

# The Ends of the Earth

By Lucius Shepard

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the Earth](#)

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Those whose office it is to debunk the supernatural are fond of pointing out that incidences of paranormal activity most often take place in backwaters and rarely in the presence of credible witnesses, claiming that this in itself is evidence of the fraudulent character of the phenomena involved; yet it has occurred to me that the agents of the supernatural, especially those elements whose activities are directed toward evil ends, might well exhibit reticence in appearing before persons capable of verifying their existence and thus their threat to humankind. It seems surprising that such shadowy forces--if, indeed, they do exist--choose to appear before any witnesses at all, and equally surprising--if their powers are as vast as described in popular fiction--that they do not simply have done with us. Perhaps they are prevented from doing so by some restraint, a limit, say, on how many souls they are allowed to bag, and perhaps the fact that they manifest as they do is attributable to a binding regulation similar to the one dictating that corporations (shadowy forces in themselves) must make a public notice of the date and location of their stockholders' meetings. In order to avoid scrutiny of their business practices, a number of corporations publish these notices in shoppers' guides and rural weeklies, organs unlikely to pass before the eyes of government agencies and reporters, and it makes sense that the supernatural might emulate this tactic as a means of compliance with some cosmic rule. That supposition may seem facetious, but my intent is quite serious, for while I cannot say with absolute certainty whether the circumstances that provoked my interest in these matters were in essence supernatural or merely an extraordinary combination of ordinary people and events, I believe that six months ago in Guatemala, a place notable for its inaccessibility and unreliable witnesses, I witnessed something rare and secret, something that may have reflected the exercise of a regulatory truth pertaining to both the visible and invisible worlds.

Prior to leaving for Guatemala I had been romantically involved for the preceding three years with Karen Maniaci, a married woman who managed a Manhattan art gallery, and it was our breakup, which was marked by bitterness on my part and betrayal on hers, that persuaded me I needed a drastic change in order to get on with living. This process of persuasion lasted several months, months during which I wandered gloomily about New York, stopping in my tracks to stare at dark-haired women of approximately five feet nine in height and 120 pounds; and at length I concluded that I had better get out of town . . . either that or begin to play footsie with mental illness. I was thirty-seven and had grown too cautious to want to risk myself in a dangerous enterprise; yet there is a theatricality inherent in being jilted, a dramatic potential that demands resolution, and to satisfy it, I chose that other option of the heartbroken: a trip to some foreign shore, one isolate from the rest of the world, where there were no newspapers and no reminders of one's affair. Livingston, Guatemala, seemed to qualify as such. It was described in a guidebook that I happened upon in The Strand bookstore as ". . . a quiet village at the egress of the Río Dulce into the Caribbean, hemmed in against the sea by the Petén rain forest. Settled by

black Caribes and the descendants of East Indian slaves brought by the British to work the sugar plantations upriver. There are no roads into Livingston. One reaches it either by ferry from Puerto Morales or by powerboat from Reunión at the junction of the Río Dulce and the Petén highway. The majority of the houses are neat white stucco affairs with red tile roofs. The natives are unspoiled by tourism. In the hills above the village is a lovely tiered waterfall called Siete Altares (Seven Altars), so named because of the seven pools into which the stream whose terminus it forms plunges on its way to the sea. Local delicacies include turtle stew. . . ."

It sounded perfect, a paradise cut off from the grim political realities of the mother country, a place where a man could go to seed in the classic style, by day wandering the beach in a Bogart suit, waking each morning slumped over a table, an empty rum bottle beside his elbow, a stained deck of cards scattered around him with only the queen of hearts showing its face. A few days after reading the guidebook entry, following journeys by plane, train, and an overcrowded ferry, I arrived in Livingston. A few days after that, thanks to a meeting in one of the bars, I took possession of a five-room house of yellow stucco walls and concrete floors belonging to a young Spanish couple, doctors who had been studying with local *curanderos* and wanted someone to look after their pets--a marmalade cat and a caged toucan--while they toured for a year in the United States.

I have traveled widely all my life, and it has been my experience that guidebook descriptions bear little relation to actual places; however, though changes had occurred--most notably the discovery of the village by the singer Jimmy Buffett, whose frequent visits had given a boost to the tourist industry, attracting a smattering of young travelers, mainly French and Scandinavians who lived in huts along the beach--I discovered that the guidebook had not grossly exaggerated Livingston's charms. True, a number of shanty bars had sprung up on the beach, and there was a roach-infested hotel not mentioned in the book: three stories of peeling paint and cell-sized rooms furnished with torn mattresses and broken chairs. But the Caribe houses were in evidence, and the turtle stew was tasty, and the fishing was good, and Siete Altares was something out of a South Seas movie, each pool shaded by ceiba trees, their branches dripping with orchids, hummingbirds flitting everywhere in the thickets. And the natives were relatively unspoiled, perhaps because the tourists kept to the beach, which was separated from the village by a steep drop-off and which--thanks to the bars and a couple of one-room stores--provided them with all the necessities of life.

Early on I suffered a domestic tragedy. The cat ate the toucan, leaving its beak and feet for me to find on the kitchen floor. But in general, things went well. I began to work, my mind was clearing, and the edge had been taken off my gloom by the growing awareness that other possibilities for happiness existed apart from a neurotic career woman who was afraid to trust her feelings, was prone to anxiety attacks and given to buying bracelets with the pathological avidity that Imelda Marcos once displayed toward the purchase of shoes. I soon fell into a pleasant routine, writing in the mornings, working on a cycle of short stories that--despite my intention of avoiding this pitfall--dealt with an unhappily married woman. Afternoons, I would be in a hammock strung between two palms that sprouted from the patio of the house, and read. Evenings, I would stroll down to the beach with the idea of connecting with one of the tourist girls. I usually wound up drinking alone and brooding, but I did initiate a flirtation with an Odille LeCluse, a Frenchwoman in her late twenties, with high cheekbones and milky skin, dark violet eyes and a sexy mouth that always looked as if she were about to purse her lips. She was in thrall--or so I'd heard--to Carl Konwicki, an Englishman of about my own age, who had lived on the beach for two years and supported himself by selling marijuana.

By all reports, Konwicki was a manipulator who traded on his experience to dominate less-seasoned travelers in order to obtain sex and other forms of devotion, and I couldn't understand how Odille, an intelligent woman with a degree in linguistics from the Sorbonne, could have fallen prey to the likes of him. I spotted him every day on the streets of the village: an asthenic olive-skinned man, with a scraggly

fringe of brown beard and a hawkish Semitic face. He commonly wore loose black trousers, an embroidered vest, and a Moroccan skullcap, and there was a deliberate languor to his walk, as if he were conscious of being watched; whenever he would pass by, he would favor me with a bemused smile. I felt challenged by him, both because of Odille and because my morality had been enlisted by what I'd heard of his smarmy brand of gamesmanship, and I had the urge to let him know I saw through his pose. But realizing that--if Odille was involved with him--this kind of tactic would only damage my chances with her, I restrained myself and ignored him.

One night about two months after my arrival, I was going through old notebooks, searching for a passage that I wanted to include in a story, when a sheet of paper with handwriting on it slipped from between the pages and fell to the floor. The handwriting was that of my ex-lover, Karen. I let it lie for a moment, but finally, unable to resist, I picked it up and discovered it to be a letter written early in the relationship. A portion read as follows:

*. . . When I went to the therapist today (I know . . . I'll probably tell you all this on the phone later, but what the hell!), I told her about what happened, how I almost lost my job by making love to you those days in the office, and she didn't seem terribly surprised. When I asked her how a responsible adult who cares about her job could possibly jeopardize it in such a way, she simply said that there must have been a great deal of gain in it for me. It seems she's trying to lead me toward you--she's quite negative about Barry. But that's probably just wishful thinking--what she's doing is trying to lead me toward what I want. Of course what I want is you, so it amounts to the same thing.*

It was curious, I thought, scanning the letter, how words that had once seemed precious could now seem so vapid. I noted the overusage of the words *terribly* and *terrible*, particularly in conjunction with the words *surprising* and *surprised*. That had been her basic reaction to falling in love, I realized. She had been terribly surprised. *My God*, she'd said to herself. *An emotion! Quick, I'll hie me to the head doctor and have it excised.* I read on.

*. . . I can't imagine living without you, Ray. When you said something the other day about the possibility of getting hit by a bus, I suddenly got this awful chill. I had a terrible sense of loss just hearing you say that. This is interesting in that I used to try to figure out if I loved Barry by imagining something awful happening to him and seeing how I felt. I usually felt bad, but that's about it. . . .*

I laughed out loud. The last I'd heard on the subject was that Barry, who bored Karen, whom she did not respect, who had recently gotten into rubber goods, was back in favor. Barry had one virtue that I did not: he was controllable, and in control there was security. She could go on lying to him, having affairs with no fear of being caught--Barry was big into denial. And now she was planning a child in an attempt to pave over the potholes of the relationship, convincing herself that this secure fake was the best she could expect of life. She was due fairly soon, I realized. But it didn't matter. No act of hers could bring conscience and clarity into what had always been a charade. Her lies had condemned the three of us, and most of all she had condemned herself by engaging in a kind of method living, chirping a litany of affirmation. "I think I can, I think I can," playing *The Little Adultress That Could*, and thus losing the hope of her heart, the strength of her soul. I imagined her at sixty-five, her beauty hardened to a grotesque brittleness, wandering through a mall, shopping for drapes thick enough to blot out the twenty-first century, while Barry shuffled along in her wake, trying to pin down the feeling that something had not been quite right all these years, both of them smiling and nodding, looking forward to a friendly gray fate.

The letter brought back the self-absorbed anguish that I'd been working to put behind me, and I felt--as I had for months prior to leaving New York--on the verge of exploding, as if a pressure were building to a

hot critical mass inside me, making my thoughts flurry like excited atoms. My face burned; there were numbing weights in my arms and legs. I paced the room, unable to regain my composure, and after ten minutes or so, I flung open the door, frightening the marmalade cat, and stormed out into the dark.

I did not choose a direction, but soon I found myself on the beach, heading toward one of the shanty bars. The night was perfect for my mood. Winded: a constant crunch of surf and palm fronds tearing; combers rolling in, their plumed sprays as white as flame. A brilliant moon flashed between the fronds, creating shadows from even the smallest of projections, and set back from the shore, half-hidden in deep shadow among palms and sea grape and cashew trees, were huts with glinting windows and tin roofs. The beach was a ragged, narrow strip of tawny sand strewn with coconut litter and overturned cayucos. As I stepped over a cayuco, something croaked and leaped off into the rank weeds bordering the beach. My heart stuttered, and I fell back against the cayuco. It had only been a frog, but its appearance made me aware of my vulnerability. Even a place like Livingston had its dangers. Street criminals from Belize had been known to ride motorboats down from Belize City or Belmopan to rob and beat the tourists, and in my agitated state of mind I would have made the perfect target.

The bar--Café Pluto--was set in the lee of a rocky point: a thatched hut with a sand floor and picnic-style tables, lit with black lights that emitted an evil purple radiance and made all the gringos glow like sunburned corpses. Reggae from a jukebox at the rear was barely audible above the racket of the generator. I had several drinks in rapid succession and ended up out front of the bar beside a toppled palm trunk, drinking rum straight from the bottle and sharing a joint with Odille and a young blond Australian named Ryan, who was writing a novel and whose mode of dress--slacks, shirt, and loosened tie--struck an oddly formal note. I was giddy with the dope, with the wildness of the night, the vast blue-dark sky and its trillion watts of stars, silver glitters that appeared to be slipping around like sequins on a dancer's gown. Behind us the Café Pluto had the look of an eerie cave lit by seams of gleaming purple ore.

I asked Ryan what his novel was about, and with affected diffidence he said, "Nothing much. Saturday night in a working-class bar in Sydney." He took a hit of the joint, passed it to Odille. "It wasn't going too well, so I thought I'd set it aside and do something poetic. Run away to the ends of the earth." He had a look around, a look that in its casual sweep included the sea and sky and shore. "This is the ends of the earth, isn't it?"

I was caught by the poignancy of the image, thinking that he had inadvertently captured the essence of place and moment. I pictured the globe spinning and spinning, trailing dark frays of its own essential stuff, upon one of which was situated this slice of night and stars and expatriate woe, tatters with no real place in human affairs. . . . Wind veiled Odille's face with a drift of hair. I pushed it back, and she smiled, letting her eyelids droop. I wanted to take her back to the house and fuck her until I forgot all the maudlin bullshit that had been fucking me over the past three years.

"I hear you're doing some writing, too," said Ryan in a tone that managed to be both defiant and disinterested.

"Just some stories," I said, surprised that he would know this.

" 'Just some stories.' " He gave a morose laugh and said to the sky, "He's modest . . . I love it." Then, turning a blank gaze on me: "No need to hide your light, man. We all know you're famous."

"Famous? Not hardly."

"Sure you are!" In a stentorian voice he quoted a blurb on my last book. " 'Raymond Kingsley, a mainstay of American fiction.' "

"Uh-huh, right."

"Even the Master of Time and Space thinks you're great," said Ryan. "And believe me, he's sparing with his praise."

"Who're you talking about?"

Ryan pointed behind me. "Him."

Carl Konwicki was coming down the beach. He ambled up, dropped onto the fallen palm trunk, and looked out to sea. Odille and Ryan seemed to be waiting for him to speak. Irritated by this obeisance, I belched. Konwicki let his eyes swing toward me, and I winked.

"How's she going?" I took a man-sized slug of rum, wiped my mouth with the back of my hand, and fixed him with a mean stare. He clucked his tongue against his teeth and said, "I'm fine, thank you."

"Glad to hear it." Drunk, I hated him, my hate fueled by the frustration that had driven me out of the house. Hate was chemical between us, the confrontational lines as sharply etched as the shadows on the sand. I gestured at his skullcap. "You lived in Morocco?"

"Some."

"What part?"

"You know . . . around." The wind bent a palm frond low, and for an instant, Konwicki's swarthy face was edged by a saw-toothed shadow.

"That's not very forthcoming," I said. "Do questions bother you?"

"Not ones that have a purpose."

"How about light conversation . . . that a worthwhile purpose?"

"Is that *your* purpose?"

"What else would it be?"

"Wow!" said Ryan. "This is like intense . . . like a big moment."

Odille giggled.

"I got it," I said. "What would *you* like to talk about? How about the translation you're doing . . . what is it?"

"The *Popol Vuh*," said Konwicki distractedly.

"Gee," I said. "That's already been translated, hasn't it?"

"Not correctly."

"Oh, I see. And you're going to do it right." I had another pull on the rum bottle. "Hope you're not wasting your time."

"Time." Konwicki smiled, apparently amused by the concept; he refitted his gaze to the toiling sea.

"Yeah," I said, injecting a wealth of sarcasm into my voice. "It's pretty damn mind-bending, isn't it?"

The surf thundered; Konwicki met my eyes, imperturbable. "I've been looking forward to meeting you."

"Me, too," I said. "I hear you sell great dope." I clapped a hand to my brow as if recognizing that I had made a social blunder. "Pardon me . . . I didn't intend that to sound disparaging."

Konwicki gave me one of his distant smiles. "You're obviously upset about something," he said. "You should try to calm down."

