

THE END OF LIFE AS WE KNOW IT

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What Lisa hated most about Mexico were the flies, and Richard said, Yeah, the flies were bad, but it was the lousy attitude of the people that did him in, you know, the way the waiters ignored you and the taxi drivers sneered, the sour expressions of desk clerks—as if they were doing you a big favor by letting you stay in their fleabag hotels. All that. Lisa replied that she couldn't blame the people, because they were probably irritated by the flies; this set Richard to laughing, and though Lisa had not meant it to be funny, after a moment she joined in. They needed laughter. They had come to Mexico to Save Their Marriage, and things were not going well . . . except in bed, where things had always gone well. Lisa had never been less than ardent with Richard, even during her affair.

They were an attractive couple in their thirties, the sort to whom a healthy sex life seems an essential of style, a trendy accessory to pleasure like a Jacuzzi or a French food processor. She was a tall, fey-looking brunette with fair skin, an aerobically nurtured slimness, and a face that managed to express both sensuality and intelligence ("hooker eyes and Vassar bones," Richard had told her); he was lean from handball and weights, with an executive touch of gray in his black hair and the bland, firm-jawed handsomeness of a youthful anchorman. Once they had held to the illusion that they kept fit and beautiful for one another, but all their illusions had been tarnished and they no longer understood their reasons for maintaining them.

For a while they made a game of hating Mexico, pretending it was a new bond between them, striving to outdo each other in pointing out instances of filth and native insensitivity; finally they realized that what they hated most about the country were their own perceptions of it, and they headed south to Guatemala where—they had been informed—the atmosphere was conducive to romance. They were leery about the reports of guerrilla activity, but their informant had assured them that the dangers were overstated. He was a seasoned traveler, an elderly Englishman who had spent his last twelve winters in Central America; Richard thought he was colorful, a Graham Greene character, whereas Lisa described him in her journal as "a deracinated old fag."

"You mustn't miss Lake Atitlan," he'd told them. "It's absolutely breath-taking. Revolution there is an aesthetic impossibility."

Before boarding the plane Richard bought the latest Miami Herald, and he entertained himself during the flight by be-moaning the decline of Western civilization. It was his conviction that the United States was becoming part of the Third World and that their grandchildren would inhabit a mildly poisoned earth and endure lives of back-breaking drudgery under an increasingly Orwellian government. Though this conviction was hardly startling, it being evident from the newspaper that such a world was close upon them, Lisa accorded his viewpoint the status of wisdom; in fact, she had relegated wisdom in general to be his preserve, staking claim herself to the traditional feminine precincts of soulfulness and caring. Sometimes back in Connecticut, while teaching her art class at the Y or manning the telephones for PBS or Greenpeace or whatever cause had enlisted her soulfulness, looking around at the other women, all—like her—expensively kept and hopeless and with an eye cocked for the least glimmer of excitement, then she would see how marriage had decreased her wattage; and yet, though she had fallen in love with another man, she had clung to the marriage for almost a year thereafter, unable to escape the fear that this was the best she could hope for, that no matter what steps she took to change her situation, her life would always be ruled by a canon of mediocrity. That she had recently stopped clinging did not signal a slackening of fear, only that her fingers were slipping; her energy no longer sufficient to maintain a good grip.

As the plane came down into Guatemala City, passing over rumped green hills dotted with shacks whose colors looked deceptively bright and cheerful from a height, Richard began talking about his various investments, saying he was glad he'd bought this and that, because things were getting worse every day. "The shitstorm's a 'comin', babe," he said, patting her knee. "But we're gonna be awright." It annoyed Lisa no end that whenever he was feeling particularly accomplished his language became countrified, and she only shrugged in response.

After clearing customs they rented a car and drove to Panajachel, a village on the shores of Lake Atitlan. There was a fancy hotel on the shore, but in the spirit of "roughing it" Richard insisted they stay at a cheaper place on the edge of town—an old green stucco building with red trim and an arched entranceway and a courtyard choked with ferns; it catered to what he called "the bleeding-ear set," a reference to the loud rock 'n' roll that blasted from the windows. The other guests were mostly college-age vacationers, a mixture of French and Scandinavians and Americans, and as soon as they had unpacked, Lisa changed into jeans and a work shirt so she would fit in among them. They ate dinner in the hotel dining room, which was cramped and furnished with red wooden tables and chairs and had the menu painted on the wall in English and Spanish. Richard appeared to be enjoying himself; he was relaxed, and his speech was peppered with slang that he hadn't used in almost a decade. Lisa liked listening to the glib chatter around them, talk of dope and how the people treat you in Huehuetenango and watch out if you're goin' to Bogota, man, 'cause they got packs of street kids will pick you clean . . . These conversations reminded her of the world in which she had traveled at Vassar before Richard had snatched her up during her junior year. He had been just back from Vietnam, a medic, full of anguish at the horrors he had seen, yet strong for having seen them; he had seemed to her a source of strength, a shining knight, a rescuer. After the wedding, though, she had not been able to recall why she had wanted to be rescued; she thought now that she had derived some cheap thrill from his aura of recent violence and had applied it to herself out of a romantic need to feel imperiled.

They lingered over dinner, watching the younger guests drift off into the evening and being watched themselves—at least in Lisa's case—by a fortyish Guatemalan man with a pencil-line mustache, a dark suit, and patent-leather hair. He stared at her as he chewed, ducking his eyes each time he speared a fresh bite, then resuming his stare. Ordinarily Lisa would have been irritated, but she found the man's conspicuous anonymity appealing and she adopted a flirtatious air, laughing too loudly and fluttering her hands, in hopes that she was frustrating him.

"His name's Raoul," said Richard. "He's a white slaver in the employ of the Generalissimo, and he's been commissioned to bring in a new gringa for the harem."

"He's somebody's uncle," said Lisa. "Here to settle a family dispute. He's married to a dumpy Indian woman, has seven kids, and he's wearing his only suit to impress the Americans."

"God, you're a romantic!" Richard sipped his coffee, made a face and set it down.

Lisa bit back a sarcastic reply. "I think he's very romantic. Let's say he's staring at me because he wants me. If that's true, right now he's probably thinking how to do you in, or maybe wondering if he could trade you his truck, his means of livelihood, for a night with me. That's real romance. Passionate stupidity and bloody consequences."

"I guess," said Richard, unhappy with the definition; he took another sip of coffee and changed the subject.

At sunset they walked down to the lake. The village was charming enough—the streets cobbled, the houses whitewashed and roofed with tile—but the rows of tourist shops and the American voices acted to dispel the charm. The lake, however, was beautiful. Ringed by three volcanoes, bordered by palms, Indians poling canoes toward scatters of light on the far shore. The water was lacquered with vivid crimson and yellow reflection, and silhouetted against an equally vivid sky, the palms and volcanic cones gave the place the look of a prehistoric landscape. As they stood at the end of a wooden pier, Richard drew her into a kiss and she felt again the explosive dizziness of their first kiss; yet she knew it was a

sham, a false magic born of geography and their own contrivance. They could keep traveling, keep filling their days with exotic sights, lacquering their lives with reflection, but when they stopped they would discover that they had merely been preserving the forms of the marriage. There was no remedy for their dissolution.

