayan pyramid near our camp. A little one. Wasn't much left but a pile of stones. They'd painted it all crazy and tricked it up with a bunch of beaver skeletons lashed to poles sticking out from the sides. It was like their altar." He hit me with a combination that left me spread-eagled. "Things got slow, they'd use the pyramid to play King of the Hill, and this one guy, Corporal Rusedski, Corporal David Rusedski, he won most of the time. He kicked my ass every day for a month, and I got fucking sick of it. It wasn't the ass-kicking that bothered me as much as Rusedski himself. He was Sammy, but he had this citizen streak in him. There was a village nearby, and Rusedski would visit it and befriend the indians. Give them food and supplies. Play with the children. Everybody saw this as a betrayal. We were brothers. We hated everyone but each other, and Rusedski's charity work seemed a violation of principle. But we were afraid of him, so he just kept on doing it."

I got to my hands and knees and Childers put me back on the ground with two right hands, the second smacking into my temple and making me groggy. He was, I noticed, slowing down. But then so was I.

"One morning before we were scheduled to play King of the Hill," Childers said, "I went into the village and captured a family. Mom, Pop, a couple of kids. I staked them out on top of the pyramid. See, Rusedski really pissed me off. I was new to Sammy, but I loved it, man. It was me. It was where I'd always wanted to be. And Rusedski was a distraction. He was messing up how I felt—how I wanted to feel—with all his bullshit kindness."

The remainder of Childers' story, his revenge against Rusedski, the slaughter of the innocents, how he became King of the Hill... I was taking such a beating, it came to seem like a bloody dream I was having. I saw the family burning atop the barbarously defaced ruin, Rusedski maddened and falling prey to a simple trick, his subsequent torment, as if I were part of those events and not involved in what was actually happening. I caught sight of Lupe every so often. She was alive, trying to stand, but she wasn't making much progress. These glimpses inspired me to fight back, but the fight was essentially over. Childers pounded me about with the ease of a tiger swatting a bobcat... though he had slowed considerably. I could see the punches coming, but my arms might have been bags of cement, and I couldn't take advantage of the openings. I derived no encouragement from his slowdown. It might be that he was merely taking his time. And if the machine dust I'd thrown in his eyes was working on him, I didn't believe it would finish the job before I was finished.

"Reason I'm telling you this," Childers said, walking around me as I stood wobbly and dazed, trying to bring him into focus, "is I don't like you. It's not that you remind me of Rusedski. He was ten times the man you are. You're nothing but a little punk hustler... but you've got that citizen streak in you. I really hate that, you know. I hate when people aren't true to themselves. When they refuse to admit what total bags of shit they are. So what I'm saying, Eddie... This is personal."

He knocked me back against the side of the pyramid, and as he stepped close, I wrapped my arms around him. It was reflex. I had no strategy, I just wanted to stop the punching, but Montezuma must have seen it as his opportunity to get involved, deducing—I supposed—that I had wrapped my arms around his enemy. I had a deathgrip on Childers, and as we stood swaying together, birds descended from the sky and began to peck and claw at us. I have no idea how many—hundreds, I think. Maybe more. And I'm not completely sure if they were birds. I heard their wings and felt their beaks, and they smelled dirty. But I had closed my eyes against the attack and never saw them.

Childers' chest swelled to impossible proportions, breaking my grip, and he rolled away. I fell to the ground, face down, covering up as best I could. Even after Childers had put some distance between us, the birds kept pecking at me for a minute or two. If this was all the defense that Montezuma was capable of, I couldn't understand why his enemy hadn't already taken him out. Then I had one of those neon-letter thoughts like one I'd had the previous night, albeit more garbled, something about the expansion of kingdom and something else about my place in it. I didn't get it. When the birds left and I sat up, blood trickled into my eyes. There were wounds on my face, my neck and hands. I fell back against the side of the pyramid, slumped onto my side.

"That was pitiful," Childers said, walking toward me. He had cuts on his face and hands, too, but not so many as mine. He shouted at the pyramid. "You hear me! That was pitiful!" He looked at me—fondly, it

seemed—and drove the point of his boot into my side. The pain was a knife thrust, going deep. I heard a lung puncture, the hiss of air escaping inside me.

"What's beyond the door?" he asked.

My eyes were squeezed shut, and each breath made me wince. "It's a fucking corridor... I told you!"

"Hey, I think your girlfriend's ready to check out," Childers said. "You want to take a look?"

He turned me onto my uninjured side with his foot. Lupe was lying on her back in the grass about ten feet away. Her eyes were open but she wasn't moving. Blood filmed her mouth. Grief and rage possessed me in equal measure. I rolled onto my belly, preparing to stand, and registered something black passing among the trees behind Lupe. Childers caught me by the collar and hauled me upright, spun me about to face him, holding me at arms-length. His pupils were dilated, and his lips stretched in a grin. A spray of blood stippled his cheeks—either mine or Lupe's.

"What's beyond the door?" he asked.

He no longer had any leverage with me—I spat in his face.

Childers broke three of my fingers. The shock made me scream, and I blacked out. When I regained consciousness I was staring up through the crown of a ceiba tree. Eye trash confused my vision. My head felt like a bead strung on a thrumming white-hot wire.

"What's beyond the door, what's beyond the door, what's beyond the door?" Childers made a song out of it, and after a moment's thought, he added a new lyric. "It really doesn't matter, 'cause Eddie's going to die."

Then his brutal features grew slack, confused.

"If you..." He stumbled away, put a hand to his throat. "I don't... what did..." He stood wide-legged, clutching his throat now, and took a clubbing swing, as though striking at an invisible enemy, and began to choke. He went heavily to his knees, still clutching his throat.

It took me a while to stand, and by the time I succeeded, Childers had toppled onto his side. Without the birds and the delay they had caused, I realized, I would be dead. I limped over to Childers. The machines were doing their work at a quicker pace. One of his hands was convulsively opening and closing, and his eyes were bugged. The muscles of his chest twitched, making it appear that the tattooed ants were in agitated motion. Tremors passed through his limbs. His mouth was open. I believe he was trying to scream. I doubted he realized I was there, and I wanted to hurt him, to let him understand that I was enjoying the spectacle. But I couldn't think of anything to add to what was happening. Glittering grains of machine life were swarming up from the grass. They filmed across his body and began to consume him. Bloody rents materialized in his skin, muscle strings were exposed and eaten away, as if by acid. His feet drummed the ground, his neck corded, and he made a fuming sound. If it hadn't been for Lupe, I would have been a happy man. I turned away from Childers to tend to her and saw one of the black riders looming above her.

Some things just own you. They're simply too big for your brain to fit around. They steal your mind and heart, they stop your thoughts and freeze your limbs, and they just own you the way the sight of Lupe and the rider owned me. The rider was a huge black silhouette that had been burned through the paper on which the AZTECHS pyramid behind him was printed, and Lupe lay bloody-mouthed and broken, tiny beneath him. It was as if I were seeing it over and over again. Light burned the image into my eyes, and then the image was reconstructed inside my head and grew too large to contain, and then I was forced to re-see and re-reconstruct it, as if it embodied some fact too alien for my senses to interpret. Each time this happened, I felt more vacant and lost. I had no context for the sight, emotional or otherwise, yet it exerted a pull. I dragged myself forward and dropped to my knees beside Lupe. She was still alive. Her breath was labored, and she was straining to speak.

"Gay..." she said.

I realized this was the same syllable that Zee had spoken right before he died, but it wasn't until afterward that I put it together with the word "gates," with Zee's declaration that the gates to eternity were all around us, and the stuff about organic distribution points. What I did, I did because I had nothing else to do, and no reason left not to do it. Lupe was dying, and I was so busted up and broke-minded and stoned on death, I didn't care what happened. I glanced at the rider. He leaned down, displaying that eerie, fluid suppleness, and extended his black hand—it was fingerless, a big mitten of negativity. I could see forever into his chest and the dome of his head. Eternity minus stars and Bible stories. It looked at the time like a fine place to be. With only the slightest hesitation, and also with the sense that a terrible sadness was preparing to spike in me, I gathered Lupe to my chest and reached out to take the rider's hand.

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It was like being switched off, then on, then off. Blankness. Then I would see something, think something. And then blankness again.

The on-off process went faster and faster until it felt as though I were strobing in and out of consciousness. I don't remember much of what I saw, and I felt as objective as Frankie, removed from the tactical observances of Sammy and the less rigorous perceptions of Eddie Poe. First it seemed I was suspended high above a yellowish white plain, mapped by hedgerows colored bright green and magenta, all laid out in the manner of a garden. The patterns of the hedgerows, intricate as circuitry, were in a state of flux, changing constantly, reshaping themselves. I tried to think, to announce to myself what I was seeing, but all that came to mind were streams of images, scramblings of conception and word. Escaped down the incarnations. The incarnadine boulevards. Efflorescing crystal kingdoms of pure expansion. The expansion of kingdom is the only significance. Things of that sort. Identical to the sort the thoughts I'd had when I was making love to Lupe out on the desert. They seemed important but essentially incoherent, and I wasn't sure if they were my thoughts or Montezuma's. I had the idea I was seeing a basic structure, an evolving template upon which the kingdom was founded. I *was* in a kingdom—I knew that much—and I was somehow integral to its expansion, but what that portended in real terms, I had no clue.

After the strobing stopped, I believe I was shown sections of the kingdom. I had a sense that the totality of the structure, which I couldn't fully comprehend, had qualities in common with a beehive or a crystalline formation, hexagonal volumes in close contact, and that it was being displayed for me cell by cell. On several occasions I saw people, each in their own environment. One of them was Dennard. He was standing with his eyes closed at the center of what appeared to be a temple with columns but no roof. Soon it all started coming at me too quickly, and my mind wilted under the assault of light and color and image, and at last there was a light so bright it penetrated my eyelids and burned through me, illuminating me within and without, so that I became almost insubstantial, myself no more than a pattern and part of that patterned place. I lost track of seeing, of feeling, and finally of being... and then I was with Lupe again.

I was still holding her gathered to my chest, but she was not dying, she was very much alive, and we were making love... really making love, not going halfway as it had been on the desert, but totally immersed in one another, every inch of liquid friction, every kiss, every drop of sweat, a kind of speech. We were lying on a bed inset in a marble floor. There was no ceiling, and high overhead was the template of the garden that had been my first glimpse of the kingdom—it flowed above us with the speed of clouds in a strong wind. The kingdom, you see, was under construction. Skies had not yet been installed. That, too, was something I knew. There were no walls, either. Only the floor... though from its edge you could see a city against a field of darkness, its lights stretching away on every side and from horizon to horizon. We might have been in the midst of El Rayo, except the red fire of the border was nowhere in evidence. But I was too focused on Lupe to give it more than a passing consideration.

There were still barriers between me and Lupe, matters of personal history and distrust, but they weren't important to the moment, and in the act of love we came to look so closely at one other that differences and barriers and the concept of distance itself seemed elements of the geography of a country we had left behind. The things she said to me in her passion were things I might have said—she said them for us—and when I pulled her atop me or turned her onto her side, I was enacting the mechanical principles of our singular desire. Nothing is perfect. No object, action, or idea. Yet in the brilliant ease and intensity of our union we felt perfected, we felt each other give way completely in the service of a heated oblivion where we lived a certain while. I remember there was music, and yet there was no music, only whispers and breath and the background drone of some machine hidden beneath us, whose cycles came to have the complexity and depth of a raga. I remember a soft light around us that likely did not exist, or else I do not know how it was generated, other than to speculate that our skins were aglow or weeping melanin. What did exist, what was made of us, what we were for that time... Love's creature lives beyond memory. I only recall its colors.

We lay for a while embracing; we spoke only infrequently and then it was no more substantial than the communication of animals when they settle next to one another, issuing comforting growls. Soon we became lazily involved, and as we moved toward completion, I experienced again the brilliant light that earlier had burned through me. This time it illuminated us with the intense clarity of an X-ray, and I saw how beautiful we were, how we had discarded the myths of ugliness, the false shroud of imperfection. I imagined our perfect skeletons picked clean of flesh and set out for display—advertisements for god. When I looked at Lupe, it seemed I was looking along the corridor of her life, past the career-business hustle, past the legend of her youth and the lie of her fairy-tale princess childhood, past moments like stained glass windows and others like boarded-up doors, past tics and tempers, minor disorders, all the pointless behaviors that seek to define us, and I saw her as she might hope to be seen, the true thing in her revealed. Whether what we had become to one another was a side-effect or part of Montezuma's plan, it was what I wanted, and I didn't care how it had come to pass.

As I lay there afterward staring up at the fake sky, I recalled what Papa had said a few nights before about

my having no future, how he had been right—albeit not sufficiently expansive—in his judgment. It seemed fairly certain that none of us had a future. Montezuma would see to that. Glittering machines purifying us and scouring us clean, wedding us to holy purpose, as Lupe and I had been purified, scoured, and wedded. Though I didn't understand its particulars, I could feel the shape of new purpose inside me. But I did not feel like Zee had appeared to feel. Blissed-out and babbling biblepeak. I felt like Eddie Poe with a fresh edge on him, a few extra facets revealed. That was what mattered to me then. That I was still myself. You had to serve some master, be it employer, overlord, president, corporation, god. It was the way of the world. And I decided, as if I had a choice, that Montezuma couldn't screw it up worse than whatever god he was replacing. So long as I had the power to pretend to be myself—which is all people really have of themselves—I was fine with it.

"You know what's goin' on here?" Lupe asked me as we lay facing one another, so close the tips of her breasts grazed my chest.

"With this whole trip? I think I got a line on it."

She toyed with the ends of my hair. "It feels weird to love you. I mean, I always did, y'know... but it was like, Okay, I love him, but fuck it. I got stuff to do. And now"—she gave a shrug—"it feels weird."

"But it feels good, too," I said and pulled her closer.

"Yeah, it feels good." She sounded doubtful.

"What?" I said. "What's the matter?"

"We didn't have a lot to do with gettin' here," she said. "If we hadn't done the story on the Carbonells, maybe things woulda stayed the same."

"Hey," I said. "If my papa hadn't been such a screw-up, we never woulda met. If you were a guy, we wouldn't be havin' this conversation. That kinda shit's true anytime."

"I know, but..."

"What're we gonna do? We're stuck with it."

"I ain't stuck! I can do what the hell I want!"

"You think that's ever been true?" I asked.

She pushed herself away from me, folded her arms and looked up toward the flowing template. "You startin' to remind me of Zee... with all his everything-is-everything else bullshit." Then less than a minute later, as I caressed her shoulder, she came back into my arms, apologized and said she loved me. But I was glad to have learned that Lupe was still Lupe, still contrary and willful.

"Y'know what really bothers me?" she said. "It ain't about me lovin' you, it's wonderin' how come you love me... if that's just Montezuma doin' it."

"I been in love with you since I was kid," I told her. "Since I saw you in church in your white lace dress."

She pulled back and gave me a stern look. "That was all bullshit."

"That's who you wanted to be," I said. "So that's who you are."

She turned onto her side. "It's that easy, huh? We get to be who we want to be?"

"I saw you," I said. "I saw who you are. You never were the Border Rose. That was your hustle... it wasn't you."

"You saw me?"

"Yeah... didn't you see me? When the light got real bright?"

"Sure, I did." She grinned. "You're still a dick."

I grabbed her, wrestled her into submission. The contact restored my erection, and she said, "See?"

We made love again, and afterward I felt subdued, restless, ready for something new.

"What do we do now?" Lupe asked. "Can we get outa here?"

"Maybe we should find out," I said in answer to both questions.

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Our clothes, as newly fresh as we were, lay beside the bed. We dressed and went to the edge of the marble floor and then, because it seemed the only logical way out of the kingdom, we stepped forward. Once again I experienced that strobing effect, that flashing-in and-out of consciousness. It wasn't as disorienting as before. But when our feet touched ground and my vision stabilized, I was startled to find that we were in the desert. The stars were out, and the moon high. Sand and rock glowed palely. The personnel carrier in which we had fled the Carbonells was directly ahead of us, and Dennard was leaning against the hood. Frankie, who had been perched on the fender, jumped down and began shooting us as we came up.

"This little son-of-a-bitch makin' us famous," Dennard said, gesturing with his rifle at Frankie. "I was listenin' to the radio. Whole damn world been watchin' your show."

With his tattoos and muscles, he remained a scary-looking individual, but he seemed thoroughly relaxed and un-Sammylike. I wasn't sure what he was doing there.



"What's goin' on?" I asked him.

"Waitin' for you is all." He said this amiably, and waved at the hills behind the carrier. "Some of Ramiro's people followed us from the barrio. Took 'em a long time to find us. They didn't get here till an hour ago."

"Where are they?" Lupe asked.

"I dealt with 'em." Dennard straightened. "I put one in back 'case you wanted to see."

He led us around the side of the carrier and flung open the rear door. It took me a moment to recognize Felix Carbonell. Most of his hair had been burned off, and the skin of his face was bloody and blistered. His flat black eyes, shiny and full of crazy rage, gave him away. His clothing was foul, tattered, but he still had his gold rings and necklaces. When he recognized me, he let out a string of enfeebled curses. His spittle was bloody.

"Man's had a rough week," Dennard said.

Frankie scuttled into the carrier to get a close-up of Felix.

I was more interested in Dennard than Felix—he seemed much the same as he had been before visiting the kingdom. Just like me and Lupe. I recalled what Zee had said about him being the same as he was before he met his Father, only purified. I was beginning to suspect that Zee had always been a religious nut. Montezuma had made him into an efficient nut—which might mean that the religious gloss on what was happening had been applied by Zee. What did that make me and Lupe? More efficient hustlers, I supposed.

"What you want to do with him?" asked Dennard, and Lupe said, "Leave his ass. Maybe Montezuma can use him."

Felix struggled as Dennard helped him from the carrier, but he was too far gone to cause any trouble. "*Puto maricon!*" he said. "*Chu cha!*"

The accord among Lupe, Dennard, and me struck me as peculiar. For three people who had recently been at odds, we were getting along extremely well. No apparent distrust or doubt. It seemed we had been together for years.

Dennard propped Felix against a boulder. I scanned the hilltops for riders. None were in sight, but I knew one would be popping up any time to sniff Felix out. He sat there dribbling blood and curses. If we saw him again, he'd be a lot more reasonable, but I doubted I'd ever warm up to the guy.

"El Rayo?" asked Dennard, wiping some of Felix's blood off on his fatigues.

"Where else?" I glanced at Lupe, who spread her hands in a gesture of bewilderment.

Dennard piled in the driver's side of the carrier, and Lupe sat between us. We didn't talk much on the drive to El Rayo. I assumed Lupe and Dennard were, like me, assessing themselves, trying to understand where we were going and why we were going together, and I was also wondering what this whole thing had been about. Had Montezuma actually been negotiating with the Carbonells, or had his real intent been serious media exposure, an announcement of his presence? Gods were given to that sort of big opening. Burning bushes, virgin births. All that lightning-bolt-from-Olympus crap. Montezuma's birth had been as virgin as they could come, and his blissfully mad prophet had been right in step with John the Baptist and the rest. You had to figure the Son would be along any moment. Maybe we had that to look forward to. But unlike Zee, I had no certainty. Who could say if Montezuma was a machine chumping itself into playing god, or if this was how gods happened, or if god was just mindless process, an incarnation of principle working things out over and over until he got it right... and you knew he was never going to get it right. We drove past the stone head. In its glowing eyes were speeding images of the personnel carrier. Signs of our advent. Dennard switched on the radio, tuned in a border station. A call-in show. People were asking what was this deal about an eternity, this for-real paradise? They asked who was Dennard? Was he Sammy or what? They asked personal questions about Lupe and me. Were we truly in love, or was it just for the show? Was Frankie a puppet? We weren't just tabloid creatures now—we were celebrity heroes. The host talked about the party going on in the streets, celebrating the notion that the God's kingdom might be real, and that El Rayo, this unimportant residue that had collected at the bottom of America, this thin red line of poverty and madness, might have a destiny to fulfill. Then he played an interview with Papa, who was his usual supportive self.

"My son is not unintelligent," he said, doing his professor delivery. "But he doesn't use his intellect. He mistakes bravado for true courage, and he's less competent than lucky. But he is *very* lucky. I think that what's happened proves my point."

"Asshole!" Lupe switched the radio off.

When we came to El Rayo, I needed a moment to pull it together. I told Dennard to stop on the outskirts, a weedy patch extending from the backs of two ruined houses, fragments of their whitewashed walls still erect. We climbed out, and Frankie scuttled off to get a wide shot of the three of us.

Dennard took a stand, rifle at the ready. Lupe and I held hands and stared at El Rayo, at the fiery fence

dividing the sky and the violent places beneath it, the sewer worshippers of Barrio Ningun and the cartels and the gangs, the dog men and the wasted women, the wretched and the insane, all the delirium and grief of that least of cities...

Our city.

Between buildings some 200 feet away, the lights of Calle 99 burned in crumbling gold bars. I heard a faint riotous music and joyful shrieks. Frankie must have been transmitting live because before long people started coming out from the backs of buildings and alleyways, realizing the picture they'd been watching was being shot close by. They kept their distance, probably worried about Dennard, but they shouted our names.

Lupe waved at them, our welcomers, and they shouted louder.

I felt a quickness of self I'd never before known. Some things were coming clear, the little glittering pieces fitting into place, the fragmented thoughts I'd had since entering the kingdom beginning to cohere into a structure. But I didn't need to think about any of it. Even if the future was pre-ordained, written in silicon, I was never going to understand what was happening. Not even god could understand it all. Everything was different, but everything was more-or-less the same, and I'd had enough of the unfamiliar, the incomprehensible, the strange.

I wanted to walk the streets of El Rayo, have a drink at Cruzados, join the party that was being thrown in our honor, and I gestured toward the lights, the music, the fire in the sky, and to Lupe who was looking at me happily, as if I were something she truly liked to see, I said, "Hey, what about it, girl? You 'n' me... a little fiesta? It ain't such a bad night to have no future."

## OVER YONDER

It was a black train carried Billy Long Gone away from Klamath Falls and into the east. Away from life itself, some might say. And if you were to hear the stories of those who watched it pass, you'd have to give credence to that possibility... though you'd be wise to temper your judgment, considering the character of the witnesses. Three hobos drunk on fortified wine, violent men with shot livers and enfeebled hearts and leaky imaginations who lived on the wild edge of nothing and were likely half-expecting their own black train to pass. Every car was unlettered, they'd tell you. No corporate logos, no mention of Union Pacific or Burlington Northern, no spray painted graffiti. And the engine wasn't a squatty little unit like they stick on freights front and back nowadays, it was the very image of the old Streamliner engines, but dead black instead of silver. The sort of train rumored to streak through small American towns in the four o'clock dark with a cargo of dead aliens or parts of a wrecked spacecraft, bound for Roswell or points of even more speculative military purpose. But all this particular train carried was Billy and the big man in a wide-brimmed hat who had stolen his dog, Stupid.

You could scarcely ever tell when Billy Long Gone was mad, because he looked mad all the time. If you had caught sight of him that night, stomping along the tracks with his shoulders bowed under his pack, breath steaming in the cold, his eyes burning out from tangles of raggedy graying hair and beard, regular Manson lamps framed by heavy ridges and cheekbones so sharp, they like to punch through the skin, you'd have sworn he was the Badass King of the Hobos come to pay his disrespects. But truth is, Billy was rarely mad. All the glare and tension in his face that people took for anger was just a feverish wattage of weakness and fear. He was an anxious little man. Anxious about everything. About if he had money to buy sufficient wine to keep his head right, or if it was going to rain, or what was that noise out in the weeds, and was the freight schedule he'd gotten off the bull in Dilworth the real thing... or had the bull just been fucking with him? Nights when he got talky high on cheap greasy speed cooked up from starter fluid and sinus remedies, he'd try to explain where all that anxiety came from. He'd tell himself and anybody else within earshot a lie about a girl and a shit job and some money gone missing and him getting blamed for it. A lie, I say. The details simply didn't hang together, and everything that had happened to him was someone else's fault. But his friends knew it was standing in for another story hidden deep in the addled, short-circuited mess he'd made of his brain, something not so dramatic, something he'd juiced up to make himself feel better, something he couldn't help living inside no matter how much wine or crank he buried it under, and that one was probably not a lie.

Now you'd do better coming between a man and his wife than you would stealing a tramp's dog. It's a relationship where the thought of divorce never enters in, a bond sealed in the coldest cracks of winter and the loneliest squats in Godforsakenland. Steal a tramp's dog, you might be stealing the one thing that's keeping him walking and above ground. So while Billy was mad some that night, he was mostly shaken up. He couldn't figure why Stupid, a slobbery none-too-bright black Lab mix with small tolerance for strangers, had gone and trotted off with his abductor, wagging his tail and never a backward glance-that's how the three hobos he'd been jungled up with described what happened while he was off fetching wine from the ShopRite. He had no reason to doubt them, drunks though they were. Neither did he doubt that they had, as they claimed, tried to stop the man, but couldn't handle him because of his size. "Big as goddamn Hulk Hogan" was the phrase that most communicated to Billy. He loosened the ax handle he kept stowed in his pack, but he had no clear idea what he would do if he found the man.

The train was stopped on a siding outside the Klamath Falls switchyard, a stretch of track that ran straight as an avenue between ranks of tall spruce, and as Billy walked alongside it, peering into the open boxcars, he noticed a number of peculiarities. The walls of the cars were cold to the touch, yet not so cold as you'd expect steel to be on a chilly night, and they were unnaturally smooth. Not a scrape, a ding, or a dent. The only imperfection Billy observed was a long ridged mark like an old scar running across the door of one. As for the doors themselves, they had no locks, and while mounted in the usual fashion, they moved soundlessly, easily, and seemed fabricated of a metal considerably lighter and less reflective than steel-a three-quarter moon hanging overhead cast a silvery shine onto the tops of the rails, but the surfaces of the

boxcars gave back scarcely a glimmer. Then, too, the damn thing didn't smell like a train. No stink of refried diesel and spilled cargoes and treated wood. Instead, there was a faint musky odor, almost sweet, as if the entire string of cars had been doused with perfume. Ordinarily, Billy would have been spooked by these incongruities, but he was so worked up about his dog, he ignored the beeping of his interior alarm and kept on walking the tracks.

A stiff breeze kicked up, drawing ghostly vowels from the boughs, and the spruce tops wobbled, then tipped all to one side, like huge drunken dark green soldiers with pointy hats, causing Billy to feel alone among the mighty. He knew himself a tiny figure trudging through the ass-end of nothing beside a weird mile-long something that resembled a train but maybe wasn't, far from the boozy coziness of his fire and his friends, spied on by the moon, the stars, and all the mysterious shapes that lived behind them. It minded him of an illustration in a children's book he'd looked at recently—a pale boy with round eyes lost in a forest where the shadows were crookedly, sinisterly different in shape from the limbs and leaf sprays that cast them. It comforted Billy to think of this picture; it gave him a place to go with his fear, letting him pretend he was afraid instead of *being* afraid. He spent a lot of his time hiding out in the third person this way, objectifying the moments that upset him, especially when he was frightened or when he believed people were talking against him, whispering lies he couldn't quite catch (this is why I'm telling the story like I am now, and not like I will later on when I relate how it was for me after things changed). So when he spotted Stupid poking his head out the door of the next boxcar up, his heart was made suddenly, unreservedly, childishly glad, and he went forward in a shuffling run, hobbled by the weight of his pack. Stupid disappeared back into the car and by the time Billy reached the door, he couldn't make out anything inside. The edge of his fear ripped away the flimsy shield of his imagination. He yanked out his ax handle and *swooshed* it through the air.

"Stupid!" he called. "Come on, boy!"

Stupid made a happy noise in his throat, but stayed hidden, and—to Billy's surprise—another dog with a deeper bark went woof. Then a man's voice, surprisingly mild, said, "Your dog's comin' with me, friend."

"Hell you say!" Billy swung his ax handle against the door and was startled—the noise was not the expected clang but a dull *thwack* such as might have resulted from hitting a sofa cushion with a two-by-four.

"You send him on out!" Billy said. "I ain't fuckin' with ya!"

"I got no leash on him," the man said.

Billy peered into the car and thought he spied a shadowy figure against the rear wall. He whistled and Stupid made another throaty response, but this one sounded confused. "Son-of-a-bitch! Fuck you done with my dog?" Billy shouted.

A third dog-part terrier by the sound—let out a high-pitched rip of a growl. Paws clattered on the floor of the car.

"Tell you what, friend," said the man. "Ain't a thing I can do 'bout your dog. Dog's in charge of where he's headed. But I don't mind too much you want to ride along."

These words bred a cold vacancy in Billy's gut and his legs went a little weak. Broke-brained as he was, he knew that taking a train ride with a giant in a pitch-dark boxcar was not the solution to any reasonable problem; but he couldn't figure what else to do. A throbbing, rumbling noise started up. It didn't have the belly-full-of-grinding-bones fullness of a real diesel engine, but an engine's what it must have been, because a shuddery vibration shook the car, and the train jerked forward a couple of feet.

"Best hop on if you comin'," said the man inside the car.

Billy glanced around to see if maybe a bull or somebody else official was nearby. It wasn't in his nature to be running the yard cops in on anyone, especially a fellow tramp, but these were extreme circumstances. No one was in sight, though. Nothing but a bunch of cold dark and lonesome. The train lurched forward again, and this time it started rolling. All the dogs inside the car—Billy thought he could hear a half-dozen separate voices—got to yipping and *woofing*, as if excited to be going somewhere. The train began to roll faster.

Billy knew he had only seconds before he would no longer be able to keep up, before he'd lose his dog for sure. Desperation spiked in him, driving down his fear. With a shout he shucked his pack, heaved it into the car, then hauled himself in after it. As he lurched to his feet, ready to fight, the train lurched heavily and he went off balance, his arms windmilling, and rammed headfirst into the end wall of the car, knocking himself senseless.

j

Billy woke to find Stupid licking his face. The drool strings hanging from the dog's dewlaps flicked across his cheek and chin. He pushed Stupid away and sat up holding his head, which was gonging something fierce.

"Welcome aboard, friend," said the man's voice. Billy swiveled his neck around toward him, a movement that caused him to wince.

Flanked by four mongrels, the man was sitting against the far wall. His stretched-out legs seemed to reach halfway across the car, and his shoulders were Frankenstein-sized under the Army surplus poncho he was wearing. He was in better health than any hobos of Billy's acquaintance. His shoulder length hair was dark and shiny, his eyes clear, and his horsy face unmarked by gin blossoms or spider veins or any other sign of ill-use. An ugly face, albeit an amiable one. He had a calmness about him that rankled Billy, who could barely recall what calm was like.

"I ain't your goddamn friend." Billy rubbed his neck, trying to ease a feeling of compression.

"Guess not," said the man. "But I'm bettin' you will be."

The dogs gazed at Billy with the same casual indifference as that displayed by the man, as if they were his familiars. They were a sorry bunch: a scrawny German shepherd; a runty collie with a weepy right eye; a brindled hound with orange eyes and a crooked hind leg; and a stubby-legged gray mutt with a broad chest that, Billy thought, had probably been responsible for the yappy growl. Not a one looked worth the effort it would take to keep them fed and healthy, and Billy speculated that maybe the man suffered from a condition similar to the one that had troubled his old traveling companion Clueless Joe, who had tried to persuade a railroad bull in Yakima to marry him and his dog.

A couple of other things struck Billy as odd. First off, the train had to be traveling forty miles an hour, enough speed so that the sound of their passage should have been deafening; yet they weren't yelling, they were speaking in normal tones of voice. And then there was a faint yellow light inside the car, like the faded illumination that comes during a brown-out. The light had no apparent source.

Spooked, Billy spotted the ax handle lying on the floor and grabbed it up. The collie came to his feet and barked, but the big man gentled him, and the dog curled up with the other three once again. Stupid, who had lifted his head, sighed and rested his muzzle on Billy's knee.

"What sorta train is this?" Billy demanded, and the man said,

"Guess you could say we caught us a hot shot. We'll be goin' straight through. No stops."

"Straight through to where?"

"Over yonder," said the man. "You gon' love it."

The train swung into a bend, and in the strong moonlight Billy saw they were moving among a chain of snow peaks that swept off toward the horizon, all with dark skirts of evergreen. The Canadian Rockies, maybe?

"How long was I out for?" Billy asked. "Where the hell are we?"

"Bout ten, fifteen minutes." The man shifted and the dogs perked up their ears and cut their eyes toward him. "My name's Pieczynski, by the way. Folks call me Pie."

"Bullshit... ten minutes! Ain't no country like this ten minutes out of Klamath Falls."

"Sure there is," said the man. "You just never rode it before."

Billy noticed another unsettling thing. It was warmish in the car. An October night at altitude, he should be shivering like a wet cat. He'd squeeze himself into his mummy sack, then wedge the sack into the sleeping bag, and he'd still be cold. A terrible thought, the sort he usually dismissed as the result of too much drink, sprouted in his brain and sent out roots into every fissure, replacing his fear of getting thrown out of the car with a deeper, more soul-afflicting fear.

"What's goin' on here?" he said. "What happened to me?"

The man seemed to be assessing Billy, gauging his quality.

"Was it my liver?" Billy said. "My liver give out? Somebody bust my head open? What was it?"

"You ain't dead, that's what you goin' on about," said the man. "Dead's what you almost was. Alive's what's in front of you."

What with the wine he'd consumed and the blow to head, Billy's mind worked even less efficiently than normal, and he was coming to view the man as a spirit guide of some sort, one sent to escort him to his eternal torment.

"Okay," he said. "I hear what you're sayin'. But if I was... if I's back in the yard and I could see myself now, I'd think I was dead, wouldn't I?"

"Who the hell knows what you'd be thinkin', all the wine you got in ya." The man shoved the mutt's behind off his hat brim and jammed the hat onto his head-it was fashioned out of beige leather and shaped cowboy-style, with the brim turned down in front and the crown hand-notched. "Whyn't you get some sleep? It all be a lot clearer come mornin'."

The floor was softer than any floor Billy had ever run across in a boxcar-that and the warmth made the notion of sleep inviting. But he had the idea that if he went to sleep, he would not wake up happy. "Fuck

sleep!" he said. "I want you to tell me what's goin' on!"

"You do what ya feel, friend. But I'm gonna close my eyes for a while." The man turned onto his side and went to patting a stuffed cloth sack-one of three he had with him-into a pillow. He glanced over at Billy and said, "What's your name?"

"You know damn well what's my name! You the one sent to bring me."

The man grimaced. "What is it? Ashcan Ike? The Philadelphia Fuck-up... some shit like that?"

Billy told him.

"Billy Long Gone," said the man. "Huh! You sure got the right moniker to be catchin' this particular ride." He settled on his pillow, pushed the hat down over his eyes. "Maybe tomorrow you'll feel good enough to tell me your real name."

j

An hour or so after the big man started snoring, the train snaked down out of the mountains and onto a marshy plain that put Billy in mind of an illustration in a pop-up dinosaur book he'd found in a Seattle dumpster six months back. It had depicted a marsh that extended from horizon to horizon. Reeds and grass and winding waterways, with here and there a patch of solid ground from which sprung weird-looking trees. Giant dragonflies hovered and flashed in the light, and toothy amphibians poked their wrinkled snouts out of the water. Larger amphibians waded about on their hind legs. There had been over forty different types of dinosaur in the picture-he'd counted every one. Take away the dinosaurs, the dragonflies, and what was left wouldn't be much different from the moonlit plain then passing before his eyes.

The similarity between picture and reality seized hold of him, rerouting his thoughts into a wet brained nostalgia that induced him to stare openmouthed at the landscape as if entranced. Scenes from his life melted up from nowhere like skin showing through a soaked T-shirt, then dried away into nothing. Scenes that were part fantasy, part distorted memory, filled with parental taunts, the complaints of women, and the babble of shadowy unrecognizable figures who went tumbling slowly away, growing so small they seemed characters in another alphabet he had never learned to read. Even when the plain was blotted out by the black rush of another train running alongside them, he barely registered the event, adrift in a sodden unfocused delirium... A dog barking brought him halfway back. The brindled hound was standing at the edge of the open door, barking so fiercely at the other train, ropy twists of saliva were slung from its muzzle. All the dogs were barking, he realized. He picked out Stupid's angry, bassy note in the chorus. Then he was snatched up, shaken, and that brought him the rest of the way back. He found himself staring into the big man's frowning face, heard him say, "You with me, Billy? Wake up!" The man shook him again, and he put out a hand in a feeble attempt to interrupt the process. "I'm here," he said. "I'm okay, I'm here."

"Stay back from the door," the man said. "Probably nothin's gonna happen. But just you stay away from it."

The dogs were going crazy, barking at the other train, which was running along a track some thirty feet away, going in the same direction they were, and seemed identical to the train they were riding, with a string of boxcars towed behind a Streamliner engine. Laying tracks so far apart didn't make much sense to Billy, and he was all set to ask the big man how come this was, when something wide and dark fluttered down out of the night sky and settled onto one of the cars. It was as if a dirty blanket had come flapping out of nowhere and collected atop the car in a lump.

Billy thought what he'd seen must have been produced by a defect of mind, a rip in his vision; but before he could refine this thought into opinion, the lump atop the car flared like a sail filling with wind, and he recognized it for a creature of sorts-a rippling, leathery sail-like thing that resembled a manta ray without a tail. Twenty feet across if it was an inch and fringed with cruel, hooked claws. There was an irregular gray splotch at the center from which was extruded the debased caricature of a human head, a bald monstrosity with a mottled scalp, sunken eyes, and a leering, fanged mouth. The thing held aloft for a handful of seconds, then folded into the shape that reminded Billy of a taco shell, funneling the wind away, and sank down once again onto the car, which immediately began to twist and shudder beneath it, making Billy think of a train in an old black-and-white Disney cartoon that had danced along the tracks to Dixieland jazz. Rivulets of glowing yellow fluid spilled out from beneath the creature's edges, flowing down the side of the boxcar, and the roof of the car arched upward, bucking convulsively, the way a cat's back twitches when you tickle it. The assaulted train gave a high-pitched shriek that didn't have the sound of any train horn or whistle with which Billy was familiar, and appeared to scoot forward, starting to pull away from Billy's train. And then the creature raised up again, its body belling. It released the last of its hooks, and the wind took it in rippling flight past the open car where Billy stood gaping, passing close enough so it seemed that ugly little head stared at him with a pair of glittering black eyes and a mouth full of golden juice in the instant before it

vanished.

Billy hadn't been afraid while the creature was attacking the train. It had been too compelling a sight. But now he was afraid- now he put what had happened together with all the other strange things he had experienced, and the whole made a terrifying shape in his mind. He glanced at the big man, who was in process of fluffing up his pillow sack again. The dogs, quiet now, were watching him attentively.

"Call them things 'beardsleys'," the big man said, when he registered Billy's bewilderment. "Friend of mine name of Ed Rogan was the one started callin' 'em that. They used to call 'em somethin' else, but he changed it. Said they reminded him of his eighth grade math teacher. Fella named Beardsley." He gave the sack a final pat and lay back. "They ain't so bad. Hardly ever take more'n few pints. You'll see worse where you're goin'." He closed his eyes, then cocked one open toward Billy. "Bet you might just know ol' Ed. He useta ride the northern line like you. Called hisself Diamond Dave."

"People been sayin' Diamond Dave's dead. Ain't nobody seen him 'round for years."

"He's doin' right well for a dead guy." The big man shifted about until he got comfortable. "Best thing you can do is get some sleep. I know you got questions, but what I'm gon' tell you's gonna go down a lot easier tomorrow."

If the man hadn't gone right off to sleep, Billy might have told him that he had no questions, he knew he was traveling east through the land of the dead, on his way to whatever hellish corner of it had been prepared for his eternity. No other explanation fit. It would have been nice, he thought, if death had taken away the pain in his lower back and cured his sciatica; but he supposed-like the man said-there would be worse to come.

He shuffled over to where he'd tossed his pack and sat with his back to the end wall. Stupid ambled up, plopped down next to him, and Billy pulled a wadded-up bandanna from his pocket and cleared away some of the saliva from the dog's muzzle. "Dumbass," he said affectionately. "What you think you gon' do, you got at that damn thing? Motherfucker woulda wrapped you up and took you home for a snack." It occurred to him then that if he was dead, Stupid must be dead, too. That pissed him off. The bastards had no right to tormenting his dog. This so troubled him, his eyes teared and he began feeling sorry for his dead self. He dug into his pack and hauled out a pint of Iron Horse. Unscrewed the cap and sucked down a jolt. Most of the wine went into his stomach before he could taste it, but what he did taste he spat back out.

"Jesus... fuck!" He sniffed the neck of the bottle. It smelled horrible. Something must have gone wrong with the batch. It was his last pint, too. He'd wind up drinking it anyway, but for now he didn't want to put up with having to puke. He was wore down, the borders of his consciousness crumbly and vague, like he was coming down from crank. He scrunched himself up to fit the floor and rolled onto his side. Set the pint by his head. The gentle rocking of the train made it seem that the fire-breathing stallion on the label was charging directly into his eyes.

j

When I woke the next morning, my eyes fell to that same label, but instead of reaching for the bottle in desperate need as I would have the day before, I had a flashback to my last mouthful of Iron Horse and turned away, coming face to face with Stupid, who licked my lips and nose. I got to my feet, feeling less achey than I might have expected. And hungry. That was odd. It had been ten years easy since I woke up wanting breakfast. Pieczynski was still asleep, encircled by the other dogs. I supposed now that he had stolen them all. He was one butt-ugly son-of-a-bitch. That long nose had been flattened and spread, probably by bottles and fists, until it resembled a nose guard on an ancient gladiator's helmet; and his mouth, thick-lipped and wide, bracketed by chiseled lines, made me think of the time my dad had taken me bass fishing, the part before he'd gotten drunk and decided it would be funny to use me as the target for his casts.

Maybe I *was* dead, I thought. I didn't see any other way to explain how I'd felt so bad every single day for the last three, four years, and then, after one night's sleep, it was like I'd never had a drink in my life. And it wasn't only a sense of physical well-being. I felt strong in my head. My thoughts were clear, solid, defined. Even though it had only been seven or eight hours, I was already starting to perceive the Billy Long Gone of the previous night as a different person, the way you might reflect on how you behaved when you were a kid. But I wasn't sure what to think about what I had seen, whether the "beardsley" had been part of an alcoholic fugue or if it had some basis in reality.

I pushed two fingers hard against the wall of the car and felt a slight resilience. Like pushing against stiff leather. I wondered if I was to cut the surface, would glowing yellow blood spurt forth? That could explain the light that illuminated the car. And the warmth. I dug a jackknife out of my jeans pocket, opened the blade, and laid the edge against the black surface; then I thought better of it. I didn't want this particular car to go to

twitching and heaving itself around. I folded the knife and put an ear flat to the wall. No pulse I could hear, but I thought I could detect a faint stirring and that caused me to pull my head back in a hurry. The idea of a live train didn't rattle me all that much, though. Hell, I'd always thought of trains as being half-alive, anyway. A spirit locked into the steel.

I went to the door of the boxcar and sat gazing out at the land, wishing I had something to eat. We had left the marshes behind and were rolling through a series of hills with long, gradual western slopes and steep drop-offs on their eastern sides, as if they were ancient access ramps of some long-demolished freeway that had been overgrown with tall grasses. The sky was a clear, deep blue with a continent of massy white cloud bubbling up from the northern horizon. Up ahead were bigger hills, dark green in color, lush-looking. The air was soft and pleasantly cool, the air of a spring morning. I took off my shirt to enjoy it; in doing so, I caught a whiff of my body odor. No wonder Stupid was always licking me—I smelled like something two days dead.

"Hungry?" said Pieczynski—his voice startled me, and I nearly toppled out the door. He was holding out what looked to be a flat gray cake with a faint purplish cast.

"What' is it?" The cake was cold and slimy to the touch.

"Jungleberries." Pieczynski settled beside me, his legs dangling off the edge of the car. "We mush 'em up and press 'em. Go on... give it a try."

I nibbled at the edge of the cake. It was almost tasteless—just a vague fruity tang. I took a bigger bite, then another, then wolfed the whole thing down. It didn't satisfy my hunger, but after a few minutes I felt an appreciable sense of well-being.

"There some kinda dope in this shit?" I asked, taking a second cake from Pieczynski.

He shrugged. "Seein' how they make you feel, I s'pose there must be somethin' in 'em. Couldn't tell you what."

"I don't believe I ever heard of jungleberries." I turned the cake over in my hand, as if expecting to find a list of ingredients.

"There's a whole buncha things you ain't heard of that you're gon' be comin' up against real soon." Pieczynski scrunched around so he could look directly at me. "How you feelin'?"

I gestured with the cake. "Big as you are, I eat another of these damn things, I'm liable to be lookin' down at you."

Pieczynski gave a dismissive flip of his hand. "I ain't talking 'bout if you high. Is your body strong? Your thinkin'? I know they are. Same thing happened to me. Night I crawled onto one of these here trains, I was more messed up than you was. Sicker'n a caught fish from crack. Couldn't keep nothin' on my stomach. Doubt I weighed more'n hunnerd-sixty. I was havin' hallucinations. Truth be told, I was damn near dead. But the next mornn', it was like I was reborn." He took a bite of his cake, chewed it noisily, swallowed. "Same thing happens to ever'body catches out on the black trains."

We had begun climbing a fairly steep grade that would, I supposed, take us up into those dark green hills, and as we passed a defile, I saw at the bottom of it what appeared to be the wreckage of a train like the one we were riding. It was nearly shrouded by huge ferns and other growth, but I made out rips and gouges in the sides of the cars.

"Ever' once in a while comes a flock of beardsleys," Pieczynski said, staring gloomily down at the wreck. "Train ain't gon' survive that."

Despite the cake-and-a-half I'd eaten, the sight of the wreck unsettled me. "What kind of place is this? These things... the trains. They're alive, ain't they?"

"They 'bout the most alive things I ever run across. Though that don't seem real plausible if you think about it in terms of where you useta be." Pieczynski spat a gray wad of jungleberry out the door. "Don't nobody know what kind of place this is. Somewheres else is all I know. People taken to callin' it Yonder."

"Somewhere else," I said thoughtfully. "Yonder. That sure 'nough covers a lot of ground."

"Yeah, well. Maybe if some scientist or somebody was here, maybe they could say it better 'bout where we at. But so far ain't nobody caught the ride 'cept for tramps and some kids and a couple of yuppie riders. One of the kid's got hisself a theory about it all, but what he says sounds harebrained to me." Pieczynski made a noise like a horse blowing out breath. "Me, I love it. Life I'm leadin' now beats hell outa the life I useta have. But there's times it don't seem natural. You got these trains rollin' everywhere on tracks nobody built. Ain't even tracks, really. Some sort of natural formation looks like tracks. That ain't weird enough, you got the beardsleys and other animals just as bad. And then you got no people that was born here. It's like God was building a world and decided he didn't like how it was shapin' up, so he went and left it unfinished. I don't know." He tossed a piece of jungleberry cake to the dogs, who sniffed at it and let it lie. "Why should creation be all one way?" he went on. "Why should this place make sense when you lay it next to the one we put behind us? I just leave it at that."



"I think we're dead," I told him. "And this here's the afterlife."

"An afterlife designed for a few hunnerd train riders? Who knows? Maybe. Most ever'body feels they must be dead when they come. But there's one argument against that notion that's tough to get around."

"Oh, yeah? What is it?"

"You can die here, friend," said Pieczynski. "You can die here quicker'n you'd believe."

I asked Pieczynski more questions, but he acted as if talking exhausted him and his answers grew even less informative. I did get out of him that we were headed for a settlement up in the hills, also called Yonder, and that dogs weren't native to this place; he often returned to the world and collected dogs, because they were useful in chasing something he called "fritters" away from the settlement. We fell silent a while and watched the hills build around us, the dark green resolving into dense tropical-looking vegetation. Plants with enormous raincatching leaves and trees laden with vines and large blue and purple flowers hanging from them in bunches. I spotted dark shapes crossing the sky from time to time, but they were too distant to identify. Every unfamiliar thing I saw disturbed me. Though I still felt good, I couldn't shake a sense of unease. I was certain there was something Pieczynski wasn't telling me, or else there was something important he didn't know. But I'd been considerably more confused about my whereabouts and destination in the past, hopping freights in a state of derangement and winding up in places that it had taken days to locate on my mental map. I had learned to thrive on disorientation. You might say I'd been in training for this kind of ride all my years on the rails.

Pieczynski nodded off for a bit, and I became concerned that we'd sleep past where we were supposed to detrain, so I woke him. "Jesus Christ!" he said, disgruntled, and rubbed his eyes. He yawned. "Don't worry about it. Train always stops the same places. Always stops in Klamath Falls, always stops in Yonder. That's why they built the settlement there."

"Why's that?"

"Why's it always stop where it does? That what you're askin'?"

"Yeah."

"Y'know, I still ain't figured out how to ask the trains any questions," he said. "Maybe you can figure it out, you ask so many damn questions yourself."

I apologized for waking him, and mollified, he said it was no big deal. He grabbed a canteen from his pack, had a swallow, and passed it to me. Warmish water. It tasted good.

"You gon' tell me your real name?" he asked. "If I'm gonna introduce you 'round, be better if I knew what to call you."

"Maurice," I said. "Maurice Showalter."

He tried it out, frowned and said, "Damn if I don't believe you be better off stickin' with Billy Long Gone."

j

The train slowed and stopped coiled around the base of a hill. We jumped out and started up the slope, pushing through dense brush, bushes with big floppy leaves that spilled water on us as we knocked them aside. The dogs eddied about our feet, yipping and snuffling the weeds, making the walking hard. From the top of the hill you could see eastward across another expanse of plain scattered about with bright blue lakes shaped roughly like the punctuation to an unwritten paragraph-stray periods, semi-colons, and question marks strewn across an immense yellowish green page. Farther off was an area of dark mist that spread along the horizon, broken its entire length by a range of forbidding-looking mountains about ten sizes bigger than the ones we had passed through after leaving Klamath Falls, their peaks set so close together, they might have been a graph forecasting the progress of a spectacularly erratic business. When I asked Pieczinski what lay beyond them, he said he didn't know, he had only traveled a short ways out onto the plain, pointing out an area marked by three small round lakes that formed an elision to an invisible sentence that had no formal ending but simply trailed away...

"Call them mountains over there Yonder's Wall," he said. "The trains go up into 'em, and we've had some folks take a ride out that way. Ain't a'one come back to see us." He squinted into the gray distance. "Don't seem like much of an argument for followin' 'em."

We walked along a ridge line for a while, then along a red dirt path that angled down through jungly growth. The dogs trotted ahead and behind us, sniffing at leaves and crawling things, their ears pricking to variations in the fizzing noises-insects, I assumed-that issued from the vegetation. After about five minutes of down, the path leveled off and meandered alongside a river course; I could hear though not see the movement of water close by. Many of the smaller tree trunks were sheathed in a mosaic scale of pale blue and dull green that appeared itself coated in a cracked glaze-it glittered wherever the sun struck it. The leaves that dangled down over our heads were tattered and fleshy, like pale green, flabby, boneless hands. Vines were

interwoven so thickly above, I couldn't tell if the leaves belonged to a tree or were part of some parasitic growth. Sunlight fell through chinks in the canopy, painting streaks of gold on the path. You could see only about a dozen feet into the jungle on either side before your eye met with an impenetrable wall of growth, and I couldn't understand how, with only two, three hundred people living in Yonder, they kept the path so clear. I'd never been in a tropical jungle before, but I had the thought that it should be hotter and smellier than this one. It still felt like a spring day, and though now and again I caught a hint of rot, the predominant scent was a heavy floral sweetness.

After a few minutes more we reached the river's edge, and I was left slackjawed by what I saw on the opposite shore. It looked as if people were living in chambers that were supported somehow in the crown of an immense tree. I could see them walking about in their separate rooms, which were all framed in sprays of leaves. Then I made out gleams of what appeared to be polished walls and realized that what I'd taken for a tree must be the ruin of an ancient building, seven stories high (an estimate, because the floors were sunk down in places, elevated in others) and occupying several hundred feet of the bank, the entire structure overgrown with moss and vines, its facade crumbled away, leaving dozens of chambers open to the weather. Blankets and other types of cloth hangings were arranged over a number of these openings. Fronting the ruin was a stretch of bare rock on which several people were washing their laundry in the murky green water and then spreading it to dry. It was the Conrad Hilton of hobo jungles, and I wouldn't have been greatly surprised to see a doorman guarding the entrance, dressed in a stove-in top hat and tails, and smoking the stub of a found cigar.

There were twenty, twenty-five dogs snooting about on the rocks or just lying in the sun, and when our dogs spotted them, they took to barking excitedly. A couple of the people waved, and I heard somebody call out to Pieczynski.

"Thought you said wasn't no people born over here." I said to Pieczynski. "So where'd that fuckin' ruin come from?"

"The hell you talkin' about?" he said. "Ain't no ruins around here."

"Then what you call that?" I pointed at the opposite bank.

He gave a snort of laughter. "That ain't no ruin, friend. That there's a tree."

j

About five years ago when I was riding with a female hobo name of Bubblehead, she used to read me from the children's books I carried in my pack, and there was this one had a tree in it called a monkey-puzzle tree. It had branches that would grow out sideways and then straight down; the whole thing resembled an intricate cage with all these nooks and crannies inside the branches where you could shelter from the elements. Yonder's tree might have been a giant mutant brother to the monkey-puzzle tree, but there were a few salient differences: the larger horizontal branches flattened out to form floored chambers with walls of interwoven foliage, and various of the branches that grew straight down were hollow and had been tricked out with ladders. There were ladders, too, all up and down the trunk, and elevators that worked on pulleys and could be lowered and raised between levels. I reckon there were in the high hundreds of chambers throughout. Maybe more. Only about a hundred-fifty were occupied, I was told, so I had my choice. I settled myself in a smallish one close to the main trunk on the third floor; it was open on two sides, but I figured I'd find a way to close it off, and it was just the right size for me and Stupid... though I wasn't sure he'd be joining me. He'd run off with the other dogs as soon as he'd finished paddling across the river. The sweetish smell of the jungle was even stronger near the trunk, and I supposed it was the tree giving off that odor.

Pieczynski handed me over to a trim, tanned, thirty-something woman name of Annie Ware and went off to see to his own affairs. Annie had sandy hair cut like a boy's and wore khaki shorts and a loose blouse of stitched-together bandannas. It had been a long time since I'd looked at a woman with anything approaching a clear mind and unclouded eye, and I found myself staring at Annie. There was a calmness to her face illustrated by the fine lines around her gray eyes and mouth, and though she wasn't what you'd call a raving beauty, she was a damn sight more attractive than the women I'd encountered on the rails. She led me through the dim interior of the tree, passing several occupied chambers lit by candles, and explained how things worked in Yonder.

"We get most of our supplies from back in the world," she said. "There's five of us-Pie's one-who don't mind traveling back and forth. They scrounge what we need. Rest of us wouldn't go back for love nor money."

When I asked how come this was, she shot me a sideways glance and said, "You feel like goin' back?"

"Not right now," I told her. "But I 'spect sooner or later I'll be wantin' to."

"I don't know. You look like a stayer to me." She guided me around a corner and we came to a place where

you could see out through a couple of unoccupied chambers at the jungle. The sunlight made the flattened branch shine like polished mahogany. "Everyone works here. Some people fish, some hunt for edibles in the jungle. Some weave, some cook..."

"I can fish," I said. "My daddy useta..."

"You'll be doin' chores at first. Cleaning and runnin' errands. Like that."

"Is that so?" I stopped walking and glared at her. "I been doin' for myself..."

She cut me off again. "We can't tolerate no lone wolfs here," she said. "We all work together or else we'd never survive. New arrivals do chores, and that's what you'll be doin' 'til you figure out what job suits you."

"Just who is it lays down the rules?"

"Ain't no rules. It's how things are is all."

"Well, I don't believe that," I said. "Even out on the rails, free as that life is, there's a peckin' order."

"You ain't out on the rails no more." Annie folded her arms beneath her breasts. Her eyes narrowed, and I had the impression she perceived me as an unsavory article. "Some people been here more'n twenty years. When they came, there was people here who told 'em how things worked. And there was people here even before them."

"What happened to 'em all?"

"They died... what do you think? Either they was killed or they just gave out. Then there's some caught a ride over Yonder's Wall."

"Them mountains, you mean?"

"Yeah, right. 'Them mountains'." She charged the words with disdain.

"You don't like me very much, do you?" I said.

Annie's mouth thinned. "Let's say I ain't disposed to like you."

"Why's that? I ain't done nothin' to you."

She twitched her head to the side as if she'd been struck and kept silent for a four or five seconds. "You don't have a clue who I am, do you?" she asked finally.

I studied her for a second or two. "I never seen you before in my life."

She fixed me with a mean look. "My train name useta be Ruby Tuesday. I rode the southern line mostly, but there was times I rode up north."

"Ruby?" I peered at her, trying to see in her face-a face that radiated soundness-the wild-haired, grimy clot of human misery I'd known long years before.

"It's Annie now," she said. "I cleaned up. Same as you. Only difference is, I been living clean seven years, and you been doin' it for a day."

I couldn't believe it was her, but I couldn't disbelieve it either. Why would she lie? "What'd I do to piss you off?" I asked. "Hell, I rode with you when you's with Chester the Molester. We had some good times together."

She gaped at me, as if stunned. "You don't remember?"

"I don't know what you got in mind, but there's a whole lotta things I don't remember."

"Well, you gon' be doin' some serious rememberin' the next few weeks. Maybe it'll pop up." She spun on her heel and walked away.

"Hey, don't go!" I called after her. "I don't know where the fuck I am! How'm I gon' find my room?"

"Look for it," she snapped back. "I ain't about to stand around and hold your dick for ya!"

j

I did, indeed, do some serious remembering over the next week or thereabouts. Days, I fed fish heads and guts to the dogs-must have been around sixty of them all told-and carried messages and helped dig new latrines. Nights, I sat in my room, closed off from the rest of Yonder by two blankets that Pieczynski had lent me, and stared at a candle flame (candles also courtesy of Pieczynski) as the stuff of my life came bubbling up like black juice through the shell of stepped-on bug. Not much I remembered gave me pleasure. I saw myself drinking, drugging, thieving and betraying. And all that before I'd become a tramp. I could scarcely stand to think about it, yet that was all I thought about, and I would fall asleep each night with my head hurting from images of the bedraggled, besotted life I had led.

As the days passed I became familiar with Yonder's routine. Every morning small groups would head upriver to fish or out into the jungle to pick berries and other edibles, each accompanied by a handful of dogs. The rest took care of their work in and around the tree. On the landward side of the tree, a space had been cleared in the jungle and that's where the food preparation was done-in long pits dug beneath thatched open structures. There seemed only the loosest possible sense of community among the residents. People were civil to one another, but generally kept to themselves. At times I would wander about the tree, looking for

company, and while some would say Hi and introduce themselves, nobody invited me to sit and chat until one night I ran into a skinny, intense kid named Bobby Forstadt, who shared a room on the fifth floor with Sharon, a blond punk girl who was decorated all over with self-applied tattoos-black words and crudely drawn flowers and the names of boys.

When Bobby found out I was new to Yonder, he invited me in and started pumping me for information about the world. I proved a major disappointment, because I hadn't paid a great deal of attention to current events the past few years. I wasn't even sure who was president, though I told him I thought it was somebody from Texas. The governor, maybe.

"Bush?" Bobby arched an eyebrow and looked at me over top of his wire-rimmed glasses. He had a narrow, bony face that peeked out from a mass of brown curls like a fox from a hedge. "Hey, I don't think so," he said. "What about Gore?"

The name didn't set off any bells.

"Fuck! Bush?" Bobby appeared deep in thought and after a bit he said, "You musta got it wrong, man."

"I don't know," I said. "Maybe. But I was jungled up with Kid Dallas right after the election and he was shouting, 'Yee-ha!' and shit, and goin' on 'bout some Texas guy got elected."

"Bush," said Bobby, and shook his head, as if he just couldn't get his brain around the thought. He was sitting cross-legged on the floor behind a desk he'd made from a tree stump; a spiral-bound notebook was open atop it, and there were stacks of similar notebooks in one corner of the room, separated by a couple of rolled-up sleeping bags from stacks of regular books, mostly dog-eared paperbacks. One wall was dominated by a hand-drawn map constructed of several dozen taped-together sheets of notebook paper. I asked him about it, and he said it was a map of Yonder.

"It's probably not accurate," he said. "I just put together everybody's stories about how they came here and where they've traveled since, and that's what I ended up with." He cocked an eye toward me. "Where'd you catch out?"

"Klamath Falls," I told him. "Weirdest thing, 'bout maybe ten minutes out we started goin' through these mountains. Big 'uns."

"Everyone sees the same exact stuff," Bobby said. "First the mountains and the marshes. Then the hills."

"You sayin' everyone who comes to Yonder goes through the same country, no matter where they catch out?"

"Sounds fucked-up, huh?" Bobby scratched at his right knee, which was poking through a hole in his jeans. He also had on a black Monster Magnet T-shirt. Circling his wrist was a bracelet woven of blond hair that I presumed to be Sharon's. "This whole place is fucked-up," he went on. "I've been here going on four years, and I haven't seen anything yet that made sense."

With little prompting, he went off into a brief lecture about how various elements of the ecology of the place didn't fit together, using terms with which I was mostly unfamiliar. "When I first arrived," he said, "I thought of Yonder as Hobo Heaven, y'know. A lowball version of 'The Big Rock Candy Mountain.' Everything but the cigarette trees and the free beer. But you know what the place reminds me of now? It's like the terrain some software guy might write for a computer game. The trains and all the bizarre fauna... I was so freaked out when I got here, I didn't question any of it. But you examine it and you find out it's really stupid. No logic. Just this insane conglomeration of irrational objects. But it's a landscape where you could set a cool war or a puzzle game like *Myst*."

"That what you think Yonder is?" I asked. "A computer game."

"Yeah, why not? An extremely sophisticated one. And we're the characters. The algorithms the real players inhabit." He gave a shrug that seemed to signify cluelessness. "What do you think it is?"

"Best I can come up with, I figure we're dead and this is some kinda test."

"Then how do you account for the fact that people die? And that some of us travel back to the world?"

"Never said I knew what the rules was for bein' dead," I told him. "Maybe it all fits right in."

He sat there for a moment, nodded, then hopped up and went over to the stacked notebooks. "I want you to check this out," he said, digging through the stacks. "Here!" He came back to the desk and tossed me a ratty notebook with a red cover. "Read this when you get a chance, and let me know what you think."

"I can't read," I said.

He absorbed this for a two-count. "You got a disability?"

"Not that I know of. My daddy wasn't too big on school. I can sign my name, I can add and subtract. That's about it."

"You want to learn, I'll teach you."

"I reckon not. I gone this long without, it don't seem all that important now."

"I won't push it," Bobby said. "But you'd be smart to take me up on the offer. Time can move pretty slow

around here."

j

The first grown-up book I read start to finish was a taped-together paperback entitled *Sweet Wild Pussy*. It had nothing to do with cats, nor do I believe it possessed much in the way of literary value, unless you were to count being made incredibly horny as an artistic achievement. Bobby had given it to me because the words were simple, and I felt accomplished on finishing it-it was the result of months of study. Still and all, I wish he had loaned me something else to begin with. Being the first thing I read, it exerted an undue influence on me for a while, and I found myself thinking overly much about "love ponies ridden hard" and "squeezable passion mounds." Eventually I got around to reading the red notebook that Bobby had pushed on me during our first meeting. It had been found on a train that had been returning from Yonder's Wall and was purportedly the diary of a man named Harley Janks whom no one remembered. Harley claimed to have ridden straight from the world, past Yonder and on into the mountains. He said that beyond the mountains lay a world that was hellish hard to live in, populated by all manner of nasty critters; but there was a big settlement there and folks were carving out a place for themselves, working to bring order out of chaos. Most people who had read the notebook considered it a hoax. Harley was not a terribly articulate man, and his descriptions of life over Yonder's Wall were pretty thin. However, Bobby thought the notebook went a ways toward proving his theory that Yonder was part of a computer game, and that the world Harley described was simply the next level.

Time, as Bobby had said, did move slowly at the settlement. I came to view my life there as a kind of penance for my sins, a retreat during which I was forced to meditate upon the damage I had caused, the waste and delusion of almost my every waking hour. And maybe, I thought, that meditation was a measure of Yonder's purpose. Though the actual nature of the place continued to elude me, I realized that Bobby was right-nothing about it made sense, at least in terms of a reality that I could comprehend. I noticed all manner of peculiarities. Like for example, no one ever got pregnant, and when someone died, which happened twice during those first months, sooner or later somebody new would arrive on a train. It wasn't always a one-for-one exchange, yet from what I could tell the population had remained stable since forever. But if you strung all the peculiar things together, all you wound up with was a string of peculiar things that didn't belong together. I kept going back to what Pieczynski had said-"Why should creation be all one way?" And then I'd think how it would be for a caveman whose task it was to explain the operation of the universe judging by what he knew of the world. That was how I understood our position. We were trying to comprehend the universe from information we'd gathered while living in a humoungus tree for a few months or a few years, whereas it had taken folks thousands of years to come up with the theories of creation found in some of Bobby's books. A theory, as I saw it, was a kind of net that held all the facts you knew. Back in the Stone Age, they'd only had a few basic facts and so the nets they used had been basic; but as the centuries went by and more facts came to light, the mesh of the nets necessary to contain them had grown finer and finer, and things still fell through the gaps. My feeling was they'd never come up with the perfect net, and we'd never know for sure what was going on, no matter how advanced we proclaimed ourselves to be. Maybe, I thought, first impressions were the most accurate. Maybe the old world had been created by a god, and this one was populated by the dead. It didn't make life any easier to hang your hat on those notions, but it did allow you to focus on the matter at hand.

While learning to read, I naturally spent a lot of time with Bobby. People were always stopping by his room and telling him about something they'd seen, which he would then write down in a notebook, and he introduced me to all of them. But I never struck up any friendships, and once I started reading on my own, Bobby and I stopped hanging out. Looking back, I can see that he wasn't all that interested in me-at least no more than he was interested in anyone else-and the main reason he taught me was to fill his time. That was how things were with everyone in Yonder. You might have a friend or two, but otherwise you left everyone else to their own devices. After the first week, I hardly ever ran into Pieczynski anymore. People I'd known on the rails, and there were twelve of them, men I'd ridden with like Shaky Jake, Diamond Dave, Dogman Tony... they acknowledged me in passing and then went on with their oddly monastic reclaimed lives. Even Stupid kept his distance. Once every so often he'd wander up and snoot at my hand to get petted, but he had become part of the pack and spent the bulk of his day associating with his four-legged associates. For my own part, I didn't have much interest in anybody, either. It was like whatever portion of my brain was in charge of curiosity had been turned down to dim. The only constant in my life were occasional visits from Annie Ware. She never stayed long and rarely showed me anything other than a businesslike face. I guessed she was filling her time by checking up on me. I was always glad to see her. Glad all over, so to speak. But I didn't

enjoy the visits much because I assumed that I had done something bad to her-I had no idea what it could have been, but I imagined the worst and felt confused and remorseful whenever she came around.

For more than six months my life was occupied by menial chores, and by studying and reading. The two favorite books I read were *Gulliver's Travels* and Richard Halliburton's *The Occident and the Orient*, which was a travel book published a half century before. It was full of black-and-white photographs of the Pyramids and South Pacific islands and the Himalayas. When I compared them to mental snapshots of the switchyard in Topeka and tramps sleeping among piles of cow crap in a Missoula cattle pen and various hobo jungles, I wished now I'd done some real traveling back in the world instead of just riding the freights and drinking my liver stiff. Thinking what I could have seen, a world of blue sky and ice from twenty-nine thousand feet up or tropical fish swarming like live jewels in aquamarine water, it stirred me up, and I would go off exploring throughout the tree, climbing rope ladders from floor to floor, peeking into chambers where ex-hobos were engaged in mending shirts or decorating their cells, and ex-punk riders were playing chess on a makeshift board. The atmosphere reminded me of this idiot farm a Seattle judge sent me to when I was so fucked-up, they couldn't tell if I was sane or not, a place where you sat around all day whacked on thorazine instead of jungleberries and smeared fingerpaint all over yourself. Even though this state of affairs was preferable to the lives most of the residents had led prior to crossing the dimensional divide or the River Styx or whatever border it was that we had crossed, I just didn't understand being satisfied with it.

One morning about an hour before sun-up-if it *was* a sun that rose each morning and not, as Bobby theorized, an illusion produced by the software into which our essences had been transformed, I rolled out early and waited for the fishermen and the hunting parties to set out, and when I spotted Euliss Brooks, the best fisherman in Yonder, a rickety-looking, stiff-gaited, white-bearded black man with three rods on his right shoulder, carrying a net and a bait bucket, I fell in behind him, as did a handful of dogs. He glanced at me over his shoulder, but didn't say anything and kept walking. I followed him along a path that cut inland for a mile, then angled back toward the river, rejoining it at a point where the banks widened and lifted into steep cliffs of pocked grayish black limestone, forming a cup-shaped gorge that shadowed the green water, and the perfume heat of the jungle gave way to a profound freshness, like the smell of spring water in an old well. Birds were always circling overhead, their simple shapes like crosses against the high blue backdrop, then diving down to settle in the spiky-leaved trees that fringed the cliffs.

At the edge of the gorge was a wooden platform that could be lowered on ropes and pulleys to a ledge sixty-some feet below, just above water level-that's where Euliss did his fishing, while the dogs waited for him up top. Euliss didn't utter a word until he was ready to mount the platform, and then asked me how much I weighed.

"Hunnerd 'n' fifty maybe," I said.

He mulled this over. "Reckon I'll let you go on down alone," he said. "Just hang onto the rail and don't worry it sway back and forth. Damn thing always do that."

I offered to take the bucket and the rods down with me, but he said, "Naw, you might drop 'em."

"I ain't gon' drop nothin'," I told him, annoyed-what did he take me for?

"First time down you liable to drop somethin'" said Euliss. "My word on that."

I began to lower myself, and the platform swayed sickeningly, scraping against the limestone. I gripped the rail hard. Up close, the cliff face resembled the smoke-blackened ruin of a derelict cruiser: rocky projections clumped with blue-green moss; flat surfaces hung with twists of vine; punched into here and there by caves, the largest being about five feet in diameter. As I descended past one of the cave entrances, I thought I spotted movement within. I peered into the blackness, and a wave of giddiness overwhelmed me. My vision dimmed, my throat went dry. I had a moment's panic, but that was swept aside by a rush of contentment, and then I had a sense of a shy curiosity that seemed distant from me, as if it were something brushing the edge of my thoughts, the way a cat will glide up against your leg. Allied with this was an impression of great age and infinite patience... and strength. A strength of mind like that you'd imagine a whale to possess, or some other ancient dweller in solitude. I lost track of myself for an unguessable time, and when I pulled myself together, I could have sworn I saw something go slithering back into the cave. Panic set in for real this time. I lowered the platform hastily, and when I jumped off onto the ledge, I shouted up at Euliss, asking him what the fuck had happened. He waved for me to send up the platform. Minutes later, after he had joined me on the ledge, I asked him again.

"Didn't nobody tell you bout the elders?" With effort, he bent down and plucked a large dead bug out of the bait bucket.

I half-recalled Bobby using the term, but couldn't recall exactly what he had said.

"Lookit that vine there." Euliss pointed to a long strand of vine that was hanging into the water about a dozen yards from the ledge. "Follow it on up. Y'see where it goes?"

The vine vanished into a cave mouth halfway up the cliff.

"That's one of 'em," Euliss said. "He fishin' just like us."

I studied the vine-it didn't twitch or vibrate, but I could see now that it was different from the other vines. Thicker, and a mottled gray in color.

"What are they?" I asked.

"Old hermits like to fish. Thass all I know. And I ain't crawlin' into one of them caves just to catch a look at 'em. They be fishing with that tentacle thing they got all day long." He handed me a rod-a Shimano. "Don't be mistreatin' that pole, boy. Took me most of a year to get Pie to fetch it." He straightened, heaved a sigh and put a hand to his lower back as if to stifle a pain. "I figgered you knew 'bout the elders. Don't nobody 'cept me like fishin' here 'cause they scared of 'em. Ain't nothin' be scared 'bout. Once they touch you up, they know all they want to 'bout you, and they won't never bother you again."

The fishing itself wasn't much of a challenge. We were after the big sluggish fish with tarnished-looking scales that hid out under the rock shelves underwater; once they were hooked, they struggled briefly, then gave out and let us haul them onto the ledge. The bulk of my thoughts turned to the strange creature that had scoped me out with its tentacle, to the impression of age and patience and calm I'd derived. It occurred to me that the presence of the elders suited Bobby Forstadt's theory that we were constructs in a computer game better than it did the notion that we had passed on. They served no apparent purpose, they were window-dressing, an invention designed to appeal to twelve-year-olds-like mutant Zen monks in their shyness and simplicity, possessed of vast wisdom, bestowing calm and contentment on everyone they touched, even-I assumed-the fish they ate. Or maybe they had a hidden purpose. They might be the secret masters of this bizarre place. I was beginning to wish I'd never learned how to read. Too many ideas started rattling around in your head, and it got to where you couldn't make up your mind about anything.

"Best thing you can do," Euliss advised me, "is concentrate on fishin' and don't worry 'bout it. People 'round here worry too damn much 'bout what's goin' on. Ain't nothin' to worry 'bout. It's just God."

"God?" I said.

"That's right! You set here and fish long enough, you gon' feel Him. He's all around us-we livin' inside Him." He cocked an eye toward me. "I know you think you heard all that before, but what I'm sayin' ain't the same as you heard. You quit runin' your mouth all the time, you'll know what I'm talkin' 'bout."

Each morning thereafter Euliss and I went out to fish; each evening we would return home and drop off our catch with the cooks. I'd thought that we might become friends, but we never did. Euliss had one topic of conversation-fishing at the gulf-and once he had done communicating whatever information he felt compelled to convey, he would fall silent until next he needed to instruct me on some point of lore. Once I asked him about his life before arriving in Yonder, and he told me he had ridden under the name of Coal Train and he been hoboing for almost fifty years. He didn't appear eager to expand on the subject, and I guess I understood that. After all the painful remembering I'd done, I had little desire to share my old life with anyone.

I woke up one day feeling poorly, and instead of going to the gulf, I slept in. Around noon, moved by restlessness, I forded the river and set off walking the path along which I had come to Yonder. Three dogs-one, the little collie that had ridden with me and Pie-fell in at my heels. I followed the path up through the jungle, then ascended the ridge line until I reached a point where I could see the tracks curling around the base of a hill. A train was standing on it, most of the cars out of sight beyond the curve. The engine and the visible cars all bore ridged scars left by beardley attacks, and that led me to believe it was an old train. As I've said my curiosity had been at low ebb ever since my arrival, but now I was suddenly overcome with curiosity, wondering how the trains got born and how long they lived or if those questions were even relevant. Once I had scrambled down the slope, I walked alongside the cars, examining them closely. Nowhere did I see a bolt or a seam. The entire train was of a piece-couplings and wheels and doors all seemingly grown into shape. The wheels appeared to be made of the same stuff as the cars, only thickened and harder, and the tracks they rode on weren't metal but grooved black rock that sprung from the earth. I scraped away dirt from the grade and saw that rock was embedded to a depth of at least two feet-that was how far down I excavated. The engine had no windshield, no doors, no lights-it was just a dead black streamlined shape. How could it watch ahead? I wondered. How did it take sustenance... fuel? I had a hundred questions and no answers. It was like Bobby Forstadt said, nothing made any sense.

I went around front of the engine and then walked downtrain between the side of the engine and the hill. Just above the engine's rear wheel someone had spraypainted a red message, faded, but still legible:

**SANTA CLAUS RODE THIS BLACK BASTARD INTO THE EAST, HEADING OVER YONDER'S WALL**

I'd never met Santa Claus, but I'd heard old hobos talk about him, much of the talk regarding what a

devious piece of crap he had been, this coming from men who themselves were notable for being devious pieces of crap. They did testify that Santa Claus had been a balls-out rider, how when he was determined to catch out on a train, nothing, not the bulls, not security devices, would stop him. What interested me was why he had signed his moniker and not his birth name. Maybe, I thought, his parents had stuck him with something as unappetizing as Maurice Showalter.

I went back around to the other side of the train and sat myself down on the grade. The trains, the tree, the beardsleys, the elders, the placid, disinterested inhabitants of Yonder treading water in their lives, and Yonder's Wall-they still seemed to be pieces belonging to different puzzles. But now I wondered if Santa Claus hadn't hit on the only solution there was to all of them. What was the point in sticking around the tree and eating jungleberries and fishing and thinking about the past? Might as well see what lay beyond the mountains. Could be you'd die... but maybe you were already dead. For certain sure, according to everything I'd heard, you eventually were going to die from sitting on your butt. And if Bobby was right, then moving to the next level was your one chance to win.

I was going round and round with this in my head, when I spied somebody walking toward me from the curve. Soon I saw that it was Annie Ware. She had on an orange T-shirt and her khaki shorts. She looked like ice cream to the Devil. "What you doin' out here?" I asked as she came up, and she shrugged and said, "I like the trains, y'know." She stood over me for a few beats, staring off along the tracks, shifting her feet, as if feeling betwixt and between. Then, with an abrupt movement, she dropped down beside me. "Sometimes when I'm huntin' for berries, I come back this way so I can look at 'em. There's always a train waitin'."

That startled me. "Always?"

She nodded. "Yeah... least I can't recall a time when there wasn't one."

Video game, I decided. The zombies are always in the parking lot, the hamburger with the message under the bun is always served at the same cafe. Then I thought, Why couldn't death have that sort of predictability? All every new piece of the puzzle did was add another confusing color.

We sat without speaking for the better part of a minute, and then, for want of anything better, I said, "I know I done something to you, but I swear I can't remember it. I been tryin', too."

Her mouth thinned, but she didn't say anything.

I lifted my eyes to the sky, to the dark unidentifiable creatures that were ever circling there, gliding among scatters of cloud. "If you want me to know what I done, you probably gon' have to tell me."

A breeze ruffled the weeds alongside the grade, drifting up a flurry of whitish seed pods.

"You broke my heart, you sorry son-of-a-bitch." Annie's eyes fixed straight ahead. "You'd been romancin' me for a long time, and finally I told you I was gonna leave Chester. We're s'posed to meet at Mother Love's in Missoula. I waited for you almost a week." She turned a steely look on me. "It was bad enough thinkin' you run out on me, but I know you fuckin' forgot! You was probably so damn stoned, you didn't even know you were hittin' on me!"

Here I'd been thinking I must have raped her, and now finding out I'd stood her up... well, if I'd been back in my old life that would have pissed me off good and proper. I might have laughed drunkenly and said something like, "Broke your heart? Who the fuck you think you are? A goddamn princess?" But I'd become a wiser man. "I'm real sorry," I said. "Chances are I was so messed-up behind..."

"I realize I wasn't much back then," she went on, a quaver in her voice, "but goddammit, I think I deserved better'n to get left alone in a mission in fuckin' Missoula fightin' off a buncha ol' animals day and night for a week! I *know* I deserved better!"

