

# Unbidden Guests

A seasonal novel by  
Willard Thurston





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## PART ONE

*If you behave badly enough toward someone,  
you can't stand being around him.*

Shirley Hazzard

## ONE

It was the wording on a small stone cairn in his neighborhood park that kept alive his ailing sense of reverence and trust. The wording on the cairn face above the Periwinkle was assured and tender, a courtly testament to a life well lived, with purpose and affection. So he surmised, his customary pensiveness put on hold.

In Memory of Elam Smith

Dearest Soul Mate, CupMate

Craftsman and Poet

My Lion and Unicorn

Ever about in our secret park

Amidst the harmony of leaves

Flushing out the nimbler memories!

## P

It was the lone memorial garnished with sprigs of flowers in the quiet dappled park. Some weeks fresh, others, usually late in the season, silk or plastic. Watched over by stately Douglass Firs and Red Cedars, their high mighty branches on bright summer days framing gouts of bright green on the grass. Wasps and bees hung out among the beds of azaleas, borage, honeysuckle and salvia in the summer, as did finches, song sparrows, thrushes and robins. Starlings, crows and bluejays never stayed long, flitting in and out. A meandering stone walkway skirted benches for reposeful folk, and an immense wide magnolia sequined each spring with a milky way of snowy stars. He was familiar with notions like ‘ironic tenderness’ that smart writers might occasionally admit to. Yet when he passed the

small stone cairn, the only irony he sensed was his protracted existence as a plaintive witness before unabashed endearment. The bird song itself seemed more vocal when he stopped by the cairn. Amidst ‘the harmony of leaves’ — a Yeats nonesuch.

## TWO

Mason Bascule sat in his dim house-keeping room eyeing some ceiling roaches while listening to Enesco’s Romanian Rhapsody in D major, Opus 11 No. 2. A symphonic work he venerated, the small cassette and CD player being an indispensable friend in his ongoing endeavor to photograph life on the East Side of downtown Vancouver, an area reputed to have more hopheads per capita than any other place on the planet. To undertake such a venture you needed music that embraced forbearance, clemency even, vivifying the haunting self-effacement he seemed yolked to these days as he chronicled the lives of the abandoned and forsaken, while living among them as a transient himself. The picture taker with the portwine birthmark on his left cheek and detectable limp who could yet adroitly see and listen! — the busy roaches, he concluded, not honoring quiet postludes. How sardonic that the sturdy music of the symphonic classics, his main life solace, even eclipsing his love of photography, should be a near relic in that new-fangled era, music that most youngsters would never hear, let alone consider the studied form and harmony of the notation, its reliable lyrical wonder, nor the inspired ingenuity that went into making up the many instruments that came to form a symphony orchestra. Yes, the Enescu ode seemed to conjure him, a bygone creature smitten by once esteemed euphonic composition, a haven of elegiac nuance and rhapsodic lyricism. Music now often considered dreary, maudlin, mushy. Another topical ‘birth marked’ travesty. Akin to his vision and dated style of photography. As one critic said, ‘You make poverty look po-

etic for god's sake.' The ongoing criticism. Though not from the edgy fugitive now glaring at him — a modern 'artful dodger' named Ryan Dyck he had briefly gone to school with only to rediscover among the hopheads, grifters and vagrants in Vancouver's East End, the very one who had so recently been adrenalized by the promise, the 'covenant of jihad', as he called it. Though now that eerie sureness had eluded him as he eyed the CD player in the house-keeping room they shared off East Hasting Street.

"Jees, can't you take that thing to a pawn shop or something?," Ryan demanded as he glowered at the CD player, aggravated by the music coming from it, Mason thought. The room itself sported a discolored sink, single hot plate, open cupboard, two old mattresses, scattered duffle bag contents, a small rickety table and two battered stools. A smelly stained toilet lurked behind a divider. All yesterday hand-me-downs with no antique potential whatever. Mason had not only been photographing the denizens of East Vancouver but stolidly living their life. An *in situ* undertaking.

"It's not worth much," Mason replied.

"So what. We'll be sleeping in the park for crissake." Ryan meant that keeping the CD player, a moderate cash asset, was extravagant given his current chill penury. In other words, was Mason a mere uncaring observer, a bystander after all?

Actually, such a sale would make little difference. Ryan was just fitfully scrounging for scape goats. He had sloughed off a payment to his coke dealer, the sum of which was astronomical. He could end up in a land fill. As he listened to the ineffable Enescu, Mason wryly wondered if that might not be a net benefit. At one time he might have scoffed, winked at the inevitability of destitution. But Ryan, this otherwise well-favored Ryan, seemed to ordain it — in his terrible need to obliterate all chastening comparison, the stark invidiousness of that polychrome age



ever in your face, acutely defining your lack and inadequacy. So the pensive Mason suspected.

“I’m off,” Ryan said, to no one in particular. He had made up his mind. A few last things stuffed into a backpack. His worldly possessions, those he now hastily fetched, little larger than a couple of six packs.

With some impatience Mason exclaimed, “Not that sweater. Mum knit me that!”

“Piss off.”

“Ryan, for god’s sake.”

“Ask for another, angel face.” After a hesitation more given to vigilance than care Ryan vacantly mumbled, “See you.”

A panned blur as the nomad fled, the rickety screen door banging with resonant cracks, causing two roaches to fall from the ceiling. Plastic sheeting plastered over some dirty-edged perforations made traction less sure Mason thought. Would he ever see his school fellow again? So the reckoning was maybe more imminent and consequential than Mason thought — a jeopardy that also shadowed an acquaintance, a ‘bystander’! But where to go? If he went. The Morales brothers — Ryan’s late drug source — did not engage in raillery. With some dispatch, Mason fitted out his own emergency pack: a single change of clothes, a late iPhone, thin wallet with bank card and allotted cash, musty sleeping bag, camera and camera bag, CD player, some Sibelius, Bizet and the Enesco — which concluded without consternation, so unlike his witness to the deeds Ryan pursued, deeds Mason had learned about incrementally and dismayingly. If the others, Dirk and Paul, were at first entertained, spectators enjoying vicarious drama, they too were beginning to shun Ryan’s awful gang contacts. The ‘ferals’, Dirk called them. A phrase that stuck. Deadhead

Ryan, it turned out, had spent some time working the trade throughout the Pacific North West, mainly as a pusher, before becoming a regular himself, spending now much of his time in California. He was also involved in some other gritty business he had yet to explain. ‘Not something for country girls like you,’ was all he said with his trademark smirk. Mason chummed with all four at the University of British Columbia, Ryan only in first year, losing contact with him in second — Ryan had hastily quit — and only renewed acquaintance when he adventitiously showed up needing a place to stay, actually a hole to hide in — Mason’s current East End roach haven. “A few days, Maze. Chance to catch up.” A request Mason had honored, so he thought, by convening a reunion of the four. A week later not much catch up, and now this hurried harried departure. A week before Mason had gone to the Nefer club on Richards Street to hear a folk singer called Deirdre Corr whom he was “warming to” as droll Dirk put it, adding, “Maze’s having cum dreams over a chick we better check out.” Mason’s romantic streak the others, even reticent Paul, found mainly diverting. Mason had quietly shrugged. He was vexed Dirk learned about Deirdre Corr. Dirk found a signed program in Mason’s duffle bag while searching for a pen. So he said. Deirdre’s picture graced the program. “Hey Maze, you got an eyeful here.” In Mason’s attempt to retrieve the program it tore in half. Dirk shrugged. Mason tried but failed to snatch back the other half. Said a grinning Dirk, “You got the program half I got the face. Worth a bit. Any offers?” By then Mason was thinking of something craven, spilling something on Dirk’s pants. Inconveniencing him for the duration of the evening. Something like that. His one hope was that the music would bore the others and they wouldn’t hang around. He would get another program that evening. Happily, the trio got distracted on the way by a new Yale Town bistro, though Ryan split as soon as they were inside Mason learned later. “Didn’t plan on seeing some missionary muscle,” Dirk suggested. Dirk called drug dealers “missionaries — always

looking out for converts.” Thus, as mesmerized as he was the week before when he first heard Deirdre sing, Mason listened to her a second time, using up almost the last of his ready cash to get in. The Irish band she played with seemed as enamored of their singer, who also played the lute, reinforcing Mason’s awe. What the farcical Dirk did not know was that Mason’s fascination had less to do with physical infatuation — though she was a sylvan beauty — than the resonance her singing had on his optimism, his sense of well being, his belief that beauty and heed and grace were not ‘illusionary’ and thrived in early courtly music, which this beguiling Irish troubadour or trobairitz harkened back to. He was aware his love of such expression skewed reality but he was hooked. Reality offered no excuse or benediction. His photographs, given their black and white starkness, told him that every day. His dutiful mother had cautioned him against a photographic career, but went along with his new enthusiasm in the end — which had upstaged his stay in academe to earn an MA in English Literature (Irish influence in Victorian realism) which Dirk dismissed as costly mouth wash. Well, the poetry of Ulster came alive in Deirdre’s voice and lute. Even a poem by John Millington Synge, the cameo face striking against fine-spun ashen hair, the voice seemingly serendipitous. He could not find the words. For perhaps the first time in his life he was speechless. His one consolation being that he was not the only charm-bound member of the audience, a coterie of mutually esteemed soul mates. Only the quiet circumspect Paul seemed diffident about the new Yale Town bistro, so Mason later learned — yet Paul went, as much out of empathy for Ryan, Mason thought. The three would have been amused to learn that Mason nearly got evicted from the club that night for taking a picture of Deirdre when she paused in her act to consider a request. She actually urged the owner-manager to reconsider the expulsion, which he did reluctantly — while assuring Mason he would be banned from the club if he did such a thing again. In business parlance: buy the CD and



booklet of the band you cheapskate! Which Mason had. He tried his best to look rebuked. None of the pics in the booklet did justice to Deirdre Corr. Whereas his digital take of her when he had a good look at it — one moment her quiet reflective side emerged — was worth a hundred such slick promotional ‘primers’. The sought-after keepsake worth keeping. Sadly, looking at the picture, only he might hear her sing.

### THREE

That memory was vivid in his mind the day he took pictures inside a shelter. Was Providence so selective then...and what stolid witness could alter the dire, disparate misfortune here? As he captured the denizens and their surround — a gritty adventure one sociopolitical publisher funded — he sensed his own inordinate immunity. Yet he would continue, as the ‘quivering’ bum he imagined he was. He was relieved the other three had gone to the races at Hastings Park. He might even get reimbursed for last week’s food tab. Ryan then marinated in some recent winnings and Dirk and Paul were determined to ‘bring him back to the boil’, as Dirk put it. The three, including demure Paul, went the night before to The Opus Bar on Davie Street, then Brandi’s, a strip club, on Hornby Street. Dirk dryly mentioned how the missionary muscle had, as he put it, even ‘commiserated’ with Ryan: ‘Always a pleasure, asshole.’ As Mason sat on a shelter’s lopsided musty cot, camera poised, he softly hummed a Borodin tune from *Kismet*, making the antipathy he then felt for himself less plaintive. A nearby fellow faintly nodded.

But these dour thoughts vanished the moment he returned to his bed sit and put on the CD of Deirdre Corr. The last time he heard her the ineffable singer had smiled at him, this repeat front-seat patron. Her pastoral voice, the match of her ethereal lute, revived the presence of a mythic

spirit who harkened back — he had revisited his notes on John Millington Synge — to the ancient caste of prophetesses known as dryaden, perhaps the feminine form of druid. His Deirdre. A child born to a minstrel's wife, beautiful beyond reckoning, her fate in the perfidy of great kingly rivals a legendary sorrow for Ulster. If this Deirdre was endowed with lustrous ash blond hair, not the twisted yellow tresses of embroidered history, she did have emerald eyes and cheeks of foxglove, and likely howled in the hollow of her mother's womb until free to touch the souls of men living in the shadow of misfortune. As in 'Deireadh an Tuath', The End of the Tribe. Or the Synge poem 'Winter', to the tune of Edudae (Book of Days). Or, the piece that took his breath away, period Gaelic words to the refrain in Shostakovich's Romance from the Gadfly. Though, during her break, Mason was not thinking of romance or ardor, but the coveted insult in much popular music, incited by the club's odd interim-act music — the yowl of the rock guitar, nails scraping a blackboard as backup to a purportedly heart-rending ballade with a horny humping beat — so 'fly', 'savvy'. World's away from this mythic Deirdre, a Euterpe, her genteel lyric music the measure of heed, warmth, and serenity. An equanimity even the gods must be covetous of. Precious words he would write later that night without embarrassment. He thought of his mother and her cherished photo albums, where his life loomed large. A mother's devotion, despite all. The son that numbed expectation. His own purgatory. Mason of the Sorrows. He decided this must be his last week among the ghosts of the East End. It was then he remembered his alert mother would not know of Deirdre's gig in Vancouver, nor his fascination with the singer. He decided he'd keep her coming to himself for the time being. His mother was ever anxious about his lone, unattached state. Another girl 'out of his league' would only add to her care. He did mention to her he'd heard a 'band' he liked, but didn't mention the singer's name nor the fact that she was, as his mother might have said, a 'humdinger'.



## FOUR

It was the inconvenient request from Millie, Helene Bascule's hyper step sister, that knocked most everything galley-west. At the time Helene, Mason's able mother, still managed Sea Sent, an exclusive bed and breakfast just off Crescent Beach. Had she been more up to date with her son's activities, interests and companions, she wouldn't have been so unprepared. Mason's discretion too often left her unawares. His fascination with the folksinger Deirdre Corr being one of the sleepers, the ghastly Ryan Dyck another. Moreover, Helene was always leery of talking to her estranged sibling Millie, so mindful was she of the wheedling entreaties that prompted such calls in the past. Nothing much had changed it seemed, the complexity gritty as ever. She could still hear the reedy voice, a mid register bassoon Mason once said. Her initial answer was she thought conclusively brief.

"Millie, I was hoping to be in Mexico during Lent."

"Helene, I wouldn't ask this, but the daughter of a friend badly needs a time out, a safe haven in fact. You have no idea. You must have met her — Tara Quinn?"

"I don't think so. The name doesn't ring a bell."

"Well, to cut to the chase, the man she was with — this Ryan Dyck — is a horror show. His whole gang really. The 'Sickie Dickies' Stephen calls them...what Ryan's into the Feds for...he's gone now, who knows where. North again maybe. He's often up there, the deadhead. Seattle and Vancouver, Tara said. Some goons he hung out with here are now harassing her, as if she would know where the crappo went. He was never around much anyway. A real sightseer. Not so the goons — the Morales mob. They're always in your face these days. Up your nose. A family of pig farmers near Fresno. One of them even took after Stephen the other day.

Though you can imagine he didn't get far with Stephen. No real harm done, apparently. Well none Stephen will own up to."

"Do I know this Ryan?"

"You might not remember. He's a crappo drug dealer, porno sickie, you name it. The furry adventure here. He was in Canada for a while apparently, then came back. Our busy deadhead."

Helene was, at the time, vaguely aware that Mason attended university with someone named Ryan, an American who may have fudged his application Mason later thought, yet the connection seemed too tenuous — and obliging here! — to pursue. Instead she continued by saying, "I don't think I ever met Stephen. I may have met his stepfather, Tom is it?"

"No that's Carl. Tom's an in-law or something...anyway, I can tell you Carl's at his wit's end. He's not well. He did warn Stephen to keep clear of all the Dycks — especially Ryan. You know how protective he is of Tara."

"No, I didn't know that." She was about to add that she could not place this Tara, but Millie preempted her.

"I even think Ryan was responsible for running over and killing Roseanne's collie Ben. You maybe don't remember Roseanne — Roseanne Hartley — a friend of Tara's. Tara is Deirdre's sister, well half-sister — Deirdre Corr, the folkie. You may remember. Maybe not. Well, she left here ages ago. God knows where. Good for her. Anyway, Tara, Tara Quinn, don't know if you met. She plays chess. Or did. She's also a dancer, Irish stuff, ballet even, in some arty stuff here, acting something — well, before the threats and at least one assault. She wasn't seriously injured. At least what she said. They're still looking for Nat Schroeder...it's really too god awful. There's even some bonnet monkey around now. An



A-rab'. Can you imagine!"

"Do I know a Nat Schroeder?"

"Don't think so...god hope you never do...Tara had a doozer when she came over yesterday. Wouldn't tell. One of the goons I think. Nat Schroeder...no, you don't know. A-hole Ryan is nowhere of course. Some neck bruising — on Tara. More elsewhere I 'spect. Clams up when I ask. Can you not postpone your trip for a time?"

"She's seen a doctor, this Tara...and can't the police help?"

"She's been to emerg, got some antibiotics. She thinks, so does Stephen though he won't say, that the one lead investigator is a Morales' narc. Things here are bad here, Helene. They're using her to bag the crappo. She's not a snitch — she doesn't know where he is anyway — and she's frightened. She's got to get away. Stephen's very worried. Her own father's away a lot, and usually drunk when he's around."

"Oh my. But why here? Is there no other relative? Could she not just go to a larger city, say?" As usual, Helene had trouble following her sister's story.

"These Morales are wall to wall. We got to get her outside — some place they wouldn't look. Your place in Crescent Beach would be perfect. She'll help out I'm sure."

Helene was by then dismayed, vexed. "This Tara I can't place. You were obviously close."

"Yeah, something about shirttail grandparents — cousins two or three times removed, or something. She's one of the younger ones. She's about the age of my daughter Sharon, who just left the Guard for the navy. Can you imagine! As for Stephen, he went to school with Sharon...he and

Tara lived common a while back. Or something. Nothing ‘common’ about Tara of course. I really don’t know what she saw in crappo Ryan. An unglued story that. Still don’t know. Sorry, but words have kinda run their course here. Do please give it a try, Helene. I’m up a creek here. Ryan dissed Tara before he left — saying she stole stuff from him! Can you imagine. Stephen went over last week to try to sort things out with the pig farmers. He had some kind of dust up and came over last night insisting I not call 911. I took him to emerg, they kept him in a while. He won’t tell the police anything and won’t press charges. He did tell me they’re still hitting on Tara can you believe, as if she’d know where a crappo put cash he never had. He owes them a bundle of course. Typical. Nat Schroeder’s the worst. They call him the ‘Scoutmaster’.”

“I’m sorry — Stephen is what, Ryan’s cousin?”

“No. Half-brother. Stephen Maistre. Same mother different father.”

“And this Nat Schroeder — who is he again?”

“Gawd. Lucky you. You must remember the Dycks?”

“No. Should I?”

“Thought you might remember that family — well you maybe don’t. Just as well. Well, maybe not. They’re one of the whatzit neighbors — the father was killed in a riot at the Folsom State Prison. He was in there for manslaughter. The mother worked at Wall Mart, or did. Ryan bud-died up with one of the Morales, an adopted a kid, Nat, a young kick-boxer they thought had some promise. He’s now one of their enforcers I think. A biker. The ‘Scoutmaster’, can you believe. He has a half-brother, maybe a cousin — Tage. T-A-G-E. Kinda unglued I know. Ryan’s no more a high-five buddy these days of course. The loot he owes one of the Morales is humungous. Anyway, they’re spooking Tara, think-



ing she knows where the crappo is. She's been assaulted at lease once. I just know you would do her a world of good, and being with you on the coast there would give her a blow hole — away from all this. Stephen agrees. We won't tell anyone. Promise. It seems it's you or an asylum. Or maybe a morgue. She's really in a pickle now with the 'scoutmaster' camping out. Well, you know, these thing's happen. Let me assure you."

Helene was a time mustering her patience. "I'm flattered you think I might help, but I suspect from what you've told me that this Tara may need more than a stay at a 'trite and true' Canadian bed and breakfast. (She couldn't resist the pun.) I assume she can't afford the daily rate. So if she's to stay as a lodger she'd have to help with the meals and some housekeeping. And walk my dog Bear. It's not a shelter here. Medical care could also be difficult, given that she's a visitor. If it comes to that."

"But you have coverage for guests, don't you?"

"Only if they suffer a misfortune while staying here as registered guests."

"Helene, I'm sure you'll work something out. You always do. Really, I'm in a jam. Roger's on the warpath. He's not been like this for some time."

"I don't think I know Roger."

"Oh right. You didn't know Allan left. I should have called or something. Well he did. Another unglued story. Roger and I have been together now, let's see, almost a year. He drives for a drilling rig and doesn't appreciate a lot of piss ass stuff when he returns. As you can see, I'm having kittens here. Please give it a go. She's actually quite a nice kid, all things considered."

Because Helene's own few Canadian in-laws were an insular, intermit-

tently troubled group, and she a successful business woman, she had been imposed on before and survived. If her husband had not died so early... but this was different. A girl she did not know, had never met, coming to her in an emotional state with mob tailings and possible physical injuries as well was beyond the pale. She was about to emphatically say ‘no’ when her sister added, with unexpected pathos.

“I’d carry on, I would, truly, but I have to go to the UCSF Cancer Centre for more chemo. I got liver cancer. Late stage. I got these awful sores on my fingers. Like paper cuts. From the second round of chemo. The first tanked. So I may not be up to things much longer. I’m by myself much of the time...Roger being away...I know I’ve not been the best of sisters...and if I did not feel so for this girl...”

Millie’s voice trailed off into what Helene imagined a spate of tears. It was indeed a different Millie calling. The bathetic actor had ‘dried up’. Or perfected her craft. Why this girl should inspire such care in her gregarious, carefree sister was a further puzzle. Another dismaying particular.

“I am surprised you should take such an interest, Millie. You were close to this Tara?”

“She’s a daughter in a way. Having an antsy child puts you on the spot. Imagine — the navy. The training centre in San Diego. Tells you something.”

“I thought you said the Guard.”

“No the navy. I’ve tried, I have, but my Sharon’s ‘shipped out’ — why I worry about a kid like Tara, I guess. Even Stephen’s edgy these days.”

“And Stephen think it’s a good idea — Tara coming here?”

“I know he wants to see her out of harm’s way for a time. He could



deal with Ryan and the hoggers more firmly on his own. Our best max hope Helene.”

The pause outlived its due. Finally, stoically Helene asked, “She can and will travel by herself — this Tara?”

Promptly Millie recovered. “I’ll put her on a bus tomorrow. No one will know but us she’s gone. Or where. You won’t be in danger. Promise. About twenty-two hours to Vancouver, express.”

“I may ask the social welfare people in Come Share, our local Kiwanis welfare advisers, to look in. And if she proves to be more than I can handle...”

“She won’t”

“I truly hope so, but if it doesn’t work out...”

“Helene, just do your best. All I ask. I know you’ll get on. I’ll send you an e-mail pic. I’ll call you later. I’ve got to go, a taxi will be here shortly — more tests. Well so. Damn blast. Thanks a billion. Bye.”

Helene scowled when she put down the receiver. She had dealt with oddballs before in some of her bed and breakfast guests, but they always paid their way, departed more or less as they came, and generally left dour pasts behind when they arrived. Moreover, having to postpone her Mexican vacation rankled. Was the cancer even real she churlishly wondered. Millie, she knew, was a natural in a melodramatic part. And what if the girl proved to be aberrant, seismically unstable, a fearsome mental case? Dangerous even. She was about to promptly call Millie back when a young trig couple rang her front gate, her beautifully crafted Ocean Spray Gate. The couple, both sail boarders, had booked that weekend to sample her hospitality and Semiahmoo Bay’s fresh brisk zephyrs — her last weekend reservation before the planned holiday. The area weather

mavens were optimistic. The following two or three days promised to be alive with a full bodied South Eastern front. Already distinct white caps furrowed the expansive bay. The twosome made a pretty lithesome picture as they stood at the gate. And, if Helene was not overcompensating, they seemed to be keenly fond of one another. Their very affection upbraided her vexation. It would be a bracing adventure — having this trialled enigmatic ‘lodger’. You’ve coped before she told herself...while saying a brief urgent prayer.

## FIVE

A lone figure sat in the bus stop lounge when Helene arrived. Millie had sent Helene a picture via Stephen’s e-mail and an incorrect arrival time. She likely got Tara on a bus earlier than intended. Or advised. Helene apologized for being late. The sorry-looking Tara barely nodded. A more pathetic creature Helene had rarely seen, at least in living memory. One eye livid and partly closed beneath a worn alpaca cap, one hand bandaged, her clothes bulky and mudlark grubby, a sad sack until Helene considered that the coat and pants might be purposefully nondescript. The shoes, in turn, were scuffed yet looked to have been well made. The cap too was dressy despite its age. An unlucky transient was Helene’s initial assessment. Yet the more she looked the more the girl seemed possessed of a certain poise. She might be quite presentable on another occasion.

Helene sat down beside her and briefly looked about the spare forlorn station. It was like sitting by a sightless deaf mute. Finally she spoke, saying more than she really intended. The silence she later thought had urged her on.

“Tara? I’m Helene. Millie sent me a picture. She said you were looking for a ‘time out’. A place to stay for a time. I hope we can get on.”

Barely a nod from the wastrel. Resolved, Helene continued. “I can offer you a comfortable quiet room on the lower floor. The booked guests stay in the upper floor suites but eat in the dining room off the kitchen. We’ll eat in the kitchen. Most of the guests go for a walk along the beach front after breakfast. And return around eleven. The checkout time.

The girl faintly nodded, silently looked into her hands, the knuckles of one badly bruised. Helene stoically tried once more.

“I have a dog, a beautiful Grand Pyrenees. Her name is Bear. She’s snow white, a great friend, very well mannered, and always a scout for affection. We get along very well. She’s getting on, but rarely complains.”

The speech sounded piece-meal, spurious even, but the silence was beginning to intimidate. She decided she’d said enough and grimly waited, even thinking it might be appropriate to just leave. When it seemed there might be no communication at all, Tara spoke, her voice surprisingly low, almost a whisper but for its surprising resonance.

“You’re kind. I almost didn’t come. Being an object of pity is a drag. I’m grateful to be here. I have some money — enough for a few days. Millie told me yours was not a mission home. I’ve got some deciding to do. A sabbatical — what I think of it — will be a benefit. Away from the ‘noise’.”

Without further adieu Helene rose and said she could help with the luggage. Tara pulled a small suitcase from under her seat. “Just the one. I may buy some things here.” At last she smiled, with a solemnity that nearly took Helene’s breath away — prompting another prayer.

Early the following morning an alerted Helene took note of a silent



Tara standing before the kitchen's wide bow window looking out at the wind surfers skimming the rilled waters of the bay. She smiled at the steel-cut oatmeal the waif had placed on the gas range. Also the two yogurts and glasses of prune juice on the small kitchen table — morning offerings Helene had suggested for her visiter. The current guests were finishing up in the bay side dining room, a stately elderly couple eager to sample the fresh morning air. 'The absolute necessary constitutional,' the husband stated. Tara had helped with the Apple Babies and French Toast, and taken snow white Bear for a walk. With dispatch Helene sought the Mud Hen bars her guests had requested for their 'constitutional'. Tara turned when she entered, her face relaxing into an unexpected smile. She had put some makeup on the eye, which didn't look as dark nor as closed, and the one wrist was covered in a newer neater bandage. Free the concealing cap, and the hair brushed, Helene was surprised how well-favored the girl was, her mezzo voice too newly alive.

“ — A day for board heads. Wind or sail surfers. Three have moved down close to the mouth of the bay. Some kite boarders are further out.”

Helene returned the smile — as much at the relief she felt at Tara's ready words. “I watch them but know almost nothing about the sport. It must require great skill.”

Tara continued with a heed that defied their initial meeting. “Some wags compare it to playing chess — knowing and keeping track of all the possible moves.”

“Does it take long to master?”

“Forever — to 'master'. You're always a kind of rookie in the outdoors. But you improve.”

Helene was encouraged by the exchange. “Millie mentioned that you were a dancer. Irish folk and some ballet she said.”

Tara dourly fetched a memory. “I was to audition for a company in San Francisco...before all the hassle.” She shrugged. “Someone would have seen, followed me.”

It was then that Helene, observing Tara for the first time fully erect and outlined against the bright window without her cap, bulky jacket and pants, realized how lithe her guest was. If tight leggings, stretch knits, struck her as immodest, she knew the era was obsessed with slim physical appearance given the persistent resort to dieting and cosmetic intervention. And with legs like that! She could barely reconcile this young woman to the creature she met the day before. But a short time later, as she fed Bear, she was further teased to spy her guest through her porch windows in a simple one piece swim suit briskly skimming the shoreline on a circular board, a group of youngsters intently looking on. After a couple of passes she released the board to the apparent owner who promptly attempted to imitate what he had just seen. After a couple of tries, he remained upright for a smooth longer pass and immediately undertook a second with a ready smile. Just then one of the incoming wind surfers closed and beached his sail board a short distance away. The youngsters and Tara drew about him. It was then Helene noticed the ugly bruise on Tara’s arm, just above the elbow. After an exchange with the surfer, Tara stood on the board as the surfer gave it a push into the leading swells, both her hands gripping the steering arm. The one injury perhaps not as bad then. Soon Tara could be seen beyond the group adroitly maneuvering her swiftly skimming sail, her motions seemingly effortless and, in her diminishing silhouette, almost chimerical. Soon the sail was but a tiny down feather against the distant purple isthmus of Point Roberts. Again the puzzle posed by her guest reasserted itself. The pieces available fit no coher-

ent recollection, the real if understated beauty especially a belated surprise.

That evening Helene and Tara looked at some family pics Tara had on her iPhone. Tara was making an effort. Sitting beside her, Helene was again mindful of the girl's toned lithe form. Looking at one picture of Millie plucking a chicken while smoking a joint, Tara said with a wry smile, "One of her comments to Ryan was: 'You're never too old to learn something stupid, are you?'" The laughter was short lived."

"My sister always was a lively act," Helene added.

Two pics, quickly passed over, were of Tara and a friend. Helene remarked how elfin the friend looked — how 'impish'. In a brief re-run of the pics, Tara said, "A school mate — Roseanne. I've lost touch. Regret that."

"You were close."

"Yes and no." Tara paused as if reconsidering a comment. "Different friends. I was considered a wonk early on — a 'skull'. Not a compliment. She wasn't that keen on school. At least our school. She wanted to be an actor I recall. She did warn me about Ryan. I kind of ignored her at the time. Didn't imagine she might be that perceptive. She called him 'Santa Baby'. Took me a while to realize she didn't mean it as a compliment." The dark comment ushered in a moment's silence, reminding Helene that Tara's earlier enthusiasm for the water sports in the bay languished when she returned. The blithe promise of that morning — in anticipation of a day's fresh activity, the winds continuing brisk that day — was marked in the evening by the initial languor that cautioned. Helene did her best to hide her own wonder. Tara's simple mention of a remembered joke about Ryan may have vivified her plight with him, the memory a downer. Images of Stephen, Millie, Roger, Tara's father Mat,



and Tara's step-sister Deirdre, were viewed with minimal comment though Helene did remark how beautiful Deirdre was. (She didn't of course know then of Mason's fascination with her, or that she was performing then in Vancouver! Tara too, it turned out, was also ignorant of her step-sister's gig on the West Coast, as was Deirdre's knowledge of Tara's furtive flight to Sea Sent — two of the early mischances Helene ever after deplored.) Said a newly thoughtful Tara, "She has a remarkable voice — 'dulcet' Stephen says. She sang madrigals with a church group for a time, later folk songs, ballads mainly, sometimes with Gaelic words — which was a surprise. She appeared several times in the Fresno Folklore Society concerts. She plays the lute too. She's been to Ireland. And Germany of all places. She liked the legacy of disco music there, apparently. She sang backup for a German singer, one Florian something — Silbereisen — in a show in the Theatre München. She sent Stephen a program. We haven't heard from her for some time. Well, she lived her own life. She knew before I did I think, how bad things could get here. We know she joined one band in LA then quit. Well, she is a nomad. Ryan called her Barbie, which she loathed. One time her feelings showed. I think she 'wandered off' — as we thought early on — to get away from him."

Then, suddenly pointing to a shelf on the sun porch Tara remarked, "You must play crib."

Helene was about to respond when Tara brightly added, "It looks like a great board. The patina."

"It's ages old. You play chess?" Millie said."

"When I can. Stephen taught me when I was young. Didi — Deirdre — liked crib. A game I've not thought of for a while.

"Sadly, I don't play chess. Did you and Deirdre play crib together?"

Again the sudden silence cautioned. Then, “ — Sometimes. She never got on with our — my father. Usually off when he was around. A complex guy.”

Helene smiled. “Aren’t we all? In one way or another.”

Staidly Tara continued. “The ‘watcher’ Stephen used to say — about Deirdre. She could have a cool way of looking at you. More ‘through you’ I think. She did live in her own world.”

“She is striking. You were close — you and Stephen?”

“I think he really liked Deirdre. He and my father didn’t get on.”

Hoping to keep the words flowing, Helene asked if her father was ‘over protective’.

Again the chary hesitation. “He seemed cross with Deirdre a lot. Maybe to get at Kyrna, our mum, who wasn’t much interested in being married it turned out. She left when Deirdre was eleven, I was nine. I don’t think he ever abused Deirdre — in a physical sense. An early presumption. Autism was little known or discussed then — often a kind of catch-all we use today. Ryan — I don’t know what went on there. She was a beauty — which I suspect embarrassed her. If you can imagine. People can take you in for the wrong reasons. I don’t think she was autistic, just a rapt ingrained escapist, as needy romantics sometimes are. That’s Stephen’s idea. As I said, you sometimes thought she was looking at you when she was really absorbed in her own thought, often with a distant smile. I used to kid her. She *could* be surprisingly perceptive though, when least expected.” Tara thought for a moment. “I remember her saying that ‘obsessive-compulsives were the least perceptive wackos’. A good depiction of Ryan I think. The phrase stuck. That’s how she was — quiet, heedful, her abstraction a reliable retreat. Part coping with Ryan maybe.

And my father. Who was a trial when he was drunk. A lesson in itself. She had an agent early on. Well, with such a rare musical talent.”

“You did say ‘had’?”

“She left home when she was eighteen — over three years ago. I’ve not seen her since she left. She occasionally writes. But hasn’t for a while. She likely has an e-mail but she’s kept it to herself — disgust with Ryan and our father maybe. She was to be in a show in the Freight and Salvage Coffee House in San Francisco. It never opened. It was called Nowrouz — a celebration of the Zarathushtrian New Year. Some people objected to the cast. Too many anglos. Funding was the main problem, she said.”

“She must have been disappointed.”

“She’s actually a fair planner when she puts her mind to it. So odd, given what they once thought her — the authorities. When I think of it now, I don’t recall ever seeing her angry or impatient. So very ‘in her own space’. Yet with eyes that often follow you. Easy to misinterpret. She’s a folk purist or traditionalist — her singing style. The ballads on the one CD are a bit too formal, elegiac for my liking. Deirdre of the Sorrows — Stephen’s allusion to the classic Irish play — her meme, he said. I didn’t bring any CDs with me, and I don’t know where she is right now. You try to keep in touch, but it doesn’t always work out.” Here Tara offered a plaintiff shrug.

“You were close.”

“Not really. She lived in her own world — as I’ve lamely said. She has her very own agenda. Millie tried to help. After our mum left, my father began drinking. He started up with a ‘fag bag’ as he calls her now — a former girlfriend was gay. It didn’t last. I see him occasionally. He’s more or less bearable — when he’s sober.”



Helene was about to offer a further sympathetic comment when Tara genially said, “Tell me about your family.”

Helene smiled, thinking she must be discreet around Tara. There was a lot happening she had yet to know the consequence of. A lot! She had not done this before — encapsulated her life for an outsider — and the words came out haltingly, in her ongoing effort not to appear impolite.

“Agh, memories. When you get to my age they get a bit hoary. Lets see — second generation Americans originally from Normandy. Beauchene was my maiden name. My father ended up in Indian Valley, Idaho. A school teacher. Not sure how or why. I was born there. My mother left shortly after — didn’t much like country life — with a salesman. She had Millie in California. That liaison didn’t last either. I don’t think they ever got married. My father remarried. A kindly woman. Alice McKay. A great volunteer worker I recall. Taught me to play crib. My father...suffered from emphysema...he was found dead on a highway shoulder in his car. He’d passed out apparently, and couldn’t summon emergency help. He did manage to drive his car off the road.”

Quietly Tara said, “That’s hard.”

Helen smiled. She was determined to get through this.

“It was. He was a cordial man, what I remember. I was six. My step mum died five years later — a heart attack. She had a history of systolic heart failure I later learned.”

Tara matched Helene’s stoic smile.

“An aunt brought me up. A dear soul, very active in her church choir. We grew the most splendid dahlias together. As you know I have a son, Mason. A bit of a romantic. Who likes classical music — mainly from the the 19th, early 20th Centuries. My few viable memories — begin with

him. My husband, Cliff — Clifford — Mason's father, was an investment broker. I was his second wife. A good and caring man who died several years ago. Pancreatic cancer. A late diagnosis. We'd been married just six years, Mason was a two-year-old. He left me reasonably well off. He did inherit some money. I bought this house after Mason finished high school and made it suitable for a B&B, something I always wanted — an extended family you might say. How to keep busy, focused." Helene took in the surroundings with a ready smile. "Mason's on assignment these days. He's a photographer. He lives in Vancouver. A bit of a loner. He comes by when he can. You may meet him."

Tara was slow responding. "I'd like that. But maybe not now. Best if I'm more or less invisible here."

Helene smiled, nodded. "He lets me know when he can come. How convenient it is. My guests expect a quiet relaxing time."

Tara looked about, saying, " — You've done well. I'm grateful to be here. Sorry to hear about your husband."

Helene had long since decided that her husband Cliff was not a subject for discussion, given his general aloofness — a proud insularity that may have contributed to his death, having shunned doctors as he did. She managed a demure smile, saying, "Things pass so quickly."

Tara, sensing a novel unease, changed the subject.

"Does Mason like folk music?"

Helene genially responded. "If it's good — meaning traditional I would guess. Most popular music he shuns I think. A bit of a loner, as I've said. He was an honor student — graduated two years ago with an MA in English literature. I thought he'd continue to the intensive, as it was called — the PhD program. Then he changed his mind. He never

did explain — well in words I can understand. Like your Deirdre, he lives an inner life. His music— his classical symphonic music — is a tonic for him I think. His muse.”

“But he took up photography...?”

Helene smiled. “I didn’t see that coming. I know he looked over the music programs at UBC and Simon Fraser but found them too modern — twelve tone and minimalist biases he said. I’m not sure what that means but he seemed then bent on studying English. Irish literature I know he liked. ‘Swift and Yeats aren’t yet fossils,’ he claimed. Then, all of a sudden — so it seemed to me — he left off to take up photography. A correspondence school in New York. I know one author especially influenced him — Andreas Feininger, an architect who became a photographer. ‘The camera as pen,’ I think he said. I told Mason it would make an excellent hobby — photography. He laughed and gave me a hug. ‘From an impeccable source,’ he said. That I remember. Had no effect of course. And I still don’t really understand why he opted out — well, as I think of it. I know he’s as enamored of his music as ever. ‘The soul of living things’ he says. He’s got me listening to some of his favorites. One of them a traditional Kazakh folk song can you believe. Some-thing about a butterfly lover. Played beautifully by a Japanese violinist!”

“Maybe he’ll meet Deirdre one day.”

“An interesting prospect I should think, given what you’ve told me about her. She seems a rare wonder.”

Tara was slow answering as if she’d thought of something then changed her mind.

“She is. Our mother was a singer. Kyrna Healy-Corr — when she had Deirdre. My father said she was never satisfied. Not a great puzzle. Well,



marriage is not for everyone.”

Tara briefly smiled then began again.

“A free soul, dear Kyrna — sorry — who seemed fond of my father, for a time. They did marry. She had come to California from Ireland with Deirdre. Deirdre was just two. I was born soon after. Kyrna eventually took up with an importer who may have been a courier for the IRA — the late story. What the IRA had to do with it all no one seems to know, or won’t tell. She helps run a pub in Belfast now. We write occasionally. She and Deirdre were never close I think. Deirdre wandered off a lot — as I’ve said — even as a kid. Kyrna scolded her a lot. What I remember — the shouting. Didi’s insular Acadian world I guess, her reality. You are a good listener, Helene, a lay confessor I hadn’t anticipated in coming here.” She reached over and patted Bear who had sauntered into the room and settled at their feet. It was a felicitous moment. Helene fetched her camera and, with Tara’s ready consent, took a picture. “Always like pics of the special guests. I’ll keep it safe for a time.”

Tara wryly smiled. “I know I look a little better than when I arrived. It is a sanctuary here.”

Helene smiled. “You live a busy life. Listening is what I do here. Rarely with as much interest. Did you like your father?”

“I never really knew him. He did serve time for a fraud conviction. Some insurance scam. Never did learn the details. Deirdre was his favorite — despite all I’ve said. I was maybe too snippy. Too head up. Jealous maybe. He did belt me a couple of times. Not unusual in such a family I now think. He was good looking. The early pictures looked a little like Ryan.” Again the stoic smile that seemed to prompt additional recollections. “Before she left, Deirdre had an Iranian boyfriend for a time. From a wealthy family. He wanted her to come with him to Iran but she balked

in the end. I never met him. The day's Ayatollahs dissuaded her I expect."

Following this supposition Tara seemed to slip into another of her private spaces. Sensing a further lull, Helene managed to say, with a resolve she hadn't anticipated, "I don't like to pry, but if I can help with some issue, please let me know. Millie mentioned little about your parents, but she was clearly worried for you." She was about to say more, soften the entreaty, but decided her dummy hand was explicit enough.

Tara smiled, acknowledged the offer. "That's kind. She must have told you about Stephen — Millie. The human factor you might say, most humans being so unpredictable. The discoveries, the later ones were dismaying...for us all...Ryan carried a lot of baggage. He liked me. Well, in his way." The comment prompted a faint grimace. "The bigger problem."

Helene smiled, rose and fixed them some hot chocolate. In due course they played several convivial games of crib — and talked into the early hours, Tara's newly candid words revealing a spellbinding drama, featuring an incubus Helene could barely imagine. Indeed, Tara's words aptly 'fleshed out' in her own mind one of the day's arrant obscenities, a gamy pornography, in addition to the drugs, that Tara had been for a time complicit with, at least in brooking the 'pretense of the artist', until she came face to face with the ugly reality of it. Her words, often episodic, were interrupted with laden feints, a kind of endemic dismay Helene thought.

*"You want to believe in someone, you tend to slight, ignore things. One of the first things....which seemed daft, even risible at the time...an Aztec relief sculpture called the Templo Mayor stone disk. You may not know it. (Helena didn't.) He had a small replica of it. I think I imagined at first he had an interest in Aztec mythology.*

*How trusting I was. The disk — a large shield-shaped stone relief sculpture — depicts the dismembered body of an Aztec deity. The pronunciation is a trial. I say ‘co-hol-shawki’ or just ‘small c’. I always have trouble spelling it. Ryan said the name better I think — better at placing accents. It’s a gruesome work, showing the body on its back with arms, legs and head hacked off. It took me a while to realize how mesmerized, turned on he was by it. In the myth small c’s mother — co-ahle-kew — big C — gets pregnant by a mortal — actually a hummingbird feather — and embarrasses her family. The one time I might have laughed I think. Well, small c’s siblings urge her to slay the careless mother. Except the feather turns into a warrior who comes promptly and ready made out of the womb — a chap called — hwet-selo-pok-tee — big H — and cuts up small c, casting her head into the sky as the moon so her mother can be comforted in seeing her daughter in the sky every night. The thoughtful son. The myth is connected to the Aztec belief that mother earth — big C — is both womb and tomb, Creator and Destroyer. The Life Force itself as courage, daring and sacrifice. Valiant birth astride a grave. Hence this earth mother has a grisly side — all matter birthed and consumed by her. A stoic creed. The disc was, what can I say, a kind of erotic totem for him — what I think now. Stephen used the word ‘periapt’. How obsessed he was with brutality, gore...I still have trouble...he actually wanted me...it was a consummate sexual image for him. ‘Nature’s Nerve’ he called it.”*

Here, Tara paused as if to stanch giddy laughter — and reassure herself Helene would not rather retire. Helene assured her anything that related to her sister’s life she’d like to know about. And no, she wasn’t tired — not in the least. This comment seemed to reassure both of them.

*“Well, what do you say to such a one. I actually spent one night looking at a DVD he had had a hand in making. It ended with a mock yet stark rendering of the disc. A girl lying so, limbs eschew, with red lines as cuts — jam I think. Well, boring for me I said, and a huge waste of time. He called the film Frat Filet — he’d belonged to a fraternity at university. So he said. What blew me away was his lordly presumption that his so-called artistry transcended morality...and then to discover, via Stephan, the later ghastly pimp stuff. Roseanne was my precursor I think. She called him ‘Santa Baby’, a*



*quip I didn't appreciate at the time. I underestimated Roseanne. She was wild but not a pushover. Though I think he threatened her before she left. I was then just stymied I think, barely imagining my own jeopardy. Shortly to be accused by the goons of conniving with Ryan...hiding the money he owed. The threats started then. I knew then I had to get out. One goon....well, so.” (Here Tara paused, shaking her head.) “It's when I went to Millie. She took me in. Then the random gun shots...two into Millie's bedroom...and that slimy cop...*

Tara paused again, her testimony taking its toll. Helene rose and put the water on for some Camomile tea. “I find this time of night a little Sambucca in the tea helps settle the day.” This comment entertained them both.

*He was into drugs, mainly coke when I first met him. We did some together. I thought at first it a bit of fun, a 'jape' he called it. A costly something you do now and then, but nothing set in concrete. He was very reassuring. He can, or could be, entertaining. Handsome cool rebels have an insidious appeal. But then, well, things changed. You need a good listener. Thanks.*

Tara had dryly smiled, considered keeping some details to herself, Helene thought. Yet she continued.

*It's discovering one you once found intriguing, once listened to, kidded even, to be profoundly sick.*

Herein Tara again paused, as if momentarily distracted.

*Well, as I've said, he could be turned on, entertained by vividly staged cruelty...he couldn't understand why I wasn't...I knew, or thought I did that such natures existed, but you don't expect one day to find such a one near you...trying to decide how to flee. The discovery of one later DVD knocked me out...I'd seen some internet tubes, and heard stories about others, but nothing like the ones he later abetted the sale of, and maybe even had a hand in making. One of the later revelations. As was the ugly confidence scheme he actually helped set up — which may have served his film making. His*

*initial word was 'patronized'. He was all gung ho then, part of a larger posh group. A tux set. Millie may not have known...*

Again the disabling disbelief and new breath.

*It seemed — what I learned from Stephen — he actually helped a group of mainly Asian immigrants inveigle then entrap scores of young — under age — white girls from poor families to serve as sex slaves. The early 'sugar babes'. Some he used in the films. He plied the girls with gifts and entertainments initially, holding out the promise of dramatic acting careers...even Roseanne, dear 'impish' Roseanne, was I think intrigued for a time. She did warn me though — before I came to grips with what was really going on. Even later, when Stephen threatened to expose Ryan, he bragged that the scheme was perfect because no authority had the guts to engage in ethnic investigation — that police departments were powerless before the politically correct juggernaut and the charge of cultural harassment and discrimination. He mentioned a couple of people who'd already been hauled up before human rights tribunals in Canada — he was up there a lot — for slander and hate speech, which is apparently par for such activity. We've similar issues in the U.S. A State Assemblywoman recently got into trouble for her outrage over the killing of a female aid worker, an ISIS hostage. Ryan showed Stephen a picture of a Toronto, Canada, school room, the school and teachers funded by the Ontario School Board, where the boys are shown sitting up front, the girls in burqas sitting well back of them, the menstruating girls at the very back. He supposedly said — Stephen's words stayed with me — it's quite a testimonial: 'What horny dumb recluse or needy cop is going to complain about that? Western feminists are too busy getting universities to punish campus rapists — mainly privileged white boys — or, you know, construction firms for not hiring more women pipe fitters, or not censoring their catcalling workers.' Suave words that hang around. No one it seems has the guts to look at what other cultures are committing or allowing — that would be discriminatory, racist. 'Islamophobic, the ineluctable sin!' — another of Ryan's phrases to Stephen. In England's South Yorkshire town of Rotherham forced shagging had been going on for ages Ryan claimed. Haraam does not forbid 'temporary marriages'. Modern gals specialized in them he claimed. One of the videographers was from England — he never told me, but Stephen overheard him with a*



*Morales one night. Stephen also suspected that some of these indulged boys were being recruited to go to fight for militant groups in the Middle East. The police down here pretty well ignored Stephen. Too preposterous maybe. No ready corpses. And the police were getting into a lot of trouble for arresting blacks. Which some Asians pass as. I sometimes still try to disbelieve...the one tape Stephen insisted I look at, one of Ryan's later tapes, Stephen had an acquaintance buy it off a Morales...the blood looked real enough in several frames, and the very young performers a long way from method acting...have you ever been immobilized by disgust, anxiety? Anyway, I did confront Ryan — something Stephen advised me not to do — and was galled by his insinuation that 'I' was a silly Western prude and hypocrite, a classic neurotic bigot. When I told him the imputation was obtuse he went into a rage, tore up a textbook I'd been reading, scattered my notes, even ripped up a gown — a birthday gift. I must have been askance for he asked what cat had eaten my 'delicious tongue'...such words molest. I hit him then, slapped him...which only set the match to the IED so to speak. He actually pulled a knife on me. I'm sure he would have hurt me. I fled to Millie's. I'm a better runner than Ryan. Where he met Stephen. You don't know Stephen but he's not one you mess with, though he was injured. Ryan cut his shoulder. I couldn't believe how he was flailing about with his knife. He's not that strong though. Ryan left promising to get even — with all of us. That night a bullet entered Millie's dining room and hit a mirror. I was staying with her then. My alcoholic father was off somewhere. As usual. The police were called. They told us later Ryan had been in a bar with friends — who would vouch for him. Another bullet entered Millie's bedroom early the next morning. Two in fact. The police retrieved one from a door jam — a hunting rifle bullet. Which I know Ryan had. But by then he had disappeared. Stephen suggested I get away for a time. The whole area is a Morales' patch — some affiliate clubs at least as far north as Portland he thought. He also talked to Millie. The implicit threat is often the most disturbing. Ryan is still off somewhere. The sums he owed, including a shark he'd been using to pay off some gambling debts, were humungous apparently. It's what the one detective said — that one of Ryan's coke dealers said I'd make good the debt, knew where some money was. That's one awful part.. He knew it was a put-on I think, the detective. I had no idea who he meant — this 'dealer'. This may sound paranoid but I suspected*



*he was bent, the cop, a Morales' stooge — scaring me, thinking I was on the take."*

Helene sat slowly shaking her head, her chin in the hand. "I can barely imagine." Tara faintly smiled, took up the thread.