Roosters crowing waked her to gray dawn light. She remembered a dream about a faceless lover, and she stretched and rolled onto her side. Richard was sitting at the window, wearing jeans and a T-shirt; he glanced at her, then turned his gaze to the window, to the sight of a pale green volcano wreathed in mist. "It's not working," he said, and when she failed to respond, still half-asleep, he buried his face in his hands, muffling his voice. "I can't make it without you, babe."

She had dreaded this moment, but there was no reason to put it off. "That's the problem," she said. "You used to be able to." She plumped the pillows and leaned back against them.

He looked up, baffled. "What do you mean?"

"Why should I have to explain it? You know it as well as I do. We weaken each other, we exhaust each other, we depress each other." She lowered her eyes, not wanting to see his face. "Maybe it's not even us. Sometimes I think marriage is this big pasty spell of cakes and veils that shrivels everything it touches."

"Lisa, you know there isn't anything I wouldn't . . . "

"What? What'll you do?" Angrily, she wadded the sheet. "I don't understand how we've managed to hurt each other so much. If I did I'd try to fix it. But there's nothing left to do. Not together, anyway."

He let out a long sigh—the sigh of a man who has just finished defusing a bomb and can allow himself to breathe again. "It's him, right? You still want to be with him."

It angered her that he would never say the name, as if the name were what counted. "No," she said stiffly. "It's not him."

"But you still love him."

"That's not the point! I still love you, but love . . . " She drew up her legs and rested her forehead on her knees. "Christ, Richard. I don't know what more to tell you. I've said it all a hundred times."

"Maybe," he said softly, "maybe this discussion is premature."

"Oh, Richard!"

"No, really. Let's go on with the trip."

"Where next? The Mountains of the Moon? Brazil? It won't change anything."

"You can't be sure of that!" He came toward the bed, his face knitted into lines of despair.

"We'll just stay a few more days. We'll visit the villages on the other side of the lake, where they do the weaving."

"Why, Richard? God, I don't even understand why you still want me . . . "

"Please, Lisa. Please. After eleven years you can try for a few more days."

"All right," she said, weary of hurting him. "A few days."

"And you'll try?"

I've always tried, she wanted to say; but then, wondering if it were true, as true as it should be, she merely said, "Yes."

The motor launch that ran back and forth across the lake between Panajachel and San Augustin had seating room for fifteen, and nine of those places were occupied by Germans, apparently members of a

family—kids, two sets of parents, and a pair of portly, red-cheeked grandparents. They reeked of crudity and good health, and made Lisa feel refined by comparison. The young men snapped their wives' bra straps; grandpa almost choked with laughter each time this happened; the kids whined; the women were heavy and hairy-legged. They spent the entire trip taking pictures of one another. They must have understood English, because when Richard cracked a joke about them they frowned and whispered and became standoffish. Lisa and Richard moved to the stern, a superficial union imposed, and watched the shore glide past. Though it was still early, the sun reflected a dynamited white glare on the water; in the daylight the volcanoes looked depressingly real, their slopes covered by patchy grass and scrub and stunted palms.

San Augustin was situated at the base of the largest volcano, and was probably like what Panajachel had been before tourism. Weeds grew between the cobblestones, the white-wash was flaked away in places, and grimy, naked toddlers sat in the doorways, chewing sugar cane and drooling. Inside the houses it was the Fourteenth Century. Packed dirt floors, iron cauldrons suspended over fires, chickens pecking and pigs asleep. Gnomish old Indian women worked at hand looms, turning out strange tapestries—as, for example, a design of black cranelike birds against a backdrop of purple sky and green trees, the image repeated over and over—and bolts of dress material, fabric that on first impression seemed to be of a hundred colors, all in perfect harmony. Lisa wanted to be sad for the women, to sympathize with their poverty and particular female plight, and to some extent she managed it; but the women were uncomplaining and appeared reasonably content and their weaving was better work than she had ever done, even when she had been serious about art. She bought several yards of the material, tried to strike up a conversation with one of the women, who spoke neither English or Spanish, and then they returned to the dock, to the village's only bar-restaurant—a place right out of a spaghetti western, with a hitching rail in front and skinned sapling trunks propping up the porch roof and a handful of young, long-haired American men standing along the bar, having an early-morning beer. "Holy marijuana!" said Richard, winking. "Hippies! I wondered where they'd gone." They took a table by the rear window so they could see the slopes of the volcano. The scarred varnish of the table was dazzled by sunlight; flies buzzed against the heated panes.

"So what do you think?" Richard squinted against the glare.

"I thought we were going to give it a few days," she said testily.

"Jesus, Lisa! I meant, what do you think about the weaving?" He adopted a pained expression.

"I'm sorry." She touched his hand, and he shook his head ruefully. "It's beautiful ... I mean, the weaving's beautiful. Oh, God, Richard. I don't intend to be so awkward."

"Forget it." He stared out the window, deadpan, as if he were giving serious consideration to climbing the volcano, sizing up the problems involved. "What did you think of it?"

"It was beautiful," she said flatly. The buzzing of the flies intensified, and she had the notion that they were telling her to try harder. "I know it's corny to say, but watching her work ... What was her name?"

"Expectacion."

"Oh, right. Well, watching her I got the feeling I was watching something magical, something that went on and on ... " She trailed off, feeling foolish at having to legitimize with conversation what had been a momentary whimsy; but she could think of nothing else to say. "Something that went on forever," she continued. "With different hands, of course, but always that something the same. And the weavers, while they had their own lives and problems, that was less important than what they were doing. You know, like the generations of weavers were weaving something through time as well as space. A long, woven magic." She laughed, embarrassed.

"It's not corny. I know what you're talking about." He pushed back his chair and grinned. "How about I get us a couple of beers?"

"Okay," she said brightly, and smiled until his back was turned. He thought he had her now. That was

his plan—to get her a little drunk, not drunk enough for a midday hangover, just enough to get her happy and energized, and then that afternoon they'd go for a ride to the next village, the next exotic attraction, and more drinks and dinner and a new hotel. He'd keep her whirling, an endless date, an infinitely prolonged seduction. She pictured the two of them as a pair of silhouetted dancers tangoing across the borders of map-colored countries. Whirling and whirling, and the thing was, the very sad thing was, that sooner or later, if he kept her whirling, she would lose her own momentum and be sucked into the spin, into that loving-the-spin-I'm-in-old-black-magic routine. Then final rinse. Final spin. Then the machine would stop and she'd be plastered to the side of the marriage like a wet blouse, needing a hand to lift her out. She should do what had to be done right now. Right this moment. Cause a scene, hit him. Whatever it took. Because if she didn't ... He thunked down a bottle of beer in front of her, and her smile twitched by reflex into place.

"Thanks," she said.

"Por nada." He delivered a gallant bow and sat down. "Listen ... "

There was a clatter from outside, and through the door she saw a skinny, bearded man tying a donkey to the hitching rail. He strode on in, dusting off his jeans cowboy-style, and ordered a beer. Richard turned to look and chuckled. The man was worth a chuckle. He might have been the Spirit of the Sixties, the Wild Hippie King. His hair was a ratty brown thatch hanging to his shoulders, and braided into it were long gray feathers that dangled still lower; his jeans were festooned with painted symbols, and there were streaks of what appeared to be green dye in his thicket of a beard. He noticed them staring, waved, and came toward them.