I sat close beside him on the palm trunk, close enough to cause him to shift away, and was about to bait him further, but he stood, said, "Ta ra," and walked into the bar.

"I'd score that round even," said Ryan. "Mr. Kingsley dominating the first half, the Master coming on late."

Odille was gazing after Konwicki, wrapping a curl of hair around one forefinger. She gave me a wave, said, "I'll be back, okay?" and headed for the bar. I watched her out of sight, tracking the oiled roll of her hips beneath her cutoffs, and when I turned back to Ryan, he was smiling at me.

"What is it with them?" I asked.

"With Odille and the Master? Just a little now-and-then thing." He gave me a sly look. "Why? You interested?"

I snorted, had a hit of rum.

"You can win the lady," said Ryan. "If you've a stout heart."

I looked at him over the top of the bottle, but offered no encouragement.

"You see, Ray," said Ryan, affecting the manner of a lecturer, "Odille's a wounded bird. The poor thing had a disappointment in love back in Paris. She sought solace in distant lands and had the misfortune of meeting the Master. It's not much of a misfortune, you understand. The Master's not much of a Master, so he can't offer a great deal in the way of good or ill. But he confused Odille, made her believe he could show her how to escape pain through his brand of enlightenment. And that involved a bit of sack time."

Given this similarity in history between Odille and myself, I imagined fate had taken a hand by bringing us together. "So what can I do?"

"Things a bit hazy, are they, Ray?" Ryan chuckled. "Odille's grown disillusioned with the Master. She's looking for someone to burst his bubble, to free her." He reached for the bottle, had a swig and gagged. "God, that's awful!" He slumped against the toppled palm trunk, screwed the bottle into the sand so that it stood upright. The surf boomed; the wildfire whiteness of the combers imprinted afterimages on my eyes.

"Anyway" Ryan went on, "she's definitely looking for emotional rescue. But you can't go about it with *déclassé* confrontation. You'll have to beat the Master on his own terms, his own ground."

Perhaps it was the rum that let me believe that Ryan had a clear view of our situation. "What *are* his terms?" I asked.

"Games," he said. "Whatever game he chooses." He had another pull off the bottle. "He's afraid of you, you know. He's worried that you're into disciples, and all his children will abandon him for the famous writer. He realizes he can't befuddle you with his usual quasi-erudite crap. So he'll come up with something new for you. I have no idea what. But he'll play some game with you. He's got to . . . it's his

nature."

"How's he befuddled you? You seem to have a handle on him."

"He's got no need," said Ryan. "I'm his fool, and a fool can know the king's secrets and make fun of them with impunity."

I started to ask another question, but let it rest. The wind pulled the soft crush of the surf into a breathy vowel; the moon had lowered behind the hills above the village, its afterglow fanning up into the heavens; the top of the sky had deepened to indigo, and the stars blazed, so dense and intricate in their array that I thought I might--if I were to try--be able to read there all scripture and truth in sparkling sentences. And it was not only in the sky that clarity ruled. What Ryan had said made sense. Odille was testing me . . . perhaps unconsciously, but testing me nonetheless, unwilling to abandon Konwicki until she was sure of me. I didn't resent this--it was a tactic often used in establishing relationships. But I was struck by how dear its uses seemed on the beach at Livingston. Not merely the social implications, but its elemental ones: the wounded lovers, the shabby Mephistophelian figure of Konwicki with his sacred books and petty need to exercise power. Man, woman, and Devil entangled in a sexual knot.

"Did I ever tell you my theory of the Visible?" I asked Ryan.

"We only just met," he reminded me.

"God, you're right. And here I've been under the illusion we're old pals."

"It's the sea air. Affects everyone dele. . . ." Ryan hiccuped. "Deleteriously."

"Well, anyway." I plucked the rum bottle from the sand and drank. "In places like this, I've always thought it was possible to see how things really are between people. To discern relationships that are obscured by the clutter of urban life. The old relationships, the archetypes."

He stared blearily up at me. "Sounds bloody profound, Ray."

"Yeah, I suppose it is," I said, and then added: "Profundity's my business. Or maybe it's bullshit . . . one or the other."

"So," he said, "are you going to play?"

"I think so . . . yeah."

"Beautiful," said Ryan. "That's really beautiful."

A few moments later Konwicki and Odille came out of the bar and walked toward us, deep in conversation.

Ryan laughed and laughed. "Let the games begin," he said.

We talked on the beach for another hour, smoking Konwicki's dope, which smoothed out the rough edges of my drunk, seeming to isolate me behind a thick transparency. I withdrew from the conversation, watching Konwicki. I wasn't gauging his strengths and weaknesses; despite my exchange with Ryan, I had not formalized the idea that there was to be a contest between us. I was merely observing, intrigued by his conversational strategy. By sidestepping questions, claiming to know nothing about a subject, he managed to intimate that the subject was not worth knowing and that he possessed knowledge in a

sphere of far greater relevance to the scheme of things. Odille hung on his every word for a while, but soon began to lose interest, casting glances and smiles at me; it appeared she was trying to maintain a connection with Konwicki, but was losing energy in that regard.

For the most part, Konwicki avoided looking at me; but at one point, he cut his eyes toward me and locked on. We stared at each other for a long moment, then he turned away with acknowledgment. During that moment, however, the skin on my face went cold, my muscles tensed, and a smile stretched my lips. A feral smile funded by a remorseless hatred quite different from the impassioned, drunken loathing I originally had felt. This emotion, like the smile, seemed something visited upon me and not an intensification of my emotions, and along with it came a sudden increase in my body temperature. A sweat broke on my forehead, on my chest and arms; my vision reddened, and I had a peculiar sense of doubled perceptions, as if I were looking through two different pairs of eyes, one of which was capable of seeing a wider spectrum. I decided to slack off on the rum.

At length Konwicki suggested we get out of the wind, which was blowing stronger, and go over to his place to listen to music. I was of two minds about the proposal; while I wasn't ready to give up on Odille, neither was I eager to mix it with Konwicki, and I was certain that if I went with them there would be some bad result. The dope had taken the edge off my enthusiasm. But Odille took my hand, nudged the softness of her breast into my arm.

"You *are* coming, aren't you?" she said.

"Sure," I said, as if a thought to the contrary had never occurred.

We walked together along the beach, trailing Konwicki and Ryan, and Odille talked about taking a trip to Esquipulas someday soon to see the Black Christ in the cathedral there.

"Women come from all over Central America to be blessed," she said. "They stand in line for days. Huge fat women in white turbans from Belize. Crippled old island ladies from Roatán. Beautiful slim girls from Panama. All waiting to spend a few seconds kneeling in the shadow of a black statue. When I first heard about it, I thought it sounded primitive. Now it seems strangely modern. The New Primitivism. I keep imagining all those female shadows in the bright sun, radios playing, vendors selling cold drinks." She gave her hair a toss. "I could use that sort of blessing."

"Is it only for women?"

She held my eyes for a second, then turned away. "Sometimes men wait with them."

I asked if what Ryan had told me about her love affair in Paris was the truth. I had no hesitancy in asking this--intimacies were the flavor of the night. A flicker of displeasure crossed her face. "Ryan's an idiot."

"I doubt he'd argue the point."

Odille went a few steps in silence. "It was nothing. A fling, that's all."

Her glum tone seemed to belie this.

"Yeah, I had a fling myself right before I came down here. Like to have killed me, that fling."

She glanced up at me, still registering displeasure, but then she smiled. "Perhaps with us it's a matter of. . . . She made a frustrated gesture, unable to find the right words.

"Victims recognizing the symptoms?" I suggested.



"I suppose." She threw back her head and looked up into the sky as if seeking guidance there. "Yes, I had a bad experience, but I'm over it."

"Completely?"

She shook her head. "No . . . never completely. And you?"

"Hey, I'm fine," I said. "It's like it never happened."

She laughed, cast an appraising look my way. "Who was she?"

"This married woman back in New York."

"Oh!" Odille put a hand on my arm in sympathy. "That's the worst, isn't it? Married, I mean."

"The worst? I don't know. It was pretty goddamn bad."

"What was she like?"

"Frightened. She got married because she had a run of bad luck . . . at least, that's what she told me. Things started going bad around her. Her parents got divorced, her dog ran away, and that seemed a sign something worse might happen. I guess she thought marriage would protect her." I walked faster. "She's a fucking mess."

"How so?"

"She doesn't know what the hell she wants. Whenever she doubts something, she'll broadcast an opinion pro or con until the contrary opinion has been shouted down in her own mind." I kicked at the sand. "The last time we talked, she explained how she was happy in her marriage for the same reasons that she'd once claimed to be miserable. The vices of this guy whom she'd ridiculed . . . she told everyone how much he bored her, how childish he was. All those vices had been transformed into solid virtues. She told me she knew that she couldn't have the kind of relationship with Barry--that's her husband--that we'd had, but you had to make trade-offs. Barry at least always wore a neatly pressed suit and could be counted on not to embarrass--though never to scintillate--at business functions." I sniffed. "As a husband he made the perfect accessory for evening wear."

"You sound bitter."

"I can't deny it. She put me through hell. Of course I bought into it, so I've got no one to blame but myself."

"She was beautiful, of course?"

"She didn't think so." I changed the subject. "Was yours married?"

"No, just a shit." Her expression became distant, and I knew that for a moment she was back in Paris with the Shit. "For a long time afterward I threw myself into other relationships. I thought that would help, but it was a mistake . . . I can see that now."

"Everything seems like a mistake afterward," I said.

"Not everything," she said coyly.

I wasn't sure how to take that, and it wasn't just that her meaning was vague; it was also that I was put off by her coyness. Before I could frame a response, she said, "Talking to Carl has helped me a great

deal."

"Oh, I see." I tried to disguise my disappointment, believing this to be a sign that her connection with Konwicky was still vital.

"No, you don't. Just having someone to talk to was helpful. Carl's a fraud, of course. Nothing he says is without guile. But he does listen, and it's hard to find a good listener. That's basically all there was between us. I helped him with his work, and . . . there was more. But it wasn't important."

I wondered if she was playing with me, making me guess at her availability, and was briefly angered by the possibility; but then, recalling how uncertain my own motivations and responses had been, I decided that if I couldn't forgive her, I couldn't forgive myself.

"What are you thinking about?" Odille asked.

Her features, refined by the moonlight, looked delicate, etched, as if a kind of lucidity had been revealed in them, and I believed that I could see down beneath the games and the layers of false construction, beneath all those defenses, to who she most was, to the woman, no longer an innocent in the accepted sense of the word, but innocent all the same, still hopeful in spite of pain and disillusionment.

"Konwicky," I lied. "You helped him translate the *Popol Vuh*?"

"He was being discreet. He's acquired an old Mayan game and some papers that go with it. That's what he's translating."

"What sort of game?"

"From what I've been able to gather, it's a role-playing game. The papers seem to imply that it has to do with spirit travel. The gods. All the old cultures have myths that deal with that. It might be something that the priests used to evoke trances . . . something like that."

For no reason I could determine, this news made me edgy.

"Is that really what you were thinking about?" Odille asked.

"I was being discreet," I said, and she laughed.

Konwicky's place was a thatched hut with one large room and a sand floor over which a carpet of dried palm fronds had been laid, and was a scrupulously neat advertisement for his travels. Wall hangings from Peru, a brass hookah, a Japanese scroll, a bowl holding some Nepalese jewelry--rings of coral and worked silver, pillows embroidered in a pattern of turquoise thread that I recognized as being from Isfahan. Gourd bowls and various cooking implements hung from pegs, and a hurricane lantern provided a flickering orange light. An old Roxy Music album was playing on a cassette recorder, Bryan Ferry's nostalgia seeming more effete than usual in those surroundings. In one corner was an orange crate containing a stack of papers covered with Mayan hieroglyphs. I started to pick up the top paper, and Konwicky, who was sitting against the rear wall, rolling a joint, said, "Don't touch that . . . please!"

"What's the problem? My vibes might unsettle the spiritual fabric?"

"Something like that." He licked the edge of the rolling paper.

Ryan had stretched out on his back between Konwicky and a cardboard box that held some clay

figurines, a comic book spread over his eyes; Odille was on her knees facing Konwicky, watching him roll.

"Why don't you tell me what else is off-limits?" I said.

He lit the joint, let smoke trickle from his nostrils. "Did you come here just to be contentious?" he asked.

"I'm not sure why I came," I said. "I figured you'd tell me."

He gave a shrug, blew more smoke. "Why are you so hostile?"

I dropped down cross-legged next to Odille. "You know what's going on here, man. But for one thing, I don't like guys like you . . . guys who want to grow up to be Charles Manson, but don't have the balls, so they hang out and maneuver weaker people into fucking them."

I said this mildly, and that was not a pose; I felt calm, without malice, merely making an observation. My dislike of Konwicky--it appeared--had shifted into a philosophical mode.

"And what sort of person are you?" he asked with equal mildness.

"Why don't you tell me?"

He made a show of sizing me up. "How about this? A horny, lonely man who's having trouble adjusting to the onset of middle age."

"Gee, Carl," I said. "I like my kind of guy a lot better than I do yours."

He sniffed, amused. "There's no accounting for taste." He passed me the joint, and in the spirit of the moment, I took a hit, let it circulate, then took another, deeper one. Seconds later I realized that Konwicky had exercised the home-field advantage in our little war and pulled out his killer weed. Even though I was already ripped, I could feel its effects moving through me like a cool, soft wind; it was the kind of weed that immobilizes, the kind with which you need to plan where you want your body to fall. My thoughts became muddled, my extremities felt cold. Yet when the joint was passed to me again, I had still another hit, not wanting to seem a wimp.

"Good shit, huh?" said Konwicky, watching Ryan suck on the joint.

"Gawd!" said Ryan, leaking smoke. "What clarity!"

I'm not sure why I reached for the clay figurines in the box next to Ryan--the need to hold on to something, probably. The wind tattering the thatch made a sound like something huge being torn apart. The inconstant wash of orange light along the walls mesmerized me, and the lantern flame itself was too bright to look at directly. In every minute event I perceived myriad subtleties, and I could have sworn I was floating a couple of inches above the ground. Perhaps I thought the figurine would give me ballast, bring me back down, because I was blitzed, wrecked, fucked-up. My hand moved in slow motion, effecting a lovely arc toward the box that contained the figurines. But the second I picked one up, I was cured of my sensory overload and felt stone-cold sober, in absolute control.

"Christ!" said Konwicky with annoyance. "Put that down!"

The figurine was a pre-Columbian dwarf of yellowish brown clay with stumpy legs, a potbelly, a hooked nose, and thick brutish lips. The eyes were slitted folds. About the size of a Barbie doll. Ugly as a wart. Holding it gave me focus and made me feel not merely whole, but powerful. The only remnant of my buzz was a sense that the figurine was full of something heavy and shifting, like a dollop of mercury. It seemed

to throb in my hand.

"Put it down!" Konwicki's tone had become anxious.

"Why? Is it valuable?" I turned the figure, examining it from every angle. "Don't worry, man. I won't drop it."

"Just put it down, all right?"

Holding the figurine in my left hand, away from Konwicki, I leaned forward and saw that the cardboard box contained five more figurines, all standing. "What are they? They look like a set."