*He was always around, the cop. Millie tried to assure me everyone was on the lookout. I think by then she was as fearful as anyone. Then the Morales brothers tried to abduct me...Ryan's loan shark enforcer was with them, one Nat Schroeder. A brother, wonder of wonders. Well, half brother to Ryan. We all come in 'halves' it seems. Had Stephen not been around with one of his friends...Roseanne told me what they did to another kid. Which may have had less to do with information than gamy assault, the daily to-do for some. What goes on today...*

She shrugged, hadn't finished the thought.

*Incidentally, I have been careful about coming here, no one saw me leave. I told Millie I might go to Spokane instead. Would transfer at Stockton. I almost did. You might tell her I'm not here if she calls. You said she hadn't called. She may think not calling is a precaution. You've been more than generous. I won't be here long. And I'll leave immediately if anything turns up here. I spent the morning I arrived — the bus got in early — scouting about the bus station. There was nobody.*

Tara had given into a long thoughtful pause then, coughed, taken a fresh breath and another sip of the Camomile tea Helene brewed, each cup with a teaspoon of Sambuca. Helene too was absorbed in assessing her own possible jeopardy!

*That's about it...why I'm here, trying to get up the courage to deal with the reality. Set a new course. Though god knows it's going to be harder...having been here. It's the discovery — the wonder of seeing a decent place, actually being in it. I still have a time imagining Ryan so obsessed and so keen...it was his demented rage that blindsided me in the end. A near free for all that one time...had he been bigger...and could run...*

Again an abrupt elision and dour smile.

*It was seeing a side of a person you never imagined, could not conceive of. Believing aggression and cruelty the pulse of life. He said as much when he was high — ‘Nature’s Nerve’. Yet he kept it to himself in the beginning. Thinking later it was just a glitch on my part. When I left he kept sending goading e-mails — only Stephen has my new e-mail — wanting to know why I was so ‘candy assed’. I was a ‘natural showboat’ he said. An ‘erotogenic masochist’. His sick notion of empathy I guess. The last comment before I had a new address. With such a person there’s no middle ground...he’s on his own planet. Not Deirdre’s planet of course. Not Didi’s...*

One of the agreeable smiles surfaced then.

*I think she instinctively knew that Ryan was a mess — long before the facts were known. But was not a loud mouth. I doubt she ever saw his precious Aztec stone disk. You’ve been a great help. But I must, will leave soon. I’ve got to get on. I want to see someone in LA. Said he knew a good private investigator who sometimes takes on pro bono work if it relates to other work he’s doing. Who knows? Also an agent there — if and when I want to find some work. I sent him an e-mail a while ago. I first met him during a lively dance class at a community college. A risk, but I’ve got to restart the engine. LA is a no-man’s land. You can be invisible there -- with some planning. At least for a time. I think I can pull it off having been away — been up here for a while — with a new look, and altered makeup, maybe a new social name. I know I’ve been a trial. Coming here has kept me sane. I can never thank you enough....*

Helene recalled sitting with Tara for sometime after — mainly in silence but for a few bon mots about luck and providence. The rare gems. Even in the shadows she was amazed how sleek and elegant her stoic guest could look. Which reminded her of Mason’s disfiguring handicap. She hadn’t told Tara about the ‘accident’: the time she got out to clear sleeting snow from her car’s windshield...neglecting to see young Mason climb out from the back...then to attentively drive off not at first realizing her child was no longer asleep in the back...to be hit by a similarly blinded oncoming vehicle. As the wise say, Nature is on nobody’s side.

Only when Helene retired did she catch her breath, and take note of the fact she hadn't read either newspaper for the last couple of days, nor consulted the network news — nor even the TV guide. The papers themselves were still in their delivery folds — suggesting Tara too was little interested then in current news. Helene also wondered why Mason hadn't called. She never liked bothering him herself, but was always anxious when he hadn't phoned for a while. No news was not always good news. He must have a lot on his mind. His work in the East End an ongoing trial she knew.

## SIX

Mason awoke in a setting he did not recognize. For a time he believed he might be dreaming. A confusion that made the realism acute. It had happened before, this arrival of prickly uncertainty, even menace — but not in a wonderland like this. Lush parkland and a stream near an expansive pond with water lilies coming alive in shafts of late morning sunlight. He lay on an embankment in an old smelly sleeping bag he could not recall climbing into which lay near the stream that meandered into the pond, actually a small tree-lined lake, covered in white and mauve blooms, water lilies thick as fleece in some patches it seemed. More bodies, nearby, were also shifting, coming to. He had a terrible hangover. Someone said, “Hey there sailor. You got a great right arm. You're the one right?” Brief laughter from a hairy face ended in raucous coughing. Slowly, vaguely Mason remembered getting caught up with a group of street kibitzers taunting some women parading with the hashtag #Our Bodies Our Selves — *Don't you need a license to be that ugly?* — *Me getting smart with you?* *How would you know?* — *Your parents must have asked you to run away from home, right?* — somewhere on East Hastings if memory served. Mainly older paunchy welfare idlers who habitually hung out near Second Beach



in Stanley Park in the summer. Where they seemed as concerned about their bikini tans as the latest rendering of the logical atomism of Wittgenstein — their philosophic duels as animated as a Punch and Judy show. Yet they had smiled for his camera, pretended to be clowns. He had been adopted or press-ganged, he couldn't really remember. They had some kind of booze, vodka he now thought — his 'great right arm' — and, in their way, partook of his own wish to escape the careless rushed heartless society everyone seemed locked into — to seek and find that space every loser gravitates to. Another variety of the 'occupy' mantra. In the present case the great 'dessert platter' of Stanley Park. He cringed at the thought that he might now be part of such a gamy community, this vain, self-esteeming fraternity of seasoned *flâneurs* — the word that came to mind — who had so seamlessly adopted him, this harmless, not unlikable naif seeking 'irrefutable experts' for a book — his wry come on that amused them — these career drones so unlike the craven sickly derelicts he had recently photographed. "No hurry; the 'coffee cops' still at Prospect Point," one fellow said to another. His presence among these sensual un-obliged folk now had an ironic edge he hadn't noticed before — on this quiet idyllic stream bank where such denizens might still camp out in the fall. Yet he recognized no one. "Lots of time," someone said, someone who'd offered the sleeping bag perhaps. Then the dizziness returned and he blacked out when he tried to stand. Must have...

...For when he finally awoke or 'came to', he discovered he was in a hospital, bandages covering an eye and one side of his head. The one uncovered eye was not too efficient in the acutance department: the room seemed bathed in a downy mist or haze. A matronly nurse came, smiled, looked at a chart, took his pulse, asked if he could remember anything. He may have shaken his head, aggravating the headache he seemed immured with. Her words offered little respite. "You were near a building some rioters threw bricks at. The riot after the Stanley Cup game. Yes?"

You've a head wound — one of the bricks we think — also some cuts and abrasions. Another doctor will be here shortly. Got that? You may be suffering from amnesia. Tough I know. Hang in there.” He felt himself nod. She looked him over for a further few seconds, checked a monitor and intravenous feed, affably nodded and left to attend another patient in the ward. It took him a minute or more to decide he wasn't dreaming. The intermittent acute pain he felt squared with the complex equipment in an intensive care ward and the likelihood of being seriously hurt — also the sudden frantic recollection of being downtown by the Bay department store, a building targeted by some brick throwing rowdies, the storefront glass exploding like IEDs. Yes, the night of the epic 2011 Stanley Cup riot. The night nothing was off limits.

Slowly he sensed anew the dizzying disbelief, the harrowing recollection of downtown Vancouver's second rehearsal of Armageddon! Memory as stammerer. Scenes that only got worse as the scenes passed in review: first off, his droll time with the jaunty campers in the park, passing out there, coming to, heading home, then hastening to the Nefer Club to worship and exalt!

It was while awaiting Deirdre's second set that the rioting outside began in earnest: the primal yelling, night creatures darting to and fro, rocks and bricks fracturing glass, several hissing burning vehicles, shrill sirens, intermittent explosions and diverse fires. Not camp or bond fires. The after-game soirée. They lost — the Canucks. Somebody was responsible. Dirk and Paul had gone to a pub to see the game. They came to the club afterward but left when the mayhem began. Ryan was, as usual, elsewhere. Deirdre had come back to a darkened stage to confer with her band members and the manager. The second set would be cancelled. The club soon emptied. For a time Mason and a few patrons looked out from the club's half-curtained windows with preternatural amazement. To

Mason it seemed the Sixth Seal had been broken — to summon the Night of Pandemonium.

He eventually left the club to look for Paul and Dirk. He could not believe the mayhem, the elation of the rowdies. He had reached the Bay department store, Georgia side, when the ear-splitting sound of smashed plate glass ignited a chorus of heady cheers. One shard nicked his hand. A second window exploded further down. Additional hurled rocks or bricks smashed counter cases nearest the windows. He had sought his handkerchief when another sharp crash set off more jubilant exclamations. He was stunned, and soon gasped for air as a dust cloud loomed from devastated framing and dry wall. He was stupefied, numbed, indeed petrified when something stone-hard walloped the side of his head. He must have lost consciousness for the next thing he remembered was someone's hands under his shoulders lifting him onto a stretcher. A further interval of insular deafening wonder, before something went over his face, with a warning from someone about one side of his head and a wounded leg — all congruent with his arrival in this emergency ward. He did remember someone on Georgia Street saying the rioters were 'avenging angels'! To rapt applause. As the memories returned to him in this acute care ward, he badly needed to supplement his vivid but single-perspective recollections, thinking one of the nurses might help. It was then an unexpected person showed up at his bedside. "Mason, it's Paul. Yes, here and upright." "Thank heaven," Mason said. Paul laughed. "Happenstance," he said, then sought and placed a chair by Mason's bed. He smiled as he sat. "I actually saw you on the stretcher, Seymour near Georgia. You were lucky I think. One of the ambulances that got through." Looking about he added, "You'll want some updates I think. They tell me you'll live." Mason grasped Paul's hand with his one good hand as one being rescued from the Titanic.



Paul began with the singular disaster that would effect Mason the rest of his life. The telling of which affected Paul as well. “What you won’t know — I’ve just seen the news — is that a person was attacked outside the club by an unknown assailant during the riot. The details are still sketchy. The unnamed person — next of kin and so on, sorry — was taken to the VGH trauma centre. Badly injured apparently. Dirk, who knows the club manager, thinks the ‘person’ was Deirdre Corr.”

Mason struggled to comprehend. “But how do you mean ‘attacked’?”

Paul cleared his throat. “‘Stabbed’ Dirk says. Unreal.”

“But she’ll be okay?” Mason frantically demanded.

Paul grimaced. “It’s bad, apparently. I’ll try to learn more.”

Mason was appalled, incredulous, and attempted to sit up then lay back. A nurse approached with a scowl. “Please, you must try to rest.” Rest, Mason wanted to say, how can I do that? From Paul’s expression he sensed a calamity loomed. He was surely dreaming, imagining He engaged Paul’s empathic look. Paul nodded, saying, “I know. I heard her too, well briefly, that night before the riot. She was awesome — what I heard. I would have stayed...” A code blue signal broke the spell. They both sensed the bustle of urgent haste in the corridor beyond. Paul stood, saying, “I’ll try to learn what I can and come back. Soon, I promise. I’m assured you’re a lucky lad. The nurse wants me to leave. More medication.”

So. He, Mason Bascule, was alive, most likely — not dreaming. Stuck in a nightmare gaming house, Providence acting as a croupier. Sometime later, in a large six-bed ward — he’d lost track of time — Paul read to him from a Vancouver paper. Because the next of kin of the injured ‘person’ still hadn’t been contacted, the name was not yet disclosed.

*During the riot, a person was seriously injured in a confrontation outside the Nefer Club in downtown Vancouver. At least two witnesses saw the confrontation but did not recognize the assailant, though they thought the person attacked might have. The riot mayhem may have screened the assault. It is hoped the public will come forward with any personal knowledge of the attack, as well as any camera and video images of the riot itself.* Mason slowly shook his head. Said the attentive Paul, “It is Deirdre, Dirk says. Unreal. I’m sure they’re doing everything possible.” It was then Mason discovered that his injured eye could and did make fluent tears. Stinging cascading tears. A good sign someone said. Only vaguely did he note a nurse giving him an injection which promptly took effect.”

It was the perforations in the ceiling panels he noted first. He hadn’t seen them before. But there they were. Much too regular for bullet holes. So he could see a little better, much better through the one eye. No, not bullet holes. An encouraging sign one nurse said that day. Talk also, in the voice snatches Mason could make out, of post concussion syndrome. Had the stone been bigger...the wider pain only incidentally physical then. And so it came back, slowly, agonizingly, most of it — him briefly stand-ing outside the club with Dirk and Paul as the noisy conflagration began. Ryan was elsewhere — no great surprise. Mason remembered being amazed, the tumult after the game seemingly both spontaneous and seismic. Dirk and Paul took off, Paul wishing him “God’s ease: go back in, hear your song bird. Look you up later.” Which Mason had done, though by then the song bird was consulting with the manager, who was shaking his head. Mindful Paul came from an otherwise devout family — yet tried to fit in, commiserate, defer even to changeling Ryan. The small elegant tattoo of a humming bird on his shoulder testified to such a wish or need. How wondrously that night had begun — Deirdre singing in her first set with a soul’s ease that captured one anew. Find a fair young maid and be glad. He had. He’d glimpsed paradise...at least for a time. And now, an ugly dire encounter. If the police investigation was ‘ongo-

ing', some dread details had finally emerged. The seriously injured performer was indeed 'talented Irish folksinger Deirdre Corr' whose elderly mother had arrived from Belfast. The extraneous shock was learning that the Nefer club safe had been broken into the night of the riot by a person or persons unknown! The riot served as a cover it was presumed. By then Mason was sitting up and reading for himself.

At the outset of the riot he had wanted to tell the hooligans to shut the hell up! You've been boring humanity for millennia. Put a sock in it. But the free-for-all he soon realized was becoming ominous, augural, what else could one say, the rocks, missiles, gas torches pitched with major league aplomb. One beaming a policeman outside the club. Had he really been there, witnessed such feral abandon? The rabid contagion? These were formidable golems he wryly thought at first, molested to breaking point by the thieving duplicitous world and corrupted wiseacres who ran it. The mego rapper's business. Which had obliterated his angel's song. They were determined to reassert themselves, these inflamed maniacs, destruction of someone, of anything, the invincible high. Paul would tell him, in due course that Dirk actually participated in the riot. Was cited for vandalism and disturbing the peace, and now out on bail. The family lawyer worked to get the charges stayed. His client was mischievously given a hallucinogenic drug. "Not by me of course," Paul stolidly assured, adding, "Ryan's been gone now for some time. I think my recommendation he seek help stiffed my influence. I'm going to enter a retreat myself soon. Get my mind off late events. I've made application to the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade as a Public Affairs Assistant. I go for an interview in a fortnight. One hopes. I can reach you through Sea Sent?..." Mason would read days later a piece that said the police were looking for one Jack Owen in connection to the safe break in, as pictured in a blurry security shot, a person Mason didn't recognize, though the name did ring a bell. Ryan had mentioned a Jack Owen, in words Mason



would not forget. ‘A neato guy who runs the camel jockeys!’ It was Mason’s first inkling of Ryan’s truck with Islam. Could Ryan also have been in the club that night? He asked the nurse to contact the RCMP. He had some information — about the riot. Ryan’s mug shot was already on file he assumed. And Ryan knew a ‘Jack Owen’.

Helene, who was just coming to assimilate Mason’s plight, read once more the note from Tara with layered anxiety. The note was left the afternoon she disappeared, the day before the riot. Helene had not expected Tara to depart so abruptly, so unannounced — leaving only this terse note with her key. She imagined they had become fellow travelers, so to speak — sojourners. Tara’s sudden absence she now sorely felt — both a keen disappointment and renewed fear for her own safety. *You’ve been so wonderful. Many thanks. T.* ‘Wonderful’ wasn’t enough, apparently. What had she missed? The room Tara stayed in appeared as if it had never been occupied. Even the shower soap dispenser looked full. Looking out the wide window that overlooked the bay she saw the man who lent Tara his sail board. He too seemed at a loss. What did he know, she wondered? It was then she noticed that the lovely Elizabeth Blaylock painting of a seagull was missing. One of the cheaper cameos from the hallway hung in its place. She swiftly entered the hall to discover the Blaylock placed where the cameo had been — at the back of which, when she released it, a second note was tucked! It took her a second or two to correlate the two. The wording here proved to be even more disconcerting.

*So very sorry. The surfer I met turned out to be a Hells Angels biker who asked if I wanted some ‘stuff’. He’s someone Ryan could have known. He didn’t know me — please be assured. I told him I was Pentecostal, didn’t do drugs, and urged him to seek Jesus. He told me Jesus was a failed pusher and left. I’d call the RCMP but they can do very little. I’ve been in limbo far too long. Hope to see you again one day and thank*

*you properly. I wanted this info to be exclusive. Regular notes can be inadvertently read by strangers. Again, many many thanks. T.*

It was all Helene could do to postpone calling the RCMP herself. She phoned the hospital instead. Only in the last few days had she learned of Deirdre's gig in Vancouver, a first apparently, and of Mason's fondness for her singing, as well as her dire injury during the riot. Helene assumed, trusted, that Tara did not know of Deirdre's coming either. How could she? The story was very recent. When she did look at an older weekend entertainment section, an ad for the Nefer Club was a single line item in the music section. 'Deirdre Corr Band — for Cool Connoisseurs,' it said. No, she decided, Tara would not have known Deirdre was in Vancouver, and would surely have let on if she had. Whereas Helene's own demure son had assured her that Deirdre was not a mortal he might court.

When he answered the ward phone, Mason was lucid and wanted to know more about Deirdre. What really happened. How serious her condition was. "If you hear any rumors....there's not much information in the papers. Nor the media sites...nothing on my iPhone, which still works oddly enough. They have wi-fi in one lounge." Helene wondered if Tara now knew that Deirdre had been performing in Vancouver and was a casualty of the riot. Helene had not specifically mentioned Tara to Mason, thus honoring Tara's need for anonymity. She told Mason she'd forgotten about a guest, and had to postpone her vacation. In the following days she kept an eye out for the worrisome biker. But he too, it seemed, had vanished.

Tara's sudden absence left Helene with a sense of loneliness she'd rarely known, a loss that linked concern and sorrow. She even felt sick at times, and only realized one morning that her distress had a physical component when she coughed up some blood. The initial diagnosis in emergency at Surrey Memorial warranted keeping her in for observation and

more tests. An intestinal obstruction had resulted in a fistula and an abscess that ruptured. “Could disappointment trigger such an event,” she had asked the on-call physician. “It can happen,” the tired doctor said, adding, “Someone close to you hurt in the riot?”

Helene lightly smiled. “He’s improving.”

She was admitted to the hospital and given a regimen of antibiotics. Her own doctor, after assessing several tests, reluctantly told her she should consider lightening her workload in the near future — she would need regular medical attention for some time. “How long?” she asked. “It’s hard to tell. I would bank on several months.”

She knew the expense of maintaining Sea Sent *and* providing for a care home was more than she wanted to undertake just then, even if Mason helped out. A day later she learned that a private room at the Waverly Care Pavilion was newly available, and her early application seeded priority. Because she had not felt that well on and off for some time — Tara had kept her engaged, distracted — she decided she might have to depart Sea Sent. She would see how she felt in the coming days. If she left now there might be no coming back. She also decided it was time to tell Mason about Deirdre’s troubled half-sister. Tara was now invisible and Sea Sent returned to business as usual. Helene had kept her bargain with wary Tara long enough.



# PART TWO

*We are stardust.*

Edward Zganjar/Joni Mitchell

## SEVEN

The famous eccentric film director, Antoine Plombiers, was puzzled, annoyed really. And talking to himself. Being sufficiently absorbed he was able to ignore the ‘heckling’ of some noisy canyon Towhees — for a time. He had barely touched the quiche Hans brought that afternoon to the terrace of his art deco style villa that outlooked Los Angeles’ Runyon Canyon Park, a bit browner that spring due to the diminished rainfall. He still had difficulty making sense of the incident. What could the creature have been thinking — the beguiling and enigmatic Tara Quinn? To begin that day’s shoot — so splendidly — then skimble off like an Arizona roadrunner. Was it that oaf who insinuated himself onto the set? The street goonlet named Ryan something? A pint sized IED. Had he placed a hex on her? She looked as if she’d seen Beelzebub. He knew the Aztec theme of the film Moon Disc initially dismayed her — the mythic encounter between Coyolxauhqui and Huitziopochtli. She had readily come to the audition but a diffidence emerged as she began to read the resumé. Indeed, it looked as if she’d lost all interest for a time. Whatever bothered her ended when she’d completed the resumé. Readily she’ tok up the script and began fluently reading the designated parts. He had her read them twice to affirm his astonishment. “Nice ending — in the film’s resumé,” she said, when she’d finished.” In the film Coyolxauqui survives; the Templo Mayor disc becomes a starry rendering of a disintegrated Huitziopochtli. Antoine had been inspired, highly entertained, by the day’s sisterhood manifestos and proclamations. Watching Tara Quinn later undertake some choreographed movements for a fight sequence upped his amazement. Elegance personified he thought. He had rarely been so certain in his life!

Then — to so abruptly, summarily vanish when they were just underway, jeopardize a possible budding career. He was as dismayed as he was

elated with his luck in finding her! This understated beauty who so sustained anticipation.

A week earlier he had listened to the friend of an agent and been impressed with the creature named Tara Quinn. An accomplished folk dancer with some ballet training and a rich mezzo voice. To say nothing of an arresting face or lithe Artemis figure. The lone audition was enough. Some things you just know. Then along comes the yobo. Even the hands-on crew was bemused for a time, one of whom apparently knew the guy. To say nothing of burdening him, Antoine the Ineffable, with finding a replacement — at this late date! While the other poot, Nat Feingold, bless him, his punctilious legal advisor, notes racial slights in the script. ‘Don’t want to rouse the ‘café’ tribes, Plumy.’ Nat, dharling, you don’t make a provocative film about a momentous Aztec battle without a few vigilantes taking note. Was it perhaps possible to proceed with what they had — just dimmish the role originally intended? More feasibly — get fiend Ganyanov to work his digital hocus-pocus? A possibility if the furtive Tara Quinn proved to be so easily unnerved, dismayed, frightened even. One might well ask why then seek employment in moonstruck LA? The padded ward in the American insane asylum as one writer put it. And now to contend with a preternatural flap about some aspects of the film being derogatory — Nat’s ‘innuendo’. Even versatile Artur, his historic advisor, was not immune. Career cavilers like that require supernatural intervention — an Aztec divine well and truly torqued. Even a patient man might indulge a snuffle or two.

The groundbreaking film was to be a re-enactment of the seismic encounter between the mythic Aztec deities Coyolxauhqui and Huitzilpopochtli, the dismembered body of the slain Coyolxauhqui destined to become the notorious relief sculpture in Tenochtitlan’s famous Templo Mayor stone disk. The film, however, would turn the myth upside down, dar-



ingly invert the ending, leave Coyolxauhqui whole! A fact the newly cast Coyolxauhqui belatedly found copacetic. Had she not even demurely smiled when the advent dawned. Why her sudden, precipitous flight so stupefied.

For urbane Antoine, the notorious disk had always been a feral obscenity, an historic reminder of an abasement, a subjugation he wanted then to eclipse. He'd long since lost interest in the sagas of 'beefy boys' — the stalwart 'gamers' — and he thought it expedient to join the growing number of wonder women, though he was disappointed they tended to berate Western plodders — not Eastern whackos. He wasn't, however, a combatant or instigator. He savored his special comforts, yet would 'cough aloud' when he could. And *here* the cough would be loud and clear.

In his film, a feminist twist finds Coyolxauhqui put back together by a sorceress and hot to reverse the historical score — carve up the mighty Huitzilpopochti into savory bits, the remnants of a collapsing giant star in the current script. A film that, in the making, seemed poised to summon a fracas eerie as the original feud. To wit: Who's on First? — in the modern tumult that promised to engulf the planet — the birthright juggernaut. About Tara Quinn's sudden departure, her putative agent, one Cass Hart, seemed less surprised than Antoine. "Mind you, she kinda came second hand, hadn't really time to check her bonafides." Great help Cass. How awful to be so frightfully busy.

Then the usually placid Antoine lurched into action and promptly called his able personal secretary, giving full rein to the slight stammer he decided early on to 'cultivate'.

"Cally, We m,may need a replacement bod. For Coyolxauhqui. Yes. Identical as possible. Y,yesterday." If it took him a while to learn the pronunciation of the Aztec gods in his film, he felt obliged to let the world

know — free of all hesitation.

“A replacement for Ms. Quinn?”

“Hmm. One without a n,nightmare sweetheart or ISIL b,benefactor.”

“Check.”

“Leggy but not s,string bean. Nor g,getting into a swivet about ‘subway skin’, nor appearing as a mocha soul sister — Nat’s touted scruples. Trust we still have p,performers willing to slight face recognition.”

“Check.”

“Late twenty something that looks her age. Maybe a t,tad younger. Her ‘mythic’ age is we may assume t,timeless. And find out just what w,worry wart Nat’s been hearing from his shysters about the ‘café’ heat’. Also, if Willardson has not yet been c,committed, get him to call me. Here.”

“He’s still at the Montage.”

David Willardson was the Paleomena Corporation’s curator of its art and historic artifact collections, select pieces of which had been requisitioned for replication in the film. But his presence here was not altogether reassuring for he also served Arthur Pechenpaugh, one of the Paleomena Princes, as the chief executives of the Paleomena Corporation were called, who fancied himself a canny street-wise know-it-all film connoisseur who backed ‘au courant’ films — including Antoine’s current film, which was reputed to be giving the executive chest pains when he realized the the tenor of it. In addition to his artifact smarts, Willardson had become in effect Pechenpaugh’s ‘explosive detector’ in the day’s cultural mine field. He wasn’t here this time to discuss Cholula pottery motifs.

Antoine fondly smiled. “David Abercrombie at t,the Montage. Hum.

How appropriate. I'll be in until noon." He paused to clear his throat. "Cally, you are worth your w,weight in gold. I say this sadly aware of how imp,pecunious I am. "

"Antoine, I am trying to lose weight."

"Such resolve." He sensed he might enjoy a minute's peace, just as the 'hecklers' outside resumed. "And can you not d,do something about these confounded Towhees. I can't work pressed by imp,perious toffs. Their chip chip noises sound like f,failed slot machines. Some even have the temerity to c,come knocking — p,pecking at their reflections in my windows. Can you imagine! Such shameless n,narcissism."

"What about al-Qaeda— they specialize in 'toffs' don't they? Sorry. It's been one of those mornings."

Ryan Dyck leaned against a remnant of wall near an abandoned subway platform — the Track Five 'Yellow Car' line in Los Angeles. Part of the track served as a shortcut to the bleak motel he sometimes dossed in when reconnecting with third-rail gang members. He convulsively banged his head against the wall, exclaiming, "Stupid, stupid, stupid!" He couldn't believe what he had done — gone to see Cutter about the rumor of an arms shipment — on a film set — thinking he was still swimming and invisible! "Jesus!" And then to see the pissy She herself, out of nowhere, costumed like some circus geek — and she see him! The unforgiving chirper. Who took off as soon as she saw him. Impulsively he had turned to flee — almost running into a group of people, visitors being shown the set he later realized. Two or three even took pictures of this impulsive 'crasher'...what in god's name was he thinking! He could end up as the dork in a viral twitter feed...they might never get him out. He almost lit into one of the picture takers, ready to slash the clown's face...he



still could not believe it. Even Cutter, the last he saw of him, was shaking his head. Too obviously he was not expected. Least of all *there*. Someone must have dissed him. Someone. The chirper likely joining in. Cutter would tell Nat who would tell Jack Owen, who would be furious, a model of self control, but furious. The Morales pit bulls too would learn in due course. He then touched his forehead. He had thumped his head hard enough to leave traces of blood...he could not believe what was happening, had happened. Had his so recent matchless luck dulled all perception, caution, all reason? Jesus! Perhaps he should head north again, to Vancouver — to North Vancouver, to sleepy Deep Cove, somewhere off the bloody map!

It seemed his initial luck in breaking into the Nefer Club safe and finding the bonanza there — abetted and screened by the riot — was running out. Jack Owen and the others, the ‘provisionals’, were cagey afterward...and now trying to ditch him? Possible. They learned he’d stiffed a drug family, pretended that finding the cache was pure luck — which it was at the time, though he later learned the money there belonged to a northern Morales’ affiliate. He had been seen by a rummy in the alley the night of the riot — seen in the van with his safe drilling rig — a rummy he’d seen before but didn’t have time to find and whack. Had the rummy talked to the angled cop he wondered, the district ‘song bird’? Was that it — the cop later checking with one of the Morales? Can’t have a bad actor in the cast. Jesus, what was he thinking — going *there*, like some affable nit, thinking Cutter might still be a source. Well...he had to, didn’t he, had to see if Cutter had anything. Only to discover none other than pissy Tara dressed up like a feather duster. Her very presence as confounding as her appearance. He still could not believe. Was he losing it? Heading for the ozone? So he kept a piece of the Nefer take? So what? To hell with them. He could manage on his own. He was coping. Like the week before in the alley back of the Nefer Club when he ran into the other pissy

She, the *first* pissy She, the elusive Deirdre Corr — her startling presence a fragmentation bomb. She was leaving from the backstairs exit, the very night of the riot and heist! Being seen by such a one, recognized, his carry-all bulging — he had acted, taken care of eyewitness Deirdre, always watching, scoping, always fucking looking — so like the staring rummy! Well, he *was* in a bloody hurry. You don't hang around after stealing the crown jewels, especially when the surrounding mayhem leaves you invisible. *No time for a chat, dear.* Just a birdie blood bath. His knife an omen. He'd watched several of the ISIS beheadings, the icing of a *kāfir* in real time. The exhilaration an 'only'. The people about the Nefer club were so flummoxed by the riot no one really noticed. The blood maybe, but not the razor's edge, the quiet silent lightening strike. The blood of the covenant. The godhead compact. He sensed a sudden dizziness now — he *had* walloped the wall with his forehead...an ill-placed wall...

Cherubic David Willardson was taking his afternoon tea in the Lobby Lounge of the Montage. Not really his 'cup of tea' this renovated golf paddock but he wanted to go somewhere neutral for supper and expected Antoine to pay for it. Antoine he knew would find the place middling — and thus be amenable to a show of generosity. An emergency flask of Courvoisier would deal with the putative Oolong tea, if need be. Actually the tea proved to be drinkable and Willardson sat back thinking Providence was not always goofing off in this rawly deceitful age.

Minutes later fly Antoine swept in yielding a walking stick, scarf and fedora to an uncertain receptionist. Beaming his usual toy grin he spotted and moved to the chair opposite Willardson as one leaving a windy Promenade Deck. Looking about he remarked, "I d,daresay you're trying to impress upon me the p,primacy of the national debt."

Willardson rose and shook Antoine's hand. "That too of course. If the 'other' matter were only as straightforward."

Antoine crossed his legs and gave the room another candid appraisal. "You must know by now the Aztec goddess left with no forwarding. Angry mythic daughters lead hectic lives, apparently."

Willardson tried to smile. A waiter approached. "You want something first?"

"An Irish Car Bomb is advised, but a Perrier will do." Glancing again about the room Antoine sighed. "Hit me, darling."

Willardson grimaced. "In the details, as they say. I believe my secretary informed Artur, your history advisor, of the objections from those cultural mavens who resent your fiddling with sturdy myth — depicting virile Huitzilopochtli as a 'titivated pinhead' — one comment I remember. Political Correctness has yet to suborn Mexican mores. At least at the racketeer level, where cutting edge executions still set a cultural norm, and ready graft the legal tender."

"A very lyrical voice your secretary by the way."

Undaunted, Willardson continued. "We've had representation from some very politic scholars — 'mousetraps' I think they're called — who claim the thrust of the film is a-historic and ethnocentric, that several of the characterizations do not fit the archeological horizon. Most await a 'gratuity' of course, initially citing 'questionable' pieces of your set, as well as the feather panaches and obsidian beading created for the royals. Too 'foppish' I recall one earnest academician declaring."

"How very clever of him."

"I trust you and Arthur Pechenpaugh remain on speaking terms. I un-



derstand his backing of the film is again crucial here.”

“One day you must remind me how such a one as Ppechenpaugh managed to become a c,corporate Poobah — in the very corporation you shill for.”

For Willardson, Pechenpaugh’s rise was self evident: “The investment Chameleon who can look in many directions at once and change his colours to match his environment.”

“Ah yes, that wall-eye of his. One eye on the chamber p,pot, the other up the chimney. ”

“I think we must look today *at* the film itself — its ‘pantywaist bent’ — another comment that’s come to mind — which, the experts infer, badly reflects on your sanction, particularly now with the corporation’s resource proposals before the Nieto administration. The Chameleon is edgy here. In such gamy changeable surroundings.”

“David, you would f,find my set designer finely l,livid if he heard what you just said — about the ‘archeological horizon’ and c,cultural *objets*. Do c,continue. As you know, I am unusually discrete.”

Willardson decided the Courvoisier would be needed, added some to his tea, audibly sighing after a token smile.

“Like the climate dispute, the cultural wars are heating up. It gets complicated. Many threads. A main one here — the few courageous Vigilantes, the new Mexican patriots, have hit upon a nationalistic trope to up their popularity: they alone are resisting the hideous cartels and their police and government stooges which Western corporations like Paleomena regularly pander to and suborn. They alone are the true Mexico, battling, in effect, the subversions of Western addiction, venery and paternalism, which Pechenpaugh, your major backer, a Paleomena ‘Prince’ often ex-

exploits. Late Western business investment — in the new car and appliance industries — have eased their anxiety to the extent that Mexico becomes America's manufacturing plant. But American intemperance and cultural anomie remain a vexation — the comparative surplus wealth lavished on illicit substances for one. In short, the snubbing of social viability. Trifling so with Aztec myth — its stoicism, sacrifice and courage, cultural touchstones — is not welcome. Paleomena's Mexican investments are extensive, many projects still fledgling and sensitive to stray, unforeseen risk. The determined patriots are slowly succeeding in making many Mexicans distrust if not hate affluent drug-rife, condescending Westerners — a main source of their travail. It's even taken on a quasi-religious tone: evangelical self-help allied to insurgent peasant slogans. Indeed capitalism itself is to blame some claim. As one writer put it, 'The mafia has transformed itself into a capitalist enterprise, while capitalism has transformed into a mafia!' An imputation Pechenpaugh would not find amusing."

"So nice to know capitalism may have a future."

Willardson paused for further sips of tea. He had no wish to slight his mandate and soldiered on. He had survived speculative blether and dummy feints before.

"In brief: your film's sensational revisionist bent — the castration ado — embarrasses wary Pechenpaugh and indirectly Paleomena. The patriots, parenthetically the Vigilantes, want open investment not ongoing tenured bribery. They could very well target Paleomena, a conspicuous Western megacorp, if a Pechenpaugh sponsored film trifles with sacred lore. All they need. 'Microaggression' now has a place at the table. Put another way, these same patriots want Western investors seeing wide opportunity not a closed shop, not business as usual. It is changing but not fast enough. This film perverts a mythic staple, the repudiation of willful selfish Coyolxauhqui, a would-be mother killer, and could become a rallying

point, Pechenpaugh's worry, vivifying 'past gringo monkeying' — another phrase I recall from the newly vocal experts. It sounds tenuous I know, but we live in the age when micro snubs can lead to macro retaliation. As for major snubs...!"

For a moment or two Antoine looked as if he'd swallowed a broach. He soon revived, mindfully saying, "So, a sweet smelling load of patriot optimism. As potent, in its way I presume, as showing the c,corpses the Brothers have b,beheaded, butchered, boiled, burnt, acidified, skinned, exploded, c,cannibalized et cetera — the artistry they're willing to share with ISIL researchers. I p,promise to take another look at the script. But we d,do have a mission — we fussy progressives."

"Pechenpaugh wants a meeting early Monday. He has tabled an offer: judicious bribes to some key ministers — to keep the current business ventures afloat. Some of the gold rings and pendants in our Columbia collection you've eyed from time to time. We know of an AM El Paso company that specializes in fine replicas. Some ministers from the old cabinet have shown an interest. And some edgy, anxious patriots, I daresay."

Eyeing Willardson, Antoine mused, "With an esteemed connoisseur's approval."

"It would be a gift of course. What happens afterward is anyone's guess. Though the script should be modified. A precaution. Keep the spotlight off hated interfering Paleomena — well Pechenpaugh — in the ongoing social-cultural melée."

"Make a film only the gamers will notice."

After a further sip of his tea Willardson added, "How much 'notice' may depend on the weight of the gold, and Pechenpaugh's susceptibility to credulity and desperation. One must play the game."



“Such nimble p,posturing. The amb,bassadorial approach: no radicals here.”

Willardson smiled and added more Courvoisier to his tea. Pechenpaugh had pressed him into this tangled job. Him, a corporate hack — the curio curator. The smell-feast. Pechenpaugh’s words still resonated: ‘Just get the poofter to lay off a bit, discover some — some inadvertency. His ass is on the line.’ Willardson smiled, the ‘ass’ here being a joint capital heinie. To think that a mere film might engender such nervousness, such apprehension — that what once would have been a nimble spoof might now caution a corporate dynasty and alert a patriotic, vigilante troupe. Cultural revisions can draw blood. He had some work to do on the coins, of course, but felt the matter could be attended to. An old Canadian friend would help assess the credibility of the copies. He must begin there.

At this time Helene Bascule had given in to her chronic illness and left off running Sea Sent. She lived then in the Waverly Pavilion, a full care facility near the Peach Arch Hospital in White Rock. Her stately Sea Sent B & B was then being run by its new owner/manager, Paula Hauser. Happily, she and Paula got on. Helene helped the new owner with some promotion, house maintenance and culinary details; Paula shared stories about her guests. One of whom, a David A. Willardson, an executive in the Paleomena Corporation, had reserved a coming weekend stay via the Sea Sent website. She promptly phoned Helene who, by then, was revising memories of her own life at Sea Sent from her few cherished albums.

“‘Your snuggerly seems ideal for a much needed furlough’,” Willardson said in his e-mail, alluding to a military venture. I guess corporate skir-

mishes can be bloody. In any case — a Paleomena toff at Sea Sent! A story for the insiders, yes? The reputation of the place hasn't slipped. Thought you'd like to share in the news."

They talked for a time about incidental matters. Paula had always wanted to set up a bed and breakfast but had little practical experience. Helene was only too happy to help out where she could. If Paula's calls were now less frequent, it was because she was finally coping on her own — and hearteningly busy. Helene was grateful she kept in touch. Her past hadn't yet abandoned her. Paula expressly said she would keep Helene heads up on the "Paleomena poobah. In case I need some expert advice. Ha."

## EIGHT

Luis Morales watched with bellicose impatience as the heavily tattooed biker sauntered into the room. The bare dusty room, one of half-a-dozen boarded up stores in a strip mall near the Ciudad Juárez bridge which connected Juarez to El Paso, housed seven players: three of Luis's enforcers, his personal bodyguard (a former El Paso policeman), his consigliere and cell liaison, and the solo Angels' biker — who looked about him with much practiced nonchalance as he was directed to sit down in a chair in the centre. Luis was the first to speak.

"What fuck is this about again?"

Stephano Luchhese, a Morales' liaison with a branch of the Nuestra Familia in San Jose, remained expressionless as he said. "Tage has something to tell us, don't you Tage."

One of the enforcers, Nat Schroeder, was amused. "Tage baby."

With facile condescension Tage said, looking at Nat, “Payday, padre.” He casually pointed to a tattoo on a deltoid muscle, then, after a grimace, farted. Nat stiffened but stayed mum when he caught Stephano’s warning glower.

Luis was relieved to objectify his anger. “We’re fuckin’ waiting ‘Taggie’.”

Stephano added, “In your own words Tage. Everybody’s cool. We’re all friends here.”

After leisurely fingering a tooth Tage said, “Cutter told Owen she left the set two days ago. Didn’t return to her hotel. Some problem with the costume the studio says. An excuse Cutter thinks. She split when she saw Dyck.”

“Who’s ‘Cutter’?” Nat blurted looking at Stephano.

“Not a name. A job title. The one who fits or tailors costumes. On set. A friend of Owen’s.”

Luis engaged Tage. “So a coincidence. Dick-head hears of an arms’ delivery from some fuck in Owen’s zoo — and goes to get a time from Cutter, thinking he’s still in, still solo, the prick. Just happens to see the broad.”

“Cutter thinks he was upset as she was. Someone else now knows he’s back. Someone in a much-publicized, well-financed studio production. He too left in a hurry.”

“The creep.”

“Cutter thinks he was high.”

“So he goes direct to Cutter on Plummy’s set, thinks Cutter’s still a



trader. hard up as usual. Seems we've undervalued Cutter." 'Plummy' was Luis's choice word for Antoine Plombiers, who sometimes requested gang protection for his scattered theatre ventures and field film crews.

Stephano took up the thread. "From Cutter we know the shipment's from a Sinaloa capo. Payment in kind. MAC 10 machine guns and Glock pistols, mainly."

"But no date of delivery."

"Cutter gave him a date. Not the date of course. Cutter and Ryan went to school together apparently. Great pals."

"Real amigos."

Tage looked off, said, "Still a mystery how she — that 'she' — got the part. Sweet of her to come out of hiding, though."

Luis glowered. "She's no use now the fuck's found. Maybe never was."

Stephano curtly smiled. "She is, or was, to play a daring Aztec goddess. The sort of thing glory hole Ryan has an eye for."

"Should he live so long. Any other shit?" Luis was getting bored.

Stephano took his time. "I'll have another word with Cutter. He may have forgotten something. Ryan's dumb enough to think he's still in the loop. Owen, by the way, returned his take from the Nefer safe. I'll speak to Cutter tonight."

"He once told Cutter she was the banker, the fuck."

Stephano belatedly concurred. "Pathetic. He's toast of course."

"Make sure the body's discovered. Our snuffy poster boy."

“Best done discretely. The body can be found later. We don’t want to upset Owen’s whackos — his retreads from the IRA. And his a-rabs.”

Luis was by then pissed off. “What the fuck doesn’t the fuck have — wacko a-rabs and wacko provisionals...pussy and dump rats.”

## NINE

“And who is this?” Mariana Thompson asked Helene with a faint smile. “A recent guest?”

Mariana was a volunteer at the Waverly Pavilion who had befriended Helene. She worked with the Pavilion’s ‘recreational therapist’ to keep the residents active and engaged. She came twice a week with interesting news, engaging stories and questions. Memories of early lives were usually easily summoned and happily revisited. Mariana’s arrival was much welcomed, almost as much as Mason’s calls and visits.

Helene too smiled. “Ah yes. Him. A recent guest Paula Hauser had. The ‘panjandrum’ — her word — she accommodated recently: David Abercrombie Willardson. Paula likes to let me know the place is thriving and sent me the picture. He’s feeding Bear some tidbit. She’s grateful, I think, that I helped her sort out some promo and housekeeping issues early on. She tells me about unusual guests from time to time. Occasionally she invites me to supper. This Willardson actually took us all out one night — last weekend, in fact. The directors at Waverly let me out if someone like Paula or Mason is with me. Have to be careful what I eat of course. He was very charming, Willardson. An executive at the Paleomena Corporation — one of the world’s colossal multi-nationals, as you may know. He’s the curator of its historic art and artifact collection. He

was here at the behest of a film set designer he said, something about authenticity. He didn't elaborate." Here Helene briefly smiled, mainly to herself. "He was a singular chap. He liked Bear — the feeling was mutual apparently — and didn't mind Paula taking a picture of them together. He heard Sea Sent was an 'Edwardian oasis', his words — not entirely an exaggeration but hardly Architectural Digest material; my love of kitschy objets, a fondness Paula shares, ruled that out long ago. I like people and like what most people like. The accessories and ornaments there — sentimental, sometimes cute, funny, often theatrical — hardly high-class turnout. My late husband called me a magpie. Paula's kept most of my 'collectables' — as we call them." Helene seemed to revisit a timely recollection or two before continuing. "He was more or less drunk, so Paula claims — his entire stay. His room reeked of scotch and eau de cologne when he left apparently. 'Disarmingly polite and an encyclopedic source of historic trivia' — another quote. This I can confirm because Paula invited my former neighbor Allen Pinker, a retired history professor — I don't think I've mentioned him — to join us for that supper. Willardson knew him, or of him, apparently. Paula keeps extensive notes on some guests — something I should have done.

"She plainly appreciated your help early on. So they got on then — Willardson and Allen?"

"Oh yes. They talked. Over my head of course. He may have disapproved of his job at Paleomena — don't mind me, I'm getting batty in my old age. They included us in the conversation — in their way. There were moments when Willardson looked rather glum. Not many, but some. I had the feeling he was here for something more than a film's 'authenticity,' whatever that might mean. For instance, I gather from their remarks they're both gold collectors. We happened to get on the subject of investments, something Paula is especially interested in. Like Willardson, Pinker



too works as an appraiser, in his case, historic coins apparently.”

“He does look happy enough here. Willardson. Bear too looks pleased. Perhaps because they’re together at Sea Sent?”

“A pleasant thought. No, it was the odd comment that surfaced. Comparing a director at Paleomena to a mythical beast. Bear reminded him of someone I think. At the time I thought it some kind of joke. He does fancy his liqueur. He seemed like one living in a past century. Another of Allen’s comments to Paula. Polite, poised, kindly to a fault. He only stayed two days. One of the mythic guests Paula said. Here but not really here. Paula is an observant gal. Reads a great deal.”

“He didn’t mention Tara?”

“No. And I wasn’t about to ask of course. I’ve not mentioned her to Paula. You and Mason are the only one’s in the know. It’s a while ago. He was an oddity, Willardson. Someone you never quite believe, yet find genial even entertaining. He was snooty though. Paula found him looking through her log book one day. She was about to confront him but changed her mind. Best sometimes not to be too vigilant she says. He struck me as someone who was in a state and needed a ‘get away’.”

“But Professor Allen liked him — found him engaging?”

“Oh yes. He mentioned him the last time he called me. He still calls, the dear. Well, occasionally. He said Willardson was a singular character. Can agree with that. One curious coincidence — it likely has nothing to do with his coming — but the day after he left — it is a gruesome story — a man’s headless, handless body was found caught in a purse seiner net somewhere near Haida Gwaii. Paula, who is an avid mystery buff, said she’d keep me informed. Such fun. Ha.”

Mason too was revisiting singular memories, but ones that yielded a pervasive dread not an intriguing curiosity. He seemed these days to be a kind of burnt offering. If his body was still on the mend — he walked then with a three-pronged cane — his mind had cleared sufficiently to follow the tragedy through again...and again. Sheer goading incredulity kept him at it. Media film of the riot he looked at several times, this day a segment on a TV in the lobby of the Astoria Hotel. By reprising the tapes, the police hoped viewers could identify some rioters and come forward with names. He was about to resume his documentation of vagrant life in the East End and lived then in a room at the Astoria.

The current film take showed a noisome crowd about the Nefer Club where Deirdre Corr sang her last set, a poignant star-crossed farewell to her Gastown fans. To her planetary fans! On the night the Canucks gave up the Stanley Cup to the Boston Bruins, he felt the Nefer club would provide relief from the wholesale disappointment for philistines like him. Dirk and Paul — Rya was a no show that night — had wanted him to come to a wide-screen showing of the game in a pub, but hockey, indeed most sports remained an embarrassment. The humiliation of his own body lingered.

He was steeped then in disappointment. Deirdre had survived, if you can call it that. The assault left her paralyzed — in a vegetative state in fact, from which there appeared to be slim hope of recovering — the verdict from his own doctor who knew one of the trauma surgeons. He had added, “It’s a wonder they kept her alive, given the loss of blood; not a great consolation I know.” In the meantime, Deirdre’s mother had come and taken her daughter back to Ireland. Dirk knew the club’s manager and communicated the news of her return to Mason. Dirk was a busy if enigmatic lad these days. While awaiting his court hearing he attended special lectures on Islam! Not for ‘dreamers’ he said, his droll account of

recent terrorist activity in Kandahar, Bagdad and Mosel full of facetious approval. The age's ultimate tuft hunters, he said. One never knew how serious Dirk was. It seemed he'd also taken over Ryan's drug trade, at least some leftovers in Greater Vancouver — Ryan being a 'missing person' then. The 'lectures' Dirk attended he characterized as 'business seminars'. He was thinking of opening a funeral home he said — again with a sly laughter that seemed to burlesque the possibility. He never mentioned a 'Jack Owen' and said he only knew about the break-in from what the papers were saying. Mason didn't believe him, yet never confronted him.

The TV screen suddenly ballooned into a fiery explosion on Georgia Street, limning the throngs of bodies that seemed to gravitate toward the Georgia area between Burrard and Richards. It was an odd discovery, the consensual abandonment of the milling crowds. The élan of rambunctious madcap lads and lassies who, in Dirk's jeremiad, were out to do some serious complaining about the indentured invidiousness of modern life, remind the lucky smug thieving 'haves' that 'having' was the problem, and bust up a few mercenary show off stores into the bargain....indeed Dirk's Marxist rants had become abrasive, chafing of late. A radical impounding even his wit, Mason thought.

