



WILLARD THURSTON

# ANASTASIA

AN ENDURING DREAM



# Anastasia

A Novel by  
Willard Thurston

## PART ONE

*Through a glass, darkly...*

1 Corinthians 13:12

## ONE

Vassily Sergeevich Ablesimov stared out upon the phosphorescent snow of the inner courtyard from his spare cavernous office in the stone barrack that was rumored to have guest-housed, among other zealous orders, the last Tzarina's select hooligans, including one megalomaniacal monk. Once again the power had cut out and only the moon kept his world from darkness. An eerie light appeared to emanate from the snow itself, independent of the lone orb eyeing him in the vast dark sky beyond his small window on the second floor. It was at such times, when his ever apprehensive world eased, that reality seemed to reassert itself. Certainly the regional surveillance apparatus came briefly to a halt, and the momentary dissolution of his corpus into undifferentiated shadow conferred a tranquility he savoured yet distrusted. Did he then yearn for release, for ingestion



in the great fierce Death Maw the lion tamers of American psychiatry had been showcasing and taunting for decades? Was he, in these the peak years of his loyal and proficient service to the GRU, the dark jewel in the large reptilian head of Soviet Intelligence, at last having second thoughts? Why, for instance, did he seek out this rather seedy office away from one of the faceless bowel-less megaliths? He would not have been inconvenienced there as he was now. His late assignment, ascertaining the recent deeds of an exceptional illegal in the United States, whom he had helped train, required his own space, he said. The skein of rumours would be less, the doubt kept muted for a specified time. Myshin agreed reluctantly, but had not officially sanctioned the change. Vassily would be on his own for the onerous period, the time needed to assess the disposition and longterm worth of the illegal. By readily pledging to do so was he deliberately tempting the raffish, crimson fates? The fates that frequently slighted, snubbed one's sense of responsibility, incumbency, dutifulness? Such thoughts hatch out on creature-less nights, in the laden quiet of a tank helmet. Urbane habits too often swaddle the mind, memory. Were the many questing authors he'd keenly read finally demanding atonement — not for the gruesome effort but the limited excuse? The dislocating pain. The unanticipated armor piercing shell. First an inner ricochet, then a blinding evisceration...conscionable thoughts can't wifferrdil or barrel roll or cut and spin. Or flee! The command turret, the sure-footed steed, left penetrable. Volatile words. They too seemed to be ganging up on him.

Years ago he lost a finger to a neglected hatch cover — the impertinent second pinkie, the inglorious Up Yours banished from the commanding right hand. Then There Were Four. Restructuring! Four lone comperes to defend the sorry legions of sullen cabbage headed clerks, conniving aparatchiks, loutish truckers and bent factory smiths, careless orderlies, lax maintenance workers and farm machine operators; onanistic mass-beguiling entertainers, wily opportunistic journalists, cagey forensic com-

missars, the stymied party buccaneers so distrustful of their neighbor, their cupidity electrifying narcissism. Ha! To be fingered, touched by genius — a phrase, with his own wry emphasis — which one of his exemplary operatives made note of while investigating a polymath in an American electronics' consortium. The phrase came from the polymath's high school year book, where it likely had a more flattering connotation, referring as it did to the executive's early manifest abilities. Long ago Vassily Sergeevich believed America so 'touched', and had forfeited control of its once shining future. Now the plodding Soviet Union appeared as grandiosely possessed. The fixed grey authority, pacing the almighty stag of prosperity, reduced to scrounging in the predatory media forest. Words that had no backup...but would not take cover.

Here Vassily paused and stared at the ghostly snow. The age of *les visuals* and public relations. Public relations! In the Supreme Soviet! The idea sat as wryly on his sleeve as a love button. President Gorbachev, the late outgoing impresario and Ballet Master, seemed an auteur right out of an American film studio. Cosmetic phrases like 'eye shadow' always entertained — Vassily's key vocabulary reduced to greasepaint. But now, Holy Rodina, he was exhorted to appear and feel good. "The Soviet people want full-blooded and unconditional opportunity. It is a good feeling." What rubbish. Any spy (and what true Russian was not a spy) who feels good is an idiot, an oxymoron. Vassily could have bit through a nail at that moment. And yet the hoary evanescent snow kept telling him of something else, of something about his love of keenness and haunted dark; of a brooding soul that embraced stealth and fine desperate courage in this changeable winter of 1991. And the insight had no PR potential whatever.