Konwicki held out his hand for the figurine, but I was feeling more and more in control. As if the figurine were a strengthening magic. I wasn't about to let it go. Odille, I saw, was regarding Konwicki with distaste.

"I'm not going to drop it, man. You think I'm too stoned or something? Hey"--I flashed him a cheery grin--"I feel great. Tell me what they are."

Ryan, too, was staring at Konwicki; he laughed soddenly and said in an Actors' Equity German accent, "Tell him, Master."

Konwicki grimaced like a man much put upon. "They're part of a game. An old Mayan game. I bought it off a *chiclero* in Flores."

"Really?" I said. "How do you play?"

"I can set the figures up, but I don't know what happens after that."

"If you know how to set them up, you must know something about it."

An exasperated sigh. "All right . . . I'll set them up, but be careful."

A long piece of plyboard was leaning against the wall to his left; it was stained a rusty orange and marked with a mosaic of triangular zones. He laid the board flat and arranged the five figures, three at the corners, the other two at the center edge opposite one another. The corner nearest me was vacant, and after a brief hesitation I set the dwarf down upon it.

"What next?" I said.

"I told you. I don't know. Whoever's playing picks one of the figures to be his corner. But after that . . ." He shrugged.

"How many can play?"

"From two to six people."

"Why don't you and I give it a shot?" I said.

It was curious how I felt as I said that. I was giving him an order, one I knew he'd obey. And I was eager for him to obey. I wanted him on the board, vulnerable to my moves, even though I didn't know what moves existed. That animal grin that had first manifested itself in front of the Café Pluto once again spread across my face.

"Come on, Carl," I said mockingly. "Don't you want to play?"

He pretended to be complying for the sake of harmony, giving Odille a glance that said, *What can I do?* and stretched out his hand, letting it hover above the figurines as if testing a discharge that issued from the head of each. At last he touched a clay warrior with a feathered headdress and a long spear. I felt less competent, and my thoughts frayed once again; it appeared that my relapse had boosted Konwicki's spirits. His bland smile switched on, and he leaned back against the wall. The noise of wind and sea smoothed out into a slow oscillating roar, as if something big and winged were making leisurely flights around the outside of the hut.

On impulse, I picked up the dwarf, and, suddenly brimming with gleeful hostility, I set it down beside a figurine at the center of the board, a lumpy female gnome with a prognathous jaw and slack breasts. Konwicki countered by moving a figurine resembling a squat infant to the side of his warrior. Thereafter we made a number of moves in rapid succession using the same four figurines. Complex moves, each consisting of more than one figurine, sometimes in tandem, utilizing every portion of the board. The entire process could not have taken more than a few minutes, but I could have sworn the game lasted for an hour at least. The room had been transformed into a roaring cell that channeled the powers of wind and sea, drew them into a complex circuit. A weight was shifting inside me, shifting just as the interior weights of the figurines seemed to shift, as if some liquid were being tipped this way and that, guiding my hand. Along with the apprehension of strength was the feeling of a separate entity at work, a quick, nasty brute of a being with a potbelly and arms like tree trunks, grunting and scuttling here and there, stinking of clay and blood. And yet I maintained enough sense of myself to be afraid. Things were getting out of hand, I realized, but I had no means of controlling them. As I stared at the board it began to appear immense, to exhibit an undulating topography, and I could feel myself dwindling, becoming lost among those rust-colored swells and declivities, coming closer to some terrible danger.

And then it was over . . . the game, the feelings of power and possession. Konwicki tried a smile, but it wouldn't stick. He looked wasted, worn-out. Exactly how I felt. Despite the intensity and strangeness of what I had experienced, I blamed it all on substance abuse. And I was sick of games, of repartee. I struggled to my feet, held out a hand to Odille. "Want to take a walk?" I asked.

I'd expected that she would look to Konwicki for approval or for some sort of validation; but without hesitation she let me help her to stand.

"Carl," I said with my best anchorman sincerity. "It's been fun."

He kept his face deadpan, but in his eyes was a shine that struck me as virulent, venomous. "That's how it is, huh?" he said, directing his words, I thought, to neither me nor Odille, but to the space between us.

"Night, all," I said, and steered Odille toward the door. I kept waiting for Konwicki to make some hostile remark; but he remained silent, and we got through the door without incident. We went along the edge of the shore, and after we had gone about thirty yards, Odille said, "You don't want to walk, do you, Raymond? Tell me what you really want."

"This how it is in Paris?" I said. "Everything made clear beforehand?"

"This isn't Paris."

"How are you with honesty?" I asked.

"Sometimes not so good." She shrugged as if to say that was the best she could offer.

"You're a beautiful woman," I said. "Intelligent, appealing. I'm tired of being in pain. Whatever possibilities exist for us . . . that's what I want."

She made a noncommittal noise.

"What?" I said.

"I thought you'd say you loved me."

"I want to love you, and that's the same thing," I said. "What the depth of my feelings are at this moment doesn't matter. One thing I've learned about love . . . you're a fool if you judge it by how dizzy it makes you feel." To an extent this was a lie I was telling myself, but it was such a clever lie that it came cloaked in the illuminative suddenness of a truth recognized, allowing me to adopt the role of a sincere man struggling to be honest . . . which was the case. Perhaps we are all such fraudulent creatures at heart that we must find a good script before we can successfully play at being honest.

"But the dizziness," said Odille. "That's important, too."

"I'm starting to get dizzy now. How about you?"

"You're a clever man, Raymond," she said after a pause. "I don't know if I'm a match for you."

"If I'm so damned clever, don't try and baffle me with humility."

She said nothing, but the wind and surf and the thudding of coconuts falling onto the sand seemed an affirmation. At last she stood on tiptoe, and her lips grazed my cheek. "Let's go home," she whispered.

Late that night Odille came astride me. Her skin gleamed palely in the moonlight shining through the window, her black hair stuck to the sweat on her shoulders in eloquent curls, and each of her rapid exhalations was cored with a frail note as if she were singing under her breath. Her breasts were small and long and slightly pendulous, with puffy dark areolae, reminding me of *National Geographic* breasts, shaped something like the slippers Aladdin wears in illustrations from *The Arabian Nights*; and her features looked so cleanly drawn as to appear stylized. Her delicacy, its exotic particularity, inspired desire, affection, passion. And one thing more, an emotion that underlay the rest: the need to degrade her. Part of my mind rebelled against this urge, but it was huge in me, a brutish drive, and I dug my fingertips into her thighs, gripping hard enough to leave bruises, and began to use her roughly. To my surprise she responded in kind; her fingernails raked my chest, and soon our lovemaking evolved into a savage contest that lasted nearly until dawn.

I slept no more than a few hours, and even that was troubled by a dream in which I found myself in a dwarfish, heavily muscled body with ocher skin, crouching on the crest of a dune of rust-colored sand, one that overlooked a complex of black pyramids. A hot wind blew fans of grit into the air, stinging my face and chest. The complex appeared to be a mile or so away, but I knew this was an illusion created by the clarity of the air, and that it would take me hours to reach the buildings. I knew many things about the place. I knew, for instance, that the expanse of sand between the dune and the complex was rife with dangers, and I also knew that there was life within the complex . . . a form of life dangerous to me. I understood this was a dream, albeit of an unusual sort, and that awareness was, I thought, a kind of wakefulness, leading me to believe that the dangers involved were threats not only to my dream self but to my physical self as well. Yet despite this knowledge, I was moved to start walking toward the complex.

I walked for about an hour, growing dehydrated and faint from the heat. The buildings seemed no nearer to hand, and the sun was a violet-white monster seething with prominences that looked much closer than the sun with which I was familiar, and although great banks of silvery-edged gray clouds were crossing the sky with the slowness of cruising galleons, they never once obscured the sun, breaking apart as they drew near to permit its continued radiance, re-forming once they had passed. It was as if the light were a

solid barrier, an invisible cylindrical artifact around which they were forced to detour. Crabs with large pincers, their shells almost the same color as the sand, burrowed in the dunes; they were quite aggressive, occasionally chasing me away from their homes . . . or hunting me.

After another hour I came to an exceptionally smooth stretch of sand, lying flat as a pond, in this wholly unlike the rest of the desert, which wind had sculpted into an infinite sequence of undulations and rises, and in color a shade more coppery. The world was so quiet that I could hear the whine of my circulatory system, and I was afraid to step forward, certain that the sand hid some peril; I supposed it to be something on the order of quicksand. At last, deciding to give it a test, I unbuckled the belt that held my sheathed knife (I was not in the least surprised to discover that I had a knife), and removing the weapon, I tossed the belt out onto the sand. For a moment it lay undisturbed. But then the sand beneath it began to circulate in the manner of a slow whirlpool. I sprang back from the edge of the sand, retreating into the lee of a dune, just as the whirlpool erupted, spraying coppery orange filaments high into the air, filaments that were--I realized as they fell back to earth around me--serpents with flat, questing heads, the largest of them seven or eight feet in length. The pit from which they had been spewed was expanding. I scrambled higher on the dune, clawing at the sand, and gazed down into a vast maw, where thousands of white sticks--human bones, I saw--were being pushed up and then scattered downward as if falling off the shoulders of a huge dark presence that was forcing its way up through them from some unimaginable depth . . .

At that moment I waked, blinking against the sunlight, still snared by the tag ends of the dream, still trying to climb out of danger to the top of the dune, and discovered Odille propped on an elbow, looking down at me with a concerned expression. The sight of her seemed to nullify all the fearful logic of the dream, and I felt foolish for having been so caught up in it. The corners of Odille's lips hitched up in a faint smile. "You were tossing about," she said. "So I woke you. I'm sorry if . . ."

"No," I said, "I'm glad you did. I was having a bad dream." I boosted myself to a sitting position. My muscles ached, and dried blood striped my chest. "Jesus Christ!" I said, staring at the scratches; I remembered how it had been the previous night and was embarrassed.

"Are you all right?" Odille asked.

"I don't know," I said. "You . . . did I . . .?"

"Hurt me? I have some bruises. But it looks to me"--she pointed at my abrasions--"that you lost the battle."

"I'm sorry," I said, still flustered. "I don't know what got into me. I've never . . . I mean, last night. I've never been like that . . . not so . . ."

She put a forefinger to my lips. "Apparently it's what we both wanted. Maybe we needed it, maybe. . . ." She made an angry noise.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm sick of explaining myself in terms of the past."

I thought I knew her meaning, and I wondered if that was what it had been for both us--a usage of each other's bodies in order to inflict pain on phantom lovers. I pulled her down, let her rest on my shoulder; her hair fanned across my chest, cool and heavy and silky. I wanted to say something, but nothing came to mind. The pressure of her body aroused me, but I felt tender now, empty of that perverse lust that had enlivened me hours before. She shifted her head so she could see my eyes.

"I won't ask what you're thinking," she said.

"Nothing bad."

"Then I will ask."

"I was thinking about making love with you again."

She made a pleased noise. "Why don't you?"

I turned to face her, drawing her against me, but as we began to kiss, to touch, I realized I was afraid of making love, of reinstating that fierce animalism. That puzzled me. In retrospect, I had been somewhat repelled by my behavior, but in no way frightened. Yet now I had a sense that I might be opening myself to some danger, and I recalled how I'd felt while playing the game with Konwicki--there had been a feeling identical to that I'd had during our lovemaking. One of helplessness, of possession. I forced myself to dismiss all that, and soon my uneasiness passed. The sun melted like butter across the bed, and the sounds of morning, of birds and the sea and a woman vendor crying, "*Coco de aguas*," came through the window like music to flesh out the rhythm that we made.

For a month or thereabouts, I believe that I was happy. Odille and I began to make a life, an easy and indulgent life that seemed in its potentials for pleasure and consolation proof against any outside influence. It was not only our sexuality that was a joy; we were becoming good friends. I came to see that like many attractive women she had a poor self-image, that she had been socialized to believe that beauty was a kind of cheapness, a reason for shame, and that her disastrous affair might have been a self-destructive act performed to compensate for a sense of worthlessness. Saying it like that is an oversimplification, but it was in essence true and I thought that she had known her affair would be ill-fated; I wondered if my own affair had been similar, a means of punishment for a shameful quality I perceived in myself, and I wondered further if our budding relationship might not have the same impetus. But I should have had no worries in that regard. Everything--sex, conversation, domestic interaction--was too easy for us; there was no great tension involved, no apprehension of loss. We were healing each other, and although this was a good thing, a healthy thing, I missed that tension and realized that its absence was evidence of our impermanence. I tried to deny this, to convince myself that I was in love with her as deeply as I had been in love with Karen, and to an extent my self-deception was a success. Atop the happiness we brought to one another, I installed a level of passionate intensity that served to confound my understanding of the relationship, to counterfeit the type of happiness that I believed necessary to maintain closeness. Yet even at my happiest I had the intimation of trouble hovering near, of a menace not yet strong enough to effect its will. And as time wore on, I began to have recurring dreams that centered upon those black pyramids in the rust-colored desert.

At the outset all the dreams were redolent of the first, dealing with dangers overcome in the desert. But eventually I made my way into the complex. The pyramids were enormous, towering several hundred feet high, and as I've said were reminiscent of old Mayan structures, with fancifully carved roof combs and steep stairways leading up the faces to temples set atop them, all of black stones polished to a mirror brilliance that threw back reflections of my body--no longer that of a dwarf, but my own, as if the dwarf were merely a transitional necessity--and were joined with incredible precision, the seams almost microscopic. The sand had drifted in over the ebony flagstones, lying in thin curves, and torpid serpents were coiled everywhere, some slithering along leisurely, making sinuous tracks in the sand. Here and there I saw human bones half-buried in the sand, most so badly splintered that it was impossible to tell from which part of the body they had come. Many of the buildings had been left unfinished or else had been designed missing one or more outer walls, so that passing beside them, I had views of their



labyrinthine interiors: mazes of stairways that led nowhere, ending in midair, and oddly shaped cubicles.

Before entering the complex I had been visited with certain knowledge that the buildings were not Mayan in origin, that the Mayan pyramids were imperfect copies of them; but had I not intuitively known this, I might have deduced it from the nature of the carvings. They were realistic in style and depicted nightmare creatures--demons with spindly legs, grotesque barbed phalluses, and flat snakelike heads with gaping mouths and needle teeth and fringed with lank hair--who were engaged in dismembering and otherwise violating human victims. In a plaza between two pyramids I came upon a statue of one of these creatures, wrought of the same black stone, giving its skin a chitinous appearance. It stood thirty feet in height, casting an obscenely distorted shadow; the sun hung behind its head at an oblique angle, creating a blinding corona of violet-white glare that masked its features and appeared to warp the elongated skull. But the remainder of its anatomy was in plain view. I ran my eyes along the statue, taking in clawed feet; knees that looked to be double-jointed; the distended sac of the scrotum and the tumescent organ; jutting hipbones; the dangling hooked hands, each finger wickedly curved and tipped with a talon the length of a sword; the belly swollen like that of a wasp. I was mesmerized by the sight, ensnared by a palpable vibration that seemed to emanate from the figure, by an alluring resonance that made me feel sick and dizzy and full of buzzing, incoherent thoughts. From beneath heavy orbital ridges, the eyes glinted as if cored with miniature suns, and my shock at this semblance of life broke the statue's hold on me. I backed away, then turned and sprinted for my life . . .

