

What Made Thee?

A 'knotty' boy & his 'genes'

A toothsome thriller by
Willard Thurston



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PART ONE: SAVANT

BODIES

The comedian known as The Gryphon was ending his show in Vancouver's Nefer Lounge in the aging Alexandria hotel which, in the musings of local chroniclers, had seen better days. The faux Egyptian wall murals now had the look of a ransacked tomb, not the vivid celebratory murals patterned after the historic talatat blocks that featured family portraits of the eccentric Akhenaten, his enigmatic 'best wife' Nefertiti, and their children. The Gryphon himself was showing signs of wear, of time travail, which his partly inebriated state did little to mask. The small audience, once highly expectant, itching to be amused, slowly began to lose its resilience, its predilection for levity. Precious wordy insinuations can become gawky, labored. When the laughter languishes, you tend to see and hear only what miffs you.

"Has anyone in the audience thought much about -- What made thee?

What Made Thee? Not who you slept with last or why you put that chalk dust up your nose but -- What made thee? Where in the 'background noise' did you, babe, dude or specialist come from? Why and how? Stuff like that. What made thee?..." (A few cursory nods.)

"You probably think...like most of the mummies here tonight...that environment is omnipotent. Right? Context and nurture are everything, the whole enchilada. Feed everybody Big Macs and out pop jelly-bellies. Bear with me. What made thee?

"We got this science today called genetics. Chirpy stuff that's up there in your face. Your airedale nose, cabbage patch dollies, your puny dangling participle. Maybe even the fact you can't carry a tune without the Vienna Philharmonic backing you up. Genes. What your father and mother imagined you wouldn't hold against them. Man were they slow. What made thee?

He looks at an overweight lad in the front row.

"Got a great bod, kid. A fact you've known for some time, right? (The lad wanly smiles.) Always pray before you smile. It helps. What made thee? What made thee?... Genes prescribe a certain inalienable and ineluctable look, from the stipulations of bone articulation to special vulnerabilities to disease. No reprieve here. Genes. No innocent bystanders. They're wasp accomplices to an arbitrary arrest!"

The lame audience response seemed to animate the Gryphon's urgency.

"Lets face it -- genes are ancient copecks more often than Swiss dollars.

Something people can get decidedly wistful about. The hoary cartoon you cannot rub out.

“Not being career stoics, folks get cheesed off! Then spooked. Then wacko: for crissake, something oughta be done about a Creator who may be both Miser and Thug...something, surely bloody something before the Second Bloody Coming. Before the Great Futures’ Peddler comes back to judge his Mays’ and Macs’ fannies! The main achievement for some folks. (A groggy someone shouts ‘boring’ followed by some table thumping.)

“Hear you man -- it is a mego scandal, right? Think about it. You look and sound better than your neighbor, you’re just a high-toned smeg head, right? Everybody knows that. And the smegs get away with it, right? Having two good kidneys, say, or 20/20 vision, or a memory that can recall Paradise Lost verbatim -- that’s hardly legit but rather something you didn’t really deserve, hadn’t earned, and maybe should be taxed for having. A lucky sonofabitch oughta pay through the nose, right? You got capital that’s earning interest and holy hannah you get to keep it!”

“Right on!” one gummy copper nose calls out, freshly awake, glancing about, prompting bearish applause from some nearby tables.

“ -- Nice to have the board of directors here. (A few sniggers.) What a bloody mess. Think about it. To be heathy and pretty, let alone wealthy or smart, is cause for reprisal, right? Only the poorest, ugliest, dumbest, most disease ridden should be allowed to reproduce without apology, right? They don’t know any better and they’ve been doing it forever, right? Right. Yeah. (More applause from the same tables.)

“I mean, life presupposes a lot of crap, and I mean a lot, right, not just some Wall Street ‘jawsmith’ adding more. Think about it. All that life crap. Mountains of it. Ugly sickening polluting crap. Chin deep in the stuff...and jees we’re living longer! Silly old farts spreading all over like dust mites. While research labs make drugs to keep ‘em living longer! Can you imagine? Naturally the do-gooders among us have a solution -- death with dignity! Don’t embarrass yourself. Get out now before you really mess up. Yes. Death with dignity. Which means not being there when it happens, right? Allen’s plea bargain. Euthanasia will soon be a political reality; the social advisement can’t be far off.”

He looks about the somnambulant crowd with blood shot eyes, shaky aspen limbs, his nose nearly a roadway marker, to stare at a couple of old boozers in the second tier of seats. One of these offers a quizzical toast. The other gives him the finger.

“So. All gummy relics, time to die with dignity. Get the plastic bag over your biscuit. Time to shuck the greasy coil. Get the ready pills down the pie hole. Trust me. You can’t expect us to clean your backside forever, pick your fingers out of the dodgy main frame, apple up the historic stink. We won’t hold it against you if you do it now. But we mean now. Bloody well now! Be courageous. You owe it to yourself to drop dead and rid the world of a roach. Be considerate, you grasping old pension codger. Especially considerate. Ninety-year-olds now, eighty-year-olds next. Every Dick and Jane over seventy should be chloroformed, period. Think of the time and bother and wretchedness we’ll all save. Think of the pity and pa-

thos we'll all avoid. A planet nearly alive again! You owe it to yourself -- and the many-too-many..."

A nearly stultifying pause. Some feeble belated hissing. Two club stewards on stage Left conclude their assessment and move in unison toward the Gryphon.

"The Mendes brothers pleaded over parking...bloody inconvenient old people parking all over the place." As the stewards gingerly take hold of the Gryphon in a graceless pantomime, he continues: "You can hardly move anymore. Everywhere you look another moonscape Freddy. Death with dignity. Death with dignity. Oblivion is looking good, right?..."

Sporadic, limp applause was punctuated by a few gamy whistles and desultory hisses as the Gryphon is finally, firmly escorted off the stage, though not be-fore exclaiming, "Just remember where you heard it all, folks! From one asshole who knows!"

The Gryphon had a reputation for being a bit of a toff, and rather hard on earth bound creatures. In the mists of history the mythical Gryphon's large claws were said to change color in the presence of poison, which is why they made great drinking vessels for suspicious potentates. Sadly, this earth bound Gryphon was becoming immune to his own rancid tongue and, of late, his frequently crapulous states. His genes weren't flying any more. Indeed, an indignant death seemed in the offing.

He professed to be a Greek foundling, but was actually christened and baptized Richard Julian Wagner, son of the late Dr. Carl Wagner who had graduated from McGill in 1919 with David's father Lucius. That much

David was certain of; he had gone to school with and been ingratiated by the wiseacre. But there were a lot of holes, a lot of missing scenes and persons in the tableaux of his memory. And of late this lack was disconcerting, even nettling. Seeing his old prodigious friend reduced to a gummy wino, despite the occasional flourish, was a sorry demise.

Thus, to a heedful mossback like David Abercrombie Townsend, the convulsions of his era, particularly that to do with sex, health, beauty and now death -- bodies ravishing and revolting -- had undermined his solicitude, which he once imagined the twilight of his years might yield as consolation. Just when his maxims and apothegms began to tango, the orchestra folded; mystery, wonder and fondness packed their instruments and left by a rear door. What remained on the floor was raw, naked and decidedly rank. He simply had too many insinuations on his hands. The reason his generation went from embarrassment over a first kiss to blithely hankering after pot and cocaine, or from the lingering nostrums of Mrs. Grundy to abrasive Marxism, radical chic and regnant political correctness, was becoming axiomatic. *Improvement too, the idol of the age, is fed with many a victim!* Imagine, an 18th Century poet said that. One William Cowper. Release from historic exaction frees the dilettante and dogmatic lovemonger -- vocations that soft pedal reality. One corollary of peacetime boredom. Everyone should be allowed, nay encouraged, to seek their own plenum. Health, wealth, beauty and sidereal debauchery for all. The Come Kingdom. A constitutional right bolstered by a fearless charter. Complaint the new bean counter, the new actuary. Such that of late, even his parents

had come under renewed scrutiny. With all their ability and sobriety, they might have warned him. Else his memory was playing tricks on him -- the paralyzing suspicion. And where were all these aphorisms coming from -- if not a desire to take the sting out of his own pathos. Deal himself a fail-safe excuse. Don't mind screwing up, just don't expect me to be there when it happens. A Woody Allen variation. Death in absentia.

Thus, it was in this spirit of forensic pique, of warming condolent nostalgia denied or revoked, that he began to look into his past, how he might have been so witless, so impiously heedless. That he had become a poseur and lay-about, a 'washout' his father would have said, was perhaps understandable if not indictable. But why his neighbor should want to follow suit was, in its repleteness, an Eleusinian mystery. Now that both his parents were long dead and buried, he might do a little remorseless digging. In keeping with the topical mantra -- dash and dump. Exceptional care was the exception now. The good Samaritan's account was overdrawn.

OSCAR

The cadaver his father worked on in medical school was named Oscar. Where the name came from David never learned. Whoever Oscar was -- most cadavers were unclaimed bodies then -- he served to instruct if not enlighten four earnest, impetuous, doughty medical students in the McGill class of 1919. Not aesthetically of course. To be heartlessly candid, Oscar was a very ugly buzzard. And looked decidedly indignant with one distinct eyeball glowering at the ceiling. The fact that his name would eventu-

ally captivate billions of zealous theatre goers was sadly burlesqued by his prone remains.

David's father, Lucius Milton Townsend, 'Doc' to his ever questing colleagues, was perhaps the most artless of these students, but also the most conscientious. If his 'confederates' read the medical compendiums (those abridged summaries designed to obviate the tomes) once or twice, Doc would read them at least twice. A toil that cut down on the hours he might appropriate to steal off to a vaudeville show, which he relished. Crude derisive career voices in the public domain were still a rarity then. And bodies a veritable novelty, in as much as one knew the female leg did indeed extend beyond the ankle and knee, though the evidence was not yet broadcast. Apropos the time and waning era, fashion still flirted with décolletage, not the precious *flagrante* that would deprecate the remnants of Nineteenth Century chic. Parenthetically, locust swarm pornography, which would come to specialize in method assault, as a tonic perhaps to the gormless Playboy philosophy (which shunned a wife and lingering double standard for a spate of feminist lip), was still years away.

The single extant picture of Oscar was a far cry from the early painterly renderings of the anatomy lab. A grubby, partially unwrapped hulk already lacking many muscles and ligaments, stretched out before four smocked and obdurate med students. Wally Whyte, a dark-haired pundit they called the gypsy, usually handled the salutations. Said Wally about Oscar, "Poor chap likely didn't survive initiation" -- a memory all four students retained a certain poignancy for, especially the sting of the paddles

on their backsides as they ran, shackled and blindfolded through the senior's trench, or experienced the high when hurled, again blindfolded, up and up in the air from a token fireman's blanket, the blanket returning ever closer to the ground, such that they would not cavil at sharing the experience with the next crop of milksop juniors. Carl Wagner, a blond sometimes sardonic maestro -- unique among the four for not only coming to McGill on a scholarship but being heir to a fortune as well -- a fortune before the war -- was unconvinced of Oscar's premature demise. "He did too survive, the swine. For a time." They all laughed at this, thinking perhaps of the senior fellow they might gladly be working on now. "Look at his weepee. Then look at his hands. What else could he do?" Oscar's hands were enormous, his penis minuscule -- a career paddler -- their senior ogre in aspic. Dr. Perlmutter, the anatomy professor, had to keep an eye on this group of 'apostates'. He brooked no disrespect of his 'bodies', and the four 'W's, Wagner, Wilde, Townsend and Whyte, were always a concern. Two dilettantes and two nincompoops to ameliorate the shortage of medics after the war. Above all, no one in this class was going to be found using intestines as skipping ropes -- a rumor he had confronted first hand. His lab would be as tranquil and sober as a library, his students at least reverent if not accomplished. As the poor man said, reverence begins at home.

In their second year, the quartet felt sufficient amour proper for themselves to have a group photographic portrait done. Wagner sat in front and presented a shock of blond hair, almost a fly whisk, with several moles

cavorting above a jutting Hapsburg lip. Despite his torpid gaze, the insinuation of frenzy prevailed. For all his wit, he was proud of his Teutonic background -- at a time when it was handily despised -- and he had suffered the worst of the initiation barbarity -- which merely confirmed his superiority. Provincial savages, he would say. *Mitlaeufer und hochstaplers*. As if to certify his transcendence, he sometimes played an old battered trombone, as Sherlock might have touched his violin in the afternoon shadows after a fix, though not as hopelessly flat and deliriously impenitent. His brilliance, despite his tin ear, the others had long since begrudged as genuine. He sat in the center, cross legged and bemused.

Wally Whyte, standing behind left, always seemed to be leaning forward, as if ready to pounce or flee. By turns ingratiating or dismissive, there seemed little middle ground in his engagement. He too had thick hair but neatly slicked back with a fruity smelling pomade, while his neatly trimmed mustache often yielded a rich contagion of butter and breakfast honey.

Frank Wilde, center back, was the best hidden of the four. A portly gent with small raison eyes in a glazed bun face. A chuckle always seemed imminent but never yielded to, as if humor were a subversive thing, not to be trusted. In actuality the most generous and deferential, he had a natural aptitude for discretion and reflective study. His reticence was sometimes construed as prudery. Eventually they would call him the Hermit. Though as much from guilt perhaps as derision.

Lucius Townsend, right, was the smallest of the lot, and by rights

should have been the one seated. A balding, nearly good looking man with deep set eyes that sometimes looked improperly aligned. Not as bad as Hollywood comedian Ben Turpin's, but near enough. A thin but prominent upper lip umbered by a long full nose, above an Il Duce chin, served to intimate a tantrum-in-waiting, the temper of a Jake LaMotta, which his customary placidity all but masked. David's otherwise demure maiden aunts attested to the hardier disposition. Between the lines David concluded his father was a hotspur, willing to take on the whole block, the lads therein apparently obliging from time to time. He lost it only once at McGill, according to the evidence in the few extant letters, but the aftermath lived on in his residence like the cosmic background noise from the Big Bang. Fortunately the target of his anger had been a snooty visitor to their rooms no one much cared for. The two ended up in an aromatic shrub near the nurse's residence. "I can't stand someone giving himself airs," Lucius was rumored to have said in a rare moment of phlegm. "We are blessed with an optimist!" -- the verdict of Carl Wagner, meaning Lucius had been conditionally forgiven. He added, "When Lucius' Methodist ancestors rise to their feet, all hell breaks loose."

Otherwise, the four always seemed to be doffing their hats -- supposedly a choice maiden or smart acquaintance had been pressed into taking the picture. In the frequent baseball games, especially when Wilde was at bat, the others seemed to be yelling in concert to let the pitch go by or swing, you idiot, swing. Only Townsend was seen actually connecting with a pitch. At other amusements they might stand stiffly in pork pie hats as if

waiting to get into a urinal in a muddy fairground. Frequently they wore overcoats. The women in the pictures appeared surprisingly stylish or unbelievably droll, a type of hat giving some the aspect of a dull half-closed eye. Mostly they appeared well fed.

But what intervened in virtually all pictures was the dirt and mud. Decent, sturdy buildings of durable granite or brick might rise up in the background, but the foreground was invariably dusty, muddy, muddy-snowy and slippery, or spiked with patchy, prickly weeds and grass. Even the boardwalks sometimes looked treacherous. The innate hideousness ascribed to concrete and asphalt was, too obviously, decades away. The shoes and boots frequently looked scuffed, smutted, spotted, stained, creased. The socks spattered. Sometimes ankle high. A contemporary naturalist's near paradise.

In residence, they lounged in vests and shirts, beneath team pennants affixed to the wall, smoking, comporting themselves as a coterie of pansies, Townsend with a pipe. They practiced examining one another with grave countenances. And had labored study sessions on how they would conduct their first vaginal exam with the lights on. "No problem at all," said the impervious Wagner. "She'll be ugly as sin and dumb as an ox. You'll swear off concupiscence for a fortnight at least. Hot-to-trot Lucius may never take a cold-shower dip in the lily pond again." A natural antagonist, Lucius had been chucked into the pond twice during initiation, the second time taking two of the seniors with him. "What in tarnation is concupiscence?" "A labour of love."

The Varsity Tuck Shop seemed to be a favorite vista for the ‘candid’, the Earl Jansen Confectionary -- Refreshments, Fruits and Tobaccos. Special girlfriends, often in pinafores, stood against forested or garden backgrounds, hat, gloves and coat in hand, or lounged on the limb of a tree in white serving uniforms. They smiled with ineluctable good humor. In a couple of pictures, Lucius and a lady friend walked away from the camera, she in high laced boots, he in pants too short, turning, doffing his hat to a passerby.

Summers were less formal. With sleeves rolled up Lucius played tennis or took a friend for a laze in a punt or row boat. He also once stood cradling a violin case before a building covered in ivy, as if undecided whether a serenade was risky or mandatory. One unidentified couple posed before the Minnedosa, an elegant capacious ocean liner. The few cars about looked dinged and archeologically speculative as the mud.

The album ended abruptly with a cricket pitch before a stately resort hotel. Everyone was photographed at a distance. The buildings stood out. It was the last of the ‘snaps’ that had been consigned to a dusty leather album -- the earliest David could find, too obviously abandoned or misplaced. The final several pages were blank. Rough black pages smelling oddly of what seemed like thyme. He could imagine several floral specimens being once impressed there.

His mother kept many if not all of Lucius’s early letters. Neatly tied in a scarlet ribbon. A late discovery among her belongings, which dated to her teens. She would outlive Lucius by almost three decades. The bundle

would stay with her until her death. In their later years they called one another 'kid'.

They eloped January 1, 1925 but did not publicly acknowledge the marriage for five months, due to the demands of his post-graduate studies and her deploy as a district teacher. His letters, the ones she kept, were addressed to Miss Elspeth Peters. They began in July 1924 and ended in May 1925. The handwriting was not as crimped as it would be later on. Nor as laconic. He worked a lot at night and was a bit of a gambler. He served then as a resident at The Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto. She taught school in Parkbeg, Saskatchewan, in a single room school house that served eight grades. The lone picture of the class that survived was filled with dual desks and motley children, their stark black and white faces filled with a fixed despair. A penal colony, junior division. Only their healthy limbs and cherub-like faces begged off a Holocaust setting. His mother looked at the camera with an ironic stoicism she would come to perfect. Perhaps she looked faintly happier that day, perhaps on receipt of a letter from her buccaneer.

“By the way, old dear, would you like to put up 2 bucks on Dempsey for Thursday’s fight? If so, I have five ironmen that say Dempsey will knock Willard so cold he’ll float home on ice.” She apparently didn’t have two dollars or she declined. The matter was not mentioned again. At least in the extant letters.

Then, apropos the ubiquitous mud and his Klondike humor: Have a real nice story to tell you. Thursday night Wally Whyte and I started out

for Waterloo, where Wally has an uncle, the day it rained so hard. We only got out 5 miles when we got stuck and decided to enjoy the downpour and walk home. You see, we haven't been able to play golf or tennis of late because of the mosquitoes, so decided we needed the exercise. Before starting home we spent an hour and a half digging out gumbo with our hands from around the wheels and fenders. We managed then to turn the car around only to land in a ditch beside the road and waded out. After looking over the situation, we left the car there for the night, as the 5 miles home made a good walk. The only thing of note on the way in, was when Wally decided to kick a road scraper out of the way with his shin. Reminded me of our Central Bute trip, only you seem to bring more luck than Wally. If you had been there I know a Rolls-Royce Silver Ghost would have turned up."

Despite his many imbroglios with nature, man and beast over the years, Lucius rarely raised his voice. Though when he did, as the Hun remarked, all hell broke loose.

Following his residency in Toronto he took up a conditional position at the Warren clinic in Cambridge, a clinic where they wore high studded collars, bowler hats and kept their shoes spick and span. Elspeth resigned and met him that summer. The clinic posting was but a brief sojourn, however. Elspeth perhaps first sensed the unease in her own recognition of her husband's inverted snobbery. The clinic's head, Dr. Kenneth Warren, an aging gaunt Edwardian with a Victorian sensitivity to slight and innuendo, had personally shown them what he believed to be a suitable flat.

It was humbler than Elspeth imagined. She had smiled while staring at the single hot plate in the kitchen. A look and silence that teased the decorum and obeisance of the era. She had glanced at Lucius and not immediately noted Dr. Warren's umbrage. They laughed buoyantly if intermittently that night, the night David's brother was conceived. So David chose to imagine. He liked to think she may have said something like --"I guess this means we make our own meals"-- but, as we've noted, he was ransacking his past not discovering it.

The next morning Dr. Warren called Lucius into his office, a small narrow room, the adjoining walls decorated with landscape prints of Turner and Constable and his own degrees, all gilt framed. A box of hand puppets aligned his large desk which was bare but for an appointment blotter, a recently typed Resume of Clinic Protocol for Applicants, and pictures of his six children. A certified pediatrician and lay Presbyterian minister, with a durable pride in his matinée idol image, he was not unmindful of looking a little like the suave British heir to the throne, and admirably comported himself when his partner, Alfred Dickerson, a small wheezing quipster, sometimes called him Eddie. This morning he wished to certify the care of some patients before he went on holiday. He did not inquire about the Townsend's apartment.

"As you know, being associated with a clinic draws the lines rather strictly between supporters and non-supporters. Practices are earned not corralled. When a man leaves here the contract stipulates that he shall not practice within a radius of 50 miles for five years. I mention this today be-

cause a former member of the clinic has opened a practice near Waterloo, and although we shan't file a formal complaint with the Board, we do expect our staff to be discreet in any dealing with Dr. Baldwin. I shall be away a fortnight, and believe my patients can be adequately served by yourself and my partner, Dr. Dickerson. You will handle the children and some newly pregnant mothers, none of whom should come to term before I return. Naturally, you will call me if any complication arises." He paused to glance down at the list of protocols on his blotter, then nodded. "Ah yes, I notice one omission on my secretary's list of the clinic's rules of comportment, which you would have received, though I'm sure by now you must know that we will not employ a physician who uses liquor."

Dr. Townsend wished Dr. Warren a satisfying holiday and pledged his assurance that Dr. Warren's patients would be served with due care and diligence. Dr. Warren anticipated a smile. "You may, of course avail yourself of my careful selection of toys, which I have found over the years to be efficacious with young Barrymores. Each is sterilized afterward, of course."

About the time Dr. Townsend was speaking into his Ediphone the following afternoon, detailing his treatment of a child with symptomatic torticollis or 'wry neck', farmer Elias Semple was getting impatient with the time it was taking for his wife to deliver their fourth child. He had been through this before and there was usually nothing to it, other than the customary bellyaching. Elias, a heavy bald lumbering man, his once powerful shoulders stooped by years of heart- and backbreaking toil and cumulative

family debt, was noted mainly among his neighbors for his patience with dated farm machinery and neglected fences. If he spent many hours repairing his walking gang, lever and disc harrows, Cockshutt shoe drill, scrub-breaker and McCormick mower, all of which he bought at auction, it was because he prided himself on being self-sufficient. He got a Massey Harris four-foot binder to do five feet and again rued the slyness if not perfidy of the managerial class. His red-faced wife, Ethel, usually an able homemaker, supplementary farm hand, and devoted mother, had this time round rather lost it. For at least a couple of months she imagined something was amiss, and not just her frequent dizzy spells and sickness -- these she had had before, yet still managed to oil the twin-team harness, tend the one Percheron's lacerated leg, milk their five cows, feed the geese, chickens and pigs, clean the milk stalls, pick and wash the ready carrots, dills and tomatoes, even scald the jars in season -- mostly before lunch. Now she barely got to the poultry when she would have to lean on her second-eldest boy, a thin but bloated child who had a problem with his bowels -- something called intussusception, as it was eventually diagnosed, a kind of involution. Mrs. Penner, her closest neighbor, and the area midwife, had urged her to take Tim to the hospital in Cambridge. Except that Tim was indispensable at the time, she had to admit. Their older boy, Ryan, left home after an argument with his father. An episode expunged from the family almanac. Cheerful Tim rarely complained. Though the frequent retching worried Ethel that he wasn't getting the right food. A month later he was admitted to surgery and had been home a fortnight when the

birthing pains began.

At the outset of Ethel's confinement Mrs. Penner realized she might not manage by herself, took the cutter and went to fetch Dr. Baldwin, who had just opened a practice in the area. But Dr. Baldwin had gone to Toronto to see a lawyer on an urgent matter. His landlord was examining a sagging roof on the office and offered the use of a phone in his dry goods store half-a-block away. By the time she reached the Cambridge dispensary and Out Door Clinic, the nurse had closed and gone home. In desperation, she called an operator in Kitchener. Could she be connected with a doctor near Cambridge? The operator found a couple of names, the second of which answered after several rings. Dr. Lucius Townsend was in his pajamas, following a late show and hot-chicken sandwich -- his first time out in weeks. He had just climbed into bed when the hallway phone jingled. Could he come out on a confinement to a farm east of Dundee? The woman at the other end was distraught; the baby was long overdue and the position she guessed perilous. She had never seen such a protracted labor and would do her best until he arrived. Lucius looked at his cold feet when he hung up. "Tout fini," he said, his phrase of choice for curtailed respite. He was not encouraged by the added request, on behalf of the husband, who was loath to leave, to pick up some needed groceries on the way out. "Old man Tucker leaves them Fridays by the gas pump." Mr. Tucker's store was at a juncture called Five Corners Lucius must pass on his way. Elspeth barely sighed.

"Don't wait up, old chum." The stolid advisement doubled as under-

statement that busy night. A phrase that became a standard refrain. To a youngster such phrases come out of the blue, but come they do, though it may have been 'plum' rather than 'chum'. Such banter had all but disappeared by the time his memory took such words to heart. Which conduct he put down to familiarity not indifference.

About the time Lucius fetched Elias' groceries, Lucie Montgomery, the pretty niece of the reeve of Brampton, was suddenly incapacitated by an excruciating pain and taken to bed. She was still seven weeks to term and formed part of Dr. Warren's coterie of primiparas. The Montgomerys had been going to Dr. Warren and before him the clinic's founder, Dr. Halbert, all their lives. Elspeth answered the ring from Lucie's husband Edgar, and explained that Lucius had been called out of town on an urgent matter. She doubted her husband would be available in any case, given the distance he had travelled. Edgar then phoned Dr. Dickerson, who had been liberal with the sherry that night at a gathering of his sulky-racing cronies. Dr. Dickerson felt Dr. Wilkie could handle the matter. Time he began to pull his weight. Dr. Wilkie, having just got to bed, climbed out onto a cold linoleum floor and fetched his homburg. When he reached the hospital and examined Lucie, he phoned Dr. Dickerson, who was then reminiscing in wheezing tones about a virtuosic shill in Notting Hill. Learning of the difficult labour, Dr. Dickerson phoned Dr. Carnegie, the clinic's youngest member, who had just finished a residency in pediatrics. Twice Dr. Dickerson decided he'd better not go, having started, as they had had, on the rye. Again he changed his mind, and sought a fresh cu-

cumber and the Vogeler mouthwash. Dr. Warren spent the evening playing bridge in a cottage at the Briars. He won first prize, two tickets to the play, *Peg O My Heart*. And enjoyed a third glass of ginger beer.

When Lucius arrived at the Semple farm house, Elias said his wife was not in a hurry this time, poor woman, and happily gathered up the groceries which he had waited patiently for, especially the Smucker's rice pudding. His wife, he noted, had not made pudding for over a month, an impulsive remark that prompted him to draw the doctor's attention to Tim's tetchy stomach -- a tergiversation which addled his regard of the confection when removed from the bag. He offered some to Tim but Tim shook his head. Tim still imagined his mother's screaming unusual, his few glimpses of the scene in the kitchen from the sitting room suggestive of someone stuck in a snow drift. He was dumfounded. "Come away Tim, she's done it before now." Though from his father's sidelong glance into the kitchen Tim was far from sure.

The following morning, the senior Mrs. Montgomery sat by her daughter-in-law whom she rarely commiserated with. "It's hideous," Lucie said again, still smarting and roiling from the ordeal the night before. Her husband tended to agree. "Perhaps it's just as well," he had said to his mother when she arrived; they both had hoped for a boy. "I've contacted the agency and they think they may have a couple -- if the complications are manageable." There was no discussion on what would happen if they weren't. The object that prompted the edgy dismayed stares was a suggestively frost-bitten female homunculus with a double hair lip who's head,

left arm and leg, twitched. Dr. Carnegie had had some problems with the arm-presentation position of the babe and possibly damaged the baby's head and neck, as was suggestively apparent to Dr. Dickerson when he at last looked in, an ominous swelling that suggested a brachial plexus injury. Mrs. Montgomery had asked if there was any hope. Dr. Dickerson, against his better judgement, remarked that babies were astonishingly resilient, and with time...Lucie, whom he remembered to be a bright if fanciful child, looked like a hoyden then, someone aiming a rock at your wind-screen. He found Dr. Carnegie in the dispensary, unshaven, bad-breathed, bloodshot, yawning in spite of himself, a blood stain on his thigh, cup of coffee in hand. After a brief summary of events, Dickerson turned abruptly and headed back into the hall. That fellow Townsend was preparing for his certification was he not? And was he not the best obstetrician they had outside of Dickerson and Carnegie. So where the devil was he at the time? His anger at himself for not hunting him down was suddenly displaced by a dislike of young Turpin eyes that quite shocked him when he later thought about it.

Elsbeth was up and reading when Lucius returned. The sun had already cleared the horizon. It had been a long night. He explained how both the Semple child and mother had survived, the mother only just, and that he urged Elias to have no more children. Apparently not the first such recommendation. He also examined Tim, at Mrs. Penner's request, and made allowance for him to come into the hospital as a patient of lesser means. The initial outpatient surgery had left complications. Dr.

Dickerson, in turn, when he contacted Townsend, displayed none of his engaging bonhomie. Yes, Townsend remembered Lucie, a good looking and impetuous youngster, not too thrilled about her condition perhaps, more impatient he thought than diffident, but normal in all respects regarding her pregnancy he believed, though he only examined her once. Dickerson was for a time nearly speechless when he learned where Lucius had been. “You went where? To assist a, a midwife...near where?...” With each question the incendiary incredulity rose. “Are you worried about Tim staying in the hospital, Dr. Dickerson?” Lucius managed to ask during one of Dr. Dickerson’s glottal-stop pauses. Lucius was by then, as he would tell Elspeth, “fed up with a conceited ass doing a good impression of himself.” As with many sly drinkers, Dr. Dickerson shied away from the dirty work in times of stress. Dr. Carnegie was hovering nearby in the office. Dr. Dickerson handed him the phone. “I have to go and pee.” Dr. Carnegie’s guileless and sobering narrative ended with, “I guess both of you were unavailable.” He apologized for the hoarseness in his voice; he was coming down with a sinus cold.

At the hearing, Lucius was at first miffed then incredulous and perhaps a little surprised for finding himself at a loss. Being so fluently and unctuously condescended to he was denied that moment of action, that summary defensive fervor that peaks early. Protracted stilted discourse foils pique. He listened in numbed silence. Dr. Warren’s self-dramatic posturing took time to unfold and was seamless, words too ornate and tangled to leave an entry -- without becoming the rash imprudent simpleton Dr. War-

ren was alluding to. "...I can only but remind myself that I too was young, and sometimes impetuous, yet that never behooved my seniors and betters to consider it anything but folly to..." By the time Dr. Warren had finished all Lucius felt was a slight pity for himself. It seemed an inchoate sense of disengagement was all he might now draw on. Resort to distemper here, among these seasoned windjammers, would beg the question. He had wanted to say that he had attended a very ill woman and her baby daughter. All he said was that his resignation would be on Dr. Warren's desk the following morning. Overdue, he would belatedly determine. Though it came as a surprise to Dr. Warren, who intended a formal reprimand, to be appended to the clinic record, for he could not imagine a young MD relinquishing a position at the prestigious Warren Clinic. The others in attendance were as amazed at the apparent peremptoriness. But they didn't know the junior member's deep ingrained dislike of preciousness and stuffiness. If he had needed an excuse, as he thought later, Providence -- in allowing the incident -- provided one. It was not, Elspeth believed, the time to tell him that he would be a father in about seven months. Dr. Wilkie had phoned to confirm the test when Lucius went before the hastily convened stewards of the Warren Clinic. In a private afterword Dr. Carnegie offered his felicitations and best wishes. And condolences -- "On the other matter."

When Lucius entered the flat Elspeth had long since pieced the scenario together. Mrs. Semple was out of bounds, a patient of limited means that another had undertaken to provide for in a cavalier manner.

Worst still, Lucius had seen fit to slight if not neglect a patient he was under contract to attend. Under the circumstances, the question of assisting a busky midwife in another's practice might not be connived at.

Lucius said he needed a night out. Old Plum agreed. They went to a vaudeville show and later ate a hot turkey sandwich. She noticed that he was occasionally shaking. He was much too fond of her then to settle the anger on anyone but himself. This she knew, and cherished him and her child the more for it. It would be the beginning of the quiet communications. He would write on a vacant page in his diary about a boxer who only saw red and got clobbered when his opponent wore white trunks. Well...that's what David thought happened; indeed hoped, begged happened. He had tried. He had.

Lucius completed his service to the Warren clinic within the month. Mainly office work. Dickerson gave him a reference, leaving out only the regret in the departure of the conscientious newcomer. He asked Doc not to hang it in a new office. Lucius was grateful.

By the final week Lucius mentioned to Elspeth a reply from the council in a district who's population center was a mining town in Alberta. She was by then packed and ready, her pretty face already touched by the campaign bemusement that would over the years change to a more impassive and habitual compunction. The obligatory finesse. In Alexo she would give birth to her first child, the happy faced lad who would survive a bout of influenza but not a freak accident much later in the cab of a creosote tanker truck. A new beginning then, from the bottom up. The why and

wherefore his father acted as he did, David never had the heart to suppose, to consider a more fulsome contretemps or egregious lapse. That an ambitious yet conscientious professional would descend from a posh city clinic to little more than a rural mine town begged a lot of questions which he had no inkling of an answer to from the extant records. Even the eventual move to Burdock, Saskatchewan, and the new exiguous Health Region No. 1, seemed a further admonition. Thus he figured it was now time for him to stand down on that early period, to leave it to yesteryear without further apology or embellishment. His own tale he knew well enough, to the extent that anyone really knows what's going on, what in fact happens over a lifetime. David had here his own copious notes and a few pithy letters. Which he still fancied to be revelatory. Memory he imagined in his pantaloon days to resemble the progress of his eyebrows from precise, even lucidity, the fleeting sleekness of a tide-rinsed algae, to the dry bosky scrub of late maturity, with its wayward 'antlers'. He pictured a scruffy boreal ungulate pondering its reflection in a river pond. The time when memory looms. When reflection yields its dismay and wonder. His late 'walk about'. A last proffered excuse. Conjoined to the Gryphon's discourse on God, Fate and his late reckoning of the 'gift' of life. Which made little allowance for happenstance and genes -- for what made thee.

PIANO

Vida Semple seemed once again lost to her popish demons, so her apostate-minded father Elias thought. Ethel had intended to name her

last live child Violet, after her great grandmother, but couldn't frame her words very well toward the end. 'Vida' stuck, so too the child's late and protracted self-absorption, the silent rocking back and forth, the engrossed fiddling with a ball of string. An abstraction that seemed both ancient and perdurable. Usually after the tears. She could have been, in her fubsy form, red hair, lavish freckles and blue dress, a popish gravestone, Elias thought; you would need a plow to budge her someday. It was surely all that stuff and nonsense that Mother Scholastica England put into the girl's head. One had to be careful about sacerdotal agents. He was no fool. Such a pother the nun made over that instrument in the cellar when it was finally taken out and sold. And him almost forgetting it was there. How glad he was when Ted Dyck came and took the old piano away. It made all that other talk about mental deficiency so much bunk. Vida was in the grip of some demon -- getting a coal oil lamp lit down there in the cellar was proof alone. No slow child does that on her own, or plays the keys so preposterously without a poltergeist or something spreading the fingers. And what noise it was. Had she played some familiar notes, well he might have felt differently. The nun once urged him to get a better radio, as if that would have helped. He could get the farm broadcast most days. What else was there? Evenings were full of static and ghost stations. No, the 'noise' Vida made could only come from a spirit you wouldn't want in a graveyard let alone a cellar. It was plain the girl needed more than a good shaking. Which the new housekeeper, Mrs. no-neck Carruthers, an old battle-ax if ever there was one, would not stand for. Thank god he

had managed to put his boys beyond the snares of such claptrap. Though the older boy was now in league with Elias' younger brother, the whipper snapper who buttered up the old lady into giving him the upper acreage when he, Elias, had been the one who broke, tilled and cultivated it. Such that the nostrums of his late devout wife now sorely chaffed: *He who has little, shall have less; and even that shall be taken from him.* Mutely he now looked into his knurled arthritic fingers, twisted in pressing, turning the plow in that quarter section, in hacking and reining out the trunks, and laying the foundations of the barn and shed. Two fingers he may have broken and not attended. By himself he had done it all. But because he had not enlisted -- he could not hold nor trigger a rifle properly -- and had not confirmed his boys, for this he was punished. So it seemed. Young Tim he still might have relied on, but Tim was very frail. His trip to the hospital did little good. And young Sarah he rarely thought of any more. She died from a felon on the thumb. An infection that started innocently enough, after she fell into an ash pit, then spread throughout her little body. So long ago. After Ethel gave birth to Vida, his arthritis became acute and his asthma worse, and he no longer had the strength to do alone what he and Ethel had managed before. So when Ethel died of a stroke, after battling a stubborn peritonitis that followed a still birth, he went back to Saskatchewan, to Burdock, where he knew the Klassen family, friends of his mother's, and got a job delivering coal. He still could not bear to think of how the farm had been. Or Ethel, for that matter, and her dying wish that Vida be enrolled in a convent school. The doctor long before

the arrival of patient doc Townsend told him to lay off. And had cheek to suggest he should wash more. Easy if you never get your hands dirty.

Now he waited for his supper in the stone cottage he first rented from old Andy Aiken who had tended a vegetable garden just outside the door. For a decade the solitary dwelling stood on the bald prairie as a megalith. Recently a few homes and the new school encroached. The land about seemed too rocky for the nob set further West, which included the so recently arrived doc Townsend, though some surveyors worked across the coulee. Andy had moved to Riverdeen to be nearer the Kiwanis park he tended near the Swift Current creek. The old, nearly toothless gent always brought presents for Vida. Elias had been annoyed how she would jabber so to the old ninny and not to him. Burbling sometimes like a drug huckster. Andy had a vicious unsightly goat who whistled and once bit Elias. Andy claimed the goat could sing. The goat was as familiar as surely as a Magpie had a tail. Against his express instructions, Vida went to his hovel in Riverdeen -- and must have heard the spirit music there. The foul singing. Seen the old vitreous crucifix. It was after one of these visits that he had uncovered the old pianoforte with the cracked sound-board in the cellar, a casualty of the trip from Bremerhaven by Andy's great grandmother, née Macht, who had eloped with an Irish teacher, poet and energumen. Elias needed an extra room for Mrs. Carruthers and the thing had to go. Then to wake up in the middle of the night and hear that eerie noise coming from it, a descant to Mrs. Carruther's organ rumble snoring. Like nothing you would expect from a piano. Strange, uncanny tinkling.

Chilling because it was so bizarre, so unnatural. No music, no tune. Like the child's head, cluttered by perverse, idolatrous confusion. Senseless clatter. The kind of notes one must hear in the crannies of hell. The illumination was the giveaway. Someone else lit and placed the finicky lamp.

At last Mrs. Carruthers brought the stew. She was skimping on the sausage again. Yet he was too distraught that night to scold or inquire. Why was he always so close to tears these days? He had endured the rising fire in his joints before. The gripping jarring pain. The thought of his mother, his own dear mother, giving the upper acreage to Lamda. She had always favored him. And was ill when she must have made her will. Or Lamda had done some fiddling. Such was the miasma he could not put from his mind -- that Lamda may have. *I smote him in my anger...but he ran wild and went his wilful way.* Lamda. Hadn't Lamda said that once in the army you learned a thing or two? Elias had never felt so deceived, so cheated, so bitter, so alone. With a boy who could barely heft his school bag, and a daughter who dribbled and played with a tangle of string as she rocked back and forth. Back and forth. A daughter mature before her time and dense as oak. Who would have to be taken from school. No sense in her repeating another grade.

But what would he do with her, with little big Vida? Leave her home to dangle her knot of string? Well at least he wouldn't have to buy the crayons she ate in school. She often put bright things in her mouth, bright things her mother had worn or given her. When it started Ethel was too sick to get the child to stop. He had no idea. Such terrible sounds and hol-

lerings the child must hear. The work of a tireless and merciless spirit. Now she sat looking into her soup. Even the bright colored pasta Mrs. Carruthers had tempted her with before seemed to have run its course. He could feel the tears on his cheeks, tears surely only he must feel, yet all might see. He must look a sight, and make a better effort to get the coal dust from around his eyes.