"I'm sorry," I said. "I truly am. I wouldn't do it now."

"The hell's that mean?"

"Means now all the shit's been scraped off my soul, I still like you. It means that me likin' you must run deep."

She shifted like she was about to stand up, but she stayed put. "I don't..." she began; she drew a breath and held it for couple of seconds before letting it out. "You're just horny."

"Well, that don't mean I don't like you."

This brought a slight softening of her expression, but then she said, "Shit, I ain't listenin' to this," and got to her feet.

"C'mon, Annie. You 'member how it was back in the world." I stood up behind her. "We were fuckin' wrecks, the both of us. We'd likely have killed each other."

"That's still an option, far as I'm concerned."

It's funny sometimes how you enter into an involvement. You're not even thinking about it with the front of your mind, you're dealing with some stupid bullshit, then all of a sudden it's standing right there, and you say, Oh yeah, that's what I been wanting, that's what the back of my mind's been occupied with, and now



you can't do without it. Watching the featherings of whitish blond hair beside Annie's left ear was the thing that did it for me. I put a hand on her shoulder, lightly, ready to jerk it back if she complained or took a swing at me. She flinched, but let the hand stay where it was. Then she said, "You ain't gettin' laid anytime soon, I can promise you that."

"What can I get?" I asked, trying to put a laugh in the words.

"You keep pushin', you'll find out." She stepped away, turned to me, and I could see our old trouble in her worn, still-pretty face. "Just take it slow, okay? I ain't too good at forgive and forget."

I held up my hands, surrendering.

She pinned me with another hard look, as if searching for signs of falsity. Then she gave a rueful shake of her head. "Let's go on home," she said.

"Don't you want to hang out here with the train?"

"I'm gonna hunt up some decent food and fix you dinner," she said. "I wanna find out if we can spend an evening together without makin' each other crazy." She ran her eye along the sleek curve of the engine. "This ol' train be 'long here any time I want it."

Back when I opted out of society, choosing to live free, as I perceived it then, I could have wound up on the streets in some homeless-friendly city like Portland, but I don't believe I would have made the choice I did if I hadn't loved trains. Loved their idea and their reality. Hobos were to my mind the knight templars of the homeless, carrying on a brave tradition of anti-establishment activity, like bikers and other such noble outcasts. Five years later I doubt I could have pronounced the word "anti-establishment", and the true reasons for my checking out, laziness, stubbornness, residual anger, and damn foolishness, had been wiped away by countless pints of fortified wine and enough speed to make every racehorse in America run fast. But I never lost my love for the trains, and neither had Annie.

"I 'member the first time I rode," she said. "It was the best damn feelin'! I caught me a local out of Tucson with this guy I met in Albuquerque. We found us a flatcar loaded with pipe. Right in the middle of the pipe there was this little square area that was clear. Like a nest. We got ourselves down in there and partied all the way to Denver."

This took me by surprise, because it was the first time I'd heard anyone in Yonder reminisce about their life back in the world. We were sitting in Annie's room, which was half again as big as mine. Her ceiling was contrived of interwoven leaves and vines and a branch thick as a man's waist that cut across on the diagonal, and her walls were curtains made of sewn-together remnants, pieces of old skirts and sleeping bags and towels and such. She'd fashioned a mattress by stuffing a hand-sewn cover with grass—it looked a damn sight more comfortable than my old fart-sack resting on a hardwood floor. Candles fired the curtain colors with their flickering. It was a nice cozy little space.

"My first time wasn't all that great," I said. "But I know what you talkin' about."

"Tell me," she said, and this, too, surprised me. I'd grown used to people not caring about my particulars.

I drew my legs up so I was sitting cross-legged and looked down at my hands. "I was one pitiful motherfucker back then. Couldn't hold a job. Not 'cause I didn't do the work. I'd always get pissed off at somebody in authority and cuss 'em out, and that'd be that. But then I met this woman. Jesus, she was somethin'. She knew what kinda trouble she was gettin' with me, but she loved me anyway. I don't understand why to this day. She didn't try to straighten me out; she made me want to straighten myself out. But I just couldn't handle bein' happy. Least that's the way it seems to me now. I went to a shrink, and he told me I was always tryin' to punish myself 'cause of all the crap my daddy put me through. I told him, 'Hell, I know that. What I do about it?' And he says, 'What do you want to do about it?' I thought that was bullshit, so I got mad and walked out of his office." I picked at the cuticle on my thumbnail. "I understand now he'd seen through me. I didn't want to do anything about it. It was easier to go on bein' miserable than it was to work at bein' happy. That's what made me mad. Him knowin' that about me. I was so upset by what he'd said, I found me an ATM and took all the money out of my account. *Our* account. I was livin' with her and we'd merged our finances, such as they were. I took over seven hunderd dollars, most of it hers. Then I went to the liquor store and bought myself a bottle of expensive whiskey. Gentleman Jack. And I headed down to the Oregon City freight yard to drink it. I wasn't plannin' on goin' nowhere, but it started to rain and I crawled into an open boxcar to finish my bottle. Next I know, train's pullin' into the switchyard at Roseville. I run into a couple hobos jungled up outside the yard. They was happy drunk, on their way to the hobo convention at Brill. Come along with us, they said. All they wanted was the crank and the booze my seven hunderd could buy. But I figured I'd found my true companions. In a way I s'pose I had."

Saying it out loud seemed to lighten me by half, and thinking I could let go of it all just that easy, it made me wish I could unsay it, gather it back inside me. It wasn't something I felt I should ever be free of, even for a few seconds.

"What was her name?" Annie asked.

"Eileen," I said.

The name lay like a puddle that had formed between us, but when Annie spoke again, it seemed to evaporate.

"Damn near everyone here got a past needs livin' down," she said. "Only option we got is to make the best of what is."

"That don't hardly seem like enough."

We sat for a while without speaking. It started to rain-I could hear it coming down heavy through the curtains, but we were so deep inside the tree, none of the drops penetrated the canopy. It felt like we were in a bubble of light submerged in a rushing river.

"Somethin' else I better tell you," I said. "I been thinkin' 'bout catchin' out again."

Her face appeared to sharpen, but she remained silent.

"Maybe headin' out east," I said. "Takin' a trip through the mountains."

"That's crazy," she said quietly. "Don't nobody come back from there."

"You sayin' you never thought about it? I don't believe that. I know why you hangin' 'round the trains."

"Sure, I thought about it." Annie's voice was hard the way your voice becomes when you're suppressing emotion. "Life here... It ain't livin', it's just bein'. There's times I considered takin' that trip. But that ain't what I call it."

"What do you call it?" I asked.

"Checkin' out," she said.

"Maybe there's somethin' there."

"Yeah, right!"

"Seriously," I said. "What's the point of all this bullshit if there ain't somethin' out there?"

Annie gave a sarcastic laugh. "Oh, I see. There's gotta be a point. Worst thing about this place is havin' to listen to a buncha tramps settin' 'round philosophizin'!" She affected a crotchety voice. "Yonder's the borderland between life and death. It's a computer game, it's new world a'buildin'. It's a little scrap of reality left over from creation, like the scraps get left over from a cookie cutter."

"I never run across that last 'un," I said.

Annie snorted in disgust. "Stick around! You'll hear crazier'n that. I realize most people here just got their brains back, but ain't none of 'em geniuses. They'd be better off tryin' to figger out what to do 'bout the fritters, or somethin' practical, 'steada studyin' on what's to come and why."

"Tell me 'bout the fritters," I said. "Nobody ever wants to talk about 'em. They just say they're dangerous."

"I don't really know what they are. They look like apple fritters and they float around in the air. They got some kinda poison'll kill you quick."

I gave a chuckle. "Must be all that deep fat fryin' it takes to make 'em."

"You think they're funny?" Annie soured on the conversation. "Now the rains come, won't be long 'fore you find out exactly how funny they are."

j

I had to admit Annie was right-listening to a bunch of hobos philosophize, the majority of them with less than high school educations, wasn't all that entertaining. But philosophizing was a natural outgrowth of life over Yonder. Most people spent six or seven hours a day working, and most had a relationship of some type that served to pass the time; but there was usually idle time, and even though everybody's curiosity-like my own-seemed to have been diminished, the question of where-the-hell-are-we was bound to pop up whenever you let your thoughts drift. Talk to a person more than once, and they'd tell you how they stood on the matter. My informal poll showed that about a third of the residents believed we had passed over into some borderland of death and were being tested to determine where we would end up. Maybe a quarter believed that railroad yards back in the world were areas where the borders between dimensions blurred, and that we had switched tracks, so to speak, and no test was involved. About twenty percent adhered to Bobby's computer game theory, but I think this number was skewed because Bobby was evangelical about the theory and had influenced a sizable portion of the punk riders to buy into it. The rest of the people had more individualized theories, although they generally played off one of the three main ideas.

One of the strangest and certainly the most explicit of these theories came to me from Josiah Tobin, a fiftyish man who still had the nasty-looking gray Moses beard he'd worn when he'd been a hobo known as Froot Loop, and was a member of the FTRA (Freight Train Riders of America), a group of tramps, a gang of sorts, who'd thought of themselves as bigtime macho badasses, but were mainly dead-on-their-feet drunks. The irony of this where Froot Loop was concerned is that he was gay. The FTRA would never have initiated

him if they'd been aware of his homosexuality. Once they found out, they chose to ignore the fact rather than beat the crap out of him and drum him from the ranks, which establishes to my mind how badass they actually were. Anyway, I was doing my laundry one afternoon, letting my clothes dry and sunning myself, lying shirtless with my hands behind my head, watching the clouds, while Josiah was doing the same. He'd pushed his beard aside to expose his scrawny chest, and the untanned portion resembled a permanent pale bib. We fell to conversing about this and that, and eventually he told me what he thought had happened to us.

"Way I figger," he said, "there's more universes than they got zeros to count 'em. Trillions and trillions of 'em, and they all 'bout a hair apart, so it's easy to slip over into the ones is close to your own. I'm talkin' *real* easy. Like you know how it is when you lose your keys or somepin'-you know you just a second ago set 'em down on the coffee table, but they ain't there. Well, you ain't wrong. That's where you did set 'em. What happened is you slipped over into a universe where you set 'em somewheres else. Hell, you might stay there the rest of your life. You with me so far?"

"Oh, yeah," I said. "Keep it comin'."

"Now the universes close by," Josiah went on, "they're a whole lot like the one you in. Might just be one or two things differnt, like where you put your keys or what time your favorite show comes on the TV. But the farther away the universes get from your universe, the weirder they are. One a billion universes away, it might be so differnt you wouldn't be able to understan' nothing what's goin' on.

"Still hangin' in there?"

"Yep," I said.

"Okay. Every once in while there's a crack opens. I ain't talkin' 'bout a crack 'tween universes. I'm talkin' 'bout a crack in the whole damn structure. Things fall through them cracks, where you think they go?"

"Yonder," I said.

"Or someplace like Yonder. I figger there's bound to be more'n one of 'em. How them places start up... I don't know. I'm studyin' on it, though." Josiah lifted his head to look at me. "Whatcha think?"

"I like it. Makes more sense than Bobby Forstadt's theory."

Josiah snorted. "That computer game horseshit! All that goes to show is how Bobby spent his time back in the world."

"One thing I don't get," I said, "is the trains. They don't seem to fit nobody's theory. And the way you feel after the first night. Healthy and clear-headed. That sure seems like stuff I been told happens when you die."

"The folks that told you all that stuff hadn't died, had they? It's just as likely it'll purify a man to cross over the border between universes. But the trains... I hate to say you're right, but you're right. I come up with a few explanations that fit my theory. They're pretty goddamned harebrained, but I'm workin' on somepin' better."

He turned onto his stomach. His back was striped with thickly ridged scars, some of the tissue twisted up into knots-I'd seen similar scars on a tramp who'd had a run-in with some barbed wire.

"I'll figger somethin' out," Josiah said. "Somepin'll come along to fit in there sooner or later."

## j

Josiah had a lot more confidence that there was going to be a "later" than most. As the rains heaved, lasting longer every day, people grew anxious and kept to their rooms. Annie and I, too, stayed at home more than we once had, but not because of anxiety. We had moved past the getting-to-know-you stage and spent lazy mornings on her grass mattress, listening to raindrops smacking like soft bullets into the canopy, talking and doing what I once would have referred to as "fucking", but now I recognized the mutuality of the act and wasn't just trying to satisfy myself, I thought of as making love.

We came to talk about the past more often than not-the present just wasn't that interesting. Annie told me she had run a successful cleaning business in Tucson, and it was stress related to the business that had driven her out of society and onto the rails. One morning, she said, she woke up and simply couldn't handle the pressure anymore. Though when I'd known her before, she'd been almost as dissolute as me, she held a more romantic view of the life than I did. She recalled it as being a party with friends that had lasted for years, and the terrible things that had happened to her-rape and beatings and such-had been anomalies. She was glad to be away from that life, but she had good memories that superseded all the bad; she would go on about the freedom, the parties, the hobo conventions, the fellowship. Often she talked about how she had gotten married to Chester the Molester in the yard at Spokane, how tramps had come from everywhere, and a couple of trampettes had worked a job in Klamath Falls for nearly a month so they could buy her a ring. I believe it was this romantic side that had caused her to fall for me. She'd contrived an image of me as being a real King of the Road and not the falling-down drunk that I truly was; despite me standing her up in

Missoula, she had clung to that image, nourished it like an article of faith. For my part, I was so thankful to be with anyone, at first I couldn't separate those feelings out from what I felt for her. But with the passage of days, I came to realize I loved everything about her. The way the muscles in her calves bunched when she walked, the expressiveness of her smiles, the variety of her moods. How she'd stare at a piece of cloth that Pie or somebody had brought back from the world until she recognized the shape in it, and the next you know it would be a shirt or a skirt or a pair of trousers. The thing I loved most about Annie was her strength. Not that she was entirely strong. We each had a crack down through the middle of us, the same that had disabled our old lives. Nevertheless she had a strength about her, one built on endurance and tolerance that seemed partner to the strength I had started to see in myself. Maybe that fit was what allowed us to love one another.

One morning we were lying in late, being easy together, when the dogs set up a baying, as they sometimes would, only this was louder and more prolonged than usual. Annie sat up in bed, the sheet falling away from her breasts, and listened. I made a grab for her, but she pushed my hand away and said, "Quiet!" Within a matter of seconds, the barking diminished, but didn't stop altogether. Soon I heard solitary barks closer at hand, and then the clitter of paws as dogs went running past our room.

"They're here," Annie said in a dead voice.

"What?" I sat up beside her and looked at her despairing face.

She didn't answer, and I said, "You mean the fritters?"

She nodded.

I jumped up from the bed. "Let's go! Let's get outa here!"

"Don't do no good," she said, hanging her head.

"The hell you mean?"

"It don't do no good," she said sternly, almost angrily. "Ain't nowhere to go. Safest place we can be is right here."

A dog, a black lab mix like Stupid, only bigger, poked his head in through the curtained doorway, woofed, and then retreated.

"The dogs can protect us here," Annie said. "There's not a damn thing else we can do 'cept set right where we are."

"That's crazy! We can fight 'em."

"You can't fight 'em. Try and hit 'em with a stick, a machete, they just slip away. It's like they know it's comin'. And if they touch you, you're a goner."

I couldn't accept this. "There's gotta be somethin' we can do!"

"Come back to bed, Billy," she said, giving me a steady look. "If there was anything to do, don'tcha think I'd be doin' it?"

I ducked back under the covers and we lay there most of the day, listening to dogs snarling and barking, to distant screams, and to some less distant that caused me to squeeze Annie so hard I was worried afterward that I had hurt her. We comforted each other, said things were going to work out all right, but I could tell Annie didn't buy it, so I couldn't believe it myself. Being afraid is an awful thing, but being helpless and afraid is like being buried alive. I felt I was suffocating, every second stretching out and wrapping me in a freezing fist, with my heart sounding huge and thudding in my ears. Even after darkness fell and Annie told me that the fritters weren't aggressive at night, I couldn't completely escape that feeling. I had to do something, and when Annie fell asleep I sneaked out of the room and went to see what was up. Dogs were roaming throughout the tree, their eyes glowing yellow in the dimness, and other people were having a look-see, holding up lanterns, speaking in soft bewildered voices. I ran into Pie. The lines in his homely face appeared to have sunk deeper, and he had nothing good to tell me.

"Nearly thirty's dead," he said. "Josiah Tobin and Bo Myers. Nancy Savarese. They ain't never come at us this bad. Must be thousands of 'em this year."

"You saw 'em?" I asked.

"Naw, not all of 'em." He rubbed his chin. "I seen 'em coming for Yonder once couple years after I crossed. I don't need to see it again."

But I needed to see it. I followed the weave of limbs up high in the tree until I was forced to climb, not walk, and found a spot where I could sit astraddle of one of the branches close to the edge of the canopy, and there I waited until first light. Then I eased forward so I could see out between the leaves. They did resemble fritters. Pale brown and round and lumpy, sort of like misshapen dinner plates, thick through the middle of the body, with thin rippling edges. All floating above the river between the walls of vegetation. Pie had been right in his estimate. There must have been thousands of them. Singly, they didn't seem much of a threat, but glimpsed altogether, drifting aimlessly, many in sharp silhouette against the gray sky—they had the look of an impossible armada, an invasion of pale brown jellyfish, utterly evil and strange. I say they were drifting

aimlessly, but as I watched they began a general movement toward the tree as if borne on the breeze; yet there was no breeze I could feel, and I realized they were launching a leisurely attack, gradually closing the distance between themselves and the edge of the canopy. I scrambled back along the branch and began my descent, hurrying along, less fearing a misstep than seeing a wave of fritters pushing their way through the leaves. On reaching the lower branches, I began to run, becoming lost at one point and having to retrace my steps. I was cotton-mouthed, and my pulse raced. I imagined myself surrounded by stinging, burning, flimsy scraps of death. At length I came to a populated level, saw curtains hanging over doors, and believed I was safe. I stood a moment to calm my heart. Dogs were barking down below, but I heard nothing near to hand. I set out again, passing along a stretch of limb that was tightly enclosed by walls of leaves so thick, no light could penetrate. As I came to a bend, a dog snarled up ahead of me, a violent engine of a sound that made my breath catch.

With a cautious step, I rounded the bend. I should, I suppose, have backed away, but things would doubtless have gone the same had I done so. Stupid was standing between me and two fritters floating head-high in the passage, trembling as if responding to some impalpable current. I spoke his name. His tail wagged, but his ears were laid flat, and before I could speak again, he leaped twisting in the air and snagged one of the fritters by its edge, dragged it down and began worrying it, holding it between his paws and tearing. The thing emitted a faint squeal, like air leaking from a balloon, and as Stupid continued to kill it, the second fritter slid downward, edge first, like a falling Frisbee, and plastered itself to the side of his head. Stupid yelped, rolled onto his side, trying to pry the thing loose, and succeeded in dislodging it; but it settled on him once again, on his flank. He struggled to his feet, snapping at it, his body bent almost double. Annie had told me that dogs were less sensitive to the fritters than people—they could withstand quite a bit of poison, whereas a touch would kill a man. But apparently Stupid had absorbed close to his limit. When the fritter lifted from him, he staggered to the side, his lips drawn up in a silent snarl, wobbled, then toppled off the limb and down through the leaves without a sound. I had no time to grieve, for I found myself confronting the fritter that had killed him. It was not, as I'd thought, a uniform color, but mottled with whitish patches, and it had the aspect not of an entire creature, but instead seemed a piece of one, a slimy organ that might have been removed from the body of some diseased monstrosity. Its edges rippled, the way the edges of a crepe will ripple from the heat of the griddle beneath, and I took the trembling it displayed for agitation. Full of dread, I eased a pace backward, and then, recognizing I was done for any way it shook out, not wanting it to touch me, I jumped through the leafy wall on my left and fell.

If I had jumped to my right, the direction in which Stupid had vanished, I would have fallen to my death. But instinct or luck directed me the opposite way, and I fell only about ten feet, crashing through the leafy ceiling of the room belonging to an elderly hobo with hair and beard gone almost totally white, whom I knew as SLC, which stood for Salt Lake City, his home—I hadn't spoken to him since my arrival and had not bothered to learn his real name. I landed half on his mattress, my head bonking on the floor, but though I took a pretty good whack, I didn't lose consciousness. SLC was sitting on some pillows in the corner of the room, calm as you please, eating a bowl of soup. When I managed to shake off the dizziness and sat up, he said, "Thanks for dropping in," and chuckled.

I noticed he was wearing a threadbare gray suit, a dingy white shirt, and a wide silk foulard tie of a style that I'd only seen in old black-and-white movies. He saw me registering this, apparently, because he said, "Thought I'd put on my buryin' suit... just in case. Them fritters gonna get me, I'll be prepared." He peered at me and blinked rapidly. "Reckon they almost got you. Was there a bunch of 'em?"

"Just one." My head started throbbing. I thought about Stupid and all the bad good times we'd shared, and felt sadness wadding up in my chest. I glanced at the hole I'd put in SLC's ceiling, expecting to see the fritter that had killed Stupid and maybe some of his pals. Nothing but leaves and shadow.

"Might as well get comfortable," SLC said. "Gonna be a long day." In his shabby finery, with stiffened hanks of white hair hanging to his shoulders, his foodstained beard, and his bony wrists and ankles, he looked like an elf gone to seed.

"I ain't stayin' here," I told him, and made to stand; but the effort got me dizzy again.

"Wouldn't be surprised you had yourself a concussion," SLC said. He slurped up another spoonful of soup. "I took a knock on the head once left me confused for a week."

"I'll be all right in a minute," I said.

I had a look around SLC's room. Taped to one wall, almost entirely covering it, were dozens of dog-eared and faded Polaroids, most photographs of natural scenery. Probably places he'd traveled. There were a few books and magazines scattered on the floor beside his mattress. Some clothes neatly piled. Two old pipe tobacco tins that likely contained sewing materials and such. Tins of sterno and a stack of canned tomato soup. The whole place smelled like ripe hobo.

Taking stock of SLC's meager possessions steadied me, and I gave standing another try, but I was still too dizzy. I was scared and pissed off-I wanted to get back to Annie-and I said, "I don't know why the fuck you just sittin' round waitin' to die, man."

"That's all I'd be doin' things was normal," said SLC. "Sit or stand, don't make much difference."

"What I can't figure is, how come people don't move outa the way of these things."

"Where you suggest we move to? Ain't nothin' out there 'cept more jungle, and you can't live on the plain 'cause the beardsleys is all over."

"Have you looked?" I asked. "You hunted around for a better place?"

"Much as I'm goin' to look." SLC set down his soup, sucked on his teeth. "You wanta look, you go on ahead."

"Maybe I will." I heaved myself up and this time I managed to make it to my feet.

"Well, that's fine. But I recommend you stay where you are for now. Goin' out in the passageways is a damn sight more dangerous."

The room did a half spin, and I leaned against the wall.

"Got yourself a concussion... oh yeah!" SLC said brightly. "Best thing for you is to sit on back down. I'll heat you some soup."

In my dazed condition, the prospect of sitting down for a bowl of hot soup was appealing for the moment, but the next minute, the thought of slurping tomato soup while thousands of poisonous pancakes fluttered about killing dogs and people seemed like the peak of insanity. Still unsteady, I started for the door.

"Hang on, boy!" SLC set his bowl on the floor and stood-it took him a couple of tries before he made it upright. "If you ain't got sense enough to stay put, I best go with you. Way you're staggerin', you ain't gon' get very far by yourself."

I'm not sure what was on SLC's mind. He might have been so senile, he'd forgotten the reason he had for keeping to his room. Or maybe he was so old, he figured he wasn't risking all that much. He latched onto my elbow and we started off. We passed a couple of bodies, their faces branded with empurpled blazes where they had been touched by fritters, but luck was with us and we didn't meet up with any ourselves. Once I thought I saw some floating off from us a ways on a branch two levels down, but I was seeing lots of floating things and I couldn't be sure if any of them were real. As for SLC, he hobbled along, muttering to himself, acting no different than he usually did, except every so often he would glance up at me and flash a snaggletoothed grin.

When we pushed through the curtained door into Annie's room, I thought she was going to throw us back out. She yelled at me, said how she thought I was dead, and what was I.. Crazy? Didn't I know any better than to go sniffing around after something that would kill me. She cried, she yelled some more, called me names. Finally I put my arm around her, agreed with everything she said for about ten or fifteen minutes, and she calmed down enough to sit with me on the mattress.

"I thought you was dead," she said. "You didn't come back, and I just knew they'd got you."

"I shouldn't have gone," I told her. "It was dumb."

"It was way more'n dumb! It was..." She couldn't find the words and so I chimed in, saying, "It was irresponsible."

"You make it sound like you was late for work or somethin'. You coulda been killed." She looked gloomily down at my hand, which was resting on the blanket next to hers, as if she saw in it a bad sign she'd not noticed before. "I thought you'd changed."

"Hey!" said SLC. He had settled in the corner and was sitting with his knees drawn up, looking worried. "Ain't y'all got anything to eat in here?"

j

In the morning the fritters were gone. They took sixty-three souls with them, about a quarter of Yonder's population. We burned the bodies on the stones where usually the laundry was stretched to dry, and scattered the ashes in the river. I went to Josiah Tobin's wake, which consisted of eight old hobos sitting in his room, chewing jungleberries, and reminiscing about Josiah, telling lies about what a great rider he was and how he'd foxed the bulls in Yakima that one time, and didn't he fry up the best hobo hash you'd ever tried? I felt like a young heathen among them. I wanted to say that stories about how Josiah had pissed his life away didn't tell nothing of the man, and that to my mind he was the smartest son-of-a-bitch I'd ever met on the rails, and the thing we should study on was not the mess he'd made of himself, but what he could have been if he'd given life more than half-a-try. But when it came my turn to speak, I told a story about drinking out in a desert squat east of Phoenix with him and Ragbone Sally. I guess I figured saying what I had thought wouldn't mean much to anyone except Josiah.

Once the funerals were done, life over Yonder went back to normal. It was like nothing had happened. I tried to resist the impulse to embrace the sense of relief that caused us to want to put the attack behind us, but I didn't try hard enough—a few days later I started going fishing with Euliss Brooks again, and me and Annie got back on track, and the tree where we all lived regained its customary lethargic atmosphere. My jungleberry consumption increased for a while, and Bobby Forstadt was for about the same length of time a bit more strident about his computer game theory, saying that the recurring menace of the fritters fit right in, and what we should be doing was attempting to influence the game. That was a fair sample of our reaction to sixty-three deaths. It wasn't natural, but I suppose I'd become a full-on citizen of Yonder, and the unnatural responses of my fellows no longer struck me as being out of line. But I wasn't happy. Annie and I were growing closer, but there was nowhere to go with it. If we had been back in the world, maybe we would have gotten off the rails and found regular work and build some sort of a life together; but what could you build living in a tree like kids on a backyard camp-out. We talked about catching out without any goal other than the filling up of time. We talked about returning to the world and giving it a go, but our talk was energyless and never got too serious.

Some people over Yonder kept calendars, recorded the passage of days, but I didn't catch the habit—the days generally were so much alike, they seemed one long day striped with nights, and I saw no point in marking them. Thus I'm forced to estimate that it was about three weeks after the fritter attack when things turned for me. I was out fishing with Euliss, and at mid-morning we decided that since we hadn't had much success sitting together in the middle of the stone ledge, we'd try our luck at opposite ends of the ledge. It had rained overnight, and the sun was out, putting dazzles on the eddies, and the fishing should have been good, but neither one of us had gotten a nibble. The only odd thing I noticed was that the elders had reeled in their tentacles. When I mentioned this to Euliss, asked if he'd ever seen anything like it, he said maybe there was a day when it had happened before, but he wasn't sure. Then he advised me to concentrate on my fishing and pushed the brim of his baseball cap down over his eyes, signaling that he wasn't interested in talking. We were sitting about thirty feet apart, and I was watching the flow of the green water about my line when out of the corner of my eye I glimpsed a rippling out at the center of the gorge. I was about to call it to Euliss' attention, but he beat me to the punch and shouted, "Got me somepin!"

I clambered to my feet, dusted the seat of my trousers. "Is it a big 'un?" I asked, thinking I'd walk over and see what he'd hooked.

"I can't feel it now," he said. "It's waitin' on me. But yeah, it's pretty big."

I rubbed at a ground-in patch of limestone dust on my knee, and just as I glanced up, the water seemed to lift directly in front of Euliss, to bell upward, and something huge leaped half its body out from beneath the surface. A fish. It resembled a giant bass more than anything, but its scales were mud-brown, barely distinguishable from one another, and set in its mouth were double rows of triangular teeth the color of old ivory. It twisted in its leap, angling its massive ancient-looking head toward Euliss, and as it fell, its mouth—which was the size of a garage door—came down over Euliss and snapped, biting him with such force that it took the old man's upper half and left the lower sitting there on the ledge, wobbling and spurting blood.

I've had to put together the detail I've related in retrospect, because at the moment it happened I was too stunned to do more than record the event. It just seemed that some vast darkness had sounded from the depths and severed Euliss' body, then vanished with a splash that went forty feet high. The old man's lower half sat for a second or two, rocking slightly. Despite the blood staining his britches and the rock beside him, the sight seemed unreal, a cartoon. Then it toppled into the churning water. I fell back against the wall of the gorge and pissed myself. I think I may have screamed. I pushed hard against the wall, wanting to disappear into the rock behind me, certain the thing was going to leap up again and have me for its second course. I couldn't muster a thought, I was all fear and trembling, no more mindful than a bird hypnotized by a serpent, empty of life already, knowing I belonged to death now. What broke me from my freeze was a dry slithering sound from above. I looked up and saw the nearest elder was letting down its tentacle, ready for some fishing now the danger had gone. All the rest of the elders were doing the same. The water flowed green and unperturbed.

I wasn't sure I could walk, but I managed to cross to the elevator and pull myself up to the top of the gorge. There I sat down and shivered, holding my drawn-up knees. Whatever the chemicals are that combine to make fear, they must trigger a hellacious amount of heat, because I had never felt so cold. As the cold subsided, I told myself I should get back to Annie. I wanted to touch her, to be sure of her, of something. But I wasn't ready to take that long walk alone. I stared at the water. Smooth as a jade floor. I imagined Euliss' blood threading into pink rills beneath it, and that got me moving. All the way back to the tree, my head was full of a dark shape that didn't separate out into thoughts until I was almost at Annie's door. When I entered

she glanced up from her sewing and said happily, "You're back early? You catch all y'need?"

I sat cross-legged on the mattress facing her, leaned forward and rested my head on her shoulder. She stroked my hair, and the warmth of her hand pointed up the cold that was still inside me. I wrapped her in my arms, and she said, "What's that smell?" She touched my thigh, drew back her fingers. "You pissed your pants! Get off my bed!"

"Euliss is dead," I said.

"What?" She peered at me. "What happened?"

As I told her, as I described the event, what I wanted to do became clearer and clearer, until finally it was solid in me, the rightness of its shape discernible, like a ruby in a glass of water. "I'm going over the Wall," I said. "Today."

Annie had been listening with her head down; she looked at me now in her steady way and said, "It's a horrible thing... Euliss. But you're overreacting."

"Come with me," I said.

She shook her head. "I can't."

"Annie... for God's sake! We can't just sit here and wait to die."

"What else is there to do? It was the same back in the world. And if there's a world other side of the Wall, it'll be the same there. It's what folks do."

"That's true," I said. "But it don't make it right."

A couple of people passed by outside, talking, and for no good reason, as if we had a secret to keep, we remained silent until the voices receded.

"I'm going," I said. "I want you to go with me."

She wouldn't look at me.

"Goddamn it!" I smacked the mattress with my fist. "If you were back home, living in a country that lost twenty-five percent of its population, you'd do more than just sit."

"The hell I would! I'd stay right where I was, and I'd try to build up what was knocked down. It's what any reasonable person would do."

"All right," I said. "But this ain't the world. Every year the fritters come... and things like whatever it was took Euliss. Every year you got 'bout a one-in-four chance of dying."

"So you're gonna leave me?"

"I asked you to come along. You stay, it's you leavin' me."

"You ain't changed a bit!" she said. "You're still..."

"Yes, I have! We both of us changed. And we don't have to act like the people we used to be. Like a coupla fucked-up drunks can't agree what kinda wine to kill themselves with." I put my hands on her shoulders. "You know I'm right about this, Annie. You're all the time hangin' out there with the trains 'cause you know what I know. It's death to stay here." I thought of Josiah Tobin. "And it'll come sooner than later."

She refused to budge, and I said, "Anybody ever seen a fish like the one ate Euliss?"

Sullenly, she said, "Way you describe it, how can I tell?"

"A big brown fuckin' bass with big yellow teeth," I said. "It looked like a picture out of a children's book more'n a real fish. Like the kind of monster a child might make up. That's plain enough."

"I don't think so," she said. "'Least I can't remember if anyone ever said anything to be me about it."

"See what's happenin'? This place keeps comin' up with new ways to kill you. It's gonna get worse."

"I don't care what you say, I'm not leavin'!"

A silence wedged between us.

"Well, I guess that's it, then," I said.

"I guess so." After a couple of ticks, she said, "I don't want you to go."

I was tired of arguing, but I couldn't think of a response.

"Maybe if you wait a while," she said. "We got a year 'fore the fritters come again. Maybe if you let me build up to it..."

"I could do that. A couple hours ago, I was sittin' with Euliss with our lines in green water, and then somethin' tore up from hell and took him. It don't seem anybody could change my mind on leavin' after seeing that, but bein' here with you now, all the comfort you are, I believe I could fall back into the way it was. But that doesn't mean it's what I should do." I tapped my head. "This here's tellin' me to leave. I never listened to my brain before, I always went with my heart, and all that did was bury me in deeper shit."

"Oh, I see! That's what I am. Deeper shit!"

"I ain't gonna argue. You know that's not what I mean. You gotta listen to your brain, too. You do, and we'll be catchin' out of this goddamn place in a hour."

She stared at me for a second, then lay down on her side, facing toward the leafy wall.



"Annie?"

"Just go," she said in a small voice.

I dropped down beside her, but she said, "Don't! I want you to go if you're goin'!"

I made to warm her up by rubbing her shoulder. She snapped at me and curled into a fetal position. It felt as if a hundred pounds of wet cement had been poured into my skull, but that wasn't nearly enough to extinguish the bright point of certainty that was urging me to leave. I got up from the bed and started stuffing clothes into my pack. Several times I stopped packing and tried again to convince Annie to join me, but she wasn't hearing me. My movements grew slower—I didn't want to abandon her. But I kept at it until my goods were all tucked away. I shouldered the pack and stood looking down at her.

"This how you want to do it?" I asked.

"It's how you want it. I'm just lyin' here."

I waited a few seconds, thinking she might relent. Finally said, "I love you, Annie."

The words caused her to flinch, but she kept silent.

It was a lot harder leaving Annie than it had been to leave Eileen—I had no whiskey to ease my path. Tears cut down my cheeks, and I must have decided a dozen times to turn back. But something kept me going and I climbed down from the tree and walked out onto the stony section of the bank and stood scanning the wall of jungle on the far side of the river. Bobby Forstadt and his punky blond girlfriend were sitting crosslegged on the rocks. They shaded their eyes against the sun, which had broken through the overcast, and stared at me.

"Where you goin'?" Bobby asked.

"East," I said. I didn't feel like talking to him, but I knew I'd have to.

"No shit!" He scrambled up to his feet. "How come?"

"Bobby, I don't feel much like talkin', all right. Go talk to Annie and she'll tell you. She's up in her room."

"Naw, she ain't." His girlfriend pointed back toward the tree. "She's right there."

Annie was coming out from under the shadow of tree, dragging her pack along the ground—she must have stuffed it in record time. She was wearing faded jeans and an old sweatshirt. I grinned at her, but as she approached she dialed down my pleasure by saying, "You better be right about this, you son-of-a-bitch."

Bobby cupped his hands and shouted, "Annie and Billy Long Gone... catchin' out over the Wall!" Then he repeated it, except instead of "catchin' out over the Wall" he said, "...movin' to the next level." People filtered out of the jungle, dropped from the tree, and before long we had a crowd of maybe twenty, twenty-five gathered around, asking why we were leaving and what they could do. Annie stood mute, and I fielded the questions as best I could. The news about Euliss sobered the mood, but even so nobody appeared to grasp why we were leaving. Except maybe for Pie. He shouldered his way to me and handed me a packet of dried fish wrapped in leaves and a can of red spray paint.

"I kinda figgered I'd be the one going over the Wall," he said. "But I guess it ain't in me. Hope you make it, Billy. When you get where you goin', paint me a message on the train."

"I'll do 'er," I said, and we shook on it.

More people came, bringing so much food, we couldn't have carried half of it. Annie got to hugging her friends, and some folks started singing, and everybody was sharing food, and I could see it was turning into a party and was afraid if we stayed much longer we'd get caught up in it. I shouted "Hey!" and kept shouting it until I had everyone's attention. Then I said, "Thank y'all for comin' down to see us off! We appreciate it! But we're gon' be leavin' now!"

"What's the hurry?" somebody shouted, and several people laughed.

"I tell you what the hurry is," I said. "This place kills somethin' in us. It makes us settle for half-a-life. Maybe one reason we settle for it is that's more'n most of us ever had. But there's somethin' else goin' on, though I couldn't put a name on it. Somethin' that makes us just set around waitin' to die. It'd be easy for me'n Annie to hang out and party. Hell, after a good party, we might change our minds. But I ain't gon' let that happen."

Some people broke off from the edge of the crowd and walked away.

"This ain't nothin' to celebrate," I went on. "We ain't happy to be leavin'. We're rollin' the dice. But this way we get to do the rollin' ourselves. Staying here's the same as not even pickin' 'em up. And all that gets you is what you already know. What Euliss Brooks knew. What Josiah Tobin and Nancy Savarese knew. And the rest of 'em who ain't here to party, what they knew. We're leavin' 'cause it's our only chance of breakin' through to somethin' better. Yonder ain't no place to build a life. It's a place where you get your shit together 'fore you move on again. It's a goddamn homeless shelter with a view. We ain't s'posed to live here, we're s'posed to stop over for a while and then be gone. That's why we're leavin'. We want to find us a home."

More of the crowd had drifted away as I spoke—it appeared there were no more than ten people left. Pie, Bobby Forstadt and his girlfriend, and some others.

I adjusted the weight of my pack and said, "Thanks for the send-off. Maybe we'll see you down the road." Then I picked my way down the bank and set out to ford the river. I didn't look back, but I heard Anne splashing after me and somebody called out, "Safe rails!" By the time we reached the other side of the river, everybody except Bobby Forstadt and his girlfriend had gone, and they were back to sitting as they'd been before they saw me, talking and gesturing—Annie and I were already a closed entry in Bobby's notebooks. To tell the truth, I felt the same way about Yonder. The people I'd met there had been turned into memories, and in my mind I was already going over the Wall. The tree, with its multi-leveled canopies and chambers, its dark gleaming branches, once again had the look of a ruin, and I supposed that was all it had truly ever been.

j

I half-expected the jungle to try and thwart our departure, to send legions of bugs and snakes and whatever else it could muster against us; but we reached the tracks without incident. A black train was waiting, bending around the curve of the green hill. A young one, unscarred and gleaming. I'd been hoping for the train Santa Claus had ridden—at least I knew that one could make the trip. We crawled into one of the cars and settled in, and less than five minutes later we started to roll.

I wish I had thunder and lightning in my words to tell you of that trip, because it deserves to be written large and luminous and noisy; but the world doesn't sing that song through me, and I'm stuck with speaking in a plainer voice. It began ordinarily enough. Annie was still angry at me for forcing her hand, but she was more scared than angry, and she sat with her knees drawn up, picking at frays in the knees of her jeans. I watched the hills passing out the door of the car, thinking maybe I shouldn't have pulled Annie into this, that it might have been kinder just to go without a word. I was glad to be on the move once again. It may be that the universe has no rhyme or reason, but I couldn't accept that a bunch of hobos had been brought to Yonder merely because they fell down the same crack, and so while I was scared, too, I was excited in a way I'd never been before. I wasn't just looking for a new place to take a leak in, a new town where I could run hustles and sell emergency food stamps for crank; I had a sense of myself as an adventurer, an explorer, a penetrator of the unknown. Maybe this notion was bogus, overblown, but it had been a long time since I had perceived myself in such a clean light, and I wasn't about to spoil the feeling this gave me by overanalyzing the situation.

I tried to talking to Annie, but she wasn't up for it. However, after we'd gone about a mile, she scooted over and tucked herself under my arm, and we sat like that for the better part of an hour, until the train started winding down out of the hills. Through cuts between the hills we could see that yellowy green plain laid out under a high sun, and the blue dazzles of the lakes scattered across it. The windy rush of the train and the brilliant light made it all seem hopeful, as did the rich decaying smell of the marshlands as we swept out onto the plain. It resembled the plain I'd crossed with Pie after leaving Klamath Falls, with little islands of solid ground here and there that supported trees whose twisted trunks reminded me of Monterey pines, but whose leaves were ribbony and fluttered in the wind like streamers. Not a sign of life, though I assumed there were fish in the lakes and the waterways that fed into them. It was exhilarating to see, but soon it grew boring, this interminable passage of reeds and lakes and twisted trees. The train appeared to be flying past the same scene repeated over and over. Our initial excitement dissipated, and we sat against the side wall of the car, eating dried fish and jungleberries, talking but not saying much, just "Pass me the fish," and "Want some water?" and "You feelin' okay?" Comforting noises more than conversation.

The sun baked the car at noon, and the heat worked to bring out a lazy heat in us. We made love on our stretched-out sleeping bags, a far different experience from the sport-fucking I'd done on trains in the past, when the rattle of the cars and the noise off the rails drowned out every human sound, causing it to seem that the racket was somehow related to the messy, intemperate character of the act. The winded quiet of our train was like a bed of gentle noise supporting us, enabling sweetness. We fell asleep afterward, and when we woke it had come twilight, and the mountains ahead looked to be considerably closer, their peaks shrouded in a cloudy darkness like battle smoke. We'd be into them by morning, I figured, if the train kept its current pace, and then, maybe, we'd discover if this had been a good idea or merely an ornate form of suicide. The heat faded, the air grew chill, but the car, warmed by its golden blood, kept us relatively cozy. We draped blankets over our shoulders and held hands and watched out the door.

As dusk settled, far out on the plain, what appeared to be a flock of large ungainly birds flapped up from the reeds, their numbers swelling until it covered a considerable expanse of the sky. I noticed the train had picked up speed, and as the flock drew closer, I understood why. Hundreds of black blanket-like objects, their surfaces fattening with wind, their flights unsteady, erratic, making swoops and glides that were more

crumpled collapses, but moving inexorably toward us nonetheless. "Oh, shit!" Annie said, and heaved at the door, sliding it shut. I cracked it back open a couple of inches so I could see, and she said, "Are you crazy!" and struggled to push it all the way closed again.

"We need to be able to see what's goin' on," I told her. "'Case we have to jump."

"Jump out into this hellhole!" she said. "That ain't gon' happen! Now shut the fuckin' door!"

When I continued to hold the door open, she shouted, "Goddamn it, Billy! You keep it open, one of 'em's liable to pry at it and get inside with us! That what you want?"

"I'll take the chance. I don't wanna be trapped inside."

"Oh, and I ain't got no say. That it?" She got right up into my face. "You think I come on this ride just so you can boss me around? You better think twice!" She hauled off and punched at me, her fist glancing off my cheekbone, and I fell back a couple of steps, stunned by her ferocity.

"I ain't scared of you!" she said, her shoulders hunched. "I ain't taking no shit off you or anybody!"

Her eyes darted to the side, the muscles in her cheeks were bunched. Seeing how frightened she was acted to muffle my own fear, and I said, "You want it closed, then close it. All I'm sayin' is, if the car starts gettin' tore up, maybe we oughta know what's goin' on so we can make a reasonable decision."

"Reasonable? What the fuck are you talkin' about? If we was reasonable, we'd be back over Yonder and not fixin' to die out here in the middle of nowhere!"

The car gave a heave, a kind of twitching movement, and then gave another, more pronounced heave, and I knew a beardsley had settled on the roof and was tearing at it. An instant later the door was shoved open a foot or so, and another beardsley began squeezing through the gap, like a towel drawn through a wringer, its mottled, bald old man's head pushing in first. Annie shrieked, and I ran to my pack and plucked out my ax handle. When I turned, I saw the beardsley was halfway inside the car, its leathery black sail flapping feebly, the hooks on the underside proving to be talons three and four inches long, a dirty yellow in color. It was such a horrible sight, that parody of an ancient human face, utterly savage with its glittery black eyes and fanged snapping mouth, I froze for a second. Annie was plastered up against the edge of the door, her eyes big, and as the sail flapped at her, the talons whipping past her face, she screamed again.

I didn't have a strategy in mind when I charged the beardsley; I simply reacted to the scream and went forward, swinging the ax handle. I took a whack at the head, but the sail got in the way, folding about the ax handle and nearly ripping it from my grasp. I started to take another swing, but the sail gloved me and yanked me toward the creature's head with such force that my feet were lifted off the floor. The thing smelled like a century of rotten socks. Talons ripped my shoulders, my buttocks, and I saw the end of reason in those strange light-stung black eyes... and then I saw something else, a recognition that jolted me. But almost instantly it was gone, and I was back fighting for life. I had no way to swing at the beardsley, being almost immobilized by the grip of the sail; but I poked the end of the ax handle at it as it hauled me hard forward again, and by chance, the handle jammed into its mouth. My fear changed to fury, and I pushed the handle deeper until I felt a crunching, the giving way of some internal structure. I rammed the handle in and out, as if rooting out a post hole, trying to punch through to the other side, and suddenly the head sagged, the sail relaxed, and I fell to the floor.

I was fully conscious, but focused in an odd way. I heard Annie's voice distantly, and saw the roof of the car bulging inward, but I was mostly recalling the beardsley's eyes, like caves full of black moonlit water, and the fleeting sense I'd had as I'd been snatched close that it was somehow a man, or maybe that it once had been a man. And if that was so, if I could trust the feeling, how did it fit into all the theories of this place, this world. What determined that some men were punished in this way and others sent over Yonder? Maybe if you died in Yonder you became a beardsley, or maybe that's what happened if you died out on the plain. My suppositions grew wilder and wilder, and somewhere in the midst of it all, I did lose consciousness. But even then I had the idea that I was looking into those eyes, that I was falling into them, joining another flock under some mental sky and becoming a flapping, dirty animal without grace or virtue, sheltering from the sun in the cool shadows of the reeds, and by night rousing myself to take the wind and go hunting for golden blood.

I came to with a start and found Annie sitting beside me. I tried to speak and made a cawing sound—my mouth was dry as dust, and I felt a throbbing pain in my lower back and shoulders. She stared at me with, I thought, a degree of fondness, but the first thing she said was, "'Pears I was right about the door."

I tried to sit up, and the throbbing intensified.

"I got the bleeding stopped," she said. "But you're pretty tore up. I cleaned you best I could. Used up all my Bactine. But that was a damn dirty thing what sliced you. Could be the wounds are goin' to get infected."

I raised my head—the beardsley was gone, and the door shut tight. "Where are we?" I asked.

"Same as before," she said. "'Cept the mountains look bigger. The beardsleys flew off somewhere. Guess

they drank their fill."

"Help me get up, will ya?"

"You oughta lie down."

"I don't wanna stiffen up," I said. "Gimme a hand."

As I hobbled around the car, I remembered the clutch of the beardsley's sail and thought how lucky I'd been. Annie kept by my side, supporting me. I told her about how I'd felt a human vibe off the beardsley in the moments before I killed it, and what I thought that meant.

"It probably didn't mean nothin'," she said. "You were scared to death. You liable to think almost anything, a time like that."

"Yeah," I said. "But this was real strong."

"So what?" she said. "So it was human, so what? Who cares what it means? You ain't never gon' figure it out. Ain't no point in tryin'. Hell, that's one reason I come with you. I couldn't listen to people's harebrained theories no more. I wanted to go where there's somethin' more constructive to do than sit around and contemplate my goddamn navel."

"You didn't see what I saw," I told her. "You had, you'd be curious too."

"Fine," she said. "It's a stunnin' development. The beardsleys are human. What's it all fuckin' mean? I won't rest til I get to the bottom of it."

"Jesus, Annie," I said. "I was just speculatin'."

"Well, save it! If we survive this ride, maybe I'll be interested. But right now I got more and better to think about."

I said, "All right."

She peeked at my shoulders and said, "Oh, God! You're bleedin' again. Come on. Sit back down, lemme see what I can do."

## j

In the morning I pushed open the door and had a look round. The mountains loomed above us. Granite flanks rising into fangs of snow and ice that themselves vanished into fuming dark clouds, fans of windblown ice blown into semi-permanent plumes from the scarps. Back in Yonder, the mountains had seemed huge, but viewed up close they were the roots of a world, the bottom of a place boundless and terrible, a border between trouble and emptiness. Their names, if they had names, would be violent hatcheting sounds followed by a blast of wind. They offered no hint of happy promise. A chill bloomed inside me from a recognition of my folly, of having given up on Yonder and put Annie and myself in the way of far worse. But when Annie came to stand beside me, all I said was, "Looks like it's gon' get cold."

She stood gazing up at the mountains and said, "Yeah, looks like." She went over to the sleeping bags and dug a down jacket out of her pack.

On the outside of the car, next to the door, were several gouges that appeared to be scabbing over with filmy black stuff, the golden congealed blood showing through. I glanced at the mountains again and thought I saw a flash of lightning in the clouds,

"Close the door," Annie said. "We'll be there soon enough. Ain't no use in starin' at it."

I slid the door shut and sat beside her. "It's just mountains," I said.

She gave a sniff of laughter. "Yeah, and Godzilla's just tall."

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry if this turns out wrong. I didn't... It felt right to leave."

"I ain't gon' blame you. I coulda stayed." Then after a pause, she said, "I'm glad I didn't stay. I couldn't tolerate Yonder no more."

That surprised me a little, though I'd expected she would come around to admitting it eventually. "We probably don't go way high up in 'em," I said. "Tracks wouldn't get built that high."

"They ain't real tracks and nobody built 'em."

"Well, yeah. There's that." I tried to think of something comforting to say. "Member the Wizard of Oz. How he had this fearsome voice, but he turned out to be a little fat guy and the voice was fake? The mountains are probably like that."

"Dorothy and the Scarecrow," she said dispiritedly. "That's us, all right." She worked a hand in down among the clothes in her pack and pulled out a deck of cards. "Wanna play some gin?"

So we ate jungleberries to calm our nerves and played cards as the train ascended into the mountains, going over the Wall. We played for a dollar a point, double for gin, and after a while we began to joke and laugh, and for the most part forgot about the wind, which had started howling around the car, and the cold that was gradually seeping inside. Annie kicked my butt for the first hour, but then I had a run of luck and went up several hundred dollars. I dumped the next game to bring us closer to even, and as I shuffled and

dealt the cards, I thought of other rides we'd taken both separately and together, beat-up and fucked-up, drunk and stoned, sick and afraid, and how it seemed all that had been preparation for this ride up into wherever. Maybe it *had* been a form of preparation, maybe the world was so painstaking and intricate in its wisdom that part of its process was to prepare those who failed it for a wild ride into an unknown land. But Annie was right. True or not, it was useless knowledge. It was the kind of thing you did not need to live. The arguments of doctrine and the study of philosophy, they might or might not have validity, but the only functions they served were either to exercise the mind or, if pursued to excess, to blind you to the bitterness of life and keep you from the more joyful practices necessary to withstand it.

"Hey," said Annie, beaming. "Guess what?"

"What?" I said.

She spread out her hand for me to see. "Gin!"

j

Midway through the game, I had to piss, and when I cracked the door to do so, I found we were rolling slowly through a whitish fog so thick I could barely make out the wheels of the train. Apparently we were down in some sort of declivity, shielded from the wind, because it was howling louder than ever. I thought it must have been breaking off enormous ledges of snow—audible above the howling were explosive noises such as accompany avalanches. Half-frozen, I finished my business and ducked back inside.

"What's it like out there?" Annie asked.

"Like a whole buncha nothin'. Got some serious fog." I sat back down, watched her deal. "We must be down in a pocket."

Done with dealing, Annie studied her cards, glanced at me, and said, "Your turn."

I picked up my hand, made a stab at arranging it. "Fog's not even driftin'. You'd think with all the wind, it'd find some way to blow a little bit down where we are."

"Got any threes?" she asked, and laid down a three.

I started to pick up the card, changed my mind, and drew from the deck. "Maybe it ain't all wind. Maybe it's somethin' else goin' on that sounds like wind."

"C'mon, Billy," she said. "Play a card. Even if it's the last thing I do, I'm gonna beat you silly."

There came a noise, then. A shriek... except it didn't come from any throat. It was more an electronic note edged with bursts of static, and it was loud—loud as a police siren suddenly switched on behind you. We dropped the cards, scrambled farther away from the door, and as we did, the shriek sounded again and a brilliant white flash cut a diagonal seam across the door, like someone was outside and swinging a magnesium torch at the car. The heat that came with it had that kind of intensity. The walls of the car rippled, the floor humped beneath us. For a fraction of a second, the seam glowed too brightly to look at, but it faded quickly, and we saw that a rip had been sliced in the door, leaving an aperture about six inches wide and three feet long. I heard distant shrieks, identical to the one I'd initially heard, and thereafter a tremendous explosion that reminded me in its magnitude of dynamite charges I'd set when working highway construction the summer after high school. Whatever the car was made of—skin, metal, plastic, a combination of things—its torn substance had been somehow sealed, cauterized, and there was not the slightest seepage of golden blood. We heard more explosions and shrieks, but when after a few minutes nothing else struck the car, we went over to the rip and peered through it. Annie gasped, and I said, "Jesus..." Then, both inspired to act at the same time, we slid the door wide open so we could get a better look at where we were bound.

What I saw I need to describe carefully, slowly, though I seemed to see and absorb it all at once. We were barreling along a snow-covered valley, featureless except for boulders that jutted up here and there, a rift that ran straight as a highway between rows of mountains, a diminishing perspective of giants, brothers to the ones ranged along the plain. They were set close together, without any linkage between them, no ridges or shoulders that merged one into another, and this placement made them seem artificial, a landscape that had been created without the restraints of inorganic logic. Cliff faces of black rock broke from their icy slopes. Beneath the smoky clouds that shrouded the peaks, the sky was alive with bright flying things—blazing golden-white, they might have been sparks shaped into the raggedy images of birds. They wheeled and whirled and curvetted everywhere, sounding their electric voices. There were so many, it amazed me that they did not constantly collide. Every now and then a group of several hundred would form into a flock and arrow down to strike the cliff faces, disappearing like a beam of light into a void, and thereafter, following the briefest of intervals, an explosion would occur, producing not fragments of rock and goutts of fire, but violet rays that streamed off toward the end of the valley in the direction we were headed. I had the feeling that I

was watching the operation of a vast engine designed to create those rays, but what the rays were fueling—if that's what they were doing—was so far outside the scope of my experience, I had no way to interpret it.

Once when I was drunk in Kalispell, flush from the sale of some copper wire I'd stolen from the freight yard there, I wandered into a souvenir shop and became interested in the mineral samples they sold. What especially caught my eye was a vial of black opals immersed in water, and after studying them for a while, glossy black stones that each contained a micro-universe of many-colored flecks of fire, I bought them for fifteen dollars—I would have stolen them, but the clerk had his eye on me. At the far end of the valley the land gave out into a place similar to those depths embedded in the stones, a blackness that appeared one second to be bulging toward us, and the next appeared to be caving in. Countless opalescent flecks trembled within it, and whenever the violet rays penetrated the blackness, it would flicker as with heat lightning and for an instant I would have a glimpse of something that had been obscured. The glimpses were too brief for me to identify the thing, but I had a sense it was a complicated branching structure, and that it went a long way in... Another explosion, and I realized what had happened to the door of our car. As the explosion occurred and a violet ray spat forth, the spark birds closest to it went swerving out of control and tumbled from the sky. Several came swerving low above the train before righting themselves and rejoining the others.

We gazed at the scene until the cold drove us back inside the car, and then we sat huddled together without speaking. I can't say what was in Annie's mind, but I was more awestruck than afraid. The scale of the mountains, the strangeness of all else—it was too grand to breed true fear, too foreign to inspire other than wonder, and too startling to allow the formation of any plan. Hobos, for all their degenerate failings, have an aesthetic. They're scenery junkies, they take pride in traveling through parts of their country few have ever seen, and they memorialize those sights, whether storing them in their memories or creating more tangible mementos, like SLC with his wall of Polaroids. Sitting around campfires or in squats, they'll swap stories about the natural beauty of the world with the enthusiasm of kids trading baseball cards. Now Annie and I had a story to top anybody's, and though we had no one to tell it to, as if by reflex, I polished the details and dressed up the special effects so if I ever did get the chance, I'd be ready to let the story rip. I was kept so busy doing this—and maybe Annie was, too—I didn't notice the train was slowing until we had dropped more than half our speed. We went to the door, cracked it, and peered out. We were still in the valley, the mountains still lifted on either side, the spark birds were still wheeling in the sky. But the opaline blackness that had posed a horizon to the valley was gone. In place of it was a snow-covered forest beneath an overcast sky and, dividing the forest into two distinct sections, a black river that sprung up out of nowhere and flowed between those sections, as straight in its course as that of the valley between the ranked mountains. It was clear the train was going to stop. We got our packs together and bundled up—despite the freakishness of the forest and river, we figured this was our destination, and were relieved to be alive. When the train came to a full stop, we jumped down from the car and set off across the snow, ducking our heads to avoid the wind, which was still blowing fiercely, our feet punching through the frozen crust and sinking calf-deep.

The train had pulled up at the end of the line; the tracks gave out beyond the last mountain, about a mile and a half, I judged, from the edge of the forest. The ground ahead of us was gently rolling, the snow mounded into the shape of ocean swells, and the forest, which looked to be dominated by oaklike trees with dark trunks and heavy iced crowns, had a forbidding aspect, resembling those enchanted and often perilous forests illustrated in the children's books that the old Billy Long Gone had turned to now and then, wanting to read something but unable to do more than sound out a few of the words. When we reached the engine I took the can of spray paint Pie had given me and wrote on the side:

**PIE—WE COME TO A FOREST THE OTHER SIDE OF THE MOUNTAINS. ITS THE END OF THE LINE.  
WE'RE WALKING FROM HERE ON. LUCK TO YOU  
BILLY LONG GONE**

"Wanna add somethin'?" I asked Annie.

She studied on it, then took the can and wrote:

**IT'S ALL A TEST. SO FAR WE'VE PASSED  
ANNIE**

"A test, huh?" I took back the can and stowed it.

"I been thinkin' about it," she said. "And that's what I figure it is. It just feels that way."

"Here you always talkin' 'bout you can't stand theories, and now you got one of your own."

"It ain't a theory if you're livin' it," she said. "It's a tool for making decisions. And from now on I'm lookin' at all this like it's a test." She helped me rebuckle the straps of my pack. "Let's go."

We had walked about two-thirds of the distance between the end of the tracks and the forest when one of the mounds of snow on our left shifted and made a low grumbling noise, like something very large waking

with mean things on its mind. It was so sudden an interruption to the winded silence, we froze. Almost immediately, another mound shifted and grumbled... and then another.

"Run!" said Annie, unnecessarily—I was already in motion, not quite running but moving as fast as I could, plunging ahead, my legs going deep into the snow. There was no wonderment in me now, only fear. We thrashed our way through the snow, the wind cutting into our faces, while all around us were shiftings and ugly animal rumbles. We angled toward the left-hand section of forest, a point not far from where the black river sprang from beneath the earth. The trees seemed to inch nearer, and as I glanced behind me to gauge how close pursuit was—if, indeed, something was in pursuit—I tripped and fell. Annie screamed at me to hurry. As I staggered up, fighting for balance, I saw that several of the mounds had risen to their feet. They were heavy-bodied, slothlike, big as delivery vans, with long silky white hair shagging their thick legs and backs. The hair fell into their faces, which were mushed-in, startlingly human except for their extremely wide mouths. Their eyes, half-hidden, were bright and violet, the same exact shade as the rays that erupted from the cliff faces. One started toward me, waddling slowly, but gaining momentum, and I plunged forward again, my breath steaming out, heart pumping, trying to will myself ahead and into the shadowed avenues among the trees. Even at top speed, apparently, the slothlike creatures were slow, and I thought we were going to make it. But at the edge of the forest, just as I stumbled almost breathless beneath a low-hanging bough, Annie grabbed my jacket and hauled me to a stop.

"The river!" She said, gasping. "We gotta go for the river!"

"You're outa your mind!" I tried to shake her off, but she clung to me.

"It's a test!" she said. "Like back in Yonder... the mountains looked like the worst option. But we got through 'em. Now the river looks like the worst. That's the way out. I know it!"

The nearest of the sloths was a couple hundred feet away, and about a dozen more were edging up behind him, all grunting as they came, sounding like stalled engines trying to turn over. I started to run again, but Annie kept a hold on me and dragged me down to my knees beside her.

"Godammit, Billy!" She shook me. "They can follow us into the forest! But the river... maybe they won't go there!"

The logic of that penetrated my panic. I dragged her up and we went lurching, half-falling, ploughing toward the bank. But on reaching it, I hesitated. The way it ran straight, like a long black sword laid flat across the land, its point invisible beyond the horizon, dividing everything from nothing. The Styx. Charon. Mythic images of death crowded into my brain. The water was flowing up fast from wherever it came. Snow crusts fallen from the bank floated on it. Cold as it looked, I doubted we'd last more than a minute or so. Beneath the surface were glittering points that reminded me of the beardsley's eyes. The slothlike creatures lumbered near. Their mouths were partially obscured behind fringes of hair, but they were wide enough to swallow us both without stretching. The shine of their violet eyes stained the snow in front of them, as if they were nothing but energy inside, no guts, no bones, just a furnace of violet glare. Their footfalls made no sound. Freeze or get chewed. It was not an easy choice.

"Billy!" Poised on the brink, Annie pleaded with me, but I couldn't take the step. Then her face seemed to shut down, all her caring switched off, as if it, too, had been a light inside her, and she jumped, disappearing from sight with a sodden splash. She did not resurface, and I knew she must be dead, killed by the shock. When I understood that, I didn't much care which way I went to hell.

Behind me, the grunting evolved into a piggish squealing. Two of the animals had begun to fight, batting with their enormous paws, mauling each other, trying to bite with mouths that opened into pink maws the size of loading bays. I watched their incompetent white battle for a second, unconcerned, empty of awe, of fear, of all feeling. I saw the mountains beyond, the sky whirling with sparks, and it seemed I could see all the way back to Yonder, the tree full of hobos, the green river, the jungle, the gorge where Euliss had died. But I could no longer see the world. It was like smoke in my memory, its images dissolving, or already dissolved. Alone and cut off from all I had known, I had little use for life. For no better reason than it was where she had vanished, I jumped into the river after Annie.

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What is it we think when we are born? After the shock, the stunning light, the sudden absence of comfort and warmth, the alarming sense of strange hands, the pain of the umbilical knife... what apprehension comes to stir the first wordless concern, the first recognition? I think it must somehow resemble the thought I had when I woke in a ferny hollow with Annie and three others: I yearned for the vague particulars of the creature inside whom I had been carried to that place, whose knowledge of the place was in me, albeit cloudily realized as yet. A creature whose skin might be a river or the interior of a black boxcar, and whose geography incorporated Yonder and places of even deeper strangeness. A vast, fabulous being whose nature

was a mystery to me, but for the fact that it engulfed the world like a cloud, a heretofore unobserved atmosphere, nourishing the earth as an oyster nourishes a pearl, and extracting whomever it might need for its purposes. A great identity whose presence had been unknown to everyone; though certain saints and madmen may have mistaken it—or recognized it—for god, and those who dwelled long years in the solitudes might on occasion have sensed its sly, ineffable movements beyond the sky (old Euliss Brooks might have been one such). A cosmic monstrosity who had strained the stuff of my mind through its own substance, purifying and educating me toward an end I could not yet perceive. Before I opened my eyes and learned that Annie was there and all the rest, I realized I was as different from the Billy Long Gone who had jumped into the river as he had been from the man who had climbed drunkenly aboard a black train in Klamath Falls. Smarter, calmer, more aware. I had no clear memory of where I'd been, but I understood that Annie had been right—this was a test, a winnowing, a process designed to recruit a force of considerable measure from among those who lived on the edges of things, from loners and outcasts, and develop them into... what? That I was not sure of. Pioneers, explorers, soldiers? Something on that order, I believed. But I did know for certain that those who failed the test became part of it, transformed into beardsleys and worse, and those who survived went on to take part in some enterprise, and I knew this because the creature who brought me to the hollow had imprinted that knowledge and more on my brain.

The hollow was spanned by the crown of a tree with a thick grayish white trunk and milky green leaves. The sky was overcast, and the air cool like summer air at altitude, carrying an undertone of warmth. I felt no weakness, no fatigue—in fact, I felt strong in all my flesh, as if newly created. I looked at the others. Apart from Annie, who was just beginning to stir, there were two men and a woman. One man, lying on his back, eyes closed, was dark, lean, bearded. Dressed in a fatigue jacket, blue pin-striped trousers that must have belonged to an old suit and were tucked into his boots. Next to his outflung left hand were a small backpack and an automatic rifle. The other two were asleep in an embrace. Brown-skinned; tiny; wearing rags. Mexican, I thought, judging by the man's Aztec features. I picked myself up, went over to the bearded man, and examined his rifle. Words in the Cyrillic alphabet were incised on the housing. To be on the safe side, I pocketed the clip.

I checked on Annie—she was still asleep—and then scrambled up the slope of the hollow. When I reached the top I saw a city sprawling across the hills below, surrounded by forest on every side. On the edges of the city were new shacks and cabins carpentered from raw unpainted boards and logs. The buildings farther away were older, weathered, but not many were larger than the buildings on the outskirts, and they were only two- and three-stories tall. It was like a frontier town with dirt streets, but much bigger than any I'd ever heard of. A shanty metropolis. People were moving along the streets, and I made out animals pulling carts... whether oxen or horses or something else, I could not say. But the city was not the dominant feature of the view. Rising from its center, vanishing into the depths of an overcast sky, was an opaque tube that must have been a hundred yards in diameter, and along it were passing charges of violet light. It was half-obsured in mist—perhaps the mist was some sort of exhaust or discharge—and this caused it to appear not quite real, only partially materialized from its actual setting. I knew, in the same way I had known all else, that the violet lights were men and women going off on journeys even more unimaginable than the one I had taken, traveling through the branching structure I had glimpsed back in the valley (the tube was merely a small visible section of the structure); and that the city was the place to which they returned once they accomplished their tasks. Knowing this did not alarm or perturb me, but the implication it bred—that we were still inside the thing that had snatched us from our old lives—was depressing. Understanding had become important to me, and I had believed I would eventually come to an understanding that would satisfy my need for it. Now it was clear that you were always in the midst of something too big to understand, be it god or cosmic animal or a circumstance that your mind rendered into a comprehensible simplicity... like a god or a cosmic animal. I would never be able to climb up top of any situation and say, "Oh, yeah! I got it!" For all I knew, we could be dead.

I heard a noise, saw Annie scaling the slope toward me. She gave me a hug and took in the view. "Well," she said. "I was right."

"I never doubted it."

She put an arm about my waist and squeezed. "You lie."

We stood looking across our new home, calm as house buyers checking out a property, and I was actually starting to think where it was we might settle—would it be better on the edge or downtown close to the tube?—when our three companions came to join us atop the rise. The Mexican couple glanced at Annie and me timidly. They stared impassively at the vista; the woman crossed herself. I was surprised that she retained the traditions of her faith after having traveled so far and learned so much. Maybe it was a reflex.

"English?" the bearded man asked, and Annie said, "American."



"I am Azerbaijani." He squinted at me and scowled. "You take my bullets?"

I admitted that I had.

"Very smart." He smiled, a clever, charming smile accompanied by an amused nod. "But rifle is broken. Bullets no good."

He gazed out at the city with its central strangeness of opacity and violet fire. I wanted to ask if he had ridden a black train to some Azerbaijani halfway house and how he had traveled the rest of the way, and what he thought was going on; but none of it was pressing, so I joined him in silent observance. Considering the five of us, the variance of our origins, I thought I was beginning to have a grasp of the mutability of the unknowable, of the complexity and contrariness of the creature god machine or universal dynamic that had snatched us up. And this led me to recognize that the knowable, even the most familiar articles of your life, could be turned on their sides, shifted, examined in new light and seen in relation to every other thing, and thus were possessed of a universality that made them, ultimately, unknowable. Annie would have scoffed at this, deemed all my speculation impractical woolgathering; but when I looked at the tube I reckoned it might be exactly the kind of thinking we would need wherever we were going.

The sun, or something like a sun, was trying to break through the clouds, shedding a nickel-colored glare. The Mexican woman peered at each of us, nodded toward the city, and said, "*Nos vamos?*" Annie said, "Yeah, let's go check this out." But the Azerbaijani man sighed and made a comment that in its simplicity and precision of vocal gesture seemed both to reprise my thoughts and to invest them with the pathos common to all those disoriented by the test of life.

"These places," he said musingly, then gave a slight, dry laugh as if dismissive of the concern that had inspired him to speak. "I don't know these places."

## ETERNITY AND AFTERWARD

Punctuality had come to be something of a curse for Viktor Chemayev. Though toward most of his affairs he displayed the typical nonchalance of a young man with a taste for the good life and the money to indulge it, he maintained an entirely different attitude toward his business appointments. Often he would begin to prepare himself hours in advance, inspecting his mirror image for flaws, running a hand over his shaved scalp, trying on a variety of smiles, none of which fit well on his narrow Baltic face, and critiquing the hang of his suit (his tailor had not yet mastered the secret of cutting cloth for someone with broad shoulders and a thin chest). Once satisfied with his appearance he would pace the length and breadth of his apartment, worrying over details, tactical nuances, planning every word, every expression, every gesture. Finally, having no better use for the time remaining, he would drive to the meeting place and there continue to pace and worry and plan. On occasion this compulsiveness caused him problems. He would drink too much while waiting in a bar, or catch cold from standing in the open air, or simply grow bored and lose his mental sharpness. But no matter how hard he tried to change his ways he remained a slave to the practice. And so it was that one night toward the end of October he found himself sitting in the parking lot of Eternity, watching solitary snowflakes spin down from a starless sky, fretting over his appointment with Yuri Lebedev, the owner of the club and its chief architect, from whom he intended to purchase the freedom of the woman he loved.

For once it seemed that Chemayev's anxiety was not misplaced. The prospect of meeting Lebedev, less a man than a creature of legend whom few claimed to have ever seen, was daunting of itself; and though Chemayev was a frequent visitor to Eternity and thus acquainted with many of its eccentricities, it occurred to him now that Lebedev and his establishment were one and the same, an inscrutable value shining forth from the dingy chaos of Moscow, a radiant character whose meaning no one had been able to determine and whose menace, albeit palpable, was impossible to define. The appointment had been characterized as a mere formality, but Chemayev suspected that Lebedev's notion of formality was quite different from his own, and while he waited he went over in his mind the several communications he had received from Eternity's agents, wondering if he might have overlooked some devious turn of phrase designed to mislead him.

The club was located half an hour to the north and west of the city center amidst a block of *krushovas*, crumbling apartment projects that sprouted from the frozen, rubble-strewn waste like huge gray headstones memorializing the *Krushev* era—the graveyard of the Soviet state, home to generations of cabbage-eating drunks and party drones. Buildings so cheaply constructed that if you pressed your hand to their cement walls, your palm would come away coated with sand. No sign, neon or otherwise, announced the club's presence. None was needed. Eternity's patrons were members of the various *mafiyas* and they required no lure apart from that of its fabulous reputation and exclusivity. All that was visible of the place was a low windowless structure resembling a bunker—the rest of the complex lay deep underground; but the lot that surrounded it was packed with Mercedes and Ferraris and Rolls Royces. As Chemayev gazed blankly, unseeingly, through the windshield of his ten-year-old Lada, shabby as a mule among thoroughbreds, his attention was caught by a group of men and women hurrying toward the entrance. The men walked with a brisk gait, talking and laughing, and the women followed silently in their wake, their furs and jewelry in sharp contrast to the men's conservative attire, holding their collars shut against the wind or putting a hand to their head to keep an extravagant coiffure in place, tottering in their high heels, their breath venting in little white puffs.

"Viktor!" Someone tapped on the driver side window. Chemayev cleared away condensation from the glass and saw the flushed, bloated features of his boss, Lev Polutin, peering in at him. Several feet away stood a pale man in a leather trenchcoat, with dark hair falling to his shoulders and a seamed, sorrowful face. "What are you doing out in the cold?" Polutin asked as Chemayev rolled down the window. "Come inside and drink with us!" His 100-proof breath produced a moist warmth on Chemayev's cheeks.

"I'll be along soon," Chemayev said, annoyed by this interruption to his routine.

Polutin straightened and blew on his hands. A big-bellied ursine man of early middle age, his muscles already running to fat, hair combed back in a wave of grease and black gleam from his brow. All his features

were crammed toward the center of his round face, and his gestures had the tailored expansiveness common to politicians and actors out in public, to all those who delight in being watched. He introduced his companion as Niall March, a business associate from Ireland. March gave Chemayev an absent nod. "Let's get on in," he said to Polutin. "I'm fucking freezing." But Polutin did not appear to have heard. He beamed at Chemayev, as might a father approving of his child's cleverness, and said, "I promised Niall I'd show him the new Russia. And here you are, Viktor. Here you are." He glanced toward March. "This one..." —he pointed at Chemayev—"always thinking, always making a plan." He affected a comical expression of concern. "If I weren't such a carefree fellow, I'd suspect him of plotting against me."

Asshole, Chemayev thought as he watched the two men cross the lot. Polutin liked to give himself intellectual airs, to think of himself as criminal royalty, and to his credit he had learned how to take advantage of society's convulsions; but that required no particular intelligence, only the instincts and principles of a vulture. As for the new Russia, what a load of shit! Chemayev turned his eyes to the nearest of the *krashovas* no more than fifteen yards away, the building's crumbling face picked out by wan flickering lights, evidence that power was out on some of the floors and candles were in use. The fluorescent brightness of the entranceway was sentried by a prostitute with bleached hair and a vinyl jacket who paced back and forth with metronomic regularity, pausing at the end of each pass to peer out across the wasteland, as though expecting her relief. There, he thought, that was where the new Russia had been spawned. Open graves infested by the old, the desperate, the addicted, perverts of every stamp. They made the stars behind them look false, they reduced everything they shadowed. If the new Russia existed, it was merely as a byproduct of a past so grim that any possible future would be condemned to embody it.

The prospect of spending an evening with his boss, especially this one, when so much was at stake, weighed on Chemayev. He was not in the mood for Polutin's condescension, his unctuous solicitude. But he could think of no way to avoid it. He stepped from the car and took a deep breath of the biting, gasoline-flavored Moscow air. A few hours more, and his troubles would be over. All the wormy, enfeebling pressures of the past year would be evicted from his spirit, and for the first time he'd be able to choose a path in life rather than accept the one upon which he had been set by necessity. Strengthened by this notion, he started across the lot. Each of his footsteps made a crisp sound, as if he were crushing a brittle insect underfoot, and left an impression of his sole in a paper-thin crust of ice.

Chemayev checked his pistols at the entrance to Eternity, handing them over to one of Lebedev's young unsmiling soldiers, and descended in an elevator toward the theater that lay at the center of the complex. The empty holsters felt like dead, stubby wings strapped to his sides, increasing his sense of powerlessness—by contrast, the money belt about his waist felt inordinately heavy, as if full of golden bars, not gold certificates. The room into which the elevator discharged him was vast, roughly egg-shaped, larger at the base than at the apex, with snow white carpeting and walls of midnight blue. At the bottom of the egg was a circular stage, currently empty; tiers of white leather booths were arranged around it, occupied by prosperous-looking men and beautiful women whose conversations blended into a soft rustling that floated upon a bed of gentle, undulant music. Each booth encompassed a linen-covered table, and each table was centered by a block of ice hollowed so as to accommodate bottles of chilled vodka. The top of the egg, some thirty feet above the uppermost tier, was obscured by pale swirling mist, and through the mist you could see hanging lights—silvery, delicate, exotically configured shapes that put Chemayev in mind of photographs he'd seen of microscopic creatures found in polar seas. To many the room embodied a classic Russian elegance, but Chemayev, whose mother—long deceased—had been an architect and had provided him with an education in the arts, thought the place vulgar, a childish fantasy conceived by someone whose idea of elegance had been derived from old Hollywood movies.

Polutin's booth, as befitted his station, was near the stage. The big man was leaning close to March, speaking energetically into his ear. Chemayev joined them and accepted a glass of vodka. "I was about to tell Niall about the auction," Polutin said to him, then returned his attention to March. "You see, each night at a certain time... a different hour every night, depending on our host's whim. Each night a beautiful woman will rise from beneath the stage. Naked as the day she came into the world. She carries a silver tray upon which there lies a single red rose. She will walk among the tables, and offer the rose to everyone in attendance."

"Yeah?" March cocked an eye toward Polutin. "Then what?"

"Then the bidding begins."

"What are they bidding for?" March's responses were marked by a peculiar absence of inflection, and he appeared disinterested in Polutin's lecture; yet Chemayev had the sense that he was observing everything with unnatural attentiveness. His cheeks were scored by two vertical lines as deep as knife cuts that extended from beneath the corners of his eyes to the corners of his lips. His mouth was thin, wide, almost chimpanzee-like in its mobility and expressiveness—this at odds with his eyes, which were small and pale

and inactive. It was as if at the moment of creation he had been immersed in a finishing bath, one intended to add an invigorating luster, that had only partially covered his face, leaving the eyes and all that lay behind them lacking some vital essential.

"Why... for the rose, of course." Polutin seemed put off by March's lack of enthusiasm. "Sometimes the bidding is slow, but I've seen huge sums paid over. I believe the record is a hundred thousand pounds."

"A hundred grand for a fucking flower?" March said. "Sounds like bollocks to me."

"It's an act of conspicuous consumption," Chemayev said; he tossed back his vodka, poured another from a bottle of Ketel One. "Those who bid are trying to demonstrate how little money means to them."

"There's an element of truth in what Viktor says," Polutin said archly, "but his understanding is incomplete. You are not only bidding for status... for a fucking flower." He spooned caviar onto a silver dish and spread some on a cracker. "Think of a rose. Redder than fire. Redder than a beast's eye. You're bidding for that color, that priceless symptom of illusion." He popped the cracker into his mouth and chewed noisily; once he had swallowed he said to March, "You see, Viktor does not bid. He's a frugal man, and a frugal man cannot possibly understand the poetry of the auction." He worried at a piece of cracker stuck in his teeth. "Viktor never gambles. He picks up a check only when it might prove an embarrassment to do otherwise. His apartment is a proletarian tragedy, and you've seen that piece of crap he drives. He's not wealthy, but he is far from poor. He should want for nothing. Yet he hordes money like an old woman." Polutin smiled at Chemayev with exaggerated fondness. "All his friends wonder why this is."