"Mind if I join you folks?" Before they could answer, he dropped into a chair. "I'm Dowdy. Believe it or not, that's a name, not a self-description." He smiled, and his blue eyes crinkled up. His features were sharp, thin to the point of being wizened. It was hard to tell his age because of the beard, but Lisa figured him for around thirty-five. Her first reaction had been to ask him to leave; the instant he had started talking, though, she had sensed a cheerful kind of sanity about him that intrigued her. "I live up yonder," he went on, gesturing at the volcano. "Been there goin' on four years."

"Inside the volcano?" Lisa meant it for a joke.

"Yep! Got me a little shack back in under the lip. Hot in the summer, freezin' in the winter, and none of the comforts of home. I got to bust my tail on Secretariat there—he waved at the donkey—"just to haul water and supplies." In waving he must have caught a whiff of his underarm—he gave it an ostentatious sniff. "And to get me a bath. Hope I ain't too ripe for you folks." He chugged down a third of his beer. "So! How you like Guatemala?"

"Fine," said Richard. "Why do you live in a volcano?"

"Kinda peculiar, ain't it," said Dowdy by way of response; he turned to Lisa. "And how you like it here?"

"We haven't seen much," she said. "Just the lake."

"Oh, yeah? Well, it ain't so bad 'round here. They keep it nice for the tourists. But the rest of the country ... whooooo! Violent?" Dowdy made a show of awed disbelief. "You got your death squads, your guerrillas, your secret police, not to mention your basic crazed killers. Hell, they even got a political party called the Party of Organized Violence. Bad dudes. They like to twist people's arms off. It ain't that they're evil, though. It's just the land's so full of blood and brimstone and Mayan weirdness, it fumes up and freaks 'em out. That's how come we got volcanoes. Safety valves to blow off the excess poison. But things are on the improve."

"Really?" said Richard, amused.

"Yes, indeed!" Dowdy tipped back in his chair, propping the beer bottle on his stomach; he had a little pot belly like that of a cartoon elf. "The whole world's changing. I s'pose y'all have noticed the way things are goin' to hell back in the States?"

Lisa could tell that the question had mined Richard's core of political pessimism, and he started to frame an answer; but Dowdy talked through him.

"That's part of the change," he said. "All them scientists say they figured out reasons for the violence and pollution and economic failure, but what them things really are is just the sound of consensus reality scrapin' contrary to the flow of the change. They ain't nothin' but symptoms of the real change, of everything comin' to an end."

Richard made silent speech with his eyes, indicating that it was time to leave.

"Now, now," said Dowdy, who had caught the signal. "Don't get me wrong. I ain't talkin' Apocalypse, here. And I for sure ain't no Bible basher like them Mormons you see walkin' 'round the village. Huh! Them suckers is so scared of life they travel in pairs so's they can keep each other from bein' corrupted. 'Watch it there, Billy! You're steppin' in some sin!'" Dowdy rolled his eyes to the ceiling in a parody of prayer. "'Sweet Jesus gimme the strength to scrape this sin off my shoe!' Then off they go, purified, a couple of All-American haircuts with souls stuffed fulla white-bread gospel and crosses 'round their necks to keep off the vampire women. Shit!" he leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table. "But I digress. I got me a religion all right. Not Jesus, though. I'll tell you 'bout it if you want, but I ain't gonna force it down your throat."

"Well," Richard began, but Lisa interrupted.

"We've got an hour until the boat," she said. "Does your religion have anything to do with your living in the volcano?"

"Sure does." Dowdy pulled a hand-rolled cigar from his shirt pocket, lit it, and blew out a plume of smoke that boiled into a bluish cloud against the windowpanes. "I used to smoke, drink"—he flourished his beer—"and I was a bear for the ladies. Praise God, religion ain't changed that none!" He laughed, and Lisa smiled at him. Whatever it was that had put Dowdy in such good spirits seemed to be contagious. "Actu-ally," he said, "I wasn't a hell-raiser at all. I was a painfully shy little fella, come from backwoods Tennessee. Like my daddy'd say, town so small you could spit between the city limits signs. Anyway, I was shy but I was smart, and with that combination it was a natural for me to end up in computers. Gave me someone I could feel comfortable talkin' to. After college I took a job designin' software out in Silicon Valley, and seven years later there I was ... Livin' in an apartment tract with no real friends, no pictures on the walls, and a buncha terminals. A real computer nerd. Well sir! Somehow I got it in mind to take a vacation. I'd never had one. Guess I figured I'd just end up somewhere weird, sittin' in a room and thinkin' 'bout computers, so what was the point? But I was determined to do it this time, and I came to Panajachel. First few days I did what you folks probably been doin'. Wanderin', not meetin' anyone, buyin' a few gee-gaws. Then I caught the launch across the lake and ran into ol' Murcielago." He clucked his tongue against his teeth. "Man, I didn't know what to make of him at first. He was the oldest human bein' I'd ever seen. Looked centuries old. All hunched up, white-haired, as wrinkled as a walnut shell. He couldn't speak no English, just Cakchiquel, but he had this mestizo fella with him who did his interpretin', and it was through him I learned that Murcielago was a brujo."

"A wizard," said Lisa, who had read Casteneda, to Rich-ard, who hadn't.

"Yep," said Dowdy. "Course I didn't believe it. Thought it was some kinda hustle. But he interested me, and I kept hang-in' 'round just to see what he was up to. Well, one night he says to me-through the mestizo fella-'I like you,' he said. 'Ain't nothin' wrong with you that a little magic wouldn't cure. I'd be glad to make you a gift if you got no objections.' I said to myself, 'Oh-oh, here it comes.' But I reckoned it couldn't do me no harm to let him play his hand, and I told him to go ahead. So he does some singin' and rubs powder on my mouth and mutters and touches me, and that was it. 'You gonna be fine now,' he tells me. I felt sorta strange, but no finer than I had. Still, there wasn't any hustle, and that same night I realized that his magic was doin' its stuff. Confused the hell out of me, and the only thing I could think to do was to hike on up to the volcano, where he lived, and ask him about it. Murcielago was writin' for me. The mestizo had gone, but he'd left a note explainin' the situation. Seems he'd learned all he could from

Murcielago and had taken up his own post, and it was time the ol' man had a new apprentice. He told me how to cook for him, wished me luck, and said he'd be seein' me around." Dowdy twirled his cigar and watched smoke rings float up. "Been there ever since and ain't regretted it a day."

Richard was incredulous. "You gave up a job in Silicon Valley to become a sorcerer's apprentice?"

"That's right." Dowdy pulled at one of the feathers in his hair. "But I didn't give up nothin' real, Richard."

"How do you know my name?"

"People grow into their names, and if you know how to look for it, it's written everywhere on 'em. 'Bout half of magic is bein' able to see clear."

Richard snorted. "You read our names off the passenger manifest for the launch."