RECORDS

Andy Aiken, the aging nearly toothless gardener who lived in the tiny cottage at the edge of the Riverdeen section of Burdock, decided the sample introductory records to the Columbia Record Rare Masters Series were best given to Thelma, the school teacher. He gave them a chance, as she had urged, but they didn't improve as she inferred. Like his gaffer honey-wagon father, Andy liked best a traditional slip jig or reel. He spent a great deal on the gramophone. And looked about for bargains in the record department of the Co-op. The introductory collection was free, he now sadly concluded, because so few people must be buying them. He had made application to the Rare Master's series thinking this would be a special treat. But such fare as Debussy's *Estampes* -- *Pagodes*, *Soirée Dans Grenade* and *Jardins Sous La Pluie* -- and Stravinsky's *Les Noces* and Concerto for Woodwinds and Piano, were definitely over-stocked items in Andy's estimation. Some folk might appreciate them, perhaps Thelma might be one of them. Though that too seemed improbable. Years ago he asked her to marry him, but she said no. With a kindness and sensibility he always

knew she had in abundance. Somehow *Les Noces* didn't fit in with his idea of her, but he didn't want to throw the records out. The oddest thing was the keenness, indeed almost mesmerization, chubby little Vida displayed listening to his new gramophone -- to these very works! He assumed it must be the first gramophone she heard. The novelty of it. Her rambling chatter stopped completely; she sat on his one good chair, hands folded, head inclined, quiet and still as a cat. When one record finished she begged him to play another with an urgency that astonished. Andy had no idea then of a savant, and would be dead when Vida's secret talent was showcased for another rare eccentric, the enigmatic European medical genius Felix Muerner. That Vida should retain a surprisingly faithful rendering of *La Soirée Dans Grenade*, not note perfect perhaps, but breathtakingly faithful and apt -- her favorite of Andy's offerings -- after hearing it only twice, was something poor Elias imagined the machination of a terrible and relentless demon that seized the girl's soul by way of the ubiquitous goat, the danger when one got too close to the rigmarole of popish superstition and idolatry, Vida's fate at that first convent school Ethel enrolled her in. Practically out of her arms they took her. All his life as far back as he remembered, perhaps beginning with his great grandfather, the papacy had been deemed the curse of civilization, with all its spiritual hoodoo, its poisonous incense and mindless chants, its numbing liturgy from which there seemed no entrance or exit, its full fledged dogma laying waste all independence or else. From the earliest popes on, humanity had been sandbagged, condemned to live in maze-like servitude he would not ask of a pig. A true

man made his own salvation, discounting that one might have a brother like Lamda. His poor dear mother was totally taken in, whom he had been too busy to care for at the last -- how could he, doing all the work? He could not help but see himself reduced to his huddled Vida, speechless, drooling again, faintly rocking...awaiting another scolding and perhaps caning. Though it seemed, on that dark silent night, he was nearly beyond caring. Only his tears might remind him of his folly and weakness. His terrible weakness. His inability to breathe, to feel anything but the fire in his joints. The tears that would not stay away. Even Mrs. Carruthers was beginning to notice. Semple. That he was. Elias. Crybaby. Reduced now to delivering coal for a shyster. Often of such poor quality that only half of it might burn. The rich dark loam of memory, with its rolling hills of Poplar, Birch and Aspen, divided among his enemies. Vida's infernal music!

FIELDMEN

Vassily Sergeevich Albesimov took note of the blue black clouds growing in the North East. It would be his last night on the open prairie. His mission was nearly finished. A sampling of the new winter wheat varieties, and information about their trash covers and companion crops that had been developed at the Experimental Farm just outside Burdock, would be gleaned the following night. This last minute heist was in response to his friend Nechayev -- St. Nevskiy they called him -- who asked him to assess the grain program at the farm. Vassily's original mandate was to find

places in the Cypress Hills for arms' caches in anticipation of the coming war with America, while keeping an eye open for the wily Igor Gouzenko, the GRU cypher clerk who had disappeared. Then Nechayev, working out of the Ottawa Residency, abruptly prioritized his assignment. The coded dead letter message, fluently translated, read: **CAUCON has defected. Proceed to get sample from Experimental Farm at Burdock. Deposition: CPR station Waldeck.** 'Caucon' was code for Gouzenko. Caucon in Greek meant croaker. The door to a toilet stall in the CPR station would be chalked on the jamb. If unmarked he would leave and await further directions. If marked, the delivery instructions would be pasted on the back of the toilet tank. The Residency, Vassily knew, would be in turmoil. Everyone must be suspect. He would be in a limbo himself for a time. He and Nechayev had discussed the farm matter earlier, before Vassily's infiltration. The seeds and cultivation data, so discursive to his original mandate, would help begin a seed culture in the academy near Kharkov without the waste of at least another year or two. Given the chaos in Soviet agriculture under the Lysenkoists, time was as scarce as the appropriate seed cultures. Nechayev had assumed a risk in sending such a message -- a risk for both of them -- and for the cut-out who awaited the package. Vassily could hardly believe things were as bad as Nechayev inferred, yet he would follow through with the order, now that Gouzenko had bailed out. He was determined, even though he might never hear from Nechayev again if a Lysenko loyalist or shill learned of the order.

Vassily worked then part time as a caretaker at the farm. His papers

identified him as George Horlick, a recently demobilized unemployed veteran. This cover job in Burdock astonished the more he reconnoitered the seed development sheds, learned of the late research into the seeds cultivation and the specialized farm machinery needed for it. He was also amazed how similar the land here was to his birthplace around Omsk. The open mother of pearl sky, the flesh sweet fields of wheat in late summer. He had often wondered if his resourceful and fearless case officer would in fact survive the purges now underway. But what else could he do? Could they do? Nechayev had convinced him in their last face to face exchange that the Stalinist agrarians under the tutelage of the wily Lysenko were hopelessly mired in ideology, their science an utter fraud, and someone would have to offer a supply of hardy untainted seeds to begin anew when these charlatans miserably failed yet again and were retributively dismissed. With the existing viable stocks perilously low, and mostly attenuated, Nechayev did not think the purges could last -- one could end up ruining the entire Ukrainian harvest if the maniacs and their flunkies kept on. Already there were clandestine rumors at the farm among some Mennonite workers of shortages, of children with scurvy and distended bellies, though whether from the failed agrarians or some other cause was not yet clear. In any case, his stealing of this unique and, for a time, irreplaceable packet of seeds could mean life or death for hundreds of thousands in the decade to come. So the courageous and daring Nechayev had assured him, even as he spelled out the likely coming operation to 'seed' the country side near the foothill oil pipeline with arms and explosives, in

anticipation of the coming war with America. The Center believed the overlords in the Kremlin thought it imminent, Nechayev claimed.

What served to drive the urgency and poignancy of this new order home was the night before last when he hiked a short distance from the Semple cottage. A light shone through the slit in the coal bin doors. He was about to increase his pace when the sound of a likely old and poorly tuned piano touched his ears. The sounds came and went on the fresh, swelling breeze. Despite the sad state of the instrument, he recognized the music his sister played the last and final time he was allowed to visit with her. His induction into the GRU had necessitated a truncation from his family until he was retired, an unlikely event he belatedly realized now that he had undertaken this wayward heist for an old and trusted friend. He might be a ghost to the end of his life, possessed of a knowledge only death could release. To question the Lysenko purists then was the guarantee of a summary demotion or even a boxcar to nowhere. But now, in this new land, to actually hear such musical sounds, the very piece, played as well as the piano might allow, the touch surprisingly deft, purposeful and emotive. He had to see, his well conditioned cautionary instincts shrill in his ears as an arctic gale. He must not be seen in this area of Burdock -- not now. Not this night. Yet he could not hold back. Be still you hecklers. No one is about. It's nearly dark. Quietly he traversed the distance to the cellar and listened, craning an ear near the closest cellar door. How quaint yet how fitting. How absolutely spellbinding. The piece, one of Debussy, with ravishing syncopation, played as if by the wind itself, leaving

out only the inessentials, if such there were...he could almost hear a groan, his voice clearing itself of disbelief, of the terrible nostalgia that often reduced him to a quavering reminiscer. What a fool he might be, to tarry and be observed, connected, remembered here...he had seen the town's eccentric hermit, Hoddey Swinton, steal food from the housekeeper's satchel, recently a garlic ring and loaf of bread, and Hoddy he knew was very good at 'displacing' criticism...thus to risk so much to hear a rapt playing of his sister's favorite composer...!

At last he peered into the cellar, through the orange slit that would be a clear giveaway were he seen. In the dark interior lit only by a coal oil flame, he glimpsed a young girl, a mere child, a fruit mite, red hair alight, cheeks pink, freckled, mouth open, saliva flagging a lower lip, rocking slightly as she played, by memory, her fingers moving as if by decree! He was dumfounded. He stayed much too long. She played another, less lyrical piece, perhaps even more difficult, something by Stravinsky he thought, dumfounded. Again her hands moved as if by dispensation, by ethereal command. Then as descant her own voice, singing as a tight echo, a strange sweet voice, pure, ineffable, what one heard or imagined in the finer choirs. He must be losing his marbles. He was going haywire, berserk. Imagining, dreaming like this during the crucial final hours of a major operation. He too could end up in an impromptu grave. Or worse.

He decided he must pull himself away, the risk was too great, someone surely would be listening beside himself. His stealth and secrecy were paramount now, to watch and card the allotments made in the seed shed dur-

ing the final assay and separation. There must be no suspicion of himself. The packet marked DARx4A would be set aside. The cultivation techniques he had long since memorized. He must not, would not fail here. It would be a cold night. Yet he must not return to his housekeeping room. He had given his notice that week, saying he was returning East. He would instead seek out one of the sheds in the Riverdeen area. One by the creek. A better cover to and from the farm. The final assay and packaging was scheduled for tomorrow at ten. He must get into his entry position in the tractor lean-to before sunrise, make certain it had not been discovered, infiltrated, re-fabricated! He might see conclusively only from there. He would be guessing otherwise, and three or four packets instead of the veridical one would make for prolonged and unmitigated extra toil. He must rid his consciousness of all detritus...including the wondrous, rare, forlorn child and her mesmerizing gift.

He returned via the coulee. Bypassing the old dump at the bottom. Children played there in the afternoons, one child in particular, absorbed, lingering, much as he had long long ago -- in a similar old glacial ditch. Which instead of mud had been filled with grain the collective did not want falling into the hands of the state bailiffs. The sound of a badly rusted fender rattling loose amidst a jagged pile of brick and stucco rubble triggered a sudden foreboding. The wind, he noted, had grown much stronger and the sky had darkened. The rusting engineless car to which the fender once belonged served as a momentary blind. He had seen the

lone child sitting there in the driver's seat, traversing the motley wastes of this long abandoned prairie dump.

On the brow of the coulee a sharp full-bodied wind collided head on. In its howl several strident voices demanded the fullest explanation of his delay. He looked for some familiar landmark to descry the straightest direction to the Riverdeen area. A dark briar of spindly bushes ended in an unrecognized clump of willows. Long bereft of leaves the nearest branches thrummed like swiftly wielded switches, the kind sometimes used in a punishment cell to defer to the injunction not to break bones. A lone campfire-charred poplar loomed on the other side, moaning softly as he approached, arthritic branches bared to the wind. In the open prairie several whirls of what Canadians called Russian Thistle tumbled by, unicycling with aimless fury into the mushrooming night, a shroud of grit and dust cauling the near witness. But an hour before syrupy Indian summer sunshine spilled over fragments of glass glistening jade, ruby, chocolate. A small carcass fur lined the day before now crawled with long orange beetles. The carcass itself heralded the bluffs that disguised the downward slope to the creek. He was certain the other child had noted all of this. The other spy.

The gate to the old cemetery appeared on his right and signaled the shortest descent to the creek. Stark cat tails by the edge slyly beckoned. Here the Pragmatist, as he thought of the boy's dog, a coal black retriever, might have been waiting, surfeited and panting, not it seemed disappointed to see a large stranger -- a resolute human the dog might slip-

stream behind to get to those areas his sleek black form would otherwise be suspect in. Many times Vassily had watched the dark smudge darting about the horizon, emerging then blending into the blackness. He thought he did see something, something not unlike the Pragmatist, running for cover down the further brow of the coulee. Instead it was the boy, running, skirting like a coyote. He too must have overstayed a rendezvous, a curfew; played truant from his supper, his homework. So alike had he been. So visually consequent in his habit of action, and perhaps thought. Another Canadian he must be on his guard to eschew, circumvent...nearly a mirror image he fondly thought. The overlooked observer. Briefly the boy glanced his way, a sighting that seemed to increase both their urgency.

On seeing the unexpected figure, David Townsend increased his pace, bypassing the dump and adjacent gravel pit. The evenings of fall seemed spitefully short. At first he thought the shadowy figure old man Semple. The Semple's stone cottage lay just back of the cemetery. But why would he be hurrying the other way? It reminded him of another stranger, not so long ago, the one who brought their dog Ali Baba home in the back of a pickup. The coal black retriever lay as an oddly haggard form, bizarrely awry, unbelievably still. It was the frozen stillness, an inaptness that puzzled and cautioned. Like a stuffed replica of an animal knocked on its side. 'Dead dog' he could not then assimilate. His mother's face he did not fully comprehend, though at the time, as now, he sensed a sheepishness for not yielding to tears as she had. He imagined shouting the re-

triever's name and even hear the responsive bark which, to the uninitiated, could evoke impiety. Ali too loved the coulee, this gash in an otherwise imperturbable landscape, left by a feral might. He would have given the stranger a fright. Heavens, he would have taken after him like a coyote flushing a rabbit. Or maybe not. He could be selective sometimes -- sensing whom he might follow into the Riverdeen section, with its numerous small chicken coops.

The streetlight glitter of some new houses facing the cemetery began to jiggle indistinctly against the horizon. The buildings were remarkably alike, rivaling the cleverness with which bees duplicated cells. Soon the coulee would be filled to accommodate more, and the imagined metropolis he knew so well, embedded in the soft mire at the bottom, sentenced to memory. He looked behind but the man had disappeared. Perhaps he had to go to the bathroom suddenly. People sometimes relieved themselves in the ditch at the bottom of the coulee. Several prairie chicken flapped awkwardly out of his path, haggling, squawking, bickering. His own block came into view with the Stanley-Crossfield mansion, a perimeter fortress that filled the chasm between the smaller jack-o'-lantern squares winking at him from the other end -- his end. Patches of the first snow still lay on the Crossfield lawn, illuminating jets of light from the windows. He tried to picture amidst the wisp-like Crossfield girls their huge, slobbering, golden Lab, those scrawny tidy inklings who wore their halos in church and who, most painful of all, were instructed to shun scrummy chaps like him. Particularly rankling were the memories of the

two occasions when the Crossfield matron herself, a tall thick-ankled Nordic fury, came to life with a broom she wielded with wanton skill, after catching Ali and himself, a budding pyromaniac, beneath the veranda in the dirt and cob-webbed filth of a quarter century -- with the youngest of her daughters. Ali's instant knowledge of a small opening at the opposite end of the veranda prevented a scene. But the second time this exit was feverishly sought out it proved to be boarded up, and what followed as a result will not bear repeating. He sent a stone ricocheting off the curb. Even Ali's remarkably indiscriminate ancestry furnished insufficient brawl experience to decompose Mrs. Crossfield and her large Golden lab, who came late to the fracas. Ali suffered the most, a drubbing from a rival he never really recovered from, but was considered the least: for one rare minute of his life he had endured, most disagreeably, the fabled life of a dog. Later his jet black form hid beneath the stilted warming cabinet by their stove, a refuge in acute periods of distress, where he would not be stepped upon or stumbled over. The self-same kitchen David noted was now in darkness. On this, the first time he had returned home late and alone.

As he approached the remaining orange squares he rehearsed the scolding he might get, perhaps a repeat of the one Guy Fysh got earlier that afternoon which was still acute in his memory. The recollection harkened to the school arithmetic period when it was discovered that chubby, red-haired, red faced, blue eyed Vida Semple had, again, smudged her notebook and eaten some of her crayons. Orange and violet marks strafed her lips, for those willing to stare, something the teacher discouraged. But

Guy Fysh had looked, needing that day a distraction from his own aura of urine and Macintosh toffee. Miss Capel was noticeably upset, and the class more than willing to share her disappointment. “Vida, Vida!” The girl was then in tears, for perhaps the third or fourth time that day, the first when Miss Capel, the dedicated Miss Capel, stalking the aisles with due diligence, tried once more to get the red hen to write right handed, her southpaw lettering sufficiently louche to prompt yet a further try. Only lanky Arnold Johanssen might inspire a remotely similar concern, coming to school as he often did with manure on his boots. Arnold had chores before school and was not impressed by a lot of fancy cream puffs. If memory served, he simply clammed up, looking somewhat less pleased with himself when Vida upstaged his stoic aura that afternoon.

Small David Townsend, who had been embarrassed moments before for not recognizing his name when written, rather than printed, was relieved that no one had noticed. Vida was his cover that afternoon. Guy Fysh then looked across at her with feral disgust. How could one be so dumb? Eating crayons. Chewing her erasers and exercise books. Eyuck! She had become the before-and-after-school target that year, her fat legs and thick torso designed to be poked and prodded. *Fatty fatty four by eight, couldn't get through the garden gate.* Guy was up there with the vanguard, showing the world he knew a laughingstock when he saw one, that he was ready as any to let the cry baby have it. The harder she bawled, the greater his resolve it seemed. “How did I make her bawl. How is she dumb.” These words an edgy furtive David had overheard on the way home from school

that day -- Vida was then a block away, hobbling, crying. The words Guy had blurted to a lean gentleman who emerged suddenly, mysteriously from an alley that adjoined the walk home from school, a stranger David didn't know, a tall stern man whose demeanor he could not then comprehend, especially when he grabbed Guy by the arm with a ferocity that must leave a bruise. Drawing his face inches near to Guy's, a deeply lined face, he demanded in a hoarse accented voice that Guy never never never do that again -- tease Vida so. Guy had looked at the man as if he were a kook. "Why me?" he exclaimed. "She eats crayons, bawls all the time, mucks up her scribbler -- and -- and writes left handed! She can't even tie shoes properly!" The man, David vividly remembered, glanced about the street before forcefully slapping Guy, sending him too off home bawling. Immediately the man seemed undecided about his action, so David thought, particularly when he spied David peeking around a telephone pole. As usual, David stood clear of such encounters. He wasn't strong nor big, and many things he timorously strove to avoid. Did the man offer up a sorry look? David wasn't sure as he hurried off. He just wanted to get away. He had seen Vida hurt before. Now he felt a queasiness for looking on, watching, thankful it wasn't him being teased.

He would trundle home thinking the world an unhappy place, that it maybe was a jungle, whatever that meant, as his father sometimes hinted to his mother when the evening hours waned. Though, for the first time in his life, he couldn't quite put the face away. It was a face you might see looking at you as you squirmed in church. Or played when and where

you shouldn't. And that was more upsetting than he thought fair. He looked about the yard. Perhaps somewhere in that forest of lilac, honeysuckle, caragana, poplar, ash, crab apple, gooseberry, sand cherry, spruce and fir -- their home had been landscaped by a horticulturist from the Experimental Farm -- perhaps near the empty pear-shaped fish pond, there could be found a bristling spine-arched cat, deathly still, and a few feet away the black sphinx of the retriever, also motionless, savoring the delicate feline smells that would soon molest him to a pitch where seething energy must force the blood pressure of the cat soaring until it could flit up the trunk of a tallish tree and temporarily force a stalemate. But no such scene presented itself on this fall evening. Even the otherwise satisfying sight of bushes no longer sprouting the prolific suckers which, along with the grass, yellow now after the first snow had all but melted, had to be cut far too often -- even this visual respite was not indulged. He merely noted that the back gate was latched, an impossible condition for it to be in were Ali about.

CAT'S EYES

When Vida saw that the piano was indeed gone -- she had looked three times that afternoon and evening, coming up each time to the kitchen then returning -- she picked up her tangle of string and began to rock on the old sofa. *Those that have little, shall have less, and even that shall be taken away from them.* Mrs. Carruthers sat at the kitchen table by the new Mantle lamp mending a pair of Elias' coveralls and mumbled something about not being too active -- being active might 'worry' the sofa. Tim sat by the hot-air

grate near the table playing with an old watch, picking at it, shaking it, thinking he might get it to work. He'd found it that afternoon in a trash can. Once more he took the glass off and separated the layers. He had seen nothing like it. It seemed the layers just might go back together in a variety of ingenious ways.

Elias was outside with a lantern tightening the hinges and latches on the cellar and coal shuttle doors. In the stronger fall winds the doors were beginning to rattle once again. When Mrs. Carruthers took out some co-coa to him, Vida wondered into the back yard, noting it was maybe too dark to get to the swings in the school yard, to relieve the sofa. Elias had finished the repairs and was flashing his torch on a pair of marbles that glowed against the dark. Vida had seen nothing like it. Beautiful light green and yellow marbles that burned like coals in the light and, more surprising, moved with the torch. In going forward and trying to catch them she felt the electric whisk of the Simpson cat pass between her legs. The Simpsons were their closest neighbors. The eyes had disappeared, but emerged again on the other side of the porch. She giggled. And again the marbles extinguished themselves as the cat slipped by her, too elusive to catch in the near dark. For a few seconds Elias managed to corner the cat, taking note Vida's gleeful amusement. Then the cat disappeared. Despite the movement of the light, the marbles had vanished. Somehow you needed a cat to fetch the marbles with the torch. This she would remember.

Inside the house, Vida squinted at the torch. She hadn't perceived its

powers before. She would, must take it with her to the schoolyard swings that night. There would be many eyes by the swings -- the feel good eyes, of this she felt certain. Several cats lived near the school. She wouldn't try to corner them there. Make them move and glide. Moreover, the toing-and-froing on the swing in the light breeze did wonders to spell the sofa, to float as the brilliant eyes had, back and forth, back and forth. She knew and treasured that feeling. You swerved into a deep star flecked sky and felt the rush on your legs like a water break, the thrill in your stomach like a pitched fall that always reliably reversed. You might one day fly away if you willed it hard enough. Even land on the soft, smiling moon. Of late it had seemed just possible, so high had she gone. Up and back, up and back, so near up and not back, rising as a kite, the bright marbles very like the stars swaying above. That was it! They were stars come down to visit. The caressing swirl in the back of the head like no other caress, better even than the hands of the nurse who salved her impetigo, the sheer sweetness of it all, like a honey ball, only better. The honey stayed. The stars too might stay and glisten and calm. The stars that stayed.

When Elias began to converse with Mrs. Carruthers about the mysterious disappearances in the kitchen, thinking perhaps Vida or Tim were feeding somebody's pet -- both had done this before -- Vida suspected there would be another commotion, which they sometimes forgot if one disappeared, and she snatched the torch just before slipping out the back door, closing it gently as she could. Immediately she went to the swings. As she couldn't hold the torch and swing at the same time, she decided to

swing first before it got too windy. Then she would cast about for the shiny bright marbles. The visiting stars. The quiet stars that could sway and swing. She saw them as never before that night when she left the idled swing. At least two sets. It seemed they extended to the thick bushes that edged the schoolyard. Even into the open prairie itself. Where the wind might betimes caress. She could hear Mrs. Caruthers calling her name. She couldn't be too long this night then.

It was the passing sight of the child in his car lights, the very one who played the piano, sitting on a school swing that so alerted Vassily the night he delivered the seed packets. As expected, the Townsend car in the hospital parking lot was unlocked, as it invariably was, and nearly full of gas. He had no trouble starting it. It would easily get him to Waldeck. He must not be observed in any public transport this last crucial night.

He was almost by the girl when he noted the torch light below the swing and heard the few snatches of her faint singing above the light breeze. He turned off his car lights and lingered by the school's perimeter scrub, the untended blackberry and caragana, to remark the timbre of the voice then aloft on the swing, the astonishing lucidity of its descant timbre, rising up and back, up further and back. If the indistinct words seemed the affirmation of a special language, the melody was unmistakable. The English ballade, *Flow Gently Sweet Afton*, the chubby legs flexing to the sweep and glide, animated in their gyro positioning as a veteran dancer's.

If he was again alerted to the child's presence and whereabouts on this

dank cloud gathering evening, he was at last in possession of his precious seeds and no one was going to tarry or belabor him now. He had done it. The rest was simply the routine, however exacting, of exfiltration. After relinquishing his take to his cutout, he would catch a bus to the coast and board a freighter to Sapporo thence to Vladivostok. He was, at long long last, going home. If that home was not as it was, it remained the familiar he had been so close to in this wide, untrammeled place. Where two children had parlayed his memory into its old raw discourse. Of uncertainty and belief. Of knowing much yet not enough.

It was shortly after he left the school that he again spotted the child, this time in his rear-view mirror, a distant waif ambling by the roadside, her torch scanning the night, heading away from the discernible and familiar street lights into a teething wilderness. His sudden dismay beggared the senses -- taken aback by recollections, cares he had not felt for decades. He, a top drawer field operative, however displaced, taken in by a child, a batty truant waiving her familiar vistas, the light of the weak torch playing before her as a faint ignis fatuus in an area close to the Cypress Hills tree line where a cougar may have recently killed a couple of calves, and where coyotes prowled with canny grace. Out into the prairie, well beyond the school fence, near a sinuous highway, hoary bright at this hour by a waining gibbous moon. Where the devil were her parents, her guardians? He watched her in the rear-view mirror, the light becoming the merest spindle narrowing to a sable blackness. The assignment of his career, his life, awaited on by a courageous confirming agent so heroically near, the pre-

cious minutes slipping by as the head-lighted weeds edged the road, the moment that would never be as pure, ineffable...that in such an elation he might be baited by a witless perhaps insane youngster passing as a wraith, a finger fixed to her mouth. A slight limp. Which he hadn't noticed before. He felt suddenly resentful seeing the coalescing blackness behind. He couldn't speak for the orphans of the world. He was surely one himself, his responsibility the onerous one. In the Soviet Union she would have thousands of sibling cyphers. Few as lucky. If she or her parents couldn't manage any better in this Shangri-La, the more fools them, as the superb English thespian would say. He often felt Canadians didn't deserve their good fortune. This merely confirmed it. To hell with her and her rakish and now flickering light. He was going home.

He drove for a mile or two, the breeze seeding his imagination with whiffs of a fulsome copse, of mushroom medallions on a breast of wild turkey from a forest near the Moscow Hills, the wind fluting his hair, the late Townsend car, a whisper of motion, his kit lolling on the back seat like a drunk, the silver grey of the bonnet speculating with the periodic moonlight. Then some eyes peered at him from the dark, the headlamps limning the shape of a dog or coyote. Yet he drove on, the image in his mind resisted until a pair nearly defied his car, this pair larger, molten for an instant, the motionless of the creature belying its shape. He hadn't seen a cougar but assumed the recent sightings not imagined given the missing calves. Then a weft of fur, running, spurting across. His foot almost independent of his will jammed on the brakes. What was he doing? This was

absurd. Only an idiot. Despite his growing consternation the car turned around, briskly changed gears, retraced its coming. The world repeats as tragedy then as farce...he would never see in this dark, the infrequent eyes that impinged his headlights confirming his disgust. Eyes alone seeding the impregnable dark. If attacked she would be dead by now...five, ten minutes back. He swore for not noting the odometer reading earlier and glanced at his watch swearing, for once in Russian. The language that sounded to him now slightly off, slightly below par. A couple of times the car faltered but kept on its retreat, it's humanitarian travesty. He had been too long in the West. His sister played some other piece. He only imagined. They never really got on.

But soon he was scanning the moon touched landscape as only a veteran of his skill, self-reliance and honed instinct can. He stopped the car, listened. Stopped again. Then drove on swiftly, his inner ear deciphering, decoding as he went. Another fluid form briefly margined the headlight beam. He swerved trying to hit it, baring, hissing his anger. On the brow of a hill he stopped again, the sounds coming from the slope below unmistakable, the snarl of at least two competitors.

He drove to the verge, fetched from his kit the knife, revolver and gas torch, one of his own devising, and hurried to the bottom. The torch, extended to its maximum, a hiss comparable to the bared fangs he glimpsed, proved enough to scatter the creatures, the last, what he deemed a large cat, leaving off dragging its prey. But the relief was short lived. The blood and slithered, quivering limbs he felt in the bright margin of light

were patents of a rank battlefield. He had seen worse but not by much. One shin revealed a skein of bone. The neck had been mauled but no major artery that he could detect severed. A bloody pulpy arm was raised about the face, the hand jammed into the mouth. He barely detected a pulse. For several excruciating seconds he ransacked his chances, even as he fetched the rawhide strips he kept for more belligerent encounters, now to stanch the obvious wounds. When he believed he had found and stopped the major bleeding, he felt again for a pulse and was relieved if chastened to find it somewhat stronger. Not much but enough to scoop up the soaked form in his arms and begin to anticipate how long before such injury would plunge the body into fatal shock, if such reflexes were not already working in concert to release all crucial systems. He paused once to open his GRU emergency kit and plunge a tetanus shot into the one nearly whole arm. He knew Townsend left his grip in the car but decided that making use of it would delay the plan he had assembled in his mind.

The ride back to the city was perhaps the longest distance he would traverse in his life, baring a future train ride into the GULAG or lorry to an execution ground, images of which passed as the shades of night before his eyes. Yet he kept on until he noted the heat gauge rising to a dangerous level. With the radiator slightly hissing he pulled into the alley behind a large dark house caddy corner to the hospital which, he decided, would be much too well lit, its wide entrance too expansive to avoid being witnessed, identified...again he felt for a pulse, now barely detectable, scooped up the sticky mass, and -- newly ardently grimacing -- rushed across the

street to the emergency entrance which at that hour proved to be deserted. A single reception desk was situated some distance from the front door, the night nurse diligently knitting and talking to another person out of sight in an adjacent room. A hospital gurney was positioned near the door. So far so good. A coat and fedora hung from a wall hook. The fedora he fetched and pulled down about his eyes after placing his charge on the gurney. By then the night nurse looked up and devoutly swore -- just as Vassily fled, keeping close to the building's brick facade. In no time he was across the street behind a box hedge that skirted the dark house. Loud fraught exclamations inside the hospital entrance were encouraging. Satisfied the child's fate was now out of his hands, beyond what he might live to tell, he stole to the car and drove away praying the delay would not prove fatal, both for the girl and himself.

CHARTS

Dr. Lucius Milton Townsend, 'Luke' to his Burdock colleagues, sat at the dining room table doing his 'charts'. The sight of his father completing these medical affidavits -- which ascribed treatments only doctors in the Saskatchewan Health Region No. 1 might complete, the detail being too specific for an office staff -- was the picture David would take to his grave: the placid, smoking, sleeve-banded, pen-poised, belt-and-brace -- pessimist? -- pater who looked remotely like the Aga Kahn, the venerated lodger they sometimes waited up for, who often sat, as now, gazing into the middle distance on a night his better half was attending a meeting of the

Orpheus Club, or was it the Rebecca Lodge, a routine that necessitated her early evening departure. A place setting for one had been left at the far end of the table, a cold repast of poached egg on toast, limp string beans and mushy syrupy pears. His mother was noted in the kitchen for dispatch and a sweet tooth, a sometimes deadly combination. Her love of sweets, which he likely inherited, and the late wartime rationing that sometimes over compensated with sugar, he would one day correlate with a mouth full of amalgam.

His father took another puff, slowly inhaled, imperceptibly exhaled, then returned to his 'charts', glancing impassively at his son. He had not counted the stitches he and Dr. Cunningham used to close the innumerable slashes, nearly a hundred in the partly scalped head alone. Perhaps two hundred in the head and shoulder. He had to posit a figure. He had to improvise for the one dangling ear they had sewn back on. Nearly as frantic as the search for a vein in the one still-fleshed leg, to tie in the gold needle and get Mrs. Satherthwaite, the night nurse, calmed and comfortable enough to find and distend an arm. Miraculously, Vida shared the matron's blood. She had attended Vida before when the child went through a bout of anemia. They had decided on 20ccs for each pound of the child. Then upped it to 30. What a bewildering mess. Amazing she was alive. He was told the child was subnormal. He glanced at his son. *What child is this...?* He couldn't remember the remainder of the carol -- on a record from his son's piano teacher which seemed unduly poignant that night. Dr. Cunningham thought one attack animal a cougar, the pierc-

ing teeth marks in the neck and shoulder, seemed to bear this out. Coyotes left rougher jagged lines apparently, the one leg suggestive of such serrated lesions. Curiously, his own car was found in a ditch near Waldeck, the motor burned out, the hood covered with mud. Blood stains dotted the back seats. If the facts worried and confused they also intrigued. A puzzle within a puzzle. David had not seen his father quite like this and imagined him reminiscing, thinking of some other time and place, the near grimace on the face a puzzle. He rarely scolded, and then curtly, succinctly. If his brief pique over a wet toilet seat was exceptional, his authority loomed pervasive as the smoke, which nearly submerged the room in a valley mist. Only when David finally left home did he discover the unappetizing scent of smoke-dinged clothes and the chroniclers of poisonous second-hand air. The picture of his stalwart pater then became a kind of icon, sitting as he did at the heavy round-legged dining room table -- into the most accommodating angle of its strut base their mutt so often fit his back after slowly descending like a flagging top. That three-sided angle this night was bare and open; David might easily sit down opposite with room to swing his feet.

He took his time. And ate everything. Silence might be treasured when discreetly shared. He liked his father like this. The man with the world waiting. Lucius barely, nodded. He had not spoken of the attack. "Think you'll ever see over the hill?..." he asked while butting a fourth Winchester in the ancient crystal ashtray -- the question that seemed their one reliable exchange -- the 'vocational climb' -- the other being a finger

flicked behind one of his son's oversize ears when he lolled in the rocking chair. David was liable for a lecture that night. Instead his father looked on with stoic equanimity, the abstracted face David knew all too well, the shapely head inclined, the haircut severe, the eyes softened, bemused, the look of one who still had two or three house calls to make, yet managed to find in this supplementary clerical exaction a moment of ease and clarity, a rare time out, the 'charts' before him the merest tether to reality. "Better not be too late." Meaning David should complete his homework and get to bed. His mother would return, her displeasure like the snow that night, fine but replete, silent, pervasive. How watchful and absorbed he had been, in this modest comfortable salon, the one valuable fixture an old Heintzman he was bribed, cajoled, wheedled, suborned, intimidated to practice, his heedful mother hoping, praying for something reasoned and defined, like the scene before him, its vividness fading, the time allowance dwindling. The man who would be dead within the decade, after a year's sick leave. Who began in a snooty clinic in the East where they wore stud-ded collars and bowler hats, and guarded their turf like a liege lord; where his wife conceived a potential Galahad (who might have enjoined the Siege Perilous but for a gruesome accident). Thence to a prairie tundra and second babe, a spindly thing resembling nothing so much as a skinny old man at birth -- scowling a lot in the earliest photos, holding a dandelion flower in one hand as a ghetto waif, in another a curmudgeon in a carriage, glowering as if aggrieved by piles. A face that only a willing mother might countenance.

And so he headed up the winding staircase after a tilt with fractional equations and compound sentences, aware that at least he was not by himself that night. For years he went to bed alone, his acute fear of the dark an aberration that seemed immutable. The genesis of which was not a mystery. And one he never learned to eschew. One Sunday evening he had listened to a CBC radio dramatization of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. When it began he ate a dish of ice cream; when it finished he dumbly, 'stupently' stared into a melted puddle of white. The horrific creature's pathetic attempts at language could still be heard in their winding hollow staircase, as the moon dunned leafy shadows on the wall. The number of nights in as many years he came home to an empty house, scared out of his wits, almost too rigid to undress, seemed now legion, all at once hurtling to get beneath the covers. Which might be even worse -- merely delaying the discovery of the ogre! He later told his mother she had two only children. He was seven when his brother, eight years his his senior, was killed. A busy athletic brother who also seemed an intermittent lodger when he attended a distant high school. It was important David retain a sibling, something. This he might take as gospel. Even a monster is company in a vast lone dark.

He never really exhausted his retinue of phantoms and his speechless escape from them -- remaining literally still as a mouse, the covers hiding all but his eyes, for he had long since decided that being surprised would be worse -- before his taciturn brother or pressed mother would return, her words with pater -- when he was there -- a kind of benediction. He

called her 'kid'. Mrs. Eisler's name was often mentioned. Mrs. Eisler had nothing wrong with her apparently but was a practiced doubter. His father he knew was good at listening to and reassuring people. "It may snow tonight." Elspeth's voice always had a huskiness in the evening. Like his laconic brother, she was not a talker. On the many other nights when he was fastly alone he vigilantly awaited the sound of the front door opening and closing, which was followed by the chill of the night wafting up the channeled stairs. He or she was home, in the house, with, near him. He might sleep. Even dream. Dreams that became a recurrent history...

He swept across a smooth near virginal expanse of ice -- no one near him -- and crossed the finish line before the sound of the crowd caught him up. On the same pearly surface he raced with a puck past two of the indisputable jocks in his school, drew the 'mostest' goalie out of his net with the grace and verve of a greyhound and slipped the puck over the crease, returning to his own end before the breathless crowd might comprehend and assimilate his mastery. Later, at his first prom, he stood for his solo in the school orchestra, an ad lib delivery such that he was again repatriated as Benny Townsend. The only confusion was that he behaved in the dreams very much like his late fleet brother who, at seven years his senior, loomed as an invincible Immortal.

Soon his nonesuch brother, still in his teens, was working the summers in Rag Johnson's crew hefting high tension power lines for rural electrification, his face sometimes raw with creosote, work that only the most intrepid of high school kids took on, not like the soft Petrie twins who went off to the Banff Springs Hotel to 'lay out the maid service and any newly holidaying divorcee' -- a commentary he wasn't then quite sure of but had little doubt about its authenticity. As a hurler in Rag's baseball team he pitched one than one no hitter, the outfield complaining they were getting cramps. He was indeed rid-

ing high...as he was that day in the cab of a tanker truck, full of creosote for the raw pines, on a cool rain drenched August morning. He drove a member of the crew who'd badly sprained an ankle to the nearest hospital. In a narrow stretch they had to pass a semi-trailer whose wheels began to skid on a corner, then yaw on a mud slurry. Soon the rig was fishtailing. He tried to hug the shoulder, twisting as only a naturally astute driver might maneuver, slowing with great care while fanning the brakes. Not enough though -- he had to jam the brakes. He perhaps delayed too long getting out in hopes of avoiding a head-on collision. The creosote cylinder broke its rusted moorings and slammed into the cab, the steering post skewering a muscular torso. His injured charge survived.

David awoke that night with a start, rubbing his eyes and gasping for breath. He had witnessed the aftermath of the collision. Seen the wreck, the blood stained dash. It was a dream dreamed before, though not with as much preamble as tonight's. As he often did when there seemed a lack of options, he went to the rocker and rocked. Squat squat, squat squat. The linoleum was thin and rilled from wear. The outside dark seemed unending. Soon his mother was beside him, urging a cup of Ovaltine. He thought of the time Billy Sinclair had taken his revenge for the bike David had 'lent' him. David's brother had gone to reclaim it when it wasn't returned. David had been trying to appease the bully. For an entire winter on most school day afternoons, Billy left David stuck head first in a snow drift. For at least a month David had stolen home from school without once noticing Vida. With guilt and desperation he went to his mother. She listened gravely in silence then succinctly rendered the facts. "David, you were wrong to give Billy the bike. But I can't go to the principal, can

I?” It was one of the few times he sensed her acumen. Going to the principal would certify him ever after a welcher, snitch and coward. His already lowly standing would be written in stone. He would have to deal with Billy Sinclair on his own. A conclusion he had anticipated. It was a different age. “Do your best, for a time. We’ll talk again.”

Later, pater would write in his diary.

Called at 3 A.M. to go up to Mortlach to see Mrs. Nodge. E. went with me. Gave Mrs. N. another hypo. Asked her again to come to the hospital. Briefly did the rounds. The Semple child slightly better. Not yet fully awake. Was a bit of a daydreamer apparently -- ha! Mrs. Friesen thought she briefly opened an eye. Got back about 6. Road’s slippery. Nearly got stuck. Before bed, worked a bit on ‘charts’. David’s having a tiff with a neighborhood kid. I’ll give him a few of days, then speak to the father, whose badly crushed hand a week back will need a new dressing.

On a supplementary diary page facing a historic précis of Hippocrates and an ad for Agarol, he wrote the following. At first, David imagined it an allusion to a generic vaudeville joke.

A criminal snitch met his Nemesis. Three options he might choose from: a ditch, a car mangler or Saskatchewan...

His mother in the pictures of this period seemed undaunted, her finely contoured Scarlet O’Hara face -- which once, in her schoolmarm days, trod the boards as the lead in such romances as *My Wild Irish Rose* -- smiled with a poise that slowly turned over the years to the visage of a plaintiff up for parole, the look of one resolved to make the grade, to look presentable, able and affable, to serve as a fitting member of the Hospital

and Church Auxiliary, the Monday Club, the Book Club, the Bridge Club, the Curling Club, the Orpheus Club, the Fortnightly Club, the special Rebecca Lodge, the IODE and the Home and School Association -- leaving her few idle evenings. An achievement he would stand in awe of in his own jaded and articed middle age. A community virtuoso, the respect she garnered more precious than rubies; so his self-pity sometimes affirmed. Who would marry an up-and-coming physician, a certified specialist who did the inconceivable early in a professional career -- leave a handsome, prestigious practice in the East to go West to become the medic in a hamlet that served a coal mine, then become a tyro in a new exiguous prepaid medical scheme, like no other in North America at the time, all services paid by the government corporation including dentistry up to the age of eighteen. At the outset, in the late forties, the doctors were paid sixty percent of the regular schedule of fees; by 1957 it was nearly eighty percent, and the board had begun to impose what was called, without apparent demur, 'deterrent fees' for office visits. (The notion of 'spin' would take another few decades to evolve.) For a time the system had been a quiescent success. The inauguration of a historic covenant Canadians, under Lester B. Pearson's Liberal nationwide health plan, would soon invoke as a right and entitlement. Initially the concerns had a more domestic focus, the well being of the farmers and their community that sustained consensus after a devastating war. The age of the devout selfless toiler and career volunteer. Confident, assured, resolute, stoic. Most days.

HEAD CHEESE

“Your head cheese is just delicious Elspeth.” Mrs. Stirrit complimented Mrs. Townsend shortly after lunch had been served at the Monday Club sitting.

“Mrs. Stirrit, it’s not head cheese at all, it’s jellied chicken,” announced Mrs. Stanley-Crossfield.

Mrs. Stirrit was not at first deterred and cheerfully replied, “Oh I know head cheese when I see it, Mrs. Crossfield. Isn’t it so, Elspeth?”

Unwittingly, Mrs. Stirrit had, as she sometimes did, fingered a delicate nerve. Mrs. Crossfield served as a kind of duenna to the ladies assembled that bright October afternoon, to stitch as an adjunct to their Monday Club program, another quilt for the Red Cross, a large coverlet that all but hid the Townsend’s extended dining room table. Mrs. Crossfield would not serve a confection like head cheese, and neither would Elspeth for that matter. In general, delicatessen fare was for exigent, displaced and intransigent Europeans. Garlic sausage Elspeth might serve at a fund raising picnic or in a pinch -- which was surprisingly often. But having grown up on a farm and lived, while at normal school in a seedy boarding house, she felt herself conversant with the effects of worms, weevils, grubs, bed bugs, lice, mold, rust and infectious bacteria. And so tended to believe, like Mrs. Crossfield and her constituency, that the concoctions sold in Sachs Delicatessen were sly, counterfeit, motley, greasy and smelly as well as foreign and hence alien. If she was wise enough not to bring up the matter of kosher and non-kosher meats, and what the Sachs’s might sell to the great un-

washed, she was genteel enough to know that she ought to serve, in her own home at least, only that which could be identified as lean meat, fowl or fish.