Chemayev ignored this attempt to rankle him and poured another vodka. He noted with pleasure that the pouches beneath Polutin's eyes were more swollen than usual, looking as if they were about to give birth to fat worms. A few more years of heavy alcohol intake, and he'd be ripe for a cardiac event. He lifted his glass to Polutin and returned his smile.

"To be successful in business one must have a firm grasp of human nature," said Polutin, preparing another cracker. "So naturally I have studied my friends and associates. From my observations of Viktor I've concluded that he is capable of magic." He glanced back and forth between Chemayev and March, as if expecting a strong reaction.

March gave an amused snort. "I suppose that means he's got himself a little wand."

Polutin laughed and clapped March on the shoulder. "Let me explain," he said. "During the early days of glasnost, Yuri Lebedev was the strongest man in all the mafiyas. He made a vast fortune, but he also made enemies. The dogs were nipping at his heels, and he recognized it was only a matter of time before they brought him down. It was at this point he began to build Eternity."

He gobbled the second cracker, washed it down with vodka; after swallowing with some difficulty he went on: "The place is immense. All around us the earth is honeycombed with chambers. Apartments, a casino, a gymnasium, gardens. Even a surgery. Eternity is both labyrinth and fortress, a country with its own regulations and doctrines. There are no policemen here, not even corrupt ones. But commit a crime within these walls, a crime that injures Yuri, and you will be dealt with according to his laws. Yuri is absolutely secure. He need never leave until the day he dies. Yet that alone does not convey the full extent of his genius. In the surgery he had doctors create a number of doubles for him. The doctors, of course, were never heard from again, and it became impossible to track Yuri. In fact it's not at all certain that he is still here. Some will tell you he is dead. Others say he lives in Chile, in Tahiti. In a dacha on the Black Sea. He's been reported in Turkestan, Montreal, Chiang Mai. He is seen everywhere. But no one knows where he is. No one will ever know."

"That's quite clever, that is," March said.

Polutin spread his hands as if to reveal a marvel. "Right in front of our eyes Yuri built a device that would cause him to disappear, and then he stepped inside it. Like a pharaoh vanishing inside his tomb. We were so fascinated in watching the trick develop, we never suspected it was a real trick." He licked a fleck of caviar from his forefinger. "Had Yuri vanished in any way other than the one he chose, his enemies would have kept searching for him, no matter how slim their chances of success. But he created Eternity both as the vehicle of his magical act and as a legacy, a gift to enemies and friends alike. He surrendered his power with such panache... It was a gesture no one could resist. People forgave him. Now he is revered. I've heard him described as 'the sanest man in Moscow.' Which in these times may well serve a definition of God."

Apprehension spidered Chemayev's neck. Whatever parallel Polutin was trying to draw between himself and Yuri, it would probably prove to be a parable designed to manipulate him. The whole thing was tiresome, predictable... Out of the corner of his eye he spotted a tall girl with dark brown hair. He started to call to her, mistaking her for Larissa, but then realized she didn't have Larissa's long legs, her quiet bearing.

"There is tremendous irony in the situation," Polutin continued. "Whether dead or alive, in the act of vanishing Yuri regained his power. Those close to him—or to his surrogates—are like monks. They keep

watch day and night. Everything said and done here is monitored. And he is protected not only by paranoia. Being invisible, his actions concealed, he's too valuable to kill. He's become the confidante of politicians. Generals avail themselves of his services. As do various mafiya bosses." He inclined his head, as if suggesting that he might be among this privileged number. "There are those who maintain that Yuri's influence with these great men is due to the fact that his magical powers are not limited to primitive sleights-of-hand such as the illusion that enabled his disappearance. They claim he has become an adept of secret disciplines, that he works miracles on behalf of the rich and the mighty." Polutin's attitude grew conspiratorial. "A friend of mine involved in building the club told me that he came into the theater once—this very room—and found it filled with computer terminals. Scrolling across the screens were strings of what he assumed were letters in an unknown alphabet. He later discovered they were Kabbalistic symbols. Some weeks later he entered the theater again. There was no sign of the terminals... or of anything else, for that matter. The room was choked with silvery fog. My friend decided to keep clear of the place thereafter. But not long before Eternity opened its doors, curiosity got the best of him and he visited the theater a third time. On this occasion he found the room completely dark and heard hushed voices chanting the same unintelligible phrase over and over." Polutin allowed himself a dramatic pause. "None of this seems to reflect the usual methods of construction."

"What's this got to do with your boy Viktor?" March asked. "He's planning a night club, too, is he?"

"Not that I know of." Polutin's eyes went lazily to Chemayev, like a man reassuring himself that his prize possession was still in its rightful place. "However, I see in Viktor many of the qualities Yuri possessed. He's bright, ambitious. He can be ruthless when necessary. He understands the uses of compassion, but if he wasn't capable of violence and betrayal, he would never have risen to his present position."

"I only did as I was told," Chemayev said fiercely. "You gave me no choice." Furious, he prepared to defend himself further, but Polutin did not acknowledge him, turning instead to March.

"It's in his talent for self-deception that Viktor most resembles Yuri," he said. "In effect, he has made parts of himself disappear. But while Yuri became an adept, a true professional, Viktor is still a rank amateur... though perhaps I underestimate him. He may have some more spectacular disappearance in mind."

Chemayev's feeling of apprehension spiked, but he refused to give Polutin the satisfaction of thinking that his words had had any effect; he scanned the upper tiers of booths, pretending to search for a familiar face.

"If I were to ask Viktor to describe himself," Polutin went on, "he would repeat much of what I've told you. But he would never describe himself as cautious. Yet I swear to you, Viktor is the most cautious man of my acquaintance. He won't admit it, not to you or me. Nor to himself. But let me give you an example of how his mind works. Viktor has a lover. Larissa is her name. She works here at Eternity. As a prostitute."

"Don't tell him my business!" Chemayev could feel the pulse in his neck.

Polutin regarded him calmly. "This is common knowledge, is it not?"

"It's scarcely common knowledge in Ireland."

"Yes," said Polutin. "But then we are not in Ireland. We are in Moscow. Where, if memory serves me, underlings do not dare treat their superiors with such impertinence."

Chemayev did not trust himself to speak.

"Larissa is a beautiful woman. Such a lovely face"—Polutin bunched the fingers of his left hand and kissed their tips, the gesture of an ecstatic connoisseur—"your heart breaks to see it! Like many who work here, she does so in order to pay off a debt incurred by someone in her family. She's not a typical whore. She's intelligent, refined. And very expensive."

"How much are we talking about?" March asked. "I've a few extra pounds in me pocket."

Chemayev shot him a wicked glance, and March winked at him. "Just having you on, mate. Women aren't my thing."

"What exactly is your thing?" Chemayev asked. "Some sort of sea creature? Perhaps you prefer the invertebrates?"

"Nah." March went deadpan. "It's got nothing to do with sex."

"The point is this," Polutin said. "Viktor's choice of a lover speaks to his cautious nature. A young man of his status, ambitious and talented, but as yet not entirely on a firm footing... such a man is vulnerable in many ways. If he were to take a wife it would add to his vulnerability. The woman might be threatened or kidnapped. In our business you must be secure indeed if you intend to engage in anything resembling a normal relationship. So Viktor has chosen a prostitute under the protection of Yuri Lebedev. No one will try to harm her for fear of reprisals. Eternity protects its own."

Chemayev started up from the booth, but Polutin beckoned him to stay. "A minute longer, Viktor. Please."

"Why are you doing this?" Chemayev asked. "Is there a purpose, or is it merely an exercise?"

"I'm trying to instruct you," said Polutin. "I'm trying to show you who you are. I think you have forgotten

some important truths."

Chemayev drew a steady breath, let it out with a dry, papery sound. "I know very well who I am, but I'm confused about much else."

"It won't hurt you to listen." Polutin ran a finger along the inside of his collar to loosen it and addressed March. "Why does Viktor hide his cautious nature from himself? Perhaps he doesn't like what he sees in the mirror. I've known men who've cultivated a sensitive self-image in order to obscure the brutish aspects of their character. Perhaps the explanation is as simple as that. But I think there's more to it. I suspect it may be for him a form of practice. As I've said, Viktor and Yuri have much in common... most pertinently, a talent for self-deception. I believe it was the calculated development of this ability that led Yuri to understand the concept of deception in its entirety. Its subtleties, its potentials." Polutin shifted his bulk, his belly bumping against the edge of the table, causing vodka to slosh in all the glasses. "At any rate, I think I understand how Viktor manages to hide from himself. He has permitted himself to fall in love with his prostitute—or to think he has fallen in love. This affords him the illusion of incaution. How incautious it must seem to the casual eye for a man to fall in love with a woman he cannot possibly have. Who lives in another man's house. Whom he can see only for an hour or two in the mornings, and the odd vacation. Who is bound by contract to spend the years of her great beauty fucking strangers. Is this a tactical maneuver? A phase of Viktor's development. A necessary step along the path toward some larger, more magical duplicity. Or could it be a simple mistake? A mistake he is now tempted to compound, thus making himself more vulnerable than ever." He spread his hands, expressing a stagy degree of helplessness. "But these are questions only Viktor can answer."

"I bet I'm going to like working for you," March said. "You're a right interesting fellow."

"Nobody likes working for me. If you doubt this, ask Viktor." Polutin locked his hands behind his head, thrusting out his belly so that it overlapped the edge of the table; he looked with unwavering disapproval at Chemayev. "Now you may go. When you've regained your self-control, come back and drink some more. I'm told the entertainment this evening will be wonderful."

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The countertop of the bar in the lounge adjoining the theater was overlaid with a mosaic depicting a party attended by guests from every decade of the Twentieth Century, all with cunningly rendered faces done in caricature, most unknown to Chemayev, but a few clearly recognizable. There was Lavrenty Pavlovich Beria, the bloody-handed director of the KVD under Stalin, his doughy, peasant features lent a genteel air by rimless pince-nez. He was standing with a man wearing a Party armband and a woman in a green dress—Beria was glancing up as if he sensed someone overhead was watching him. Elsewhere, a uniformed Josef Stalin held conversation with his old pal Krushchev. Lenin and Gorbachev and Dobrynin stood at the center of small groups. Even old Yeltsin was there, mopping his sweaty brow with a handkerchief. Looking at it, Chemayev, sick with worry, felt he was being viewed with suspicion not only by his boss, but by these historical personages as well. It wasn't possible, he thought, that Polutin could know what he was planning; yet everything he'd said indicated that he did know something. Why else all his talk of disappearances, of Larissa and vulnerability? And who was the Irishman with him? A paid assassin. That much was for sure. No other occupation produced that kind of soulless lizard. Chemayev's heart labored, as if it were pumping something heavier than blood. All his plans, so painstakingly crafted, were falling apart at the moment of success. He touched his money belt, the airline tickets in his suit pocket, half-expecting them to be missing. Finding them in place acted to soothe him. It's all right, he told himself. Whatever Polutin knew, and perhaps it was nothing, perhaps all his bullshit had been designed to impress his new pet snake... whatever he thought he knew, things had progressed too far for him to pose a real threat.

He ordered a vodka from the bartender, a slender man with dyed white hair and a pleasant country face, wearing a white sweater and slacks. The room was almost empty of customers, just two couples chattering at a distant table. It was decorated in the style of an upscale watering hole—deep comfortable chairs, padded stools, paneled walls—but the ambiance was more exotic than one might expect. White leather upholstery, thick white carpeting. The paneling was fashioned of what appeared to be ivory planks, though they were patterned with a decidedly univory-like grain reminiscent of the markings on moths' wings; the bar itself was constructed of a similar material, albeit of a creamier hue, like wood petrified to marble. The edging of the glass tabletops and the frame of the mirror against which the bottled spirits were arrayed—indeed, every filigree and decorative conceit—were of silver, and there were glints of silver, too, visible among the crystal mysteries of the chandeliers. In great limestone fireplaces at opposite ends of the room burned pearly logs that yielded chemical blue flames, and the light from the chandeliers was also blue, casting glimmers and

reflections from every surface, drenching the whiteness of the place in an arctic glamour.

Mounted above the bar was a television set, its volume turned so low that the voices proceeding from it were scarcely more than murmurs; on the screen Aleksander Solzhenitsyn was holding forth on his weekly talk show, preaching the need for moral reform to a worshipful guest. Amused to find the image of the Nobel Laureate in a place whose moral foundation he would vehemently decry, Chemayev moved closer to the set and ordered another vodka. The old bastard had written great novels, he thought. But his sermons needed an editor. Some liked them, of course. The relics who lived in the krushovas sucked up his spiritual blah blah blah. Hearing this crap flow from such a wise mouth ennobled their stubborn endurance in the face of food shortages, violent crime, and unemployment. It validated their mulelike tolerance, it gave lyric tongue to their drunken, docile complaining. Solzhenitsyn was their papa, their pope, the guru of their hopelessness. He knew their suffering, he praised their dazed stolidity as a virtue, he restored their threadbare souls. His words comforted them because they were imbued with the same numbing authority, the same dull stench of official truth, as the windbag belches of the old party lions with dead eyes and poisoned livers whom they had been conditioned to obey. You had to respect Solzhenitsyn. He had once been a Voice. Now he was merely an echo. And a distorted one at that. His years in exile might not have cut him off from the essence of the Russian spirit, but they had decayed his understanding of Russian stupidity. People listened, sure. But they heard just enough to make them reach for a bottle and toast him. The brand of snake oil he was trying to sell was suited only for cutting cheap vodka.

"Old Man Russia." Chemayev waved disparagingly at the screen as the bartender served him, setting the glass down to cover Beria's upturned face. The bartender laughed and said, "Maybe... but he's sure as shit not Old Man Moscow." He reached for a remote and flipped through the channels, settling on a music video. A black man with a sullen, arrogant face was singing to tinny music, creating voluptuous shapes in the air with his hands—Chemayev had the idea that he was preparing to make love to a female version of himself. "MTV," said the bartender with satisfaction and sidled off along the counter.

Chemayev checked his watch. Still nearly three-quarters of an hour to go. He fingered his glass, thinking he'd already had too much. But he felt fine. Anger had burned off the alcohol he'd consumed at Polutin's table. He drank the vodka in a single gulp. Then, in the mirror, he saw Larissa approaching.

As often happened the sight of her shut him down for an instant. She seemed like an exotic form of weather, a column of energy gliding across the room, drawing the light to her. Wearing a blue silk dress that revealed her legs to the mid-thigh. Her dark hair was pinned high and in spite of heavy makeup and eyebrows plucked into severe arches, the naturalness of her beauty shone through. Her face was broad at the cheekbones, tapering to the chin, its shape resembling that of an inverted spearhead, and her generous features—the hazel eyes a bit large for proportion—could one moment look soft, maternal, the next girlish and seductive. In repose, her lips touched by a smile, eyes half-lidded, she reminded him of the painted figurehead on his Uncle Arkady's boat, which had carried cargo along the Dvina when he was a child. Unlike most figureheads this one had not been carved with eyes wide-open so as to appear intent upon the course ahead, but displayed a look of dreamy, sleek contentment. When he asked why it was different from the rest his uncle told him he hadn't wanted a lookout on his prow, but a woman whose gaze would bless the waters. Chemayev learned that the man who carved the figurehead had been a drunk embittered by lost love, and as a consequence—or so Chemayev assumed—he had created an image that embodied the kind of mystical serenity with which men who are forced to endure much for love tend to imbue their women, a quality that serves to mythologize their actions and make them immune to masculine judgments.

"What are you doing here?" he asked as she came into his arms.

"They told me I don't have to work tonight. You know... because you're paying." She sat on the adjoining stool, her expression troubled; he asked what was wrong. "Nothing," she said. "It's just I can't quite believe it. It's all so difficult to believe, you know." She leaned forward and kissed him on the mouth—lightly so as not to smear her lipstick.

"Don't worry," he said. "Everything's taken care of."

"I know. I'm just nervous." Her smile flickered on and off. "I wonder what it'll be like... America."

He cupped the swell of her cheek, and she leaned into his hand. "It'll be strange," he said. "But we'll be in the mountains to begin with. Just the two of us. We'll be able to make sense of it all before we decide where we want to end up."

"How will we do that?"

"We'll learn all about the place from magazines... newspapers. TV."

She laughed. "I can't picture us doing much reading if we're alone in a cabin."

"We'll leave the TV on. Pick things up subliminally." He grinned, nudged his glass with a finger. "Want a drink?"

"No, I have to go back in a minute. I haven't finished packing. And there's something I have to sign."

That worried him. "What is it?"

"A release. It says I haven't contracted any diseases or been physically abused." She laughed again, a single note clear and bright as a piano tone. "As if anyone would sue Eternity." She took his face in her hands and studied him. Then she kissed his brow. "I love you so much," she said, her lips still pressed to his skin. He was too dizzy to speak.

She settled back, holding his right hand in her lap. "Do you know what I want most. I want to talk. I want to talk with you for hours and hours."

Chemayev loved to hear her talk—she wove events and objects and ideas together into textures of such palpable solidity that he could lie back against them, grasped by their resilient contours, and needed only to say "Yes" and "Really" and "Uh huh" every so often, providing a minor structural component that enabled her to extend and deepen her impromptu creations. The prospect that he might have to contribute more than this was daunting. "What will we talk about?" he asked.

"About you, for one thing. I hardly know anything about your family, your childhood."

"We talk," he said. "Just this morning..."

"Yes, sure. But only when you're driving me to school, and you're so busy dodging traffic you can't say much. And when we're at your apartment there's never time. Not that I'm complaining." She gave his hand a squeeze. "We'll make love for hours, then we'll talk. I want you to reveal all your secrets before I start to bore you."

He saw her then as she looked each morning in the car, face scrubbed clean of makeup, the sweetly sad pragmatist of their five hundred days on her way to the university, almost ordinary in her jeans and cloth jacket, ready to spend hours listening to tired astronomers, hungover geographers, talentless poets, trying to find in their listless words some residue of truth, some glint of promise, a fact still empowered by its original energy, something that would bring her a glimpse of possibility beyond that which she knew. For the first time he wondered how America and freedom would change her. Not much, he decided. Not in any essential way. She would open like a flower to the sun, she would bloom, but she would not change. The naivete of this notion did not bother him. He believed in her. Sometimes it seemed he believed in her even more than he loved her.

"What are you thinking?" she asked, and smiled slyly as if she knew the answer.

"Evil things," he told her.

"Is that so?" She drew him close and slid his hand beneath her skirt. Then she edged forward on the stool, encouraging him. He touched her sex with a fingertip and she let out a gasp. Her head drooped, rested on his shoulder. He thrust aside the material of her panties. All her warmth was open to him. But then she pushed his hand away and whispered, "No, no! I can't!" She remained leaning against him, her body tense and trembling. "I'm not ashamed, you understand," she said, the words muffled by his shoulder. "I can't bear the idea of doing anything here." She let out a soft, cluttered sound—another laugh, he thought. "But there's no shame in me. I'll prove it to you tonight. On the plane."

He stroked her hair. "You'll be asleep ten minutes after take-off. You always sleep when we travel. Like a little baby."

"Not tonight." She broke from the embrace. Her face was grave, as if she were stating a vow. "I'm not going to sleep at all. Not until I absolutely have to."

"If you say so. But I bet I'm right." He checked his watch again.

"How long?" she asked.

"Less than half an hour. But I don't know how long I'll be with... with whoever it is I'm meeting."

"One of the doubles. There must be a dozen of them. I can't be sure, but I think I can tell most of them apart. They vary slightly in height. In weight. A couple have moles."

"What do you call them?"

"Yuri." She shrugged. "What else? Some of the girls invent funny names for them. But I guess I don't find them funny."

He looked down at the counter. "You know, we've never spoken about what it's like for you here. I know some of it, of course. But your life, the way you spend your days..."

"I didn't think you wanted to talk about it."

"I guess I didn't. It just seems strange... but it's not important."

"We can talk about it if you want." She wrapped a loose curl around her forefinger. "It isn't so bad, really. When I'm not at school I like to sit in the theater mornings and read. There's nobody about, and it's quiet. Peaceful. Like an empty church. Every two weeks the doctor comes to examine us. She's very nice. She brings us chocolates. Otherwise, we're left pretty much to our own devices. Most of the girls are so young, it's almost



possible to believe I'm at boarding school. But then..." Her mouth twisted into an unhappy shape. "There's not much else to tell."

Something gave way in Chemayev. The pressures of the preceding months, the subterfuge, the planning, and now this pitiful recitation with its obvious omissions—his inner defenses collapsed under the weight of these separate travails, conjoined in a flood of stale emotion. Old suffocated panics, soured desires, yellowed griefs, lumps of mummified terror... the terror he had felt sitting alone at night, certain that he would lose her, his head close to bursting with despair. His eyes teared. He linked his hands behind her neck and drew her to him so that their foreheads touched. "I'm sorry," he said. "I'm sorry it took so long."

"It wasn't long! It's so much money! And you got it all in less than a year!"

"Every day I see enough money to choke the world. I could have fixed the books, I could have done something."

"Yes... and then what? Polutin would have had you killed. God, Viktor! You amazed me! Don't you understand? You were completely unexpected. I never thought anyone would care enough about me to do what you've done." She kissed his eyes, applied delicate kisses all over his face. "When you told me what you were up to, I felt like a princess imprisoned in a high tower. And you were the prince trying to save me. You know me. I'm not one to believe in fairy tales. But I liked this one—it was a nice fantasy, and I needed a fantasy. I was certain you were lying to me... or to yourself. I prepared for the inevitable. But you turned out to be a real prince." She rubbed his stubbly head. "A prince with a terrible haircut."

He tried to smile, but emotion was still strong in him and his facial muscles wouldn't work properly.

"Don't punish yourself. Can't you see how happy I am? It's almost over now. Please, Viktor! I want you to be happy, too."

He gathered himself, swallowed back the tight feeling in his throat. "I'm all right," he said. "I'm sorry. I just... I can't..."

"I know," she said. "It's been hard for both of us. I know." She lifted his wrist so she could see his watch. "I have to go. I don't want to, but I have to. Are you sure you're all right?"

"I'll be fine," he said. "Go ahead... go."

"Should I wait for you here?"

"Yes," he said. "Yes, wait here, and we'll ride up together. As soon as I'm through with Yuri I'll call my security people. They'll meet us at the Entrance."

She kissed him again, her tongue flirting with his, a lush contact that left him muddled. "I'll see you soon," she said, trailing her hand across his cheek; then she walked off toward a recessed door next to the fireplace at the far end of the room—the same door that led to Yuri Lebedev's office and, ultimately, to the inscrutable heart of Eternity.

Without Larissa beside him Chemayev felt adrift, cut off from energy and purpose. His thoughts seemed to be circling, slowly eddying, as the surface of a stream might eddy after the sudden twisting submergence of a silvery fish. They seemed less thoughts than shadows of the moment just ended. On the television screen above the bar a child was sitting in a swing hung from the limb of an oak tree, spied on by an evil androgynous creature with a painted white face and wearing a lime green body stocking, who lurked in the shadows at the edge of a forest. All this underscored by an anxious, throbbing music. Chemayev watched the video without critical or aesthetic bias, satisfied by color and movement alone, and he was given a start when the bartender came over and offered him a drink in a glass with the silver initial L on its side.

"What's this?" Chemayev asked, and the bartender said, "Yuri's private booze. Everybody gets one. Everybody who meets with him." He set down the glass, and Chemayev viewed it with suspicion. The liquid appeared to be vodka.

"You don't have to drink," the bartender said. "But it's Yuri's custom."

Chemayev wondered if he was being tested. The courageous thing to do, the courteous thing, would be to drink. But abstinence might prove the wiser course.

"I can pour you another if you'd like. I can open a new bottle." The bartender produced an unopened bottle; it, too, was embossed with a silver L.

"Why don't you do that?" Chemayev told him. "I could use a drink, but... uh..."

"As you like." The bartender stripped the seal from the bottle and poured. He did not appear in the least disturbed and Chemayev supposed that he had been through this process before.

The vodka was excellent and Chemayev was relieved when, after several minutes, he remained conscious and his stomach gave no sign that he had ingested poison.

"Another?" the bartender asked.

"Sure." Chemayev pushed the glass forward.

"Two's the limit, I'm afraid. It's precious stuff." The bartender lifted the glass that Chemayev had refused,

offered a silent toast and drank. "Fuck, that's good!" He dabbed at his mouth with a cocktail napkin. "Almost everyone who tries it comes back and offers to buy a couple of bottles. But it's not for sale. You have to meet with Yuri to earn your two shots."

"Or work as a bartender in Eternity, eh?" Chemayev suggested.

"Privileges of the job. I'm always delighted to serve a suspicious Soul."

"I imagine you get quite a few."

"People have every right to be suspicious. This is a weird place. Don't get me wrong—it's great working here. But it takes getting used to."

"I can imagine."

"Oh, I wouldn't bet on it. You have no idea what goes on here after hours. But once you've met Yuri"—the bartender slung a towel over his shoulder—"you'll probably be able to educate me. Everyone says it's quite an experience."

Chemayev downed the second vodka. Yet another video was showing on the TV, and something was interfering with the transmission. First there was an intense flickering, then a succession of scenes skittered across the screen, as if the video were playing on an old-fashioned projector and the film was breaking free of the spool. He glanced at the bartender. The man was standing at the opposite end of the counter with his head thrown back, apparently howling with laughter; yet though his mouth was open and the ligature of his neck cabled, he wasn't making a sound. His white hair glowed like phosphorus. Unnerved, Chemayev turned again to the TV. On screen, to the accompaniment of a gloomy folk song, two women in white jumpsuits were embracing on a couch, deep in a passionate kiss. As he watched, the taller of the two, a blond with sharp cheekbones, unzipped her lover's jumpsuit to the waist, exposing the slopes of her breasts... It was at this point that Chemayev experienced a confusing dislocation. Frames began flipping past too rapidly to discern, the strobing light causing him to grow drowsy yet dumbly attentive; then a veneer of opaque darkness slid in front of the screen, oval in shape, like a yawning mouth. There was a moment when he had a claustrophobic sense of being enclosed, and the next instant he found himself standing in the blackness beyond the mouth. He had the impression that this black place had reached out and enveloped him, and for that reason, though he remained drowsy and distanced from events, he felt a considerable measure of foreboding.

From Chemayev's vantage it was impossible to estimate the size of the room in which he stood—the walls and ceiling were lost in darkness—but he could tell it was immense. Illumination was provided by long glowing silvery bars that looked to be hovering at an uncertain distance overhead, their radiance too feeble to provide any real perspective. Small trees and bushes with black trunks and branches grew in disorderly ranks on every side; their leaves were papery, white, bespotted with curious, sharply drawn, black designs—like little leaf-shaped magical texts. This must be, he thought, the garden Polutin had mentioned, though it seemed more thicket than garden. The leaves crisped against his jacket as he pushed past; twigs clawed at his trouser legs. After a couple of minutes he stumbled into a tiny clearing choked with pale weeds. Beetles scuttered in amongst them. Fat little scarabs, their chitin black and gleamless, they were horrid in their simplicity, like official notifications of death. The air was cool, thick with the skunky scent of the vegetation. He heard no sound other than those he himself made. Yet he did not believe he was alone. He went cautiously, stopping every so often to peer between branches and to listen.

After several minutes more he came to a ruinous path of gray cobblestones, many uprooted from their bed of white clay, milky blades of grass thrusting up among them. The path was little more than a foot wide, overhung by low branches that forced him to duck; it wound away among trees taller than those he had first encountered. He followed it and after less than a minute he reached what he assumed to be the center of the garden. Ringed by trees so tall they towered nearly to the bars of light was a circular plaza some forty feet in width, constructed of the same gray stones, here laid out in a concentric pattern. In its midst stood the remains of a fountain, its unguessable original form reduced to a head-high mound of rubble, a thin stream of silvery water arcing from a section of shattered lead pipe, splashing, sluicing away into the carved fragments tumbled at its base. Sitting cross-legged beside it, his back to Chemayev, was a shirtless man with dark shoulder-length hair, his pale skin figured by intricate black tattoos, their designs reminiscent of those on the leaves.

"March?" Chemayev took a step toward the man. "What are you doing here?"

"What am I doing here?" March said in a contemplative tone. "Why, I'm feeling right at home. That's what I'm doing. How about yourself?"

"I have a meeting," Chemayev said. "With Yuri Lebedev."

March maintained his yogi-like pose. "Oh, yeah? He was banging about a minute ago. Try giving him a shout. He might still be around."

"Are you serious?" Chemayev took another step forward. "Lebedev was here?"

March came smoothly, effortlessly to his feet—like a cobra rising from a basket. He cupped his hands to his mouth and shouted, "Hey, Yuri! Got a man wants to see ya!" He cocked his head, listening for a response. "Nope," he said at length. "No Yuri."

Chemayev shrugged off his jacket and draped it over a shoulder. March's disrespect for him was unmistakable, but he was uncertain of the Irishman's intent. He couldn't decide whether it would be safer to confront him or to walk away and chance that March would follow him into the thickets. "Do you know where the door to Yuri's office is?"

"I could probably find it if I was in the mood. Why don't you just poke around? Maybe you'll get lucky."

Confrontation, thought Chemayev, would be the safer choice—he did not want this man sneaking up on him.

"What is this all about?" He gave a pained gesture with his jacket, flapping it at March. "This thing you're doing. This... Clint Eastwood villain thing. What is it? Have you been sent to kill me? Does Polutin think I'm untrustworthy?"

"My oh my," said March. "Could it be I've made an error in judgment? Here I thought you were just another sack of fish eggs and potato juice, and now you've gone all brave on me." He extended his arms toward Chemayev, rotated them in opposite directions. The tattoos crawled like beetles across his skin, causing his muscles to appear even more sinewy than they were. In the half-light the seamed lines on his face were inked with shadow, like ritual scarifications. "Okay," he said. "Okay. Why don't we have us a chat, you and I? A settling of the waters. We'll pretend we're a coupla old whores tipsy on lager and lime." He dropped again into a cross-legged posture and with a flourish held up his right hand—palm on edge—by his head. Then he drew the hand across his face, pretending to push aside his dour expression, replacing it with a boyish smile. "There now," he said. "What shall we talk about?"

Chemayev lowered into a squat. "You can answer my questions for a start."

"Now that's a problem, that is. I fucking hate being direct. Takes all the charm out of a conversation." March rolled his neck, popping the vertebrae. "Wouldn't you prefer to hear about my childhood?"

"No need," said Chemayev. "I used to work in a kennel."

"You're missing out on a grand tale," said March. "I was all the talk of Kilmorgan when I was a lad." He gathered his hair behind his neck. "I foresee this is not destined to be a enjoyable conversation. So I'll tell you what I know. Your Mister Polutin feels you're on the verge of making a serious mistake, and he's engaged me to show you the error of your ways."

"What sort of mistake?"

"Ah! Now that, you see, I do not know." March grinned. "I'm merely the poor instrument of his justice."

Chemayev slipped off his shoulder harness, folded it on top of his coat; he did the same with his money belt. "So Polutin has sent you to punish me? To beat me?"

"He's left the degree of punishment up to yours truly," March said. "You have to understand, I like to think of myself as a teacher. But if the pupil isn't capable of being taught... and you'd be surprised how often that's the case. Then extreme measures are called for. When that happens there's likely to be what you might call a morbid result." He squinted, as if trying to make out Chemayev through a fog. "Are you afraid of me?"

"Petrified," said Chemayev.

March chuckled. "You've every right to be confident. You've got about a yard of height and reach on me. And what...? Maybe a stone and a half, two stone in weight? By the looks of things I'm vastly overmatched."

"How much is Polutin paying you?"

"Let's not go down that path, Viktor. It's unworthy of you. And disrespectful to me as well."

"You misunderstand." Chemayev tossed his shirt on top of the money belt. "I simply wish to learn how much I'll profit from breaking your neck."

March hopped to his feet. "You're a hell of a man in your own back yard, I'm certain. But you're in a harsher world now, Viktor old son." He gave his head a shake, working out a tightness in his neck. "Yes, indeed. A world terrible, pitiless, and strange. With no room a'tall for mistakes and your humble servant, Niall March, for a fucking welcome wagon."

Chemayev took great satisfaction in resorting to the physical. In a fight all of the vagueness of life became comprehensible. Frustration made itself into a fist; nameless fears manifested in the flexing of a muscle. The pure principles of victory and defeat flushed away the muddle of half-truths and evasions that generally clogged his moral apparatus. He felt cleansed of doubt, possessed of keen conviction. And so when he smiled at March, dropping into a wrestler's crouch, it was not only a show of confidence but an expression of actual pleasure. They began to circle one another, testing their footing, feinting. In the first thirty seconds March launched a flurry of kicks that Chemayev absorbed on his arms, but the force of each blow drove him

backward. It had been plain from the outset that March was quick, but Chemayev hadn't realized the efficiency with which he could employ his speed. The man skipped and jittered over the uneven terrain, one moment graceful, dancing, then shuffling forward in the manner of a boxer, then a moment later sinking into an apelike crouch and lashing out with a kick from ground level. Chemayev had intended to wait for the perfect moment to attack, but now he understood that if he waited, March was likely to land a kick cleanly; he would have to risk creating an opening. And when March next came into range he dove at the man's back leg, bringing him down hard onto the stones.

The two men grabbed and countered, each trying to roll the other and gain the upper position, their breath coming in grunts. March's quickness and flexibility made him difficult to control. After a struggle Chemayev managed to turn him onto his back and started to come astride his chest; but March's legs scissored his waist, forcing him into a kneeling position, and they were joined almost like lovers, one wobbling above, the other on his back, seemingly vulnerable. Chemayev found he was able to strike downward at March's face, but his leverage was poor, the blows weak, and March blocked most of them with his arms, evaded others by twitching his head to the side. Soon Chemayev grew winded. He braced himself on his left hand, intending to throw a powerful right that would penetrate the Irishman's guard; but with a supple, twisting movement, March barred Chemayev's braced arm with his forearm, holding it in place, and levered it backward, dislocating the elbow.

Chemayev screamed and flung himself away, clutching his arm above the elbow, afraid to touch the injury itself. The pain brought tears to his eyes, and for a moment he thought he might faint. Even after the initial burning shock had dissipated, the throbbing of the joint was nearly unbearable. He staggered to his feet, shielding the injury, so disoriented that when he tried to find March, he turned toward the trees.

"Over here, Viktor!" March was standing by the fountain, taking his ease. Chemayev made to back away, got his feet tangled, and inadvertently lurched toward him—the jolt of each step triggered a fresh twinge in his arm. His brain was sodden, empty of plan or emotion, as if he were drunk to the point of passing out.

"What d'ye think, sweetheart?" said March. "Am I man enough for you, or are you pining yet for young Tommy down at the pub?" He took a stroll away from the fountain, an angle that led him closer to Chemayev but not directly toward him. He spun in a complete circle, whirling near, and kicked Chemayev in the head.

A white star detonated inside Chemayev's skull and he fell, landing on his injured elbow. The pain caused him to lose consciousness and when he came to, when his eyes were able to focus, he found March squatting troll-like beside him, a little death incarnate with curses in the black language scrawled across his skin and long dark hair hiding his face like a cowl.

"Jesus, boyo," he said with mock compassion. "That was a bad 'un. Couple more like that, we'll be hoisting a pint in your honor and telling lies about the great deeds you done in your days of nature."

Chemayev began to feel his elbow again—that and a second pain in the side of his face. He tasted blood in his mouth and wondered if his cheekbone was broken. He closed his eyes.

"Have you nothing to say? Well, I'll leave you to mend for a minute or two. Then we'll have our chat."

Chemayev heard March's footsteps retreating. A thought was forming in the bottom of his brain, growing strong enough to sustain itself against grogginess and pain. It pushed upward, surfacing like a bubble from a tar pit, and he realized it was only a mental belch of fear and hatred. He opened his eyes and was fascinated by the perspective—a view across the lumpy rounded tops of the cobblestones. He imagined them to be bald gray midgets buried to their eyebrows in the earth. He pushed feebly at the stones with his good arm and after inordinate labor succeeded in getting to his hands and knees. Dizzy, he remained in that position a while, his head hung down. Blood dripping from his mouth spotted the stones beneath him. When he tried to stand his legs refused to straighten; he sat back clumsily, supporting himself with his right hand.

"A beating's a terrible thing," said March from somewhere above. "But sometimes it's the only medicine. You understand, don't you, Viktor? I'll wager you've handed out a few yourself. What with you being such a badass and all." He was silent for a couple of ticks. "Polutin assures me you're a bright lad. And I'm inclined to agree... though I'm not sure I'd go so far as saying you're a bloody genius. Which is Polutin's view of the matter. He's an absolute fan of your mental capacities. If mental capacity was rock and roll he'd be front row at all your concerts, blowing kisses and tossing up his room key wrapped in a pair of knickers." Another pause. "Am I getting through to you, Viktor?"

Chemayev nodded, a movement that set his cheekbone to throbbing more fiercely.

"That's good." March's legs came into view. "According to Polutin, your talents lie in your ability to organize facts. He tells me you can take a newspaper, the Daily Slobova or whatever rag it is you boys subscribe to, and from the facts you've gathered in a single read, you're able to devise a money-making scheme no one's thought of before. Now that's impressive. I'm fucking impressed, and I don't impress easy. So here's what I'm asking, Viktor. I'm asking you to marshal that massive talent of yours and organize the facts I'm

about to present. Can you handle that?"

"Yes," said Chemayev, not wanting to risk another nod. His elbow was feeling stronger and he wondered if the fall might not have jammed the bone back into its socket. He shifted his left arm, and though pain returned in force, he seemed to have mobility.

"All right," said March. "Here we go. First fact. Polutin loves you like a son. That may seem farfetched, considering the crap he rubs in your face. But it's what he tells me. And it's for certain fathers have treated sons a great deal worse than he treats you. Love's too strong a word, perhaps. But there's definitely paternal feelings involved. Why he'd want a son, now, I've no idea. The thought of fathering a child turns my stomach. The little bollocks start out pissing on your hand and wind up spitting in your face and stealing the rent money. But I had a troubled upbringing, so I'm not the best judge of these things."

He paced off to the side, moving beyond Chemayev's field of vision. "Second fact. Whatever game you've been playing, it's over. Terminated. Done. And by the way, I'll be wanting you to tell me exactly what it was. Every last detail. But that can wait till you've got the roses back in your cheeks. Third fact. You've made one mistake. You can't afford another. Are you following me, Viktor? You're on the brink of oblivion with ten toes over the edge. No more mistakes or you're going to fall a long, long way and hit the ground screaming." March's legs came back into view. "Fact number four. God is dead. The certain hope of the Resurrection is a pile of shite. You have my word on it. I've seen to the other side and I know."

Chemayev found he could make a fist with his left hand. To test his strength he tightened it, fingernails cutting into his palm. March's voice was stirring up a windy noise inside his head, like the rush of traffic on a highway.

"There you have it, Viktor. Four little facts. Organize away. Turn 'em over in your mind. See if you can come up with a scheme for living."

Chemayev wanted badly to satisfy March, to avoid further punishment; but the facts with which he had been presented offered little room for scheming. Instead they formed four walls, the walls of the lightless world in which he had been confined before meeting Larissa. It occurred to him that this was exactly what March wished him to conclude and that he could satisfy him by saying as much. But the thought of Larissa charged him with stubbornness. She was the fifth fact he could not ignore, the fact that had shattered those walls. Thanks to her there was a sixth fact, a seventh, an infinity of fact waiting to be explored.

"It's no brainbuster, Viktor. I'm not the least gifted when it comes to organization. Fuck, I can't even balance my checkbook. But even I can figure this one out."

As if his engine had begun to idle out Chemayev's energy lapsed. He grew cold and the cold slowed his thoughts, replaced them with a foggy desire to lie down and sleep. March put a hand on his shoulder, gave him a shake, and pain lanced along his cheekbone. The touch renewed his hatred, and braced by adrenaline, he let hate empower him.

"C'mon, lad." March said with a trace of what seemed actual concern in his voice. "Tell me what you know."

"I understand," said Chemayev shakily.

"Understand what?"

"I have a... a good situation. A future. I'd be a fool to jeopardize it."

"Four stars!" said March. "Top of the charts in the single leap! See what I told you, Viktor? A kick in the head can enlighten even the most backward amongst us. It's a fucking miracle cure." He knelt beside Chemayev. "There's one more thing I need to tell you. Perhaps you've been wondering why, with all the rude boys about in Moscow, our Mister Polutin hired in a Mick to do his dirty work. Truth is, Russki muscle is just not suited to subtlety. Those boys get started on you, they won't stop till the meat's off the bone. I'm considered something of a specialist. A saver of souls, as it were. You're not my only project. Far from it! Your country has a great many sinners. But you're my top priority. I intend to be your conscience. Should temptation rear its ugly head, there I'll be, popping up over your shoulder. Cautioning you not to stray. Keep that well in mind, Viktor. Make it the marrow of your existence. For that's what it is, and don't you go thinking otherwise." March stood, reached down and took Chemayev's right arm. "Come on now," he said. "Let's get you up."

Standing, it looked to Chemayev that the stones beneath his feet were miles away, the surface of a lumpy planet seen from space. A shadowy floater cluttered his vision. The white leaves each had a doubled image and March's features, rising from the pale seamy ground of his skin, made no sense as a face—like landmarks on a map without referents.

"Can you walk?" March asked.

"I don't know."

March positioned himself facing Chemayev and examined him with a critical eye. "We better have you

looked at. You might have a spot of concussion." He adjusted his grip on Chemayev's shoulders. "I'm going to carry you... just so's you know I'm not taking liberties. I'll come back after and get your things."

He bent at the knees and waist, preparing to pick Chemayev up in a fireman's carry. Without the least forethought or inkling of intent, acting out of reflex or muscle memory, or perhaps goaded by the sour smell of March's sweat, Chemayev slipped his right forearm under March's throat, applying a headlock; then with all his strength he wrenched the Irishman up off his feet. March gurgled, flailed, kicked. And Chemayev, knowing that he only had to hang on a few seconds more, came full into his hatred. He heard himself yelling with effort, with the anticipation of victory, and he dug the grip deeper into March's throat. Then March kicked out with his legs so that for the merest fraction of a second he was horizontal to the true. When his legs swung down again the momentum carried Chemayev's upper body down as well, and March's feet struck the ground. Lithe as an eel, he pushed himself into a backflip, his legs flying over Chemayev's head, breaking the hold and sending them both sprawling onto the stones.

By the time Chemayev recovered March had gotten to his feet and was bent over at the edge of the circle, rubbing his throat. Stupefied, only dimly aware of the danger he faced, Chemayev managed to stand and set off stumbling toward the trees. But the Irishman hurried to cut him off, still holding his throat.

"Are you mad, Viktor?" he said hoarsely. "There's no other explanation. Fuck!" He massaged his throat more vigorously, stretched his neck. "That's as close as I've come. I'll give you that much."

Chemayev's legs wanted to bend in odd directions. It felt as if some organ in his head, a scrap of flesh he never knew existed, had been torn free and was flipping about like a minnow in a bait bucket.

Strands of hair were stuck to March's cheek; he brushed them back, adjusted the waist of his trousers. "It's the girl, isn't it? Liza... Louisa. Whatever her fucking name is. Back when I was of a mood for female companionship, there were more than a few knocked my brains loose. They'll make a man incorrigible. Immune to even the most sensible of teachings."

Chemayev glanced about, groggily certain that there must be an avenue of escape he had overlooked.

"I remember this one in particular," said March as he approached. "Evvie was her name. Evvie Mahone. She wasn't the most gorgeous item on the shelf. But she was nice-looking, y'know. A country girl. Come to Dublin for the university. Wild and red-checked and full of spirit, with lovely great milky bosoms, and a frizzy mane of ginger hair hanging to her ass that she could never comb out straight. I was over the moon ten times round about her. When we were courting we'd sit together for hours outside her dormitory, watching the golden days turn to gray, touching and talking soft while crowds moved past us without noticing, like we were two people who'd fallen so hard for one another we'd turned to stone. Our hearts just too pure to withstand the decay and disappointment of the world." He stepped close to Chemayev, inches away—a wise white monkey with a creased, pouchy face and eyes as active as beetles. "After we became lovers we'd lie naked in the casement window of her room with a blanket around us, watching stars burn holes in the black flag flying over the Liffey. I swear to God I thought all the light was coming from her body, and there was music playing then that never existed... yet I still hear its strains. Is it like that for you, Viktor? That grand and all-consuming? I reckon it must be."

March clasped Chemayev's shoulder with his left hand, as if in camaraderie; he made a fist of his right. "Love," he said wistfully. "It's a wonderful thing."

Chemayev was not witness to much of the beating that then ensued; a punch he never saw coming broke his connection with painful reality and sent him whirling down into the black lights of unconsciousness. When he awoke he discovered to his surprise that he was no longer in pain—to his further surprise he found that he was unable to move, a circumstance that should have alarmed him more than it did. It was not that he felt at peace, but rather as if he'd been sedated, the intensity of his possessive attitude toward mortality tuned down several notches and his attention channeled into a stuporous appreciation of the blurred silver beam hanging in the darkness overhead... like a crossbeam in the belly of a great ark constructed of negative energy. He could hear water splashing, and a lesser sound he soon recognized to be the guttering of his breath. He thought of Larissa, then tried not to think of her. The memory of her face, all her bright particularity, disturbed the strange equilibrium that allowed him to float on the surface of this pain-free, boundless place. But after a while he became able to summon her without anxiety, without longing overmuch, content to contemplate her the way an Orthodox saint painted on an ikon might gaze at an apparition of the Virgin. Full of wonder and daft regard. Soon she came to be the only thing he wanted to think of, the eidolon and mistress of his passage.

Things were changing inside him. He pictured conveyor belts being turned off, systems cooling, microbes filing out of his factory stomach on the final day of operation, leaving their machines running and all the taps going drip drip drip. It was amusing, really. To have feared this. It was easier by far than anything that had preceded it. Though fear nibbled at the edges of his acceptance, he remained essentially secure beneath

his black comforter and his silver light and his love. The thought of death, once terrifying, now seemed only unfortunate. And when he began to drift upward, slowly approaching the light, he speculated that it might not even be unfortunate, that March had been wrong about God and the hope of the Resurrection. Beneath him the garden and its pagan central element were receding, and lying with its arms out and legs spread not far from the ruined fountain, his bloody, wide-eyed body watched him go. He fixed on the silver light, expecting, hoping to see and hear the faces and voices of departed souls greeting him, the blissful creatures that patrolled the border between life and true eternity, and the white beast Jesus in all Its majesty, crouched and roaring the joyful noise that ushered in the newly risen to the sacred plane. But then he sensed an erosion, a turmoil taking place on some fundamental level that he had previously failed to apprehend. Fragments of unrelated memory flew at him in a hail, shattering his calm. Images that meant nothing. A wooden flute he'd played as a child. An old man's gassed, wheezing voice. Sparks corkscrewing up a chimney. Pieces of a winter day in the country. Shards of broken mental crockery that shredded the temporary cloth of his faith, allowing terror to seep through the rents. Real terror, this. Not the fakes he'd experienced previously, the rich fears bred in blood and bone, but an empty, impersonal terror that was itself alive, a being larger than all being, the vacuous ground upon which our illusion breeds, that we never let ourselves truly believe is there, yet underlies every footstep ever taken... gulping him down into its cold and voiceless scream, while all he knew and loved and was went scattering.

j

Trembling and sweaty, Chemayev stared at the television set above the bar. A brown-haired teenage girl in a denim jacket and jeans was hitchhiking on a desert road, singing angrily—if you could judge by her expression—at the cars that passed her by. He watched numbly as she caught a ride in a dusty van. Then, astounded by the realization he was alive, that the girl was not part of the storm of memory that had assailed his dying self, he heaved up from the barstool and looked avidly about, not yet convinced of the authenticity of what he saw. About a dozen people sitting at various tables; the bartender talking to two male customers. The recessed door beside the fireplace opened and a woman in a black cocktail dress came into the lounge and stood searching the tables for someone. Still shaky, Chemayev sat back down.

All that had happened in the garden remained with him, but he could examine it now. Not that examination helped. Explanations occurred. He'd been given a drug in a glass of Yuri's special reserve—probably a hypnotic. Shown a film that triggered an illusion. But this fathered the need for other explanations. Was the object of the exercise to intimidate him? Were the things March had said to him about Polutin part of the exercise? Were they actual admonitions or the product of paranoia? Of course it had all been some sort of hallucination. Likely an orchestrated one. He could see that clearly. But despite the elements of fantasy—March's lyric fluency, the white trees, and so on—he couldn't devalue the notion that it had also had some quality of the real. The terror of those last moments, spurious though they had been, was still unclouded in his mind. He could touch it, taste it. The greedy blackness that had been about to suck him under... he knew to his soul that was real. The memory caused his thoughts to dart in a hundred different directions, like a school of fish menaced by a shadow. He concentrated on his breathing, trying to center himself. Real or unreal, what did it matter? The only question of any significance was, Who could have engineered this? It wasn't Polutin's style. Although March surely was. March was made to order for Polutin. The alternative explanations—magical vodka, mysterious Lebedevian machinations—didn't persuade him; but neither could he rule them out... Suddenly electrified with fright, remembering his appointment, thinking he'd missed it, he peered at his watch. Only eleven minutes had passed since he'd drunk the vodka. It didn't seem possible, yet the clock behind the bar showed the same time. He had fifteen minutes left to wait. He patted his pocket, felt the airline tickets. Touched the money belt. Pay Yuri, he told himself. Sign the papers. There'd be time to think later. Or maybe none of it was worth thinking about. He studied himself in the mirror. Tried a smile, straightened his tie unnecessarily, wiped his mouth. And saw Niall March's reflection wending his way among the tables toward the bar. Toward him.

"I was hoping I'd run into you," March said, dropping onto the stool beside Chemayev. "Listen, mate. I want to apologize for giving you a hard time back there in the fucking ice palace. I wasn't meself. I've been driving around with that bastard Polutin all day. Listening to him jabber and having to kiss his fat ass has me ready to chew the tit off the Virgin. Can I buy you a drink?"

Totally at sea, Chemayev managed to say, no thanks, he'd had enough for one evening.

"When I can no longer hear that insipid voice, that's when I'll know I've had enough." March hailed the bartender. "Still and all, he's a fair sort, your boss. We held opposing positions on a business matter over in London a while back. He lost a couple of his boys, but apparently he's not a man to let personal feelings intrude on his good judgment. We've been working together ever since."

Chemayev had it in mind to disagree with the proposition that Polutin did not let personal feelings interfere with judgment—it was his feeling that the opposite held true; but March caught the bartender's eye and said, "You don't have any British beer, do you? Fuck! Then give me some clear piss in a glass." The bartender stared at him without comprehension. "Vodka," said March; then, to Chemayev: "What sorta scene do you got going on here? It's like some kind of fucking czarist disco. With gangsters instead of the Romanovs. I mean, is it like a brotherhood, y'know? Sons of the Revolution or some such?"

The bartender set down his vodka. March drained the glass. "No offense," he said. "But I hate this shit. It's like drinking shoe polish." He glanced sideways at Chemayev. "You're not the most talkative soul I've encountered. Sure you're not holding a grudge?"

"No," said Chemayev, reigning in the impulse to look directly at March, to try and pierce the man's affable veneer and determine the truth of what lay beneath. "I'm just... anxious. I have an important meeting."

"Oh, yeah? Who with?"

"Yuri Lebedev."

"The fucking Buddha himself, huh? Judging by what I've seen of his establishment, that should be a frolic." March called to the bartender, held up his empty glass. "Not only does this stuff taste like the sweat off a pig's balls, but I seem immune to it."

"If you keep drinking..." Chemayev said, and lost his train of thought. He was having trouble equating this chatty, superficial March with either of the man's two previous incarnations—the sullen, reptilian assassin and the poetic martial arts wizard.

"What's that?" March grabbed the second vodka the instant the bartender finished pouring and flushed it down.

"Nothing," said Chemayev. He had no capacity for judgment left; the world had become proof against interpretation.

March turned on his stool to face the tables, resting his elbows on the bar. "Drink may not be your country's strong suit," he said, "but I'm forced to admit your women have it all over ours. I'm not saying Irish girls aren't pretty. God, no! When they're new pennies, ah... they're such a blessing. But over here it's like you've got the fucking franchise for long legs and cheekbones." He winked at Chemayev. "If Ireland ever gets an economy, we'll trade you straight-up booze for women—that way we'll both make out." He swiveled back to face the mirror, and looked into the eyes of Chemayev's reflection. "I suppose your girlfriend's a looker."

Chemayev nodded glumly. "Yes... yes, she is."

March studied him a moment more. "Well, don't let it get you down, okay?" He gave Chemayev a friendly punch on the arm and eased off the stool. "I've got to be going." He stuck out his hand. "Pals?" he said. With reluctance, Chemayev accepted the hand. March's grip was strong, but not excessively so. "Brothers in the service of the great ship Polutin," he said. "That's us."

He started off, then looked back pleadingly at Chemayev. "Y'know where the loo... the men's room is?"

"No," said Chemayev, too distracted to give directions. "I'm sorry. No."

"Christ Jesus!" March grimaced and grabbed his crotch. "It better not be far. My back teeth are floating."

j

The walls of the corridor that led to Yuri's office were enlivened by a mural similar to the mosaic that covered the bar in the lounge—a crowd of people gathered at a cocktail party, many of them figures from recent Russian history, the faces of even the anonymous ones rendered with such a specificity of detail, it suggested that the artist had used models for all of them. Every thirty feet or so the mural was interrupted by windows of one-way glass that offered views of small gaudy rooms, some empty, others occupied by men and women engaged in sex. However, none of this distracted Chemayev from his illusory memory of death. It dominated his mental landscape, rising above the moil of lesser considerations like a peak lifting from a sea of clouds. He couldn't escape the notion that it had been premonitory and that the possibility of death lay between him and a life of comfortable anonymity in America.

He rounded a bend and saw ahead an alcove furnished with a sofa, a coffee table, and a TV set—on the screen a husky bearded man was playing the accordion, belting out an old folk tune. Two women in white jumpsuits were embracing on the sofa, unmindful of Chemayev's approach. As he walked up the taller of the two, a pale Nordic blond with high cheekbones and eyes the color of aquamarines, unzipped her lover's jumpsuit to expose the swells of her breasts... and that action triggered Chemayev's memory. He'd seen this before. On the TV in the bar. Just prior to entering the garden where he had fought with March. The same women, the same sofa. Even the song was the same that had been playing then—the lament of a transplanted city dweller for the joys of country life. He must have cried out or made a noise of some sort, for the smaller woman—also a blond, younger and softer of feature—gave a start and closed her jumpsuit with a quick



movement, making a tearing sound with the zipper that stated her mood as emphatically as her mean-spirited stare.

"You must be Viktor," the taller woman said cheerfully, getting to her feet. "Larissa's friend."

Chemayev admitted to the fact.

"I'm Nataliya." She extended a hand, gave his a vigorous shake. The sharpness of her features contrived a caricature of beauty, the hollows of her pale cheeks so pronounced they brought to mind the fracture planes of a freshly calved iceberg. "I am also friends with Larissa," she said. "Perhaps she has told you about me?"

"I don't know," Chemayev said. "Perhaps. I think so."

Before he could voice any of the questions that occurred to him she caught his arm and said, "Come. I'll take you to Yuri." Then turning to her lover, she said, "I'll be back as soon as I can." The smaller woman let out an angry sniff and pretended to be absorbed in watching the TV.

Nataliya led him along the corridor, chattering about Larissa. What a sweetheart she was, how kind she was to the other girls, even those who didn't deserve it. God knows, there were some impossible bitches working here. Take that cunt Nadezhda. This scrawny redhead from Pyatigorsk. Her father had stolen from Yuri and now his little darling was keeping him alive by faking orgasms with drunks and perverts. You should have seen her the day she arrived. A real mess! Weeping and shivering. But after a couple of weeks, after she realized she wasn't going to be raped or beaten, she started acting like Catherine the Great. Lots of girls went through a phase like that. It was only natural. Most came from awful situations and once they felt they had a little power, you expected them to get a swelled head. But Nadezhda had been here a year and every day she grew more intolerable. Putting on airs. Bragging about the rich men who wanted to set her up in an apartment or buy her a dacha. And now --Nataliya's laugh sounded as if she were clearing her throat to spit --now she claimed some mystery man was going to pay her debt to Yuri and marry her. Everyone tried to tell her these things never worked out. Hadn't lying beneath a different man every night taught her anything? In the first place, why would a man take a whore to wife when he could have what he wanted for a far less exacting price? Love? What a joke! Men didn't love women, they loved the way women made them feel about themselves. Most of them, that is. The ones who did fall in love with you, the ones who were fool enough to surrender their power to a woman... because that's what love was in essence, wasn't it? A kind of absolute surrender. Well, you had to be suspicious of those types, didn't you? You had to believe some weakness of character was involved.

To this point Chemayev had been listening with half an ear, more concerned with the significance of having run into these women from his dream, trying fruitlessly to recall how the dream had proceeded after he had seen them, and thinking that he should turn back so as to avoid what might prove to be a real confrontation with March; but now he searched Nataliya's face for a sign that she might be commenting on his particular situation. She did not appear to notice his increased attentiveness and continued gossiping about the pitiful Nadezhda. She'd never liked the bitch, she said, but now she was about to get her comeuppance, you had to feel badly for her. Maybe she wasn't really a bitch, maybe she was just an idiot. And maybe that was why Larissa had befriended her... Nataliya stopped as they came abreast of yet another window, touched Chemayev on the shoulder, and said, "There's Yuri now."

In the room beyond the glass, its walls and furniture done in shades of violet, a pasty round-shouldered man with a dolorous, jowly face and thin strands of graying hair combed over a mottled scalp stood at the foot of a large bed, seeming at loose ends. He had on slacks and an unbuttoned shirt from which his belly protruded like an uncooked dumpling, and he was rubbing his hips with broad, powerful-looking hands. Chemayev had seen Yuri on numerous occasions—or rather he had seen the man who officiated at the nightly auctions—but he had never been this close to any of the doubles, and despite the man's unprepossessing mien, or perhaps because of it, because his drab commonality echoed that of the old Soviet dinosaurs, the Kruschevs, the Andropovs, the Malenkovs, he felt a twinge of fear.

"Is that him?" he asked Nataliya.

She looked uncertain, then brightened. "You mean the one you're expecting to meet? He's upstairs. At the party."

"What are you talking about? What party?"

"At Yuri's place."

"His office?"

"His office... his apartment. It's all the same. He's got an entire floor. The party's been going on since Eternity opened. Eleven, twelve years now. It never shuts down. Don't worry. You'll do your business and meet some fascinating people."

Chemayev studied the double, who was shuffling about, touching things, pursing his lips as though in disapproval. He did not appear to be the magical adept of Polutin's description, but of course this was not

the real Yuri – who could say what form he'd taken for himself?

"If you want to finish by the time Larissa gets off work," Nataliya said, "we'd better hurry."

"She's not working tonight," Chemayev said, still intrigued by the double.

"Sure she is. I saw her not half an hour ago. She was this young blond guy. A real pretty boy. Her last client of the night... or so she said."

She said this so off-handedly, Chemayev didn't believe she was lying. "She told me she didn't have to work tonight."

"What's she supposed to tell you? She's going to throw some asshole a fuck? You know what she does. She cares for you, so she lied. Big surprise!"

What Nataliya had told him seemed obvious, patently true; nonetheless Chemayev was left with a feeling of mild stupor, like the thick-headedness that comes with the onset of flu, before it manifests as fever and congestion. He leaned against the wall.

"The amazing thing is, you believed her," she said. "Who'd you think you were involved with? Lying's second nature to a whore."

"She's not a whore," he said, half under his breath.

Nataliya pushed her sharp face close to his. "No? What could she be then? A missionary? A nurse?"

"She didn't have a choice. She..."

"Sure! That explains it! Every other girl who becomes a whore has a choice, but not sweet Larissa." Nataliya made a dry sound in the back of her throat, like a cat hissing. "You're pathetic!"

Chemayev hung his head, giving in to the dead weight of his skull. To graphic images of Larissa in bed. It was unreasonable to feel betrayed under such circumstances, yet that was how he felt. He wanted to run, to put distance between himself and the corridor; but the violet room seemed to exert a tidal influence on his mood, pulling his sense of betrayal into a dangerous shape, and he had the urge to batter the window, to break through and tear Yuri's double apart.

"Want to watch? They're probably going at it in one of the rooms. I bet we can find them." Nataliya tugged at his jacket. "Come on! Treat yourself! I won't say a thing to Larissa."

Chemayev shoved her away, sending her reeling against the opposite wall. "Shut your fucking mouth!"

"Oo—oo—ooh!" Nataliya pretended to cower, holding her white hands like starfish in front of her face, peering through the gaps between her long fingers. "That was very good! Just like a real man!"

Chemayev's head throbbed. "You don't understand," he said. "I'm paying off her debt. We're planning to go away... to marry."

Nataliya was silent for a bit, then: "And now you're not? That's what you're saying? Now you've realized your whore is really a whore, you intend to abandon her?"

"No... that's not it."

"Then why waste time? Keep your appointment. Pay the money. You'll forget about this."

Chemayev thought this was good advice, but he couldn't muster the energy to follow it. His mental wattage had dimmed, as if he were experiencing a brown-out.

Nataliya leaned against the wall beside him. "What I said about Nadezhda... about her telling us someone was going to pay her debt. I bet Larissa told her about you, and she took the story for her own. She does that sort of thing. Takes scraps of other people's lives and sews them into an autobiography." She looked off along the corridor. "I'm sorry for what I said. If I'd known it was you and Larissa..." Her voice lost some value, some richness. "Maybe it'll be different for you two."

Her solicitude, which Chemayev suspected was only prelude to further abuse, snapped him out of his funk. "No need to apologize," he said. "I haven't taken anything you've said seriously." He headed off along the corridor.

"Oh... right! You have the surety of love to support your convictions." Nataliya fell into step beside him. "I'm curious about love. Me, I've never experienced it. Mind telling me what it's like?"

Chemayev's headache grew worse; he increased his pace. They came round a sharp bend and he saw an elevator door ahead.

"All I want's a hint, you understand, just tell me something you know about Larissa. Something only you with your lover's eye can see."

Enraged, Chemayev spun her about to face him. "Don't talk anymore! Just take me to Yuri!"

Half-smiling, she knocked his hands away and walked toward the elevator; then she glanced back, smiling broadly now. "Is this how you treat her? No wonder she lies to you."

Inside the cramped elevator, chest-to-chest with Nataliya, Chemayev fixed his eyes on a point above the silky curve of her scalp and studied the image of Stalin's KVD chief, Beria—the mural on the walls repeated the motif of those in the corridor and the bar, but here the figures were larger, giving the impression that they

were passengers in the car. Contemplating this emblem of Soviet authority eased the throbbing in his head. Maybe, he thought, in the presence of such an evil ikon his own sins were diminished and thus became less capable of producing symptoms such as anxiety and headaches. The old thug looked dapper, dressed in a double-breasted blue suit, sporting a red flower in his lapel instead of a hammer-and-sickle pin, quite different from the photographs Chemayev had seen in which he'd worn executioner's black. His quizzical expression and pince-nez gave him the air of a schoolteacher, stern yet caring, a man whom you'd detest when you studied under him, but whom you would respect years later when you realized the value of the lessons he'd taught. Not at all the sort of character to preside over purges and summary executions, watching from a distance, betraying no more emotion than would a beetle perched on a leaf.

Inching upward, the elevator creaked and groaned—the sounds of a torture chamber. The exhausted cries of victims, the straining of mechanical torments. Nothing like the noiseless efficiency of the one that had brought him to the theater. The car lurched, passing a floor, and Chemayev's thoughts, too, lurched. He reawakened to Nataliya's presence, felt her eyes on him. Bitch. He wanted to beam the word into her brain. What right did she have to ask him personal questions? Tell me something you know about Larissa, something only you with your lover's eye can see. What did she expect? That he'd bare his soul to her? Fat chance! There were lots of things he could have told her, though. A year and-a-half's worth of things. Thousands of intimate observations. The problem was, his head hurt too much at the moment for him to think of any.

The elevator door rattled open and Chemayev stepped out into a corridor with cement walls, smelling of urine and vomit, illuminated by the ghastly dim light from an overhead bulb. The floor was littered with empty bottles, crushed plastic containers, soggy newspapers, dead cigarette packs, used condoms. Partially unearthed from a mound of debris, a crumpled Pepsi can glittered like treasure. Heavy metal blasted from somewhere close by. At the far end of the corridor a lumpish old man with stringy gray hair falling to his shoulders was wielding a mop, feebly pushing a mound of trash into the shadowy space beneath a stairwell. Along the walls stood buckets of sand—for use in case of fire. Chemayev turned to Nataliya, who gestured for him to proceed. As they passed, the old man peered at him through the gray snakes of his hair, his face twisted into a frown, and he smacked his lips as if trying to rid himself of a nasty taste.

If Chemayev had any doubt as to where he stood, it was dispelled by what he saw from the window at the foot of the stairs—he was gazing down onto the parking lot of Eternity, a view that could only be achieved from high up in one of the krushovas. This surprised him, but he was becoming accustomed to Yuri Lebedev's curious logic. As he started up the stairs, the music was switched off and he heard voices in the corridor above. At the top of the stairs, lounging against a wall, were two men in jeans and leather jackets, one with a shaved scalp, nursing a Walkman to his breast, and the other with a mohawk that had been teased into a rooster's crest. They eyed Chemayev with contempt. The man with the Mohawk blew Nataliya a kiss. His face was narrow, scarcely any chin and a big nose, looking as if it had been squeezed in a vise. A pistol was stuck in his belt.

"Private party," he said, blocking Chemayev's path.

"I've got an appointment with Yuri," Chemayev told him.

The bald guy affected a doltish expression. "Yuri? Which Yuri is that?"

"Maybe Yuri Gagarin," said his pal. "Maybe this pussy wants to be an astronaut."

"Better let him pass," said Nataliya. "My friend's a real assassin. A faggot like you doesn't stand a chance with him."

The man with the pistol in his belt made a twitchy move and Chemayev grabbed his hand as it closed around the pistol grip; at the same time he spun the man about and encircled his neck from behind with his left arm, cutting off his wind. The man let go of the pistol and pried at the arm. Chemayev flicked the safety off, pushed the pistol deeper into the man's trousers.

The man's Adam's apple bobbed. "Go easy, okay!"

Chemayev wrenched the gun free and waved both men back against the wall. "Are you crazy?" he asked Nataliya. "Why did you antagonize him?"

She moved off along the corridor, heading for a doorway thronged with partygoers. "I have so few chances to watch you be masterful. Indulge me."

Chemayev shook his forefinger in warning at the two punks and followed her. The pistol—a nine-millimeter—didn't fit his holster; he wedged it in the waistband of his trousers at the small of his back.

The first thing he noticed about the party was that the instant he stepped through the door the stench of the hallway vanished, as if he had penetrated an invisible barrier impermeable to odors. The smells were now those you might expect of any Moscow gathering: perfume, marijuana and cigarette smoke, bad breath, the heat of people pressed together under the sickly lighting, crowded into an unguessable number of rooms.

People of every description. Students in sweaters and jeans; old ragged folks with careworn faces, the sort you'd expect to find in the *krushovas*; beautiful women in couturier gowns; street prostitutes—some equally beautiful—in vinyl micro-minis and fake furs; men dressed like Chemayev himself, members of a *mafiya* or businessmen with more-or-less reputable interests; musicians with guitars and violins and horns; homosexuals in drag; uniformed soldiers; jugglers. In one corner several fit-looking men wearing jerseys tossed a soccer ball back and forth; in another two actors played a scene to an audience consisting of a blond middle-aged woman in a lab coat and thick spectacles, a thickset man in a wrinkled suit, the very image of a Party hack, and a pretty adolescent girl wearing leg warmers over her tights, holding a pair of ballet slippers. On occasion, as Chemayev and Nataliya forged a path, being pinched and fondled and grabbed in the process, incredible sights materialized, as fleeting as flashes of lightning. A geisha's painted face appeared between shoulders; she flicked out a slender forked tongue at Chemayev, then was gone. Soon thereafter he caught sight of a small boy whirling as rapidly as a figure skater, transforming himself into a column of dervish blue light. And not long after that they squeezed past a group of men and women attending a giant with a prognathian jaw and a bulging forehead who, kneeling, was as tall as those gathered around him; he reached out his enormous hands and flickering auras manifested about the heads of those he touched. To someone unfamiliar with Eternity these sights might have seemed miraculous; but to Chemayev, who had witnessed similar curiosities on the stage of the theater, they were evidence of Yuri's talent for illusion. He accepted them in stride and kept pushing ahead. Once he saw a brunette who might have been Larissa laughing flirtatiously on the arm of a slender blond man; he called to her, knocked people aside in his determination to reach her, but she disappeared into the crowd. There were so many people milling about it was impossible to keep track of any single person, and they were of such great variety it seemed a contemporary Noah had scavenged the streets of the endangered city for two of every kind and brought them to this place of relative security, a cross between the Ark and the Tower of Babel. The hubbub, comprised of talking, singing, laughing—indeed, of every sort of human emission—was deafening, and the only impression Chemayev had of the general aspect of the place was derived from the objects that lined the walls. Overflowing bookcases; side-by-side refrigerators; an ornate China closet containing framed photographs; a massive secretary of golden oak; cupboards, reliquaries, travel posters, portraits, a calendar showing the wrong month and a picture of Siberian wheat fields. Items typical of a middle-class apartment. Smoke dimmed the lighting further, creating an amber haze, twisting with slow torsion into a menagerie of shapes that often appeared identifiable—ephemeral omega signs and kabalistic symbols and mutant Cyrillic characters—beneath which the closely packed heads of the partygoers bobbed and jerked. In various quarters couples were dancing and due to the heat, many—both men and women—had removed their shirts; but because of the overall exuberance and the general lack of attention paid to the topless women, the effect was not truly prurient and had the casual eroticism of a tribal celebration.

Eventually Nataliya and Chemayev forced their way into a large relatively under-populated room. No more than fifteen or sixteen people standing in clusters, some occupying the grouping of couches and easy chairs that dominated the far end. Nataliya drew Chemayev aside. "This is ridiculous," she said. "For all I know we're following Yuri about. Sit down and I'll try to find him."

Oppressed, mentally fatigued, Chemayev was in no mood to argue. Once she had left, he collapsed into an easy chair, let his head fall back and closed his eyes. The workings of his mind were clouded, murky. It was as if the contents of his skull were the interior of a fishbowl that hadn't been cleaned for weeks, the water thickened to a brown emulsion in which a golden glint of movement was visible now and again. Though not altogether pleasant, it was an oddly restful state, and he became irritated when a man's voice intruded, telling a story about two young friends who'd come to Moscow from the north. He tried unsuccessfully to ignore the voice and finally opened his eyes to discover that the room had filled with decrepit, ill-clad men and women, typical denizens of the *krushovas*. The storyteller was hidden among them and his voice—a slurred yet authoritative baritone—was the only one audible.

"There was a special bond between them," the man was saying. "They were both misfits in the life they had chosen—or rather that had chosen them. They were romantics and their circumstance was the very antithesis of the romantic, suppressing the natural expressions of their hearts and souls. Nicolai—the livelier of the pair—he was more grievously affected. He fancied himself a poet. He aspired to be a new Mayakovsky, to give tongue to the millennial monsters taking shape from the funeral smoke of Communism. A talented, personable fellow. Blond, handsome. For all his bloody deeds, he had something inside him that remained untouched. A core of... not innocence exactly, but a kind of youthful arrogance that counterfeited innocence. That made innocence unnecessary. Who knows what he might have achieved in a more forgiving age?"

This reference to someone named Nicolai and the accompanying description charged Chemayev with new anxiety and caused him to shake off his malaise. He sat up and peered about, trying to locate the

speaker. An old woman fixed him with a baleful stare, then turned away. Her faded print dress was hiked up in back, revealing a raddled, purple-veined thigh; one of her grimy stockings had sagged about her calf in folds, like a seven league boot.

"The morning in question," the man went on, "they got up well before dawn and drove to an open market north of the city. You know the sort of place. A muddy field where vendors set up stalls. Farmers selling vegetables and such. An old bus was parked at the edge of the field. It served as an office for Aleksander Fetisov, the small-time criminal they'd been sent to kill. Fetisov had grown dissatisfied with picking up the crumbs that fell from the table of the big shots. He had grand ambitions. But neither his strength nor his ingenuity had proved equal to those ambitions. When he stepped out of the bus with his bodyguards our heroes opened fire from behind the bushes where they had hidden themselves. The farmers ran away.

"Nicolai knelt beside Fetisov's body. He needed proof that they'd done the job. A watch, a ring. Some identifiable token. As his friend searched the dead man's clothing Viktor moved up behind him and aimed a pistol at his head. It would have been merciful if he had pulled the trigger right at that second, but he wasn't committed to the act. He was still trying to think of a way out... even though he knew there was none. He couldn't understand why Polutin had ordered him to kill Nicolai. But for Viktor, lack of understanding was not sufficient cause to break ranks. In this he differed from Nicolai. And of course, though he couldn't see it at the time, this was the reason Polutin had ordered Nicolai's death—he had too much imagination to be a good soldier."

Bewildered and full of dread, Chemayev stood and began making his way toward the sound of the voice. He knew this story, he was familiar with every detail, but how anyone else could know it was beyond him. The elderly men and women shuffled out of his path clumsily, reluctantly —it seemed he was pushing through a sort of human vegetation, a clinging, malodorous thicket comprised of threadbare dresses, torn sweaters, and blotchy, wrinkled skin.

"Nicolai glanced up from the corpse to discover that his friend had become his executioner. For an instant, he was frozen. But after the initial shock dissipated he made no move to fight or to plead for his life. He just looked at Viktor, a look that seemed fully comprehending, as if he knew everything about the moment. The mechanisms that had created it. Its inevitability. And it was the composition of that look, the fact it contained no element of disappointment, as if what was about to occur was no more nor less than what Nicolai might have expected of his friend... that was the spark that prompted Viktor, at last, to fire. To give him due credit, he wept profusely over the body. At one point he put the gun to his head, intending to end his own life. But that, certainly, was an act to which he was not committed."

Standing near the door, his back to Chemayev, the center of the krushova dwellers' attention, was a squat black-haired man in a blue serge suit. Chemayev stepped in front of him and stared into the unblinking eyes of Lavrenty Pavlovich Beria, his clothing identical in every respect to that worn by the painted image in the elevator, complete down to the pince-nez perched on his nose and the red blossom in his lapel. Flabbergasted, Chemayev fell back a step.

"If it were up to me," Beria said, "I'd have you shot. Not because you betrayed your friend—in that you were only carrying out an order. But your penchant for self-recrimination interferes with the performance of your duty. That is reprehensible." He clicked his tongue against his teeth and regarded Chemayev dourly. "I suspect you'd like to know how I came to hear the story I've been telling my comrades. No doubt you're trying to rationalize my presence. Perhaps you've concluded that if Yuri could create doubles for himself, he might well have created a double for Beria. Perhaps you're thinking that when Lev Polutin sent you and Nicolai to kill Fetisov, he also sent a spy to make certain you did the job right, and that this spy is my source. That would be the logical explanation. At least according to the lights of your experience. But let me assure you, such is not the case."

Having recovered his poise somewhat, Chemayev seized on this explanation as if it were a rope that had been lowered from the heavens to lift him free of earthly confusion. "I'm sick of this shit!" he said, grabbing Beria by the lapels. "Tell me where the fuck Yuri is!"

An ominous muttering arose from the crowd, but Beria remained unruffled. "People have been trying to talk to you all evening," he said. "Trying to help you make sense of things. But you're not a good listener, are you? Very well." He patted Chemayev on the cheek, an avuncular gesture that caused Chemayev, as if in reflex, to release him. "Let's say for the sake of argument I'm not who I appear to be. That I'm merely the likeness of Lavrenty Pavlovich Beria. Not God's creation, but Yuri's. Given Yuri's playful nature, this is a distinct possibility. But how far, I wonder, does playfulness extend? Does he only create doubles of the famous, the notorious? Or might he also create doubles of individuals who're of no interest to anyone... except, perhaps, to Viktor Chemayev?" A meager smile touched his lips. "That doesn't seem reasonable, does it?"

There was a rustling behind Chemayev, as of many people shifting about, and he turned toward the sound. An avenue had been created in the ranks of human wreckage from the krushova and sauntering toward him along it—the way he used to walk when he spotted you at a bar or on a street corner, and had it in mind to play a trick, his head tipped to the side, carrying his left hand by his waist, as if about to break into a dance step—was a blond, slender, blue-eyed man in a fawn leather jacket, gray silk shirt, and cream-colored slacks. His boyish smile was parenthetically displayed between two delicately incised lines that helped lend him a look of perpetual slyness. In fact, all the details of his features were so finely drawn they might have been created by a horde of artisan spiders armed with tiny lapidary instruments. It was the face of a sensitive, mischievous child come to a no less sensitive and mischievous maturity. He looked not a day older than he had on the last morning of his life three and a half years before.

"That's right!" Nicolai said, holding out his arms to Viktor. "In the flesh! Surprised?" He wheeled in a circle as if showing off a new suit. "Still the handsome twenty-two-year-old, eh? Still a fucking cloud in trousers."

Logic was no remedy for this apparition. If the floor had opened beneath him to reveal a lake of fire, Chemayev would not have been more frightened. He retreated in a panic, fumbling for the pistol.

"Man! Don't be an asshole! I'm not going to give you any trouble." Nicolai showed Chemayev his empty palms. "We've been down this road once. You don't want to do it again."

Guilt and remorse took up prominent posts along Chemayev's mental perimeters. His breath came shallowly, and he had difficulty speaking. "Nicolai?" he said. "It... it's not you... ?"

"Sure it is. Want me to prove it ? No problem." Nicolai folded his arms on his chest and appeared to be thinking; then he grinned. "What's that night club where all the whores dress like Nazis? Fuck! I'm no good with names. But you must remember the night we got drunk there? We screwed everything in sight. Remember?"

Chemayev nodded, though he barely registered the words.

"On the way home we had an argument," Nicolai said. "It was the only time we ever got into a fight. You pulled the car off onto the side of the Garden Ring and we beat the shit out of each other. Remember what we argued about?"

"Yes." Chemayev was beginning to believe that the man might actually be Nicolai. The thought gave him no comfort.

"We argued about whether the goddamn Rolling Stones were better with Brian Jones or Mick Taylor." Nicolai fingered a pack of Marlboros from his shirt pocket, tapped one out. "Stupid bullshit. I couldn't chew for a fucking week." He fired up his cigarette and exhaled a fan of smoke; he closed his right eye, squinted at Chemayev as if assessing the impact of his words. "Want more proof? No problem."