"I don't blame you for thinkin' that," said Dowdy. "It's hard to accept the existence of magic. But that ain't how it happened." He drained the dregs of his beer. "You were easy to read, but Lisa here was sorta hard 'cause she never liked her name. Ain't that so?"

Lisa nodded, surprised.

"Yeah, see, when a person don't like their name it muddies up the writin' so to speak, and you gotta scour away a lotta half-formed names to see down to the actual one." Dowdy heaved a sigh and stood. "Time I'm takin' care of business, but tell you what! I'll bring ol' Murcielago down to the bar around seven o'clock and you can check him out. You can catch the nine o'clock boat back. I know he'd like to meet you."

"How do you know?" asked Richard.

"It ain't my place to explain. Look here, Rich. I ain't gonna twist your arm, but if you go back to Panajachel you're just gonna wander 'round and maybe buy some garbage. If you stay, well, whether or not you believe Murcielago's a brujo, you'll be doin' somethin' out of the ordinary. Could be he'll give you a gift."

"What gift did he give you?" asked Lisa.

"The gift of gab," said Dowdy. "Surprised you ain't deduced that for yourself, Lisa, 'cause I can tell you're a perceptive soul. 'Course that was just part of the gift. The gift wrappin', as it were. It's like Murcielago says, a real gift ain't known by its name." He winked at her. "But it took pretty damn good, didn't it?"

As soon as Dowdy had gone, Richard asked Lisa if she wanted a last look at the weaving before heading back, but she told him she would like to meet Murcielago. He argued briefly, then acquiesced. She knew what he was thinking. He had no interest in the brujo, but he would humor her; it would be an Experience, a Shared Memory, another increment of momentum added to the spin of their marriage. To pass the time she bought a notebook from a tiny store, whose entire inventory would have fit in her suitcases, and sat outside the bar sketching the volcanoes, the people, the houses. Richard oohed and ahhed over the sketches, but in her judgment they were lifeless—accurate, yet dull and uninspired. She kept at it, though; it beat her other options.

Toward four o'clock black thunderheads muscled up from behind the volcano, drops of cold rain splattered down, and they retreated into the bar. Lisa did not intend to get drunk, but she found herself drinking to Richard's rhythm. He would nurse each beer for a while, shearing away the label with his thumbnail; once the label had been removed he would empty the bottle in a few swallows and bring them a couple more. After four bottles she was tipsy, and after six walking to the bathroom became an adventure in vertigo. Once she stumbled against the only other customer, a long-haired guy left over from the morning crowd, and caused him to spill his drink. "My pleasure," he said when she apologized, leering, running his hands along her hips as he pushed her gently away. She wanted to pose a vicious

comeback, but was too fuddled. The bathroom served to make her drunker. It was a chamber of horrors, a hole in the middle of the floor with a ridged foot-print on either side, scraps of brown paper strewn about, dark stains everywhere, reeking. There was a narrow window which—if she stood on tip-toe—offered a view of two volcanoes and the lake. The water mirrored the grayish-black of the sky. She stared through the smeared glass, watching waves pile in toward shore, and soon she realized that she was staring at the scene with something like longing, as if the storm held a promise of resolution. By the time she returned to the bar, the bartender had lit three kerosene lamps; they added a shabby glory to the place, casting rich gleams along the countertop and gemmy orange reflections in the windowpanes. Richard had brought her a fresh beer.

"They might not come, what with the rain," he said. "Maybe not." She downed a swallow of beer, beginning to like its sour taste.

"Probably for the best," he said. "I've been thinking, and I'm sure he was setting us up for a robbery."

"You're paranoid. If he were going to rob us, he'd pick a spot where there weren't any soldiers."

"Well, he's got something in mind . . . though I have to admit that was a clever story he told. All that stuff about his own doubts tended to sandbag any notion that he was hustling us."

"I don't believe he was hustling us. Maybe he's deluded, but he's not a criminal."

"How the hell could you tell that?" He picked at a stubborn fleck of beer label. "Feminine intuition? God, he was only here a few minutes."

"You know," she said angrily, "I deserve that. I've been buying that whole feminine intuition chump ever since we were married. I've let you play the intelligent one, while I"—she affected a southern accent and a breathy voice—"I just get these little flashes. I swear I don't know where they come from, but they turn out right so often I must be psychic or somethin'. Jesus!"

"Lisa, please."

He looked utterly defeated but she was drunk and sick of all the futile effort and she couldn't stop. "Any idiot could've seen that Dowdy was just a nice, weird little guy. Not a threat! But you had to turn him into a threat so you could feel you were protecting me from dangers I was too naive to see. What's that do for you? Does it wipe out the fact that I've been unfaithful, that I've walked all over your self-respect? Does it restore your masculine pride?"

His face worked, and she hoped he would hit her, punctuate the murkiness of their lives with a single instance of shock and clarity. But she knew he wouldn't. He relied on his sadness to defeat her. "You must hate me," he said.

She bowed her head, her anger emptying into the hollow created by his dead voice. "I don't hate you. I'm just tired."

"Let's go home. Let's get it over with."

She glanced up, startled. His lips were thinned, a muscle clenching in his jaw.

"We can catch a flight tomorrow. If not tomorrow, the next day. I won't try to hold you anymore."

She was amazed by the panic she felt; she couldn't tell if it resulted from surprise, the kind you feel when you haven't shut the car door properly and suddenly there you are, hanging out the side, unprepared for the sight of the pavement flowing past; or if it was that she had never really wanted freedom, that all her protest had been a means of killing boredom. Maybe, she thought, this was a new tactic on his part, and then she realized that everything between them had become tactical. They played each other without conscious effort, and their games bordered on the absurd. To her further amazement she heard herself say in a tremulous voice, "Is that what you want?"

"Hell, no!" He smacked his palm against the table, rattling the bottles. "I want you! I want children, eternal love . . . all those dumb bullshit things we wanted in the beginning! But you don't want them

anymore, do you?"

She saw how willingly she had given him an opening in which to assert his masculinity, his moral position, combining them into a terrific left hook to the heart. Oh, Jesus, they were pathetic! Tears started from her eyes, and she had a dizzying sense of location, as if she were looking up from a well-bottom through the strata of her various conditions. Drunk, in a filthy bar, in Guatemala, shadowed by volcanos, under a stormy sky, and—spanning it all, binding it all together—the strange webs of their relationship.

"Do you?" He frowned at her, demanding that she finish the game, speak her line, admit to the one verity that prevented them from ever truly finishing—her uncertainty.

"I don't know," she answered; she tried to say it in a neutral tone, but it came out hopeless.

The storm's darkness passed, and true darkness slipped in under cover of the final clouds. Stars pricked out above the rim of the volcano. The food in the bar was greasy-fried fish, beans, and a salad that she was afraid to eat (stains on the lettuce)—but eating steadied her, and she managed to start a conversation about their recent meals. Remember the weird Chinese place in Merida, hot sauce in the Lobster Cantonese? Or what had passed for crepes at their hotel in Zihuatenejo? Things like that. The bartender hauled out a portable record player and put on an album of romantic ballads sung by a man with a sexy voice and a gaspy female chorus; the needle kept skipping, and finally, with an apologetic smile and a shrug, the bartender switched it off. It came to be seven-thirty, and they talked about Dowdy not showing, about catching the eight o'clock boat. Then there he was. Standing in the door next to a tiny, shrunken old man, who was leaning on a cane. He was deeply wrinkled, skin the color of weathered mahogany, wearing grungy white trousers and a gray blanket draped around his shoulders. All his vitality seemed to have collected in an astounding shock of thick white hair that—to Lisa's drunken eyes—looked like a white flame licking up from his skull.