He shuddered as another brick sailed into a large storefront window — the Bay, Georgia street side, the smoke then from a couple of fires sooting, shrouding the air. He had to admit he had many times scowled at the myriad cosmetics touted up front on the main floor of department stores. More precious products designed to keep people feeling inadequate. Nearly as witless, he churlishly thought, as the girls who so easily appeared on the porn sites angry Ryan obsessively craved (and happily caddishly loathed) as they were tied up and beaten, their lavish makeup bleeding — while smiling so sweetly in the 'happy as a lark' takes. Dirk had shown him one DVD — his amusement manifest. Girls Mason had difficulty



imagining putting up with such morbid manhandling and showcasing. Who yet seemed only too eager to molest the luckless peepers world wide, the girls' sometimes winsome beauty a harsh sobering fact. How to chastise disappointment he wryly guessed — as another brick or large stone passed through a still pristine window, the double pane splintering into a rosette of fragments, a veritable kaleidoscope. The shouting and laughter about as exhilarating as you'd find on a sonsy toboggan run. The faces ecstatic. A lost but animate tribe, only spoiled by the obtuse girl who posed with an expensive hand bag for a cellphone camera. He might have thrown a brick at her. The fact she was Asian merely needled his misgivings about her cupidity and the Asians who brought such boundless loot into Vancouver — Hongcouver! The real estate dynasty. Fortune's favorites. The ones who often shopped at places like the Bay and refused to participate in his former Richmond high school's graduation ceremony, selecting a venue of their own instead. The cut above. So he stolidly reflected as he studied the gleeful exhibitionist. He felt a comradely hand on his shoulder. "Hang in there buddy!"

"Dirk! You're here!"

"An historic event, eh?"

Mason grasped his arm. "Paul said you learned something more about Deirdre."

Dirk faintly nodded. "The family, well the mother, took her back to the Emerald Isle, as you must know. Someone told the manager her one CD was selling well. Who would have known — besides you."

"A hospital in Belfast you said?"

"Guess so. The manager may have an address."

Mason weakly smiled. "Thanks."

“See you angel face.” He looked at the screen. “God, what colors! Fantabulous!”

Mason returned to the riot tape. Dirk had likely met one of his dealers in the hotel he thought. It was a busy hub. Dirk was not a user himself but apparently helped with deliveries. The fact that he seemed to be whispering, like the voice in the sound track of the tape, Mason grimly reckoned with. His own hearing loss seemed to be permanent. The doctor had been non-committal. “It’s early yet.”

About this time David Willardson sat in Arthur Pechenpaugh’s Los Angeles office staring at the disconcerting African sculptural art Pechenpaugh ‘decorated’ his corporate suite with. The statues ever reminded him that his appreciation of gentility and decorum, to say nothing of comity, was all but extinct.

“Would you like some coffee?” Miriam, Pechenpaugh’s observant personal secretary asked with an insider’s smile. “I make a pot about this time.”

The coffee proved to be surprisingly good. He would tell Miriam on his way out — which he assumed would be soon after the big cheese arrived. He thought of the many precious bric-a-brac at Sea Sent, mainly palatable kitsch — stuff sufficiently amusing to excuse the hoarding of it. So unlike Pechenpaugh’s stark gruesome ‘masterpieces’. He was finding them particularly noxious when Pechenpaugh entered, looking as ill humored as some of his *magnae matres*. For the better part of a minute he ignored Willardson, choosing to sit at his large Empire desk and shuffle through some documents in a gleaming white folder before examining a graph on his computer screen. Willardson thought of the code white in many hospitals — the prompt for threatening behavior. Finally the lum-

bering senior executive — one of the five Paleomena Princes — spoke without looking up.

“You got hold of Pinker?”

Willardson affably nodded. “Of course.”

“He verified the cob? The macuquina?”

“He wasn’t sure it was from the Cartagena de las Indias mint, as you maintained — suggesting it was difficult to distinguish it from the Santa Fe de Bogotá mint. Both operational in or about the early sixteen hundreds.”

Pechenpaugh finally looked up, but not at Willardson, rather something beyond his accomplished abettor and sometime shill. “But he took them for vintage?”

“He was impressed, yes. Very little clipping on the one.”

“So he suspected, knew they were fabricated. But impressed.”

“There being so few of the vintage coins we could only commission a small number of replicas. They were well made. Dr. Pinker had trouble telling some apart. He believed we were investigating a fraud.”

Pechenpaugh seemed in tune with this summation. But only briefly as he finally confronted Willardson. “You met the cutout.”

“Yes, who brought an evaluator.. He seemed satisfied. Neither were antiquity experts.”

Again Willardson had trouble assessing Pechenpaugh’s mood. Despite what appeared to be a workable bribe, the moose-like Pechenpaugh looked undecided, edgy. What Willardson did not know was that earlier that week Pechenpaugh had met with Fabio Luchese, a West Coast mafia don, alone in a private room in a restaurant in San Diego’s Little Italy. A



command appearance. The exchanged words there were brief but pithy. They had made some changes in one family, Fabio said. The Morales. One member of which would be 'indisposed' for sometime. Pechenpaugh was to deal only with a new family, the Belmontes, in future, which included a secretary to a government minister. The Belmontes were distant cousins to the Texas-California Morales.

Thus Willardson was surprised by Pechenpaugh's further comments, not so much to him, as to an intervening Kismet. "Damned if a woman isn't muscling in. Alejandra Belmonte. Yeah. Not too many live amigos left in some broods apparently. Better keep an eye on the family jewels. I thought you should hear the warning from me." He added, "The one older Morales capo, Luis, is on extended medical leave. So I'm informed. In short, that messy team may be down for the count. One's gone AWOL apparently."

After a further preoccupied interval, Pechenpaugh looked up at Willardson with a grimace. "A bloody mare's nest. A Belmonte boss — now a bloody bitch it seems! Stay tuned buddy. Miriam will ring you. Off with you now." Cautioned, Willardson rose, noted the executive's dismissive gesture, then went straight to Truluck's Restaurant in La Jolla, a favourite eatery, but could not relax as he picked at his Ricetta Lasagne al forno. He never liked rawly expedient demands — like finding and 'appraising' talented but needy goldsmiths. The after shocks were always unpredictable. By 'jewels' Pechenpaugh meant Paleomena's reputation. The gold bribe might not be enough. He sensed Pechenpaugh was on his last legs in the corporation — the rumors were becoming resonate. Too many stray interests. If he never liked the man, he recoiled at the staging of humiliation. Which he suspected was in the works. Such cycles never ended. Fortunately the proprietor of La Jolla, an old friend, was a gold mine of distracting salacious jokes. "What's an innuendo? An Italian sup-

pository.”

It was nearly dark when Ryan Dyck left the Greyhound bus station in Blaine, Washington. The Birch Bay tide was in and he debated trying to swim across to White Rock. Only with new identity papers could he risk going through customs. As usual he travelled light, his earthly possessions at the time stashed in a small water proof bag. His thoughts raced. With his snorkel he might swim some of the distance underwater. He would try that night, yes, using the shoreline near Semiahmoo just West of the Peace Arch border crossing. The sky was overcast. The night would be dark. He could doss that night in the old house off Cypress Street. The home, the last time he visited, was being used to store second hand furniture. He could use the public facilities off the East Beach main parking lot. This time of year the shower might even be working. He would contact the elusive Omar, once known as Jack Owen, when he was settled. He still had café contacts on the East and West Beaches, but he had to renew contact discretely. He fancifully thought of staying in one of White Rock's sleepy bed and breakfast homes. He had looked at the Sea Scent mansion on Crescent Beach several times. A possibility. Would the owner recognize him? He might run into Mason! He curtly laughed. He *must* be incommunicado for a time. Subsequent to blundering onto the film set to see Cutter, and encountering the pissy She, he learned with amazement about Moon Disc, the story encompassing the very myth that had always galvanized him: the dismemberment of the willful Coyolxauhqui depicted in the famous relief sculpture on the Templo Mayor stone disk. An example for all determined, uncompromising brothers. That Tara might play the part of Coyolxauhqui in the film enflamed his manic ardor. Seeing her so 'rendered' was a special honor killing, a *carnevale* for a lady castigator. The Whore Superior. Another with following eyes. Jack Owen, now

Omar al-Rashid, would not object. Stagy killers were a bonus. American cin  drama was a great source of amusement for him — American actors the showcase example of its courage and generosity, not a single one of whom would act out in reality what they might do on film. He belonged to a unique transcendent fraternity!

But it was not quite all sweetness and light. Yet. His late jeopardy — given his over confidence in thinking he still acted solo, and his rash reflexive act to seek out Cutter, put *him* in harm's way. He *must* leave the country, the continent ASAP — get to a mid-east training camp. The beguiling image on the famous disk helped ease the strain. Yes. Someone. Sooner or later. A more singular execution rite he could not imagine! And with the prospect of summary recruitment by a jihadi cell, an elective the versatile Omar had never rescinded, he sensed his world coming together, his energies coalescing and rejuvenating. His wild ad lib days were over. Resignation, compliance, and purpose were now the givens. He even began to see his return to White Rock as his very own Night Journey, and Islam as the only path. Why he'd not seen it before was perhaps his one remaining confusion.

Conversely, Tara Quinn remained corrosively scared and undecided — again! Only this time the new unknown jeopardy made her anxiety far worse. On fleeing the film set, after seeing the ogre himself and glimpsing the hatred in his eye, she had furtively sought the anonymity of strange neighborhoods, mainly near the waterfront. She decided she daren't return to her hotel and frantically assessed current circumstance on the fly — that, for instance, she still bore some makeup markings of the Aztec deity she was cast as. She had whipped off the feathers and garlands as she raced to the change room, grabbed her coat, jeans, shirt and handbag and fled into the street, letting her feral brain elect a route away from the



film lot. The guard at one gate looked at her with wonder as she rushed out, burbling on his cell to some authority — she hadn't considered she might be safer inside than out. If such a one as Ryan Dyck — *Ryan Dyck!* — could get in, anyone could. Her grisly encounter with the goon rat pack was still a searing memory. Only on the outside — way outside! — might she consider catching her breath. Some time later she found herself sitting in a restaurant near the Santa Monica State Beach, wondering if she could afford the Bayside Hotel there. She needed a secure, good night's sleep. When she left Sea Sent she had several hundred dollars in her hand bag. Most of it she still had. By then she had rubbed off all the thick makeup but still looked like a wraith from Dawn of the Dead in her compact. So what. They would be looking at your money not your face, gumbdrop. Scary creatures were a commonplace...here.

An hour later she lay on a comfortable bed looking at the room's scalloped-edged crown moulding, which looked good enough to eat. She had just turned the air conditioning down. Nearly seven hundred dollars left. So. Ryan once thought you were a talented whore...any prospects? She was also an adept shop lifter. Yes, she *would* get by — for a time. Time enough to consider a second call to the agent her friend recommended. Shouldn't be too long placing that call. But her strident inner voices would not let up. *Come on girl, you're hallucinating, you've panicked. So how did he find me then? How? Directions? Hardly luck? And what would he be doing on a film set for gawdsake? Stay with the worry girl. Stay under the radar for a day or two. At least. And think, think, think.* But there was *something else*, there is always *something else!* The fact that she had left Sea Sent a day before the awful riot in Vancouver bemused her until she read about — the unfathomable discovery of Deirdre's performance and ominous injury there! In a coma still, the last she read. Deirdre *in* Vancouver! Singing *in* a club. To *rapt* audiences no doubt. She still could not believe — being attacked — *in* the club! It made no sense. A very popular entertainer *attacked?* Had she,

they, stayed in touch... almost twins they were...and now so...so...oh god! The guilt was becoming landlocked.

Reading of the attack dazed her. Why, who, how? She knew her imagination was working overtime yet the ugly Ryan fit in most of the scenarios that then docked her mind and heart. She was soon wiping tears. At one stage lambasting her pillow. When again still, aware she continued to breathe, she thought of Helene and her son. They would have witnessed some of the riot, at least on the tele. Dear Helene, the sought out proxy mother...who would demand an explanation now...now.

*Yes, Helene — your recent ‘boarder’ once ruled out suicide, at least once before...*

After a time Tara promptly pulled the sleeping pills from her hand bag...enough for one very good-night's sleep. The sleep of Lethe — Stephen's metaphor. For Helene and Deirdre, then, one pill — *one*. Well, two.

## TEN

The usually debonair Antoine Plombiers indulged a pout. The question had not surfaced before. His history advisor was ever the arrant perfectionist when least welcomed. The fact that he sometimes looked in on a shooting session — as he had this day — exacerbated the antipathy. Antoine rarely caviled over Artur's 'recommendations' but this day decided not to stifle his much backlogged dander. The film was going ahead. Period. The handsome gold bribe had been paid and a new actor, given Tara Quinn's sudden disappearance, been hired to play Coyolxauhqui. In short, Pechenpaugh, with Willardson's finagling, had come through, to insure Paleomena's Mexican investment future. Well, near future. The film, it

turned out, was largely a red herring — the major investment brokers and their government lackeys had been dickering with Pechenpaugh and Paleomena over land use titles, drilling and excavation permits all along. Indeed, the question of the film never came up apparently. Willardson merely served as the resident page turner — assembling the ‘gratuity’ — while the talks intensified, the ‘time outs’ spent mulling over newcomer Alejandra Belmonte’s efficacy and clout or — in one of Pechenpaugh’s seamier asides — when the drug barons might best bump her off. Alejandra had risen in the ranks and was now the lead broker in one family, her male relations being decimated in the ongoing wars. Her influence had grown, such that some government leaders were taking note, working her into their business expectations. Antoine sat back in his director’s fauteuil arm chair determined to proceed with the current take. They were already behind schedule. But he would not be rash. Immaculate equanimity would settle the matter and humor his prickly history advisor.

What Antoine did not realize was that his conversation with fastidious Artur had been picked up and amplified by a stray wi-fi speaker near the shooting set. A coincidence of band widths perhaps. Antoine often wore a personal recording device about his neck like a medallion to savor his bon mots and inform a ghost writer who worked on his ‘autobiography’. He’d left it on this day. The mike also had a supplementary pager to summon security personnel. It would take him some time to realize that the exchange with Artur was overheard by the active workers on the set, reducing some to near hysterics, leaving them unsure what they might expect next.

The initial confrontation with Artur centered on the replacement of Coyolxauhqui. Artur debunked her suitability. His eminent expertise had been slighted. The matter, a touchy but authentic detail, might not be winked at. So. Touché!



Fussy Artur was on form. His overheard words began with: “Do please consider the affront: the stellar Coyolxauhqui figure you wish to invoke here should not, I think, be so hum, ‘Playboyish’, so surgically up-tilted. Dr. Roy David’s speciality tits — here, in Tenochtitlan? Antoine, really.”

Given Tara Quin’s flight, the actress Antoine had cast as Coyolxauhqui, an athletic dancer named Hayden Hunter, was a fine performer and not at all hard on the eyes, but American in one sense dear Artur did not approve of now that the costume she would wear was at last completed and fitted onto the wearer. Its braided feather panaches and snake garlands italicizing two large artificial bosoms — features Antoine was duly aware of when he cast her in the role. Artur had not seen Hayden in the flesh until now and suffered a twinge of professional conscience — and had the temerity to say so aloud, sufficiently and lucklessly so to be heard beyond the margin. The comment nettled Antoine in part because of his own concern about buggerish authenticity — those physical features and items that gave the facades, furnishings and artifacts an authenticity experts might coo over. The costume itself had taken the better part of a week to complete, and was surely as realistic, detailed and vivid as any Aztec godhead might have wished. To have the film set back now because a cast member had global boobies that coincidentally pointed decidedly out and up was on the order of an immanent bomb threat. Antoine gritted his teeth and said to Artur, “Ganyanov may d,do some fiddling. La,ater.” Pytor Ganyanov was their gifted special effects genius.

But Artur was not to be sidelined. Once begun the battle order remained. He added, “I may also remind you that Ms. Hunter’s agent is a lawyer and most particular about his client’s appearance. Skin color especially. ‘No ‘corbeau shades,’ I recall him saying. The contract with this performer is, I understand, finely conditional.”

It was then that Antoine and Artur realized their words had been heard by most of the crew and cast. A happenstance posterity is prized for. Hayden herself, who had heard much of the exchange, was nervously sniggering. Additional to the the boob question, Antoine knew the makeup artist had spent all morning getting the right brown skin tone. ‘Antique drab’ Antoine called it. If it was darker than anticipated, it would do. Deciding on a new hue, blending the pigments and readjusting the complimentary costume shades could take an extra day.

After shutting off his mike, Antoine stood and took his expert aside. “I’m sure Providence is smiling. You must study the mosaics for the palace scenes. Immaculate. We’ll pontificate later.” As Artur mechanically turned and walked or was pushed off the set, the crew, on Antoine’s genial — “Do continue!” — gladly completed the *mis-en-scène*, carefully placing the lights and light baffles on the palatial stage, the lower steps to a full-size replica of the Templo Mayor. If it took a moment or two for the cast to settle down, the taping of the lethal reverse encounter between Huitzilopochtli and Coyolxauhqui and their fearsome entourages mandated only two takes: the choreographer had done her job. Half-an-hour later Antoine relaxed in his pavilion as a food server brought his afternoon Brandy Alexander white hot chocolate. He had tried to humor Hayden when the take was finished. She offered a dismissive shrug in return as she left the set. Watching her leave he decided he’d made a cogent choice, given the urgency. Yet the misgivings Artur pertly summoned remained unduly annoying. A tiny voice intimated that the image, the appearance of the lovely co-star just might be problematic, that the artistic furies were trying to tell him something. Was Hayden a burr or spoon of sand some Belmonte goon had thrust into his white chocolate? As he cradled the warm cup he thought again that the virtuosic Ganyanov would be allowed, at the very least, some leeway to finish the bloody scene that ‘inspired’ the Moon Disc, the notorious Aztec image of the butchered Coyolxauhqui — here

the sanguine body parts of Huitzilopochtli, the ‘sinews’ of a collapsing giant star, as devised in the story board illustrations.

As he sipped his drink Antoine sensed a reprieve. By the time the disc was carved into the steps of the Templo Mayor any dismembered cadaver must have been a lapsed memory. Who really would know what the face-of-painted-bells Coyolxauhqui looked like, let alone her tits? Artur, you arrogant pedant. Antoine’s spirit improved with every dredged up nuance. Coyolxauhqui could well have graced a Playboy centerfold. Who knows? As for ‘corbeau shades’ he doubted Hayden’s agent was that dogmatic. And had not Hayden herself readily undertaken the makeover? That evening, ensconced in the study of his Runyon Canyon villa, its Art Deco splendor trippy for the select tourists, he spent a happy half hour looking over the congratulatory notes and e-mails from the tolerated patrons — half expectant, half moot — also a handful of mindful and solicitous producers, two envious but respectful directors, a few personal friends whose graciousness retained its old world preciousness, and — as dividend — a sweet if ironic note from Alejandra herself. ‘Poor Montezuma II. Gulled again by a precious dego. And none the wiser. Poor fella. Imagine — Coyolxauhqui alive and well. Swelling the Binders Full of Women. Bravo!’ That Alejandra was becoming an adroit Mexican spokesperson and entrepreneur would stir the pot. Give Moon Disc a revelatory edge. But the unexpected call from his studio secretary Cally ended the reverie.

“Nat called. He’s in a snit.”

Antoine smiled. “One of N,nat’s favorite roles.”

“Something about Hayden. He knows you’re in. A pager or driver must have seen you come.”

“Do listen in if you like.” It was one of Antoine’s measured gratuities; agent Nat Feingold was a Cally favorite. It took a moment to establish



connection.

“Yes Nat. So g,good to hear from you. Hayden, by the way was sp,pectacular. Such athleticism. Poor Huitzilopochtli lost a few choice feathers and a b,beaded headband. Talk about a droopy tail. We only had to s,shoot the scene twice.”

“Anto, I know you’re the best kind of elephant shit around but our agreement didn’t call for subway skin. I’ve just seen the rushes and you can see below her water line in a couple of passes. Not nice Anto. Not nice at all. You going to make me call Aryeh? Frankly, Anto, the rest doesn’t look that good either. All that brown guck. You’ve been a naughty boy.” Aryeh Adler was one of the day’s eminent lawyers.

Antoine indulged a snuffle. “I must say I didn’t count the m,millisec-onds the loin decoration moved. As one with your i,ineestimable encyclope-dic learning knows, the Aztecs hadn’t yet d,developed spandex nor silk case-sexes. And their g,gods, especially their fungible goddesses, were not slaves to reticence or d,demurral. We both share a v,venerable respect for creative genius do we not? I have it on g,good authority...”

“Anto, I can send you a catalogue of kids who’ll let you cut their hearts out if you ask them to. Hayden Hunter is not one of them. Her conscientiousness is not the issue here. The contract with you is — which, in the fine print my road sec highlighted for you, allows for a framed pecto-ral but emphatically no twat. And no melanotic nigger skin! Light café not nigger. Period. And in some scenes...you really don’t want me to call Aryeh do you.”

By then Nat’s — as well as Artur’s — trumped up objections beg-gared impertinence. Antoine was about to extol Ganyanov’s select talents when he impulsively changed his mind, as much to incommode the over-weening Nat Feingold. Moreover, he doubted that Hayden’s career was

airtight as Nat suggested. And Nat's smarmy resort to bribery this time barely a notch above al-Qaeda thuggery. What was the outfit he worked for paying him anyway?

"I think you better call your terrorist guru, Nat. Haven't had a chance to try the latest c,cough syrup."

"Anto. You're dangerously rocking the boat here."

"Have a heart felt d,day, Nat."

Antoine had no sooner put down the receiver than he summoned Cally on his cell, saying, "That original list of actors I want to see again. Especially the one, w,what's her name — Tara something — "

"Tara Quinn."

"Yes, her. Between you and me."

"Absolutely. How do I find her?"

"We might put an add in the g,goddesses wanted sections."

"Hey ho."

It took Antoine a moment or two to get over Cally's silent remonstrance. He did expect a lot someday. But as he reviewed Tara Quinn's computerized portfolio her friend-of-a-friend agent had assembled, and the brief film take before she fled, he was struck again by the girl's sleek beautifully proportioned physique. A more regnant Aztec form he could not then conjure. And a face he now elected to favor as pertinently Aztec. She appeared to be normal sized and likely halfway between 'up and down'. Her eyes and cheek bones alone might appease the prissy Artur and his own surfacing guilt for hiring Hayden. He recalled then that he had been impressed with Tara Quinn's reserve energy, rich contralto voice,

in addition to her leggy trig figure. Thus her leaving, fleeing so precipitously continued to puzzle. Did she need protection, from some disgruntled charmer? You only had to ask, dear. Being left up a creek for a replacement, he had decided the acrobatic-dance performance of Hayden in the Cirque du Soleil quite miraculous. He had always favored leggy hoofers — when feasible. And Hayden, at the time, seemed especially keen to land a film role. He had not anticipated her current agent being another Great Virgin Gamekeeper — who she more or less pretended to ignore to Antoine's satisfied bemusement. Such that his accountant had signed the contract which he cursorily inspected, the highlighted section of which appeared at the time a mere fustian ruse, a stolid way to augment a bonus payment. Now, as he looked again at the very apt Ms. Quinn, he mentally marshaled the pertinent film takes. If Nat objected to the fight sequence revelations, the brief panned closeups of the sacrificial rite of dismemberment of Huitzilopochtli, the next take, could up the ante — all the chopping bouncing wallops! So a replacement normal-sized lass without a vigilante agent would not perhaps be amiss. Especially this inaugural choice lass. The oddity in Antoine's mind was the insignificance of the frames Nat objected to, which Antoine had reviewed that afternoon — the reference to milliseconds not entirely an exaggeration. Perhaps if she hadn't so neatly shaved. More evidence of Nat the stand-in Game Keeper at work. If the confrontational scenes were inimical to a PC 13 rating, Antoine had planned them to be little more than Tulum frescoes presented as soft-focus slow-mo tableaux — with voice-overs, suggestive of a Greek chorus, speaking in a putative Nahuatl dialect. One way to 'tone down' the encounter and salvage an R rating. But Hayden's outstanding bumpers were just perhaps a trifle, well, bumptious. Even framed in Flamingo and Quetzal feathers. Dour fastidious Artur had fielded a point. Antoine wondered how realistically Ganyanov could change a face and torso and whether Hayden's contract permitted some adept morphing. If he had been



tempted to just proceed as intended, the picture of Tara before him now was sufficiently galvanizing to settle the matter. Her genes seemed entirely fortuitous. The earlier afternoon shoot was an early take for the otherwise bountiful Hayden. A slight further delay would not bring down the temple, her recompense payout large but not exorbitant. His accountant was a mindful chap, unlike her agent. He ought to have another look at this plausible Aztec ‘she’ and hope the want sections might elicit a call at least. Cally may have to wade through several score responses, but would not miss one from a Tara Quinn. In his excitement Antoine summoned Cally to a further briefing.

“When she calls or e-mails — our Ms. Quinn — invite her to lunch.”

“Sure she’s mortal?”

“We live in a magical world, Cally.”

A lone, stubble-bearded Ryan Dyck sat on a weathered bench off Vancouver’s Stanley Park roadway that outlooked Deadman’s Island in Coal Harbor. A bright warming sun was high in the sky, the light breezes freely teasing. His apparent ease or abstraction subsided when he picked up a tattered Georgia Straight newspaper left beneath the bench. His rapid flipping of the pages suddenly stopped half way through. One article abruptly fixed his attention.

With mounting disbelief he read how the film *Moon Disc* would break new ground — reverse a little known but consequential myth that had been a cultural staple for several centuries. The article was titled: *Coyolxauhqui’s Revenge*. It took him little time to comprehend the arch reversal — a much celebrated Aztec executioner dismembered *by* a female! ‘The Plombiers’ film *Moon Disc* confronts the heresy of sexual he-

gemony.’ A further paragraph posited that ‘...such a female, a noble daughter taking on and vanquishing an opportunistic and imperious son, frames the hauteur of patriarchal intimidation, the historic presumption that robustly screws everybody.’ Ryan’s sudden anger left him shaking at the day’s topical spin, the latest proselytization, a key espousal of which was that rape itself was deemed — a capitalist adjunct! He was further incensed to learn that a Hayden Hunter would play Coyolxauhqui. No mention of Tara Quinn in the cast. With great vehemence he tore the magazine in half, ending with a picture of a young blogger who had written, ‘Most men don’t see themselves, the blind mindlessly leading the blind. Nature’s belligerent thrusters. The *myopic* visionaries.’ Ryan was ready to explode. If he both lusted after yet resented women generally before, his ‘centrifugal’ hatred was analogous now to a fissile core. Nor could he believe Tara Quinn leaving such a film. He had seen her in a very grand gaudy costume, a harpy’s blood in her eye...!

## ELEVEN

The want ad in *Variety* from Antoine Plombier’s film company, Corybant Productions, both intrigued and cautioned Tara Quinn the day she sat in a Venice Beach café with a morning coffee. The want section of any paper was filled with swindlers, defrauders, stalkers. Corybant Films offered some kind of security. How unusual was that? Was it worth even a disguised response? Still, if genuine, could she not be as safe there as elsewhere? The ad did not mention Antoine’s name. Prudent maybe. Would the Morales extended tribe be using the want adds? Would ogre Ryan? Who knows?

*Corybant Films has lost contact with a fine actress under contract for the film Moon*

*Disc. If she is in transit or dealing with a Green Card, etc. she could stay at an abode of her choosing, retain a security driver and legal council through CF.*

She coolly debated the matter. Was it a ruse to let the goons know where she was, given the tracing facilities available, or a genuine even urgent query? She did leave the film set in a hurry and remained ‘at large’. She initially suspected someone on the set itself. The likelihood of Dyck showing up there on his own...she checked the number given in the ad again. Corybant’s studio office. Hmm. What to do? Have one of the street folk she met give the office a call — one of the many wannabe players, or the dudes posing as agents? Just such a one sat talking to a waitress in another café two days before, saying, ‘Want me to contact him, tell him you’re available...well interested?’ She never learned who the ‘him’ was.

She scowled. Give it a try girl. Propose a neutral meeting place — of your own choosing. She called the number from a pay phone and was promptly put in touch with the big cheese himself. “Ah — so very p,pleased you called. Cally recognized your voice. I’ll s,send a car.” After a brief silence he added, “Special license p,plate, in capitals — HOUYHNHM. Known w,world wide. Let me s,spell it for you. A chap called Menninger pilots the beast.” He then slowly spelled out the name of Swift’s transcendent godlike horses. In turn she stoically gave him the name of a busy neighborhood park. She would come forward only at the last moment. The fact that the preposterous license lettering came from the card himself helped decide the matter. Who else would get a license plate like that!

She could hardly believe the limo that drew up to the Coral Tree green space. Nor the large spruce man who got out from the back seat. He looked about, spotted her, came forward, extended a hand. She hesitated, almost fled. Had he been more assertive she just might have. He smiled, saying, “Antoine is a lucky lad.” She looked him over. With a tai-



lor like that and wheels to boot, she had trouble imagining some kind of handoff. He continued: “My name is Menninger. Mr Walstrom, our driver, is a chauffeur for executives at the Paleomena Corporation. You hinted at some worry for your safety in your message. Let me assure you, Antoine has sent the very best — us.” He then politely beckoned for her to join them, which she did after a brisk intake of air. Immediately the wonder ensued. Had she ever seen let alone been in such a vehicle? A third man sat by the driver. He turned. “Hi, I’m Ken. I fix Mr. Walstrom’s martinis.” This produced a spate of polite smiles. Ken looked like he could take on and thrash Ryan and Stephen together. She stifled a laugh. So, girl, this Antoine must be something bloody special. Better bank on it.

And he was, though not in any way she remembered. His office, at least the one he interviewed her in, not the production stage as before, was a circular art deco salon full of gleaming fruitwoods and aromatic leather patinas. She had slipped back into the pre-war years she thought as she took in his fleet suit and waistcoat, easy Beckham coiffeur, understated van dyke, slightly insouciant bow tie, wing tip oxfords, and beckoning smile as he took and kissed her limply proffered hand. A delectable lunch someone named Cally had set out in an adjoining room was being extolled by Ken as he chatted with the same conscientious Cally. Tara was nearly speechless.

“I can’t imagine what I’ve done to deserve this.”

Antoine smiled. “Modesty c,can be a decided handicap in this industry. Indeed, a g,good actress has a struggle to pull it off.”

“I guess I’m a natural. One of the ingénues’. Do they still use that word?”

Antoine smiled and gestured for Tara to sit on the chair before his wide

sumptuous desk. Noting her heed of the desk he said, “Grey elm and sas-safras. Quite f,friendly.” He drew an envelope from a top drawer and perched himself on the desk corner as he opened it. “Pleased be assured, seeing you again has improved the landscape here about. I won’t inquire about p,personal habits, but if you are trying to avoid them at p,present I can provide a comfortable and safe place to stay. We all w,want you to reconsider the film you left off. The script’s been somewhat revised if that w,was your initial objection.”

“Please, I’m here. The offer of a safe place to stay is welcome, and kind of conditional. A former boyfriend made some long-term enemies. One showed up on the set...I panicked...I didn’t tell my agent. A long story. I’ve been ‘hoofing it’ ever since. I almost didn’t call.”

Antoine smiled. “We’re very pleased you did.”

“I’ll start shooting, or whatever, whenever you wish. But I may need some backup when its done. It would be helpful if I could use an alias for the promotion and credits. One I can register. Something simple, common — the name — ‘Ann’ something.”

Antoine quickly responded. “I’ll get the p,promo wizards to devise a surname immediately. Please be assured, the film will make you a b,bud-ding star. You’ll be in a position to hire some Kens of your own. N,natu-rally, we will help and be on the lookout for w,witless reviewers. Ken can be your b,back-up during the making of the film.”

It was then she partly laughed, partly cried. She had never been as anx-ious as she was the past week, thinking half of LA looked for her, even hid-ing for an hour one night in the back of a garbage stall. It was then An-toine presented her with a shiny gold-plated key he’d taken from the enve-lope — to a suite in the very hotel this office was situated, L’Ermitage in Beverly Hills. He smiled and faintly shrugged. “The suite is arguably

early Mycenaean, which I t,tend to shun. You're entirely safe. We do have other suites, of course, should you share my b,bias. I think that's what it's dubbed and d,derided in popular p,parlance."

She smiled and took the key, cradling it like a small delicate bird. A veritable hummingbird!

Antoine added, " — Immediate possession. Cally and Ken will take you up after we eat. Cally can hustle up a w,wardrobe for the time being. A t,task she specializes in." A comment ample Cally took in with her stintless good humor. "We'll talk again tomorrow. Early afternoon. Cally will convene a time and n,notify Ken."

Tara thought of the few belongings she left behind on coming here. Shedding the detritus of a past. And thanked her lucky stars. Seeing Ryan had appalled her, returned her to the dread of a pit and pendulum. The assault that one time still numbed, debilitated. She knew Antoine's film had some unsavory scenes but none as gruesome as those she might have endured on her own. Her anxiety had almost subsided. That alone was a blessing. It was the first time, in a long time, she felt up to enjoying a meal.

Antoine too, when he again reviewed the early film take before the goonlet showed up, realized he had overlooked the remarkable if understated beauty the first time round. He too sensed a Providence tirelessly at work. As for a new name, indeed a new personage, the prospect livened an auteur's *raison d'être*. Something brief, common yet emphatic. 'Ann' perhaps, as she hinted — 'Ann Able' say. He said the name several times aloud without hesitation as his self-satisfaction loomed. If her welcome here was, well, yes, a trifle *outré*, he sensed in 'Ann Able' a talent rare and vital as dessert rain.



## TWELVE

The body remained unidentified. It lay in the morgue of the Chief Coroner's Office in Vancouver for a week. It had been found in a dumpster near a once stylish coat with an unusual gold coin concealed in a lining pouch. There was a garbage strike at the time and the body had been partly eaten by rodents. The face and neck especially were attenuated, one eye gouged, the teeth stark against rilled lips. Only one hand yielded prints, which had no match on registered files. Allen Pinker, who had been asked to identify the odd coin, promptly phoned Willardson who flew up that day on a corporate jet. As they looked at the body Willardson thought of recent terrorist beheadings and the body found near Haida Gwaii. This head also looked detached from the body, though some tissue still connected it to a section of bare cervical vertebra. The morgue technician awaited a comment.

“You mentioned a tattoo.”

“Yes. The examiner thought it was of a humming bird — originally. What was left was quite ‘lovely’ — her word. The coroner will welcome a statement.”

After a nod to Pinker, Willardson said, “I can only verify the coin that you said was found in the inner pouch of the coat. A likely Aztec motif. Gold leaf. Impressive but of little historic value. A likely facsimile of some in any number of Mesoamerican archives. I have no idea of its provenance and can think of no one who would commit this. I assume the body may never be identified?”

“Only if a friend or relative registers a missing person and can identify the body, though the face is badly deteriorated. The man does have old scars on an elbow — old stitches we think. And the putative hummingbird of course — though when that was done is hard to say. Somebody sure

wanted him out of the way. The coin is a puzzle of course. The coat appears to have been well made — odd given the man’s few plain clothes. Maybe no connection. A mess of course, the coat — somebody likely looking for cards, ID. Didn’t find or know of the coin it seems.”

The coin was a further reminder for Willardson that extortion payments of any kind were not always discrete and often followed torturous paths. He crossed himself as he left.

He and Pinker talked afterward in Willardson’s suite in the Hotel Le Soleil, the dining nook of which overlooked the stately grey-stone Vancouver Art Gallery. A Transgender rally was just concluding on the gallery’s front lawn near its Doric portico. Restless clouds umbered the sky. A light rain was falling. “Our liquid sunshine,” Pinker said.

They had ordered the Lambi — steamed conch with white rice and white beans — and exchanged distracting pleasantries as they ate, mainly to do with the culinary arts practiced at Le Soleil. As he poured the tea Willardson took up the matter of the enigmatic coin.

“Were such a cob coin not so rare — this fine replica being as surprising — I wouldn’t be quite so puzzled. What connection to the body is another matter. I am grateful you called.”

“I couldn’t help think it was somewhat like one you had me examine a while back. The curiosity of its presence in such a place indeed confounds. You must be worried. What will you do now, if I may ask?”

“I must inform Arthur Pechenpough of course. It is a daunting puzzle. One would need access to an original design to make such a cob, the design rare and specific. The mould itself wasn’t top drawer. I will consult a friend in the Numismatic Department of the National Museum of American History. Assess the current appeal of such a specie. I’ll try to follow

up on any future identity of the body, of course. I may call on your expertise again.”

“On call any time. It is curious, a single coin carefully tucked away so.”

A newly reflective Willardson thought to himself: the matter was worrisome as a hand over a flame. He then brightened. “I did note, when I arrived — that the gallery across the street from us has a collection of works from the Pearlman Collection. Mainly Cézanne. A patron of the provident Graces. Usually. I trust you’ll accompany me. We’ll have a cognac first?”

“My dear fellow, a pleasure.”

Willardson was of course duly considering several improvident scenarios: the cutout informing some cadres of his own, the goldsmith himself keeping a replica of the mould he would later hawk to an inferior minter, an ‘accident’ on the way to acquit another bribe...only a few coins recovered...prompting a pent up retribution? Willardson was simply stupefied at that stage as the possibilities loomed. The similarity of the coin to the ones he’d secured for Pechenpaugh far too close for comfort. He hadn’t inspected them all, yet felt this coin was extrinsic, a mediocre facsimile. Duplicity, perfidy was omnipresent in that age, everything ostensibly specious, feigned, ersatz. Italicizing the worth of Cézanne — ‘a seeker of authenticity’.

The call to Pechenpaugh could wait.

## THIRTEEN

The wary Ryan Dyck had a strange unpleasant taste in his mouth. He



had eaten some nuts in the lounge of the Jasper Hotel on Water Street. The odd taste was he knew extraneous to the nuts.. He awaited a hamburger. He picked the lounge this night because it was reliably dim inside. He had just met a regular hophead that day in the alley behind the Astoria and still awaited instructions from Omar's team...while wrestling with the novel idea that he may have been dumped!

He thought he recognized two men who took up a table across the room from him. He wasn't sure if they saw him. The dread that seemed then a persistent state suddenly became worse. He might heave but dare not enter the bog. He knew the nausea had little to do with the nuts, or his daily food fare, or indeed the silence of the great Omar. It was far worse. A malaise he'd never known. A week ago. Two? The night he and Paul had been together on an overdue night out....

If the cache found in the Nefer club safe the night of the riot was predestined, as he initially thought — running into Deirdre, the singing Barbie, afterward was not. She might yet identify him. Yet he dealt with the 'looker' and he escaped with his take intact! The exhilaration really never let up — especially the night he met and persuaded Paul to join him for an overdue celebration or, as he put it, 'a rad night out'. Dirk was away doing his new jihadi spiel. Dirk, the wall-to-wall gum beater. Whereas Paul the good, the student of sociology, had just finished his volunteer gig at the Food Bank. Such magnanimity. So modest. So discreet. Yet he knew Paul, like most religious folk — Paul was Pentecostal — had a weakness for nude sexy girls. After some reedy coaxing Paul went along. "Here, wear my coat," Ryan had said to appease Paul's need for anonymity, camouflage. Ryan then sported an expensive Covert Coat with black fleece lapels. He had a gold coin secreted inside the lining of one jetted pocket. A good luck charm he thought. A hard-up hophead sold him the coin. Said a friend stole a goldsmith's graphite mould and made a couple of

gold alloy samples. But was disappointed — too crude the friend thought, particularly the edging. Something wrong with the mould. Ryan wasn't so sure, and intended to find an upmarket assessor. He would contact the hothead in due course. He was a crack addict, unknown to Omar Jack, and still snarked for Ryan.

Paul seemed grateful for the coat that night. Ryan wore Paul's older tweed jacket. Ryan was expansive that night. "You've admired it — the coat. We're amigos, right?" Paul was amused if not flattered, quietly appreciative. But while walking toward the designated show lounge two men accosted them. They came from behind. Ryan didn't know either. More rat shit he thought, sensing his own power, his transcendence that night, even relishing a fight. But he was surprised by the men's skill and toughness. He tried to fight them off but between them they dinged his knife arm and had him on the ground in no time. Paul tried to help but was knocked aside and struggled to regain his balance, then collapsed a second time after being pummeled in the stomach.

"What the fuck do you want?" Ryan barely got the words out, the one arm about his neck a vice. Then he saw the large knife, a Tuareg he thought. He heard words, accented words, Mexican he believed.

"You come with us. Want the money. All of it. Then you live."

"What money?" Ryan gasped, hoping to attract some passers by. But the few about quickly shrank away. By then Paul had regained his feet but staggered about. The second blow left him winded, befuddled. He vomited.

"We kill you Dickhead."

"You've got the wrong guy!" Ryan managed to exclaim as the hand tightened about his neck.

“Sure, sure punki,” the one man said.

“No, no you silly fuck, he’s over there — Dyck. The Coat.”

They looked menacingly at Paul, who began staggering up Powell Street, calling out while anxiously glancing back. The two looked at one another. “Yeah — the coat,” one said. Said the other, puzzled, “No beard.”

Ryan was frantic. “Why he shaved it off, you dumb shits!”

The man with the knife hesitated then rushed after Paul. The other man, still holding Ryan, looked up long enough for Ryan to thumb him in the eye, leaving him dazed.

Promptly Ryan fled in the opposite direction yet heard the brief but frantic shouts for help. The area about was then deserted. He ran till his lungs rattled inside him yet continued running, running, hiding eventually in a dumpster somewhere back of Cordova Street. The verdict was in: he hadn’t slipped the Morales’ goons...yet he couldn’t imagine how they found him. Who among the Irish crew, the ‘provisionals’, would have ratted? Cutter? Surely not. One of the flinty jihadis — the feather legs? His mind was disordered as the reeking mess in the bin. Yet he didn’t move. Daren’t. “*You, you,*” he said accusingly. “*You!*” “*The first time: You.*” He could tell them nothing — Paul. The yelling — so shrill, yet so brief. They gagged, took him away...most likely. He remembered seeing a van across the street — where they would have taken him. He was sick then. A geyser. Soon he was inside out...knowing he must escape, get away to the Middle East...a must.

The lurid memory of that night eased when the two men in the Jasper lounge left, leaving the room to himself but for a bag lady. His hamburger arrived shortly after.



Much, much later he would put it down to just one more snuff film take. A competing crew. Why should a goody goody like Paul get off scot free anyway? He had sampled the goods. Reluctantly, condescendingly maybe, but he had. The best hash and coke. The occasional tart. The very best. What protection was innocence — Western innocence Dirk would say. The cause of the world's mess! It was the moment Ryan sensed the transcendence of the ominous Black Flag. The total overdue consummate remedial resolution. The coming arbiter of the order and place he'd been denied. Cruelly denied. He had indirectly killed; he could do it directly! He had been corrupted in the West. Beguiled, entranced by humbling dissolute freedom and its advertising smarm. The West would pay for it!

Imagine — a hummingbird. A hummingbird! What a patsy!

Days later Ryan Dyck stood looking at the anchored tankers in English Bay which were gilded by a setting Tangerine sun, the sky above streaked in flammable tints. A gull pecked at the shell of a small crab on the sand. His anger, once so overwhelming and 'insistent' had subsided after Jack Owen called. The stirring transforming Omar al-Rashid. 'No, no change of plan,' he said. 'A slight delay, no more. You will meet a chap here, in Vermont Vista. He's a Canadian — like you. Conducting a seminar. Says he knows you. Dirk Church. We'll keep you posted. Remember to change your disposable cell.' Again Ryan tested the waters. Not all that cold. He would swim about Siwash Rock, perhaps even attempt to climb it. He had once; he could do it again. With Omar's late reassurance he felt invincible. The time would come. Sooner than he imagined. Ding dong Dirk. Conducting a seminar. Ha! Life was good. A little careless sometimes, but good.

## FOURTEEN

Antoine Plombiers was at first quite speechless — a rare historic event. A discommoding phone call Cally received and duly informed him of had clouded his horizon. But his secretary had things to do and soldiered on.

“...Said today, ASAP.”

When Antoine found his voice it was less resonant than head-up Cally remembered.

“Who they?”

“Didn’t specify. Decidedly discreet their appointment service — the Bel-monte’s. A connection operator sounded like Joe Pesci.”

“Them, now? Not the Morales?...”

“No, the cousins.”

“There w,were threats?” Antoine’s voice was still finding its timbre.

“A postponement of the film was advised.”

“Ha.” His initial amusement soon faded. “Any reasons? A hint or t,two?”

“Just said your production crew needed some special instructions. Something about the script — something overlooked.” Again the silence busy Cally disregarded. “You’re free at eleven, for about an hour.”

Said a sober Antoine. “Phone detective Shearer. The usual with b,backup. Inconspicuous. And let Alex know we’re expecting some r,riff raff.” Alex was one of the new greeters at L’Ermitage. “I want it minuted. So stay tuned. Some of them like a k,kind of equestrian stale — Scapa I think.”

“I’ll get some.”

“Such opportunistic p,patronage...imagining we’re all ag,gog, grateful for impromptu int,trusions. Put on your thinking cap when they c,come. Please interrupt anytime.”

“Roger.”

“Your boyfriend is a k,kick boxer, yes?”

“Former boyfriend.”

“Did he t,teach you some maneuvers?”

“He wasn’t much of a teacher.”

“Ah.”

“Funny thing, it was a woman who phoned.”

Antoine was momentarily stunned. “Good lord. You’re resorting to a d,drip feed again?”

“Thought I’d give the curiosity an honorable mention. Timing is crucial here. Maybe Alejandra herself. Who knows?”

“Right! Battle stations! All hands on the table, Shearer on the b,buzz line!”

The ‘buzz line’ was the device Antoine kept with him always. A senior’s emergency warning signal with the option to summon private detective Shearer’s team. A costly program but cautious Antoine had long since decided his peerless ‘HOUYHNHM’ presence alone was not always honored among the apostates of LA. And the interesting if problematic Alejandra Belmonte had yet to present herself. If indeed she was the caller.

Thus, Cally and Antoine were not entirely fazed when the surpri-



singly stylish, comparatively young, beautiful and somewhat diminutive Alejandra Belmonte and two friends were ushered into Antoine's office by Shearer, one of the 'friends' an equally stylish if more robust gal, the second a monstrosity not in Huitzilopochtli's battle regalia but a smart business suit. Erika and Mario. Neither Cally nor Antoine had met Alejandra before, though Cally knew of her rise in the Belmonte family from pieces in the LA Times and her long-standing interest in film production. After some handshakes and Antoine's prickly cordiality — "Cally may want the name of your couturier before you leave!" — Alejandra sat in one of the chairs placed before Antoine's desk while her companions stood behind occasionally glancing out the mural windows. Alejandra crossed fetching legs and studied Antoine with a Mona Lisa smile.

"You perhaps don't recognize me."

Antoine froze. "My word! Yes indeed. I never imagined Ariadne finding her way — that miraculous yarn ball!"

The fussy pun obviously pleased him and broadened Alejandra's smile as she said, "You're perhaps distracted by the modern maze. Too many Minotaurs. Too many hectic 'bull runs'."

Antoine adopted a theatric moue. Such animated metaphors! Alejandra fluently continued.

"Luis, my distant cousin, has left on a needed vacation. Before he departed he was sadly troubled by the very Nordic actress playing Coyolxauhqui. He left in a state of confusion. Unusual for him. He suggested we help you find another, and well, further fine tune the script — keep Ariadne's yarn in tact, so to speak. I trust we've come in time."

Antoine smiled at Cally. Luis on vacation — needed or not — was a telling detail. Nor could he believe Luis disappointed with the spectacular

Hayden or cared a hoot about the script. Still, the opportunity that now presented itself was congenial — a Belmonte conversant with one of his favorite Greek myths! His astonishment was only matched by his anticipation. “Your timing is in fact impeccable. We are indeed considering a replacement. And, if I am not mistaken, you can meet her this very day.” He looked at Cally who quickly responded, “ — 3 PM. If she’s on time. Her coming may prompt a new look at the script’s characterization of her of course.”

Alejandra looked at Erika who belatedly nodded.

“That is fortuitous. We look forward to meeting her. I suggest we meet in the North loggia of our Brentwood estate. I’ll send a car.”

Newly anxious Antoine responded immediately. “A special treat.” He briefly glanced at Cally woodenly smiling the while.

“Do we know the name of this new performer?”

“ — Ann Able.”

Cally managed to return Antoine’s luminous smile; it was the first time she’d heard the new name.

“A promising newcomer?” Alejandra asked.

“Most promising.”

“We also have assembled some costumes we think suitable. That in their way better flesh out the mythic side of the character. Less prodigal than planned perhaps. It would be useful if she could try some on.”

Antoine could barely believe what he was hearing let alone seeing. Luis Morales ‘on vacation’ could mean a signal demotion or as likely a ruse to intimidate a — now delinquent or lax — film maker! As for get-

ting Tara Quinn, even as Ann Able, to a mob layout, after her terror at sighting one of its goons, was on the order of sending Ariadne off to face the Minotaur on her own. It was then the heedful and well versed Cally piped up. “Ms. ah, Able was recently threatened by a man she once knew. She is very wary these days. She may balk at going to a new address.”

“I’ll drive the limo myself. Erika and Mario will be with me. You may bring your own sitters and advisors.”

Antoine demurely smiled. Cally silently gestured slitting her throat, a gesture Alejandra took note of for she smoothly proposed an alternative venue for a first meeting.

“I’m sure we can work something out. Yes. Perhaps we could meet her here first. I’ll bring some of the costumes. We’ll discuss matters in full then. I have a prospectus here you may wish to examine in the meantime. To help tweak some aspects of the script. I’ve followed your career and this film in particular with great interest.”

Antoine managed to keep his expression hospitable as Alejandra placed the document on his desk.

Antoine maintained his much practiced bonhomie. “Indeed w,we shall. A p,prospectus. So looking forward to seeing — these exclusive c,costumes.”

The meeting ended as speciously as it began. When the trio had gone Antoine faced a candidly expressive Cally.

“A precious name — that. Spur of the moment was it?”

“A sudden illumination.”

Cally dryly smiled.



“Sudden, yes. And if you have some notion of what’s going on here, do tell.”

“I have heard of women steering some of the families. A paucity of menfolk. Better diplomats on the whole I imagine — the gals. More prudent. Didn’t know about costumes. I suspect she’s had you in mind for a while.” This comment was followed by a fetching smile.

Antoine mused, “A sorority number fronting the Belmontes.”

“She is a winner is she not?”

“It’s not the word uppermost in my mind. What can she be up to coming here — now?”

“She wore a St. Christopher medallion on her necklace.”

“Ah. You noticed that too. The one who assists people crossing a perilous river. An irony that daunts.”

“The bond between she and Erika seemed close. Glad she agreed to coming here. Astute gal don’t you think? All in all. Willing to roll a bit.”

“You had no idea? Luis ‘on vacation’?”

“Not a bean.”

“And you think we should perhaps take an overdue sabbatical...?”

“Not really. Best not to annoy the new mother goddesses.”