“No, I’m afraid it’s only -- ” The ‘only’ was for the benefit of Mrs. Goldman.

“ -- Oh now do call me Violet,” Mrs. Stirrit warmly enjoined, tapping Elspeth lightly on the knee.

“ -- It’s only jellied chicken, from a fryer that was in Saturday’s church sale.” Mrs. Stanley-Crossfield faintly inclined her head. Elspeth was a sensible woman if sometimes unnecessarily patronizing.

“Do you serve head cheese often, Mrs. Stirrit?” Mrs. Crossfield queried, peering at Mrs. Stirrit with faint commiseration. The question provoked several glances in her direction, and she became suddenly flummoxed over the realization that the confusion of the two dishes might be unseemly here. This was, after all, the Monday Club, not a Ukrainian picnic. She suddenly had the premonition that of the women seated here, few would presume to serve head cheese to a guest, nor break bread with one who did. Surely she was not one of these? And yet her instinctive largess told her that something here was amiss, that Mrs. Stanley-Crossfield could be a bully, and was not all that well liked. Mrs. Stirrit may not have fully realized the impropriety of sometimes rolling nylons down to the ankle, but some things the wife of the only Presbyterian clergyman should not slight at the Monday Club. Abetting the sale of questionable meats was apparently one.

“Oh not often,” Mrs. Stirrit said finally.

“Who can afford it?” said Mrs. Engler, a sturdy matron from the Riverdeen section of town, the area David liked most, with its smooth summer paths along the lazy creek laced with confessional cat tails, where one might study and observe the amorous couples who gathered there and on the swing bridge above. Mrs. Engler’s son was a stocky minion who boxed at Don Dennis’s gym at the back of the Piccadilly Cafe. Built like a miniature Heracles, Max kept the school’s playground impersonal. David was one of his secret if daunted admirers. Max had taken on and soundly thrashed the monstrous Billy Sinclair.

Following Mrs. Engler’s apt summation, lunch was resumed. The ladies agreed that the leftovers of the lunch they each contributed to would go to Mrs. Carruthers, who was helping the Semples after Ethel died. Agnes Thierman, the United Church deaconess, kept a benevolent eye on the family.

“Is little Vida still poorly, Agnes?” enquired Mrs. Rushworth, who was one to focus on human plight, her own husband a recovering alcoholic.

“The matron, Mrs. Friesen, told me she’s opened her eyes, eaten some soup, but not spoken. Though I understand, from Mr. Lewis, the principal at Central School, that she was particularly shy around strangers. I’m told she has had some bad nightmares, though. Has Lucius said anything, Elspeth?”

“No, not much. Her high white blood count has come down a bit. A fairly good sign. I think he’s amazed she survived at all.”

Mrs. Autry, the new wife of the municipal engineer was confused how such a thing could happen. “But surely she must have been taken...well by someone. Out such a distance. Talk about nightmares.”

Said Mrs. Engler, “Mrs. Carruthers said she’d wandered off before.”

“But that far out? And then to be dropped off -- as she was.” Mrs. Little, the new wife of a new doctor in Burdock, was also fraught with wonder.

The others, mindful of the ominous words, appeared to concentrate on their stitching. Elspeth knew, from Lucius’ brief summation of the police report, that an animal or animals may have dragged the child further out into the prairie, but decided such detail was sensational here. As for her ‘retrieval’, that puzzling act defied seemingly explanation.

Said Mrs. Rushworth, “You would think the rescuer would come forward. Well a someone who knows something.”

“She was such a pretty baby,” said Mrs. Stirrit, her words barely out of her mouth before she sensed the pathos, the memory of Vida and her apparent simplemindedness all too vivid in the minds of the stitchers.

Stated Mrs. Crossfield, to get beyond the unspeakable nub, “Mrs. Carruthers has her hands full with Elias.” She eyed Mrs. Stirrit when she spoke.

A further pause ensued, while the others nodded with conditional assent, thinking of the often surly, smelly and unkempt Elias, and how Mrs. Crossfield was the seer they willingly bore, her good head for figures and clout with the reeve’s office in part compensating for her condescend-

ing manner. Moreover, she had scored her point: Mrs. Stirrit's chatter sometimes delayed her section of the quilt, as was noted again as Mrs. Stirrit once more set aside her portion of its harlequin squares and tapped Elspeth on the knee to exclaim how she remembered, oh how she remembered Ali! the late Townsend dog. "Such a gadabout when you got to know him." The sudden recollection brought tears to her cheeks, her nostalgia a boon to her her eccentric mirth.

The others faintly smiled, recalling how Ali had once been discovered soundly asleep beneath the table upon which an earlier quilt lay, hiding him from sight. A sudden stray sound had upset Mrs. Crossfield, ever alert to slights of her social etiquette, or 'winders', as they were clandestinely called. The greatest amount of acceptable expressions of alarm had ensued, with at least two anxious brows tilting at a neighbor, until a second sound drew the rapt expressions of one and all beneath the quilt to stare with wonder upon the dark hulk asleep and apparently dreaming, as Ali sometimes did, his sighs somewhere between a whimper and a woof.

"'You! Out!' That's what you said Elspeth." Again Mrs. Stirrit was immersed in laughter.

To be caught on the living-room rug, to which the table extended, was alone cause for reprimand, but to suddenly find oneself sprawled out indecently, a moist tongue electrifying a nylon-sheathed ankle, was "downright impecunious", as Mrs. Stirrit said now in her sporadic retelling. Thus was Ali able to move with lightening speed out of the room, through the screen door in the kitchen, and into the alley at the back, before his alien pres-

ence materialized, his ‘impecunious’ scent, the lone clue to his materiality. David’s intermittent washing had, it seemed, merely guaranteed his flight to the creek and its soft redolent ooze. Only when the carpets were cleaned, obliterating his tracery in the house, did he neglect for a time his his usual domestic haunts, wandering about like an itinerant sponger.

“Oh how I remember.” Mrs. Stirrit daubed at her eyes.

“He could be the darndest pussyfoot,” Mrs. Harlo, the urbane wife of a Health Region dentist, explained, relieved perhaps the ominous and possibly unsavory tale of little Vida was shelved for a time. “Remember when he absconded with your fur-lined galoshes, Hatty?”

The smiles were immediately wistful. Elspeth suspected the list was long, including her own itinerary of: a swath of freshly churned butter just after the war, an entire steer’s head, horns and all, several yards of felt, a straw hat, a length of chain that turned out to belong to the dog catcher, and a gopher the agile tracker had actually cornered in the garage and knew not what to do with. She was grateful that no one mentioned the missing chickens the Englers once attributed to the dark poacher, and that Rhea (Mrs. Crossfield) should hold back her own special conversational entry: a beef heart that sat on her pantry counter, nearly thawed, which Ali filched with his usual aplomb after finding the back door unlocked, a heist wondrously glimpsed by the oldest of the Crossfield girls.

“Is it true that his mother was killed by coyotes shortly after his birth?” Mrs. Rushworth had always treasured the earlier story.

Elspeth was grateful for the reminder. “With most of her pups. I try

my best to keep track. Of his capers. Were it not for David we would have had him put down long ago. Actually, Dr. Wolan thought he had cancer.”

“He did have a bark,” said Mrs. Crossfield.

All the ladies nodded.

“Oh that reminds me!...” Mrs. Stirrit blurted, her memory again a merry-go-round. But unluckily she hesitated with a coy “If I may.” The prompt ensuing silence she hadn’t anticipated and was a time recollecting what exactly she wanted to say.

“This is a doggy story is it?” Mrs. Crossfield asked with unusual caution, within her, unknown to the others, a suspicion that Mrs. Stirrit came perilously close to being a mockery of herself, her stories sufficiently vulgar and insinuating to be entertaining.

“Don’t you like doggy stories, Mrs. Crossfield?”

Mrs. Crossfield was far from certain how to interpret the querulous tone of voice.

“No, I’m not not opposed to ‘doggy’ stories. Tales of alleged heroism and loyalty are always heart felt. Though the embellishments sometimes chafe the mindful.”

Such words were of little help to Mrs. Stirrit.

“I remember,” Elspeth began, more to fill the cavity than entertain, “when he followed my mother to church. He always knew she would be a soft touch. As you know my mother loved to bake, and said that David and Ali were her tasters.” Elspeth’s mother, Isidore. was a regular at the

morning service of her new enlightened United Church. Despite her stealth in leaving the house, she was sometimes uproariously discovered by Ali in her congregation after a careful sniffing out of each pew. Finding her at last, he would fall back on his haunches to survey the brethren, his large pink tongue worn like a neckerchief flopping behind -- the prelude to his fugue with the ushers. Sometimes, if Vida was in a pew, he might escape and lay beneath her, the near devotees grateful at least for the sudden silence. By then the ushers would usually break off, not wanting to cause a further disturbance. Especially if Vida's father might be nodding. Vida would pat the dog and touch her lips to keep quiet. Astonishingly, the mutt would lick her ankle once or twice then park his snout on a paw. He was home free and perhaps not a little tired of the searching and fuss. Members of the congregation might nod knowingly to a neighbor yet were largely unaware of the long-standing connivance of the two. Vida often had an extra cracker or two. At the bottom of the coulee, amidst the natural quilt of toys already laid out for play, he might be digging furiously into a gopher hole, his fore paws trundling dirt back through hind legs spread-eagled above, oblivious to the second or third hole nearby and its observant resident. Vida, her basket full of spring Crocuses, was a frequent witness. He would pause to greet her, lick her hand or face, accept a pat and cracker, before continuing with the geyser. An affable and timely work break. Vida would look on, betraying her concern for the gopher. Ali was like her father sometimes, always in a rush. She especially liked the sensitive patch of white just beneath Ali's chin.

“Peeyoo!” would come the greeting at the end of such a day, Elspeth framed by the orange glow of the kitchen doorway. Ali may have rolled lustily in the murky goulash by the creek, mixing in a rotted fish or two to add that extra little something. He kept up a deathbed rattle the while, glancing with strained benevolence and arched silken eyebrows at Elspeth, then at David, then back at Elspeth. She held out some old towels and turned to go in. The open door signaled a halt to the senseless delay and he bolted. Seconds later he would be dragged out, his limbs and expression stiffly incredulous, to fall again on his haunches, wipe the foam about his lips with a deft slurp of his neckerchief, and resume the desperate breathing. When the door finally closed he all but choked and anticipated a few sharp indignities. A brother’s keeper to a studiously unkept brother was David’s later deliberation on the matter. At the time they regarded one another with mild contempt. By then Vida would be eyeing her crocuses from her pillow, wondering how often they would open on the southern window shelf. They too seemed to be disappointed in her. She began to rock. One was safe and neat as Tim’s clock rocking. As indeed Mrs. Stirrit sometimes did to sojourn herself at the Monday Club.

BERLIOZ

It was one of those discoveries that come without warning and demand an accounting. Why hadn’t he taken it all in before? This sudden unheralded break with his past seemed uncanny. Yet the facts were now incontrovertible. His image framed in the landing mirror riled him -- as it never had be-

fore! He seemed suddenly, dramatically, neither a child nor a relative of his parents. The neck had a distinct bend, exaggerated by a jutting adam's apple, the head seemed minuscule, the shoulders bony and narrow, lacking any promise of a 'build'. The face was as galling. Eyes small and crowded together, large ears poised for flight. The latest haircut would needle, in both senses, for a fortnight at least. Yet it was a true novelty how the totality should gang up on him now, on this unremarkable morning. He had survived Monday doldrums before this. But the air this day seemed full of allergens; one remained submerged, pinched, stir crazed; there was apparently no surfacing after this. Again he centered himself in the mirror. How could the recognition be so ominous while so raw and unforeseen? The unmitigated whole, even lesser here than its lovelorn parts, formed a specter chilling as a drift blown house. Welling up in his mind were the treks back in moon pearled snow, shoulders hunched to warm the parka, the stone obelisk in the downtown park looming as a monstrous artillery shell, a memorial to the many footsteps lifeless now, each a hoary hieroglyph on the bronze plaque. The chill always gave an urgency to one's step, the squeak of the packed snow crust signaling progress, even as the air cauterized your nostrils.

And now, in the landing adjacent his room, before the broad mirror, the furnace trundling breaths of mephitic air, the realization vexed like a power break. The long school day would soon begin with a quiz on the particularity of deflected and refracted light -- which now acutely rendered his ungainly form. The phrase angular convolution kept intruding.

A day fixed in amber. Like the stains on his glue-scented desk -- immutable. The one slight respite would be that homeward rush in a chinook gloaming, platinum roadways packed puck smooth, snowballs swift as atoms, words blistery, barmy, white plumed, the silly Vida sent packing, the briefest respite...then home to a noisy ice-caked mutt, silent only as the paws are towed dry. Home where it all began. The brief earlier trek archived with the closing door.

A bolted supper of sardines on toast and syrupy peaches, to stomach the weekly early evening trudge into the spare-lit mid-town brownstone and slow climb up the darkened staircase to an immortal piano teacher and virtuoso, another inclusive juggernaut, an eternity away from release again to the luminous snow, circling the lone silent shell, the crunch and ache, and salty lament of a scapegrace and lout.

“ -- You might as well be slinging hash.” In a greasy spoon -- the topical presumption.

This comment, on his arrival before the loose-paned door, was delivered inside to a singer of talent, whose promise was ethereal compared to his. So, Miss Berg hadn't been practicing either. He knew it would be a rout then for himself, but waded in after stamping his feet and removing dripping galoshes, the laden warmth of Mrs. Lang's rooms tepid with womanly aromas and fading potpourri. The assault on Miss Berg continued, a register higher he imagined. Madame Lang was addressing the careless Olympians. “I have other things to do.” She glowered then at him, barely concealing a grin. Being so near a lambasting before the ac-

tual ordeal left him oddly alert. Just how awful could it get? But soon he would learn that once expended, the immortal's disappointment merely nestled in silence before a sluggard like him, or took up considerations of the other things to do. And yet how he wanted to please this lone stranded daimone whose endowment, both musical and personal, was gospel. Some things you just know. "Mrs. Lang, remarkable woman. We are so fortunate." No one disputed it. Especially the gnomish adjudicators who came to town for the Kiwanis Music Festival. "How musical are her senior students! Always amazing." If she walked with a limp -- he knew little then about acute anterior poliomyelitis -- it was to ease the divinity of her presence. Only the jeweled snow, moon purpled, might dock the later tears, freeze into a swoon of wonder melancholy itself, the loneliness that mesmerized with grandeur, made one sense the depth of space, the exalted vastness of escape.

Thus it was, before that ancient mirror, in the central upstairs landing, the heat grate all but scalding the soles of his feet, that he sensed a new and nettled grasping of the facts. One couldn't go on like this. Something had to be done, something quite remarkable. Something to mask the dismay, ritualize the waiting removal to a secret if illusive absorption and enchantment. In looking up pneumatic he had come across Pneuma which, he believed at the time, said it all. The soul's fiery spirit, the link to the energy of the cosmos, not simply the extended flatulence he might reconsider later on. And had the agent, the catalyst, the veritable genetrix not been patiently musing him for some time?... The silly Vida, his meas-

ure of things female and insipid up to that time, had perhaps prevented him seeing it earlier. If he would much later wonder at the actual dimensions and nature of the being he then conjured, the graceful agreeable form and manner -- 'gracile' would come into his lexicon in due course, as would 'comity' -- the creature, a paragon or eidolon of his own concoction, was fated to reorder, recast his sorry life. Leave him a grateful witness if not a participant. If Vida was destined to be a kind of Nemesis, he was oblivious of the possibility then. Indeed, his new infatuation blinded him to the counterpoint of shared pain. Obsession draws on the imperious hormones.

If gradual, the recognition began to layer its constituents about the time he discovered the back book racks of the mid-town news stands, in that blinkered era when 'beguiling' meant the airbrushed Sunbathing Magazines he and his bravos in the fifth and sixth grades discovered in their reconnoitering of a moldy store run by a Chinese gent who loved tobacco and giving Caucasians uneven hair cuts. Mr. Wong's barber shop and confectionary was as exciting and challenging as any Mayan tomb for a modern archaeologist. What the art photographers were up to in the rest of the three or four books designed for fearless cherubs, credulous pantaloons, fading lotharios, budding fiends and insignificant others, was mind boggling. What in god's name was the woman doing? The pose had no relation to human activity he knew about. But he would not cavil at finding out. He distinctly remembered scratching his head. For already he had discovered a tenant of the durably erotic. The full figure doing noth-

ing in particular -- meaning you might impute a variety of situations -- was the apprehensible object of desire. For the figure to accommodate a multitude of imaginings, prospects couldn't be too site specific. Yet it had to be entire. What he believed the Italians call *interra* -- which meant, with a little consideration, unabbreviated, undiminished, unexpurgated, and certainly uncropped. Better still, what the Calabrians refer to as *sana* -- again, with some thoughtful license -- the idea of healthy, sane, implicit totality. It had been a time of heady anticipation for him. The exactions of the day might be derailed, transformed after all. Even Vida might be neglected in the anticipation. He was still a decade away from the advent of mass market tenderloin and secondary papillae, or the lithographic color that merely heightened the invidiousness, along with the fixed specificity, and the stilted and cropped poses which left you always in doubt about the total ensemble. What delighted about the early wood nymphs was that you could really tell which ones were worth keeping under the mattress. Legs, arms, chests, haunches, hair, latent smiles -- everything was there, as unassuming as the boy's shower. The installation of this, his own Olympian roster, was rarely in doubt, the proof in ageless water-marked black and white, long before stain on monochrome achieved archival celebrity. The part that wasn't there, giving airbrush art an unpromising debut, you really weren't that interested in just then. You vaguely knew women didn't have any, at least to speak of, otherwise you would never be found out in the cold, nose pressed against the store glass after closing time...so would he pause throughout his life to reconsider the pilgrimage -- from embar-

rassment at stripping for a skin-shirts basketball game, to strenuous arguments over whether being prevented watching Deep Throat violated one's inalienable due in the expanding domain of rights and freedoms. Still, his happy sojourn in Mr. Wong's parlor lasted barely a summer or two. By then the other aberrations were taking root. His own oddity, physical and emotional, seemed at times downright 'impecunious', as Mrs. Stirrit might say. The very drollness came as an unsightly birthmark. He was a bit of a freak. Though not yet aware of the patented extremities. He was, no question, an early distempered critic of the age's icons. For instance, he took pains to remind himself how Marilyn Monroe strangely disappointed -- too saccharine, flaccid, fat-knee'd, uninspiring bones, under-defined musculature etc. -- while the latest pelvic moaner-crooner looked slattern if not demented; and when later he read the interminable editorials by Hugh Hefner et al he imagined a Runt Book, the history of modern man, who gave up a wife and lingering double standard for endless female -- inevitably feminist! -- tongue. Fools, dolts, nincompoops! Throughout it all, he faced only occasional doubts about the acuity and transcendence of his vision and his quest. He would have made an inspired SS explicator, reminding an impetuous Führer that the Jews represented at the very least a triumph of German subcontracting; some of the pictures of the dark-eyed beauties he'd saved would have clinched the matter, if he'd been able to take the pressed fanatic aside in a quiet corner. He could in his stride imagine Catherine MacKinnon, the feminist guru, a prodigious Mother Courage telling the sly fiddler Bertold Brecht to get a life or go piss up a

hawser in the flies. But the later beauty hawkers never pulled their punches. When the silicon retreads began appearing he nearly despaired. Making all breasts look alike is just what that numbskull Michelangelo did with his mud pie bosoms, and we've been waiting ever since for a rested Apollo to come back from the Hyperboreans to say his peace. Michelangelo's David continues to stand there alone, looking rather spent and somewhat bemused. Maybe he rather fancied Goliath. God you fear maybe both male and gay. That's when you really begin to feel a little silly. In the end, in your dotage, you return to those little exclamation marks, those impecunious symbols, letters, Cadmus gave the intrepid Greeks, to find your way. And you try again -- one word at a time, to piece together the underlying vision. Of the form, the articulation, the essence that became so telling and captivating. The nothing in excess mantra he would cling to as a flagrant freak.

He was well into his high school slog -- when the concern became intransigent. It led him to assume that he and Berlioz had a similar fate -- to be haunted by a creature, the indescribable 'she' one might never engage nor reconcile himself to. An Ophelia free of Elsinore. If Mendelssohn might captivate with his violin concerto and smiles of a midsummer night, David would need Berlioz at his most haunted to commiserate with over this new predicament. And, like a spendthrift romantic he would, eventually, write it all down, in words extravagant yet necessary. Both the larval agitation and adult melancholy. Instinctively, he knew the exercise pa-

thetic, for he would soon be dead and the likelihood of anyone reading it remote.

By then, of course, he was a latecomer to contrition -- to the discovery that only when you have willingly shared it all, each person's pain from the very beginning, might you sleep or walk away -- all the terror and torment of every man, woman and child. How else might the multitude stop running, ragging, comparing, bellyaching? What other peace could there ultimately be? The accumulated resentment in any recognizable afterlife dense as a black hole. Only man might forgive his fellow...and of man you really cannot ask nor expect. A god merely seeks to dramatize the idiosyncrasies, diseases and natural disasters, let alone the characteristic cupidity and lust that define existence. Once the Bachs and Mozarts were out of the deck the big He or She loses interest. So it would seem.

Such was the spectral editorial that would cross his mind when he leafed through his high school yearbook, minding the pitfalls of old age, realizing that Vida, the Vida of ancient vista, was not in any of the class portraits. Had she even finished grade school? He could not remember. Likely not. What happened after her accident was an unwritten history for him. Which his adolescent preoccupations had bypassed, overlooked. Another sensitive fellow creature vanished into the mist. Or perhaps another Monday Club. Why such things should return to haunt him suggested that one needed more than a quiet snuffle or two while listening to the B Minor Mass....the aegis of discovery, being, like Athena's, lined with snakes or, like her benighted owl, spreading its learned wings only at dusk.

He had never really believed in a God who might forgive us for the fright of living.

And so, when David Abercrombie Townsend regarded himself in his landing mirror, as he had that first awesome day in that new marathon school term, he knew something was terribly amiss. It seemed to presage something written in stone. Was this then all there was? Recapitulation *ad nauseum*. *Ad misericordiam*. Later, much much later, he would be reduced to a mental shorthand, thinking that elegance was no excuse, and oblivion far too good to be true. The Deity or Deities always changing their minds, tinkering with things. Their human male, the supernumerary beast, compensating as the suave interminable meddler and critic. Usually by presence if not behest of a terrible female form divine...the late pithy excoriation. Rooked by a myth after all.

And so, lacking such topical, bloggable wisdom, his own history began.

The commitment to devise an escape from his imagined tenure of toil and abuse began with a childhood friend who was as disengaged and eccentric as he, except that Cyril Prosccommon, often given to hysteric giggling, was two years older (a near eternity when you're seven or eight), and hence more maven than pal. But Cyril played in a world vivid as David's, and being as isolated from a ready pool of friends -- they lived in a neighborhood where the boys were on the other side of town and the nearest girls vestals, Vida perhaps excepted. Hence he and Cyril tended to marinate in make-believe, beginning as most cherubs do with the basics of big-little excavation and construction, to accommodate a buccaneering army

corps. A tangled prologue in which a latent homosexuality lingered in their mutual admiration for the manly boys the waiting Aphrodities might cotton to. To arrest the notice of the one, you had first to at least affect the delineation of the other. Thus did the juggernaut begin.

A vacant lot next to the Prosccommon's was full of varieties of weeds that lent themselves to miniaturization -- foundling items that can beguile perspective and size -- and a loamy soil heavy on sand which one might water and burnish with the hand to create a hard patina -- highways for their toy vehicles, usually serving guerrilla militias, in this wild uncharted domain. This resort to miniaturization would become a cult with David, his discovery of a rock formation or patch of earth that contained no tell tale clue to its comparative dimension could turn him, however briefly, into a practicing or at least participating optimist. Cyril was a natural, with his buck teeth, bulging high head, dark double lashed eyes, and a cow lick of hair that hung about his forehead like a dusty tail as he worked to 'pave' a section of roadway that would serve as another conduit for the loads of matches that sometimes filled his trucks. Mr. Prosccommon worked for a tire company which advertised with booklets of penny matches, always plentiful when the sturdy woodies ran out. Cyril thus had an unlimited supply and his vehicles were always trundling along with this contraband, usually in front of a tanker truck -- a small can attached to a lead lorry loaded with matches. Accidents were all too common, and the fires spectacular. They would watch together the tangerine whish whoosh as another tanker 'exploded', often set off by a tiny fizzler firecracker, the plastic

trucks coming to burn with wildly chromatic flames. Their unwitting status as budding pyromaniacs would not be confirmed for several months, until they managed to set alight a neighbor's fence. Being conscientious aficionados they wasted little time.

Often they stood together before the Hong Kong 'blast assortment' in Mr. Wong's confectionery. "Naw, that one just squizzles. The green ones are okay." David sometimes doubted Cyril's acumen in these matters. Cyril was often betrayed by his outlandish laugh which, once ignited, required the stern hand of someone like his no-nonsense mother to put out. How often they sat in a movie theatre, Cyril too absorbed to go to the bathroom, sitting up on his turned-up seat like a bronk rider, once in mesmeric absorption as the dribble emptied the seats in front. Danny Kaye was a particularly reliable fuse in setting Cyril off. David would try to tone him down, but was often too entertained himself to be a chaperon, and way too wary of the one or two officious ushers to admit or display ready kinship. Cyril's laughter was like an old Model T starting up, the scoring of the contact points ending in a screech. Late Saturday afternoon was best, the theatre nearly empty, the usher and ticket taker often next door wolfing a hotdog. For one admission a second smaller chap might slip beneath the gaze of the diminutive Mrs. Wolgemuth, whose crutches were always propped behind her in the wicket of the Lyric Theatre, her head level with the ticket wheel. Inside, in the consoling dark of a new drama, Tyrone Power would again be confirmed as a suitable companion for Terry of Terry and the Pirates, Cyril's 'non-comic' hero of the moment, a paragon

who also readily appealed to David then. Terry had a better build but Tyrone better companions David thought. Like the fetching Maryam (Cécile Aubry) . To accommodate such as The Black Rose, the caravans in the vacant lot became just that, modern trucks covered with the smaller pieces of embroidery, crocheting and petit point from Elspeth's linen closet, and the explosions as often the result of careless packing of mines and rockets. It would be some time before Elspeth correlated the curious yellowing and whiff of sulphur on her lace doilies to other than a puzzling deterioration. A Thousand and One Arabian nights held sway for a summer at least. Ali Baba and the *qui vive*. Sinbad was not long behind, a precursor to the later romantic era of Bluebeard and Sir Francis Drake, given David's growing love of model sailing ships, Spanish ships of the line and Drake's sleek privateers, most of which he fashioned himself, improvising as he went with surplus tool shed 'materiel'. The small kits that he could afford were far too simplistic, nominal and uniform for his evincible imagination. If his creations might look bizarre, cockamamie to earth-bound Cyril, David harbored no doubt about their suitability. These he took to the fish pond, the ones that might float at least, in the violent spring run off, when the cracked cement crater was full of water and their mutt would stand haunch deep looking down, ears forward, tail stirring the sky, staring in rapt wonder at the water skaters and smaller boats that skimmed the surface. Occasionally he might snap at the trceries of the water skaters, astonished perhaps that all he got was a mouthful of water. Garter snakes and bull frogs infiltrated the foliage at the edge, the border of the jungle of

peonies, honeysuckle, caragana and lilac behind, David's pristine rain forest. But Cyril was a campy bull dozer at heart. After the garage fire they tended to specialize. David attaching the cheaper penny firecrackers to the tiny cannon on his ships with Terry of the manly build, a cartoon cut-out manning the bridge soon augmented by publicity pics of Tyrone and his 'Dulcineas'. David relished the careless manliness of such Heroes. His notice of admirable deltoids and pectorals was 'commemorative'; the fearlessness, something he might aspire to. Some of the maturer boys in grade eight flaunted such handsomeness and cheek, and for a season at least he lost himself to their manifest prowess, his female eidolon the patiently waiting Grace. How could one possibly be dulled or inconvenienced with such campy heroes on your side? Bluebeard and Sir Francis in the lily pond. One needed naught other and naught else. If school and music might limit the excursions available, the excursions themselves became more and more attune to that infinity within the finite. The absurdity of which only adults must contend. Eventually, even Vida Semple would disappear from sight. Due to a nearly fatal misadventure he would fathom only years later.

BEHEMOTH

A small suite occupied a portion of the basement adjacent the coal furnace and shuttle, which in turn faced the mangle washer and cement-floored utility room with its shopworn workbench, a holdover from the previous owner. The suite itself consisted of a narrow bed-sitting room -- "his

stateroom” one boarder called it -- with small windows just above ground level, plus a shower bathroom and kitchenette, all accessed by a descending staircase off the attached garage. One of the boarders, a gentle soul who worked as a government liaison officer at the Experimental Farm, was a great conundrum for Ali. Mr. Oleander appreciated company at mealtime, human or canine, in his tiny windowless kitchen with dual hotplate and oil cloth table. Indeed, the canine drop-in may have been the favorite and most persistent of his visitors. “A watch dog...who watches bowls and pans,” he would say as Ali waited with the smidgen of patience he might muster around strangers. “A watchdog with very big eyes. Who doesn’t always eat his vegetables.”

David was not quite five when his parents moved into the stately house, and he was urged to keep out of the basement, partly he knew because of the suite, but also because there was something else there that was inimical to small adventurous boys. He might steal a glimpse when his mother took down the washing, to look on soberly at the large blackened monstrosity with its heavy arms, a veritable Grendel or Kraken -- names he would unearth later -- which his parents didn’t want him provoking, with its glowering eye through the lidded grate, a flare of heat and flame when open. It required constant tending, numerous placations from the coal shuttle and removal of the remains, clinkers of varying sizes, depending on the quality of the offerings, followed by many shovels full of ash. All in all the presence of this poorly tethered blast breather, did not look promising. His mother might never complain, but she became pursed and stern when

off to the basement with a bolt of washing. It seemed the proximity of the brute provided things like warmth and hot water, never plentiful, mind you, but then you could hardly expect such a groaner to be generous in captivity. Occasionally David might help Elspeth carry the remains of the constant offerings, the clinkers, up the stairs and out to the garbage cans in the ally. A grisly sight, no question, full of razor-edged worm holes his miniature lead soldiers might get lost in, the frequent forlornness of his mother during these moments of heft and heave a further caution. Sensibly his father went immediately off to the office or hospital, whereas his mother had been on a farm and knew about creatures. The Sawatsky farm -- vacant while she grew up -- was haunted with just such denizens. (It would be a decade before David discovered first hand the ghostly effects of swamp gas.) Thus, before their subterranean monstrosity, the right amount of the offering at the most propitious time was crucial. Through fatigue or carelessness Elspeth sometimes neglected to keep her young son apart, and the tongues of flame and searing breath inched closer and closer over the coming months. Yet he never presumed the beast reconciled to its new masters, and thought a beauty like his mother always in jeopardy. Had Terry and the Pirates not intervened on several occasions he might have gone to his father. Terry suggested that one might overcome unspeakable enemies even half naked, his impeccable pecs frequently dunned and sooted in carbolic adventures. Overcoming brute monstrosities was essentially a matter of will power, exploiting the creature's shortcomings. A creature that might quiver but not move. Nor feed

itself. You even had to fill the eerie dank lakes in two of its branching arms with water by yourself, dark pools only the most seasoned and intrepid of sailors might traverse. Somedays its fiery belly went cold. Most unsettling and incommoding, though the creature stood then helpless, innocuous, strangely frigid. It might always mark one with black pitch, but a daring adventurer could utilize his mother's impervious gloves. In no time his own company of bravos was assisting, eventually intervening and superseding. Keeping the menace to a minimum. The intelligence cadres were always first rate. So that even the back of the beast was reconnoitered, delineated, bivouacked, partly demystified. Though the spiders there were enormous, and obviously had imbued some strange essence from the generative beast.

"It's just your furnace," said Cyril as another woody blossomed into light. A liquid gem in the early fall dark, a molten eyelet, lighting a depth of the dewy fenny rain barrel outside Cyril's home with its splendid water beetle, big as a coal man's thumb, swift as a Perch, which could be seen scurrying down the reeky slippery sides. Another woody broke forth, its brief floret an aurora borealis against the surface of the unfathomed barrel.

"It rumbles a lot."

"Furnaces don't rumble."

David rubbed his nose. "It sort of rumbles."

The debate was interrupted by Mrs. Prosccommon, a stout heavy handed mother who didn't like Cyril playing by the rain barrel. David

watched with patient wonder as Cyril ran indoors before the snapping garter she used as a switching stick. He too was admonished to get on home. In the window by the chimney he could see Cyril climbing the steep narrow staircase to his room, to the greasy elaborate erector set he kept in a series of boxes under his cot. David rather preferred that dull utilitarian gun metal -- realistic, shopworn, seasoned, worldly -- to the primary colors of his Meccano set. But his pater had had a Meccano set and not regretted it. It was in that upstairs room years later that Cyril would show David his latest tracings of magazine girls whose clothes miraculously disappeared. It was also in that room that Santa Claus was quite exploded.

“He’s just another whopper. Go ask your mother.” The information was obviously old hat for Cyril. David, reeling from so many discoveries at the time, immediately went to his one available parent to seek assurance that at least the Easter Bunny would return. His mother seemed uncertain -- a bad sign. He was miffed and went to the creek to smote the frogs, only to encounter the second in his morality play installments that year. An old wrinkled gent came from behind and shook the heebie-jeebies out of him. “You come down here before. I see you. You come, drink my water. Come, take a drink.” David was dragged into a backyard and a pump faucet. He balked at the proffered glass. The water was poured over his head. Dead frogs did not improve drinking water he learned. That some folks in the Riverdeen section might filter water from the creek for household use struck him as strange if not daft with all the creatures milling about in its cavernous, tenebrous waters. Yet he never smote a frog again.

It was about the time Cyril's cousin came for a visit, a scoffer even more informed and impetuous than Cyril, who had a novel aspect -- a precocious sarcasm -- and looked upon Cyril's 'friend' as a dumb kid and kooky fiddler. David surprised them both by hitting a complicit Cyril one day with a softball bat -- on his spine! -- and anticipated the worst when Cyril took off yelping and staggering like a car winged dog. David anticipated a ghastly, calamitous denouement, Cyril paralyzed for life, walking like a stick insect, the perpetrator led before a synod of school principals all with thick heavy straps and yammering eyes. But Cyril returned when the cousin left, healthy, dismissive of David's late craven apology, and likely reconciled to the fact that beyond the vestals, who were out of bounds and not keen on paving roads, David was the only heedful outback adventurer and match bearer in the neighborhood. Yet their sojourn together was drawing to a close. David had discovered that only in the private realm can one be oneself, can one work single-mindedly on an adventure without comment or adjudication from a board member, however well intentioned. And by then his imagination had furnished a physical world that honored nothing less than the idealized bodies of the ancient Olympians and take a lifetime to explore. For by then he was sampling the early creation myths he first encountered in the history rich mailers the drug companies issued to his father. Such that the roster of his dramatis personae underwent an exclusive change. The alteration could not have been more devastating -- or edifying. Or precipitous. For shortly after the bat and frog incidents, enforcer-protector, maven and boon companion Terry/

Tyrone of the Pirates found themselves burnt to a crisp. Into the behemoth they went, along with their sidekick clan. If it was rash even gauche, it was not entirely an accident, for David had discovered a more durable and versatile medium than postcards or newsprint, or stiff lead soldiers for that matter, the heady miracle all solitary, gifted posers and surrogate adventurers find sooner or later: the protean wonder of Plasticine! The trials and tortures remained much the same, though the hero stretched out on the hot air grate sweated more realistically when made of Plasticine! But these small lanky figures looked too flaccid to techo Cyril. "They look funny." "They can turn, and don't stand up standing all the time," said David -- pointing out the limitations both of delineated newsprint and erect lead soldiers. But Plasticine and loamy soil were incompatible and Cyril not amused. "They look like some old porridge stuff." A conclusion David could not ameliorate. Shortly thereafter they played mainly in silence and apart. The Plasticine truck David had fashioned went nowhere; even the half-plastic, half Plasticine compromise scored one artery of Cyril's spreading network of highways and camouflaged re-staging areas. David's designs were far too messy and cumbersome beside the latest Detroit miniatures Cyril fetched or stole which David more and more despaired of because, being detailed to the umpteenth rivet, were harder and harder to imagine as anything but what they were. Certainly nothing the later 'road warriors' would have found challenging. "But yours never really crash, I mean really," said David. Despite the case David made for the realism of grunge and authentic malleability, the thistle and burr

flecked vehicles became gum balls. Besides, Plasticine took ever so long to ignite. By then the larger Cyril wanted David to play in another more densely weeded section of the lot. Instead, David took up his Plasticine and went home, to play more and more by himself. To fashion svelte navy frogmen who might cut through an assortment of submarine nets made of twine; to render a surprisingly realistic Flash Gordon and Dale Arden as presented in his Big Little Books. If he was not yet a critically accomplished sculptor, he was pleased with the mutable creatures in his sagas. Cyril did not recognize their special grace and supple nature perhaps because the roads he strove to maintain took hours and hours of dedicated upkeep, given the many animals, pets and occasional Stanley-Crossfield vestal who ventured to traipse across the vacant lot. In due course, even David's ships of the line, with their delicate balsam superstructures and easily tipped hulls, yielded to the age of 'iron', to larger and elaborate Meccano vessels of his own concoction that sailed very well on the aquamarine carpet of the den, a change his father took note of and underwrote ever more complex sets. The waters of the fishpond, in consequence of the bravos and lead guns lost overboard and never recovered from the muddy bottom, gave way to the warp and weft of the study carpet as David's imagination became more pithy, elaborate and accommodating, the arabesques of intricate wool flowers tropical islands and atolls waiting to be mapped and explored. Ineluctably, the imagination that might turn carpet flora into ocean atolls, could not long abide the remaining stiff lead soldiers that had always been part of David's and Cyril's rebel gangs and loyal forces. How

absurd they now looked when tumbled over in battle -- not collapsed or floundering, but retaining the same rigid upright position. Plasticine attached to detached arms, legs and heads did wonders for the action and *mise-en-scène*. At least initially. Thus did escapades of the heroes circa grade six come alive as never before. But by then something else was brewing in his consciousness, as it was in Cyril's -- about the time David's image in the hall mirror was so newly and persistently confounding. If the progress in his own mind was imperceptible, the reaction of his parents, particularly his mother, was anything but reassuring. His later trips to Wong's magazine stand became excursions to that preserve for observation mainly, given the cost of the magazines. If nurses had been part of his corps for some time, they now tended to upstage a lot of former goings on. Elspeth was at first amused then concerned. If broken arms and heads had seemed a pathetic early recourse, discounting the expense of the lead soldiers themselves, nurses made entirely of Plasticine, some with battle-devastated costumes, were more sobering, despite the fact he had already been given a good book on the subject. The diffident silence of her regard was about all he needed. The look was enough to reassure him that only subterranean things were worth bothering with, as Terry and his gang knew all too well. As in the sojourn with Cyril's matches, one must do some things by stealth, like the teasing of Vida Semple after his witness of the Elm street gent's anger. And so the dark corners of the basement nearest the rumbling behemoth became the bivouacs for his burgeoning partisans. Meccano ships are easily converted to troupe carriers and armored

cars. The very recourse to such connivance added to the haunt and verisimilitude. The darkened corner ignites the imagination, each section of the old settling concrete foundation a continent unto itself. How live and satisfying the secret, the arcane, the looming swart and monstrous! The other-worldly spiders and their sinister webs. The blackened pitch of several decades of the behemoth's sweat. A secret reality that demanded ever more acuity and exactness to fetch the real and pristine, such that his heroes were now complete from their tunic buttons to their genitalia, their uniforms a layer rolled first to cardboard thinness...though uniforms themselves were becoming redundant, for by then he was, as we've noted, living among the daimones of ancient Greece -- as depicted in a pharmaceutical treasury among his father's medical treatises and advertisements in the library, beneath the yellowing wallpaper of National Geographic maps. More important, the suite below, next the behemoth, was now vacant, the last occupant returning to England and a former sweetheart. Being full of deep empty cupboards, David's dramas might be cosseted and occasionally prolonged. Not that all evidence of his later variations was unknown above stairs. Cyril had a voyeuristic streak and had long since demonstrated how tracing paper might be used to remove a costume from the outline of a catalogue model. David, having pretty much abandoned two dimensional distractions, at least for the time being, was not a little chagrined his mother should find two very old examples of the more sensational, which she regarded in a constrained moment of silence -- as was her wont. Perhaps David had overdone the pubic hair. She offered a

grandmotherly smile. “David, everyone has a body and there’s nothing wrong with it.” She did not elaborate, and left the pictures to be disposed of as he felt best. Meaning the maw of the behemoth sooner than later. It would be two or more decades before he realized that having a body was at least part of the problem, perhaps the main part. “Bodies establish, encapsulate invidiousness -- a most troublesome attribute,” he would write to his friend Peter, a mathematician specializing in elliptic modular functions who had been retained by Paleomena -- the corporation David would one day work for as its art salon curator. “Bodies -- manifolds! if you like -- can at times be nearly sublime -- the acute problem. For the greater the sensitivity to the subtleties of the rarer wonderworks, the more one may be tempted to intervene, to make over the static image of the lesser. The compact between hubris and invidiousness that humans seem innately prey to. The beauty that transcends cupidity.” By then words were becoming his nubile consorts. As his multidimensional world again abstracted.

As his father said, he should have been playing more sports. A comment he later returned to again and again. When the fates lost interest in teasing him -- or so he thought.