A recent ironic and reoccurring dream seemed to play to him alone. In it he stood before the authorities in an afterlife. They resembled the Party Faithful, not the airy beings he might have imagined. He was to be re-

warded with a special prize and sensed a forgotten excitement. He had been a decent citizen in a frequently indecent community, had not become disgruntled when the later fortunes of his career sidestepped his worth while yet serving his comrades with distinction — and most knew it. He had given his only son to the wretched war in Afghanistan and remained almost faithful to his wife of twenty-seven years, a woman he worked at tolerating, except during an early amorous liaison that led directly to their marriage. She too, he knew, had been disappointed, yet shunned despair. Occasionally content they stood by one another, and a stable and trusted unit of society survived. Now, in this bonus afterlife, he was to be commensurately rewarded. The Party Secretary came forward, shook his hand, gave him a medal, then beckoned to a figure in the audience. Vassily's wife emerged, with her characteristic lapsed smile. The Secretary took her hand, joined it with her husband's, and pronounced them for eternity inseparable...

The cold barren aura of the snow seized Vassily's vision: he and his patient forbearing wife had fooled all, and now an eternity gaped before them. He sensed that only in Soviet Russia where man alone sought to deal with intransigent nature was such a dream likely. Planning for assault is the sane man's salvation, he proclaimed to himself; grace, reward the victim's habit. Tell that to the PR machine!

He then returned to the matter at hand, thinking in the placid darkness of the communiqué on his computer that had ushered in his dour mood that night. Anna Anastasia Aleksandrovna Kniažnin, 'Zia to intimates, operational alias Dr. Frieda Van Eerden, mathematician, remote sensing expert and phased-radar engineer, one of his select smart 'illegals', had gone missing from her spy cell. Her contact was unable to arrange a routine briefing over a period of two months and Vassily was summoned to a hearing that night — the very night this building's lighting had cut out. As yet there was no word of an accident or defection — which he would secretly



welcome — for as such she would be in some ways quantifiable, even predictable; but as a void — she had simply disappeared — she became an unknown risk, the kind of risk the GRU sometimes surrendered to the newly busy SVR...a fact that seemed to make the dingy room colder than usual.

Frieda was the last of the half-dozen illegals he had in the past decade meticulously groomed for placement in the United States, and most of these, including Frieda, were partly educated, even adroitly indoctrinated in, and at the expense of, the great United States itself — the net result of a recruitment and training program he had perfected. The Marxist ‘empathy’ — to use the ingratiating word — in America’s Ivy League universities was itself a sturdy conditioning. His former GRU boss delighted in the results and duly informed the appropriate crony in the Politburo. As a result Vassily was awarded a rare citation (to select insiders the Rabkin Star, after Lenin’s love-child) a recently instituted accolade for senior GRU officers that conferred a handsome subsidy to one’s retirement — if one was still officially valued at the time, which Vassily Sergeevich would likely be — just. Part of that likelihood might rest with Frieda, and what she was up to at the moment — in the heady age of renewal.

But Vassily was then transfixed not by prospects of a settlement withheld but by his own recent ideological consternation, which was shadowed by the possible turning or duplicity of his pre-eminent protégé. It seemed an omen, a ghost interrupting his last will and testament to his Maker, for like Frieda — Anastasia — ‘Zia — he too believed finally in a stern but beatific Deity — one that simply sanctioned Caesar his due. An ancient vision, that lay so rigid in a frost...

As he sat in the dark, a narrow pool of moonlight glistening the skin of his heavily veined hands, now interlocked upon his desk, his mind bearishly sought out the early scenes of ‘Zia’s spotting and recruitment, and the paradox of the younger half-sister, Zoya Belova Stolbanov — who

eventually parodied ‘Zia’s earnest dedicated genius with a rambunctiousness and inspired delinquency that became something of a legend in certain quarters in the Fifth Chief Directorate of the older KGB. Blat she had, no question, vested in two or three influential members within the Party...but Vassily’s mind leapfrogged that clamorous domestic muddle to reach the promontory where an overview of ‘Zia’s, Frieda’s, career lay open. He was obsessed by oversights that might have forewarned him of vulnerable traits in his candidates. Ironically, Zoya’s antics served at the time to sharpen ‘Zia’s perception of betrayal, of disloyalty to Holy Rodina. As the proverb says: a person without a Motherland is like a nightingale without a song; the difference between ordinary ‘truth’ (everyday pravda) and immortal istina. The difference was great: Zoya’s father was a dishonorably discharged border guard, Anastasia’s a decorated Soviet intelligence officer killed in Afghanistan; the mother of both children a distraught idealist and eventual ‘refusenik’ when Zoya was conceived! As he sifted through the vivid recollections (again!) he could retrieve no dissimulation, no psychological tic, no tell-tale thread of circumstance that might hint at a betrayal now. And from the time of her indenture with GRU tutors, indeed, as a condition of her admission, she was sequestered from her restive family, including the later deviant japes of her half-sister, thus eliminating all input from that clever seditionist — who would remain in Russia when ‘Frieda’ went abroad. Vassily’s new boss, appointed that summer, had duly commented on the dual anomaly — the irregularity of recruitment of a young female from an unstable family! But even the sarcastic Lieutenant-General Myshin knew the difficulty in finding able committed homegrown illegals, especially when the intelligence community was so implacably hated and feared, due in part to its own insatiable suspicion of amiability — and the new Ballet Master’s success in making life exceedingly complex for boozers, inveterate crooks, and rigid apparatchiki — about seven of ten Russians Vassily estimated. Myshin was likely envi-

ous of his assistant's record and said his peace, for the record; otherwise Vassily doubted the General possessed any documentable reason to distrust or attempt to compromise his able if heterodox servant, notwithstanding the portable suspicion that a particularly able deputy could upstage his boss if the latest costume mistress...