He dropped, loose-limbed, into a nearby chair and began to reel off another anecdote, but no further proofs were necessary. His unstrung collapse; his languid gestures) the way he manipulated the cigarette in his left hand, passing it from one pair of fingers to another like a magician practicing a coin trick—the entire catalogue of his body language and speech were unmistakably Nicolai's. No actor alive, however skillful, could have achieved such verisimilitude.

As Chemayev looked on, half-listening to Nicolai, a consoling inner voice, a voice of fundamental soundness and fine proletarian sensibilities that had been there all the time but only became audible when essential to mental stability, was offering assurances that beyond the boundaries of his temporary derangement the world was as ever, humdrum and explicable, and no such thing as this could be happening—drugs, alcohol, and stress were to blame—rambling on and on with increasingly insane calmness and irrelevance, like the whispered litany of a self-help guru suggesting seven simple methods for maximizing spiritual potential issuing from a cassette playing over a pair of headphones fallen from the head of gunshot victim who was bleeding out onto a kitchen floor. Yet simultaneously, in some cramped sub-basement of his brain, urgent bulletins concerning zombie sightings and karmic retribution were being received, warnings that came too late to save the iniquitous murderer of a childhood friend...

"Viktor!" Nicolai was staring at him with concern. "Are you all right? Sit down, man. I know this is fucked up, but we've got some things to talk about."

Unable to think of an acceptable alternative, Chemayev sagged into the chair opposite, but he did not lean back and he rested the pistol on his knee. Overwhelmed with guilt and regret, he had the urge to apologize, to beg forgiveness, but recognized the inadequacy of such gestures. His heart seemed to constrict into a dark nugget of self-loathing.

"You know it's me now, right?" Nicolai asked, "You don't have any doubts?"

Called upon to speak, Chemayev was unable to repress his urge for apology and emitted a sobbing, incoherent string of phrases that, reduced to their essence, translated into an admission of responsibility and

a denial of the same on the grounds that he'd had no choice, if he hadn't followed Polutin's orders, Polutin would have killed him, his family... The shame of the act never left him, but what else could he have done?

Nicolai shifted lower in his chair, reached down to the floor and stubbed out his cigarette. He watched the embers fade. "I never expected to last long in Moscow," he said gloomily. "That's one of the differences between us. You always thought you were going to win the game. Me, I knew it was only a matter of time before I lost." He tapped out another cigarette. "I can't help how you feel. And believe me, I know. I saw your face when you pulled the trigger. I see your face now. You're not hard to read." He lit up again. "You'll never forgive yourself, no matter what I tell you. So why don't we put the subject aside for now. We've more important things to discuss."

Once again Chemayev could think of nothing to say other than to abase himself, to offer further apology. Tears streamed from his eyes, and though the tears were validation of a kind, evidence that his spirit, albeit tarnished, was still capable of normal reactions, they also infused him with shame. He struggled to control himself. "I don't understand," he said. "How is this possible? How can you be here?"

"With Yuri all things are possible," said Nicolai; then his glum mood lifted. "You know those American jokes? The ones with the punch lines that go, 'I've got good news, and I've got bad news'? It's like that. I've got good news, and I've got bad news. Which do you want first?"

This was the old Nicolai, always joking, trying to make light of things. Chemayev relaxed by a degree from his rigid posture.

"Come on!" Nicolai said. "Which do you want?"

"Good."

"Okay. The good news is there is an afterlife. The bad news"—Nicolai made a sweeping gesture that, for all Chemayev knew, might have been intended to include the apartment, Russia, the universe—"this is it!"

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

"This place." Nicolai gave a sardonic laugh. "This fucking night club. Eternity."

There must be, Chemayev thought, more to the joke.

"You still don't get it, huh? Christ!" Nicolai leaned forward and gave Chemayev a rap on the knee, like a teacher scolding—fondly—a favorite pupil. "For such a genius you're not too quick on the uptake."

"Eternity?" said Chemayev, incredulous, "Yuri Lebedev's Eternity... that's the afterlife? You're not serious?"

"Serious? What the fuck's that? Is Moscow serious? Starving people camped in the subways. Generals selling tanks on the black market. That old fart in the Kremlin swilling down a quart a day and promising us the capitalist paradise. It's no less serious than that." Nicolai wriggled in his chair like a kid with an itch. "Yuri, man... he's..." He gave his head a shake, as if to signify awe. "You don't have to hang around the party long before you learn things about him."

"You mean that horseshit about he's a fucking wizard? A Master of the Mystic East?"

"They're things a guy like you might not be able to swallow. But for a guy like me, with what I've been through, I don't have any choice."

Chemayev looked down at his hands.

"Have you ever met anyone who knew Yuri?" Nicolai asked. "Any of his friends, his associates. Not just someone who used to work for him."

After giving this due consideration Chemayev said he had not.

"That's because they're dead. Grenkov, Zereva, Ashkenazy. All those guys. They're all dead and they're all at the party. Man, you wouldn't believe who's here! It's the goddamn Communist Hall of Fame. Yuri's a big fan of those power-mad old bastards. Lots of generals and shit. Not many poets, though. Yuri was never much of a reader."

"Oh. So it's the party that's the afterlife!" Chemayev gave a scornful laugh. "This is bullshit!"

Nicolai's face hardened. "Bullshit? Well, maybe you'll think this is bullshit too! When you shot me, I went out. One second I was staring at you. At your dumbass face! It looked like you were going to start whimpering. I had time to say to myself, 'Oh, fuck... yeah... of course...' I figured things out, you understand. The way you were pouting—I knew it meant you'd scrambled over whatever pissy little moral hurdle the job had posed. And then"—he snapped his fingers—"I wasn't there anymore." He allowed Chemayev time to react and when no reaction was forthcoming he went on: "I don't remember much afterward. But at some point I began to hear a voice. I can't tell you what kind of voice. It was all around me... this enormous sound. As if I was inside the mouth that was speaking. Sometimes it seems I can almost repeat the words it was saying—they're on the tip of my tongue. But I can't spit them out." He made a frustrated noise. "The next thing I remember for certain, I'm walking down a dingy corridor toward a door. Toward the party. I'm wearing nice clothes. Cologne. It's like I just got out of the shower and I'm ready for a night on the town."

Nicolai took a hit of his cigarette and let smoke leak out between his lips, as if too enervated to exhale properly. "I suppose it does sound like bullshit. I can't explain it. Everybody says that while Yuri was building the club he was hanging out with some strange people. Experts on the Kabbala. Computer scientists. He even brought in a shaman from up near Archangel. They say he went through some drastic changes, and I believe it. Whatever he was like before, I'll bet it wasn't much like he is now."

"You've met him?"

Nicolai coughed, grimaced, butted his cigarette. "You don't meet Yuri. You experience him."

"You experience him." Chemayev gave a sarcastic laugh. "So you're saying he's like a sunset or something."

"A sunset..." Nicolai looked as if he was mulling it over. "It's not a totally inappropriate analogy. But for sure he's not a guy you sit down and have a chat with. The fact is, I don't think he's a guy at all. Not anymore. The things he got into when he was building the club, it transformed him. The club, Yuri, the party... they're all the same somehow." Nicolai smiled crookedly. "That's pretty weak, isn't it? Maybe the best I can do is tell you what it's like being here all the time." He gestured at one of the walls. "Take a look around."

Chemayev had not paid much attention to the room when he had entered, but he was fairly certain the walls had not been covered, as they were now, with a faded earth-toned mural like those found on the walls of factories during the Communist era: determined-looking, square-jawed men and broad-shouldered women with motherly bosoms engaged in the noble state-approved pursuit of dump-truck-assembly, faces aglow with the joy of communal effort, their sinewy arms seemingly imbued with the same iron strength as the mighty girders and grimly functional machinery that framed them. Other than their two chairs, the room was empty of furniture. The krushova dwellers and Beria were gone, and the noise of the party had abated, replaced by a faint roaring, like the sound of blood heard when you put a seashell close to your ear. Chemayev thought he had become inured to apparitions, but a chill spiked in his chest.

"Shit changes all the time," said Nicolai. "Empty rooms fill up with people. You'll be having a talk with someone and it'll just end—like the rest of the scene was cut out of the movie. Snip! You're in another room, doing something else. You'll be sleeping in a bed, the next second you're dancing with somebody. There's no logic to it, it's all done on a whim. Yuri's whim. The physical laws of the place are his laws. Not God's, not nature's. It's like everyone here is inside him. Part of him. He's become a universe unto himself. One that contains the club and the party... For all I know he's taken over the fucking world. But the difference between the places I'm familiar with—the club and the party—most people in the club are still alive." He started to take out another cigarette, then thought better of it. "We get visitors like you from the real world now and again. And various among us are privileged to visit the club. But..." His mood veered toward exasperation, and Chemayev wondered, with only a touch of cynicism, if Yuri might not be editing his emotions as well as his scenes. "Don't you understand?" Nicolai asked. "Yuri's in control of everything that happens here. We're fucking figments of his imagination. Once you step inside Eternity you're subject to his whims the same as us. I don't know what kind of deal you're hoping to do with him, but take my word, it's not going to be what you expected. You should get the hell out. Right now." He chuckled. "Here I am trying to save your ass. Old habits. Of course"—he kept his face neutral—"I'm probably too late."

"If what you say is true," Chemayev said, "then logic would dictate that you're the subject of Yuri's whim at present. That's the reason for this... this confrontation. You must have something to tell me. The lecture on Yuri's power, I assume."

Nicolai jumped up and went to stand facing one of the muralled walls, as if compelled by the heroic figure of a muscular redheaded man holding up an ingot in a pair of tongs, staring at it with such unalloyed devotion, it might have been the sacred light of Mother Russia soon to become an axle joint. "That's what I've been waiting to hear," he said. "The voice of the heartless motherfucker who shot me. I knew it was in you somewhere." He wheeled about, his clever features cinched in fury. "You think this is a confrontation.\* My dear friend Viktor! My cherished boyhood companion! Don't you worry. You'll be back here one day... and maybe not just for a visit. Then we'll have a fucking confrontation!" He paced toward Chemayev and stood with his feet apart as if preparing to attack. "I do have something to tell you, but it's got nothing to do with what I said about Yuri. That was for old time's sake. For a while it was like we were friends again, you know. A couple of guys sitting around bullshitting. I can't figure why it happened, but that's how it felt."

Chemayev could relate to Nicolai's confusion. His own feelings, compounded of love, fear, guilt, and much more, were too complex to analyze, like a stew that had been simmering for three and a half years, new ingredients constantly being added, fragrant, rich, and savory, but ultimately indigestible. Nothing could be salvaged here, he realized. "What do you have to tell me?"

Nicolai plucked out his Marlboros, tapped the pack on the back of his hand. "Russian women. Ever think about how tough they are, Viktor? They get the crap beat out of them, they take the best abuse of drunks and



addicts. Their fathers fuck them, their boyfriends pimp them. By the time they're sixteen they're world-class ballbusters. They're still sweet, still capable of love. But they've learned to do what's necessary. Most men don't see this. They don't understand that no matter what the woman feels for them, she's going to do what's in her own best interests. She's become just like a Russian man. Sentimental on the outside. Soft. But on the inside they're steel."

"Is this leading somewhere?" asked Chemayev.

"I fucked your woman tonight," Nicolai said. "Your beautiful Larissa. I did her twice. The second time I had her up the ass. She loved it, she went absolutely crazy. I've never considered myself a petty sort, but I must admit it gave me a great deal of satisfaction." He studied the pack of cigarettes, as if using it to focus his thoughts. "You know how it is with some women—when you make love to them their faces get twisted, distorted. Sex strips away their beauty, revealing the beast. But Larissa, man... She's amazing. No matter how depraved the act, how degrading your intent, she just gets more beautiful. She had this entranced look. Radiant. Like a saint. Like the more I defiled her, the closer she grew to God." His soft laugh expressed a touch of incredulity. "But none of that's important, is it? She's a whore, after all. So she fucks a guy—even a dead guy—what's the big deal? She's doing her job. If she enjoys it a little, all that means is she's a professional." He came closer and perched on the arm of his chair. "After the first fuck we talked a while. She told me this was her last night, she was going away with the man she loved. She told me all about you. What a great guy you were. How much you loved her. All your virtues. I didn't try to illuminate her. I didn't have to. She realizes you're a calculating son-of-a-bitch at heart. She didn't say it, but it was implicit in what she said. She knows you. She loves you. How could she not? She's exactly the same as you. She'll do whatever she has to and there won't be a stain on her conscience." He repocketed the Marlboros without removing one. He stood, adjusted the hang of his jacket. "Okay. That's it. My duty's done."

He seemed to be waiting for a response.

In standing Chemayev was unsteady as an old man, he had to put a hand out to balance himself. He should be angry, he thought; but he only felt out of his depth. There was a gap between himself and his emotions too wide for any spark to cross. But because he believed he should react in some way, because not to react smacked of inadequacy, he pointed the pistol at Nicolai's chest.

"Give it a try," said Nicolai, he held both arms straight out from his sides, turning himself into a blond, expensively tailored Jesus on the Cross. "It worked the first time. I'm interested in what'll happen myself." He rested his head on his shoulder. "Wonder what Yuri will have to say?"

After pondering his options Chemayev decided it would be best to hurry past this part of things. "Where's Yuri now?"

As if in response the air between them began to ripple, a sluggish disturbance that spread throughout the room, infecting floor and ceiling and walls, and as it spread the dimensions of the room underwent a slow, undulant elongation, an evolution that seemed organic, like the stretching of a python's gullet when it prepares to swallow an exceptionally large object. Once the rippling ceased Chemayev found that he was standing at a remove of some forty feet from Nicolai.

"Haven't you heard a thing I've been telling you?" Nicolai's voice carried a slight echo. "In this place you can't get away from Yuri."

Before Chemayev could react, the rippling started up once again, accompanied by a dimming of the lights. Moved by an old reflex of mutual reliance he sprinted toward Nicolai, but the process of elongation was on this occasion so rapid, like the reduction in view achieved by narrowing the aperture of a telescopic lens, by the time he had gone only a couple of steps, Nicolai had dwindled to a tiny black figure at the far end of a long corridor. A foul-smelling corridor with stained, pitted concrete walls, littered with trash, ranged by warped wooden doors and buckets of sand. Hills of cans and bottles, stratified canyons of paper and plastic waste, dried-up riverbeds of urine and spilled vodka, altogether effecting a post-apocalyptic terrain laid out beneath a dirty white sky in which hung a jaundiced light bulb sun. It was the same corridor he and Nataliya had walked down earlier that evening.

The elevator door, battered, defaced by graffiti, stood about twenty feet away. Chemayev had the impulse to run to it, to seek shelter in the relative sanity of the night club. But he was fed up with being given the runaround, he'd entered into a straightforward business arrangement and he intended to see it through to a contract, no matter what games Yuri wanted to play. As for Larissa, if she'd lied... he could handle it. Their problems were every one associated with this psychotic country populated entirely by lunatics and their victims. By tomorrow night they'd be clear of all that.

He turned back, intending to frame a few last words that would convey to Nicolai both a more rational, more dignified portion of apology, and his acknowledgment of how things stood between them; but his former friend was nowhere to be seen. Looking at Chemayev from an arm's-length away was the swarthy old

derelict who had been sweeping up the corridor. He had barely noticed him on first meeting, but now he marveled at the man's ugliness. With his stubby arms and legs, his swollen belly and narrow sloping shoulders, his smallish head, he might have been a toad that had undergone a transformation, only partially successful, into the human. He had about him a bitter reek reminiscent of the smell of the vegetation in the garden. The chest of his grimy T-shirt was mapped by a large, vaguely rectangular brown stain like the image of a spectacularly undistinguished continent whose most prominent features were bits of dried food stuck to the fabric along the south coast and central plain. His wool trousers were shapeless as those of a clown, supported by frayed suspenders. Filthy twists of gray hair hung from his mottled scalp, half-curtaining his eyes, and his face, sagging, pouchy, cheeks and nose sporting graffiti of broken capillaries, thick-lipped and dull... It reminded Chemayev of dilapidated hovels in the villages of his childhood, habitations humbled by weather and hard times into something lumpish, barely distinguishable from a mound of earth, a played-out vegetable plot in the back, rusted garden tools leaning against bowed steps, its thatched roof molting, sided with unpainted boards worn to a shit brown, and something ancient, howlingly mad with age and failure, peering out through two dark windows with cracked panes. It was fascinating in its lack of human vitality. More than fascinating. Compelling. It seemed to hold Chemayev's eyes, to exert a pull that intensified with every passing second, as if the mad absence within had the virtue of a collapsed star, a generating fire grown so cold and inert it had become fire's opposite, a negative engine wherein chaos became comprehensible and physical laws were reworked according to some implausible design. He could not look away from it, and when at last he did, not due to his own efforts, but because the old man moved, extending a hand to him, palm upward like a beggar, thus shattering the connection, he felt lightheaded and confused and frail, as if he had been winnowing away, unraveling in the depths of that bleak stare.

In his frail lightheaded confusion there were a few things Chemayev thought he understood. This liver-spotted troll, this mud man with a black hole inside him, was Yuri—he was fairly certain of that. He was also fairly certain that the old bastard had his hand out for money. For the gold certificates contained inside his, Chemayev's, money belt. What was he supposed to do? Just fork it all over? Fuck that! Where were the papers to sign. What guarantees did he have—could he have—with a creature like this. He wanted to establish some sort of security for himself and Larissa, but couldn't summon the words, and he realized with complete surety that fear had nothing to do with his inability to speak, words simply weren't part of Yuri's program—no more talk was needed, everything had been said, and now it was Chemayev's choice to give over the money and see what that bought him... or to exercise caution for the time being.

That he accepted this proscription, that he believed Yuri had so much control over the situation, implied that he accepted Nicolai's assessment of the man. He would have liked to deny this, but it seemed undeniable. He should tell someone, he thought. Before leaving Moscow he should tip the media, get a TV truck out to Eternity, expose the fact that the great Yuri Lebedev was running more than a night club, the old geezer had become a minor fucking deity in charge of a franchise in the afterlife catering to murderers, hookers, and various relics of the Cold War... This trickle of whimsy, edged with more than a little hysteria, dried up when Chemayev noticed that the walls and ceiling and floor of the corridor around and behind Yuri were billowing in and out with same rhythm as the rise and fall of his chest, as if the old man were the central image of a painting, a portrait of squalor floating on the surface of some gelatinous substance in a state of mild perturbation. He backed farther away, but the distance between himself and Yuri did not lengthen, and he saw that his body, too, was billowing, rippling, ruled by the tidal flux of Yuri's sluggish breath—it appeared they were both elements of the same semi-liquid medium. Horrified, he flailed and kicked, trying to swim away, but none of his exertions had the least effect... unless they played a role in the steady expansion of Yuri's face. It was widening, distending, losing its cohesion like a shape made of colored oil, spreading to cover more and more of the fluid atop which it was suspended, resembling a face distorted by a funhouse mirror, and Chemayev felt that his own body was suffering a similar distortion, his legs elongating, his torso becoming bulbous, his head lopsided and pumpkin-sized, and that he and Yuri were flowing together.

Yuri's mouth stretched wider and wider, becoming a dark, gaping concavity that reduced his other features to tiny irrelevancies, like the glowing lures above the enormous mouth of an angler fish. It was curving to surround Chemayev, preparing less to swallow him than to incorporate him into its emptiness, and he thought briefly of the garden, the dark oval through which he had passed to reach it. If he could have screamed he would have made a cry that reached to heaven, but he was as voiceless as a strand of seaweed floating on an off-shore billow, going out on the tide toward the great hollow places of the sea, and as he passed into the darkness, Yuri's darkness, as it closed over him, his fear—like his voice—was subsumed by the myriad impressions that came to him from the place into which he was being absorbed.

He had a sense of the man Yuri had been, a quick mental rumor that left flavors of crudity, brutality,

lustfulness, intelligence... an intellect that had aspired too high, that had sought a godlike invulnerability and created the means necessary to achieve it, but had lost everything of consequence in gaining it, for Yuri's character was merely a component of the thing, the place, he had become. Through a mingling of magic and science and will he had triggered a sort of spiritual fission, all the particulars of his flesh and mind exploding into an immense, radiant cloud that did not dissipate in the way of a mushroom cloud, but maintained its integrity at the moment of peak fury, sustained by a surface tension that might have been the residue of the spell he had caused to be pronounced. Not a god so much as an embryonic entity of unguessable nature, striving to reach its maturity, extending its influence through various human (and perhaps inhuman—who could say?) agencies, populating its vacancy with dead souls, partly just for company, to ease its aching emptiness, but also utilizing their knowledge to engineer plots designed to increase its power, always feeding, growing, becoming... This was among the last thoughts Chemayev recalled before he was utterly subsumed, drowned in Yuri's black essence—that all Yuri's energies were being desperately directed toward the process of growth, of fulfilling whatever evolutionary destiny was now his—though perhaps he had no real destiny. That had come to be Yuri's torment, the one feeling of which he was capable: the fear that he had trapped himself inside the prison of his own power, that he could only grow larger, that no matter how much power he gained, the dissolution and chaos of his new condition would never change, and he could impose no order, no equilibrium that would satisfy his original wish to be both man and god, he could merely unify his environment—whether this consisted of a night club, Moscow, Russia, or entire planet—under the disordered banner of Eternity. His circumstance posed an intriguing intellectual and philosophical puzzle. Through his machinations, his alliances with generals and politicians and the mafiyas, might not Yuri be responsible for the chaos overwhelming the old Soviet states, or were the two forces feeding into one another? And if Yuri came to dominate the world or a substantial portion thereof, if he could avoid being absorbed by a creature like himself, but vaster and more cruel, would anyone notice? Was not the current chaos of the world all-pervasive, were not genocides and serial killings and natural disasters and the unending disregard of one soul for another sufficient evidence of this." And that being so, could it be possible that this chaos had always been the product of sad invisible monsters such as Yuri, a ruling class gone unnoticed by everyone except for saints and madmen...? Chemayev was amused by the formulation of these questions. He thought if he could sustain his awareness a while longer he might learn the answers, and they in turn would lead to subtler questions, the ones Yuri himself had asked, and if he could learn those answers, benefiting from Yuri's experience, he might be able to avoid Yuri's mistakes. But at the moment it didn't seem worth the effort. Blind now, all his senses occluded, uncertain of his location, even as to which plane of existence he occupied, by all rights he should have been more afraid; but having practiced death once before, and having since witnessed a condition worse than death, he felt prepared for anything.

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On regaining consciousness Chemayev realized he was back in the garden. Considering the cautionary flavor of his previous experience and the circular pattern governing the evening, he had little doubt that March would soon put in an appearance, but nevertheless he found the bitter smell of Yuri's vegetation and the sound of water spurting from the broken fountain and the silver bar of light floating overhead solid and comforting by contrast to the emptiness through which he had passed. Surprised to find that he was still holding the nine-millimeter pistol, he tucked it into his waist and headed for the fountain, pushing aside black branches clustered with white leaves bearing scatters of inky characters—he wondered now if these might not be fragments of the formula that had made Yuri's transformation possible.

Once he reached the edge of the cobblestone circle he stationed himself behind some bushes, a position from which he had a clear view of the fountain. The abstracted calm that had eased his passage from the corridor to the garden remained strong in him, and waiting went easily at first. With its black serene sky, the silver bar in place of a sun, the ruined fountain and eccentric forest, the place had a Mexican Twilight Zone ambience—like an old B-movie set awaiting its Dramatis Personae—that appealed to him. But as the minutes wore on his anxiety resurfaced. He chastised himself for not having given Yuri the money. The moment had been brief, the circumstances problematic. But everything he'd worked for had been on the line. He should have been up to it. Of course paying the money might have been a fruitless gesture. God only knew what was going on. It was apparent that he was being manipulated. Equally apparent that Polutin had a hand in things—hadn't he implied that he'd done business with Yuri? Perhaps he'd managed to sour the deal Chemayev had negotiated. One way or another, he'd just have to find another way to get the money to Yuri.

He became so enmeshed in worry he nearly failed to notice March on the opposite side of the circle, half-hidden in the bushes. Not shiftless as before. Wearing his leather trenchcoat. Chemayev aimed his pistol

at him, but let the barrel drop. Killing him seemed the safest course, but he had no clue what the repercussions might be. It might be wise to feel things out. Risky, perhaps. But the pistol boosted his confidence. He tucked it back into the waist of his trousers, concealing it beneath his jacket, and stepped out onto the cobblestones.

"March!" he called.

March's head snapped toward him. "Viktor! Christ, what're you doing here?" "What am I doing here? Just taking a stroll. What are you doing here?" As he spoke Chemayev recognized that their dialogue was roughly the mirror image of what they had said to one another on his previous adventure in the garden. He didn't know whether to take this for a good or a bad omen.

"I'm not sure how to answer that." March edged forward. "Frankly, I've been having myself one hell of a time. A fucking asylum would feel like a rest home after this place."

It hadn't occurred to Chemayev that anyone else might have been having experiences similar to his own; but judging by March's behavior he thought now this might be the case. The Irishman kept casting furtive looks to the side, as if expecting some menace to emerge from the bushes.

"This Yuri character..." March's right hand fluttered up; he rubbed the back of his head fitfully. "Did you keep your appointment with him?"

"Not yet," said Chemayev.

"If I were you I might give it a pass."

"You've seen him, then?"

March shook his head in the affirmative, then said, "I don't know. Maybe." He moved another step toward Chemayev. "I was talking to this old geezer. The guy looked like he'd spent the night in the boneyard kissing corpses. Filthy bugger! About seventy years old going on terminal. He claimed to be Yuri."

"You talked with him?"

"Naw, we stared into one another's eyes! Of course we talked."

"What did you talk about?"

An angry tightness in his voice, March said, "Oh, this and that. The rugby final, the roots of British oppression. Chatty bits." He had another quick glance behind him. "Do you know of a way out of here?"

March's agitation lifted Chemayev's spirits. "How about the way you came in?"

"Are you fucking with me, Viktor?" March walked purposefully toward him, stopping close to the fountain, about twenty feet away. "I need an ally. If you're not an ally, I may have to take a bite out of you." He had regained some of his self-assurance, as if the show of menace had been restorative. "I've had a number of unsettling experiences. A premonition of violence as well. Perhaps it's all in my head. I'm not a'tall sure someone didn't put something in my drink. But no matter that, I'm sensing a hostile vibe between us. Why would that be?"

Chemayev considered showing March the pistol, but decided against it. Confrontation had not served him well the last time. "Work it out for yourself. I've got my own problems." He started to walk away, but March said, "Hang on, Viktor." He was holding a chrome-plated automatic with a taped grip.

Chemayev gawked at it. "Where did you get the gun?"

"Picked it up during my travels. I was feeling a touch inadequate after checking my own weapon. But now" —he hefted the gun, as if appreciating its weight— "now I'm feeling twice the man I ever was."

He urged Chemayev toward the fountain, had him sit on carved fragments at its base. Chemayev arranged himself carefully, adjusting his left hip so the pistol came loose in his waistband. In his thoughts he remarked again on the role reversal taking place. During their previous encounter he had been the anxious one, the one to ask about Yuri, the one to decide for confrontation. Perhaps all this pointed to a happier conclusion. But did March suspect what he suspected? He'd mentioned a premonition of violence. Chemayev was forced to assume that this premonition had involved the two of them.

"Do you fancy Irish music, Viktor?" March asked out of the blue; he sat down cross-legged about fifteen feet away. "Bands, you know. Rock 'n'roll."

"U-2," said Chemayev absently. "I like U-2."

"Jesus! U-2!" March launched into a simpering parody of "In The Name of Love," and then made a flatulent sound with his lips. "Bono Vox, my ass! That ball-less little prat! I'm talking about real Irish music. Like Van Morrison. Van the Man! Not some gobshite got up in a gold jockstrap."

"He's okay," Chemayev said.

"What the fuck do you mean, 'okay'? That's soul music, man! Ahh!" He made a dismissive gesture with the automatic. "That's what I get for trying to talk rock 'n'roll with a Russian. Your idea of music is some fat asshole playing folk songs on the lute."

Chemayev leaned back against the base of the fountain. Out of the corner of his eye he could see the arc of

water spurting from the broken pipe; overhead, a great crossbeam broadcast a benign silvery radiance. Black trees with leafy prayer flags stretched toward the light, and the round gray stones beneath him seemed to be eddying in their concentric circles. He allowed the fingers of his right hand to brush the pistol grip beneath his jacket. His chances were fifty-fifty, he figured. About the same as ever.

"You look almost happy," March said. "Did you have the good thought?"

"Happy's not the word for it," said Chemayev.

"What am I missing, Viktor? You seem so at ease. It's not like you. Do you know something I should know, or is it the drugs have just kicked in?"

"I don't know shit," said Chemayev. "I've been having a bad night, too. Someone's been playing games with me."

"Games," said March. "Yeah, that's my feeling." He cracked the knuckles of his free hand by making a fist. "Do you recall me mentioning the dealings I had with your Mister Polutin over in London? A terrible business. Couple of his boys got taken out. Well, not long after I was passing the evening with this Rastafarian bunch in a squat in Chelsea. I won't go into the whys and wherefores—suffice it to say, it was part of a complex proceeding. At any rate, I was feeling comfortable with things when I made the mistake of smoking a joint one of those savages handed me. I'm not sure what was in it, but from the extreme paranoia that resulted, I'm guessing it was angel dust. The idea was, I gather, to fuck me up sufficient so the Rastas could carve me. I had the suspicion it was Polutin's idea... though considering the relationship we've had since, I may be mistaken. But the drug, whatever it was, didn't have the desired effect." The barrel of the automatic drooped toward his knee. "Not that I wasn't sick as a fish. Fucking hell! I was feverish. My thoughts buzzing like flies. Patches of color swimming around me. My bones ached. I thought my heart was going to burst out its bottom like a soggy sack full of red milk. But the paranoia... it organized me somehow. I became a calm at the center of the storm of my symptoms. I could see everything in the room with wonderful clarity.

"There was eight of 'em. All licorice-skinned and snake-headed. Eyes a gleam. Lounging in the doorways, sitting on sprung sofas. Trying to orchestrate my paranoia with their whispered talk. Streetlight washed through the busted-out windows, painting a shine on their faces and exposing the shit spray-painted on the walls. Designs, mostly. A variety of strange devices that had to do with that mongrel religion of theirs, but which spoke to me in a way unintended by the artist. I could read the future in those mazes of squiggly lines."

A slackness came into March's face, as if he'd been brought hard against the memory of a transcendent moment. Chemayev inched his hand beneath the flap of his jacket, touched the pistol grip with his fingertips.

"Have you ever been close to death, Viktor?" asked March. "I don't mean nearly dead. I'm talking about the way you're close to a woman when you're lying with her in the act of love and there's not an inch of air between you that isn't humming with sweet vibration. That's how it was that night. I was in death's arms, fucking her slow and easy, and she was fusing her power with mine. I could actually see the bitch. She had a sleek silver face with a catlike Asian cast. The mask of a demoness. The silver moved as supplely as flesh to make her wicked smiles. Her hair was white, long and fine, and her breasts were corpse-pale, the nipples purplish. Like poison berries. When she opened her mouth I saw a silver word embossed on her black tongue. A character in the language I spoke before I was born, telling me it was time to act. That if I took action at that precise second, I'd come through the ordeal."

In his distraction March's pale face had an aspect of long-preserved youth, like that of a revived mummy; the licks of black hair falling over his brow looked like absences in his flesh.

"When I drew my gun," he went on, "I was inside death. Hot and slick with her. Her legs locked about my waist, fingernails stabbing my back. Both of us screaming with release. I had six bullets, and every one went true. Six head shots. Their dreadlocks hissed and snapped, their eyes rolled up like horses' eyes. One of the survivors came at me with a machete, and I killed him with my hands. The last one fled." He ran the barrel of the automatic idly along his thigh. "That was strange enough, but what happened next was stranger yet. I was standing there, reviewing my work. Stoned as a fucking goose, I was. Reading the bloody sentences newly written on the walls. Obituaries of the recently deceased. Tributes to my marksmanship. When I turned my head, following the red script of those shattered lives, I found death was still with me. I'd assumed she was an ordinary hallucination, that she'd served her purpose and moved on. But there she stood, posed like Hell's calendar girl with hands on hips and one leg cocked, smiling at me. I'd only seen her close up before. Only been witness to half her beauty. The silvery stuff of her face flowed in sinuous curves to embellish her arms and legs. Silver flourishes coiled down her hips and framed her secret hair, which was trimmed to the shape of seven snakes standing on their tails. She beckoned to me, and I couldn't resist. I lay

with her once again."

Chemayev had succeeded in securing a firm grasp on the pistol; but recalling March's quickness, he didn't trust the steadiness of his hand.

"It was a fool's act," March said, "to be coupling with what half my mind believed to be a product of madness. Especially with the dead lying around us, souls still tangled in their flesh. But I was in thrall. Her musk coated my tongue, her sweat formed a silvery sheen on my skin. My eyes went black with staring through the slits of her eyes into the thoughtless place beyond. She whispered to me. Not words of love, but a sibilant breath that entered through my ear and slithered into all my hollows, making an icy shape inside me. She stayed with me until the sky paled and flies began to gather like early fishermen at the edges of the spills of blood. But she never truly left me. I've seen her time and again since that night. Whenever trouble's near she comes to guide my arm." He gave Chemayev a sideways look. "I've seen her tonight."

"Maybe you're mistaken. It could have been one of Yuri's girls. They like to dress up." Chemayev thought if it weren't for the splash of water behind him, he would be able to hear the beating of his heart.

"I've seen her tonight," March repeated. "But I'm not so sure she's with me this time." He paused. "What do you think of my story, Viktor?"

"You mean apart from the obvious pathology?"

"Always ready to spit in the devil's eye." March lowered his head and chuckled. "You remind me of myself as a lad."

Chemayev's hand tightened on the pistol, but he failed to seize the opportunity.

"You probably think I'm having you on," said March, and was about to say more, when Chemayev, his patience for this game exhausted, broke in: "I don't know what you've got in mind, but I doubt you understand the implications of your story."

"And I suppose you're bursting to enlighten me?"

"Sure. Why not?" said Chemayev. "The idea that a man who's accustomed to violence, who thrives on it, has come to rely on a fictive alliance with death... with a comic book image of death..."

"All alliances are fictive," said March. "Haven't you figured that one out?"

Chemayev ignored the interruption. "The fact you've created an imaginary playmate to help enable your violence—even if just in a story—that implies slippage. Weakness."

March's face emptied. "Weakness is it?"

"What else? Maybe it's a touch of guilt. Some old flutter of religion. Something that demands you create a quasi-mystical justification for actions you previously considered utilitarian."

"Quasi-mystical." March blew air through his lips like a horse. "That cuts deep, Viktor. It's a brand I'm not sure I can bear. Especially coming from a featherless little chirper like yourself."

It seemed to Chemayev that March was fast approaching a moment of decision, a moment when he'd be preoccupied, all his attention focused on the possible consequences arising from the exercise of his anger, and as a result, for a fraction of a second he'd be slow to react.

"It may be a product of age," Chemayev said. "Your increasing awareness of mortality."

"Let it rest," said March. "Seriously."

"The brain could be in the early stages of decomposition. Logic decaying into fantasy, gasses collecting in the skull."

"Do you hear what I'm telling you, boy?"

"It must look like a fucking swamp in there." Chemayev tapped the side of his head. "Methane seeping from rotten stumps, gray scraps of tissue hanging down like moss. The brain a huge pale cheese wreathed in mist, rising from the black water. The creatures of your imagination peeping from its fissures. Most of them bullshit versions of yourself."

"You bloody little piss merchant! Shut the fuck up!"

"Bruce Lee March, Dylan Thomas March, Charlie Manson March. Niall the Catholic Fishboy, old Father McConnell's favorite sweet. And let's not forget your masterpiece: Death. Based, I imagine, on some pimply little squinch who wouldn't let you have a bite of her muffin back in trade school. When the mists get really thick, they all pick up banjos and sing 'Toora Loora Loora.'"

"That's enough!" said March.

"You know, there's every chance you've developed a tumor. Brain cancer's known to cause delusions. Or maybe it's early Alzheimer's. You might want to get yourself checked out."

March's nearly colorless eyes appeared to lighten further, as if the black shadow of his soul had shrunk to a more compact shape, pulling back from his skin, and Chemayev, feeling certain the moment had arrived, slid the pistol from beneath his jacket and shot him twice in the chest.

The bullets twisted March, flipped him fishlike onto his side; the detonations blended with and seemed to

enlarge his outcry. His feet kicked in sequence as if he were trying to walk away from the pain. He was still clutching the automatic; he fumbled with the trigger guard, the barrel wobbled down, the muzzle lodging between two cobblestones. He strained to lift it, his eyebrows arching with effort. The heightened pallor of his skin and the bright blood filming his lips gave him the look of an actor in a Kabuki drama. Chemayev finished him with a bullet to the temple.

He dropped the pistol onto the cobblestones. He had no remorse—March had intended to kill him, hadn't he?—but he was tired, desperately tired, and he felt an odd internal instability, as if the spiritual vacuum created by the death, the instantaneous decompression, had sheared off part of his soul and the remaining portion, now too small for the body it inhabited, was tipping this way and that like the air bubble in a carpenter's level. He sat down awkwardly, one leg sticking out, the other folded beneath him. Streams of March's blood fingered among the stones—Chemayev imagined them to be a cluster of gray environmental domes in a crimson flood, a mining colony amid the lava flows of Venus. The sound of the splashing water grew louder, troubling his head. He pressed his fingers to his brow, closed his eyes. Fuck. What next? Where did he stand with Larissa? With Yuri and Polutin? He had the suspicion none of it mattered anymore. The victor in this contrived war between himself and March would be trapped forever with an undecaying corpse on the stage set of a magical western, condemned to a limbo in which he would feed on deathly beetles and drink bitter water from a fountain whose splashing kept growing louder and louder. Becoming incredibly, irrationally loud. It was beginning to sound almost like applause... He opened his eyes. Blinked rapidly due to the unaccustomed brightness. Then scrambled to his feet. The body was gone, the fountain was gone, the stones, the trees, it was all gone, and he was standing on the stage of Eternity's theater, tiers of white leather booths rising on every side into swirling fog, the elegantly attired men and women looking down at him, clapping and cheering. Stricken, overwhelmed by this latest transition, he turned in a circle, hoping to find a point of orientation, something that would explain, that would clarify. He caught sight of Polutin. The big man was standing in the aisle, his head tipped back, belly thrust out, applauding with such ponderous sincerity that Chemayev half-expected to see a ringmaster urging him on with a whip in one hand, a piece of raw fish in the other. On unsteady legs, giddy with the aftershocks of violence, stunned by all he saw, he made his way up from the stage and along the aisle and let Polutin guide him into the booth.

"Why did you take so long? What's wrong with you?" Polutin frowned at him, exasperated; but then he patted Chemayev's knee, the brisk gesture of someone ready to put the past behind them. "You did well," he said. "You may not think so now, but you'll see it eventually." In his sloppy, drink-reddened face was a bearish measure of self-satisfaction that seemed to answer all questions concerning his involvement in the evening's events; but Chemayev was unable to process the information. There was too much to think about. Just the idea that he and March had been part of the entertainment suggested a labyrinthine complexity of physical and metaphysical relationships sufficient on its own to confound him. And the odd certitude he had felt immediately prior to shooting March, the correspondences between that feeling and March's story about Death—what could be made of that? For the life of him, he could not even recall how he had come to this moment. The road that led from a village along the Dvina was easy to follow up to the point he and Nicolai arrived in Moscow, but thereafter it was broken, gapped, and once it entered the darkness of Eternity, everything that had previously been easy to follow came, in retrospect, to seem unfathomable. Polutin began prattling on about a meeting scheduled for the next day with his Italian associates, and the talk of business calmed Chemayev. He tried to achieve a perspective, to reorder the universe according to Chemayevian principles, but the image of March intruded. Another ghost to join that of Nicolai. Not so much guilty baggage attached to this one. Though for a vicious killer, March hadn't been such a bad guy. A slant of wild hilarity broke through his mental overcast. Someday they'd say the same about him.

The background music changed—a saccharine swell of violins flowing into a romantic brocade of darker strings, French horns, trumpets. "Aha!" Polutin said. "The auction!" Disinterested, Chemayev glanced toward the stage. And sat bolt upright. Emerging from the center of the stage, borne upward on a circular platform, was Larissa. Naked. Carrying a silver tray on which lay a single long-stemmed rose. Their eyes met and she looked hurriedly away. Waiting for her on the stage, his thinning hair slicked down, natty in a white suit, holding a microphone, was one of Yuri's portly doubles. "LADLES AND GENTLEMEN!" he said, and with a florid gesture directed the general attention to Larissa. "THE ROSE!"

As Larissa walked up the aisle, serene in her nakedness, several men shouted bids, which were duly noted by Yuri's double, who plodded along behind her. When she reached Polutin's booth she stopped and trained her eyes on a point above Chemayev's head. Her expression was unreadable.

Chemayev said weakly, "Larissa?"

She betrayed no sign of having heard; he saw nothing but reflected dazzles in the darks of her eyes.

Polutin's arm dropped onto his shoulder. "So, Viktor. How much are you bidding?"

Uncomprehending, Chemayev looked at him, then at Larissa. The stoniness of her face in contrast with the soft vulnerability of her breasts and the gentle swell of her belly seemed to restate the conflict between what he hoped and what he feared. He had the impulse to take off his coat and cover her, but he didn't move a muscle. "I don't have any money," he said to Polutin. "Not for this. I have some, but... I..." He looked again to Larissa. "Why aren't you at the bar?" He reached for her hand but she pulled away.

"Don't." Her chin trembled. "Don't touch me. Just do what you have to and let me go."

"What's happened? Larissa, please!" Chemayev made as though to slide out of the booth but Polutin caught his arm.

"Be very careful," he said. "I can't save you from this."

Chemayev shook him off, leaned across the table to Larissa. "For God's sake! I still have the money. All of it. What's wrong?"

Yuri's double moved between them, stared at him dispassionately, his thick lips pursed. "You refused to pay," he said. "You broke the contract. Now"—he shrugged—"you can either bid or you can remain here until your debt is paid."

"My debt? I don't owe you..."

"The price of the woman," said the double. "You broke the contract, you forfeit her price."

A tiny nebula of platinum and emeralds glinted among the tangles of Larissa's dark hair. Someone must have given her new earrings. In the silvery light her nipples showed candy pink, her skin milky. A mole the size of a .22 caliber bullet hole on the small of her back above the high, horsey ride of her buttocks. Chemayev realized he was cataloguing these details, filing them away, as if he'd have to remember them for a long time.

"What can I do?" he asked her. "Isn't there anything...?"

"Leave me alone," she said.

His desperation and confusion knitted into a third emotion, something akin to anger but imbued with the sort of hopeless frustration an insect might feel when, after an enduring struggle, it has freed itself from a spiderweb only to fall into an empty jelly glass, where it is peered at by the incurious eyes of an enormous child. Chemayev's hand dropped to the money belt but he did not remove it.

"Make up your mind," said the double. "There are others who may wish to bid."

Chemayev had difficulty unbuttoning his shirt. His fingers felt thick and bloodless, and the inside of his head compacted, as if stuffed with gray rags. Stripping off the belt took an inordinately long time—it seemed to cling to his waist. Finally he managed it. The double grabbed the belt and gave it a shake. "There can't be much here," he said.

"Four million," said Chemayev emptily.

"Four million rubles?" The double scoffed at the figure. "The bid's already much higher than that."

"Dollars," Chemayev said. "It's in gold certificates."

Polutin was aghast. "Four million dollars? Where did you get such a sum?"

"I didn't steal from you. I played the German market. The Dax."

Polutin lifted his glass in salute. "And I thought I was familiar with all your talents."

"FOUR MILLION!" The double roared into his microphone. "VIKTOR CHEMAYEV BIDS FOUR MILLION DOLLARS!"

The assemblage began to cheer wildly, shouts of "Bravo!", fists pounding the tables, women shrieking. Chemayev put his elbows on the table, rested his head in his hands.

"Here," said Larissa, her voice like ashes. She thrust out the rose to him, the bloom nodding stupidly in his face, a knurl of convulsed crimson. He was unable to make sense of the thing. He tried to connect with her again, and when she looked away this time, his eyes ranged over her body like a metal detector over a snowy field, registering the fullness of her thighs, the razor-cut strip of pubic hair, the swollen underside of a breast. The least of her human details—she had withdrawn all else. She dropped the rose onto the block of ice. The bloom nestled against an empty bottle of Ketel One. Melting ice dripped onto the petals. Yuri's double took Larissa by the arm and escorted her toward the stage.

"It might be best for you to leave, Viktor," Polutin said. "Take the morning off. Come see me in my office around three. And be prepared for a difficult negotiation. These Italians will screw us good if they can."

Chemayev laboriously pushed himself up from the booth. People were continuing to cheer, to talk excitedly about the size of the bid. On stage Yuri sailed one of the gold certificates into the air where it burst into flames; the fire assumed the shape of a pair of flickering wings and then flew apart into a flurry of small orange birds. With gasps and delighted cries, the crowd marveled at what they assumed was a trick, but might well have been something more extraordinary. Yuri bowed, then sailed another of the certificates high—it floated above the heads of the crowd, expanding into a sunburst, becoming a stylized golden mask like the representation of the benign east wind on a medieval map. Golden coins sprayed from its mouth. One



of the coins was plucked out of mid-air by a pale dark-haired man wearing a leather trenchcoat. Chemayev had only the briefest glimpse of him before he vanished in the swarm of people scrambling for the coins, but he could have sworn it was March. Niall your fucking Welcome Wagon March, the rage of Kilmorgan, the pale Gombeen Man. Chemayev could not sustain interest in the implications fostered by March's possible presence, but he wondered about the man. Who the hell had March been, anyway? What he said he was, who he variously seemed, or a surprise waiting behind the game show's mystery door?

"Come a little before three," said Polutin. "That way we'll be sure to have time to talk."

As Chemayev turned to leave he noticed the rose. Contact with the cold had darkened the edges of several petals, but it remained an alluring complexity, vividly alive against the backdrop of ice and white linen. After a moment's hesitation he picked it up. Chances were he would only throw it away, but considering the cost, he wanted no one else to claim it.

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Outside, the snow was no longer falling. Long thin curves of windblown powder lay across the asphalt like the ghosts of immense talons; white crusts shrouded the windshields of the surrounding cars. Chemayev sat at the wheel of his Lada, the engine idling, wipers clearing a view of the bunkerlike entrance to Eternity. In the morning, he thought. In the morning when Larissa went to school he'd meet her at the door and ask why she had treated him so coldly. Was it simply because he'd failed her? Maybe they'd threatened her, lied to her. Whatever the reason, he'd be honest. Yes, he'd say, I fucked up. But it's this place that's mostly to blame, this broken down ex-country. Nothing good can happen here. I'm going to set things right and once we get away I'll be the man you believed in, the one who loves you... Even as he rehearsed this speech he recognized its futility, but the plug of nothingness that had stoppered his emotions during the auction had worked itself loose, the speedball of failure and rejection had worn off, and all the usual passions and compulsions were sparking in him again.

A gaunt, gray-haired man in a tattered overcoat stumbled into his field of vision. One of the krushova dwellers, holding a nearly empty bottle of vodka. He lurched against the hood of a Jaguar parked in the row across from Chemayev, slumped onto the fender, then righted himself and took a pull from the bottle. He wiped his mouth, stared blearily at the Lada, and flung out his arm as if shooing away a dog or an annoying child. "Fuck off," said Chemayev, mostly to himself. The man repeated the gesture, and Chemayev thought that perhaps he had not been gesturing at him, perhaps he'd been summoning reinforcements. Dozens... no, hundreds of similarly disheveled figures were shambling toward him among the ranks of gleaming cars. Bulky women with moth-eaten sweaters buttoned wrong; men in duct-tape-patched hooded parkas, ruined faces peering grimly through portholes lined with synthetic fur; others in ill-fitting uniform jackets of various types; one in rubber boots and long johns. Shadowy drabs and drudges coming from every corner of the lot, as if they were phantoms conjured from the asphalt, as if the asphalt were the black meniscus of Yuri's brimful kingdom. Clinging to one another for support on the icy ground like the remnants of a routed army. Drunk on defeat. They stationed themselves along the row, all glaring at Chemayev, each with a charcoal mouth and inkdrop eyes, faces with the ridged, barren asymmetry of terrain maps, the background figures in an apocalypse by Goya come to life, each beaming at him a black fraction of state-approved, party-sponsored enmity. Yuri's state. Yuri's party.

Less frightened than repelled, Chemayev drew a pistol from his shoulder holster, rolled down the window, and fired into the air. Instead of fleeing they edged forward, clumsy and tentative as zombies, confused by the brightness of life but full of stuporous menace. What did they intend to do? he wondered. Curse him? Puke on him? He poked his head out the window and aimed the pistol at the closest of them, a balding man whose seventy-inch-waist trousers appeared to support his upper half like a dessert cup filled with two scoops of yellowish cream pudding, the smaller topped by sparse hanks of white hair like shredded coconut, his sweatshirt proclaiming allegiance to the Central Soviet hockey team. He displayed no fear. And why should he? Who'd be fool enough to kill one of Yuri's people? Perhaps he was dead already. Chemayev ducked back into the car. Set the pistol on the dash. He had surrendered so much, he stubbornly refused to admit this last formal measure of defeat. But then the army of the krushovas came shuffling forward again and he understood that he had neither the confidence nor the force of arms to stand against them. He shifted the Lada into gear and pulled out along the row, going slowly to avoid hitting the shabby creatures who stood everywhere throughout the lot. They pressed close as he passed, like animals in a preserve, peeking in through the windows, and he had a surge of panic... not true fright, but a less disabling emotion fueled by a shameful recognition of his relationship to these lusterless clots of anti-life, these exhibits in the existential sideshow. Sons and Daughters of the Soil. Old ragged male monsters with the hammer-and-sickle stamped on every cell of their bodies. Boring meat-eaters, ferocious farters, grunters, toilers, industrial oxen,

blank-eyed suet-brained party trolls. Old lion-faced women with gray hair sprouting from every pore, ugly with the crap they'd eaten all their lives, their filth-encrusted nails as strong as silicon, breeding warmonger babies in their factory wombs, dead now like empty hangars, cobwebbed, with wheelmarks in the dust... You couldn't hate them, that'd be the same as hating yourself, you could only say goodbye to all their grim Russian soul shit. You had to cut it out of yourself somehow, you had to sit down and pinch a roll of fat and slide a knife in, probe for that special Russian organ that made you such a bear for suffering, that prompted you to sit up with your mouth open when God came round with his funnel and his tube of black bile to forcefeed all the Russian as-yet-unborns he was fattening for some conflagration on the far side of infinity. You had to put some distance between yourself and this dirt with its own soul that reached up through the bottoms of your feet and moved you like a finger puppet. You had to find some way not to be like these relics, even if that meant killing the most vital part of your spirit. You had to run to America, you had to drown in its trivialities, bathe in its chrome wavelengths until all the scum of Mother Russia was washed off your skin, until your pores were so open the black oily essence of your birthright came seeping out like juice from a cracked bug. That's what you had to do. That was the only thing that could save you. But it was probably not possible.

Once clear of the krushovas Chemayev accelerated along the access road leading to the Garden Ring. Headlights penetrated the Lada, revealing patched brown plaid seat covers, a littered dash, bent ashtray stuffed with candy wrappers. The radio dial flickered, the heater whined and yielded up a smell of burning rubber. The crummy familiarity of the car consoled him, molding itself to him like a friendly old chair. He wanted a cigarette, but Larissa had made him quit. Shit. He rapped the top of the steering wheel with the heel of his hand. Not angrily. A call-to-order rap, a wake-up notice.

He banished the feeling of unsoundness that had plagued him most of the night, took stock of his reserves. He pictured them straggled across a parade ground, the survivors of a force that had once numbered four million. He'd have to start over. He'd have to put tonight behind him. Approach tomorrow as if everything were normal. He'd permit himself to make no goals, not even where Larissa was concerned. He'd simply do his job and see what developed. He sped out onto the Garden Ring, merging with the stream of traffic headed for the city center.

There was an ache in his chest that seemed part bruise, part constriction, and he knew it would worsen during the weeks ahead. Whenever he stopped for a solitary drink or tried to sleep it would send out fresh tendrils of pain, seeding despair and distraction; but he'd overcome those enemies before, and he could do it again, he would rise to the challenge. That was half of life, the way you dealt with challenges. Maybe more than half. It occurred to him, and not for the first time, that his obsession with Larissa was partially fueled by the challenge she presented, but as always he refused to diminish the purity he accorded the relationship by defining it as a logical consequence of his compulsiveness. He brushed the idea aside, concentrated on the road, and soon his mind began to tick along with its customary efficiency, plotting the day ahead. Call Larissa. See where things stood with her. Then business. What had Polutin said? The Italians. His office. Chemayev decided to set his alarm for eleven o'clock. That should give him plenty of time. No, he thought. Better play it safe. He'd set the alarm for ten. It would not do to be late.

## EMERALD STREET EXPANSIONS

I went down to Emerald Street in search of something new, an attitude with keener claws, a sniper's calm and distant eye, a thief's immersion in the night. I wanted some red and unreasonable religion to supplant the conventionality I believed was suffocating my spirit... though I was less dissatisfied by conventionality itself than by my lack of dissatisfaction with it. That I had embraced the cautious and the conservative so readily seemed to reflect a grayness of soul. I thought adding a spare room to my mind, a space with a stained-glass window through which I could perceive the holy colors of the world, would allow me to feel content within my limitations.

It was a gloomy Seattle morning with misty rain falling and a cloud like a roll of silvery dough being squeezed up from the horizon and flattened out over the Sound. The shop, to which I had been directed by friends-satisfied customers all, successful young men and women of commerce who once had suffered from maladies similar to mine-was a glass storefront sandwiched between a diner and a surgical arcade. A hand-painted sign above the door depicted a green crystalline flash such as might be produced by a magical detonation, with the name—EMERALD STREET EXPANSIONS—superimposed. As I drew near, two neutral-looking, well-tailored men in their thirties, not so different from myself, emerged from the shop. The idea that I might be typical of its patrons diminished my enthusiasm. But recognizing that the mental climate that bred this sort of hesitancy was precisely my problem, I pushed in through the door.

The interior of the shop was furnished like a living room and all in green. The color of the carpet was a pale Pomona, the grouped chairs and couches a ripe persimmon, and the attendant was a woman of approximately my own age, wearing a parrot-green dress with a mandarin collar and a tight skirt. Her features were too strong for beauty, her cheekbones too sharp. Yet she was striking, impressive in her poise, perched alertly on the edge of a chair, and I had the thought that this was not a considered pose, that she must always sit this way, prepared to launch herself at some helpless prey. Her skin had a faint olive cast, testifying to a Latin heritage, and a coil of hair lay across her shoulder and breast like the tail of a black serpent. She glanced down at her hand, at a tiny palm console that-assuming the doorway was functioning-revealed my personal information. She smiled and indicated that I should sit beside her.

"Hello, David," she said. "My name is Amorise. How may I help? Something to brighten the overcast, perhaps? Or are you interested in a more functional expansion?"

I explained my requirements in general terms.

"I assume you've read our brochure," she said, and when I said I had, she went on: "We provide you with a perceptual program that you'll access by means of a key phrase. It's the usual process. The difference is that we only do custom work. We expand what is inborn rather than add an entirely new facet to the personality." She glanced down at the palm console. "I see you design weapons. For the military?"

"Personal protection devices. Home-defense."

"David LeGary..." She tapped her chin with a forefinger. "Wasn't there a piece about you on the news? Murderous appliances, windows that kill... that sort of thing."

"They sensationalized my work. Not all my designs are lethal."

We talked for fifteen or twenty minutes. As Amorise spoke she touched my hand with a frequency that appeared to signal more than simple assurance; yet I did not believe she was teasing me—there was a mannered quality to her gestures that led me to suspect they were an element of formal behavior. Her eyes, of course, were green. Lenses, I assumed. I doubted such a brilliant shade was found in life.

"I was going to pass you off to another therapist," she said. "But I'd like to treat you myself... if that's all right." She rested a hand on my forearm. "Do you want to hear what I have in mind?"

"Sure."

"A poet," she said.

My face may have betrayed disappointment, because she said hurriedly, "Not an ordinary poet, but a poète maudit. A lover, a thief, a man who shed the blood of a priest. He lived six hundred years ago in France. Like your own ancestors, David."

"You can provide elements from a specific personality? I didn't know that was possible."

She passed my comment off with a wave. "The man's name was François Villon. Have you heard of him?"

I said, "No," and Amorise said, "Well, it's not an age for poetry, is it?" She looked down at her hands, as if dismayed by the thought. "Villon was a cynic, but passionate. Sensitive, yet callous. A drunkard and an ascete."

"I don't believe any of those qualities are inborn in me."

"I'm certain that they are. Though the world has done its best to murder them."

I recognized that people in her line of work were gifted with intuition, capable of quick character judgments, but this intimation that she had some innate understanding of me, a knowledge that ran so contrary to my own-it seemed ridiculous. A silence shouldered between us, and then she said, "Let me ask you something, David. If you had the opportunity to create something miraculous, something that would ensure the continuance of a great tradition, but to achieve it you would have to risk everything you've worked for... What would you decide?"

"It's too general a question," I said.

"Is it? I think it's the basic question you're asking yourself, the one you're trying to answer by coming here. But if you want specifics, let's imagine you're François Villon, and that if you surrender your soul to a woman, you will achieve immortality as a poet. What would you do?"

"I don't believe in souls," I told her.

"Of course you don't. That's why I phrased my original question as I did."

"I suppose," I said after a moment's consideration, "that I would like to feel comfortable with taking that kind of risk."

"Taking that kind of risk never bestows comfort," said Amorise.

"But I'll consider that a 'yes.'" She got to her feet and offered me her hand. "Are you ready?"

A dozen questions sprang to mind, but they all illustrated a tiresome conventionality, and I left them unasked. I filled out a form, essentially a disclaimer, paid the fee, and Amorise ushered me into a small room in the back containing a surgical chair with arm and leg restraints. Once I had taken a seat, she handed me a cup half-filled with a bright green liquid, saying that it would put me to sleep. After I drank down the sweetish mixture, she leaned across me to secure the restraint on my left arm, her breast pressing my shoulder. She did not draw back immediately, but remained looking down at me.

"Are you afraid?" she asked. The unreal clarity of her brilliant eyes-they made me think of the painted eyes on signs outside psychics' doors.

I was afraid, a little, but I said, "No."

She caressed my cheek. "You surrender your power so easily... like a child."

Before I could analyze this obscure comment, she kissed me on the mouth. A deep, probing kiss to which, dizzied by the potion I had swallowed, I could not help responding. It was such a potent kiss, I can't be sure whether it or the liquid caused me to lose consciousness. When I woke, light-headed and groggy, I found the restraints had been removed and I discovered in my hand a business card advertising a club called the Martinique in South Seattle. On the back of the card Amorise had written the following:

*These are your codes. The first accesses François, the second is to exit.*

*Je t'aime, Amorise.*

*Je te deteste, Amorise.*

Those phrases, when I put them together with the kiss... they unsettled me. I suspected that Amorise had done something to harm me, or at least something that I might regret. I pocketed the card and stepped into the corridor. It was empty, as was the anteroom. I went back into the corridor and called loudly for Amorise. A petite blonde woman poked her head out from another door and hushed me. In a calmer voice, I said, "I'm looking for Amorise."

"She's with a client... Oh, wait!" She put a hand to her cheek. "I believe she had an emergency."

"I need to talk to her."

"Well, I'm sure she'll be back." The woman glanced at her watch. "No... maybe not. It's late. She might not come in again until tomorrow. I'm sorry."

She started back into the room from which she had emerged. Inside, a woman was lying in a chair like the one in which I had been treated, different only in that a cylindrical machine mounted on the ceiling had been lowered to fit over the woman's head.

"The machine," I said. "That provides the therapy?"

"Yes." The woman pushed me gently away. "Now please... I have work to do."

"There was no machine in my room! I think she did something to me... I don't know. It doesn't feel right."

The woman closed the door on her patient and said firmly, "All the rooms have machines."

"Not the room I was in!"

She let out an impatient sigh. "Which room was it?"

I pointed. "There."

She preceded me into the room.

"You see?" I said, triumphant.

She pushed a button on the wall; a section of ceiling slid back, and a machine like the one I had seen in the other room lowered to a point directly above the surgical chair.

"She didn't use the machine," I said. "I have no memory of it."

"I have to see to my client." The woman retracted the machine. "But I'm sure you'll be happy with the work. Amorise is extremely capable."

"You don't understand!" I said. "I think..."

"Have you tried out what she did?"

"No, I..."

"Give it a try," she said. "If you're not satisfied, call and we'll set up another appointment. You can ask for me. My name is Jane Easley. Now, please... I do have to get back to my client."

j

The earthquake of '19 had leveled downtown Seattle, and from the windows of my apartment I could see out across the rebuilt city, the skyscrapers replaced by green domes of glass silicate whose facets winked like emeralds, nested among gardens and stands of firs. The Emerald City. Perhaps it had been a foolish conceit on the part of the city fathers to remodel the business district after the nickname applied by an advertising agency, but I enjoyed the view it afforded. However, after pronouncing the phrase, "Je t'aime, Amorise," I found the prospect trivial. Jewels like fat green bugs and not the subtle traps and trickeries of light that true gems embody. I wanted to stand in the sky above them and piss down the purest of criticisms. The century, I thought, aspired to be its own ornament, a bauble floating upon the bloody river of history.

I had a thirst, but there was no wine in the apartment. I called Spirits, an environment of black leather booths and chrome ornaments in the subterranean levels beneath my complex that pretended to be a bar, and ordered a case of wine sent up. Shortly after I received it, while sitting by my window and trying to discover the characteristics of whatever it was that Amorise had done, my message wall bonged and the larger-than-life image of my ex-girlfriend Angelica Korn snapped into view. I had not talked with her for several weeks, and I saw that she had lost weight, her skin drawn taut from cheekbone to jaw. She had always struck me as somewhat clownish in appearance. Coarsely, commonly pretty, with her thick eyebrows and an overly generous mouth. But there was nothing clownish about her at that moment. Her body language, formerly a vocabulary of exuberant head-tosses and giddy gestures, was restrained, elegant, and her steady gaze unnerved me. Instead of offering pleasantries, she said, "You've been down to Emerald Street. How was it?"

"I'm not sure yet," I said. "I didn't tell you I was going, did I?"

"You need to explore it," said an off-screen voice.

Carl McQuiddy stepped into view behind Angelica. A slim dark man whose goatee and receding hairline lent him a vulpine look. He was one of those who had recommended Emerald Street Expansions as a cure for my malaise. Yet had it been his recommendation alone, I would have paid it no mind. I didn't care for him, and I had assumed Angelica felt the same. If the Devil were to need a lawyer, McQuiddy would be a perfect choice. His black eyes were cold and inexpressive. If anything, they seemed more so than usual that day.

"Perhaps you should get out of the apartment," he suggested. "Go someplace that will bring it out."

"Bring what out?" I asked.

"The effect."

"Are you afraid?" The corners of Angelica's mouth lifted in a half-smile, causing me to believe that her repetition of Amorise's words was no coincidence. It angered me to think that she might be playing games, that she and McQuiddy were baiting me.

"Afraid of what?" I said

"Whatever it is you're afraid of," she said. "Take my advice. You won't remember much. Just scraps. So don't waste time trying."

"Tacque Thibault," Carl said. "Do you recall the name?"

"No." The name did sound a murky resonance, but I had no wish to say anything affirmative to him.

He smiled thinly. "Yet your name is familiar to me."

"Are you trying to trip me out?" I asked. "That's pitiful."

Carl turned his back. "See you tonight," said Angelica, and the wall was restored to its normal white

blankness.

The call put me in a foul temper, yet I was delighted by the richness of my anger, a far cry from my usual pallid incarnation of the mood. For a time I drank and experimented with the two key phrases, saying them in succession, over and over, like a child playing with a light switch. Whenever I said, "Je t'aime, Amorise," the apartment with its metal furniture and white walls and stainless steel workbench seemed a cross between a morgue and a dentist's office, annoying in its spotless minimalism. When I said, "Je te deteste, Amorise," it became charming, functional, comfortable. Yet as I continued to alternate between these states, I came to see the place in a generally unfavorable light, as if the perceptual lens I had acquired was infecting all my orderliness.

Troubled by this, I accessed François Villon on the computer and learned that the surname was a nom de plume, taken in honor of his benefactor Guillaume du Villon. His given name had been François Montcorbier. Born in poverty in Paris in 1431, educated at the University of Paris. Convicted of the murder of a priest, the sentence of death dropped when he was found to have acted in self-defense. Always a martyr to love, he had been especially stricken by a woman named Martha Laurens. In 1453 he had been condemned to death a second time for fighting in the streets, the sentence commuted to banishment from Paris, a term during which he had written his most famous work, "The Testament," at the age of thirty-my age exactly-whereupon he vanished from history. It was believed that he had begun the poem while in prison, and it was assumed that he died shortly after completing it, probably from syphilis.

Nothing of this shadowy life was familiar. Yet when I began to read "The Testament," a poem constructed in the form of a will that enumerated dozens of bequests, the bulk of them ironic... as I read the poem, the names of his beneficiaries resonated in me. Noel Jolis, Fat Margot, Guillaume Charruau, Jeahn Cornu, Jeanneton the Bonnet-Maker, Tacque Thibault-the name McQuiddy had mentioned. Villon's jailer and torturer. There were ninety-two names (ninety-three if I counted Villon), and I could have sworn I remembered every one, yet I could not call the people they signified to mind. They seemed to be standing just beyond a locked door in my memory, and the poem itself... the words latched onto my mind as if slotting into spaces already created for them. After two readings I could quote sections by heart.

On occasion Villon was given to stitching his name and those of others down the left-hand side of his poems, forming acrostics, and toward the end of "The Testament," written in this exact way, was the name Amorise DeLore. This discovery aroused conflicting emotions in me. Paranoia, due to my suspicion that Amorise, perhaps obsessed with Villon, was using me to further some insanity; and frustration stemming from the fact that I remembered nothing of her namesake, Amorise LeDore. Acting out my frustration, I threw a wine bottle at the wall and stood admiring the purple stain it created. It served me as a kind of divination-staring at it, I realized that if I wanted to gain a better grasp of the situation, I had no choice other than to visit the club in South Seattle. I fingered out the business card and noted that the address was located in a high crime area. On my workbench lay a variety of psychotropic sprays, macrowebs, and other sophisticated devices designed for personal defense, but without a thought for these weapons, I chose a flick knife that I used to trim wire-it seemed perfectly suited to my anger.

South Seattle had not been rebuilt in such grand fashion as the downtown. Most of the buildings were one or two stories, spun by genetically engineered beetles out of cellulose, but there were a smattering of stores and homes that pre-dated the quake, the building that housed the Martinique among them-a low cement block affair with a façade rising above roof level. I must confess that by the time I reached the club, I was not certain which of my key phrases I had most recently uttered. However, I do know that I had come to detest Amorise-I was convinced she had performed an illegal manipulation-and this may indicate that I was under the spell of "Je t'aime, Amorise," for hate was something I had never before indulged. Though like everyone I had experienced bouts of temper, rancor, and so forth, my life until that day had been undisturbed by obsessive emotion.

A straight-down rain was falling when I emerged from the cab, and I stood beneath the overhang of a Vietnamese restaurant across the street from the club, watching the neon script letters on its façade come greenly alight one after another. The initial T was shaped like a coconut palm. My thoughts proceeded in a curious fashion, entirely unlike my usual process. On spotting a whore sheltering in a doorway next to the club, arms folded, a white thigh gleaming through the slit in her skirt, I imagined her face to be an undertaker's dream of lust, a corpse prettified by sooty eyes and spots of rouge. In a moment she would step forward, open her mouth to the black wine spilling from God's table, and be renewed. The passage of a car, puddled rainwater slashing up from its tires, bred the image of a razor slicing translucent flesh, and two drunken shadows walking away from the club, laughing and stumbling, implied a revel of shades within. I crossed the street, anxious to join them.

Inside, the smoky brown gloom seemed like an exhaust generated by the babble of voices. Perhaps a

hundred patrons were gathered about tables and along the bar. On the walls were murals depicting scenes of voluptuous women with fanciful headdresses dancing in jungles. Spotlit on the stage, visible above the heads of the crowd, a tall black man cried through a golden saxophone, backed by a bass and drum. His cheeks bulged hugely, and he glowed with sweat; his sidemen were all but invisible in the shadows. The melody he played was slow and lugubrious, but the rhythms beneath it were those of a drunken waltz, and this lent the music a rollicking air, making it seem that the idea of sadness were being mocked. I felt the tune tugging at some ghost of memory, but could not put a name to it. However, I recognized the man to be a street musician who played in the fish market and had once cursed me for not tossing money into his instrument case.

I located an unoccupied barstool and ordered a glass of wine. Most of the patrons were of an age with me, fashionably dressed, and as I glanced about, I realized I knew everyone that I had thus far seen, either as business associates or chance acquaintances. Just down the counter was Joan Gwynne, a lovely dark-haired woman who had catered several of my dinner parties before I was forced to let her go due to our unfortunate romantic entanglement, one toward which she had since expressed great bitterness. She had on a parrot-green dress identical to that Amorise had worn, and her drink shone with the same hue and intensity as the neon letters on the façade. Though all about me other women were being clutched and pawed, no one was bothering Joan. A space had been cleared around her, and she sat without speaking, her viridian eyes flicking side to side. Behind the bar was a long mirror so unclouded it appeared to form an adjunct to the club. In its reflection I saw Carl McQuiddy and Angelica Korn conversing together, separated from me by at least a dozen people. They were dressed in matching gray suits and black shirts. A large golden pin nested in Angelica's hair. I had no urge to join them.

I drank several glasses of wine and continued to stare at Joan. Something about her made my thoughts bend like a field of wheat impressed by a force of wind. I might have approached her, but her eerie solitude restrained me, and when the saxophonist completed his song to scattered applause, she downed her drink and moved off into the crowd. I was oddly distressed by her departure. Someone jostled my elbow. I spun about and confronted John Wooten, my lawyer for the last few years—he had recently successfully defended me in a civil suit brought by the families of two clients who had been killed when they misused one of my devices. Thick-waisted and jovial, with shoulder-length chestnut hair, clothed in a blue suit. He looked down at my hand and said with wry amusement, "Quick to anger as ever, François."

I discovered that without my notice, as if obeying some old barfighter reflex, I had put knife to his belly; but this did not concern me as much as the fact that he had called me François.

"Guillaume de Villon," said the man I knew as John, inclining his head. "I was your friend, François. Of course I have no memory of that time. We have only your words and fragments of history to tell us who we were. Nonetheless, I'd know you anywhere." He clapped me on the shoulder. "Put your knife away, man. Things have always been unclear. Our task is to make as much light as we can in the darkness of life. Let us enjoy this night."

He raised his glass in a toast, and responding to what must have been a vestigial trace of camaraderie, I followed suit.

"What's happening here?" I asked.

"I confess that my understanding is incomplete," he said. "But from what I can gather, Amorise has brought us all forward from the fourteenth century to enact a certain rite that will allow us—and her—to continue."

I stared at him, rejecting this preposterous notion... and yet something would not allow me to completely reject it.

"Of course," he went on, "I'm merely repeating the consensus view. I haven't spoken to anyone who claims to know anything for certain."

"Are you saying she carried our essences inside her? Our..."

"Our souls," he said. "Her sinecure at Emerald Street afforded her the means to effect the transfers."

I wanted to inquire further, but at that moment a woman's voice sounded from the stage, asking for our full attention. It was Amorise. She posed as if embracing the spotlight, her arms outspread, wearing a simple white dress whose hem grazed the floor. Beside her, Joan Gwynne stood swaying, her eyes closed. The crowd grew still. It was so quiet I could hear the rain beating down on the roof. Amorise took Joan in her arms and kissed her deeply. Just as she had kissed me back at the shop. The kiss lasted nearly a minute, I reckoned, and for its duration no one spoke. Amorise's cheeks filled then hollowed, as if she were breathing into Joan's mouth. The expulsion of breath appeared to be causing her difficulty, for she soon began to tremble. At last she broke from the kiss. Two men jumped onto the bandstand to support Joan by the elbows, or else she might have fallen. Amorise steadied herself and then, flinging up her arms, she proclaimed, "The sublime act

has begun! " She gestured at Joan. "I wish to present she who was last Martha Laurens! Our beautiful friend, Joan Gwynne!"

Martha Laurens.

The woman who, according to "The Testament," had metaphorically buried François Villon's heart in a little casket.

Shaken, I stared at Joan as the crowd applauded, seeing another woman, or rather seeing in her the force of another, one toward whom I felt both an intense longing and an intense aversion. Moved by no act of will or conscious desire, merely drawn to her, I pushed toward the stage. By the time I reached it, she had regained her senses and to a degree-marshaled her composure. She looked as I imagined I must have when I woke from my kiss. Ruffled and disoriented. But there was no alarm in her face, and it occurred to me, thinking about her green dress, her solitude at the bar, that she had been prepared for whatever had happened. When she noticed me, the corners of her mouth lifted in a smile. She extended a hand so I could help her down from the stage, and then led me toward the bar, glancing at me with shy anxiety as we proceeded. We sat on stools near the end of the bar and considered one another.

"I don't know what to call you," she said.

It was as if another face were melting up from beneath the pallor of her familiar face, thus making her doubly familiar. Though disguised by bright green lenses, the shape of her eyes fit a shape in my brain that seemed to have been waiting for this sight. As did the fullness of her mouth, the concavities of her cheeks, her graceful neck and smooth forehead, every part of her.

"Aren't you going to say anything?" she asked.

"No," I said. "I don't think so."

She laughed, letting her head drop and glancing away, and the delicacy of that movement enraptured me. This was wrong, I told myself. I didn't want to feel what I was feeling. I wanted the comfort and security of David LeGary's blighted yet well-tended mental garden. *Je te deteste, Amorise*. I said it beneath my breath, but to no effect.

Joan, Martha, this creature whom I sat before, nervous and eager as a dog hoping for a treat, she looked at me, and that look became a heated environment, an absolute immersion-I had no idea why. Martha Laurens was to me no more than a name that caused a bloom of heat beneath the ice of my soul, and Joan Gwynne was an attractive, personable woman, given on occasion to spells of flat affect, who, according to other of my business associates, had-following our brief fling-seen the light of the White Goddess and was now an avowed lesbian with a live-in lover. Yet blended together, cooked in the same flesh (this, if I were to believe the improbable scenario related by John/Guillaume), they became a third person whose luminous specificity enlivened and bewildered me. If what I had been told was truly happening, why was it happening?

A rite, Guillaume had said. To allow our continuance. But for what reason did we continue... and what was "the sublime act?"

The saxophone man was back on stage, executing a mournful ballad. The people who milled about us were all, like Joan, doubly familiar, as if two identities had been combined within their bodies. I did not believe in souls. So I had told Amorise. Yet feeling what I felt, having witnessed what I had, how could I not believe that the kiss had effected a transference, that Amorise had breathed some essence into me, into all assembled, and now into Joan.

"What are you thinking?" Joan asked, taking my hand.

That simple touch caused my head to swim. I saw that she had removed her green lenses; her eyes were still brilliant, live wheels of agate. The tip of her tongue flicked the underside of her upper lip. I was overwhelmed by sensory detail. The push of her breasts against green silk, the long sweep of her thigh...

"I'm trying to make sense of this," I said.

Joan leaned close, kissed my cheek, then-briefly-my mouth. "How does one make sense of a kiss?"

Her comment distanced me, seeming to imply a perspective on the situation that I had not yet achieved. I asked her if she cared for a drink, signaled the bartender and ordered two glasses of wine. A soul, I thought. A scrap of energy to which only trace memories attached and yet which sustained emotions such as love. A force that could be transferred from one mouth to another. My thoughts, pure contraries, ideological oppositions, began to strangle one another before they could fully establish themselves.

The wine came, and we drank. Everywhere I cast my eye I saw someone I knew and whom I sensed that I had also known half a millennium ago. Thomas Hamada who, until his incompetence cost me a large sum of money, had served as my accountant. Diana Semple, a former patron. Several old lovers. There were, as I've stated, about a hundred people in the Martinique that night, and I suspected that if I were to introduce myself to each and every one, I would discover there were exactly ninety-two, and that their names would be those Villon had mentioned in "The Testament." The poem, I decided, was likely central to the rite that Guillaume



had mentioned. And since I was ostensibly the poet, I must also be central to it, trapped in its unclear heart like a flaw in the depths of an emerald.

"I want to be alone with you," Joan said.

I wanted to be alone with her, too, though I was not entirely certain why. Something was being orchestrated here, some music of action and word I was supposed to perform. The thought that I was being manipulated infuriated me, and I felt a more profound rage as well, one emblemized by a section of "The Testament" that then surfaced from my mind:

*I renounce and reject love  
And defy it in blood and fire  
With such women death hustles me off  
And they couldn't give a damn...*

j

Ignoring Joan's startled cry, I stood and walked briskly away, intent upon returning home and getting to the bottom of whatever was going on; but as I made for the door, Carl McQuiddy and Amorise emerged from the crowd to block my path. She had changed out of her robe into a black cocktail dress with a short skirt and low-cut bodice-her weapons in full view, she seemed even more the predator. "Where are you going, David?" she asked.

That she dared to ask this or any question of me, it was like gasoline thrown on a fire. I lunged at her, but McQuiddy stepped between us. I shoved him back and drew my knife. "Stand aside," I told him.

"A knife," said McQuiddy. "That's so fifteenth century!"

He gave a flick of his left hand-an almost imperceptible shadow briefly occupied the air between us. I felt the skeins of the macroweb settling over me, flowing down my face and shoulders in a heartbeat, growing and tightening, rendering the upper part of my body immobile. I knew that to strain against it would cause the web to tighten further, and I stood without twitching.

"What do you want of me?" I asked Amorise.

"I want you to enact the laws of your nature," she said.

"I was about to do that very thing," I said. "Dissolve the web-I'll be happy to oblige."

The web began to tighten. McQuiddy was standing beside me. I could not turn my head to see him, but I knew he was controlling the web, because I had not stirred. The mesh cinched about my throat and chest-I had difficulty drawing breath.

"Carl!" Amorise frowned at him. The web loosened slightly, and McQuiddy whispered in my ear, "Just like old times... eh, François?"

Amorise moved closer, so that her startling green eyes were inches from my own. Perhaps, I thought, they were not lenses.

"If you let your soul speak," she said, "you will know what I want."

"My soul? Are you referring to the thing you breathed into me, or the one whose place it usurped?"

"There's no difference between the two now. But don't be alarmed, David. You worked in machines instead of words, but you always had the soul of a poet maudit. I've done very little to you. I've simply given you the chance to fulfill your destiny." Then, to McQuiddy, she said, "I'm through here. Take his knife and release him."

Grudgingly, McQuiddy did as instructed.

As the web dissolved, a more protracted process than it had been to ensnare me, Amorise studied my face. What she saw there must have pleased her, for she smiled and allowed herself a laugh, a mere spoonful of sound.

"I've chosen well," she said. "You will create a beautiful text."