I came back to consciousness thrashing around in the dark, hot bedroom. Odille was still asleep, and I slid out from beneath the sheet, being careful not to wake her. I crossed to the door that led to the living room, my heart pounding, skin covered with a sheen of sweat. The room beyond was slashed by a diagonal of moonlight spilling through the window, and the furniture cast knife-edged shadows on the floor. I wiped my forehead with the back of my arm and was startled by the coldness and smoothness of my skin. I looked at my arm, and the feeling of cold ran all through me--the skin on my wrist and hand was black and shining like polished stone, channeling streams of moonlight along it. I let out a gasp, and holding the arm away from me, I staggered into the living room and onward into the kitchen, the arm banging against the door, making a heavy metallic sound. I tripped, spun around, trying to keep my balance, and fetched up against the sink. I didn't want to look at the arm again, but when I did I was giddy with relief. Nothing was wrong with it; it was pale and articulated with muscle. A normal human arm. I touched it to make sure. Normal. I leaned against the sink, taking deep breaths. I stayed there for another fifteen minutes, trying to counter the dream and its attendant hallucination with rationalizations. I was smoking too much dope, I told myself; I'd lived for too long under emotional pressure. Or else something was terribly wrong.

Houses and intricate buildings in dreams, says Freud, signify women, and for this reason I supposed that the pyramids might be related to my experiences with Karen--a notion assisted by the patent sexuality of the serpent imagery. There was no doubt that I had been damaged by the affair. For a year and a half prior to falling in love with her I had been forced to watch my father die of cancer, and had spent all my time in taking care of him. My resources had been at a low ebb when Karen had come along, and I'd seen her as a salvation. I'd been obsessed with her, and the slow process of rejection--itself as lingering as a cancer--had turned the power of my obsession against me, throwing me into a terrible depression that I had tried to remedy with cocaine, a drug that breeds its own obsessions and eventually twists one's concept of sexuality. I wondered if I was still obsessed, if I was sublimating the associated drives into my dream life. But I rejected that possibility. All that was left of my feelings for Karen was a vengeful reflex that could be triggered against my will, and it occurred to me that this was a matter of injured pride, of anger at myself for having allowed that sad woman to control and torment me. The dreams, I thought, might well be providing a ground for my anger, draining off its vital charge. And yet I couldn't rid myself

of the suspicion that the dreams and the game I had played with Konwicki were at the heart of some arcane process, and one morning as I walked along the beach, I turned my steps in the direction of Konwicki's hut, hoping that he might be able to shed some light on the matter.

I hadn't spoken to him since the night of the game, and I had seen him only twice, then at a distance; in the light of that, it was logical to assume that he had come to terms with what had happened. But the instant his hut came into view I tensed and began to anticipate a confrontation. Ryan was sitting outside, dressed with uncharacteristic informality in cutoffs and a short-sleeved shirt; his head was down, knees drawn up. When he heard my footsteps, he jumped to his feet and stood in front of the door.

"You can't go in," he said as I came up.

I was taken aback by that, and also by his pathetic manner. His eyes darted side to side as if expecting a new threat to materialize; nerves twitched in his jaw, and his hands were in constant motion, plucking at his cutoffs, fingers rubbing together. He looked paler, thinner.

"What's the problem, man?" I asked.

"You can't go in," he said stubbornly.

"I just want to talk to him."

He shook his head.

"What's the hell wrong with you?"

Konwicki's voice floated out from the hut. "It's all right, Ryan."

I brushed past Ryan, saying, "You better get yourself together," and went on in. The light was bad, a brownish gloom, and Konwicki was sitting cross-legged against the rear wall; beside him was something bumpy covered by a white cloth, and noticing a corner of orange wood protruding from the cloth, I realized that he had been fooling around with the game.

"What can I do for you?" he said in a dry tone. "Sell you some drugs?"

I sat down close to him, off to the side, so I could watch the door; the dried palm fronds crunched beneath my weight. "How you been?"

He made a noise of amusement. "I've been fine, Ray. And you?"

I gestured at the covered board. "Playing with yourself?"

A chuckle. "Just studying a bit. Working on my project, you know."

I didn't believe him. There was a new solidity to his assurance, and I suspected it had something to do with the figures and the board. "Are you learning how to play it?" I asked.

After a silence, framing his words with--it seemed--a degree of caution, he said, "It's not something you can learn . . . not like chess, anyway. It's more of a role-playing game. It's essential to develop an affinity with one's counter. Then the rules--or rather, the potentials--become evident."

The light was so dim that the details of his swarthy features were indistinct, making it difficult to detect nuances of expression. But I had the feeling he was laughing at me. I didn't want to let him know that I was leery about the game, and I changed the subject. "Sounds interesting. But that's not why I came here. I wanted to"--I pretended to be searching for the right words--"clear the air. I thought we could. . .

."

"Be friends?" said Konwicky.

"I was hoping we could at least put an end to any lingering animosity. We're all going to be living here for a while, and it's pointless to be carrying on petty warfare . . . even if it's only giving each other the cold shoulder."

"That's very reasonable of you, Ray."

"Are *you* going to be reasonable? You and Odille were done before I came along. You must be aware of that."

"If you knew me, you wouldn't approach me this way."

"That's why I'm here . . . to get to know you."

"Just like a Yank, to think he can know something through talking." Konwicky's hand strayed toward the board as if by reflex, but he did not complete the movement. "I don't let go of things easily. I hang on to them, even things I don't really want. Unless I'm made to let go."

I ignored the implicit challenge. "Why's that?"

Konwicky leaned back and folded his arms, a shift in posture that conveyed expansiveness. "I've traveled in America," he said. "I've seen slums in Detroit, New York, Los Angeles. Ghastly ruins. Much more terrible in their physical entity than anything in England. But there's still vitality in America, even in the slums. Some of the slums in London, they're absolutely without vitality. Gray places with here and there a petunia in a flowerpot brightening a cracked window, and old toothless women, and children with stick arms and legs, and women whose bodies are too sallow and sickly to sell, and men whose brains have shrunk to the size of their balls. All of them moving about like people in a dream. Bending over to sniff at corpses, poking their fingers in a fire to see how hot it is. So much trash and foulness lying about that the streets stink even when they're frozen. To be born there is like being born on a planet where the gravity is so strong you can't escape it. It's not something you can resist with anger or violence. It's like treacle has been poured over you, and you crawl around in it like a fly with your wings stuck together. I've never escaped it. I've run around the world; I've cultivated myself and given myself an education. I've developed refined sensibilities. But everywhere I've gone I've carried that gravity with me, and I'm the same ignorant bloody-minded sod I always was. So don't you tell me something's not good for me. I'll want it more than ever. Things that aren't good for me make me happy. And don't say that something's done. I'm too damn stupid to accept it. And too damn greedy."

Despite its passion, there was a hollowness to this statement, and after he had done I said, "I don't believe you."

He gave a caustic laugh. "That's good, Ray. That's very perceptive. I've other imperatives now. But it used to be true."

I let his words hang in the air for a bit, then said, "Have you been having odd dreams lately?"

"I dream all the time. What sort of dreams are you talking about?"

"About the game we played."

"The game? This game?" He touched the cloth covering the board.

I nodded.

"No . . . why? Are you?"

His mocking voice told me that he was not being direct, and I realized there was no use in continuing the conversation; either he was lying or else he was running yet another game on me, hoping to make me think he knew something by means of arch denial. I tried to dismiss the importance of what I'd said. "A couple . . . just weird shit. I haven't been sleeping well."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

If Konwicki was dreaming of that strange desert, if there was an occult reality to the game we'd played, I knew--because of my partial admission--I must look like a fool to him; to me, with his arms folded, half-buried in the dimness, he seemed as impenetrable as a Buddha. The thatched roof crackled like a small fire in a gust of wind, and behind Konwicki, mapping the darkness of the wall, were tiny points of lights, uncaulked places between the boards through which the day was showing; they lent the wall the illusion of depth, of being a vast sky mapped with stars, all arranged in a dwindling perspective so as to draw one's eyes toward a greater darkness beyond them. I began to feel daunted, out of my element, and I told myself again that this was the result of manipulation on Konwicki's part, that by intimating through denial some vague expertise he was playing upon my fears; but this was no comfort. I tried to think of something to say that would pose a counterspell to the silent pall that was settling over me. I had a great faith in words, believing that their formal noise elegantly utilized could have the weight of truth no matter how insincere had been the impulse to speak, and so when words failed me, I felt even more at sea. I looked away from Konwicki, gathering myself. The doorway framed a stretch of pale brown sand and sun-spattered water and curving palm trunks, and the brilliance of the scene was such a contrast to the gloom within, I imagined that these things comprised a single presence that was peering in at us like an eye at a keyhole, and that Konwicki and I were microscopic creatures dwelling inside the mechanism of a lock that separated dark and light.

The weight of the silence forced me to stand and squeezed me toward the door. "We haven't settled anything," I said, brushing off my trousers, making a bustling, casual business of retreat. "But I hope you understand that I don't need any aggravation. Neither does Odille. If you want to make peace, we're open to it." I stepped into the doorway. "See you around."

Once outside under the sun, breathing the salt air, I felt easier, confident. I had, I thought, handled things fairly well. But as I turned to head back to the house, I tripped over Ryan, who had reclaimed his place beside the door, sitting with his knees drawn up. I went sprawling, rolled over, intending to apologize. But Ryan didn't appear to have noticed me. He continued to sit there, staring at a patch of sand, fingers plucking at a fray on his cutoffs, and after getting to my feet, watching him for a second or two, I started walking, maintaining a brisk pace, feeling a cold spot between my shoulder blades that I imagined registered the pressure of a pair of baleful eyes.

That same night, following a bout of paranoid introspection, I dreamed that I went inside one of the pyramids, a structure not far from the statue of the snake-headed creature that I had encountered in earlier dreams. Leery about entering, watching for signs that would warn me off, I passed through a missing wall and climbed a stair that ended several hundred feet above in midair and was connected to a number of windowless cubicles, all of the same black stone. I considered exploring the cubicles, but when I put my hand to the door of one, I heard a woman's muffled voice alternately sobbing and spewing angry curses; I pictured a harpy within, some female monstrosity, and I withdrew my hand. On every side a maze of other stairways lifted around me, rising without apparent support like a monumental fantasy by

Escher or Piranesi, reducing perspective to a shadowy puzzle, and I felt diminished in spirit by the enormity of the place. Snakes lay motionless on the stairs, looking at a distance like cracks admitting to a bright coppery void; black spiders, invisible until they moved, scuttled away from my feet, and their filmy webs spanned between each step. From a point three-quarters of the way up, the desert appeared the color of dried blood, and set at regular intervals about the complex were five more colossal statues, each similar to the first in its repulsive anatomy, but sculpted in different poses: one crouching, one with its head thrown back, and so on. I couldn't help wondering if these six figures were related to the counters of Konwicki's game.

I had intended to go all the way to the top, but I grew uncomfortable with the isolation, the silence, and started back down. My progress was slowed by an attack of dizziness. I could still hear the woman crying, and the percussive effect of her sobs made me dizzy. The spaces beneath were swelling upward like black gas, and afraid that I would fall, overcoming my nervousness concerning the cubicles, I flung open the door to one, thinking I would sit inside until my vertigo had passed. A fecal stink poured from the cubicle, and something moved in the darkness at the rear, startling me.

"Who's there?" called a man's voice.

There was something familiar about the voice, and I peered into the cubicle. A pale shape was slumped against the far wall.

"Come on out," I said.

The man shifted deeper into the corner. "Why are you here?"

"I'm dreaming all this," I said. "I don't have much choice."

A feeble, scratchy laugh. "That's what they all say."

I stepped inside, dosing until I had clear sight of the man. For a moment I failed to recognize him, but then I realized it was Ryan--Ryan as he might have looked after a hard twenty years, his blond hair grayed and the youthful lines of his face dissolved into sagging flesh. The creases in his skin had filled in with grime and looked to be deep cuts. His clothes were in tatters. "Jesus, Ryan!" I said. "What happened?"

"I'm in jail." Another cracked laugh. "I have to stay put until. . . ."

"Till what?"

He shook his head.

I knelt beside him. "Where are we, Ryan?"

He giggled. "The endgame."

"What the hell's that mean?"

"The game," he said, "is not a game."

I waited for him to continue, but he lost his train of thought. I repeated the question.

"The game is just a way of getting here. You've already done playing, and now you have to wait till all the moves have been made."

I asked him to explain why--if I'd done playing--moves were still to be made, and he replied by saying

that a move wasn't a move until it had been made everywhere. "It's like this place," he said. "A place isn't really a place. One place leads to another, and that place leads to another yet, and on and on. There's nothing that's only itself." That thought seemed to sadden him, and he said, "Nothing."

The woman let out a piercing scream, and her curses echoed through the pyramid.

I tried to pull Ryan to his feet, thinking that there might be some more pleasant place for him to wait; he struck at my hands, a flurry of weak blows that did no damage, but caused me to release him.

"Leave me alone," he said. "I'm safe here."

"Safe from what?"

"From you," he answered. "The Master thinks he's the dangerous one, but I know it's you. He's made the wrong move. Sooner or later he'll see I'm right, and he'll try and stop it. But you can't stop it. The travelers have to come and go; the transitions have to. . . ." His speech became incoherent for a few seconds; then he snapped out of it. "Of course there are no right moves. Even the winner pays a price once the game is done. But not to worry, Ray," he said with a flash of his old cockiness. "It'll hurt, but it'll be a much cheaper price than the one the Master has to pay. Or else you can always keep playing if you want to be noble and take the risk."

He lapsed into incoherence once again; I attempted to bring him to his senses, but all he would say was to repeat that "it" couldn't be stopped, "it" had to happen, and to ramble on about "exchanges, necessary transitions." Giving up on him, I left the cubicle and went out onto the sand. The sun was low, its violet-white disk partially down on the horizon, and the shadows had grown indistinct. I strolled about the complex, feeling for the first time at ease among the buildings; I was comfortable even in proximity to the snake-headed statue. I stepped back from it, admiring its needle teeth and flat skull, all its obscene proportions, and although I felt as before a sense of resonant identity with it, on this occasion I was not frightened by the feeling, but rather was pleased. Indeed, I found the entire landscape soothing. The snakes, the crabs scuttling down the sanguine faces of the dunes, the black silence of the complex . . . all this had a bleak majesty and seemed the product of a pure aesthetic.

On waking and remembering the dream, however, I was more disturbed by my acceptance of that bizarre landscape than I had been by my fear of it. It was still dark, and Odille was asleep beside me. I eased out of bed, pulled on jeans and a shirt, and went into the patio. The edges of the tile roof framed a rectangle of stars and dark blue sky, with the crowns of palms showing half in silhouette, the ragged fronds throwing back pale green shines from the lights of the house next door. I dropped onto a lawn chair and lay back, trying to settle my thoughts. After a few minutes I heard the whisper of Odille's sandals on the concrete; she had thrown on a bathrobe, and her hair was in disarray, loose about her shoulders. She sat opposite me, put a hand on my knee, and asked what was wrong.