As was his habit of late, Vassily did not complete the thought. Perhaps he was losing his acuity and nerve, in his old non-golden age. It was at such times that the American conservative kept him wryly animated. You have your provocative market panoply with its invidious designer terrorists and Epicurean addicts, we keep our lousy kleptos and showcase parasite laws; and for the time being we agree to sustain the contrariety only to keep the lads and lasses from tearing themselves to bits (in Vassily's mind the true heroes were those who survived consumerism's frenzied 'peacetime'). Yet Vassily knew the American conservative was not so pessimistic. One man's folly was another's vitalization. Intellectual and aesthetic squalor both were indices of freedom. At times it seemed so egregiously simple...but for the many pretty expensive, extortionate pictures, the new exclusively visual reality. The 'Come Kingdom' one wag called it.

He was getting cold. The heat also had diminished with this interruption of the electricity. The order pad would glower up at him when the light returned. 'Zia — Frieda — knew too much to be left to happenstance. Her story even unorthodox Vassily would not welcome reading in the Washington Post. He knew one day he might be ordered to sacrifice a prized child, and if he hesitated the General would not demure taking up the wide protective Party apron...

But was there an alternative? To the hedonistic and forensic juggernaut — the passover of the hypnotic beat? The new American bible. The Hotel California.

If Vassily Sergeevich was at the moment irresolute, he did not believe the diffident were, in the end, to be trusted. Not so long ago it was the un-



impeachable habit of Party expedience, the secret tribal belief that many also would have died without the gulags. Where there was no plan and no sturdy culture, what blooms there were became aberrant cancers, usually killing the mother plant. And what culture, what ‘consumer’ culture, had ever been ‘responsible’, except unto itself. And what, in the modern fated fishbowl, but a slave, will do the exacting, unjolly, unremunerative labor?

Yes, he must still believe in the gospel of mastery: it was his last illusion, in a stark illusionless cell.

## TWO

The smell of brown algae upon the beach imparted to the warming sunlight a hint of profanity, a room-temperature negligence. Louis Peak happily looked out upon the pert sails tickling the waters beyond the meandering seawall of Vancouver’s lush somnolent Stanley Park. He stood near an ancient stone pediment — the plaque before him identified it as Siwash Rock — wondering why such a promenade on a Sunday morning should be so deserted. It was his first visit to Canada’s West Coast, and a new-found delight attended the discovery of this quiet near-paradise which his hectic wayfaring life had thus far overshot. For a brief few minutes even the dismaying circumstances that brought him to this vista eluded his preoccupation. He believed he had several days, perhaps even a week’s hiatus, and was suddenly keenly aware he was momentarily happy — for perhaps the second or third time in his life. If he had to exercise a little existential hugger mugger to seal this suspension of reality, so be it. The buggerish events of the past several months must catch up with him soon enough — so he believed. Until then he would let the radiant sunlight and blithe breezes stroking his thinning hair upstage the recent ugly memories.

But what and where were the people?

As he continued his clockwise stroll about the seawall two cyclists bore down upon him with an immediacy that initially incited terror: for one horrific moment he thought his hiatus had summarily ended, that hard upon him sprang the thugs sent to end his sad sometime abject life. He had nowhere to turn; the bay flanked his left, a sheer rock face his right.

But confusion cribbed even this response. The riders passed by before he decided the water afforded the more reasonable alternative. The cautionary words of the intent cyclists continued to goad. “Head up for the huffers!” the one urged, seconded by the other. The rushed phrase was meaningless, leaving Louis raptly confused. Some kind of warning? Here? He was a universe away from an answer when a strange rumble touched his ears. His sense of panic returned and with it astonishment as a herd of steaming brutes descended the gauntlet of the seawall, all but squeezing him into the sea. Runners! All female, or so he initially surmised, all in earnest, and all, after a few seconds elapsed while he concluded he would live a few minutes more, unshapely and grim featured. He was surely stolidly dreaming. He had never witnessed such unpromising female flesh.