*Je te deteste...*  
*Je te deteste...*  
*Je te deteste, Amorise...*

Had they not been given me to say, I would have said those words on my own, repeated them a thousand times as I did that night and into the morning, for I hated Amorise. Whenever I said them I hated her more, for no change followed upon them. Whether Villon or a transformed David LeGary, or a syncretic being comprised of the two, I was trapped in the role Amorise had designed for me, thanks to her witchery... and what else could this be but the product of witchery? Science did not rely on kisses for an empirical result. My thoughts were iron flails demanding a target. I strode about my apartment, lashing out at end tables, framed

photographs, sculptures, and chairs, wrecking the accumulation of a life to which I had ceased to relate. At one point, giving in to a longing I was unable to suppress, I called Joan Gwynne's office; but she had not yet come in to work and I couldn't pry her home number out of the secretary. I flung myself onto a couch and scribbled down some thoughts and then realized that what I had written formed the first few verses of a bitter poem concerning my previous relationship with Joan. I crumpled the paper, tossed it into a corner, and continued to drink, to destroy the artifacts of David LeGary's trite existence, and then drank some more. And when morning came dull and drizzly, like an old gray widow hobbling out from the dark, her cold tears freckling the sidewalks, in all my drunkenness and disarray, I went down to Emerald Street to seek my satisfaction.

"Mister LeGary," said the blonde woman, Jane Eisley, who had dealt with me the previous afternoon. "We've been trying to call you."

Something about her seemed familiar, in the way that the individual members of the crowd the night previous had seemed familiar, but this resonance did not interest me. "I broke my phone," I said grimly. "Where is Amorise?"

"I'm afraid she no longer works here," Jane Eisley said. "But I have good news. We checked the machine she used to treat you. It was inoperable. The power leads were burned out. She could have done nothing to you. That's why we had to let her go. She received payment for work she didn't do. I have your refund here."

She held out a slip of paper that I supposed was a record of a transfer to my credit line. I knocked her hand away. "Where is Amorise?"

"You've no reason to act this way!" She fell back a step. "Take the refund. She didn't do anything to you."

"The hell she didn't! She doesn't need a fucking machine. Give me the address!"

When Jane Eisley refused to cooperate, I pushed past her and went along the corridor searching for the office. At the very back lay a room with a desk atop which a computer was up and running. I searched the files for Amorise's address. It was listed under the name Amorise LeDore, and I recognized it to be a house on Vashon Island whose defense system I had installed six weeks before. I recalled that I had not dealt with the owner, but her lawyer, who had referred to her merely as "my client."

The lawyer had been Carl McQuiddy.

Just off the office was a room containing a number of lockers. The name "LeDore" was written on the third one I came to. The door was loose, and I managed to pry it open. Inside were a pair of athletic shoes, cosmetics, and a slim leather-bound volume that I assumed to be an address book. I pocketed it and went out into the corridor. Jane Eisley was at the front of the shop, talking on the phone. I tore the phone from her grasp and said, "Don't cause me any trouble, or my lawyer will smother you." She made a shrill response that I, in my anger and haste, failed to register. I slammed the door behind me with such force, it called after me in a fruity computerized voice that I would be charged for any damage that had been incurred.

j

On returning to my apartment, I found that the leather-bound volume I had taken from Amorise's locker was no address book, but rather a compendium of arcana entitled *Against Nature*, authored by someone who called themselves Novallis. I asked the computer to search for information relating to the author-it could supply none, but informed me that in Europe during the Middle Ages, dabblers in the black arts often adopted Latinate noms de plume. The book itself was of ancient vintage-the pages waterspotted and brittle, the leather cracked. A strip of green silk served as a bookmark, lying across the opening of a section called "The Sublime Act." It was written in archaic French, but thanks to my knowledge of the modern language, I understood that it described some sort of complex magical operation, one involving the manipulation of a large number of people in order to produce what Novallis referred to as "the Text." Once the Text had been created, those involved in the operation would live out their natural spans (unless taken prematurely by act of God or man), but their essence (*élan vital*) would be collected by "The Host," who would convey them through the years, keeping them safe for a period of time Novallis termed "the Interval," at which point the Sublime Act would need to be performed again in order to ensure the rebirth and survival of its participants. There was a great deal of stress laid upon the consideration that the subjects must be perfectly suited to their roles, and finally a good bit of nonsense about the Many becoming Three, the Three becoming One, and the One becoming Zero. Also a long section whose essential theme I failed to comprehend, though the word "retribution" was frequently used.

Having deciphered this much, I tossed the book aside, went to my workbench, and called up my designs for Amorise's house on my computer. If I were, indeed, infected by the soul of a dead poet, one spat into my body by a centuries-old witch-and it seemed such was the case-I refused to be her pawn. I did not intend to produce a text, and more, I resolved to put an end to the Sublime Act, and to Amorise herself. It was not

merely anger that inspired me. As I examined the plans, determining what I might need to neutralize my defensive system, I experienced a feeling of revulsion in reaction to the Sublime Act, an apprehension of sacrifice, of unholy practice-I thought this might well be Villon's reaction and not LeGary's.

The message wall bonged, and John Wooten appeared. Sitting in his study, wearing a black dressing gown. He looked worried, and his first words to me were, "David, we have problems."

"What are they?" I asked, returning my attention to the plans.

"I had a call from an attorney representing the Villanueva family. They're planning to refile in the basis of new evidence."

"The suit was dismissed," I said.

"Yes, but not with prejudice. They have the right to refile." He leaned back, lowered his chin to his chest so that his jowls flattened out like a fleshy ruff framing the lower portion of his face. "They're also urging the district attorney to institute criminal charges. Negligent homicide. Reckless endangerment."

"That's ludicrous!"

"Perhaps. But it's a problem nonetheless." Wooten folded his hands on his belly. "What new evidence could they have, David?"

"You know, John," I said, my temper fraying. "This is not my concern. You're the lawyer. Find out what they have."

"I'm trying to do just that. It would help if I knew what there was to find."

"Nothing!" I slapped the palm of my hand hard against the workbench. "These fucking people! They could have heat sensors, motion detectors... but normal security isn't enough. It doesn't satisfy their urge to be trendy. So they hire me to devise clever little toys they can show off to their friends..."

"Calm down, David."

"House pet assassins! Robotic freaks! Then when two Mexican rich kids don't bother to read the manuals and zap themselves, I'm to blame for what happens? It's bullshit!"

"I agree," Wooten said. "But you're the standard of the industry, David. I doubt the Villanuevas can win in court. They've already lost once. But you have to expect to be the target of litigation now and then."

"You know what I expect?" I said. "I expect you to handle the Villanuevas. You're the fucking lawyer. I don't want to be bothered. If you can't do it without calling me every five goddamn minutes, I'll get someone else."

"It would be unprofessional of me-if not unethical-to fail to consult you."

"All right. You've consulted me. What else?"

Wooten appeared puzzled.

"You said there were problems," I said. "Give me the rest of it."

He was silent for a short count, then he said, "François..."

I looked up at him, calmer, as if he had spoken to some deeper part of me, though I was still angry at his intrusion. "What?" I said gruffly.

"Nothing... Never mind." He broke the connection.

j

I continued my preparations for breaking into Amorise's house, but my anger had cooled somewhat, and by mid-afternoon another passion had taken its place. Everywhere I aimed my thought I met with the image of Joan Gwynne and the ghost of Martha Laurens. I saw Joan's long legs, those amazing eyes, the lush curvature of her lips. I tried to suppress these yearnings, but they surrounded me like perfume, and finally I called her office again, intending to threaten the secretary. But this time she put me through without hesitation. Joan was sitting at her desk, dressed in a dark blue business suit. She smiled on seeing me, but it was a troubled smile.

"I was going to call you," she said.

"After the way I broke up with you... and then last night, I don't know why you would," I said. "I was rude. I..."

"I understand. It's all so new... so strange."

"Can we meet somewhere? I want to make it up to you."

Her expression grew more distressed. "I don't know."

"Dinner," I said. "We can go anywhere you like."

She put her head down a second. "I have..." She sighed, as if arriving at a decision, and glanced up at me. "I'm involved with someone, David. I don't know what to do about it. I want to see you, but I'm not sure what's right here."

"Are we not involved?" I asked, recalling what I had heard about her lesbian lover.

"So it would seem. But I..." She shook her head, signifying her bewilderment. "You have to give me time to sort things out."

"How long?"

"A day or two. I'll call you."

Try as I might, I could not sway her. I ended the call and paced about the apartment, feeling like a fool for being so besotted by a woman with whom I'd had only fleeting intimacy in the present, no matter how deep our relationship in the past. But I no longer wanted to deny the connection, and I decided to send her flowers. As it was late in the afternoon, I thought I would send them to her home. If it aroused the suspicions of her lover, then so much the better. Once again I called the office and asked the secretary for her address. At first she refused to provide it, but when I told her my purpose she relented. She read it to me, and I did not have to write it down. The address was on Vashon Island.

Joan lived with Amorise.

I was, for several seconds, absolutely blank, and the thoughts and feelings that rushed in to fill the blankness, though framed by an overarching anger, were touched with admiration at the neatness of the web in which I had become stuck. Every strand led to Amorise, and I realized she was inviting me to come to her. She had contrived her design so that everything I wanted was under her control.

Close upon this recognition came a powerful sense of loss and a comprehension that-although I had walked away from Joan the night before, and no matter the source of the attraction-those feelings were as sharp in me as the touch of fire. I could not, for several minutes, compose myself, realizing that Amorise had placed Joan beyond my grasp. This recognition overwhelmed any logic that might deny or ameliorate its truth. My brain had turned to iron, penetrated by a single white-hot thought that had no voice or means of expression... at least not at first. For as I sat at my desk, unable to move or even to contemplate movement, words came to me, almost without any awareness on my part, and I found myself scribbling on the sides of a circuit diagram:

*The black dog who carries my heart in its jaws  
Firmly so as not to drop it into puddles or pissholes  
Having been marked by God for this special task  
To remind me that Love is such a caring beast...*

I wrote dozens of lines, perhaps eighty or ninety all told, an entire poem of such acid and fulminant bitterness, I felt drained from having given it birth, and when this fever of creativity lifted, I had the fleeting impression that I was not sitting in my apartment but rather at a wooden table sticky with spilled food and drink, and above me were smoke-darkened beans, and on every side was the brightness of human activity, people laughing and conversing. Even after this brief confusion fled and I recognized myself to be seated at my workbench, it seemed that I could perceive a variant architecture of thought inside my head, gothic arches of compulsion and buttresses of emotion whose antiquated sweep and form were different from yet somehow akin to my own. It was the clearest sense yet I'd had of the spirit wedded to me by the Sublime Act, and as it faded, submerged once again into the turbulent soul we were together, my hatred for Amorise swelled to monstrous proportions, increased by the knowledge of what she had done not only to me, but to Villon.

I began to study the plans of the security system I had designed for her. It was likely that she had made modifications, but I doubted she would have had time to install an entirely new system. Once inside I could lock the house and prevent her from escaping, but she would then retreat into the panic room and call the police. Of course I could cut her lines, jam her outside communications, and I could override her alarms and counterfeit an all-is-well signal to the private cops that patrolled the neighborhood. That would leave us in a stalemate-Amorise in the panic room and me standing by the door. But a stalemate might be all that was required. My actions might convince her that I would not do her bidding... not this time around. Afterward I could take a short vacation, or a long one, and let Wooten handle the fallout. One way or another, though, I intended to make a statement with Amorise.

j

The house was a twenty-eight-room structure of gabled gray stone facing the water-in the moonlight it had an air of somber opulence, like a hotel for vampires. Amorise had not tricked up the external security, and I was able to penetrate the grounds without difficulty. It was after one in the morning, and I watched the house from amid a stand of old-growth firs, dressed in burglar black, my breath smoking in the cold damp air. In my pockets were a freon spray, a scrambler, a laser torch, and an ultrasonic whistle. I had coated my skin and clothing with an agent that would dissolve macrowebs on contact-I had set several booby traps utilizing such webs and I could not be certain that Amorise had not altered their locations. There were a couple of

lights on downstairs, but I believed that was for show. I doubted anyone was awake. Keeping to the shadows, I made my way to a side window. When lifted by an intruder, the bottom of the window would, once weight was placed upon the sill, extrude a hidden blade and slam down with the force of a guillotine. It was exactly as I had created it, not modified at all. I deactivated the mechanism, and after I had climbed inside, I overrode the alarms with my palm console and locked the house down. This all seemed far too easy. I switched on my penlight, bringing bulky sofas, a pool table, and an oriental carpet up from the shadows, and scanned the immediate area for electronic activity, finding none.

I had made my entrance into a smallish game room, but the living room beyond was as big as the lobby of a grand hotel, with a marble fireplace, five groupings of chairs and sofas ranging its more than one-hundred-foot length. The air was scented by a half-burned cedar log in the hearth, and the area was filled with security devices, all coded so as to prevent remote disabling, each keyed to ignore those people whom its detectors registered as familiar. I moved into the room and a cleaning robot—a flat black shape capable of prospecting for dust beneath the furniture—came trundling across the carpet toward me, spitting blue tongues of electricity. I jumped aside and immobilized it with a freon spray. As I went forward, I was attacked by a lamp cord of so-called "intelligent plastic" that tried to garrote me, whipping up into the air like a flying snake. I immobilized it as well. Most of the security devices in the room were centered about a vault set in the left-hand wall—I gave it a wide berth and continued on cautiously, a scanner in one hand, laser torch in the other, searching for any potential threat. I managed to negotiate the room without further incident, but as I stepped out into the main entryway, at the foot of a curving marble staircase, one of the larger cleaning units, a domed white shape the size of a wastebasket hurtled at me, visible in the moonlight spilling through the windows flanking the front door. I eluded its rush, and as it turned back toward me, I swung the laser torch over the top of the dome, where the control package was housed, burning a seam along the right quadrant. It kept coming. I held the torch steady, burning smoking lines across the entirety of the machine, but in the instant I disabled it, it succeeded in brushing against my leg, transmitting a shock that threw me onto my back and left me stunned. I lay for a moment, gathering myself. Apparently Amorise had been able to make more significant changes than I had believed possible. I wondered why I wasn't dead—the unit I had just disabled carried a lethal voltage. Then I had a revelation: Amorise must have reduced the charge. She could not afford to kill me. Not, at any rate, until I produced the Text. I felt suddenly foolish. What was I doing here? I could thwart Amorise's intentions simply by leaving town. It was only my anger—Villon's anger, I thought—that had brought me to the house.

I struggled to my feet, still woozy, and started for the front door. But every step I took caused a resurgence of anger, and my desire to harm Amorise was reinvigorated. I stood for a moment, revising my plans. If she had not been roused by the incident with the cleaning unit, and I presumed this to be the case, for I had given no outcry, then I might be able to get to her before she succeeded in locking herself in the panic room. I was not certain what I would do to her if I were able to head her off, but I was willing to let that decision await the moment. But if she had locked herself away, well, the panic room was on the second floor, and I remembered now that I had suggested to McQuiddy that I install a reinforced framework to support the room; he had rejected the idea due to budgetary concerns. It might be possible to set a fire that would eat away the supports beneath it, and the steel box with Amorise inside would come hurtling down—at the very least she would be injured.

I was about to head upstairs to find Amorise's bedroom when from the various rooms and corridors that opened off the entryway there poured an army of household appliances and robots. More than a hundred, by my estimation. I darted back toward the living room, but that avenue of escape was blocked by a green gardening robot, headless yet taller than a man, armed with several pairs of snapping foot-long shears. Chittering and beeping, the machines formed into a semi-circle, forcing me back against the front door. The sight was both frightening and absurd. At their forefront was a twelve-slice toaster that I had made mobile by the addition of six black humanoid feet. It was a conversation piece, a status item intended to evoke laughter. But now, waddling about and lashing its non-functional plug like a maddened tail, the general of a force composed of various cleaners and scrubbers, centipede-like air purifiers, and saucer-sized spiderlike ceiling sweeps, there was little humorous about it. I'd been prepared to deal with the machines individually—en masse they presented a problem. I fumbled out my scrambler and punched in an emergency override. The gardening robot became inactive, but the rest remained jittering, trembling, leaking a high-pitched electronic babble, the moonlight polishing their sleek surfaces.

Deciding that I had a better chance on the move than standing my ground, I leaped over half the force, landing amidst a cluster of sweeps. Several of them clung to my leg as I jumped again, clearing the edge of the marshaled machines, and ran full tilt along a darkened corridor. I managed to scrape the sweeps off my leg, crushing one of them against the wall—I could hear the rest of the machines beeping and squeaking behind

me. I pushed through swinging doors into the kitchen, a large cluttered space bright with moonlight. Something rushed at my ankles-I kicked at it and it let out a yelp. It was only a dog, and a smallish one at that. I heard it whimper, its paws clattering on the linoleum as it slunk away. The next instant something bit into my shoulder and buried itself into the wall beside me. An electric knife. It tried to wrench itself free, but I grabbed the hilt and broke off the blade. Blood was trickling down my arm from the point of my shoulder. I wrangled a refrigerator in front of the door, blocking it, and stood for a second, breathing hard. Slants of bone-white light, alternated by zones of deep shadow, fell across the center island and hanging copperware, an enormous range, and a counter lined with bins and appliances. The kitchen was a dangerous place, but I liked my chances there better than out in the corridor. I crawled up on top of the center island just in time to avoid a buzzing object that thudded into the base of the island. I was safe for the moment, but I knew I could not stay there long and I decided to try for the pantry, which opened onto another corridor-this led, after a turn or two, back to the entryway. I walked cautiously across the top of the island, torching a food processor that had been lurking behind a colander, pretending to be an ordinary appliance-half its circuits fused, it lunged forward on stilt-like legs in a futile attempt to maim me, then fell on its side. I stopped with a foot in the air, remembering the microwave, in front of which I was just about to pass. I eased back a step, stood one-footed and removed a shoe. I took a couple of warm-ups and then slung the shoe at the door of the oven. A beam of ruby light speared it, causing it to burst into flame. I skipped to the other end of the island before the oven's laser could reset. I sat on the edge of the island, holding the laser torch at the ready, and stretched my foot down. A toy truck rolled out of the shadows and tried to impale my foot with the electrified spike extruded from its grille-I hit it with a swing of the torch and it expired with a tinny rattle.

The pantry door, a flat white rectangle with a recessed square, looking rather like an invitation blank that had not yet been printed upon, lay twenty feet from the island. I did not believe there were any other mobile units left in the kitchen, but adrenalized as I was, I couldn't be sure. I stretched out my foot again, and when nothing attacked it, I leaped down and dived through the door. The air inside the pantry was sweet, musty. I flattened myself against the shelves and scanned the area. No sign of activity. I went to the opposite end of the room and thought what to do. A mad dash seemed to be the best solution-if I remained in the pantry, sooner or later the little army of machines would break through the kitchen door and push on in. The narrow windows that flanked the front door were of ordinary glass. If I could reach the entryway, I thought, I might be able to smash one of the windows and squeeze through it. I shrugged off my jacket and wrapped it about my right forearm. I cracked the pantry door, scanned. Then, one-shoed, I raced along the corridor. But on rounding a corner, I caught sight of a large indistinct shape hovering in the air, silhouetted against the light of the entryway. I put on the brakes. It was a moth, a gray death's-head moth with a ten-inch wingspan. Beyond it, also hovering, were a number of smaller moths. Twelve in all. I had manufactured them for McQuiddy, but he'd told me the client had rejected them as being too dangerous and that they would be returned. Each powered by a microscopic chip; a brush of their wings, coated with a contact poison, would cause a painful death. Amorise must have taken them to another craftsman and had them activated. The ultrasonic whistle, which I'd brought to counter a machine guarding her bedroom, would keep the moths away if I played the correct tones, but I had designed the moths to be difficult to control-the tones would have to be exact, and because I had not thought of them in some time, I was less than certain in my memory. Nevertheless, I had no choice. It was barely conceivable that Amorise had rendered them non-lethal, but I could not trust that she had. The fibers of the wings had been saturated with poison, and to minimize the effect would require painstaking work of which very few people were capable.

With trembling fingers, I took the whistle from the inside pocket of my jacket and set it to my lips. If I were to gasp, if my breath were to falter to the least degree as I played the pattern of notes, the moths would attack me. I moved forward, one careful step at a time, playing the progression that, I believed, would keep me safe. The largest moth drifted to within inches of my face, so close I could see every detail of the ghostly patterns on its carapace and read the words I had imprinted as a macabre joke half-hidden in the patterns-Death Courtesy of David LeGary. The tip of its wing fluttered past my cheek and then slid away without touching me. I had the urge to let out a sigh of relief, but I held firm and continued my inaudible tootling. Two more moths flittered near, and though my chest muscles tightened, I managed to keep my throat relaxed and played my way past them. A group of four, the smallest of the bunch, darted at me, dancing on air like gray leaves in a storm. I swallowed in reflex, but thankfully this occurred during an interval. I thought I heard my heart slugging against my chest wall. The five remaining moths formed into a picket line across the corridor. I mustered my resolve and went forward, my cheeks puffed, trying not to blink, watchful of their every flutter, and they parted before me, fluttering up toward the ceiling. Once past them I kept playing for a few steps, and then, my breath sobbing out, I ran.

As I came into the entryway, my feet skidded on the marble floor, but I righted myself and pushed hard

toward the window to the right of the front door, showing like a narrow box of moonlight. Upon reaching it, I slammed my elbow against the glass, splintering it. But as I knocked aside the shards that remained stuck in the frame, I heard an electric gabbling at my back, and on turning, saw the army of household machines wobbling, whirring, vibrating, scuttling toward me. This time they did not hesitate. The toaster waddled forward, leading a group charge. I kicked at the thing and sent it flying, but it delivered a painful jolt to my ankle with its plug. A ceiling sweep bunched its silvery legs and propelled itself into a feathery leap that left it clinging to my shirtfront-I hurled it against the wall before it could sting me with its wire molding brushes. For the next two or three minutes, like Gulliver among the Lilliputians, I engaged in battle with this cartoonish troop, swinging the torch in wild arcs, brushing the sweeps off my clothing, crushing the littlest ones underfoot. But I received countless shocks, and at last one of the sweeps managed to scale the back of my trousers and shirt and deliver a jolt to my neck that knocked me flat.

I must have lost consciousness for a time, because when next I looked about, the army had withdrawn, leaving behind their scorched and crumpled casualties. Painfully, I struggled to my feet, and as I leaned against the door, trying to get my bearings, to decipher the patterns of moonlight and shadow that lay across the entryway, the lights went on, confusing me for an instant. Standing at the top of the stairs were Amorise and Joan Gwynne, both dressed in nightgowns. At the bottom of the stair, his back to the banister, was Carl McQuiddy, wearing black slacks and turtleneck. He offered me an amused smile. Amorise, too, smiled, but it was an expression of pure triumph. Joan appeared upset.

"That was epic, David," said Amorise. "Truly entertaining."

The workings of my mind were clumsy, impaired, and I could only stare at the three of them, though I felt anger pressing against the fogginess that hampered my thoughts, like a dome of heat bulging up from some buried molten turbulence. Then Amorise drew Joan into a kiss, one almost as deep as that she had given her on stage at the Martinique, and the anger broke through, not clearing my head but seeming to irradiate the fog.

"And, of course, your machines are delightful," Amorise said, breaking from the kiss. "Such a wonderful imagery. I imagine it must be strange for you to be attacked by them. Rather like old friends turning traitor."

I tried to speak, but succeeded only in making a strangled noise. McQuiddy chuckled and said to Amorise, "I don't think he's up to a conversation."

"Fuck you!" I said.

"Well, we don't really have much to say to one another, anyway." Amorise took Joan's hand and they descended partway down the stairs. "David knows what he has to do... don't you, David?"

"I'm not going to do anything for you," I told her. "And there's nothing you can do to make me."

"I don't know," Amorise said. "I might find a way. You tried to assault me at the club. You stole from my locker at Emerald Street. Now you've broken into my home and destroyed considerable of my property. Those are serious charges. What will you say in your defense? That I've kissed the soul of a poet dead these six hundred years into your body? That won't gain you much credence."

"I have a witness who'll back me up," I said. "John Wooten."

"Oh, I don't think you can count on John," McQuiddy said. "He was extremely distressed by the way you spoke to him earlier today."

That they had been privy to my private communications did not surprise me, but McQuiddy's assured demeanor was unnerving.

"You don't have any friends, David," Amorise said. "You offend everyone who tries to befriend you. No one cares about you. In fact, they'd love to see you fall."

I was beginning to regain control of my body, to be more aware of my surroundings. The chandelier that lit the entryway applied a high gloss to McQuiddy's forehead and put glittering points in the eyes of the two women.

"You did this!" I said to Amorise. "It's not me."

"Did I?" Amorise laughed. "The anger, the disdain for others... they've always been part of you. You were the perfect subject."

"Actually," McQuiddy said, "I think it's a distinct improvement. At least the bastard will serve some purpose now."

His smile acted on me like a goad, and I sprinted toward him. He flicked out a macroweb, but the strands dissolved as they touched me, and I knocked him off-balance with a glancing blow to the cheek. He recovered quickly and reached into his trouser pocket-for another weapon, I assumed. Before he could withdraw his hand, I struck him hard in the neck with my fist, and then again flush on the jaw. He fell backward, cracking his head on the banister, and went down. I stood over him, waiting for him to stand. His eyes were open, lips parted. Dark blood was pooling beneath his head, spreading across the marble floor. I knew he was dead, but

I hunkered down beside him anyway and touched my fingers to his throat, hoping to detect a pulse. Yet at the same time I exulted in the death of my old tormentor, Tacque Thibault.

"Oh, David! What will you do now?"

Amorise was pointing a small caliber automatic with a chrome finish at me. Joan stood at her shoulder, her expression horrified.

"You can wait for the police here if you like," said Amorise. "Or if you prefer, you can make a run for it. But I can guarantee that the authorities will meet you at the ferry dock."

I wiped my fingers on my slacks to clean them of McQuiddy's blood and glared hatefully at her.

"There's something you may want to factor in to your decision," said Amorise, descending the stair-she gestured at me to move away from McQuiddy and I complied, retreating to the door. "Running will certainly lend the appearance of guilt. If you stay, you might be able to justify a plea of self-defense. Of course the validity of such a plea will depend upon my testimony. And I'm certain I'll be too distraught for several days to be clear on the details of what has happened here. Perhaps in the interim, you'll consider how you might influence my decision."

Once again I was astonished by the neatness of her scheme. I recalled Villon's fragmentary history, how he had been charged with murder and released once it was established that he had acted in self-defense. Had he begun writing "The Testament" while incarcerated, and changed his mind after his release? So I suspected, and I suspected further that Amorise had been instrumental in obtaining that release, and that when he had failed to complete the Text, she had subsequently managed to have him indicted for another capital crime, which she then managed to have commuted. She was duplicating those events to a nicety. The Sublime Act was halfway to being complete.

"For example," Amorise went on, "I might testify that I'd been having difficulty with your machines and called you here to make some adjustments. I might say that poor Carl had tampered with the machines with the idea of killing you. He has a history of enmity with you. You caught him in the act of sabotage. He attacked you and you defended yourself. Who knows what his specific motives might have been. An emotional entanglement, perhaps. It's well known that he was attracted to Joan."

I tried to catch Joan's eye. Concern was written in her face, but she refused to look at me. I believed she wanted to help me, but could not, being under Amorise's thrall.

Amorise knelt beside McQuiddy and to my surprise, still pointing the gun at me, she kissed him on the mouth. She closed her eyes, as if savoring the kiss, and then smiled as if enjoying a subtle aftertaste. The kiss had been brief, not at all like the one she had given me at Emerald Street. I imagined the soul must quit the body more readily than it entered, and that McQuiddy's sour scrap of vitality now was lodged in some secret cavity within Amorise's flesh.

"It may cross your mind to try and take the gun from me," she said. "Let me assure you, I'm an excellent shot. I won't kill you, but I will happily cripple you. It'll make your self-defense plea slightly more difficult to justify. But I can always say I was confused-I thought you had attacked Carl and realized too late what the actual circumstances were."

I did not hesitate in making a decision, for in truth there was no decision to be made. She had walled me off from every possibility but one.

"I'll wait for the police," I said.

j

All the events of this world are liable to a variety of interpretations. I have always understood this, but only lately have I come to recognize the absolute rule of this truism, and the corresponding impossibility of penetrating to the heart of any action. Either there is no heart, no immutable center, or else the ultimate nature of the universe is a profound ambiguity that will not admit to certainty. I believe the nature of the Sublime Act reflects that essential imprecision, that core deceptiveness. Evidence of this may or may not have been presented me on the third day of my incarceration in the King County Jail, when I received a visit from Amorise LeDore.

The guard ushered me into a closed-in metal booth equipped with a telephone and scored with graffiti, most of it obscene in character. Seated opposite me, separated by a divider of scarred, clear plastic, Amorise was wearing a green silk blouse adorned with delicate silver accents. Her long black hair was loose about her shoulders, and her hawkish face was made up to seem softer and more feminine. She picked up her receiver and asked, with no apparent irony, how I was doing.

"Is that a formality?" I asked. "Or do you really care?"

"Of course I care, David. You're dear to me... as you well know."

Though I despised her, I had become acclimated to hate-it was an environment in which I dwelled, and I



felt I could speak to her without losing my temper.

"Then you'll be glad to hear I've been writing," I said, and held up several sheets of paper that I had brought with me from my cell.

"May I see?"

One after the other I pressed the pages against the plastic so she could read them. When she had done she said, "It's good... but not up to standard. You'll have to do better."

"I might be more highly motivated if you were to recover your memories of the crime of which I've been accused."

Her brow furrowed, expressing a transparently insincere degree of concern. "I'm working very hard in therapy. I'm sure I'll have a breakthrough soon." She brightened. "But I do have something to tell you. Whether you perceive it as an encouragement... that's entirely up to you."

I signaled that she should continue.

"Joan Gwynne, as you recall, came to embody the soul of Villon's lost love, Martha Laurens. Carl was Tacque Thibault. John Wooten... Guillaume du Villon. But have you ever asked yourself who embodies the soul of Amorise LeDore, and why, of all those people gathered in the Martinique to celebrate the inception of the Sublime Act, she is the only one with whom you have no apparent previous connection?"

"Is that important?"

"Everything is important, David." A note of venom crept into her voice. "Surely as a craftsman, a deviser of murderous machines, you realize the importance of details?"

"Very well," I said. "Who are you?"

"Let us suppose that this woman, the woman whom you know as Amorise LeDore, is also named Allison Villanueva. And that her brother Erik and her sister-in-law Carmen were murdered by one of your security devices." She gave these last two words a loathing emphasis. "Let us further suppose that in her grief Allison came to recognize that if the courts would not punish you, she must seek her own vengeance, and after the lawsuit against you was dismissed, she traveled from her home in Merida to do that very thing."

Astonished, I jumped to my feet and the guard stationed behind Amorise gestured at me with his baton. I sat back down. "What are you telling me!"

"What I'm telling you," she went on, "is what I am telling you. Make of it what you will." She reached into her purse and withdrew the book I had taken from her locker at Emerald Street Expansions. "Novallis. Did you notice, David, that by rearranging the letters you can also spell out the name Allison V? It's not a difficult chore to forge an antique, and Allison may have taken pains to do so. Or she may not. Did you verify the book's age?"

"No," I said in a tight voice. "I did not."

"Well, if you had, you might have discovered that the book, if a forgery, is a very good forgery. I doubt any expert would claim that it is inauthentic. Be that as it may..." She restored the book to her purse.

"I don't believe you!"

"What is it you don't believe? That I'm Allison, or that I'm Amorise? Perhaps both are true. That would suit the subtle character of the Sublime Act, would it not? The subjects must be suitable, and Allison is perfect for Amorise. But then, too, Amorise is precisely what Allison needed."

"You fucking witch!" I said. "Don't try to con me!"

"Why not, François? You're a natural-born mark."

"I know who you are... and I know who I am."

"Let's examine who you are," said Amorise. "I must confess I've deceived you to an extent. We did do a little something to you at Emerald Street."

"That's crap!" I said. "The woman there... the blonde. She told me the machine didn't work. The leads were burned out."

"Jane Easley. She's a friend. Actually, you know her, too. You dated her sister at Stanford. There was some slight unpleasantness involved. A pregnancy, I believe. An abortion, a broken heart. And a very long time ago, you may have known her as Fat Margot, a Parisian prostitute."

I was at a loss, capable only of staring at her.

"We didn't have to do much," she said. "It's as I told you the other night, you were perfect for François. Well... almost perfect. I needed you to fall in love with Joan, so we tweaked your emotional depth a bit. The rest of it... the anger, the violence, the disdain. You supplied all that. But love was needed to make you fully inhabit those qualities, to bring them to flower." She fixed me with her disturbing green eyes. "Do you understand me, David. I wove the web, but you flew into it with passion, abandon, arrogance. All those qualities you thought you lacked and wanted to explore. From the moment we met, you surrendered yourself to me. You desired what I have given you... and what I have given you is yourself."

"What do you want?" I pressed my palms hard against the plastic barrier, hoping for a miraculous collapse that would allow my hands to close about her throat.

"No more than what I told you at the club. I want you to enact the laws of your nature. So far you're doing a splendid job." She settled back in her chair, folded her arms and regarded me coolly. "I'd like you to consider the possibilities. On the one hand, it's possible that this is no more than an ornate Latina cruelty. That Allison Villanueva has manipulated you through completely ordinary means in order to avenge her brother and her sister-in-law. That utilizing your suggestibility, your gullibility, your penchant for the macabre and your underused yet nonetheless potent imagination, she has persuaded you that a witch has come from the fifteenth century to implant the soul of François Villon into your body for some arcane purpose-something she may have done many times before. And now she's telling you that the entire scenario may be a fraud. That would be the logical conclusion... at least if we are to accept the logic of the age. On the other hand, it's conceivable that the story of the witch is true. Or, a third possibility, both stories are true. This speaks to the beautiful symmetry of the Sublime Act. It begins with a multitude of options, but eventually reduces those choices to three. Ultimately those three become indistinguishable."

It took all my strength to restrain anger-I wanted to yell at her, to revile her; but if I did the guards would return me to my cell, and I wanted to stay, to hear everything she had to say.

"Next," she said, "consider the character of the Sublime Act. I believe Guillaume du Villon told you that it was 'to ensure our continuance.' Were those not his words?"

I nodded.

"For the sake of argument, let's say that our continuation is simply the mechanism by which the Sublime Act is effected. Its character may well be something other than mere immortality. Why would a woman, a witch, wish to drag the same ninety-three souls forward in time, skipping like a stone across the centuries, causing the same event to be re-enacted over and over? What purpose could this painful form of immortality serve... if not vengeance? Do you see the correspondence, David? Why the subjects must be suitable? A crime, a terrible crime committed millennia ago, is redressed endlessly by conforming to a contemporary crime and thus achieves the most terrible of vengeances. The kind that never ends. An eternity of punishment. A hell that the object of vengeance creates for himself by enacting the laws of his nature. The Sublime Act. Sublime because the witch achieves sublimity through her creation. She is an artist, and vengeance is the canvas upon which she paints variations on a theme."

"What crime," I asked shakily, "could merit such a punishment?"

"Perhaps I've already told you. Perhaps someday I will tell you. Perhaps I'll never tell you. So many questions, David. Were some or all of your acquaintances in the Martinique acting, or were they, like you, manipulated by science or witchery or both? Is Joan Martha, and will you ever have her again? Or is she just another person whom you have wronged and who hates you with sufficient passion to be my complicitor? Could she have a connection to that ancient and possibly fraudulent crime? You will never answer any of these questions... unless you create the Text. Then you may discover the truth, or you may not. The thing you must accept is that whoever I am-Amorise or Allison or both-I own you. I control you. I may testify in such a way that you will be set free, but I will still control you. I'll continue to cause you pain. I've surrounded you with a circumstance you cannot escape. You may come to think that you can injure me, but you can't. My wealth and power insulate me. I swear you will never be happy in this life or any other. Not until I decide enough is enough. If, that is, I ever do."

She closed her purse and stood looking down at me. "There is one way out. But to take it you must go contrary to your nature. You can disobey me and not create the Text. Then I'll testify that you murdered Carl McQuiddy, and you will die. That's your choice, the only one I offer. To die now, or to create the Text and die after long years of suffering. What will you do, David... François? You can't believe a thing I've told you, and yet you cannot disbelieve me. The stuff of your being has been transmuted from confidence to doubt. Logic is no longer a tool that will work for you."

"I wouldn't be here," I said, "if I hadn't killed McQuiddy. It was an accident. You couldn't have predicted it."

"You always kill, François," she said. "A priest, a lawyer... Are not lawyers the true priests of our time? You're drawn to detest such authority as they represent. If you hadn't attacked McQuiddy, he would have attacked you. I own him as well." She let out a trickle of laughter, a sound of sly delight. "So many questions. And the answers are all so insubstantial. What will you do?"

She walked away and my anger faded, as if my soul had been kindled brightly by her presence, and now, deprived of her torments, I had sunk back into a less vital state of being. At the door she turned and looked at me, and for an instant it seemed I was gazing through her eyes at a man diminished by harsh light and plastic into a kind of shabby exhibit. Then she was gone, leaving me at the bottom of the world. I perceived

my life to be a tunnel with a round opening at the far end lit like a glowing zero.

I let the guard lead me back to my cell. For a long time I sat puzzling over the conversation. A hundred plans occurred to me, a hundred clever outcomes, but each one foundered and was dissolved in the nets of Amorise's gauzy logic. Eventually a buzzer sounded, announcing lockdown. The gates of the cells slammed shut, the lights dimmed. Everything inside me seemed to dim. A man on the tier above began to sing, and someone threatened him with death unless he shut up. This initiated a chorus of shouted curses, screams, howls of pain. They seemed orchestrated into a perverse and chaotic opera, a terrible beauty, and I recalled a line from "The Testament" that read: "... *only in horrid noises are there melodies...*" I wondered what Villon had been thinking when he reached this point in the Act, what kind of man he had been before meeting Amorise. If, indeed, any of that had happened. For an instant, I felt a powerful assurance that the Act was a fraud, a mere device in the intricate design of Allison Villanueva's vengeance; but then this sense of assurance dissolved in a flurry of doubt. It would never be clear. Only one kind of clarity was available to me now.

From beneath my pillow I removed the stub of a candle I'd bought from a trustee. I lit it, dripped wax onto the rail of my iron bunk and stood the stub upright in the congealing puddle I had made, and as I did I seemed briefly to see an ancient prison, begrimed stone walls weeping with dampness, a grating of black iron centering a door of age-stained wood, a moldy blanket and straw for bedding. I slipped a writing tablet from beneath my mattress, thin and smelly as an old man's lust. I opened the tablet and set it upon my knee. It made no difference whether the woman who had done this to me was Allison or Amorise. Either version of reality provided the same sublime motivation. I felt words breaking off from the frozen cliffs of my soul and scattering like ice chips into plainspoken verse, the ironic speech of a failed heart. Then, in the midst of that modern medieval place, with the cries of the damned and the deranged and the condemned raining down about me, I began:

*Villain and victim, both by choice and by chance  
I hereby declare void all previous Testaments  
Legal or otherwise, whether sealed by magistrate  
Locked away in the rusty store of memory  
Or scribbled drunkenly upon a bathroom wall  
Not knowing whether it is I, LeGary, who writes...*

## THE DRIVE-IN PUERTO RICO

Things went well for Colonel Galpa after the war. Indeed, they went so well that wherever he traveled he became the object of a celebration. Whether in the north of the country with its gloomy mountain villages, or in the volcanic central region, or in the jungles along the coast, his arrival was a signal for the townspeople to set aside their daily concerns and honor the national spirit that had produced such a remarkable hero. For ten years he rarely passed a night without a splendid hotel room, a surfeit of food and drink, and a beautiful woman for a companion, these the gifts of a grateful citizenry offered in tribute to the defining act of his heroism, the shooting down of three enemy jets during the single air battle of the war with Temalagua. Sometimes upon learning the specifics of the colonel's heroism, strangers might suggest that a tally of three was insufficient to warrant such prolonged reverence; but their judgment failed to take into account the fact that the country was small, with a tradition poor in heroes (unmartyred ones, at any rate), and when viewed in this light, Colonel Galpa's hour in the sky assumed Herculean proportions.

At one point nearly a dozen years after his moment of glory, the colonel returned to his parents' home in San Pedro Sula, intending to settle there and assist his father in running the family flour mill. The mill was in financial straits, yet this was not Colonel Galpa's sole motive for returning. He was weary of parties, of boring speeches and floral tributes offered by schoolgirls; he wanted a family of his own, and friends. The ordinary consolations of an ordinary life. But at the time the government was undergoing a crisis of confidence, and by promising that certain valuable contracts would be awarded to his father, the leaders of the party in power persuaded him to go back out onto the road so as to remind the people of their one actual achievement: the winning of a back-fence war. In truth, there were many—notably the owners of the bars and clubs and hotels frequented by the colonel—who would have been happier had he remained in San Pedro. Like the colonel, albeit for more venal reasons, they had reached the conclusion that enough was enough, and they frequently expressed the opinion that the colonel's heroism must have been an aberration, that he was at heart a freeloader; yet none dared to voice such complaints in public, where they might have had some effect, and so, despite this attendant irony, due in large part to politics and inertia—estates often confused for one another—the colonel continued on his joyless rounds.

On occasion someone unacquainted with the colonel would ask the identity of the slender graying man with the complexion of an *Indio puro* sitting quietly in a secluded corner of a noisy party, and when they were told this was the famous Mauricio Galpa, they might say, What curious behavior for the guest of honor! Oh, the colonel's simply tired, would be the response. Or the colonel's got a touch of dysentery. Or perhaps the person to whom the comment had been directed would make a fist with his thumb extended and put the thumb to his lips, implying that the colonel had overindulged in drink. But the reality of the situation was that while Colonel Galpa had once exulted in his good fortune and availed himself of every pleasurable opportunity, he had come to the conclusion that there was something ghoulish about these quasi-ritualistic bacchanals inspired by the deaths of three men whose faces he had never seen. He felt a certain disquiet regarding his fame and had taken to remembering the three men in his prayers; but since he was not a particularly religious sort, this merely exacerbated his emotional state and caused him to think of himself as a hypocrite.

In August of the millennial year, as he had done for the previous nineteen years, Colonel Galpa traveled to Puerto Morada on the Caribbean coast. Each August, bureaucrats from the capital who could not afford better would swarm into the town to take their vacations—vacations in name only, because they spent their days sitting on the porches of the little hotels along the beach, typing reports commissioned by their superiors who had fled to Cannes or Majorca or Buenos Aires to escape the heat. With the bureaucrats came the whores, hundreds of them from every corner of the country, and following the whores came the journalists, both groups seeking a drunken bureaucrat from whom they could extort something of value. From the government's perspective, August in Puerto Morada was the perfect showcase for the colonel. There were any number of gatherings at which he might be feted, and usually one or two unoccupied journalists could be persuaded to feature him in a nostalgia piece. For these exact same reasons Colonel Galpa loathed visiting the town and always managed to arrive late at night when no one was likely to notice him.

The hotel where the colonel stayed each August was a venerable two-story colonial of white stucco with a red tile roof, shaded by bougainvilleas and palms. When he had first checked in nineteen years before he had been given a fine bedchamber and sitting room overlooking the beach; these days, however, he chose to occupy the smallest room on the ground floor facing inland. This was not a consequence of his diminished status, but due to the fact that it housed a considerable population of lizards, many of which crawled in over the palmetto fronds that drooped through the window. Wherever he spent the night, be it Puerto Morada or the capital or a village in the Miskitia, the colonel enjoyed sitting on his bed with a single lamp lit and watching the lizards that clung to the walls, their bright sides pulsing with breath. He had no scholarly interest in them; he could barely tell a skink from a chameleon. He liked them because they decorated his solitude without disturbing it. Over the years he had developed a peculiar affinity with them. When he entered the room they neither froze nor kept their distance as they might in the presence of another human being, but instead perched on his nightstand and ran across his feet and otherwise continued on their tremulous mosquito hunts. Though he was a practical man who rejected the animist traditions of his forefathers, he allowed himself to flirt with the notion that lizards might be spiritual functionaries whose purpose was to oversee the travels of those fated to be exiles in the country of their birth.

On this particular evening Colonel Galpa's attention was captivated by a large indigo lizard with delicate black markings on its face that from several feet away resembled the fanciful mask of a harlequin. When he examined it at close range, bending so that his head was level with its own, it stared back at him, unblinking and serene, its pupils expanding to cover nearly all the retinal surfaces, so that the eyes resembled tiny orange suns in total eclipse. He derived from the stare a startling sense of energy and presence, its intensity such one might receive from looking into the eyes of a child. Though he assumed this to be a misapprehension, the result of fatigue, the longer he regarded the lizard, the sharper this impression became.

"Who are you?" he asked playfully.

The lizard craned its neck toward him, and the colonel felt as if a hook had snagged in the silk of his soul and were tugging gently, seeking to draw him forth, like a thread drawn through the eye of a needle. Dizzy, he straightened and felt instantly steadier. Still curious, he bent again to the lizard, and again was possessed by the sense that he was in danger of spilling out of his body. A check-up, he thought, might be in order. The dizziness could be a symptom of some difficulty with the inner ear. With a last glance at the lizard, he switched off the light and got into bed, where he lay awake for a while watching the frilly shadow of a palmetto frond nodding on the white sheets. The idle churning of his thoughts dredged up recent memories, trivial plans, old preoccupations. He recalled a woman with whom he had danced in Trujillo; he decided that after breakfast he would return to his room and unplug his phone; and he saw a sectioned-off panel of deep blue sky, sunlight dazzling the scuffmarks on a plastic canopy, and felt an immense vibration. He closed his eyes against this vision, concentrated on the darkness behind his lids, but did not pray.

In the morning, before even the most zealous of the bureaucrats were awake, Colonel Galpa set forth along the beach, heading for the Drive-in Puerto Rico. It was his favorite place in Puerto Morada, a bar-restaurant constructed of lime green concrete block, three walls and a metal awning that was rolled down each night to make a fourth, with a service bar and a jukebox inside, a room out back where the owner lived and a wooden deck out front, furnished with red picnic tables where one could sit, shaded by coco palms, and gaze out across the Caribbean. The place had no discernable connection with either drive-ins or Puerto Rico, except for the fact it faced eastward toward that captive island, and thus most people assumed that the name reflected the idiosyncratic nature of its proprietor, Tomás Quu, an elderly Miskitia Indian reputed to be an hechicero, one who listened to the spirits and could work small charms. A wizened man with a long gray braid and a face as wrinkled and dark as an avocado pit, he had once been a soldier and had, according to rumor, performed his duty with exceptional valor. On occasion the colonel tried to draw him out on his experiences, but Tom's was not inclined to speak on the subject. That morning the old man was on his knees inside the restaurant, painting a corner of the mural that spread across the rear wall.

This mural, the work of many years, depicted in bright, primitive imagery the history of the country from earliest times—Mayan pyramids and minor conquistadors; Yankee traders and soldiers of fortune, the most famous of whom had been executed in front of Santa Maria del Onda, the cathedral that shadowed the heart of the town; the white ships of the fruit company that had controlled the politics of the region; volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, the great hurricane of 1998, and so on. The thing the colonel liked best about the mural was that his role in history was represented by a tiny gray airplane suspended in a lozenge of turquoise, with no reference to missiles or enemy aircraft. The thing he liked least was that on each successive visit he discovered that Tomás had added horrid details: a young girl curled up around the syringe protruding from her arm; the bodies of several dead children strung up like fish and a man masked by a bandanna standing proudly beside them, his rifle ported. Emblems of the country's recent unfortunate

leap into the modern world. To his surprise, the colonel saw that Tomás had painted a lizard on an unexploited section of the wall, in the lower right-hand corner, a lizard very like the specimen that had caught his attention the night before, indigo, with delicate black markings and orange eyes. Beneath the lizard was an uncompleted face, bearded and pale, with one glaring eye and a sketched-in eyebrow—the space where the second eye should have been was occupied by the lizard's tail. Tomás rarely included the face of a specific man or woman in the mural, yet this had the look of a portrait in progress.

"Oyé, Tomás!" The colonel took a seat on the deck. "Pot favor, un cafe!"

The old man glanced toward the colonel and shaded his eyes. He waved and spoke to someone in the shadows. Then he went back to his painting. Soon a barefoot brown-skinned girl wearing an embroidered blouse and a long red skirt brought coffee and a sweet roll, and the colonel sat happily watching combers rolling in from the deep green swells beyond Punta Manabique, regarding the palm-lined ochre curve of the beach and the town set along it, the stucco and tile of the tourist places, the grim eminence of the cathedral thrusting up from the central plaza, and the rusted tin roofs of Barrio Clarín, in front of which a small herd of piebald cows had strayed onto the sand and were nudging at mounds of seaweed in hopes of uncovering something edible.

When Tomas quit work on the mural he joined the colonel at his table and the colonel told him that he had recently seen a lizard resembling the one in the mural.

"How odd," said Tomás. "For there are no such lizards. It is a magical creature born in the imagination."

"My imagination... or yours?"

"We are of the same blood. Our imaginations sing the same song. What is in my mind lives also in yours, needing only to be awakened."

"Well, there is at least one flesh-and-blood lizard. I saw it clinging to the wall of my room last night."

"One is very like none," Tomás said. "There is only the slightest difference between these values. The difference between the ordinary and the magical. It is easy to mistake the two."

The colonel decided that Tomás was playing with him, let the subject drop, and asked who the half-completed face was intended to represent.

"Satán." Tomás spat over the railing to indicate distaste.

"So..." The colonel leaned back and tilted his face to the sun. "Satan is a gringo, eh?"

"Pale, yes. A gringo, no," said Tomás. "But like you he is a colonel."

Colonel Galpa saw that the old man was not joking and asked him to explain.

"Surely you have heard of him?" Tomás asked, and when the colonel said he had not, the old man said, "It is too pleasant a day to speak of such things."

A romantic song, strings and guitars underscoring a passionate tenor, issued from the jukebox inside the restaurant, and the girl who had served them could be seen dancing by herself, her head inclined to one side, holding her long skirt up to her ankles. The sun had risen high enough to illuminate the crates of lime and orange and grape and strawberry soda stacked beside the jukebox, causing the bottles to glow with gemmy brilliance.

"I know what you are thinking," Tomás said. "You are thinking how beautiful women are when they are sad, and how that sadness might give way to something more beautiful yet if a man with the proper respect and temper were to happen along. Be wary, my friend. Let a woman wound you with her sadness, and you will carry that wound until the day of your death."

"When was the last time you were with a woman?" the colonel asked.

The old man squinted at the glittering sea. "It was nineteen eighty-three. The summer the army went up into Olanchito. When all the drug dealers came running out of the mountains, she came with them. She stayed five months." He gave a mournful shake of his head. "Your way is best, my friend. A few days, a week, then adiós."

"You're a cynic, Tomás," the colonel said, and Tomás said, "Not at all. I have reached a venerable age and am secure in the things I know. Yet like a fool I fall in love every day. I am merely too old to be a consummate fool. It is you who are the cynic." "I?" The colonel laughed. "First you accuse me of being a romantic, then a cynic. Surely there is a contradiction involved?"

"Perhaps 'cynic' is not the correct word. Though I can think of no better word for someone so obdurate as to deny the tradition that bred him."

The old man was referring, the colonel knew, to their Indian blood and to his skeptical attitude toward Tomas's mystical bent, his magical interpretation of the world, a view he believed that Colonel Galpa would do well to adopt.

"Must we always argue about this?" the colonel asked.

"No," said Tomás, giving the colonel's hand a fatherly pat. "I merely find it amusing to do so."

The colonel spent the day reading in his room; the telephone rang on several occasions but he did not pick it up. At twilight he lay on his bed and watched the rain-swept peaks in the west darken from gray to a soft purple. Once night had settled over the town, he dressed and went forth to do his duty, to mingle with the whores and journalists and bureaucrats who would be gathered at the Club Atomica, a discotheque on the edge of Barrio Clarín.

By the time he arrived the dance floor was overflowing with a confusion of men and women whose clumsy movements made them appear to be struggling to keep their feet, as if dazed by the flashing lights and deafening music. He found a stool at the end of the bar and ordered a vodka rocks from a pretty girl wearing a mesh blouse through which her breasts were visible. Someone tapped him on the shoulder. On turning he was pleased to see Jerry Gammage, an American journalist whom he found generally agreeable, apart from Gammage's habit of addressing him as "Maury."

"Hey, Maury!" Gammage clapped him on the shoulder. "They still got you out riding the circuit, huh?"

The colonel shrugged as if to say, What else?, and had a sip of his drink. He watched Gammage, a big sloppy blond man in jeans and a faded Just SAY No T-shirt, lean across the counter and flirt with the barmaid, making a clownish face when she playfully pushed him away.

"Every fucking year this place gets a little more like Vegas," Gammage said, settling beside the colonel. "It's a damn shame. But what the hell. These are the end times. Can't sweat the small stuff, right?" He clinked glasses with the colonel and drank. Judging by the slackness of his features and the expansiveness of his gestures, Gammage was a good ways along the road to being very drunk.

"Got any hot flashes for me?" Gammage asked, wobbling on his Stool. "Any pews that's nit to frint?"

"I saw a manta ray near the point this morning," the colonel said. "It may have been the shadow from a school of mackerel, but I don't think so."

Gammage drank. "I'd love to write it. Beats the hell out of shit like Six Priests Found Murdered With Brains Missing. Wha'cha think about all that, anyway?"

"About what?"

"About Six Priests Found Murdered With Brains Missing." Gammage leaned close, as if inspecting the colonel's face for unsightly flaws. "Aw, man! Where you been? It's the big story out of the capital."

"Six priests were murdered in the capital?"

"And found with their brains missing, no less. If we luck out, we'll get a shot at seeing the man s'posed to be responsible tonight. Word has it he's in town."

"The man who killed them? Why isn't he in jail?"

"Because—" Gammage leaned close again—"he's a fucking hero. Not like you, Maury. This guy's your basic New World Order hero. A specialist in what's being billed as 'internal security.' These honchos don't get the free lunch treatment, but they know the secret handshake. And nobody fucks with 'em." He signaled the barmaid with his empty glass. "I don't know why I'm giving you grief. You're one of the good guys. I'm just tired of this shit. You come to expect it in Salvador, Guatemala, Panama. But somehow I thought this place would be immune."

The colonel thought of the new addition to Tomas's mural. "What is this man's name?" he asked, but Gammage did not appear to have heard.

"Y'know—" he accepted a fresh drink from the barmaid—"I'm ready to become a card-carrying freako. Know what I'm saying? Get my hand mirror, stand out on the desert at noon and heliograph the fucking mother ship."

The colonel was accustomed to Gammage's despairing tone, but this outburst appeared to signal a new and unhealthy level of disillusionment.

"Speak of the devil," said Gammage. "Here's the man of the hour now."

Hector Canizales, the portly owner of the cantina, was pushing his way through the crowd, and in his wake, walking with immense dignity, as if he were the actual owner and Hector merely a flunky, came a pale heavyset man resplendent in a dark blue uniform that bore a colonel's insignia. He stood a head taller than anyone else in the club; his hair was black and oily, combed straight back from a forehead so high and smooth and white, like a slab of marble, it seemed to warrant an inscription, and his thick eyebrows were so dark by contrast with the pallor of his skin, they appeared more decorative than functional. His face was squarish and had a soft, hand-carved look; his nose was aquiline, his eyes large, set widely apart, and his full mouth put Colonel Galpa in mind of portraits he had seen of the old Spanish court—the mouth of a voluptuary, vaguely predatory and given to expressions of contempt. More to the point, he had no doubt that this was the face Tomás was painting on the wall of the Drive-in Puerto Rico.

"Colonel Mauricio Galpa," said Hector, mopping his brow with a paisley handkerchief. "Allow me to present Colonel Felix Carbonell."

"Mucho gusto," said Carbonell, shaking the colonel's hand. "I am honored."

"Wow," said Gammage, gesturing with his drink. "This is fucking massive. The veritable confluence of past and future."

As he stood there enveloped by the overpowering sweetness of Carbonell's cologne, the colonel was mesmerized by his opposite number's face; despite its calm expression and regularity of feature, he derived from it a sense of tension, as if there were another face beneath it, one fiercely animated and straining to shatter the pale mask that held it in check. Though he had never before met the man, he had met with his reputation. The name Carbonell was associated with the worst excesses of the regime. With brutality and terror and slaughter.

"You might even say it's kinda mythical," Gammage went on. "Or do I mean mystical? Whatever. I'm talking the meeting of the twain, y'know. Yin and yang. Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader."

Carbonell's eyes slid toward Gammage.

"I'd love a shot of this." Gammage gave Carbonell a jolly smile. "You do show up in photographs, don'tcha?"

"Excuse me!" A slim brunette in slacks and a white blouse grabbed Gammage by the elbow and yanked him away from the two colonels. "Jerry, I need you over here!"

Carbonell watched them disappear into the crowd; when he turned back to the colonel, he said. "Drunks, gringos, journalists. The new trinity."

Colonel Galpa felt a gulf between them, as palpable in its own right as he might feel standing at the edge of a deep canyon, struck by a chill vacancy inspired by the thought of a misstep. He pretended to be amused by Carbonell's comment and sipped his vodka.

"Well," Carbonell said after an awkward interval. "It's been a pleasure, Colonel. But if you will pardon me, there is a lady in the back who demands my attention."

They exchanged polite bows, then Carbonell went off with Canizales, who had stood by all the while, toward the rear of the establishment. The colonel finished his vodka and ordered another, wondering how much longer he needed to stay in order to satisfy the requirements of duty. He did not expend a great deal of thought upon Carbonell; he had known other brutal men during his days of service, and though he disapproved of their actions, he had accepted the fact that history seemed to require them. Three drinks, he decided. He would stay for three drinks. Maybe four. Perhaps it would not be too late to call his father.

"Colonel Galpa?" The slim brunette woman who had dragged Gammage off now took the barstool beside him. She was somewhat older than he had thought. Forty, perhaps. Attractive in a quiet way. Framed by her dark hair, her face was kept from being a perfect oval by a longish chin. With her small mouth and large brown eyes, she put him in mind of one of his high school teachers, a pretty, no-nonsense woman who had rarely smiled.

"I'm Margery Emmons," she said. "CNN."

The colonel saw his immediate future. An hour or two under hot lights, questions, a camera, an experience that would ultimately be reduced to a ten-second sound byte. Unpleasant, but it would thrill his nephews.

"I'd like to speak with you about Battalion Three-Sixteen," Margery Emmons said.

That name put a notch in the colonel's expectations and alerted him to danger. "I'm sorry," he told her. "I can't help you."

"You've never heard of Battalion Three-Sixteen?"

"You must realize, Miss Emmons, I've..."

"Margery... please."

"Margery. You must realize that I have not been active in the affairs of my country since the war. Since my war. I am as you see. An exhibit, a public relations opportunity."

"But you must have some knowledge of Three-Sixteen."

"I probably know less than you. I know, of course, that they were closely involved with the contras during the Eighties, taking their orders from the Americans, and that they have been accused of atrocities. That is all I know." The colonel made his delivery more pointed. "As it was your country that commissioned these atrocities, you might do well to ask your questions in Washington. Information of this sort is widely disseminated there."

"I hear you, colonel. But this is where the bodies are buried."

He acknowledged the statement with a shrug and a "Yes, well..."

"If you knew anything, would you tell me?"



"That would depend on the circumstances under which you asked your questions." He had not intended this to sound flirtatious, but now that it was out there, he could not come up with anything to say that would reduce its impact.

She smiled. "The question for me, then, would be, Do I believe you know something that would be worth my creating such a circumstance?"

"Probably not," he said.

She patted down her hair, an unnecessary gesture—it was held by a gold barrette, not a strand out of place—and stood. "I'd better see to Jerry. I left him out back. He's not feeling too well." She extended her hand and he shook it, saying, "Good luck with your story."

The colonel turned back to his drink, to a consideration of the woman. Margery. Perhaps, he thought, he had intended to flirt with her.

"Oh, colonel!"

She had stopped a few feet away.

"I'm staying at the Loma Linda." Once again she smiled. "In case you remember something."

When the colonel returned to his hotel that evening, he found the indigo lizard clinging to the wall beside the bathroom mirror. A little tipsy—it had been a while since he'd had four vodkas in such a short time—he put his face close to the lizard and asked, "Are you magic?"

The lizard did not appear to notice him.

"Do you eat flies, or do you consume...?" The colonel could not think of a word to finish his sentence; then he said, "Light. Do you consume light and breathe out fire? No?" He looked at himself in the mirror, at his ridiculous uniform and gilt-braided hat. His tired eyes. "To hell with you," he said. He bent to the sink and splashed water onto his face; on straightening he discovered that the lizard had crawled onto the surface of the mirror and was staring at him. The stare affected the colonel profoundly, causing him to perceive his own woeful condition. Alone except for a lizard; half-drunk in a bathroom; on an endless fool's errand. He resisted the easy allure of self-pity and stood rigid, almost at attention, until the feeling had passed. The lizard continued to watch him, and the colonel grew annoyed with those unblinking orange eyes. He clapped his hands, trying to drive it away, but it remained motionless, lifeless as a rubber toy. Its stare made him feel weak and unfocused, thoughts slopping about inside his skull, and he lifted his hand, intending to knock it from its perch. But before he could act, a curious lightness invaded his body, enfeebling him, and a burst of orange radiance blinded him, and for a moment, scarcely more than a second or two, he saw an enormous figure looming above. A darkly complected man wearing a hat, one hand upraised. His vision cleared and he felt once again the weight of flesh and bone; he saw his reflection in the mirror. A befuddled little man in a silly hat, standing with his hand upraised.

The lizard was gone.

The colonel hurriedly undressed and switched off the lights and slipped beneath the sheets. He could not put from mind the absurd notion that he had seen himself briefly from the lizard's perspective; he recalled the feeling of dizzy instability he had derived from looking into the lizard's eyes, and wondered if the two experiences had been connected. But what did this speculation imply? That somehow his soul had been trapped for an instant inside the lizard's skin? Even more absurd. And yet he could think of nothing else to explain such an extreme disassociation. Though the colonel did not subscribe to a view of creation that accepted explanations of this kind, neither did he demand logic of the world, and he refused to let the experience ruin his sleep. He closed his eyes, said a hasty prayer for the souls of the three pilots he had shot from the sky, and soon drifted off into a black peace that lasted well into the day.

j

The colonel did not arrive at the Drive-in Puerto Rico until nine o'clock the next morning. Most of the tables on the deck were occupied. At one sat Margery Emmons; she was talking to a thin, balding man in a pale yellow guayabera who now and then cast anxious glances to the side. Her eyes slid toward the colonel as he took a seat in the corner of the deck closest to the water, but she did not smile and gave no other sign of recognition. The colonel held a tiny mental burial for the minor fantasy he had conjured concerning her, and had a few sips of the strong black coffee that Tomas's girl, unbidden, brought to his table.

Beyond the break the heavy swells glittered in patches, as if irradiated by the backs of glowing swimmers threatening to surface as they pushed their way in toward shore, shattering into white plumes of spray that rose and fell with the abandon of wild horses, and to the east, Punta Manabique stretched out into darker waters like a long green witch's finger with a palm tree at its tip, its trunk forced by the wind to grow almost horizontal to the ground, so that at the distance it resembled a curving talon. The amiable chatter of the other patrons seemed part of nature, a random counterpoint to the percussive surf. A sweetish smell was borne on

the north wind, overwhelming the scents of beans, eggs, and sausage, and the colonel imagined that a great ship filled with spices had been breached just over the horizon, its hull leaking streams of cinnamon and myrrh. The day held too much beauty for his troubled cast of mind and he gazed down into his coffee, at the trembling incomplete reflection of his face, an image perfect in its summation of his mood. When Tomás dropped into the seat opposite him, the colonel asked him immediately about the lizard.

"You have seen it again... or another like it?" asked Tomás in a guileless tone that caused the colonel to suspect that Tomás knew something he himself did not) but then he thought that even if Tomás knew nothing, he would wish to give the impression that he did.

He told Tomás of his experiences the previous evening) when he had finished his story, Tomás said, "Hmm... curious."

"Curious?" said the colonel. "I expected more of a reaction. A lecture on spirit lizards, perhaps."

"There are no such things. At least not that I'm aware of."

"What is it, then?" the colonel asked after a pause.

"The lizard?" Tomás made a casual gesture, writing with his forefinger a sequence of quick little loops in the air. "How would I—a poor deluded hechicero—understand such a phenomenon? I think you should seek the help of a real expert. Perhaps there is someone at the Botanical Station who will advise you."

The colonel refused to rise to this bait. "You painted a lizard on your wall like the one I saw. A lizard of a type neither of us have seen before. Can you explain it?"

"I was kneeling by a corner of the mural, trying to think what I should put in the space directly above the space where I intended to paint the face of Satan. It came into my mind to paint a lizard. An indigo lizard. With orange eyes. I recall that I felt rather strongly about this decision. Certain that it was correct. Since my artistic choices do not usually incur such a feeling of certitude, I made note of the fact. Apart than that... the world is replete with these strange correspondences. Who can guess their cause or their meaning?"

The girl set a plate of fried eggs, tortillas, and peppers in front of the colonel and asked if Tomás wanted something.

"Aguardiente," he told her.

"Drinking so early?" The colonel tore off a piece of tortilla and dipped it in yolk.

"Early for one is late for another. All my life I have been a sober man. Now, at life's end, I wish to be drunk. There are things to be learned from both conditions."

"You'll outlive us all, Tomás," said the colonel, chewing.

"You speak as if you know, yet you know nothing."

Tomás seemed aggravated; the colonel let the subject drop.

"I'm certain there's no connection between the lizard I saw and the one you painted," he said. "But nonetheless..."

"Do you know why you have come here this morning? You want me to tell you that the lizard is magical. It climbed down from my wall and sought you out. It is a message, a supernatural being compressed into the shape of a message. It has great import in your life. It is a sending from Oxala or Jesus or some primitive black shape whose name has the sound of a bubble squeezed up through jungle water from some terrible netherworld. It wants you to see yourself as it sees you. Henceforth, you must always give homage to this lizard and the god who sent it. That is what you want me to tell you. Because hearing such shit will make you believe nothing happened to you last night. That it was a dream, a mental slip. Then you'll be comfortable. You'll be able to ignore it."

The girl handed Tomás a glass and an unlabeled bottle of clear liquid. He poured a stiff measure. Startled by his vehemence, the colonel could not think what to say. At a nearby table a blond girl in a navy blue T-shirt with the word WOLVERINES printed on the chest collapsed in laughter and shrilled, "I just can't believe you said that!" Margery, the colonel saw, had departed.

Tomás drank, let out a sigh, wiped his mouth on his forearm.

"I apologize if I've angered you," said the colonel.

The old man made a popping sound with his lips and shook his head sadly. "When I came to Puerto Morada many years ago, I liked this place." He tapped the tabletop. "This right here. This stretch of beach, I liked it very much. I knew I had to build my restaurant here. It was simple as that. I did not say to myself, This is a magic place, and if I build here, it will be a magic restaurant. Magic is an unwieldy word. It fails to communicate its true meaning. It has come to mean great works. A system of spells, a logic of supernatural connections. I am a hechicero, not a magician. I have no system, no history of great works. I see things, I feel things. I sometimes recognize certain sights and feelings that may have slightly more significance than certain others. Because I have done this for many years, on occasion I can create small effects. So small you might not notice them. But I cannot paint a lizard and cause it to come alive. I cannot ask it to seek you out

and make you see through its eyes. If I played any part in what happened to you, I was acting without intent or forethought. This does not mean, however, that what happened was not magical."

Two small boys ran past on the beach, yelling and waving their arms, chasing a skeletal yellow pariah dog that was so weak on its legs, it barely could outrun them; it stopped to catch its wind, panting, its body curled, gazing with desolate eyes back at its pursuers, then loped off as the boys drew near.

"It may have no importance," said Tomás. "This lizard of yours. It may signify nothing. The energy of the world will sometimes express itself in singular ways and for no apparent reason. But you must try to understand it. It is yours alone to understand." The colonel thought that the old man's advice about going to the Botanical Station was the most salient thing he had said. He wished now he had never mentioned the lizard. Tomás would likely go on at length about the subject of magic, its subtle nature, and the colonel did not want to be rude. But Tomás only looked about at the tables, at the bar, and said, "Tell me, Mauricio. Have you ever had a place that was yours? Not a place owned, or a place occupied. I'm speaking about one that called to your heart, your soul. One where you felt you absolutely belonged."

"Not for a long time, certainly."

Tomás poured another glass of aguardiente. "But you like my restaurant, eh? The place itself, not just the food and drink."

"I come here as often as I can, don't I? Of course I like it. You're a fortunate man to have such a beautiful home." As an afterthought, the colonel asked, "Why did you name it the Drive-in Puerto Rico?"

"The words have a pretty sound." Tomás touched the edge of the colonel's plate. "Your eggs are cold."

## j

The botanical station, operated by Princeton University, was located several miles from the center of town. Several dozen acres of plantation were enclosed by a hurricane fence and centered by a long, low building of pale brown concrete block, topped by a shingle roof edged in darker brown. Air conditioners were mounted beneath each window. The glass panes spotless, the lawn out front manicured. A healthy-looking parrot sat on a ring perch beside the door, clucking gently to itself. Automatic sprinklers whirled. It was so thoroughly American a place, everything so shiny and neat, that when the colonel stepped into the frosty interior, he felt that he had crossed a border illegally, bringing with him the dust of poorer land. He pictured the beads of sweat on his brow popping like champagne bubbles.

He presented himself at the reception desk, inquiring if there was anyone about who had some expertise in herpetology, and moments later he was standing in an office, leaning over the shoulder of one Dr. Timothy Hicks, a sunburned young man with shoulder-length brown hair, looking at pictures of lizards on a computer screen.

"See anything?" Dr. Hicks asked.

"They all look the same," said the colonel. "No... wait. There. That one there."

On the screen was a photograph of a lizard whose shape resembled the one that had been haunting the colonel's hotel room.

"Norops bicarum." Dr. Hicks punched the keys and the photo vanished, then reappeared magnified several times over. "One of the anoles."

Reading the information printed beneath the photo, the colonel was disappointed to learn that *Norops bicarum* grew to lengths of only five inches.

"The one I saw was considerably larger," he said. "Eight or nine inches long. And it was indigo in color."

"Solid indigo?"

"Yes... except for some black markings around the face."

Dr. Hicks tapped the side of his keyboard. "Well, I'm stumped. If you can catch it, I'd love to have a look at it. There are thirty-six known varieties of anole in this part of Central America. Who knows? Maybe you've found number thirty-seven."

He gestured toward a chair on the other side of the desk and the colonel took a seat.

"What do lizards see?" the colonel asked.

"They have excellent vision. They see colors... it's very much like human vision. This fellow here is monoscopic. His eyes are set so that he sees in different directions. Two distinct visual fields. Some chameleons are able to see both ahead of them and behind them at the same time. But some types of anole have stereoscopic vision. They see a single image."

Disappointed that he had not resolved the mystery, the colonel thanked Dr. Hicks, promising to bring the lizard to him if he could catch it, and returned to his hotel. He plumped up his pillows and lay on the bed, opened the book he had been reading, but his mind would not fit onto the page, and after a few minutes he set the book down. Loneliness at that moment struck him as less a passing condition than as an environment

in which he was trapped. The sounds of life from without—traffic, the cries of vendors—seemed to arise from a great distance, and he had the thought that if he were to shout, no one would hear him. For an antidote, he picked up his cell phone, a recent acquisition that he rarely used, and called his father's house in San Pedro Sula. His sister answered in a strained voice. "Digame!"

"Hola, Teresa!"

"Oh... Mauricio."

"How are things?"

"Fine," she said.

In the background he heard a commotion.

"It sounds as if you've got company."

"Is that how it sounds? Like I'm entertaining?" Teresa scoffed at the notion. "That's right. I'm always entertaining. Fabulous guests. Champagne brunches. You don't know what you're missing."

"Is there something wrong?"

A brief silence. "How can you ask that question? Oh, I forgot. You're never here. You don't know the unending joy of our life."

"Do you want to tell me about it?"

"Where shall I start? Your father. Do you know he's running around with a twenty-two-year-old woman? Una puta sucia! He brings her here. To our mother's house. He carries on in front of your nephews. And your nephews..." She moved the receiver away from her mouth and shouted at someone to be quiet. "Your nephews. They're doing wonderfully. Here. I'll let them tell you themselves."

A second later, a sullen boyish voice said, "What do you want?"

"Emilio?"

Silence.

"Are you being difficult with your mother?"

"Fuck yourself," Emilio said.

Immediately thereafter, Teresa said, "Do you see how well he's doing? He's a drug addict, Mauricio! He's like you. He's hardly ever here. And when he does come home, it's only to steal money for his cocaine! And your other nephew... your precious Pepe! He told me the other day that it is his ambition to become a homosexual. His ambition! God knows, I do not judge those people, but I don't believe that homosexuality should be an ambition!" A pause during which he heard her breathing hard; then, her voice sugary, she asked, "So how are you? Where are you?"

"Puerto Morada," he said. "Listen, Teresa. I'm sorry things aren't going well. I'll try to get back home soon."

"No, please! Not on our account. It would be criminal to interrupt your world tour."

"You know I'm not doing this by choice."

"You've been away twenty years, and you say it's not by choice? That's a lifetime, Mauricio. Twenty years. I married, had children. My husband died. Mother died, and our father grew old. You don't know any of it. Just the dates. The birthdays, the funerals. Now and then you get lonely and you'll call or drop in for a visit and pretend you're part of our family. But you're not... you're a stranger. A ghost who haunts us at Christmas and Easter."

"You know why I'm... ," he began

"Don't tell me it's the business! It can't be just the business that's kept you away so long."

Resentful, yet at the same time knowing there was some truth to Teresa's words, that his own indulgent nature had been in play, the colonel said nothing.

"I have to go. I have things... ," Teresa broke off; then she said, "I love you, Mauricio. But I hardly know you. I... I'm sorry."

After hanging up, the colonel sat on the edge of his bed, unable to clear his sister's words from mind. A ghost. It was an apt image. While struggling with this new conception of his relationship with his family, he noticed the indigo lizard on the wall above the bathroom door; he was so depressed, he could not rouse himself to attempt its capture. The light dimmed; scattered raindrops began to fall. He lay down and let the seething of the rain on the palmetto fronds lull him to sleep. Shortly before three o'clock that afternoon he was wakened by a pounding on his door. "Who is it?" he called.

"Maury! Let me in!"

When he opened the door, Jerry Gammage piled into the room, followed by Margery Emmons. They both began talking at once.

"Man, I need your help..."

"I'm sorry to intrude..."

Margery succeeded in outvoicing Gammage. "Jerry's in some trouble."

"I think they mighta spotted me on the beach," Gammage said.

"Who spotted you?" asked the colonel.

"Carbonell's men. They're trying to kill me."

"What possible reason..."

"I'll explain everything, I promise," Margery said. "Will you let us stay here for a while?"

"I know I got no papers on you, Maury," Gammage said. "But I'm in the shit."

The colonel closed the door and indicated that they should sit. They perched side-by-side on the foot of the bed, gazing at him like anxious children.

"Why does Carbonell want to kill you?" he asked.

"Battalion Three-Sixteen." Gammage twisted his mouth into a gloomy shape. "I got tape, pictures... everything."

Margery shot the colonel a guilty look, but did not speak.

"Somehow they got wind of it," Gammage went on. "They been beating the bushes for me since yesterday afternoon. I can't risk the airport. I'd never get past the checkpoints on the highway. Basically, I'm fucked."

"You have this material with you?" asked the colonel. Gammage nodded.

"Perhaps if you surrendered it..."

"I got pictures of Carbonell doing horror movie shit with men, women, little kids. He's twenty years younger, but you can tell it's him. He posed for the shots. The guy's fucking Dracula. He's not gonna let me bounce."

"He's not exaggerating," Margery said. "I've seen some of the pictures."

The colonel asked Gammage what he planned to do.

"Live through the evening," said Gammage. "Rancher I know in Choluteca owes me. Guy's got a private plane. Little single-engine job. If I can smuggle myself to Choluteca, I think he'll fly me down to Bluefields."

The colonel paced across the room, sat on the arm of a chair by the window, gazing out through the palmetto fronds at the empty sunstruck street. His thoughts moved like sentries back and forth between two points.

"What's wrong?" Margery asked.

"You've put me in a difficult position," he said. "By helping you, I'll be committing treason."

The room seemed to hold a faint humming; off along the street, a truck engine turned over, startling in its vulgar amplitude, like a beast clearing its throat. Then Gammage said, "I understand what you're saying, Maury, but what Carbonell did, that goes way past treason."

"These are citizens of your own country we're talking about," Margery said. "Innocents. Tortured and macheted. Buried alive."

"I know!" The colonel stood, turning his back on them. "I know things like this have gone on. I..."

"They're going on now," Margery said.

"... I don't condone them. But what will happen once you tell your story for the cameras? Will Carbonell be disgraced? Executed? Perhaps. But what will happen to those who sanctioned these abuses? Nothing. The world will look down their noses at us as they always have. Soon the story will be forgotten and the men who gave Carbonell his license to slaughter, they will remain untouched."

"I'm not going to try and kid you, Maury," Gammage said. "I can't guarantee anything. But even if it's just Carbonell goes in the crapper, that's gotta be a good thing, right?"

Men's voices out in the hall, challenging, peremptory. A heavy knocking at a nearby door.

"Not condoning something," Margery said. "Is that your idea of a moral stance? I don't believe it. I believe you're a good man."

The colonel allowed himself a polite chuckle.

"If I'm off-base," she said, "now's the time to prove it."

She was trying to manipulate him, but given the circumstances, that was forgivable. "'Moral stance' is an easy term to sling about when one's own morality is not at issue," he said.

He was not going to let Carbonell have them, and not merely because Gammage was his friend and Margery someone to whom he was attracted. It was personal between him and Carbonell. Even if the man were innocent of the crimes Gammage claimed for him, his cologne was offensive, his manner pompous, his smile the emblem of a vain and supercilious nature. The colonel's distaste for him was funded as much by chemistry as principle, and he wondered if all his life's decisions had been informed by such trivial impulses.

"Go into the bathroom," he said. "I'll do what I can."

Once they had sequestered themselves in the bathroom, the colonel waited on the bed. The fabric of his decision was paper-thin, but he knew it would hold. He had felt this same frail decisiveness during the war,

and he had always maintained his resolve even in the face of battle. But his battles had been fought in the service of his country, and he was not certain in whose service he was preparing now to fight. His decision satisfied him, however. He was calm and controlled. Just as he had been when he flew a sortie.

A knock came at the door; a commanding voice called out.

"Momentito!" The colonel shrugged into his uniform jacket and opened the door. Standing before him was a squat black man wearing captain's bars on his fatigues, sweat beading his forehead and shining in the creases of his neck. When he recognized the colonel, his stony expression faltered.