I had previously told her that I'd been having bad dreams, but had not been specific; now, though, I told her the entire story--the game, the feelings I'd had, the dreams, and my meeting with Konwicki. Once I had done, she lowered her head, fingering the hem of her robe, and after a pause she asked, "What are you worried about? The game . . . that it's real?"

I was ashamed to admit it.

"That's ridiculous!" she said. "You can't believe that."

"It's just the dreams . . . and Ryan. I mean, what's the matter with him?"

She made a noise of disgust. "He's weak. Carl's found a way to undermine him with drugs or something."

"That's all."

We were silent for several seconds; a palm frond scraped the roof, and the surf was a distant hiss.

"I knew something was bothering you," she said. "But . . ." She got to her feet, walked a couple of paces off, and stood with her arms folded. "Carl's getting to you. I wouldn't have thought it possible." She sighed, jammed her hands in the pocket of the robe. "I'm going to see him."

"The hell you are!"

"I am! And if *he* believes there's anything to the game, I'll find out about it." I started to object, but she talked over me. "You aren't worried about me, are you? About my going back to him?"

"I guess not."

"That doesn't sound like a vote of confidence." She knelt beside my chair. "Don't you understand how much I hate him?"

"I never understood why you were with him in the first place."

"I was vulnerable. He took advantage of my confusion. He confused me even more. He violated my trust; he weakened me. If I could, I'd. . . ." She drew a deep breath, let it out slowly. "Don't tell me you haven't ever done anything that you knew was bad for you even when you were doing it."

"No," I said, surprised by her vehemence. "I can't tell you that." I stroked her hair. "What did he do to you?"

Her face worked, suppressing emotion. "The same sort of thing he's trying to do to you . . . except I didn't have anybody to tell me what was going on. Listen! Nothing's going to happen. I'm just going to talk to him. He'll lie, but I know when he's lying. I'll be able to tell whether he's concerned for himself or looking for a way to hurt you. And that'll put your mind at ease."

"It's not necessary."

"Yes, it is!" She put her arms around my neck. "I want you to get past this so I can have your undivided attention."

There was an edge to her intensity, a hectic brightness in her eyes, that quieted my objections, and later that night when she said she loved me, I believed her for the first time.

Two nights later as we sat at dinner in a small restaurant, a one-room place of stucco and thatch lit by candles, Odille told me that she had spoken with Konwicki. "You don't have to be concerned about the game," she said. "Carl's only trying to unnerve you." She had a forkful of rice, chewed. "I told him all about your dreams . . . everything. You should have seen him. He was like a starving man who'd been handed a steak. He said, Yes, yes, it was the same for him. Dreams, odd intuitions. Then I described your last dream, the one with Ryan, and what he'd said about Carl's making the wrong move. He loved that. He said, Yes, that was true. And he didn't know how to stop it from happening. After that, he offered an apology for everything that had happened between us. He said the game had changed him, that he could see now what a reprehensible sort he'd been."

"A reprehensible sort?" I said. "Were those his words?"

"I believe so."

"Reprehensible . . . shit!" I stared at her over the rim of my coffee cup. "It sounds to me like he's corroborating the dreams. Why else would he admit that he'd made a bad move?"

"Because," said Odille, "he knows if he were to deny it, he'd have no way of affecting you. But now, claiming that it's all true, especially the part about him possibly losing, he has an excuse to talk to you, to play with your mind. He can pretend to be your ally. You watch. He'll come to see you. He'll try to align himself with you. He'll have a plan that'll involve the two of you working together to save each other from the game . . . its perils. Then he'll start manipulating." She had another bite, swallowed. "He thought he was fooling me, but he was transparent."

"Are you sure about all this?"

"Of course. Carl's a greedy little man who thinks he's smarter than the rest of the world. He can't imagine that anyone could see through him. If there was anything to the game, he never would have told me." She took my hand. "Just wait. Watch what happens. You'll see I'm right."

Odille's reassurances had not convinced me of the fecklessness of my fears. Recalling Konwicki's statement that familiarity with one's counter was important, I set out to reinhabit the feelings I'd had while playing, to recall the moves that had been made. It was not hard to recapture those feelings; they returned to me every night in dreams. But the moves were a different matter. Other than the first, I could remember only the last two: one in which all four figurines had been placed in close proximity, and another in which the figure of the infant had been placed in a zone adjoining that of the dwarf. I asked Odille what she could recall about the counters from working on the translation, and she said that all she knew was what Konwicki had told her.

"He used to joke with me about them," she said. "He identified himself with the warrior, and he said my counter was the female . . . the one you moved during the game. He described her to me. A real maniac, a terrible creature. Slutty, foul-mouthed, vile. She was always throwing tantrums. Physically abusive."

"Maybe he was trying to demean you by describing her that way."

"I'm sure he was. But once he did show me some of the translation he'd done about her, and it looked authentic."

"What were they . . . the counters? Did he ever tell you that?"

"Archetypes," she said. "Mayan archetypes. Spirit forms . . . that was the term he used. I'm not sure what that meant. Whoever made the figures, whoever assigned them their characters, had a warped idea of human potential. All the characters were repellent in some way. . . . I remember that much. But when he told me all that, I was trying to pull away from him, and I didn't pay much attention."

A week went by, and I made no further progress. I was spinning my wheels, wasting myself in futile effort. Then I took stock of the situation, and suddenly all my paranoia seemed ludicrous. That I could have even half-believed I had been possessed by a Mayan spirit in the shape of a dwarf was evidence of severe mental slippage, and it was time to get a grip. The dreams must have some connection to the abuses I had suffered during the past few years, I thought, and to be this much of a fool for love was debasing, particularly in the face of the abuses I met with every day in Livingston. Malnutrition, tyranny, ignorance. I determined that I was going to take a hard line with my psyche. If I had dreams, so what? Sooner or later they would run their course. And I also determined to grant Odille's wish, to give her my



undivided attention; I realized that while I hadn't been neglecting her, neither had I been utilizing the resources of the relationship as a lover should. Things were changing between us in a direction that I would never have predicted, and I owed it to her, to myself, to see where that would lead.

Our lives were calm for the next couple of weeks. The dreams continued, but I refused to let them upset me. Odille and I fell into the habit of taking twilight walks along the beach, and one evening after a storm, with dark blue ridges of cloud pressing down upon a smear of buttermilk yellow on the horizon, we walked out to the point beyond the Café Pluto, a hook of land bearing a few palms whose crowns showed against the last of sunset like feathered headdresses. Nearby stretches of cobalt water merged with purplish slate farther out, and there were so many small waves, it looked as if the sea were moving in every direction at once. We sat on a boulder at the end of the point, watching the light fade in the west, and after a minute Odille asked if I had ever been to Paris.

"A long time ago," I said.

"What did you think?"

"It was the winter," I said. "I didn't see too much. I had no money, and I was staying in a house that belonged to this old lady named Bunny. She was straight out of a Tennessee Williams play. She'd been Lawrence Durrell's lover . . . or maybe it wasn't Durrell. Somebody famous, anyway. She was an invalid, and the house was a mess. Cat shit everywhere. There was a crazy Romanian who was printing an anarchist newsletter in the basement. And Bunny's kids, they were true degenerates. Her fifteen-year-old raped the maid. The twenty-year-old was dealing smack. Bunny just lay around, and I ended up having to take care of her."

"God, you've lived!" said Odille, and we both laughed.

I put an arm around her. "Are you homesick?"

"Not so much . . . a little." She leaned into me. "I was just wondering how you'd like Paris."

We had talked about the future in only the most general of terms, but I felt comfortable now considering a future with her, and that surprised me, because even though I was happier than I'd been in a very long time, I had also been nervous about formalizing the relationship.

"I suppose we're going to have to leave here eventually," I said.

She looked up at me. "Yes."

"It doesn't matter to me where we go. I don't have to be any particular place to do my work."

"I know," she said. "That's your greatest virtue."

"Is that so?" I kissed her, the kiss grew long, and we lay back on the boulder. I touched her breasts. In the darkness the whites of her eyes were aglow; her breath was sweet and frail. Waves slapped at the rock. Finally I turned onto my back, pillowed my head on my hands. Icy stars made simple patterns in the sky, and it seemed to me at the moment that everything in the world had that same simplicity.

"Someday," Odille said after a long silence, "I'd like to go back to Paris . . . just to see my friends again."

"Want me to go with you?"

She was silent for a bit; then she sat up and stared out to sea. I had asked the question glibly, thinking I knew the answer, yet now I was afraid that I'd misread her. At last she said, "You wouldn't like it."

Americans don't like Parisians."

"The way I hear it, it's mutual," I said, relieved. "But there are exceptions."

"I guess so." She glanced down at me and smiled. "Anyway, we don't have to stay in Paris. We could come to the States. I wouldn't mind that." She tipped her head to the side. "You look puzzled."

"I wasn't sure we'd get around to talking about this. And even if we did, I thought it would be awkward."

"So did I for a while. But then I realized we were past awkwardness." With both hands she lifted the left of her hair and pushed it back behind her head. "Sometimes I've tried to imagine myself without you. I can do it. I can picture myself living a life, being with someone else. All that. But then I realized how artificial that was . . . that kind of self-examination. It was as if I were wishing for that prospect, because I was afraid of you. To end doubt, or to learn whether my doubts were real, all I had to do was stop thinking about them. Just give in to the moment. That was easier said than done, I thought. But then I tried it, and it *was* easy." She ran a hand along my arm. "You did it, too. I could tell when you stopped."

"Could you, now?"

"Don't you believe me?"

Before I could answer, there was a crunching in the brush behind us, and two figures emerged from shadows about thirty feet away. It took me a second to identify them against the dark backdrop--Konwicki, with Ryan hanging at his shoulder. I stood, wary, and Odille came to her knees. "What the fuck are you doing?" I asked them. "Tracking us?"

"I have to talk with you," said Konwicki. "About the game."

"Some other time, man." I took Odille's arm and began steering her back along the point, giving Konwicki and Ryan a wide berth, but keeping an eye on them.

"Listen," said Konwicki, coming after us. "I'm not after mucking you about. We're in serious trouble." I kept walking, and he grabbed my shoulder, spun me around. "I've been having dreams, too. They're different from yours. But they're indicators all the same."

His face betrayed anxiety, but I wasn't buying the act. I shoved him back. "Keep your hands off me!"

"The game's a conduit," he said as we walked away. "A means of transport to another world, another plane . . . something. And to another form as well." He caught up with me, blocked our path; Ryan scuttled behind him. "I don't know how the Mayans discovered it, but it was a major influence on their architecture, on every facet of their culture. The ritual cruelties of their religion, the--"

"Get out of my way." I was cold inside--a sign that I was preparing for violence. My senses had grown acute. The slop of the waves, Konwicki's breathing, the leaves rustling--all were sharp and distinct. Ryan's pale face, peering from behind Konwicki, seemed as bright as a star.

"You're a fool if you don't listen to me," Konwicki said. "The game we played was real. I admit I wouldn't be here if I didn't think I was in danger, but there's--"

"You made the wrong move, that it?" I said.

"Yes," said Konwicki. "I didn't know it at the time. I didn't know we were actually playing. And later, after I realized something strange was happening, I didn't see the mistake I'd made." He wagged both hands as if dismissing all that. "We've got an option, man . . . I think. The winner can keep the game

going for one more move at least. It'll be a risk, but a relatively minor one." He looked as if he were about to grab me in frustration, doing a fine imitation of a desperate man. "That way we have a chance of figuring out what else we can do."

"I'm not one of your goddamn chumps!" I said. "I know Odille told you about my dream. You're trying to use it against me."

"Yes, yes, you're right," he said. "I *was* using it. I wanted to fuck with you. I admit it. But after Odille talked to me, I began thinking about some of the things she'd told me. And some of the things you'd said, too."

I made a derisive noise.

"I'm telling the truth. I promise you!" he said. "After I talked to her, I had another look at the game . . . at the papers. Some of the things she'd told me gave me new insights into the translation." His words came in a rush. "You see, I believed that the figures--the dwarf, the warrior--that they were the entities involved. I thought they were conveyances that carried you to the pyramids. And they are. One of us was going to be transported. That much was certain. I thought it would be me, but it's not . . . it's you. And I'd overlooked the obvious." A dismayed laugh. "It's a matter of elementary physics. For every action there's a reaction."

He paused for breath, and having heard enough, I said, "Odille told me you'd come up with something clever. Guess she was wrong about that."

I started to push past him, but he shoved me back. "For God's sake, will you listen?"

"I'm going to tell you once more," I said. "Keep your hands off me."

"That's right, you stupid clot!" he said. "Just go home and bugger your stupid whore and don't worry about a bloody thing!"

"Such talk," I said; my arms had begun to tremble.

"Let's just go!" Odille pulled at me, and I allowed myself to be hauled along; but Konwicki planted a hand on my chest, bringing me up short.

"I'm trying to save your sodding life, you ass!" he said. "Are you going to listen to me, or. . . ." He was, judging from his disdainful expression, about to deliver some further pomposity.

"No," I said, and nailed him in the stomach, not wanting to hurt my hand. He caved in, went to his knees, then rolled up into a fetal position, the wind knocked out of him. Ryan darted toward me, then retreated into the shadows; a second later I heard him running off through the bushes.

It had been years since I'd hit anyone, and I was ashamed of myself; Konwicki had been no threat. I dropped to my knees beside him, counseled him to take shallow breaths, and once he had recovered somewhat, I tried to help him up. He pushed my hands away and fixed me with a hateful stare.

"Right, you bastard!" he said. "I warned you, but that's all right. You'll have to take what comes now."

After that night on the point I concluded that Livingston had lost its charm; I wanted to avoid further conflicts, and I was certain more would arise. Odille was in accord with this, and we planned to leave as soon as I could find someone responsible to take over the Spanish doctors' house. We decided to settle

in Panajachel near Lake Atitlán until I finished my current writing project, and then to visit New York City en route to Paris; almost without acknowledging it, we had made an oblique, understated commitment to each other, one that by contrast to our pasts and the instability around us was a model of rigor. Perhaps our relationship had begun as an accommodation, a shelter from the heavy weather of our lives, but against all odds something more had developed; although I wasn't ready to admit it to her, unwilling to risk a total involvement, I had fallen in love with Odille. It wasn't any one instance or event that had brought this home to me, but rather a slowly growing awareness of my reactions to her. I had begun to focus more and more upon her, to treasure images of her. To savor all the days. And yet I detected in myself a residue of tension, one I also detected in her, and this was evidence that we were afraid of the obsessive bonding that had occurred and were preparing for disappointment, obeying the conditioning of our pasts.

Ten days passed, and I hadn't found anyone to take the house. I wrote to the Spanish doctors, telling them that an emergency had come up, that I had to leave and wanted to delegate my responsibilities to the local priest, who had become something of a friend, and who--aside from his clerical duties--maintained a small museum that displayed some Mayan artifacts of indifferent value. I began to pack my papers in anticipation of their response. Early one evening I went to the telegraph office to call my agent in the States and tell her about the move, to see if she had money for me. The office was a low building of yellow stucco next to the generator that provided the village's power, and was manned by a harried-looking clerk who was arguing with an Indian family, and was guarded by a soldier wearing camouflage gear and carrying a machine gun. The phones lined the rear wall of the office, and choosing the one farthest from the argument, I put in the call. Five minutes later I heard my agent's voice through a hiss of static, and after we had taken care of business, I asked what was new in the big city.