“Is that possible?”

“With your ability and reach...a possibility.”

“Do remind me. So, no egress, no evacuation for the nonce. You

might m,meet Tara before hand. Our new 'Annie'. Take her to the fourteenth f,floor lounge for a chat. Get Ken to accompany you. I'll phone P,pechenpaugh."

"And if she bolts? Our Ann Able."

"We may have to compliment our g,guests on their reign of terror. I rather think she will come. We must try to be more b,broad-minded Cally."

"Doing my damnedest. I do know a bit about her — Alejandra. I'll leave you a fact sheet before I go up. Some details may have escaped your attention."

Antoine brightened. "The beginning and end of all art. I also think we should c,cast an eye on that unexpected prospectus before we meet."

"Roger. Hum. Ann Able. Hum. Our great white hope."

None of the elevators Cally waited for carried Tara Quinn, who had been notified of the meeting though not her new appellation. When Cally was about to call Tara's room, she spotted her coming off a screened service elevator with Ken. She wore a large floppy hat and dark glasses, and kept looking about her.. A ghost of a smile touched her face when Cally approached, saying, "Hi. Antoine suggested a brief meeting in the lookout lounge before the formal meeting in his office. Ken you're free, yes? Good."

Cally had decided to jump in at the deep end, continuing with: "One of the film's patrons will be present — at the meeting with Antoine. A smart gal — Alejandra Belmonte. She's now the head of one family, and she's radically changing the protocols of doing business. She has her own film production company. You'll get on. She'll be here in about forty minutes. You're looking great. We've a new name. Yes. Hope you'll try

it on.” As Cally headed toward the lift she turned and said, “Ann Able.”

But Tara was elsewhere and barely moving. “A Belmonte? Here?” They are one of the Michoacana families aren’t they? You can’t be serious?”

“Her extended family’s assisted Antoine before. Longtime. You accept the part and you’re home free.”

“Oh please.”

“It’s true,” Ken said. “She’s one of the new mavens on Paleomena’s radar. Pechenpaugh’s for sure. You’ll be as safe with her as anyone right now. In one of her sanctioned projects you’re sacrosanct.”

Tara quietly whistled.

Astute Cally had finally had enough and played a trump card. “You can leave of course — anytime. Now if you like. We’ll be disappointed but understand. It’s still early.”

Tara again hesitated. “Oh Christ You people. She’ll know me as — what did you say — Ann Able? And she’s interested in Antoine’s film?” Tara’s expression conveyed major skepticism.

Cally again rose to the occasion. “Yes. Had a hand in it early on, apparently. Cogent suggestions Antoine’s taken to heart.”

It was of course a well crafted fib, a seamless improvisation, a Cally specialty. She continued with valid advice.

“The name ‘Ann Able’ I would use henceforth, regardless. We can instate the identity, put the new papers together whether you stay or go.”

The ready candid assurance seemed to hold sway. Ken spoke up. “Meet her. Make up your mind. Give us that at least. She’ll know you



as Ann Able. You can shuck the alias whether or not you decide you want out.”

All waited quietly as Tara wrestled with a decision. “Ann Able,” she said with wry ambiguity. “Anything but,” she added before biting her lip. “I take the dark glasses off only when I’m good and ready. Able, Ann. What fun.”

“Only if it’s copacetic. The name. Sudden, I know. Hadn’t anticipated Antoine’s brain wave. We all like it.”

“Able. A bit flattering wouldn’t you say?”

Cally smiled. “Not a bit.”

“Not at all,” Ken added.

“The challenge or dare,” Tara mused, while dealing with a stubborn grimace. “Keep the enemies closer. Jesus.”

“Great handle — Ann Able,” Ken said in the elevator.

Cally resumed talking in the lounge while they waited for a table.

“When you finally meet Alejandra you’ll be less confused about her film creds. Her acumen and business ventures are exceptional, very sweet. I keep abreast of the Belmontes for Antoine.” Cally didn’t mention that her curiosity was largely her own and had little prompting from the hoity-toity Antoine as she continued.

“She’s very bright and easy on the eyes, as Ken will affirm I’m sure. She has an MBA from the Haas Business School at Berkeley. She owns two agra businesses and half-a-dozen restaurants. She’s always been interested in film. She has her own film company that does her media advertising and general info videos. I’ve seen her and read a recent interview in

the Sunday Times. I believe she's here to stay. Hope you do too. She doesn't know you're staying here."

Settled in the restaurant Cally spelled out more details over a brunch of frittatas and papaya lassis. The restaurant hostess had been informed of the the group's coming and had a table ready, screened by a dense Ficus and spreading English ivy. In looking over Alejandra's prospectus, Cally and Antoine realized she'd carefully considered the film's premise — even its setting and costumes. Agreeably, the thrust of the current narrative proved apposite Alejandr's own, at least in outline. After some token comments about studio life in general, Cally resumed.

"The revised film Moon Disc is a turnabout. You all know the setting, the encounter between two famous or notorious Aztec deities. The turnabout is that in this story the female prevails. The famous stone disc will picture the vanquished body of the *male* god. It's time the old macho bulwark came tumbling down, it's hegemony the main hindrance to civilization — well, that's one topical presumption. The disc in the film will be analogous to a collapsing red giant star — I've seen the digital preps and they look great. I suspect Alejandra wants to promote the film — by endorsing its premise and assisting its promotion. A testament to her own rise. Her backing should be plain to all in her community. Her timing may be adroit I think. Sorry Ken."

"Don't be. Decisive women can be intoxicating...in most any guise."

Tara listened on as one being briefed on strict custodial protocol.

"In the prospectus Alejandra left us the suggested costuming is vintage, but with different styles and patterns for the aftermath — the 'awakening' as she calls it. The costumes help define the transformation she says in her prospectus. The fight scene will remain dramatic of course. Antoine's hired a very fine fight master. The storyline of the film leads up

to this encounter. The final scenes show a triumphant Cololxauhqui outlined against the remnants of a supernova, the candescent serpentine remnants of Huitzilopochtli settling into a vivid disc. An astronomer is assisting in the graphic rendering. A metaphor we can all use in this macho ISIL age.”

Cally sat back, took a drink of her lassi, and smiled at the attentive and diverted others before continuing in a more sober tone.

“One matter Alejandra apparently debated yet advises — in the prospectus she recently left Antoine. Some of the costuming is unusual in that it has a stark quality — she wants an arresting but not a gaudy female. Two costumes suggest line engravings. They show the celestial representation and deeds of divine beings your character represents — a kind of evolution in the film. The figure frames the engravings so to speak. Hard to imagine but plain enough when you see it. This was not in-the-works earlier — that first time round. Everything OK so far?”

Tara was still considering. “The eye makeup is still elaborate, or was. From my last time...”

“Yes. Very dramatic. Particularly for the fight scene. ‘Peking Theatre dramatic’ — the face — one makeup artist’s comment. As you may know Cololxauhqui is tethered to the sacrificial stone and given a weapon that resembles Huitzilopochtli’s but the blades are in fact feathers. With the help of a sorceress she releases and clouds his eyes with the feathers, seizes his obsidian barbed weapon — the maquahuiti — and begins clobbering him. Alejandra wants this segment to have a mosaic feel, panned frame dissolves I’m told. She’ll explain I’m sure. An innovative gal.” Cally smiled.

But Tara was still nursing her doubts. “The thrust of the story must make it newly dangerous for her. For Alejandra. For a Belmonte.”



Again Cally proffered a tenable reality.

“She’s respected in the business community — pointing the way for others. From what I read she’s in touch with several government ministers, who have an eye for winners, believe me. The violence in Mexico has angered many people, women not least, who are in some cases effectively lobbying, even directing some families. Sometimes they are the only viable members left in a cartel family, the killing of their male relatives being so wholesale. In general, they appear to be more astute, using violence sparingly and, well, more prudently I would guess. They also tend to be shrewder business minders. Alejandra is called the Magical Woman, the Milagroso Mujer. You’ll see the world through shrewd different eyes. It’s a world where men vainly try to dominate...the usual fatal fanaticism. Not budding paragons like Ken of course.”

If Cally’s monologue was a tad personal, she believed its tenets an article of faith and was keen to see them broadcast.

Ken smiled. “Antoine’s language is infectious.” This earned him a token slug from Cally.

Tara barely nodded, saying, “Ken or another will be with me throughout the shooting?”

“Part of your contract with Corybant Films.”

“What does the busy Mr. Pechenpaugh, the one sponsor you mentioned, think of such a new twist? He comes across as a hard hat. Can such a one be happy with such a reversal?”

“Antoine hasn’t been expansive here. I assume just salvaging the funding was his main concern. Some of it now possibly Alejandra’s input. Her family deals with many corporate proxies. The Secretary of tourism and the Secretary of Social Development, both tough women, should come

on board when the publicity cranks up. In summary: the film will get a long overdue debate going, the age-old abuse and degradation of women. Particularly independent-minded women. The semiotics of their sad history — another adjunct in the prospectus Alejandra left us. It has been carefully worked out, the design of the film. I say that as a witness to many half-baked proposals.”

Ken and Cally looked to Tara for some sign of assent.

“I’m really not sure. It’s more than I....”

“Meet her. Meet Alejandra. You won’t be disappointed.”

Tara gave way to a wary smile the others interpreted as a ‘yes’, further encouraging her to meet the Milagroso Mujer. Whose dark windowed limo arrived a few minutes later. Tara wanted to see the woman arrive at street level. Cally believed Tara had an eye for untenable situations. Indeed, for a moment she may have considered leaving, fleeing. Was it the exquisiteness of the limo that gave her pause? The understated elegance of the one female passenger? The deference shown her by her own stylish sitters and her own cordiality toward them?

Cally decided the question was by then passé. The relief she felt was considerable. She had been following the horror in the Middle East and elsewhere. Strong, savvy gals like Alejandra could set a new norm.

## FIFTEEN

If Tara, as Ann Able, was initially undecided, diffident, finally meeting the able, cogent Alejandra was a welcome reassurance. It was perhaps the very detail in the planning that calmed, held promise. Also the manifest

fact that Alejandra was pleased with Antoine's new star. The contract itself was again spelled out in detail, including a handsome bonus on completion. There was no mention of visiting the Brentwood estate. Tara took up the pen Alejandra offered her like one signing a historic covenant. *You give your heart to each and every thing in turn!...* It had crossed Tara's mind that Alejandra might be gay. The contract said nothing about sex with the convener...and so far, no inklings or come-ons.

What surprised and flattered at the same time was a further offer to model a line of voguish attire, mainly pants and skirts Alejandra was helping a friend promote for his prêt-à-porter collection under the Ceryx label. The offer came toward the end of the meeting in Antoine's office. If Antoine was surprised, he promptly endorsed the brand. "Altog,gether swish — Ceryx. Means 'herald'. In the harb,binger sense." Cally, for whom this offer was also a surprise, said to Tara, to Ann Able, on Antoine's cue, "It often gets more amped up here on in. What can happen to able comers." Said Alejandra, "You'll have the time, it'll take only a day or two." There seemed no limit to Alejandra's moxie, exploits, resolve and creative savvy. First impressions. With Tara's — Ann's — faint bemused nod, Alejandra phoned a photographic agent on her private line. The group listened in: the photographer Louis Führ — the photographer she'd often used before — wasn't available, was in fact on assignment in Europe. But the agent had learned from a friend of a fine photographer who might be available. "He tends to work in the larger formats but is exceptionally inventive. He's done work for the 'Bygone series' in Architectural Digest, some period Interiors' specials, also style sets for Le Monde and Club Monaco, also Benetton — children's wear and a couple of their Unhate ads — and created program and backstory sets — mainly dramatic stills — for some theatre companies including Podolianka, a Ukranian song and dance ensemble. He's now working on a book about the notorious drug culture in Vancouver's East End. Obviously a versatile artist," the agent con-



cluded. Said Alejandra, “Purgatory can be exhausting.” The agent laughed. If mention of Vancouver’s East End stirred a latent memory for Tara, she could not then bring it into focus. She further learned that this photographer was likely short of funds. “He’s not a businessman,” Alejandra wryly remarked. “He’ll welcome a profitable gig”. They were urged to trust her agent’s judgement — with Antoine’s endorsement of course — which was promptly given. Tara managed a token smile. She was in fact speechless when Mason Bascule’s name was mentioned. Because she still feared for Mason’s mother she decided to remain mum. She had read about the riot, the curiosity of Deirdre performing in Vancouver, the injury she sustained in the club, and her mother taking her back to Belfast. The stark raw facts. The manager of the Nefer club had posted an e-mail address but Tara had not received a reply. She thought instead of the fresh expansive bay beyond Sea Sent. Her looming career a radiant sun...or growing storm.

On seeing Tara in a salon in L’Hermitage a short week later, a ready, operational, photo studio space, Mason Bascule sensed he’d seen her before. The day after his discharge from hospital, his mother showed him a picture she had taken of a guest with Bear, a winsome if perplexing gal, named Tara Quinn, who unexpectedly left Sea Sent a day before the riot. Her sudden, indeed abrupt leaving, disturbed his mother, who didn’t want to burden him with such news while he was in recovery, she said. She knew how depressed he was. Ergo, when he learned that this Tara Quinn was non-other than the half-sister of Deirdre Corr he was stunned and incredulous. “Are you sure?” “I’m sure,” Helene stated with a slight but emphatic nod. “I’ll fill you in soon. The stories she told me. When you have time.” Which she had. In plaintive detail. And now — remarkably — this Tara here — the half-sister of the ineffable Deirdre Corr and

one-time target of Ryan Dyck. He found he had to sit down.

On seeing Mason the heedful Tara, the promising Ann Able, was herself on edge and predisposed, again, to promptly disappear. Him! Here! Her past coming to roost? Had Helene talked to the wind surfer? Someone else? After a more or less cordial businesslike greeting Tara confronted Alejandra while a bewildered Mason found himself wondering if he was again dreaming. Tara was plainly distraught. Indeed, it took Alejandra the better part of a quarter-hour to assure her that Mason, in committing to his East End work, would not have pandered to mobsters, let alone spy for them. Who's there to spy on? She'd not known of Tara's stay at Sea Sent, yet was dismissive of Tara's edgy supposition, which struck her as paranoid. She added a footnote.

"He was contacted the day before yesterday. I spoke to him myself. No way he could be a cutout or plant as you suggest. I would know. It takes days, weeks to enlist and place such a one. You told me yourself your knowing of him was second hand — largely through his mother's own albums. A discreet woman you said — whom you trusted. Thus, it's highly unlikely he would really know who you — Ann Able — are. You said you never met him. He's just another lucky photographer. A bit of a romantic, a poetic lad, I think. Not always the best of informers by the way. Had he not known of my own work he wouldn't have taken on the assignment, he said. He did tell me he'd been in hospital — after the riot in Vancouver. He also mentioned a singer, one Deirdre Corr — your half sister, yes? — who was injured in that awful riot. Her fate obviously affected him. He said he was in a professional limbo — another confidence to me — but needed to get going again. Hardly the comment of a hood. He was grateful we called. I told him he came highly recommended. All in all, a good sign, no?"

Tara wanted to believe yet held back..the lurid memory of that one en-

counter...not yet concluded...

Alejandra firmly continued. "Please. You *can* say no. You've signed nothing yet with Ceryx. Naturally I'd be disappointed if you did opt out, but the decision is yours. I'm sure you must realize you're as safe here as anywhere right now. A career beckons before you that kids today would kill for. Talk to him. You are a good judge of character and motive. I think so. He's not bad looking. And a handicap often makes an individual more caring and perceptive. You may inspire a new friendship. Artists toil to immortalize select subjects. I think so. I've told him only your new name. He knows you only as Ann Able."

It was these last deft words, followed by a jovial chuckle, that persuaded Tara to stay, to see the matter through. With a keen eye. Tara's unwelcome suspicion that Alejandra had her eye on her dissipated with her approval of Mason. She looked about the studio and the cases Mason was now unpacking. So, break a leg — Ann Able.

The days that followed were indeed a revelation. She did model the new roomy, flowing, fine weave pants, skirts and jackets, in a series of takes, both still and animated. Mason's direction of the poses and lighting, as natural as possible, was what you might expect from a fine pictorial artist. If he spoke a little too loud sometimes, it was because he was adjusting a new hearing aid — he'd been injured in the Nefer club during the riot. Unexpectedly, the 'manner' of his approach was understated, almost apologetic, which further assured. Indeed, his attention to nuance rather defied a supplementary agenda, at one time using the example of Tai Chi to summon a flow to the movement. Which he tracked like a mesmerized mime artist she thought, maneuvering quite well on his one gimpy leg while using one of the few hand-held cameras. In between the shoots they talked. Alejandra's designer friend had a variety of ensembles to exhibit. Often their voices mingled as she changed behind a screen.



The conversation resumed at the end of the day's shoot. The fact they were tired abetted the conviviality. Alejandra left them on the salon's leather siesta chairs with a bottle of Rioja. By then they had extricated their identities. He fondly if sadly told her the little he knew about Deirdre, her injury, admitting to an infatuation with her — particularly her singing. She in turn told him of her clash with Ryan, Millie's call to Helene, her stay at Sea Sent, and subsequent adventure here under her new name. Hearing of her awful travail with none other than a toxic Ryan Dyck amazed as it alarmed Mason. She was surprised to learn about his early years at university, meeting Ryan there, and much later in Vancouver's East End — his last encounter with a 'troubled and barely recognized fellow'. The keen recollections and the happenstance of meeting on such a photo shoot contributed to a shared solicitude and subsurface humour. But Tara — Ann Able — wanted to learn more about Deirdre. She knew it was an emotive subject but her anxiety about the fate of her half-sister spurred curiosity.

"You did say you heard Deirdre sing just before the riot."

Mason was slow to take up the thread.

"I was caught up in her music, her voice...such that I must have been immune to what was happening outside. At first. As were most of the patrons I think. It was only after her first set finished that we became fully aware of the noise, the hubbub outside which was growing in intensity...by then the band had packed it in. I lost track of them in the mêlée outside."

He broke off suddenly, his face a frozen mask. But her need to learn more of the details urged her on.

"You did mention being hit by one of the thrown objects."

This all too grim reminder forced him back.

“It’s a time I still think unreal. A kind of, well” — he plaintively shrugged — “phantasmagoria. I need big words to hide behind.” He tugged at his ear. “Sorry. The media account of it all is so lame. It was only when I came to in emergency that I learned of her injury — the absolutely bizarre circumstance of it. I still can’t believe. To be attacked so... there. The two witnesses...only noted the blood...apparently...”

Tara too was momentarily unnerved...a silent dismay Mason noted as he resumed.

“I never entertained any idea of actually approaching her...before... some paragons you best admire at a distance. Don’t smile. Being as lovely as she was the queue would be very long in any case. But her singing placed one in a special world. A place you had to pinch yourself to recognize, to assume. The sense of well-being, serenity comes so rarely.” He sensed becoming short of breath. “What can I say now...the creatures of myth carry on.”

Tara was heartened by this testimonial despite the pathos in it. “You were in love with her.”

“She reminded one of the courtliness in romance, its essence — trust.”

Tara smiled. “And you were injured by one of the missiles the rioters threw.”

Again the rigid mask. Then: “How comely is it to lose, forfeit your inspiration...in so many words? Sorry. Seeing you that first day was disconcerting. You seemed every bit as...singular.”

“If only I could sing, eh?”

This brought a renewed smile to the sad face. “Who knows. Maybe

one day?”

It was perhaps but a matter of time she thought later. She excused herself by thinking it was not only an act of kindness, of recompense — the convivial kiss that touched off the protracted whole-hearted embrace which ended in her frescoed Mycenaean suite. She needed to restore her sister; he, to foil a too acute memory. So she guessed. She was aware from the start how beholden he was. He might lose himself in her embrace. It was some of the most attentive lovemaking she could remember: to be in the thrall of one who actually cherished you, his very freighted wonder a yummy engagement. Looking at her after a particularly winsome interlude he said, “I’ve nixed the monastery...the Gregorian chants...”

That evening, as they shared a pizza, she finally detailed all: her trial with maniacal Ryan and the racketeers he widely served, his later fascination with radical Islam, her anguish on learning of Deirdre’s death and her dread that Ryan could have had something to do with it — her own words barely recognizable as she proceeded. “A cutting-edge Mr. Hyde. The disbelief hasn’t really let up.” Neither were eating when she’d finished.

He said, “My dislike of him is less puzzling these days.”

“He did look to you for a place to stay.”

“He hadn’t many options then.”

After the shoot the next day she absolved or foiled the poignancy by tying on, modeling for him some costumes for the film, the ones germane to the altered myth, the fittings for which had been done at the hotel, a studious Antoine looking on with Alejandra. The eye makeup, which she had learned to apply, a wonder in itself. She showed him the sheer



litho costumes and even slipped into one — with no Alejandra alert to the progress, as had happened one day! Her very visual presence partly eclipsed the forbidding retrospection. He said at one point that stars take a while to be born but live a long time. By then their embraces in the interludes were nearly baroque, as he thought of them — ready, exuberant with many wondrous inventions. He couldn't believe how supple she was, she how deft he could be despite his handicap. Several times they paused to look at one another like long lost survivors. After one particularly animated foray they collapsed like spent runners.

Later, in a faintly discernible dawn, their forms relief sculptures on a messy bed, they talked again about their sorry past and, in particular, the role of leniency — the unwillingness to ditch someone you knew to be in trouble. He lay on his side dumbly gazing at her. Had he seen a more beautiful seamless creature? Ever? By then his hearing aid was working as touted. She talked in the main. The Ryan she had gone to high school with had a lot going for him — tall, good looking, bright, even charming when he wanted to be. Part of an act she later believed when she confronted his addiction to drugs and ugly pornography, even his late fascination with heartless Islam. “He delighted in misleading people I think now. Your all-inclusive scam artist. What you do when you dislike yourself you think? When reality gets in the way? Fool and debase other people — upstage your potential critics?”

He was about to glibly say that he'd always been ‘downstage’ himself but checked himself in time. He'd been caught up in her nimble engaging presence and telling words. Which tended to humanize his own pained recollections. One in particular which he expanded on.

“I do know Ryan was very casual about doing assignments — when we were at university. I used to think he imagined he was in say Oxford in the early twentieth century — there less for an education than a memora-

ble good time. Almost like Sebastian in *Brideshead Revisited*. An illusion you can sustain only so long, though the four of us did have a few okay times that one year. Paul helped here, being the ready mitigator he was. Dirk and Ryan often duelled. Paul's ready humor usually distracted the combatants. *Come on you guys — the whole world is your urinal*. His sayings, here dissing a pissing contest, were a time out when I think of it now."

"Ha. The guys who can and do pee everywhere."

"That fist year, Ryan, who had some issues we weren't aware of, suddenly quit. Just before exams. We lost contact. Until he turned up in the East End. Much changed of course. Took me a while to realize it was the same person."

"You too."

"I miss especially Paul. I know he planned to go to a retreat about the time of the riot. I hope to see him when I return."

He smiled, took up and kissed her hand as she fondly ruffled his hair, her own thoughts newly alive.

"I know he left Fresno for a time after college, our senior high school, then returned. He didn't mention a Canadian university. It's when he started hitting on me. He saw me in a dance class...it was hot, we were sweating. A late memory. You don't think much of it at the time...how unprotected you look. Too caught up in your own imagined prowess. But I remember him looking on — avidly. I wasn't seeing anyone at the time. Stephen found me a little too uppity I think. I was ambitious then. Maybe a bit envious of Deirdre. We remained friends though, Stephen and I. He told me things about Ryan I didn't believe at first — that drugs were his 'thing' and that he sold to pushers as far north as Vancouver. A very active coastal network apparently. They called him a 'Deadhead'. It

was about then that things got dicey. In short, his stiffed suppliers — he had several apparently — were not happy, and imagined they could get at him through me. The wonder was that his only real passion, an obsession that still mystifies, was the ghoulish pornography that led I think to his jihadi pretensions! Words simply don't cut it." She studied Mason for a moment. "You know the Aztec Templo Mayor stone disc? It's a key icon in the film."

Mason looked blankly at her for a second. "The one with the butchered goddess?"

"Ryan's 'pound of flesh'. In the Epicurean sense. A 'fun' thing. A tonic. I'm not making this up."

Mason stifled a laugh.

"Then the pimping stuff on top of everything. I was dumfounded at the time. You begin to doubt your own sanity, your own perception."

Mason was a moment responding. "I actually felt some guilt for my own spite, dislike. At the time." He ventured a smile. "I think it auspicious *we* should have tried to understand, befriend the same person.

Tara nestled closer, placing her head near his shoulder.

A stoic Mason continued. "I felt certain Ryan was involved in something rank when he left but never learned what it was. He knew an Asian guy in Vancouver, I remember. A Saladin with a scowl and many rings, I recall. Ryan was a mess then, a break away train I think. No easy way to back off."

Tara resumed her own narrative after taking up his gesturing hand.

"I was perhaps naive. A bit too hopeful maybe. He could be charming. Well, ingratiating I guess. I still don't know what to make of the sites,



the images he downloaded. A late discovery. And then to call me a prude when I balked at approving. God, the sheer bloodymindedness. He said I would get excited. That was part of the dismay — that the girls, well some, actually seemed to enjoy it. The stymieing part...the recognition that the orgasms, the ejaculations looked real enough. The droll detail. An alien world.” She looked up at him with a conspiratorial smirk. “You don’t think I’m a prude I trust.”

“I’m thinking of a credible apsara, a cosmic jin — a full lexicon.”

She continued, as much to humour the appraisal. “So, not a prude. Well, he struck me, in due course, as an unspeakably aberrant psychotic. A very *modern* monster. A veritable ISIS or ISIL ghoul, destined for — what did one writer call it — Headhackinstan? He would fit in in such a place, I have little doubt. My once troubled Hamlet figure, as I first thought of him — yes, I did — had vanished. A sobering time.” She looked away, her presence there beside him a poignant reminder it seemed. “My dismay merely prompted him to brag with a candour that astonished. I don’t think he ever wondered about his obsession. Too caught up in it I imagine. The anticipation, it seems, never lets up. The sadistic thresholds a kind of dizzying hierarchy apparently. I’ve done some research about it.”

They both paused as if to catch their breath. “Trying to make sense of it puts you in a bind,” she said after a time.

He then surprised her.

“This may sound provocative. It’s not intended to of course. I’ve looked at a few SM sites. Many of the players are surprisingly well favored. You know the word concinnity?”

But then she had risen up on an elbow looking at him with constrained

wonder.

“Not really. Something to do with balance, symmetry. Not something I imagine being manifest during such an exhibition. This is not a trick question I presume.”

He backed his head in his hands.

“The curiosity is we’d never allow an animal to be treated so. The wanton killing of a lion is more newsworthy than say a slaughtered Oromo baby in Ethiopia. Are humans so ‘dis-prized’? For instance, the Vatican museum has some ugly scenes in its art archive that someone thought special. The moral heroism and submissive degradation behind some does not account for the elegance of the bodies — one measure of inequality, disparity. Think of the many crucifixes that portray a lithe beautifully proportioned elongated form. Would such crucifixes be as engaging if they were of a person suffering from say neurofibromatosis type1 — Joseph Merrick’s malady? The Elephant Man. Always a suspension — the *human* splendor that seduces. Michelangelo’s David, say. Do we underestimate the antipathy for it in an *equality obsessed* population? A population engaged in belittling almost all cultural standards, certainly Western standards? The sadistic threshold you mentions?” He wryly smiled. “Sorry. The phrase crouching tiger, hidden dragon keeps needling me.”

By then Tara was on the verge of dry laughter remembering some of his directions during the shoot. “The tiger pouncing stuff — in the one layout?”

“Couldn’t think of the word ‘pouncing’.” He turned to face her. “Some conceptual artists thrive in rendering deformity and hideousness. One reason perhaps I wanted to document the dregs in Vancouver’s East End. The truly devastated ones. The people who’ve ditched their expecta-

tions. Even Schadenfreude loses its craven haunt there. Bodies entirely lacking dignity. Not virtual at all.”

“Yet an empathic pursuit — documenting such hopelessness, speaking truth to power so to speak.” Tara was holding onto their shared solicitude.

“The humanitarian way of putting it. You do see some stoics there. The ones who haven’t yet abandoned reality. But the will to change is gone for the most part. Some of them might even have heard Deirdre. One chap I know got in one night.”

“He was as fascinated with my sister?”

“I would think so. He didn’t look well. I looked for him during one intermission. He’d left apparently. I’ll be on the lookout for him when I return. If he survived.”

By then they both lay on their sides, their legs tucked, candidly eyeing one another.

“And you never thought of approaching her? Hard to believe.”

Her smile set off the coming exchange.

Said he, “Just so. The tawny-throated Nightingale singing for the special mate. Hardly me of course.”

Said she, “The *male* bird does the singing.”

“Ha — one of the endemic confusions.”

“Do your impromptu asides ever let up?”

He smiled. “It’s maybe rare.”

“She was flesh and blood,” Tara averred.



“Not really sure — never saw her naked.” He then checked himself. “There *was* some blood...that night...two witnesses. Only two...that have come forward.” He was then looking not at her but through her, an unfocused stare. She apprised him again as he returned to regard her and finger her face. “If I sang as well would I be here now I wonder?”

This gave him pause. “You are an operatic player I think. Familiar with aspiring folks.” But by then he was too enamoured for further talk.

An hour later she awoke to find she was alone and curiously alert to the faint sounds of a piano from the salon below her bedroom. The playing was not at all bad she decided as she ventured to listen on her balcony. Sounded classical, wistful, the music. She slipped into the elegant morning gown Alejandra had given her saying — “Let’s begin ‘the legend’ today!” — and ventured toward the sound. Finding Mason Bascule at a baby grand keyboard being listened to by a few of the hotel staff was a surprise. He played another tune, a Chopin Etude someone said, containing the theme to Over the Rainbow. When he finished the applause was enthusiastic. Seeing her in the long silk gown, he rose from the piano, acknowledged the polite disappointment in his audience while assuring them he had a tape they all must listen to! It was then Tara noted the salon’s section of parquet wood floor as he crossed to a music console, placed a CD, and paused for a moment as the first tune began, the folk tune Greensleeves in slow 3/4 time, from his CD of Deidre’s group. One of the songs without words that featured Deirdre’s lute. After a further bow to the audience he approached the hovering Tara and asked if he could have the first dance. The request amused the audience. Soon this part cripple was moving about the room with the elegant Tara in a surprisingly agile if not altogether fluent step, his one poor leg being a kind of fulcrum to his movements. He told her later he had unapologetically done something he always wanted to do — dance with a fabled Irish beauty to an ineffable Irish

slow waltz! He doubted the opportunity would return, for she might find it easier to ignore him after. He had another CD — but for another night, if there was one. The last performance that night was from the same CD which they eventually sat and listened to like orphic witnesses — the song *A Stór mo Chroi* (Gaelic for ‘Darling of my Heart’). Tara reminded herself that a performer is honored when a talented admirer gets caught up in her work — and felt some guilt at not appreciating Deirdre as he had. Her own late invalidated state — her own ‘terror’ — had umbered the early fixed recollections.

After the next day’s shoot — the last Ceryx shoot — she asked him what he thought of Antoine’s film, the shooting for which would begin that week. They sat at the margin of the hotel’s salon they had used as a studio, on a banquette that lined one side. She was a little anxious to explain before he answered.

“She doesn’t actually cut up the brute, just casts him into the heavens where he seems to expand then implode — ‘precipitating the dust for a cosmic star nursery’ — Alejandra’s words. I’ve seen the storyboard for the magic graphic renderings. They’re quite miraculous I think.”

“It will certainly stir a few hearts. A word I use advisedly. A tale whose time has come, I imagine, given the PC fanatics out there today.”

“Meaning?”

“Men being the age’s cosmic heavies. The designated...black holes.”

Coyly she asked, “You don’t approve?”

“Anything you’re in — I approve of.”

She looked at him with a droll fondness he hadn’t noticed before. They agreed on a holiday together when the film was finished. He was a

little anxious, he said, to return to his portraiture, as he called it, of Vancouver's East End denizens. "You stay too long on Cloud Nine you slight the bedlam below."

"I think you still seek my sister — in your special Emain Macha. That's the place, yes — in the Synge play? I looked it up."

Mason smiled, belatedly nodded. He was about to say something but changed his mind, bringing up another matter. "I want to find the one fellow she may have befriended. See if he's still coping."

"Does he have a name?"

"Adam. Someone called him that. Adam Sally. I saw her talking to him before a performance one night. The second night I went. Two nights before the riot. She handed him something — money perhaps. He left shortly after. He never returned I think. She dedicated one of her songs — Silver Dagger — to a 'special survivor' she said. That I know."

Again she looked at him with a treasured fondness. "So, 'till we're together again."

"Not 'till, when. All good films have a fan club."

## SIXTEEN

Luis Morales and the ghostly Fabio Luchese met in a hotel suite in the Omni Los Angeles at California Plaza. In short order they looked at a large video screen that featured a film taken in a cordoned area of an upper floor suite at L'Ermitage that contained a small pool. Luis had seen the now dated film before, Fabio had not. A vivid photographic ocean skyline



surrounded the pool. Colourful birds flitted about the many potted palms. A supervisor of guest services at L'Ermitage who had his family threatened had been outfitted with a spy cam and filmed several venues in the hotel. One set that gave Fabio pause featured Ann Able standing by the pool with her back to the camera, suggestively nude but for a halter top, as an unknown artist touched up what looked like pictographs on sheer dancer's tights. Alejandra sat on the opposite side in a bikini looking at the work with a judicious expression. A watchful Ken stood nearby. Luis was then more than a little peeved and determined the world must know of his anger.

“Can you believe this shit?”

Fabio added a footnote. “You know the tracings parody the early sacrificial rite of the Five Hundred that brought forth the Aztec deities your family, your ancestors honour.”

“The big flier...what to do with a whore running the store.”

“When they learn her strategy they'll not be amused. It must be done soon, as we've agreed: pictures of the head at the next meeting with an Aztec serpent garrotte. You must talk again to the supervisor. He will have an indebted friend or two.”

“Better have, the cunt.”

“But soon.” After a further regard of the scene Fabio said, “Play the sound track again for this last section. Beginning with Alejandra's words.

*ALEJANDRA: The intaglio tracings will rally the mujeres. And your beauty will energize los hombres.*

*TARA: I hope you've backed the right horse.*

*ALEJANDRA: You must mean Puma. Who transforms the dark. The being you summon.*

*TARA: God willing*

*ALEJANDRA (bemused): What does the silent Ken think. Do we not have a winner?*

*KEN (smiling): In all categories.*

“In your dreams,” Luis exclaimed. “Kensy pretends he’s a battle cruiser. The big dumb dressup.”

Fabio studiously resumed.

“She’s no fool. The stave he carries is a clever signaling device — also a weapon. Blade and gun. The blade can also reflect and generate accent light transmission — dot spectral codes. Some pertinent field messages are not trusted to electronic means. I have one. Useful in sunny climates.” He paused for emphasis. “Ken is Plombiers’ sitter during the filming. The planning must be immaculate.”

Luis nodded. “The ‘head’ for sure. I’ll act as fucking Huitzilopochtli myself.”

Fabio was apathetic. “Keep it sub rosa. The remainder routinely weight-dumped.”

“Still can’t believe she’s here, the big ‘pudenda’. Came out of nowhere.”

Fabio was a moment assessing Luis’ self-conscious comment. Where had the moron been? Was he unaware of her ongoing dealings with the Vigilantes — those citizens who were fed up with both the police and the army? Already, she had groups that worked to consolidate some families,

make them indebted to her. Finally he said, apathetically, “I’d also consider removing her lead in the film. She could be a rallying point. The showcase image.”

“A fuckin’ A.”

“The film is a liability all round. The publicity it will generate will abet the multi-culture juggernaut — the social anarchists, Western hate mongers, the right’s nazis. The crybaby generation. Something *you* must thwart.”

“A fuckin’ A.”

Again Fabio looked down. The crude, frequently witless, loud mouth Luis was not a windfall. Would the prodigious Alejandra Belmonte, Luis’s rarified second cousin, the one with the MBA, who learned her craft in the American business scrabble, not be a consideration? Installing a base for herself in LA a measure of her acumen and resolve, her ‘cojones’? He would discuss the matter with his captains. Luis would be a while planning the abduction. Perhaps an intervening meeting and some protracted bargaining...the more he thought of the possibility, the more the prospect suggested itself. Yet he was not entirely at ease. Not while contemplating the ‘broad option’ as it was called — for perhaps the first time in his life. But recent events had come to a head, issues of incompetence that seemed endemic! The list here was intimidatingly long. As he regarded the too often inept Luis he mentally subsumed the salient blunders.

First off, the matter of the ‘outsiders’— those IRA goons who had stolen a mafia cache in the Nefer club vault in Vancouver! Luis had fingered Ryan Dyck, but not learned how he might have known of the cache. Fabio suspected Dyck was a lucky pry and that one of Luis’s own soldiers colluded with the IRA heavies. As disagreeable was the suspicion that



some of the IRA yardbirds were working with a terrorist cell, Dyck himself moonlighting as a pimp for the maniacs who, in turn, glamorized jihad on their blogs. What puzzled was Ryan Dyck's connection to such a resourceful IRA group — he little more than a glorified pimp after all.

And then! The dizzying mind numbing blunder! Fabio still had trouble

believing it. To whack the *wrong* pry, not the Dyck-head but some hoodoo with a hummingbird tattoo...how could he trust Luis with the abduction of Alejandra? He was all but convinced he mustn't. He had wanted to question Dyck. Luis's team was either badly briefed, bungled the abduction, or served another group — the IRA group Dyck may have consorted with, the indelible suspicion. Looking again at the new 'lady' capo in the video he felt a desire he'd not known for some time. Moreover, the loose ends seemed endless then — the drifter Adam Sally was still at large, the wino who apparently saw Ryan with the safe cracking tools in a van. He told a social worker he knew who Ryan sometimes worked with and had made a list of names but didn't trust the police. She told a Staff Sergeant she knew who happened to be one of Fabio's extended-family narcs. It was assumed the wino could identify some of the gang members, having seen Ryan in the East End with them. The wino they had to find. Moreover, the folk singer someone attacked in the club had herself a step-sister who apparently knew Ryan....perhaps it was time to clean up that rank festering herd which could so haplessly 'lose' a mafia cache. All the runners and spielers: human foot and mouth disease.

## SEVENTEEN

Mason had been a long block away when he saw the drifter he believed to be Adam Sally in the alley near the Kit Cat Club off Hastings Street. He brown bagged his camera and hurried along, sometimes moving onto the street to avoid the welter of street bedding from the night before. In his rush he actually did not see the accident, hearing only the ominous thud of metal smacking flesh. A large truck had collided with the fellow he believed to be Adam Sally. The speed with which the vehicle sped away keened the recognition and convulsive disbelief. A couple of haggard street folk were it seemed the only witnesses, one of whom leaned unsteadily over the body when Mason approached...by then he had called 911 on his cell. To his astonishment one of the mendicants, a wino he thought, began going through Adam's clothes.

“Hey you, for god's sake.”

The man looked up startled and staggered off, dropping something on the way. The side of Adam's head bled profusely, his shoulder a sticky hodgepodge of protruding bones. The chest too was badly contused. Mason could hear a siren a block or two away. He could do very little. It was then he noted the small paper packet the wino had dropped. Mason looked about for the wino but could not see him among the gathering throng. As he knelt to assess the injured man he picked up the packet. Dog-eared pages held together by an elastic band. Absently he placed it under his camera bag as he checked for vital signs though he had no expertise in such matters. He could not tell if Adam breathed nor could he find a pulse. Two constables approached. He said he didn't see the collision. And was too far away to get a license plate. A large truck left the scene in a hurry he said, a crew cab. An ambulance would be there soon he was told. He stood back as the officers assessed the victim, their expressions uniformly grim. The gathering gawkers, mostly bleary eyed street folk,

were being restrained by one officer. “He had a curse on him,” one derelict said looking at Mason. It took Mason a moment to realize the derelict hadn’t meant him.

The ambulance arrived. Two paramedics quickly assessed the man, placed an oxygen mask and moved him into the ambulance, which quickly sped off sirens screaming. The police began canvassing the onlookers. He gave his name and his housekeeping hotel address. Did he know the man? No, he didn’t think so, his voice then alien to his own. He was free to go but would be contacted later. It was only then he realized he retained the packet the wino — the putative Adam Sally — had dropped. Which he wasn’t ready to relinquish just then. The perplexity really only asserted itself when he was back in his room and set the packet down on the lone spare table. Was this what the wino sought or just happened to notice? A mystifying find now. He undid the elastic to find a set of tightly folded pages, each containing writing in a small uneven hand. He began to read — lower case words in mainly unpunctuated sentences that would score him the rest of his life. Words, in their way, of a like-minded romantic, another intent ‘immaterialist’, the word he chanced on then. But that was only the beginning. Someone had given Adam some advice, in a kindly and optimistic tone. Words to treasure in a nether world. Words none other than Deirdre Corr had bestowed on Adam Sally! One paragraph ended: *Deirdre the Beatific*. One of the few times Adam capitalized his words. Hardly something to prompt a murder. Yet the hit and run looked decidedly deliberate. If you can’t know or find something, or want something kept secret....kill the custodian? The needling inference.

If it took him a very long minute to assimilate the ominous treasure before him, he was soon reading the lines with the gravity of a conspiracy theorist. Lines meandering, fraught, full of ghastly import...words that would not let up...words being the sole consolation left?



*said she you mustn't leave your music you mustn't i'll buy you another magic flute her words it's a pitiful thing when ears are shut to the dulcet spheres let your heart be your guide your mother will only rest when you do has this ineffable She the wondrous Deirdre ever lost the optimism she exudes was the IRA never a force in her life never a hex the four names each an Apollyon can music mask such troubles cast it aside like her memory of my humble time in the first band how sweet-tempered her recollection of it was she then unaware of the drugs the sluggard's transport to 'dulcet spheres' how one swims in a desert*

As he read, Mason was astonished to learn that the haunted Adam had likely known Deirdre from an early age, that they shared a love of music and an early misfortune — something to do with the IRA. The resort to this journal — to absolve the later 'sorrows'. A reference to Synge's Deirdre with her lover Naisi, Adam perhaps, and the Seven Years of mythic legend? Given their years together, a time frame that might fit. Who then might fearsome Conchubor, the fell kingpin in the play, have been? Poignantly — for him — the misfortune he could only guess at.

*the discovery of oneself a sorry recognition the ever never past its ever returning asteroids the frosty stony lads who should not be so invisible asteroid Jack Owen now Omar al-Rashid and his icy tail Ryan Dyck but who to inform not the hovering sergeant O'Doul how did he find me this new Omar this modern Conchubor this demon Balor in human form who may be the one who tunnelled into the Nefer money mine the money bags I spy in the truck in the lane the Stanley Cup riot a foil and spur to the heist? dark matter Conchubor et al escape but not not the Fair She so lost in the ruin rumour of a confrontation with Conchubor and a knife or was it iceman Ryan the rumour to panic rumour Cloud Conchubor has come but not claimed her nor Naisi nor brother to Naisi Conchubor et al hunting for me the 'ever never' I know the names cravenly tell a social worker I know no means to flee forgive me Deirdre the sorrows continue names that dock the heart including busy sergeant O'Doul who I spy one day quickly furtively taking an envelope from Conchubor our contemporary 'cloud' the dulcet spheres long since departed names to seal one's fate Jack Owen the maimer of hope*

*and trust Ryan Dyck Owen's icy pimp for the icy jihadis and the three others the late IRA bomb boys Teddy Keegan Martin Flynn Kian Brannigan the mafia disconnects O'Doul's scurrying lads all now looking for me all all all*

Mason could barely believe what he read. This Jack, a possible mob captain, likely with Ryan's help, tunneling into the Nefer club's vault? Also, dire Conchubor Jack, with a knife, or Ryan, in a confrontation, with such a knowing witness?... And what of the mirky O'Doul?

He was drawn out of this miasma by a call from an excited Tara. She was in a hurry but needed an answer from him. He initially listened as a stranger, a funk he soon snapped out of. Another of Alejandra's business associates, a Paris based Cervin stocking and sportswear manufacturer, wanted to use 'Ann Able' in an ad campaign for a new style of silk stocking called *Quetzal*. Tara was exuberant. "Alejandra is a pulsar, what can I say — her energy, smarts, contacts — I feel like some atomic wonder myself these days. Please forgive the ardour. In brief, the salespeople here requested a meeting next week. They haven't yet commissioned a photographer but liked the Ceryx ads and wanted to know if you were available." His silence prompted a further comment. "I need a docent, a second-guesser. Can you come? I'll pay your fare. You're the one person I can count on for sturdy advice these days. The film's all but finished — my part anyway. A couple of re-shoots. It's temping, this gig — well the money and rep is tempting. Another means of leaving my domestic rut. Can't be all bad can it. You there?..."

"I'll come," he said after a moment's reflection. "You have a day, a time?"

"Mid morning next Monday — ten o'clock — the proposed meeting. But earlier's great for me. You okay?"

"Shall I wear a wire?" he drolly asked.

“Your eyes and ears are all that’s needed. Especially your eyes. My ears still work well enough. You okay? You sound a bit peaky.”

“A late discovery...sobering stuff.”

“Can we share it?”

“I hope so.”

“Soon, I promise. Had to touch base, see if you could come. Must go. The makeup gal is waiting. Nearly there, the film. Some good moments. Clobbered the big H a week ago. He’s out in the cosmos somewhere. Hubble maybe can see him. Call you again later. Love you.”

When he turned off his cell, the world was unreal as before. Only now he seemed a manifest witness in it. Conchubor with a knife? A silk stocking?

After a protracted flight — a delayed departure — he arrived at the hotel guest suite to find Tara — he still had trouble calling her Ann Able — in a bedroom removing her slacks. He must have looked surprised for she said, with some amusement, “They want to see my legs. They’ve not seen the rushes to Antoine’s film but heard some good things about it from Alejandra. They have seen the Ceryx ads. Glad you’re here. They are too.” He decided against telling Tara of Adam’s diary notes just then, believing her optimism remained relative, contingent.

After backing the slacks on a fauteuil she stood wryly looking at him in a peasant blouse with a Minoan sea motif, leather sandals and plum coloured briefs, her long lithe legs a Fifth Century Greek sculptor’s dream.

“Alejandra has already recommended you by the way. The ad campaign has an Aztec theme. Wonder of wonders. Some of the stockings



have faint Aztec motifs. Inspired by the iridescent Quetzal bird. So Alejandra says.” After studying Mason for a time she added, “You don’t approve of trendy ventures.”

“You won’t find a more dedicated chronicler — photographer.”

This comment freed up the waiting smile. “Lets go see the MAD guys. They’re in the suite just across the hall.”

In an expansive board room, the modern chrome furniture moved to the sides, two sales folk introduced themselves. Maria, a tall vivacious brunette in a chic pant suit, and Vincent, a bald runt with chin strap beard, neatly dressed in a high collared white shirt, dark slacks and loafers. Mason wryly imagined a Tartuffe with a leg fetish. He also noted Tara’s sudden abstraction when she was introduced to him. Indeed, she was a moment fielding a smile.

Someone had set up a large reflector screen in the middle of the room that faced a mural window and ample sunlight filtering through sheer white curtains. Maria led Tara to a spot near the centre of the screen and asked her to turn about. Vincent sat in a chair next to the screen initially studying Tara with the apathy of an iguana Mason thought. Soon however both Maria and Vincent were nodding to one another. Tara offered a faint apologetic shrug. She was not a natural exhibitionist. Mason sensed a flare of irritability, though the specific reason eluded him; Tara — Ann Able — was being affirmed a singular sensation here. Vincent outlined the ad campaign, to extend over a year, and briefly displayed some of the Aztec motifs incorporated in Antoine’s film — then staidly remarked how some of the linear pictographs would be used on some of the stockings, that each frame of the ad would be dramatic, though less apocalyptic than in the film. He indulged a chuckle.

If Tara seemed oddly unmoved Mason was not happy that Vincent

so easily assumed Tara an eager participant. He continued as if concluding a one-sided climate change debate. There were to be two sets of ads, he said — one for America, one for Europe. The European ads would be more arresting, in some the figure nude but for the stockings. People were generally more liberally minded there he nonchalantly added. Then, as facilely, he requested to see Tara's torso. "Just remove the top. A simple confirmation," he said.

"We *should* see your chest," Maria unctuously remarked, "the over all contour." She might have been requesting a stock quotation, Mason thought.

For a moment it seemed Tara had not heard the request then, to Mason's astonishment, mechanically undid the front buttons to her blouse and lowered it to her waist. Maria offered a benevolent smile.

Vincent stood and looked at Tara from a couple of angles then sat down and formed his fingers into a wedge as if convening an inner debate.

"Not a little small?" Tara said with wry amusement.

Vincent immediately brightened after glancing at Maria. "Not at all. Exactly what we want in fact. Lean, trig." After an explosive laugh he added, "Couldn't really imagine any better. Took a minute to appreciate our luck. Please accept our congratulations. The Moon Disc Avenger, a kind of Xochiquetzal — in the flesh!"

"Just how nude is nude?" Tara asked after raising her blouse, her tame amusement on hold. Vincent seemed surprised by the remark and looked to Maria who took up the matter.

"All in good taste I assure you. Our art director is working up the poses. Mainly profiles, using some Aztec murals for the specs — 'tableaux' he calls them. Several ghost silhouettes will act as auras about the central

figure — mainly those she vanquishes in the film. These takes are mainly for the European market as Vincent says. You'll see the array shortly."

"Do I have any editorial say?"

Again Mason stood open mouthed as stolid Vincent looked to Maria to stiffen the entreaty.

"We really don't think you'll find any unworkable. But if you are unsure at this stage best to let us know. We'll be disappointed but understand."

Tara looked to Mason and smiled. "My photographer is a maestro. I'd like his opinion."

Maria promptly said that Mason's input was welcome, and that it was a stellar day for them all. She added that Alejandra had highly recommended Mason for the campaign, and if he was willing?... Mason put on his limp guest smile and nodded. Vincent happily handed out some proposed art sketches and extant blurb copy. They could begin the following week. Tara looked over the sketches with a commendable nod to some, a bemused feint to others. By then everyone was displaying concerted smiles, though Mason imagined Tara putting on a performance, and had not fully restored her blouse. But, as they say, looks can be deceiving.