His later career in advertising and art criticism, leading to his placement with the Paleomena Corporation as its salon curator, would merely verify what he discovered in those days below stairs, on the workbench by the behemoth where he rolled out and made his soft clay *dramatis personae*, with their later collar bones and shoulder blades, ribs and dimpled haunches -- resulting in the numinous revelation that beauty might indeed

be apprehended, and was not in fact mythical. However much a society's taste might vary, the durable paragon was never far off, examples of which -- symmetry, concinnity, eurythmy -- tended to work cross culturally with amazing clarity. Advertising would be impossible otherwise. He would discover the word comity. He would be accused of being a fascist and a racist, but the accusations came mainly from totalitarians, for whom equality must rescind hierarchy, those who would turn humans into essences, pure figments of the imagination. Bodies had splendor and intelligence and discreteness -- which entailed stratification. The human problem and celebration. Because without hierarchy there is no drama, and what are humans without their passion plays, their wonderful remonstrances. Their fathomless resentments, which could become dense as a black hole. Something the Olympian gods, who might drearily live forever, found the omnipotent entertainment! Death kept the audience alert.

He would remember ever after the day the first of the numinous forms materialized from his own hands, made of a lighter neutral clay than previously -- the vivid greens reds yellows blues that were less and less satisfactory in fashioning believable humans, even when blended into the darker sooty gray he always ended up with. Later on he would recognize the special patina and mystery of the Plasticine grays when mixed with brown. A recognition that would in time amend his esthetic perceptions to acknowledge the presentiment of gracile form alone. Whatever the color.

But when a new 'clean clay' pelican grey first appeared on Burdock's Co-op toy department shelves, suddenly, ethereally, a newly recognizable

being emerged from the pudgy masses and stick salients of yore. Tyrone had become a parian marble Policlitis Spear Bearer, the Venus of Willendorf something nearer a fifth century Artemis -- though here his critics would have some latitude, for his paragon was slighter, more lithe than the Aphrodite of the Cnidians. A point that would daunt his mature years. Perhaps at that stage he yearned for a playmate, and the more gamin form filled the pubescent niche, someone akin to Johanna Wagner down the lane, a lass who was to cause him nearly as much anguish as Gy Fysh had Vida Semple, though in far less attributable ways. Anyway, the gracile form was suddenly ‘galvanically’ there, emerging in excelsis as he labored, to fashion an ineffable pantheon born and delivered before his very eyes! The magic of recognition and witness truly awful, in the textual sense, in its realization. He might fashion his own eidolon! In his own good time and place! He had surely glimpsed the Pneuma. Never ever after having to do without, looking in from the outside, his nose pressed against the glass at closing time. Even the serpentine Johanna, his first intimation of a universal kore, might be finally rendered and staged in a credible human drama. His talent was not inconsiderable, as he could come away from a movie -- one about the Great Barrier Reef with Gilbert Roland, say -- and recreate the characters with a satisfying verisimilitude, especially the gamin swimmer played by Terry Moore. A talent that was of course problematic for the moral rectitude of his parents when the occasional factual and finely detailed example emerged from the netherworld. “It’s a phase,” said pater, with his complaisant regard of frailty. “Fair anatomically. But, as

you say, intemperate and time-consuming. He should be out scrumming with the kids across town. And he may need a math tutor this year.” El-speth kept her eyes open, and David had to be ever more cautious and resourceful. Especially in planning the stealthy incursions into her purse to pay for the growing allotments of clay! A circumstance that would add the luster of the spy to his endeavors, a life truly voluptuously lived on an edge. What one does not accomplish in the white heat of dissimulation, in the seized, stolen interval. An interval that can furnish an Artemis and an Echo!

But then near disaster. The suite was again rented, despite earlier protestations to the contrary. “If I ever do that again I need my head examined.” So El-speth once stated with uncharacteristic candor after enduring a boarder who drank, swore and snored with a resonance that rivaled the rumble of the furnace on winter nights. Initially, the new boarder could not have been more satisfactorily ingratiating, fastidious -- or sensationally enlightening to a wanton young Donatello! A newly graduated dentist with impeccable personal habits -- less a taste for the lubricious in books and magazines, both of which he managed to leave laying about behind his ever open door. (It is instructive to remember that at one time in the early fifties many communities locked their doors only when they went on holidays. Thieves were as rare then as career bellyachers and civil libertarians. “With entitlement and empowerment comes remorseless demand and diminished responsibility,” David would one day write in his neo-con period, plagiarizing his friend Julian.)

David could not believe his eyes. Most of the dentist's offerings came from Europe, where a Playboy philosophy had long since been found sophomoric and superfluous. The biographies were poignant and lusty -- one of Toulouse Lautrec he read several times. A publication called *For Men Only* featured illustrations of an elegant cosmopolitan and/or bohemian life, emphasis on the Parisienne, that he was only beginning to sense -- another universe his young eyes sighted with mesmeric fascination. Those French knew a thing or two. Some sensational illustrations from Flaubert's *Hérodias* were part of the dentist's library and became a touchstone. The anatomical subtleties alone were spellbinding. Someone else had noticed too. This was about the time he began to mimic the voices of his denizens, how they addressed one another in the given dialogue, plied their apposite and opportune expressions...as well as realize the correct placement and contour of trochantor, patella and so forth. The muscles would take a little longer but followed with commendable or at least excusable leeway when he began consulting those medical tomes in their library. *The Diseases of Women* by Crossen and Crossen might be a trifle obtuse for a thirteen-year-old, but *Gray's Anatomy* became and remained a kind of bible, such that the later parian clay masterworks were never painted or otherwise adorned, beyond of course what his perceptions deemed anatomically harmonious and affectively apt, given the character they represented. Which meant that ankles could not be thin as sparrows, like his mother's, nor legs short and bowed as his aunts, nor smiles and scowls forced as Gilbert Roland's. Polyclitus and Michelangelo had, he believed,

seen and said it all, of this he had little doubt -- with ample allowance made for Michelangelo's gruesome female nudes, with their ugly mud pie breasts. David's critics could make of him what they liked. Some things you just know.

Apropos our story, in light of the new renter, David had to return, with a nostalgic frisson, to the sooty crannies about and behind the behemoth, until the dentist took himself off with a dietician from the hospital. Thereafter David inherited the suite, and suffered through the days of high school with few scenes, the crannies about the behemoth sufficiently remote and entirely sufficient to rest his active *dramatis personae*. But by then his parents, he belatedly and sadly came to realize, were exhausted. Their own moral code and unrelenting assiduousness through a depression and two world wars had simply worn them out. So he perceived and came to believe. Like most privileged epicures, he tended to cavil at such dedicated toil, discounting the comfort and surety he would otherwise have been oblivious of. His wondrous Artemis may never have entered the enchanted forest otherwise. But that vexing realization was still decades off. What helped with the engagement at this stage was his discovery that the light and shadow he strove to plasticize might be as realistically applied to paper -- to a two dimensional realm he now resurrected, the paraphernalia and space necessary for a full-fledged three dimensional *mise-en-scène* too inconvenient for a burgeoning dilettante lacking a Hollywood production facility. After all, seeing was seeing, and the moving frame essentially a series of stills. As he had always been deft with pencil and tempera, one

facet of his creative ability his parents warmly applauded -- including the painting of a barn dance that toured Canada in a federally adjudicated juvenile art salon. Now he realized that the problems compounded by a three dimensional scene might be satisfactorily resolved by converting it to two. Which he proceeded to do with dispatch, realizing also that one feature that had thus far eluded him, the fashioning of a realistic skin, pores, goose bumps and freckles, to say nothing of a subtle moue or pout -- a difficulty with a head the size of a walnut -- was expressly realizable. He could now look at illustrations and movie marquees with a new acquisitiveness. Terry Moore's fetching complexion and elliptical grin might escape the pallid tone of Clean Clay, yet be captured on drawing paper with carefully prepared tempera. It seemed he might one day leave the crimped, limited mundane world entirely.

Curiously, it was about this time he found another escape which actually abetted his artistic assimilations and productions -- his mother's late susceptibility to the idea of attending an early movie on a weeknight! If his first success at suggesting such a travesty surprised him, he soon learned to scan the movie page for those romances, even those with an 'adult' rating, that he might reliably tempt her with. "You've finished your homework?..." Well, not entirely, but like so many things he was discovering at that time, people were often hospitable to the idea of finding a serviceable excuse, especially when impromptu, the toll on the civic paragon not insubstantial. Pater being particularly late for supper was often the clincher. "Kid, can you eat out tonight? David and I may go to a movie."

He never overheard the tone of pater's voice in response to this request, yet pater always complied...coming to sit with his usual patience and composure at one of the four greasy spoons, reading a paper while masticating his breaded pork cutlet and drinking his fifteenth or sixteenth cup of coffee that day. A cigarette or two or three would follow with the ice cream, and the inevitable visitation to the cafe of Hoddy Swinton, the local putative village idiot -- a prickly bent-nosed eccentric who occasionally flashed his discharge papers from the insane asylum at Weyburn with the exclamation -- "So prove you're not, eh?" Hoddy was Burdock's only resident with no fixed address -- he usually had two or three -- who sold papers and collected pennies thrown at him in one of the three downtown beer parlors. He would of course see Doc Townsend as soon as he entered the cafe, and in a shrill nasal voice shout out Doc Townsend's name as he approached with a day old newspaper and summation of his days woes. "As you can see Doc, I need a new pair of mitts. I try my best but I had to tote some old leaky batteries last week for Soo Security." Would Doc Townsend be willing to assist a humble fellow mortal? As the cafe's patrons watched with bemused caution, Doc Townsend would reach into his pocket to fetch a dollar -- a not inconsiderable heist for Hoddy in 1955. It was perhaps the guarantee that Doc might be permitted to read his own paper without further interruption. Thus would pater in the last years of his practice eat many late suppers in the Modern, Venus or Elite cafes, where he would be deferred to by the Chinese proprietors with a solicitude that comes from citizens whose exactions are manifold, and whose decorum and patience

seem fathomless, one in particular whose handle was also 'Doc', a thin skeletal gent with a stoop and kindly if not venerable aspect, who often cooked Doc Townsend's untimely supper himself.

It was a scene Vassily Sergeevich -- known thereabout as George Horlick -- glimpsed for the third or fourth time as he slipped along the slushy sidewalk outside, the cast to the interior fixtures behind the hoar frosted window bleached to an ivory patina, the persons inside so many figurines in a dusty, neglected soap carving. How the city reminded him of his own home town, with its layerings of snow and riddled ice, the tar smell and thrum of balding tires on hard pack, the coalescing group of laborers and field hands, here including roughnecks, seeking escape in demon vodka -- rather, the half-dozen beers that would make one more or less immune to a seedy home and unstinting overnight chill. With Doc Townsend putting out, Hoddy might look forward to a moderate take that night, coming now from the Select Cafe while replacing his old eaten mitts with a bright blue pair he likely fetched that day from the United Church jumble. Vassily assumed the hermit retained a quite spectacular array of failed clothing, though his boots were invariably whole and shiny in this kind of weather. He seemed to be wary of Vassily -- as if he detected a denizen as cagy and wary as himself. A someone he had maligned or implicated in the course of his misadventures. "Not me, maybe this other chap who's been around..." Though he invariably raised his hand to doff his toque and smiled to all and sundry, displaying a limited number of sharp snagged teeth. But another of the figures Vassily imagined made when the creator

was nodding, or avid and impetuous while temporarily lacking crucial materials.

This night Vassily headed across the street skirting the Paradise beer parlor, off across the CPR tracks to the pervasive blackness beyond the dimly lit roundhouse. Once lost in the prairie dark he turned hard left and swiftly continued until he reached the sudden steep incline into the coulee, the trench of which he followed to its eastern end. It was warmer here below the wind, the mud congealed in the evening frost. The higher stiff grasses here afforded a measure of camouflage as he moved. He was cautious and leery that night, the night his assignment ended with the confirmation of his bolt hole from the dead letter drop -- an old bunged gopher hole triangulated from the corner of the cemetery above. But as he knelt and felt the cold earth of the stoppered hole, to retrieve the sought water tight envelope and its cryptic note, he discovered something else, a small toy discarded or dropped by a child he thought at first, until he identified the tiny pawn chess piece from a set like one he had seen others playing with in the Kiwanis park on Sundays. His smaller pen light revealed its smooth patina. The note was as revealing: gone was the wry undertone of his handler. The directions here were transcribed by a cypher -- words his secret anonymous friend would use only under duress. In secreting the pawn, his friend had made a considerable sacrifice on his behalf -- chancing so poignant a warning.

The shiver barely passed through his body when he knew, resolved, what he must do, even before the onerous presence of the pawn fully con-

firmed the bleak vista in his mind.

So. Someone suspected or invented a travesty. Sometimes one in the same. Perhaps his travail with the seed packets had compromised his handler, alarmed the current edgy Center chiefs. It seemed he was decreed a ghost, a dead man. A mere pawn. To likely fill a trench by the old gravel pit. He had often suspected that no material witnesses might be left...a suspicion that enjoined his late assignment to find locales for the caches of arms and explosives that later spetznaz teams would use to cripple hydro and electric utilities, in the anticipated cold war turning hot, particularly the main gas line above the Cypress Hills that would soon connect with the main conduit to the East. The suspicion never abated that the crazed paranoia might one day reach down even to the active field players...who just might come to wait out a struggle, or doubt the evil attributed to 'greedy bourgeois jackals' and 'decadent cosmopolitan idlers'. Moreover, the Soviet agricultural 'experts' could indeed be discovered to be wrong if not obtuse, and their cadres were taking no chances. An able suspect player discovered by a live conniving other is the grave embarrassment. A pawn indeed. His anxiety had been valid all along.

Yet escape, flight -- the immediate impulse -- was forfeited because someone had taken a considerable chance on his behalf. He must see the official matter done and ended. The resolve of his distant masters was always the terror that silenced the night. He grimly smiled. He must follow the instructions in the note to the letter -- not reveal by a sudden or impetuous act the concerted daring of his mysterious friend, this unknown senti-

nel who would leave such a clue, risk such an intrepid tip-off. Vassily might be killed regardless, yet he would now go to the appointed rendezvous prepared. With luck he could survive. His resolve to stay alive, even in the face of an protracted hunt of his whereabouts, was the dare that nerved his sense of order and truth and nobility. He would return. The maniacs must perish. The patient, mindful, competent and steadfast survive. So he had believed and must now. He had been a fugitive before. Caesar was not God. Of this he was a savant.

He retrieved his kit from the old gardener's shed and fitted the clip into the revolver. There would be two sitters, one concealed. As he sat on the shared toilet in his housekeeping unit he worked out the scenario he would devise to facilitate such a murder. The sniper would be close at hand, less than a hundred feet; they would not risk a chase. As he pictured the scene, apropos the note, his plan slowly materialized -- even where he might bury the bodies in the cemetery, where the new layer of concealing moss might would help. Thank god he had substituted similar looking seed packages for the select offering he'd taken. The researchers at the Experimental Farm would be a week or more before the alternate package was discovered -- given a favorable spring. Nechayev said the Ottawa Resident had been disappointed he had not recruited anyone on the farm's agronomy team. At first he had been doubtful of the urgency -- agricultural data was readily shared in the world community. Yet time was of the essence now, to plant the hybrid seeds in soils of the Soviet Union, to form a prospectus as early as possible, along with the pertinent fertilizers and ground

covers. A single season can mean the difference between survival and slow death to a large rural population, given the confiscatory methods of the agricultural commissars. Who filled their quotas regardless! How bathetic that his own GRU service might then be riddled with such a layering of factions, one servicing the ignorance or vengeance of the other. The involutions and convolutions only a Russian mind might conceive and imagine dissecting. Soviet paranoia a kind of pornography he sometimes mused. The game to strip your opponent or rival of any semblance of respectability, even viability. The very jesuitical mind set that almost got him dismissed from the Cheka. You show me yours, I'll show you someone else's. At times he felt the weight of the folly...yet the vision remained -- of a new man, freed from the invidiousness of the past. Shit heads, the name career thugs gave to such idealistic beings, even as they ratted on one another in the latest terror only to secure their own wretched end. What fools, dolts, nincompoops, as his stolid English instructor was fond of saying. Thinking the English might word their 'confessions' so, 'explain' their actions. What was it the anonymous celt said about language: that French sounded like a woman teasing a cat, Italian a man rallying a madonna, Spanish a worshipper complaining of the cold, German a stable hand screwing a horse, and Russian, a drunk dreaming aloud? The kind of humor that could have you demoted, even jailed on a bad day. That could cause one to miss a well-rehearsed goose step around the Lenin Mausoleum.

He would return. And more than this new current handler, whoever he was, would come to know about it. Caesar's limited take. His pact with

himself.

PLAYMATES

In the fall of 1953, on the first day of school which coincided with his twelfth birthday, David sensed a new dynamic in the schoolyard. The arrival of the very real Wagner duo, Julian and Johanna, earmarked the change. If David's own recourse to a two dimensional saga had upstaged his Clean Clay players, the sheer detailing of his new pictorial *dramatis personae* had become as particular, ethereal and wondrous as the other world they inhabited. It was the advent of the Wagner duo who served to enhance this painterly acuity! One as critic, one as inspiration. The curiosity being that as his cast of players took on a critical detailing, the central sylphic muse arrived in a stark factual three-dimensional tease, the Siren named Johanna, who ever after haunted his prairie landscape. The 'Vida' that tormented. It was as if he'd suddenly split in two, the Wager duo becoming both the unexpected mentor and near incarnation of his central muse.

Julian Wagner was the apposite son of his father Carl, the maestro in Lucius' class at McGill, who was now onto his third wife, entrusting his second, Bibi, with his two children: Johanna, Bibi's child, and Julian, the child of his first wife. After giving birth to Julian, his first wife drowned in a boating accident in which Carl was reprimanded at the inquest for neglecting the deployment of life-jackets. Bibi in turn, after Carl took up with a UN translator, came to Burdock with an agrologist on loan to the Experimental Farm from Minnesota. Unlike Julian's father, Carl, who was some-

what homely, preciously unkempt, and believed his German ancestry largely virtuosic yet banal (too reliably transcendent he would fondly sigh), Julian was almost handsome, neat, possessed a considerable musical talent, and faked an interest in German romanticism mainly to rally his archly satiric father, a tic that in time devolved into a fanciful dualism -- the heady romanticism and the adroit derision that fed on it. He fancied the nickname Jule, something akin to a Koh-i-noor gem, a Siegfried who slays the dwarf and keeps the loot -- much of this panoply assimilated by the time he came to the seventh grade class at Burdock Central School, his father then an estranged 'peer' who lived in the Swiss Alps.

When the teacher roll-called his name, "Julian Wagner?" he responded by saying "Julian Seigfried Parsifal". The teacher, Miss Browne, was at first amused. "You mean Julian Carl Wagner." Said Julian, "It's the dwarf deal, when I must play with the little people." Gangling Julian was at least a foot higher than the nearest student. Some in the class giggled. Miss Browne demanded order, and declared that Julian would be called Julian in class.

Julian's twin in all but birth, Johanna, was Carl's child by Bibi, a Swedish ballet understudy, who conceived Johanna when Julian was three months old. Bibi became the consequential irritant in the first marriage, which was more or less over by the time of the drowning. Bibi in turn grew to resent Carl's ingrained Fascism -- her own father having been killed in the war -- and left shortly after Johanna was born. By then Carl had taken up with the EEC translator, and accepted a position as medical

director for a consortium of spas in the Austrian Alps. Bibi interrupted her ballet career to become an exemplary mother to both children, whom Carl wrote to once a month, took on art junkets in Europe during the early summer, and provided an ample annuity for which Bibi served as interim consignee.

Nearly as tall as Julian, Johanna was a near proportionate replica of the elongated figures David had begun to abandon in clay. Her sudden arresting presence made him decide that the abandonment was premature, that ferules too might have trochanters, patellas, raised acromials and deltoids. Unlike the dark bold Julian, she seemed ever beclouded in sandy frizzy curls above a freckled nose and cheek. Her oval, wide, often half-lidded eyes intimated that David's latest Scheherazade might be a bit fey. Already postured as a promising dancer like her mother, she seemed to exist at one remove from her days and class at school. Her lips frequently anticipated a pout without actually revealing a distortion, a demur that seemed to vacillate against a sly scowl. She would prove to be the second brightest and least companionable of the girls in the class -- next to quiet plain Emma Goldman -- and she would soon be called 'Miss March' and 'Stuck Up' by the girls and 'Hubba Hubba' by the likes of Cyril who usually ended up standing behind her in the combined grade Seven and Eight calisthenics classes. Miss Browne could not make up her mind whether to make an issue of the shorts Johanna wore, being of regulation length but sufficiently wide to reveal an expanse of thigh that could be sensational during the bends and stretches. Cyril claimed he could see her briefs and

bragged about the ‘feels’ he copped during recess in the school commons -- implicating the various tag team japes where a lad might veer into a nearby sororal coterie and brush against a select denizen to determine if her blouse, were she wearing a training bra, merely collapsed. Johanna was said to be nearly a handful, which most lads irascibly and peevishly doubted, while remaining envious of Cyril’s enterprise. The bustling consequential commons was also the dusty agora where mogul Julian usually peddled his supply of stolen jawbreakers, cheaper by half than the Kimble confectionary across the street. By grade Eight he would be topping up his clients’ supply of Sunbathing Magazines, flashing his pictures to the mesmerized sixth and seventh graders, who had an amazing talent for pooling their cash before such contraband. It was a time of reckoning for heedful witnesses like David. The outside world was definitely on the take, and did things on the sly or QT that seemed at times infinitely adventurous if not salacious. For instance, he and Cyril had been shepherds in the Christmas Concert the year last and, not being in the front line of rehearsal, often lolled about the stage, at one point lying down to gaze up at the high ceiling, the scalloping about the corners taking on a novel angular perspective from their lie, not unlike the cloud formations they might unravel while lying on the beach by the old Kiwanis swimming hole. Miss Browne briefly sauntered by, moving to scold a group of tardy sopranos, allowing David and Cyril a glimpse of Miss Browne’s underwear -- the holiest set of woolies David ever saw or would see. The disagreeable aspect of it Cyril seemed to bear better than he, and left for the lavatory to indulge

his soon convulsive giggling. For David it had come as a shock and a blow. Miss Browne was obviously in some kind of pickle. He was familiar with the destructive power of moths and the like, yet what self-respecting being would wear such disgusting apparel? The matter quite bamboozled him. Women, at least as he attired them, did not look bereft, certainly not that haplessly sloven. He simply couldn't figure it out. Cyril's mundane acumen easily bested David's yen for perplexity. "So she's saving up to buy something. A new ruler to hit us with." The last had broken over the shoulder of sturdy Max Engler. Who was later sent off to the Principal's office for a strapping. One of a series that month. From which he returned manifesting his usual impregnable phlegm. Though he stayed out of trouble the remainder of that day.

"Maybe a dictionary."

"She has a dictionary."

David anticipated the worst. "A smaller one, maybe. Like Miss Laybourne's, only more handy."

"She's already got one."

Miss Browne did carry a moderately sized dictionary in her patrol of the aisles, and could heft and despatch its weight on the head of a scapegrace or malingerer with lightening speed. Whereas Miss Laybourne, an older less agile schoolmarm, was a substitute teacher who came once a week while Miss Browne directed the Christmas concert. She tended to favor a leaden fly swatter over her smaller dictionary. Thus far both David and Cyril had escaped the fly swatter. Shortly after the laden discovery of

Miss Browne's woolies, David found Julian hawking a new Sunbathing Magazine in the bosky scrub behind the school. David was disappointed and artlessly said so aloud. "Kinda heavy. No real, well, sylphs." The comment surfaced during a studious quiet and alerted several lads in the throng, who all looked to David with a mixture of distrust and disfavor. Sylph for them sounded like some kind of lisp. Then another lad, more esteemed in the group also scoffed. "Mostly fat. Some are like this. Just old mainly." Julian's prompt suave touting of Rubens' models merely exacerbated the suspicion. Only David bought a copy this day, thinking Julian acted as he did to save face and show off.

"Lookit, cousin, we're not selling here D'Antinos or Lemckes or von Adolphs," he said to David when the others had left. 'Sylph' is a specialty number. Know what it means?" "I make them almost every day," David said limply, almost penitently. Julian regarded David with rare sobriety. He was not to be put off this time, and after some adroit prodding -- "Well are they dogs like Miss Browne or not, nonce?" -- was furtively shown the latest coterie in David's 'clean clay' gallery. Julian was the first outsider to glimpse the surprising menagerie. His amazement on seeing the three-dimensional pantheon was not held back.

"This is Gilbert Roland -- holy crow. And this, crimmeny, Terry Moore. Both bloody here. Congratulations. But you got the thing underneath all wrong though -- they don't have any. Even that small."

David was stunned.

"What do you mean?"

They don't have pricks, even modest ones, you silly cunt. Well none that you could see from ten paces, unless she's a she-male."

David was momentarily aghast. "That's bullshit." It was perhaps the first time he ventured to use a generic putdown.

"No, cunt, gospel. They got a hole that looks like the eye of the Cyclops Odysseus put out, at least when they mature. Up until then it's little more than a slit, a coin machine with a coin barely stuck in the slot." Both Julian and David shared an interest in believable flesh, but Julian obviously had better retainers. "Johanna's got a little slit, and a few fuzzy wuzzies. Which she won't let me count. She's a late bloomer mother says. The best kind apparently."

"How the christly fuck do you know that?" David had continued with the debut of his new bracing lexicon. If he hadn't mastered it yet, the determination surfaced as never before.

Julian looked at his less worldly friend, who could sculpt like an Alexander Oppler, draw like an Albert Sterner, beings he had to inform David of -- artists his Rabelaisian father had had a fondness for.

"You really don't know, do you simp?"

It was a moment when David would ever after regret his lapse into earnestness. "Lookit, I know what you told me about how, well, how it's done -- this male-girl plug stuff -- but honest I've looked through all the doctor books in my father's library and never come across anything like that."

"A scholar and a gentleman, I must presume."

David scowled.

“Well at least we can get your tit out of the wringer. Fetch ye old Gray’s Anatomy, cousin. The tome.”

On Julian’s dare David fetched the original and massive Gray’s Anatomy. Promptly Julian flipped to the back pages where the genitalia were rendered. “See, that it’s, nonce. The heart of the matter. Which I think pater apprised me of before I could walk.”

“Yeah okay but it grows. Doesn’t it?...”

Julian, forthrightly accepting the manifest aesthetic gifts of his new found adventurer, patiently recapitulated for him the act of coitus and the ‘pertinent appurtenances needed for it’ while quoting liberally from his father’s inaugural lecture. “And that’s that. That’s how you came to be you and me, me. Father thinks the creator has a dry sense of humor. Unless you get born on a Sunday. But say, dumbbell, why do you hide everything down here in this dungeon? Why not put it on the mantle?”

It was time for David to exhibit a pointed incredulity.

“Are you nuts? My parents...Christmas.”

To say that Julian was amazed would be to give handsome astonishment less than its due.

“Tell me -- they think it’s what -- gross, lousy? Or just ignorant?” He pointed again to the model of Terry Moore.

Lamely David said, “They think, I guess, it’s a waste of time.”

“Let’s see the rest.”

“That’s the best.”

Julian looked into the deep cupboard and nodded at the many other

characters lining the narrow shelves. For a moment it looked as though David would balk. So Julian reached in and grabbed a couple.

“Be careful, you can squeeze them.”

“I’ll handle them like coddling moths, pecker head.”

David was a bit embarrassed.

“Hey, simp, these are looking kinda shopworn, I’d say.”

“Well, they’ve been around a while.”

“Ah ha. The rest, the paragons I imagine, just kind of sit about like Caesar’s wife while you carry on the show with the others, right? The old masturbate skirmish in the flesh.”

David was livid.

“Okay, okay, simp, not so fast, just looking.” He held the two figures away from his stung playmate. And look he did.

“My god have these been in some big little adventures. The ones that get into the real fights, not just look on. That’s neat -- skinny bowed legs this one. And a tiny head. And this faun no prick at all.”

“Well, I ran out of clay,” David tried to say matter-of-factly.

“Makes sense. Makes a lot of sense. The creator ran out of leg stuff, head stuff and pecker stuff. Really. Why we are like we are, right? The clay ran out the day we were made. Indeed. Like Mozart, the Creator was a lazy ass. Couldn’t be bothered. Or maybe just broke.”

David was by then mute and nearly fuming.

“And, holy hannah, a Centaur. A fine horsey man. And is this one a patootie! Know where that head went into. But they both look like

they've been in the wars, to quote my own pater."

David sullenly looked on.

"So these are the ones that actually see some action, right? Get to perform in the daily rigmarole. Perform in the vortex. The creatures lacking the perfected bodies. Or maybe getting on with the repairs. The Centaur excepted." By then he had taken notice of the many lesions suffered by many in this coterie. David's rancid silence confirmed the conclusion. Julian smiled, not ungratefully.

"Tell you what, simp..."

Julian, who had been taken to the continent several summers on tours of the grand salons, especially those in Italy, his wealthy sumptuous father's other vocation, simply smiled at his school fellow's dilemma. David's wariness and trench line *qui vive* seemed simply daft to him, who had been from an early age exposed to the best and worst of the masters, including his father's rogue collection of what he called both 'nuees arden-tes' (the hot gas in a volcano's magma) and, less sensationally, 'the venerable trouves', which included several nude photos of Bibi her own father had taken. It was part of Carl's enlightened education of his son. Bibi, a leggy ballet dancer with a brief professional career, was a Scandinavian free spirit, sun worshipper with great 'empathy' for the Indian Jainist sect of sly-clad devotion, as Carl put it. He too had been swept off his feet to discover so svelte a form -- 'slender, tender and tall' -- that might exist in live flesh. Splendor, he believed, was nothing less than the upstaging of cupidity and envy. The harmonious transcendence. The visualization of the

mindful witness. In due course he felt doubly blessed, for Johanna promised to be a perfected double of her mother.

Once Bibi had taken over the family after Carl's first wife accepted Carl's liberal settlement package (then promptly drowned), Julian and Johanna played together as Edenic waifs in their new apparently 'stintless' surround. That David might manifest both pride and chagrin at displaying his soft clay wares and later his drawing struck Julian as the genuine article. Pater told him many stories of both the artist and the public's confusion over original and 'unameliorated' beauty. "It is the aesthetic sense that makes of us man or beast. Where that sense is in crisis -- where dogmatism or anarchy makes us slight the worth of the entralled artist -- the cannibals take over." Given Julian's estimate of the denizens in Burdock, certainly their school, 'cannibals' seemed about right. Though his pater was, as he said later, a bit of a droner, one of the ardent toffs. On seeing David's near marvels he, at fourteen, was disposed to exercise his growing picture of himself as connoisseur and indispensable patron. Taking David in hand he collected some of the drawings and clay wares, insuring that they were well and kindly concealed in his valise when they left David's house. Directly they went to Terpsichore Bibi, though David did not anticipate this. She answered the door wearing jeans and a sloppy joe. Soon they stood in the long open ended room off the kitchen where a dance bar and mirror had been installed. "Johanna's doing warmups," Julian felt oddly compelled to remark as Bibi sat to inspect David's offerings. David had a hard time concentrating on Mrs. Wagner's obvious surprise and de-

light with his work, and missed the wink at Julian when she took up the Terry Moore oceanic Naiad character. Emphatically, fantastically, miraculously, Johanna worked at the bar, the winter sun radiant through two skylights, the furnace going full bore. An ormolu shaft of sunlight livened the nimble arching figure, her gold-brown hair alive in sleek ringlets, her faintly sweat marked leotard inadequate for the time with its revelation of marvels in waiting. If Cyril had glimpsed white shorts, he surely never saw the bum as escaped as it was here. And when she stood with crossed feet in what he would later identify as the basic Fifth Position, her front indeed limned a perfect coin machine. David was mesmerized. That he should be so moved by it would later and ever after confound his notion of prurience -- whether he was, and had been all his life, little more than a shy sly voyeur. But that day the very heavens beckoned. The face her helmet of hair framed turned out to be wider and spade like, her large blue eyes no longer showcasing the tedium she seemed to cultivate, but absorbed, focused on her immediate objective. She was performing for a god, and knew the god was paying attention...ornate words he would later write with easily conceded desperation.

So on that lovely December morning, the snow through the kitchen door a late afternoon auric gloaming, the sheen and smell of wood polish on the hardwood floor the handiwork of a Nibulung/Burgundian, the dual image of the sylph at the golden bar, regnant, committed as an Ariadne to lead one out of the maze...he couldn't have been happier or more content. He had arrived. He had glimpsed the miracle, the Pneuma. The

world could do as it wished ever after and he wouldn't complain.

Bibi was finally quite earnest. "David these fauns, both the sketches and models, are wonderful; you must go to a good art school, the one in Toronto at least." Then after a second visual communication with her son, added less assertively, "Have you ever approached your father?"

Julian sighed, looking drolly at his mother. Such things take time. But the leading invitation was irresistible for smitten David, and the Townsend's Methodist ways, as briefly outlined then by himself, were soon as comparatively sensational as the nymph at the bar. Without sensing the partisan nature of his excuse, he imagined the explanation a courtesy to this new kind adult. Bibi could only smile. She was prudent enough to know the ground rules for living and staying in a small town, and she got more information that day than she bargained for. Though she couldn't help but feel Elspeth, whom she knew, might not be up to date on her son's efforts 'downstairs' as Julian had wryly termed it. Bibi was also not a little apprehensive that David might expand to others as he had to her. She had broken up one family; she did not want to be an agent, however indirect, to distemper another. Something she too had not a glimmering of in her own youth: that once begun, openness, candor, freedom can also mightily complect. Like her belated discovery as a latitudinarian that freedom beggared equality, for one was never free of form, of circumstance or more pertinently here, bodies in the round. Finally she said, "David, they're really quite lovely, especially the Centaur. How you got that beautiful blend of horse and man is quite majestic I think. Not at all slattern like

they generally are depicted.” David didn’t know what slattern meant but sensed a caution here, as the silence thereafter implied. Had he said too much? Words he knew might be too eagerly voiced. His lonely existence didn’t abet speeches, explanations. Something said impromptu, in the moment, would almost always dismay him later. The fixed variable. Some things might be pertinent, pithy even, but could be problematic even dismaying in acknowledging. Truth risked being halved by disclosure, by utterance. His idea of the otherwise splendid gift-bearing magi seeking the *other* way on their return, was again revived in his adolescent brain. Even the connoisseurs, as Mrs. Wagner obviously was or might be, had to make their way on their own -- which sooner or later discounted plaintive or collusive deeds. “Over some things you simply have to draw a curtain,” he would hear his father say a month later when Elspeth ventured to clean out one of the suite’s closets. She had been disturbed by the details. She hadn’t reckoned how a youngster’s play world need be that carnal, engrossed to be credible, enjoyable -- that consuming. Reality had not fragmented into perception for her. Christian salubrity was paramount, and piety always a nose ahead of charity. As was her wont, she decided to say nothing to David. If only she could encourage him to play more sports and have more friends. Words, acts should be self-evident, straightforward. Never sly, furtive or craven. As ever, her silence confirmed David’s own expanding inner sanctum, where the imagination might run riot. He had been left on his own recognizance on many many terrifying through-a-glass-darkly nights. It was beginning to show.

Julian of course was a mine of information. As he too had few friends “among the dwarfs,” and prided himself on being an astute and selfless patron, he happily put up with David’s gaucheries. Johanna remained similarly aloof among her age peers, except the handful of inductees whose mothers also championed things like rhythmic gymnastics, which the town of Burdock generally felt to be exhibitionistic. Hoddy Swinton you might find stealing a look through the ajar doors of the school auditorium on a summer evening, but few others. David could rarely think of an excuse to be there, and so sometimes joined Hoddy in the breezy confessional -- feasting on the spectacle as the supple Johanna and her sylphs bent themselves double or rived themselves in half while scampering, floating after ribbons, balls and clubs. It was apparent at the outset that rhythmic gymnastics attracted the prettiest girls. Only a gracile form might perform, compete on such a stage, align herself like a steeple, lunette or crosier. Always trouble. The male imagination was a sorry limited thing the progressives were always lamenting, despairing of, even as their splendid social utopias loomed Zeus-like in their minds.

Oddly, Johanna also seemed to like Julian best, and would affect a sometimes voluptuous disgust of him that seemed to entertain them both. Oftentimes they sought out a section of a sandbar in the creek that had silted into an embankment to form a small but discreet and pristine beach. The path was narrow and scratchy in that outlying turn of the water, widening to facilitate a weir pump that served to irrigate the Southern part of Riverdeen in the spring runoff. The hum of the generators could be felt

through the sun-baked gumbo soil, which pretty naked feet might hone into a fine sandy patina in the dry hot summer. The vast open prairie above the embankment was all but obscured by the tangle of chokecherry, morning glory, honeysuckle, soldiering cat tails, tall plume and pony grasses, most shoulder high. Delicate Bluebottles and durable Dragonflies hovered and hazed in profusion by the moist verge of the water. Then a running race -- fluid and timely along the pathway, the more scraggly scratchy briar and bindweed newly absent, Johanna suddenly silent about bramble berry fronds and their spiny teeth. They had condescended to take David along one day to their select sand bar. "Cousin, Johanna wants to go for a swim." Ordinarily they would have been by themselves, David assumed. When you are Paris and Helen, or Cadmus and Harmony, you flee when you can. Yet David felt a few things should be got out of the way, if he was to share an adventure with this often alarming duo. "How come you never salute the flag; I thought only Jehovah Witnesses did that."

"The war's over."

"But what about O Canada, you sing that."

"Canada didn't know any better."

Julian's words often bewildered. "Do be alarmed, old simp, I tend to agree with pater here. The war was fought for the wrong reasons against the wrong enemy."

"I guess not." David had no idea what Julian was talking about but it sounded like someone would get hell sooner or later for it.

“We should have been in Russia fighting Uncle Joe.”

“Is that your mother’s Uncle?”

Johanna sniggered. But did not expand. She was leading the expedition then, happy to be free of the razor tangle.

“It’s like this simp, the Nazis need never have come to power if we hadn’t been so gutless early on.”

“But they weren’t a good influence.”

“Well, they did get a lot of people back to work, simp. Around the world. They couldn’t have been all bad.”

“That’s dumb. They killed a lot of people.”

“They didn’t have you and me to advise them, did they.”

“You turn things around.”

“The problem with being a paragon, being exclusive. You notice the essence, the paradigm.”

“I don’t think I know much about that.”

“Well, look at that thing wiggling about your swimsuit. Barely keep the dirty filthy little worm inside. Smells to high heaven someday.”

With some chagrin David quietly announced, “I can’t always help that.”

“Well there you are. Add that to the rotten unclean food you eat and you’re a poisonous, stinking pariah, one of the great unwashed. What do you think about that?”

Again David was nettled by the ingrained dirt about his ankles. “My dad never says things like that.”

“Well he’s busy most of the time, simp. You have to keep an ear to the ground.”

David thought of the dirt and wax his mother sometimes helped him flush out of his ears.

“Try to imagine yourself married to Emma Goldman and you have it. Even if you were that lucky, ha, ha, you would never get near the Schnauzer. She’s untouchable goods to the likes of us. Go to her father and ask for her hand and you’re a shyster upstart. It’s an uphill thread. Whereas, if Emma were an arab, they’d cut your dink off first then send you packing. As pater says, Auntie Semite sometimes knows best,” Julian concluded with a suave smile.

It was all plain as the gooey gunmetal embankment mud to David which he noticed with some relief was slowly lightening and widening into the white luminous sand on the shingle of the closeted beach. A miracle of presence and sun-leavened brightness. Only a few footprints dotted its margin, Robinson Crusoe he imagined, still ignorant of Friday. Johanna let out a whoop, ran, splashed and dived into the water. Julian followed. David took his time to take off his T-shirt. He was punier than Julian, who had begun a water fight with Johanna. Yet, to his surprise, he was a better swimmer -- in fact he was exceptional for his age, his mother having patiently taken him at an early age to the swimming hole, which they called a ‘pool’, for instruction, sitting quietly with a neighbor as he bawled his head off the first week at the edge of the water. Yet that very month, in the free time, he became fluent both above and under water. By the af-

ternoon of this dome blue day, he more or less proved he already had his Red Cross Intermediate Certificate. Julian stood mutely rubbing his eyes as simp submerged for a longish underwater reconnoitre, to see the arabesques Johanna's legs made in the yellow-marbled water. She was better than Julian but not as good as David. Soon they were playing tag, David the elusive minnow and prowling muskrat. Johanna applied herself to escape and attack. David felt he could hold his breath forever. She looked as good or better below water as she did above.

She brought a lunch basket her mother put together. Turkey and egg salad sandwiches, tomato juice and grapes. They sat on the sand, the bank theirs alone that afternoon, the sun articling through a clump of poplars further down, one of which inclined in a long arch toward the creek stopping a meter from the water. For a time they sat on the thick curve and watched the water skaters, the delicate long-legged bug you detected only by its tracery in the water. "Like an electron," Julian said, before launching into a dissertation on atomic evidences. In grade nine -- he had skipped a grade -- he was studying physics. "Time to jump the orbit, break the shell, simp." A school of Pike Johanna had spied hovered in a shaded pool just beyond the trunk. Eyeing the pike, she said with savory disgust, "Just like boy wonder. Even the same groddy eyes." Julian pushed her off and the pike vanished before she hit the water.

The afternoon was a heat flush mirage when they returned and, after a minute on the broiled clay-mottled sand, went for a second and third dip. Julian was well into the sandwiches when they returned, seated in an odd

pose on a cooler section of beach near some Chokecherry trees. David looked at him. Said Johanna, “He thinks he’s meditating, in the lotus pose.”

“Think smink,” said Julian. “One bears the heathen and bed wetters with grace.”

Johanna snarled in spite of herself, David looking then bloodshot and a little waterlogged.

“Come sit by the master, cousin. Think not of the cock who couldn’t lay.”

Said Johanna as she helped herself to a sandwich. “We’ve got to eat these to watch him drool. He’s a great drooler. J. Drooler.”

“Such, simp, is the curl of feminine lip.”