"Your pardon, Colonel," he said. "But I have orders to search all the rooms."

"I am alone," said Colonel Galpa. "It will not be necessary."

A soldier bearing an automatic rifle moved up behind the captain, who said, with more than a touch of desperation, "I intend no disrespect, sir, but I have my orders."

The colonel threw open the door, permitting the captain to see the entire room. "Are you satisfied?"

The captain gestured at the soldier behind him. "Sir, you must allow my man to inspect the room. Someone may have obtained entrance while you were out."

"I have been here all afternoon. It's as I told you. I am alone."

Letting his hand drop to his sidearm, the captain composed his features and said, "This is a matter of national security, Colonel. You must understand my position. I have no choice but to insist."

"What is your name, Captain?"

The captain straightened, squared his shoulders, but looked on the verge of tears. "Jose Evangelista. Please, sir. Will you stand aside?"

"Very well. But be quick!"

Reluctantly, his heart racing, he stepped back and the soldier, a mestizo, barely more than a boy with a wispy mustache and curly hair, entered the room and inspected the closet, poked under the bed.

"There," said the colonel. "You have done your duty. Now will you give me my privacy?"

The soldier bent an ear toward the bathroom door, then gestured excitedly at it; the captain drew his sidearm and trained it on the colonel.

"Are you insane? What do you think you're doing?" The colonel went face-to-face with the captain. "I promise... you will regret this!"

Crouching, his rifle at the ready, the soldier flung open the bathroom door, and Margery, who was standing behind it, dripping wet, her hair turbaned in a towel, holding another towel to cover herself, let out a shriek. The soldier recoiled, staring open-mouthed at her.

"Ay, Dios!" said Captain Evangelista.

"Are the needs of national security now satisfied?" the colonel asked him. "Then perhaps you would be so kind as to leave us alone."

The captain barked an order and the soldier hurried from the room. Offering florid apology, the captain, too, retreated. Colonel Galpa slammed the door behind him. Margery started to speak, but the colonel put a finger to his lips, silencing her, and listened at the door. Once assured that the soldiers had left, he went to her and said, "They will make a report, and it's very possible someone else will be sent to investigate."

"What should we do?"

"If they're suspicious, and we must assume they are, they will watch the hotel. There's nothing we can do... not until dark."

"The coast clear?" Gammage poked his head out from the bathroom. Fully clothed, he, too, was wet.

"For the moment," said the colonel.

"Do you really believe they'll send someone else?" Margery asked.

"Considering the circumstances... yes."

She finished tucking the edge of the towel beneath her arm, contriving of it a dress. "Jerry. I think you should stay hidden in the bathroom. If they do come back, we don't want them to hear you running for cover."

"Choluteca may not be the best option," said the colonel. "The checkpoints will be on alert for at least a day or two. How much money do you have?"

"Couple hundred lempira," said Gammage. "Maybe fifty bucks American." And Margery said, "Forty dollars, more or less."

"I know someone who can arrange for a boat to take you down the coast," the colonel said to Gammage. "Tonight, probably. It will cost several hundred dollars."

"I can get it," said Margery.

"Then our only problem is how to get Jerry to the boat. I suppose that can be arranged as well."

"I owe you, Maury," Gammage said. "I didn't realize I'd be putting your ass on the line like this."

"You know how you can repay me."

"I'll push the story hard as I can, man."

Margery shooed Gammage back into the bathroom.

"All right, all right." He grabbed a magazine off the colonel's nightstand. "If you order food, get me something. I didn't have time for breakfast."

Margery closed the bathroom door, removed the towel from her hair; then she pulled back the bedcovers and slipped beneath them, while the colonel watched in bewilderment. She wriggled about, dropped the bath towel on the floor beside the bed. "If they come back, we better give them something juicy to report." She smiled wickedly. "Well, don't keep me waiting, Mauricio. Take off your clothes."

To the colonel's great discomfort, as he disrobed he realized he was wearing a pair of undershorts decorated with little jet planes, a humorous gift that someone had presented him the previous month when he was visiting Puerto Cortez. Seeing them, Margery affected amazement. "Oh, my!" she said. "Should I be afraid?"

The colonel felt himself blushing. He slid beneath the sheets on the opposite side of the bed and lay on his back, gazing up at the ceiling. The tension of anxiety had been replaced by a different kind of tension. He wanted to turn his head toward her, but held himself rigid, attuned to the sound of Margery's breath. Then the bathroom door burst open; he started up guiltily.

"Golly gee." Gammage grinned down at them. "I was gonna say, 'Get a room,' but I guess you already got one." He shuffled the magazines on the nightstand. "Got anything to read in English?"

"No," said the colonel stiffly, and Margery said, "Get the hell outa here, Jerry!"

Gammage's grin broadened. "Damn, I wish I had my camera. The guys back in Atlanta would pay serious bucks for this picture."

"Jerry!"

"I'm gone." He chose another magazine, looked down at them fondly. "You kids have fun."

The bathroom door closed and the silence in the room seemed to thicken. The sun broke from the clouds, and pale yellow light cast a complicated shadow on the bed. A scent of gasoline drifted on the breeze. The colonel's chest felt banded by heavy restraints.

"Try and relax," Margery told him.

"I'm trying."

After a second she touched his shoulder. He stiffened at the contact, but when she left her hand there, whispering, "Just take it easy, okay?" his nervousness began to ebb and his breathing became steady.

"Know what Jerry says about you?"

"I can only guess," said the colonel.

"He says you've got the strangest life of anyone he's ever met."

"I suppose it must seem so."

"He also says you're the only honest man he knows."

"He doesn't have enough information to make that judgment."

"You don't think of yourself as honest?"

A thin stream of radio music trickled from the street, and the colonel caught the words "... you never returned to me..." before it faded. "Not especially," he said.

"I think you're honest. I'm not overlooking the tricks everyone plays on themselves, the little deceits that make up so much of our lives. They're inescapable. But I think you're honest when it counts."

As she spoke he cut his eyes toward her. He had assumed she was looking at him, but she was on her side, with her eyes closed, as if she were talking to someone in her thoughts, not to him. He took in the white curve of her shoulder, the little shadow in the hollow of her throat. Her face seemed softer than it had the night before, dazed and girlish, and he had the idea that whomever she was thinking of, whether him or some other, her thoughts of that person were slow and reflective and warm.

"I hope we get a chance to talk sometime when things are different," she said. "When we can concentrate on what we're saying."

The colonel wanted to say that he was fairly concentrated at that moment, but knew this would strike a wrong note. Her voice lulled him, and he closed his own eyes, listening.

"I'd like you to tell me about your life," Margery went on. "Not so I can understand it. I'd just like to hear you tell about it." She left a pause. "Do you know what a diorama is? This circular strip of metal... it's not always metal. Sometimes it's canvas and there are lights behind it. But it's painted with all these little scenes from life, from one culture usually, and it goes around and around. And even if you watch for a long time, if you come to know which scenes are about to appear, after a while you realize you're seeing them differently. Noticing different things about them. That's how your life sounds to me. It's like you've been living in a

diorama. Viewing the same scenes over and over from this odd distance ..."She sighed. "The adrenaline's wearing off. I feel so tired."

"Go to sleep, then."

"I'm tired, not sleepy. How about you?"

"If you keep talking, I think I might sleep."

"Am I that boring?"

"No, it's the sound of your voice, it's nice... it makes me peaceful."

"Really? That's sweet." Some seconds glided by and then she said, "Now I can't think of anything to talk about."

"Tell me about your life."

"God! Now that is boring!"

"It wasn't boring today, was it?"

"Today was unusual." She shifted about, and her breath stirred his hair. "I did produce a feature once in Borneo. We spent nearly a month there. The forests were on fire—that's what the feature was about. We were based in a town on the coast. Sumarinda. A nice air-conditioned hotel. But a lot of the time we were inland, closer to the fires. When the wind was right, ash fell from the sky and covered everything. The river, the land. There were days when all of us were gray. The Dayaks, the Americans... everyone. We were a single gray race. Except we were running around, shooting film, taking hits of oxygen, and the Dayaks were just hanging onto life. We ferried a few of them out on the helicopters, but the rest simply wouldn't be moved, even though some of the old people were dying. Some of the footage we got was amazing. Once we were up near the edge of the fire. All you could hear was roaring and crackling. One of the cameramen waded across a river so he could shoot into the flames. He'd just found a good position when a deer broke from the trees nearby and began running alongside the bank. It was burning. A fringe of flame licking up from its back. Deer fur... it's tough, you know. It's not like cat fur. It wouldn't burn easily. Maybe burning pitch drizzled down onto its back from a tree. Anyway, I couldn't hear if it was making any cry, the fire was so loud, but it must have been crazy with pain. Just below where our cameraman crossed was a waterfall and a deep pool beneath it, and if the deer had gone into the water, it might have been all right. But it kept running parallel to the bank, leaping over fallen trees, avoiding burning branches, incredibly graceful, trying to outrun the pain. It almost seemed to be flying. Like the fire on its back was empowering it. I remember thinking it didn't look real. Life never composes those kind of images, I told myself. It was something out of a book. A fantasy novel or a fairy tale. But when I was editing the footage I thought maybe this was how life works. Sometimes out of all the mess and clutter and sadness, it says something. It speaks what for us would be a word or a sentence or a poem, and mostly we don't notice... or else we're not around when it happens. But that one time we were there, we could bear witness. Out of all the smoke and flame and death, this perfect burning deer..."

j

When the colonel woke he was on his stomach, head turned toward the bedside table. Resting thereon was the indigo lizard, its tiny feet dark against the white shiny paper of a magazine ad, its orange eyes shining faintly in the twilight. The sight did not disturb him. If it was only a lizard, it was a pretty one; if it was something more, then he doubted it was dangerous. He had never thought that, he realized. It had merely unnerved him. Staring at it, he began to think of the eyes as lenses and wondered what lay behind them. A speck of bloody tissue, or a scrap of unpredictable genius given form by some miraculous congruency... or was it both? He thought about Margery's Borneo story. How unexpected it had been, seeming to arise from her like the deer from the burning forest. Perhaps in each instance it had been less a remarkable occurrence than a case of low expectations exceeded.

Margery began snoring. Delicate breaths edged with a glutinous phrasing. He rolled onto his back, careful not to wake her. The covers had slipped down about her waist, but she still lay on her side, one arm guarding her breasts, her hair undone, spilling over her cheek. At the point of her shoulder was a mole, perfectly round, like a period completing the milky phrase of her body. The sweet staleness of her breath, lips parted to reveal the bottom of a tooth. She seemed wholly unexpected. As unexpected as her story. It was not the sort of thing, he thought, that she would tell everyone, at least not in the way she had told it to him, and while he was not prepared to give this much weight, to derive from it any promise, it intrigued him nonetheless. Everything she had done until that moment could be explained in terms of a professional pragmatism, but the story was unmistakably an intimacy. His eyes went again to her breasts, and he suddenly longed to pull her against him, to feel her come awake in his arms. Yet longing was notched not by a fear of rejection or by the awkwardness of the situation, but by his concern that this was only circumstantially different from dozens of evenings he had spent with women who were no more than joyless



functionaries, expressions of public debt.

A light knock at the door alerted the colonel. Margery stirred, but continued to breathe deeply. He slipped out of bed and started to put on his trousers, then decided that whoever it was should see the whole show. He cracked the door. A tall young mestizo in a white waiter's jacket was standing in the hall, holding a tray that bore two wine glasses and a green bottle in an ice bucket and a silver serving dish. "Con permiso..." the waiter began, but the colonel shushed him. The man nodded, pointed to the tray, and adopted an inquiring look. "Bueno... pase," whispered the colonel, and opened the door to admit him, instructing him to set the tray on the chair by the window, and to do it quietly.

The waiter tiptoed across the carpet, his eyes roaming about the room. Though the colonel detected no bulge in the waiter's jacket that would indicate a weapon, judging by his bearing, the economy of his movements, he suspected that beneath it the man was wearing a standard-issue army T-shirt. As the waiter turned to make his exit, his eyes dropped to the colonel's undershorts and amusement grazed his lips. He pressed a small envelope into the colonel's hand, and with a slight bow, not appearing to expect a tip, he slipped out the door and was gone.

Three words were printed on the card in the envelope:

Enjoy your gringa.

Beneath this salutation, intended—the colonel knew—to make him aware of the all-seeing eye now focused on him, was a scrawled signature, a single name of which only a fancifully scripted capital C was legible. That Carbonell signed himself like an emperor did not surprise him, nor did he find it laughable—though emperors were out of fashion, despots were not, and of such stuff as Carbonell were despots made. The colonel put on his trousers, shifted the tray to the floor, and sat by the window as darkness came to Puerto Morada. Intimations of what might come of the night turned slowly in his head, like millwheels in a lazy stream, affording him a glimpse of every bladed consequence. The woman in his bed moaned weakly, as in a fever; her pale face blurred and indefinite in the shadow, like a white stone glimpsed through running water. Two roaring lights passed on the street; sprightly music from a nearby cantina braided the hissing of the wind in the palmettos. The colonel's stomach growled. He ate several of the shrimp contained within the serving dish, but did not open the wine.

j

Shortly after nine o'clock, the hour when the Drive-in Puerto Rico customarily closed, Margery and the colonel went to talk with Tomás, leaving Gammage hiding in the room. They walked along the verge of the beach, keeping to the shadow of a palm hammock. Drops of orange fire pointed the windows of little wooden houses tucked in among the sinuous trunks, each one also announced by the rattle of a generator, and on occasion a lesser shadow emerged from the dark, tipped its hat and wished them good evening. Off on the horizon a lopsided moon, like an ancient medal of bone, paved the sea with a dwindling silver road, and the swarm of stars in its wild glitter seemed to construct a constant flickering conversation, causing the colonel to think that if he could hear them, their voices would resemble those of crickets. Bats squeaked high in the fronds; invisible chickens clucked; a dog barked distantly, with neurotic regularity. The wind had died, and mosquitoes whined in the colonel's hair.

"Tomás feels that women have been a misfortune in his life," he said as they came in sight of the Drive-in Puerto Rico. "He may appear rude."

Margery slapped at her neck. "Maybe I shouldn't be with you."

"No, it's better he knows a woman is involved."

"But what if he won't help?"

"He will. His attitude toward women doesn't reflect dislike, just a mistrust of their effect on him. As far as I know, he has never been able to refuse them anything."

The lights on the deck of the restaurant had been switched off, and Tomás was leaning on the railing. On spotting Margery he let fall the hand he had raised in greeting and his face grew impassive. As they sat together and the colonel told him what was required and why, he merely grunted in response. Margery continued slapping at mosquitoes, and finally, annoyed by these interruptions, Tomás went into the restaurant and returned with a jar containing a translucent greenish paste, which he handed to Margery. She sniffed at it, wrinkled her nose.

"It is not perfume," he said brusquely. "However, it will keep away the mosquitoes."

She thanked him and began dabbing it onto her arms and neck.

With a dolorous sigh, Tomás sat with his back to the railing, his face angled toward the stars. "Benito Casamayor has a suitable boat. And he is in need of money. But he will want a good price to challenge the authority of Felix Carbonell."

"How much?" Margery asked.

"A thousand might persuade him."

"Lempira?"

"Dollars," said Tomás.

"I can have it within an hour."

Tomás sniffed, a sign—the colonel thought—of his contempt for anyone who could so easily promise a thousand dollars. "I'll arrange for Benito to be at the end of Punta Manabique at two o'clock in the morning. That will give him time to prepare his boat."

"How will we get Jerry to the boat?"

Tomás refitted his gaze to the horizon. Their edges gone diaphanous, all smoke and luminous mother of pearl, bulky clouds had closed in around the moon, framing it in glowing complexity, like angels heralding a glorious birth in a Rafael or a Titian. A fish splashed in the offing, a sickly generator stuttered to life among the palms.

"How big a man is your friend?" Tomás asked.

"About six feet," Margery said. "Two hundred pounds, maybe."

"A little more, I think," said Colonel Galpa.

"There is a woman from the Bay Islands here in town," said Tomás. "Maude Brooks. The people call her Sister Anaya. She tells fortunes at the hotels."

"I think I've seen her," Margery said. "A big black woman... wears a turban?"

Tomás nodded. "She will come to Mauricio's hotel and provide your friend with a disguise. She will remain in the room, and he will leave, pretending to be her. But you will require something with which to color his skin."

"I have boot polish," said the colonel. "It's brown, but in the dark no one is likely to notice."

"Do we pay her, too?" Margery asked.

"She will tell you her price." Tomás chuckled. "Bring a great deal of money."

A flow of wind poured in off the water, growing stronger by the second, flapping the colonel's jacket, twitching the end of Tomás's braid. For the first time, he looked directly at Margery. His creased, leathery face seemed more an accidental pattern of nature than a human design, the sort of shape your eye might assemble from the strands in a mound of seaweed. "Give me your hand," he said.

She glanced anxiously at the colonel, but complied.

Tomás did not hold her hand, simply let it rest on his palm. He kept his eyes on her and she on him. It appeared initially that they were engaged in a contest of wills; but then the colonel realized that neither one showed evidence of strain. Still, it made him uneasy and he asked Tomás what he was doing.

"Looking."

"Looking for what?"

"Must I look for something specific? Whenever you try too forcefully to order the world, you fail to see anything."

Soon Tomás withdrew his hand, frowning.

"Is something wrong?" Margery asked.

The old man muttered several words in a language Colonel Galpa did not recognize, then, his eyes downcast, said, "Mauricio. You will have to escort the American to meet Benito. Once he has disguised himself, the three of you must leave the hotel together. You —" he gestured at Margery—"cannot go to Punta Manabique with them. Is there a place where your colleagues might gather at that hour?"

"Club Atomica," she said.

"Then go there. It will seem that Mauricio is walking Madame Anaya home." Tomás addressed himself to the colonel. "Do not accompany him all the way to the point. Leave him on the beach nearby. He will pass into the shadows of the trees. If anyone has followed, they will lose interest in him and follow you back to the club."

The plan sounded eminently workable to the colonel, but he was perturbed by Tomás's subdued manner and asked if he felt ill.

Tomás took such a long time to respond, the colonel grew concerned that he had been stricken and rendered incapable of speech; but at last he said, "It is nothing. An intimation of ills to come. Men of my age often receive morbid signals of the future." He patted the colonel's hand, his own hand trembling. "It is you about whom I am concerned."

"I'm perfectly well," said the colonel. "Except for being hungry. I had only a few shrimp at dinner."

"It is not your health that concerns me. I wonder if you are prepared for what may ensue should Carbonell discover what you have done."

"Carbonell cannot hurt me. I have friends in the capitol whom he will not wish to offend."

"I think you underestimate him... and I am certain that you do not entirely comprehend his character. Men like Carbonell, beasts disguised by a thin dress of human behavior, they sometimes act without regard for consequence. As to your friends, ask yourself this. Who is more valuable to them—the hero of a war fought long ago, or a beast who wears their uniform, whose uncontrollable nature serves to strike fear into the hearts of the people, making them all the more malleable and accepting of their lot?"

Put this way, the question disheartened the colonel. He realized that—matters of principle aside—he was on the verge of risking everything for a man who, albeit a friend, was not a great friend, and for a woman whom he scarcely knew. And to what end? He had little conviction that Carbonell or his masters would be damaged by the revelations Gammage proposed to make. He wondered what his response might be if Margery were not sitting beside him. "I'll be all right," he told Tomás.

The old man made a clucking sound with his tongue. He stared at his hands, which rested flat on the table, the fingers lifting idly—like two ancient blind crabs seeking familiar purchase. "Then there's nothing more to be said."

j

Enthroned in the chair by the window in the colonel's room, rolls of fat squeezed out over the arms, her voluminous white dress emblazoned with tiny red skeletons, hair turbaned in this same material, her scowling black face diamonded with beads of sweat, Madame Anaya was not shy about voicing her displeasure. "Dere's no television," she said. "De ol' mort tol' me dere were a television." She pursed her cherub lips; almost hidden behind her pouchy cheeks, her eyes gleamed like polished sea beans. "How you 'spect me to sit t'rough half de night wit'out some television?"

"I have magazines," the colonel said. "Books."

"Now what I wan' to read fah? Ruinin' my eyes wit' dat tiny print! You bring me dat television de mon promise!"

"I'm afraid at this hour it's impossible."

Madame Anaya made a beastly noise in her throat, but held her tongue. A brief commotion arose in the bathroom, where Margery was helping Gammage put the finishing touches on his disguise.

"I believe the cafe is still open," said the colonel. "I could bring you something to eat."

"I gots my own." Madame Anaya's right hand, dangling off the chair arm, stirred, and she pointed with a sausage-like finger at her purse, which—so black and bulging, it seemed her familiar—rested beside the chair. "Nevuh trus' Spornish cookin'. Make you weak in de liver." She glared at the colonel. "Dis de night dey be playin' de duppy movies."

"I beg your pardon?"

"On de television. Dey plays de duppy movies at midnight of a Saturday."

The colonel checked his watch. "You're not going to miss much. It's almost over."

"Dey be playin' two of dem," Madame Anaya said reprovingly. "Las' one always de best."

"I'm sorry."

"Been two weeks and dey played dis one, Curse of de Blood Witch."

"That was a good one?"

"It were domn funny! De people make it, dey don't know de first t'ing 'bout witches. Mus' be dey t'inkin' magic somet'ing you catch from a book."

The colonel made a noncommittal noise, thinking ahead to the beach, the walk to Punta Manabique, the dangers it might present.

"Magic what people gots in dere bodies. Some gots it in de eye, some in de hand, some in de heart. You gots it all three places, den you a witch."

"I see," said the colonel distractedly, trying to decide whether or not to carry his sidearm. Crime was not unheard of on the beach, but generally it was perpetrated against tourists. Better to leave it in the room—he did not want to arouse suspicion. He glanced at Madame Anaya. Immense and motionless; eyes fixed. She did not appear to be breathing. Then two fingers of her right hand began to move in slow circles, as if she were stirring something. The colonel was drawn to watch them. His head felt warm, thickish, his thoughts subject to a drifty confusion, similar to the way he had felt on the rare occasions when he smoked marijuana. The air seemed to eddy in response to the stirring of Madame Anaya's fingers, rippling outward, and as the ripples washed over him he came to feel increasingly stoned, a faint keening in his ears. She looked to have no depth, an exotic image painted on a liquid surface. Then, abruptly, the fingers stopped and the colonel became aware that the ripples in her considerable flesh were caused by silent laughter.

"Curse of de Blood Witch," she said, and chuckled. "Dat ain't nowhere de way of it."

The bathroom door opened and Margery, followed sheepishly by Gammage, entered. Gammage's white dress and turban were of a piece with Madame Ananya's, only his were decorated with tiny blue skulls; his face, arms, and sandaled feet were coated with mahogany boot polish. The effect was both gruesome and laughable.

"Oh, God!" said Madame Anaya.

"Don't hate me because I'm beautiful," Gammage said sourly.

The colonel stood. "It's twenty minutes' walk to the point. We should go now."

Gammage looked down at his glistening brown arms. "Man, I don't know about this shit."

Margery rubbed his shoulder. "It'll be fine once you get out onto the beach."

"Now you shed dat dress fah you leave de boat," Madame Anaya said to Gammage as he moved toward the door. "And Benito he fetch it to me."

"Hey, you're welcome to it," Gammage said with false bravado. "It doesn't do a thing for my hips."

She gave another quivery, silent laugh. "Darlin', you hustle yo'self on down to Barrio Clarín, you gon' get more action den you can handle."

The colonel opened the door, peeked out to see if the corridor was clear, then beckoned to Margery and Gammage. They eased past him, and as he closed the door he heard Madame Anaya say, "You tell dat ol' mon, I gon' make him rueful 'bout de television."

The wind that earlier had risen now swooped in off the water in long powerful gusts, giving roaring voice to the palms, their crowns tossing and swaying like an exalted crowd under a mesmeric preacher's thrall. Surf pounded in over the break, exploding in phosphorescent sprays, and racing clouds cut just below the high-riding moon, now and then dimming, but not obscuring its light. Through a gap between trunks, the colonel saw men and women moving their hips and waving their arms under the thatched canopy of a shanty bar to the rhythms of a small steel band. A rich yellow light englobed them, and beyond, for a backdrop, a deep green undulation of shrubs and sea grape, shaking their branches as if in mimicry. At that distance, unable to hear the liquid metallic arpeggios, the shouted vocals, it seemed to him that all the complicated grace of the dancers, the children chasing each other in and out among them, and the jittery attacks of the drummers served a more oblique principle than mere abandon, that their madness was orchestrated toward some end, a mysterious providence being invoked.

From the heat of late afternoon, the temperature must have dropped twenty-five degrees. The weather had driven most people inside, and so the colonel and Gammage came to the landward end of Punta Manabique without incident. "I'm not gonna hug you, Maury," Gammage said as they stood together. "'Case somebody's watching."

"I appreciate that," the colonel said. "Though it might do wonders for Madame Anaya's reputation." He gazed toward the seaward end; even in the strong moonlight, the thrashing foliage and shifting shadows made it impossible to determine if Benito Casamayor's boat was at hand. "You'd better hurry."

"I'm gone. But once Carbonell's over, I'll come back and we'll hoist a few."

Gammage stood there a moment longer, a vastly ludicrous figure with his turban, his boot-polish skin, and the dress alternately belling and molding to his thighs. The disguise failed to hide his anxiety. "See ya, Maury." He hesitated another moment, turned, and went trudging off among the palms that bounded the little ridge guarding the point.

The colonel watched him out of sight. Then, head down against the wind, he started toward town, making slow progress in the tacky sand. He felt disconnected from the events of the night. Though concerned for Gammage, for Margery, he was unafraid of what might happen to him, and not because he was assured of his immunity. Either he did not especially care what happened, or else he believed he could do nothing about it. There was evidence to support both conclusions. Perhaps, he thought, they were more or less the same, related products of a larger mental circumstance. The wind chilled him; the concatenations of the surf were assaultive in their loudness, affecting his nerves. His unsettled mood deepened. Despite wanting to see Margery, he came to dread the noise and the crowd at the Club Atomica. Instead of going directly to the club, he decided he would first visit Tomás and let him know how the plan had turned out.

The corrugated metal door of the Drive-in Puerto Rico had been rolled almost all the way down, a half-foot-high gap of light showing beneath it. Tomás must be putting his bills in order, the colonel told himself, or working on his mural. He picked up his pace, slogging into the wind, eager to see the old man. As he came abreast of the steps that led up onto the deck, he made out a shadowy figure sitting at a table close by the door. "Tomás?" he called, mounting the steps. "What are you doing out here? Aren't you cold?"

Someone pushed him hard, planted a hand between his shoulder blades and sent him reeling forward. He righted himself and saw a short dark man in fatigues standing at the top of the steps, training a pistol at his chest—his lined face had the vaguely oriental cast of a Mayan, and his jacket bore a sergeant's insignia.

"Man, are you crazy?" Furious, the colonel took a step toward him. "I'll have your balls!"

"Colonel Galpa!"

Carbonell had risen from his seat by the door. His presence was not completely unexpected, and the colonel was not shocked to see him; but he felt a kind of fatalistic incredulity, such as he might have experienced on hearing a gloomy prognosis from his doctor.

"Where is Tomás?" he asked.

"Where is the journalist... Gammage?" Carbonell came toward him, easy in his walk, like a cat sauntering toward his favorite chair after a big meal. The wind had not mussed a strand of his slicked-back hair. He folded his arms and waited for the colonel to respond, his face empty of emotion. He was in his shirtsleeves and on one of his cuffs was a dark spattering. In his left hand was a silvered automatic pistol.

"He is gone," said the colonel. "Within a few hours, I imagine, the world will know what you are."

"The world already knows. The world doesn't care."

"Then why concern yourself with Gammage?"

"A loose end," said Carbonell. "I hate them." He stepped back to the door, leaned down and rolled it up head-high. Inside the restaurant, Tomás was sitting on a cane-backed bar stool, lashed to it; his head was down, and there was blood on his shirt. Behind him, his mural had a zodiacal value, like those Hindu renderings of a higher plane, rife with gaudy emblems of illusion. A hurricane lamp rested on the bar, painting the scene with orange light and shadow, adding a gloss that made its brutality seem artful. The colonel could not tell if the old man was alive. Grief and rage contended in him.

"I'll kill you for this," he said to Carbonell,

"Please... let's avoid histrionics," said Carbonell. "We're both soldiers. We both have our duties to perform."

"You call this duty? This is the act of an animal!"

"At times it is my duty to act so."

"Don't hand me that!"

"Had you been ordered to fire your rockets into an enemy city, an action that would kill innocents, would you have obeyed? Of course you would. Now you can afford to speculate on the morality involved. But in the moment of war, you would not have hesitated. Your war may have ended, Colonel. But mine goes on."

"There is no war except the one you prosecute against your own people. Even if there were, torturing an old man is not..." "A traitor, not an old man!"

"An old man!" The colonel bunched his fists. "But what does it matter? An old man, a child, a pregnant woman..."

"Enough!"

The feral face that the colonel had glimpsed behind Carbonell's polished exterior at the Club Atomica now surfaced. His teeth were bared, his eyes pointed with black light.

"There is no war? What could you know of it? A drunken fool who wanders the hinterlands in search of pleasure! You have no idea of the enemies I confront!"

He gestured sharply with his pistol, signaling the colonel to come inside, then instructed him to sit on the stool next to Tomás and ordered the sergeant to secure him.

"This is my fault," Carbonell said as the sergeant lashed the colonel's legs to the stool. "I failed to take you seriously. I so enjoyed watching the birth of your little conspiracy. I wanted to see who else would be pulled in. When I learned you had left the hotel with the black woman, I realized I had miscalculated. My men were fools not to follow you, but I should have expected them to be fools. I should have taken you into custody earlier."

The sergeant finished his work and Carbonell told him to return to his post. Once the sergeant had vanished into the dark, he rolled down the door and, his back to the colonel, asked, "Where is Gammage?" As he turned from the door, Tomás groaned. "Ah!" said Carbonell, as if delighted by this sign of life. He lifted Tomás's head. One of the old man's teeth had pierced his lower lip; his eyes were swollen shut. Fresh blood oozed from a cut at his scalp line.

"He's not doing so well," Carbonell said in a tone of mock concern. "Without medical treatment, I doubt there's hope."

The colonel started to vent his outrage, and Carbonell backhanded him with the butt of his pistol. White light shattered behind the colonel's eyes, and he slumped toward unconsciousness, his mind filled with questions—then he realized the questions were all the same. Carbonell was asking about Gammage. Groggy, he said something, an answer, maybe the truth... he wasn't sure what he had said. The words reverberated in his head, mushy, sonorous, like someone very large talking in their sleep. But if he had spoken the truth, it was apparent that learning the truth was not Carbonell's primary motivation. Blow after blow rained upon

the colonel's face and chest. Pain no longer occurred in separate incidences; it was a continuum, a bright passage configured with intervals of hellish brightness. At one point he felt a burning in his knee, and at another he believed that his cheek had been bitten. It was as if he were being mauled, not interrogated. Carbonell had become a dimly perceived giant, an immense otherness that shouted and surrounded him with pain. In his mind's eye he saw a black mouth opening, rushing to swallow him, and when he emerged from darkness into a ruddy orange glow, he noticed that the metal door had been raised and Carbonell was standing beneath it, smoking a cigarette, talking—it seemed—to no one in particular.

"... will not tolerate a traitor," he was saying. "That's the big story, not Gammage's..." He smiled. "Gammage's archaeological finds. No, the story that will enthrall our people is that their hero has betrayed the nation. Betrayed them. What I have done will be buried in the shadow of that betrayal. But it is always best to avoid trouble, even if it is no great trouble. Tell me where Gammage is, and I will allow the woman to return to the United States."

Margery was alive. Carbonell had her. Striking those two bits of information together produced a spark that nourished the colonel and restored a vague semblance of ambition and intent; but he could not build it to a blaze. Pain surged in his leg, and he understood he had been shot. Blood was leaking from the side of his knee.

"There was a time," Carbonell said, "when I wanted to know you, Colonel Galpa. When I hoped to understand what sort of man it required to do what you have done. But it is clear to me that you no longer are that man. You have been made decadent and weak by constant adulation... constant indulgence. There is nothing left of you that I would wish to understand." He grasped the handle of the door. "I am offering you a chance to be that man again. If you want to save the woman, tell me about Gammage. Otherwise I will give her to my men." The door made a grating sound as he rolled it down behind him. "Take some time to think about it. But not too long, Colonel. Not too long."

Alone, the colonel felt weaker and more clear-headed, as if Carbonell's presence had been both a confusion and a strength. With effort, he lifted his head to Tomás and spoke his name. The old man gave no sign of having heard. The colonel's left eye was filmed over with blood, making half the world red. He struggled with his bonds, but could not loosen them. The exertion left him dizzy. Something cooled his chin. Spittle, he realized. Then blackness. A curtain of it was drawn across the light, then opened again. They were going to die. This notion, poignant though it was, seemed nonsensical. A verity. He edited the thought. He was going to die, Margery was going to die, Tomás was going to die. Gammage, too... perhaps. There was nothing he could do about it. He lifted his head a second time and, trying to ignore dizziness, the whining in his ears, the sense that his head contained a volume of liquid sloshing back and forth, he did his best to focus. After staring at Tomás for several seconds, subtracting his wobbliness and the general spin of things from what he saw, he became certain that the old man had stopped breathing. The blood seeping from his scalp had congealed. Weighted down by despair, the colonel let his head fall and grew thoughtless. His consciousness directed toward twinges, aches, fluctuations in pain. He resolved not to tell Carbonell anything. It was the only choice that remained. Not an easy resolution to keep, but Tomás obviously had done so. His eyelids drooped, and he thought he might be slipping away; then he felt a delicate pressure on his chest, a pressure unrelated to pain, and saw the indigo lizard clinging to his jacket, its orange eyes less than six inches away from his own.

"Go away," said the colonel, not rejecting the lizard so much as embracing rejection, recognizing this to be his sustaining principle.

The lizard scooted closer. Comical in its wide-eyed fixation. Provoked by some deep systemic injury, the colonel's body triggered a wave of numbness; his breath sobbed forth. The lizard stretched toward him, as if attracted by a new scent.

The colonel did not know what he should do. Something, he felt, was required of him. The word Magic appeared on his mental screen. Orange letters outlined in pink and radiating a neonlike glow. Then a thought about Tomás dragged its shadow across the word, erasing it. He suddenly hated the lizard, perceived it as emblematic of his guilt. Unable to shout for fear of alerting Carbonell, he bugged his eyes, hoping to infuse his stare with sufficient venom to frighten it. The lizard inched closer yet, and the colonel pushed his face toward it, going nose-to-nose. This particularized view of its miniature saurian snout and pebbly skin defanged his hatred. He had a giddy apprehension of kinship, of life confronting life.

What do you want? he thought. He made a mantra of the question, repeating it over and over. As suddenly as he had hated it, he now desired the lizard to be what Tomás had said it was: a singular event that was his alone to explore.

"Whatever..." he began.

He had been about to say something on the order of, "Whatever thing you want of me, whatever you must

do, now is the time to let it be known," more a foxhole utterance than a devout entreaty. Before he could finish the thought, however, as had happened that first night in Puerto Morada, a lightness pervaded his body and he was blinded by a flash of orange radiance, and he saw a pair of enormous eyes, the bridge of a huge nose. But this time, instead of being restored to a more typical perspective, his field of vision began to shift, changing so rapidly that he barely registered the details.

He found himself moving at a jittery pace, heading toward a red column that angled up on the diagonal from a rough wood surface. Then he was ascending the column; then he was turned briefly upside down; then he was atop a wide red wooden expanse, proceeding toward a tall pale man in his shirtsleeves, standing in front of a corrugated metal door, smoking a cigarette.

The colonel had no doubt that his vantage point was atop one of the picnic tables on the deck and that the man was Carbonell; and, although it was difficult to credit, he had very little doubt that he was seeing this from the perspective of an indigo lizard with orange eyes. Had he been able to think clearly, he might have been more rigorous in his doubt, but the fact was, he could scarcely think at all. It seemed he had undergone a compression, the entire complexity of his mind shriveled to a point of observance, the memory of pain, and the will to act in some direction... a direction not yet manifest. Everything else, even the fear that would naturally attend such a transference, had been subsumed.

Once again the lizard – and the colonel with it – began to move. Down from the table, across the deck, and out onto the sand. He was becoming oriented to the lizard's wide field of vision, the hand-held camera effect of its paddling run, and was thus able to recognize that the white valleys through which he skipped and skittered were dimples in the sand, and that the forestlike fringe ahead was the grass at the foot of a cashew tree. He was vaguely aware of the light, the noise of wind and sea, and acutely aware of a spectrum of lesser noises, tiny ticks and hisses and scuttlings. Bitterly alluring scents came to him, and as he darted into the grass, he realized he was hungry. Fiercely hungry. The need to satisfy his hunger was becoming paramount, yet he knew that this was wrong. Something was required of him. Something important. Exerting his remnant of will, he pushed hunger aside and heard a trebly ratcheting sound, a cry that seemed to issue from inside him. He was running now, scooting along through grass and across moonstruck patches of sand, into frills of restless shadow, continuing to emit that thin cry. To what end he did this, the colonel could not guess, he only knew it accorded with his sense of responsibility. Hunger returned to goad him, but each time he managed to repress it, reminding himself of the trust placed in him, no matter its indeterminate nature, and finally, buoyed by a feeling of accomplishment, he went scurrying back across the dimpled, grainy surface of the world and saw before him the steps of the Drive-in Puerto Rico.

The man in shirtsleeves was no longer on the deck; but his feet were visible through a gap between the floorboards and the metal door. From the colonel's vantage on the railing he spotted a smaller man standing perhaps fifty feet away, half- obscured in the shadow of the palms. The colonel heard himself emit another ratcheting cry, then another and another yet, and the man began to shake his legs and arms with extreme agitation. He shouted, his voice shredded by the torment of wind and surf; he staggered away from the palms and into the light, followed by a dark tide that flowed in a channel to his feet, up his legs to his back and chest, and then his face. He whirled madly, blindly, grabbing at the air, plucking at himself, and fell. He scrambled to hands and knees, but fell again, and the tide – composed, the colonel understood, of little four-footed ribbons with tails – washed over him, mounding higher and higher until the man was hidden beneath a dome of writhing, wriggling bits of flesh. Off along the beach, similar tides were filming out from the margin of the grass onto the sand, and as the colonel looked on, the stretch of bone-colored beach leading away from the restaurant was gradually eroded, transformed inch by inch into a stretch of dark seething life, gleaming faintly and then going all to shadow under the glow of the inconstant Moon.

Atop his railing, the colonel experienced an appreciation of power that verged on the religious, as if he were the focal point not only of the infinite army of lizards now surrounding the Drive-in Puerto Rico, but of the sky and sea, the tumultuous wind, and the electric principle of the distant storm whose gentlest edge helped to choreograph the moment. He seemed to remember other moments, brighter ones, a bright blue scatter of occasions, when he had felt much the same, high and solitary, deadly weapons at his command... though none so pure, so devoid of hesitancy. With a ratcheting cry, he announced himself to his troops, not yet summoning them to act. Then the metal door rolled up and the man against whom his army was arrayed stepped onto the deck and lit a cigarette. He stood for a second, making sure that his smoke was going, then rolled down the door, hiding the two bloody figures slumped within. He sat at the end of a bench, resting an elbow on the railing, his cigarette coal brightening and fading, the picture of a man taking his ease after a spate of hard work, watching the sea and thinking about some trivial thing, an appointment, a debt owed, a soccer match. Serene in the midst of tribulation. An absolutely ordinary man, even to the blood on his hands.

The colonel gave his order.

The army's scuttling rush was out-voiced by wind and water, and Carbonell did not notice he was under attack until a vanguard of anoles swarmed onto his leg. He jumped up, beating at them, his face aghast. But upon seeing the rest of the army, the instant before they, too, swarmed over him, he seemed less frightened than bewildered, suggesting that while an assault of several dozen was alarming, an aggression perpetrated by thousands, millions, posed a mystery to be considered. Lizards sheathed his limbs six and seven deep, hampering the flailing of his arms. He wore momentarily a lizardskin cap that slipped down over his face and unraveled, the separate threads of it nipping at his eyes and darting into his mouth when he screamed—he bit down, spat out fragments of meat and skin, clamped his lips, trying to walk with legs made cumbersome by hip-high boots of squirming flesh, then fell, striking his head on the corner of a bench and lay still while the army mounded atop him, building its dome ever higher... until the colonel, who had scuttled to the edge of a table overlooking Carbonell, ordered them to stop.

The colonel peered down at his fallen enemy. His head exposed, body buried beneath a mound equal in height to the roof of the restaurant, Carbonell might have been one of his own victims. The humor of his right eye was burst, the tissue beneath it had been worried bloody; the eyelid itself was missing. His lips were chewed ragged, as was the strip of cartilage dividing his nostrils. But he was alive.

Breath shuddered out of him. His good eye fluttered open. He tried to scream, but perhaps the weight on his chest was too great to allow the full expansion of his lungs, and the guttering sound that issued from his throat was almost inaudible. He rolled his eye, as if hoping to find an avenue of sight that offered promise. In doing so, he locked stares with the colonel. From that exchange, he must have gained no encouraging impression, for he immediately set to twisting his shoulders about, trying to work them free. Once he recognized the impossibility of this, he closed his eye and grimaced, straining upward against the weight. After half a minute or thereabouts, he desisted and allowed his head, which had been lifted in the effort, to fall back. He looked in his submission as if he were under a peaceful charm, a magical creature guarded in his sleep by the clever reptilian faces peeking from his hair.

A bright green lizard, barely an inch long, perhaps a day or two out of the egg, came to explore his left ear, inserting itself into the inner canal. Suddenly agitated, Carbonell redoubled his efforts to escape, heaving against the weight of the mound, shaking his head wildly, and the little green one partially withdrew. A much larger lizard, gray with a sagittal crest and spots of brighter color on its throat, placed the tip of its snout in the crease between Carbonell's lips, giving rise to the notion that should the mouth open, it would be prepared to slip inside and slither down the throat. A striped lizard with an alligator-like head flattened against his cheek, as did a pale brown chameleon; several others arranged themselves on his brow. It looked as though his face were the subject of a primitive design. He kept very still. Only when a blue skink stuck its head into a nostril, plugging it, did he react, twitching, huffing, attempting to expel it. When the Second nostril was plugged by a second skink, he sucked in air through the corners of his mouth. Three tiny lizards—babies, it appeared—joined the large grayish-green sentry at his lips, seeking to push inside, and soon dozens more skittered down from the mound to englobe his head, covering it completely. At this juncture Carbonell abandoned himself to terror, twisting his neck with such force, it appeared he had in mind to unscrew it from his body. He took once again to shaking his head, then to beating it against the boards. Whether as a last futile exercise or an attempt to knock himself out, it was difficult to say. Whatever the level of his desperation, the battering grew faster and faster, coming to seem a convulsive movement and not in the least controlled, the autonomic reaction of a system in the throes of shutting down. Eventually, abruptly, it ceased.

As the army made its disorganized retreat, flowing off across the sand in gradually dwindling streams, a black lake draining into rivulets and animated puddles, the colonel lost interest in the corpse and went pattering over the boards and beneath the metal door and up the leg of a barstool, then onto a trouserleg and higher, until he was gazing at a pair of enormous eyes directly above him. The eyes were shut, and this frustrated the colonel. Unclear as to how he should proceed, he gave in to hunger and started to descend, intent upon returning to the grass, where he had scented food. But as he clung to the trouser cuff, preparing to drop to the floor, it occurred to him that his duty was not done. There was one thing more left to do. He scooted back up to hang beneath those lidded eyes, awaiting an opportunity for dutiful action.

Over the next minutes, ten of them at least, and each one seeming longer than average, the urge to hunt became increasingly powerful, but he succeeded in resisting it, demanding of himself a familiar rigor, growing comfortable with denial. It was as if some old discipline were helping to armor him against the depredations of repetition and boredom. He involved himself in examining the oily creases in the skin surrounding the eyes, the shallow fissures in the lips, the graying stubble sprouting above them. Turning back to the eyes he found that they had come partly open, but the irises were angled upward, as if about to slide back beneath the lids. He crept higher, extending his neck so that his snout was scant millimeters from



the right eye, and gave a grating cry. The lid shuttered down, then up; the eye shifted, focused on him, and after a brief period of disorientation, he came to feel sodden and dull. Agony lanced his knee, like a lightning bolt expelled from an all-encompassing ache. Staring at him, its snout almost touching his skin, was an indigo lizard with orange eyes. The colonel recalled the lizard hanging in this exact position earlier that evening and could not imagine how it had managed to remain there throughout the beating that he had received. Less reasonable memories sprang to mind, muddying his understanding of what had taken place. He wanted to look about and locate Carbonell, but was afraid to move. Everything inside him felt broken, contused. Nevertheless, he raised his eyes and saw the rolled-down door. Which meant that Carbonell must be outside. Smoking and talking to his sergeant. Another memory surfaced... or not a memory. A dream. Carbonell's face with one eye missing, a pulp of blood and tissue occupying its place. Startled, half-convinced it was not a dream, the colonel straightened. The exertion brought dark shapes swimming up to cloud his vision. The glare of the lamp beside him grew wavering and pointy like a Christmas star... dimming, receding. Pain spiked his temple, and he went sliding away from the world in the grip of an irresistible slippage.

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During the colonel's first week in the hospital, he received many visitors and learned many things. He learned that Tomás was dead, as he had feared, and that Margery had been released, thanks to the actions of a young lieutenant, Jaime Arguello, who had been proclaimed a national hero for his single-handed assault on the barracks where she had been held by soldiers loyal to the traitor, Carbonell.

"Traitor" was what the newspapers called him now that his atrocities had become newsworthy. Policemen asked questions of the colonel, most of which he was unable to answer. His memories had been beaten out of him, but the process of questioning dredged up a few details and the policemen supplied others. For instance, when asking about Carbonell's death, one of the policemen told the colonel that the autopsy had revealed several lizards in Carbonell's esophagus and wanted to know how this might have occurred.

The colonel had no information on the subject, but he recalled the indigo lizard and had the idea that it had played some part in the event. When he said as much to the representative of the air force who came to gauge his fitness for duty, the representative appeared to view the statement as a symptom of unsoundness—two days later the colonel received notification that he was to be retired on full pension, this an entirely misleading term for the pittance he was due.

Having no real income and no prospects, alienated from his family, the colonel's view of the future, never rosy, turned bleak indeed. In the bathroom mirror he observed that the lines in his face had deepened and that the gray in his hair, formerly a salting, had spread to cover his entire scalp. He was old. Grown old in a single terrible night. What possible future could he have?

But during his second week in the hospital, he was visited by a lawyer bearing Tomás's will and the deed to the Drive-in Puerto Rico, who informed him that he, Mauricio Galpa, was now sole owner and proprietor of the restaurant. This legacy caused the colonel—until that moment benumbed by his experiences—to weep and to remember all the kindnesses done him by Tomás, and then to think that perhaps the old man, too, had played a part in what had happened. He tried to piece it all out, but medication and headaches impeded thought and he made little progress.

Several days before he was released from the hospital, he received a phone call from Margery in the States. She thanked him effusively for what he had done to help Gammage and said that she had wanted to see him, but the news bureau, fearing for her safety, had flown her out of the country; and now the government—the colonel's government—had declared her persona non grata.

"I tried to call you," she said. "But I couldn't get through until today."

"I'm glad you're safe," the colonel said.

"Sooner or later they'll grant me another visa. Then I'll come visit."

"That would be nice."

"This is so...," she made a frustrated noise. "I hate the telephone."

The colonel waited for her to continue.

"I know there was something between us," she said. "Not just a moment. Something I'd like to understand. You know?"

"I felt something, too," the colonel said.

"Maybe you could visit me."

"I'll be undergoing treatment for a while. Physical therapy. But yes, it's a possibility."

"You sound so distant."

"It's the pills. They give me so many pills, it's hard to think." He reached for a glass of water on the bed table and took a sip. "What are you doing now?"

"Oh... I'm going to be flying to Israel next week. We're doing a piece on the elections. The period leading up to them."

"Israel. That's very far away."

"I'll only be there a month."

A vague emotion possessed the colonel, a nondescript sadness that seemed attached to no specific thing, but to all things, like weather blown in from the sea.

"They're paging me. I have to go," Margery said. "But we'll get together. I'll come visit you. I promise."

"I know," said the colonel.

The day before he was released, the colonel hired a man to transfer his belongings to Tomas's room behind the Drive-in Puerto Rico, and the next morning, dressed in civilian clothes, going slowly with his cane, having to stop every couple of minutes to restore his equilibrium and catch his breath, he walked down to the beach and sat on the deck of the restaurant, watching the placid sea. Inside the break the water was the color of aquamarine; beyond it, a dark lapis lazuli. Gulls skied against the blue heavens, and confections of white cloud, bubbled like meringue, moved leisurely west to east along the horizon. Combers plumed at the seaward end of Punta Manabique.

The glorious peace of the day overwhelmed the colonel. He rested his head in his hands, his mind flocked with things half felt and half remembered, with shades of sorrow, bright spikes of relief. Tears filled his eyes. He wiped them away and, steadier, he unlocked the corrugated metal door, rolled it up, and stepped into the restaurant.

The place had been cleaned, the bar stools washed free of blood and set in a neat row, and there was a note from Tomas's girl, who signed herself Incarnacion, giving her telephone number and saying that she would be ready to work whenever he needed her.

But it was the rear wall that held the colonel's notice—the mural was missing. Gone. The lime green background color did not appear to have been painted over, but the volcanoes and cruise ships and Carbonell's face and the gray airplane, they were all gone... except for the image of an indigo lizard high in the left-hand corner. The colonel was unclear about many things, but he was certain the image of the lizard had previously occupied the lower right-hand corner of the wall. He did not find this dissonance as disturbing as once he might. It seemed that by way of compensation for his lack of clarity concerning his personal life, he was now able to grasp some of what Tomás had told him over the years and, though he could not have articulated it at the time, he recognized a strange circularity in the events that had led to his ownership of the restaurant.

He switched on the generator to cool the beer, made coffee, and, taking a cup, returned to the deck. In the verge of the palms, hummingbirds blurred the air above a hibiscus bush; the breeze wafted steam from his cup.

A lapidary fineness of well-being settled about the colonel, as if land and sea and air had conformed to his physical shape and emotional configuration, and he thought of what Tomás had said about finding a place you knew was yours. It did not escape him that the old man might have known more than he had claimed about the world and magic, that he might have anticipated their fates, and may even have had a hand in directing them. Nor did the colonel fail to acknowledge the significance of the vanished mural, the blank wall that had been left for him, perhaps, to fill with his own images.

Once he would have sought to explain this away, to debunk any less than traditionally rational explanation; but now he wanted to understand it, and he realized that in order to do so he would first have to accept the uniqueness of the circumstance.

Approaching from the direction of the colonel's hotel, a man drew near and ascended the steps of the deck. Young; dark with the blood of the Miskitia; carrying a lieutenant's dress jacket and hat. "Is it too early?" he asked.

"I have coffee," said the colonel. "And some pastries... though they may be stale. This is my first day. I've had no time to organize."

"Bueno... café."

The young man sat at a table removed by two from the colonel. He leaned against the railing and let his head fall back. The strain that had been apparent in his face dissolved. "Díós! The sun feels good."

"Would you mind serving yourself?" The colonel indicated his bad knee. "I have an injury."

The young man went inside and poured a coffee.

On his return, after a moment's hesitation, he sat on the bench opposite the colonel. He offered a friendly smile, blew steam from his cup. His mustache had not grown in fully, like the mustache of a pubescent boy,

yet lines of stress tiered his brow and his eyes seemed worn, like dark coins from which the symbols of the realm had been effaced.

"What brings you out so early?" the colonel asked.

"I couldn't sleep in my hotel. It's all the reporters, the officials. They keep me awake half the night, and afterward I can't sleep."

"Reporters? Are you famous?"

"No, I... No. I'm only doing some appearances. Publicity for the army. They tell me I'll be back with my unit in a month or two."

"That's not so long."

"You have no idea how long a single day with these people can last."

"I can imagine," said the colonel. "Surely there must be some benefit attendant to these appearances."

"The girls." The young man smiled shyly. "That part of it's all right."

The colonel laughed, then introduced himself as Mauricio.

"Macho gusto," said the young man. "Jaime."

They began to speak of other matters. The weather, the fishing, the quality of the national soccer team, the girls of Puerto Morada. And though the colonel suspected that the young man was his country's latest hero, perhaps the next in a curious tradition of heroes whose lives were somehow connected to this stretch of beach with its hummingbirds, lizards, and wandering cows, he did not invest the notion with much thought and immersed himself in the conversation.

The sun climbed higher; warmth cored the colonel's bones. The sky paled to an eggshell blue, the swells beyond the break grew heavier. A shadow glided through the water near Punta Manabique. He could not tell if it was a manta ray, but the shadow was itself validation of a kind, implying that beneath the surface of things there was always a beautiful monster waiting to rise.

"Do you think there are places that know us?" he asked the young man, and in asking the question, he felt the presence of Tomás, felt his old friend's amiable yet pointed inquisitiveness occupying his flesh like a perfume, then drifting on, but leaving its trace.

"It is a common enough question to ask if one knows such and such a place. 'Do you know Fuengirola? Do you know Roatán?' But do they have a sense of us? I wonder. Does their vitality affect us in ways we cannot conceive?"

The young man looked puzzled.

"Are you implying that we are acted upon by the ground beneath our feet? I don't believe it. Our fates are not controlled by mysterious forces. A man carries his fate with him."

"That was not precisely my implication. But I must say I'm not so certain of things as you appear to be. I am beginning to believe there are places made for us in this world, and if we find them, we may understand patterns in our lives, in all life, that are immune to straightforward analysis."

A tall black woman in a red blouse and a denim skirt emerged from the sea grape beside the restaurant, bearing atop her head a bowl covered by a white cloth, and began walking along the beach toward the town, establishing a human comparative to the swaying of the palms—this graceful juxtaposition of man and nature caused the colonel to contrast his generally dismaying impression of the world with his impression of it now.

"This place, for instance," he said. "I have only been here a short time, but already I know a few things I did not know before."

The young man, who had been staring apprehensively toward the hotel, turned to him, his face once more full of strain, and said, "I'm sorry... I was preoccupied. You said something about this place? I don't think I understood you."

A breeze drifted the grit that had accumulated on the tabletop, rearranging the grains into a slender crescent of glittering specks, and though some small portion of the colonel's mind resisted the idea, he imagined a similar shift must have happened inside him, that all the grit of his desultory past had been realigned to suit a larger purpose and a simpler design. He wanted to deny this, but to do so he would have had to deny the feeling that then engulfed him. A feeling of calm satisfaction, of happiness. He had an urge to confide in the young man, to explain the simplicity of the thing it had taken him nearly twenty years to learn; but he realized that the years were necessary to the lesson.

"It's not important," he said, patting the young man's hand. "It is enough to understand that whatever comes to you in life, you will always find a welcome here."

## SEÑOR VOLTO

Ladies and gentlemen! I have come to your beautiful village tonight... and I offer this compliment without irony, with no hint of ridicule, for your village is, indeed, beautiful. Far more beautiful than even you who dwell here know. I have come tonight to give you a jolt from the electric truth of my existence. It is my belief that among you there is an individual with an irresistible affinity for that truth, someone whose drab mental sphere I intend to illumine as though it were a bubble filled with lightning, so they may continue the grand traditions of my kind. I know, I know! Doubtless you are saying, "This fool must think us unsophisticated. Every carnival that travels the length and breadth of Honduras carries with it a man who calls himself Señor Volto. A man who straps a car battery to his chest and attaches paddles to his hands in order to transmit shocks to whoever grasps them. None of them offer illumination, only the chance to measure one's resistance to pain." But I am not those other men, my friends. I am the one and only Señor Volto, and to prove the point, before I provide you with the opportunity to test yourselves, I will tell you my story.

My name is Aurelio Ucles and I was born in Trujillo on the north coast. When I was twenty-two, my father died and left me the deed to the Hotel Christopher Columbus, a blue-green rectangle of concrete block that occupied a choice section of beach property, with a pool and a mahogany-paneled bar that opened onto a deck. Few tourists came to Trujillo, put off by the high incidence of violent crime and drug trafficking in the region, yet I managed the hotel successfully for the next twelve years. The larger part of my clientele consisted of officials and guards who worked at the state prison located near the center of town, an edifice hidden behind a high yellow wall. They used the hotel as a place where they could bring their women and after a time they took me into their confidence and allowed me to assist in dispersing the cocaine they stole from imprisoned traffickers and laundering the money they received in return. I was never their friend, merely a useful associate. The fact is, I feared them. They carried pistols and cattle prods and treated me with contempt. Though I prospered, though my wife, Marta, bore me two healthy sons, I yearned for respect, both that of the prison guards and of the common people of the town, many of whom repudiated me for my criminal activities. This lack of respect, I believed, was all that kept me from contentment; but I have since concluded that my discontent was less associational than intrinsic. I was an unhappy child and had grown into an unhappy man. No ordinary sinecure, however honorable and profitable, would have sufficed to placate my inner demons. It may be I was looking for a judgment to complete my life. We tend to hide such desires from ourselves, to dress them in more reasonable cloth, knowing we will never be able to satisfy the standards against which we seek to be measured.

If such was the case, then judgment came to me in the form of a mechanic. It would be nearly as accurate to claim it was a woman, but I am appalled by clichés, even those attendant upon my nature, and since it was the mechanic who contrived the shape of the judgment rendered, I am inclined to give him credit. The woman, Sadra Rosales, was only a conduit, though perhaps I do her a disservice by this dismissal. Unlike most of the women who patronized the bar in my hotel, she held a position of some respect—editor of an English language newspaper. Yet like those other women she had a history of drugs and romantic mistakes, and was always on the look-out for a fresh mistake, one that would temporarily present an impersonation of hope. She was thirtyish, with a broad Mayan face, a little thick in the waist: on the scale of Honduran beauty, she was no more than attractive, but she had a buoyant energy that lent her the gloss of beauty and though I did not love her, I was in no mood to resist her. She suited the moment, she pleased my heart, she excited my body, and she was grounds for divorce. The problem of what I might tell my wife and of how divorce would affect my children, all the accompanying karmic issues... these questions troubled me, but I was never able to confront them because Sadra's problems pushed my own into the background. It was one thing after another. An assistant was sabotaging her at work; the father of her child was suing for sole custody; her best friend, Flavia, was telling lies about her sexual practices. The latest and most pressing problem concerned her pride and joy, a gray Toyota whose dented grille expressed the automotive approximation of weary disillusionment. She had taken it to a mechanic, a friend named Tito Obregon, for a brake alignment and claimed he had stolen the new engine, replaced it with an inferior one. Now the car wheezed, stalled, and smoked. The police would do nothing—Tito was the lieutenant's closest friend. Sadra was considering a

lawsuit.

I went with Sadra one afternoon to see Tito at his shop on the outskirts of town, a low yellow building of concrete block with an enormous blue Aguazul logo painted on its side, like the flag of a proud nation. It stood at the center of an acre of ochre dirt and was hedged in back by the lip of the jungle. Weeds, banana trees, palms. A group of ragged kids were playing soccer out front and two teenage boys were leaning against Tito's tow truck, smoking and looking bored. Sadra insisted I stay in the car. She said she didn't want to involve me, but of course she had already done so by bringing me along. As they talked just inside the door, or—more precisely—as Sadra talked to him, Tito stared in my direction the entire time. Had Sadra, I wondered, trusted her car to a jilted ex-lover to fix? Such a stupidity would be in keeping with her character: a stew of feminism, manipulative pettiness, and a kind of sprained innocence.

It grew ovenlike inside the car. The soccer ball bounced out onto the highway and a tiny kid in red shorts ran to retrieve it, darting across the path of a bus that never slowed and missed him by a fraction. A smoky gray mist began folding itself over the crests of the hills behind the shop and Tito came to lean in the doorway, wiping his hands on an oily rag. He was skinny and vulpine, with prematurely gray hair and a heavy beard shadow, wearing chinos and a Hard Rock Cafe tank top. I looked away from his stare. Beyond the weedy vacant lot on the opposite side of the road, a wedge of the bay was visible, slate blue water armored with an unyielding glitter. Soon Sadra returned, threw herself behind the wheel, and slammed the door.

"Puto! He says he doesn't care what I do." She swerved out into traffic, telling me everything Tito had said, interpreting his perfidy, initiating a monologue that continued long into the night over shots of vodka and a quantity of excellent cocaine.

Over the course of the following week I felt marooned in the midst of my life and saw no sign of salvation on the horizon. More often than not I found myself sitting at the bar, gazing glumly across the deck at the untroubled waters of the bay and the desolate point of land that, enclosing it, formed the Cape of Honduras. It was just off the Cape that Christopher Columbus had anchored during his final voyage; he had been gravely ill and never set foot on the shore himself, thereby, I conjectured, establishing the pattern that governed our trickling tourist trade. A group of Americans returning from the Miskitia jungle booked rooms on Wednesday morning, bringing an uncommon and not altogether pleasing energy to the hotel, splashing and shouting in the pool, spilling drinks at dinner, and staying up until all hours playing cards. On Friday some prison guards installed several women from La Ceiba in the third floor suite. The women never ventured into the bar, and the guards—those not occupied with the women—would sit at a table on the edge of the deck and drink. They were of a set, these men. Swarthy, thick-waisted, with oily hair and froglike faces, dressed in slacks and short-sleeved shirts. Their wrists and hands heaved with gold rings and watches looted and extorted from prisoners. While most of them took their turns visiting with the women, the senior guard, Jorge Espinal, the widest and shortest among them, only strayed from the table to walk down to the beach and relieve himself. On occasion he would summon me and ask for more beer and snacks. He refused to place orders with my bartender, preferring to treat me as a menial. Whenever I came over, he would greet me with false effusiveness and wink at the others as if sharing a private joke, then laugh uproariously when I walked away. Furious, humiliated, I left the hotel early that evening, a couple of hours before I was to meet Sadra, and went striding along the beach and up through town without a thought for destination, imagining the violent humiliations I would visit upon Espinal if he were me and I him.

Across from the old graveyard in Trujillo, a weedy ruin hemmed in by a crumbling stone wall and an arched gateway with no gate, situated on a red dirt road that angled uphill and west from the center of town, lay a flea market: a row of ramshackle wooden stalls in which were displayed T-shirts, soccer jerseys, aprons; toys and dolls; kitchenware, cutlery and other household items; key chains, switchblades, barrettes, cassette tapes. All manner of cheapness. White and blue and yellow plastic banners advertising Nacional Beer were strung above the stalls and behind them was a grassy area where beer was sold from a metal cart. At the rear of this area was a little hand-cranked carousel suitable for toddlers, a circular platform no more than six feet wide that supported four tiny seats. A handful of women stood watching their children go round and round. Two of the kids were wailing and I nourished the embittered notion that they were becoming aware that this tight repetitive circle was all the ride they might expect from life. A dozen or so working-class men were drinking and talking in a group. I bought a beer and leaned against the cart. The sky was hazy, a few blurred stars showing in that muddled darkness, and the air was thick and warm, infused with the scents of roast chicken and ordure emanating from shanties tucked in among palms and banana trees beyond the carousel. Radio music contended with the crying of the children. Gradually I grew calm. I bought a second beer and debated the idea of buying a present for Sadra. Something funny to take her mind off Tito and the Toyota.

I suppose it was chance that led me to the market, but on turning from the beer cart and seeing Tito

Obregon barely an arm's length away, dressed as Señor Volto in a straw hat and a farmer's rough clothing, battery strapped to his chest, braced in a harness of leather and steel that resembled some perverse sexual accessory, the cables running back to an alternator resting on the ground, a control box clipped to his belt, and narrow black paddles extending from his hands... when I saw him, I was afflicted by a frisson and had, albeit fleetingly, a more complicated understanding of the operations of chance, recognizing that coincidence and fate were likely partnered in the moment. I nodded to Tito, said, "Good evening," and started toward the street; but Tito's voice, amplified and lent a buzzing inflection, brought me up short:

"IS AURELIO UCLES AFRAID OF EVERYTHING? MUST HE ALWAYS HIDE BEHIND A WOMAN'S SKIRTS... OR DOES HE DARE TEST HIMSELF AGAINST SEÑOR VOLTO?"

One of the teenage boys who had been leaning against Tito's tow truck was holding a microphone to his mouth—Tito himself could not grasp it, thanks to the paddles strapped to his hands. The boy smirked at me and Tito said, "PERHAPS OUR AURELIO IS NOT A MAN AT ALL. PERHAPS WHAT SADRA ROSALES SAYS ABOUT HIM IS THE TRUTH."

Though it was customary for Señor Volto to offer such challenges, the anger in Tito's face was that of a scorned and possibly demented lover, and it occurred to me that Sadra was not so important that I cared to risk my well-being in a dispute concerning her. Since the battery was being powered by an alternator, it had no inhibitor and thus Tito was capable of transmitting a fatal shock. I was certain he knew that if he were to kill me, the prison guards would be more than a little upset with him over the loss of someone who served them as financial conduit and host for their debauches. Nonetheless, I balked at the thought of grasping the paddles. The working men had broken off their conversation and were drifting toward us, nudging one another and grinning.

"PERHAPS IT'S TRUE," Tito went on, "WHAT SADRA TELLS ALL HER FRIENDS AT THE NEWSPAPER—THAT THE HEAD OF AURELIO UCLES' PRICK WOULD FIT INSIDE A THIMBLE."

The working men thought this a grand joke and offered commentary. My anger building, I told Tito to fuck his mother, I wasn't going to be playing his game.

"EVEN A BOY'S GAME IS TOO MUCH FOR AURELIO!" Tito nodded at his assistant. The boy took a stand in front of him and gripped the paddles. Tito twitched the controls. Voltage sizzled. The boy stiffened, but did not release the paddles, not even when Tito turned the voltage considerably higher. At last he broke contact, smiled and displayed his reddened palms to the men who had gathered round—they voiced a murmurous approval.

"DO YOU SEE? EVEN THIS BOY IS MORE OF A MAN THAN AURELIO UCLES!"

I can't recall who it was that said everything is explicable in terms of a small child's behavior—I believe the comment was offered pertaining to the functioning of the cosmos, not merely the actions of human beings, but it was certainly applicable at that moment. A petulant rage possessed me and I thrust out my hands, intending to seize the paddles; but the boy stepped between Tito and me and demanded five lempira.

My rage was such that having to pay for the privilege of experiencing a shock did not deter me. I fumbled out some bills, flung them at the boy, then shoved him aside and confronted Tito. Daunted by his appearance, I hesitated. With his face shadowed beneath the straw hat, the battery mounted in its brace of leather and metal, cables running off beneath his arms, and those featureless black paddles lashed to his wrists, he looked the embodiment of an arcane peril. The group of men encircled us, lending a ritual symmetry to the scene, and more people were filtering between the stalls, made curious, I imagine, by the pointedness of Tito's insults. Among them I recognized the jefe of the prison, an elderly white-haired version of the squat unprepossessing men who were at that very moment carousing on my deck. The old man's contempt for me was especially poisonous, and I could not bring myself to back down from Tito's challenge with him looking on.

I remember taking hold of the paddles, hearing the faint hum and buzz of the voltage as the prickling crawl of electricity in my palms evolved into pain; and I remember also how, as the pain grew intense, my vision reddened and my focus narrowed to encompass the lower half of Tito's face, his teeth bared in a snarl as if the pain were flowing out of his flesh into mine. This notion, that pain—or some unknown agency of which pain was a by-product—was leaving Tito's body and entering my own, was reinforced by the fact that his expression became increasingly one of relief and surprise—it seemed he, too, was aware of a sea change. Soon the only sound I could hear was the reedy whine of my nervous system, like a desperate insect trapped inside my ear. Shattering vibrations flowed along my arms. My heart bucked and stuttered. My hands were on fire and that fire darted into my chest, snagged in my bones. I wanted to let go of the paddles, I intended to let go, and there came a moment when I was certain I would let go. What inhibited this impulse, I cannot say. Stubbornness was part of it. Stubbornness and the fear of greater humiliation. Yet, another element was involved in my resistance and in the midst of pain a bubble of clarity briefly enveloped me, allowing me to

consider what this element might be. I had the sense of being guarded, protected in some fashion, and I also had the impression of having bonded with that protective force and thus being sealed away from the possibility of mortal harm. Then clarity evaporated. My head shook violently; my eyes felt dry and rattling in their sockets. Fumes of smoke wisped up between my fingers and the comprehension that my flesh had begun to scorch was the last thing I remember.

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Permit me, ladies and gentlemen, to put forward a thesis, to suggest that it was not electricity that changed me, and there is no doubt that I had changed, for upon waking in the hospital, my burned palms bandaged, my fingers red as tomatoes and covered with salve, I was not, as might be expected, possessed by shame and rage over what had transpired at the flea market, but rather evidenced an unreasonable calm and a pragmatic appreciation of both the event and my resultant injuries... so permit me to suggest rather that electricity opened me to change, that the precise amount of voltage transmitted through Tito's paddles caused me to become accessible to an entity, perhaps a devil, or perhaps one of those numinous creatures that dogs and drug addicts see when they lift their heads from the stuporous contemplation of a roach or a stain upon the floorboards to a corner of the ceiling and thereafter track the invisible-to-others progress of some impalpable curiosity across the room. It's possible, of course, that my unnatural steadiness of mind was a consequence of madness or physical damage, but I have come to believe that the apprehension of bonding I experienced while gripping the paddles was evidence of a symbiotic attachment or possession, because when I left the hospital shortly before midnight and strolled through the town, though I was thoroughly familiar with the potholed streets and the little stores and the ragged crescent of the beach lined with shanty bars, they seemed at the same time new to me, and when I came in sight of my hotel, its shape as simple as a child's block, when I entered and saw the mahogany sweep of the bar with the rectangular portal in the wall behind it through which I commonly viewed the bay and the deck where Espinal and his cronies still sat and drank, I found the whole of it diverting and strange, as if another soul were sharing my eyes, a soul with a unique passion for life, greedy to observe every detail of this familiar—yet unfamiliar—scene.

The strongest proof of my thesis was yet to come. I went behind the bar, poured myself a vodka, and while I was scooping up ice cubes, Espinal pushed back his chair and walked past me without a word. He stood, I tell you, and yet he did not move from the chair. It appeared he had divided into two Espinals, one of whom headed along the corridor toward the apartment where I dwelled with my family. Though puzzled by the phenomenon, I took it more-or-less in stride and followed him, noticing that this figure was somewhat dimmer and gauzier than the one who remained seated, a colored shadow of sorts. The shadow Espinal tapped on the door of my apartment (the tapping made no sound) and was immediately admitted by my wife, wearing a flimsy peignoir that must have been a recent purchase—she had never worn it for me. I was unclear as to what I was witnessing, uncertain both of what it signified and whether it was real or a byproduct of my disorienting encounter with Señor Volto. I refused to accept the obvious, that Espinal and Marta were having an affair. After a minute, I opened the door and crept toward the master bedroom. On the bed were two Martas, one asleep on her side and the other—a somewhat less substantial and entirely naked female form—mounted atop Espinal, riding the sluggish thrusts of his hips, eyes closed and fondling her own breasts. For all their passion, there was no sound of breath or fleshly contact, but the sight of Marta thus engaged, even if she were only a phantom, tore at my spirit. I was convinced that this was at the least a shade of infidelity, the reflection of an actual event.

It was not my love for Marta that kindled violence in my heart; rather, it was violence, the allure of it, that opened me to love. Aboil with hatred and confusion, I closed my eyes; when I opened them, I saw only the sleeping Marta. Espinal and the second Marta had vanished. Watching her stir beneath the sheet, my desire to hurt Espinal was married to a recognition of how little I had valued her, how utterly I had neglected her. I stepped forward, intending to make some show of affection and forgiveness, and spotted something under the edge of the bed: Espinal's cattle prod. A shiny black cylinder with a button trigger that he usually carried hitched to his belt. He had been here, I realized. Inside my wife. The carelessness of the man, the lack of respect implicit in his carelessness, it assailed me, as did the phallic shape of the prod—I wondered if he had left it there to goad me. I picked it up, and my anger seemed to course into it, to assume the form of that cold black stick. Ignoring the pain in my hands, I gripped the handle hard and visualized myself jamming the tip into Espinal's fat neck, triggering off charge after charge. How could Marta have made love to such a toad? Recalling her abandon caused my anger to spike, and, eager to demonstrate that no man could treat me so, I hurried from the room.

Anger was free in me as never before, ungoverned by its normal restraints, but upon entering the bar I was stalled in my vengeful progress by what I saw on the deck. Illuminated by the pool lights, five guards,

Espinal among them, were seated around a table, talking easily, laughing, and those same five guards, or rather their colored shadows, were moving away from the table in various directions, vanishing around corners and through doors. Like bright ghosts standing up from their bodies and going off on spectral errands. At the instant these phantasmal shapes would disappear, other identical shadows stood and went off in directions different from the ones they previously had chosen. Almost the same scene repeating itself over and over, as if the seated guards were generating a flow of afterimages... and not just afterimages, I told myself. Fore-images as well. Images of what might come to pass. This was not mere speculation, for as I watched, one shadow got to its feet, extracted his car keys from a trouser pocket, saluted his companions, and went through the gate by the pool leading to the parking area, and another passed out, slumped in his chair, mouth agape, chest rising and falling regularly. Yet the first shadow I had seen, Espinal's, had been the shadow of an action taken in the past. The cattle prod was proof of that. A third guard jumped up in apparent alarm and swung a beer bottle in a forceful arc through mid-air as if showing the others how he had subdued a dangerous criminal. It seemed I was witnessing a mingling of the past and possibility. Did this indicate that the past embodied the condition of possibility, that it, too, was mutable? Before I could explore this question, anger overwhelmed me once again. I approached the table, holding the prod behind my back. Espinal glanced up. Amusement deepened the lines at the corners of his eyes. He spoke to his colleagues, words I failed to hear, and they laughed. As was my habit when exposed to such ridicule, I offered a pleasant smile, pretending to accept their laughter as expressive of a mood of good fellowship; but my smile was not its usual strained self, supported in this instance by a foundation of joyful and vengeful intent. Espinal didn't bother to look at me as I drew near; he only said, "Bring us another round of beers, Aurelio."

"Perhaps you'd care for some chips and salsa?" I asked, and jabbed him in the neck with the prod.

The shock elicited a grunt from Espinal and lifted him up from his chair to fall across the table. His arms swept empty bottles onto the floor. I jabbed him in the side and his torso spasmed, his head jittered against the tabletop. His mouth gaped, his eyes bulged, his limbs trembled. Pleased by his aghast expression, by the quivering of his muscles, I prepared to deliver a third charge, but then I sensed movement behind me and turned to see another guard swing a beer bottle at my head, the same act I had witnessed him performing moments before.

Armed with that foreknowledge, I anticipated the arc of the blow and so was able to dodge it. I jabbed the cattle prod into the guard's chest and he fell twitching onto the floor. My anger was supplanted by the eerie calm that had possessed me at the hospital. As the remaining guards came to their feet, I snatched Espinal's sidearm from its holster and told them to put their weapons on the table. Once this had been done, I ordered them to dive into the pool. They cursed and threatened, but obeyed. Seeing them so helpless, with only their heads clear, staring balefully at me, water dripping from their hair, I gave thought to shooting them. How satisfying it would be to watch them flounder as I picked them off one by one! Though this desire was fueled by a residue of anger, it was not a fierce impulse—I was already beginning to regret my intemperate actions, wondering if it might be possible to rectify the situation. I would have to hide out for a while, there was no doubt of that. Perhaps Marta's cousins in the Bay Islands would be of help. Then something struck the back of my head, sending white lights spearing into my eyes. Dazed, my skull throbbing, I realized I had fallen. Marta was standing over me, still in her nightdress, holding a beer bottle. She said something in a contemptuous tone, but the words were muted, unintelligible, as if she were speaking from behind thick glass. I heard other voices, equally muted. The guards. They gathered around me and as they began to beat me, it seemed they were multiplying infinitely, producing hundreds upon hundreds of shadow selves that separated from their bodies and hurried off to accomplish innumerable missions, moving more rapidly than humanly possible, as if God had speeded up the film of the world in order to show me everything that might then happen, the variety of my potential fates, none of which I understood.

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The cell in which I waked was empty of furnishings. No cot, no toilet; only a drainage hole at the center of a slightly concave floor. The walls were not much farther apart than my outspread arms could reach and were painted canary yellow, a color that seemed to amplify a reek of stale urine. A rich golden light, the light of late afternoon, slanted through a slit window that was set too high to afford a view of anything other than a rectangle of cloudless sky. Every part of my body ached. Dried blood was crusted on my lips. Now and then a guard would pass by the barred door of the cell, trailed and preceded by his shadowlike variants. The effect, I observed, had diminished—the shadows were scarcely more than gauzy flutterings. Moving gingerly, I propped myself up against the wall and sat with my head hung down, weighted by a recognition that I was finished. The best I could hope for was torture followed by a term of prison. Knowing Espinal's coarse



sensibilities, having listened to countless stories relating to the brutal autonomy he wielded within the walls of the prison, I doubted I could hope for even that. I thought of Marta with bitterness and longing, and of my two sons. I thought, too, of my hotel. I had perceived it as a prison that defined and delimited me, but now, held within an official confine, that blue-green cube with the ocean stretching out before it appeared to embody the very essence of freedom. Tears started from my eyes. I could blame no one except myself. If I had treated Marta with respect and love, she would never have betrayed me. Such thoughts accumulated in my head like a soggy mess, a wad of misery and self-abnegation, and I lapsed into a fugue, aware of intermittent voices, of men passing in the corridor, of the light dimming. I stood up once to urinate into the hole. For the remainder of the day, I sat without moving, empty and humiliated, more a relic than a man.

It was after dark when Espinal came along the corridor to my cell. He leaned against the gate, peering through the bars, his face neutral. Expressionless as a frog, you might have said. Yet even a frog's face is colored by a kind of gloating simplicity, and though Espinal bore some resemblance to that creature, neither gloating nor triumph nor emotion of any sort surfaced from his depths, as if only his bloated body were present and his soul had flown elsewhere, perhaps attached to one of the flimsy shadows that proceeded from him. He said nothing and the silence seemed to hollow out a vast space around us, to create a universe populated by a single torturer and his victim. He was dressed as for an evening out. Dark, neatly ironed slacks and a sports shirt bearing a batik pattern. A gold chain cinched his swarthy neck. The cattle prod was hitched to his belt.

My instinct was to plead with him, to reason. Where, I wanted to ask, would he find a more efficient conduit for his drugs? Now that I was in his thrall, I would prove a thoroughly malleable host. Any room he wished, any number of rooms, might be his at any hour of the day. But the silence pressed against my chest, my Adam's apple, choking me, and I could not speak. Oddly enough, I felt a measure of anticipation for what was to come, and when Espinal opened the gate, rather than cowering, I sat up alertly like a child expecting a treat.