He found himself looking over the field with a sore comfortless vigilance: women he liked more than food, which he relished, but could find not a single form he might excuse this atrocious near-nakedness — bodies never in the gods’ more Nemesis-fraught dreams to be looked on uncovered. Where is the bloody censor when you need him? To escape to a northern clime only to be plowed under by a herd of smelly heaving monstrosities — of the gender he always believed Nature’s best shot? He looked upon the throng with growing wonder. There seemed to be scores of them if not hundreds. He clung to his square foot of seawall and for the first time in his life felt not the slightest inclination to lift either of the

two cameras slung about his neck and record what a promotional verbal description would have prompted him rising at almost any hour to see (in this case a YWCA sponsored former-smokers' run, in which the less conditioned runners — with smaller oxygen transference capacity — were given a head start). All his life he had assiduously photographed what instinct told him were inspired variations of *La Masterpiece* — when not photographing fatty wines, naughty fashions, impervious automobiles, rapt celebrities (their palaces, pussies and palpitations), exotic foods, sleek ships, posh homes, immodest objets d'art, and other dishy items that form the quarry of the stolid freelance photographer. He was on the point of despair — in his final moments on earth venting the craven injunction, *Woman Clothe Thyself!* — when he did spot some creatures who would be forgiven the brief attire, then more. His optimism rallied. Soon he counted a dozen — and more on the way. He decided to cling to the dry land. And display a becoming accord. He even fingered the nearest camera.

Elsewise, health and hygiene were subjects in his philosophy that begged for corruption — well, a little well-versed trifling at least. Redolent scent and seasoned 'experienced' bloom he savored as much as any intemperate connoisseur. Yet he adamantly felt only vernal, dewy, and splendidly proportioned creatures should be publicly aired in states of raffish and sporty undress (to sustain the anticipation), and only when at least two observers are present, one to affirm the other's witness, like all dedicated birdwatchers. Naturally he kept these fond notions to himself, certainly amidst the present throng, where his peculiar sense of decorum would surely not earn him the square foot of earth he desperately clung to.

The runners had sporadically thinned, coming then in smaller groups, sometimes even twos and threes when, *Lo and Behold*, before him ranged the amber-haired beauty who indirectly had, in the traffic of ill-luck, so recently made his life a shambles. She sped by as decisively and assuredly as any feature performer, even looked up at him, or rather his cam-



eras, with a detachment, a non-recognition that spooked. She was several yards beyond before he had focused and cued the motor drive to document her sprightly movement. If she appeared a little more poised, forthright, somewhat better groomed or more trigly attired than the creature he remembered with such distress, he could not at that moment deny some kind of awesome similarity. Many seconds later he began to consider the likelihood of luckless coincidence, a fluke look-alike say, or possibly his own unreliable (at that juncture) nervous system. Was the curiosity not to be mad, at that time?

His life had been nearly tolerable — the customary mixture of boredom and anticipation (which he compared to the thrifty rabbit stew: one horse to one rabbit, the rabbit being the anticipation) — until he chanced to fall into the orbit of a Russian dynamo named Zyta. Because of her he had allowed himself to be drawn into a (most likely) mischievous and complex ruse.

Late one afternoon two laconic, grey-flannel gents came to his studio in North Hollywood with a commission to alter, in subtle yet highly consequential ways, a series of futuristic illustrations. All backgrounds and a few props were to be given faintly historic, antiquarian looks. At first he was a little daunted, yet soon realized how uncannily the scenes lent themselves to the task. Using a series of litho masks on a masking easel — a technique he had long tinkered with — he managed to insinuate a medley of ancient Mid-East communities. He was just then learning the essentials of Adobe Photoshop and still trusted his tried and true printing techniques to accomplish ticklish alterations, though he knew his time in the conventional printing trenches was drawing to an end. In addition to the alterations, he was asked to photograph a young Russian named Zyta, whose entry status to the U.S. he never did learn, and interpolate her into several of the scenes.

But as he began the work he became haunted by the originals — by

what they might represent. He had never seen more elegant or exquisitely detailed pics, none of which had the imperious and precious look of a sci-fi film set, which they yet slyly intimated. He could find no forthcoming movies, in or out of Hollywood's back lots, that showcased scenes like them; nor could he think of a single science fiction writer for whom they might serve as illustrations. The original scenes were unsigned, likely computer generated, but with a line-screen compactness that seemed far greater than offered by the better programs. The enigmatic Zyta — he now recalled — simply shrugged; publicity of any kind she coveted. "Is already summertime, okay?" 'Fall' — the curse of age — not far beyond for this career hustler he assumed. Queries of his retainers drew laden smiles, some hints about a new comic-book format — and finally a handsome cash payment. But once the work was completed and delivered he felt distraught, strangely perplexed. Then, as if by decree, the disturbing messages began.