"The usual," she said. "Boring parties and editors playing musical chairs. You're better off down there . . . as long as you're working. Are you working?"

"Don't worry," I said.

My agent let some dead time accumulate, then said, "I guess I should tell you this, Ray. You're going to find out sooner or later."

"What's that?"

"Karen had her baby."

For an instant I felt strangely light, free of some restraint. "I didn't think she was due this soon."

"There were complications. But she's all right. So's the baby. It's a boy. It's really cute, Ray. A little doll. It just lies there and squeaks."

I let out a nasty laugh. "Just like his mama."

"I thought you went down there to let go of her. You don't sound like you're letting go."

"Must be the connection." I stared at the pocked, grimy wall, seeing nothing.

Another pause. "What're you working on, Ray?"

"You'll see it soon," I said. "Look, I've got to go."

"I didn't mean to upset you."

"I'm not upset. I'll call you in a couple of weeks, okay?"

I walked outside, cut down onto the beach. Dusk had given way to darkness, and the jungled shore was picked out by shanty lights; there was also a scattering of lights on the hills lifting behind the village, showing the location of small farms and platanals. The moon, almost full, had risen to shine through a notch between the hills, paving the chop of the water close to shore with silvery glitter; but threatening clouds and dark brooms of rain were visible farther out--a storm would be hitting the coast within a matter of minutes. I was angry as I walked, but my anger was undirected. Karen was no longer an object of hatred, merely a catalyst that opened me to violent emotion, and I realized that part of the reason she had maintained a hold over me for so long was due, not to any real feeling, but to my romantic nature, my stubborn denial that the light in the heart could be snuffed out. I had hung on to the belief that--despite Karen's betrayal--the good, strong core of my feelings would last; now I was forced to face the fact that they were dead, and that made me angry and caused me to doubt everything I felt for Odille.

A voice called to me as I was passing a stand of palmettos. I ignored it, but the voice continued to call, and I whirled around to see Ryan running down the beach, his blond hair flying, dressed in the cutoffs and soiled shirt that had become his uniform. He staggered to a halt a few feet away, gasping.

"What do you want?" I asked.

He held up a hand, trying to catch his breath. "Gotta talk to you," he managed. He looked alien to me, a pale little twist of a creature, and I felt vastly superior. Stronger, more intelligent. The fierceness of the loathing that fueled these feelings didn't strike me as unusual.

"Talk about what?" I said.

"Odille . . . you have to break it off with her."

"You jealous, Ryan?"

"Konwicki . . ."

"Fuck Konwicki!" I gave Ryan a shove that sent him reeling backward, catching at the air with his hands. "If he's got a problem, tell him to come talk to me himself."

"You have to stop seeing her," said Ryan defiantly. He slipped a hand beneath his shirtfront as if soothing a stomachache and kept his eyes lowered. "I'm warning you . . . bad things are going to happen if you don't."

"Goodness me, Ryan," I said, taking a little walk around him, examining him contemptuously, as if he were an unsightly objet d'art. "I wonder what they could be."

Ryan's chin quivered. "He's . . . he's. . . ."

"C'mon, man! Spit it out!" I said. "Has he been doing bad things to *you*? He must have been doing something nasty, mighty bad to turn you into such a twitchy little toad. Is it drugs? Is he feeding you bad drugs, or. . . ."

Anger came boiling out of him. "Don't talk to me like that!"

I knew at that moment that Ryan had a weapon. The way he kept shifting his right hand under his shirt as if adjusting his grip, keeping his weight back on his heels, balanced, ready to strike. And I wanted him to strike.

"I got it," I said. "Konwicki's into boys now. That's it, right? And you're his boy! That explains why I've never seen you with a girl."

"Stop it!" He set himself, the muscles of his right forearm flexing.

"What's it like with him, man? He make your little doggy sit up and beg?"

"You better stop!"

"Does he make a lot of noise, Ryan?" I laughed, and the laugh startled me, sounding too guttural to be my own. "Or is he the strong, silent type?"

With a shout, he pulled a knife from beneath his shirt and slashed at me. I caught his wrist, gave it a sharp twist. He cried out, the knife fell to the sand, and he backed away, cradling his wrist, his expression shifting between panic and anguish. "I'm sorry," he said. "I'm sorry. He told me I had to. . . ." Then he broke into a stumbling run and went crashing through the palmettos. I scooped up the knife and began to hunt him. That was how it seemed. A hunt. One in which I was expert. I've never been much of an athlete, yet that night I ran easily, with short chopping strides that carried me in a zigzagging path among the palmettos. I kept pace with Ryan, running off to his left and a little behind, intending to harry him until he dropped. He glanced back over his shoulder, saw me, and ran faster, frantically calling out to Konwicki.

On hearing that, I slowed my pursuit. It was Konwicki I really wanted, and since Ryan had been his messenger, it was likely that he was now going to see him. And yet we were heading away from the beach, away from Konwicki's house. I decided to trust my instincts. If Konwicki had somehow convinced Ryan to kill me--and I thought that must be the case, that he'd hoped to evade the judgment of the game by eliminating me--after the deed he would have wanted Ryan to meet him somewhere out of the way. I dropped back a bit, letting Ryan think he had lost me, keeping track of him by ear, picking out the sound of his passage through the foliage from the noises of insects and frogs and wind. We were moving onto the slope of one of the hills behind the village, and despite the uphill path, I was still running easily, enjoying myself. The musky scents of the vegetation were as cloying as perfume; clouds flowing across the moon, driven by a gusting wind, made the world go alternately dark and bright with an erratic rhythm that added to my excitement. I exulted in the turbulent weather, in my strength, and I threw the knife into the brush, knowing that I wasn't going to need it.

As I passed through a banana grove, a flickering yellow light penetrated the bushes to my left from one of the farmhouses. The wind was rapidly gaining in force, tattering the banana leaves, lifting them high like the feathery legs of giant insects, and something about their articulated shapes fluttering in a sudden wash of moonlight made me uneasy. I began to have an inconstant feeling in my flesh, a dull vibration that nauseated me; I tried to push it aside, to concentrate on the running, but it persisted. I estimated that I must be a quarter of the way up the hill, and I could hear Ryan jogging along almost parallel to me. He had stopped calling out to Konwicki, but now and then he would cry out, perhaps because of the pain in his wrist. I was having some pain myself. Twinges in my joints, in my bones. Growing sharper by the moment. And there was something wrong with my eyes. Every object had a halo, the veins of leaves glowed an iridescent green, and overhead I could see dozens of filmy layers between the clouds and the earth, drifting, swirling, coalescing. I shook my head, trying to clear my vision, but if anything it grew worse. The halos had congealed into auras of a dozen different colors; hot spots of molten scarlet and luminous blue were insects crawling in the dirt. The pain kept growing worse, too. The twinges became jolts of agony shooting through my limbs, and with the onset of each I staggered, unable to stay on course. Then a tremendous pain in my chest sent me to all fours, my eyes squeezed shut. I tried to stand, and in doing so caught sight of my left hand--gnarled, lumpy fingers thick as sausages, clawing at rusty orange sand, lengthening and blackening. A fresh surge of pain knocked me down, and I twisted about and gouged at the earth for what seemed a very long time. Rain started to fall, and another burst of pain dredged up a bassy scream from my chest that merged with the wind, like the massive flat Om of a

foghorn wedded to a howl. One instant I felt I was splitting in half, the next that I was growing huge and heavy. I receded from the storm and the world, dwindling to a point within myself, and from that moment on I was incapable of action, only of mute and horrified observation as another "I" took control of my thoughts, one whose judgments were funded by an anger far more potent and implacable than my own.

I lashed out with my left arm, clutched something thin and hard, tore at it; the next second a banana tree fell across my chest. But the pain was diminishing rapidly, and after it had passed, rather than feeling exhausted, I felt renewed. I climbed to my feet and looked out over the treetops. The storm that during transition had seemed so chaotic and powerful now seemed inconsequential, hardly worth my notice. Lightning scratched red forking lines down the sky; inky clouds rushed overhead. A flickering nimbus of bluish white overlaid the jungle, and beneath it, the lights of the houses ranging the hill were almost too dim to make out. I could find no sign of the defeated. Frustrated, I moved toward the nearest house--a structure with board walls and a roof of corrugated metal--knocking away branches, pushing masses of foliage aside, my hair whipped into my eyes by the wind. When I reached the house I stood gazing down at the roof, trying to sense the occupants. The energy flows binding the metal, stitchings of coruscant lines and dazzles, could not hide the puny lives within: shifting clots of heat and color. My quarry was not there, but in a fury I swung my arm and tore a long rip in the roof, delighted by the shriek of the tortured metal. Dark frightened faces stared at me through the rip, then vanished. A moment later I spotted them running out the door and into the jungle, becoming streaks of red beneath the ghostly luminescence of the leaves. I would have enjoyed pursuing them, but my time was limited, and I was concerned that the completion of my task would be hampered by the victor--I felt him lodged like a stone in my brain--whose pitiful morality was a nagging irritant. I wondered at his motives for entering the contest. Surely he must have known what was at stake. There is no morality in this darkness.

I comforted myself with the thought that before too long the victor would have his due, unless--and I thought this unlikely--he chose to renew the challenge; and I pressed on through the jungle. Something ran across my path--an animal of some sort. It swerved aside, but before it could escape I grazed it with a claw, tearing its belly and flipping it into the air. The kill improved my temper. I had never relished employing my license here. The weak strains of life are barely a music, and the walls that hold back death are tissue-thin. But I was pleased to see the blood jet forth. I watched the animal's essence disperse, misting upward in pale threads to rejoin the Great Cloud of Being, and then continued on my way.

At the crest of the hill I paused and gazed back down the slope. From this vantage the landscape of that soft female world seemed transformed, infused with new strength. Great smoking clouds streamed from the sea, and the jungle pitched and tossed as if troubled by my sight. The souls of the trees were thin gold wires stretched to breaking. The thunder was a power, the lightning a name. I stood attuning myself to the night, absorbing its black subtleties and cold meanings, and thus strengthened, restored to the fullness of purpose, I went along the crest, searching the darkness for the defeated, listening among the whispers of the dead for the sound of one soon to die, for that telltale dullness and sonority. At last I heard him venting his rage against one of the alternates in a house a third of the way down the hill. His obvious lack of preparation dismayed me, and once again I felt less than enthusiastic about my duty. It would be a mercy to end these intermittent rituals of violence and let the brood come as an army to urge on this feeble race to the next plane.

The house was a glowing patch in the midst of a toiling darkness and was made of sapling poles and thatch; orange light striped the gaps between the poles and leaked from beneath the door. I called to the defeated. The angry conversation within was broken off, but no one came out. Perhaps, I thought, he had mistaken my call for an element of the storm. I called again, a demanding scream that outvoiced the thunder. Still he remained within. This was intolerable! Now I would be forced to instruct him. I ripped aside the poles at the front of the house, creating a gaping hole through which I saw two figures shrinking back against the rear wall. I held out my hand in invitation, but as the alternate collapsed to the floor, the

defeated went scuttling about like a frightened crab, running into the table, the chairs. Disgusted, I reached in and picked him up. I lifted him high, looked into his terrified face. He struggled, prying at my claws, kicking, squealing his fear.

"Why do you struggle?" I asked. "Your life is an exhausted breath, the failure of an enervated creation. You are food with a flicker of intelligence. True power is beyond you, and the knowledge of pain is your most refined sensibility." Of course he did not understand: my speech must have seemed to him like a tide roaring out from a cave. But to illustrate the point I traced a line of blood across his ribs, being careful not to cut too deeply. "Your ideas are all wrong," I told him. "Your concept of beauty a gross mutation; your insipid notions of good and evil an insult to their fathering principles." Once again I made him bleed, tracing the second line of instruction, slitting the skin of his stomach with such precision that it parted in neat flaps, yet the sac within was left intact. "Evil is as impersonal as mathematics. That its agencies derive pleasure from carrying out its charge is meaningless. Its trappings, its gaud and hellish forms, are nuance, not essence. Evil is the pure function of the universe, the machine of stars and darkness that carries us everywhere." At the third line I saw in his face the first light of understanding, and in his shrieks I detected a music that reflected the incisiveness of my as-yet-incomplete design. His eyes were distended, bloody spittle clung to his lips and beard, and there was a new eagerness in his expression; he would--had he been able to muster coherent thought--have interpreted this eagerness as a lust for death, yet I doubted he would be aware that to feel such a lust was the signature of a profound lesson learned. I thought, however, that once we returned to the desert, once I had time to complete the design, our lessons would go more quickly. I traced a fourth line. His body spasmed, flopping bonelessly, but he did not lose consciousness, and I admired his stamina, envied him the small purity of his purpose. The bond that held me in that place was weakening, and I grasped him more tightly, squeezing a trickle of darkness from his mouth. "You and I," I said, slicing the skin over his breastbone, "are gears of the machine. Together we interlock and turn, causing an increment of movement, a miniscule resolution of potential." With the barest flick I laid open one of his cheeks, and he responded with a high quavering wail that went on and on as if I had opened a valve inside him, released some pressure that issued forth with a celebratory keening. Beneath the wash of blood I had a glimpse of white. "I can see to your bone," I said. "The stalk of your being. I am going to pare you down to your essential things, both of flesh and knowledge. And when we return to the temples, you will have dear sight of them, of their meaning. They, too, are part of the machine." His head lolled back; his mouth went slack, and his eyes--they appeared to have gone dark--rolled up to fix on mine. It was as if he had decided to take his ease and bleed and study his tormentor, insulated from pain and fear. Perhaps he thought the worst was over. I laughed at that, and the storm of my laughter merged with the wind and all the tearing night, making him stiffen. I bent my head close to him, breathed a black breath to keep him calm during the transition, and whispered, "Soon you will know everything."

That is a mere approximation of what I remember, an overformal and inadequate rendering of an experience that seems with the passage of time to grow ever more untranslatable. Trapped by the limitations of language, I can only hint at the sense of alienness that had pervaded me, at the compulsions of the thing I believed I had become. I woke on the beach before dawn not far from Konwicky's house, and I thought that after the possession--or the transformation, or whatever it had been--had ended, in the resultant delirium I must have wandered down from the hillside and passed out. No other possibility offered itself. My muscles still ached from the experience, and my memories were powerful and individual and sickening. I remembered how it felt to have the strength to tear iron like rotten cloth; I remembered a cold disdain for a world I now embraced in gratitude and relief; I remembered the sight of a black hand wicked with curved talons closing around Konwicky and lifting him high; I remembered intelligence without sentiment, hatred without passion; I remembered a thousand wars of the spirit that I had never fought; I remembered killing a hundred brothers for the right to survive; I remembered a silence that



caused pain; I remembered thoughts like knives, a wind like religion, a brilliance like fear, I remembered things for which I had no words. Things that made me tremble.