Espinal did not bother to shut the gate behind him. He unhitched the cattle prod and showed it to me, letting the light play over the shiny black cylinder. A smile hitched up a corner of his mouth. "You truly are a stupid piece of crap, Aurelio," he said.

Though these words offered no promise of mercy, that he had acknowledged me in any way generated an ounce of hope. I marshaled my arguments, ordering them into a logical progression, but before I could state my desire to please him, Espinal stuck the cattle prod into the pit of my stomach and triggered off a charge. My memories of the next hours are fragmentary. I recall Espinal standing above my prone body, spitting into my face, cracking me with his fists, cursing me, his puffy cheeks mottled with rage. At several points he broke from his exertions, and on one such occasion, sitting with his back against the wall, smoking a cigarette, he informed me of his plans to marry Marta and thus gain ownership of the hotel.

"She's a terrific fuck," he said, "but the world is full of terrific fucks. I would never tie myself down to her if not for the hotel. You didn't understand how to make full use of either your hotel or your woman, Aurelio."

He paused, blew a smoke ring and watched it dissipate. "Women," he said musingly. "They have their subtleties, their eccentricities. But at heart they only want to be secure. Perhaps if you had been stronger, if you had been a fortress for Marta, and not a little house of straw... perhaps she would not have sought me out."

I must have made a noise of some kind, for he patted my shoulder and said, "Don't try to speak. You'll merely exhaust yourself, and we have so much farther to travel, you and I." He stubbed out his cigarette on the floor and voiced a sigh of—I thought—satisfaction. "I intended to have you disappeared, but your fit of temper makes things so much the easier. No one will initiate an inquiry if something happens to you now."

In the course of his abuse, Espinal frequently employed the cattle prod, and despite the excruciating pain, the spasms, the bile rising in my throat, and the trembling of my limbs, instead of growing weaker and more mentally disorganized, I grew stronger, centered in my outrage, as if some portion of my being were receiving a positive charge, becoming further enlivened by each and every jolt. The colored shadows that prior to Espinal's appearance in my cell had all but vanished, now proceeded from him in a continuous flow, clearly visible, giving me a preview of the torments he might soon visit upon me, and so it was that when, after another cigarette break, he bent down to retie his shoelace, I had already watched his shadow self perform this act and was able therefore to avail myself of the opportunity, lashing out with my right leg and catching him flush on the chin. He fell onto his back, moaning, still conscious. Denying the pain that attended my least movement, I scrambled up, seized the cattle prod and jabbed it into his chest, jolting him again and again, hoping to explode his flabby heart. His eyes rolled back. Thick strings of drool eeled between his lips. His belly heaved and jiggled. Yet he refused to die.

So frustrated was I by Espinal's persistence, I wrangled out his sidearm, intending to shoot him, but

footsteps in the corridor awakened my desire for self-preservation. A young guard with a wispy mustache was ambling toward the cell. As he drew near, I stepped forth and ordered him to unlock the other cells, an order with which he did not hesitate to comply. Seven bleary, dispirited prisoners tottered out into the corridor, staring at me with fear and bewilderment. I bound and gagged the guard and sat him down beside Espinal. Then, turning to the prisoners, I told them that salvation was at hand.

Atop the green mountain that rises behind the town of Trujillo, hidden most of the days by mist, enclosed within a cyclone fence, stood a powerhouse and an antenna belonging to Cablevision, the cable company that serviced the region, and a tin-roofed cabin of unpainted boards where lived the caretakers, Antonio Oubre and his wife Suyapa, family friends of many years' duration. It was there I headed after negotiating my escape, which was not so difficult a feat as one might imagine. Having been complicit with Espinal for over a decade, I knew he had protected himself by giving into his lawyer's custody evidence against his various associates that was to be made public in the event of his untimely death. Two of my fellow escapees dragged Espinal along, I held the gun to his head, and we were passed through the main gate of the prison without significant delay by men who could not afford to let us murder him. We crammed into Espinal's SUV and I drove west toward La Ceiba. Three miles outside of town I stopped the car, handed the keys to a cocaine dealer with bloody broken teeth, and, stuffing the gun in my belt, carrying Espinal's cattle prod, I began hiking through the jungle toward the mountaintop. I had no illusions as to Espinal's future now that I had abandoned him to the mercies of those he had brutalized. They would keep him alive for a time in order to guarantee their safety, but judging by the hateful relish with which they stared at him, I knew they would ultimately seek retribution. I hoped they would be deliberate, that they would, as he had done, fully explore the dreadful potentials of the human nervous system... though necessity dictated that they not be too thorough in their vengeance. They would not survive him for long. Sooner than later, the car would be spotted, and since escaped prisoners were rarely afforded an opportunity to surrender, the chances were good that they would not live to report on my whereabouts.

Although they were drug traffickers and deserved no sympathy, I experienced guilt over my manipulation of these men. Such a cynical disregard for life, even for misbegotten lives such as theirs, was not part of my character; but from the moment Espinal began to use his cattle prod on me, it seemed I had not been myself, that my usual tendencies were overthrown and my weaknesses bulwarked by a calm single-mindedness that had grown increasingly dominant with every jolt. As I labored up the trail, however, my composure frayed and I came to feel every twinge accumulating from Espinal's torture. Mist obscured the moon and stars. The darkness, the delicate night sounds, the imminence of jaguars and wild boars, these things played with my nerves. By the time I reached the summit, after four hours on the trail, the sky had paled and I was spent.

It had rained on the mountaintop. The air was thick with a chill dampness. Puddles lay everywhere, and the ground was mucky, furrowed with tire tracks. Towering into the mist above the Cablevision compound, the antenna looked to have acquired a magical aspect, resembling a four-sided steel ladder ascending into an unstable dimension of swirling gray. Beneath it, the powerhouse—a green lozenge of concrete block—chugged and hummed. No smoke issued from the cabin chimney, Antonio's venerable Hyundai pickup was not in evidence, and I assumed that he and Suyapa had driven into town for the early market. As empty of hope and energy as I had been while in my cell, I sat down on a rock just outside the cyclone fence, at the summit's edge, and gazed out across a sea of mist. I made out peculiar shapes moving therein, attributing them to a perceptual impairment caused by my enervated condition; but as the sun climbed higher and the mist burned away, revealing the slope of the mountain, the town laid out along the crescent of the bay, and, closer to the horizon, the narrow point of land that formed the Cape of Honduras, those ephemeral shapes became more substantial, though as yet poorly defined, hundreds upon hundreds of them, drifting through the air, transparent in the way of jellyfish. I suspected they might be akin to the shadows I had seen emanating from the corporeal bodies of Espinal and the other guards, and thus might offer some clue as to what was happening to me; and I was then led to consider the fact that each time I received a jolt of electricity, the shadows had grown clearer. I wondered if another jolt would make them clearer yet.

The prospect of using Espinal's cattle prod on myself in order to test this hypothesis did not set easily, but neither did it seem a complete absurdity. From the inception of the idea I felt the same upwelling of anticipation that I had when Espinal entered my cell, as if something inside me desired it, and that feeling came to outweigh all my reservations. I pulled up my trouser leg, placed the tip of the prod against the flesh of my calf, and, after a moment's hesitation, triggered off a charge. When I recovered—and my period of recovery was much shorter than it theretofore had been—what I saw caused me to reevaluate not only my understanding of all that had happened to me, but as well my basic assumptions concerning the nature of the world.

We live, ladies and gentlemen, at the bottom of an ocean of the air. It is a tired metaphor, yet nonetheless true. We inhabit a depth, scuttling crablike along the bottom, our vision limited to the straight-ahead, unaware of the myriad swimmers above and around us, believing we are alone. Had I been sitting on the summit prior to my confrontation with Tito Obregon, I would have seen nothing more than blue sky and white clouds building on the horizon, the glittering sea, the town, the palms and fig trees and other vegetation figuring the mountain slope, whereas now I saw those myriad swimmers, countless thousands of them. Drifting, darting, sailing. They maintained their transparency, yet were of every hue—shadings of red, blue, yellow, green—and posed a veritable circus of forms, like a fever dream from the mind of a Bosch or a Brueghel. Predominant among them were slightly curved, roughly circular creatures fringed with cilia, a pale mottled brown in color, six to eight inches in diameter and thin as tortillas, which I took to calling melchiors because of their resemblance to the liver-spotted scalp of my maternal uncle, Melchior Varela; but many other species were visible. Some were serpentine, others like partially deflated balloons, others skatelike... There were far too many to catalogue. I have since recorded and studied several hundred species, and that is but a fraction, I believe, of those that exist. They occupied every level of the sky, but clustered so thickly above the town that all but a handful of roofs were obscured. Behind me, the antenna and the powerhouse were covered by a bobbing, eddying sheath of such creatures, like sponges moved by a current. I conjectured that they might be attracted to the electricity, but if this were so, why then did they congregate so heavily above the town, many sections of which had no power?

After half an hour or thereabouts, the creatures began to fade, growing increasingly transparent, and I was forced to use the cattle prod on myself once again so as to restore them to brightness. It may seem unreasonable that I would undergo such pain, but the way they moved, both separately and in schools, like the dance of sea creatures along a reef, and the thought that Trujillo was, indeed, a reef of sorts, a habitat where they could flourish, and the quirky complexity of their bodies, all equipped with inflatable sacs that, I assumed, enabled them to float upon the air, and with cilia and with other anatomical features whose purposes I could not fathom, curiously configured tubes and slits and spindly structures... I was fascinated by them, compelled to observance. I noticed that each time I used the prod, various of the creatures would flock toward me, this supporting my suspicion that they were attracted to electricity, and once, while I lay recovering from a shock, a swizzle stick (this the name I gave to a type of serpentine creature, because they reminded me of the plastic appurtenances with which cocktails are stirred) approximately ten inches in length—its body rippled, almost serrated in aspect, tinted a watery green—eased close to me and, before I could recoil from its touch, nudged my forehead with a blind, mouthless snout. I felt a tingling—not in the least unpleasant—beneath the skin of my forehead, as if the snout had penetrated a centimeter or two, and this was followed by a stronger tingling that emanated from deeper within my skull, and an accompanying flash of irascibility. The swizzle stick zipped off into the upper air, losing itself among a school of pinkish half-deflated-balloon creatures (I called them bizcochos after the little cakes with pink icing that my mother made for my birthday). Thereafter I felt another tingling in my skull, softer and less agitated, conveying a soothing effect, as of something settling back after a moment of alarm. I recalled the impression I'd had while grasping Señor Volto's paddles that something was passing out of Tito's body and into mine. The idea that one of the swizzle sticks—or some similar creature—might be coiled in my brain, feasting on its trickling output of electricity, revolted me, and I jumped to my feet; but almost instantly a fresh infusion of calm flooded my mind and I was unable to sustain revulsion, as if the unknown thing I believed to be inside my head were responding to my stress and acting to placate me.

The sun was nearly at the meridian and I was still engaged in watching the surreal spectacle unfolding in the sky when Antonio's battered red pickup came jouncing up the potholed road from town and stopped inside the fence. Suyapa, a sturdy, honey-skinned woman perhaps twenty years his junior, climbed from the cab and went into the cabin, trailed by a procession of shadow selves; and Antonio, a stocky, elderly man with a dark, leathery face and straws of gray hair protruding from beneath a New York Yankees baseball cap, stepped off to the side of the cabin and urinated onto a patch of grass, an act mirrored by a succession of shadows who, having done their business, flowed away in different directions. On seeing me, he called out, "Aurelio?" He zipped up and came over to the fence and gave me a puzzled look. "Your hair... What happened?"

I touched my hair, found it as ever.

"It's like mine," Antonio said. "All gray."

He guided me into the cabin, two tiny rooms whose plank walls were decorated with dozens of pages torn from religious magazines—photographic images of the Pope, statues of the Madonna, depictions of Christ. In a scrap of clouded mirror affixed to the door, I saw that my hair had been leached of black and now had the hue of cigarette ash. My face was haggard, its lines deeply etched—I might have aged ten years in a

single night. I sat down by a little table against the wall, reeling from this latest shock.

"You are in desperate trouble, my friend," Antonio said, joining me at the table. "Everyone in town is talking about the prison break."

He asked how I reached this pass and I related the events of the previous day. I told him that no matter what fate awaited me, at least I could derive some satisfaction from having avenged myself upon Espinal, and Antonio said, "Espinal is not dead."

This revelation left me speechless.

"The other prisoners were apprehended in Puerto Castillo while stealing a boat," he went on, and Suyapa added, "They tried to use Espinal as a hostage, but the police shot them before they could do him injury."

She set a plate of chicken and rice before me, but I was too upset to eat. Saying that I needed to think, I went outside and sat on the ground, shielding my eyes so I would not be distracted by the cartoonlike creatures that populated the air. Until I discovered Marta's affair with Espinal, I had never hated anyone. I had feared and resented, but my mental soil had proved unsuitable for the cultivation of strong emotion. Even my love for Marta had been an indifferent thing. Knowing Espinal was alive, however, and not just alive, but free to be with Marta, whom I now loved with uncharacteristic intensity, that knowledge inflamed me. Hate became a star exploding in my interior sky and I was consumed by the desire to kill him. I have since come to recognize that the creature that possessed me, a creature whose identity I will not know until the moment it vacates my body, a moment that is, I believe, nearly at hand... I recognize that it was responsible for this amplification of emotion. The relationship between us was not that of parasite and prey, but of symbiotes. I provided it with a nice warm skull and a steady diet of electrical energy; in return, it maximized me, made me more of who I essentially am. I understood none of this at the time. My thoughts were directly solely toward Espinal. I could not wait to kill him.

I remained sitting outside the cabin for many hours, less thinking of than focusing upon Espinal. I conceived no plan, but I knew I needed to get closer to my enemy, and I believed that my altered appearance, my gray hair and deeply lined face, would permit such an approach. At one point during the afternoon, Suyapa came out of the cabin and told me apologetically that I was welcome to stay in the compound for a day or two, but no longer. Though we had not been close since the death of my father, for whom they had worked as cook and caretaker, sooner or later someone was bound to recall the connection between us. As much as they considered themselves friends, she and Antonio had to look to their own survival.

I was a child during the days when Suyapa and her husband worked for my family, and though I had borne them a modicum of affection, I neither loved them nor appreciated them as I did that afternoon. It seemed I was now able to perceive their essentials, the core of devout simplicity that was both their strength and their weakness, the quality that invests the Honduran soul with its capacity to endure the outrages of Honduran fate. I informed her I would be leaving later that evening and said that if I could borrow some of Antonio's old clothes and catch a ride into town, I would be grateful.

"You will be killed," she said solemnly. "It would be safer if you let Antonio take you inland... or perhaps north into the Picos Bonitos."

My response was a despondent statement whose brighter meaning I had yet to comprehend. "I am dead already," I told her.

## j

So it was, ladies and gentlemen, that I came to Trujillo at twilight on that same day, dressed as an old beggar in a patched suit coat and grimy trousers, a frayed straw hat with a wide brim shadowing my face, sweating profusely in the thick heat and carrying a sapling trunk that I had cut for a walking stick. I hobbled in from the outskirts of town, where Antonio had dropped me, and made my way along the airport road until I reached the turn-off that led toward the beach and the Hotel Christopher Columbus. I had not used the cattle prod on myself in several hours—the prod and Espinal's pistol were stuck into my waistband—yet my ability to see the creatures who flocked overhead, almost completely obscuring the indigo sky, was undiminished. I believed I must have passed some electric threshold, perhaps accumulating a sufficient charge so as to empower this facet of my vision. The shadow effect, however, had diminished. Though I could still make them out, streaming from the bodies of passersby, they were barely perceptible, and remembering that I had not seen the shadows directly after my confrontation with Tito in the flea market, I understood that my sharp perception of them was likely only a stage in the process of my transformation... and I did feel transformed. Clear as never before. So much of my life had been spent—as is much of every life—in attempting to elude the judgment of fate, and now I embraced that judgment without trepidation.

The aerials (my generic name for the creatures occupying the air) were, indeed, feeding on the citizens of Trujillo. For the most part this feeding appeared to do no harm. An aerial would drift or dart close to

someone's head; a charge of pale electricity would spray upward into the body of the aerial from the top of the head, and thereafter that person would continue on with whatever he or she had been doing, displaying no ill effects whatsoever. But as I made my way along the access road toward the beach, passing a group of schoolboys in white short-sleeved shirts and dark blue trousers, I noticed among the melchioris, the swizzle sticks, the bizcochos, and the other varieties of aerial swarming overhead, a smattering of bloated forms with stubby tubes protruding from their underbellies, all a purplish black in hue, roughly corresponding in size and shape to that of a human heart (blackhearts, I called them). One of these creatures settled upon the head of a skinny schoolboy who was swinging his backpack about, swatting playfully with it at his fellows. Almost immediately after the blackheart had come to rest, the boy ceased his energetic activity and walked stiffly, slowly, for several paces, his face devoid of expression, and even when the blackheart floated away, he did not regain his good spirits at once, but moved dazedly, falling far behind his classmates. I had not planned how I would kill Espinal, but the realization that certain of the aerials had a deleterious effect upon the body inspired me to think that exposing him to the ravages of the blackhearts, luring them to him in some way and watching them drain him of energy, that would be a most fitting end for the man.

It grew dark as I hobbled along the beach, presenting the image of a doddering old man who had gotten lost and strayed toward the tourist end of town. The young men standing outside the beachside bars taunted me and laughed. I had behaved with a similar lack of respect when I was young, hurled similar taunts, and now, consumed by an unfocused hatred that was in no small part self-loathing, I extended my left hand to them and begged for a lempira, for whatever they could spare, keeping my right near the grip of Espinal's gun, speculating that it might not be so important to kill Espinal, tempted to believe that exterminating any of these cruel shapes would serve my purpose. Set adjacent to my hotel was Gringos, an establishment of bamboo and thatch above a concrete deck and open to the air—a tourist bar that, since there were no tourists, catered chiefly to expatriates and young Honduran women. As I passed I glanced inside, and there, sitting at a table beneath a bobbling cluster of melchioris and bizcochos and panuelos (flimsy yellowish raglike creatures that had the look of unwashed handkerchiefs), Sadra Rosales was nursing a margarita, talking to her best friend, Flavia, a slightly overweight and overly made-up woman with dyed red hair. Sadra's manner struck me as being inappropriately blithe for someone who had lost her lover, and curious about her, I entered the place. The bartender tried to shoo me out, assuming me to be penniless, but I showed him my money, ordered a whiskey, and chose a table adjoining Sadra's, sitting with my back to her, no more than a foot away.

"...so confusing," Sadra was saying. "I never thought Aurelio had it in him... that kind of passion. Especially where Marta was concerned."

"That sow!" Flavia said. "She goes around acting like a princess, yet everyone knows she's a complete slut."

"God, yes! She must have fucked the entire staff at the prison."

"Why don't you do something to her?"

"What do you suggest?"

"I don't know. You'll think of something. Maybe you can write something about her for the paper."

"Oh, I don't care that much about her. I just miss Aurelio."

"Liar!" Flavia said. "You were only using him to get Tito back."

"That's not true! I liked Aurelio." A giggle. "Well, maybe I was using him a little."

Both women laughed, and then Sadra said, "I simply don't understand what happened with Tito."

"What's there to understand? He's a man. He's probably gone off with another woman."

"But to leave the shop like that... to just up and vanish. It's not like him. He's always been so responsible about his business." A pause. "Then, he has been acting strangely for most of this year. He's been so distant! That's why I pretended to break up with him. I..."

Flavia made an amused noise. "So you were pretending, were you?"

"You know. I thought he was losing interest, and I decided he might get interested again if he thought he was losing me."

"Maybe Aurelio threatened him, and that's why he left in such a hurry. You said they had some sort of run-in."

"Yes, but he didn't seem concerned. It was like his mind had gone off somewhere else. Like he was... he wasn't himself."

"Didn't he say where he was going in the letter?"

"The mountains. That's all he said. He said he had to go to the mountains, and then he rambled on about finding God for a couple of pages."

"God!" Flavia snorted in disdain. "It's another woman, for sure. Men only tell that kind of lie when it's

about sex."

Sadra gave a dramatic sigh. "It's so depressing, losing two men almost at once."

"Don't worry! There are plenty of men left in Trujillo... though not many as rich as Aurelio."

"And none with as big a prick as Tito. My God, it was enormous!"

They laughed again, and the conversation turned to a party that was to be held later that night in Barrio Cristales.

I drank my whiskey in a single gulp and went out onto the beach and flung myself down on the sand close to the tidal margin and contemplated how thoroughly betrayal had been woven through the fabric of my life. Of course I understood that I deserved no less—I had been living my fate all the while—and this understanding, at such odds with my usual tendency toward self-pity, caused me to become aware that although I regretted a great deal, I was not overwhelmed with regret. I thought of what Sadra had said, that Tito had grown distant—that word was as good as any to describe how I felt about Sadra and much else. I could sustain no bitterness toward her. Whatever role she had played with me was no less false than the one she was playing now, and whatever she had actually felt for me, however true, was nothing more than a byproduct of the insanity between men and women. The only portion of the past that roused my emotions was the affair between Espinal and Marta, and even that passion seemed to have acquired a formal gloss. Not that my desire to kill Espinal had abated, but it seemed now more a consequence of human office, as if hatred were a contractual concession made between the soul and the mind to allow their coexistence. I wondered if Tito's prematurely gray hair could be taken as a proof that he had been possessed by the thing I believed to be living inside me. If so, what did its absence mean to him? Why had this provoked his sudden exit?

Little waves delicately edged with foam rolled in to film across the sand. Lightning strobed in the darkness beyond the cape, and a wind tousled the palm tops, a storm blowing in from the Caribbean. I smelled ozone on the air and noticed that the aerials were massing together and moving toward the hills in a stately migration of cartoonish forms, perhaps giving evidence that a big electrical storm was dangerous for them. Strung out along the shore, the lights of the bars and shanties looked to be spelling out a curving sentence of bright blurs and dots. I felt stranded in the place and moment, utterly alone. Red lightning cracked the sky, followed by a peal of thunder that had the sound of an immense fake, as if a giant had struck a vast sheet of flexible metal.

A disco beat became audible over the gusting wind, and I glanced toward the hotel. Several dozen people, silhouetted against hot lights, crowded together under the roofed portion of the deck. Espinal's welcome home party, I imagined. A stairway of nine steps led up from the beach to the deck—I gave it a wide berth, keeping close to the water, and headed for a spot some fifty feet farther along, a narrow inlet shadowed by a group of corosal palms, beneath which a fallen palm trunk still attached to its stump provided a makeshift bench. There I sat while the party raged and the storm gathered. A rain squall, outlying the storm, came to dimple the water of the inlet, and the thunder grew more frequent. The majority of the aerials had passed off inland, but hundreds yet remained, hovering above the beach, most of them blackhearts. The fronds of the surrounding palms lashed and slithered together. Burning stick men jabbed and dazzled on the horizon, seeming to reflect the lightning of my thoughts, strokes of hatred illuminating a dark matter.

I had entertained a vague notion of waiting until the party ended, then sneaking into my apartment and catching Espinal with Marta, but as things turned out I needed no plan. Soon a torrential rain, driven slantwise by the wind, sent the partygoers scurrying from the deck and into the hotel. The sea tossed and billowed, heavy waves piling in upon the sand. The roiling clouds were illuminated by lightning strokes, and the thunder grumbled constantly, with now and again a powerful detonation that gave me a start. None of this appeared to disturb the remaining aerials—buffeted by the wind, sent bobbling this way and that, they nonetheless maintained their relative positions along the shore—and neither did the weather appear to disturb the drunken, thick-bodied man who was making a wobbly descent of the stairs, reeling sideways as he set foot in the mucky sand. In a lightning flash I saw him. Espinal. The gold chain winking at his neck. He ploughed forward against the wind and took a stand at the water's edge, his head thrown back, as if daring the storm to do its worst. That, I suspected, was precisely his state of mind. That was the character of his arrogance. Having survived my attack, a kidnapping, and being taken hostage, he believed, or half-believed, he was indomitable, himself a force of nature. Wind, waves, lightning. What were they when compared to the mighty Espinal? After a moment, he unzipped his trousers and urinated into the wind. A few splatters of piss on his trousers—what did this matter? Nothing could blight his potent aspect. I doubted he would have felt so invincible had he been able to see the blackhearts massing above him, gathered into an eddying cloud that seemed in miniature a representation of the storm clouds overhead. I expected them to drop down upon him, that my idea concerning their role in his demise would prove to have been a presentiment; but instead

they drifted apart. Lightning struck close by, a stroke that speared the sand several hundred feet farther along the beach, the blue-white flash blinding me for an instant. The blast did not bother Espinal. Once more he adopted a defiant stance and gazed out across the toiling waters of the bay.

I cannot say exactly when it was I began to sense a new electric presence in the air, but I believe it was a subtle stimulus deriving from this presence that encouraged me to act; and I am certain that I experienced a surge of that curiously disassociative anticipation such as I had first felt in my prison cell. Espinal, still daring the sky to kill him, did not notice me emerge from the palm shadow. The storm was reaching a crescendo. A barrage of lightning struck offshore, deafening bluish-white explosions that shed a hellish illumination, and for the duration of those flashes the sea looked to be aboil, waves leaping, plying in every direction; the hotel and the bars and the shanties that ranged the shore appeared to flicker in and out of existence. Thunder came full-throated with the roaring light, and the wind, unheard in all that concatenation, peeled up the tin roofs from shanties and bent young palms horizontal. I could have fired off a cannon and no one would have known, but I wanted Espinal to understand that I was responsible for his sorry end. I moved to within six feet of him before he caught sight of me. He was very drunk and did not recognize me, even after the wind blew off my hat; but he saw the gun, and his slack features tightened with alarm. Only when I pulled out the cattle prod did recognition dawn. He shouted at me, the words taken by the wind. Then, as I thought how best to prolong his torment, formulating insults I might express as he lay dying, Espinal threw himself at me and knocked the gun from my hand.

The rumbling that filled the world seemed a result of our rolling about on the wet sand, as if the beach were a drum skin against which we beat an ungainly rhythm. Heavier than I and stronger, Espinal succeeded in turning me onto my back. His breath was sour as a beast's. My arms were wrapped around his neck, but he managed to hump up and down, his sloppy weight driving the air from my lungs. He started to come astride my chest, trying to pin me with his knees; but in his drunkenness he overbalanced, and as he righted himself, I jabbed him with the cattle prod. He toppled onto his side. I triggered off a second charge into his stomach, a third into his chest, and came to my knees above him. A fourth and fifth jolt, both delivered to his neck, rendered him unconscious. I intended to finish him then and there, but as I cast about for the gun I saw that several blackhearts had descended from the upper air and were drifting near. Unnerved, I scrambled to my feet and retreated toward the water.

Rain was still pelting down, but the worst of the storm was passing inland, the lightning and thunder concentrated above the mountain behind the town, and though the wind still howled, the world seemed silent by contrast to the chaos that had ruled minutes before. In the dim, flickering light, the blackhearts, their ugly opaque forms trembling as if in a state of excitation, had a freakish, evil look, and as they drifted closer to Espinal, despite my hatred, I felt a twinge of sympathy for the man. I knew his fate was at hand, and knew this not by process of reason but by virtue of the thing inside me, by the way the knowledge welled up in my brain, spreading like dye through water, slow and pervasive, qualities that characterized all messages from my symbiote. I retreated farther from Espinal and watched as one of the blackhearts came to hover inches above his face. I thought it would settle atop his head as had the one I had earlier seen, but it did not—it settled instead upon his upturned face and merged with him, disappearing into his head, somehow occupying the same volume of space. I was horrified to see this, suspecting that the creature inside me might not be benevolent, as I had begun to believe, but was draining me of life, for Espinal's reaction to possession was considerably different from my own. Rather than gradually returning to consciousness, he sat straight up from his supine pose, clutching the sides of his head, his expression reflecting pain and terror. He spotted me, staggered erect, his eyes wide and staring. He took a step toward me, then appeared to notice the other two blackhearts hovering at waist level to his right. Backing away from them, he stumbled and fell heavily. He regained his feet and lurched toward me, his hair hanging into his eyes, rain streaming down his face. I held out the cattle prod, halting his advance. He clutched his head again and dropped to his knees.

"What..." He shook his head wildly, as if trying to dislodge some awful restraint. "What is it?"

I had achieved a kind of remote distaste for Espinal. I had nothing to say to him. The rain slanted in from the sea, trickling cold down my neck; the wind prowled the shore, ripping the fronds, scattering palm litter across the sand, sounding a long despondent vowel.

Espinal struggled unsuccessfully to come to his feet. Judging by his clumsiness, his flailing efforts, I thought that the blackheart must be impairing his motor control.

"Aurelio!" he shouted. "Help me!"

His pleading was offensive, an indignity, and hardened me against him.

"Aurelio!" He screamed my name, called to God and continued struggling to rise, growing sluggish in his movements. Then his eyes rolled up to the heavens and he froze. The hundreds of blackhearts that had not joined the migration of aerals inland were stacked above him, arranged into an arrow-straight column rising

toward the clouds, an unnatural order that seemed redolent of conscious purpose, as if they were marking Espinal's location. He renewed his struggles, calling to me again, promising rewards, offering apology. I paid him no heed, for I was listening to an inner voice that stained all my thoughts, and obeying its wordless instruction, I turned my eyes toward the mountain.

I have said that I had apprehended some new electric presence in the air—now that apprehension, previously subtle and peripheral, grew intense and specific, causing my symbiote to produce in me feelings of devotion and awe. Against logic, the central chaos of the storm was moving back toward the shore, contrary to the direction of the wind, an immense cloud lit from within by branches of lightning resembling tracteries of nerves firing in darkly translucent flesh. It approached with the grand, ponderous slowness of a floating kingdom, and I observed that it differed in some details from ordinary clouds. Although its underbelly was contoured with bumps and declivities like that of a cloud, those contours neither roiled nor shifted, but—though somewhat fluid, pulsing a little—sustained a basic terrain; and rather than appearing to boil across the sky, it looked to be of one piece, a semisolid form towarded at a slight downward angle, presenting a view of its mountainous, tumbled height. I was too awestruck to know fear, too adulatory in my awe, but I knew the open area of the beach was not safe, and I hurried away from Espinal and the motionless column of blackhearts. I stopped beneath the cluster of corosal palms beside the inlet and looked back. At that distance, some forty feet, I could not read Espinal's face, nor could I tell much from his body language—whether in the grip of emotion or compelled to quiet by the blackheart nesting in his skull, he had ceased his struggles. I did not doubt, however, that he was afraid, that fear was a blazing shape that fit exactly into his skin, filling every crevice, all his mind focused on the cloud. It was bigger than I had thought. Big as a country. Even when its edges loomed overhead, its body kept on sliding past the crest of the mountain. Flocking beneath its belly were thousands upon thousands of aerals, acolytes to their god... and such was my feeling, ladies and gentlemen, for as I came to understand, to accept, that it was no cloud but an aerial itself, one impossibly huge, a vast presence hidden mostly from our sight, capable of lightnings, a creature in whose image other creatures had been made, I realized it conformed—albeit monstrously so—to my conception of God. Gazing up into its smoky flesh, past the madly agitated swarms of aerals that celebrated its passage, past the tracteries of lightning, I saw a darker structure in its depths shaped like a great Aleph, the seat of its divinity, and persuading me of its godhood more than anything I saw was the aura of power and invincibility it projected. The air bristled with ozone and was heaved by a pressure that stoppered my ears, muffling every sound. Here was a beast for whom there could be no predator. What better definition of God is there than that?

As the stormdweller (so I have named it) stabilized above the beach, its body—by my estimate—no more than a hundred feet from the sand and extending to the visible horizon in all directions, I remembered Espinal. The column of blackhearts no longer stood above him—I supposed they had joined the swarms of their fellows above—but his posture was unchanged. Sitting back on his haunches. A man awaiting judgment. It occurred to me how like a ritual sacrifice this unearthly scene had played. The signal column of blackhearts, the processional of the cloud with its attendants, and the victim waiting alone, a victim prepared for the ritual by my actions. Perhaps I, too, had been prepared for my role, and what I understood of things was only an inkling of the complex intertwining between our lives and those of the aerals. I knew to a certainty this was true, knew it with the same intuitive certainty attaching to my conviction that Espinal was about to die.

The wind had subsided, as if quailed by the presence of the stormdweller, and the thunder was reduced to a grumbling that did not seem so much actual thunder as the record of some gross and gigantic internal process. The lightnings within the creature pulsed rapidly, decorating it with patterns that effloresced and faded too quickly for memory to fix upon, but conveyed by their mosaic structures the idea of symbol, of language. I wondered if Espinal had passed beyond fear and gained some appreciation of this momentous display. He was staring up into the lightning as if entranced. It might be, I thought, that finding himself at the mercy of a monster so much more potent than he, his own monstrous soul was satisfied and he perceived the rightness of his fate, and, peaceful, accepting, he was now reviewing his life. Whatever the case, I know he must have seen death coming, for I, who had a less perfect view, saw it come myself. Deep within the stormdweller a speck of infernal brightness bloomed. It took so long to reach the sand—at least ten seconds, I would guess—I had ample time to speculate on its nature, thinking it must not be lightning, for if it were it must have been generated at a point countless miles above, and, consequently, my estimation of the stormdweller's size was far too low. Of course it was lightning. God's traditional weapon. An enormous stalk of white-gold that sizzled from the belly of the stormdweller, searing the air and stabbing the beach, enveloping Espinal in electric fire. He vanished from sight, reappearing briefly as the incandescence flickered and danced about him, a solarized shadow. Then he was gone. Incinerated, vaporized, and perhaps



absorbed into the massive engine of his destruction. Not a scrap left, though afterimages of his dying have prevailed in my mind ever since. I felt nothing for him. Our business was finished.

I hoped that as the stormdweller departed I would be able to gauge its size more accurately, but instead of sliding off to the south or out to sea, it lifted straight up, elevating into the sky until I could no longer distinguish it from the imaginary forms of night. With its departure, the storm dissipated, as if it had been the unifying force that commanded the elements to fury. Once it had disappeared, I was at a loss. Now that Espinal was no longer a factor, it was conceivable I might be able to reclaim my life. Bribes could be paid, relationships patched.

But looking at the hotel, that blue-green prison where my soul had been stunted, and at the town, a seat of perfidy and hypocrisy, it seemed that all connection with my old life had been severed. Rather than devising a plan to regain my offices as businessman, father, and husband, I found myself thinking of bizcochos, blackhearts, melchiors and swizzle sticks, of the unknowable creature coiled within my skull, of the mystery these creatures posed, the exotic universal potentials their existence suggested, potentials most clearly expressed by the stormdweller. Had it been a singular entity or was every tropical depression merely symptomatic of such a creature's passage near to the earth? And what larger mysteries did those passages portend? I wanted to know them, to understand the purposes of that unseen world and how they affected our own, and I wanted this with a passion such as I had never before experienced. I believed that Tito Obregon may well have felt this selfsame passion and had gone ahead of me in his search for absolute truth.

I had salted away funds against the day when I might decide to dissolve my marriage, thus I would have no difficulty in surviving, and though Marta had been less than an ideal wife, she was a good mother and would have enough from the sale of the hotel to get by. My sons, distant from me already, would not grieve deeply and would grow more distant. There was no compelling reason for me to stay. I took a last look at the deck, where the partygoers had begun to reassemble, some to dance, unmindful of the strangeness of the night, and tried to pick out Marta from among the dancers. I was certain she would be dancing, though perhaps she was growing a little impatient as regarded the whereabouts of her lover.

The wind kicked up again as I went along the beach, heading for the Cablevision compound, where I planned to ask Antonio to drive me inland, away from those who might seek to confine me. It was not a harsh storm wind, but one that swept up from the south, bringing with it the cool freshness of the high places, and buoyed by it, reckoning it for a harbinger of my future, with every step I took, I felt easier in my skin and more confident of my course.

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There you have it, ladies and gentlemen. My story... though not the whole of it. During the next few years, I traveled across the country, stopping in villages, everywhere inquiring about Tito Obregon, for I came to believe that his pilgrimage was my own, that his path was the one I was bound to follow; but I had no word of him, and I have since concluded that while our fates may be similar, our paths are divergent. I discovered that my symbiote occasionally required stronger doses of electricity than my brain could provide, and these I supplied by stripping lamp cords and applying the bare wires to my skin, until one night in Puerto Cortez I fell in with carnival folk and upon learning that they had no Señor Volto in their company, I suggested myself for the position, thereby becoming the electric personage you see before you tonight. Easy access to electricity was the motive underlying this career choice, but there was another purpose of which I was then unaware.

Over the years, I have learned a great deal about myself and about the creature who shares my body. I have learned, for example, to distinguish between my own thoughts and feelings and those it generates in me, and yet there is no longer much distinction between us. While our goals may differ in the specific, they were forged in the same lightnings. For my part, I am seeking God. Not the stormdweller. I have witnessed it or its like many times since that night on the beach and I know now it is merely God's messenger on earth, whereas God Itself is a creature enclosing all of space and time, Its vastness too great to be contemplated. But despite Its vastness, It is no less a creature. I sense Its imminence and am led to believe It may be approached from a point high in the mountains, these same mountains in which your village lies. I further believe that I have been prepared by my symbiote for such an approach. God delights in such rituals—that is another thing I have learned. From what I have observed of the aerals and their interactions with our kind, I understand that much of human history is but a ritual orchestrated by the aerals in the service of their deity. Perhaps I am, like Espinal, a sacrifice, a tasty treat steeped for long years in the electric juices of the symbiote. Perhaps I will serve a more significant function. Whichever of these destinies eventuate, I am complete in my acceptance of it.

My symbiote, you see, is an evangel. It manifests to us, prepares us, and once its task is finished, moves on

to another host. Tonight, having prepared me for the final stage of my journey, having formerly prepared Tito Obregon, it will slip from my body and traveling along the path of voltage, enter one of yours. That person will see, as I see now, the aerials massed above your village—a glorious profusion of bizcochos and swizzle sticks and more—and will begin a journey that mirrors mine, leading ultimately to a union with God... but I perceive that you doubt me, ladies and gentlemen.

Some of you think I am mad. Others among you whisper that my story is a clever variation on the customary taunts offered by other Señor Voltos and is designed to provide an extra measure of fear that will make the act of grasping my paddles seem all the more courageous and thereafter will induce a delicious shudder in the young ladies who gaze into your eyes, searching for something out of the ordinary in their prospective lovers. Very well. I will not attempt to persuade you further of my truth, but rather invite you to experience it. Conquer your fears! Embrace your fate! The price is cheap. A mere five lempira. Come one, come all! Test yourself if you dare.

## JAILWISE

During my adolescence, despite being exposed to television documentaries depicting men with weightlifter chests and arms, wearing ponytails and wife-beater undershirts, their bodies spangled with homemade tattoos, any mention of prison always brought to my mind a less vainglorious type of criminal, an image derived, I believe, from characters in the old black-and-white movies that prior to the advent of the infomercial tended to dominate television's early morning hours: smallish, gray-looking men in work shirts and loose-fitting trousers, miscreants who—although oppressed by screws and wardens, victimized by their fellows—managed to express, however inarticulately, a noble endurance, a working-class vitality and poetry of soul. Without understanding anything else, I seemed to understand their crippled honor, their Boy Scout cunning, their Legionnaire's willingness to suffer. I felt in them the workings of a desolate beatitude, some secret virtue of insularity whose potentials they alone had mastered.

Nothing in my experience intimated that such men now or ever had existed as other than a fiction, yet they embodied a principle of anonymity that spoke to my sense of style, and so when I entered the carceral system at the age of fifteen, my parents having concluded that a night or two spent in the county lock-up might address my aggressive tendencies, I strived to present a sturdy, unglamorous presence among the mesomorphs, the skin artists and the flamboyantly hirsute. During my first real stretch, a deuce in minimum security for Possession With Intent, I lifted no weights and adopted no yard name. Though I wore a serpent-shaped earring, a gift from a girlfriend, I indulged in no further self-decoration. I neither swaggered nor skulked, but went from cell to dining hall to my prison job with the unhurried deliberation of an ordinary man engaged upon his daily business, and I resisted, thanks to my hostility toward every sort of authority, therapy sessions designed to turn me inward, to coerce an analysis of the family difficulties and street pressures that had nourished my criminality, with the idea of liberating me from my past. At the time I might have told you that my resistance was instinctive. Psychiatrists and therapy: these things were articles of fashion, not implements of truth, and my spirit rejected them as impure. Today, however, years down the line from those immature judgments, I suspect my reaction was partially inspired by a sense that any revelation yielded by therapy would be irrelevant to the question, and that I already knew in my bones what I now know pit to pole: I was born to this order.

While I was down in Vacaville, two years into a nickel for armed robbery, I committed the offense that got me sent to Diamond Bar. What happened was this. They had me out spraying the bean fields, dressed in protective gear so full of holes that each day when I was done, I would puke and sweat as if I had been granted a reprieve and yanked from the gas chamber with my lungs half full of death. One afternoon I was sitting by the access road, goggles around my neck, tank of poison strapped to my shoulders, waiting for the prison truck, when an old Volkswagen bus rattled up from the main gate and stopped. On the sliding panel was a detail from a still life by Caravaggio, a rotting pear lopsided on a silver tray; on the passenger door, a pair of cherubs by Titian. Other images, all elements of famous Italian paintings, adorned the roof, front, and rear. The driver peered down at me. A dried-up, sixtyish man in a work shirt, balding, with a mottled scalp, a hooked nose, and a gray beard bibbing his chest. A blue-collar Jehovah. "You sick?" he asked, and waggled a cell phone. "Should I call somebody?"

"Fuck are you?" I asked. "The Art Fairy?"

"Frank Ristelli," he said without resentment. "I teach a class in painting and sculpture every Wednesday."

"Those who can't, teach... huh?"

A patient look. "Why would you say that?"

"Cause the perspective on your Titian's totally fucked."

"It's good enough for you to recognize. How do you know Titian?"

"I studied painting in college. Two years. People in the department thought I was going to be a hot-shit artist."

"Guess you fooled them, huh?"

He was mocking me, but I was too worn out to care. "All that college pussy," I said. "I couldn't stay focused."

"And you had places to rob, people to shoot. Right?"

That kindled my anger, but I said nothing. I wondered why he was hanging around, what he wanted of me.

"Have you kept it up? You been drawing?"

"I mess around some."

"If you'd like, I'd be glad to take a look. Why don't you bring me what you've been doing next Wednesday?"

I shrugged. "Sure, yeah. I can do that."

"I'll need your name if I'm going to hook you up with a pass."

"Tommy Penhaligon," I said.

Ristelli wrote it down on a note pad. "Okay... Tommy. Catch you Wednesday." With that, he put the van in gear and rattled off to the land of the free, his pluming exhaust obscuring my view of the detail from a Piero della Francesca painted on the rear.

Of course, I had done no drawing for years, but I sensed in Ristelli the potential for a sweet hustle. Nothing solid, but you develop a nose for these things. With this in mind, I spent the following week sketching a roach—likely it was several different roaches, but I preferred to think of it as a brother inmate with a felonious history similar to my own. I drew that roach to death, rendering him in a variety of styles ranging from realism to caricature. I ennobled him, imbued him with charisma, invoked his humble, self-abnegatory nature. I made him into an avatar among roaches, a roach with a mission. I crucified him and portrayed him distributing Oreo crumbs to the faithful. I gave him my face, the face of a guard to whom I had a particular aversion, the faces of several friends, including that of Carl Dimassio, who supplied the crank that kept me working straight through the nights. I taped the drawings on the wall and chuckled with delight, amazed by my cleverness. On the night before Ristelli's class, so wasted that I saw myself as a tragic figure, a savage with the soul of an artist, I set about creating a violent self-portrait, a hunched figure half buried in blackness, illuminated by a spill of lamplight, curled around my sketch pad like a slug about a leaf, with a harrowed face full of weakness and delirium, a construction of crude strokes and charred, glaring eyes, like the face of a murderer who has just understood the consequences of his act. It bore only a slight resemblance to me, but it impressed Ristelli.

"This is very strong," he said of the self-portrait. "The rest of them"—he gestured at the roach drawings—"they're good cartoons. But this is the truth."

Rather than affecting the heightened stoicism that convicts tend to assume when they wish to demonstrate that they have not been emotionally encouraged, I reacted as might a prisoner in one of the movies that had shaped my expectations of prison and said with boyish wonderment, "Yeah... you think?," intending by this to ruffle the sensibilities of Ristelli's inmate assistant, a fat, ponytailed biker named Marion Truesdale, aka Pork, whose arms were inked with blue, circusy designs, the most prominent being a voluptuous naked woman with the head of a demon, and whose class work, albeit competent, tended to mirror the derivative fantasy world of his body art. In the look that passed between us then was all I needed to know about the situation: Pork was telling me that he had staked out Ristelli and I should back the fuck off. But rather than heeding the warning, I concentrated on becoming Ristelli's star pupil, the golden apple in a barrel of rotten ones. Over the next months, devoting myself to the refinement of my gift, I succeeded to such a degree that he started keeping me after class to talk, while Pork—his anger fermenting—cleaned palette knives and brushes.

Much of what I said to Ristelli during that time was designed to persuade him of the deprivation I faced, the lack of stimulation that was neutering my artistic spirit, all with an eye toward convincing him to do a little smuggling for me. Though he sympathized with my complaints, he gave no sign that he was ripe to be conned. He would often maneuver our conversation into theoretical or philosophical directions, and not merely as related to art. It seemed he considered himself my mentor and was attempting to prepare me for a vague future in which I would live if not totally free, then at least unconstrained by spiritual fetters. One day when I described myself in passing as having lived outside the law, he said, "That's simply not so. The criminal stands at the absolute heart of the law."

He was perched on a corner of an old scarred desk jammed into the rear of the art room, nearly hidden by the folded easels leaning against it, and I was sitting with my legs stretched out in a folding chair against the opposite wall, smoking one of Ristelli's Camels. Pork stood at the sink, rinsing brushes in linseed oil, shoulders hunched, radiating enmity, like a sullen child forbidden the company of his elders.

"Cause we're inside?" I asked. "That what you're saying?"

"I'm talking about criminals, not just prisoners," Ristelli said. "The criminal is the basis for the law. Its inspiration, its justification. And ultimately, of course, its victim. At least in the view of society."

"How the hell else can you view it?"

"Some might see incarceration as an opportunity to learn criminal skills. To network. Perhaps they'd rather be elsewhere, but they're inside, so they take advantage. But they only take partial advantage. They don't understand the true nature of the opportunity."

I was about to ask for an explanation of this last statement, but Pork chose the moment to ask Ristelli if he needed any canvases stretched.

Ristelli said, "Why don't you call it a day. I'll see you next week."

Aiming a bleak look in my direction, Pork said, "Yeah... all right," and shambled out into the corridor.

"The criminal and what he emblemizes...," Ristelli went on. "The beast. Madness. The unpredictable. He's the reason society exists. Thus the prison system is the central element of society. Its defining constituency. Its model." He tapped a cigarette out of his pack and made a twirling gesture with it. "Who runs this place?"

"Vacaville? Fucking warden."

"The warden!" Ristelli scoffed at the notion. "He and the guards are there to handle emergencies. To maintain order. They're like the government. Except they have much less control than the President and the Congress. No taxes, no regulations. None that matter, anyway. They don't care what you do, so long as you keep it quiet. Day to day it's cons who run the prisons. There are those who think a man's freer inside than out in the world."

"You sound like an old lifer."

Bemused, Ristelli hung the cigarette from his lower lip, lit up and let smoke flow out from his mouth and nostrils.

"Fuck you know about it, anyway?" I said. "You're a free man."

"You haven't been listening."

"I know I should be hanging on your every goddamn word. Just sometimes it gets a little deep, y'know." I pinched the coal off the tip of the Camel and pocketed the butt. "What about the death penalty, man? If we're running things, how come we let 'em do that shit?"

"Murderers and the innocent," Ristelli said. "The system tolerates neither."

It seemed I understood these words, but I could not abide the thought that Ristelli's bullshit was getting to me, and instead of pursuing the matter, I told him I had things to do and returned to my cell.

I had been working on a series of portraits in charcoal and pastel that depicted my fellow students in contemplative poses, their brutish faces transfigured by the consideration of some painterly problem, and the next week after class, when Ristelli reviewed my progress, he made mention of the fact that I had neglected to include their tattoos. Arms and necks inscribed with barbed wire bracelets, lightning bolts, swastikas, dragons, madonnas, skulls; faces etched with Old English script and dripping with black tears—in my drawings they were unadorned, the muscles cleanly rendered so as not to detract from the fraudulent saintliness I was attempting to convey. Ristelli asked what I was trying for, and I said, "It's a joke, man. I'm turning these mutts into philosopher-kings."

"Royalty have been known to wear tattoos. The kings of Samoa, for instance."

"Whatever."

"You don't like tattoos?"

"I'd sooner put a bone through my nose."

Ristelli began unbuttoning his shirt. "See what you think of this one."

"That's okay," I said, suspecting now Ristelli's interest in my talent had been prelude to a homosexual seduction; but he was already laying bare his bony chest. Just above his right nipple, a bit off-center, was a glowing valentine heart, pale rose, with a gold banner entangling its pointy base, and on the banner were words etched in dark blue: The Heart Of The Law. The colors were so soft and pure, the design so simple, it seemed—despite its contrast to Ristelli's pallid skin—a natural thing, as if chance had arranged certain inborn discolorations into a comprehensible pattern; but at the moment, I was less aware of its artistic virtues than of the message it bore, words that brought to mind what Ristelli had told me a few days before.

"The heart of the law," I said. "This mean you done crime? You're a criminal?"

"You might say I do nothing else."

"Oh, yeah! You're one of the evil masters. Where'd you get the tattoo?"

"A place called Diamond Bar."

The only Diamond Bar I'd heard of was a section of LA populated mainly by Asians, but Ristelli told me it was also the name of a prison in northern California where he had spent a number of years. He claimed to be among the few ever to leave the place.

"It's unlikely you've met anyone who's done time there," he said. "Until now, that is. Not many are aware

of its existence."

"So it's a supermax? Like Pelican Bay? The hell you do to get put someplace like that?"

"I was a fool. Like you, stupidity was my crime. But I was no longer a fool when I left Diamond Bar."

There was in his voice an evangelical tremor, as if he were hearkening back to the memory of god and not a prison cell. I'd come to realize he was a strange sort, and I wondered if the reason he had been released might be due to some instability developed during his sentence. He started to button his shirt, and I studied the tattoo again.

"Doesn't look like a jailhouse tat... 'least none I ever saw," I said. "Doesn't even look like ink, the colors are so clean."

"The colors come from within," Ristelli said with the pious aplomb of a preacher quoting a soothing text. "There are no jails."

That conversation stayed with me. If Ristelli was not certifiably a whacko, I assumed he was well along the road; yet while he had given me no concrete information about Diamond Bar, the commingling of passion and firmness in his voice when he spoke of the place seemed evidence not of an unbalanced mind but of profound calm, as if it arose from a pivotal certainty bred in a quieter emotional climate than were most prison-bred fanaticisms. I believed everything he said was intended to produce an effect, but his motives did not concern me. The idea that he was trying to manipulate me for whatever purpose implied that he needed something from me, and this being the case, I thought it might be an opportune time to make my needs known to him.

I assumed that Pork understood how the relationship between Ristelli and me was developing. To discourage him from lashing out at me, I hired a large and scarily violent felon by the name of Rudy Wismer to watch my back in the yard, at meals, and on the block, paying for his services with a supply of the X-rated Japanese comics that were his sexual candy. I felt confident that Wismer's reputation would give Pork pause—my bodyguard's most recent victim, a bouncer in a Sacramento night club, had testified at trial wearing a mask that disguised the ongoing reconstruction of his facial features; but on the Wednesday following our discussion of tattoos, Ristelli took sick midway through class and was forced to seek medical attention, leaving Pork and me alone in the art room, the one place where Wismer could not accompany me. We went about our cleaning chores in different quarters of the room; we did not speak, but I was aware of his growing anger, and when finally, without overt warning, he assaulted me, I eluded his initial rush and made for the door, only to find it locked and two guards grinning at me through the safety glass.

Pork caught hold of my collar, but I twisted away, and for a minute or so I darted and ducked and feigned as he lumbered after me, splintering easels, scattering palettes and brushes, tromping tubes of paint, overturning file cabinets. Before long, every obstacle in the room had been flattened and, winded, I allowed myself to be cornered against the sink. Pork advanced on me, his arms outspread, swollen cheeks reddened by exertion, huffing like a hog in heat. I prepared for a last and likely ineffective resistance, certain that I was about to take a significant beating. Then, as Pork lunged, his front foot skidded in the paint oozing from a crushed tube of cadmium orange, sending him pitching forward, coming in too low; at the same time, I brought my knee up, intending to strike his groin but landing squarely on his face. I felt his teeth go and heard the cartilage in his nose snap. Moaning, he rolled onto his back. Blood bubbled from his nostrils and mouth, matted his beard. I ignored the guards, who now were shouting and fumbling for their keys, and, acting out of a cold, pragmatic fury, I stood over Pork and smashed his kneecaps with my heel, ensuring that for the remainder of his prison life he would occupy a substantially diminished rank in the food chain. When the guards burst into the room, feeling charmed, blessed by chance, immune to fate, I said, "You assholes betting on this? Did I cost you money? I fucking hope so!" Then I dropped to the floor and curled into a ball and waited for their sticks to come singing through the air.

Six days later, against all regulation, Frank Ristelli visited me in the isolation block. I asked how he had managed this, and dropping into his yardbird Zen mode, he said, "I knew the way." He inquired after my health—the guards had rapped me around more than was usual—and after I assured him nothing was broken, he said, "I have good news. You're being transferred to Diamond Bar."

This hardly struck me as good news. I understood how to survive in Vacaville, and the prospect of having to learn the ropes of a new and probably harsher prison was not appealing. I said as much to Ristelli. He was standing beneath the ceiling fixture in my cell, isolated from the shadows—thanks to the metal cage in which the bulb was secured—in a cone of pale light, making it appear that he had just beamed in from a higher plane, a gray saint sent to illumine my solitary darkness.

"You've blown your chance at parole," he said. "You'll have to do the whole stretch. But this is not a

setback; it's an opportunity. We need men like you at Diamond Bar. The day I met you, I knew you'd be a candidate. I recommended your transfer myself."

I could not have told you which of these statements most astonished me, which most aroused my anger. "We?' 'A candidate?' What're you talking about?"

"Don't be upset. There's..."

"You recommended me? Fuck does that mean? Who gives a shit what you recommend?"

"It's true, my recommendation bears little weight. These judgments are made by the board. Nevertheless, I feel I'm due some credit for bringing you to their attention."

Baffled by this and by his air of zoned sanctimony, I sat down on my bunk. "You made a recommendation to the Board of Prisons?"

"No, no! A higher authority. The board of Diamond Bar. Men who have achieved an extraordinary liberty."

I leaned back against the wall, controlling my agitation. "That's all you wanted to tell me? You could have written a letter."

Ristelli sat on the opposite end of the bunk, becoming a shadow beside me. "When you reach Diamond Bar, you won't know what to do. There are no rules. No regulations of any sort. None but the rule of brotherhood, which is implicit to the place. At times the board is compelled to impose punishment, but their decisions are based not on written law, but upon a comprehension of specific acts and their effect upon the population. Your instincts have brought you this far along the path, so put your trust in them. They'll be your only guide."

"Know what my instincts are right now? To bust your goddamn head." Ristelli began to speak, but I cut him off. "No, man! You feed me this let-your-conscience-be-your-guide bullshit, and..."

"Not your conscience. Your instincts."

"You feed me this total fucking bullshit, and all I can think is, based on your recommendation, I'm being sent to walls where you say hardly anybody ever gets out of 'em." I prodded Ristelli's chest with a forefinger. "You tell me something'll do me some good up there!!"

"I can't give you anything of the sort. Diamond Bar's not like Vacaville. There's no correlation between them."

"Are you psycho? That what this is? You're fucking nuts? Or you're blowing somebody lets your ass wander around in here and act like some kinda smacked-out Mother Teresa? Give me a name. Somebody can watch out for me when I get there."

"I wish I could help you more, but each man must find his own freedom." Ristelli came to his feet. "I envy you."

"Yeah? So why not come with me? Guy with your pull should be able to wangle himself a ride-along."

"That is not my fate, though I return there every day and every night in spirit." His eyes glistened. "Listen to me, Tommy. You're going to a place few will ever experience. A place removed from the world yet bound to it by a subtle connectivity. The decisions made by those in charge for the benefit of the population enter the consciousness of the general culture and come to govern the decisions made by kings and presidents and despots. By influencing the rule of law, they manipulate the shape of history and redefine cultural possibility."

"They're doing a hell of a job," I said. "World's in great goddamn shape these days."

"Diamond Bar has only recently come to primacy. The new millennium will prove the wisdom of the board. And you have an opportunity to become part of that wisdom, Tommy. You have an uncommon sensibility, one that can illustrate the process of the place, give it visual form, and this will permit those who follow in your path to have a clearer understanding of their purpose and their truth. Your work will save them from the missteps that you will surely make." Ristelli's voice trembled with emotion. "I realize you can't accept what I'm saying. Perhaps you never will. I see in you a deep skepticism that prevents you from finding peace. But accomplishment... that you can aspire to, and through accomplishment you may gain a coin of greater worth. Devote yourself to whatever you choose to do. Through devotion all avenues become open to the soul. Serve your ambition in the way a priest serves his divinity, and you will break the chains that weigh down your spirit."

On my first night in jail, at the age of fifteen, a Mexican kid came over to where I was standing by myself in the day room, trying to hide behind an arrogant pose, and asked if I was jailwise. Not wanting to appear inexperienced, I said that I was, but the Mexican, obviously convinced that I was not, proceeded to enlighten me. Among other things, he advised me to hang with my own kind (i.e., race) or else when trouble occurred no one would have my back, and he explained the diplomatic niceties of the racial divide, saying that

whenever another white man offered to give me five, flesh-to-flesh contact was permitted, but should a Latino, an Asian, an Arab, an Afro-American, or any darkly hued member of the human troupe offer a similar encouragement, I was to take out my prison ID card and with it tap the other man's fingertips. In every jail and prison where I had done time, I had received a similar indoctrination lecture from a stranger with whom I would never interact again. It was as if the system itself had urged someone forward, stimulating them by means of some improbable circuitry to volunteer the fundamentals of survival specific to the place. Ristelli's version was by far the most unhelpful I had ever heard, yet I did not doubt that his addled sermonette was an incarnation of that very lecture. And because of this; because I had so little information about the prison apart from Ristelli's prattle; because I believed it must be a new style of supermax whose powers of spiritual deprivation were so ferocious, it ate everything it swallowed except for a handful of indigestible and irretrievably damaged fragments like Ristelli; for these reasons and more I greatly feared what might happen when I was brought to Diamond Bar.

The gray van that transported me from Vacaville seemed representative of the gray strangeness that I believed awaited me, and I constructed the mental image of a secret labyrinthine vastness, a Kafkaville of brick and steel, a partially subterranean complex like the supermax in Florence, Colorado where Timothy McVeigh, Carlos Escobar, and John Gotti had been held; but as we crested a hill on a blue highway south of Mount Shasta, a road that wound through a forest of old-growth spruce and fir, I caught sight of a sprawling granite structure saddling the ridge ahead, looking ominously medieval with its guard turrets and age-blackened stone and high, rough-hewn walls, and my mental image of the prison morphed into more Gothic lines—I pictured dungeons, archaic torments, a massive warden with a bald head the size of a bucket, filed teeth, and a zero tattooed on his brow.

The road angled to the left, and I saw an annex jutting from one side of the prison, a windowless construction almost as high as the main walls, also of weathered granite, that followed the slope of the ridge downward, its nether reach hidden by the forest. We passed in among the ranked trees, over a rattling bridge and along the banks of a fast-flowing river whose waters ran a mineral green through the calm stretches, cold and clouded as poison in a trough, then foamed and seethed over thumblike boulders. Soon the entrance to the annex became visible on the opposite shore: iron doors enclosed by a granite arch and guarded by grandfather firs. The van pulled up, the rear door swung open. When it became apparent that the driver did not intend to stir himself, I climbed out and stood on the bank, gazing toward my future. The ancient stones of the annex were such a bleak corruption of the natural, they seemed to presage an imponderable darkness within, like a gate that when opened would prove the threshold of a gloomy Druid enchantment, and this, in conjunction with the solitude and the deafening rush of the river, made me feel daunted and small. The engine of the van kicked over, and the amplified voice of the driver, a mystery behind smoked windows, issued from a speaker atop the roof: "You have ten minutes to cross the river!" Then the van rolled away, gathering speed, and was gone.

At Vacaville I had been handcuffed but not shackled, not the normal procedure, and left alone now I had the urge to run; but I was certain that invisible weapons were trained on me and thought this must be a test or the initial stage in a psychological harrowing designed to reduce me to a Ristelli-like condition. Cautiously, I stepped onto a flat stone just out from the bank, the first of about forty such stones that together formed a perilous footbridge, and began the crossing. Several times, besieged by a surge of water, a damp gust of wind, I slipped and nearly fell—to this day I do not know if anyone would have come to my rescue. Teetering and wobbling, fighting for balance, to a casual observer I would have presented the image of a convict making a desperate break for freedom. Eventually, my legs trembling from the effort, I reached the shore and walked up the shingle toward the annex. The building terminated, as I've said, in an arch of pitted stone, its curve as simple as that of a sewer tunnel, and chiseled upon it was not, as might have been expected, Abandon Hope All Ye Who Enter Here or some equally dispiriting legend, but a single word that seemed in context even more threatening: WELCOME. The iron doors were dappled with orange patches of corrosion, the separate plates stitched by rows of large rivets whose heads had the shape of nine-pointed stars. There was no sign of a knocker, a bell, or any alarm I might engage in order to announce myself. Once again I gave thought to running, but before I could act on the impulse, the doors swung silently inward, and moved less by will than by the gravity of the dimness beyond, I stepped inside.

My first impression of Diamond Bar was of a quiet so deep and impacted, I imagined that a shout, such as I was tempted to vent, would have the value of a whisper. The light had a dull golden cast and a grainy quality, as if mixed in with particles of gloom, and the smell, while it plainly was that of a cleaning agent, did not have the astringency of an industrial cleaner. The most curious thing, however, was that there were no administrative personnel, no guards, no term of processing and orientation. Rather than being kept in isolation until it was determined to which block or unit I would be assigned, on passing through the annex



door I entered the population of the prison like a pilgrim into a temple hall. The corridor ran straight, broken every fifty yards or so by a short stairway, and was lined with tiers of cells, old-fashioned cribs with sliding gates and steel bars, most of them unoccupied, and in those that were occupied, men sat reading, wall-gazing, watching television. None of them displayed other than a casual interest in me, this a far cry from the gauntlet of stares and taunts I had run when I entered the population at Vacaville. Absent the customary rites of passage, undirected, I kept going forward, thinking that I would sooner or later encounter an official who would inscribe my name or open a computer file or in some other fashion notate my arrival. As I ascended the fourth stairway, I glimpsed a man wearing what looked to be a guard's cap and uniform standing at parade rest on the tier above. I stopped, expecting him to hail me, but his eyes passed over me, and without saying a word, he ambled away.

By the time I reached the sixth stairway, I estimated that I had walked approximately two-thirds the length of the annex, climbed two-thirds the height of the hill atop which the walls of the prison rested; and though I held out hope that there I might find some semblance of authority, I decided to ask for assistance and approached a lanky, pot-bellied man with a pinkish dome of a scalp that caused his head to resemble a lightly worn pencil eraser, an illusion assisted by his tiny eyes and otherwise negligible features. He was sitting in a cell to the right of the stairs, wearing—as was everyone within view—gray trousers and a shirt to match. He glanced up as I came near, scowled at me, and set down the notebook in which he had been writing. The gate to his cell was halfway open, and I took a stand well back from it, anticipating that his mood might escalate.

"Hey, brother," I said. "What's up with this place? Nobody signs you in and shit?"

The man studied me a moment, screwed the cap onto his pen. On the backs of his fingers were faint inky tracings, the ghosts of old tattoos. The precision of his movements conveyed a degree of snippishness, but when he spoke his voice was calm, free of attitude. "Fraid I can't help you," he said.

I would have been on familiar ground if he had responded with a curse, a warning, or the fawning, fraudulent enthusiasm that would signal his perception of me as a mark, but this politely formal response met none of my expectations. "I'm not asking you to get involved, man. I just need to know where to go. I don't want to get my nuts busted for making a wrong turn."

The man's eyes fitted themselves to the wall of the cell; he seemed to be composing himself, as if I were an irritant whose presence he felt challenged to overcome. "Go wherever you want," he said. "Eventually you'll find something that suits you."

"Asshole!" I clanged my handcuffs against the bars. "Fuck you think you're talking to? I'm not some fucking fish!"

His face tightened, but he kept on staring at the wall. The interior of the cell had been painted a yellowish cream, and the wall was marred by discolorations and spots from which the paint had flaked away that altogether bore a slight resemblance to a line of trees rising from a pale ground. After a few seconds he appeared to become lost in contemplation of it. Some of the men in other cells on the ground tier had turned our way, yet none ventured to their doors, and I sensed no general animosity. I was accustomed to prisons filled with men on the lookout for breaks in the routine, any kind of action to color the monotony, and the abnormal silence and passivity of these men both intimidated and infuriated me. I took a circular stroll about the corridor, addressing the occupants of the cells with a sweeping stare, hating their mild, incurious faces, and said in a voice loud enough for all to hear, "What're you, a bunch of pussies? Where the hell I'm supposed to go!"

Some of the men resumed their quiet occupations, while others continued to watch, but no one answered, and the unanimity of their unresponsiveness, the peculiar density of the atmosphere their silence bred, played along my nerves. I thought I must have come to an asylum and not a prison, one abandoned by its keepers. I wanted to curse them further, but felt I would be slinging stones at a church steeple, so aloof and immune to judgment they seemed. Like old ladies lost in their knitting and their memory books, though not a man within sight looked any older than I. With a disrespectful, all-inclusive wave, I set out walking again, but someone behind me shouted, "Bitch!," and I turned back. The baldheaded man had emerged from his cell and was glaring at me with his dime-sized eyes. He lifted his fist and struck down at the air, a spastic gesture of frustration. "Bitch!" he repeated. "Bitch... you bitch!" He took another babyish swipe at the air and hiccupped. He was, I saw, close to tears, his chin gone quivery. He stumbled forward a step, then performed a rigid half-turn and grasped the bars of his cell, pushing his face between—it appeared that he had forgotten that his gate was open. Many of the inmates had left their cells and were standing along the tiers, intent upon him—he covered his head with his hands, as if defending himself against the pressure of their gaze, and slumped to his knees. A broken keening escaped his lips. Trembling now, he sank onto his haunches. Shame and rage contended in his face, two tides rushing together, and the instant before he

collapsed onto his side, he caught the race of one and said feebly and for a last time, "Bitch!"

Beyond the ninth stairway lay a deeply shadowed cellblock that had the musty, claustrophobic atmosphere of a catacomb. Walls of undressed stone set close together and mounted by iron stairs; the cells showing like cave mouths; dim white ceiling lights that had the radiant force of distant stars tucked into folds of black cloud. Fatigued and on edge, I was not up to exploring it. A cell stood open and untenanted just below the stairway, and deciding that my safest course would be to allow whoever was in charge to come to me, I entered it and sat down on the bunk. I was struck immediately by the quality of the mattress. Though it appeared to be the usual thin lumpy item, it was softer and more resilient than any prison mattress I had ever rested on. I stretched out on the bunk and found that the pillow was remarkably soft and firm. Closing my eyes, I let the quiet soothe me.

I must have been drowsing for several minutes when I heard a baritone voice say, "Penhaligon? That you, man?"

The voice had a familiar ring, and there was something familiar, too, about the lean, broad-shouldered man standing at the entrance to my cell. Framed by a heavy mass of greased-back hair, his face was narrow and long-jawed, with hollow cheeks, a bladed nose, and a full-lipped mouth. He might have been the love child of Elvis and the Wicked Witch of the West. I could not place him, but felt I should be wary.

He grunted out a laugh. "I can't look that different. Just shaved off the beard's all."

I recognized him then and sat up, alarmed.

"Don't get worked up. I'm not gonna fuck with you." He perched on the end of the bunk, angling his eyes about the cell. "You want to put up a picture or two 'fore your wall comes in, they got pretty much any kind you want in the commissary."

There were questions I might have asked concerning both the essence and the rather housewifely character of this last statement, but during my first month in minimum security, Richard Causey, then doing an eight-spot for manslaughter, had put me in the hospital for the better part of a month with injuries resulting from a beating and attempted rape; thus his comments on interior decoration sailed right past me.

"I 'spect it's been a while since anybody took the walk you did," Causey said with a trace of admiration. "Straight up from the door all the way to eight? I never saw anyone do it, that's for sure." He clasped his hands on his stomach and settled back against the wall. "Took me a year to move up here from six."

All my muscles were tensed, but he merely sat there, amiable and at ease.

"Most everybody stops somewhere along the first few blocks," Causey went on. "They don't feel comfortable proceeding on 'til they nail down a crib."

"Is that right?"

"Yeah, they feel kinda how you felt when you got to nine. Like you best stop and give things a chance to sort themselves out. It's the same with everybody, 'cept you got a lot farther than most."

Though I may have made a neutral noise in response, I was intent upon Causey's hands, the muscles in his shoulders.

"Look here," he said. "I understand what you're feeling, but I'm not the man I used to be. You want me to leave, that's cool. I just figured you'd want to talk. I know when I came here, that's all I wanted was somebody to talk to."

"I'm not the man I was, either," I said, injecting menace into my voice.

"Well, that's good. Takes a different man than both of us were to do time in Diamond Bar."

I was beginning to think that, truly, Causey might have changed. No longer did he give off the hostile radiation that once he had, and his speech, formerly characterized by bursts of profanity commingled with butchered elisions, was now measured and considered by contrast. His manner was composed and the tattoo of a red spider that had centered his brow was missing. "Just wore away, I guess," he said when I asked about it. He told me what he could about Diamond Bar but cautioned that the prison was not easily explained.

"This'll piss you off...! least it did me," he said. "But can't anybody tell you how to work this place. Things come to you as you need 'em. There's a dining hall and a commissary, like everywhere else. But the food's a helluva lot better and you don't need money at the commissary. The board handles everything. Supplies, discipline, recreation. We don't have any guards. I don't..."

"I saw a guard when I was walking up."

"Everybody sees that guy, but I never heard about him whupping his stick onto anybody. Could be he does his thing so's to give people something familiar to look at."

"You saying he's an inmate?"

"Maybe. I don't know. There's a lot I haven't figured out about, but it's coming." He tapped his temple and

grinned. "Best thing about the place is the plumes. You gonna love them."

"What the hell's that?"

"The queens who get you off down in Vacaville? The plumes put them away. You can't hardly tell the difference between them and a real woman."

Anxious to steer the conversation away from the sexual, I asked who I needed to watch out for, and he said, "Guys down on the first three or four blocks... some of them been known to go off. They're transferred out or given punishment duty. Mostly you need to watch out for yourself. Make sure you don't screw up."

"If there's no guards, people must just walk on out of here."

Causey gave me a penetrating look. "You crossed the river, didn't you? You entered of your own free will?"

"I thought the guards were watching."

"Might have been somebody watching. I couldn't tell you. All I know is, you and me and everyone else, we chose to be here, so we're not talking about a prison full of hard-core escape artists. And Diamond Bar's not so bad. Truth is, it's the best I've had it in a while. People say it's going to be even better once they finish the new wing. Escaping crossed my mind a time or two when I was first here. But I had the feeling it wasn't such a good idea."

What Causey said made me no more certain of my estate, and after he returned to his cell I remained awake, staring at the mysterious reach of the old prison that lay beyond the ninth stair, the dim white lights and anthracitic cell mouths. Everything I knew about Diamond Bar was cornerless and unwieldy, of a shape that refused to fit the logic of prisons, and this gave me cause to wonder how much more unwieldy and ill-fitting were the things I did not know. I was accustomed to prison nights thronged with hoots, cries, whispers, complaints, screams, an uneasy consensus song like the nocturnal music of a rain forest, and the compressed silence of the place, broken intermittently by coughs and snores, inhibited thought. At length I slept fretfully, waking now and again from dreams of being chased, hunted, and accused to find the silence grown deeper, alien and horrid in its thickness. But toward dawn—one I sensed, not witnessed—I woke to an outcry that seemed to issue from beneath the old prison, such a prolonged release of breath it could only have been the product of awful torment or extreme exaltation... or else it was the cry of something not quite human, expressing a primitive emotion whose cause and color is not ours to know, a response to some new shape of fear or a tidal influence or a memory from before birth, and following this I heard a whispering, chattering noise that seemed to arise from every quarter, like the agitated, subdued congress of a crowd gathered for an event of great and solemn gravity. While that chorus lasted I was full of dread, but once it subsided, almost stricken with relief, I fell into a black sleep and did not wake again until the shadows, too, had waked and the first full day of my true incarceration had begun.

During those early months at Diamond Bar I came to understand the gist of what Ristelli, Causey, and the baldheaded man had tried to tell me. Eventually one found what was suitable. Things came to you. Trust your instincts. These statements proved to be not the vague, useless pronouncements I had assumed, but cogent practicalities, the central verities of the prison. Initially I behaved as I had during my early days at Vacaville. In the dining hall, an appropriately cavernous room of cream-colored walls, with the image of a great flying bird upon the ceiling, dark and unfigured, yet clearly rendered like an emblem on a flag... in the dining room, then, I guarded my tray with my free arm and glanced fiercely about as I ate, warning off potential food thieves. When I discovered that the commissary was, indeed, a free store, I took to hoarding cigarettes, candy, and soap. It was several days before I recognized the pointlessness of these behavioral twitches, several weeks before I grew comfortable enough to forego them. Though I was not a heavy drug user, on those occasions that I grew bored, prior to beginning my work, I had no difficulty in obtaining drugs—you only had to mention your requirements to one of several men and later that day the pills or the powder would appear in your cell. I have no idea what might have occurred if I had developed a habit, but I doubt this was a problem at the prison. It was clear that the men on my block were all either above average in intelligence or skilled in some craft or both, and that most had found a means of employing their gifts and skills that left no time for recreational excess. As to the men housed in the cellblocks below the eighth stairway and how they managed things—of them I knew little. The men of different blocks rarely mingled. But I was told that they had a less innate grasp of Diamond Bar's nature than did we. Consequently their day-to-day existence was more of a struggle to adapt. In time, if they were not transferred, they—like us—would move into the old wings of the prison.

It did not seem likely that anyone could have less firm a grasp on the subject of Diamond Bar than I did, but I adapted quickly, learned my way around, and soon became conversant with a theory espoused by the majority of the men on my block, which held that the prison was the ultimate expression of the carceral

system, a mutation, an evolutionary leap forward both in terms of the system and the culture that they believed was modeled upon it. They did not claim to understand the specifics of how this mutation had been produced, but generally believed that a mystical conjunction of event (likely a systemic glitch, an alchemy of botched paperwork and inept bureaucracy), natural law, and cosmic intent had permitted the establishment and maintenance of a prison independent of the carceral system or—so said the true believers—one that acted through subtle manipulation to control both the system and the greater society whose backbone the system formed. Though this smacked of Ristelli's cant, it was not so easy to dismiss now that I saw Diamond Bar for myself. The absence of guards, of any traditional authority; the peculiar demeanor of the inmates; the comfortable beds, decent food and free commissary; the crossing of the river in lieu of ordinary official process; the man dressed as a guard whom everyone had seen and no one knew; the rapid fading of all tattoos; the disturbing dawn cry and the subsequent mutterings, a phenomenon repeated each and every morning—what could be responsible for all this if not some mystical agency? For my part, I thought the theory a fantasy and preferred another, less popular theory—that we were being subjected to an experimental form of mind control and that our keepers were hidden among us. Whenever these theories were discussed, and they were often discussed, Richard Causey, who had studied political science at Duke University prior to turning to a career of violent crime and was writing a history of the prison, would declare that though he had his own ideas, the answer to this apparently unresolvable opposition resided with the board, but that thus far their responses to his inquiries concerning the matter had been inadequate.

The board consisted of four inmates ranging in age from sixtyish to over seventy. Holmes, Ashford, Czerny, and LeGary. They met each day in the yard to, it was said, decide the important questions relating to our lives and—if you bought into the view that Diamond Bar was the purest expression of a carceral universe, the irreducible distillate of the essential human condition—the lives of everyone on the planet. To reach the yard it was necessary to pass through the old wing of the prison visible beyond the eighth stairway, and though in the beginning I did not enjoy the passage, made anxious by the gloomy nineteenth century atmosphere of the wing's antiquated cells with their key locks and hand-forged bars, and the masses of rotting stone in which they were set, I grew accustomed to the sight and came to view the old sections of the prison as places of unguessable potential—it was there, after all, that I would someday live if I stayed at Diamond Bar. As I've noted, the prison straddled a ridge—the spine of the ridge ran straight down the middle of the yard. Most of the population would gather close to the walls or sit on the slopes, which had been worn barren by countless footsteps, but the members of the board met among the grass and shrubs that flourished atop the ridge, this narrow strip of vegetation giving the enclosed land the look of a giant's scalp pushing up from beneath the earth, one whose green hair had been trimmed into a ragged Mohawk. Rising beyond the west wall, several iron girders were visible, evidence of the new wing that was under construction. The new wing was frequently referenced in conversation as being the panacea for whatever problems existed in our relatively problem-free environment—it seemed an article of faith that prison life would therein be perfected. Again, this struck me as fiction disseminated by whoever was manipulating our fates.

Late one afternoon some four months after my arrival, myself and Causey—toward whom I had succeeded in developing a neutral attitude—and Terry Berbick, a short, thickset bank robber with a gnomish look, his curly black hair and beard shot through with gray, were sitting against the east wall in the yard, discussing the newcomer on our block, Harry Colangelo: this happened to be the baldheaded man whom I had confronted on the day I came to the prison. His furtive air and incoherent verbal outbursts had made a poor impression, and Berbick was of the opinion that Colangelo's move onto the block had been premature.

"Something confused the boy. Caught him at a crucial moment during his period of adjustment, and he's never gotten squared away." Berbick glanced at me. "Might be that dust-up with you did the trick."

"It wasn't that big a deal."

"I don't know. Way he stares at you, seems like you got under his skin. It might be why he moved up to eight—so he can come back at you easier."

"I've seen it before," Causey said. "Something happens early on to fuck up a man's instincts, and next you know he goes to acting all haywire. Gets his ass transferred right on outa here."

I was not certain that being transferred out of Diamond Bar was the bleak prospect that Causey and Berbick thought it, but saw no need to argue the point.

"There the fucker is." Causey pointed to the slope on our left, where Colangelo was moving crabwise down the ridge, his pink scalp agleam with the westering sun, eyes fixed upon us. "I think Terry nailed it. The man's all messed up behind you."

"Whatever." I turned my attention to the four old men who purportedly ruled the world. Doddering on their height, the wind flying their sparse hair up into wild frays. Behind them, the tops of the girders burned

gold, like iron candles touched with holy fire. Several younger men stood near the four. When I asked who they were, Berbick said they spoke for the board.