After Mason discussed some technical matters with Vincent, he returned to Tara's suite to find her standing by a highboy blankly staring at the opposite wall which housed a mural-sized mirror. She had put on an oversize bath robe and seemed unaware he'd entered. She was not moving and appeared lost in thought. Her blouse and shorts lay on the bed. "You okay?" he lamely asked.

"I know him," she woodenly said.



“What?”

She briefly scowled. “Vincent. I know him. Vincent Gebara. He was one of the tux set — the players I saw Ryan with inside a casino. He met guys there. He never introduced me. It seemed obvious they weren’t social pals. They were always a distance away. Yet so convivial, ingratiating, real honest-to-god friends...the Hustler, the name of the casino.” She added, with some chagrin, “One of the things we did when Ryan was flush, in the early days: gamble.” She paused as if to reaffirm her own discovery. “The second time Ryan met Gebara — the guy here — he came away pretending nonchalance. He’s not a great actor. One of Gebara’s chaps had given him something. The URL to a so-called marriage agency. Ryan was hesitant showing me. Medley I think it was called. A business venture Ryan said. A ‘sponsorship trust’ he called it. Straight faced. He would help vet the contacts here. Ha. I had a glimpse of some of the ‘hopefuls’, as he called them. Mainly women, most of them very young — one of the first ‘intimations’.” She paused, as if constraining her anger. “A scam of course. A recruitment drive to find ‘blue-eyed’ sweeties.” A brief sarcastic laugh. “He was on an upper that one day, Ryan, so blithe, congenial. Very charming. No” — she held off his approach — “I’m fine.” Another scowl, then, “I can only guess what happened after. The stories of the missing girls, including your East Enders, were not far off. The kind of coincidence that hangs around. From the bit I saw of one tube, I suspect this ‘Medley’ of women was international. It seems the smarmy invitational approach has legs. The ‘virgins’ available this side of paradise. My rebuke ignited ‘cherry bomb’ Ryan — you with me?...”

“Good god. You can’t go through with this ad thing — you can’t.”

Tara was a moment responding, her voice more assertive when she did.

“I have to. I have to learn more about the swine. They’re all mixed up

— the top gangs all eager to prove their moxie and audacity. Gebara wouldn't have recognized me. We were playing Black Jack some distance away. Ryan got up suddenly, said he'd be back shortly. I saw him suck up to the guy — shake his hand. Ryan was likely still making up his mind about me. I wasn't yet a *trusted* player. He may have glanced my way but didn't try to introduce me. Gebara's focus was entirely on Ryan — his up and coming Johnny Ponce."

"But the others you knew of...the one cop. You would have been a subject, a person of interest, surely. The very guys you wanted to duck..."

But Tara — Ann Able — was awash in her own thoughts. "The more I think of Deirdre the more I suspect Ryan may have had something to do with her death. Yes, I know. A horrible thought." She held up her hand. "Let me finish. I didn't think much of it at the time — that she knew something she wouldn't tell me. She may have known before I did about Ryan's drug dealing — even his awful porno obsession. Canny Roseanne said as much. Stephen sent me an e-mail a while ago — he's discovered some things since — about Ryan's former connections. Including some shank film making. Gebara's name came up. A possible backer. So cool...then that awful street story of the used girls...Stephen again. 'Bragging rights' Stephen calls it. Then there's the story of the guys who broke into the Nefer club vault. A combined effort. Something Ryan would join in. Alejandra's helped out here — yes — she ties into a lot of chatter. She seems well versed on the riot and the break-in — if select on details. Urban Riots, especially with gangland exploits, she's an expert on. Has to be I guess. You may think I'm naive but I trust her. She's her own head honcho. The club *was* robbed that night, and Alejandra believes the riot screened the break-in. Any witnesses who recognized one or more of the robbers would have been summarily dealt with, she says. The Vancouver Sun says the investigating is 'ongoing' — the way you sometimes foil unwell-

come discovery. I did ask her if the money could be Belmonte money. It wouldn't be, she said. Not her bag. She did say Luis was upset. He's currently in a kind of limbo apparently — she has a special smile when alluding to the 'colicky chaps'. No names of course. I know, I know...yet I trust her. I cannot shake the suspicion that one of the cops investigating Ryan in Fresno was on the take, and with that kind of money — well, he'd have gang friends wouldn't he? Alejandra said bent cops were useful, not only to parasites. 'Stay focused on your end game; that will absolve some players, impugn others.' Her late advice to me. Ryan was one of Gebara's hacks. I've got to know more. Alejandra doubts I'm still a target. But who knows."

Mason grimly smiled, sat down shaking his head. "I really think you ought to reconsider — going ahead with this gig."

But Tara was still absorbed in her own narration.

"What you get in the wake of a very messy tragedy. 'Under investigation' — the ongoing excuse. After seeing him today — a client of a client of Alejandra's for crissake. The underworld Cloud. She says she deals with several cartel lieutenants. The respect accorded her seems routine. You may think it odd, very odd, that I should believe, trust her. But I do. She's her own player. She's been candid with me — I know you may think otherwise — but I'm valuable enough to earn my keep. She did warn me — about Gebara. Well, not so much warn as suggest I carefully read whatever contract I signed with him. 'He's clever,' she said, 'but works at arm's length; not a hot dog.' Ryan was indeed mixed up with him. Alejandra knew of the marriage scam. She said she would consult 'the auricles', as she calls her field players, for recent activity. And now with this jihadi stuff...which I think Ryan was into before he took off. Drug money funds a lot of creeps. I can't help thinking some PC stuff is also involved — the Islamist apologists. You can finger Islamic goons really only after they



go berserk or self-detonate. And then they're mad not Islamic." After a shrug, she added, "Sorry, that's how I feel. And I want to learn more. I must."

Mason barely nodded. He was aghast. "But if he did recognize you...you surely can't go ahead with this particular campaign."

"If I refuse he may get suspicious. I can hardly invoke modesty, propriety, given the film I've been working in. Given the teaser stuff they want."

Mason looked away. "You did pander to the louse."

"The way you finger a nit."

Mason scowled. "Oh come on — he's obviously bad news all round."

"No, I've got to try, to find out more. Find out if, how he worked the awful stuff Ryan fancied, traded in. What more there may be to it. Alejandra is as interested. A guy like that won't bother with street stuff unless there's an additional take somewhere. And what about those missing girls in your East End? Some apparently made their way South. Alejandra keeps an eye...she sees him from time to time...she's not held back so far. Yes. I know, you think that's a trust misplaced, but she's not a cynic. A realist not a cynic. You think I'm treading on eggshells here but I've got to try. I've gone this far."

After this lengthy declamation she sat down beside him, crossed her legs and studied him.

"I am listening," he said, trying to minimize a grimace.

"I have to learn more. I just have to. You can't leave in the middle of a — a siege, almost a bloody crusade. I know what you're thinking. The 'stand alone' babe. Well, I've got in touch with a private investigator. A

retired detective. Yes. Alejandra approves. ‘Another perspective is always useful,’ she said. You’ll meet him shortly I hope. I trust you will help — keep an eye out, on and off the set. Yes? You said, in so many words, you hoped to remain part of my, our life — no caveats. Alejandra also approves by the way — of you.”

Mason knew all too well by then when Tara was determined, resolved. His knowledge of Adam’s notes also steeled his resolve.

“Providence willing.”

“A mutual undertaking?”

*“Mutatis mutandis.”*

“Is that the phrase?”

“It’ll do. Things changed that have to be — and explained.” Looking at her as she headed toward her bathroom he added, “I’ve got a sorry story of my own to tell. Well, from another. Some things I recently came across. Things you should know. Now.”

“In the East End?”

Mason nodded.

Tara grimaced. “After a shower we’ll talk.”

By then she had opened the etched shower door and turned on the water. He was about to ask her to turn off the water when, noting his expression, she did just that. He said, “You better sit down — for a bit. I’ve something you should, must know about. At this time.”

Half an hour later they sat opposite one another in the alcove off the bedroom that faced her ensuite. She toyed with the ties to her bath robe. Looking off she said in a near whisper. “No real turning back is

there?”

It took him awhile to say, “No.”

“You never met Adam Sally?”

“I saw him about. His death — he was DOA at emergency — was a blow. On a bruise.”

“You want to stay?”

“Very much.”

“Let’s shower together.”

Wryly studying him she removed the bath robe and again turned on the shower. “My inspector general. Love you. My siege engine. The laughter soon abated in the rush of water.

Later, on the bed, as his gaze strayed to the expansive bed sit and bathroom, he noted again the many ornate glass screens and dividers. “Alejandra’s likes reflections.” Nestling on his chest she added, “The large ones are bullet proof apparently. She leaves little to chance.”

“Not a great consolation.”

“My reliable pessimist.”

“I think you have a mob gene.”

“Tell me.”

## EIGHTEEN

Luis Morales blankly looked at Fabio Luchese. It took a while for the words to sink in.



“What social worker? We ran over the other shit — the rummy.”

“The list, the names he mentioned to the social worker.”

Again Louis looked as if he faced a life sentence for a crime he hadn’t committed. Fabio continued as if talking to a third party.

“As we mentioned earlier — our source in the investigative unit — a social worker talked to him after the fire. She said he — the ‘rummy’ — had seen the people involved in the break in. People who’d left in a dark blue van. Some he knew. Gang members. He made a list.”

Luis’s mazy confusion prompted Fabio to state the essential points again, as much to absolve his growing loathing for the troll before him. “The ‘rummy’ — a vagrant who lived solo but saw the team coming from the club. They had two large bags. Carryalls. He claimed to know some of them. He had a list he said. But would talk only to an organized crime unit detective.”

“So? He’s caput.”

“But not the list.”

By then Louis was fit to be tied. “Jees, what fuckin’ list? We killed the Dyck prick and the goddam rummy. What the fuck else?”

Fabio dourly smiled, debating how much this moron, this *pasticcione* ought to be told. The one simple operation he had compromised by not getting the packet, the list of persons active in the robbery. Likely former IRA members, Fabio thought now, who worked with Jack Owen, whom Luis had consorted or connived with on earlier jobs before he became the radicalized Omar al-Rashid. Luis would want to stiff that past connection. Fabio also now suspected the insular Omar had intercepted the arms’ shipment — Luis’s moonlighting family again — and that Omar was the

brains behind the tunnelling into the Nefer club's vault and stealing the mafia cache that *happened* to be there. Ryan, being the area feeder, may have targeted the vault. Fabio still hadn't worked out who knew of the cache beside Luis and his lead lieutenants. It was the vagrant's likely knowledge of former IRA members — names, possible whereabouts — what he claimed to have. The list. One could finger a snitch through the gang members.

“It's a matter of some importance. We'll talk about it later. The vagrant was not all he seemed to be.”

“It's this fuckin' film...like a fuckin' spider.”

Fabio adopted a tolerant smile. He had decided that Luis was a grave liability, hardly one to deal with Luis's adroit younger cousin Alejandra. Her abduction was ‘put on hold’. Indeed, Fabio had made a discreet overture to her himself. As for Ryan Dyck, he had wanted to question not kill him. Fabio now believed Luis only sought to recover the money, rescind the embarrassment. Not only did Ryan Dyck escape with a share of the money, but a stray and likely innocent bystander was killed, the body dumped in a garbage container, what operational sluggards do to hide, erase a fiasco. Fortunately for Luis, a city outside workers' strike was ongoing at the time, and the body not discovered for several weeks. Fabio had subsequently learned via his police informant that a unique gold coin was found in a coat near the dead man — a coin extraneous to the cache money. The swank coat likely belonged to Ryan Dyck, the coin a further engaging puzzle. He had the wry suspicion that Alejandra would sort out what was going on — sooner than later. Luis was history. A ghost.

## NINETEEN

It was with some diffidence that Helene withdrew the second family album from the highboy, the memories it evoked still raw and, in their way, unforgiving. But her pleasure in sharing the first pictures with Mariana made it difficult to slight or ignore the second set. It would be an adventure, she decided, going over the trying events it earmarked with this observant yet gracious witness. Perhaps some of the forbearance, the equanimity imparted in perusing the first would rub off here.

“She is beautiful. And with such talent. It seems so improbable—what happened.”

They looked at the program photo of Deirdre Corr. Helene had told Mariana of Mason’s esteem for her singing. “He was as much in awe of her as enamoured I think. He went to several of her performances, including her last — the night of the riot. Sadly, the rioters intervened. Being injured as she was is still an awful puzzle. A subject Mason’s not expansive on.”

“I can only imagine how he must feel. You say he’s better now, at least physically.”

“Well, for the most part.” Helene managed a defensive smile. She hadn’t told Mariana that Mason’s hearing was impaired, or that the current diagnosis was not optimistic. The tough part was that it was an inherited condition, his injuries in the club not germane to its onset. The prognosis was that he could be mainly deaf by middle age. He explained his new hearing aid by saying he wanted Tara to know he wasn’t becoming less attentive to her words. A bit suave, Helene thought. He was thinking of Deirdre Corr’s CDs — surely.

Mariana pointed to another picture. “And that must be Tara Quinn.



She does look a little like Deirdre — well, an athletic Deirdre. They make an arresting couple she and Mason. Are they still seeing one another?”

“I don’t think so. Well, not regularly. Her career’s taken off since the release of Moon Disc. She’s also in demand as a top model I understand. She loves travel apparently. She now uses a professional name — Ann Able.

Suits her I think.”

“Were you optimistic for a time — seeing them together?”

Again the defensive smile. “Mason has a pensive streak. I’m not sure. Tara’s an extrovert I think. At heart. Some unfinished business at any rate — mainly on her part I gather. Mason’s not spoken of her for a while. Since he returned. So I guess they may have parted. Amicably I’m sure.”

“He does look a little down — in some pictures on this one page. Ever thoughtful, as you’ve said. Easily understood now.”

“I do ask for pictures. He usually obliges. Some here he took in a welfare shelter. The one who died — in a car accident — he was close to. Deirdre’s injury took its toll, of course, but I think there was something else bothering him. He never let on. He’s always caring and attentive when he visits. It may be, could be an act for my benefit — I don’t know. Your children seem more complex as you age. A matter of perception — simple worry I guess. Your mother must have been exemplary.”

“My mother always seemed a saint. To do all she did.” Mariana indulged a rare grin. “Can you imagine — pregnant for nine years!”

“Oh my word! Nine?”

After a light smile Marianna added, “Thirteen children.”

Helene fondly gasped.

“And guess who’s the thirteenth? One of those things...”

Helene’s prompt surprise gave way to a heart felt hug and smile. “Please forgive me for being so grateful.”

Mariana happily turned a page.

“This is an earlier photo? Relatives?”

“No. It fell out from an earlier page — in the other album. I should replace it. It’s from his days at UBC. They’re together here. This one is Paul, this one Dirk, this one Ryan. Ryan was the problem one. Drugs and some other issue. Mason never explained. Ryan quit school — university — suddenly. They were together for a short time when Mason began documenting life in the East End of Vancouver. I don’t think he’s mentioned any of them since the riot. At least not to me — no, he did recently say he hadn’t seen Paul for some time. Nor had Dirk, apparently. I think he liked Paul the best. He might be at a retreat Mason thought.”

“They look happy here. They make me think of my brothers. Friends for a camera, often teasing or worse after.”

Wistfully Helene said, “The rest on the page are Paul’s pics of the riot. Mason didn’t have his camera that night. I think they would have confiscated it anyway — at the club. After the picture he stole of Deirdre on an earlier night. He seemed a thoughtful chap, Paul — like Mason. He comes from a religious family Mason said. I met him once. He had a tattoo just below his T-shirt sleeve. A small hummingbird. Can you imagine — beautifully done though. I usually don’t care for tattoos, but Paul’s was, well, endearing. I hadn’t seen anything quite like it.”

“Handsome too — Paul. I see what you mean about he and Ma-

son having a certain something. ‘Mindful’ — how I think of a school friend of mine. You said Mason was briefly outside the club but went back in.”

“The only one of the four apparently. I did learn that the Church boy, Dirk, was involved in the riot. An altercation with a policeman apparently. He is a grandson of one of the patrons of the hospital’s new wing, Dr. R. L. Church. It was an awful evening. They had a good lawyer, the family, of course. I don’t think the boy’s been charged. He’s very contrite I’m told. Mason thinks it’s all show.”

“Was Mason surprised that his friend would get involved?”

“I’m not sure. He was injured and very distressed afterward. He’s better now. He talks about it very little and I don’t want to pry. I just know he hasn’t seen Paul for a while, and I think that puzzles, bothers him. They were the closest I think. Though I know very little. Mason was supposed to attend a rehab centre after he got out of the hospital, but left. As far as I know, he’s resumed living as a street person. He’s compiling a book of photographs — of the street scene in Vancouver’s East End. Quite heart-rending material. He seems very committed these days, I must admit.”

“I hope I get to see it one day — the book.”

“You’re high on my list.”

Mariana turned another page.

“And these are the publicity shots for the film that Tara made. Ann Able in the screen credits.”

“I’m not supposed to mention ‘Tara’ to strangers. Please be advised...it’s to do with the matter I haven’t been told about. Quite a reversal



apparently, the film story — this Aztec deity, can never pronounce her name — turning back the pages of legendary myth. Mason showed me a review of the film in Empire Magazine. It's sure to get people talking. So Mason assures me."

"Have you met her?"

"Yes. Well, some time ago. Long before she met Mason. She was actually one of the last guests I had at Sea Sent. She was simply 'Tara' then. Tara Quinn."

Mariana looked up with surprise and ready anticipation.

"Yes, I know. It's a complicated story. My sister Millie urged me to offer her a stay at Sea Sent — as a kind of refuge or safe haven. Nearly a year ago. Her life in California had become, well, topsy-turvy. Due in part to her liaison with a person that Mason knew — even attended UBC with for a time — the Ryan fellow we saw earlier. Now *he* was a busy lad. In and out of Vancouver like a yo-yo apparently. Some bad things I learned about in due course, from Tara...but try not to dwell on them. Drugs, mainly."

Having begun, Helene felt obliged to expand a bit despite Mason's wish to keep Tara's early story under wraps.

"She was in a state, Tara, when she arrived here. But we got on. Her stay with me was beneficial I think. Then, without warning, she up and suddenly left. I was anxious for a while myself. I heard no more about her until Mason mentioned that he had met her and that she was a player in the Corybant film Moon Disc — and working as a model in some ads that Mason got commissions for. Exclusive apparel. Wonder of wonders. Believe me, I was as surprised as you may be. Mason said she was very grateful — staying with me at Sea Sent. And will visit when she can. He gave

me a very nice thank you note from her. And a large check. Which I have yet to cash.”

“The more I learn about Sea Sent — the more fascinating it becomes.”

“The fellow who caused all the turmoil, first in California, is now a fugitive, yet still a worry. I haven’t seen Tara — Ann Able — since her stay, though I gather she and Mason remain in touch. He was to bring her around some while back, but something intervened. As I said, I suspect something’s far from resolved. He told me not to worry — a dismissive comment that hardly eases one’s anxiety.”

“Do you think it had anything to do with the film?”

“Well, it’s a possibility. Though it was the later ads — especially the stocking promotion that seemed to be a concern. Again, as I’ve said, I’m only guessing, but Mason was more defensive then...his ready assurances that everything was okay.”

“And these are some of the ads?”

“Tear sheets I think they’re called.”

“She is a lissome beauty. Legs that go on forever.”

“Yes. ‘Legs out of a Balanchine ballet,’ Mason said. I’ve not seen such a ballet. Mason avidly explores film archives of course. He seemed diffident about showing me. I’m glad he did. I was keen of course. A couple of the stocking ads are revealing — the bold European set. The designs *are* striking. There was a lot going on at the time I think, but he wouldn’t elaborate. We’ll come to some telling prints later on. Prints of a brief holiday they took in Vienna — coffee houses and concert halls. Pictures sometimes reveal traits, peculiarities you hadn’t noticed at the time.”

Mariana laughed. “Your pictures and thoughts are always interesting.

My sainted mother used to say that albums have lives of their own. And never really die. Even strangers take them up she claimed.”

Helene managed an engaging smile.

## TWENTY

The fact that Helene remained unsure of Mason’s liaison with Tara — with Ann Able — was one consequence of a plan whereby the two would continue their investigation in a discreet, indeed, recondite manner, their latest maneuver being the ‘infiltration’ of Mason into an Islamic enclave as a liberal altruist wishing to learn why the West was so ‘distrusted’, as he put it in the letter to the Mosque information director, whose office sponsored lectures on Islam for interested individuals.

It was agreed that Mason should begin in Vancouver, the last joint exploit for both Jack Owen and Ryan Dyck the night of the riot. It was hoped Mason might scrape acquaintance with some dissidents and thus find a thread to the busy Jack Owen and, feasibly, Gebara himself, as well as Deirdre’s fate vis-a-vis Owen the night of the riot. Ann was getting impatient, an impetuosity smitten Mason wished to ease. She had learned little about Ryan’s connection to Vincent Gebara in the interval since the break in. The police investigation remained ‘ongoing’, its report contingent upon finding specific ‘persons of interest’. Alejandra said that the one policeman very likely was an informer. But only to Luis’s side of the family. “He may be looking for other ‘benefactors’ in due course,” she added. “Business as usual.” A tenant Ann Able was beginning to take as gospel.

Thus did a curious Mason come to a Mosque-sponsored instruction



classroom in a thick dark wig Tara had rented for him from a Corybant wardrobe mistress. He had also umbered his face and hands with a brown pigment from the same mistress that hid his birthmark. Tara said he could pass as a jihadi, in a pinch. Especially if he could look “a little pissed off with the material world.” Well, he was in a pinch, to some extent her doing. She was determined to learn what went on between Vincent Gebara and Ryan Dyck and, as she put it, “The sometime jihadi Ryan was impressed with — the thug he knew as Jack Owen. A possible one-time IRA provisional whom he called ‘awesome’ more than once. A word he thought still had meaning. At the time I just thought he was touching base with a few swank friends. Now, with Adam’s list...and seeing this Vincent ogre...you don’t mind doing some digging...women aren’t that welcome...”

She hadn’t finished the sentence. No point in flogging a dead horse. Her own resolve was she said ‘jihadi firm’. His enrollment in the introductory class was a first step, one way of hearing about and possibly seeking out favored jihadis like Jack Owen. Tara had engaged the private investigator to determine her jeopardy from a foot-loose Ryan if and when Ryan turned up again in LA. The investigator also introduced her to an FBI agent whose team worked in tandem with the DEA in fraud and racketeering. Yes, Ryan Dyck was a ‘person of interest’ in ‘several investigations’. The agent seemed grateful for Tara’s early experience with Ryan but would not detail the agency’s current interest in him. The private investigator assured her that he and the agent kept in touch. They both welcomed Mason’s participation, and agreed he should begin in Vancouver, where street comment about the break in would still be ‘skinny’ — readily discernible ‘on the street and in busy cafés and bars’. Tara had told Alejandra of her private detective’s connection with a friend in the FBI and Mason’s coming attendance in a Mosque sponsored introduction to Islam. “He should not be seen taking pictures,” Alejandra said with a smile.

When Ann broached the subject of the detective's liaison with the FBI agent, Alejandra remarked that conscientious agents were a help in identifying wildcard players. She added, with a smile, "Over time *viable* business becomes eclectic, not ruinous. They have limited sanction the FBI — particularly now with the numbers of undocumented Mexican workers the current American government conceives as residents. In point of fact, I meet with two FBI agents about once a month. We compare notes. Your forthcoming experiences will be instructive all round." Ann said later to Mason, "Talk about complexity — convolution — involution! The proficient swimmers you hang on to, yes?" Said a pensive Mason, "Never was a good swimmer." Ann smiled. "You're doing okay."

As fate would have it, Mason was already considering an Islam education class for Westerners — before the current undertaking. "What in the world prompted that?" was Ann's initial surprised response. His answer was simple enough. "One of the fellows I photographed in Vancouver's East End was an elderly Muslim who'd been ditched by his family. A younger brother wanted another wife and asked him to move out. He told me he and his brother never got on. He was a gentle soul. And very frail. Sometimes delusional. He wouldn't go to a walk-in clinic. They would only 'put him away' he said. I don't remember anyone looking for him. Yet someone must have wanted him out of the way. As I understand it, Muslims usually look after their own — the much touted family of the Ummah. His one possession was his Qur'an. He read some passages to me. In Arabic. He didn't translate. They sounded quite poetic. The lyrical verses were obviously precious to him. Afterward he said to me in English, 'Life allows many lives; mine's taken an odd path'. Oh yes, he also said about the Hadith — a traditional source of guidance principles — 'It sometimes emends itself'. Something, from a Muslim. I wanted to give him some cash but he refused, with a smile that still haunts. His face was, is, an elegy in itself. I've never photographed one whose equanimity

seemed more timeless, perdurable. A curiosity in our day's sectarian turmoil. I decided I should learn more — as problematic as that might be. I would have told you.” Tara had responded with a kiss. “Righto sailor.”

The belatedly-arrived-at ‘education seminar’ was conducted in the warehouse of a commercial mall in Surrey. The room was nondescript except for pronounced arabesques high on the walls and the edges of some blackboards. He nodded to the handful of participants already seated. All looked, none nodded back. One even scowled or sneered at him. He was one of the few whites and perhaps the only cripple, which he imagined some taking note of. These guys were obviously pissed off. Life in the West had only aggravated their loathing of it. So he surmised. Any one of them could slice his head off with great panache he suspected. Then his conscience told him to lay off. He sat in a back seat and stared at the arabesques. As he waited a list of some current events kept needling him, a list he had been compiling for a while from several websites: the rise of ISIS or ISIL, the collapse of cities like Mosul, Ramadi, Kobani and Palmyra, the destruction of ancient Roman ruins in Palmyra, the extermination of Iraqi Christians and Yazidis, the blithe beheadings of unlucky captives, the swarms of youngsters who yearned to join the butchers, the missing Nigerian girls, the celebrated stoning of a Syrian woman by ISIS, an honour killing that got minimal media attention (upstaged by Western feminists’ ever more fastidious rendering of rape and deafening silence about traditional Islamic misogyny), the brisk Kristallnacht-style pogroms in many European cities coinciding with the widening strictures on free speech, the growing delineation of American ‘infamy’ in the Middle East, and racial resentment in American cities erupting again with sensational animation. A perfunctory list of course. Indeed, reporting itself in North Africa and the Middle East never seemed more hazardous. He thought of the ‘but’ brigade — the excuse mavens, those adept at caviling — also



some American celebrities and their loathing of America, particularly the nature of its ‘middle class’: tacky homes, boring routines, dumb religion, pointless schooling, marital slogging, ignorance of spontaneity and the blessings of feral nature. ‘They paved paradise and put up a parking lot’ — one of the long-standing mantras. He wasn’t sure what ‘paradise’ would look like without the parking lot. Was the concern for living longer, spending an extra year or two in a care home the worry? Or the lack of a ready suicide pill? The unparalleled freedom to live out a natural life hadn’t much wained in America, and things like the providential Polio vaccine allowed even more folks the leisure to robustly sound off. And what about all those many many meticulously made musical instruments, also the acoustic-friendly concert halls and recording studios, techno CDs and DVDs, radio, film and music archives on networks that flourished despite the parking lots? The dreamers were a little shrill. America specialized in honing self-dramatic ravers. The problem is what you do for an encore! A problem some radicals were ardently coping with. Chrissie Hynde of the Pretenders hoped the United States would lose big in Iraq. Emulating a new post on the Breitbart site: ‘Rocker Girl, Mother of Two and ISIS Recruit Wants to Behead Christians with a Blunt Knife.’ As avant-garde as ever, Karl Heinz Stockhausen, the ultramodern composer — one of Mason’s bugbears — called 9-11 the greatest creative act of the modern era. That Australian seven-year-old holding up the head his dad had just sliced off threatened to become routine as shelling peas — decapitation spooking virtual reality and going viral. He knew many if not most of the ‘parking lot’ travesties were attributed to American-Conservative ogres by the gleeful conspiracy wiseacres, the arduously fervid inference-and-association crowd, so safely ensconced in the comparatively comfortable West. The Innuendo Dedicated Brigade. Western swine lined up like bowling pins. The insidious perpetrators. As bad or worse than the Jews. Could the others in this room read his mind — apprehend these ‘seditious’ thoughts,

given the look and contagion of ‘defensiveness’? The instructor, who apologized for being late — a congenial looking chap with rimless glasses, a bushy black beard and a knitted watchman’s cap — immediately launched into a fevered jeremiad that seemed, given the prompt enthusiasm that greeted it, a salient feature of these sessions. It didn’t take long for Mason to suspect he had blundered into the wrong room!

“You all know the facts that don’t make the Washington Post — which many investigative sites world wide have made plain. In brief, Western pikers are scared shitless of us. Of me and you. They know their hegemony is over — their despoliation and corruption of the planet. They distract themselves with texting and video games and films of bedlam and adultery — Mature Entertainment. (This comment prompted some laughter.) American kids who can barely read and write are fat and lazy, sit in awe of their digital Frankensteins. Their mushrooming elders are old, decrepit, their politicians venal opportunists. They haven’t the guts to fight us man to man, so they pretend to patronize us while bombing us at a distance. But our Muslim brothers know better. They continue to support us. They may not say so in public, but they support us. They know we, and we alone, will bring order to the planet. Low birth rates and exponentially growing debt will alone destroy the West. We’re just saving time!”

The applause following this outburst was sustained.

By then Mason feared he was indeed in the wrong room. The words were inimical to ‘a cordial introduction to Islam’ — the blurb that engaged his interest. Indeed, the avid speaker was well and truly torqued, his contempt manifest as he reiterated some details from a last lecture that he wanted to reiterate this day. Parenthetically, the ‘brazen Western dissimulations’: The telltale sulfidated steel from WTC 7, which housed American intelligence and law enforcement agencies — ‘Gulianai’s bunker’ — being covertly destroyed, thus limiting any sturdy investigation; the

paucity of plane wreckage in the Pentagon remains; the inability of Mohammed Atta et al being able to pilot jet planes into buildings without flight guidance, buildings moreover, that collapsed like accordions by ostensible thermite explosions, the official explanations for which incited many doubters; the false leg ‘inadvertently’ missed in the Marathon bombing and the police rehearsal of a terrorist bomb attack on the same day; the inconsistencies and faux testimonials at Columbine and Sandy Hook, both gun lobby bonanzas; a paltry knife that could in no way remove the head of a man. With some chagrin Mason realized that only a person with an exhaustive knowledge of the details — which excluded him — might question the many flagrant assertions. Such a one was too obviously playing truant this day. He was chagrined he was himself so ill-informed about such events, and was convinced he had blundered into the wrong room. This was not the genial introduction mentioned on the site he looked at. Something was terribly amiss. The incendiary speech continued:

“The current slaughter in the Middle-East is being done by America, Britain, France and their surrogates. The abductions and murders — all clever deceptive showcasing, astute fabrication, the Western speciality. Westerners can’t tell the difference between fact and fiction any more. Look at their nightly entertainments — every human bestiality and calamity — as entertainment! Most of it to a fun rock beat. And always more and more ‘realistic’ as their high definition increases and their paltry censorship lapses. Gruesomeness Mandated. Even many American so-called artists work themselves into orgies of hatred and contempt for their fellow Americans.” Everyone in the room kept nodding. Mason did learn, when the atrocities dwindled, that Haraam — the things forbidden in Islam — included interest on most loans, buying investment certificates and insurance, keeping dogs and eating pigs. Apropos the first, American bankers, brokers and their government flunky regulators were historically conniving — pitching whole communities into ruin while the perpetrators gave them-



selves handsome bonuses. A list of Jewish bank executives, investment councillors and brokers followed, a list that seemed infinite. Indeed, the instructor pretended to run out of breath — to more incipient laughter. He then said he would answer questions. Even ones that shadowed Islam in the West. To one question the instructor replied, with some deliberation, that no, slavery was not strictly Haraam, and had its place when a need was apparent. It was the only way some fractious ethnic groups might be tolerated. This assessment prompted more laughter. Another lad asked about Bacha Bazi, a type of engagement Mason did not know about — sex with young hairless boys who were considered girls — which too was not Haraam, the ‘temporary’ marriage being matter-of-factly excused. Mason was also reminded, that women often needed firm handling to keep them sane, keep the bellyaching to a minimum. No mention of specialty surgery. Then the recent example of Naomi Klein came up — her contention that runaway Western capitalism was the day’s chief earthly menace. The instructor smiled. “Western feminists are sometimes our greatest allies. Western Human Rights tribunals are often made up of women. We sue the rare critic and such tribunals usually back us up. Islamophobia is a great ally. The mouse that roars. It’s so obvious they want us to win. They can’t wait for us to win!” More general laughter. A plethora of ostensible facts and statistics followed, the minuteness of the detail such that questioning any one ‘fact’ or ‘number’ must again invoke a large array of particulars which only a person with a near-encyclopedic knowledge of the event or survey might pose — details and insights well beyond Mason’s apprehension — though he would have remained mum here regardless. He was not a crusader. In closing, the instructor said that killing a non-believer was an express ticket to Paradise — a statement that seemed to ease the anticipation in the room. Killing was both the warrior’s honour and the martyr’s sanctification, he said in conclusion. By then Mason wondered if he would get out of the room alive. He was

either dreaming or emphatically in the wrong place! How that should have happened keened his anxiety.

When the instructor finished he wanted the names of the attendees, so he could follow up on their progress. He had mislaid an earlier list but had been encouraged by some entrants' progress in learning Arabic. He would remember their names. Everyone signed. Mason placed a false name and hoped no one would remember him. Some names were English American, some European, some obscure. If he had doubts about the dissolution of Western Civilization, the tales of its dramatic fall were, he knew, the life blood of many Western cynics, some of whom were exceptionally polished in their rapt anticipation. He had read at length more than one eloquent Western execrator, determined chaps with endless allegations of the West's perfidy, a compendium that represented a lifetime of selfless dedication — a further reminder that he may have underestimated the attraction of catalytic drama for a comparatively comfort ridden populace. The instructor looked as if he might approach him as he left. It was touch and go for a few seconds until another 'student' garnered his attention, but not before he had given Mason a cool assessment, a look not at all congruent with his self-assured manner.

On leaving Mason kept an eye out for followers as he returned to his car, which he had parked some distance from the warehouse entrance. The suspicion that he'd stumbled into a recruiting or solidarity-enhancing seminar, a session few knew about, gripped him. Then, with some chagrin he realized the address he'd sought for the 'Basic Introduction to Islam' was across and further down the street, as specified on a roadway marker planted in the narrow boulevard grass. In his haste to find the location he had overlooked the sign.

He detected no one following him as he drove off. At the end of the boulevard he abruptly turned into the opposite mall, parking near a

Kung Fu gym. No car followed him into the adjacent mall and the few pedestrians seemed uninterested in him.

He walked to the specified office only to learn that the seminar had been cancelled that day. Another would be held next week at a different hour and in a room at the other end of the same mall. There had been a mixup that day. A small group of young men, all conventionally dressed, were conversing outside the office. He exchanged what he believed to be genial nods with some and drove away again scanning for followers but could only guess at the passing cars and the few pedestrians. His anxiety remained acute.

He had been inside his East Pender bed sit for less than an hour, trying to assess what he had just witnessed, when a bold knocking on his door startled him. He almost didn't answer it. When he did two large men dressed as construction workers, so he thought, barged in, one grabbing his arm and twisting it behind his back. His feeble cry of "Oh for god sake!" was drowned out by the blunt query, "Who sent you?" repeated several times, each more menacing than the last.

"What are you talking about?"

"Who sent you! Who sent you!"

It was obvious if he didn't provide a suitable answer he was going to get clobbered; the one chap had produced a kind of truncheon.

"I have no idea what you're talking about — sent? — me?"

The truncheon was raised menacingly when a second set of bold knocks resounded on the bed sit's hollow door. The two goons looked at one another quizzically — without resolution it seemed. The knocking resumed. "Tell them to go away," one goon whispered which Mason did only to be answered by: "Police! Open the door!" The two goons were



suddenly on the verge of hysteria.

“I can’t, two guys are about to beat the shit out of me.”

“We’ll break the door down if you don’t open up.” Mason tried to smile; the police chap had obviously heard inventive excuses before. But what the police would want of him — here, now — perplexed as it giddily astonished. The two goons looked frantically about the room. Finding no exit or concealing defensive area they suddenly, brusquely wrenched open the door and fled past two constables, almost knocking one over. The commotion that followed was seismic. The bumped constable caught the leg of the first goon, tripping him down the narrow entrance stairs. A third constable appeared at the bottom and despite her surprise confronted and cautioned the rambunctious fellow. After being slugged by him she managed to bind and cuff him with the help of the second officer. She called on her cell for backup as the first constable, a giant of a man, wrestled the first goon, who was also promptly combative, into submission after a couple of robust slaps. Mason looked on this mêlée as one in the front seat of a horror flick. He almost reached for his Iced Tea.

“Busy place,” the first constable, a heavy pink faced man, said when the goons had been taken off. “They were looking for something?...”

Mason must have appeared like a lost time traveller, an Eastside Rip Van Winkle. “No,” he said limply, “I don’t know.” The gal constable then came into the room, assessed Mason’s dismay, approached and said with some kindness, “Why don’t you sit down and let us look around.” Which Mason promptly did, still dazed by what had just happened and what happenstance brought the police so unexpectedly. He sensed he must be dreaming — again! — but, as before, could find no role for himself in the story. “What something?” he managed to say.

The first constable looked at him with stoic patience. “You took a

packet off the wino who was killed in a hit and run. We have a witness. We would like to see it.”

Immediately the comment brought Mason back to the hear and now. Tara’s comment about a ‘bent cop’ flashed in his mind. As did Adam Sally’s mention of a shady Sergeant O’Doul. What would this policeman want with that list? He sensed the reason could be obvious yet his distrust, suspicion wouldn’t let up. Provisionally he’d left the list with Tara on his last visit. Which she had shown to her detective. Surely that would suffice, given her briefing to him. He spoke up, more forcefully than he intended.

“I don’t remember taking anything. I wondered if I could do something for the injured man. At least one witness searched the man’s pockets before I got there. I remember shouting at him.” This largely impromptu rendering he desperately hoped had some credibility.

The first constable shook his head in unfriendly disbelief. “Just tell us where it is.”

Mason could not bring the constables into focus. A fourth entered the room, whispered something to the large constable, something about someone being held up, then left — someone by the name of O’Doul. Mason was certain he heard the word O’Doul. He shrugged, hiding his dismay. “I felt for the guy. I was concerned for him...I don’t remember picking up anything.”

“You got after one street person for going through the victim’s clothes.”

“That’s so surprising?”

The gal constable looked at him less amiably. “Where did you put it? He saw you pick something up.”

Mason shrugged. “I don’t know what you mean. I can’t remember anyone taking anything. Certainly not me.”

“Where?” The question was razor edged.

Mason was by then nursing his own anger. “So what the hell was that first duo — the guys you sent to read me a citation?”

The three constables exchanged more stark disbelieving looks.

“Just tell us where it is.”

Eventually Mason found himself undergoing a marathon interrogation in a police precinct. In the course of which he told the questioning detective that he had blundered into what might be a jihadi recruiting session at a Mosque-sponsored lecture and wondered if the two chaps who preceded the police had come to interrogate him about how he ended up in such a venue. They wanted to know who had sent him and were resolutely determined to jog his memory. This produced a mere guffaw from the questioning detective. He was not there for ‘comic relief’ he said. Despite all, an encouraging comment Mason thought — the guy knew the theatric device of ‘comic relief’. It was then a female constable entered the room, whispered something to the detective while handing him a note. They conversed. She glanced at the viewing window. Mason thought he heard her say, “He’s here,” and wondered who the ‘he’ was. His anxiety was then acute. He was not yet ready to divulge Adam’s list. Adam’s claim that one mountie was on the take ratified Mason’s suspicion. Adam’s list could implicate — also erase, if lost or destroyed. The not infrequent loss of ‘key evidence’ in investigations a keen reminder. His question then: Who would most benefit from it?

It was some time before Mason’s protracted bewilderment gave the questioners pause. Mason’s effort to document life in the East End



may also have bored them but the reality of the dedication — from his several confiscated camera memory chips, plus his feeling for the Muslim which prompted him to seek out the intro lecture to Islam — peeled away some of the distrust. Though they showed no interest in the two goons who preceded them. “Likely got the wrong address,” one questioner casually said. “A messy neighborhood you stay in. Mismatch alley. They weren’t Jehovah Witnesses.” The comment struck Mason as evasive, blasé, scornful even, adding to his suspicion.

His meagre worldly possessions in the bed sit had been accounted for in their entirety that day. They had thoroughly searched his bed sit, made their own ‘list’. They could hardly believe he lived so. Almost the ‘hand to mouth’ of his subjects. “Can you not tell why a wino’s effects are so important?” he asked them. They listened to this oddly declamatory question in silence. They did learn of his retail advertising work — he kept a diminutive-sized portfolio in his camera bag — and his mother’s past management of a bed and breakfast residence on Crescent Beach, a background fact he was eventually obliged to give them, adding that he spoke to her every week at her care home. He would rent a flat in Kerrisdale when his work in the East End was finished.

He was told to remain in the city. They would contact his mother and be in touch with him again.

When again on his own, taking refuge in a Gastown sidewalk cafe, he wondered when and how this episodic nightmare might end — and what exactly an East End vagrant had told the social worker that might galvanize a policeman so when he learned of it. The fact they had no interest in tracking a possible radical Muslim cell underlined the PC mantra of the era and/or the possibility of a wildcard detective — or detectives. Corrupted cops rarely lacked for sympathizers and sometimes worked as a camorra. He felt he must be discreet for a time. Perhaps if he were to

‘lose’ his cell phone for a while. He would get drunk one night and be picked up as a vagrant. A performance he then felt up to. In his ominous list of names, earnest Adam clearly included the name O’Doul, a cop he though bent. Whose name Mason was certain he heard the one policeman mention. He must continue to honour that fact. Such a rare list, in alien hands could, as he surmised, exempt as well as condemn.

## TWENTY-ONE

Helene looked up with a grateful smile when Mariana entered — to begin the second of that week’s bi-weekly ‘chin fests’. Paula Hauser, the new owner of Sea Scent, had called two days before, wanting to know if Helene knew a Detective Sergeant T. O’Doul, a member of the Deas Island Constabulary. Helene said she didn’t. Paula was managing well these last few months and called less often than she once did to learn the secrets of running an exclusive Bed and Breakfast. But the visit of Sergeant O’Doul had obviously alarmed her and she phoned Helene when he left. She seemed surprised Helene had nothing to tell her. “I don’t think I ever had a policeman call. I never asked my guests what they did for a living. Some volunteered of course, but none mentioned a police matter — that I remember. A few lawyers, of course.” Paula was plainly disappointed, for she spent a while almost accusing Helene of not being upfront about Mason’s activities when she sold Sea Sent. In the course of the conversation Helene learned more than she wanted about Sergeant O’Doul and his interest in Mason. She couldn’t imagine Mason concealing information pertinent to an ongoing investigation. She left a message for Mason to call her.

Helene had yet to tell Mariana of the hit-and-run accident Mason

witnessed. It seemed at the time too speculative and sensational. But a lot had happened since their last talk — including two policewomen visiting her the day after Paula called! She was keen to tell Mariana what she knew this day, the better to vivify her own recollection, also share her wonder and dismay. Mariana was barely settled in an adjacent chair when Helene started in.

“I’ve got a story you’ll find interesting, I think. Mason called me about an incident, a hit-and-run, a while back. One of the down-and-outers he knew was hit by a truck and killed. He thought it might be deliberate. He gave a statement to the police, he said.”

“It must be a worry living as he is.”

“It was sobering, hearing him describe the hit-and-run. He actually knew and liked the man apparently. He was on edge when he called. Of late he’s been calling from a pay phone of all things — he doesn’t want me to phone him on his cell for a while. He did say the police would likely call me. Even come for a visit, to question me about his East End work — of which I know almost nothing — a project he began about the time I sold *Sea Sent*. He said they might want to search my room. With my consent, he advised. He didn’t explain. Fine. Well they came, two female constables. They did search my room. Then they insisted I call Mason — which I did, but had to leave a message. I learned later that same day — from Paula — that two constables, both men, had paid her another visit — with a search warrant, can you believe! I hadn’t told her about the hit-and-run because I didn’t think it involved *Sea Sent*. She was vexed of course.”

“You must have been alarmed. And anxious.”

“Baffled, more like. Particularly why they would want to search *Sea Sent*. It’s very puzzling. And disturbing of course. Mason is not al-



ways candid with me, yet I can't imagine him impeding an investigation or re-visiting Sea Sent. Paula was very upset, to say the least. The police must have had fun going through all the nook and crannies at Sea Sent. Sorry, but the way I designed it, it was rather Victorian — so Mason said. Clutter is clutter after all when it's not wanted, not cherished. Non-prized objects find no niche, I read somewhere. Well, there were plenty of niches at Sea Sent when I left. Indeed, Paula wanted most of the furniture and *objets* — a word Mason fancies. Ha! I have no room here, as you see. And Mason seems chronically footloose these days. I kept some valuable pieces — I've two boxes under my bed. They were careful, the constables, and didn't damage anything here — or there, according to Paula. Not much of a concession to Paula of course. She still thinks I'm hiding something. I know something's bothering Mason, but he's keeping it to himself. One of those things. I'm sure it will work out."

Mariana smiled. "Your albums they looked at?"

"Not for long. They were looking for something else, I think. What — I can only imagine. I assured them Mason hadn't visited me for over a fortnight — though he does call regularly. My retirement home life rather bored them, the constables, I think. Paula also said they went through her registry thoroughly. I've kept no records myself of course."

Helene had no sooner said this when the floor supervisor entered the room.

"Helene, another policewoman would like to see you. She has some further questions. I think you should be alone."

Helene smiled. "Of course show her in. Dear Mariana is just leaving."

## TWENTY-TWO

Mason was upset the police had not asked or mentioned anything about his safety, given the bruisers they took into custody. Indeed, Mason heard no more about them during a follow-up visit to his bed-sit. “Likely nothing to do with you,” the one constable reiterated. He must have looked shocked for the constable brusquely added that such intrusions were commonplace in that neighborhood. “They got a wrong address. You choose to live here, expect a few rowdies. They’ve been remanded — assaulting a police officer. Actually two. You want to charge them, see a lawyer. They were leaving when we arrived.”

If Mason was miffed, he did his best to keep it to himself. They looked about his room again and took some fingerprints from the door, the lone window sill, table, the two chairs, wash basin and toilet. They left without comment, other than demanding he not leave the area.

“For how long?”

“We’ll let you know.”

He did return to the industrial mall in Surrey for the ‘friendly’ Introduction to the Path of Islam — in a new physical guise: died brown hair cut short, concealing makeup on his birthmark, and thick non-prescription glasses which made him look near sighted. Easy to assemble and easy to maintain. In his retail advertising work he had altered the makeup on several models, men and women. Ann, who’d worked with several makeup artists herself by then, vetted the finished look.

The reading list he was given contained a book he’d already read. *A Brief Guide to Islam* by Paul Grieve, a chap who believed Islam a ‘peaceful’ religion — by and large. The feature lecture, from a kindly elderly gent, dwelled on the ‘thoughtful and heedful nature of Islam’ and its ‘grow-

ing appeal to millions of caring people'. Questions should be written out and submitted at the end — to be answered at the next lecture. No names need append the questions. Islam did not focus on individuals only shared problems. To himself Mason woodenly mused, 'Any executed non-believer will serve as a Heaven-Gate pass.'

He remained alarmed by the police constables' glib dismissal of his concern and fear. The two thugs who initially attacked him were in no doubt about his identity. Someone must have watched him return to his bed sit. Tara's early comment about a bent copper and Adam's depressing narrative kept him head up, his eye ever peeled when he ventured beyond his room. His anxiety lingered when he got through another day without incident. He was still a police 'person of interest' of course, which a terrorist group might not want to abduct — his one consolation. He would find a new house keeping room in due course.

After a close inspection of the neighborhood one afternoon, he called Tara from a pay phone — the now successful, ever elegant Ann Able. He told her at length about his witness to a jihadi diatribe, his near miss with a couple of thugs, and his ongoing truck with police — which must puzzle observant jihadis, limited their interest, he hoped. He then asked about her own private investigator. Fine she said, then promptly wanted to know if he was okay and could he get away. He couldn't right then. She was silent for a time, then said she missed him and urged him to try to join her. "LA's a no-man's land. If you're not a celebrity here you're invisible."

"And if you are one?" he asked.

With some amusement she replied, "I've a studio body guard — two currently who alternate in business hours. Cell ready after. They intimidate hustlers, stringers and diverse oglers." A light chuckle followed this



comment. “They also look for sly prowlers of course. One of the givens. Alejandra’s been a help. A mine of information, actually. Her work with Antoine a further plus.” She added, “I miss my wrangler.” She paused for a moment, then said with a dry laugh, “Lots of cowboys here but few complicit ‘caballeros’ — a word I’ve latched onto.”

After a moment, Mason dryly said, “How about a ‘verray parfit gentil knight’. Squire class.

“He’ll do. Do I know him?”

“One of Chaucer’s ‘complicits’”

“Oh. Who’s Chaucer? Oh. Him. What am I again?”

“The Wife of Bath. She holds her own among the jawing pilgrims.”

“Is she good in bed.”

“The best.”

“Do come.”

When the amusement abated Mason learned that the private detective Ann hired had uncovered leads on some drug dealers and S&M groupies who knew Ryan with but nothing current. Yes, she had been discrete and had kept Adam’s notes safe — in an airline luggage compartment. It was agreed Adam’s notes should be kept close until they learned more. Ann’s detective agreed. ‘We’re on a learning curve,’ he told Ann. Mason was by then all but convinced he was the target of a bent mountie. He almost lost his voice saying how lonely he felt on his own, yet told her not to call him on his cell. It’s now a police listening station, he said. For how long he didn’t know. He would call her at least twice a week from a call box.

Two days later he called her again — out of desperation. He had to talk to someone sane. “I was called in to identify a body...sorry, this is going to take a while.”

“I’m listening. Really listening.”

He had to take a breath before beginning.