But as the sun brought light into the world, light brought doubt into my mind and caused the memories to diminish in importance. Their very sharpness was a reason to doubt them; memories, I believed, should be fragmentary, chaotic, and these--despite their untranslatable essence--were a poignant, almost physical, weight inside my head. Their vividness seemed a stamp of fraudulence, of the manufactured, and thus my problems with interpreting what had happened became complex and confusing. How much, for instance, had Odille known? Had she, out of hatred for Konwicki, manipulated me? Had she known more than she had said, trying to encourage a deadly confrontation? And if so, what sort of confrontation was she trying to encourage? And what about coincidence? The coincidence of so many elements of those days and the dreams and the game. Was it really coincidence, or could what seemed coincidental have been a matter of selective memory? And Konwicki . . . had he been honest with me that night on the point, or had he, too, been engaged in manipulation? Could Odille's desertion have left him more bereft than he had allowed, and was that a significant motivation? I wished I had let him finish speaking, that I had learned what he meant by the phrase "for every action there's a reaction." Was that merely another coincidence, or did it refer to an exchange of travelers between this world and that desert hell? And most pertinently, had my deep-seated anger against an old lover been a sufficiently powerful poison to cause me to imagine an unimaginable horror, to erect an insane rationalization for a crime of passion? Or had anger been the key that opened both Konwicki and me to the forces of the game? Each potential answer to any of these questions cast a new fight upon the rest, and therefore to determine an ultimate answer became a problem rather like trying to put together a jigsaw puzzle whose pieces were constantly changing shape.

The sun had cleared the horizon, shining palely through thin gray clouds; clumps of seaweed littered the beach, looking at a distance like bodies washed up by the surf, and heaps of foam like dirty soapsuds demarked the tidal margin. My head felt packed with cotton, and I couldn't think. Then I was struck by an illumination, a hope. Maybe none of it had happened. A psychotic episode of some kind. I went stumbling through the mucky sand toward Konwicki's place, growing more and more certain that I would find him there. And when I burst into the darkened shack, I saw someone asleep on an air mattress against the wall, a head with brown hair protruding from beneath a blanket.

"Konwicki!" I said, elated.

The head turned toward me. A tanned teenage girl propped herself on an elbow, the blanket slipping from her breasts; she rubbed her eyes, pouted, and said grouchyly, "Who're you?"

The air in the room stank, heavy with the sourness of sexual activity and marijuana. I couldn't tell if the girl was pretty; her environment suppressed even the idea of prettiness. "Where's Konwicki?" I asked.

"You a friend of Carl's?"

"Yeah, we're soul mates." Being a wiseass helped stifle my anxiety.

The girl noticed her exposure, covered herself.

"Where is he?" I asked.

"I dunno." She slumped back down. "He went somewhere with Ryan last night. He'll probably be back soon." She shaded her eyes, peered into the thin light. "What's it like out there? Still drizzling?"

"No," I said dully.

The girl shook her hair back from her eyes. "I think I'll catch a swim."

I stood looking down at the cardboard box that contained the Mayan figurines.

"That means I'd like to put on my suit," said the girl.

"Oh . . . right. Sorry." I started out the door.

"After I'm dressed," said the girl, "you can wait here if you want. Carl's real free with his place."

I stood outside, uncertain what to do. While I was considering my options, the girl came out the door, wearing a red bikini; she waved and walked toward the water's edge. I stared in through the door at the cardboard box. Konwicki would not be returning, I realized, and the answer to all my questions might be in that box. I checked to make sure that the girl wouldn't be a problem--she was splashing through the shallows--and darted inside. I picked up the box, then remembered the papers; I stuffed as many of them as possible in among the figurines, stuck some more under my arm, and went jogging along the shore toward home.

These were the facts, then. Konwicki was missing. The police were indifferent to the matter. Gringos were prone to make unannounced exits of this sort, they said. Likely he had gotten a girl in trouble. Ryan had been found on the hill, incapable of rational speech, his wrist broken; I saw him once before he was flown home under sedation, and he looked very like the Ryan of my dream. Drugs, said the local doctor. An Indian family with a small farm claimed that a demon had torn a hole in their roof and chased them through the jungle; but the sightings of demons were commonplace among the hill people, and their testimony was disregarded, the hole in the roof chalked up to storm damage--a ceiba tree had fallen onto it. A deer had been found disemboweled in the jungle, but the wound could have been made by a machete. A shack had been destroyed, apparently by the wind. As the days passed and the memories of that night grew faint, I came to see this combination of facts as an indictment against myself. It was conceivable that in chasing Ryan I had frightened an Indian family who had already been terrified by a tree crashing down upon their roof, and that in my rage, a rage funded by the bizarre materials of Konwicki's game, I had erected a delusionary system to deny my participation in a violent act. Having reached this conclusion, I became desperate to prove it wrong. I refused to accept that I was a murderer, and I pored over Konwicki's notes, trying to legitimize the game. I discovered what he had meant by saying that the game could be prolonged; according to his notes, the winner could choose to continue alone for one more move and thereby negate the penalties that accrued to both winner and loser . . . though why anyone would choose this option was beyond me. Perhaps the Mayans ranked their priorities differently from those of our culture, and personal survival was not high among them. The fact that Konwicki had not told me that I, the winner, could save him and risk myself by continuing seemed to testify that he had been trying to trick me into going on. However, that wasn't sufficient proof. Even if he had not given the game any credence, he might--as Odille had suggested--have said the exact same thing in order to gain a hold on me. The events of that night lay on an edge between the rational and the irrational, and the problem of which interpretation to place upon them was in the end a matter of personal choice.

Yet I was obsessed with finding a solution, and for the next month I pursued the question. I no longer had dreams of the pyramids and the desert, but I had other dreams in which I saw Konwicki's tormented face. From these dreams I would wake covered with sweat, and I would go into my study and spend the remaining hours of the night staring at the four counters that had been employed in the game: the dwarf, the warrior, the woman, the infant. I grew distracted. My thoughts would for a time be gleefully manic, sharp, and then would become muzzy and vague. I was afflicted by the smell of blood; I had fevers, aural

hallucinations of roaring and screams. And I fell into a deep depression, as deep as the one that had owned me in New York, unable to disprove to my own satisfaction the notion that I had killed a man.

Throughout this period, Odille was loving and supportive, exhausting herself on my behalf, and during moments of clarity I realized how fortunate I was to have her, how much I had come to love her. It was this realization that began to pull me out of my depression . . . that, and the further realization that she was beginning to fray under the pressures of dealing with my breakdown. Over the span of a week she grew sullen and short-tempered. I would find her pacing, agitated, and when I would try to console her, she would often as not react with hostility. Usually I was able to break through to her, to bring her back to normalcy. Then one night, returning from the corner store, where I had gone to buy olive oil, matches, some other things for the kitchen, as I came into the living room I heard Odille out on the patio, sobbing, cursing, her voice thickened like a drunkard's. It was the voice I'd heard in my dream, coming from one of the cubicles in the pyramid. I stopped in my tracks, and as I listened, a dissolute feeling spread through my guts. There was no doubt about it. Not only were the timbre and rhythms identical, but also the words.

"Bastard," she was saying. "Oh, you bastard. God, I hate you, I hate you! You . . ." A wail. "Dead man, that's what I'll call you. I'll say, 'How are you, dead man?' And when you ask what I mean by that, I'll say that I'm just anticipating . . . you fucking bastard!"

I went out onto the patio, walking softly. It was hot, and a few drops of rain were falling, speckling the concrete. Sweat poured off my neck and chest and back; my shirt was plastered to my skin. The lights were off, the moon high, printing a filigree of leaf shadow on the concrete, and Odille was perched on the edge of a chair in the shadows, her head down and hands clasped together--a tense, prayerful attitude. It seemed hotter the nearer I came to her. "Odille," I said.

She threw back her head, her strained face visible through strands of hair; she looked like a madwoman caught at some secretive act.

I started toward her, but she jumped up and backed away. "Don't touch me, you bastard!"

"Jesus, Odille!"

I moved forward a step or two, and she screamed. "You lied to me! Always lies! Even in Irún . . . even then you were lying!"

She had told me enough about her affair in Paris to make me think it was her old lover--and not me--that she was addressing. "Odille," I said. "It's me . . . Ray!" She blinked, appeared to recognize me; but when I came forward again, she said, "I won't listen to you anymore, Carl. Everything you say is self-serving. It has nothing to do with what I'm feeling, what I'm thinking."

I took her by the shoulders. "Look at me, Odille. It's Ray."

"Oh, God . . . Ray!" The tension drained from her face. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry!" Her mouth twisted into an expression of revulsion, and she pushed me back. "Sitting there mooning about that bitch in New York. You think I don't know? I do . . . I know! Every time you touch me, I know!"

"Odille!"

Again her face grew calm, or rather, registered an ordinary level of distress. "Oh, God!" she said. "I feel out of control, I feel . . .!"

I tried to embrace her, and she slapped me hard, knocking me off-balance. She came at me, shouting,

slapping and clawing, and I went backward over the arm of a chair. My head struck the concrete, sending spears of white light shooting back into my eyes. I grabbed at her leg as she stepped over me, but I was stunned, my coordination impaired, and I only grazed her calf with my fingernails. By the time I managed to stand, Odille was long gone.

I went into the living room and stood by a table that I had marked into zones like the game board; the four counters were set upon it, and on the floor was the box containing the remaining two counters. In the pool of lamplight the rough brownish orange finish of the clay had the look of pocked skin; shadows had collected in their eye sockets, making them appear ghoulish. I would have liked to break them, to scatter them with a sweep of my hand and dash them to the floor; but I was frightened of them. I recalled now what Ryan had said in my dream about the victor paying a price, and I also recalled Konwicky's description of the female counter. A maniac, Odille had said. Foulmouthed and physically abusive. It was possible to dismiss the evidence of dreams, to blame Odille's emotional state on stress, on the turbulent emotional climate of her past, to dissect experience and devise a logical system that would explain away everything inexplicable. But there had been one too many coincidences, and I knew now that the game and all its hallucinatory consequences had been real, that the potency of the game was in part due to the fact that this world and the one from which the game derived were ultimately coincidental, lying side by side, matching one another event for event; the game was a bridge between those worlds, allowing the evil character of one to tap into and transform the weak principles of the other. Maybe the Mayans had played the game too often; maybe it had infected them and they had fled their cities, looking for someplace untainted by that other world. Maybe that ominous vibration of the old ruins, of Tikal and Palenque and Cobán, was a remnant of the power of evil, a lingering pulse of the ancient machinery. The theory was impossible to prove or disprove, but I had the feeling that I was not far from right. And what was to happen now? Was I to lose Odille, watch her decline into a madness that accorded with the character assigned her counter by some impersonal agency, some functionary of a universal plan?

So it appeared.

It was curious, my calmness at that moment. I had no idea whether or not there was a remedy to the situation. I thought about Konwicky's notes, his declaration that the game could be prolonged if the winner chose to put himself at risk for one more move, and I remembered, too, how Ryan had hinted at much the same thing in the dream; but there was nothing in Konwicky's notes that explained how one should initiate the tactic. Still, I acted as if there was remedy, as if I had a decision to make. I sat down in a straight-backed chair, staring at the counters, and thought about what we make when we make love, the weave of dependencies and pleasures and habituations that arise from the simple act of bestowing love, which is an act of utter honesty, of revelation and admission, of being innocent enough to open oneself completely to another human being and take a step forward into the dangerous precinct of their wills, hoping that they have taken the same immeasurable step, hoping they will not backtrack and second-guess what they know absolutely--that here is a rare chance to deny the conventional wisdom, to attempt an escape from the logics that supposedly define us. Karen Maniaci had taken that step and then had become afraid. It was not blameful, what she had done; it was only sad. And perhaps her rejection of love, her sublimation of desire, and her decision to view the life of her heart in terms of an emotional IRA, a long-term yuppie investment, choosing the security of what she could endure over the potentials of hope--maybe that was all of which she was capable. But that was the imperfect past. I thought of Odille then--her childhood of white lace and Catholic virtue, her intelligence and her ordinary passage through schools and men and days to this beach at the ends of the earth, this place where one thing more than the expected had happened--and I thought of the risk we had taken with one another without knowing it . . . to begin with, anyway. At some point we must have known, and still we had taken it. As it had been with Karen, it was now--I did not understand how to step back from that commitment, even though it was clear that the prospect of yet another risk lay before me.

Perhaps the game was--as Konwicki had suggested--merely a matter of attunement, not of rules; and perhaps once I'd entered the game's sphere of influence, I had only to acknowledge it, to make a choice, and then that choice would be actualized within its boundaries. Whatever the case, I must have reached a decision that bore upon the game, because I realized that the table and the counters had undergone a transformation. The surface of the table had become an undulating surface of rusty orange upon which the counters stood like colossi, and in the distance, apparently miles and miles away, was a complex of black pyramids. It was as if I were a giant peering in from the edge of the world, looking out over a miniature landscape . . . miniature, but nonetheless real. The wind was blowing the sand into tiny scarves, and hanging above the pyramids was a fuming violet-white sun. Acting without thought, feeling again that sense of power and possession, I removed three of the counters, leaving the dwarf to stand facing the black buildings alone. After a moment I took one of the two remaining two counters from the cardboard box and set it close to the gnome. The figure depicted a youth, its proportions less distorted than those of the dwarf, yet with muscles not so developed as those of the warrior. I leaned back in my chair, feeling drained, wasted. The table had returned to normal, a flat surface marked with lines of chalk.

I was more than a little afraid. I wasn't sure what exactly I had done, but now I wanted to retreat from it, deny it. I pushed back my chair, becoming panicked, darting glances to the side, expecting to see an immense black talon poking toward me from window or door. The house seemed a trap--I remembered Konwicki and Ryan in the hut on the hill--and I scurried out into the night. It was spitting rain, and the wind was driving in steadily off the sea, shredding the palms, breaking the music from a radio in the house next door into shards of bright noise. I felt disoriented, needing--as I had that first night at Konwicki's--something to hold, something that would give me weight and balance, and I sprinted down onto the beach, thinking that Odille would be there. At the Café Pluto or one of the other bars. Maybe now that the game had been joined once again, she would have grown calm, regained her center. The moon flashed between banks of running clouds, and chutes of flickering lantern light spilled from shanty windows, illuminating patches of weeds, strips of mucky sand littered with fish corpses and offal and coconut tops. In the darkness above the tossing palms I glimpsed a phantom shape, immense and snake-headed, visible for a fraction of a second, and I picked up my pace, running now out of fear, the salt air sharp in my lungs, expecting a great claw to lay open my backbone. Then I spotted Odille--a shadow at the margin of the sea, facing toward the reef. The tide was going out, leaving an expanse of dark sand studded with driftwood and shells. I ran faster yet, and as I came near, she turned to me, backed away, saying something lost in the noise of the wind and surf. I caught her by her shoulders, and she tried to twist free.

"Let me go!" she said, pushing at my chest.

I glanced behind me. "Come on! We've got to get out of here!"

"No!" She broke loose from my grasp. "I can't!"

Again I caught hold of her.

"Leave me alone!" she said. "I'm. . . ." She brushed strands of wet hair away from her face. "I don't know what's wrong with me. I must be crazy, acting like that."