If David would later suspect he got many of the words wrong, and missed a nuance or two, he distinctly remembered emerging from the meandering creek only to feel over-his-head and out-of-his-depth on the warm naked sand. Yet just in looking, observing, he sensed a belated frisson that was all the consolation he needed then.

A little later, tomato juice in hand, Julian affected a nostalgia for “the ancient Roman pickle -- the ponce or shyster of senatorial rank I’ve been obliged to play in earlier lives. One makes the best of it, as Bibi often says.” He paused, reflected. “Pater Senior isn’t apparently as flush as he used to be. Being a connoisseur, things may not improve overnight either. Yet we mustn’t slight your education, simp. Your days here too are numbered.” By then Julian was standing, surveying the creek, weir and pop-

lars. “One may not neglect the generic Bluebottles, who have the courtesy to linger a while.”

Johanna had up to that time been active too in reconnoitering the insect population about the edges of the sand bar, fetching a portion of sandwich here, a celery stalk garnish there. She had a Ladybird Beetle on the back of her hand when she squatted as Julian had earlier, cross-legged, transporting the beetle from one hand to the other as she nibbled her sandwich and daubed an iota of the garnish nearer the insect. If one took flight two would replace it, wings aquiver, to sample the treat on her lapped wrists. As if to augment the food chain Julian plopped down behind her and extended a matching wrist...while his free hand alighted on the cowl neck of Joanna’s damp clinging swimsuit to release the selvage and peer down her chest. For a time he gamely studied the revealed contents, which hectic David could not see and tried assiduously to disregard. “Lady dawn, lady balm.” Julian handily looked up. “Lady in waiting.” Then, in a stagy gesture, Joanna newly attuned to her lady bugs, he began lowering the straps of her swim-suit pressing her arms to her sides with a deliberation that astonished his callow and sore-eyed school fellow. “Boy wonder works his imagination pretty hard I think, Jo.” Johanna suddenly released her beetles and cocked her head at their flight as if watching a film upside down while the slow curtain of her swim suit revealed one then the other half of her faintly cambered chest. Julian was not uncritical. “You’ll note, simp, how the nippies sort of begin the whole business, like a new party balloon.” With the back of his nails he lightly traced the opal

of a shoulder, then her sun-dappled hair and neck. “It’s when the cocktail weiners come out.” Stroking her thus, as a violinist might caress his instrument David felt, he stolidly tried to ignore the display before him. “Over-size, ready; like a baby’s head. Peaseblossom.” By then, he had maneuvered Johanna’s gentian one piece almost to her navel, being hindered from going further by her frequent deft snacking from the remains in the picnic hamper. When he did manage to disengage one hand, after a ticklish pantomime, the other held onto a sandwich with a well-garnished lettuce leaf and tomato slice edging loose -- a salient too fixed and precarious to out flank. Nibbling and licking the cascade Johanna swam back into her suit, then, to reassert herself, adopted the classic lotus asana after a seemingly effortless try, something Julian could not do.

For a time Julian obliged the physical finesse. “Please note the mulled mastication.” Then, after studying her balance as she pac-manned her sandwich, he surprised her and David by pushing on her sternum with one finger and easily tipping the shoulder heavy form onto its back. As she sought to release bent entwined legs -- less easily accomplished than their placement when inverted -- Julian began to displace the exposed delta of her suit, starting them both raptly giggling, such that before she disentangled her legs, pushed him away and plastered the richly garnished lettuce leaf onto his face, he was able to pull aside the light weft-knit fabric of the gusset and afford David his inaugural if brief glimpse of a live female labia. Both sister and brother indulged a spate of nearly silent sniggering as Johanna tugged to restore the gusset. Gravely Julian said, just be-

fore he released the selvage, “Note simp, a teased eyebrow upstage, the...the ‘tormenter’.” David tried to scowl. The brief disclosure reordered the precepts of his anatomical smarts. Julian resumed in a dramatic silence, “Think of the Immortal kore, simp. Not the cloven hoof.” He and Joanna exchanged silent droll looks. She then drew a brownie from the lunch box and crushed it over her brother’s head, the crumbs a landslide, David thought. “Such nice brownie bedbugs,” she said. “J drooly Bedbug.”

In the lengthening, purpling shadows Joanna rose to fully restore her suit, her eyes risible, her lips oddly pursed. Julian was rallying, the mayonnaise all but wiped clean of his face. As he licked and wiped his face clean, he said, “Well, simp, I said you had to keep your wits about you. Can’t go through life eyes to the right, quick march.”

The pause was for David electric and relentless. Finally Julian said, “I think simp wants to make you immortal. Put you on a pedestal. He’s seen the lesser Olympians.”

Johanna fetched a second brownie as she snaffled a draught from her cup of tomato juice. She blankly looked at David -- “Your older brother died in an accident, right?” She gave Julian a dismissive shrug.

“Well he’s hardly thrilled about it,” Julian piped in.

David was not unmindful of the dramatic opening. “He was crushed. In a van. A tanker,” he said into the void, belatedly thinking it was a strange subject here. Did it have to do with being crushed, he wondered? Being unlucky? Being human? Johanna might have smiled, he thought.

For perhaps the first time she looked at him, at his slicked hair, red eyes, plumping form. Then his nervous hands. “What sort of a royalty do I get?” she asked. David grimaced and thought very hard. Said Julian, “Royalty, shmoyalty. You get your bum immortalized. Your clam, well I can’t say. He’s a fusspot.” David silently roiled. “Clam bake?” asked Johanna. “Well it goes into an oven doesn’t it?” she asked of her attentive, proximate audience.

“Does the clay get baked, simp? No, it stays fresh, just sits around sweating in the heat.”

By then Johanna began collecting the picnic ware and lunch wrappings. David looked on sensing an acute sobering piquancy. The shadows now had that lovely mallow density that eluded his plastic arena. Color turned you inside out. Soon he was walking behind his new pathfinder Kalon in a late redolent sun-creek gloaming, deciding that if the static human figure might be apprehensible, the moving ensemble was entirely defiant. His figures had never before struck him as dead. As frozen, petrified. Again he decided she wasn’t, couldn’t be real. Simply more impertinent evidence of the Immortal in transit, a transcendent other inadvertently coming and going. Another superfluous reminder: look on at your peril. Julian was his usual confounding help as he trundled along behind observing the environmental detritus. “You’ll note the fuzz on the elder elderberries, like a boar’s snout after a sneeze. And on the far bank do note the gastronomical egesta from last year’s grad dance.” In calmer sections, the creek bottom sometimes yielded up a dark green algaecide sludge that

looked like badly digested fruitcake. “How the slime keeps humping the sand. Can you believe it.” Several times Johanna released the back selv-edge of her damp swimsuit. A too lush reminder. Soon she was cursing the blackberry brambles. A couple of pink scratches laced one knee when they emerged into the open walkway that led to the swing bridge. He walked beside her then, Julian still ransacking the possibilities behind. “Did you see that horse floating down the creek? Looked as if he’d really tied one on.” Said Johanna, her azure eyes half lidded, “He always sees horses about now. He never likes walking.” Said Julian, “I’m a performer not a hoofer.” David knew that hoofer could be a dancer, whereas Julian played the violin -- one of the other music teacher’s ‘genius’ pupils who got two adjudication marks in the nineties at the last Kiwanis Music Festival. They paused and threw some of the cat tails they collected on the path down into the now reflective water, watching them limn the currents. He noted Johanna and Julian making lurid faces at one another, inventing all sorts of wizardry with their hands. They both ended up lightly laughing with that maniacal edge that apprized and dumfounded. After an abrupt turn in the path, the swing bridge emerged above the embankment coppice. Said Julian, taking note of David’s observant witness, “To bare a soul string...then leave it swinging, tsk, tsk. Hey ho bardolatry.” Johanna continued on ahead of them, once stubbing her toe on the cross ties. Continued Julian, “One day the thing’s gonna come tumbling down, you can bet your padudallywoodally on it.” No sooner were they on the plank walkway than Julian began swaying side to side. The quavering always

spurred David on to the other side. "I give you -- Indomitable's upper gun deck."

They parted as they sometimes did just beyond the hospital park, below the steep hill at the back of the hospital where David often played, one day falling through a grass and earth stoppered hole into a strange chamber, reminiscent of a stable. Or so he believed. An unpleasant odor always issued from one small depression in the hill which that day slowly caved in, depositing him in a space with much straw and an array of crude shelving, which housed in the dust filtered light the most alarming and unusual objects -- packages of syringes, stained dressings, portions of casts, dinged jars. An old hospital dump, he imagined later, its earth covering slowly eroded by the heavy snows of the late forties and early fifties...a setting he may have conjured in a dream, in the raw open wound of his imagination. The sense of being fetched into a witches brew was lost to him only in name, for the period in question seemed relentlessly uncanny and bewildering. He was a while finding the leverage needed to heft himself out of the cavern. How queasy he felt when he emerged. As culpable and ungainly as that day by the creek when Julian led him to an arcane haunt and sought to immortalize his sister -- the lush alien detail that always lambastes, knocks you galley west. Demands you begin all over again -- such being the plight given a swollen suppurating past. He might never be that certain about what happened. Stranded memories lingered like pets left tethered by a front door, faces ever in doubt.

It was a bewildering time for one given to a recondite and provisional

life lived looking in, on, never entered into as a consequent player. One problem was parenthetically indexed in his memory the afternoon he discovered in the mail on his father's desk a marriage manual, still in its monogrammed mailing envelope from a drug company, a notable item either mislaid or left to alert the doggedly curious. The fact it had arrived on the eve of All Saints Day seemed doubly daunting. Perhaps the earlier book he'd been consigned was not deemed effective, for the new book's discovery coincided with Julian's rather brutal summation of the 'bare facts'. Now glancing through this latest 'trove' with its many benedictions about respect, patience and consideration, David could not assimilate the small elegant line drawings of the basic coital positions, despite his envy of the fluid nimble hand that created them. His disbelief at that moment, as signal as his wonder at first beholding his own marveled creations, would tease him ever after. No, people did not do this.... Was he a freak then from the word go? The likelihood that people actually willfully enjoined one another in such clinches seemed absurd, farfetched, a tribulation beyond reckoning. A conclusion that would not much soften with time. 'We don't call them animals for nothing,' Julian or someone like him would say later on. It was this very subject a mature Julian, as a comedian called the Gryphon, would take up years later with a renewed resonance that seemed prophetic to David's lingering doubts about the 'human' condition. As usual, Julian's audience was perhaps on its guard when he launched into his Creator schtick.

"There's a lot of yammering these days about humping -- no longer

so pure and simple! Some of the world's once great religions are getting called on the carpet. Too much beefcake. Not Islam, of course, but the two modern pariahs -- Judaism and Christianity. So many wary believers thinking they've been suckered and stiffed -- adding to the growing number who couldn't give a hoot one way or another, or decided they're heading for Headhackistan. I quote a fellow pariah. Yet the religion that's getting the most licks these days was begun by a chap who didn't get his grand start in the usual grand way by clobbering his doubters and rivals into submission, or letting them in on the fact that being mortal and peculiar was a fail-safe drama, a reliably captivating passion play. Why humans were and are so fascinating. One reason old Zeussy killed off the Heroes and their Daimones was they were becoming banal, familiar; they had shucked the dread of their own demise; they were becoming too godlike. An ample warning I should think. Immortals habitually die of boredom -- except they can't. *Humans* keep their twitters aglow. Method assault for an eternity. The history of everything. ”

A few half-hearted sniggers.

“Hang in there -- this isn't rocket science. There's a poem by a wiseacre named De Vries that begins so: ‘He -- the Creator, the big cheese -- makes a world where one thing eats another then sends His only son to be our brother.’ So what do we have on the table after this big Sandbagger comes to suggest we rethink pillage, bloodletting and rapine? The basic preoccupations of the historic marauders all created in the Sandbagger's image. Not an encouraging start. He sends his Love Child to perform a

few miracles, bad mouth some money changers, tool about on an ass to case the neighborhood, then get himself crucified in a fairly convincing manner to forgive us for Not Knowing What We Do -- killing and maiming many millions while -- coincidentally -- keeping our arteries unclogged, our joints limber, our minds alert, our snogging forthright -- and our numbers serviceably culled -- and the planet Green. The silly notion of 'be fruitful and multiply' is but another variant of Not Knowing What Ye Do. Al that caterwauling, pussywhippin' dongfloggin' yowling."

Then the Gryphon paused, as if he'd forgotten a line. A few sniggers surfaced in the audience. David even sensed an inaugural and puzzling demur about what he was about to say -- which the forthcoming words seemed, in their adopted earnestness, to ratify, as if even the Gryphon had found his Road to Damascus. Indeed, some in the audience looked nonplussed, as if they had missed something, while others duly waited for the recognizable screwer, the deadly sucker punch.

"Ever think that Hell may be filled with some very compassionate folk. The legacy of pain. That can't be ignored. Solzhenitsyn took note. All that pain over all that time. Humbling right? Lets you in on the lyric of renunciation. Makes you, in the annals of time, acutely aware..."

Again a pause and a nod that suggested the show was over. Some lagging piecemeal applause. The Gryphon himself looked a little spent, redundant, supernumerary. Not pleased someone might applaud. So David thought, before he resumed: "You ever think that maybe all God wanted was a few extra Beethovens, Bachs and Mozarts. The gold-

standard Ode to Joy. Got the lyric wonders out of the deck, the touching passion players...the romantic goods to make the catharsis show credible? All **He** was really interested in -- the unparalleled human passion play to ease the boredom. Rappers don't really cut it, do they? The connoisseurs of crap. The premier hog callers...don't worry, it only gets more complicated hereon in."

The silence continued unbroken.

"The Al Qaeda and ISIL regulars -- yeah. In Islam they let you in on a few fetching details, not many mind you. After all the houris are rather limited for an eternity -- you can lay the lot in a long weekend, right? The Great Virgin Gamekeeper knows all about that -- if we're talking infinity here -- trillions and trillions and trillions of years. Seventy two or three handmaids won't go very far. But there's maybe just enough for a devout chap to bury his face in the carpet, which sounds about right when you think of it. The one time you might sell form fitting Levis in Mecca, eh?... Still, the Islamist may have the right idea: kill everyone who asks too many bloody questions."

Finally some half-hearted whistles and equally vociferous boos, including a couple of threatening gestures. A shouting match begins between two patrons in a far corner. They only desist when aware of the hissing they've evoked. The Gryphon takes note of the momentary quiet and concludes, as he usually did: "Oblivion is looking good, right?..."

Spare applause and a whistle or two from the bear baiters.

It was an evening when David discovered for the third or fourth time

that he had no head for drink, and was barfing in the bog shortly after the Gryphon finished up. It took several years before he identified his school fellow in the lurid disguise. He was disappointed but worried too, in keeping with the patented message, that the promised paradise was maybe just another retirement home, a close description of it left off for good reason. It was a complex matter. Humans free of sin would no longer be ‘human’ and thus identifiable or recognizable, even to themselves most like. Take away appetite, pride, credulity and you sleep. So how can you be reborn and be aware of it? As the Gryphon invariably said at closing time, ‘Oblivion is looking good, right?’ Later he would add: “If you come to recognize yourself in the afterlife, you’re in big trouble.”

To belatedly discover his former school fellow this archly acrimonious came as a shock to David. He wryly wondered if such discontent might be the result of an incestuous entrancement that offered no accommodation to a basically seemly society and, as a result, little durable respite? It was a question David put to himself as the Gryphon wallowed in his often precious miasma. The obsessive aspect of indulgence convening its own Nemesis? The idea carried a sturdy taunt. David suspected there would always be a nimble witted fiend somewhere tinkering with things, giving the screw another turn; that even oblivion may be finally a forlorn hope -- a sub-junction of O’Toole’s Law (which rendered Murphy’s optimistic). It seemed there would always be a godlike adventurer, investigator, devilish ‘savant’ who wanted to know what another tweak might accomplish; who could never leave well enough alone because well enough was a dead end.

And that was about the time he began to consider that by making body and minds so invidiously different, cosmic wonders like black holes may be nothing more than the density of accumulated resentment. Al Qaeda in the round.

The clues in David's past were 'congregating'. It was shortly after a mid-teen All Hallows'Eve when he gleaned further evidence of the gamy human condition. Or so he imagined. It came with a rare 'adult' party at the Townsend's on the evening of the first snow. The moon was full and the prairie tundra sparkling. As the celebrants arrived many children, including David, could be seen upon the brow of the coulee, dark forms moving about in a pale blue incandescence, savoring the extra time allotted by an extended curfew. Early that afternoon David had attended a sonsy school fête. Why he didn't find bobbing for apples a 'lark' was a question he put to his 'board of elders' on the way home from school. He acknowledged it was supposed to be fun, but when you repeatedly made an ass of yourself in a highly convincing manner...he had yet to consider the byways of egocentrism.

Shortly after all the late guests arrived David returned home from the coulee uniquely worried about Ali Baba, whose hind legs had konked out during the last ride down the hill; barely did they lift him back to the top. Even now as the two approached the noisy, well-lit house he just kept up with David, who was then too cold and wet himself to be of much comfort, other than logging the new handicap. The din of the festivities allowed Ali to slink up the darkened staircase and settle beneath David's bed

-- a rare coup on this forgiving night. In turn David stole glances from the landing at the festivities below, in particular the voices of the more formidable adults of the community, a secondary school principal, an elderly spinster across the lane, the choir master, and a druggist who made and sold tombstones as a hobby. Their stories and pieces of inflated gossip spanned hours of high spirited twitters, sniggers and guffaws. Particularly astonishing were the explosions caused by the choir master, a stern, taut, little skeleton of a man who owned half the real estate of the town, and wore the same two suits his industrious wife repeatedly patched and mended until he had, ostensibly, two tailor-made suits. He neither smoke nor drank, nor engaged in anything that might foil his image of self-discipline, yet there he was, his high-pitched nasal voice telling Mrs. Stirrit that she was a mother-kin to winter pansies, and that she shouldn't give a second thought about putting on her woolies that night for he rarely took off his long johns -- even in summer! She must have taken his advice for her laughter, the most raucous and boisterous of all, continued uninterrupted throughout the evening, a deluge of wheezes and rasps punctuated by drink ice palmed as dice, and dishes brusquely fetched from and dispatched to table tops. What David delighted in were crystal flutes and shot glasses saluting the ceiling and reflecting the sparkle of the fire, and the overdecorated 'girls' alighting near this table and that chair, but always moving off, damselflies molested by the riot and smell of a delicatessen. So he surmised.

The gradual decrescendo of noise and hubbub was almost complete

when a blithe commotion took place next door where the ladies were getting into their coats. It was incited by the discovery that Mrs. Stirrit had absently put on a second pair of woolies belonging to another. After each had regained her breath and wiped away the laugh tears, they began to talk seriously of severe winters past and how they were endured. Vida's name surfaced, convening words too dolorous for David to assimilate. Once Ali Baba's name was mentioned, with unusual deference David thought with some chagrin, just as he fell asleep and dreamt of the feral coulee.

RECKONING

Vassily approached the car with the wind to his back, the gusts of dirt and thistle blowing ahead of him occasionally blurring the car. A dusky sun was setting to his right, limning the edge of the gravel pit. He walked at his normal brisk pace, knowing he must get to within fifty feet to make the first shot count. He kept his hands outside his pockets and pretended calm. He knew it would be easier all round if they could garrote him unsuspectedly in the front seat of a car. Only once, and for a second, did he imagine his fate other than it was. The driver, the lone body visible, stood by the hood hunched to the wind, spitting dirt from his mouth. When Vassily still had an estimated ten feet to go the crack split the air. His left shoulder shuddered in a crimping blow. He rolled on the ground, having little difficulty simulating a grave injury, holding his chest. The bullet came from his left, from the pit's newest grader level. A phantom briefly

smudged the horizon. Mutely he strained to forestall the pain. At the last minute he rolled away, fetched the Lugar from his breast pocket with his right hand and shot twice at the driver. Another rifle shot broke the silence, nicking his belt as he rolled into the heady dirty wind before rising, running, dipping and turning as a further shot buzzed his ears. He kept running into the wind so, yawing, zig zagging, almost as he once maneuvered his tank in the training tundra of Siberia. Abruptly the shots ceased and he assumed the second man had taken after him. The trip wire he had extended across a section of the prairie two nights before was, he noted, still taut and largely indistinct in the dusty wind. With luck... then a sixth shot knocked his toque off. He kept on, then abruptly turned and knelt when he'd reached the allotted measure he allowed for a swift runner, as the hit man would certainly be. He heard the flagrant cursing as he fired without pause at the newly sprawled body, the rifle landing several paces from the twitching form. In four seconds it was all over. The form lying in a slow ooze of blood that small bits of thistle settled in and could not escape. Approaching the car in a cloud of dust he saw the driver slumped down by the running board, the side of his head covered in blood, the limbs awkwardly placed. Wincing, favoring his left shoulder, he felt for a non-existent pulse. The man was dead, or soon would be. He always was a lucky bastard Nechayev had said. "A yokel out of an old fable." His shoulder was a mess but not, he now knew, a gusher. The bullet skimmed his shoulder likely grazing the bone. A swiftly applied dressing stopped the main bleeding. With exquisite agony he could lift the elbow

and move his fingers. The wind he decided had clinched the matter; without it he likely wouldn't have prevailed. He swallowed the last of his sulfa pills, then grappled with getting the two bodies in the trunk, using the rifle and his rawhide strips as a crab winch. He weighted both with rocks from the gravel pit. He was beyond trying to bury them. He would have to ditch the package somewhere as it was. And so, that night, just beyond the Saskatchewan River Landing park, he drove the car near the water and dumped the bodies, wading in and pushing them to a concealing depth. The current was slack there but sufficient to carry the bodies further out. His own jeopardy was also now a duel with time. Another team would be dispatched in due course. He believed he had a week's grace period as he drove back, leaving the car on an empty street back of the hospital.

Early the following morning he lay in the shelter of a chicken shed, the chickens roosted and mute. The pain in his shoulder was he concluded not exceptional. He had been wounded before and bargained with contingency. He would survive. Must. To foil the pain he strove to recall the few choice moments in his exiguous stay here -- bathing in the sleepy condolent creek, gorging himself on chokecherries, hunting the ducks that stayed late in the wet fall to graze on the swathed but unharvested fields -- grain fed fowl! Lastly he thought of the young girl playing so masterfully in the cellar. His 'Evening in Granados'...perhaps his last 'night out'. Whose young life may well be near an end. Had he imagined it all, so edgy and impatient was he then? Yet he had provided as his one warrant specified, his only regret that he could not explain to his future handlers

why the dedicated professionals at the Farm might not be candidates for hire. Idealists much like himself. Ha! The chief agrologist, Bruce Armstrong, generous and sturdy, blessed with a pretty blithe wife. A dancer someone said.

As he passed out, he imagined dancing with Bibi Armstrong on a stylish palazzo. Why is it you always find the inimitable beauties in such remote locations? Beauty not specifically designed to molest....

That very night Vida first spoke to Mrs. Hammond, the redeye nurse, while a keen wind rattled the windows in the hospital, and Vida's weak voice nearly went unheard. Vida wanted a drink. She was bewildered. Mrs. Hammond composed herself. "You've suffered an accident, Vida, but you're healing nicely. Your left hand will soon be good as new." An exaggeration, but it was one hope they might then invoke. The right hand was, miraculously, barely touched, only a few fingers scarred in the attack. Then the suddenly astonishingly compos patient wanted to know if Andy was close by. Mrs. Hammond was a time recalling who Andy might be. "He's the gardener," Vida said between sips. "He wont be angry as my dad."

"We'll do our best to find him dear; I'm sure he'll be here tomorrow."

Earlier that day Elias had been to the hospital to sign the papers that would put Vida, if she continued to progress, into the long-term care wing at the Weyburn mental asylum. There was no sense in leaving her in school and she would get the care she needed there. Dr. Layton, the new expert on the scene, a psychologist, was most reassuring. The only other

alternative was keeping her at home, a prospect that brought a new vale of tears to Elias' face as he gazed into his arthritic hands. Dr. Layton and Mrs. Crisp, the Matron of the hospital, exchanged glances. Weyburn would likely be best. Vida could be visited when she was settled.

Dr. Layton, the first psychologist in Burdock, and a brisk resolute talker, described a progressive catatonic state, still perhaps sub-clinical but encapsulating full blown symptoms, words Lucius Townsend found precious and largely inapt but kept his mouth shut. Of late he was losing his nerve in many respects, the pain ascribed to his gallbladder sufficient to keep him merely functional, not as calmly dedicated and assertive as he once was. The prospect of a stone had not been ruled out in his last examination. He was to be X-rayed that week. Also, the Benzedrine he sometimes now wrote a false prescription for was threatening to become a habit. Had they not been so busy during and after the war he might have left off. But the late exhaustion seemed invincible. He must get a hold of himself. 'It's a great world if you don't weaken,' he 'overheard' himself say to a night nurse in the hospital. Weakness was on his mind these days, Elias Semple being but another example of the neighbor beyond his help, and his daughter another example of the ill-starred. For a second time he returned the unopened cigarette package to his shirt pocket. The two-pack-a-day man was near to opening a third...and then to have his car stolen the night of Mrs. Klassen's confinement. He had to get old Sampson, the hospital taxi man, out of bed to drive him into Herbert. Only to find that the baby had been born hours before. The father wanted instead an

abortion for his fifteen-year-old, who was at least four months into her pregnancy. “Thought you’d appreciate me covering up for you, doc.” Boozy, belligerent threats ensued when Lucius refused. If Sampson hadn’t been there he didn’t know what might have happened. The local midwife, an older Mennonite lady he knew and sometimes worked with, also vehemently balked at the request. Sampson was not as staunch a believer as himself, yet felt the idea monstrous when he heard the heated words coming from the kitchen and came forward. Sampson phoned the RCMP when they returned to Burdock. Lucius suspected it might all end badly. Especially for the youngster. The clinic would advise the Regional Health Board.

Vida he may have thought as pathetic perhaps, but not he had concluded, mad or catatonic. And Providence it seemed was still in her corner; indeed, she might handily survive. Might. Earlier, before the attack, he was particularly touched by her pressed flower collection Elias brought to the hospital as a gift decoration and the quaint but legible labels she had fashioned for each variety. Elspeth knew her teacher and made enquiries. There seemed to be a late deterioration, not unconnected the teacher felt with the laxity in her home, something Elspeth rather doubted. “The teacher is a hard luck story herself, I think. It’s unfortunate Vida couldn’t have had someone like Miss Alexander last year. She has some training in deficient learners I hear from the school nurse, Mrs. Wharton.” They had mulled the plight of the girl over a late-night milk toast, the one offering Lucius might now eat without discomfort at night. Perhaps his own plight

had eclipsed that of the girl. But he doubted Weyburn would do her much good. He was still diffident about the psychological diagnosis of ‘unsoundness of mind’. He knew Hoddy Swinton guarded his discharge papers like the royal gems in the Tower. When confronted by a teaser -- “Hoddy you’re as crazy as a cookoo!” -- Hoddy would pull them out and challenge his assailant to prove his own soundness of mind. Moreover, Lucius detected no improvement in Hoddy since his discharge. But then he had been told more than once, that he was a philistine when it came to ‘mental disorders’.

Lucius was in bed and nodding when Elspeth at last turned out the light. Ever a good looking woman he thought. Though she hadn’t had much of a husband the year past. He fell asleep thinking of the early renewable times. The smiles all round.

It was just such pleasant nostalgic imagery that graced Vassily’s mind as he awoke in excruciating pain a second time to radiant sunlight in a cloudless blue sky and the crowing of a second or third operatic cock. That he might see the sun at all teased even as the pain dogged his consciousness. At first he could barely move. He anticipated a heavy fever. Yet it seemed a miracle, was a miracle, that he might awake to another day; that he was alive and might slowly stand, even walk. The fever would lessen the ongoing quest for food.

He returned to the creek and gulped several handfuls by the track that fed the local pump. He debated going to the hospital. Until the onset of a stubborn infection, he decided he would hope to return...in his reverie the

night before he had revisited the enlightened socialistic plans he pledged one day to implement, something akin to the values of someone like the disciplined yet compassionate Stanley Knowles, one Canadian who might share the resolutions that would revive Holy Mother Russia and perhaps the world: Caesar his due, God his, with a concordance for the two. He saw little conflict in the details of this Fabian treatise, his main solace and distraction that once nearly curtailed his enlistment in 'the service'. His subsequent glimpse of a utopian freedom that had gone so wrong would be, must be redeemed and revamped. As for now blind chance must decide his calling. Once again. Either he would languish in a septic ward in the West or return a possible fugitive to the land of his birth. Perhaps to a prison ward. If the Fates were unsympathetic.

But as he rose from the creek the shadows behind him were unstinting. Fate had decided.

"I wouldn't try that, if I were you. No insult intended, old boy."

Two mounties in breeks, parkas and astrakhans stood back of him, one with his holster unsnapped.

"Come without a fuss and we'll do the same."

It seemed an 'irrefusable' offer. He had overslept, must have been seen in the bright sunlight by a resident of the area who called the local constabulary. He smiled when he thought of the dark retriever he sometimes saw in the prairie, his 'pragmatist' -- a consummate chicken thief as well, he had no doubt. He strove to imagine that was all there was to it. Hoddy maybe talking again out of turn.

But such insouciance was far from Mrs. Engler's mind when she looked across her breakfast table to spy the tramp sunning himself by the McCarthy chicken shed. The man's presence presented her with a dilemma. She sided with the world's have nots, but did not like the look of this one. There was something not quite right about his appearance, what she could see of it. He seemed too robust for one thing, his profile reminded her of a teacher she once had a crush on. Moreover, his kit though grimy and worn looked too sturdy and well designed to belong to an idler or listless drifter. Moreover, there simply were too many coincidences that month in Burdock, beginning with the Semple tragedy, the doctor's missing car, to say nothing of the two Rhode Island layers Mrs. McCarthy had been missing -- weeks after the Townsend's dog had been put down. There were also some stories about the Semple housekeeper, which suggested she was either a thief herself or the victim of one. Finally, with a sigh, Mrs. Engler phoned the RCMP. "Well he may be sunning himself I know, but he doesn't look right. And it looks as if there's some blood."

Constable Ian Frazer had answered the call. He was the kind of man in uniform women often swoon over. A fine athlete, crack shot, avid swimmer, canoeist and camper, natty dresser, also a former and now residual trainer and examiner for the Royal Life Saving Society, in which capacity he was anxious to arrive that morning at the RCMP training facilities in the Moose Jaw Natatorium, where the latest round of instruction was scheduled. The call from Mrs. Engler thus distracted him from the satisfying image of himself showing the students the various strategies in rescu-

ing a troubled swimmer or ill-fated boater. Dedication and self-esteem often go hand in hand. The fact that three female candidates were accepted this year, all of whom shaved their legs, made the exhibition of himself a most welcome duty. That they might look like Martians in their bathing caps and baggy wool suits did not distract at all from the pinched cleaved chests and ever escaping nates one glimpsed poolside. In light of all this, a mere tramp, and possible chicken thief, might be readily disposed of.

It was before this impetuous and reluctant officer that Vassily was first questioned in the hospital annex lounge while being treated for his wound. The preliminary queries revealed George Horlick to be a veteran stranded after demob, a little disoriented perhaps from the sudden freedom and release, not being told any more what to do and when, a drifter who had unaccountably left a caretaker job at the Experimental Farm to go on a binge, and was found with a wound he said was accidental and self-inflicted, the clumsy attempt to shoot a rabbit in the act of stepping into a large hole, perhaps that of a badger. He had fallen forward and the gun went off. The likelihood of the owner of such a weapon being so maladroit would wait an investigation of the man's papers, including this possession of a select revolver reputedly taken off a German officer. Since no other persons in that region had recently been treated for gunshot wounds, uppermost in Ian's mind was the salient plan that he would use to postpone releasing the man. The idea presented itself as he conducted the interview.

"I want you to remain in hospital for a day or two -- yes I know you feel

not too bad -- but I have another problem to sort out. You'll learn what I mean in due course. I've talked to the doctor. Sargent Harker will keep an eye on the ward while you're here. We'll talk tomorrow. Questions?"

Vassily decided he had been blessed. Escape from the ward would be a breeze. Yet the food they were about to serve looked like a gourmet spread. Vigilantly he must look for the coming of a 'too innocuous' stranger. Other than that -- bon appetite.

"I've no place special to go."

"Excellent. See you."

But if Ian Frazer accepted himself as a young Apollo, he also believed himself quick-witted, a hubris that usually kept him abreast of the resolvable complexities in his caseload. The interrelation of recent events in his district suddenly hit home while he was waist deep in the sparkling chlorine blue pool, its stale humidity the breath of a groggy leviathan, as he showed the genteel Amy Holmes how to improve her tow kick, essentially a supine scissor kick. Amy floated on her side, arms over her head, hands fixed to the spill rim. She all but despaired of her weak leg kick and cooperated with a selfless resolve that touched him as he took up her ankles and after getting her to relax her legs, maneuvered them into the sequence of tuck, spread and close that would give one the strength to haul an ailing but cooperative swimmer out of harm's way, a not always feasible prospectus. "You should feel a distinct surge against the sides of the knees," he said, trying to overlook the few pubic curlicues issuing from the gusset of her swimsuit. Tuck, spread and close; up, out and together. After several

hands-on manipulations she seemed to get the hang of it. With practiced ease he hefted himself onto the deck, to gauge the pressure her hands exerted on the side tiles. “Better, but you need some practice.” “The understatement of the year,” said a determined Amy in response, her hands firmly braced against the tiles. As he watched the sucking surges, noting anew the delicate but defined sinew of her form, the remaining pieces of the puzzle surrounding the Semple child formed a credible whole: Horlick had been the one who found and delivered the child to the hospital, and stolen Doc Townsend’s car. He would have been covered in blood. The probability seemed unflinching as he knelt on the deck, again testing the hand pressure exerted from the kick, averting his eyes from the eddies then swirling about the littoral of Amy’s young chest, coincident with her own needy laughter as she shunted her legs. Horlick! My god, the man could be up to any number of tricks! Yet the bugger must have a conscience. The clinic doctors were in no doubt that the child was attacked by an animal, likely a cougar, and almost didn’t make it. Yet what was Horlick doing out in the prairie where he must have found her? As compensation for this insight, Ian decided to try Amy out in the deep end. With a little coaxing she followed him to the plunge line, grasped his chin, pulled him onto his back, affixed the cross chest hold and began to pull her cooperative victim to the shallow end. Their progress was slow, her breathing labored, her knees sometimes bouncing off his bum, yet she coursed the length of the pool without pause. They grinned while idling in the shallows and she released some water from her cap. He assured her it was a good start,

that he was bonier and heavier than most drowning people, while duly reminding her that such rescues should only be deployed as a last resort -- if, and only if, the rescuer felt confident of the attempt, and the cooperation of the person in distress seemed assured. As often as not a rare event. He also managed to look at, nod to and assist other swimmers as they struggled by, feeling then some chagrin for Amy and her older woolen costume that left her looking like a partly dissolved gumdrop, its very skein of modesty an untoward revelation when wet. But by then he had a further plan. The class was just over, the swimmers climbing out of the pool, Amy standing dripping, arms folded in front. She seemed at times to be a bit of a simpleton, making his fascination with her strangely companionable. Goosebumps needled her arms, which she held up like an observant gopher, he thought, following the action about the pool with large rather bruised, tracery eyes, eyes that were beginning to haunt. It appeared she had left her towel in the dressing room yet awaited some kind of formal dismissal, a hiatus that aided his coalescing plan. He grimaced before beginning.

“Look, I’ve got an unusual police case I need some help with. If I sound kinda bold, I sometimes am, but not without cause, I hope. You’re under no obligation of course, nor any responsibility. But I sometimes find an alert outsider a help in coming to a decision. And I could use such a one now.”

The line rarely failed. Amy faintly blushed. “Well, I don’t know about ‘alert’.”

“The coffee in the canteen isn’t too bad this time of day -- usually the second or third urn. We could meet there in say twenty minutes? Shouldn’t take long.”

Amy seemed agreeable but incredulous. “Just me?” For a baleful moment it seemed he was on his own.

“Well, it’s sometimes easier to stay focused one on one. Little more than a hunch but it seems to work. You have a noticeable regard for others that will be especially helpful I think. In this case.” He waited on tenterhooks, suddenly fresh out of further excuses.

“Sure, I guess so.” She nimbly smiled. “I have to make a call first though. Say half-an-hour?” She squinted more water from her eyes, and looked briefly as if she were severely near sighted.

By the time they met and tabled their backgrounds -- she a student teacher in Moose Jaw, her father a farm implement salesman, he a farm boy from Cadillac and recently proposed inspector -- he was sufficiently versed in his take on the mysterious George Horlick that he could impress a listener with an absorbing delineation of the case. Amy took note of his carefully ironed service shirt, his strong active hands, his innate assurance and occasional coyness, his winsome dimpled chin, and listened in heedful silence, her gaze darting between his lidded sleuth’s eyes and the vague middle space on the table between them. When she deemed it appropriate to speak they had reached the celebrated time of Vida’s recovery of her voice in the hospital and, except for the one leg, marginal use of her limbs. Amy’s initial comment belatedly took his breath away. “Could you

not arrange for them to be in the same ward? Or together at mealtime? He could hardly not be partial to her if he did as you think?" His own silence seemed suddenly alien to him. She added, "Would it not help to confirm your hunch and if so be a mutual benefit to her, if she indeed remembers anything? Maybe to both of them? As for the other matter -- leaving as he did -- perhaps he left before demob and feared being identified. Not unheard of." She apathetically smiled, as much to herself. "Perhaps he thought he arrived too late...yet would not want to leave her in the prairie. It's something a shell-shocked soldier might do -- shunning recognition of another death. There's some new literature on such disabling fears." She had avoided his face as she voiced these erudite words, perhaps he thought because of his reputed doggedness. He had been warned of this obduracy before. Suaveness he was still perfecting. Her thick dark helmet of hair with its wet fringes and fenced bangs seemed a distracting foil for her quiet reconnoitering eyes. "That may be an excellent start," he said, nodding while the artful ploy sunk in. His approval of her handily grew as he thought of the classes in the week to come. If he could only reconcile such acumen with the homely limp look of the swimmer...surely one of the other girls would suggest a less penitent costume. Looking at her now, at a frayed seam on her blouse, he guessed her impecunious, and likely beholden, and decided that overt attention in the pool may be seen as obvious and excessive given her demure manner and understated loveliness. No doubt about it -- she was becoming a first order of business! He repeated, "That might just be a very good start. Especially Vida's reaction

if, as you say, she remembers anything.” The light smile that greeted these words settled the matter. They sipped their coffee in a ready if not acknowledged silence. Amy noted several of the candidate life-savers looking their way and resisted their imputation of privilege. Before they parted he said, “I’ll keep you posted.” She responded, after a brief consideration, “I’d like that.”

When Vassily took his main meal with sergeant Harkness, two days later, the girl he remembered now with some solicitude, the performer who beguiled a vegetable cellar, survived an attack by a cougar (the forensic guesstimate), the disarmingly pathetic Vida Semple, was seated opposite. She had shown a gratifying improvement. She was still oblivious of the nature of her ‘accident’, but could walk then, slowly, and her one partly bandaged hand, the right, seemed on the mend but for a series of ruby scratches that paralleled the stitches. From the naturalness with which she handled her fork, Vassily assumed she was left handed. Amazingly, the left hand was nearly unmarked, whereas the forearm was knitted with a myriad of scrapes and intersecting seams of stitches. The right leg had been saved, but was set in a splint below the knee. It was then, as he watched her eat, that he realized how unusually long her fingers were, and could imagine her spanning at least an octave with thumb and third finger. Her neck, scalp, forehead and one ear were also badly scarred. The ugly lesions on her mostly shaved scalp, a veritable railroad of stitches in the round, freed then of all bandages to promote healing, gave her the look of an unfinished ghoul or Frankenstein mate. Yet he must think her preter-

naturally lucky, given the prognosis when he found her. He sensed a providential smile. She faintly hummed as she ate, her Dresden blue eyes livid against a pink freckled complexion and the tufts of carotene hair on the one side of her head. An old young face on a small too early maturing body, which she now seemed to drag about after her like a hand-me-down, a veteran stoic...as the nurses talked to her, as Rev. Betthauer, the Lutheran minister, talked to her and Sergeant Harkness, a towering hulk with bushy eyebrows, talked to her. Even the busy Townsend paused for a timely chat. Vassily too joined in -- how she was doing so well, would make a great recovery. Vida listened with an equanimity reserved for an Easter sermon. The drooling had ceased. She had been told of the attack but apparently had yet to remember or countenance it, according to Dr. Layton. Only the occasional nightmare was still a worry.

She sometimes spoke as if among old acquaintances. "My father is not well. My mother knew but didn't tell us. I have a cat named Spider. Spider keeps to himself." He would later learn the cat was in fact the neighbor's.

Vassily envisaged Frazer's ruse, as defined by Harkness' observational presence, but felt an inaugural demonstration was in order. He had discovered a piano in the nurse's lounge. Vida seemed well enough to at least give it a try.

"Would she like to go for a stroll?"

The one good hand came up without coaxing.

They slowly made the 'rounds' saying hello to several patients on their

way to the lower floor. There he took her into the lounge, found a chair for her and put a record on a newly donated gramophone. Songs from South Pacific by Morton Gould and his orchestra. His strategy was abetted by the fact the piano could not be seen from the nook which housed the turntable. He had deliberately placed the chair so Vida faced the turntable not the distant piano. Vida listened with an intensity the few staff and mobile patients who noticed found entertaining, often glancing at the child and her newfound friend. When the record finished, Vassily resumed the walk, passing the keyboard, which Vida veered toward with his feigned puzzled approval. Promptly she fetched herself onto the piano bench and began immediately to play the opening overture on the record. To his amazement, nothing less than her own wonderful astonishment at the freehold discovery of the piano spurred her virtuosic playing of it, using the stiffened fingers available on her left hand as the accompanying line, the lyric tunes performed by the right with a deftness, precision and musicality that stopped cold all activity in the chamber. When she had finished you could hear for a moment a leaky faucet in the lounge kitchen before the first applause erupted, nay exploded. Vassily had managed an astonishment vivid and lucid as the others. The evening was young, enchanting and, as they say in America -- the band played on. If he gestured that he doubted his ears, he knew he was not alone. Then a further reality dawned on him. She never had a fingering technique to contend with. Her musicality was as pure and as naturally syntonized as they come: she was merely utilizing what nature allowed, a little less than before, but

enough to keep the instrument busy, her left hand, her 'weighted hand' finding many apt if broken chords as well as occasionally aiding the more tune-ready right. He sensed a very rare tear in his own eye. The other half of his equation. Unto God, the things that are manifestly His.