It took the old man almost a minute to hobble the length of the room, and a considerable time thereafter to lower himself; wheezing and shaking, into a chair. Dowdy hauled up another chair beside him; he had washed the dye from his beard, and his hair was clean, free of feathers. His manner, too, had changed. He was no longer breezy, but subdued and serious, and even his grammar had improved.

"Now listen," he said. "I don't know what Murcielago will say to you, but he's a man who speaks his mind and sometimes he tells people things they don't like to hear. Just remember he bears you no ill-will and don't be upset. All right?"

Lisa gave the old man a reassuring smile, not wanting him to think that they were going to laugh; but upon meeting his eyes all thought of reassuring him vanished. They were ordinary eyes. Dark, wet-looking under the lamplight. And yet they were compelling—like an animal's eyes, they radiated strangeness and pulled you in. They made the rest of his ruined face seem irrelevant. He muttered to Dowdy.

"He wants to know if you have any questions," said Dowdy.

Richard was apparently as fascinated by the old man as was Lisa; she had expected him to be glib and sardonic, but instead he cleared his throat and said gravely, "I'd like to hear about how the world's changing."

Dowdy repeated the question in Cakchiquel, and Murcielago began to speak, staring at Richard, his voice a gravelly whisper. At last he made a slashing gesture, signaling that he was finished, and Dowdy turned to them. "It's like this," he said. "The world is not one but many. Thousands upon thousands of worlds. Even those who do not have the power of clear sight can perceive this if they consider the myriad realities of the world they do see. It's easiest to imagine the thousands of worlds as different-colored lights all focused on a single point, having varying degrees of effectiveness as to how much part they play in determinin' the character of that point. What's happenin' now is that the strongest light—the one most responsible for determinin' this character—is startin' to fade and another is startin' to shine bright and dominate. When it has gained dominance, the old age will end and the new begin."

Richard smirked, and Lisa realized that he had been putting the old man on. "If that's the case," he said snottily, "then ... " Murcielago broke in with a burst of harsh, angry syllables. "He doesn't care if you believe him," said Dowdy. "Only that you understand his words. Do you?"

"Yes." Richard mulled it over. "Ask him what the character of the new age will be."

Again, the process of interpretation.

"It'll be the first age of magic," said Dowdy. "You see, all the old tales of wizards and great beasts and warriors and undyin' kings, they aren't fantasy or even fragments of a distant past. They're visions, the first unclear glimpses seen long ago of a future that's now dawnin'. This place, Lake Atitlan, is one of those where the dawn has come early, where the light of the new age shines the strongest and its forms are visible to those who can see." The old man spoke again, and Dowdy arched an eyebrow. "Hmm! He says that because he's tellin' you this, and for reasons not yet clear to him, you will be more a part of the new age than the old."

Richard gave Lisa a nudge under the table, but she chose to ignore it. "Why hasn't someone noticed this change?" he asked.

Dowdy translated and in a moment had a response. "Murcielago says he has noticed it, and asks if you have not noticed it yourself. For instance, have you not noticed the increased interest in magic and other occult matters in your own land? And surely you must have noticed the breakdown of systems, economies, governments. This is due to the fact that the light that empowered them is fadin', not to any other cause. The change comes slowly. The dawn will take centuries to brighten into day, and then the sorrows of this age will be gone from the memories of all but those few who have the ability to draw upon the dawnin' power and live long in their mortal bodies. Most will die and be reborn. The change comes subtly, as does twilight change to dusk, an almost imperceptible merg-ing of light into dark. It will be noticed and it will be recorded. Then, just as the last age, it will be forgotten."

"I don't mean to be impertinent," said Richard, giving Lisa another nudge, "but Murcielago looks pretty frail. He can't have much of a role to play in all this."

The old man rapped the floor with his cane for emphasis as he answered, and Dowdy's tone was peeved. "Murcielago is involved in great struggles against enemies whose nature he's only beginnin' to discern. He has no time to waste with fools. But because you're not a total fool, because you need instruction, he will answer. Day by day his power grows, and at night the volcano is barely able to contain his force. Soon he will shed this frailty and flow between the forms of his spirit. He will answer no more of your questions." Dowdy looked to Lisa. "Do you have a question?"

Murcielago's stare burned into her, and she felt disoriented, as insubstantial as one of the gleams slipping across his eyes. "I don't know," she said. "Yes. What does he think about us?"

"This is a good question," said Dowdy after consulting with Murcielago, "because it concerns self-knowledge, and all important answers relate to the self. I will not tell you what you are. You know that, and you have shame in the knowledge. What you will be is manifest, and soon you will know that. Therefore I will answer the question you have not asked, the one that most troubles you. You and the man will part and come together, part and come together. Many times. For though you are lovers, you are not true companions and you both must follow your own ways. I will help you in this. I will free the hooks that tear at you and give you back your natures. And when this is done, you and the man may share each other, may part and come together without sadness or weakness."

Murcielago fumbled for something under his blanket, and Dowdy glanced back and forth between Richard and Lisa. "He wants to make you a gift," he said.

"What kind of gift?" asked Richard.

"A gift is not known by its name," Dowdy reminded him. "But it won't be a mystery for long."

The old man muttered again and stretched out a trembling hand to Richard; in his palm were four

black seeds.

"You must swallow them one at a time," said Dowdy. "And as you do, he will channel his power through them."

Richard's face tightened with suspicion. "It's some sort of drug, right? Take four and I won't care what happens."

Dowdy reverted to his ungrammatical self. "Life is a drug, man. You think me and the ol' boy are gonna get you high and boost your traveler's checks. Shit! You ain't thinkin' clear."

"Maybe that's exactly what you're going to do," said Richard stonily. "And I'm not falling for it."

Lisa slipped her hand into his. "They're not going to hurt us. Why don't you try it?"

"You believe this old fraud, don't you?" He disengaged his hand, looking betrayed. "You believe what he said about us?"

"I'd like to believe it," she said. "It would be better than what we have, wouldn't it?"

The lamplight flickered, and a shadow veered across his face. Then the light steadied, and so it seemed did he. It was as if the orange glow were burning away eleven years of wrong-thinking, and the old un-paranoid, sure-of-himself Richard was shining through. Christ, she wanted to say, you're really in there!

"Aw, hell! He who steals my purse steals only forty cents on the dollar, right?" He plucked the seeds from Murcielago's hand, picked one up and held it to his mouth. "Anytime."

Before letting Richard swallow the seeds, Murcielago sang for a while. The song made Lisa think of a comic fight in a movie, the guy carrying on a conversation in between ducking and throwing punches, packing his words into short, rushed phrases. Murcielago built it to a fierce rhythm, signaled Richard, and grunted each time a seed went down, putting—Lisa thought—some magical English on it.