“It all began when Dirk Church — a guy I told you about — was called in to identify some people seen on one of the tapes the police were using to identify rioters; someone had photographed us standing outside the Nefer Club. The hybrid offence charge he faced after the riot was stayed, by the way. An investigating sergeant— not named O’Doul — wanted Dirk to confirm the identity of the persons he was seen with the night of the riot. Dirk identified me and Paul Landers, referring to Paul as ‘Humming Bird’, our choice name, which eventually cued the sergeant to a missing person bulletin. I can’t remember where Ryan was at the time, but he wasn’t with us when the video was taken. Dirk was later asked to identify a body...what was left of it. Paul...Paul Landers...had been murdered. Dirk said I would appreciate being notified...hence the call to me to answer more questions and affirm Paul’s identity. The family hadn’t yet been informed. Seems there was some doubt at first. No doubt now.”

“Oh god.”

“The decent fellow...”

Tara too was distraught and keen to make some sense of the deed. “Did you learn anything — how it might have happened?”

“Nothing. Nothing at all. Nothing.”

“So very sorry.”

A solemn silence ensued.

Mason's 'requiem' words that followed were a testament to a decent, generous, forbearing individual. If he managed to hide the tears, he admitted he could not remember being so tired, bereft, whipped. "No sinew left." She, in turn, urged him to join her. "You need to get away." After a pause she added, "Miss the parallel parking." He plaintively sighed, promised to call again soon, and assured her he was working on a 'disappearing act'. "The 'boy scouts' insist I hang around of course, for their curtain calls." Her amused laughter followed, ending with, "Only the finest of players...!"

On returning to his room he glanced in his washstand mirror and decided he might resemble a fugitive, one suspected of nefarious activity. His interrogation about Paul Landers had lasted in stages for the better part of an afternoon! It was his lassitude and frequent bathetic responses to their insinuations, he imagined, that gave his belligerent questioners pause: "No, we didn't call him hummingbird because he was a territorial nit." They had wanted to know if Paul ever argued with Ryan over Ryan's expanding drug territory. Mason couldn't remember actually looking at any of them. He must have sat there like a ghost, a revenant. The apparent facts made no sense. He did remember some of the pauses in the interview, as someone came in from outside to cue the questioners. Was he in tears? Perhaps. He knew he had trouble breathing. Again he was told to not leave the area. He did remember plaintively asking, "Where would I go?..." A question none of the questioners took up. The sight of Paul's savaged remains would haunt him the rest of his life. Only Deirdre's ongoing sorry state compared.

He phoned Tara a day later from a discrete phone booth in a busy hotel lobby hoping against hope she might be in — a sane ready confidant he needed then — but was caught off guard by the frantic pitch of her voice! "Oh Mason, oh god! Something else has come up. I still can't believe it



— a Wanted poster I saw of Roseanne — Roseanne Hartley. I must have mentioned her. A school friend. No?”

“The name I remember. Not much else. Sorry.”

“It was a shock. Seeing the poster. I called Millie, who’s trying to get in touch with Roseanne’s mother. She was an item, Roseanne, always on the go. The ‘express princess’, Millie used to say. She and her mother were close I remember. Who else would put up such a poster? It’s just so — unreal. Sorry. One of those freaky shocks. Anything more on Paul?”

“No. Nothing new. I’m still a ‘person of interest’ of course. The dour curiosity.”

“Oh christ. We seem a haunted couple you and me. The bent cop, Paul, and now this. You’d be better off here. I would be. Particularly now.”

“I called, wanting to hear your voice. Someone sane. Tell me about Roseanne.”

“This may sound self-dramatic...I’ll try to keep it brief...I know you’re hurting. But it’s something that won’t let up. A school mate who knew Ryan — Roseanne Hartley — actually warned me about him. Well, I met her here a few days ago. She was auditioning for a film, a remake of Oscar Wilde’s *Salomé*, she said. I wanted to say, yes dear, ISIL badly needs a night out. I didn’t of course, and I’ve since learned there is no such film in production here. Wonder of wonders. Would she even know who Oscar Wilde was? But seeing, meeting her was an agreeable surprise. She was a smart kid, a good mimic and talented dancer I recall — hip hop, salsa — a competition regular. She looked great. Very

yummy. She was in a hurry — we agreed to meet later at a café in Westchester. She never turned up. She didn't leave me a contact number. I kind of shrugged it off, she could be an impromptu act, but then this missing poster turns up — yesterday — of the same Roseanne! Then I remembered some of the backgrounds in one of Ryan's tubes — I'm sure of it — Middle Eastern, the Levant. This will sound farfetched, but I never thought of it until now — Ryan reprising Salomé. It's one of those creepy intimations that has legs. I just can't shake the idea — a theme he would exploit — harum-scarum sex, beheading and murder. And he did know and fancy Roseanne at home, though they did have a falling out, as I've said. But now, here — who knows? This is so grody. Is the poster maybe a publicity stunt, I wonder? They do some strange things here. My private detective's checked out the poster but can't find out who ordered or posted it. The printer — his logo was on the back — said it was a rush order. A parent he imagined — a father perhaps. Mrs. Hartley was a single mom — I don't know about a 'father'. It was the suddenness of the poster that shocked — two days after I saw her. It makes little sense. We can't find a Canadian or American nexus — no report of a missing person resembling Roseanne — nor a line hotel room registered to a Mrs. Hartley. She may have someone here, I don't know. Anyway, the anxiety won't let up. Millie said the mother's away but is asking around. She's not well — Millie. She has cancer and the chemo is making her sick. I felt bad asking her but I think she understood. My worry is that Roseanne could be quarry for one of Ryan's babe hunters. One of the pesky ifs. Ryan was always on the lookout, talked to a lot of street hustlers. I should have mentioned it earlier. Please consider — the internet porn industry here is ubiquitous. A 'million Gaussian points' some wag said, about the many private gigs. Some undoubtedly schitzo."

Mason's silence eventually flagged Tara's brisk narrative. "You still here?"

“Yes. It does sound odd, fishy. And possibly forbidding — the timing. I’d be worried. Sadly, I’ve got some more sorry news of my own. As bad or worse.” He could hear Tara give way to a sigh. “Seems Dirk said some things about me....”

“Oh christ, it never rains...and I had some other news...which Roseanne has upstaged. It can wait.”

“Something less dismal — the news?”

“A new film.”

“You’re interested?”

“We’ll see. Later. Sorry, always seem in a rush these days. A taxi’s waiting. Another interview. Bad timing. Phone soon as you can. Should be free in an hour or so. Love you.”

Mason then realized, again, how he missed the words they once shared about Deirdre. Somehow Tara was moving on — her new life bypassing stragglers, the infirm. The subject did come up, but her empathy seemed more centred on him than on Deirdre.



## PART TWO

*A lie has many endings.*

Anon

*Those serpents!*

*There is no pleasing them!*

Lewis Carroll

## TWENTY-THREE

It was an emphatic decision. The East End book was finished, the publishers wrestling with a thorny issue: the legal jeopardy for printing intimate shots of ‘questionable public benefit’ — the ‘social demeaning’ aspect — and he had no further project lined up. He would take his chances and head south to see Tara. He still resisted calling her Ann Able. He phoned his mother from a pay phone and said he would be away for a while. He wouldn’t be long. A job he had to see about. The best excuse he could think of. He asked her not to mention he was away. He would phone in due course. He decided to keep the news of Paul’s death from her for the time being. The police interest in his connection to Adam Sally would be trial enough.

Helene put down the receiver with some consternation. The police had not bothered her for a while, but there was no guarantee. Well, Mason was upset, and undoubtedly had things to do. She could tell from his tone of voice that something was urgent, needed attending to. She returned to her morning newspaper and coffee. A piece about a ‘differentially abled’ foster child with an ungainly birth mark touched her. The child had gone missing. ‘We’re all ‘marked’,’ she said to herself. Some you see, some you don’t.

Two long days later Mason was bypassing Weed, California, in his rented Hyundai. A plane would have been more risky he imagined. Thus he was surprised and grateful that no one stopped him at the border, making him wonder how official the ‘investigation’ of him was. Mind you, he had taken the Sumas crossing when it just opened, the lone custom officer there half-awake and yawning. Perhaps he was lucky. The clear brisk morning around Weed was exhilarating, the air at that elevation compara-

tively pristine but for occasional fine wisps of sand or grit. He hoped to be in LA by mid to late afternoon. He had booked into a Friendship Motor Inn. He wanted a decent night's sleep that night. He would find something more spartan and covert the following day. He had phoned Tara before leaving, her contralto voice beguiling as ever, yet somewhat less solicitous than when he last talked to her.

"I'd love to see you but you think its prudent leaving? My private detective — Pete Voss — gave me an earful about bent coppers. The 'team' effort."

If he had detected any real diffidence in her voice he might have stayed. She seemed pleased to know he would be there in a few days. "My very own wayfarer," she said. "My other eyes. I called Millie last night, her birthday's coming up — I sent her a suede toggle coat. We talked. A risk I know. But I feel safe here. I asked her how things were — asked if she'd learned any more about Mrs. Hartley. She hadn't seen her for a long while and wasn't sure where she was. She didn't know what Roseanne might be up to. Since I left, Stephen and the hoggers have remained at arm's length. She sounded down. The chemo's a drag of course. Little gets Millie down." After a short pause she added, "Glad you're coming. I can use a willing partisan. A gopher to help look for Roseanne. I can't rid myself of the possibility that Ryan or his ilk is involved here. I know, its sounds a little dotty, but it won't let up."

"'Gopher'. Ha. Nobody more invisible or determined. As of now. You mentioned last time a new film."

"More when you come. If there is 'more'."

They met at sunset in a homey waterside oyster bar and ordered a bottle of Muscadet and the Horseback Devils — oysters wrapped in bacon. The sun loitered above a jagged business skyline. Wicker furniture and



gingham tablecloths were coming alive in a gloaming. She was more sleek and lustrous than he remembered. A shawl, floppy hat and shades nearly fudged her presence. Her smile was as warm though, the kiss not perfunctory, after which she restored her dark glasses. The conversation, much awaited, soon tripped along.

He looked about him, smiled. “No, not the haunt of a goddess — this joint. Good choice.”

“I’ve booked a discrete hotel. I’m awaiting a call — from my agent — but we can meet there a couple of times a week. Tonight if you like.”

“Very much.”

Her smile could awaken a mummy, he thought. ‘Mummy’ being a word he associated with these days. Her amusement idled as she sat back studying him.

“I’ve engaged a retired detective, as I mentioned, a guy I’ve come to trust. Hope you do too. Pete Voss. He’s introduced me to an FBI agent, one Bruno Cavet, who has an interest in terrorist cells and their collaborators. They were both in the marines. Bruno knows Alejandra. “Mutual interests,” was all he said. I can imagine. He comes across as wise and knowledgable as, well, Thucydides and maybe as old.” She smiled quizzically at him. “I think I’ve got the right guy — in the frank prudent assessment department. You’ve mentioned him a couple of times.”

“Thucydides is top drawer. Must have a reincarnation or two.”

“They’ll both welcome a discreet helper. The ‘gopher’ I mentioned.”

“Discreet and willing.”

“You look well.”

“I’m here. Miss the dancing of course.”

This produced a fond chuckle. “I’ll get a player installed. Deirdre’s ballads lighten the load, yes? Any further word on her state? The last I heard from the mother — who did finally phone — she was in a care home.”

“Sadly no. The same. The paralysis likely permanent, apparently. Also a vocal chord trauma. The mother did send a recent e-mail. A general statement. She’s obviously crushed. It’s gruesome. The fact Deirdre only made the one CD one of the haunts.”

Mason stopped, as if short of breath. “A wilderness subject.” He sought Tara’s — Ann Able’s — hand. “You mentioned in an earlier phone call a film.”

After a quiet sustained hug, Ann said, “One of those oddities — British. UK Film Council. Set here. Some kind of remake of The Disappearance of Alice Creed.”

Mason wryly smiled. “Do I know this ‘Alice’.”

“Probably not. Similar story, well somewhat similar from the little I’ve read. Hard to tell from a shooting script. Different title of course — Missing Angel. I had no say in the title.” She sighed. “Hoary enough coincidence...I haven’t yet been contacted, though my agent’s optimistic.”

“And nothing more on Roseanne.”

“Nothing. We had one lead on Jack Owen, the late jihadi. Had. Pete needed a cut out — but didn’t finally trust the guy he might have used. I think he’ll consider taking you on.”

“He knows I’m something of a fugitive?”

“Yes. He smiled when I told him. ‘Can’t be all bad,’ he said. You’ll meet him tomorrow. You’ll get on. Incidentally, he told me he was looking into this O’Doul thing. He and Bruno frequently compare notes. He says Bruno’s been investigating the Owen gang, and knows of the IRA connection. He knows his history, Bruno — modern and ancient. He recently compared the day’s media to professional raconteurs. He and Pete were looking over a recent media report on ‘terrorism’. Bruno mentioned some guy in passing — a guy called ‘Hero’ something. Pete filled me in. Known for ‘embroidered history’— this ‘Hero-dot-us.’ One of your pals?”

By then Mason was broadly smiling. “How ‘bout a real horny Thucydides tonight?”

Ann Able smiled, promptly left two bills on the table, and took his hand.

Ryan Dyck entered the quiet dark neighbour park off Roper Street in White Rock, ever looking about for ‘nonchalant’ observers. The park was five or six minutes from the beach. Immense Douglas Firs and Red Cedars loomed above him. Street light filtered through their high menacing branches. He must return the same way he came. He was nervous yet expectant. Assured now of an ‘exfiltration’ as he fondly thought of it. No longer Point Roberts but an area yet to be specified in Los Angeles. ‘Come back the inland route — through Spokane. As before — no planes.’ He was to call a specific number on arrival. ‘Yes, Omar contacted us. The engagement’s on.’ He still had most of the money and now the prospect of the onliest, cutting edge adventure, beginning in a still-to-be-specified Middle East training camp. He liked the word ‘engagement’. The words he had waited, longed for, prayed for....the time had



come...only the brave...the world must learn...Santa Baby bearing gifts.  
Allahu Akbar!

## TWENTY-FOUR

Pete Voss seemed preoccupied when Mason was introduced to him in his small, musty, messy office, the abiding seediness relieved by a couple of surprisingly vibrant potted African Violets that sat on a cracked window ledge, the window pane itself, which outlooked a grubby commercial alley, dulled with unwavering neglect. Tara's — now Ann Able's — description of Mason as her 'fast friend' seemed a tolerable but incidental detail, Voss's train of thought at the time waylaid elsewhere.

He was a short stocky ruddy-faced man with close cropped red hair and a Karl Malden nose. 'A great Blood Hound,' Mason would comment later to Ann, a joke she tolerated at the time. A photo of one of Roseanne's wanted posters lay on his desk near a pad with some indecipherable writing on it.

When his lingering abstraction abated Voss said aloud, as if addressing a seminar, in the voice reminiscent of a Southern marshal, "An unusual business. Strange the printer had no contact information. Very strange. The timing too is odd. Seein' Roseanne, a lively Roseanne from what you said, days before the poster went up. Either someone suspected she was missin' for a time, or there's more to it than meets the eye. The picture also looks a little too posed, cutsie for my liking. Missin' persons' photos are usually more informal, pro-visional. It could be a ruse of course, but — given her past with this Ryan rascal — we'd better follow through."

Mason smiled, impressed with Voss's summation, and said both he and Tara suspected something could be awry, amiss. Tara added, "I'd just feel

a lot better if I knew Roseanne had no connection with Ryan's gang of procurers. Including the jihadi."

But Voss was not yet finished. "I'm also a bit concerned about this up-comin' film — Missin' Angel." He glanced up at Tara — at Ann Able.

"You think it's front door?"

It seemed Tara had anticipated the question. "I know, it sounds a bit ironic. My current agent's one of the best. Handles several major and upcoming stars. He recommended I consider the part. I know these things can be deceptive — but one of Antoine's 'fair haired boys' is directing it. Which means Arthur Pechenpaugh has likely signed on or has some interest in it."

Voss nodded, his features settling into a grimace. "Then we have to do some serious excavation. When will you know about the part?"

"Within the week I'm told."

Voss was silent for a time, then, "We must disinter brother Omar."

It was then Mason made out the words in the notation on Voss's note pad...words that appalled.

## TWENTY-FIVE

It *was* an unexpected and sobering discovery — the URL on Voss's note pad that continued to daunt Mason as he sipped his morning coffee in the lobby of the Friendship Motor Inn. Tara had slipped away early from their tryst motel. "The paparazzi are always hard up, so we should be discrete during the day," she had said with an affectionate smile. That a liai-

son with him might engender popular speculation continued to amuse and caution, given his current situation, anonymity being the shelter he lived in then.

He wouldn't have been as curious about the URL on Voss's note pad but for the recollection it ignited. The site's name THEDEVILSWITHOUT.NET was scrawled in capitals. He knew the site — a conspiracy theorist's haven, chalk full of royal purple allegations. But what might the name be doing on a Voss note pad? He decided to keep this discovery to himself for the time being; Tara — the mindful Ann Able — had enough on her plate at the moment. But in looking over the content of the site later that morning on the hotel's computer, he was surprised by its expanded size and tone — more virulently accusatory than ever. Then, as if subjected to an electric shock, he recognized one of the names of the site's contributors — Dirk Church! He knew Dirk had some radical ideas about the would-be perversity of the day's corporations and their government enablers. Was he just getting into his stride when Mason knew him? The man, he recalled, cultivated a blasé cynicism, but it seemed more a matter of style than intimidation. But when he had read a couple of Dirk's contributions he realized the cynicism had archly intensified into a blithe contempt. He did recall that Dirk had told him, more than once, with fond esprit, that he, Mason, was a nearly lovable idiot. Mason had been on about the purity of pastoral serenity — or some such 'romantic falderal', as Dirk called it. Lyric poetics seemed a select amusement for Dirk. 'We're inundated with pandy dandy dreamers,' Mason recalled him saying. But the more he read the essays on the site, the more he marvelled at the burgeoning reams of malevolent audacity. Which goaded him to compose an e-mail.

*Dirk, what a wonderful 9-11 Truthers site — thedevilswithout.net. Catalytic drama to excoriate a smug, avid, comfort ridden society, eh? All these Western swine*



*lined up like carnival targets. The sheer numbers! A fine recruiting tool for a clever Islamist. So relieved to find one head-lobbing execution a staged affair, and the target himself referred to as a 'bloke' — the modern idiomatic English for a person of questionable status. Webster's Third actually invokes 'inferior'. I can't help thinking he's now monitoring the practice of Bacha Bazi — permissible sex with hairless boys, ascertained to be girls — out of the public glare, making sure no Haraam protocols are broken. I wonder whose lovingly set-out body his parents will get. Or are they too aspiring thespians? Was the staged slaughter at least halaal, I wonder? A question you might take up. If not, it could be a further insult to our Muslim brethren. Really Dirk, I had no idea — how ingenious! Guilt by Arduously Sought Inference and Association. You could coin a new nom de guerre — Imputation Incorporated! All those 'seems', 'could be', 'might be', 'more than likely', 'allegedly', 'most likely', 'presumably' et cetera qualifications. And all those awesome degrees you hold! You could run a whole department at MIT! When we first met you only mentioned an honours BA from Oxford University — which we all imagined one of your squibs of academe. Were we really that gauche, uncomprehending? So sensitive to resplendent light? I guess we were. Not as funny as the Three Stooges, but close enough, eh? Also, having broached your site, I think that Paul's advice to you some time ago — that you trust your doctor's advice about that stubborn eczema — may have been rash. Your doc might just be a stake holder in some radical new-fangled drug — from that hothouse Regeneron in New York, say. I think you better thoroughly check him out first. You can never tell. I know at least one person who underwent advised treatment like a docile cow. And he's a wasp nest of buzzing complaints now. Best of luck old boy. Cordially, ...*

When he had finished — got some of the load off his chest — he debated sending the e-mail. Did he want to be identified as one of the scoffers? He could spend many months trying to ascertain the cogency of even a handful of articles on the site: anyone can marshal a lot of 'facts' but only the diligent expert unravel them. Best he remained more or less anonymous, the 'nearly lovable idiot'? You have maneuvering room as an idiot. Nobody pays attention. He would not send the e-mail anonymously of course and, in the end, simply trashed it.

He then debated the wisdom of mentioning the rants of Dirk to Pete Voss — who might be following a lead or even touting some virulent allegations of his own! As a private investigator he would certainly be in a position to lambaste some event or ‘person of interest’ — particularly while using an alias as tweeters do. Should he spend time scouting for such an alias? He decided to keep his eyes and ears open. Outside of Tara — of Ann Able — he really trusted no one these days. He *was* having a time dispensing with the name ‘Tara’ — his patient sojourner. He consulted his watch. In an hour he was to join Voss in his office to review the tracking of Jack Owen, aka Omar al-Rashid — Ann’s one possible link to the person who had caused her so much grief. He must remember to call her ‘Ann Able’ around Voss. She said Pete would update him on late possibilities. Mason tried to smile as he took the final sips of his morning coffee.

He phoned his mother later that morning. She seemed pleased to hear his voice — yes, she was fine — then exclaimed, “Oh Mason!”

He was caught off guard. “You okay?” he promptly asked.

“Mason, something terrible has happened.” It took Helene a moment to spell it out. “Your friend...Paul Landers is dead. I’ve just learned. I just read the story yesterday. I’m so very sorry.”

Mason then realized that in the hectic interim he hadn’t told his mother of Paul’s death. He quietly swore, leaving a silence Helene must have taken as shock as she continued.

“He had been missing for some time apparently. I don’t know the family. The story in the one paper is short on details. The police are investigating.”

It took Mason a moment to phrase a simple, unladen question.

“It’s hard to believe...when did it happen? The papers here don’t have much Canadian news.”

“Well that’s the disturbing part — he’d been missing for some time. Paul’s mother Irene made a public appearance asking for help in finding her son. He was found several days ago, apparently, in a ‘deteriorated state’ the one story said. And not identified right away. You know his family?”

“Not well — I met his mother. I’ll send a card. I should phone her....” But he wasn’t sure he’d do any of those things. The last few days had aggravated his own sense of jeopardy. He continued the pretence of surprise and shock. “Were there any other details — where he was found, the nature or extent of any sickness or injury?”

“No. Just that he’d been found outside I take it. Somewhere in the East End. If I can do anything this end please let me know. I know you were close.”

“I’ll try to get in touch with the mother. Though I’ll be of little help.”

Again the implications darkened his horizon. He was a ‘person of interest’ in the investigation. Whereas not contacting the mother was heartless. But her incoming calls could be monitored by the police. A call from California might not be advisable. He decided he would consult Voss in due course if the detective proved trustworthy as Tara claimed.

He learned after the talk about Paul that his mother’s carpal tunnel syndrome in her left hand was worse, her digestion better than it was, and that she continued to enjoy the company of Mariana Thompson. She was grateful to know he was well and in touch with Tara, with Ann Able. “Please give her my love and best wishes.” The unexpected phrase lingered some time after he said his adieu. He’d also told Tara that Paul was



a pensive fellow-creature, unlike the two other players he'd gone to school with and met up with in the East End. He still found the murder implausible, unbelievable. Paul Landers was a quiet observant fellow, one with heart and patience. Who would harm such a one? Such a murder Mason could barely fathom. His own jeopardy seemed more manifest, imminent. Now, with the media account of Paul's death, a memorial service would likely follow. He would look up recent Vancouver Sun obituaries. He sensed his own world shrinking, withdrawing, leaving fewer places he might reside. Tara, as Ann Able, was on her way to becoming a recognized gifted performer. He might be a nostalgic familiar for a time, but most stars ended in a firmament that seared shade plants.

Pete Voss was not in his office when Mason arrived for the scheduled up-date. A doughty secretary Pete shared with another chap, a cleaning product salesman in a nearby office, told Mason that Pete was on his way and motioned for him to take a seat. A black vinyl sofa faced the secretary's desk. As he sat Mason could see through a hallway window into Voss's office, a window he hadn't noticed before. Pretending to ease a leg cramp — "An old problem," he said to the secretary — he walked back and forth along the hall, glancing at the desk top in the office. The top looked as cluttered as before though now an assortment of folders — most zipper binders — sat on the surface, a fat one plainly labelled 'Truthers'. He confirmed the name on a second pass. So: Pete as ally or crank. Though Tara's trust in him seemed to nix the latter. A question he silently debated as he sat, smiling at the watchful secretary. She seemed about to offer a pleasantry when Voss entered, his heavy steps resounding in the hall. As usual he seemed preoccupied with a matter that excluded bystanders. Mason waited patiently for the spell to abate.

Without taking Mason in he suddenly said, "I think you've got to get

down on your belly to Allah — for a time. To locate this Owen chap. Seems to be a key. Also a good disguise for a time. 'Til we learn more about this busy mountie of yours.”

Mason kept his smile decorous.

Voss finally looked at him. “Don’t know how we’ll read this jingo fraternity Omar heads unless we have a body inside it. Learn the tack and navigation chart. All the hokey-pokey. Capeesh?”

Mason swallowed and tried to look appreciative, even if his mind was a welter. He managed to say, “I did a while back attend a lecture on Islam — for curious outsiders, nonbelievers.” Voss looked directly at him — for perhaps the first time as Mason continued. “I believe Ann told you I’d been photographing the derelicts in Vancouver’s East End.”

“She may have.”

“While there, I met an elderly Muslim who was on his last legs, yet possessed a serenity rare if not unique among the people I photographed. I decided a closer look at Islam might not be amiss — to assess his uniqueness and, well, the aptness of my pictures of him. I don’t meet many people in accord with their limitations, with the ways of Fate.”

Voss was momentarily amused. “Ann did mention something about a romantic chap she knew. Then you turn up. You got any competitors in that department?”

Easily Mason said, “Almost certainly, given Ann’s pluck and popularity.”

Voss snorted. Then reached over and fetched the Truther’s folder. “You can glean some topical tripe on Western corruption and dissolution here — one way to fit in with the keener crybabies. I have a colleague

who can coach you, should you take up the assignment. He'll provide some background. With enough detail from the site you'll be a shoo-in. Conspiracy shills sharpen the knife. Capeesh?"

Again Mason struggled to contain his anxiety. For Ann then. Eastward ho!

## TWENTY-SIX

He approached the stately Anglican church trying to sort out the dual sense of anguish and anger he felt. The weather, being inclement, cloudy gusty and rainy, seemed apropos. He had decided that he must attend Paul's memorial service. He had crossed the border with alternate identity papers Voss prepared for him. "Moles need a few blow holes," Voss remarked.

Mason stole into the church at the last minute and solemnly nodded to the usher whom, luckily, he did not know. He sat at the back. At first he recognized only the mother. He was saddened Dirk was absent. Had he really abandoned, rebuked this crowd? Ryan, he assumed, lived then as a nomad, an evacuee — ducking, palming off his past. Soon he recognized some faces from his time at UBC. Would any remember a Mason Bascule? In any case, the sombre mood in the room daunted inquisitiveness. A large luxuriant spray of flowers lay on a gurney before the lectern. Before leaving for the service he learned from Voss, through the FBI agent he worked with, that Paul Landers had indeed been murdered, likely tortured, his body dumped in a commercial garbage bin. A missing person notification eventually linked the hummingbird tattoo to Paul's anxious mother, his one living parent.

The few moving, dismayingly earnest testimonials to Paul finally



ceased. The minister gave his benediction. With some misgivings, Mason decided to bolt — slip away from the auditorium as inconspicuously as possible. At the end of the ceremony he could not face the mother. His courage failed him. He would almost certainly be drawn into the investigation again. His trust of the police was on a very short lease then. Thus, on this dismal day, he stole away from the funeral home as a fugitive penitent. He said a prayer for Paul and begged his sufferance for not hanging around. As a ‘provisional’ jihadi he might truly become invisible. One way to slip into the shadows. If he found the prospect dull, peculiar, onerous, he could not suppress his need for obliteration, for an immunization of self. He was rarely vexed to the point of restiveness, agitation, let alone recklessness. But the last few weeks disclosed a disposition he was alarmed to discover, prompted in part by the numbing fanaticism inherent in the indoctrination spiel he attended in Richmond, as well as his discovery of a depravity — in his research on Islam’s radical cadres — that only a child-sacrificing Moloch might endorse. On the unctuous thedevilswithout.net site there was no mention of the Rotherham, England scandal — young poor white children press ganged into serving as sex slaves for mainly Pakistani men. The murder of Christians and Jews by Muslims might make a headline but the general reaction to Muslim excess was that Westerners had to ‘look to their privilege’ and not foment hatred. Indeed, atrocities that could not be fastidiously verified, were often deemed ‘rumours’ by the media or ‘still to be confirmed’. Resolutely pointing a finger could get you labelled a rank fuddy-dud or hauled up before a Human Rights Tribunal accused of Islamaphobia. It was a tried and true Muslim tactic: the threat of a law suit being often enough to discourage telling criticism. The Ummah had bottomless pockets and abundant ready ‘enforcers’ when it came to intimidating castigators. Even now, with the Rotherham story ‘out’ and charges pending, it remained largely unknown. You could say anything malicious about Christians (a crucifix in an artist’s

urine was considered ‘art’), Jews (the Protocols of the Elders of Zion served as regular editorial fodder in parts of the Middle East and Europe); and DEWMs, dead European white men (the original perpetrators of warped Christianity and after-burner capitalism). In point of fact, *live* white men were then being slurred as the legacy hucksters of imperialistic repression. The celebrated Naomi Klein had just weighed in. Their reputation as campus rapists and rabid insensitive cops hadn’t helped. In the U.S. the word Republican was becoming synonymous with Reptile, Conservative with Con in urbane circles — the MOSH fraternity: Mostly Original Substrate Humans. What shocked was the recruitment wave Jack Owen, as Omar al-Rashid, was riding. The promise of regular pay and girls a go-go underpinning the attraction of righteous, mandated jihad. Indeed, some of the gals had themselves discovered the glamour of devout slaughter with fearless zealots.

What aggravated his malaise was the witless actions of many Westerners themselves. The modern commercial was in its shrewd invidiousness an acutely molesting act itself. Look what you don’t have and likely never will. Look what you haven’t been doing, with endless revised accusatory updates. Then there were the precious shills. Two TV Cialis commercials he still marvelled at: a supposedly responsible parent gives his youngster keys to a vintage car — telling him ‘It’s time.’ The boy is surprised, shocked even, the act totally unexpected, suggesting the dad had good reason not doing so before. In another a housewife diligently at work in the kitchen tells her son he can, indeed should, stay out far far beyond his current curfew time, to the boy’s bemused astonishment. Parental responsibility American style. Mature entertainment.

In a recent 60 Minutes segment, a flinty gal interviewed the Islamic activist Anjem Choudary, who described the September Eleven terrorists as ‘magnificent martyrs’. The interviewer had a few adroit questions but

seemed totally unprepared for the verbal blitzkrieg she was bombarded with — a Chaudary specialty, the obliteration of ‘exchange’. In ‘real combat’ only the greater monster wins and doesn’t bother with grammatical nuance. The 60 Minutes’ non-interview was followed by a woozy soft-pornographic commercial for Viagra, the actress in the ad making the pitch as unctuously wanton as they come. The fact that she was so axiomatically banal — another foldout nonce — was a fine twisting of the knife. 60 Minutes, the reputed American standard for television journalism, had that night the measure of its gamy audience. Well so. Should he be annoyed for being so annoyed? Hadn’t he noticed the ongoing impugning of traditional Western mores? *When did you first feel inspired by the commitment to reveal the inanity and bigotry our older customs and conventions...?* The generic question today.

So the upstaging of aesthetic and moral standards was the new norm — why get upset? Get on with it man. Freedom embraces both bad and good, though the bad was more collegially entertaining, the burdensome good often getting devoutly shat on. The essence of humour. Thus Islam’s loathing of parody and respect for the sword. Should he expect anything else? Ryan Dyck as a poster boy for a *cleansing* ISIS was not entirely a witless aberration.

## TWENTY-SEVEN

It was one of those sunny sultry days in a succession of such days when many people seek distractions — to avoid hectic enervating chores that can wait, have waited. On one such day a film production crew was arduously at work in a remote wilderness area to meet an equipment rental deadline. The current film was a furtive grey market affair, the main props



and filming equipment scrounged from a larger company, a firm owned by a crony of Vincent Gebara. The set was a rendering of the great hall in the palace of Herod Antipas, the Roman Client State ruler of Galilee and Perea. The backdrops looked realistic at a distance but tacky up close. The staging of the action thus took place some distance from any single backdrop, each take tight-framed to the backdrop. The costumes and some props however were well made and credibly historic, the players themselves a shapely patrician bunch. Beyond the set an open desert loomed. Landscape curtains had been set up as much to obscure the set itself.

Roseanne Hartley had never felt as alive, dynamic, so animated she occasionally found herself laughing to herself. The sly advertising had been a triumph, quite literally ‘out of sight’ — the ‘Missing’ Posters the cat’s meow. An air-tight ruse. When the art-house film she had landed the plum part in went viral, as she imagined, the once ‘missing’ Roseanne would miraculously reappear as a reincarnated Salomé! A new mesmerizing Pleiad! If she was aware the film could have a second more flagrant cut, the main effort had seemed sturdy enough to warrant her enthusiasm. The ‘inserts’ would be relegated to ‘roduction bed bugs’ her stand-in agent said. She hadn’t told her often gabby mother about film. It would all work out in the end.

Thus, on this adventurous day, the young actress, otherwise alive in a seductive dance costume, was for a time unaware of being attacked in an emphatic, unrelenting and unrehearsed manner. The scene she knew would be a bit ‘up hill’ — the film’s final scene, her murder/execution at the hands of the palace guards, which was being shot ahead of schedule due to the need to return some long focal length lenses. But the sudden shock and pain that ensued after the deft knife slashes electrified her. A muffled scream was scotched by blood rising from her throat. A lot of

blood. A momentary frantic writhing as more blood spurted, some of it spattering the nearest crew members. The director, boom operator and two of the guards vainly tried to restrain the attacker — an out-of-nowhere crazy — when they realized his manic intent.

Whereas dynamic Ryan, who had fended off the three who belatedly sought to restrain him, remained fleetingly aware of the newly stunned film crew as he stood by the body, a dagger, a pugio, in hand, the novel awesome swearing a further puzzle for him. He was sufficiently menacing that no one attempted to disarm or take him down, though their number did shift him to better defensive position beyond Roseanne where he defiantly rocked back and forth, his knife menacingly poised. The boom operator looked on aghast as he favoured a twisted ankle. Indeed, the crew was a time realizing the attack didn't proceed as scripted — that the killing scene was in fact a grisly murder not the sensationally staged execution of the head strong Salomé, and this 'player' was an unknown! Two crew members did frantically work to stanch the welling bleeding, copiously swearing the while as the futility registered — the neck arteries no longer summary fountains but idled conduits. Nothing worked. Ryan maintained a defensive stance, a smile flickering. Soon the blood, which was everywhere, merely suppurated from the deep slashes, leaving a lax motionless form. No ample first aid kit was on site. The numbed actors and spare crew looked on in a spreading silence, their looming culpability only just dawning as one of them dumbly stared at his cell phone. There was no signal in this area. Even providing an accurate address to the deliberately selected wilderness location was implausible. And the nearest community with a hospital was an hour or more away by car. The incredulity itself stymied, paralysed. The futility of any real remedial action passed over the set like the intermittent gusts of sand and grit. Ryan looked about with some impatience. He had imagined the scene a crossing of the Red Sea. Whereas no one paid much attention to him. The deed was

paste tense — only a paralyzing futility lingered. He could scream.

“What?” he said in a strident voice as the astonishment about him loomed, his poised bloodied knife an ongoing threat.

The eerie silence continued. The members of the once diligent film crew engaged in filming the final scene remained frozen, dumfounded at what they had so summarily witnessed. The director, Peter Leone, was for a time speechless — the futility of calling 911 the question no one broached, had an answer to. The production was underground, placed in a remote wilderness and, to the extent it portrayed pedophilic lust and gruesome head hacking, limited in its sanction and approval, the culpability thus infinite. Intermittent gestures of futility accompanied the intermittent fitful swearing.

For Ryan the dismay confused. But only momentarily. He was still riding an ineffable high, the blood still warm on his hands. He had managed the execution despite the three or four who frantically tried to intervene while avoiding his deftly sweeping knife. He could do it again! His departure date had allowed for some free time. With a false identity he had managed to find work as a cast extra, a banquet server in the great hall. His sudden, dramatic appearance as one of the guards startled the others, but not impeded his intent.

He smiled. He had acted with great panache he thought, nearly severing much of the neck. Another mission he was destined to undertake. What self-respecting Islamist would have done less? A much idolized Jewish whore slaughtered in real time! A historic reckoning! He'd learned about the film from some street folk. When he discovered Roseanne Hartley in the cast he applied as an extra, a banquet server as it turned out. Roseanne was another pissy She he had a score to settle with. She had called him 'Naughty Nick' before a school class. Then, “Any more help-



ers?” An underground tube of him being pleased by a young boy in the men’s john was making the rounds. He was drunk at the time. The class sniggered the rest of the day. The bigger guys in the class happily joining in. *Santa Baby, Santa Baby...*

Peter shook his head at the cell phone his key grip James Collier held in a palsied hand. The slowly acknowledged futility, their jeopardy as accessories to a real murder, paralyzed. A defiant Ryan remained standing, still dandling his sanguine dagger, his Roman pugio. Santa Baby on a joy ride.

Peter was blindsided by the sudden rapt manic deed and, sensing what he feared could be the onset of a protracted fit, quietly said to the newly recognized and transformed banquet server, “Okay. You’ve done enough. Very impressive.” Solemnly he looked about at the others nearest to him and quietly said, “Those of you who want to leave, leave.” He felt he could, should say that. He knew this crew. Some had records, a few could be ‘persons of interest’ in ongoing investigations. Yet no one moved.

If Ryan was suspicious at first, his edginess ebbed into a smile. He gave the director a hug, saying “Tomorrow is another day,” before curtly nodding and heading toward the change/makeup pavilion saying, as he rubbed at his blood spattered breast plate, “We’ll need to wash the armour — for some of the inserts.” He vented a chuckle. Peter looked after him with askant wonder as the crew gave him a wide birth. He still could not register what had happened, the pool of blood in one small depression of the set nearly ankle deep. The crew and cast were then acutely aware of their manifest liability. They all looked to Peter whose raised hand signalled a pause, an interim judgement. “Again — those who want to leave, please do so,” he said with authority. There were a few questioning glances to one another, yet no one moved. “We are all accessories to a murder, one way or another,” he continued, then paused as if the implication

had yet to sink in. “I think most of you should leave. I’m hoping Wes, James, Doug and Nic will stay. A request only. We’ll deal, the ones who remain, with the clean up, and our banquet server in due course. Those who want to leave should do so. Now.” This last comment had an edge to it that prompted a slow if hesitant departure, leaving Peter alone with his four key workers. “We’ll get beyond this...” He was thinking then of Roseanne’s reaction to first seeing Ryan on the set. Ryan had been a last minute substitute for a minor non speaking part. “Him...!” she had said with singular disgust. “You know him?” Peter had asked. “He should be locked up,” she said as she turned away. A member of the crew also recognized him. Such that Peter learned the extra named Ron Grant was likely someone called Ryan Dyck. The name didn’t ring a bell. Adventurers and hopefuls filled the trade like ocean plastic. Just how he got into the guard’s armour remained the mystery. There must have been an extra costume. The guy obviously came prepared. Peter had said to a bristling Roseanne, “Don’t worry we’ll keep him at arm’s length. He’s one of the banquet servers — end of story.”

They found Ryan sitting outside the makeup tent on one of the set’s ornate chairs rubbing a bloodied hand on his leather and hessian skirt. He was aware of Peter looking down at him, faintly shaking his head as he did so. Finally Peter said, “You’re crackers. Totally baked.”

Ryan smiled. “One way of looking at it.” He had never felt as animated, as invincible, transcendent. Peter could barely believe. He might have been talking to an agent. He looked over at his spaced-out cameraman, Nic Zilkovsky, who limply said, “Jamey’s got a bleeding hand... Doug’s binding it up. Not too bad.”

The director nodded and looked off at the paste board scene that backed the current take — the steps before the cistern that had held John the Baptist, the last actor to leave. Peter still could not reckon what had

happened, and realized Ryan himself might have to be eliminated. This would have been their first NC-17 rated film — when their editor finished the cut for general distribution and the preview night. Select private vendors would receive the the second ‘inserts’ cut that Ryan so nonchalantly alluded to. Peter’s chief electrician, Wes Fincher, came up behind him and asked, “You’ve an idea about the bod?”

“I’ll talk to Nic.”

“Until...where should we put it? The bleeding’s stopped.”

“Take one of the rugs — the cheap ones. It will have to be dumped. Put it with the backdrops for now. We’ll have to use some sand and dirt to cover the blood that leaked out. There’s a shovel somewhere.”

“What about Ryan?”

Peter scowled. “I’ll deal with him. The blood on stage is a priority, even though it looks like part of it. Better break it all up. Use a wardrobe trunk and one of the sand curtains. We’ll dump it, along with...”

Wes nodded and turned away with dispatch. Peter wanted to hit Ryan then, and would have if he did not still hold the dagger in one hand. Peter debated what to do next. Whatever tenuous link to reality this Ryan Dyck had, it had finally broken. Yet he knew madness was sometimes episodic. What would the lunatic remember, say, brag to others he wondered? He had a revolver in his shoulder pack...should he just finish him off now? Who would miss him? He went to fetch his shoulder pack, but when he returned Ryan had gone, vanished. Wes, who was folding a messy sand curtain used in the clean up, said he hadn’t seen him about. “Thought he was with you?” When he finally looked at Peter he blanched. “He left?”

“Seems so.”



Wes was a moment responding. “Holy shit.”

Then together they noticed the last car, Peter’s Saab sport’s car, swiftly driving off, Ryan at the wheel, happily waving at them as he left. Once again they were undecided; only the prop truck remained. Wes shrugged. “We’ll never catch him.” He added, with some relief, “Doug’s back back with Jamey. The bleeding’s stopped.”

It was then Nic approached. While dumbly staring at the disappearing car he asked, “What do we do with the memory chips?...”

“Smash and burn them.”

Still eyeing the disappearing car Nic listlessly added, “Luckily, none of the blood got on the equipment.”

“We won’t take it back right away.”

Wes solemnly nodded. “Thought he had flipped.”

Peter too was thinking how madness could be episodic. But also adroitly maniacal. A sustained bloodletting.

Early the next morning, in a seedy motel room, director Peter Leone gravely, mutely assessed the situation. They had worked through the night to dispose of the grisly mess. The blood stained ground was covered with dirt and sand, the crudely painted backdrops broken up and unloaded in a remote junk yard. Roseanne was wrapped in one of the sand curtains, taken aboard Peter’s catamaran after dark, weighted and dumped at sea. The few good props were unmarked but for one brazier leg, which was scrubbed clean. These, along with the film equipment, would be returned the following day.

Peter still half doubted what had transpired, his chest pains again severe, aggravated it seemed by the fact psycho Ryan had so readily disappeared — vanished. There would be rumours, speculation...Peter scrounged then for viable explanations. *A key backer pulled out...a distributor lost a network...an actor got mad, damaged a key set, caused a serious accident.... Accident. Ha!*

Wes, the electrician, sat nearby, thinking aloud. “His costume was missing but not his street clothes. They were still in the tent. Never thought him a psycho. What I saw. A kook maybe, but not a *kook*.”

“He’s gone...and Salomé’s in the great sea cistern. The question is — the promotional stuff we have to scrap, nullify. The stuff that’s out there.”

Wes plaintively shrugged. “Not a lot out there...we ran out of money.”

“I’m thinking of the posters.”

“Oh christ. Forgot about them.”

“Nothing to be done. They’re out there. I don’t think anyone really kept track. The cameras and the few good props we must return with some excuse. Funding again. Somebody pulled out. Something.”

Wes shook his head while an absorbed Peter tallied the remaining jeopardy.

“The renters know we’ve begun. Been at it for a while. The question is — how mum is the crew going to be? And our splendid psycho. Gebara will wash his hands of course. Pay off or scare any pry. Good luck there. Or he may be cagey...shrewdly vindictive. Some of us maybe ought to check out new identities? Maybe promptly.”

Wes had been thinking along the same line. “Some of the crew will

want their back wages. Sooner or later”

The silence that followed this pronouncement seemed interminable. The only way they might do that now was to rob a bank.

“Gebara’s issue. He always works on the cheap.” Peter still had trouble believing what had happened.

Finally Wes asked, “You leaving — disappearing for a while?”

Peter shrugged. “I think so. Less noise later on. Better use rented cells for a time.”

Some miles from the set a buoyant relieved Ryan was laughing, laughing.

## TWENTY-EIGHT

It was one of those days when disbelief and coincidence align. In Ann Able’s case, a *new* sighting of Roseanne Hartley, who she saw seated in a waterfront café near the Club Reina. Ann was on her way to look over a revised script and told her security escort to stop the car. When she approached and forthrightly enquired — “Roseanne?” — the girl turned, smiled, but shook her head. “It’s a nice name, but not mine.” By then Tara, as Ann Able, on hearing the girl’s middle European accent, realized she’d made a mistake. The girl certainly looked like Roseanne — the Roseanne she had so recently seen, talked to. The face, physique, skin tone, even hair style — all were amazingly congruent but for the accent. The eyes too, she belatedly decided, were likely more oval. Yet the overall impression was striking. She too smiled and returned to her car. The similarity continued to daunt. We all have doubles she knew, sometimes dead ringers, a designation that struck her then as prophetic.



About this time a group of fishermen on the Santa Monica Pier noticed what at first looked like a sick or dead dolphin floating some distance off the pier. The alerted shore watch discovered a body wrapped and tied in a kind of curtain material. An emergency team was summoned and, in a first aid pavilion, discovered the swollen body of a girl whose head and hands had been hacked off. It appeared that a weight attached to the legs had slipped free, as suggested by a sodden abraded rope mesh that might have held a sizeable stone or rock perhaps. Two frayed strands of the mesh had broken free. The shore watch captain thought wave surges in a late night storm could have dislodged such a weight. The disposal looked hastily done. Backup help was needed to keep the crowd at bay before the body was removed. It remained an exceptionally gruesome puzzle for several weeks. The missing persons lists were of little initial help, given the feasible matches to young missing females.

But eventually, a Mrs. Hartley became worried about her daughter who hadn't contacted her for well over a month, when her custom was to call about once a week. She became sufficiently anxious to file a report with the LAPD Adult Missing Persons Unit, providing Roseanne's age, last known domicile and, when requested, as detailed a physical description as she could muster. The Missing Person Unit nor Mrs. Hartley knew then about the wily posters. A review of the County Coroner's files identified a person with a light discolouration or birth mark on a forearm similar to the one described by Mrs. Hartley. When told of the possible match she became very distraught yet agreed to see the person so described. But when informed of the mutilations in the coroner's office she fainted and had to be rushed to emergency. When revived and partly sedated, she managed to provide an odds-on identify of the telling birth mark, a slate grey nervus above the wrist, recalling how she had considered removing

the mark early on. While confronting her loss she offered a timorous apology to the female officer who had been with her. “I respect what you have to do,” she managed to say through her tears. Without the birth mark she might never have known what happened. A conclusion she would never quite reconcile herself to.

In reviewing her daughter’s late friends one name stood out — one Ryan Dyck with whom she had been close for about a year ago. “It didn’t last. I was thankful...he had a reputation...not something I dwell on.” As fate would have it, Ryan Dyck was already a DEA ‘person of interest’. Renewed efforts to find him were promptly undertaken — a search that yielded the Missing Posters of the self-same Roseanne. The puzzle had become grimly surreal. Mrs. Hartley, who knew nothing about the posters, was acutely distraught and had to be sedated.

All this Mason was unaware of as he descended the trailhead from the small parking lot above Le Matador Beach just North of Malibu. He had sought a time-out that day. He’d been listening to Deirdre’s CD, and put off again trying to contact the mother. He was a stranger and she must be contending with many queries. He had learned that Deirdre Corr was in a care home in Belfast ‘with family and friends’ — the extent of the Nefer Club manager’s blurb to the media. One band member was quoted as saying, ‘You never expect something godawful like that — in Canada!’. The care home would only say Deirdre was in stable condition. Which left Mason in an airless limbo. So he headed to the pristine beach for a breather. He brought two cameras and anticipated a spectacular sunset. Ann Able — with the help of her agent — was assessing late contract stipulations. A couple of scenes were ostensibly hard core. Otherwise she might have come with him.

The sunset promised to be glorious. Already the water shimmered with edgy reflections. He sauntered along the beach taking note of a strand of rope on the sand trailing into the water. He then froze in his tracks. Further out, near a distant bluff edge, was a being he never thought he'd see again. Indeed he had to stealthily move closer with his tele lens, using a nearer boulder as a blind, to confirm his suspicion. Yes, it was — the prodigal overbearing Ryan Dyck, who now had a straggly beard and looked unusually grubby as he tied a sleeping foam to a back pack. What also puzzled appeared to be a ragged period costume, a short tunica...Mason thought of Tara's mention of a Mideast film setting, a further unsettling discovery. It was one of those moments you find difficult to decide what to do. Instead of approaching, Mason hunkered down behind the boulder and waited, watched, taking several pictures. He had timed his arrival to coincide with the glorious sunset, electric fingers stirring the ebbing surf. He called Tara on his cell phone. There was currently no room for messages.

Then Ryan Dyck surprised. Suddenly standing and glancing at his watch he removed the tunica and waded into the water wearing only underwear shorts and what looked like a fat money belt. The tide was coming in. He dove into a wave crest and began swimming away from the shore. He appeared to be a good swimmer, his arms alive in a proficient crawl. Within a minute he was but a spec on the further light swells, then disappeared into the ensuing darkness. Mason trained his eyes on the occasional lip of a snowy wave surge but could see no evidence of a swimmer. He was dumbfounded. It was hardly the hour to go alone for a protracted swim. He waited thinking Ryan must return. But nothing. No Ryan. Was he meeting someone offshore? He saw no evidence, no light or beacon of an offshore vessel. Only the gathering dark. There was no lifeguard station at Le Matador and no one about in that section of beach. He wondered if he should call 911. He called Pete Voss instead, whose an-



swer was forthright and reassuring. “I’ll be there within the hour — with an explosive expert. Keep an eye on the backpack. Discourage any prowlers. It could be a bomb. I’ll get a friend on the possible pick-up offshore — a Port Authority officer. I’ll see you at the bottom of the North trail-head stairs. There’s a story about two guys leaving for Yemen from around there. Likely a boat out there somewhere. Don’t approach or touch the backpack.”