She happened to be into *Some Enchanted Evening*, another of the Morton Gould offerings, when Peter Layton, the psychologist arrived to check up on a couple of patients. He was immediately directed downstairs by the reception secretary who soon sat with a cleaning lady by the stairwell, craning, listening. In the lounge Dr. Layton came forward almost as if he was eavesdropping, arms not quite crossed, chin viced in his hand. Vida was playing, it was pointed out, all selections on the record. "I never," said Mrs. Carey, the station captain, joining in the ubiquitous head shaking. Vida was aware of the belated nearly riotous applause, got up from the piano and went and put her arm about Vassily's waist -- a gesture that further melted her audience. Vassily himself struggled to remain conversant with his neighbors. The expressions were unconstrained. "But how in the world?" "I've heard about such feats, but I've forgotten the name for it."

Dr. Layton beamed his beneficent approval even as he shook his head. "A savant I should think."

Vassily acknowledged the many amiable expressions by rising, taking Vida's good hand, going to the turntable nook and putting on another record. He hummed along with it, a tic Vida promptly took up, singing in her surprisingly clear soprano. Morton Gould again, this time excerpts

from Oklahoma. Everyone joined in. When it was finished he took the warm palm to the keyboard and reset the bench. By then Dr. Layton knelt by the piano, watching the performance as a vigilant if not galvanized adjudicator. Again a recapitulation of the songs on the twelve-inch 78, ending with Many a New Day, the lyric picked out by the lean fingers, an artful chord progression bussing the good right hand. Vassily then sat down beside her and played the opening tune of An Evening in Granada. Vida joined in and took over with her own spare rendering. If Dr. Layton was nearly speechless before, he now took out a notebook and began to write swiftly, expending the occasional unrehearsed sigh. He had the recording of the *Estampes* by Walter Giesecking. Decades later he would recall how the condescending tolerance of the 'Western canon' was then an unknown, and virtuosic endowment not yet a natural antagonism when inspired by and allied to dead European males. Hey Hey Ho Ho Western Culture's Got To Go would have been as alien then as a snuff film.

The rest of the evening was, as a cynic might say, an absolute total bloody miracle. Vida was finally stopped only when it was determined that one of her fingers on the left hand had broken a scab and bled. The hand was immediately dressed and she returned to a happy incredulous coterie of admirers, which she charmed by being both shy and direct in her spare comments, while always seeking out the newcomer with the immobilized shoulder. To an outsider they seemed to be inseparable. She wanted to know why Andy the gardener, couldn't come. Dr. Layton said he would get after Andy. Vida nodded and glumly pursed her lips. Andy was get-

ting on and was sometimes forgetful. Later she would ask Vassily if Elias was okay. “He’s a coal-man.” Harkness had informed Vassily that they’d be “busting his ass but for the kid. So don’t over do it chump.” Only later did they notice that Mrs. Little, a terminally ill diabetic, had slipped peacefully away while Vida played.

That night Dr. Layton phoned a colleague in Zurich who worked with the renowned Swiss endocrinologist Felix Zveno Muerner, who in turn was being rehabilitated among his peers after a nebulous period in which he was said to be both a victim and pander to certain lurid aspects of Nazi medical practice. Dr. Layton had been in school with Dr. Francis Wilde, who had specialized in developmental psychology and was then heading up a seminar at the Muerner Clinic in Bern. Like Muerner, he had a special interest in anomalous, rarified ability. Unlike Muerner, he was not then much interested in the intricate certainties and limitations of genetic endowment.

“My god Frank, she is superb. Probably a social retard in a non-sympathetic environment, but far from a golem, as I originally thought, though her speech is sometimes slurred. A deformed palette it appears. The widowed father appears to be a chronic manic depressive and an arthritic ogre. She’s had a devil of a time at school, apparently -- she’s not deaf, as I earlier thought, and she’s had a teacher firmly trying to get her to write right handed. Apparently she got through grade four without much supervision, other than the interventions her condition ritually invites. Yes, four. I’ve changed my mind about Weyburn, of course, and I

think you really ought to have a look. She's tiny but physically mature for her age and has a pure soprano voice, possibly even pure pitch." He paused, nodding several times with esteemed concurrence, then surprise. "What? Come over there? To Bern?" His hesitation was barely perceptible. "I really don't see why not. I'm sure father Semple would give his blessing. Well fairly sure. You think Muerner himself might be interested? My word. Well he won't be disappointed. He has a special interest in genetics, you said. In recruiting eggs, in some cases?... Yes, I see. Humm." But he was on a roll, and didn't want to perplex or incommode his distinguished friend. "Well, she may be close to menstruation -- she's mature for her age. Yes of course I'll send you a detailed report and a recording tape. My pleasure."

In his excitement Layton completely forgot Amy's birthday. But phoned her at her hotel the following morning. She was out of breath. "Peter, oh, I had to come back in, I was in the hall. I've got to run. You're still in Burdock? Yes? Thank you. You've had a discovery? Oh the Semple girl. Yes amazing. The story I've heard -- from our instructor, an RCMP constable. Incredible. And now you think -- a savant? My word. Peter, I'm so sorry, but I'm really very very late. I should be here for supper I think. They'll page me. I really must go. Sorry, bye."

He felt a trifle miffed and, had he known, would not have approved of the swank Constable Fraser upstaging his regard of thoughtful and alert Miss Holmes, nor the plan the mountie elected for Vida and her mysterious friend, something Amy had become immersed in, being a student of

what would later be called Special Ed, something of an untapped reservoir then, which she had reconsidered at Peter's prompting: "In our rural schools many of the children have latent physical handicaps. Some may have a medical problem like Phenylketonuria, but others have varying ocular confusions, attention complications, and the like, that require reorientation and a great deal of patience. You probably won't have the time, but I think you should ply that one professor you mentioned with the idea. He will have a stake in it sooner or later. Sure as thunder." Amy, a natural philanthropist, put the question to her sponsor, the generous Dr. Lothar, and he agreed to a limited survey. Amy might use part of her student teaching periods to administer the assembled tests. As for the suave busy Constable Fraser, she soon realized he was interested in his 'man', and possibly her, but not the child. Her ingrained reticence and cultivated politeness spared him the recognition until it was too late. The direction from his superintendent, to whom he had introduced delectable thoughtful Amy, was that George Horlick, if thought suitable and amenable by an assayer like Peter Layton, might accompany Vida Semple to the clinic in Bern, expenses paid by the clinic, thus shelving the forlorn and likely now thankless chore of investigating the man, whose papers identified a stressed ex-soldier who appeared disconcerted, 'disfigured' by his new unconstrained state -- ever so slyly, Fraser believed. Moreover, the unknown Horlick had surely bamboozled pantywaist Layton. Earnestness was a most adaptable ruse. Well good riddance. He knew Layton to be an ambitious fancy stepper -- getting even the ear of his superintendent with kind

caring Amy's connivance no doubt. They wanted a lucky benign drifter, well they could have him. Out of their, his hands. Ian learned of the transfer an hour before he was to conduct the final lesson on rescue and artificial respiration. Amy was early that day. He found her sitting quietly on a pool bench deftly tucking her hair in her cap. Later he would recall her immaculate toes, as delicate, precisely modulated as a babe's, harbingers of the essential being he imagined. The familiar perfection one notices after the fact. Afterward he silently repeated her unexpected last words, "No, thank you, I'm flattered, but I must get the early bus. Thank you very much for your help. The conditions your superintendent set out are a godsend. For both of them I truly think." It was the one time he felt her smile an unconditional benefice.

Watching her leave, disappearing into the women's change room, as a wraith might fade into a wall, he was nearly overwhelmed by a close self-pity. A feeling immune to self-counsel. He imagined himself overboard at sea. Good swimmer that he was, he could drown. Her serenity and comeliness seemed to him then preternatural -- though he might never use such a word. In any case, she seemed now as remote as the imaginings of young Vida Semple.

"What do you think of that psychologist fellow who lectured us last week? You think the day will ever dawn when criminals can plead 'diminished responsibility'? 'Neurotic anxiety' and crap like it?"

Ian and his superintendent were wolfing a burger in the canteen. Ian shook his head in disbelief at his labored question. He was then correct-

ing the written tests for the silver and bronze stars. Amy had earned a bronze. The superintendent merely grunted. He cherished a clean desk.

PART TWO: SVENGALI

DRUMMER

Felix Muerner had been silent for some time, his deceptively young Claudius demeanor quite static, reminiscent of a period bust: wide forehead, dimpled chin, heedful eyes framed by an extraneous elf lock. At first the others in the room imagined him distracted by something in the ornamental shrub garden which the Chinese Drawing Room overlooked -- the new conference setting for the gross 'morphologists', as he called them, his hand-picked team of: endocrinologists, biometricians, cytologists, embryologists, physiologists, proto-geneticists and metamorphic surgeons (neuro, vascular, orthopedic and plastic-cosmetic) who gave to the Muerner Clinic in Bern an aura the match of its Edenic setting. Gradually, however, the silence began to confuse. Even long-winded Avery Muth, Muerner's head honcho of the lower limb, sensed the void as he continued to argue, with wary glances in Muerner's direction, the virtues of not attempting to widen the arc of the adductor tubercle which the junior member of his team, Mark Amelin, thought inappropriate if the leg of young Vida Semple under review was to survive the onset of a bone deterioration -- Gorham's disease was the late diagnosis -- which had been detected in her cer-

vical vertebra, and the one femur mauled in her truck with a cougar. With some surgery and cobalt therapy Muerner hoped to see the girl improve, and so learn to help others who might suffer from this rare illness. Though he was not optimistic. He knew of cases of spontaneous remission, but these were exceedingly rare. As keenly as he wished to see her music ability blossom, the eventual pain and debilitation the disease would inflict might be more than they could cope with. Poignantly, the more he conferred and listened to her, the more he was convinced her genius was singularly transcendent. To lose such a prodigy to a rare wayward disease would be a travesty. Muerner was rarely at peace with the careless Fates.

But there was another matter for which the study of Vida Semple -- parenthetically her skeletal shape and accelerated rate of maturation -- was crucial: to better understand and detail the nature of the *sound hale* individual. The being Muerner envisaged, given the future promise of tissue culturing and genetic modification -- eventual sequencing and replacement -- was what his day's cultural mavens sometimes deferred to as an eidolon.

Thus, for the 'unspared' newcomer, the team in the Chinese Drawing room met to assess select clinic patients and in so doing better conceptualize a veritable eidolon, a salubrious and physically elegant human that the promise of medical science and genetic engineering presumed one day likely if not inevitable. And bones, the basic foundation, tended to upstage all else -- the size of an individual, his or her pigmentation, affective nature, even intelligence, for without a good skeleton the programmed senes-

cence accelerated. Egalitarian fancies aside, the quest was one of Muerner's obsessions which the others in the room abided for it afforded them research venues and opportunities they would rarely find in the struggling government laboratories, always scrounging for funds, nor in academe, where conventional precepts were very hard to alter because many academics based their careers on the existing norms and models. In short, Muerner was a successful medical guru and the private clinic remained in the black. The curiosity for the critics of such flinty utopians, was that the clinic, in its consistently successful treatment of persons with serious genetic, adventitious and tumultuous misfortunes, actually made money! As for Muerner's eidolon, the image of the Doryphoros, the Spearbearer by Polyclitus served as an 'ectype' in his gross anatomy seminars, referring as it does to a facsimile, not an archetype or prototype, and thus a kind of whetstone for Muerner's idea of 'symmetria'. The philosophic question of the existence of an external universe, here the 'perceived' human body -- whether it existed beyond our cognizance of it -- did not concern the steadfast Muerner. Bodies were emphatically 'in the round' in an external universe. Period. Because the majority of humans were disappointed with what happenstance or improvidence allotted them, their shared perceptions were an authentication of reality! And, moreover, a confirmation of his own sense of beauty and salubrity!

Adding to the curiosity was the ornate room itself. The usual seminar had been moved to the Drawing Room to permit a group of acoustic specialists render more soundproof the oval boardroom off Muerner's study

where these fortnightly meetings took place. A recent fire in the study prompted the renovation. Rumor attributed the fire to a faulty bugging device in a wall, planted by a clever info hustler.

“ -- As I was saying and have said.” Avery flashed a professional smile. The others appeared attentive but for sidelong estimations of the one person still oddly quiet. Finally Eve Kielice spoke, with her characteristic deliberation, which everyone present paid heed to.

“It’s the drummer.”

A second silence followed this pronouncement, as baffling, but also faintly intimidating. Eve continued: “The light persistent bump in the background. Comes from a residence across the garden. Someone started up a week ago. A hopeful jazz drummer perhaps.” (After the war, be it noted, America had a world audience, and the beat was becoming a ‘pandemic’ -- Muerner’s word.)

They listened then nodded as if suddenly conscious of a perfectly self-evident explanation for their patron’s distraction. It was indeed a kind of impertinence -- in a neighborhood like that! Muerner smiled at Eve. Her wistful candor he cherished, especially the lucidity of her overview of daily events. He turned now in his swivel chair, returned to the dossier on his desk then nodded conclusively. “You did indeed, Avery.” The drummer had suddenly vanished from the face of the earth. Muerner smiled, momentarily aware, given his return to the forum, that a layman might find Avery’s words a little precious. The seminars, as we’ve noted, were expressly designed to anticipate and confront the prospects imposed by re-

search into developmental maturation, Vida Semple being one example of a much accelerated growth rate. Muerner had, as intimated, his own idealistic preserve, his own 'hermeneutics', gross anatomy being his celebratory mass, muscles especially a latin rite -- the dispensation for a tricky unforgiving skeleton. The manly maneuver! Symmetry concinnity eurythmia remained the paramount hope or desideratum. Vida Semple's long term health and welfare hung in the balance this day. Her innate endowments, beyond her musical ability, had some serious shortcomings. A tragedy that only a Shakespeare might portray. According to the gospel of Felix Muerner.

Avery Muth continued after a bracing intake of breath. "I know Mark many times said as much in his atelier -- that the two fasti, the rectus femoris, even the sartorius and the lateralis, given the length of the femur tentatively decided upon, will add an inelegant bulk -- which I understand will be a trial to change at this stage -- and so, if you diminish the arch of the tubercle you weaken the joint in lateral play."

"Not if you broaden the attachment of the rectus femoris and slightly offset the patella, which is an advantage in many tasks in any case." Mark Amelin was adamant and by then also rather piqued.

"But you speak only of a subset example here do you not?"

"Of course not."

The exhaustion in Amelin's young voice gave the others pause, including Muerner. The brilliant developmental physiologist continued as if rehearsing lines in an empty theatre.

“I would say in general that the programmed senescence here with Miss Semple will not incapacitate intervening maturation of the long bones and gross musculature up to the age of the preliminary brain stake -- as late as nine or ten, in most youngsters. Miss Semple may be a borderline case, as she is now fourteen, but the intervention I’ve suggested is entirely compatible with the additionally desired constructs. All we need now is to decide the speed of maturation and design the surgery accordingly. Demanding perhaps, but hardly a swinish task. The onset of Gorham’s may even be worse without such intervention. ”

“And what has the artist to say, at this juncture?” Muerner calmly asked, ever attuned to the aesthetic component, especially in the planning of his female sub-ventions. The impervious Louis Führ was slow to respond but reconciled when he did. Führ was a sculptor whose work connoisseurs alluded to when caviling over classic poise and *belle tournure*. Führ’s work showcased an athletically primed splendor that exemplified the ancient Greek notion of ‘nothing in excess’ -- a tenet with Muerner himself.

“I think it’s a nice idea to keep a slight bow to the overall contour -- in this example, and with slight changes to the slope of the patella leave the knee its more natural dependence, with a slight diminution of tractive power, mainly I presume in lateral play. All things considered.”

“Not so slight.” Able Avery, they recalled, was an ardent climber.

With Vida’s problem assessed and a surgical regimen pending, the seminar revisited the generic topic that had been scheduled that day -- the theo-

retic reconstruction of a faulty lower limb whose marginal incapacities and deficiencies (the lot of many humans) would invite surgical intervention -- given both the aesthetic and moral 'noise' left in the wake of the Nazis Wunderkinder and the new 'eugenics', with its promise of not only health and intelligence but splendor as well -- a conceit, as we've noted, the prodigious and often obdurate Muerner harbored a stubborn sympathy for. So with his coming models or 'ectypes', the judicious interventions proceeded pace. His own late maturing sense of the sexual dichotomy left a greater aesthetic indulgence in the creation of the female -- still the key he believed -- and he wanted Führ, perhaps the artist with instincts nearest his own sense of beauty, to fully say his peace. Said the solicitous Führ with a patient smile, "If we've decided that a 'perfect' arrangement can be banal and stultifying over time, then I think the thinner ever so slight convexity with the prospect of the less durable thigh, may be apt here. It is, after all, a feature of the Belvedere. The variations to come should begin I think with this example."

On this point Muerner tended to agree. When he first began to consider experiments in both transformational surgery and the prospect of interventions in the maturing processes, he believed his theoretic examples must approximate venerable aesthetic identity. He predicted, given the appeal of Marx in academe and among social activists generally, that health, energy, intelligence even beauty would become de facto entitlements sooner than later. If the transformational modern tools would be slow in coming, the standards should not be in doubt. Hence the insistence on

such a conjectural seminar as the present one. Features of the gross anatomical being some of the easier variables to sort out. The retreat from the heavier Policlitus example under review was thus a key he felt. The sexual catalyst, he believed, was better served by barely perceptible imperfections, the trappings of self. Hence the hegemony, at this seminar, of anatomical aesthetics on the marginally-cambered leg within the parameters Louis had initially set out. Said Muerner, in conclusion, "Avery, your ongoing caution here, as it is with Miss Semple's proposed treatment, is duly noted." A geniality seemed to reassert itself with Avery's condolent nod and promise to give them all hell later on. With the seminar thus adjourned, the participants shuffled out in relieved twos and threes. Only Eve remained behind, wearing her uncommitted smile.

"Wilde wants an audience."

"Does he indeed."

Wilde headed the psychiatric group, the smallest of the medical teams Muerner retained to mainly evaluate the criteria for intervention by the clinic.

Eve continued, "Friday next would suit me best. He feels your peremptory dealings with the Methodological Behaviorists, as of last Friday in your talk to the *Academie des Sciences*, was 'callously indifferent'. Incidentally, some of my day notes he's not returned."

"Yes, alright -- book him." Muerner imagined the unctuous Wilde somehow incapable of being 'scheduled'. Angus Dowd, the new CEO of the Paleomena Corporation, a former English intelligence officer and a

witness at the Nuremberg trials, would add apropos Wooly Freudian Wilde, 'The bright man's burden.' Muerner tended to agree. He added, gratefully, "I will see Wilde returns your notes."

"Thank you."

Eve placed a folder on the table before Muerner. "The late file -- on our savant, Vida Semple. The latest biopsy confirms Gorham's. She and her companion have been installed in the Villa Gruenberg for the time being. A voice track is being set up by the piano microphone. Dr. Wilde hopes to arrive and do some recording this evening. He's concerned that her short term memory is 'waning' as he put it." While speaking Eve was not surprised to see Muerner once more gazing upon the garden, the faintly audible sounds of the drummer and his erratic syncopation again echoing in the chamber's lofty ceiling. It was a time before Muerner responded. "Yes, Horlick and the Pixie. Not as mythical as she seems."

Gervase Caen, Muerner's private secretary, was sufficiently deaf not to hear the distant relentless drum practicing, despite his office being near the Chinese Drawing Room. During the seminar he spoke on the phone to his chief investigative assistant Hermann Still as he stared at the terraced gardens beyond. Only the lake, now littered with fallen cherry blossoms, was absent his view. His grey flinty face hardened as Still filled his boss in on a development that was becoming intractable. Like Msr. Caen, Herr Still was inured to understatement, a manner that tended, in this instant, to make the matter at hand incendiary.

"There is a film."

“Film.”

“At first we discount the likelihood, jah?”

Gervase did not immediately respond. Hermann, not unpleased to be the messenger of grave tidings, promptly continued.

“First, the package with the photos. Now yes we cannot doubt it a film, later Wehrmacht issue, a copy, on my desk, by private courier. The sender’s address is non-existent. The scene in the film is you say sometimes -- dim.”

“How so dim?”

“Dim.”

“But not dim enough.”

“Jah. Same old stock room in the basement. Same cadres. SS Obersturmführer Pilz and SS Haupscharführer Dr. Wasser.”

“The main wire plant.”

“Jah.”

“The film is what, exactly again?”

“That is the point. There are the two ways the experiment went: one, the victim in contact with the revivers. Two, the victim also near female subject as revivers work on the back and legs. One segment, two, yes. Apparently, according to the available archives, the experiment itself personally set by an aid to Hartjenstein himself. ”

“And the recognition is credible.”

“Jah.”

“You personally and alone opened the parcel?”

“Jah.”

“With the usual precautions.”

“Of course.”

“You don’t think it’s a fake. A digital exploit.”

“It is well done if fake. Well, so far. Vintage film hard to duplicate.”

A meeting was arranged forthwith. Hermann dismissed his grouchy and punctilious secretary early that day and had the projector set up in his own office when Gervase arrived. The clinic legal advisor, Alexis Kopf, a dimpled balding insurance specialist, made notes and requested several segments of the film be replayed, some a frame at a time. Alexis was the son of a school friend of Muerner’s who went into hiding with Muerner’s aunt’s assistance after the events that perpetrated Kristallnacht, November 9-10, 1938. Eventually he fled to Switzerland where he became one of the first internees to arrive there after passage in the Swiss parliament of the Sanctuary Law that allowed such fugitives to stay rather than be ‘repatriated’ to Germany. Alexis had no doubt of Muerner’s loathing for the Nazis, but knew his older friend had been suborned when, at one stage, the very young, promising medical graduate had to choose between the welfare of his family and a few friends and the scientific maundering of the Third Reich. Had he not made such a fated accommodation, Alexis’ father may not have survived. He also knew that Muerner’s case remained one of the ‘at large’ examples that might have been pursued had the war crime tribunals not run out of steam by the mid fifties. Just what aspects of Muerner’s interest in endowment and intelligence coincided with the

Nazis mania remained a secret the meticulous and discreet Muerner never spoke of. Now, however, some twenty years later, some documents and photographs -- most recently this unusual segment from a documentation film -- had surfaced from an apparently knowledgeable extortionist, a puzzling latecomer, who demanded a lavish income for life, payable in half-yearly installments. His evidence, though conjectural, would embarrass both Muerner and his celebrated clinic, long since part of the modern recovery miracle in Europe and the illustrious promise of a near utopian future with its state-of-the-art research into fetal tissue cultures and genetic inheritance. Were the war documents to land in the hands of an unflinching private prosecutor, one of the leftover purists, it would be sufficient to reopen a clouded past. That much Alexis was convinced of even before the latest bow shot from the extortionist's arsenal -- the film of a ghoulish experiment conducted near Majdanek in the Eastern Territories. The very existence of the document re-vivified a historic nightmare.

When the film finished Alexis felt impelled to make a short statement, a summary as much for his own benefit, which the others might fine tune as he proceeded. He had ample opportunity, the silence following being more or less exhaustless.

"It is, I think, a hard luck case any way you brook it. If it is a fake, it may cue many critics in the meantime. I think a review is now in order. Please feel free to add any editorial comment you think useful. So, into the breach. I'll begin with the first set of photos."

Alexis, an articulate lover of things baroque, had bushy dark hair

about a tonsorial bald spot that flattened his head and gave to his small animated eyes and hands a bloated refractive look, as if viewed under water. Ordinarily given to a droll conversational style of address, his features this day rather belied the sprightliness that attended his usual explication of complex matters. Moreover, his own family past had flown in his face with the coming of the film and knocked the wind out of him. Hermann and Gervase listened in a sober silence, Hermann occasionally picking his nose and shunting air through his nostrils.

“Gentlemen, well. It is now a commonplace that the Nuremberg and regional tribunals were all hampered by exigency, impetuosity and, largely at the behest of the Soviets for perhaps understandable if not excusable reasons, a seemingly unslakable thirst for swift justice. ‘A truncation of justice,’ one writer in summation put it. Thus the extent and digressions of the Nazi horror may never be known in their entirety, but facts will come to light from time to time which will and sometimes should embarrass and indict. I must admit that what I’ve learned over the last week has profound implications, both for myself and for my friend, the clinic, and your own good selves.”

‘Friend’ was not pronounced with Alexis’ usual affection, Gervase thought.

“Felix is possibly identifiable in two group photos that show, as background, the conference room once used by Alfred Rosenberg in Munich, whose racial ideology Josef Mengele embraced when he was at Frankfurt University, and later the Institute for Hereditary Biology and Racial Hy-

giene. Again, at a conference or seminar Mengele chaired, a teenage Felix is putatively recognizable in the gallery of students or inductees, sitting in a front row. He is very young of course, and was first thought a child of one of the directors.”

Alexis tugged at his cufflinks and cricked his neck before continuing.

“The third piece of evidence, uncovered -- by our late to the game blackmailer -- purports to be an identity pass given to a doctor who was attached to an Eisnsatzgruppe at Zweibel, then at Majdanek. The pass mentions also a transfer to Majdanek, where it is alleged the experiments in which Felix is implicated were initiated in the basement of a factory that made electrical wiring. Though, historically, these experiments appear to have been centered at the medical facilities in Dachau and Auschwitz. The extortionist claims to have been a primary witness as well to a doctor Ehrmantraut who recommends Felix as an intern in a letter to SS Sturmbannführer Dr.Horst Pilz. The doctor was sentenced to ten years in 1947. The basement had been a museum for historic printing presses dating from the Reformation, some of which can be seen in the background.”

Alexis availed himself of a water carafe on the grog tray. Gervase and Hermann followed suit, Alexis accepting the finger of Glenmorganie Gervase added to his glass. He seemed to relax a bit after downing his drink in one go. Gervase hesitated then poured him another. Alexis regarded it with a fond grimace.

When Gervase elected to smile his whole face fractured. Alexis felt his commentary was going well. Best to get on with it. Three merry boys.

“Details of the hypothermia experiments have long since been documented by several authors of course. Purportedly undertaken to learn how German sailors plucked from icy North Atlantic waters, or frozen infantrymen on the Russian front, might be revived, they serve as testimony to the ruthless and often aberrant nature of Nazi medical experiment. To wit, mainly Russian POWs were placed in frigid waters, large tubs filled with ice, for long periods then revived, at least the survivors were, by various means, the most effective being immediate immersion in a luke warm bath that was rapidly heated. The film also suggests that female inmates were part of one ‘tank team’ -- one inmate in the present film could be construed to be Eve Kielice, Felix’s longstanding partner and chief assistant administrator. The preliminary examination of the film has all but ruled out a fake addendum, though the examination is ongoing. Gervase has been assiduous enough to posit the identity from some early pictures that make up her resume when she sought work at the Bern Clinic, then the Hofstee Clinic for the Victims of Naziism. We must not discount, of course, the possibility of a separate, unrelated individual who looks much like a young Eve.”

He paused here, wanting to add a personal encomium, but the words eluded him, even as the break silently affirmed the esteem common to them all. Again he stared at his untouched drink.

“Some of the detail has a pertinence that we should not slight, I think. I trust your patience is exemplary. As the film shows, some female detainees, who otherwise appear well -- are not at least malnourished -- were

used to dry, warm and massage some of the prisoners. The captions in the film, I believe, allege that the latter resort was often successful, though not as efficacious as the incrementally heated bath, apparently. Parenthetically, such staff would not be available on a warship or field hospital, I presume. I must remind you all that such recourse is not part of the existing evidence on the matter.”

Gervase and Hermannn barely nodded. The comment was met with another fast silence. Alexis offered a shrug, a dismissive spreading of the hands. Despite his wish to be impartial, perhaps because of it, the atmosphere was becoming strained. For he too was aware of Muerner’s thesis that stipulated the galvanic competition of male sexuality, exhibitionism being a fixed variable, to insure a better ‘documentation’ of sperm -- one of the old debates that would color the future of endocrine research (up to and into the 90’s with the contentious book *Human Sperm Competition* by biologists Robin Baker and Mark Bellis). The imputation that Muerner had been part of the team that documented the experiments, was now suggestively verified by a couple of segments in which a group of ‘observers’ were making notes in the background of the same segment of the film that putatively contained footage of Eve, which showed upstage a slight but healthy youngster in a medical smock near a prisoner huddled by the edge of the tub from which his petrified form had been hoisted a minute or so before. A brief blurry closeup showed the girl, little more than a child, torpid yet head up with a recognizable cheek bruise or lesion and hint of a louche smile. The orderlies revisited the victim’s vital signs as she ap-

peared -- her back then to the camera -- to massage his legs. It took several minutes before the icy victim flicked his eyelids -- to spontaneous nods from the witnesses. A success. The man would likely live to be frozen another day. Or perhaps given a shot of phenol into the heart. So might a frigid U-boat sailor find himself benefitted and succored in the minds of some of the experimenters. The wizened face of another participant, Dr. Willibad Wasser, came into focus, the pertinent data about the changes in cerebrospinal fluid and blood flows on a nearby blackboard.

Hermann, glancing at the impervious Gervase, responded as he cupped his monogramed handkerchief, "Taxing points, jah." As he sometimes did, Hermann might kick down an open door in his will to be incisive and discerning. The possibility that a young woman, that this young woman, barely a teenager when the film was made, could be anything but a hideously aggrieved victim herself, was momentarily stultifying. Yet, if one slighted the likelihood of a bedeviled actress, drugged or terrorized stripling, the gross reality affirmed its black and white warrant: she could have been part of a team! Could. She seemed relaxed enough standing off stage and her demeanor throughout the lurid presentation apparently apathetic -- to a cynic, even curious witness. That one slightly out of focus figure among the orderlies was a credible image of Muerner himself -- as again attested by Gervase's assembly of early family and university photographs from Muerner's archive -- was a preternatural shock. The ramifications loomed in that culpable, sensationally forensic age.

Hermann's belated conclusion, however rhetorical and interrogative,

the others were loath to broach. Muerner was in line for a Nobel Laureate, and timeless Eve one of the guardian angels of the illustrious clinic, one of its Lares Familiares. She oversaw almost all the work Muerner undertook, even refereed some of the disputes. That she had been Muerner's friend and confidante since joining the clinic in the early 50's all but doubled the jeopardy. Her fetching looks, patient dry wit, care with detail, sense of fairness and awareness of personal and professional vulnerability, was becoming proverbial, enhancing her presence. Just speculating on she and Felix's mutual expediency, connivance, cooperation -- acceptance! -- took one's breath away. Had not Muerner, or one like him, handed her an additional towel during one of the squalid interventions?

In conclusion, Alexis sought to resurrect his characteristic geniality. "I will of course play the film as soon as Felix returns from the Villa, where he's gone to meet and hear again the savant that Dr. Wilde has become concerned about. Apparently her last performance went poorly, and she went entirely dry at one time -- apparently she's contending with a lot of pain these days. I regret having to do this so soon, but it cannot be helped."

It was about what the others expected from the mindful 'curate', though they may have wanted a more climatic resolution, a declamation. Alexis doubted not that he and Felix would talk at length on the morrow, else his retainer must be forfeit. What nettled nay scorched, as the limo whisked him home was his own hectic response to the protracted spectacle of an egregious assault, due perhaps to that putatively homely face some-

one said grew on you, parsed your morality, set you finally alight in the shadowed mordant cave -- Eve's face! The visage that might render beauty a waking sleeper not a hectic siren -- something perhaps too complex and subtle for suave fashion journals let alone the tabloids, a curiosity Muerner must have long since apprized. While the nights of the city rallied before him, Alexis was again quite overtaken by the reckoning of his own sense and sensibility. The very preposterousness of Fate, of a sophisticated but morbidly, balefully lapsed culture. He detected a clammy perspiration on his hands. An acute embarrassment, he was now situated to witness again. He had to harken back to his idealistic student days to recall the 'burn' -- the Nazi legacy distilled into its ineluctable matter-of-fact 'pornography'? The concentrated or molecular acid that burned all unprotected substances, took the varnish off all pretense of understanding. Then, again, humanity might survive its current cranky adolescence, its infatuation with bodies. Man might one day even lay off the visual, recognize the Mozart Quintets as essential in-sight and transport. Ne plus ultra and sine qua non. Turn the glaring lights out? Muerner, you poor observant swine, you saved my father and indentured my life.

He was not pleased with himself -- as a wordy wizenheimer. So make a pun of it you pin head. What else can the practicing survivor do? The other does not bare thinking of.

That night as Eve readied for bed, she thought of the amazing Canadian waif, the Pixie Felix called her, her smooth pink skin a nearly transparent skein of freckles, whose focus and cheerfulness had recovered in her

new placid surround with the mysterious yet seemingly devoted Horlick -- the maisonette Muerner himself furnished as a more-or-less permanent home and domicile. Vida's example remained the sturdy miraculous in human affairs, the genius that belies science and confounds reason. If the recent diagnosis of Gorham's was disheartening, Eve had been a stoic witness to misfortune much more grievous. Making her wonder why Felix had slipped into another of his declines, his quiet debilitating funks. He had had heart rending clinical cases before Via Semple. Something, someone -- which or whom she had missed or overlooked -- was eating away at his composure, his resolve, his patience. She thought they might get through the decade without much chagrin or embarrassment -- even play golf twice a week -- but the waning of expectation seemed again nearer than ever.

They had been charmed, of course, by the girl, and the revelation of her eccentric but exemplary intelligence, yet Eve found herself at the time as focused on the companion and 'befriender', thinking him other than the ready ingratiating opportunist he appeared to be. But what matter? Such waifs rarely find anyone alertly concerned before their 'coming out' and recognition. An early if interim symbiosis she had imagined it. Nearly an outpatient specialty! Though she still believed the largely unknown Horlick was simply biding his time before fleeing.

The sparsely creamed face staring back at her was unusually alert to the other night reflections about, the pink reflection of her pale back in the pearled closet doors, the shadowed sitting room off the bedroom, with its

haunt of uniformed golems pacing, the regular foot fall awaited, the naked probing lights beyond. That even at seventy-seven she appeared, like Vida, somehow stalled, fixed in middle age, otherwise a sorry anachronistic spinster, barely conceding the pendent flesh that was her inheritance, which hangman Wurzel likened to the one woman she would come to resemble...was she even slightly anorexic in anticipation of it, the boney form sojourning the skeletons she had left behind, the dropped corpses that hung before her eyes now, ruined dolls and masks dangling from a leafless tree. Understanding of suffering comes only through pain, maturity obviates all shortcuts, so said the behaviorist Wilde in trying to appease, offer an excuse, however pathetic. As much for himself, perhaps. That she had not suffered in the acutely physical sense, not been starved, beaten, frozen, branded, butchered...due in large measure to the companion and friend she now awaited, imagining herself as she was, a raw pressed domestic for the ghoulish camp doctor who employed an unusual and unexpected primary statistician.

The spell was creased by a distant siren, two, penetrating the curtain-baffled window. The police arrived plainly these days, in most cases. A carnival of lights and colors. No silent sloe-black mariah or Daimler. Or very rarely. Why was she dwelling on such aberrations now? When the clinic and her finely gifted champion seemed the transcendent authority of the age. Their enterprise the consummately cared-for future of hope itself, that heady inaugural prospect where one might escape even oneself, the defective corporate soma...in so many words. Was it but a reinstate-

ment of stinging memory? Which the poignantly luck-starved Vida rekindled?...

When she had cleaned her face and creamed her hands she felt the composure returning as she donned the blue-black kimono, its broad lapels luminescent in the reflections. The look serene and sumptuous. The sliver of flesh harboring the light.

The phone noisy at that hour was not a good sign. It could only be Felix, calling somewhere, not near.

“Yes.”

There was an uncharacteristic pause, slight but fractious, then the upper register voice, nearly that of a muted child. “Alexis called. Bless him. Something’s come up. I think I may have to make a statement -- something. He’s upset. An anonymous someone has come along with something rather concrete.”

She too could not at once find the words.

“I can help?” she asked when he later entered the expansive bedroom.

“At first I thought not, but I think you’d better get dressed. I won’t sleep and it’s best Alexis hears some details from me, from us, first. That you can verify some events will reassure him. He trusts you above us all I think. He suggested his office in the Paleomena Tower. About as secure a venue.”

“Can we do it without Gervase?”

“Said and done.”

“I should take the private limo.”

“Of course.”

The Paleomena penthouse executive offices occupied a manicured horticultural playground. The head of the corporation, Arthur Pechenpaugh, an avid golfer and obsessive putter, one day decided that practicing in the sterile broadloom, glass/chromium and leather environs, was part of his problem and presto -- a credible sky and flora that might line a signature hole at Pebble Beach in springtime. Alex had just set up the the projector in the potentilla and orchid accented lounge and softened the lighting when he heard the doorman announce the arrival of special guests to the penthouse. He met Felix and Eve in the elevator rotunda. Eve elected to keep her coat on. If Alexis was surprised to find both of his favorite people in attendance he did not let on. The presence of the older projector in the verdant lounge constituted an immediate and unforeseen liability with Eve's appearance. He took Felix's coat with a durable smile and was about to explicate the need for the meeting when Felix beat him to it.

“Gervase told me the matter in so many words. We can look at the film later if you wish, but it may be redundant after what I plan to say. Some parts of the film, I understand, are likely edited. Thus some details need filling in. You've been patient and loyal, and here we are. Strangely I'm very hungry. And brought a tuck box. I had Marianne make it up when I got back from the villa, expecting to work late.” He smiled at Eve, who quietly winced, then surprised them both then by spreading a paisley tablecloth and squatting on the luxuriant turf broadloom picnic style. “Can you not get the sound effects going, Alexis? Maybe not as high as

Arthur sometimes has them. And two or three of Arthur's back-only 'wayzgoose chairs', I think he calls them."

After a brief hesitation, Eve soon sat beside him with a couple of cushions fetched from a sofa for her elbow, tucking her legs, looking somewhat cajoled. After a false booming start on the secreted speakers, the just perceptible sounds of water falling amidst well-tempered bird song filled the air. Alexis returned looking a little miffed as he surveyed the picnickers.

"Felix, this is a meeting."

"Of course."

When the second flute of champagne had been consumed, largely in a gestured silence, Felix leaned back and dabbed at his lips before acknowledging the ready made audience. "Let us begin. There's not a lot to tell. A few missing months. Mainly at a camp in the Voges mountains of France -- near a small village called Mousey, the residents of which paid a heavy price in Nazi reprisals, yet remained unstinting in their assistance and care of especially British SAS personnel, both during and after the war -- in the SAS's post-war effort to track down the ogres who in one way or another contributed to the working of the Struthof-Natzweiler quarry, medical facility, interrogation cell, gas chamber and crematorium, where several of their number were tortured and murdered."

Both Alexis and Eve were inclined to let him speak on, Eve seemingly impervious to the tale, as if wanly humoring a sibling who insisted on telling a protracted and stolid adventure once more.

"I was seconded in forty-two to a quite irascible maniac, SS Haup-

sharführer Dr. Willibald Wasser, who recognized my interest in the endocrine system and my low standing in the SS. He didn't buy my story of weak knees. Basically, Wasser was an insecure lout -- that's an oversimplification, but it'll do for now -- who needed someone to lord it over, and a very young brilliant recent graduate was just the ticket. He took me under his tutelage and never, I think, imagined how awful it was. I'm talking mainly of his general medical acumen, the realm of the feasible. His prurient taste in art was the heady distraction from his own mediocrity I tend to think now. What you may not know is that he was early on part of the T4 euthanasia teams that spent several months gassing children like Vida -- lives unworthy of life -- before being transferred to the hypothermia teams. A memory that does not mellow with time."

After a silent deferential query of the others, he filled his flute with the last of the champagne and settled against the back rest.

"Now why did I not simply slit Wasser's throat and attempt to escape to the West. It is a question I put to myself from time to time -- even laying aside the improbability of escape -- and as always I decide that by doing so I would have endangered several lives who were dear to me, and likely compromise a pipeline that my family, particularly my aunt, used for several friends of friends throughout the war -- lucky stiffs, some of whom I think can be dug up if absolutely necessary. Had the war continued another year I would likely have been shot or guillotined -- ammunition was a precious commodity then -- along with my aunt and my grandmother who at eighty-six was still a resourceful late night signaler. As you know

my father died on the RMS Empress of Ireland in May of 1914. He was visiting a dying uncle in Canada and came back to join the army of the Great Dukedom of Hesse. I was an unwelcomed illegitimate child and raised by my aunt. She was instrumental in getting me into medical school.” After smiling at Eve and fondly reassessing his surroundings he continued:

“Now about my part in the war. Very early on I knew my assistance to Wasser would entail considerable unpleasantness, which would be perpetrated with or without my consent -- not to belabor the point which, I decided, I might in some ways ameliorate, usually by suggesting flaws in the doctor’s procedures, which was not difficult. And so I did, when the opportunity arose. The fact that I stayed alert and kept records of a medical procedure that often killed inmates is true. That I ever imagined, at the outset, some of the work augmenting human medical knowledge, I was disabused of early on. Such freezing experiments are now a controversial issue for current research into hypothermia. I can amplify the interests and dilemmas later, if you like. What I wish to stress now is the recognition that increased my wonder at the savaging some humans can endure and still minimally function. I shall leave in escrow the worry of those who feel much pain and terror about the mundane everyday mishaps of unfortunate friends, relatives, pets and farm animals. I realize it gets difficult here but the conundrums keep reasserting themselves. If one rules out iniquity -- the likelihood of a devil incarnate, a circular argument which beggars the wit of a forgiving deity, at least one humans might apprehend -- then

we are left with a medical or psychological explanation, which might have been annotated if we could have experimented on some of these self-same monsters instead of hanging them. But that is considered perverse, and I stand accused.” He paused and looked into the distance. “If I sound a little precious tonight, a trifle obdurate, it is because this speech has always taken too long in rehearsal.” He set down the flute, re-crossed his legs and folded his arms. “Parenthetically, the question of being a witness or being a corpse -- the Primo Levi conundrum -- I elected to shelve. At the time. And do so to this day. Suicide may partly excuse the perpetrator, but not succor the survivors. Dr. Levi may find that invoking his dilemma to measure my own is unwarranted if not execrable. If so, I stand accused.