"God!" said Richard afterward, eyes wide with mock awe. "I had no idea! The colors, the infinite harmony! If only . . ." He broke it off and blinked, as if suddenly waking to an unaccustomed thought.

Murcielago smiled and gave out with a growly, humming noise that Lisa assumed was a sign of satisfaction. "Where are mine?" she asked.

"It's different for you," said Dowdy. "He has to anoint you, touch you."

At this juncture Richard would normally have cracked a joke about dirty old men but he was gazing out the window at shadowy figures on the street. She asked if he were okay, and he patted her hand. "Yeah, don't worry. I'm just thinking."

Murcielago had pulled out a bottle of iodine-colored liquid and was dipping his fingers into it, wetting the tips. He began to sing again—a softer, less hurried song with the rhythm of fading echoes—and Dowdy had Lisa lean forward so the old man wouldn't have to strain to reach her. The song seemed to be all around her, turning her thoughts slow and drifty. Calloused brown fingers trembled in front of her face; the callouses were split, and the splits crusted with grime. She shut her eyes. The fingers left wet, cool tracks on her skin, and she could feel the shape he was tracing. A mask. Widening her eyes, giving her a smile, drawing curlicues on her cheeks and forehead. She had the idea that he was tracing the conformation of her real face, doing what the lamplight had done for Richard. Then his fingers brushed her eyelids. There was a stinging sensation, and dazzles exploded behind her eyes.

"Keep 'em shut," advised Dowdy. "It'll pass."

When at last she opened them, Dowdy was helping Murcielago to his feet. The old man nodded but did not smile at her as he had with Richard; from the thinned set of his mouth she took it that he was either measuring her or judging his work.

"That's all folks!" said Dowdy, grinning. "See? No dirty tricks, nothin' up his sleeve. Just good ol' new-fangled, stick-to-your-soul magic." He waved his arms high like an evangelist. "Can you feel it,

brothers and sisters? Feel it wormin' its way through your bones?"

Richard mumbled affirmatively. He seemed lost in himself, studying the pattern of rips his thumb had scraped on the label of the beer bottle, and Lisa was beginning to feel a bit lost herself. "Do we pay him anything?" she asked Dowdy; her voice sounded small and metallic, like a recorded message.

"There'll come a day when the answer's yes," said Dowdy. "But not now." The old man hobbled toward the door, Dowdy guiding him by the arm.

"Goodbye," called Lisa, alarmed by their abrupt exit. "Yeah," said Dowdy over his shoulder, paying more attention to assisting Murcielago. "See ya."

They were mostly silent while waiting for the launch, limiting their conversation to asking how the other was doing and receiving distracted answers; and later, aboard the launch, the black water shining under the stars and the motor racketing, their silence deepened. They sat with their hips pressed together, and Lisa felt close to Richard; yet she also felt that the closeness wasn't important; or if it was, it was of memorial importance, a tribute to past closeness, because things were changing between them. That, too, she could feel. Old postures were being redefined, webs were tearing loose, shadowy corners of their souls were coming to light. She knew this was happening to Richard as well as herself, and she wondered how she knew, whether it was her gift to know these things. But the first real inkling she had of her gift was when she noticed that the stars were shining different colors—red, yellow, blue, and white—and there were pale gassy shapes pass-ing across them. Clouds, she realized. Very high clouds that she would not ordinarily have seen. The sight frightened her, but a calm presence inside her would not admit to fright; and this presence, she further realized, had been there all along. Just like the true colors of the stars. It was her fearful self that was relatively new, an obscuring factor, and it—like the clouds—was passing. She considered telling Richard, but decided that he would be busy deciphering his gift. She concentrated on her own, and as they walked from the pier to the hotel, she saw halos around leaves, gleams coursing along electrical wires, and opaque films shifting over people's faces.

They went straight up to their room and lay without talking in the dark. But the room wasn't dark for Lisa. Pointillistic fires bloomed and faded in mid-air, seams of molten light spread along the cracks in the wall, and once a vague human shape—she identified it as a ghostly man wearing robes—crossed from the door to the window and vanished. Every piece of furniture began to glow golden around the edges, brighter and brighter, until it seemed they each had a more ornate shape superimposed. There came to be so much light that it disconcerted her, and though she was unafraid, she wished she could have a moment's normalcy just to get her bearings. And her wish was granted. In a wink the room had reverted to dim bulky shadows and a rectangle of streetlight slanting onto the floor from the window. She sat bolt upright, astonished that it could be controlled with such ease. Richard pulled her back down beside him and asked, "What is it?" She told him some of what she had seen, and he said, "It sounds like hallucinations."

"No, that's not how it feels," she said. "How about you?"

"I'm not hallucinating, anyway. I feel restless, penned in, and I keep thinking that I'm going somewhere. I mean, I have this sense of motion, of speed, and I can almost tell where I am and who's with me. I'm full of energy; it's like I'm sixteen again or something." He paused. "And I'm having these thoughts that ought to scare me but don't."

"What, for instance?"

"For instance"—he laughed—"and this really the most im-portant 'for instance', I'll be thinking about us and I'll understand that what the old guy said about us parting is true, and I don't want to accept it. But I can't help accepting it. I know it's true, for the best. All that. And then I'll have this feeling of motion again. It's like. I'm sensing the shape of an event or . . ." He shook his head, befuddled. "Maybe they did drug us, Lisa. We sound like a couple of acidheads out of the Sixties."

"I don't think so," she said; and then, after a silence, she asked, "Do you want to make love?"

He trailed his fingers along the curve of her stomach. "No offense, but I'm not sure I could concentrate on it just now."

"All right. But . . ."

He rolled onto his side and pressed against her, his breath warm on her cheeks. "You think we might not have another chance?"

Embarrassed, she turned her face into his chest. "I'm just horny is all."

"God, Lisa. You pick the weirdest times to get aroused."

"You've picked some pretty weird times yourself."

"I've always been absolutely correct in my behavior toward you, madam," he said in an English accent.

"Really? What about the time in Jim and Karen's bathroom?"

"I was drunk."

"Well? I'm nervous now. You know how that affects me."

"A common glandular condition, fraulein." German accent this time. "Correctable by simple surgery." He laughed and dropped the accent. "I wonder what Karen and Jim would be doing in our shoes."

For a while they told stories about what their various friends might do, and afterward they lay quietly, arms around each other. Richard's heart jolted against Lisa's breast, and she thought back to the first time they had been together this way. How protected she had felt, yet how fragile the strength of his heartbeat had made him seem. She'd had the idea that she could reach into his chest and touch his heart. And she could have. You had that much power over your lover; his heart was in your care, and at moments like this it was easy to believe that you would always be caring. But the moments failed you. They were peaks, and from them you slid into a mire where caring dissolved into mistrust and selfishness, where you saw that your feeling of being protected was illusory, and the moments were few and far-between. Marriage sought to institutionalize those moments, by law, to butter them over a ridiculous number of years; but all it did was lessen their intensity and open you up to a new potential for failure. Everyone talked about "good marriages," ones that evolved into hallowed friendships, an emeritus passion of the spirit. Maybe they did exist. Maybe there were—as Murcielago had implied—true companions. But most of the old marrieds Lisa had known were simply exhausted, weary of struggling, and had reached an accommodation with their mates based upon mutual despair. If Murcielago were right, if the world were changing, possibly the condition of marriage would change. Lisa doubted it, though. Hearts would have to be changed as well, and not even magic could affect their basic nature. Like with seashells, you could put your ear to one and hear the sad truth of an ocean breaking on a deserted shore. They were always empty, always unfulfilled. Deeds fill them, said an almost-voice inside her head, and she almost knew whose voice it had been; she pushed the knowledge aside, wanting to hold onto the moment.