"You'll be all right."

"You can't know that!"

I pulled her close, pressed her head onto my shoulder. She was shaking. "Calm down, just calm down. You're all right. Don't you feel all right? Don't you feel better?" I stroked her hair, my words coming in a torrent. "It's just the pressure, all the pressure. We've both been acting crazy. But it's over now. We have

to leave; we have to find a new place." I searched the sky for signs of the monster I'd seen earlier, but there was only the darkness, the rushing moon, the lashing fronds. "Are you okay, are you feeling okay?"

"Yes, but--"

"Don't worry. It's just the pressure. I'm surprised we both haven't gone nuts."

"You're not going to leave me?" Her tone was similar to that of a child who'd been expecting a beating and had been granted a reprieve.

"Of course not. I love you. I'm not going to leave you . . . ever."

Her arms tightened around my neck, and she said that she couldn't stand the idea of losing me; that was why, she thought, she'd lost control. She just couldn't bear going through the same heartbreak again. I reassured her as best I could, my mouth dry with fear, continuing to look in every direction for signs of danger. The sea rolled in, smooth swells of ebony that detonated into white flashes on the reef.

"Come on," I said, taking her hand, pulling her along. "Let's go back to the house. We have to get out. This place, it's no good anyway. Too much bad shit has happened. Maybe we can find a boat to take us upriver tonight. Or tomorrow morning. Okay?"

"Okay." She forced a smile, squeezed my hand.

We went stumbling along the shore, beating our way against the wind. As we were passing close to a clump of palms, their trunks curved toward the sea, a figure stepped from behind them, blocking our path, and said, "Dat's far as you go, mon!"

He was standing barely a dozen feet away, yet I had to peer in order to make him out: a cocoa-skinned boy in his teens, about my height and weight, wearing jeans and a shirt with the silk-screened image of a blond woman on the front. In his hand was a snub-nosed pistol. His eyes looked sleepy, heavy-lidded--Chinese eyes--and he was swaying, unsteady on his feet. His expression changed moment to moment, smiling one second and the next growing tight, anxious, registering the chemical eddies of whatever drug he was behind.

"Gimme what you got, mon!" He wagged the pistol. "Quickly, now!"

I fumbled out my wallet, tossed it to him; he let it slip through his fingers and fall to the sand. Keeping his eyes on me, the gun trained, he knelt and groped for the wallet. Then he stood, pried it open with the fingers of his left hand, and removed the contents. My vision was acting up; superimposed on the boy's face was another face, one with coarse features and pocked ocher skin--the image of the counter depicting the youth.

"Shit . . . boog muthafucka! Dis all you got? Quetzales all you got? I want gold, mon. Ain't you got no gold?"

"Gold!" I said, easing Odille behind me. To the surprise of half my mind, I felt in control of the situation. The bastard planned to kill me, but he was in for a fight. I was in the game again, flooded with unnatural strength and cold determination, my fear dimmed by my partnered consciousness with a muscular little freak who thrived on bloodlust.

"Ras clot!" said the boy, his face hardening with rage, jabbing the gun toward me, coming a few steps closer. "Gold! American dollars! You t'ink I goin' to settle fah dis?" He waved the fistful of Guatemalan currency at me.

The rain had let up, but the wind was increasing steadily; all along the beach the bushes and palms were seething. The sky above the hills had cleared, and the moon was riding just high enough so that the tip of the highest hill put a black notch in its lowest quarter. With ragged blue clouds sailing close above, their edges catching silver fire as they passed, it was a wild and lovely sight, and my heart stalled on seeing it. I felt suddenly calm and alert, as if attentive to some call, and I watched the tops of some silhouetted acacias inland swaying and straightening with a slow ungainly rhythm, bending low all to one side and lurching heavily back to upright again, like the shadows of dancing bears. At the center of the wind, I heard a silence, a vast pool of dead air, and I knew that other world, that place half my home, was whirling close, ready to loose its monsters upon whoever failed this test. I was not unnerved; I was empowered by that silence, unafraid of losing.

"Didn't you hear me, mon?" said the boy. "T'ink I foolin' wit' you? I ast if you got gold."

"Yeah, I got gold," I said coolly. "I got more gold than you can handle. Look in the secret compartment."

"What you mean?"

"There's a seam inside the billfold," I said, gloating over what was to come. "An inner flap. You have to look real close. Slit it open with your fingernail."

The boy stared into the wallet, and I flew at him, driving my shoulder into his abdomen, my arms wrapping around his legs, bringing him down beneath me. I clawed for his gun hand, caught the wrist as we went rolling in the wet sand left by the receding tide. I butted him under the jaw and smashed his hand against the sand again and again, butting him once more, and at last he let the gun fall. I had a glimpse of a dagger falling onto the rust-colored sand, and as we grappled together, face-to-face, in his eyes I saw the shadowy, depthless eyes of the counter, the coarse slitted folds, the hollowed pupils. I smelled cheap cologne, sweat, but I also smelled a hot desert wind. The boy spat out words in a language that I didn't recognize, tearing at my hair, gouging at my eyes; he was stronger than he had appeared. He freed one hand, punched at the back of my neck, brought his knee up into my chest, sending me onto my back. Then he straddled me, twisting my head, forcing my face into the sand and flailing away with his fist, punching at my liver and kidneys. There was sand in my nose and mouth, and the pain in my side was enormous. I couldn't breathe. Black lights were dancing behind my eyes, swelling to blot out everything, and in desperation I heaved up, unseating the boy, grabbing at his legs; I saw leaden clouds, a boiling sun, and then darkness filmed across the sky once again. The boy broke free, coming to his knees. But in doing so he turned away from me, and that was his undoing. I knocked him flat on his stomach, crawled atop him, and barred my forearm under his neck, locking him in a choke hold by clutching my wrist. We went rolling across the sand and into the water. A wave lifted us, black water coursed over my face, the moon blurred into a silver stream like the flashing of a luminous eel. I surfaced, sputtering. I was on my back, the boy atop me, humping, straining, his fingers clawing. His Adam's apple worked against my arm, and I tightened the hold, digging into his flesh with a twisting motion. He made a cawing noise, half gurgle, half scream. I think I laughed. Another wave swept over us, but we were anchored, heels dug into the sand. I heard Odille crying out above the tumult of wind and waves, and suddenly my glee and delight in the contest, the sense of possession, of abnormal strength . . . all that was gone.

The boy spasmed; his back arched like a wrestler bridging, trying to prevent a pin, then he went stiff, his muscles cabled. But I could feel the life inside him flopping about like a fish out of water, feel the frail tremor of his held breath. I didn't know what to do. I could release him. . . . I doubted he would have any fight left, but what if he did? And if he lived, wouldn't he continue to be a menace, wouldn't the game be unresolved, and--if not the boy--would not some new menace arise to terrorize me? I didn't so much think these things as I experienced a black rush of thought of which they were a part, one that ripped through me with the force of the tide that was sucking us farther from the shore, and once this rush had

passed, I knew that the choice had already been made, that I was riding out the final, feeble processes of a death. Even this realization came too late, for at the moment the boy went limp and his body floated up from mine in the drag of the tide.

Horried, I pushed him away, scrambled to my feet, and stood in the knee-deep water, fighting for balance. For the briefest of instants I spotted something huge, something with needle teeth and a flat skull, bending to the boy. Then Odille was clinging to me, dragging me away from the shore, saying things I barely heard. I turned back to the boy, saw his body lifting, sliding down the face of a swell, almost lost in the darkness. I searched the sky and trees for signs of that other world. But there was nothing. The game was over. Whatever had come for the boy already had him, already was tormenting the last of him in that place of snakes and deserts and black silences. That place forever inside me now. I looked for the boy again. He had drifted out of sight, but I knew he was there, and I would always know how his body went sliding into the troughs, rising up, growing heavier and heavier, but not heavy enough to prevent him from nudging against the reef, his skin tearing on the sharp rocks, then lifting in the race of outgoing tide and passing over the barrier, dropping down and down through schools of mindless fish and fleshy flowers and basking sharks and things stranger and more terrifying yet into the cold and final depths that lay beyond.

When I returned to the house, I discovered that the figurines depicting the youth and the warrior had been shattered. The marmalade cat fled from our footsteps and peered out from beneath a chair with a guilty look. I didn't puzzle over this; I was for the moment unconcerned with validation and coincidence . . . except for my comprehension that the life of one world was the shade of another, that the best and brightest instances of our lives were merely functions of a dark design. That and the memory of the boy dying in the shallows colored everything I did, and for a very long time, although I went about the days and work with my accustomed verve, I perceived a hollowness in every incidence of fullness and was hesitant about expressing my emotions, having come to doubt their rationality. Odille, while she had not been aware of the undercurrents of the fight on the beach, seemed to have undergone a similar evolution. We began to drift apart, and neither of us had the energy or will to pull things back together.

On the day she left for Paris, I walked her to the dock and waited with her as the ferry from Puerto Morales unloaded its cargo of fat black women and scrawny black men and chickens and fruit and flour. She leaned against a piling, holding down the brim of a straw hat to shield her eyes from the sun, looking very French, very beautiful. However, I was no longer moved by beauty. Some small part of me regretted her leaving, but mostly I was eager to have her gone, to pare life down to its essentials once again in hopes that I might find some untainted possibility in which to place my faith.

"Are you all right?" she asked. "You look . . . peculiar."

"I'm fine," I said, and then, to be polite, I added, "I'm sorry to see you go."

She tipped back her head so as to better see my face. "I'm sorry, too. I'll never understand what went wrong, I thought. . . ."

"Yeah, so did I." I shrugged. "*C'est la vie.*"

She laughed palely, turned to the ferry, obviously nervous, wanting to end an awkward moment. "Will you be all right?" she asked suddenly, as if for an instant she were reinhabiting the depth of her old concern and caring. "I'll worry about you here."

"I'm not going to stay much longer . . . a couple of weeks. The doctors will be back by then."



"I don't know how you can stand to stay a minute longer. Aren't you worried about the police?"

"They're tired of hassling me," I said. "Hell, one of the lieutenants . . . you remember the one with the waxed mustache? He actually told me the other day that I was a hero." I gave a sarcastic laugh. "Like Bernhard Goetz, I'm keeping the city clean."

Odille started to say something, but kept it to herself. Instead, she let her fingers trail across my hand.

At last the ferry was empty, ready for boarding. She stood on tiptoe, kissed me lightly, and then was gone, merging with the crowd of blacks that poured up the gangplank.

The ferry veered away from the dock, venting black smoke, and I watched until it had rounded a spit of land, thinking that the saddest thing about Odille and me was that we had parted without tears. After a minute or so I headed back to the house. I had planned to work, but I was unable to concentrate. The inside of my head felt like glass, too fragile to support the weighty process of thought. I fed the cat, paced awhile; eventually I went into the living room and gazed down at the cardboard box that contained the four remaining figurines. I had been intending to destroy them, but each time I had made to do so, I'd been restrained by a fear of some bad result. It occurred to me that I enjoyed this irresolute state of affairs, that I found it romantic to cling to the belief that--mad from unrequited love--I had done terrible violence, and that I'd been shying away from anything that might prove the contrary. I became enraged at my self-indulgence and lack of fortitude; without thinking, I picked up a figurine and hurled it at the wall. It shattered into a hundred pieces, and to my astonishment, a stain began to spread where it had struck. A spatter of thick crimson very like a smear of fresh blood. I tried to blink the sight away, but there it was, slowly washing down the wall. I was less afraid than numb. I looked into the box and saw that the figurine I'd broken was the infant. Ryan. I glanced again at the wall. The stain had vanished.

I started laughing, infinitely amused, wondering if I should call New Zealand and check on the particulars of Ryan's health; but then I realized that I would never pin down the truth, that his health or illness or death could be explained in a dozen ways, and I was afraid that I might not stop laughing, that I would continue until laughter blocked out everything else. Everything was true. Insanity and the supernatural were in league. Finally I managed to get myself under control. I packed my papers, a few clothes, and after wrapping the three remaining figurines in crumpled newspaper, I carried them to the house of a local priest and donated them to his museum. He was delighted by the gift, though puzzled at my insistence that he not allow them to be handled, that they be treated with the utmost care. Nor did he understand my hilarity on telling him that I was placing my fate in God's hands.

At the jetty, I found a swarthy white-haired East Indian man with a powerboat who said he would transport me up the Río Dulce to the town of Reunión for an exorbitant fee. I did not attempt to haggle. Minutes later we were speeding north through the jungle along the green river, and as the miles slipped past I began to relax, to hope that I was putting the past behind me once and for all. The wind streamed into my face, and I closed my eyes, smiling at the freshness of the air, the sweetness of escape.

"You look happy," the old man called out above the roar of the engine. "Are you going to meet your sweetheart?"

I told him, no, I was going home to New York.

"Why do you want to do that? All those gangsters and slums! Don't tell me New York is as beautiful as this!" He waved at the jungle. "The Río Dulce, Livingston . . . nowhere is there a more lovely place!"

With a sudden jerk of the wheel, he swerved the boat toward the middle of the river, sending me toppling sideways, balanced for an instant on the edge of the stem, my face a foot above the water. Something big and dark was passing just beneath the surface. The old man clutched at my arm, hauling me back as I

was about to overbalance and go into the water. "Did you see?" he said excitedly. "A manatee! We nearly struck it!"

"Uh-huh," I said, shaken, my heart racing, wondering if the priest had mishandled one of the figurines back in Livingston.

"I would wager," said the old man, unmindful of my close call, "that there are no manatees in New York. None of the marvelous creatures we have here."

No manatees, I thought; but dark things passing beneath the surface--we had plenty of those. They came in every form. Male, female, shadows in doorways, rooms in abandoned buildings with occult designs chalked on the walls. Everywhere the interface with an uncharted reality, everywhere the familiar world fraying into the unknown.

Escape was impossible, I realized. I had always been in danger, and I always would be, and it occurred to me that the supernatural and the ordinary were likely a unified whole, elements of a spectrum of reality whose range outstripped the human senses. Perhaps strong emotion was the catalyst that opened one to the extremes of that spectrum; perhaps desire and rage and ritual in alignment allowed one to slide from light to light, barely noticing the dark interval that had been bridged. There was a comforting symmetry between these thoughts and what I had experienced, and that symmetry, along with my brush with drowning, seemed to have settled things in my mind, to have satisfied--if not resolved--my doubts. This was not so simple an accommodation as my statement implies. I am still prone to analyze these events, and often I am frustrated by my lack of comprehension. But in some small yet consequential way, I had made peace with myself. I had achieved some inner balance, and as a result I felt capable of accepting my share of guilt for what had happened. I had, after all, been playing head games with Konwicki before taking up the counters, and I had to shoulder responsibility for that . . . if for nothing else.

"Well, what do you say?" the old man asked. "Have you anything in New York to rival this?"

"I suppose not," I said, and he beamed, pleased by my admission of the essential superiority of the Guatemalan littoral.

We continued along the peaceful river, passing through forbidding gulfs bordered by cliffs of gray stone, passing villages and reed beds and oil barges, and came at last to Reunión, where I parted company with the old man and caught the bus north, sadder and wiser, free both of hate and love, though not of trouble, returning home to the ends of the earth.

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