“I can say I did not initiate any of the experiments myself. But I did keep records for the impervious Wasser. I was a good statistician, which he vaguely appreciated but unfortunately never paid much attention to, otherwise he would have realized that many of his experiments, the variables vaguely arrived at, were exceedingly limited when they weren’t absurd. I doubt he ever really distinguished between a fixed and intervening variable. I shall furnish you with a list of such trials, should you wish, but they aren’t I think pertinent tonight.

“Now at Majdanek, where I first saw Eve, Russian prisoners were the main guinea pigs. And their sufferings unfathomable. I chose to live, to observe and, through my own work, remember the aberrations and compulsions that clinically sane men harbor. I hope to learn more about that sanity in due course. Yes? About the infamous Dr. Sigmund Rascher, and

why he moved his team from Dachau to Auschwitz, and latterly Majdanek -- closer to the Russian front. I've heard it said the screams of his many victims at Dachau were too concentrated to concentrate. So."

Alexis nodded but without assertion. Then put his head in his hands.

"Eve was one of several youngsters taken from a village in Poland after it had been devastated by Luftwaffe bombing. She had the misfortune of scratching the eye of a Rottenführer, in a dispute over a gold locket."

"An Unterscharführer."

"I stand corrected." Felix was about to relay an anecdote but decided against it.

"When I first saw her she had been pressed into a group that might end up as domestic laborers or field whores -- possibly the officer ranks. Her assessors were a time making up their minds." His voice trailed off then returned. "It might be helpful to mention that the use of analgesics helped Eve and other detainees accept a rather stolid hair stylist. Among other things." Eve took this in without notice. "She always was a forward child, and a little flighty, prone to 'elopement' as they say in today's rest homes. For good reason. At twelve -- or was it thirteen? Yes, a beguiling thirteen, she was not only the daughter of a rich and resourceful kulak, a sore point with the fierce, neighboring and chastely dogmatic Soviets, but also a Pole, and thus a subhuman according to Nazi stratification. After a while you stop counting your blessings. Actually, it was Wasser who retained her as a domestic...about the time his freezing experiments be-

gan. I think he was actually taken with her. But as a voyeur not a rapist I think. He painted her” -- Muerner looked at Eve -- “yes?”

“Now one day when she was tending Wasser’s garden, I filched the uniform from a wounded SS officer and took her for a ride on a bicycle I used to get about the camp. I informed Wasser that I was regrettably a bit of a hard up pederast -- the kind of confession an SS medic can indulge. I suspect he was keenly interested to learn how I made out. Later that day I informed him that the agile creature had resisted my clutches during our outing and ran off. Though not before bashing me with a rock. Eve left, at my behest actually, several distinct scratches on my face and neck, plus a lurid hematoma, from the rock -- I was presumably not one of her favorites then -- which may have saved my life. Had I also not returned, a gestapo team would have savaged some people in the local village. As it was, an army team was dispatched to find her. Wasser wanted his gardener back. I was interrogated, roughed up a bit, demoted and given a warning to stick to my statistics. Wasser may have helped out here. The pervert fraternity looks after its own. Just so.”

Muerner handsomely smiled as Eve sought out the second bottle of champagne.

“Now some of my critics accuse me of being a toffy German patriot, culturally mutilated by his *bund*, but one tries to overlook the apple heads. Too often in vain. I later learned that ‘the garden waif’ actually joined an underground courier team and, about the time I was transferred to Struthof-Natzweiler, the Maquis. A paternal cousin of hers lived in

Mousey -- also a resourceful partisan. Eve even received a notable citation, but keeps it to herself. I can say with emphatic assurance that she did not participate in any of the experiments pictured in the photos or this film. The time frame is way off. I'm sure that when both the pictures and film are exhaustively examined the pertinent frames will disclose another. Over time many extras fleshed out the cast, so to speak."

As Muerner proceeded, Alexis was equally aware of the fast bemusement Eve evinced in listening to the tale and its precious raconteur. He had little doubt what it represented. One reads occasionally about such affection and esteem, but rarely if ever comes across the genuine article. He felt a little sheepish being in such proximity to it that afternoon, and sensed a professional compunction chiding him for taking note. She was indeed an unsung and well-preserved beauty, he decided, a veritable redefinition of a timeless aesthetic. Something only a lucky intimate might find and treasure. It was just beginning to dawn on him. Again he sensed the intrusive reflection as Felix continued with this stark yet sardonic self-parody.

"As for the clinic, and my contribution to it. Yes, it is true I owe something to the fantasies of Alfred Rosenberg. Symmetry, proportionality is often a fundamental of science. Knowing thyself is inextricably bound with the precept of Nothing in excess -- the elegance of the concise, clear and succinct in all things. Beauty, salubrity, are not mythical, in my judgement. Humans are not as electively constructed as Buicks or tapestries, and much less ephemeral. Vida Semple herself exemplifies the want of a

healthy, well-articulated skeleton. Her specific predicament begs for a restoration. Bones reveal their own euphony.” Again Felix and Eve’s eyes briefly met, this time with a dimpled candor, as if a wry amusement was fostered by the mere regard of one another. “I really only have one thing left to say, before I begin answering your questions. It may strike you as overly dramatic yet the dynamic it portends must not I think be neglected. When we were withdrawn from the Voges, I passed through a village that was about to be torched by the SS. I was sent to fetch and log a cache of medical supplies. In passing a farm house I saw the headless and mutilated corpse of a boy of about eight or nine. The humans who engage in such acts do so in part because they have the hormonal momentum to do so; where this energy comes from is not exclusive to clinic research. If there is a genetic endocrinal component, and I suspect there is, the time is long overdue to sustain a serious quest for it. We manufacture many drugs within ourselves, and some of us do it far more sensationally than others. I think you will agree it is a pressing and pertinent question. Not to be dismissed as iniquity or fantasy or obsession. Oscar Wilde was on to something I think when he penned, ‘There is no hell but this: a body without a soul, or a soul without a body.’ Either way we can’t avoid the obvious. Culture and ideology too often distort perception and free will.”

If he had been prepared to say more he stopped. The tuck box was nearly empty but for the apples.

“I think I’ve said about enough. It’s now up to my solicitor and Providence, who I trust may be one and the same.”

Alexis tsked away the imputation. “Now, now. Well, yes, I do have some questions. And feel some urgency to place them. And not what you may think.”

Eve faintly smiled, as if at last impatient herself to proceed. Alexis began with a frog in his throat, which he had to clear.

“As regards the immediate dilemma, I would say that our extortionist, presuming he believes he has an exclusive, will revise his terms over time, if the payments are made. By making them, we allow time to maneuver, to look for mistakes he’s bound to make. I presume you do not have any idea who the perpetrator might be?” He avoided looking at Eve.

Said Felix, “I’ve already confessed to a certain detachment at the time -- professional and personal. Though I can think of any number of ‘Adolfs’ who would jump at the opportunity.”

Then Eve surprised them. As chance would have it, both Felix and Alexis glanced her way as she was about to begin, thus heralding her opening.

“It is only a hunch, a remote possibility, but the role fits the character I’m recollecting. There was a ghoul in the orderly staff, actually a campo -- one who was skimming the prison rations. About the time Wasser interviewed me, I saw him at a distance showing some photographs to a group of men, including Wasser. I learned later he had pictures of a pretty female detainee he helped rape. I assume he had his own camera. ‘Mein angel,’ he’s reputedly to have said. A voyeur and resourceful sadist. Shrewdly vindictive. I heard him often mutter how he would get back at

so and so. He would say things like ‘He won’t be smiling forever.’ He had it in for a lot of people, yet presented himself as a friend of the prisoners, despite the fact he was contributing to their wretchedness. He may have been gay. His last name on his file was Wojcik. I saw it written on one of the daily register boards. They called him ‘Wurzel,’ the root. A faint inscription appears on the corner of one picture. It could be his hand. At least a possibility. He appears in some of the photos we’ve received -- both with the regular camp staff, and one with his ostensible ‘angel’. She looks surprisingly well and may be a recent detainee. ”

Alexis looked expectantly at Felix, who was slow responding, as the recollection registered. “Ah yes, him.” Again he and Eve exchanged a pithy memory in a glance. “He may have killed one of the guards -- got him drunk and tumbled him down a scar, a vista lookout. He had the run of the camp. I remember him reporting the disappearance; he was one of the monitors. But did he find me especially repugnant? I don’t know.”

Said Eve, “He hated underlings.”

“Enough to plan and initiate a threat like this?” Alexis asked, now fully alert. “Learning say of your recent successes here?...”

Eve faintly nodded. “If he’s alive and managed to glean photos of the camp staff in their work settings, he would have a sensational collection to be sure. Felix may be, could be, a late ‘discovery’.”

“Well, it’s a start,” Alexis said into the pause that followed, both Eve and Felix newly absorbed in thought, intimating a concord of silence that Alex gravely noted. “I do have one question. Really only one.” Felix but

not Eve looked up. “Not really germane in one sense, and yet it is pertinent. How cold-blooded is this specialty of yours going to become, Felix? Are you going to be the new revived Alfred Rosenberg? It is a question that will be on a jury’s mind... if it comes to that.”

“Alexis, I am a scientist. And, despite all, not a pessimist. Nor a mystic. And if I have ever appeared insensitive in your eyes, it has escaped my notice.” He then paused, staring at the apples. “But then I have been with Eve. That makes me special, don’t you think?”

Alexis felt once more the lingering chagrin of a too proximate doubt. “It’s an answer a foreman will find terse and enigmatic, but I can live with it. Anything you care to add would not be slighted.”

Felix nodded as he ditched a smile. “What today’s researchers into hypothermia must decide is the cogency of some of the extant Nazi data -- whether the graphs depicting the lowering of body temperature of volunteers below levels we today consider experimentally acceptable, has pertinence to their work. Since their work is crucial to a better knowledge of survival in cold environs -- from rescues at sea, to wilderness and climbing accidents, to careless oversights on the domestic front, to the very utility of cold state surgery -- all such knowledge will save lives and ameliorate pain. What they must decide first, is if the persons subjected to such terrors were sufficiently healthy -- i.e. within the normal range of health -- to constitute a useful experimental model. The second question, of whether the data is so tainted as to defy use under any circumstance, only they and their colleagues can attempt to gainsay. Yet I can’t help thinking it is already a

moot point, for I've seen several footnotes in respected scholarly journals citing evidence from possible Nazi experiments. Utility is a human excuse in most things."

Alexis nodded and sighed, whether of relief or dismay he seemed himself undecided.

That night, as they lay in bed -- Felix supine studying a graph, Eve prone and turned around, reading a slim book propped in the arches of his crossed slippered feet, her own toes tucked under his shoulder -- an intruder would have been struck by the naturalness of the inversion. He was in white silk pajamas, she an ebony kimono, arabesqued with deep-blue Hyacinths . He stroked her calves, thinking she was getting rather thin. She was perfectly aware of the control she exercised, her companion and friend the utopian connoisseur he had always been. She had no trouble spotting the seers, the visionary in the pack.

"Why do you think he is exceptional?" Felix still had not assimilated her comment about the befriender who had attended Vida on her initial visit to the clinic.

Eve turned a page, flicked her lip corner with her tongue. "He looked much too relaxed, innately assured, complacent even. Competent. So I thought. Think. For a rank and file soldier."

This merely teased the analyst and formalist in him; he had little diffidence about her perception, her unassuming vigilance.

"Competent how, exactly?"

"Well, he noticed things -- your new Tula piece in the salon. He

promptly smiled when he saw and touched it.”

“And that is competency personified?”

“He knew the seam back of the headrest, the stamp of the state arsenal that made it. Though he didn’t mention it. But I saw the self-congratulatory inflection.”

“‘Inflection’. Hmm. Anything else?”

“Well, he mentioned to Professor Hindel, the music professor who’s taken a keen interest in Vida, the selections Vida was familiar with. Had heard her play. Some Debussy things. His French sounded pretty good to me.”

“So he’s a dilettante.”

“Hardly with a physique like that. That takes years of punishment. N’est-ce pas?”

Felix was silent and had left off his gentle caressing trceries, which she sometimes found tentative. She smartly turned a page.

“He was in the war.”

“Paymaster corps.”

“How did you learn that?”

“I asked him. Not just rank and serial number. Basic training. Where he served, under whom. Where he felt least safe. And did he do a turn when he learned he was being, well, ‘featly’ observed, if I may say so.”

His hand sought her back. “Featly. *L’eau a la bouche*. How did he react?”

“Well, he kept to his English, and went underground. Subterranean.

He quite suddenly got interested in Vida. And took no further notice of the salon, which had obviously initially charmed him. A nostalgic treat, I would think, not a rube's curiosity. Also, there's a slight cadence to his English that I've yet to place."

"Interesting." He thought for a moment. "And what about Vida?" By then he was making a note in the margin of his graph. She had no trouble answering.

"Astonishing, captivating. Unlucky," she added, pausing in her reading. "Though the nightmares have ceased. She's been told of the attack but still seems unable to assimilate it. I think she lives in the present, and with considerable pain. Though complaint for her is a risky business. A fact she learned early on I expect." She paused for a moment as if to reconsider a comment. "Hard judging her innate intelligence; the tests still only scratch the surface I think. Unlike some savants she definitely has an affective nature: she obviously adores her benefactor, and plays her music with a feeling, perhaps even a rapture, that many savants don't exhibit --at least at her age. A wonder all round. And a heartbreaker."

"Her father petitioned to have her back after her appearance on Rare Gifts did he not?"

"'Daddy'."

"She was in a quandary then, no?"

"I doubt it. She's really only had one guardian, one boon fellow, that was and is fairly obvious. Though his real reasons for being so remain a mystery. Perhaps he was, is looking for a kind of sabbatical himself." As

she looked back at him the mutuality that was also their providential accord intensified. "You can't sleep."

"I must admit to thinking about the other matter."

"How we find him?"

"That too."

"First off an ad, yes, in the personal section. 'Affluent English collector-connoisseur seeking unique war photos. All material or facets thereof considered in strict confidence.'

"Facets. Will our friend know what it means?"

"Categories, classes."

"Facets...yes, maybe."

"I have a further idea."

"Yes." By then he had taken in her comment, 'You can't sleep', and had begun to caress her hip, realizing she had on the new teddy.

"It involves Wilde -- and Wilde's obverse rival. The ineluctable Horlick."

"How so?"

"I think he may find it a challenge -- a reprise of his sojourn here. Also a release from having to abide Wilde's crotchets about Vida, et cetera."

"Looking for the weasel -- our opportunistic house guest? You're serious."

"Unlike Wilde, he has no reputation to honor -- that we know about. Wilde's a dogmatist in his practice. Likely stuck with the pedigree, but one he can hardly be content with. His father was also a doctor, by the way.

McGill 1919.”

“I must admit you’re ahead of me.”

With an abruptness that amused him she reversed her position to lie beside him, her lips near his ear.

“I think Wilde’s a kind of fugitive also. Well a fugitive. Not unlike Horlick.”

“You do?”

“I suspect he’s gasping for air, poor dear, given the day’s experimentalists in his field. And I think one of us ought to throw him a buoy. Ask him to assess Horlick, discretely of course, as we ask Horlick to find our ogre. We learn the perception of the one and the astuteness of the other.”

“Why is it you can be so utterly eloquently perceptive, in matters relating to my clinic staff?”

“The easy stuff.”

They regarded one another with a droll willfulness -- well, near enough. Said he, “Yes, you’ve said before. Bodies act out the mind.”

“Let me put it to Horlick. Find us ‘the weasel’ and we’ll double the initial deposit on the undertaking.”

He didn’t answer for a time, his hand then not quite negligently traipsing her waist. He could feel the controlled dimpling, the incipient laughter. She was ticklish but held her breath now. That she might still excite him -- an obdurate infatuate -- perhaps even find the experience tolerable amazed him. They had long since argued out the question. He had been seduced by an image that lingered. And she reconciled to the fact.

“You feel he’s up to the task.”

“He’ll either take the deposit and split or follow through. I give you even odds. He seems to me more guarded these days -- looking over his shoulder.”

“And Wilde too...a fugitive?...”

“In so many words. The new inductivists in his field must be a trial.”

“Horlick does look like he’s ‘been in the wars’. Good old reliable Wilde.”

“I also think he likes me. Horlick.”

“So. You can’t sleep either.”

As if on cue Eve’s barefoot form alighted on the parquet and approached the doors of the music console. After pressing some switches and toeing a pair of dance pumps she tightened the sash of her gown.

Seconds later one was aware of a timeless two-headed phantom moving through the night-speckled room to the outworld strings and ban-doneon music of Astor Piazzolla, the shimmering arabesques of her gown moving to Le Grand Tango with the poise of a heading cobra, so attuned to the rhythmic nuance -- a world that only a special twosome may share. Including a last return to the settle of the satinwood four poster. The moment when the historic and forensic cancel one another out.

David Townsend would have appreciated that special animism, which teased the mundane. As with Julian and Johanna, the possibilities of such a pageant seemed indispensable, invincible, limitless, love inseparable from

giddy passion yet enervating without it. Passion drew the picture. Words, feints, doubts would come later. When the recognition of his vicarious indulgences became manifest, the discovery would leave him ever an outsider to the live breath, the portmanteau of the tango, to the atavistic players, now oblivious of the stray streetlight that gave them a gibbous caricature. Only in their movement might one discern the telltale anima that presupposed the elegance of form. Johanna too had the kind of torsion that could seethe an ocean. Nature flaunting its panoramic lust, its repossession. Would full skirts and an acre of petticoats have softened the blow, he sometimes wondered, harkening back to the Victorian sensibilities he sometime imagined himself a familiar or legatee of? Or that later Romantic idyll which enshrined melancholy, which he in part slighted because Julian never really gave up on him? Perhaps because, as he would later learn, Julian was gay. Not unlike Herr Leidhoff, a much respected piano teacher in Saskatoon, who David occasionally took lessons from at the earnest behest of his hometown teacher. Remarked Mrs. Lang after his inaugural lesson, "He invited you to the Sunday night recital? Even Arlene never got asked that!" Arlene was another musical genius, more dedicated than Julian, bestowed by an insouciant Fate on Burdock's other music teacher. Well, it turned out Herr Liedhoff believed only boys might play the piano. Douglas Tice, one of his senior students, had found David's playing "interesting" -- in that boy soprano era before David signed on to his avoirdupois. Douglas' last words were, "I can see you're tired." David had been yawning for some time in his hotel room after Douglas walked him back in

a December frost, their steps on the packed snow across the bridge that spanned the Saskatchewan River sounding like the snap of a fresh apple. Douglas had gotten as far in the hotel room as nudging David's foot with his own, but decided his target's playing sufficiently gauche to reconsider the compensations. David was relieved when he left. He might get back to his delectation of the generic Johanna, in such tales as *The Woman Who Road Away*, purchased earlier from the pocketbook stand in the lobby. Johanna, he decided, definitely wanted to put down her homework and take a hike. But then the calamity that reminded one how even phantoms, put there only to remind, were fragile too -- in his case the two quintessential players he had such trouble assessing and rendering.

They had been skating on the creek, Julian pretending great mastery despite his heavily snow-dusted apparel. "It's like this, simp" -- then kerplop. Looking up, he enquired in his customary condescension. "You got that, the pas de chat?" Johanna, the best skater, was giggling then with intent. "You're a scream." Julian smiled. "If you insist." He then rose and sailed on, a careening engine slowly derailing.

The cracking they first misinterpreted, thinking it the branches of some iced poplars smarting in the breeze. The splash turned them both about, the commentary from Julian -- "Holy Hannah!" -- not germane. Julian was a clumsy swimmer and briefly disappeared beneath the rilled water that began seeping over the still cracking, depending ice. David had little recollection of what happened next, coming round as his hand slowly froze -- he had to take off his padded glove to grasp the scarf he had

thrown to Julian, after laying spreadeagled on the ice, praying the section he was on was whole. He could hear ominous cracking sounds as he skim-bled back on his knees holding the scarf which Julian could not tightly grasp. After a short incredulous pause, Johanna had run off on her skates to fetch help from the nearest house, but had a time getting up the embankment.

“Oh god, oh piss!” Julian was badly messing his metaphors when Andy Aitken came down with a long board and a rope. Setting a slip knot he tossed it to Julian but had a time getting the stiff Julian to get his wrist into it. Then it seemed he couldn’t move his hands at all. Athwart the board David was pushed nearer, finally close enough to get a loop of rope about Julian’s limp wrist. When Andy slid the board back they both lay across it and pulled but without success. Julian’s parka was caught in the serrated edge of the ice. By then a farmer and his wife and young son were letting out a hitch rope down the embankment slope, the young light son slithering across the ice in a pair of oversize snow shoes. Apparently that turn in the creek, where the current gathered momentum, had been a menace most every spring, despite the signs, which David could not remember seeing. Later they would learn how impatient the farmer had been with the regularity of the calamity and the habitual neglect of warning signs. In due course a lasso settled about Julian’s shoulder and one arm, the young lad placing it with a long slender pole, and a tug-of-war team managed to rein the wet stiff form in, an ice channel breaking almost to the shore.

David had watched the finale of the adventure in a huddled cold,

shoulders hunched, venting steam upward to warm his frozen forehead and eyebrows, aware only of the parka that kept slipping into the water. Johanna knocked her hands together. She seemed embittered, angry even. With him? he wondered. He tried to think what he might have done but nothing came. All he could see was the wet parka and toque. It was about then he realized Johanna was crying through her anger, apparent revulsion and disbelief. He noticed she had bruised her knee, as seen through a tear in her slacks. He had the feeling she had not much experience in mix ups. And that his 'view from a distance' was a drawback, certainly a failure of know how if not nerve. It was an early sobering recognition and recapitulation -- the lethargy that numbed him in emergencies, as if actually being there was a rapt incapacitating curiosity. What dazed was the picture of Johanna occasionally simpering, wiping tears. Pinching herself with the discovery that Julian was not invincible perhaps. David's idol with a human grimace. Which suggested ever after that he too, David Townsend, might be in over his head, without much hope of rescue or redemption except by drastic fortuitous means. He had sensed then in Julian's near demise a recognition of his own craven passion for 'capturing the human form' separate from its circumstance. The form that might stand upright like a god, oblivious of mundane accidental earth. His passion for such 'realism' in a later drawing class became something of a class amusement. The sensibility that was incurably bourgeois. Only plodders sought to ape a discrete concrete reality, and ostensible perverts the finicky detailing of the female body. Mein kempf he would later think of it, how he and Hit-

ler had little social wherewithal as artists. But he had none of Adolf's rage or hubris or rhetorical clout. He might look on from the contingent shadows though, during his university sojourn, as another supercilious arts student railed against conformity and hierarchy before being chucked into the library lily pond by an EUS (Engineering Undergraduate Society) student. It was said at the time somehow akin to a lynching -- gruesomely obtuse according to the arts cognoscenti. But whatever you might think of the young hotspurs from the EUS, they tended to get things done without a lot of palaver. Like sitting a professional Lady Godiva on an old nag once a year. They also smashed up a series of sculptures they had themselves concocted out of cement and chicken wire and placed by stealth in conspicuous venues about the campus, each with an impressive plaque. Only to gather them up one day on the library plaza and pulverize the lot with sledgehammers. The outcry was wondrous to behold. Still, no one could identify the works. Only the curator of the fine art gallery in the library, a frotteur by the name of Rossen, might imagine a tear in the eyes of the rain-streaked Kraken as they proceeded.

It was the time when David drifted in craven escape and dour compensation into the flea-pit theaters on Granville street (he then attended the University of British Columbia), where he hoped to catch a glimpse of a recyclable Johanna -- in vain of course, for the female actors were invariably ill-proportioned if not shapelessly blobby. Put together with an excess of Plasticine or a crude outlaying of it, usually both. Lacking entirely the poise, detachment, ironic humor, coherent frame and finely tuned

tournure Johanna displayed with such insouciance. By comparison, Marilyn Munroe was a flaccid schlep, another silly grinning suppurating sponge. Beyond her celebrated face, little trig definition at all without an abundance of wire and latex. A body that would look ridiculous in an Olympic sprinter's costume. The topical fascination with immense, ergo shapeless breasts, completely eluded him. As did the banal creations of the later plastic surgeons who would specialize in such precious buffoonery. If he might sympathize with those who felt the 'whole realistic scene' ought to be shucked, he knew his one consolation in life was the rarefied beauty of his 'especial lady', as he would wryly come to think of her, the creature who would encapsulate the notion of definition, symmetry and elegance -- the law of parsimony. Nothing in Excess. Unlike the age's mushrooming injunction -- Without Excess Nothing. But by then a new facet of his pursuit had been 'incorporated': he had left off the painterly arena, had abandoned sculpture and drawing for the easy complicity of photography. To be tarred yet again as another plodder who turned wine into water. Still, light and shadow seemed every bit as mysterious, if not more so given its congruent rendering. And now entirely portable and more easily 'vaulted'. His diletantism had graduated to a new and practical fulsomeness, for the detailing in photography becomes quickly sensational, even in soft-focus prints. Thus, as he would later realize, the 'interminable feast' had begun -- about the time he also discovered the language of art criticism, which might turn any caviller about realism inside out, though at the time the big guns were directed to sluggards like himself.

But by the sixties it had transpired that the ‘artist’ was simply the one who persuaded the community he was an artist. Deconstruction and concept art would build (‘deconstruct’) many careers. Julian, he felt, would have approved of his new and progressively involuted craft, the pithy words that would keep him on the cutting edge. “I’ve got to hand it to you, Simp.” By then Simp would be capitalized and Julian listening in awe, so David imagined. It’s really quite simple when you think about it. *With unanticipated assertiveness, they (the abstract expressionists) do not posit any wide disambiguation of articulation, rather a mosaic deanthropomorphization of reality and blithe compartmentalizing of pathos.* All he had to do was listen for Julian’s voice. “Well, I’ll be cantilevered,” he imagined Julian remarking. But the last images he had of Julian were not promising, lying as he was in an isolation ward to combat the pneumonia he caught in the icy creek water. Johanna had come across David in the hospital only once. Looking a little prim he thought. Sidelined, marooned, as she must have been in a place like Burdock without Julian, her enveloping curls tied back then in a tight pony tail, revealing a cornered chin and eyes lacking their cover, their embroidery, given to a naked and direct impassivity, their aslant precision reminding him then not of a Scheherazade but of a sea bird, a cormorant. Julian he recalled wolfed down the truffles she brought. The next day David asked to do a portrait of her but she pursed her lips -- as if he might be a protracted nuisance after all. “We’re packing already. I haven’t got the time.”

Bruce, Bibi, Johanna and Julian, his hand still in a splint, left that fall

for New York. (Father Carl had bought a home in the Vineyard and Joanna and Julian were admitted to Hunter College.) Just when the cool weather descended in mid August. Julian left a note. "Keep it up sailor; I await your inaugural exhibition. Johanna sends a moue." It was about then the chiaroscuro memories of Vida Semple began to haunt and eviscerate. The enigmatic 'she' that seemed to transcend the notion of 'she' entirely! And possibly assay and rebuke his own visual limitations. Why was discovery so often a belated affair?...

JACQUES

In 1954 David stood on the stage of the Burdock collegiate auditorium in a diaper, a baby bonnet festooned with several bright feathers, a bib, and a pair of his late brother's large work boots that ended just below his knee. It was the specified school uniform that day -- for his induction into grade nine, the first tier of the Burdock Collegiate Institute he was about to ascend. It coincided with the discovery that he not only looked odd but acted even stranger. He even spilt the milk, the designated firewater, he was supposed to deliver to a kindred soul-sufferer on that taunt ridden stage. That he began sniggering at one point seemed to mollify the intensity -- how can you rally a moron? It was perhaps the beginning of his discovery that if one couldn't outwit the bravos, you might 'out-nit' them. Or at least delay the inevitable. Which sometimes allowed one to addle the moment long enough to summon a vomit reflex and produce the real thing...usually enough to faze the sturdier tormentors. This coupled with

an equally flagrant earnestness in flattering or apologizing to the one or two bully holdouts usually kept his walks to and from school tolerable. It was the beginning of his methodology in dealing with authority, stolid and mischievous, in general: immaculate stupidity and fecklessness coupled with a dismaying earnestness to do the right thing. Enough to enervate both freewheeling badgerers and tenured wardens. Most of the time.

It was also the time he learned that melancholy was as much or more obliging than masturbation. And loneliness itself an oddly magnetic solitude. Learning like Jacques in *As You Like It*, to ‘suck melancholy as a weasel sucks eggs’, was the true ‘interminable feast’ he concluded. This recourse to wistfulness came long before the media obsession with mind dimmers like Ted Bundy, Paul Bernardo, reedy confessional tabloids, or the porns that paced the barbarity of Snuff Films. About as steamy as it got in the uptown movie house, *The Eagle*, an old shoe box redolent with rancid popcorn and hints rank flattulence, was Rhonda Fleming in *Little Egypt*. “Holy mackerel!” Cyril would exclaim. Rhonda was a revelation at the time. A living midriff and navel -- which moved below a face both amused yet invitational -- was one of those discoveries you can only make in the comfort of a darkened hall. When the lights went on you were always a little chagrined by who sat in the audience, including yourself. The waste of time alone was then a cardinal offense to one and all.

But as he fetched his Clean Clay wonders, the one leftover fix he had in those supplicatory days, he sensed a mastery that presaged the entry into the numinous world which made the mundane bearable. As his dealing

with the world approached what adults sometimes called ‘discernment’, he might rid himself of footling prosaic concerns and champion the life of the Heroes and Daimones, the cast of creatures the gods used to taunt and implicate in their designs which the same Heros and Daimones always managed to complect, even beguile -- their inevitable mortality conferring the ‘passion play’ the gods coveted! The dramatic tension he found palpable. For instance, beside his rarefied wonder works, meddlers like Elvis Presley looked witless, even at times demented, a louche greasy-haired monkey. The inverse of an Achilles or Odysseus in the Iliad. This understudy buffoon in a *comedia dell’arte*, a Pedrolino suffering from Saint Vitus Dance (Sydenham’s chorea). And the specter of such popular icons as Marilyn Munroe, as we’ve noted, an antithesis to the venerable. Vague loose apparitions lacking all sagacity, poise and finesse -- popular nonentities indexing banality, the ineluctably ‘jejune’, to use Woody Allen’s choice epithet. To be a mass idol you can’t be too far removed from the mass. And the mass fed on itself. The drug culture. The crux of David’s world was congruent form, structure, concinnity, the principia of variation (unlimited, unconstrained variation being no ‘variation’ at all). The pruning of excess that divulged elegance. Even mundane skeletons, a must of all structures, had to have a specific harmonious articulation -- the irreducible essential. From a purely physical point of view, muscles might be developed and sinew ‘honed’ but bones challenged the transformational endeavor. Without good bones, lives deteriorated. Polyclitus pretty much said it all David thought. If beauty as ascribed to flowers, dress, architec-

ture, music, poetry, even mathematics and physics, might incite and inspire eclectics, splendor of the all-too-recognizable human form was less in doubt. The very notion of health, salubrity, harmony, maneuverability begged the question; so David believed. By about fourteen he fancied he had known this instinctively, innately. That a Camelot President of the U.S. might find adolescent posturing, ersatz glamour and floppy tits appetizing merely informed you of the state of the Union and its esthetic demise. Which the President's patient wife so serenely and dutifully resisted. Largely in vain.

He might smugly feel thus, even a sense of equipoise dong so -- until, that is, the week of the quarterly school dance, when the lack of 'having lots of friends', as his mother urged, as opposed to one or two, became acute. The onerous occasion would put him at sea once more. Polyclitus hadn't sat in on their collegiate fêtes or 'lits'; seen the rare but manifest individual beauties he'd barely noticed before who seemed to materialize as if by perverse magic, knocking his whole regimen off the shelf. Here was incontestable loveliness he hadn't really an inkling of -- in its bewildering 'fractal multiformity' (a later phrase) -- and he had no cogent idea what it really looked like or behaved, or how to apprehend let alone appease or sojourn it. How even to avoid it. Worse, he had nothing whatever to say for himself. In such company he was a fraud and buffoon. He would always be a poor impromptu speaker, and at fourteen a golem. He did ask one girl out at an early age and sat throughout the evening staring into his hands. That she hadn't fled in disgust was the hectic breath of purgatory.

After this fiasco he sat out the dances, usually heading off in their direction, but returning soon after, relying then on his parents being away, as they usually were (his brother long since a late-night room mate and soon to be ghost) to slip into his rocking chair and put on Morton Gould's Latin American suites, or the lyric melodies Percy Faith or Hugo Winterhalter orchestrated, sometimes the ballet music to Faust or Swan Lake, latterly such feasts as the Robert Shaw chorale, specifically a record given to him by his music teacher, entitled, Robert Shaw Conducts Volume II of Christmas Hymns and Carols, a tome that would linger as a touchstone of that sad but prodigious time, the envelopment of spare humbling elegance, the nub of reverence. From the vintage durable gambol of Hacia Belen to the chaste winnowing of What Child is This. The advent of Mary Had a Baby to a libidinal beat was still a few years off, as were 'commitment' songs that patronized restlessness, or the monotony and numbing recreancy of early rap, developments that would only confirm his doubts about democracy -- where the cathedral housed the cabaret. Moreover, modern 'serious' music seemed to him then 'transitional' music: music that never went anywhere; interim strains that connected the ballads or show tunes in a concert suite -- Richard Rodney Bennett's orchestral suite work between Some Enchanted Evening and Bali Hai. More and more the compositions of Tchaikovsky, Borodin, Verdi, Bizet were generally deemed fusty, old hat. No earnest modern composer had the nerve or complacency or patience to write another musical piece reminiscent of a Carmen. The beckoning of the Twelve Tone scale (a 'democratic' scale) and 'amalga-

mated' minimalism seemed imperious. Anything goes that can. If his age sanctioned everyone to pee in the soup, as he thought of it, he had the satisfaction of long since going on a fast.

The other thing he learned that year was that he was no better on the clarinet than he was on the piano. But the censorship laws did not apply to music, especially local sponsors of community bands, here of a local 'boys' band'. The bandmaster, Timothy Criton, undertaker and disciplinarian, soon whipped the lads into shape. "Again," Criton would say, his patience a most durable trait. 'Pong' would go the tuning bar, and Cyril, who also played the clarinet, would wet his reed and summon his B flat, hoping the overtones that all listened for and mostly didn't hear, would coincide. David was never certain who was listening to what. Cyril always sounded a bit off, like a party whistle, but no one was indicting. 'Close enough' was the standard. If the ensemble playing might be a compendium of standards, the tuning up was methodically broached. You had your chance. If you blew it, the audience must bear the consequence. Which they did, often in droves, and kept the contributions coming to fund the trips to various and sundry locales, usually to enter a music festival, the sad consequences of one such competition prompting a debate about the wisdom of seniority determining who played the first and second chairs. Orchestra and band scores had never been democratically 'scored'. Somebody is expected to whistle better than his neighbor. David's plaintiff 'form'.

He went for a test. Mr. Criton had the new assistant, a mild mannered

school teacher by the name of Mr. Howarth, sit in and listen as you played a passage that was unidentified but for its notes. David was given thirty seconds to look the passage over. Easy enough. Playing the piano gave him a rough estimate of what lay before him. “Whenever you’re ready.” Mr. Criton evinced a smile.

The tune to Flow Gently Sweet Afton was soon apparent. David finished with a tolerable number of squeaks and pauses.

“Next.”

“What did you play?” Cyril later asked. “You didn’t recognize it?” David answered. “I couldn’t hear.” “Flow Gently Sweet Afton ” Cyril scowled; he had faced earlier the alternate and unrecognizable Cruising Down the River.

There were more changes underway than a reassessment of the musical talent, as it turned out. As if following David’s evolution with his corps of buccaneers and engineers, some ladies in the Orpheus Club had long thought it nice if girls could join. “They plan on having some glockenspiel players,” said Mrs. Harlo, a friend of Mrs. Criton. “The uniforms look quite nice.” “Are they like the band’s?” asked Mrs. Stirrit, happily imagining a consensus, but ingenuously putting her finger on the delicate point. “No, more like the majorettes.” Six majorettes had joined the marching band that summer. A silence greeted this disclosure. Some women disapproved the final selection of the majorette uniform. Doris Saddlemeier, the swish wife of the mayor, was in charge of the design. Her pretty daughter Lisa, a John Deere princess at last year’s agricultural

fair, was the majorette captain. David had heard Elspeth updating Lucius late one night. “Agnes thought the skirts skimpy. The lyre support for the glockenspiel rests on the hip, skewing the pleats a bit when they march. Mrs. Olgivey voted with Doris and Mrs. Tell.” Some whispering followed that David couldn’t make out, which was greeted by a wheeze of a laugh from pater. A minute later they were both snoring like rucking crows.

“What are you looking at kid?” It was Nick Dreyer talking, staring at David with a mixture of incredulity and loathing. Nick was the marching drill instructor. Short, squat, captious, ferocious, malevolent. The last time out the band had scored low on its marching adjudication. Answered David, “My music lyre keeps slipping.” Nick glowered. “Keep your eyes right.” A consistently difficult thing to do with their miniature Percheron’s strutting in front, skirts swinging, flanks all but galloping. Lisa of the pretty bum, alone among the heavyweights. Suddenly callipygian had an index card in David’s lexicon. “By the right, quick march.” Da, da, di-da da. Cyril once nearly walked into a ditch, his thick glasses perched on his nose.

November Eleventh they shivered in their blue capes and tried to keep their clarinets from cracking, as was anticipated if left unattended in the cold. The majorettes had been given a reprieve at the last minute. The speeches droned on before the memorial plaque. They were lucky soft undeserving dogs, no question. But no one had the nerve to plainly say so. Peacetime.

Just before the ceremony Elspeth had to let his trousers out. Again.

David was putting on weight. "I wish he played sports more often." His father had a point. His son's fine bones could not accommodate a wattle of chin in the making. As his inner world mushroomed, so did his flesh it seemed. Yet by then he was almost immune. Lisa's bum he had long since mastered. And she had an awful voice. Squeaky and incessant. Nature rarely left you dangling on a hook. At least in perpetuity. Though it could and did happen, as it did with his memory of Johanna Wagner -- and some creatures he never learned the provenance of who haunted his wanderings in Riverdeen. Why is it the less well off or ne'er-do-well families so often produce the paragons? Another question to pace his special Parthenon. A point he knew most people would slight as insignificant and inconclusive, but he and most people had parted company some time ago. He came to think of these 'belles' as not really there, simply the Creator's reminder that He/She/It still had a thing or two up Her/His/It's sleeve. Beings not real, but in the vicinity. An Artemis or Aphrodite who had tired of the antics in and around Mount Olympus. On sabbatical perhaps. Mostly going or coming. Sometimes yawning. Like Mary Ellen, the raven haired half sister to invincible Billy Sinclair, their Spartan dynamo who put up the base and scaffolding for the diving board in the Kiwanis swimming hole off Elmwood Park, whose backstroke Mr. Poole, the Red Cross swimming instructor, marveled at. Billy had elegance personified -- a build. A clone of the Belevedere Apollo only better, despite the hair on his chest and under his arms. He also had a perfect bouncy cock in the dressing room that defined for David the meaning of 'resilient'. When

Billy once caught David throwing rocks into the creek near the swimming hole, he threatened to 'plow him under'. Which he surely could have done. Yet Billy David didn't fear. Billy had bigger fish to fry. You were simply the small leach he brushed aside as a routine matter when swimming in the creek.

Mary Ellen you rarely saw in the park or the swimming hole though. Daimones don't hang around usually. They have things to do. David's subterranean life as a spy was put to the test. The sightings became at least verifiable if not frequent. Some things you just know. What separates the sheep from the goats, the ineffable from the merely gifted or lucky. Many times he would scold his senses -- this couldn't be, he was imagining. By then he knew the experience of the sobering day after while looking at a sculpture he'd completed in a rush the night before. But holy hannah, there she would be the next day, as starkly sovereign as ever, as perfectly limbed as his imagination could absorb, lifting, binding her skirts to stealthily wade into the creek. Breasts that hung and pointed at the same time under her loose top. Very feminine, yet athletically defined. Definitely not real. There simply to let you know you were pathetic and mortal. He doubted one might touch her. As elusive as the hovering pike she so carefully approached to steal a better look at. He had done that too -- before they might dissolve in an instant. Like this phantom, they were divined teasers, patient only in the rich brown depths.

Then, too often, her sabbatical would be over somehow. She would suddenly astonishingly become attached to some ungainly hulk, an ill-

tempered creek rat with a motorcycle that wouldn't start or an old car he was endlessly fixing. Soon they would be yelling at one another -- words he could hear out of sight. She might still be comely but now normal -- the Daimone had obviously left. Long before he discovered Samuel Beckett, he had his suspicions about the Creator's sense of humor. Her story only wizards and would be auteurs like himself might amend, perhaps if the conviction was strong enough. He would have made a splendid Nazi youth he decided years later. Some things you just know. Shakespeare's Jacques, being the disgruntled sardonic wag he was, might have approved.

TOYS IN THE ATTIC

Rudi Verhoff -- known to his old camp inmates as Versteck, the surname he had abandoned in his new life in the New World -- was getting exceedingly impatient that afternoon with his failing eyesight and his disappointment with the initial Playboy magazine which, from its promotion, he anticipated being as explicit as the pictures Wurzel had shown him in the camp. The gremlins inside Rudi's mind, his 'familiar', set about tearing one another apart when idled, manacled, as they were now by the new magazine's unfulfilled promise, which his magnifying glass only exacerbated. "All godmothers, the Americans." He was miffed, as only a famished sidelined carnivore can be. Despite a couple of divorcees he'd readily managed, he seemed inconsolable these last few weeks. The Germany he left might be in ruins, but sex there had not been a dilatory peepshow. America was a slyly Puritanical continent with a fey sunny-boy philosophy.