Somebody shrieked in the courtyard. Not unusual. Groups of people frequently hung around the courtyard at night, smoking dope and exchanging bits of travel lore; the previous night two French girls and an American boy had been fighting with water pistols, and the girls had shrieked whenever they were hit. But this time the shriek was followed by shouts in Spanish and in broken English, a scream of pure terror, then silence. Richard sprang to his feet and cracked the door. Lisa moved up behind him. Another shout in Spanish—she recognized the word doctor. Richard put a finger to his lips and slipped out into the hall. Together they edged along the wall and peeked down into the courtyard. About a dozen guests were standing against the rear wall, some with their hands in the air; facing them, carrying automatic rifles, were three young men and a girl. Teenagers. Wearing jeans and polo shirts. A fourth man lay on the ground, his hands and head swathed in bandages. The guests were very pale—at this distance their eyes looked like raisins in uncooked dough—and a couple of the women were sobbing. One of the gunmen was wounded, a patch of blood staining his side; he was having to lean on the girl's shoulder, and his rifle barrel was wavering back and forth. With all the ferns sprouting around them, the pots of flowers hanging

from the green stucco wall, the scene had an air of mythic significance—a chance meeting between good and evil in the Garden of Eden.

"Ssst!" A hiss behind Lisa's shoulder. It was the Guate-malan man who had watched her during dinner the night before; he had a machine pistol in one hand, and in the other he was flapping a leather card case. ID. He beckoned, and they moved after him down the hall. "Policia!" he whispered, displaying the ID; in the photograph he was younger, his mustache so black it appeared to have been painted on for a joke. His nervous eyes and baggy suit and five o'clock shadow reminded Lisa of 1940s movie heavies, the evil flunky out to kill George Sanders or Humphrey Bogart; but the way his breath whined through his nostrils, the oily smell of the gun, his radiation of callous stupidity, all that reduced her romantic impression. "Malos!" he said, pointing to the courtyard. "Comunistas! Guerrillas!" He patted the gun barrel.

"Okay," said Richard, holding up both hands to show his neutrality, his non-involvement. But as the man crept toward the courtyard, toward the balcony railing, Richard locked his hands together and brought them down on the back of the man's neck, then fell atop him, kneeing and pummeling him. Lisa was frozen by the attack, half-disbelieving that Richard was capable of such decisive action. He scrambled to his feet, breathing hard, and tossed the machine pistol down into the courtyard, "Amigos!" he shouted, and turned to Lisa, his mouth still open from the shout.

Their eyes met, and that stare was a divorce, an acknowledgement that something was happening to separate them, happening right now, and though they weren't exactly sure what, they were willing to accept the fact and allow it to happen. "I couldn't let him shoot," said Richard. "I didn't have a choice." He sounded amazed, as if he hadn't known until this moment why he had acted.

Lisa wanted to console him, to tell him he'd done the right thing, but her emotions were locked away, under restraint, and she sensed a gulf between them that nothing could bridge—all their intimate connections were withdrawing, receding. Hooks, Murcielago had called them.

One of the guerrillas, the girl, was sneaking up the stairs, gun at the ready. She was pretty but on the chubby side, with shiny wings of black hair falling over her shoulders. She motioned for them to move back and nudged the unconscious man with her toe. He moaned, his hand twitched. "You?" she said, pointing at Richard and then to the man.

"He was going to shoot," said Richard hollowly.

From the girl's blank expression Lisa could tell that she hadn't understood. She rummaged in the man's jacket, pulled out the ID case and shouted in rapid-fire Spanish. "Vamanos!" she said to them, indicating that they should precede her down the stairs. As Lisa started down there was a short burst of automatic fire from the hall; startled, she turned to see the girl lifting the barrel of her rifle from the man's head, a stippling of red droplets on the green stucco. The girl frowned and trained the rifle on her, and Lisa hurried after Richard, horrified. But before her emotional reaction could mature into fear, her vision began to erode.

Glowing white flickers were edging every figure in the room, with the exception of the bandaged man, and as they grew clearer, she realized that they were phantom human shapes; they were like the afterimages of movement you see on benzedrine, yet sharper and slower to fade, and the movements were different from those of their originals—an arm flailing, a half-formed figure falling or running off. Each time one vanished another would take its place. She tried to banish them, to will them away, but was unsuccessful, and she found that watching them distracted her from thinking about the body upstairs.

The tallest of the guerrillas—a gangly kid with a skull face and huge dark eyes and a skimpy mustache—entered into conversation with the girl, and Richard dropped to his knees beside the bandaged man. Blood had seeped through the layers of wrapping, producing a grotesque striping around the man's head. The gangly kid scowled and prodded Richard with his rifle.

"I'm a medic," Richard told him. "Como un doctor." Gingerly, he peeled back some layers of bandage

and looked away, his face twisted in disgust. "Jesus Christ!"

"The soldiers torture him." The kid spat into the ferns. "They think he is guerrillero, because he's my cousin."

"And is he?" Richard was probing for a pulse under the bandaged man's jaw.

"No." The kid leaned over Richard's shoulder. "He studies at San Carlos University. But because we have killed the soldiers, now he will have to fight." Richard sighed, and the kid faltered. "It is good you are here. We think a friend is here, a doctor. But he's gone." He made a gesture toward the street. "Pasado."

Richard stood and cleaned his fingers on his jeans. "He's dead."

One of the women who had been sobbing let out a wail, and the kid snapped his rifle into firing position and shouted, "Cayete, gringa!" His face was stony, the vein in his temple throbbed. A balding, bearded man wearing an embroidered native shirt embraced the woman, muting her sobs, and glared fiercely at the kid; one of his afterimages raised a fist. The rest of the imprisoned guests were terrified, their Adam's apples working, eyes darting about; and the girl was arguing with the kid, pushing his rifle down. He kept shaking her off. Lisa felt detached from the tension, out of phase with existence, as if she were gazing down from a higher plane.

With what seemed foolhardy bravado, the bearded guy called out to Richard. "Hey, you! The American! You with these people or somethin'?"

Richard had squatted beside the wounded guerrilla—a boy barely old enough to shave—and was probing his side. "Or something," he said without glancing up. The boy winced and gritted his teeth and leaned on his friend, a boy not much older.

"You gonna let 'em kill us?" said the bearded guy. "That's what's happenin', y'know. The girl's sayin' to let us go, but the dude's tellin' her he wants to make a statement." Panic seeped into his voice. "Y'understand that, man? The dude's lookin' to waste us so he can make a statement."