And now the same allegro creature who posed for him a fortnight ago loomed by without a smidgeon of greeting or recognition. It seemed but one more premonition, in a long list that included, before he hastily departed Los Angeles, the furtiveness of his patrons and suspected surveillance and search of his studio. A week after he delivered the work, on a forgetful night out, two goons hauled him off a busy street into an alleyway where a police cruiser suddenly miraculously emerged at the opposite end. To his rescuers, two taciturn plainclothesmen, he gave a sketchy description of his attackers but could offer no motive or explanation. Indeed, if he was not then impoverished, he looked it. Their concern mimicked formality anyway. The usual street mayhem. No authority subsequently called — only the husky phone voice that repeatedly pronounced him in big trouble if he didn't cool it. He had no idea what was meant. Cool what? His voyeuristic vicarious life seemed to magnify the menace. Whom could he have offended, and how? Vividly he recalled a childhood

bully who made an entire school season a hell, the stark memory of which chilled the phone calls.

The following week he left on a crash vacation. Only later, as he drove through the serene coastal vistas of Oregon, did he wonder at the coincidence of the plainclothesmen. Was it all perhaps simply a warning — but for what? To keep to himself? To forget the original pictures? The plainclothesmen had been surprisingly negligent in not urging him to register the attack. Their very passivity insinuated complicity. His anxiety let up somewhat when he arrived at the border, at the orderly green parkland about the Peach Arch near Blaine, Washington. But now, as the young runner disappeared beyond a turn in the Stanley Park Seawall, he felt again the wrenching dismay, also a newfound resentment. What could it all mean? That extraordinary, perhaps *sui generis* art work might intimidate? Even injure? He suspected his mind was in overdrive but the haunt wouldn't let up. Was he, perhaps like the runner, simply luridly mistaken for someone else?

Then, on returning to LA, he was for a time undisturbed. He worked, sulked, and drank between frequent satisfactory trysts with Cody, his on-off girlfriend, a resilient cabaret performer who generally kept him upbeat. She imagined herself the incarnation of a mythic goddess whose name he could never pronounce, a tiny quarter-sized image of whom had been intricately tattooed onto her hip, almost as a clinician might mark the greater trochanter or outer hip bone. The symbol remained unmasked and aloof against the garish costumes she wore at the cabaret, where she sometimes performed with a Czech gypsy and his trunk of smelly snakes. Louis had told no one of his fear and depression, not even Cody, for whom he often bared his knotty wayward soul. He was, he said, a stray dog looking for a home.

“Some homebody,” said Cody, perhaps thinking of his recent bearishness, as she applied the wedjat motif to focused wide open eyes.



She dressed at home for her first show. “Makes your arrival a somo event,” she said. From the eyes, lips were deftly brushed into a crimson wound then, after vetting the finished face, she matter-of-factly began fastening small plastic menats to her wide nipples, the nub of full low-slung breasts. She stood, craning to see the face and torso in the low vanity, dangling in her hand a small replica of the famous Rebus pectoral which would cover not her sternum but pinkish loin, still an exclusive patch of wispy blond curls against sun-burnished hips and legs. The veteran Miss America. She gave the menats a slight twirl. “About all the velvet you can handle tonight, I guess,” she said. In his disjointed state he stoically agreed. But she told him to sod it: the Orange Julius man, a recent patron, had been highly entertaining and she wasn’t going to work that night with the world’s sorrows pulling on her menats. He laughed at this, and that was when she told him he maybe shouldn’t wait up.

But he could hardly sleep. All mental energy seemed then unsparing. He was both chagrinned and loath to think she might be at risk as well. To lose her now would be unbearable. His selfishness seemed impregnable, his paranoia mushrooming.

Then he began to sweat over — the Orange Julius man! Was Cody going to serve some kind of intrigue after all — innocently, willingly? Stealthily? Were his enigmatic patrons arbitrary as well as cruel? Like a cagey player’s attention coalescing on a game board he began to collate stray events. The merest hunch. Vividly he recalled seeing the Wild Bill Cody outfit hastily shed when her agent unexpectedly booked her into Anteros’ snake snow that night. A possible stacked deck. After a surly silent debate he got up, briskly dressed for a night out, and like the wary mongrel he was, promptly followed her to the once elegant club where she was scheduled to perform within the hour.

As the taxi whispered down the Strip he sensed-at-a-distance the visceral exhilaration of anarchy, where menace paced an ill-omened scene,

making one a reflexive fugitive. The only move possible was speedy elusive flight, whether from or to didn't much matter. Cruising was the intransigent, hypnotic all. Your eyes pulled you about like a kite — else you crashed.

The cabaret, named the Nekhbet, after the vulture Goddess of Upper Egypt, was planned and built as an exclusive club, but the well-heeled patrons came infrequently and the original owner, a mysterious importer, leased the space to another, who kept the place packed at least on weekends by catering to the Strip's more bourgeois drop-ins: randy salesmen, agog tourists, office dog-bodies shunning home-sweet-home, stray cops, glazed groupies, a handful of untidy tipplers, and a few mannered observers of human decadence, like himself — a small but reliable crowd. And it was here that antiquarian minded Cody, who had been seduced by the promise of the place, exhumed the anointed marvels of her self to the omnivorous natives.