Mason called Tara again and got through. “You’re at Matador! Lucky you. Sorry I couldn’t join you.” Fluently she continued. “Oh god Mason — Phillip Noyce is directing a new film. My agent thinks I have a chance. Missing Angel may be a no go. Creditation problems. I’m to go for an interview for the Noyce film in two days. The only catch — the film is set in Australia, the East Coast. A minimum of two months work. I’m still amazed. Phillip Noyce! I’ll see what accommodations are available. There’ll be a publicity angle I’m sure.” When she paused to catch her breath he calmly stated that he had just seen Ryan Dyck, a comment that brought her back to earth.

“Him? There?”

“He was just rolling up a sleeping foam on the beach when I saw him. He was some distance away. I confirmed it was him through a tele lens. He looked scruffy.”

“How scruffy?”

“A straggly beard. Long hair. Some kind of, I don’t know — tunica, a wide long shirt — historic looking. Roman maybe. But the worse for wear.”

“Oh Christ.”

“He sat for a while by a back pack then, after taking off the tunica,

swam away from the beach. A good swimmer I think. But he's not come back — for nearly an hour. I phoned Pete a while ago. He's on his way here. With a bomb expert. Told me not to touch the back pack and discourage any visitors."

"Oh my god."

"A precaution. He's notified a Port Authority guy — to investigate a possible pick up. It's bizarre, but there he was. By himself. Looking off —like some mystic."

"You think someone was meeting him offshore?"

"I don't know. Pete thinks its likely. No one's been near the backpack. Not many people at this hour. As I said, he's got someone at Port Authority looking into a possible pickup."

"He must know something. He's not always upfront — Pete. God I hope we find the bastard. Pete will look for a bomb. One of his colleagues is an expert. Lookit, I've got to go — my ride's here. I'll be at the hotel in an hour. Give me a call. I'll be waiting. Don't do anything heroic. Very fond of you. Bye."

He waited, looked out into the night. He saw no lights. He was not a sailor but thought he might see some lights from a passing ship or yacht. But nothing.

Pete called him from the parking lot above. He was on his way. Mason could see him shuffling down the steps with surprising alacrity. A second man followed carrying a large suitcase. A small dog followed the second man, its tail briskly wagging.

They went immediately to the back pack, about a hundred yards out from the stairs. Pete's friend — simply introduced as Doug — told

them to stay well back until he had examined the pack. He first looked at it through Mason's telephoto lens. On approaching it, he used a large self-illuminating magnifying glass to examine the surface followed by what Pete called a light-based plasmon sensor to scan it. He then had Shasta, his dog, sniff the pack. With a satisfied nod he opened the fastener and waved an all clear. While Pete held a flashlight Doug looked through the contents. First off: a sweater Mason recognized as his own despite its sorry state — the one Ryan took when he left the bed sit. It was sufficiently ratty and filthy to remain unmentioned and unclaimed, though Mason was a time coming to that conclusion. Also in the backpack: a baseball cap, shoes, no socks, a water flask, a small empty Advil vial, and an old wallet empty but for a tattoo parlour business card. But at the bottom — an old narrow, ornate case. Which prompted Doug to wave off Mason and Pete until he scanned it while Shasta sniffed about, barking a couple of times. "Seems okay," Doug finally called out with some relief while hugging his dog. "Our fun Pandora," Pete said as Doug opened the box. They all stared at its contents — a blood stained dagger, the box a custom reliquary. Neither Pete nor Doug touched the dagger. "Looks old — the dagger," Doug remarked, adding, "the blood alerted Shasta." Said Pete, "The blood's congealed. Best get it to forensics ASAP." Gesturing toward the intensifying dark offshore he added, "I should hear from my friend soon. He's a regular with the shore police."

Mason continued to stare at the dagger with a sense of dread he'd not known before. Another telling 'birth mark' he thought, the congealed blood a close if darker match to his own. In no time it seemed Doug had, with gloved hands, placed the knife in an evidence bag and headed off to the parking lot stairs, Shasta following, her tail going full tilt.

Said the pragmatic Pete, "I would have heard by now if my friend had found anything. He's likely been picked up. A louse doesn't drown him-



self.” Mason silently nodded. The finding he shared with Tara, with Ann Able, later that night. A laboured silence ensued. He doubted again he could ever call her ‘Ann’. “Let’s go for a drink,” he said. “Share some nappy visions.” A comment met with a laugh. “My very own Unicorn.”

## TWENTY-NINE

It was Pete’s ‘busy friend’, a somber FBI agent, one Bruno Cavet, a big stout man with full jowels, bushy hair and reedy voice (Mason recalled a print of Alexander Dumas) who provided some cogent explanations and deft forward planning. The briefing took place in a little used residence in Bunker Hill that overlooked a fire station, a select vista for the meeting with Pete, Mason and Ann. Bruno said it was a safe house he sometimes used in his investigations. Mason would later learn that the home was in fact Bruno’s and he an intermittent lodger after his wife died. A silent shrug would accompany this acknowledgement. As unremarked was Bruno’s graduate level education in early European history and his fluency in several European languages, including Latin — things Mason would learn in due course. “Known as ‘Dugong’ among his close pals,” Pete said. “Big in all departments.” On meeting and coming to know Bruno, Mason’s guarded respect for the FBI went up a notch.

At the initial briefing Mason was surprised to learn that Bruno was also interested in thedevilswithout.net site. Earlier that week Pete had shown him Ann’s pictures of Ryan — the net result being a video Bruno had unearthed, which he played for the others on his iMac, a makeshift video of a raw truculent Ryan trashing the West and vowing to remove every vestige of it from the face of the earth, a scurrilous derogation of all things urbane and seemly — the ‘time-honored frauds’ — including music. A ha-

range that made a stung Mason wonder if Ryan had ever listened to anything other than society-trashing rock and rap — finally taking the jaded scoffers and profaners at their word. Mason and Ann also learned that Ryan’s pal Jack Owen, aka Omar al-Rashid, had been sending insulting letters to some families of American soldiers killed in the Middle East and posting the family names and addresses of some returning soldiers on radical blog sites. He obviously worked with some astute hackers. When the tape finished Pete softly said to Bruno, “You said you got a tip from one of the site’s contributors.”

Bruno curtly nodded. “I regularly hear from an undercover agent posing as a radical — a periodic contributor to the site, in fact. He’s slowly being accepted as a smart ‘truther’. He’s discovered info that appears to come from secure military data banks. He put an ad on another site requesting comments from recent recruits to better design and promote jihadi blogger proclamations — part of a team effort espoused in the ad. Had a trunkful to choose from. But this one stood out. The tape, incidentally, may have been made here, some time before Ryan disappeared. The wall behind him has some dilapidated crown moulding which was popular in a storm hit area of South Los Angeles. Squatters have been found in parts of some damaged homes. Then there’s the dagger.”

As he listened Mason reflected on the deliberation in Bruno’s base voice, a study in sedateness and comprehensiveness he thought; what Bruno hadn’t witnessed had yet to occur you felt. Tara — Ann Able — sat silently shaking her head, even rubbing away a stubborn tear. It *was* a shock — the tape — on top of everything else. The Ryan in the tape Mason could barely imagine. The cynical huckster, drug and porno addict turned pitiless hate monger. Nearly one and the same he mused, yet was stumped to marshal the events and circumstances that could produce such a being — in a person he at one time believed to be a smug egocentric, a

swank Cassandra, not one to plug a rabid, murderous, intolerance. Madness, he reminded himself, could be progressive, gradational, even episodic.

Bruno continued after a further sip of coffee, his single-mindedness no less apparent. “The Port Police found several craft in the area, but Ryan Dyck was on none of them. Each was searched. He was likely picked up earlier. As we suspected.”

Mason winced. “I should have called sooner.”

This statement was left standing on its own, an ungainly interval Bruno concluded with, “We’ve pretty well ruled out suicide.”

Bruno’s pad, the venue selected for this private viewing, was once a tidy trig bungalow long since abandoned to disuse, so it seemed, the historic occupant busy elsewhere. A tiffany shade over a breakfast nook housed at least one large spider. The coffee maker was operational though, and a curious Mason had yet to see into the refrigerator. Bruno’s lumbering frame seemed but another timeless fixture, his regard of newcomers embarrassingly unenthusiastic, stoic. Yet the measured pace in his voice gleaned attention. Especially when he took up a new subject, his very deliberation affirming the composure.

“Ann, this look-a-like you mentioned...you thought she resembled Roseanne Hartley.”

“Well, I thought so at the time.”

“You expected her to recognize you.”

“That’s true. I was even surprised at first she hadn’t. I did say to her — ‘Roseanne?’ She smiled, said it was a nice name but not hers. It was then I noted the accent and the eyes, more oval than Roseanne’s. But at a dis-



tance, the look seemed dead on — the same physique, colouring, similar hair style. Even her voice, less the accent, could pass as Roseanne's."

Mason noted that for this session Ann wore her 'anonymity' rags, older jeans and a loose beige tank top over a white singlet. An hermetic Grace. He couldn't remember her looking more desirable.

"You said she knew the manager."

"Yes, I think so."

"Could she be mistaken for the image of Roseanne — in the missing poster?"

"Possibly."

"She was by herself?"

"Yes, and looked quite fetching."

"She was likely expecting someone."

Bruno was a time resuming. Everyone was head up. "I don't think it's an issue — the girl's similarity — but we should leave the posters up for a while. See who logs in. The family is being consulted."

Bruno then glanced at Pete who easily nodded.

"It's unlikely Roseanne's death was planned — the clumsy deposition of the body suggests that. Rushed perhaps. The dagger we found in Ryan's backpack had blood on it we now know matches Roseanne's DNA, as does the dried blood on the costume found nearby — all intimating some kind of gaudy event. A video possibly. I've already seeded a couple of undercover radicals looking for a poser — one Ryan Dyck, an LAPD 'plant'. Pictures of Ryan will soon be ubiquitous. That should flush out some info. There were a hundred posters of Roseanne printed. We may

double that. We don't know how many were actually placed. And we're still not sure who ordered them. Mrs. Hartley contacted the Adult Missing Persons Unit but did not order the posters. Sadly, understandably, she's suffering from bouts of amnesia — aggravated by her loss no doubt. One family member, a cousin with power of attorney for her, has agreed to the utility of leaving the posters, even adding to their number. She too is puzzled by them. I think we take another look at the club you saw this Roseanne look-a-like at. The manager might have some info if she's a regular there. Worth a trip." He added, looking down, "As it turns out, the lady in question may be a current 'person of interest' in an allied case. Money laundering big time. We'll be especially interested if it's the same person. I'll have a picture of her today." The same reflective Bruno concluded by saying, "Salomé's ghost."

He would later tell Mason to forget about his Vancouver plight. "O'Doul's been furloughed. Enough said."

## THIRTY

The Club Reina was a newcomer to the Los Angeles waterfront — an ambitious Hollywood-nostalgia showcase not far from the Crusty Crab. A large grey navy ship, a frigate perhaps, passed quietly in the distance outlined against a warm lucid sky. The same girl Ann Able thought to be Roseanne Hartley sat in the same sidewalk café near the club. Her name was Senta Novak and she *was* 'a person of interest' in an ongoing FBI investigation. Her picture Ann had verified as the Roseanne Hartley double she'd seen earlier in the same café. Two gents who were clearly enamoured and inclined to think they were God's gift were trying to pick her up. She had pulled her arm away from one man when the manager and one of the

waiters approached. After some sharp words the two left, one frequently looking back at the girl while indulging a dismissive shrug. The girl smiled at the manager and resumed her showy crossed-leg pose on one of the café's mod Dolphin chairs. Bruno, who'd been looking at the framed celebrity pics inside the Club Reina, nodded for his handsome undercover companion to approach the girl, then went outside and took up a seat at a nearby table.

"Great conversationalists those two?" the undercover agent asked.

The girl laughed. "It was not that obvious for me."

"You waiting for someone?"

Again the durable smile. "I wait for some people, yes. They are waiting for a guy who is late."

"The club next door is new."

"I think so."

"The offer of a drink is not, I guess, on."

"I should not — not today. I will not have the time to enjoy it."

"You like it here?"

She looked at him with a wary smile. "It is close to home. Friendly. Fresh air — on some days, like today." She looked him over again, less amiably this time. "They make the great malted milk shake here, I am told." This wry mock comment seemed to please her.

"Any chance of seeing you later?"

The girl took him in with renewed candor, then reached for a cigarette. "I smoke. Is not a benefit sometimes. 'Smoke Free' is everywhere."



“I’d like to see you.” He added with a grin, “I know a club that has a terrace with ashtrays.”

The girl laughed, studied him. “You are, as they say, a ‘find’— you think, yes?”

The man shrugged. “Not often.”

It was then Bruno spoke. “Hey you, the girl obviously wants to be left alone. Take a hike.”

The man looked at his stern-faced partner-for-the-day, shrugged and left, keeping his smile to himself. After a short time Bruno said, “Don’t mean to be forward, miss, but you seemed uncomfortable. I like the place too. The area — memories. Best on your own, somedays.” He smiled, lit a cigar, looked off at the distant frigate.

The girl too looked away and toyed with her cigarette as if Bruno’s comment touched her. She was about to say something when the manager announced with some finality, “They’re here.” The remark was non-descript; he could have been talking to anyone.

Two men got out of a dark stretch limo that had pulled up to the side of the club, came over and escorted the girl into the back seat. Before disappearing she gave Bruno a brief smile.

“Great escort crew,” Bruno wryly said to the manager, then, “A regular?”

“Never seen her before.”

Bruno promptly paid his tab and departed, not leaving a tip.

Bruno, Pete, Tara and Mason watched a surveillance tape an hour later in Bruno’s ‘layaway pad’, as Mason characterized it for a wistful

Ann Able. Bruno provided the travelogue.

“As you can see, the stretch limo that picked Senta up from the café has stopped by a pier where the famous yacht, the *Kismet II*, is anchored near the Los Angeles Yacht Club...on which Vincent Gebara and some friends are staying. The yacht just returned from the Bahamas where Gebara met some people at Little Whale Cay including a contingent from the German Consulate in Nassau. The security was blue-chip. We’ve had Gebara and several of his associates on our radar for some time. The coincidence of your interest in the guy and noting this look-a-like escort were lucky draws. We’ve been watching the area to identify the yacht’s guests, but only made the specific connection with the girl today.”

After a quick fast forward he resumed.

“A second limo now is taking the girl home — she stayed until daybreak on the *Kismet*. Her identity has been confirmed. Senka Novak, an aspiring Serb model who sought work in the U.S. a year ago. With some success apparently — she has an agent and will be in the American Vogue boutique pages next month. You’ll note that her escort in the limo sees her into her suite then returns to the limo with what appears to be a DVD case.”

When the tape ended, Bruno poured himself a further cup of coffee and topped up the others. Mason had never tasted or needed a stronger brew! After glancing at Pete, Bruno took up where he left off.

“Ms. Novak’s association with Gebara remains a puzzle — if she’s more than a select escort. Her resemblance to Roseanne Hartley *is* uncanny. Gebara’s associates are a wide assortment — British, Russian, German. Three of them billionaires. Gebara heads a consulting and advertising firm — some of its promotional work you’re familiar with. He manages a multi-tier product distribution network — mainly pharmaceuticals

— some of which go to Africa and troubled areas in the Middle East. The quality is often substandard. We're just beginning to comprehend the extent of it. He no longer runs a seamy match-making service called Medley which Ann was familiar with. His film work — he sponsors films — is as much a hobby or obsession as a business, as his match-making service may have been. He's been known in the department to patronize several cult film makers, including some porno lads who mainly work offshore. He has a yen for 'rough' sex. As a voyeur it seems. He works with, or trusts, very few people. He may even suffer from SID — sensory integration disfunction — has trouble engaging fully in leisure and play. One assessment from our evaluators. We have a clip of him briskly rebuking an older woman who was fawning over him in a casino. She thought he was a relative, she said. He does like to gamble, but only at a distance. His bets are placed by a surrogate via a real time code system. We've not followed up on some of these business ventures — until now. We should have some interesting info in a few days."

Bruno then turned to Tara — to Ann Able — the renewed deliberation in his speech a call to attention.

"Were you to approach him — ask him if he had any more promo work, tell him you're in between engagements and a little antsy — he much approved of the stocking ads — we'll be able to better assess his intentions, current preoccupations, habits, comings and goings, and so on. Your own evaluation will be useful of course. We too think his association with Ryan Dyck had an ominous criminal side. Using Ryan's talent as a 'pry' for one — anticipating gang interests and targets and possibly working skin trade scams. He is, in his way, a venturesome and canny tycoon. His lawyers, the very best."

If Mason was aghast, Ann considered the suggestion with a deliberation he'd rarely seen. He bit his tongue. Finally she spoke.



“I’d have a sitter...throughout...?”

“Of course. Gebara’s recently promoting a leather goods manufacturer — using some of the Aztec motifs in the hosiery line. He’ll likely need some models, and employing you now would be a fine coup for him. He’s also acquired a casino, a Bellerophon franchise. He’ll offer you something, I’m sure. We’ll see you have a boyfriend — your sitter — who’ll seem carefree. Not your current studio escort. Sorry Ann, but this guy has to be an unknown and special forces grade. You might mention, in due course, that you’d seen an old friend here but lost contact with her, then saw a missing person poster and got worried. Could he perhaps help? Possible?”

Ann again promptly nodded. “Yes. Of course.”

“Then we’ll send a staged tape to Gebara via a friend’s e-mail — of a street person being queried by a vice-squad officer who’s investigating the rumour of a snuff porn film set in ancient Judea — as you hinted Ann. The officer will show the person a picture of Roseanne. The person will mention seeing a poster of the girl and a rumor he’s heard about the film. A plea of innocence about the tape — from the friend — won’t impress Gebara. Suspicion among perps is always useful. We’ll carefully follow his response.”

Mason silently, somberly looked into his hands. Ann noted his unease and reached over and touched his arm. “I can handle it,” she said.

Bruno added, “It’s a question we shouldn’t minimize. We’re working impromptu here — he might well be aware of Roseanne’s disappearance, even her death. It’s possible he would know of a gamy video or film she may have performed in, and whether Ryan was involved. As I’ve intimated — it’s a favorite ‘hobby’ of Gebara’s.”

After a further consideration Ann Able again said with conviction, again looking at Mason, “I can handle it. He’s one ‘fellow’ I’ve got to deal with.”

Mason put his head into his hands. It seemed he was the milksop here. The late news about Deirdre was as dispiriting. His Muse was paralyzed and remained in a coma. If Tara, Ann Able, had softened the blow, her courage, her determination overshadowed his elegy for Deirdre.

### THIRTY-ONE

“Vincent? It’s Vincent isn’t it?”

As planned, Ann Able ‘ran into’ Vincent Gebara as he strode from his hotel to a waiting limo. He had departed the yacht that week and taken up a suite in the J.W. Marriott Hotel. FBI watchers had been following Gebara’s comings and goings, which proved to be surprisingly regular that week. On cue, Ann approached the hotel — to meet her ‘friend’ — and ‘belatedly’ saw Gebara briskly stride out from the hotel entrance. The sun had nearly set and adjacent building facades limned some figures in a bronze aura.

Ann apologized, smiled, then affirmed her recognition. “Vincent!” Gebara was a moment taking her in. “Hi. Long time! It’s me. Ann. I’m meeting a friend.”

Gebara affected a belated recognition — so Ann guessed.

“Of course — *Quetzal!* — the very one. Ann Able. How are you? You look great. My word. We’re off to the new show lounge and casino — the Bellerophon — you might have heard of it. Why not join us? Do, yes.”

He broadly smiled and genially beckoned.

Ann hesitated. “I’m meeting a friend, from the studio.”

“Bring him along. More the merrier!”

“Really! Good lord. Well great! Let me get him. He’d love to come, I’m sure. I was to meet him in the Concierge Lounge. I’ve read about it — the Bellerophon.”

“Splendid. Andrew come over here.” He motioned to one of his companions. “You remember Ann — Ann Able — our super model for *Quetzal*! Ann Able — Andrew Foison.

“Mon Dieu! — in the flesh. I’ve only seen the ads, mam-selle! But here, now! You’re joining us of course.” He reached over, smartly took and kissed her hand. Dismissively Vincent said. “Don’t mind him — he’s Flemish, or pretends to be. Some family that dates back to the crusades. Don’t get him started.”

Vincent’s joviality wained a bit when Ann returned with her boyfriend, all 260 pound chiseled muscle of him, his neck alone the size of a stallion’s. Being handsome as well didn’t help, though Gebara seemed relieved when Ann took his arm saying, “Don’t mind Freddie. He sees I don’t split a nail — unnecessarily.” She initially sensed Gebara pull away, but she held on and he duly accommodated the showy act.

The gesture had the wanted effect and, with Ann in tow, the entourage set off to Gebara’s new show lounge and casino, the Bellerophon, one in a growing chain of clubs the Russian entrepreneur named ‘Kissy’ Borozov had devised. Vincent Gebara was a late franchisee. If Gebara was a sufferer of SID he seemed immune that night. So the determined Ann surmised.



For both Ann and ‘Freddie’ it was a new experience. Neither had been in such a sumptuous and detailed historic surround before. Ancient Greek as it turned out. “Delta Force lifer,” was Freddie’s quiet comment to Ann on seeing a splendid hoplite warrior in the lobby. Before the inner mosaics of a chap on a winged horse facing a terrible beast, a Chimaera, he added, “Great Osprey that. The horse.” Ann smiled. Freddie played his part well, staying not quite out of sight, while ‘reconciling’ himself to Ann’s ‘impromptu’ engagement with Gebara. They exchanged fond glances and smiles, which Gebara took in with suave good humour — a surprise for Ann, for he did not quite fit, at least that night, the character of the malignant overlord she imagined him to be, making her wonder just how culpable he was in late events. The confusion was limited though. The man’s seamless ingratiation, when away from strictly merchandising decisions — her initial witness to his business firmament — earmarked the successful modern buccaneer. Some of Mason’s pessimism had rubbed off.

The stage show opened with a snooty comedian known as the Gryphon, whose rendering of topical obsessions had a sardonic edge that might elicit both laughter and tears, but was maybe too esoteric that night to invite either, his very presence in such a club a further surprise for Ann. He pretended to acknowledge ready applause before he began.

“As we’ve learned in the last few days, it’s best to insult only people who are too weak to retaliate or too dumb or distracted to realize they’ve under review. Only object to another’s taste if you can easily, readily and equanimously thrash him. For instance, you can say what you like about traditional Western stuff — the new Judas Gospel craps all over the first Catholic hierarchy. Indeed, you might think its author was talking about today’s Vatican. You can even stick a historic crucifix in a gallon of urine — now that’s perceptive art. Several connoisseurs have assured us of it. The

many critics of the Jews say that if God gave them the Holy Land why didn't He tell anyone else? Even our American President shuns the Israeli Prime Minister. So God's either decided or has a crucial wager going." He looked expressly about the room.

Some intermittent laughter.

"The message here is becoming axiomatic. Jokes about Jews and Christians in general are getting a little trite. No sense flogging dead horses. Other religious groups naturally are either lying low or flaunting fresh kills. Comedians and cartoonists who value their lives have to be careful about whom they burlesque these days. They might look to the subgroups. Consider: we've not heard many quips about Baptists or Mormons, say. Silly rumors that Mitt Romney may run again for President remain just that — silly rumors! Mormons take the hits like veteran boxers, barely batting an eye. No audience potential there. As for Baptists...good lord, they feel guilty just clapping in church."

Polite laughter from the stylish genteel audience. An audience that surprised both Ann and Mason.

"Understandable. A word to the wise — to the 'prudently edgy' — those who want to be seen as perceptive and courageous but tend to shun head hackers. It's the operating principle these days: *Safe Edginess*. How to be winsomely daring yet safe. You don't want a group of belligerent critics waiting for you at the stage door with tar and feathers, let alone knives and bombs. So you burlesque those who can't afford Phil Beck, won't put your children at risk, or are too slow to realize they're being butt-ended. You've got to be alert, shrewdly selective. Best to hunt down folks who haven't realized how odious they've become."

This esoteric analysis produced one or two amens but generally a quiet sonority. In all fairness, most people were still finishing their desserts

and jawing with friends and guests.

“We’re in the thrall of multiculturalism folks, and ethical micro-management. Cosmopolitan birth rates count here. Without them your multiculturalism lacks ‘multi’. And without ‘multi’ we don’t get on. Just for instance, your local hairy Salafi will be less inclined to date the few remaining transgender priests. Even Al Sharpton’s cheery nature may not be enough to affiance the last Camille Paglia.”

The Gryphon paused as if to acknowledge the audience’s tepid response, then said with a leading smile, “Dance me to the end of love, as one popular prophet has said. A quick-step today. For instance, on the same day Massachusetts fondly legalized marijuana and same-sex marriage — the dancers keeled over. I quote Leviticus 20:13: ‘If a man fox trot with another man he must be stoned.’”

A few laughs and nods of approval or resignation but mainly a tolerant hush. The Gryphon himself seemed irresolute about proceeding. It seemed the audience awaited the next act, a Russian dancer billed as an Apsara. Finally he said, “Okay, I give up. She’s on her way. Live!”

The curiosity for Ann Able was that Gebara — this Gebara — continued to foil the sinister image she had of him. He behaved rather well this night, seeing that Freddie was not neglected nor condescended to. And he seemed genuinely pleased to see her. Her lingering anxiety was that she had overlooked something, that her performance here as an actor was only as good as the script. And here she was winging it.

The performance of the dancer — the numinous Apsara — was as beguiling and rarefied an exhibition of ‘exhibitionism’ as she’d seen. The transformation of the costume itself a wonder — from hermetic habit to bejeweled divinity, the proceeding revelations fluent and oddly decorous — the dancing of a Terpsichore who prized Sylphic movement and the



music of Aram Khachaturian and Dimitri Shostakovich, ending with the wondrous and humbly named Second Waltz by Shostakovich — music Mason himself had been plying her with. The next and final act was every bit as unexpected — none other than a splendid choral group, sounding like the Robert Shaw Chorale, singing seasonal carols in a seamless disco style with a great rhythm group and dancers dressed as shepherds and shepherdesses. The audience loved it. The performance recalled to her an old pleasing Christmas CD by Bony M. To which Gebara joined in with a fine bass baritone voice. By then Freddie was in the grip of a very droll expression. The audience itself seemed surreal, so appreciative of all the performers, a parody of an audience you expect to find in a show lounge. Ann Able was biting her tongue...in this quizzical setting. Moreover, how do you thank a suspected monster for a singularly touching night out? Was the whole enterprise a mere show? A clever means to mislead? But for whom for gawdsake? Was she ‘in fact’ dreaming?...

“That was a remarkable show!”

“A bit of a gamble. Yes. The casino itself, a floor below, is the business end. The show lounge is the work of the Russian who devised it. A quiet but assertive chap. A class act a little above me but well executed. His select introductory vouchers account for many in the audience here tonight. The acts may have to change over time of course. As I’ve said, he’s a singular chap — a 19th Century Russian, an elegant old-fashioned romantic. A *Pensant*, someone said. We’ll see. The casino is another matter of course. The sums are huge. The gambling franchise has a reputation with affluent Asian gamblers. The Russian behind it, a brother to the show lounge impresario, does a lot of business in Singapore and China. He and his brother don’t get on — as you might expect. I perhaps should have explained. Fortunately, the youngsters of the Asian élite here have found it well, ‘copacetic’ — the casino. I must show you the underground

parking lot some time. The cars.” Nearly askance over what she was hearing, Ann had no difficulty asking if he needed any model performers these days: she was in between engagements and a bit restless.

“My word. You must have read my mind. I do have an offer. Two really. But the one takes precedence. It is a bit of a departure for me — a film about a very early Christian, specifically at the time of Herod Antipas. We’ve had to interrupt the undertaking — one of the lead performers left early on in a huff, didn’t get along with a cast member — incensed the chap was even hired I’m told. Not sure just why. I also think she, the performer, and the director didn’t get on. Anyway, we’ve been looking high and low for a replacement.”

It took an addled Ann Able a moment to field her question, “What’s the film called?”

“It’s loosely based on Oscar Wilde’s play *Salomé*. We’ve changed several lines and added others. An update you might say. The production team has made some stunning palace sets. It’s set in the Middle East of course, as you must know. A new indeed refreshing take on an early Christian prophet. We think it will have legs today. We’ve had a time getting it into production. But things should go smoothly from now on.”

Ann was dumbstruck and struggled to keep a straight face — thinking again she was dreaming. “The notorious beheading of John the Baptist! Isn’t that a bit daring — in this day and age?”

“It’s also a promotional bonanza — in this day and age! Think of the media debate it will foster.”

Ann struggled to affect a smile. “I can only wonder what part I could possibly play in such a production.”

Gebara nodded and resumed the solicitous tutorial that continued to

daunt.

“The focus of the work is less centered on Salomé than it is on Herodias — her mother. A bit of a departure of course, but we’ve cast Salomé as very young, and her mother a smart perceptive and still captivating woman — not a jealous vengeful harridan but an engaging seer. Yes.” Gebara’s smile was airtight. “Herod is portrayed as a haunted troubled fellow — badly in need of distracting compensation. How it all works out is less in keeping with the so-called historic reality than a take on, well — ‘sense and sensibility!’ Yes, a Jane Austen ‘take’ you can say.” Again the treasured enigmatic smile as Ann suppressed a welling incredulous laugh. “Meeting you as I have this evening, I’m hoping you might consider auditioning for the part of Herodias. It’s her foresight that saves the day — in our production. I cannot guarantee the part, for we are looking at two other actresses. But I’d be grateful if you’d consider it.”

By this time Tara was almost sniggering. She could hardly believe what she was hearing. “Goodness. I take it Salomé survives then.”

“Well, she certainly survives the film. John the Baptist proves to be a rather disgusting tramp she uses for a time to tease her beset father, who’s been a delinquent guardian in the past. In the end Salomé tells her dear John — John the Baptist, Jokanaan — that he badly needs a bath.”

Gebara jovially laughed at this, inviting Tara to join in, which she did with an agile smile. The entire evening had taken on a bizarre, freakish aspect — not the least being a Gebara who sounded at times as eccentric as Antoine Plombiers, making her wryly wonder if they might be in cahoots!

“I must admit — the part sounds very interesting. Where would an audition take place?”

Gebara pulled a business card from his breast pocket. “Give me a



call early next week. We'll arrange a time and place. I do think you have a good chance of getting the part."

A ready smile followed this assertion.

If Ann Able then expected a presumptive offer of a late night drink, she was further surprised by Gebara's apology for having to leave when the show ended. "I do have a bit of a gambling problem and have promised a bad loser a rematch, to begin — he checked his watch — within the hour. Do please give me a call. I won't be so pressed next week. Now let me get you and Freddie a cab."

Later, a bemused Ann conferred with an edgy, disbelieving, sleep-deprived Mason.

"No, I don't think I was followed. Well, fairly sure."

Mason was by then listening with steeped wonder to Ann's rarefied evening with Gebara. His sense of the surreal also resurfaced. Ann had returned to their hotel hoping not to wake him, but he had been anxious for her and not slept. He had wanted to tag along that evening but Bruno wouldn't have it. "A matter of safety and surveillance," he sternly said.

Soon Ann was beside him in the bed while still reviewing the evening's unbelievable events. She had climbed under the covers nude but continued as if her words were summoned by an oracle. Mason was readily dismayed by the prospect of her actually considering a Gebara film, a preposterous one at that, the sardonic aspect as much taunt as excuse he thought.

"My god, you can't go through with this. Not now!"

“I have to — can’t live with the blinding confusion. All the charged clouds. Something’s very odd. Audacious on one level, malarky on another. The tease won’t let up.”

Mason frowned. “Go make the film in Australia. You need some open space.”

This produced a smile, then a further surprise as she turned to face him. “I may not get that part. It happens.” Then, after a wink, “My fail-safe lover usually puts out here...helping one forget.”

After a sheepish hesitation, Mason declared, “He’s on call tonight.

## THIRTY-TWO

The intercepted cell phone conversations added more pieces to the Gebara puzzle. Again Bruno’s pad was the venue for the ‘concordance’ as Pete put it, jauntily citing Bruno’s own world. The fact the sun was radiant and a surging sea calm after another sudden storm capped the moment. Bruno introduced the recordings with a short acknowledgement: “They’re fragments. The timing device on our receiver has a delay default to elude warning prompts. As I’ve said, Gebara’s security is blue-chip. We’re not entirely sure we’re ‘cryptonymous’. We trust we are. The voice on the first short segment is Gebara’s.”

*G: ...Oh come on...it can’t have been him. He’s in Yemen...it’s been confirmed. It was just another snoop that looked like him. You said he was clean-shaven yes?...well, there you are. Incidentally, don’t call me again on this line. You’ll get a new prompt in due course.*

“That excerpt was from his hotel room,” Bruno explained. “The

next is from the Bellerophon office. A late exchange. The second voice is that of a person we're trying to identify. Gebara calls him Abba."

G: *...Yes...most promising Abba...Ann Able has agreed to an audition and will likely get the part.*

A: *So it's decided.*

G: *It's another means to upgrade the legitimacy, stifle any leftover rumour mongers. Peter Leone is still directing of course.*

A: *I thought he was away — on a 'sabbatical'.*

G: *No, he had a bout of pneumonia, but is better now.*

A: *The crew's not the same?*

G: *A different film crew, yes.*

A: *And the posters? What will you do with those?*

G: *What will we do with the posters? Nothing. Sweet Fanny Adams. She's 'missing'. End of story. We thought of using Senta, making her up to resemble Roseanne...but it's risky. PLaying Salomé will be sweetly distracting*

A: *Your replacement — the Czech. Senta Novak.*

G: *Very yummy indeed. It's in the works, by the way, the 'Santa Baby' tube. She's a gem in it — Senta. Should be out soon. In France I think, first off. It'll get special publicity there, a further ignition switch —ha, ha — for the iceman who is being trained as we speak and will soon be ready — our antsy maniac. Santa Baby! Ha, ha.*

What followed was in Arabic — between the caller and a person Gebara apparently handed the phone off to. Bruno glanced at the others. "We're having a comprehensive translation done. I've seen some passages. Allahu Akbar figures in at least one salutation. It is complex — the gist. Involuted. As some strategies are. We've pretty well concluded Gebara



hopes to revive, rejuvenate Western culture by alerting middle-class Westerners to the peril of multiculturalism, the anarchy it fosters. More on that in due course. He is an eccentric operator, his use of confrontational art, principally film, another means to provoke the stolid middle class — which is often characterized in the arts community as inane, bigoted, heartless, specious even. As I said, eccentric, involuted — his craft. However, the rumour of a late film or video, that possibly involved Roseanne Hartley, must have alarmed him. He could end up an accomplice to a murder if he was connected to it, embedded in a legal cocoon for some time. The project obviously went awry. To what extent he sanctioned it we don't know. In any case, he seems determined to keep that production under wraps by conspicuously conceding delays and underfunding of the self-same film — the imputation being that his late intervention has salvaged a fine stalled venture. So he's obviously worried. And by making the film both visually stunning and flattering to the day's Zeitgeist — the ascent of women — he's upstaged some of the needy prattlers. So far he seems to be succeeding. By patronizing the feminist lobby, who are now denigrating most privileged men — an obsessed Jewish potentate here — the film will appeal to heady progressives. One way to slight or, as the cognoscenti say, 'occult' the suspicious, admonish the rumourmongers." Here Bruno paused, as if acknowledging a point of order. "The reworked film shouldn't distract us from his overall crusade however. In short, Gebara believes only an antagonized West will rise up to confront Islam — a faith he loathes, believing only a peon, a thrall can and will adhere to it. Hence his need to render jihadi offences ever more heinous and Western pop culture ever more dissolute for a remaining fed-up middle class — his 'forlorn hope' you might say. As I said — involuted. Yet he's determined, even if he's dancing on the end of a pin. I'll leave off the question of madness for the time being. He may intend a disastrous end to this current film. A bomb perhaps. Another 'unforgivable tragedy'. We

shouldn't discount the possibility. It's unlikely he would actually flatter the PC brigades. As I said — 'involuted'."

After staidly pausing to add more cream to his coffee, Bruno voiced a new wrinkle. "Gebara seems vexed by the growing 'truther' cabal — the West's own conspiracy theorists who pillory Western institutions and their stewards — the 'self-appointed praetorians' as one writer put it. The West's own august insurgents.

Mason suppressed a laugh. Taking in the alerted others he added, "The 'new psalm singers' — one of Dirk's early expressions."

Bruno wryly smiled, settled his cup and saucer on a side table, and resumed his telling narration. "Like the 'truthers', the smarter jihadi recruiters are fashioning a generic denunciation of the West for disgruntled and insolent young men — dissidents the West seems to incubate as well as anywhere. What effect the 'truthers' have on general opinion is hard to gauge. The jihadis shrewdly exploit the Western sense of equity and fairness, and anguish over insult — the PC mantra. As you know, our media pride themselves on their courage and resource, but generally shy away from innuendo or rumor not centered on — a brash, self-assured Republican who's not yet 'checked his privilege', a white venal 'cuckservative', a disgraced traditionalist, a lax Catholic cleric, say, or pedophile sports coach. I leave open the question of being 'mad or Muslim'...as *bons viveurs* parlay 'gay or European'. Most if not all terrorists are deemed mad by the media, yet the same media has trouble attributing ruthlessness to any tenant of the Religion of Peace. Some scholars of course think Islam is not a religion — the sociological definition of which allows for an 'optional' church, a different or separate assembly — but a creed one writer calls an 'absolutist fiefdom', a feudal thralldom where only its warriors are sanctioned a measure of license—the appeal to many restless men. Hence our urgent need to know more, and advise."

With some weariness Ann said, “I’d still like to know in more detail Gebara’s pretexts, and his masks. For instance, is the Bellerophon one of his baits — some kind of, well, snooty target for a bomber...I mean, how committed and sly is he?”

“Good question. As with all ‘ultraists’ there are curiosities. The current Bellerophon show lounge has as much to do I think with Gebara’s gambling habit and the urbane Russian who programmed the show lounge. Which serves to mask the exclusive member-only gambling club below — the work of the roué bother. Gebara’s commitment to provocative film making is perhaps the chief oddity. I think the project Ryan Dyck may have performed in was for a time off his radar. Being a possible accessory, however inadvertently, would sully both his business dealings and his standing in his fascist cabal. Thus his need to extol the current film, make it into something notable to foil rumor. He suavely said a while back, if memory serves, ‘Yes, I fund the occasional *outré* film — hoping to find a director who can make sensuousness elegant, eloquent, free it from, well, its ‘Augean stables’. He often alludes to mythic tales.” Here Bruno indulged a smile. “The irony is that this task of the stalwart Hercules, cleaning up the dirty Augean stables, was accomplished without due payment! But I digress.”

Mason freely added, “One time Mycenaean Eurystheus, king of Tiryns, who ordered the cleanup, declined to pony up.” He smiled. “One of the stories I know. Seldom have an opportunity...”

Said a head-up Ann, “He does play the swank connoisseur. Do you still think I can play a part in this, this cock-and-bull film. Sorry.”

Said Pete with a rare chuckle, “‘Bull cock’ — a good Gebara handle that.”

Said Bruno, “Freddie will be around of course. Indeed, Gebara



may think him a ‘seal’ of approval for such a film. Pun intended. He turned to Mason. “You’re not happy though.”

Fondly looking at Ann he said, “I have the most to lose.”

Ann fondly smiled. “My alter ego.”

To Ann Bruno said with conviction, “Audition for the film. You’re safe there with Freddie as elsewhere. He’ll act as your agent — one of the adhesive ones. We’ll make sure he’s up on the lingo. You’ll learn some things about Gebara we can all use. And the film will have some legs. Gebara’s counting on it and paying his publicists handsomely I’m sure. A net benefit for a good actress. No qualms necessary.”

### THIRTY-THREE

Mason’s reluctant re-engagement in the ongoing infiltration of recruitment cells — his worry for Tara, for Ann Able, spurred him on — came the day he asked a kindly guest Muslim lecturer he’d listened to at Gordon College to recommend a group that was, as he put it, ‘adroitly critical of Western culture’. The time was overdue he said. He conceded to the instructor that he was particularly dissatisfied with his lot, with many ugly trends in the West, and sensed something vital and salutary in Islam and wanted to learn more and help out where he could. He’d read some criticisms on the internet and wanted to get in touch with people who were determined to make a change. He wasn’t able to do much physically, he said, his limp in approaching the instructor more or less self-evident. But he was articulate and might help with things like reports or manifestos. He came dressed in his ‘minimal’ disguise: a short beard — he had not shaved for well over a month — a cropped head, thick thin-framed specta-

cles, and a dark knitted watchman's cap. Makeup still covered his birth mark.

The instructor looked at him with a gravity Mason hadn't thought him capable of expressing and said, after judicious reflection, "Stay after the class next week. I will call a friend and see if I can give you an address. What may I call you?"

"Tom's fine. Tom Graves."

"I shall look for you next week, Tom."

Following that lecture — select quotes from the Hadith and the Sunna of the Prophet — Mason waited until the last questioners who hung around after left, then approached the instructor, who again looked at him with a sudden diffidence that slowly dissolved into his feature smile. "Ah yes. I haven't forgotten. I won't be long." He then turned and entered a door at the back of the hall, promptly closing it after him. The man was gone long enough for Mason to wonder if he should just leave — worrying he may have bitten off this day more than he could chew. Bruno's patience and acuity, and Ann's selfless determination kept him there — the attendant need to pull his weight.

The man returned through the same door looking at first abstracted, only taking in Mason when he approached. His smile had vanished. "You are sure you wish to enter into a serious dialogue with the Prophet? You have no hesitation? No ulterior motive? We'll find out soon enough if you do. As you know, mischief makers abound."

Mason nodded, trying to match the novel gravity of the instructor's face. He had carefully rehearsed his lines, trying to make them sound impromptu. "I believe the time has come for me to sort out my life. I think I must consider Islam's path to, well, dis-illusion. We sometimes call it 'dis-

ambiguation’.” The concept he had carefully selected. It seemed to appeal to the instructor.

“It is an arduous ‘path’.”

“Well, I can only begin with my own limitations.”

Again the instructor looked at him with something approaching forbearance, the prologue to his provisional smile.

“I know of a meeting you may wish to attend. It is in a building not far from here. It is a select group, and you will be requested to register your name and address. You may be scanned before entering. A timely precaution. You must consider the consequences of attending. You will be approaching a sobering new vista, a new reckoning of your life. It will be hard to turn back. Very hard.”

“It is what I want. Dearly want.” Thespian Ann had tutored him in a ‘dramatic role’.

With his new facial makeup, new identity papers, and his ‘preloved’ clothes, he felt reasonably assured he could pass as an interested loner. Thus, giving over to a ‘method performance’, he entered the upstairs room of an abandoned storefront, where he was promptly scanned and presented with a register for his name, address, occupation and language skills. After this scrutiny he was allowed to join a small congregation of 16 individuals — he was the 17th — in a musty barren room with a single desk in front. He was the last to enter. He was surprised to find a nondescript group you might find at a college or university, an arts and science class, geography say. He was further surprised to see only five non-whites, and all of these joking with their neighbors. Only two in the group sported beards. A few at the back even glanced his way and smiled as he entered. “Good show,” one said, offering a hand. For the first time Ma-



son wondered if he'd overdone the disguise. Were these not typical Americans — born and bred?

A muscular man with rimless glasses and a shock of white hair entered and placed a folder on the desk. He stoically looked about the room and stated, "God willing, we will begin." This was followed by a short invocation in Arabic. Looking again about the room with what Mason imagined a headmaster's propriety he said, "We are fortunate today to hear from a recent convert who speaks with an eloquence few of us master. His words are a beacon of light in this dark age. Please welcome the exceptional Naguib Shehta."

The applause was prolonged, or so Mason thought, as he wrestled with the unsettling suspicion that he knew this newcomer — had in fact gone to school with him. As the recognition registered he could barely believe his senses: the man then standing before them, this inspiring charismatic convert, despite the robe, straggly blond beard and Taquiyah cap, was none other than Dirk Church, now known as Naguib Shehta! Who promptly began his presentation with the old pernicious Charlie Manson calumny about Jews which, given the applause and laughter that greeted it, was a favorite trope here. If Mason anticipated a barrage of callous cynicism he knew Dirk capable of, he was shocked by the tailor-made invective for this crowd. No audience like a credulous, engrossed audience! So he surmised. If he worried about his own identity he soon believed Dirk was sufficiently caught up in his own contumely and the raptness of his audience to see only a crowd that responded as one — including himself!

"We are often told there is no humor in Islam. That we cannot laugh at life. Well consider this: without anti-Semitism the Jew would cease to exist. Anti-Semitism is the defining karma for the Jew. Assimilation is his death knell. The indifferent marginal member the key danger. His touted

singularity — as the Chosen People of God — lapses when he’s just another dude, another good time Charlie. Even the appeal of science and the arts can default. He needs to be singled out to be ‘satisfied’, his deeds conspicuous and unrivaled. Anti-Semitism is a meme, a reassurance of singularity! Curious God never told anyone else about his ‘Chosen People’. Was the Jewish God finally a little embarrassed maybe?...”

This gamy testimonial elicited protracted laughter. Mason didn’t join in. The question of anti-Semitism was for him but another historic clumping of perversity, a conclusion he knew that could be considered anti-semitic in some quarters. His own motley ancestors would be among the guilty and the vanquished in such carnage. The few Jews he knew were exceptional, independent, resourceful folk. Their very shrewdness and insularity sometimes daunting. Vide the Holocaust revisionist David Cole! A formidable writer like the flinty Hannah Arendt, who would write half *The Origins of Totalitarianism* in footnotes, was as intimidating. Such exacting scholarship always impugned. He was ever deficient, even possibly culpable around such erudition. Confusion was no excuse. In the end he decided he was simply too dumb, too stolid to understand such subtlety, such honed ‘discrimination’. And if not pleased to be another feckless Gentile, reconciled to the likelihood. He now resented the malicious Dirk the more for reminding him of this incapacity as the maniac ventured on, while praying his resentment didn’t show.

“The assimilated Jew becomes just another buccaneer in the sea of cut throat businessmen, promoters, venal investors and regulators. Note, the U.S. can never adopt enough government regulations — because Americans have no spiritual core, no residual integrity left. If there’s no consensus about right and wrong, who’s left to abide by an agreement? Ever more elaborate rules, laws and regulations make enforcement desultory and deviance self-sustaining. *America’s* Jews have, by and large, been

blessed, American's want of self-regulatory morals a boon to the clever huckster. Indeed, America's ventures in the Middle East, which have caused much instability, were spurred in part by a fervid Jewish-Christian-Fundamentalist lobby allied to a military-industrial nexus that seeds distrust to boost its importance. You build peerless new weapons you don't shelve them. Though they're harder and harder to use today because the new feminist utopia is championed by American's current goody-goody President and his unctuous administration."

Ready laughter surfaced here.

"Today the new feckless progressive is a romantic and wants to atone for his culture's sins — all the exacting traditional beliefs and their adherents. Bless him. Christianity is, as we've seen, a very wormy moribund creed. The Pope Himself is patronizing Marxism in the hope of salvaging his degenerate church and clergy. Even indulging in what amounts to pedophilia, fondly washing everybody's feet. He can't stand anyone getting their feet dirty."

The amusement here was mockingly stoic.

"He's even now a climate change guru. Who rarely mentions Jesus any more, just the destitute and dispossessed, while his Cardinals quietly pander to the Mafia, the Vatican Bank discretely laundering money — well, it would wouldn't it, being so reliant on Mafia inspired accountants who tend the tithes, donations and charities that help keep the same insular clergy in creature comforts. Talk about the evils of sinecures, loose money and bottom up sex! Like the hedge fund brokers — almost anything goes!"

More enthusiastic applause. If Mason fancied asking questions about some Muslim exploits — ingrained pedophilia and forced child marriage, the stark flags of the niqab and burka, pious honor killings, includ-



ing theatric stoning and maiming, terrorist earmarked charities, chattel slavery, endemic corruption and extortion, rote teaching of Xenophobia, routine female mutilation and servitude — or the Gulf States refusing to take a single Muslim refugee, suggesting the Ummah’s espousal of kinship was a fine gaseous old croc. Moreover, the want of indigenous accomplishment beyond the above was one of the singular historic absences! But he remained silent, duly chagrinned he would not consider such queries here. Just as well, for Dirk was on a role.

“And talking about sex. Pray note the progressive sex education that’s now being jammed down American youngsters’ throats. Inspired by progressives who tout broad spectrum identification — lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, pangender, intra-gender, bi-curious, pan-sensual, situational gender, asexual, transabled, the limb hacker nullos — literally asexual: no outside parts at all — cis-female, cis-man — cis-man being the ugly Western prig who’s raping twenty percent of college women — much of this for grade school kids. One enlightened Facebook guru posits as many as 51 sexual varieties — more to follow I daresay — and wants to remove the sex identification on birth certificates. Pay attention, it gets ravenous here. Who here knows what a TERF is? T-E-R-F. One lad quietly said, “Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminist.” This provoked a few snickers. “Please explain,” Naguib asked. The responder matter-of-factly stated: “Transgender men — men becoming females — resent not being considered women by some feminists because they have no vagina, just an expensive purse.” More abiding laughter over which Naguib asserted, “Indeed. All opposing views are regarded as bigoted and illegitimate — more bewildering identity politics. You try to combine or eliminate some of the above sex groupings and the PC hyenas will tear you limb from limb, including self-mutilating nullos. One daring traditional feminist — yes, there still are such things — has suggested that men changed into women aren’t really women because their artificial vaginas smell worse than regular

women — more bacteria at large, perhaps. So, the modern ‘smell’ test and debate. Any volunteers? For the new ‘menstrual’ show?...”

This nearly brought the house down. After gesturing for calm Nanguib resumed.