"Take it easy." Richard got to his feet. "The bullet needs to come out," he said to the gangly kid. "I ..."

The kid swiped at Richard's head with the rifle barrel, and Richard staggered back, clutching his brow; when he straight-ened up, Lisa saw blood welling from his hairline. "Your friend's going to die," he said stubbornly. "The bullet needs to come out." The kid jammed the muzzle of the rifle into Richard's throat, forcing him to tip back his head.

With a tremendous effort of will Lisa shook off the fog that had enveloped her. The afterimages vanished. "He's trying to help you," she said, going toward the kid. "Don't you understand?" The girl pushed her back and aimed her rifle at Lisa's stomach. Looking into her eyes, Lisa had an intimation of the depth of her seriousness, the ferocity of her commitment. "He's trying to help," Lisa repeated. The girl studied her, and after a moment she called over her shoulder to the kid. Some of the hostility drained from the kid's face and was replaced by suspicion.

"Why?" the kid asked Richard. "Why you help us?"

Richard seemed confused, and then he started to laugh; he wiped his forehead with the back of his hand, smearing the blood and sweat, and laughed some more. The kid was puzzled at first, but a few seconds later he smiled and nodded as if he and Richard were sharing a secret male joke. "Okay," he said. "Okay. You help him. But here is danger. We go now."

"Yeah," said Richard, absorbing this. "Yeah, okay." He stepped over to Lisa and drew her into a smothering hug. She gripped his shoulders hard, and she thought her emotions were going to break free; but when he stepped back, appearing stunned, she sensed again that distance between them ... He put his arm around the wounded boy and helped him through the entrance; the others were already peering out the door. Lisa followed. The rows of tourist shops and restaurants looked unreal—a deserted stage

set—and the colors seemed streaky and too bright. Parked under a streetlight near the entrance, gleaming toylike in the yellow glare, was a Suzuki mini-truck, the kind with a canvas-draped frame over the rear. Beyond it the road wound away into darkened hills. The girl vaulted the tailgate and hauled the wounded boy after her; the other two climbed into the cab and fired the engine. Only Richard was left standing on the cobblestones.

"Base prisa!" The girl banged on the tailgate.

As Richard hesitated there was a volley of shots. The noise sent Lisa scuttling away from the entrance toward the lake. Three policemen were behind a parked car on the opposite side of the street. More shots. The girl returned their fire, blowing out the windshield of the car, and they ducked out of sight. Another shot. Sparks and stone chips were kicked up near Richard's feet. Still he hesitated.

"Richard!" Lisa had intended the shout as a caution, but the name floated out of her, not desperate-sounding at all—it had the ring of an assurance. He dove for the tailgate. The girl helped him scramble inside, and the truck sped off over the first rise. The policemen ran after it, firing; then, like Keystone Kops, they put on the brakes and ran in the opposite direction.

Lisa had a flash-feeling of anguish that almost instantly began to subside, as if it had been the freakish firing of a nerve. Dazedly, she moved further away from the hotel entrance. A jeep stuffed with policemen came swerving past, but she hardly noticed. The world was dissolving in golden light, every source of light intensifying and crumbling the outlines of things. Streetlights burned like novas, sunbursts shone from windows, and even the cracks in the sidewalk glowed; misty shapes were fading into view, overlaying the familiar with tall, peak-roofed houses and carved wagons and people dressed in robes. All rippling, illusory. It was as if a fantastic illustration were coming to life, and she was the only real-life character left in the story, a contemporary Alice with designer jeans and turquoise earrings, who had been set to wander through a golden fairytale. She was entranced, and yet at the same time she resented the fact that the display was cheating her of the right to sadness. She needed to sort herself out, and she continued toward the lake, toward the pier where she and Richard had kissed. By the time she reached it, the lake itself had been transformed into a scintillating body of light and out on the water the ghost of a sleek sailboat, its canvas belling, glided past for an instant and was gone.

She sat at the end of the pier, dangling her feet over the edge. The cool roughness of the planks was a comfort, a proof against the strangeness of the world ... or was it worlds? The forms of the new age. Was that what she saw? Weary of seeing it, she willed the light away and before she could register whether or not she had been successful, she shut her eyes and tried to think about Richard. And, as if thought were a vehicle for sight, she saw him. A ragged-eyed patch of vision appeared against the darkness of her closed eyes, like a hole punched through black boards. He was sitting on the oil-smeared floor of the truck, cradling the wounded boy's head in his lap; the girl was bending over the boy, mopping his forehead, holding onto Richard's shoulder so the bouncing of the truck wouldn't throw her off-balance. Lisa felt a pang of jealousy, but she kept watching for a very long time. She didn't wonder how she saw them. It all meant something, and she knew that meaning would come clear.

When she opened her eyes, she found it had grown pitch-dark. She couldn't see her hand in front of her face and she panicked, thinking she had gone blind; but accompanying the panic was a gradual brightening, and she realized that she must have willed away all light. Soon the world had returned to normal. Almost. Though the slopes of the volcanos were unlighted—shadows bulking against the stars—above each of their cones blazed a nimbus of ruby glow, flickering with an inconstant rhythm. The glow above Murcielago's volcano was the brightest—at least it was for a few seconds. Then it faded, and in its place a fan of rippling white radiance sprayed from the cone, penetrating high into the dark. It was such an eerie sight, she panicked. Christ, what was she doing just sitting here and watching pretty lights? And what was she going to do? Insecurity and isolation combined into an electricity that jolted her to her feet. Maybe there was an antidote for this, maybe the thing to do would be to go see Murcielago ... And she remembered Dowdy's story. How he'd been afraid and had gone to Murcielago,

only to find that the old apprentice had taken up his own post, leaving a vacancy. She looked back at the other two volcanos, still pulsing with their ruby glow. Dowdy and the mestizo? It had to be. The white light was Murcielago's vacancy sign. The longer she stared at it, the more certain that knowledge became.

Stunned by the prospect of setting out on such an eccentric course, by the realization that everything she knew was dissolving in light or fleeing into darkness, she walked away from the pier, following the shoreline. She wanted to hold onto Richard, to sadness—her old familiar and their common woe—but with each step her mood brightened, and she couldn't even feel guilty about not being sad. Four or five hours would take her to the far side of the lake. A long walk, alone, in the dark, hallucinations lurking behind every bush. She could handle it, though. It would give her time to work at controlling her vision, to understand some of what she saw, and when she had climbed the volcano she'd find a rickety cabin back in under the lip, a place as quirky as Dowdy himself. She saw it the same way she had seen Richard and the girl. Tilting walls; ferns growing from the roof; a door made from the side of a packing crate, with the legend THIS END UP upside down. Tacked to the door was a piece of paper, probably Dowdy's note explaining the care and feeding of wizards. And inside, the thousandfold forms of his spirit compacted into a gnarled shape, a nugget of power (she experienced an upwelling of sadness, and then she felt that power surging through her, nourishing her own strength, making her aware of the thousands of bodies of light she was, all focused upon this moment in her flesh), there Murcielago would be waiting to teach her power's usage and her purpose in the world. Oh, God, Richard, goodbye.

Scan Notes:

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