The original club had been lavishly appointed and Louis, who usually welcomed pagan extravagance, was pained to see yet another banquette cushion with a cigarette burn, the elegant crystal drops of the chandeliers, shaped like Selkets, dwindling, the casual deterioration of the gilded restrooms into cockroach bogs and, worst of all, the sad comeliness of some of the performers who, like Cody, abided the naked damp, routine sleaze and irregular pay, a nosey kleptomaniac magician and, currently, an irredeemable feature act, filled by an Eastern European gypsy named Anteros, whose snakes and tarantulas visited without noticeable enthusiasm the considerable attractions of his partner's aging but taut exercised body. It was Cody's infatuation with Egyptian arcana that gave the act a smidgeon of anticipation. A makeup artist at Universal with whom she sometimes slept, for cocaine, fashioned a menacing looking hood for a young bull snake in Anteros' collection. She danced with this theatre cobra in a lowered glass cage — for the audience's protection, the marquee said —

on a darkened stage. The ineffable Anteros, garishly made up as an Egyptian monarch, cued the snake with some portentous Eastern mumbo jumbo and a small winch hidden in the cabaret ceiling that lifted the reptile into a menacing coil via a thin wire attached to the lowest segment of the snake's makeshift hood. Eventually the snake disappeared behind (ostensibly into) the large cylindrical crown of Lower Egypt Cody wore over her saffron curls, a false mechanical head coming to rest as an uraeus (a dilated cobra head) on her forehead. Thereafter Anteros took up the crown while a transpired Cody lay on a marble bier where a tarantula, then an immature python, glided over her munificent and incisive torso while a thoughtful Anteros conspicuously laid out an assortment of ancient embalming instruments.

As Louis approached the Nekhbet's ornate entrance and squat moronic doorman who invariably watched as patrons themselves struggled to open the massive door, the low moon loomed as a lurid tangerine bauble, owing to an unusual dispersion of pollutants into the troposphere that week, its immensity and phosphorescence unduly haunting with Cody's mention of the 'Orange Julius man' resounding in his head. The bulky doorman, attired in the acicular crown of Upper Egypt, pleated kilt, loin apron and heavy beaded collar, wide as a freighter truck, smiled oafishly as Louis grabbed the door's large brass handle: plainly, he had come of his own volition to the Nekhbet that night, and so doing absolved the ancients of all ancillary blame.

Inside, his eyes active in the dim light, Cody's act with the flinty Anteros seemed imminent. The last of the pedestal dancers gathered sections of her moulted costume. A musty smell clung to the place like the occasional fetid odour, yet this night Louis was seized by a distinct sense of the macabre: a glass eyeball of remarkably realistic design stared up at him from an empty highball glass on an adjacent table, and the dancer coming toward him, clutching wispy strands of sequined polyester about



an unexpectedly delicate nakedness, fixed upon him a candid eye, the twin of which appeared umbered and shut.

### THREE

As the Zil limo propelled him toward the unwelcome meeting with his Department Head, to join the official enquiry into the disappearance of Frieda Van Eerden (the exceptional Anastasia Kniaźnin) —and what form a sudden reincarnation might take — Vassily Sergreevich Ablesimov found himself nodding with one eye open. When awake he continued to mutely rail against the coming of glasnost, the chichi creed, particularly the sermonizing of keen Party ‘prelates’, which seemed to him the tactic of a hoarse ring master in a failing circus. A species of condescension daft as that touted by the United Nations! To befriend the world was to slight realpolitik. “We must not hide our lights behind a bushel!” Lemonshchik! The wile of the modern serpent — determined to be more than a worm. My god, the bedevilled Egyptians had more respect for wisdom!

Vassily had always championed the individual against his whining — a challenge most accommodators tended these days to eschew, stumping instead for egalitarian nostrums. In his mind, adversity baptized the survivor, who might then be sanguinely acknowledged. Economics too he believed hopelessly involuted. Only the resourceful might get things done; the rest made speeches, then coiled like adders to spew their virulence when criticized. He was in the emotive press of an early Crusade that evening. And, given his miasma at the moment, which he would keep to himself, continued thus: Without a supreme central cunning a nation disintegrates — witness the chronic inability of the U.S. to check its subversive conspiracy mavens. What did the U.S. have left to exploit but the marketing of a reflexive onanism that fed on itself, which its advertising genius

had perfected. Yes, the serpent had escaped its Genesis — and peddled notions like glasnost, perestroika and uskorenje. Voyeurism, Bohemianism, and ants-in-the-pants! So onward Western love mongers — but leave my Anastasia alone! Give us a Eucharist that reads like the front page of Pravda and enshrines the doltishness of popularity. Onward American scandal ferrets. The free-wheeling media arena is the temple of impatient incompetents. The exotic dung ball for all aspiring maggots. Happy days!