That a blague like Playboy might be considered roguish said it all. So it seemed. He might have avoided some dissatisfaction by soliciting a working girl, but his exiguous frugality extended to his vices as well as his necessities, and he was loathe to pay for something he'd once taken as axiomatic. Rape nature's necessity if need be. Left to women alone, the race would die out. But this night none of the phone numbers in his address book yielded the voices he sought. Or at least the response he expected. One even urged him to reconsider playing bridge.

“Bastards.”

To add to his vexation that afternoon was their condo's flunky gardener using a very noisy weed-eater to trim the forsythia, lilac shrubs and hydrangeas beneath his narrow balcony. The gardener and Rudi were enduring antagonists. Rudi promptly sought out the manager of the apartment complex but the chap, as usual, was away. He did say something nasty and resonant directly to the gardener but his longstanding grudge against the current condo manager clouded the peak of his complaint. A derelict weed eater as persevering accompaniment to his day's woes! Which he noted had strafed and marked the bilious green siding, the paint for which he had not voted against at the last Annual General Meeting because it was deemed a bargain. Now glancing at the flakes that filtered onto the yellowing lawn and up onto his patio, he pronounced again, “Bastards.”

His small second floor apartment, on the south-west corner, the one patio with a privacy shield, had slowly come to resemble his own deterio-

rating state, the garish floral wallpapers the former owner had plastered throughout the suite -- even the ceiling in the bathroom -- now adding to his claustrophobia. Many times he thought to change the coverings but never had the energy and was peeved by the quotes he had received to have it done. "Shysters." The impending sense that he wouldn't be around long enough to make it worth while added to his pique. Had his wayward son not written to him in the tone of a gladsome English travelogue announcer, he might have suffered through some renovations -- to at least improve the equity, what he would deem the 'liquidity', of the apartment. But his son was, he sadly concluded, one-hundred and fifty per cent English, and hence not to be trusted nor forgiven. The slippery English had always been a puzzle to Rudi. Toffy English humor the preserve of nitwits he thought. The Goon Show and Fawlty Towers great conundrums. The English language itself was the advertiser's -- 'the ultimate swindlers' -- language par excellence he long ago concluded in his war against the corrupt and thieving world. Moreover, his son Peter lived in Birmingham, married to an attractive, wealthy, older woman who couldn't stand the father-in-law and made little attempt to hide the fact. Only a precious English milksop would put up with a slight like that. The last birthday money Rudi sent Peter, hoping he might use it to cross the channel and help sort out his father's messy estate, had been spent on a computerized typewriter and tuition to Leeds University to study business administration. Purchases that only served to lengthen the wordiness of the letters and add to the tedium of the travelogues. "Windbag!" That Rudi

saw himself as a brutally honest philosopher and shrewd delineator of the human scene merely ordained the insult. Businessmen were a corrupted *Bund* of career brown nosers. “Assholes!” At this stage he even began to doubt Peter was his, and dispatched a private investigator to verify certain facts. Why for instance, had the one woman he loved to distraction, put ‘father unknown’ on the birth certificate? A detail he learned long after the fact. The privileged English aristocratic mother of their out-of-wedlock-child had finally spurned Rudi, even after he divorced his devoutly Catholic wife in order to marry her! “Bitch!” Indeed, he only learned of his son when he received a letter from Peter, then sixteen, that began, “Mon cher papa.” If having a son named Peter Aylesford-Cooper was a tribulation, Rudi was grateful his only son had the backbone to find out the facts. Not entirely a Peter Rabbit, then. An accompanying picture would all but confirm Rudi’s paternity. Rudi once considered himself *matinée* idol material, who indeed looked like a young William Holden in his youth, an image Peter revived in Rudi’s imagination, discounting Rudi’s late physical debilitation that now added to his impacted resentment. A vexation that had grown over the years during his employment as a sleeping car porter, catering to folks he more and more despised for their undeserved luck in surviving the war, a job he could never quite quit because of the long layovers it afforded, the reliable, quiescent interludes of escape, where he might loll about his select public gardens to photograph the roses, his singular passion that rivaled his hankering for sex and, of late, pornography. The unappreciated artist left to his own devices. Except

that his failing eyesight restricted ascertaining the subtler hues and shapes. Due he believed to the impurities of modern food and air, the thoughtless uncaring world that could no longer smell the roses -- could, in fact, breed roses that had no smell at all! He felt vindicated when American comedian Fran Leibowitz said, "The outdoors is what I go through to get from my apartment to the taxi."

"Bastards!"

Puttering about his kitchen to make himself a perfunctory lunch, cupboard doors wobbled on their hinges, drawers caught and halted, crying out for re-tracking and gluing. The dining room carpet curled at the kitchen end and tried with ingenious craft to trip him up. As he sought the salad he neglected to turn down the heat on the fry pan, such that the smell and fumes of past greasy burnt offerings filled the tiny kitchen. An electrician, a busy bright gal who lived beneath him, often warned him about overloading the circuitry with prolonged use of high temperatures in his grease encrusted stove and oven. "Aluminum wiring remember?" she had said again during her last visit to sort out and remove the high amp fuses in his electric box which had one day contributed to the fumes and smoke haze of a sizzling tenderloin.

Then there was the ongoing misplacing of eye glasses, two old pairs of which he now needed atop of one another to read the lettering of his gas bill. The proposed resort to laser surgery he kept putting off because he didn't trust the new ophthalmologist in the clinic he often beggared the patience of. Though here he was tempted to try the Fates for, in addition to

his inability to sharply focus his camera, the miniature train set he had assembled with such exceptional patience he could no longer reliably repair or even consistently re-track derailed cars.

If the late domestic detail was unrelenting, Rudi's late life in Nazi Germany was no less forlorn and chaotic.

The final onslaught in his transplanted life in Switzerland came with the onset of pulmonary edema, such that he often had choking spells, which his nitro pills no longer countered, even when taken several at a time, a late resort that had enabled him to withstand at least one protracted attack. His last trip to intensive care was, he was assured by the head nurse when he came to, almost his last. The many pills he took, both prescribed by his doctor and self-administered from the numerous health food stores he patronized, then filled one half of the dining room table, prompting an old and stoic neighbor to remark, "Only a healthy person could survive all this."

The single gamy pursuit that perhaps kept Rudi alive was the ever more flagrant pornographic tapes he might rent, unrivaled in their upstaging of his dour surround and corrosive memory. Why he should have found such fair salubrious he would have dismissed as self-evident. His troubles, even his environs, vanished in the seething roil of whatever drugs his system succeeded in manufacturing on their own while he watched such scenes. What detailed images of the humbled female might accomplish in record time. The deft manhandling that the owners of such 'mysteria' so obviously wanted and deserved. One progenitor of these pics be-

ing the snooty little bitch he had failed to rape in the basement of the wire factory in Poland during the war -- the slender fleeing naiad he had helped pick out of the Bug River with Wurzel -- they worked then as camp guards -- as she tried to swim to the further bank. The owner of the smooth white leg he had latched onto and finally pulled against the boat, one of several village folk who tried to flee before the SS arrived, this one being one of the few good swimmers, the bitch who had left some scratches he still contended with when he elected to shave. The bitch who such and such camp doctor, an amateur painter, had finally recruited as a domestic, the purity of her skin an inspiration it was said. Wurzel had wanted to interrogate her. If it seemed unlikely such a youngster would have important information, there seemed little doubt about her crucial role in one spy cell, likely as a messenger, hence their their pique when the camp doctor intervened. But not before Wurzel had taken pictures of her. She had been stripped in anticipation of her interrogation. How soft and seamless her skin was. They were about to rape her when the fastidious doctor intervened, insisting she not be carelessly abused; he had other plans for her. Wurzel hide select prints above the elevated toilet tank in the commandant's office -- the short fat officer who could barely reach the chain. The pictures became a popular peepshow. Her nearly hairless sex a special creamy patina. He and Wurzel were later assigned to the team that prepared the freezing hypothermia sessions: ice tubs, heating paraphernalia and rectal inserts. One doctor subsequently recruited other inmates to see how some men responded to a female presence. To this day Rudi could re-

call her special smoothness, the cameo skin he had never experienced before or since -- the mädchen the gods neglected in the sex clubs. The real bonus came with Rudi's late discovery and reunion with the wily Wurzel, a loner like himself, who died of testicular cancer -- but not before making him, now Rudi Verhoff, chief executor of his will! Unlike Rudi, Wurzel had this rare historic archive, which he and Rudi examined with great élan before Wurzel's death. Many pictures and one brief film Wurzel managed to take with him to the internment camp he was placed in after the war, devising clever sleeves within sleeves. The 16mm film segment Rudi often viewed on a rented projector. Which showed none other than a young Felix Muerner assisting, or at least in the company of, the snooty, officious Dr. Wasser who then headed the hypothermia experiment team! A find that galvanized with the recognition of the now eminent Muerner -- and possibly the teen who had caused Rudi so much distress. He felt certain more pictures of the minx awaited his diligent searches of Wurzel's messy ramshackle apartment, images that might rekindle the fever and furor of the historic moment. Though he knew only the 16 mm film he might use to suborn the newly esteemed quack in Bern -- the pictures of the girl had no retributive value. Indeed, they suggested, in their starkness, his own culpability. Still, Muerner's long standing companion could have been the creature who so beguiled him then, even, in the end, getting him demoted to a lowly caretaker's drudge -- a latrine cleaner! -- by ratting on his theft of Russian gold teeth! "Bitch!" Thus would he, at long last, deal with Muerner and his select tart and live like a king. The Fates had rendered

Wurzel's special documentation invaluable. A prize to the patient, intrepid and resolute!

While Rudi was refurbishing his memories via Wurzel's picture trove, Muerner and his timeless companion were engaged in a conversation that broached another subterranean existence. It began when Eve recapitulated her take on their late assessment of Vida, and the curiosity of Vida's benefactor who had mysteriously disappeared for a time when the telex query from the Canadian RCMP officer arrived. Vida had just been settled in her trig, newfound home and began playing for services in a Lutheran church. Eve and her perdurable Siegfried sat on dual-backed conversation seat or *Indiscret*, Eve thinking aloud.

"I can't help feeling Horlick was a privileged lad from Eastern Europe. Transplanted before the war. Paymaster corps the tolerable purgatory. If so, a Pole maybe, even an aristocrat, as some of the 'diaspora' Poles were and are. Much points in that direction. Someone whose table manners were versed in deference and finesse and a patience with silver tea servers or samovars, who knew the cachet of Armenian brandy, and gazed at the artworks in the salon as if they were imperial orphans, yes? I could have inadvertently resorted to a Polish phrase or two, but I don't want to reveal my hand just yet. Using French was a less intimidating option. So I thought."

Muerner's rapt silence, both reassuring and in its way entertaining, always prompted her to continue.

"His curious subsequent avoidance of French, upon realizing what it

must reveal before a heedful witness, was I think one slip. Over all, I can well imagine him a courier or appraiser for a clandestine group or trust. Yes, truly. At worst KGB or GRU, though they too have their 'idealistic' stringers, their dedicated shill players -- the craft of such institutions is germane -- open, pristine Canada being a land of interest for them, of course. A passageway into the United States. Especially after the war. His being there, and coming here, seemed too coincidental, too ad lib to be credible. Had he been under strict instruction as a field operative, he would never have come. Found an excuse. Or left immediately on his arrival. At first I thought he was simply in transit, waiting a cue. But now I'm not so sure."

She paused to let the import of her late analysis invite comment or suggestion. Forthrightly Muerner smiled, merely saying, "Do please continue."

"Being a Pole, or one such, and knowing the turmoil in the Eastern Block, the possibilities are rife. As his decidedly rugged and strafed frame intimates. And then his sudden brief mysterious disappearance -- what else can you call it -- after that Canadian RCMP query. An investigation that was perhaps slighted from the start -- with our intervention. Another reason to flee the spotlight. He claims to have wanted to see an opera. William Tell."

Muerner nodded. "Yes, it's a subject I've maybe devoted too little time to; I can see that now." Eve dryly silently smiled, prompting him to continue. "It seemed inconsequential at the time. I think. You infer he may

have been some kind of courier or field agent. Trying on a new identity, perhaps. In flight even. Which we may have helped tailor. After all, the turbulence in the Soviet Union with the discrediting of the Lysenkoists has been spectacular. The state is definitely on the skids. But there the association pales I think. If he was in the war operating as a career spy, would he abet the life of a waif, see her aptly placed here? He could very well be 'in transit' reassessing his options. Minding the changing landscape. Not a hardened militant. As you say -- too circumspect, perceptive, refined, compassionate even, no? Given his care of Vida. Please continue."

"I sought him out during an evaluation session of some of the rarefied students at the school -- those on the programs the clinic was routinely monitoring at that time, Vida among them. As Dr. Wilde amused Vida with a game of jacks, trying to assess her motor skills separate from her keyboard feats, I asked to meet Horlick in the Japanese garden, to discuss some long term options for Vida. Matters I swiftly got out of the way, there being only two or three -- assessment, sponsorship, placement in the special school for a duration father Semple might agree to, with a careful ongoing evaluation. He is aware of her worsening condition. But when I suggested he might assist the clinic in another way I sensed dismay. The matter we talked about a while back. I mentioned to him that we had lost contact with a former Czech-German patient, a paranoid schizophrenic Wilde had been treating -- a fib of course -- and wondered if he could help us locate him. I did mention it to you."

"A quite nice tack. I vaguely remember. I wonder where I was when

you told me. Please go on.”

“It was an overcast day and the first blossoms from the cherry trees lay on the lake like confetti. The drummer was still distracting you. Anyway, facing the wiry often grave Horlick as I did, a topical mystery man if ever, I was partly reassured by the reason for his disappearance and the promptness of his return; he claimed to have attended a concert of the Ochestre de la Suisse Romande and seen the opera I mentioned. He told the matron and took Vida with him, facts I verified when I consulted the registry and spoke with the matron. We were dealing with two seminars that weekend -- mainly due to Wilde’s intransigence. Was Horlick dismayed by my request to help us look for a patient? I think not. He can be winsomely ingratiating.”

“Agreed.”

“He pointed to the blossoms with a smile. ‘Me? Here?’ he said with that engaging earnestness he can summon from time to time. ‘Some sort of missing person hunt, you mean?’ Hunt, yes, I said. But only in the reconnoiter sense. I stressed that he’s a sad case, our former patient, and could be dangerous if confronted. We simply wanted to know where he is and how and if he’s coping. I assured him that all additional daily expenses would be assumed by the clinic.”

“He seemed to assimilate the import of the proposal?”

“I think so. He watched me with great care thereafter.”

“Perhaps it’s your new hair style -- very chic by the way.”

“I doubt he’s into den mothers.”

“Well he is a connoisseur -- you’ve made that clear.” Slowly Muerner reached over took up and touched his lips to her hand.

“Well he touched all the bases. ‘And you cannot go to the police?’ he asked.”

Muerner nodded. “I am listening.”

“Well, here on in I decided to be as candid as prudence allowed.”

“Indeed.”

“No, I said to him. The fellow would react badly if he knew the police were involved. This comment took a few seconds to mature. ‘But me?’ he said, with some apprehension I think. ‘Surely a private detective would serve you best.’ I replied that you and I felt he might have some time on his hands here and believed he could ably handle the job, especially given his sensitivity and perceptive interplay with Vida. I suggested our patient wouldn’t be looking for an outsider, a tourist say. He both laughed and, as I suspect, winced at the suggestion. ‘It’s rather sudden,’ he said after a time. I smiled; frankness seems to entertain him. Still, he avoided my eyes. Then he shrugged, as if further consideration was a waste of time. ‘I trust my success or lack of it will not alter my status with Vida. The concert was a benefice for her. Sooner or later I won’t be of use, of course, but for the time being...my own life remains inconsequential. This quest will afford me an excuse to hang on. I understand her condition may be dire. And likely terminal. Unless requested, I would not willingly leave.’ His innate practicality lingers as a kind of after taste. More than ever I’m convinced he’s some kind of operative. Awaiting instructions perhaps, or

reconsidering. Whatever. Maybe even GRU. Near enough. Canada remains, after all, a crucial no-man's-land in the Cold War. I think he just may be in a bit of a quandary himself -- given the late turmoil in the Soviet Union. He's not a thug. I still think he's on the lookout for stray events or, shall we say, unscheduled arrivals. He would be, must be. If my assessment of him is correct."

"I think you must continue with the recruitment."

"So do I."

And with that the two took up where they had left off, reviewing recent clinic files.

A day later Eve faced the cautious Horlick with a sympathetic face. The RCMP query had been easily answered in the affirmative: Horlick had agreed to assist the clinic for an indefinite period, and had no immediate need to return to Canada. As for the proposal -- yes, they, Eve and Muerner, were asking a lot but the matter would not rest. More and more Horlick's questions and comments confirmed Eve's assessment of him. "I'm not entirely sure where I might or should begin...you have a name, or an alias, yes? I assume your patient may be dismayed or angered by the intrusion of an outsider. Does he have an interest or contention -- that convenes interested participants? He is lucid -- in general?"

Eve decided the time was expedient to admit to a want of detail and to fill in some blanks.

"I can furnish you with a pretty good description of our patient. And a name, of course, which he may not be using now. Also a photograph. He

sent the clinic a parcel -- a film that relates to his past. By private courier. He believes the film valuable and requests the clinic buy it. It is a Nazi film of medical experiments which he claims are perpetrated here. It would be bathetic, laughable -- we are licensed by the Swiss Government -- but for the malicious aspersions the day's media often exploit. We would buy it but we have no reason to believe he will honor an agreement. His paranoia seemed to be in check when he suddenly left, but his condition now is anyone's guess. He was urged to consider committing himself -- he lived alone at the time -- and was treated here only as an outpatient. How he got hold of the film is not entirely a puzzle: he was between early 1943 and late 1944 a Nazi concentration camp guard. He is a classic misogynist and sadist. We did what we could."

Vassily smiled. He had no desire to question Eve's account. And the clinic he had long since decided was exemplary, perhaps unique. All he said now was: "The courier can be identified, confirm the address?"

"Unfortunately it wasn't registered." She was getting impatient. "The initial courier may well have delivered it to another for a later hand off. I'm sure our former patient will, in time, opt for an anonymous or third party bank account, the sum he wants is large, but for now he's being cagey. So he must imagine."

For the first time, she felt, he regarded her with an unassuming demeanor.

"He's using a 'cut out' -- for the interim -- I believe it's called."

"Will you do it? See what you can turn up?" And for god's sake don't

take all day to respond, she said to herself.

“I’ll give you an answer at supper?”

“Of course. I can have an expense account set up for you first thing tomorrow, plus the pertinent information we have on our patient. ”

Again Vassily looked at her with a recognition that was tense but not unflattering. Eve anticipated a further stipulation and was surprised when he placidly stated: “I too believe Felix a decent dedicated man. An early appraisal.”

“You don’t know the half of it.” All the while she kept her eyes upon him and he realized then her susceptibility to acne was in fact the lingering effects of frost bite -- what he assumed she had already concluded about his own pitted face -- a mutual recognition that bemused if not reassured them both, though hers was less noticeable.

“I think Vida may have got here just in time,” he added.

“I think so too.”

On the return walk along the garden he asked about Vida’s longterm prognosis and was further resigned to the fate of his now precious, even adored charge -- who’d ‘rescued’ him from a possibly dire end himself.

In the forthcoming weeks Vassily as George Horlick frequently debated with himself the option to leave, to vanish without trace. The investigation in Canada might uncover a discrepancy if persistent. He could readily find a new identity in the West, fabricate an educational record that would get him into a needy civil engineering department of some municipality in Holland, say. Such a decision would lessen if not curtail the con-

stant imposition of looking over his shoulder, looking for the ‘inadvertent’ stranger or long-lost ‘friend’. It was tempting. Especially as the internecine turmoil in Russia seemed then seismic and ongoing. The last word from Nechayev was that the Ottawa residency was in a mess and its Center minders undecided how to proceed. The fact that Nechayev himself was now silent, and possibly in trouble himself given the climate, pointed to an unravelling of the command structure. Thus, as a rogue operative Vassily guessed he still had some lead time. One can get used to relative comfort and affluence. But the thought of returning to his homeland, to help restore a sense of order and stability, if not civility -- the noble endeavor -- had never left. To Caesar...to God. It seemed so self-evident to him. The timing was the only caveat. Was he then a simpleton, an *uyobok* or *ebanat*, as idealists sometimes were? Still, he would live with the imputation. Some things he would not abandon. The music Vida took up was a harrowing reminder. His leaving then would slight the role he had undertaken with her. Especially now that her health seemed in decline. He had no children and she was becoming a kindred spirit. Moreover, staying on would minimize the RCMP suspicions about him in Canada. He was not important enough to initiate an extradition request. The good offices of the clinic itself would help in the long term.

So...until they kicked him out or Vida suddenly perished. Or the ‘other’ persona appeared.

As for his present assignment, to find the identity, whereabouts and activity of the clinic’s ‘blackmailer’ ghoul, a patron of the Hermann Land-

owney Gallery as it turned out -- the label name of the gallery inadvertently left on an inner wrapping sheet of the original parcel -- was traced to a Rudi Verhoff, whose whereabouts proved to be embarrassingly simple, his application for a postal box a model of artless veracity. Hardly the routine act of a mental defective, a paranoid. Could someone in the post office help with an address?... To which the 'missing' address arrived the same afternoon. The man seemed incapable of care or finesse or cannot eschew the dare -- to confirm his 'veracity'? Or the clinic was using him, Horlick, as an exploitable front. A role he was not unexperienced in. The first day Verhoff left his flat to board a bus Vassily broke into it. Verhoff's romantic wall art was a surprise. 19th Century landscapes and engravings he'd mounted himself. Could this really be the patient Muerner and his Eve were so anxious about? The question was settled when he discovered a set of pictures from the Nazi era in the easily unlocked drawer of an old cluttered desk. A collection that testified to the hypothermia experiments and Muerner's possible involvement, and the abuse of some youngsters, one of whom looked remotely like a very young Eve. Dismayingly, one Russian victim of the hypothermia trials he may have known, a discovery that would prey upon him the rest of his life. A person very like the instructor who taught him cypher coding in the academy. The discovery was a seismic shock. He remembered 'coming to' seated in the desk's ratty chair kneading his brow.

The discovery of the collection he was reluctant to relate to the mindful Eve. Caesar's deeds were sometimes inexplicable. Sardonicly he

though of Verhoff as the clinic's 'patient' blackmailer. The pun helped him accept Eve's ruse.

He copied as much of the flat and its contents as he thought crucial and left as unobtrusively as he came. In due course Eve leafed through the collection with a quiet that stilled even the crickets outside in the garden. Or so he imagined. They stood in the small study off the Chinese drawing room, the beautiful modulated panelling in a subtle arabesque scrolling, a fine parody of the stark squalid evidence he furnished that day. He waited his turn to speak. The pretense of him finding a former 'patient' was now starkly discounted. Finally she spoke. Without demure.

"I trust the scene herein you've documented verifiable, if it comes to that. And that you've no confusion about our anxiety."

"It's not one of the better documented...programs, the hypothermia experiments. But it's not a total surprise. I assume he may have copies of the stills elsewhere." In his own mind he wondered: What indeed do you call such things? 'Programs' came out inadvertently. He would leave to her the acknowledgement the pictures possible acute embarrassment to the clinic and Muerner in particular, if indeed one of the medics pictured there was a young Muerner. He had concluded the identity of the young girl pictured in the one set was inconclusive.

Eve seemed to barely hear his words as she stared at the awful, consequential pictures. "They were Russians, mainly. At least in that facility. As As you may know. The other pictures...are a mere sideshow."

She was about to say more, so he instinctively sensed. But words are

some times at a loss. She resumed after a further exchange within herself.

“It’s a story that begs an accounting. The pictures here barely touch the margins. I, we, are grateful for what you’ve accomplished. I hope we may count on your resourcefulness again, should the need arise. And your discretion, at least for a time.” She looked rather forlorn then, he thought, an unusual state.

When she looked up at him he must have been abstracted himself for he felt obliged to field an excuse. “I must admit I was thinking of Vida -- perhaps as a buffer to all this -- and whether I’m the right companion she needs now.” But Eve’s candid look then rather sidelined his plea. Again, she might have put a question to him but didn’t. Instead she smiled and seemed to acknowledge his concern with her follow-up words:

“You must be impatient, the war being over. Of course Vida asks about you when you’re away and greets you like a cell mate when you return. She was making headway, until recently of course. Our department psychiatrist Dr. Wilde, has been in touch with the Burdock therapist and feels that the Swiss Reformed Church here has provided her an appreciative audience for her music -- she has played regularly at Friday and Sunday services as you know -- though for how long is uncertain. Some benefit appearances may have to be cancelled.” As if to discount recent disappointments, she added, “It’s an older congregation, at the church, but one that insists on the sturdy Methodist hymns that enjoin classic form and harmony. A stable kindly home. Dr. Layton, the Burdock therapist seems to agree. Her father is apparently dying of cancer, and arrangements are

being made for her return for an extended visit. Which may be problematic now.”

Vassily was doing his best to appear sanguine. “You wish to continue your care, evaluation and schooling of her here. For a time.” He sounded more anxious than he wished.

“Well, that will be accomplished as best we can. Her dyslexia is mild but impacted, and she seems prone to emphysema. As you know, she is remarkably resilient, given her background and, despite all, in love with the piano here -- an old Chickering Muerner bought at auction. One of the best investments he’s made he claims. Providence. Still...” She sensed this distraction slighted her purpose, her need to suborn, and returned to the matter at hand.

“You’ve said little about your own feelings on entering Herr Verhoff’s flat. We’d be grateful for a frank word or two.”

Again the direct gaze rekindled the fire that edged his soul. How he wanted to tell all but could not add to the poignancy in the room. He wanted an out, not a further detailing of a heresy he knew only too well. Hence a sober tally of the facts.

“The place was a mess. Particularly the kitchen. He’s been fiddling, splitting the building’s cable satellite input and created many ancillary problems...the fuse input is a Pandora’s box for one, not helped by the fact the wiring is aluminum -- an infraction here in itself, I understand. He’s started at least one fire. The kitchen table was all but covered with medications -- as you can see in the one photo -- some prescription, most self ad-

ministered. He's a health store patron and lover of greasy foods -- sausages especially. The stove is a burnt shell -- almost literally. Some fairly good furniture has been soiled and needs repair. The surprise for me was the quality of some wall art. He's obviously a collector. Prints of some famous paintings adorn the walls in several rooms. They point to a romantic's love of 19th Century landscapes, not his hoarding of this ugly collection. I'm far from an expert but the works of British artists Constable and Turner are fairly well known. A curiosity, as you infer -- given that one bookcase was full of assorted Playboy magazines and some books I've not seen before. One a photographic documentation of Nazi atrocities. Which had several page markers in it."

Eve picked up a print of one of Horlick's interior vistas. "What does the wall art suggest to you again? It looks decidedly maudlin to me."

"Well some. The Blake engravings were a surprise. This one, for instance. The frame of which identifies the Landowney Gallery." He fetched another photo for her inspection. "This one as well." Instantly she had her response.

"The 'Inner Eye'. Vision, inspiration. Reason gets short shrift with Blake. Another mystic scourging vitality by way of the flesh. A common failing."

Thereafter he decided it best to silently keep to the script she had mindfully worked out. He'd never heard romantic art so adroitly derided.

After a protracted pause, in which she appeared to rethink a wry impulse, she said, "I have a proposal. Importunate but I think necessary."

She paused as if to catch her breath. "Would you consider meeting the man -- perhaps as a mutual panderer and maniac? Find out how retributive he is and what he really wants, if he can define it with lucidity, and how one might abet it. There would be a further remuneration in addition to your expenses." Without interruption she added, "You can also leave of course, as promptly as you wish, with our blessing and thanks. And a future bequest if need be." At last she looked up with a durable smile. "Your patronage of Vida is admirable, but you must get impatient some days. It would be the last request we would make, the mutual resolution of which is a clinic preference, as you must know. We could have him arrested but the files here might become public property. The assessment of his sanity wouldn't help. The intended retribution would have been accomplished -- in his eyes, and the public's I dare say. Muerner and I think the clinic's been a benefit to many unlucky people, and we wish to see it thrive. But ours is not an uncontested vision."

While she talked the image of the one Russian, half frozen, returned with feral savagery to him. The face a startling visage from his own past -- the man who had been his tutor in the coding school, and his sponsor for entry into the First Chief Directorate. The man was likely gay but abusive of the fact. Vassily had had an affair with his wife. Indeed, at one time he thought of asking Yevgenia to divorce Yuri Ivanovich. In the particular image found in Rudi's flat, a lifeless child-like girl, a remote but tenable Eve, looked on from a side vault, an unfocused shivering urchin waiting instructions. A stoney Verhoff could be seen near by holding a mop. If she

looked no more than about twelve, her face resembled that of a hanged partisan. A more pathetic child he could not remember. Two other pictures of this girl were taken against a barrack wall with other inmates. Two men, one an SS officer, conferred in the background. Four pictures showed a young girl nude and likely unconscious, her skewed body deforming her face. In one a man, out of focus, smiled at the camera.

There were eight pictures of Muerner in the lot Vassily found in the flat, none of he and the girl in the same frame, some of Muerner in a classroom, standing near what appeared to be a dreamy Mengele and a second older unidentified person also in a white smock. A statistical graph filled the blackboard behind. Muerner appeared to be deep in thought. Only one pictured him standing in the 'ice' room, looking down at a folder he appeared to be opening. The others showed him at a desk with an unidentified person, presumably also a doctor. When Horlick looked up he realized he had become abstracted again: the silence in the room patiently awaited his return and he promptly said, "I'm grateful for what you've done for Vida and would be glad to assist you in better assessing this individual."

He smiled as best he could, looking about the room and garden as if to reaffirm a certainty. Eve's large canny eyes were directly upon him. "It would be a start. And help you make up your own mind."

"Yes. Perhaps." He offered what he deemed a gesture of sobriety.

Yet Vassily was in a quandary. The pictures suggested Muerner might not be a luckless victim. Eve too, despite the rank images of the girl who

might be a much younger version of herself, could be seen, imagined, as part of a team. Yet he could not dismiss the net benefit the clinic had been to a modern questing community. Eve too shared and participated in that accomplishment. Moreover, she and Muerner were too innately conjoined to be mere associates. And survivors were as often as not legatees, not perpetrators. He felt there was a lot more to the story and decided his assessment of Rudi Verhoff would help confirm or settle his own doubts. The fact that Eve and Muerner had trusted him so far with such an inquiry was encouraging. It was some time since he had been offered a kind of ‘trusteeship’, as he thought of it.

When Eve and Felix relaxed at the end of the day, sherries in hand, Felix was the first to put the question.

“I think I come off little better than Verhoff himself in his picaresque tally of events. A statistician...not a lot of excuses.”

“All rather anti-climatic. What Horlick returned with. Without the 16 mm film we’d remain historically anonymous. The identities of persons in the stills will be hard to verify.”

“Horlick’s not seen the film?”

“No, the original wasn’t in the flat. Nor any copies. He’s not a complete dunce our blackmailer. Though the historic photos Horlick copied in the flat also in their way indict the owner. The 16 mm film we received was likely transcribed. The original would be somewhat clearer.”

“The film does show me in a seminar room with both Clauberg and Brandt looking on, Clauberg smiling as only a ghoul can. I suspect there

are some records too. To follow perhaps. My name must have been appended to a dozen documents or more at the Struthof/Natzweiler camp. Which were never destroyed as far as I know.”

“Have you told Alexis this?”

“Not yet. They may not surface. They are the worst I think. Death certificates with a blocked in signature. You think Horlick wants, is willing, to confront our leech?”

“I sense impatience.”

“What he is...and where will he go eventually I do wonder. He is a fine enigma.”

“He’s definitely a complex character and, I suspect, dealing with a past nearly as complex and possibly confounding as our own. He assured me he would continue.”

“That’s some comfort. I guess.”

“A shrewd guess. All things considered. I wish him well. Life goes on. Vida is much worse I hear.”

“Sadly, she’s probably had Gorham’s for some time. It’s into her shoulder and upper spine now. She’s had to suspend playing. She told me she may have been ‘worrying’ the piano. Where that notion comes from I’m not certain, but I suspect it has a long pedigree. Out of her early life perhaps. What makes her case particularly poignant now is the memory of Wasser heading a team that gassed such invalids. Life unworthy of life. My own wish to keep her free of pain will be put to the test when the morphine no longer works. Am I a *mitläufer* after all? I think not.”

“Such a one would not pose such a question.”

The Verhoff matter was, as it transpired, neatly concluded with a sudden, massive, acute and deadly heart attack. Verhoff's son Peter arrived from Switzerland keen to wind up his father's estate, pocket the sole remaining bank funds, and return home. He had no interest in his father's past and easily accepted the imputation of insanity, sub clinical or otherwise. By then Horlick had cleaned out the flat of all the 'historic' documents he could find and bade farewell to Eve and Muerner. He told Vida he had a sick relative of his own to attend to. (Not entirely a lie, for he looked upon the failing Soviet Union as his own ailing paterfamilias.) She lay then in a hospital bed as the marble effigy on the lid of a saint's tome, her hands folded in front. He suspected she was in pain, which his presence may have ameliorated -- the thought of which forged a memory that would linger. He promised to write her and visit her one day soon. "Promise?" she said, with some treasured assurance. "Yes, a promise," he promptly said. "You're famous, yov're inspired many people," he added, sharing in her lingering recognition of such a likelihood. The tearful hug she gave him nearly foiled his resolution to return. He was told she would likely not play the piano again, nor live much longer. He suspected Muerner might end her life before it became excruciating, unbearable -- for all of them.

Yet he could not linger. The time was ripe for his return -- the solemn promise he would not, must not slight. He had committed unconscionable

deeds before. And would again. Though he knew he would never assimilate, be at peace with this one. He almost didn't go. Only his laden promise to himself facilitated his departure.

"We'll never see or hear of him again, of course," Muerner remarked with some wistfulness when he and Eve reviewed recent events the night he left. "I wish him well."

"He did tell me he thought you were a decent and civilized man."

"Sober chap."

"Somedays."

LAST WORD

David's last late commentary from the Gryphon was curious in that Julian was becoming as fervid as the religious energumen he was vilifying. He was never far off the gene schick it seemed. His royal jewels.

He was back again at the Nekhbet show lounge, by way of a lucid DVD David had purchased, where Julian as the Gryphon remained impenitent as before, though perhaps less 'schnockkered' or wall-eyed -- his sojourn with AA a modest success or, as he called it, a 'coalitional truce'.

"I have it on great authority -- Aristotle no less -- that I was likely born this way. A recognition that rather gives the heave ho to any sense of rising above one's station, of doing anything exemplary, or having anything approximating transcendent free will -- climbing out of the ditch, so to speak. 'I was born this way' -- take it or leave it. Soothing words for folks like Ghengis Kahn and Muhammad Atta. Hitler, Stalin and Pol Pot might

claim that Fate slighted their own innate gifts, for we all know what a drip Fate can be. Only an uptight nerd might imagine trying to get beyond the circumstance of her or his birth -- only to rue the impertinence, in the fullness of time.

“Now the Great Creator or Pneuma, if you like, the fiery cosmic spirit or great universal fart -- both beholden to the Big Bang -- gives us these numb nut genes, then puts us into a world full of cataclysmic natural disasters and carnivorous creatures that eat one another alive with great élan. We got booted out of the Edenic mall for pinching an insider game track -- well attempting to. Then, late in the game, the great Mugwump or Mufti has some second thoughts and wants to forgive us for taking note maybe -- and sends his only son to die in the manner several hundred thousand or million did before Him -- all of whom are dissed for eternity for not getting to the bus on time.

“Now a good stolid chap just might think the Kingfish is maybe a little off, maybe room temperature sort of, know what I mean...that in fact the days of ‘whine and neuroses’ began in the beginning -- in the first bloody chapter of bloody Genesis! For the specified guidelines He, She or It promptly lays down for our benefit are not really a great help -- the rules of engagement in a thumb index like the Decalogue -- the prized and banal Ten Commandments. The Jews of course have well over two-hundred ‘commandments’ or injunctions; whereas Christians have difficulty multitasking.”

A few token soundtrack whistles.

“Now Chris Hitchens has already given the Decalogue a cold douche. Which of course only galvanizes the soreheads at the celestial spa. Making their ongoing study and explications more exculpatory and inventive than ever...people being born the way they are....”

As David listened to the DVD, he was reminded once more that he was a very old man then, and not much interested in polemics. Bach's Saint Matthew Passion was his spiritual reveille and reverie, one of many masterpieces in 'the canon' that tended to preen a distrust of some kind of divine inspiration or intervention; that made one wary of fulsome ridicule as much as religious zeal. And Hitch, bless his soul, admitted to not being very musical! Yet what was a man without his music, his one 'unarticled' gift? Vida's revelation and transformation. A human might otherwise well lament the day he was born. But Hitchen's rebuke seemed then ordained -- in that adroitly invidious age, as the Gryphon re-iterated.

“Any god who is so damned unsure of Herself/Himself/It would not put the worry right up front, right? So a shrewd punter might think. I am the Big Wonder God -- yeah -- and thou shalt have no other, not even a paste up...and certainly no graven images -- ziltch, zip, squat -- and no taking of My name in vain, not even a moue or pout. There's a lot of bleary eyed consternation here. And I mean a lot. After all, He/She/It created us in His/Her/It's image -- so He/She/It must know what nitwits we can be. And once He/She/It gets this jazz off His/Her/It chest, She/He/It begins to sweat and sets aside a day of rest! Already He/She/It is think-

ing: What have I done, jees, what have I bloody well done? So -- time for a nap, a time out. A day of rest. Whew. Sunday bloody 'doneday'.

“So the first Four on the Stoney Tablet tell us bugger all about the worth of morality but only about the insecurity of the big cheese who made us.

“Next, we got to respect our parents -- family values and such -- though some folks don't want to be parents, and prove it at the outset, a fact kids learn early on. Don't mind being a father, babe, long as I don't have to be a parent. Moreover, we're told zip about what orphans are supposed to do. And they get created by the gross weight, yes? Nor is there any injunction about looking after kids -- which you just might expect from a Cat lecturing hard bitten adults about fooling around! Mind you, this Cat also gets pissed off from time to time and enacts the obliteration of an entire tribe, down to the kids and virgins, so maybe She/He/It is looking ahead, and figures it's prudent to keep some options open.

“Then She/He/It seems to get down to work with the next few injunctions -- except that one might accuse Her/Him/It of plagiarism at this stage. Hitch shines here. After all, murder and theft were deemed gauche by all the cultures that preceded the Essenes -- the early Christians. So it seems. And there was no think tank about whether warfare was sometimes hunky dory, or to what extent taxation, in all its guises, was theft. Rousseau or even Friedrich Ugust von Hayek might have helped out a bit here, depending on your druthers, but obviously weren't consulted -- yet the Omnipotent must have known they were coming down the pike. And

Morelly and Mably -- a couple of ingenue *philosophes* -- didn't even get into the tent. Left's face it: stealing has become a high art form. Lucrative too. As for perjury, it too wasn't a winner with the early mavens and gurus, so its inclusion seemed a bit patronizing -- again suggesting a craven need to join the club, or at least scrape acquaintance with the standing members. As for adultery -- well, most of you know that story. When Moses first came down from Sinai he had a cart full of tablets -- well over three hundred commandments in all. Well, the district Elders weren't buying that baggage -- even from a God. They promptly sent Moses back up the mountain and nodded with considerable satisfaction when he returned with two tablets. Still, he had a dour look. "Yes, I got it down to ten, but the one about adultery is still in there." So the wailing and grinding of teeth must have continued, for a time at least. Then, when it was discovered that sex is often the most fun when a bit naughty, fornication became a little easier to bear. And we've shouldered this burden even since.

"Now about covetousness -- especially what your neighbor has -- is fine as far as it goes, the cattle and one's wife can all be stabilized, right, but to not even think about what it would be like to have what your neighbor has is demanding a lot from a bunch of hayseeds -- from a clutch of greedy, envious, murderous, impudent, mendacious, hustlers and soreheads -- all, every last one, molded in the Creator's Image. Which leaves us so-called moderns with dumb things like drug abuse, crooked drivers (camel and otherwise), rape, pillage, genocide, pedophilia, ritual mutilation and slavery -- often among venerable, earth-loving peoples. We'll get to stoning and ox

goring another day, okay. As for global warming -- it's just humanity waking up with a godawful fever. So what a bunch of pansies we turned out to be. Anyway, just thought I'd ask, again: Would you buy a paradise from this tough old Busy Body, this Progenitor of Genesis? This Awesome Troika, including a ghost. It gets hairy. Trust me, you wake up in the After Life and recognize yourself -- you're in big trouble! Actually, the Islamists have the right idea -- kill everybody who asks too many bloody questions.

“Oblivion is looking good, right. Cheers. Have a good night.”

A short time later David would watch with dazed wonder two planes fly into the Twin Towers, and in stunned disbelief at their belated collapse. The images of couples holding hands in their leap into a mushrooming oblivion would scold and haunt him ever after. Death with dignity. That both Julian and Johanna perished in that epic disaster was the final straw, so to speak -- their lost, never to be recovered remains, scattered somewhere in the rubble. Two of his favorite people, his two childhood familiars, had been in Tower Two to vouchsafe and co-sign an annuity Julian's father left. It was as if a lifeline to David's own twined, knotted past had broken, leaving him suddenly stranded in a vast barren tundra.

He would get on with his inane life, as stricken people do, going through the motions, lusting after ghostly pretense...well, something. He He would become an art critic and even find himself in the Paleomana consortium as its art curator -- mainly buying art objets and paintings for the executive princes, his gift of precious obfuscation earning him a reputa-

tion for resourcefulness. His entanglement with the remarkable one-egg twins Zoya and Catherine would come in due course, as would his sojourn with their remarkable half-sister, Anastasia Kniaznin, who would transcend the banality and fanciful history of her first name.

God willing, he would live to tell it all. Only the good perish before their time.