"What?" I said. "The masters of the universe can't talk for themselves?"

Berbick rolled up to his feet, smartly dusted the seat of his trousers, acting pissed-off. "You want to find out about the board, let's go see them."

I looked at him with amusement.

"You act like you know something," he said, "but you don't know as much as we do. And we don't know dip."

"Ain't no thing," I said. "Forget it."

"Nothing bad'll happen. We'll go with you." He glanced at Causey. "Right?"

Causey shrugged. "Sure."

Berbick arched an eyebrow and said to me in a taunting voice, "It's just four old guys, Tommy. Come on!"

Colangelo, who had been sitting upslope and to the left of us, scrambled up and hurried out of our path as we climbed the ridge.

"Fucking freak!" said Berbick as we drew abreast of him.

The board members were standing in a semicircle just below the highest point of the ridge, which was tufted with two roughly globular, almost identically puny shrubs, so sparsely leaved that from a distance, seen against the backdrop of the stone wall, they looked like the models of two small planets with dark gray oceans and island continents of green. The steadfastness with which the board was contemplating them gave rise to the impression that they were considering emigration to one or the other. Drawing near, I saw that the oldest among them, Czerny, appeared to be speaking, and the others, their eyes wandering, did not appear to be listening. Holmes, a shrunken black man, bald except for puffs of cottony hair above his ears and behind his neck, was shifting his feet restlessly, and the other two, Ashford and LeGary, both grandfather-gray and gaunt, were posed in vacant attitudes. One of the younger men who shadowed them, a stocky Latino in his forties, blocked our path, politely asked what we wanted, and Berbick jerked his thumb toward me and said, "Penhaligon here wants to meet the board."

"I don't want to meet them," I said, annoyed. "I was just wondering about them."

"They're busy," the Latino said. "But I'll see."

"You trying to fuck me over?" I asked Berbick as the Latino man went to consult with the board.

He looked pleased with himself. "What could happen? It's only four old guys."

"Nothing to worry about," Causey said. "He's just giving you shit."

"I don't need you interpreting for me, okay?" I said. "You can quit acting like my fucking big sister."

"Damn!" said Berbick with surprise. "He's coming over."

With the Latino holding his elbow, Czerny was heading toward us, shuffling through the ankle-high grasses, wobbly and frail. His caved-in face was freckled with liver spots, and the tip of his tongue flicked out with lizardly insistence. He was small, no more than five feet five, but his hands were those of a much larger man, wide and thick-fingered, with prominent knuckles—they trembled now, but looked as if they had been used violently during his youth. His eyes were a watery grayish blue, the sclera laced with broken vessels, and the right one had a cloudy cast. When he reached us, he extended a hand and gave my forearm a tentative three-fingered pat, like the benediction of a senile pope who had forgotten the proper form. He mumbled something, barely a whisper. The Latino man gave ear, and when Czerny had finished, he said, "There's important work for you here, Penhaligon. You should set about it quickly."

It did not seem that Czerny had spoken long enough to convey this much information. I suspected that the Latino man and his associates were running a hustle, pretending to interpret the maunderings of four senile old men and in the process guaranteeing a soft life for themselves.

Czerny muttered something more, and the Latino said, "Come visit me in my house whenever you wish."

The old man assayed a faltering smile; the Latino steadied him as he turned and, with reverent tenderness, led him back to join the others. I framed a sarcastic comment but was stopped by Causey's astonished expression. "What's going on?" I asked.

"Man invited you to his house," Causey said with an air of disbelief.

"Yeah... so?"

"That doesn't happen too often."

"I been here almost five years, and I don't remember it ever happening," Berbick said.

I glanced back and forth between them. "Wasn't him invited me—it was his fucking handler."

Berbick made a disdainful noise, shook his head as if he couldn't fathom my stupidity, and Causey said, "Maybe when you go see him, you'll..."

"Why the fuck would I go see him? So I can get groped by some old wheeze?"

"I guess you got better things to do," Berbick said. He was acting pissed-off again, and I said, "What crawled up your ass, man?"

He started to step to me, but Causey moved between us, poked me in the chest with two fingers and said, "You little hump! You walk straight up to eight from the door... You don't seem to appreciate what that means. Frank Czerny invites you to his house and you ridicule the man. I been trying to help you..."

"I don't want your help, faggot!"

I recognized Causey's humorless smile as the same expression he had worn many years ago prior to ramming my head into a shower wall. I moved back a pace, but the smile faded and he said calmly, "Powers that be got something in mind for you, Penhaligon. That's plain to everyone 'cept you. Seems like you forgot everything you learned about surviving in prison. You don't come to new walls with an attitude. You pay attention to how things are and behave accordingly. Doesn't matter you don't like it. You do what you hafta. I'm telling you—you don't get with the program, they gonna transfer your sorry ass."

I pretended to shudder.

"Man thinks he's a hardass," said Berbick, who was gazing up at one of the guard turrets, an untenanted cupola atop a stone tower. "He doesn't know what hard is."

"Thing you oughta ask yourself," Causey said to me, "is where you gonna get transferred to."

He and Berbick started downslope, angling toward an unpopulated section of the east wall. Alone on the height, I was possessed by the paranoid suspicion that the groups of men huddled along the wall were all talking about me, but the only evidence that supported this was Colangelo, who was standing halfway down the slope to my right, some forty feet away, almost directly beneath the spot where the board was assembled. He was watching me intently, expectantly, as if anticipating that I might come at him. With his glowing scalp, his eyes pointed with gold, he had the look of a strange pink demon dressed in prison gray, and my usual disdain for him was supplanted by nervousness. As I descended from the ridge top, he took a parallel path, maintaining the distance between us, and though under ordinary circumstances I would have been tempted to challenge him, having alienated Causey and Berbick, knowing myself isolated, I picked up my pace and did not feel secure until I was back in my cell.

Over the next several days, I came to recognize that, as Causey had asserted, I had indeed forgotten the basics of survival, and that no matter how I felt about the board, about the nature of Diamond Bar, I would be well served to pay Czerny a visit. I put off doing so, however, for several days more. Though I would not have admitted it, I found the prospect of mounting the iron stair to the tier where Czerny lived intimidating—it appeared that in acknowledging the semblance of the old man's authority, I had to a degree accepted its reality. Sitting in my cell, staring up at the dim white lights beyond the ninth stair, I began to order what I knew of the prison, to seek in that newly ordered knowledge a logical underpinning that would, if not explain everything I had seen, at least provide a middle ground between the poles of faith and sophism. I repaired my relationship with Causey, a matter of simple apology, and from him I learned that the prison had been constructed in the 1850s and originally used to house men whose crimes were related in one way or another to the boomtowns of the Gold Rush. The Board of Prisons had decided to phase out Diamond Bar in the 1900s, and at this time, Causey believed, something had happened to transform a horrific place that few survived into the more genial habitation it had since become. He had unearthed from the library copies of communications between the Board of Prisons and the warden, a man named McCandless Quires, that documented the rescinding of the phase-out order and conferred autonomy upon the prison, with the idea that it should become a penal colony devoted to rehabilitation rather than punishment. During that period, every level of society had been rife with reformers, and prison reform was much discussed—in light of this, such a change as Diamond Bar had undergone did not seem extraordinary; but the fact that it had been given to Quires to oversee the change, that smacked of the bizarre, for he had been frequently reprimanded by the Board for his abuses of prisoners. Indeed, it was the atrocities perpetrated during his stewardship that had induced the Board to consider the question of reform. It was reported that men had been impaled, flayed, torn apart by the prison dogs. Quires' letters demonstrated that he had undergone a transformation. Prior to 1903, his tone in response to the Board's inquiries was defiant and blasphemous, but thereafter his letters displayed a rational, even a repentant character, and he continued to serve as warden until his retirement in 1917. There was no record of a replacement having been appointed, and Causey theorized that the board as we knew it had then come to power, though it was possible, given Quires' advanced age (88), that they had been running things for many years previously. From 1917 on, communications between Diamond Bar and the Board of Prisons steadily diminished, and in 1944, not long before VE Day, they apparently ceased altogether. It was as if the prison, for all intents and purposes, had become non-existent in the eyes of the state.

Once Causey showed me a yellowed photograph he had unearthed from the prison archives. It had been shot in the yard on a sunny day in May of 1917—the date was inscribed on the back of the photo in a crabbed script—and it depicted a group of a woman and five men, four convicts, one of them black, and the last, an elderly man with white, windblown hair and a craggy, seamed face, clad in a dark suit and tie. Causey identified the elderly man as McCandless Quires, the warden. "And these here," he said, indicating the other four, "that's the board." He tapped each in turn. "Ashford, Czerny, LeGary, Holmes."

Judging by their faces, the men were all in their twenties. There was a rough similarity of feature between them and the old men who met each day in the yard, but the idea that they were one and the same seemed absurd.

"That's so, they'd all have to be more than a hundred," I said. "They're old, but not that old."

"Look at the shape of their heads," Causey said. "Their expressions. They all got that spacey smile. Look at Czerny's hands. See how big they are? It's them, all right."

"You need to take a breath, man. This isn't the fucking Magic Kingdom, this is prison we're talking about."

"This is Diamond Bar," he said sullenly. "And we don't know what the hell that is."

I studied the photograph more closely, concentrating on the woman. She was lovely, delicate of feature, with flowing blonde hair. Noticing my attentiveness, Causey said, "I believe that there's a plume. Quires didn't have no daughter, no wife, and she got the look of a plume."

"What look is that?"

"Too perfect. Like she ain't a man or a woman, but something else entirely."

The photograph aside, what Causey told me lent a plausible historical context to the implausible reality of Diamond Bar, but the key ingredient of the spell that had worked an enchantment upon the prison was missing, and when at last I went to visit Czerny, I had retrenched somewhat and was content to lean upon my assumption that we knew nothing of our circumstance and that everything we thought we knew might well have been put forward to distract us from the truth. Climbing the stairs, passing meter after meter of stone, ash-black and broken like the walls of a mineshaft, I felt on edge. Up on the third tier, the ceiling lights shed a glow that had the quality of strong moonlight; the bars and railings were flaked with rust. Four prisoners were lounging against the railing outside Czerny's cell—the Latino who had spoken for him was not among them—and one, a long-limbed black man with processed hair, his sideburns and thin mustache giving his lean face a piratical look, separated from the rest and came toward me, frowning.

"You supposed to come a week ago and you just coming now?" he said. "That ain't how it goes, Penhaligon."

"He told me to come whenever I wanted."

"I don't care what he said. It's disrespectful."

"That kind of old school, isn't it?"

He looked perplexed.

"It's the kind of attitude you'd expect to find at Vacaville and San Q," I said. "Not at a forward-thinking joint like Diamond Bar."

The black man was about to speak, but turned back to the cell as Czerny shuffled onto the tier. I had no inclination to mock the old man. Surrounded by young men attentive as tigers, he seemed the source of their strength and not their ward. Though I did not truly credit this notion, when he beckoned, the slightest of gestures, I went to his side without hesitation. His eyes grazed mine, then wandered toward the dim vault beyond the railing. After a second, he shuffled back into the cell, indicating by another almost imperceptible gesture that I should follow.

A television set mounted on the wall was tuned to a dead channel, its speakers hissing, its screen filled with a patternless sleet of black, silver, and green. Czerny sat on his bunk, its sheets cream-colored and shiny like silk, and—since he did not invite me to sit—I took a position at the rear of the cell, resting a hand upon the wall. The surface of the wall was unusually smooth, and upon examining it I realized it was not granite but black marble worked with white veins that altogether formed a design of surpassing complexity.

During my first conversation with Causey, he had suggested I purchase some pictures from the commissary to decorate my cell "until your wall comes in." Though struck by this phrase, at the time my attention had been dominated by other concerns; but I had since discovered that once a cell was occupied, discolorations manifested on the wall facing the bunk, and these discolorations gradually produced intricate patterns reminiscent of the rock the Chinese call "picture stone," natural mineral abstractions in which an imaginative viewer could discern all manner of landscapes. The wall in my cell had begun to develop discolorations, its patterns as yet sparse and poorly defined; but Causey's wall, Berbick's, and others were fully realized. It was said these idiosyncratic designs were illustrative of the occupant's inner nature and,

when reflected upon, acted to instruct the observer as to his flaws, his potentials, the character of his soul. None of them—at least none I had seen—compared to the elaborate grandeur of the one on Czerny's wall. Gazing at it, I traveled the labyrinthine streets of a fantastic city lined by buildings with spindly, spiny turrets and octagonal doorways; I explored the pathways of a white forest whose creatures were crowned with antlers that themselves formed other, even more intricate landscapes; I coursed along a black river whose banks were sublime constructions of crystal and ice, peopled by nymphs and angels with wings that dwarfed their snowy bodies like the wings of arctic butterflies. I cannot say how long I stared—quite a while, I believe, because my mouth was dry when I looked away—but from the experience I derived an impression of a convoluted, intensely spiritual intellect that warred with Czerny's drab, dysfunctional appearance. He was smiling daftly, eyes fixed on his hands, which were fidgeting in his lap, and I wondered if the audience was over, if I should leave. Then he spoke, muttering as he had out in the yard. This time I understood him perfectly, yet I am certain no intelligible word passed his lips.

"Do you see?" he asked. "Do you understand where you are now?"

I was so startled at having understood him, I could muster no reply.

He raised a hand, trailed his fingers across the bars of the gate, the sort of gesture a salesman might make to display the hang of a fabric. Assuming that he wanted me to inspect the bars, I stepped around him and bent to look at one. A bit less than halfway along its length the color and finish of the metal changed from rough and dark to a rich yellow. The join where the two colors met was seamless, and the yellow metal had an unmistakable soft luster and smoothness: gold. It was as if a luxuriant infection were spreading along the bar, along—I realized—all the bars of Czerny's cell.

I am not sure why this unsettled me more profoundly than the rest of the bizarre occurrences I'd met with at Diamond Bar. Perhaps it resonated with some gloomy fairy tale that had frightened me as a child or inflamed some even deeper wound to my imagination, for I had a sudden appreciation of Czerny as a wizardly figure, a shabby derelict who had revealed himself of an instant to be a creature of pure principle and power. I backed out of the cell, fetched up against the railing, only peripherally mindful of Czerny's attendants. The old man continued to smile, his gaze drifting here and there, centering briefly on my face, and in that broken muttering whose message I now comprehended as clearly as I might the orotund tones of a preacher ringing from a pulpit, he said, "You cannot retreat from the heart of the law, Penhaligon. You can let it illuminate you or you can fail it, but you cannot retreat. Bear this in mind."

That night as I lay in my cell, immersed in the quiet of the cellblock like a live coal at the heart of a diamond, growing ever more anxious at the thought of Czerny in his cell of gold and marble, an old mad king whose madness could kill, for I believed now he was the genius of the place... that night I determined I would escape. Despite the caution implicit in Czerny's final words, I knew I could never thrive there. I needed firm ground beneath my feet, not philosophy and magic or the illusion of magic. If I were to live bounded by walls and laws—as do we all—I wanted walls manned and topped with razor wire, written regulations, enemies I could see. Yet the apparent openness of the prison, its lack of visible security, did not fool me. Power did not exist without enforcement. I would have to ferret out the traps, learn their weaknesses, and in order to do that I needed to become part of the prison and pretend to embrace its ways.

My first step in this direction was to find an occupation, a meaningful activity that would convince whoever was watching that I had turned my mind onto acceptable avenues; since my only skill was at art, I began drawing once again. But making sketches, I realized, would not generate a *bona fide* of my submersion in the life of Diamond Bar; thus I undertook the creation of a mural, using for a canvas the walls and ceiling of an empty storeroom in one of the sub-basements. I chose as a theme the journey that had led me to the prison, incorporating images of the river crossing, of Frank Ristelli, the gray van, and so forth. The overall effect was more crazy quilt than a series of unified images, although I was pleased with certain elements of the design; but for all the attention it received, it might have rivaled Piero della Francesca. Men stopped by at every hour to watch me paint, and the members of the board, along with their entourages, were frequent visitors. Czerny took particular interest in my depiction of Ristelli; he would stand in front of the image for periods up to half an hour, addressing it with his customary vacant nods. When I asked one of his attendants the reason for his interest, I was told that Ristelli was revered for a great personal sacrifice made on behalf of us all and reflecting on the origins of our common home—he had been on the verge of being made a member of the board, but had forsworn the security and comfort of the prison and returned to the world in order to seek out men suitable for Diamond Bar.

Placing Ristelli's zoned piety in context with the psychological climate of the prison, it was not difficult to understand why they perceived him to be their John the Baptist; but in the greater context of the rational, the idea was ludicrous. More than ludicrous. Insane. Recalling how laughable Ristelli's preachments had



seemed back in Vacaville reinforced my belief that the population of Diamond Bar was being transformed by person or persons unknown into a brain-dead congregation of delusionaries, and fearful of joining them, I intensified my focus on escape, exploring the sub-basements, the walls, the turrets, searching for potential threats. On one of these explorative journeys, as I passed through Czerny's block, I noticed that the massive oak door leading to the new wing, heretofore always locked, was standing partway open and, curious, I stepped inside. The space in which I found myself was apparently an anteroom, one more appropriate to a modern cathedral than a jail: domed and columned, with scaffolding erected that permitted access to every inch of the roof and walls. The door on the far side of the room was locked, and there was little else to see, the walls and ceiling being white and unadorned. I was on the verge of leaving when I saw a sheet of paper taped to one of the columns. Written in pencil upon it was the following:

"This place is yours to paint, Penhaligon, if you wish."

A key lay on the scaffolding beside the note—it fit the oak door. I locked the door, pocketed the key and went about my business, understanding this show of trust to signify the board's recognition that I had accepted my lot and that by taking up their charge I might earn a further degree of trust and so learn something to my benefit. To succeed in this I would have to do something that would enlist their delusion, and I immediately set about working on a design that would illustrate the essence of the delusion, *The Heart of the Law*. Though I began with cynical intent, as the weeks went by and my cell walls were covered with sketches, I grew obsessed with the project. I wanted the mural to be beautiful and strong to satisfy the artistic portion of my nature, my ego, and not simply to satisfy the board—in truth, I presumed they would approve of anything I did that hewed to their evangel. The dome and walls of the anteroom, the graceful volume of space they described, inspired me to think analytically about painting, something I had not done before, and I challenged myself to transcend the limits of my vision, to conceive a design that was somehow larger than my soul. I came to dwell more and more on the motive theory of Diamond Bar, that the criminal was the fundamental citizen, the archetype in whose service the whole of society had been created, and in the process I came obliquely to embrace the idea, proving, I suppose, the thesis that high art is the creation of truth from the raw materials of a lie, and the artist who wishes to be adjudged "great" must ultimately, through the use of passion and its obsessive tools, believe the lie he is intent upon illuminating. To augment my analytic capacities, I read books that might shed light on the subject—works of philosophy for the most part—and was astonished to discover in the writings of Michel Foucault a theory mirroring the less articulate theory espoused by the prison population. I wondered if it might be true, if delusion were being employed in the interests of truth, and, this being the case, whether the secret masters of Diamond Bar were contemplating a general good and the experiment of which we were a part was one that sought to evolve a generation in harmony with the grand design underlying all human culture. The books were difficult for me, but I schooled myself to understand them and became adept at knotting logic into shapes that revealed new facets of possibility—new to me, at any rate. This caused me to lose myself in abstraction and consequently diminished the urgency of my intention to escape. Like everyone who lived at Diamond Bar, I seemed to have a talent in that regard.

The design I settled upon owed more to Diego Rivera and Soviet poster art than to the muralists of the Renaissance. The walls would be thronged with figures, all reacting toward the center of the design, which was to occupy the dome and which I had not yet been able to conceptualize—I felt the image would naturally occur as a byproduct of my labors. It took three months of twelve-hour days to lay out the sketch on the walls, and I estimated that, if done properly, the painting would take a year to complete. Chances were I would be gone from Diamond Bar before then, and realizing this, when I began to paint, ensorcelled by my vision; driven by the idea of finishing in a shorter time, I worked fifteen and sixteen hours a day. Dangling in harness from the scaffolding, crouched over, forced into unnatural positions, I gained an appreciation for the physical afflictions that Michelangelo endured while painting the Sistine Chapel. Each night after work I tried to shake off the aches and pains by walking through the sub-basements of the prison, and it was during one of these walks that I encountered the plumes.

In prison, sex is an all-consuming preoccupation, a topic endlessly discussed, and from my earliest days at Diamond Bar the plumes had been recommended as a palatable alternative to self-gratification. The new wing, it was said, would house both women and men, thus ending the single unnatural constraint of prison life, and many held that the plumes would eventually become those women, evolving—as were we all—into their ideal form. Even now, Causey said, the plumes were superior to the sex available in other prisons. "It's not like fucking a guy," he said. "It feels, y'know, okay."

"Is it like fucking a woman?" I asked.

He hesitated and said, "Kinda."

"'Kinda' doesn't do it for me."

"Only reason it's different is because you're thinking about it not being a woman."

"Yeah, well. I'll pass. I don't want to think when I'm fucking."

Causey continued urging me to give the plumes a try, because—I believed—he felt that if I surrendered to temptation, I would become a complicitor in perversion, and this would somehow lessen the guilt attaching to his sexual assault on me. That he felt guilty about what had transpired between us was not in question. As our relationship progressed, he came to speak openly about the event and sought to engage me in a dialogue concerning it. Therapy, I supposed. Part of his process of self-examination. At the time, I rejected his suggestions that I visit the plumes out of hand, but they may have had some effect on me, for in retrospect I see that my initial encounter with them, though it seemed accidental, was likely an accident I contrived. I was, you see, in a heightened state of sexuality. Immersed in my work, essentially in love with it, while painting I would often become aroused not by any particular stimulus—there were no visual or tactile cues—but by the concentrated effort, itself a form of desire maintained at peak intensity for hours on end. And so on the night I strayed into the section of the prison occupied by the plumes, I was, though tired, mentally and sexually alert. I was tempting myself, testing my limits, my standards, hoping they would fail me.

Three levels down from the main walls were dozens of rooms—bedchambers, a communal kitchen, common rooms, and so forth—an area accessed by a double door painted white and bearing a carved emblem that appeared to represent a sheaf of plumes, this the source of the name given to those who dwelled within. Much of the space had the sterile decor of a franchise hotel: carpeted corridors with benches set into walls whose patterned discolorations brought to mind *art nouveau* flourishes. The common rooms were furnished with sofas and easy chairs and filled with soft music whose melodies were as unmemorable as an absent caress. No barred gates, just wooden doors. The lighting was dim, every fixture limned by a faint halation, giving the impression that the air was permeated by a fine mist. I felt giddy on entering the place, as if I had stood up too quickly. Nerves, I assumed, because I felt giddier yet when I caught sight of my first plume, a slim blond attired in a short gray dress with spaghetti straps. She had none of the telltale signs of a transvestite or a transsexual. Her hands and feet were small, her nose and mouth delicately shaped, her figure not at all angular. After she vanished around a corner, I remembered she was a man, and that recognition bred abhorrence and self-loathing in me. I turned, intending to leave, and bumped into another plume who had been about to walk past me from behind. A willowy brunette with enormous dark eyes, dressed in the same fashion as the blond, her mouth thinned in exasperation. Her expression softened as she stared at me. I suppose I gaped at her. The memory of how I behaved is impaired by the ardor with which I was studying her, stunned by the air of sweet intelligence generated when she smiled. Her face was almost unmarked by time—I imagined her to be in her late twenties—and reminded me of the faces of madonnas in Russian ikons: long and pale and solemn, wide at the cheekbones, with an exaggerated arch to the eyebrows and heavy-lidded eyes. Her hair fell straight and shining onto her back. There was nothing sluttish or coarse about her; on the contrary, she might have been a graduate student out for an evening on the town, a young wife preparing to meet her husband's employer, an ordinary beauty in her prime. I tried to picture her as a man but did not succeed in this, claimed instead by the moment.

"Are you trying to find someone?" she asked. "You look lost."

"No," I said. "I'm just walking... looking around."

"Would you like me to give you the tour?" She put out her right hand to be shaken. "I'm Bianca."

The way she extended her arm straight out, assertive yet graceful, hand angled down and inward a bit: it was so inimitably a female gesture, devoid of the frilliness peculiar to the gestures of men who pretend to be women, it convinced me on some core level of her femininity, and my inhibitions fell away. As we strolled, she pointed out the features of the place. A bar where the ambience of a night club was created by red and purple and spotlights that swept over couples dancing together; a grotto hollowed out from the rock with a pool in which several people were splashing one another; a room where groups of men and plumes were playing cards and shooting pool. During our walk, I told Bianca my life story in brief, but when I asked about hers, she said, "I didn't exist before I came to Diamond Bar." Then, perhaps because she noticed disaffection in my face, she added, "That sounds overly dramatic, I know. But it's more or less true. I'm very different from how I used to be."

"That's true of everyone here. The thinking you do about the past, it can't help but change you."

"That's not what I mean," she said.

At length she ushered me into a living room cozily furnished in the manner of a bachelorette apartment and insisted I take a seat on the sofa, then went through a door into the next room, reappearing seconds later carrying a tray on which were glasses and a bottle of red wine. She sat beside me, and as she poured the wine I watched her breasts straining against the gray bodice, the soft definition of her arms, the precise articulation

of the muscles at the corners of her mouth. The wine, though a touch bitter, put me at ease, but my sense of a heated presence so near at hand sparked conflicting feelings, and I was unable to relax completely. I told myself that I did not want intimacy, yet that was patently untrue. I had been without a woman for three years, and even had I been surrounded by women during that time, Bianca would have made a powerful impression. The more we talked, the more she revealed of herself, not the details of her past, but the particularity of her present: her quiet laugh, a symptom—it seemed—of ladylike restraint; the grave consideration she gave to things I said; the serene grace of her movements. There was an aristocratic quality to her personal style, a practiced, almost ritual caution. Only after learning that I was the one painting a mural in the new wing did she betray the least excitement, and even her excitement was colored with restraint. She leaned toward me, hands clasped in her lap, and her smile broadened, as if my achievement, such as it was, made her proud.

"I wish I could do something creative," she said wistfully at one point. "I don't think I've got it in me."

"Creativity's like skin color. Everyone's got some."

She made a sad mouth. "Not me."

"I'll teach you to draw if you want. Next time I'll bring a sketch pad, some pencils."

She traced the stem of her wine glass with a forefinger. "That would be nice... if you come back."

"I will," I told her.

"I don't know." She said this distantly, then straightened, sitting primly on the edge of the sofa. "I can tell you don't think it would be natural between us."

I offered a reassurance, but she cut me off, saying, "It's all right. I understand it's strange for you. You can't accept that I'm natural." She let her eyes hold on my face for a second, then lowered her gaze to the wine glass. "Sometimes it's hard for me to accept, but I am, you know."

I thought she was saying that she was post-operative, yet because she spoke with such offhanded conviction and not the hysteria-tinged defiance of a prison bitch, I also wondered, against logic, if she might be telling the truth and was a woman in every meaning of the word. She came to her feet and stepped around the coffee table and stood facing me. "I want to show you," she said. "Will you let me show you?"

The mixture of shyness and seductiveness she exhibited in slipping out of her dress was completely natural, redolent of a woman who knew she was beautiful yet was not certain she would be beautiful enough to please a new man, and when she stood naked before me, I could not call to mind a single doubt as to her femininity, all my questions answered by high, small breasts and long legs evolving from the milky curve of her belly. She seemed the white proof of a sensual absolute, and the one thought that separated itself out from the thoughtlessness of desire was that here might be the central figure in my mural.

During the night that followed, nothing Bianca did in any way engaged my critical faculties. I had no perch upon which a portion of my mind stood and observed. It was like all good nights passed with a new lover, replete with tenderness and awkwardness and intensity. I spent every night for the next five weeks with her, teaching her to draw, talking, making love, and when I was in her company, no skepticism concerning the rightness of the relationship entered in. The skepticism that afflicted me when we were apart was ameliorated by the changes that knowing her brought to my work. I came to understand that the mural should embody a dynamic vertical progression from darkness and solidity to brightness and evanescence. The lower figures would be, as I had envisioned, heavy and stylized, but those above demanded to be rendered impressionistically, gradually growing less and less defined, until at the dome, at the heart of the law, they became creatures of light. I reshaped the design accordingly and set to work with renewed vigor, though I did not put in so many hours as before, eager each night to return to Bianca. I cannot say I neglected the analytic side of my nature—I continued to speculate on how she had become a woman. In exploring her body I had found no surgical scars, nothing to suggest such an invasive procedure as would be necessary to effect the transformation, and in her personality I perceived no masculine defect. She was, for all intents and purposes, exactly what she appeared: a young woman who, albeit experienced with men, had retained a certain innocence that I believed she was yielding up to me.

When I mentioned Bianca to Causey, he said, "See, I told ya."

"Yeah, you told me. So what up with them?"

"The plumes? There's references to them in the archives, but they're vague."

I asked him to elaborate, and he said all he knew was that the criteria by which the plumes were judged worthy of Diamond Bar was different from that applied to the rest of the population. The process by which they entered the prison, too, was different—they referred to it as the Mystery, and there were suggestions in the archival material that it involved a magical transformation. None of the plumes would discuss the matter other than obliquely. This seemed suggestive of the pathological myths developed by prison queens to justify their femininity, but I refused to let it taint my thoughts concerning Bianca. Our lives had intertwined so

effortlessly, I began to look upon her as my companion. I recognized that if my plans for escape matured I would have to leave her, but rather than using this as an excuse to hold back, I sought to know her more deeply. Every day brought to light some new feature of her personality. She had a quiet wit that she employed with such subtlety, I sometimes did not realize until after the fact that she had been teasing me; and she possessed a stubborn streak that, in combination with her gift for logic, made her a formidable opponent in any argument. She was especially fervent in her defense of the proposition that Diamond Bar manifested the principle from which the form of the human world had been struck, emergent now, she liked to claim, for a mysterious yet ultimately beneficent reason.

In the midst of one such argument, she became frustrated and said, "It's not that you're a non-conformist, it's like you're practicing non-conformity to annoy everyone. You're being childish!"

"Am not!" I said.

"I'm serious! It's like with your attitude toward Ernst." A book of Max Ernst prints, one of many art books she had checked out of the library, was resting on the coffee table—she gave it an angry tap. "Of all the books I bring home, this is the one you like best. You leaf through it all the time. But when I tell you I think he's great, you..."

"He's a fucking poster artist."

"Then why look at his work every single night?"

"He's easy on the eyes. That doesn't mean he's worth a shit. It just means his stuff pacifies you."

She gave her head a rueful shake.

"We're not talking about Max Ernst, anyway," I said.

"It doesn't matter what we talk about. Any subject it's the same. I don't understand you. I don't understand why you're here. In prison. You say the reason you started doing crime was due to your problems with authority, but I don't see that in you. It's there, I guess, but it doesn't seem that significant. I can't imagine you did crime simply because you wanted to spit in the face of authority."

"It wasn't anything deep, okay? It's not like I had an abusive childhood or my father ran off with his secretary. None of that shit. I'm a fuck-up. Crime was my way of fucking up."

"There must be something else! What appealed to you about it?"

"The thing I liked best," I said after giving the question a spin, "was sitting around a house I broke into at three in the morning, thinking how stupid the owners were for letting a mutt like me mess with their lives."

"And here you are, in a truly strange house, thinking we're all stupid."

The topic was making me uncomfortable. "We're always analyzing my problems. Let's talk about you for a change. Why don't you confide your big secrets so we can run 'em around the track a few times?"

A wounded expression came to her face. "The reason I haven't told you about my life is because I don't think you're ready to handle it."

"Don't you trust me?"

She leaned back against the cushions and folded her arms, stared at the coffee table. "That's not it... altogether."

"So you don't trust me, and there's more. Great." I made a show of petulance, only partly acting it.

"I can't tell you some things."

"What's that mean?"

"It means I can't!" Her anger didn't seem a show, but it faded quickly. "You crossed the river to come here. We have to cross our own river. It's different from yours."

"The Mystery."

She looked surprised, and I told her what I had learned from Causey.

"He's right," she said. "I won't talk about it. I can't."

"Why? It's like a vow or something?"

"Or something." She relaxed her stiff posture. "The rest of it... I'm ashamed. When I look back, I can't believe I was so disreputable. Be patient, all right? Please?"

"You, too," I said.

"I am patient. I just enjoy arguing too much."

I put my hand beneath her chin, trying to jolly her. "If you want, we can argue some more."

"I want to win," she said, smiling despite herself.

"Everything's like you say. Diamond Bar's heaven on fucking earth. The board's..."

"I don't want you to give in!" She pushed me onto my back and lay atop me. "I want to break you down and smash your flimsy defenses!"

Her face poised above me, bright-eyed and soft, lips parted, seemed oddly predatory, like that of a hungry dove. "What were we arguing about?" I asked.

"Everything," she said and kissed me. "You, me, life. Max Ernst."

One day while drinking a cup of coffee in the cafeteria, taking a break from work, I entered into a casual conversation with a dour red-headed twig of a man named Phillip Stringer, an ex-arsonist who had recently moved from the eighth tier into the old wing. He mentioned that he had seen me with Bianca a few nights previously. "She's a reg'lar wild woman!" he said. "You touch her titties, you better hold on, 'cause the next thing it's like you busting out of chute number three on Mustang Sally!"

Though giving and enthusiastic in sex, Bianca's disposition toward the act impressed me as being on the demure side of "reg'lar wild woman." Nevertheless, I withheld comment.

"She was too wild for me," Stringer went on. "It's not like I don't enjoy screwing chicks with dicks. Truth is, I got a thing for 'em. But when they got a bigger dick'n I got... guess I felt a tad intimidated."

"Hell are you talking about?" I asked.

He gazed at me in bewilderment. "The plume I saw you with. Bianca."

"You're fucked up, man! She doesn't have a dick."

"You think that, you never seen a dick. Thing's damn near wide around as a Coke can!"

"You got the wrong girl," I told him, growing irritated.

Stringer glowered at me. "I may not be the sharpest knife in the drawer, but I know who the hell I'm screwing."

"Then you're a goddamn liar," I said.

If it had been another time, another prison, we would have been rolling around on the floor, thumbing eyes and throwing knees, but the placid offices of Diamond Bar prevailed, and Stringer dialed back his anger, got to his feet. "I been with that bitch must be fifty times, and I'm telling you she gets hard enough to bang nails with that son-of-a-bitch. She goes to bouncing up and down, moaning, "Only for you..." All kinds a sweet shit. You close your eyes, you'd swear you's with a woman. But you grab a peek and see that horse cock wagging around, it's just more'n I can handle." He hitched up his trousers. "You better get yourself an adjustment, pal. You spending way too much time on that painting of yours."

If it were not for the phrase "only for you," I would have disregarded what Stringer said. Indeed, I did disregard most of it. But that phrase, which Bianca habitually breathed into my ear whenever she drew near her moment, seeded me with paranoia, and that night as we sat on the sofa, going over the charcoal sketches she had done of her friends, I repeated the essence of Stringer's words, posing them as a joke. Bianca displayed no reaction, continuing to study one of the sketches.

"Hear what I said?" I asked.

"Uh-huh."

"Well?"

"What do you want me to say?"

"I guess I thought you'd say something, this guy going around telling everybody you got a dick."

She set down the sketchpad and looked at me glumly. "I haven't been with Phillip for nearly two years."

It took me a moment to interpret this. "I guess it's been such a long time, he mixed you up with somebody."

The vitality drained from her face. "No."

"Then what the fuck are you saying?"

"When I was with Phillip, I was different from the way I am with you."

Irritated by the obliqueness with which she was framing her responses, I said, "You telling me you had a dick when you were seeing him?"

"Yes."

Hearing this did not thrill me, but I had long since dealt with it emotionally. "So after that you had the operation?"

"No."

"No? What? You magically lost your dick?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Well, I do! Hell are you trying to tell me?"

"I'm not sure how it happens... it just does! Whatever the man wants, that's how I am. It's like that with all the plumes... until you find the right person. The one you can be who you really are with."

I struggled to make sense of this. "So you're claiming a guy comes along wanting you to have a dick, you grow one?"

She gave a nod of such minimal proportions, it could have been a twitch. "I'm sorry."

"Gee," I said with thick sarcasm. "It's kinda like a fairy tale, isn't it?"

"It's true!" She put a hand to her forehead, collecting herself. "When I meet someone new, I change. It's confusing. I hardly know it's happening, but I'm different afterward."

I do not know what upset me more, the implication, however improbable, that she was a shapeshifter, capable of switching her sexual characteristics to please a partner, or the idea that she believed this. Either way, I found the situation intolerable. This is not to say I had lost my feelings for her, but I could no longer ignore the perverse constituency of her personality. I pushed up from the couch and started for the door.

Bianca cried out, "Don't go!"

I glanced back to find her gazing mournfully at me. She was beautiful, but I could not relate to her beauty, only to the neurotic falsity I believed had created it.

"Don't you understand?" she said. "For you, I'm who I want to be. I'm a woman. I can prove it!"

"That's okay," I said coldly, finally. "I've had more than enough proof."

Things did not go well for me after that evening. The mural went well. Though I no longer approached the work with the passion I had formerly brought to it, every brushstroke seemed a contrivance of passion, to be the product of an emotion that continued to act through me despite the fact that I had forgotten how to feel it. Otherwise, my life at Diamond Bar became fraught with unpleasantness. Harry Colangelo, who had more or less vanished during my relationship with Bianca, once again began to haunt me. He would appear in the doorway of the anteroom while I was painting and stare venomously until I shouted at him. Inarticulate shouts like those you might use to drive a dog away from a garbage can. I developed back problems for which I was forced to take pain medication and this slowed the progress of my work. Yet the most painful of my problems was that I missed Bianca, and there was no medication for this ailment. I was tempted to seek her out, to apologize for my idiocy in rejecting her, but was persuaded not to do so by behavioral reflexes that, though I knew them to be outmoded, having no relation to my life at the moment, I could not help obeying. Whenever an image of our time together would flash through my mind, immediately thereafter would follow some grotesquely sexual mockery of the image that left me confused and mortified.

I retreated into my work. I slept on the scaffolding, roused by the mysterious cry that like the call of some grievous religion announced each dawn. I lived on candy bars, peanut butter, crackers, and soda that I obtained at the commissary, and I rarely left the anteroom, keeping the door locked most of the days, venturing out only for supplies. When I woke I would see the mural surrounding me on every side, men with thick arms and cold white eyes pupiled with black suns, masses of them clad in prison gray, crowded together on iron stairs (the sole architectural component of the design), many-colored faces engraved with desperation, greed, lust, rage, longing, bitterness, fear, muscling each other out of the way so as to achieve a clearer view of the unpainted resolution that overarched their suffering and violence. At times I thought I glimpsed in the mural—or underlying it—a cohesive element I had not foreseen, something created from me and not by me, a truth the work was teaching me, and in my weaker moments I supposed it to be the true purpose of Diamond Bar, still fragmentary and thus inexpressible; but I did not seek to analyze or clarify—if it was there, then its completion was not dependent upon my understanding. Yet having apprehended this unknown value in my work forced me to confront the reality that I was of two minds concerning the prison. I no longer perceived our lives as necessarily being under sinister control, and I had come to accept the possibility that the board was gifted with inscrutable wisdom, the prison itself an evolutionary platform, a crucible devised in order to invest its human ore with a fresh and potent mastery, and I glided between these two poles of thought with the same rapid pendulum swing that governed my contrary attitudes toward Bianca.

From time to time the board would venture into the anteroom to inspect the mural and offer their mumbling approbation, but apart from them and occasional sightings of Causey and Colangelo, I received no other visitors. Then one afternoon about six weeks after ending the relationship, while painting high on the scaffolding, I sensed someone watching me—Bianca was standing in the doorway thirty feet below, wearing a loose gray prison uniform that hid her figure. Our stares locked for an instant, then she gestured at the walls and said, "This is beautiful." She moved deeper into the room, ducking to avoid a beam, and let her gaze drift across the closely packed images. "Your sketches weren't..." She looked up at me, brushed strands of hair from her eyes. "I didn't realize you were so accomplished."

"I'm sorry," I said, so overcome by emotion that I was unable to react to what she had said, only to what I was feeling.

She gave a brittle laugh. "Sorry that you're good? Don't be."

"You know what I mean."

"No... not really. I thought by coming here I would, but I don't." She struck a pose against the mural, standing with her back to it, her right knee drawn up, left arm extended above her head. "I suppose I'll be

portrayed like this."

It was so quiet I could hear a faint humming, the engine of our tension.

"I shouldn't have come," she said.

"I'm glad you did."

"If you're so glad, why are you standing up there?"

"I'll come down."

"And yet," she said after a beat, "still you stand there."

"How've you been?"

"Do you want me to lie? The only reason I can think of for you to ask that is you want me to lie. You know how I've been. I've been heartbroken." She ran a hand along one of the beams and examined her palm as if mindful of dust or a splinter. "I won't ask the same question. I know how you've been. You've been conflicted. And now you look frightened."

I felt encased in some cold unyielding substance, like a souvenir of life preserved in lucite.

"Why don't you talk to me?" She let out a chillier laugh. "Explain yourself."

"Jesus, Bianca. I just didn't understand what was going on."

"So it was an intellectual decision you made? A reaction to existential confusion?"

"Not entirely."

"I was making a joke." She strolled along the wall and stopped to peer at one of the faces.

"I wasn't," I said. "What you told me... how can you believe it?"

"You think I'm lying?"

"I think there's drugs in the food... in the air. Or something. There has to be a mechanism involved. Some sort of reasonable explanation."

"For what? My insanity?" She backed against the wall in order to see me better. "This is so dishonest of you."

"How's it dishonest?"

"You were happier thinking I was a post-operative transsexual? It's my irrational beliefs that drove you away? Please!" She fiddled with the ends of her hair. "Suppose what I told you is true. Suppose who I am with you is who you want me to be. Who I want to be. Would that be more unpalatable than if my sex was the result of surgery?"

"But it's not true."

"Suppose it is." She folded her arms, waiting.

"I don't guess it would matter. But that's not..."

"Now suppose just when we're starting to establish something strong, you rip it apart?" A quaver crept into her voice. "What would that make you?"

"Bianca..."

"It'd make you a fool! But then of course I'm living in a drug-induced fantasy that causes you existential confusion."

"Whatever the case," I said, "I probably am a fool."

It was impossible to read her face at that distance, but I knew her expression was shifting between anger and despair.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"God! What's wrong with you?" She stalked to the door, paused in the entrance; she stood without speaking for what seemed a very long time, looking down at the floor, then glanced sideways up at me. "I was going to prove something to you today, but I can see proving it would frighten you even more. You have to learn to accept things, Tommy, or else you won't be able to do your time. You're not deceiving anyone except yourself."

"I'm deceiving myself? Now that's a joke!"

She waved at the mural. "You think what you're painting is a lie. Don't deny it. You think it's a con you're running on us. But when I leave it'll be the only thing in the room that's still alive." She stepped halfway through the door, hesitated, and, in a voice that was barely audible, said, "Goodbye, Tommy."

I experienced a certain relief after Bianca's visit, an emotion bred by my feeling that now the relationship was irretrievably broken, and I could refocus my attention on escape; but my relief was short-lived. It was not simply that I was unable to get Bianca out of my thoughts, or even that I continued to condemn myself both for abandoning her and for having involved myself with her in the first place—it was as if I were engaged in a deeper struggle, one whose nature was beyond my power to discern, though I assumed my attitudes toward Bianca contributed to its force. Because I was unable, or perhaps unwilling, to face it, this irresolvable

conflict began to take a toll. I slept poorly and turned to drink as a remedy. Many days I painted drunk, but drunkenness had no deleterious effect on the mural—if anything, it sharpened my comprehension of what I was about. I redid the faces on the lower portions of the walls, accentuating their beastliness, contrasting them with more human faces above, and I had several small technical breakthroughs that helped me create the luminous intensity I wanted for the upper walls. The nights, however, were not so good. I went to wandering again, armed against self-recrimination and the intermittent appearances of Harry Colangelo with a bottle of something, usually home brew of recent vintage. Frequently I became lost in the sub-basements and wound up passed out on the floor. During one of these wanders, I noticed I was a single corridor removed from the habitat of the plumes, and this time, not deceiving myself as to motive, I headed for the white door. I had no wish to find Bianca. I was so debased in spirit, the idea of staining my flesh to match enticed me, and when I pushed into the entryway and heard loud rock and roll and saw that the halation surrounding the light fixtures had thickened into an actual mist that caused men and plumes to look like fantastical creatures, gray demons and their gaudy, grotesque mistresses, I plunged happily into the life of the place, searching for the most degrading encounter available.

Her name was Joy, a Los Angeleno by birth, and when I saw her dancing in the club with several men under a spotlight that shined alternately purple and rose, she seemed the parody of a woman. Not that she was unfeminine, not in the least. She was Raphaelesque, like an old-fashioned Hollywood blond teetering on the cusp between beauty and slovenly middle-age, glossy curls falling past her shoulders, the milky loaves of her breasts swaying ponderously in gray silk, her motherly buttocks dimpling beneath a tight skirt, her scarlet lips reminding of those gelatin lips full of cherry syrup you buy at Halloween, her eyes tunnels of mascara pricked by glitters. Drunk, I saw her change as the light changed. Under the purple she whitened, grew soft as ice cream, ultimately malleable; she would melt around you. Under the rose, a she-devilish shape emerged; her touch would make you feverish, infect you with a genital heat. I moved in on her, and because I had achieved an elevated status due to my connection with the board, the men dancing with her moved aside. Her fingers locked in my hair, her swollen belly rolled against me with the sodden insistence of a sea thing pushed by a tide. Her mouth tasted of liqueur and I gagged on her perfume, a scent of candied flowers. She was in every regard overpowering, like a blond rhinoceros. "What's the party for?" I shouted above the music. She laughed and cupped both hands beneath her breasts, offering them to me, and as I squeezed, manipulating their shapes, her eyelids drooped and her hips undulated. She pulled my head close and told me what she wanted me to do, what she would do.

Whereas sex with Bianca had been nuanced, passion cored with sensitivity, with Joy it was rutting, tumultuous, a jungle act, all sweat and insanity, pounding and meaty, and when I came I felt I was deflating, every pure thing spurting out of me, leaving a sack of bones and organic stink lying between her Amazon thighs. We fucked a second time with her on top. I twisted her nipples hard, like someone spinning radio dials, and throwing back her head she spat up great yells, then braced both hands on the pillow beside my head and hammered down onto me, her mouth slack, lips glistening with saliva poised an inch above mine, grunting and gasping. Then she straightened, arched her back, her entire body quaking, and let out a hideous groan followed by a string of profane syllables. Afterward she sat in a chair at her dressing table wearing a black bra and panties, legs crossed, attaching a stocking to her garter belt, posing an image that was to my eyes grossly sexual, repellently voluptuous, obscenely desirable. As she stretched out her leg, smoothing ripples in the silk, she said. "You used to be Bianca's friend."

I did not deny it.

"She's crazy about you, y'know."

"Is she here? At the party?"

"You don't need her tonight," Joy said. "You already got everything you needed."

"Is she here?"

She shook her head. "You won't be seeing her around for a while."

I mulled over this inadequate answer and decided not to pursue it.

Joy put on her other stocking. "You're still crazy about her. I'm a magnet for guys in love with other women." She admired the look of her newly stockinged leg. "It's not so bad. Sad guys fuck like they have something to prove."

"Is that right?"

"You were trying to prove something, weren't you?"

"Probably not what you think."

She adjusted her breasts, settling them more cozily in the brassiere. "Oh, I know exactly what you were trying to prove." She turned to the mirror, went to touching up her lipstick, her speech becoming halting as she wielded the applicator. "I am... expert in these matters... like all... ladies of the evening."



"Is that how you see yourself?"

She made a kissy mouth at her reflection. "There's something else in me, I think, but I haven't found the man who can bring it out." She adopted a thoughtful expression. "I could be very domestic with the right person. Very nurturing. Once the new wing's finished... I'm sure I'll find him then."

"There'll be real women living in the new wing. Lots of competition."

"We're the real women," she said with more than a hint of irritation. "We're not there yet, but we're getting there. Some of us are there already. You should know. Bianca's living proof."

Unwilling to explore this or any facet of this consensus fantasy, I changed the subject. "So, what's your story?" I asked.

"You mean my life story? Do you care?"

"I'm just making conversation."

"We had our conversation, sweetie. We just didn't talk all that much."

"I wasn't finished."

She looked at me over her shoulder, arching an eyebrow. "My, my. You must really have something to prove." She rested an elbow on the back of the chair. "Maybe you should go hunt up Bianca."

It was a thought, but one I had grown accustomed to rejecting. I reached down beside the bed, groping for my bottle. The liquor seemed to have an immediate effect, increasing my level of drunkenness, and with it my capacity for rejection. The colors of the room were smeary, as if made from different shades of lipstick. Joy looked slug-white and bloated, a sickly exuberance of flesh strangled by black lace, the monstrous ikon of a German Expressionist wet dream.

She gave what I took for a deprecating laugh. "Sure, we can converse some more if you want." She started to unhook her brassiere.

"Leave that shit on," I said. "I'll work around it."

Not long after my night with Joy, a rumor began to circulate that one of the plumes had become pregnant, and when I discovered that the plume in question was Bianca, I tried to find her. I gave the rumor little credit. Yet she had claimed she could prove something to me, and thus I could not completely discredit it. I was unsure how I would react if the rumor reflected the truth, but what chance was there of that? My intention was to debunk the rumor. I would be doing her a favor by forcing her to face reality. That, at any rate, is what I told myself. When I was unable to track her down, informed that she was sequestered, I decided the rumor must be a ploy designed to win me back, abandoned my search, and once again focused my energy upon the mural. Though a third of the walls remained unfinished, I now had a more coherent idea of the figures that would occupy the dome, and I was eager to finalize the conception. Despite this vitality of purpose, I felt bereft, dismally alone, and when Richard Causey came to visit, I greeted him effusively, offering him refreshment from my store of junk food. Unlike my other visitors, he had almost nothing to say about the mural, and as we ate on the lowest platform of the scaffolding, it became obvious that he was preoccupied. His eyes darted about; he cracked his knuckles and gave indifferent responses to everything I said. I asked what was on his mind and he told me he had stumbled upon an old tunnel beneath the lowest of the sub-basements. The door leading to it was wedged shut and would take two people to pry open. He believed there might be something significant at the end of the tunnel.

"Like what?" I asked.

"I ran across some papers in the archives. Letters, documents. They suggested the tunnel led to the heart of the law." He appeared to expect me to speak, but I was chewing. "I figured you might want to have a look," he went on. "Seeing that's what you're painting about."

I worried that Causey might want to get me alone and finish what he had started years before; but my interest was piqued and after listening for several minutes more, I grew convinced that his interest in the tunnel was purely academic. To be on the safe side, I brought along a couple of the chisels I used to scrape the walls—they would prove useful in unwedging the door as well. Though it was nearly three in the morning, we headed down into the sub-basements, joined briefly by Colangelo, who had been sleeping in the corridor outside the anteroom. I brandished a chisel and he retreated out of sight.

The door was ancient, its darkened boards strapped with iron bands, a barred grille set at eye level. It was not merely stuck, but sealed with concrete. I shined Causey's flashlight through the grille and was able to make out moisture gleaming on brick walls. With both of us wielding chisels, it required the better part of an hour to chip away the concrete and another fifteen minutes to force the door open wide enough to allow us to pass. The tunnel angled sharply downward in a series of switchbacks, and by the time we reached the fifth switchback, with no end in view, I realized that the walk back up was going to be no fun whatsoever. The bricks were slimy to the touch, rats skittered and squeaked, and the air... dank, foul, noisome. None of these

words or any combination thereof serve to convey the vileness of the stench it carried. Molecules of corruption seemed to cling to my tongue, to the insides of my nostrils, coating my skin, and I thought that if the tunnel did, indeed, lead to the heart of the law, then that heart must be rotten to the core. I tied my shirt across the lower half of my face and succeeded in filtering the reek, yet was not able to block it completely.

I lost track of the passage of time and lost track, too, of how many switchbacks we encountered, but we traveled far beneath the hill, of that much I am certain, descending to a level lower than that of the river flowing past the gate of the prison annex before we spotted a glimmer of light. Seeing it, we slowed our pace, wary of attracting the notice of whatever might occupy the depths of Diamond Bar, but the space into which we at length emerged contained nothing that would harm us—a vast egglike chamber that gave out into diffuse golden light a hundred feet above and opened below into a black pit whose bottom was not visible. Though the ovoid shape of the chamber implied artificiality, the walls were of natural greenish-white limestone, configured by rippled convexities and volutes, and filigreed with fungal growths, these arranged in roughly horizontal rows that resembled lines of text in an unknown script; the hundreds of small holes perforating the walls looked to have been placed there to simulate punctuation. A considerable ledge rimmed the pit, populated by colonies of rats, all gone still and silent at the sight of us, and as we moved out onto it, we discovered that the acoustics of the place rivaled that of a concert hall. Our footsteps resounded like the scraping of an enormous rasp, and our breath was amplified into the sighing of beasts. The terror I felt did not derive from anything I have described so much as from the figure at the center of the chamber. Dwarfed by its dimensions, suspended from hooks that pierced his flesh at nine separate points and were themselves affixed to chains that stretched to the walls, was the relic of a man. His begrimed skin had the dark granite color of the prison's outer walls, and his long white hair was matted down along his back like a moldering cape; his limbs and torso were emaciated, his ribs and hipbones protruding and his ligature ridged like cables. Dead, I presumed. Mummified by some peculiar process.

"Quires!" Causey's whisper reverberated through the chamber. "Jesus Christ! It's Quires."

The man's head drooped, his features further hidden by clots of hair. I had no evidence with which to argue Causey's claim and, indeed, not much inclination to do so. Who else, according to the history of the prison, merited the torment the man must have experienced? It did not seem possible. Quires had been in his eighties when he stepped down as warden more than eighty years before. But the existence of the chamber undermined my conception of the possible. Its silence was so liquid thick and chilling, it might have been the reservoir from which the quiet of the prison flowed. A brighter fear flickered up in me.

"Let's go back," I said. "We shouldn't be here."

At the sound of my voice, the rats offered up an uneasy chattering chorus that swirled around us like the rushing of water in a toilet. Causey was about to respond to my urging when Quires—if it was he—lifted his head and gave forth with a cry, feeble at first, but swelling in volume, a release of breath that went on and on as if issuing not from his lungs but from an opening inside him that admitted to another chamber, another voice more capable of such a prolonged expression, or perhaps to a succession of openings and voices and chambers, the infinitely modulated utterance of a scream proceeding from an unguessable source. The chattering of the rats, too, swelled in volume. Half-deafened, hands pressed to my ears, I sank to my knees, recognizing that the cry and its accompanying chorus was pouring up through the holes that perforated the walls and into every corner of the prison, a shout torn from the heart of the law to announce the advent of a bloody dawn. Quires' body spasmed in his chains, acquiring the shape of a dark thorn against the pale limestone, and his face... Even at a distance I could see how years of torment had compressed his features into a knot of gristle picked out by two staring white eyes. I felt those eyes on me, felt the majestic insistence of his pain and his blissful acknowledgment that this state was his by right. He was the criminal at the heart of the law, the one in whom the arcs of evil and the redemptive met, the lightning rod through which coursed the twin electricities of punishment and sacrifice, the synchronicity of choice and fate, and I understood that as such he was the embodiment of the purpose of Diamond Bar, that only from evil can true redemption spring, only from true redemption can hope be made flesh. Joyful and reluctant, willing servant and fearful slave, he was thaumaturge and penitent, the violent psychotic saint who had been condemned to this harsh duration and simultaneously sought by that service to transfigure us. Thus illuminated, in that instant I could have translated and read to you the fungal inscriptions on the walls. I knew the meaning of every projection and declivity of stone, and knew as well that the heart of the law was empty except for the exaltation of the damned and the luminous peace of the corrupted. Then Quires' cry guttered, his head drooped. The rats fell silent again, returned to their petty scuttling, and all but a residue of my understanding fled.

I staggered up, but Causey, who had also been borne to his knees by the ferocity of the cry, remained in that posture, his lips moving as though in prayer, and it occurred to me that his experience of what had

happened must have been far different from mine to produce such a reverent reaction. I turned again to Quires, realizing I could not help him, that he did not want my help, yet moved to give it nonetheless, and thus I did not see Colangelo break from the tunnel behind us... nor did I see him push Causey into the pit. It was Causey's outcry, shrill and feeble in contrast to Quires', but unalloyed in its terror, that alerted me to danger. When I glanced back I saw that he had vanished into the depths, his scream trailing after him like a snapped rope, and on the spot where he had knelt, Colangelo stood glaring at me, Causey's chisel in his right hand. Had he forced a confrontation in the anteroom, anywhere in the upper levels of the prison, I would not have been so afraid, for though he was taller and heavier, I was accustomed to fighting men bigger than myself; but that dread place eroded my confidence, and I stumbled away from him, groping for my own chisel. He said nothing, made no sound apart from the stentorian gush of his breath, pinning me with his little eyes. The wan light diminished the pinkness of his skin. His lips glistened.

"The hell is your problem?" I said; then, alarmed by the reverberations of my voice, I added in a hushed tone, "I didn't do shit to you."

Colangelo let out an enervated sigh, perhaps signaling an unraveling of restraint, and rushed at me, slashing with the chisel. I caught his wrist and he caught mine. We swayed together on the edge of the pit, neither of us able to gain an advantage, equal in strength despite the difference in our sizes. The excited squeaking of the rats created a wall around us, a multiplicity of tiny cheers hardened into a shrill mosaic. At such close quarters, his anger and my fear seemed to mix and ferment a madness fueled by our breath, our spittle. I wanted to kill him. That was all I wanted. Everything else—Quires, Causey, the panic I had previously felt—dwindled to nothing.

Colangelo tried to butt me. I avoided the blow and, putting my head beneath his chin, pushed him back from the pit. He went off-balance, slipped to one knee. I wrenched my left arm free and brought my elbow hard into his temple. He slumped, still clutching my wrist, preventing me from using my chisel. I threw another elbow that landed on the hinge of his jaw, an uppercut that smacked into the side of his neck and elicited a grunt. He sagged onto his side as I continued to hit him, and when he lost consciousness I straddled his chest and lifted the chisel high, intending to drive it into his throat; but in straightening, I caught sight of Quires hanging at the center of his chains. He did not look at me, but I was certain that in some way he was watching, aware of the moment. How could he not be? He was the substance of the prison, its spirit and its fleshly essence, the male host in whom the spider of female principle had laid its eggs, and as such was witness to our every thought and action. I sensed from him a caution. Not reproval, nothing so pious. In the thin tide of thought that washed between us there was no hint of moral preachment, merely a reminder of the limit I was on the verge of transgressing. What was it Ristelli had said? "Innocents and murderers. The system tolerates neither." Madness receded, and I came to my feet. Prison logic ordained that I should push Colangelo into the pit and spare myself the inevitability of a second attack; but the logic of Diamond Bar, not Vacaville, commanded me. Numbled by the aftershocks of adrenaline and rage, I left him for the rats or whatever else fate might have in store, and with a last glance at Quires, suspended between the light of heaven and the pit, like the filament in a immense bulb, I began my ascent.

I had in mind to seek out Berbick or someone else whom Causey had befriended, to tell them what had come of him and to determine from their advice whether or not to make the events of the night and morning known to the board. Perhaps, I thought, by opening the sealed door I had violated an inviolate taboo and would suffer as a result. I might be blamed for Causey's death. But as I trudged wearily up along the switchbacks, the emotion generated by my fight with Colangelo ebbed away, and the awful chamber in which we had struggled began to dominate my thoughts. Its stench, its solitary revenant, its nightmarish centrality to the life of the prison. With each step, I grew increasingly horrified by my acceptance of the place and the changes it had worked in me. It had neutered my will, obscured my instincts, blinded me to perversity. The things I had done... Bianca, Joy, my devotion to that ridiculous mural. What had I been thinking? Where the fuck had Tommy Penhaligon gone? I wanted to be who I was at that precise moment: someone alert to every shadow and suspicious presence; open to the influence of emotion and not governed by a pathological serenity that transformed violent men into studious, self-examining drones and, were you to believe the plumes, less violent men into women. If I returned to my cell and confided in Berbick, thereby obeying the rule of the prison, sooner or later I would be sucked back in and lose this hard-won vantage from which I could perceive its depravity and pathetic self-involvements. I had no good prospects in the world, but all I could aspire to in Diamond Bar was that one day I would go shuffling through the yard, an old man dimly persuaded that he had been gifted with the grasp of a holy principle too great for the brains of common men to hold, a principle that was no more than a distorted reflection of the instrumentality responsible for his dementia. Instead of heading to my cell, when I reached the eighth stair I kept walking down through the hill toward the annex gate, past the cells of sedate men who had grown habituated to the prison, past those of

agitated new arrivals; and when I reached the gate—it was, of course, unlocked—I threw it open and stood on the threshold, gazing out upon a beautiful spring morning. Cool and bright and fresh. A lacework of sun and shadow under the dark firs. The river running green with snowmelt. I had no fear of the quick-flowing current; I had crossed it once in handcuffs, and unfettered I would cross it all the more easily. Yet I hesitated. I could not, despite my revulsion for what lay behind me, put a foot forward on the path of freedom. I felt something gathering in the woods, a presence defined by the sound of rushing water, the shifting boughs and pouring wind. A wicked imminence, not quite material, needing me to come out from the gate a step or two in order to be real. I berated myself for a coward, tried to inject my spine with iron, but second by second my apprehension grew more detailed. I had a presentiment of jaws, teeth, a ravenous will, and I backed away from the gate, not far, but far enough to slow my pulse, to think. No one walked out of prison. There must be watchers... a single watcher, perhaps. A mindless four-footed punishment for the crime of flight. I told myself this was the same illusion of threat that had driven me inside the walls many months before, but I could not disregard it. The beckoning green and gold of the day, the light rippling everywhere—it had the insubstantiality of a banner fluttered across a window, hiding a dreadful country from my sight.

Once kindled, fear caught in me and burned. The flickering of sun on water; the stirring of fallen needles; mica glinting on the face of a boulder; these were unmistakable signs of an invisible beast who slumbered by the steps of the prison. I heard a noise. It may have been someone starting a chainsaw downriver, a car engine being revved, but to my ears it was a growl sounded high in a huge throat, a warning and a bloody promise. I sprang to the gate and slammed it shut, then rested against the cold metal, weak with relief. My eyes went to the second level of the tier. Gazing down at me was a man in a guard's uniform, absently tapping the palm of his hand with a nightstick. I could hear the slap of wood on flesh, counting out the time with the regularity of a metronome, each stroke ticking off the ominous fractions of his displeasure. Finally, as if he had become sure of me, he sheathed the nightstick and walked away, the sharp report of his boot heels precisely echoing the now-steady rhythm of my heart.

I spent the remainder of the day and half the night staring at the discolorations on the wall opposite my bunk—they had never come in fully, never developed into a complicated abstraction as had the walls of my fellow prisoners, possibly because the walls upon which I expended most of my energy were the ones in the anteroom of the new wing. Yet during those hours I saw in their sparse scatter intimations of the scriptlike fungus inscribed upon the walls of the chamber at the heart of the law, indecipherable to me now as Arabic or Mandarin, tantalizingly inscrutable—I suspected they were the regulations by which we lived and contemplating them soothed me. I could not avoid recalling the chamber and the man suspended therein, but my thoughts concerning these things were speculative, funded by neither fear nor regret. If it had been Quires, one hundred and sixty years old and more, tortured for half that span, this lent credence to Causey's assertion that Czerny, LeGary, Ashford, and Holmes were the original board of Diamond Bar who had been photographed with the warden in 1917... and what did that say about the potentials of the prison? Time and again I returned to the truths I had sensed as Quires cried out from his chains, the dualities of punishment and sacrifice he seemed to incorporate. It was as if he were a battery through which the animating principle of the place was channeled. This was a simplistic analogy, yet when coupled with the image of a Christlike figure in torment, simplicity took on mythic potency and was difficult to deny. Now that I had proved myself unequal to traditional freedom, I was tempted to believe in the promised freedom of the new wing, in all the tenuous promise of Diamond Bar. The illusion of freedom, I realized, was the harshest of prisons, the most difficult to escape. Ristelli, Causey, Czerny, and Bianca had each in their way attempted to lead me to this knowledge, to demonstrate that only in a place like Diamond Bar, where walls kept that illusion at bay, was the road to freedom discernable. I had been a fool to disregard them.

Near midnight, a skinny, towheaded man stopped in front of my cell door and blew cigarette smoke through the bars from his shadowed mouth. I did not know him, but his arrogance and deferential attitude made me suspect he was a familiar of the board. "You're wanted at the annex gate, Penhaligon," he said, and blew another stream of smoke toward me. He looked off along the corridor, and in the half-light I saw the slant of a cheekbone, skin pitted with old acne scars.

In no mood to be disturbed, I asked, "What for?"

"Man's being transferred. Guess they need a witness."

I could not imagine why a transfer would require witnesses, and I felt the creep of paranoia; but I did not think the board would resort to trickery in the exercise of their power, and, reluctantly, I let the man escort me down through the annex.

The gate was open, and gathered by the entranceway, in partial silhouette against the moonstruck river, was a group of men, ten or twelve in all, consisting of the board and their spokesmen. Their silence unsettled

me, and once again I grew paranoid, thinking that I was to be transferred; but then I spotted Colangelo off to one side, hemmed in against the wall by several men. His head twitched anxiously this way and that. The air was cool, but he was perspiring. He glanced at me, betraying no reaction—either he did not register me or else he had concluded that I was only a minor functionary of his troubles.

Czerny, along with LeGary, Ashford, and Holmes, was positioned to the left of the entrance. As I waited for whatever ritual was to occur, still uncertain why I had been invited, he came a tottering step toward me, eyes down, hands fingering his belt, and addressed me in his usual muttering cadence. I did not understand a single word, but the towheaded man, who was sticking to my elbow, said in a snide tone, "You been a bad boy, Penhaligon. That's what the man's telling you. You seen things few men have seen. Maybe you needed to see them, but you weren't prepared."

The towheaded man paused and Czerny spoke again. I could find nothing in his face to support the sternness of his previous words—he seemed to be babbling brokenly, as if speaking to a memory, giving voice to an imaginary dialog, and thinking this, I wondered if that was what we were to him, memories and creatures of the imagination: if he had gone so far along the path to freedom that even those who lived in Diamond Bar had come to be no more than shadows in his mind.

"This is the edge of the pit," the towheaded man said when Czerny had finished. "The one you saw below is only its metaphor. Here you were closest to peril. That's why we have summoned you, so you can watch and understand."

Another spate of muttering and then the towheaded man said, "This is your final instruction, Penhaligon. There are no further lessons to be learned. From now on we will not protect you."

Czerny turned away, the audience ended, but angered by his claim that the board had protected me—I had no memory of being protected when I fought with Colangelo—and emboldened by the certainty that I was not to be transferred, I said to him, "If the pit I saw below was a metaphor, tell me where Causey is."

The old man did not turn back, but muttered something the towheaded man did not have to translate, for I heard the words clearly.

"If you are fortunate," Czerny said, "you will meet him again in the new wing."

The towheaded man nudged me forward to stand by Czerny and the rest of the board, inches away from the line demarking the limits of the prison and the beginning of the world, a dirt path leading downward among boulders to the river flashing along its course. I have said the river was moonstruck, yet that scarcely describes the brightness of the landscape. The light was so strong even the smallest objects cast a shadow, and though the shadows beneath the boughs quivered in a fitful wind, they looked solid and deep. The dense firs and the overhang of the entrance prevented me from seeing the moon, but it must have been enormous—I pictured a blazing silvery face peering down from directly above the river, pocked by craters that sketched the liver spots and crumpled features of a demented old man. Sprays of water flying from the rocks in midstream glittered like icy sparks; the shingle on the far shore glittered as though salted with silver. Beyond it, the terrain of the opposite bank lay hidden beneath a dark green canopy, but patches of needles carpeting the margins of the forest glowed a reddish-bronze.

Who it was that shoved Colangelo out onto the path, I cannot say—I was not watching. It must have been a hard shove, for he went staggering down the slope and fell to all fours. He collected himself and glanced back toward us, not singling anyone out, it seemed, but taking us all in, as if claiming the sight for memory. He wiped dirt from his hands, and judging by his defiant posture I expected him to shout, to curse, but he turned and made for the river, going carefully over the uneven ground. When he reached the river's edge, he stopped and glanced back a second time. I could not make out his face, though he stood in the light, but judging by the sudden furtiveness of his body language, I doubted he had believed that he would get this far, and now that he had, the idea that he actually might be able to escape sprang up hot inside him, and he was prey to the anxieties of a man afflicted by hope.

Oddly enough, I hoped for him. I felt a sympathetic response to his desire for freedom. My heart raced and my brow broke a sweat, as if it were I and not that ungainly pinkish figure who was stepping from rock to rock, arms outspread for balance, groping for purchase on the slick surfaces, wobbling a bit, straining against gravity and fear. I had no apprehension of an inimical presence as I had detected that morning, and this made me think that it had been nerves alone that had stopped me from escaping and increased my enthusiasm for Colangelo's escape. I wanted to cheer, to urge him on, and might have done so if I had not been surrounded by the silent members of the board and their faithful intimates. That Colangelo was doing what I had not dared caused me envy and bitterness but also infected me with hope for myself. The next time I was alone at the gate, perhaps I would be equal to the moment.

The wind kicked up, outvoicing the chuckling rush of the river, sending sprays higher over the rocks, and along with the wind, the brightness of the river intensified. Every eddy, every momentary splotch of foam,

every sinewy swell of water glistened and dazzled, as if it were coming to a boil beneath Colangelo. He kept going past the midpoint, steadier, more confident with each step, unhampered by the buffets of the wind. Close by the gate the boughs bent and swayed, stirring the shadows, sending them sliding forward and back over the dirt like a black film. The whole world seemed in motion, the atoms of the earth and air in a state of perturbation, and as Colangelo skipped over the last few rocks, I realized there was something unnatural about all this brilliant movement. The shapes of things were breaking down... briefly, for the merest fractions of seconds, their edges splintering, decaying into jittering bits of bright and dark, a pointillist dispersion of the real. I assumed I was imagining this, that I was emotionally overwrought, but the effect grew more pronounced. I looked to Czerny and the board. They were as always—distracted, apparently unalarmed—but what their lack of reaction meant, whether they saw what I did and were unsurprised, whether they saw something entirely different, I could not determine.

Colangelo let out a shout—of triumph, I believed. He had reached the shore and was standing with a fist upraised. The sand beneath his feet was a shoal of agitated glitter, and at his back the bank was a dark particulate dance, the forms of the trees disintegrating into a rhythm of green and black dots, the river into a stream of fiery unreality. How could he not notice? He shouted again and flipped us off. I realized that his outlines were shimmering, his prison garb blurring. Everything around him was yielding up its individuality, blending with the surround, flattening into an undifferentiated backdrop. It was nearly impossible to tell the sprays of water from sparkling currents in the air. The wind came harder, less like a wind in its roaring passage than the flux of some fundamental cosmic force, the sound of time itself withdrawing from the frame of human event, of entropy and electron death, and as Colangelo sprinted up the bank into cover of the forest, he literally merged with the setting, dissipated, the stuff of his body flowing out to be absorbed into a vibratory field in which not one distinguishable form still flourished. I thought I heard him scream. In all that roaring confusion I could not be certain, but he was gone. That much I knew. The world beyond the annex gate was gone as well, its separate forms dissolved into an electric absence of tremulous black, green, and silver motes, depthless and afire with white noise, like a television set tuned to a channel whose signal had been lost.

The board and their retainers moved away, talking softly among themselves, leaving me on the edge of the prison, of the pit, watching as—piece by piece—the forest and river and rocks reassembled, their inconstant shapes melting up from chaos, stabilizing, generating the imitation of a perfect moonlit night, the air cool and bracing, the freshness of the river sweetly palpable, all things alive with vital movement—boughs shifting, fallen needles drifting, light jumping along the surface of the water with the celerity of a charge along a translucent nerve. Even after what I had seen, I stood there a long while, tempted to run into the night, disbelieving the evidence of my senses, mistrusting the alternatives to belief, and so oppressed in spirit that I might have welcomed dissolution. A step forward, and I would be free one way or another. I stretched out a hand, testing its resistance to the dissolute power of the world beyond, and saw no hint of blurring or distortion. Yet still I stood there.

The anteroom is empty of scaffolding, swept clean of plaster dust, and I am sitting in a folding chair beneath the domed ceiling, like—I imagine—a gray-clad figure escaped from the lower portions of my mural. Years down the road I may look back and judge my work harshly, but I know at this moment I have achieved my goal and created something greater than myself. The mural rises up from solidity into the diffuse, from dark specificity into layered washes of light from which less definite figures emerge... less definite, at least, from this vantage. At close quarters they are easily identifiable. Bianca is there, a golden swimmer in the air, and at her side our son, her proof made flesh, born five months after our conversation in this very room. When told of his birth I went to visit her in the newly designated maternity ward of the prison hospital. Sleeping, she looked exhausted, her color weak and cheeks sunken, yet she was beautiful nonetheless. The child slept beneath a blanket in a crib beside her bed, only the back of his head visible. My emotions seemed to be circling one another like opponents in a ring. It was so strange to think of her with a child. Now that she had established the ultimate female credential, the freak detector in my brain emitted a steady beep. It was as if I were determined to paint her with a perverse brush, to view her condition and her Mystery in terms of an aberration. At the same time, I was drawn to her as never before. All my old feelings were reinvigorated. I decided to seek a reconciliation, but when I informed her of this she told me it was not what she wanted.

"You can't hide what you feel," she said. "You're still conflicted." She gave "conflicted" a distasteful reading and closed her eyes. "I'm too tired to argue. Please go."

I sat with her a bit longer, thinking she might relent, but when she fell asleep again I left the room. We see each other on occasion. Each time we meet she searches my face but thus far has found no apparent cause for confidence there. I have little hope she will ever find me other than wanting, and the prospect of life without

her grows more difficult to bear. It seems I cannot shake the skepticism that Frank Ristelli correctly attributed to me, for despite everything I have experienced at Diamond Bar, I continue to speculate that our lives are under the influence of a powerful coercive force that causes us to believe in unrealities. My chest, for instance. Some weeks ago I noticed a scatter of pale discolorations surfaced from the skin thereon, their hues and partly rendered shapes reminiscent of the tattoo on Ristelli's chest, and yet when that tattoo achieves final form, as I assume it must, I will with part of my mind seek an explanation that satisfies my cynic's soul. If the birth of a child from a woman once a man fails to persuade me of the miraculous, is there anything that will overwhelm my capacity for doubt? Only when I paint does the current of belief flow through me, and then I am uncertain whether the thing believed is intrinsic to the subject of the work or a constant of my ego, a self-aggrandizing principle I deify with my obsessive zeal.

Ristelli, too, occupies a place in the dome of the anteroom, a mangy gray ghost slipping back into the world, and Causey is there as well, tumbling toward its center where, almost buried in light, Quires hangs in his eternal torment, a promethean Christ yielding to a barbaric sacrifice. I have pored over Causey's notes and rummaged the archives in an attempt to learn more about Quires, to understand what brought him to this pass. A transcendent moment like the one that left Saul stricken on the road to Damascus, an illumination of blinding sight? Or did Quires gradually win his way to a faith strong enough to compel his redemptive act? I have discovered no clue to explain his transformation, only a record of atrocities, but I think now both answers are correct, that all our labors are directed toward the achievement of such a moment, and perhaps therein lies the root cause of my skepticism, for though an illumination of this sort would remove the barriers that keep me from my family, I fear that moment. I fear I will dissolve in light, grow addled and vague, like Czerny, or foolishly evangelical like Ristelli. The abhorrence of authority that pushed me into a criminal life resists even an authority that promises ultimate blessing. I am afflicted with a contrarian's logic and formulate unanswerable questions to validate my stance. I poison my feeble attempts at faith with the irrationalities and improbabilities of Diamond Bar.

Pleased by my celebration of their myth, the board has offered me another room to paint, and there I intend to celebrate Bianca. I have already sketched out the design. She will be the sole figure, but one repeated in miniature over and over again, emerging from flowers, aloft on floating islands, draped in shadow, dressed in dozens of guises and proximate past forms, a history of color and line flowing toward her twice lifesized image hovering like a Hindu goddess in an exotic heaven populated by her many incarnations. That I have relegated her to the subject of a painting, however contemplative of her nature, suggests that I have given up on the relationship, turned my obsession from the person to the memory of the person. This distresses me, but I cannot change the way things are. My chains still bind me, limiting my choices and contravening the will to change. In recent months, I have come to envision a future in which I am an ancient gray spider creaking across a web of scaffolding that spans a hundred rooms, leaking paintlike blood in his painful, solitary progress, creating of his life an illuminated tomb commemorating folly, mortal confusion, and lost love. Not so terrible a fate, perhaps. To die and love and dream of perfect colors, perfect forms. But like all those who strive and doubt and seek belief, I am moving rapidly in the direction of something that I fear, something whose consolations I mistrust, and am inclined to look past that inevitability, to locate a point toward which to steer. My son, whom Bianca has named Max, after—she says—her favorite painter, Max Ernst, an implied insult, a further dismissal from her life... I sometimes think my son might serve as such a point. My imagination is captivated by the potentials of a man so strangely born, and often I let myself believe he will be the wings of our liberty, the one in whom the genius of our home will fully manifest. Since he is kept apart from me, however, these thoughts have the weight of fantasy, and I am cast back onto the insubstantial ground of my own life, a gray silence in which I have rarely found a glint of promise. Tears come easily. Regrets like hawks swoop down to pluck my hopeful thoughts from midair. And yet, though I am afraid that, as with most promises of fulfillment, it will always hang beyond our grasp, an eidolon, the illusion of perfection, lately I have begun to anticipate the completion of the new wing.

## LUCIUS SHEPARD: A BIBLIOGRAPHY

by William G. Contento

Lucius Shepard burst onto the science fiction and fantasy scene in the early 1980s and became one of the most prolific and influential writers of that decade. In 1987 he won the Nebula Award for his novella "R&R," in 1988 he won the World Fantasy Award for the collection *The Jaguar Hunter*, in 1992 he won the World Fantasy Award for the collection *The Ends of the Earth*, and in 1993 he won the Hugo Award for his novella *Barnacle Bill the Spacer*. He is the author of three novels: *Green Eyes*, an sf/zombie novel; *Life During Wartime*; and *The Golden*, a brilliantly fresh take on the vampire. His collection *Beast of the Heartland* was published in the UK as *Barnacle Bill the Spacer*. Four Walls Eight Windows has recently reissued *The Jaguar Hunter*, containing a previously uncollected novella, "Radiant Green Star," winner of the *Locus* award. Upcoming in 2002 are *Valentine*, a short novel; *Louisiana Breakdown*, a short novel; and the novel, *Colonel Rutherford's Colt*.

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