“There’s even dismissive names for traditional behavior — mansplaining, whitesplaining, straightsplaining, menterrupting, bropropriating. What the Founding Fathers couldn’t get beyond. The poor sots. The WOC — Women of Color — is now WOC/Non-binary POC — People of Color! In other words, there’s no actual male and female beings any more, or any meaningful ethnicity or creed, only a morass that’s perpetually guessing Who’s really Who, and Who’s on First and shouldn’t be! Even ROTC candidates are now urged to march in women’s shoes! As if women had no say in the shoes they wear. It’s so obvious they want us to win — their senior officers in women’s shoes — the new feminized warrior. Who insists on protection from the cis-gender men. The modern feminist who may never bear or suckle children yet disses the shoes working cis-gal mothers sometimes buy. I mean, how can you prove yourself a mover and shaker if they won’t protect you from the ‘man-babies’!”

The applause here was nearly asthmatic.

“But wait — you ‘ain’t heard nothin’ yet’! Even star athletes want to become feminists, the new lionesses. Brucey, so sorry — Caitlyn! — Jenner spends hours and hours in the media flogging a fine self-dramatic role, so heedful of his ‘debutante balls’, as one canny writer put it.”

The laughter here became convulsive, seismic, the high fives home run hits. Dirk happily waited, then held up his referee hands.

“Just wait until cloning gets off the starting block and the first Woolly Mammoth is re-created. Somebody’s bound to suspect they’ve

dissected the poor beast. Don't laugh. Somebody will find the monster cute sooner than later and in need of 'mentoring' — softening its aggressive tendencies."

Again, helpless laughter, which Dirk patiently waited out, then:

" — Take the clamorous Black community. It continues to savage itself, and I mean savage, yet no one in the black community feels responsible, no one — not even a president who fancies himself an exemplary black, his white relatives tucked away like an embarrassing deuce. Democrats even sidle up to supporters of NWA — Niggaz Wit Attitude — whose icon rap song is 'Fuck tha Police' and, like the African Internationalists, seek to destroy all vestiges of White Western civilization and culture. Some openly encourage killing white people. The earlier Integration movement is now the Diversity movement — diversity meaning Exponentially Entitled! It's all too apparent: only the most gender mutilated and ethnically and socially paranoid lead the hierarchy of the most deserving. The new American aristocracy. The excuse virtuosi, citing discrimination, substance dependency, bipolar fits, antisocial personality disorder — except their own of course — and, the killer, intermittent explosive disorder. Even, yes — unrelenting dissatisfaction disorder. One big name white gal, Rachel Dolezak desperately wanted to be black. Frizzed her hair, dyed her skin. Presented herself as a role model, a black activist scourging white racists — today's cat bird seat — until her white parents had had enough. Anyway, the lady inspired a new word — 'wigger'. Which rhymes with... 'bigger', right?"

The laughter remained intermittently convulsive, audience members still pasting high fives. Mason managed to slap a couple himself. He couldn't remember being more ominously, gruesomely entertained.

"Yes — Americans are exceedingly touchy these days — less touchy-



feely than just touchy. If you haven't read Mother Jones recently — you should. A late piece found that the food Westerners eat is racist, the three-meals-a-day privilege, and that English itself, its grammar and vocabulary, is racist. Yes, racist! Somebody's paying attention. So when someone criticizes you in English you can tell them to F-off because they're using racist lingo! If I'm stuck with using English for the time being you'll understand. Airhead lingo can still be used to stiff the airheads.”

The ready applause for this was sustained, including more high fives which primped the self-esteem. These guys were obviously in tune with the day's fulminators.

“Think of all the PC ‘trigger warnings’, the wormy ‘microaggression’ — yes, microaggression — faintly unpleasant ideas or behaviors as full-scale offenses. There's now a litany of such affronts: microassaults, microinsults, microinvalidations and, for the poorly endowed pinhead, micro-rape.”

If the laughter here was slow in coming, as much from amusement as confusion, Mason thought, it reached a crescendo second-to-none before it abated.

“The academic blether here — the micro insult — is for anal masochists only. The squalid behavior is, I quote, ‘Characterized by predatory non-physical prurient communications with the intent to penetrate the victim's emotional security on the basis of heteronormative impositions.’ Ah ha. Got that? Hetero means ‘other’. Normative means ‘normative’ — *not* ‘other’. What to do? Just spell Indigenous with a capital ‘I’, and give the current 51 sex subsets a thumbs up okay.” General laughter. “As for the left overs, those who still think of themselves as conventional men and women, the dead again believers — they're becoming the new disrespected Niggers! But hang on! Many of these are turing into canny real-

ists who are even now swelling the ranks of the Islamic State! Bless them. They want us to win. They can't wait for us to win. *They can't wait for us to win!* It's what you — you! — were born to do. Show them the way! The light! Allahu Akbar!"

A hush followed, graced with some reverent invocations of the Prophet. Mason was manifestly speechless, which some others seemed to interpret as awe, one duly smiled, nodded his way.

"Some of you may have seen the obscene Tot's and Tiaras, where fathers, mothers parade three- and four-year-olds as fussed over beauty queen goddesses — about as invincibly idiotic and obtuse as American mania gets. Infantile cheer leaders with nothing to cheer. It's quite simple, really, Americans are turning into a bunch of hoary tasteless bat-shit crazies — who have no prospect of joy or fulfillment. Scolding, rebuking the undeserving is their lone vocation. Only their electronic toys distract. They can only engage game board circuits and convulsive ghastriness. Family entertainment today. Look too at Western pop music. Coddled baboon acts, diarrhetic words — not really words but endless mouthings — the 'groovy' stuff — so *rad, fab, brutal, tits*. 'Projective vomiting' one writer called it. The contorted faces of inane pop idols in splendid agony. How you dramatize piles perhaps. One enduringly popular song, less noxious than some — 'I'm Ready' — which gets repeated ad nauseam — sounds like a four-year-old on a potty vainly waiting for his dear mother to wipe him off."

More ready laughter.

"As for Western classical music — the so-call classic symphonic stuff. All that emotion."

Here Mason listened with a particular dread.

“It’s nothing more than the *Requiem* for Western civilization. It’s all there — the terrible fulsome catharsis. The realization that regret, sadness, melancholy is all there is. That’s all, folks!”

More self-satisfied laughter. Here Mason almost raised his hand. He believed unsurpassed odic lyricism and the cherished euphony accompanying it to be indeces of solicitude, serenity, joy — his ‘symphonic stuff’! And what about musical wits like Gioachino Rossini? But he knew mention of an Enescu rhapsody, a seraphic Missa Solemnis, let alone a sylvan trobairitz, could merely incite more derisive laughter. Dirk was surely just nodding to tin-eared naysayers. Once on a howling roller coaster...hard to get off. Still, it was a blow Mason had no courage, no pugnacity to fend off.

“Look at Western fashion. *Haut couture* they call the so-called best of it. Humans dressed up as aliens. Arrogance enshrined. Some of you may not know the word ‘insouciance’. You should. What you get when humans copt an ‘ideal’ — a monstrous deception. ‘Middle class’ is the peerless derogatory term America’s urbane progressives use. Indeed, America’s middle class is shrinking — yet paying the bulk of the taxes. Only the poor and very rich are multiplying. And the very rich are as removed from reality as any beings in history as they hoard their money and salve themselves with foundations that often actually augment their wealth, certainly their power. The American wealthy even lavish money on the precious Democrats who seem keenly in favor of the dissolution — in effect placing more taxes and regulations on the shrinking ‘irredeemable’ middle class — regulations the powerful manipulate, to keep the ‘undeserving’ in their place. Taxing the wealthy to the hilt will only run the government for a few weeks after all. No one, however, is paying much attention to the humungous American subsidy debt. Indeed several American cities have been bankrupted paying their civic employees salaries and pensions! The



trade deficit itself since the Clintons is nearly 17 trillion — trillion! — dollars. And, given current trends, could be 20 trillion by the end of the Obama presidency. Americans simply shrug. Their trusted economists say ‘just create more money — buy up and resell toxic bonds and investments.’ In a decade or so, if the trend continues, American debt vis-a-vis its GNP could be close to Greece’s today. What does that tell you? Think of the many cities facing bankruptcy — few and fewer Americans actually buy products made in America. Think of the many abandoned malls that attract archival photographers. American infrastructure is also a mess but no one really dares confront it. There’s no money! And now, with the coming legalization of euthanasia, the social advisement for it can’t be far off — how the old and infirm, the growing burdensome constituencies, may be taken care of. New drugs will complicate things of course, keep the golden oldies hanging out. Yet fewer and fewer Western women desire babies. Abortion is a thriving practice in the U.S. So many dedicated removal experts. Even late trimester kiss-offs — the auction of baby parts being a seminal spat. A film about Planned Parenthood abortion practices was recently banned by PP itself. The scragging must be done *sub rosa*, so the humane progressives can continue to be ‘humane’.”

These last comments invoked a mainly strained silence, many heads shaking in disbelief.

“Humane. A great ‘high’. One state legislature made marijuana use and same sex marriage legal on the same day! It’s sanctioned in the Christian bible didn’t you know? You didn’t? Goodness. Leviticus 20:13: ‘If a man lies with another man they must be stoned.’”

The spontaneous laughter was explosive. Mason had heard the joke before — the comedian that Ann had heard told it to his audience. Dirk had to work his hands to quiet the response. When the hilarity finally abated he said, “One late characterization of America from acknowledged expert

Bernard Lewis” — here Dirk paused as the anticipation grew — “America is harmless as an enemy, treacherous as a friend.”

Renewed spirited applause.

“As for the rest of the planets congregants? Well, Hinduism is now a venal business venture. Like many Asian ‘isms’. All the other creeds — and there are hoards of them, from the rants of health faddists to venal product gurus — are essentially bric brac. And they are all — all! — every last one, scared shitless of us. They rally in the streets but have not the stamina nor vision to oppose us. They can no longer face us directly on the battlefield. They use drones — more electronic game playing. A major news caster even fabricated stories of his ‘heroism’. Can you imagine? The guilt is ubiquitous. Yes, scared shitless — who wouldn’t be in a bat-shit crazy society, a society that touts nothing precious except that of so-called ‘free speech’ — when you remind them of it — which they’ve spent eons trying to define, and are now more undecided, more vindictively argumentative about the subject than ever. Intolerant of all intolerance — the new evangelical creed! Meaning, in the end: stagnation, fossilization, no one daring to act except the ever more rabid castigators. Because they are lost and scared! Think of the ‘courageous’ journalists and writers who routinely lambaste conservative Western conventions and institutions because they know they are perfectly safe doing it. While major universities now turn down speakers critical of Islam. Yes. Bill Mahr from Berkeley, Christine LeGarde from Smith College — because the multiclits see the IMF as crusader tainted — Condolezza Rice from Rutgers, the apostate Ayan Hirsi Ali from Brandeis — a bloody Jewish university! — Robert Birgeneau from Haverford. Jeremy Skahill in The Intercept adroitly argues that the use of drones is not only cowardly and immoral but illegal! What does all this tell you? Cowardly, immoral and illegal! It’s too bloody obvious — they want us to win! They can’t wait for us to win.

*They can't wait for us to win!* It's what you — *you!* — were born to do — blow the asinine place to kingdom come!”

A sudden standing ovation was sustained, applause Dirk waited out.

“Let's remove the poor souls from the miasma of ‘anything goes’, of over-leveraged democracy, of *I can't get no satisfaction*. Hardly a mystery. They spend as much time playing poker — screwing with Lady Luck — as diligently praying to a knowing and thus exacting God! Even the so astute American President is concerned about the ‘less than loving expressions by Christians themselves’ — all those Christians so less perfect than himself — the so called leader of the free world. What does this tell you: he's already on board! He's already on board!”

These comments resulted in another standing ovation, which Dirk fondly acknowledged. Holding up his hands for a further pause, he concluded with: “In short: they yearn for release, for a sturdy social structure. For a faith that doesn't cave in to cavers. And only we can give it to them! Only we! And you — you! You are the long-awaited heralds, the invincible enablers! The holy warriors! The soul and sword of Mohammed! Allahu Akbar!”

The applause remained sustained. If Mason was appalled, he was also impressed with the sweep and poignancy of the harangue to a captive and all but consecrated audience. An audience he still marveled at because of its unanticipated ‘whiteness’ — suggestively an upper crust college class! Some of what was vilified he also found regrettable — the President's derogatory comments about Christians just after the wholesale massacre of Christian students in Kenya — but the exaggerations were possible he thought because of the growing Western malaise of heady, seductive normlessness. Deciding, by and large, on the fly, free of constraint, of all dated, timeworn precepts. The new PC wardens discounted all norms because



norms always discriminate, and facts were always somehow suspect — those Steven Pinker marshaled for instance: more people worldwide growing old, a decline in maternal mortality, more growth in the last 50 years than the previous 2 million years of human existence, far less mortal violence and disease, much less crime, more real equality, even less absolute poverty. Was Western influence so irrelevant here? Sadly, the day's opportunistic political class had little stake in freedom. Resourceful people decide their own fate. Better having a growing dependent constituency resenting achievement, success, luck — given manifests of excuse, of entitlement, with endless 'oversight' regulations. The reliable electorate. The question even he debated was whether humanity was smart enough to realize the benefice of freedom. You can make a mess of your life in a culturally divisive, welfare-baited society with very little effort — one of the realities he confronted almost daily, porno-druggi-jihadi Ryan being a stellar example. He was also now, as the session drew to a close, wondering how he would get out of the place with a minimum of fuss. He held his chest and affected a fainting fit. Several faces soon looked down on him, whom he waived off. "I'll be okay in a minute or so — an old problem, from the chemo. Sorry. The talk was just...just so overwhelming." This seemed to satisfy some onlookers. One of whom took pity and asked if he should call someone. Mason smiled, said he would soon be okay. He just needed a time to recoup. He'd done it before. God willing.

In the corridor he heard a sharp discussion, then someone moving along the same corridor.

"Someone's coming," an onlooker said.

The upshot being that Mason was taken to a vehicle, an older SUV, driven to a deserted park and dumped. No questions, no answers. Just a ridding of one obviously physically unsuited to the current need and expectation. He told them he regretted not being more physically fit.

When they left, he thanked his lucky stars and vowed to never again attend such an indoctrination session. He might be persuaded to help review malevolent blog sites — but that was it. Someone else would have to serve as a courageous witness. He was not a warrior.

On returning to his hotel — he had used Pete’s ‘exfiltration’ maneuvers — sudden double backs and exits from cluttered stores and hectic areas, ever seeking the wider terrain while remaining vigilant to followers. When home free, so he trusted, he breathlessly phoned and told Pete of his discovery of a former school friend becoming an exuberant eloquent jihadist. Pete listened as one being told an old trite tale. “One of the givens these days — the ‘coming outs’, some less unexpected than others. You don’t think he recognized you?”

“No — he was far too wrapped up in his gospel. We — his audience — were so many numbed communicants I think. I doubt our former friendship would carry much sway with him now. Unless he discovered me a zealous convert. I’m not sure I could pull that off. Sorry, but they were a scary inimical bunch. Regular Americans you’d think on first glance. I’m pretty sure no one followed me.”

“We mustn’t discount that you may now be a ‘person of interest’ of course. These cells do not dump someone lightly. The scanning process often includes a photo. We’ll assign a sitter. Bruno has some new and interesting information about Vincent Gebara — more cell phone intercepts. Some of it rather garbled, but the gist is plain enough. We should convene early this afternoon. You okay?”

“Fine. Has Ann come to any decision do you know?”

“I think she’s considering an audition.”

Mason winced, reflexively sighed.

Pete sensed the dismay. “Freddie will be there. In the background, but there. 2 PM at Bruno’s okay with you?”

“Yes. Sure. I have a picture of Dirk — well a group picture of us. I’ll bring it with me. He’s also on file with the RCMP in Vancouver I think. He’s now called Naguib Sheta. A wispy beard. But recognizable.”

Ann answered after several rings. “I was on the internet. Didn’t hear my phone at first. A so-called debate between Douglas Murray and a Muslim who’s name I didn’t get. In England. Like so many, the Muslim was adept at obliterating conversation. Always interrupting. A speciality I think.” Mason’s silence newly alerted her.

“Sorry, I’m listening.”

“...An old school fellow...has become a rabid Islamist. I listened to a spate of his edgy invective today.”

“The session you went to?”

“I’m still, well, dumbfounded. Well, sort of. He was an arrogant guy, but not mad — at least when I knew him. He’s simply honed his fanaticism. I showed you a picture I think — the four of us, first year UBC.”

“He spoke at this meeting?”

“Yes, the group’s current Chosen One, an aspiring *éminence grise* I think. Dirk Church. Now Naguib Sheta. ”

“Good lord.”

“Lordly for some.”

A brief laugh. “Doesn’t really help — laughter.”



“I’ll see you today — at Bruno’s?”

“Of course.” She added, after a pause, “I’m free tonight.”

Without embarrassment he said, “My savvy queen.”

After a further pause she mused, “Not a fairy godmother then.”

Shafts of brilliant late sunlight burnished Bruno’s lair that afternoon — the wake of angels, Mason thought. He’d never met a human more perceptive or pertinently knowledgeable as Bruno Cavet — a feeling sustained that afternoon. If finding such a one in the FBI surprised, he had little doubt about the man’s acumen. Again the strong delicious coffee awaited — this time with what was soon identified as a burnt almond torte.

“Had my first slice in Prantl’s Bakery in Pittsburgh. Walnut Street.” It was one of Bruno’s rare familiar comments. “With the wife. A best time.”

By then the others were smiling and gesturing with their mouths full. Peter was the first to speak.

“Heard about the place. Never had the good fortune.”

Said Ann after a satisfied swallow, “God bless Prantl’s.”

This brought a quiet but affable consensus of nods.

Bruno added, “I’ll begin in a bit. Gebara’s late ‘text’ is best listened to with few distractions.”

Pete nodded. “What we guessed but hadn’t affirmed. He’s a busy lad. Sobering stuff.”

Ann wryly smiled. “The big chill.”

Pete candidly took her in. “You’ve thought any more about the film?” He too had been alerted by Gebara’s suggestion to Ann to audition for the film.

“I haven’t really decided. The ‘today’ intercepts should help.”

Pete looked at Bruno who nodded. Ann and Mason took note of the quiet exchange. Said a resolved Bruno, “Best get to it. Two voices. Gebara and one we’ve still to identify.”

Beginning with the very first snatches of conversation, the incredulity grew for both Ann and Mason. Everyone listened in a studious silence to the ‘reassuring’ Gebara.

G: ...*No no, he’s a find.*

S: *Not Ryan Dyck.*

G: *No, not him...what’s his name, the other guy — Church, Dirk Church. Naguib Shehta, the adopted name.*

S: *Do I know him? One of the ‘provisionals’?*

G: *No. A former drug courier and rent rowdy...on his way up.. He’s anxious to go. Even Bukhari is interested. He’s seen a tape. Yes, Asghar. Amara too.*

S: *Any of the others. Choudary?*

G: *No, Choudary hasn’t been contacted. He will be in due course. He’s too rambling these days. As for Church — what a name! — he’s full of piss and actually quite good at lambasting the ‘execrable’ West — a word he likes. He’s a bit snooty but his language is taking root — and it’s a blast. He touches all the bases. Gets standing applause in some sessions. He’ll be a great blogger in Europe and the Middle East.*

S: *What language skills does he have?*

G: *Other than declarative English none. Well, he's trying to learn Arabic...you know how it is, jaded Westerners never really do. Takes years...even then...they all live in the here and now. Always patronizing the 'poetry'. Keep you posted of course. Nice conversing with you...all the best. See you in Davros....*

Bruno took up the thread.

“A glitch in our hardware interrupted this taping...this conversation was, as you see, the last part. What you will not know, at this stage, is that Vincent Gebara is a veteran member of a group whose ideology we're beginning to apprehend as a whole. We're convinced this 'dark matter' group wields considerable influence world wide — 'the hidden gravity' some call it. A possible progenitor of the the Illuminati or the Thule societies. As you may know, the Bush family, Winston Churchill, even Barack Obama have been named as prominent members, though no evidence for such claims has ever been produced. Given what you'll hear shortly, I doubt the current American president would be welcome there — unless he's far cagier and cynical than we think. A friend of mine thinks the Thule Society is the better probable measure — a society that never really died out. Hitler's National Socialist German Worker's or Nazi party was a late and crude offshoot. It supposedly attracted the likes of Rudolf Hess, Arthur Rosenberg and Adolf Hitler. Even before it became a Nazi icon its members were involved in a cult of the so-called Aryan race, whose beginnings go back to the mythical land of Thule, which the early Greek legend placed near Greenland and Iceland. I tell you this now because I think we've badly underestimated the appeal of such an overriding ideology, a tough *Weltanschauung* — particularly now that the West is facing a cultural demise, as is anticipated in the following exchange. It is part of a conversation Gebara had with a *Lepénisation des esprits* organizer — one of the fervent eurosceptics. We were actually surprised we found it — the line was



less secure than expected. Indeed, the transparency might have been deliberate...their sympathetic constituency is growing and heeding promising news. Gebara doesn't mention a name in the exchange but we think some references may have been to a backer of Jean-Marie Le Pen, who's becoming known as the Last Samurai. So."

Bruno then cued the recorder.

G: *...it's the obverse of shock and awe...awakening of the Sleeping Giant...getting us back on track.*

S: *It should foster encouraging developments — especially the debates going on in Britain and Australia — the ones I'm most familiar with. The Canadians make some noises but are still treading water, well, most of the time — though their one special forces group did return fire. The Americans are, as usual, politically fractured. Obama is ever preoccupied with his redistribution shtick — the illusion of ethnic-racial-economic harmony. So touchingly publicly concerned, while patronizing Black power fanatics. One day he even fancied himself a Jew — standing for a picture at the Wailing Wall — then cavalierly spurns Netanyahu. I'm told you've been recruiting some new warriors.*

G: *Um, two in the current group look particularly promising. One a maniac who will certainly try to bomb the state beauty contest you drew our attention to last week — the very 'physical invidiousness' mantra — from the one manifesto — that has put chaps like him over the top...he's always had a rank misogynist streak that's quite overwhelmed him now. He's mad as a hornet of course, and has already opted to undertake the bombing rather than join the fighters in Syria. Virgins on the brain you might say. The planning looks impressive — much better than some past stuff.*

S: *Do we know him?*

G: *I don't think so. He's a new recruit out of California. A former drug peddler and warm-body necrophiliac — a late discovery — his keen interest in eighteen carat pornography being a catalyst we think. He was useful for a time — as a pro-*

curer — for some sex-starved cyphers there. Also contacts in the mafia and IRA. A chap with another prize name — Dyck. Ryan Dyck. He was picked up a while back off Le Matador Beach. A matter of sedating the mad dog until we're ready. He'll be sensational. We can attack pubs, schools, churches — but attacking such a crass beauty competition will rouse the PC partisans, the 'they had it coming' crowd, who in turn are working tirelessly for us in antagonizing the conventional folk who in turn scold the politicians...for the middle class, despite its diminishing size, still has many votes...a modest start of course, to be followed by the real outrages — the cataclysm dominos. I know Foster has told you as much.

S: *The 'inevitables'.*

G: *Well, one relatively small neutral newspaper to start — the 'stalwart cowards', Foster calls them — the ones unctuously warning about fomenting hatred, who won't be missed by our real allies. The smugness and stridency of the beauty vilifiers will only amplify the demands of fed up sleepers. It's got to be done, as Ian has often urged. The gloves are off. Islam is a world curse. The obliteration of 'self'. In its way as poisonous*

*and nullifying as the PC mantra that is proliferating here.*

Bruno briefly interjected, "We've yet to identify 'Ian' and 'Foster'."

S: *And the controlled device?*

G: *The editorial floor will be gutted. Likely damage to floors above and below. Several dozen or more. And possibly a building next door. Not 9-11 but, in its way, as dramatic I think. Particularly now.*

S: *The result you anticipate.*

G: *Look at it this way: the Conspiracy Theorists and Truthers are a mother load for the Jihadists — the Truthers main targets being Western institutions and their minders. The Truthers are ISIL's regimental buglers and scourges. And with Russia about to explode, take on the wold again, ancestral Slavic culture reasserting itself — the klepto-*

*crat peerage eyeing a dissolute Europe....*

S: *Keep us in the picture.*

G: *Of course.*

When the exchange ended the silence in Bruno's parlour seemed un-remitting.

After a time Bruno said, "It's an exchange that's verified some of our hunches. The 'kleptocrat peerage' is a droll reference to the likes of Bossy Borozov, the tycoon brother of Kissy — the Bellerophon creator. The historic 'Russian Duo' some say: the romantic and the buccaneer, one always obliging, inspiring the other. It's apparent that Gebara thinks the 'Templars', a word undergoing a revival, will survive an Armageddon. He travels these days with a muscular security detail that packs chemical spray bombs and rocket launchers. He seems to be anticipating a convulsion that will destroy a lot of people. The 'supernumeraries' he calls them in another exchange. Iran's nuclear bomb could set the match. Only some Israelis seem worried about it. And they're rebuked as paranoid, by and large.

Ann was the first to speak.

"I still have some confusion about what Gebara anticipates. I've never doubted his, well, bravado, but this takes the cake — if what I think is really going on — this war of the worlds." She looked beseechingly at Pete and Bruno. Bruno took up her entreaty.

"We've been tracking Gebara and his coterie for some time. It is not something we advertise of course, and your discretion is taken as a given here. As alluded to, this Thule group — in whatever late name or guise they now adopt — believes democracy has run its course, the multiculturalism it's now touting is destroying the benefices of the Enlightenment — es-



essentially the freedom, however imperfect, we've known, by vilifying, excoriating all intolerance, the most pernicious 'intolerance' of all, which erases freedom of speech and debate, and thus initiative beyond academic reproof. The Thule spokesmen we've listened to, assert that protracted comfortableness, ease, tranquility — irenic life, the endgame of 'progress' — makes people complacent and indolent and, as many believe, eventually cowardly, dissolute and sick. America's obese, inactive, lethargic children being a case in point for them, the American singular, unprecedented indebtedness being another, which countries like Italy, Greece and Spain appear eager to outdo. Islam proposes a solution that substantially nullifies the individual, leaving a maze only a devout believer can follow. Understandably, this is anathema to the Thule group. Which in turn believes that the ethos of the Enlightenment can renew mankind, a drama that requires a periodic wholesale purging of the diseased members — including today the hordes of smuggled economic migrants, mainly young men, flooding into Europe, who may turn Europe into a no-man's land. The only difference really between Nazism and this new Utopian creed — that they acknowledge, as unbelievable as it will sound — is that the Jews, being as masterful as they generally are, would be among the 'chosen', the 'elect' — in this inevitable transcendence. Please bear with me. The Jews have always identified themselves as exclusively capable and masterful. Indeed, we've heard spokesmen from the Thule group claim that if the top Nazis had not been so obsessed with them, Germany would have won the Second World War! I tell a very old German friend, who survived the war, that he sometimes seems more German than Jew and he dryly laughs. The desirability and possibility of a permanent peace is thus poppycock for the Thule group. Like diseased plants, the undeserving, merely define the perceptive, culturally erudite and accomplished. Hence the eternal war against indolence, insouciance, sentimentality, witless piety and cowardice — all the emanations of a dissolute population they believe. And

the way you do that is to rouse the Sleeping Giant — get the traditional staid Western middle-class to sit up and take action. Regrettably, for them, traditional Western middle-class culture, certainly its mores, is nearly a spent force. So time is of the essence.”

Ann and Mason exchange droll smiles. Said Ann, patting Mason’s knee, “Never thought of you as a Templar.”

Said Mason, “Way too sentimental.”

Pete and Bruno looked at one another. Mason added, more earnestly, “Paul’s death...changed some things. Some of Ann’s courage has rubbed off.”

He and Ann exchanged collegial smiles.

Again Ann turned to Bruno. “So this so-called Thule group has been under investigation for some time?”

“On and off, yes, depending on the department’s priorities. It has always been a covert undertaking. Mainly by secret NSA code breakers and dissemblers. I don’t know to what extent Gebara’s proxies have influenced the NSA. I’m telling you about it now because, given your past association with Gebara himself and his business ventures, you can help us better anticipate his purpose and strategy. He obviously has plans for you.”

Ann tried to smile.

“Both of you, actually. Being an outsider Mason can assist us on several fronts. Keeping track of the proliferating bloggers for one.”

They all looked at Mason who placidly said after a short laugh, “As long as I don’t need more work in the makeup department.”

“Please be assured, you’re under no pressure here. We welcome your assistance but will readily understand if you want out — both of you. As you know, Mason has a ubiquitous sitter these days. To keep an eye out for Islamic pit bulls. Not quite the match of Freddie, but near enough.”

Ann and Mason exchanged glances. Said Ann, “You know my interest — to follow up on the grizzly stuff Ryan Dyck helped perpetuate, which Gebara obviously had a hand in. I can hardly leave off now — on the eve of Armageddon.” Again she looked at Mason. “Mason’s been a brick.”

Mason smiled. “Well, as one of the ‘provisionals’...I’ll do what I can of course.” Looking at Ann he whispered, “*Cherchez la femme.*”

A pervasive quiet amusement ensued before Bruno continued.

“I think the next step is to sort out what Gebara hopes to accomplish with this ‘revised’ film of his. He’s obviously striving to nuke all rumour of an earlier production. Regrettably he’s a player we can’t forfeit just yet. He may have funded the aborted film from an offshore source, where a backer is hard to isolate. Both Pete and I think Gebara’s planning something outstanding, even memorable with this much-touted revived production — to obliterate all evidence of the earlier cheesy work and — if a canny meltdown is planned, make the destruction of such a remarkable work all the more heinous...a ruin we must be in a position to prevent. So we’re asking a lot. Freddie will of course be present — with ready access to backup. We do know Gebara’s spending a lot of money on some very lavish sets. Whatever he has in mind, the advertising is exceptional and idiosyncratic for him. He’s never plugged a film this way. Indeed, he’s kept to the boonies for the most part. ‘Tastier free range chicks,’ he’s quoted as having said. Pete and I suggest you audition for the part, Ann. Then make up your mind. Some pointed questions about the production will flesh out our understanding of it. We will have a better idea of Ge-



bara's timeline when the shooting schedule surfaces. He's often present on the sets of his films — the ones feasibly rating an R or NC 17 classification. A command performance here I think. The day he's away is the day we'll take note. We'll know by then what's in store."

## THIRTY-FOUR

When the four gathered for an update four days later, the weather had changed. A dry wind stirred up whirls of debris outside the fire station that Bruno's Pad overlooked. The street was empty. Following a few remarks about the weather — bi-polar disorder being a favourite — they tucked into the coffee and pastries, this time Randy's Apple Fritter Donuts. Said a mindful Ann, "So very good. Given the name. We sometimes called Ryan, 'Randy'."

Mason smiled. "Dirk's word too, whenever he condescended to address us, now that I think of it." He eyed his donut. "I'm reminded that 'stressed' spelled backwards is 'desserts'."

Pete joined in after a savored swallow. "The important line in the Declaration of Independence...Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Country Fare." Receiving the amused response he anticipated, he added, "Not in California mind you. You all know it became a state in 1850. Nobody had money then or electricity, most people spoke Spanish and there were a lot of gunfights in the streets. Nothing's changed much. Except that women had real boobs then and men didn't hold hands."

Ready self-conscious laughter. Said Ann, "I doubt they had as many guns then either."

This rounded out the amusement.

Said Mason, “Well, they couldn’t ‘print’ their own then, could they?”

It soon became obvious that Ann, despite the raillery, was keen to proceed, her hand going up to decline more coffee.

“Talking about guns, duels *and* boobs...some things have come up...about the audition. One is the discovery of Senka Novak playing the part of Salomé, just after the release of her video single ‘Santa Baby’, a reprise of Eartha Kitt’s golden oldie — only now a group of hairy bearded men fill the background, all looking like Muslim radicals. I assume you know about it. As you know ‘Santa Baby’ was one of Ryan’s nicknames. One he liked, relished I think. I can’t help wondering if he had a hand in the video.”

Promptly Bruno said, “It is a matter we were going to touch on today: Gebara’s marketing of Senka Novak. The video will also flatter his mad dog Ryan by reviving his nickname. Suggesting that Gebara’s been egging him on for some time. Thus the imminence of something dire should not be ruled out given the intercepts of Gebara’s comments. You may be wise to decline, Ann.”

Said Pete, “She may have sided with Gebara’s faction. Become a player, a Mata Hari in his entourage. He’s seen with her a lot lately.”

Ann continued with a further unsettling fact. “The film’s ‘Director Designate’, as Mason calls him, is none other than Peter Leone, who is rumored to have been around on the earlier film. Which leaves me in a kind of no-man’s-land. He could have been a witness to Roseanne’s murder.”

Bruno responded. “Gebara obviously thought it prudent using Mr. Leone, who has told at least one publicist that rumors of an earlier film were

just that — rumours. ‘What may have happened,’ this publicist said recently on a chat show, ‘is that a promoter fascinated by the story tried to stir up some interest, posit a possible audience to some production people. It’s a daily game here.’ The publicist is one Gebara has used before. We think Freddie, acting as your agent, should see Gebara — suggest you have a chest cold, see what affect a suggested delay will have. You’ve not seen the script after all. If Gebara decides to go ahead post haste with another performer, we must anticipate some kind of meltdown.”

But...the wily Gebara proved amenable to a ‘slight’ delay and gave Freddie a copy of the script — even apologizing for its ‘late appearance’. “We fancy a perfect script of course but rarely consider the time it takes to create one.”

The script itself proved to be a singular surprise, indeed, a totally unexpected endeavour in and of itself. No one had envisaged an astute parody of the popular banal story of Salomé! Thus assessing the document took some time. Ann’s droll reaction — when they convened to discuss it — was prompted by the flagrant revision of the story: both Herodias and Salomé being quintessentially modern feminists with luxurious contempt for a furtive sin hound like Wilde’s Herod. Said Ann, “If Salomé occasionally taunts her Tetrarch step-father, it is supernumerary to her main fun game — fondly reminding him of the curse Jokanaan, John the Baptist, has placed on him for marrying his brother’s wife! A curse that is causing Herod nightmares. In one section she says of Jokanaan, ‘He smells to high heaven, so the curse *must* be infectious, poisonous; some hideous disease awaits you. None of your augurs have the courage to tell you.” In conclusion Ann said, “If they actually stick to the script, it could be an interesting film.”

Mason softly joined in. “‘Cleanliness’ being the next big thing.”



Pete and Bruno exchanged limp smiles. Bruno was the first to speak.

“We have some recent and telling information on the film. We learned last night that Peter Leone is stepping aside and one of Antoine Plombiers’ directors replacing him. Apparently Peter Leone was recently taken to emergency at Cedars-Sinai. Which may not be a further ruse. He is reported to have a virulent tumour and been admitted to the Brain Tumour Centre in Santa Monica. We suspect Mr. Plombiers may be in part responsible for the current script. One writer that worked on Moon Disc is on board apparently.”

Said Pete, “A canny endgame.”

Said Bruno, “Freddie thinks Gebara’s excited. Pulling out all the stops. With this ‘astute’ — his word — parody of perversion. We’re planning for the worst. The destruction of such a film will intensify the resentment of Islamist terror — from both sides.”

Said a reflective Ann, “The film does have Plombiers’ imprint written all over it...a fine twist is Herod trying to overwhelm John the Baptist with the gems, peacocks and raiments he tried to bribe Salomé with in the original play. Jokannan’s curse is ever overhanging of course. Jokanaan says he will only remove it if Salomé will ‘comfort’ him — he’s a sly lecher. But Salomé, like her mother, finds the prophet a huge bore and says when he’s first brought forth from the cistern, ‘My word, you badly need a bath, Jokie, and a new hair dresser wouldn’t hurt. Heavens!’ Herod remains mortified and seems oblivious to the mockery of him. Actually, Salomé ends up entertaining the guards, in particular the Syrian who dies of love for her in the original play. Here they take off together and do a ‘conspicuous ballet’ — the words in the script. Said ‘ballet’ isn’t spelled out. The costumes are lovely, and the sets as designed, sumptuous. It has the makings of a smart extravaganza. Even if the ending remains a blur. Early

scripts sometimes leave part of the ending in escrow. In the current script, Herodias confers with Salomé several times ‘off stage’ but has few lines of her own — mainly ironic comments and stylish moues about Herod’s competence — as both ruler and lover. On any other occasion an actress would be flattered....”

Well, as Fate sometimes does, it suddenly intervened here with a seismic shock — a devastating explosion by a presumed suicide bomber in a shopping mall near the sound stage where Ann would have auditioned for the role of Herodias. The explosion put the production in limbo. At first estimate, twelve people were killed in the mall parking lot and at least three near the main entrance. Two inventory workers in the soundstage suffered slight concussions. The final tally of injured and dead would take several days. It was a large mall spread over several acres. No one could quite figure out what happened. Was there a specific target...was the timing off? The networks had a field day with the possible horrific intent — an attack on a county beauty pageant that had been scheduled to take place in a nearby park later that day. In the course of the investigation, two key witnesses, both looking for parking stalls in the mall’s outdoor parking lot, said they saw a young bearded man approach two ladies, each with a young child — very near the epicentre of the explosion. Both witnesses had left the shopping mall just before the explosion occurred and were not injured. It was when they saw the bomb crater on the evening news — where they believed they had seen the man and the two women — that they went to the police with their observations. At first their testimony seemed iffy.

Both agreed that one of the women seen with the man had packed her groceries and purchases into her Dodge Caravan but not closed the rear door. It was a very busy day and even the outdoor parking lot was

full. Many cars moved through the aisles looking for leaving vehicles. Both witnesses said they had driven by the two women at least twice and wondered why the one who had finished her shopping did not move her van. “She continued to ‘yak away’ with a friend no apparent concern for searching drivers,” the one witness remarked, adding, “On one pass we saw the young bearded man get out of his car — very near the epicentre — presumably to ask if the one woman was leaving. He may have been insulting — may have — for both women ignored him. He returned to his car and we moved off and thought no more about it. Eventually we found a parking stall on the far side of the mall. Luckily we were parked on the outermost ring and were several blocks beyond the mall when the explosion took place.”

The witnesses commentary was duly recorded and not revisited until a day later when a tape the bomber had made was discovered on a new and little known blog site. The tape had been made in real time by a cam placed on the dashboard of a car — the likely position. The voice in it was unknown at first, as was the brief image of the driver of the car when he got out and approached the two women. Bruno was one of the first investigators in his department to watch and listen to the tape and identify the driver. The sponsor of the site promptly shut it down. The debate to publicly air parts of the tape was ongoing, with no decision in sight. Bruno played it in its entirety before Pete, Ann and Mason. “Your association with the perpetrator is deemed pertinent. You will be questioned about it by a team from the department. They agreed you should hear and see it first. It would be but another example of road rage — here parking lot rage — if the explosive package were not so well devised and destructive.”

Ann and Mason watched and listened to the tape in silence. The voice Mason was all too familiar with, though here it seemed more eerily



deadpan than remembered. Ann would later agree with this assessment.

The tape began with a parking lot vista, what a driver might see, via a cam set on the dashboard of a vehicle moving about a crowded parking lot, one of many cars trying to find a parking stall. The car stopped near a van filled with groceries, the rear hatch up. Two women were talking to one another near the van's rear. Two young children played about the van. One woman leaned on an empty shopping cart. A pause of nearly a minute ensued. The car then moves off, heading up and down several aisles before returning to the spot where the two women are conversing. The driver, a thinly bearded caucasian, exits his car and approaches the women. He says something but is ignored. It appears one woman responds to his query but in an offhand manner. Only the second woman actually looks at him but says nothing. The driver returns to his car and after a further reconnoiter of the aisles returns and stops before the two women who continue to jovially converse with one another. It is then the voice sound track kicks in.

*“...I ask them...not unreasonably...‘Is the conversation going on for another half hour?’ The one says ‘probably’ and ignores me. ‘Probably.’ The word of Mother Superior. Probably...probably. Such sweet contempt -- you’re a man after all, a pushy undeserving white man. Not worth considering, even acknowledging. A late discovery — this poplar loathing of balls. Another of the late ‘revelations’. So — bugger off dickie. Probably...probably...so...no time, no opportunity to park here and join the hectic shoppers...no time to eat a last supper...then head off to the pretty pretty park...these two dreamboats will do well enough.”*

The car, as evidenced from entrance security cameras, had driven by the Main Entrance at least twice before suddenly veering back into the lane it first came from only to stop out of the security camera's sight before the two women. The voice in the tape was then ghoulishly limp, fading at last to a mere whisper.

*...you're a man, piss off...a lucky irresponsible cracker...born rapist, plunderer, murderer of culture...'you owe it to yourself to drop dead and rid the world of a roach'...so the Western jurist says, is saying...lucky you got as far as you did! Lucky you. Allahu Akbar!*

A thunderous two stage explosion followed.

The four witnesses to the tape remained silent for some time. Bruno was the first to speak.

“You know the voice I presume, and the person who approached the two women.”

Both Mason and Ann silently nodded. For Mason the brief flash of anger in the voice masked its subsequent chilling apathy despite the morbid acumen — which surprised, chilled. No feeling, no apparent vexation, the voice finally of a ‘bot’, despite its surprising awareness of the day’s PC zeitgeist. Was he surprised a parking lot slight could trigger such stark vengeance? Not really. It just changed the venue somewhat — eschewing the park vista and the much touted beauty pageant. Ryan was a very touchy soul, seeking a pride that must continue to humiliate him. Mason sensed that long ago. This desperate heartless act made Mason reconsider the old debate: the extent to which we’re marked at birth, the endowment that deals, brokers with circumstance and allows some to cope, others less so, sullyng the notion of inalienable ‘right’. He knew many if not most people considered the idea a heresy, and he was stoic or craven enough to keep it to himself. But the prospect would not leave him. If there was a cause for everything, which he tended to believe, like today, we were all fated. Luck and happenstance both stem from and initiate ‘causes’. Even solicitude itself, without a sturdy culture to recognize and acknowledge it, can be a patronizing provocation?...

Ann finally spoke, still fighting back tears.

“Gebara must be a little disappointed. Maybe I should wear some plastic explosive the next time we meet.”

Without looking up Pete said. “No chance of that. His contempt is his elixir these days. Another fountainhead. But he’ll be a while resuming.”

With some chagrin Ann added, “I’m thinking of the Eighteenth Century notion of ‘forlorn hope,’ for those soldiers who were the first into the breach of an assault. I just watched a historic film recently...the sense of a sacred heroism, and the cherished accomplished past that motivated, inspired it. That stiff upper lip. *For in spite of all temptations, To belong to other nations....He remains an Englishman...*”

If Mason remained flattered he might be considered useful to such a team, he sensed he lived in the Last Days, that the ‘breach’ Ann spoke silently of yawned before them all. While his muse, the ineffable Deirdre, remained comatose. Silent, still...a soul in aspic.



# PART THREE

*We live, as we dream — alone.*

Joseph Conrad

## THIRTY-FIVE

The death of Deirdre Corr came not so much as a shock as the imposition of a life sentence. The treasured muse had left. For tristful Mason the loss seemed irreparable. As if in the Ravel-Fokine ballet *Daphnis and Chloe*, Daphnis were to find himself alone. Perhaps Dirk was right: melancholy is the stolid classist's legacy.

He'd been in touch with a head nurse at the Mater Infirmorum Hospital in Belfast, Deirdre's last abode. She died from something called autonomic dysreflexia—brought on by a serious fall and concussion that precipitated a stroke. Earlier she suffered a bout of pneumonia that left her in a frail state for many weeks. *Many weeks...* He also learned her mother, Mrs. Healy-Corr, had died a fortnight before her daughter. Several times he had thought of visiting his muse, but the sobering reality of her ghost-aphasia state stayed him. The cowardliness he sojourned. He would remember her as he first heard her in the Nefer Club. That memory had not yet dimmed. Not yet.

These retributive thoughts replayed themselves on his way to see his own mother.

He found her asleep and was on the point of leaving off his visit when she opened her eyes and smiled at him. "Oh good," she said, sitting up and replacing a stray lock of hair.

The lounge they sought at the end of her hallway was bright with warming sun and a regnant lily poised in a glass flute on an end table. She was more frail than he remembered yet enthused to see him. He helped her into one of two apple green arm chairs there and fitted her cane to the rear of its arm rest.

She was very happy to learn that Ann had landed the role of the lead

female actor in Philip Noyce's new film. "I trust you'll join her in due course." He smiled, nodded. On earlier visits he had read the letters Ann Able — his ineffable Tara, sent him — except the last. His mother's speech was somewhat garbled this day, yet he managed to get the drift. She had suffered a stroke a month ago but seemed to be improving. Mari-ana was expected within the hour. 'Two pluses in the same day,' she said with some clarity.

What was he doing then?... He did his best to explain that the work was steady but routine — some ad work and annual reports. Not much creative effort, beside soothing pressed art directors — about his speed then. He still bid on some jobs south of the border and of late one in Europe. His agent remained active. Helene didn't ask about the book. The publisher had balked in the end; there weren't enough anonymous pictures: the destitute ought not to be identified, recognized in that era. Like his mother's health, his hope and luck had abated. He smiled, kissed and hugged her, said he'd be round the next day and left, saying hello to the newly arrived Marianna as he exited the pavilion. "She's in a good mood today. Keenly looking forward to your coming."

Said Mariana, "She's become a friend...there's no resident I enjoy visiting more."

In his car Mason debated going to his 'secret park'. He savoured the diversions available then. As promised, he had a security tail watching over him this side of the 49th, a legacy of his truck with jihadi recruiters. Some time ago Bruno freed him from the worry of any further Vancouver police scrutiny — the earlier chapter — but would not expand. Mason's suspicion of an 'irregular' cop had never really lapsed. Bruno had said, with his trademark resolution, 'Forget about it.'

The study of Gebara was ongoing and urgent though. He helped out



when he could — usually by identifying other persons Ryan may have consorted with. He and Pete exchanged a few e-mails. But the jihadi factions were becoming so diverse and flagrant that studying their tactics, deeds and manifestos required teams of assayers. Mason's limited association with Ryan and Dirk was soon mined of all useful details. Eventually Bruno concluded Mason was sufficiently unknown, out-of-the-way and anomalous to be free of Islamic menace, and the watcher left.

He and Tara visited Deirdre's grave in Milltown Cemetery in Northern Ireland. Kyrna, her mother, was buried in the Belfast City Cemetery — God's Acre for the IRA, its partisans and sympathizers. They weren't able to trace the father. Tara was the only known living relative.

Tara, with the help of the surviving band members, arranged for a Parian marble head stone in Milltown. Classic, elegant and rare. Many garish popish monuments further up the pathway loomed against an overcast sky the day they visited. Aspen and Birch leaves littered the grass and walkways. The band members were then playing in a band in Germany — backing up some pop singers including the remarkable Helene Fischer in one special. "Doing okay," one said in a late letter to Tara.

They stood silent before the simple plaque when the attendant left. Tara several times wiped back tears. Mason left his unattended.

Tara was the first to speak. "What especially smarts is she never met you."

Mason smiled. "She did actually."

This comment brightened the mood a bit. "Oh, yes, that — the pic you stole during a performance. Not a great consolation."

“I think she actually was the reason I was allowed to stay. She got after the manager.”

“You didn’t tell me that.”

Mason barely nodded. “She did smile at me. A look I didn’t capture.”

Tara then knelt and placed the fresh petunia posy by the headstone tablet that was engraved only with Deirdre’s name and ‘Our Peerless Nightingale’. A favour to Mason. The cemetery discouraged artificial flowers. Mason had sought and found a rose that resembled one he once saw on the cairn in his ‘secret park’. This winter rose he placed atop the plaque.

They didn’t stay long. Partly due to the somber blustery weather he thought. In the hotel they ate a largely silent supper and for the first time did not think of making love when they retired. Seeing the grave had somehow broken the link between them. It seemed inadvertent, almost callous to carry on. Then. They parted the next day. She to Australia, he to Vancouver.

She sent several letters from Australia. She never mentioned Ryan Dyck or Dirk Church again. The land itself served as a distraction. The letters were in essence wonderful travelogues, what you would send to an esteemed friend, not a lover. A CD of some Irish songs that were part of a larger collection also arrived — a CD he already had but never let on. He did ask if Tara knew of Deirdre’s early music interests — what she liked, listened to. The answer was surprisingly prompt and forthright: ‘Yes — a Kazakh folk song of all things. About a butterfly lover. I don’t think I appreciated it. Too messed up then I guess. I can’t remember any other specific songs. She listened to a lot of Gaelic ballads. Mainly on her own I think.’

Did he know the Kazakh song? He did, and thanked her for mention-

ing it, too profusely he thought later. He would play it for her when he could.

The song, however, wasn't mentioned in her last letter.

*Dearest Mason,*

*I must write this. I've met someone. He is an investor in Philip's film. He's a marine architect. A great sailor. He lives a life I've only imagined until now. He works with a foundation to preserve the Great Barrier Reef. We're out in it, sharing its awesome wonders almost daily. It is a dizzying world. I've described it to you often enough I think. The creatures are ineffable — to use a word you like. His name is Saul Ellerman. He owns a home near Airlie Beach. We plan to marry once the film is finished. I'll tell you more about the film when I've seen it whole. It's a sequel to Rabbit-Proof Fence. Indigenous spelled with a capital 'I', as you've noted.*

*Resent me if you must, but don't hate me. That would be unbearable. Please find it in your heart to understand. You helped set the peer standard! I hope to see you again, sooner than later. Wish me well...*

*Lasting affection and gratitude, Tara*

He was not altogether surprised, the anticipated disappointment something he had tucked away, knowing he likely lived on borrowed time with her. But for Deirdre, she may never have taken him on.

He went for a walk to nurse his wounds, at first aimlessly negotiating the newly leaved and blossomed trees in the streets of his favourite neighbourhood. Spring had come, with its insurgent tints. Indeed, he stood before the entrance to his special park as one rawly amazed by the pageant springtime showcased. Fine landscape art, a co-respondent's love, someone said. The crocuses and young daffodils were pristine, the tulips just off-stage, the ground covers dewy and vibrant. His favorite cairn at the foot



of the mighty Douglas Fir lay alive in a shaft of sunlight. Someone had cleaned off the dull musk of winter, the stain of sleet and spent needles. As he approached he was further astonished to see a small fresh Mayflower sprig propped beside it...the mysterious communicant lived still and had been there in his absence. He sat on a bench a short distance off and marveled at an acrobatic flitting Bluejay that suddenly alighted atop the magnolia, whose new tiny stars were gathering in their cosmic nursery. However chimerical this interlude, he knew he shared the space with another kind alert human, and that certainty seemed to reveal the clear blue sky through the mighty laden branches of the Douglas Fir.