As we've noted, Vassily Sergeevich was not your typical GRU officer. The overwhelming need throughout his life, beginning with one of the colossal blunders in radiation containment, which he witnessed firsthand and would likely perish by, was his measure of patient accretionary propriety — essentially, he flattered himself, the Republican Roman's attributes of pietas, officium, constantia, disciplina, industria, virtus, frugalitas, communitas — the legacy of his reincarnations, his mos maiorum (time-honoured principles), from which the fruits of civilization precariously flowered. Demure ideologues smitten by Utopia, like thugs with exotic tastes, were proud, chameleonic, subtly perfumed, and endowed with faulty synapses — badly in need of a lesson in humility, from a church that knew its place, the care of only-begotten souls, the church he willed when he listened to Boris Godunov and fretted over his vocation.

So, as the frozen grizzle of the Moskva River intermittently extruded itself beyond his window, occasionally defining rigid box trees, Vassily Sergeevich wondered what his boss would confront him with and how he would fare in the gruelling cross questioning. But unlike the agenda of many colleagues, this was not the ordeal to agonize over. He had done his best at the time, his conscience was clear. If the humanly-flawed, convoluted authority of the Party was to lash out when it periodically uncoiled itself, he must, would be, ready. Russia was a study in the ordination, the ethos and power of severitas — this he had ever acknowledged, particularly in the dead of winter.

General Myshin stood behind his large oak desk, rocking gently back and forth on his heels. An aide saw Vassily comfortably seated opposite, calmly noted the late assassination of the former Pakistani president, offered and lit a cigarette, then poured out a glass of raspberry schnapps, which Myshin knew his assiduous deputy liked. *Comitas punctilio!* The General's army uniform was impeccable, his handsome features a movie producer's dream. Now, if he were just seven or eight inches taller Vassily thought somewhat churlishly, and a little more knowledgeable of the many straining cultures that Soviet ideology often crudely, if not pointlessly, sought to delouse...the tics and crotchets of ethnic groups became bloody when you scratched them repeatedly, as a child might a ripe Mosquito bite. What better way to mutual self-aggrandizement, to burn or suborn the marginal member — a mutual infection!

"I'm grateful you came promptly, comrade. We have much to sort out and little time."

— Myshin displaying cautionary courtesies? Alerted, Vassily stoically listened on.

"I've read your evaluation of agent Anastasia Kniaźnin — code alias Frieda Van Eerden — and I'm satisfied you saw in her a meritorious candidate — as to her emotional stability, early academic achievement, excellent Komsomol record, and so forth. Perhaps you wish to play another card or two."

Vassily said without hesitation, "I can think of no perplexity evident in the last contact. Her radar and remote sensing goods were always top drawer. As you know, I'm not in agreement with the policy of leaving our younger agents in place for the recommended duration."

"You wish perhaps to institute re-evaluation of status protocol with your former superior?"

Long ago Vassily discovered himself immune to the formal syntax that would otherwise dog all oncoming exchanges.



“Not in this weather.”

But the General had mewed up his sometime political wit, a fact that gave Vassily further pause. Indeed, Myshin would appear that evening as remote and severe as a serf’s ikon. There seemed to be more on his mind than the pall of one illegal operation’s default, with which he had no ongoing traffic.

“What can you remember of the step sister?” Myshin suddenly shuffled through an open dossier. “ — Zoya Belova Stolbanov.”

Again Vassily was ready. “Not much. Frieda — ‘Zia — was often embarrassed. But her family happily receded when she joined the service. I suspect Zoya’s gamy father was even relieved to see the back of her.”

General Myshin looked with a diffident calm upon his lieutenant. “Your office is perhaps poorly informed about recent events. Zoya Belova disappeared four weeks ago, yesterday. After an attack in a London club. By a Muslim. The club, the Apsara, is one of Kissy Borozov’s toffy cabarets. The disappearance — absolutely confirmed — is a concern. Given her devious habits and connections here. And the recent disappearance of your illegal.”

For Vassily the void quickly teamed with creatures, and the comment that had lingered in his mind over prolonged assignments — keeping agents in place more or less indefinitely — promptly abandoned. The concurrence of Frieda’s silence and her stepsister’s departure was a knotty curiosity. What was not unusual was the Cheka information network being highly selective in communicating sudden cautionary coincidence. Vassily merely nodded and added quietly, “I very much doubt there’s been any communication between the two.”

“Unfortunately, there is more.”

Vassily smoked in silence.

“In brief — the busy Zoya may have left with information regarding an ongoing diplomatic operation. Someone has been exceedingly careless.

So I am told, in house. It would be preferable for both of us if you reflect and corroborate any anxiety you had relating to our esteemed agent.” Vassily smiled at the wording. Myshin continued to look a little coerced. Still, he used the adjective ‘our’. “Thus far the Neighbors know only of the disappearance.” He meant the SVR, the Foreign Intelligence Service.

Vassily continued to smoke in a heavy dense silence, his facial features a deadpan mask. He suspected the ‘ongoing operation’ was likely a means to scotch a rumour — the ‘information’ — that some big shot would be embarrassed by.

Said the unexcitable Myshin, “You were the closest intelligence cadre to the Kniaźnin and Stolbanov families.”

Vassily took his time responding. “Zoya was a canny delinquent, a recognition that surfaced really only after Anastasia left home. I assume the drugs the refusenik mother was given before the Stolbanov twins were born — the one dying of meningitis — had consequences; the select ‘therapy’ in such clinics was not always salutary...in any case, Frieda was never close to Zoya or her nutty father, and remains the best trained, certainly the most intelligent and diligent agent we currently have in America. I think we should suspend any conjecture. What may have happened to Zoya, what she may have gleaned in her whoring, remains an unknown. From what you’ve disclosed thus far.”

The General retrieved a page from his dossier, then paraphrased aloud: “She attacked an Islamist backstage at the London Apsara, one of the Borozov dark haired lads, who claims he had gone there to deliver a coded message.” The General neatly replaced the page. “It would be helpful, Vassily Sergeevich, if you can be precise.”

Vassily too managed a straight, even thoughtful face. There was obviously more to the story than an Islamist courier getting sidetracked by a nautch dancer at a popular club. The story itself seemed preposterous. Seemed. Still, he soldiered on.

“If memory serves — it is a while ago — I can vouchsafe: indifference to her school’s curriculum, as many mischievous students are, petty theft, for which I believe she has a full record, promiscuous social habits — she liked older lads, even her oafish father, if memory serves. Also — great expectations, in a Dostoevsky sense — she wasn’t keen on collective farm toil. I recall a shouting match with a local activist, a Komsomol cousin, who didn’t approve of her language. She bonked him with a turnip I believe. In short, she was not a recognizable daughter of her austere refusenik mother — in the philosophic sense. Any and all ideals she had were sloughed off early on.” Then he added, after more careful reflection through lazy smoke channels, “I can’t remember any specific actionable mischief. Or imagine what information she might have gleaned that could prove detrimental. Unless some party whores now have security clearance.”

Said an impatient Myshin, “Our esteemed colleague demands the fullest slate. I will welcome a forthright and detailed affidavit, which will accompany my preliminary report. Not later than tomorrow morning, first thing.”

“I will get to see the final draft?”

“I think so. You may be asked about it later.” The General kept his smile nearly decorous, then swiftly handed over a folder fetched from a bulging briefcase. “Actually, the case may be a safe steal, cut and dry. The FSB may need a benefit performance.” Meaning: the FSB with SVR oversight might take over the matter regardless, somebody’s embarrassment too much to stomach.

As he left the building Vassily dourly noted, again, that the megalith tower had not a single outside window on one side. Mechanically flashing his pass, he sensed anew the battiness of the age. A show lounge dancer a threat to a ranking plutocrat. All he had learned was that another Russian dancer had fled, ostensibly with sensitive information, and someone was



gleaning historical grist for a reckoning with this plutocrat. Vassily's assessment. And that someone needed to get at his illegal and resurrect some unfinished company business. The phrase 'cut and dry' was the key — meaning the GRU must promptly validate its illegal or forfeit the investigation to its pushy Neighbors. That such confusion shrouded his pre-eminent protégé remained the stark fact to assimilate and requite. He sat in his car not seeing the distant river bank, the merest laugh line in a twilight ghosted by the frosty smears of the lights to the Vol Goradsky further on. The driver crouched over the wheel in silence occasionally blowing on ragged gloves, the car's heater barely functional, the window left partly open to forestall fogging. Vassily sat like a plumped pigeon ensconced in the niche of a dark tenement, often with both eyes closed. He had no idea what the final communiqué would look like and was not one to add needlessly to the discomfort. Vodka and a tepid gas fire awaited him in his small apartment. Only when his inside and outside were at least room temperature would he attempt to plan his response if indeed the mysterious official, who was anxious a clever delinquent not perturb the ranks, had to be confronted. Already Vassily's breath summoned tiny icicles that clung to his fleece collar. At such moments he hibernated, his brain alone foraging. He had very little to do with the daily maneuvering of the GRU, both inside and outside the country, and rarely took a holiday, preferring to see his wife off to Sochi rather than pass a week there distracted from his work, his avocation and lone consolation — the excuse of the insular virtuoso. Rarely was he cognizant of the studiously gamey seaside chatter that occasionally cued one to events that might never be publicly recorded, as well as embellish those already disclosed. It was a full half-hour later before he sat in his study, his feet submerged in a heated water massager, a gift from his wife, and resurrected the early encounters with his nulli secundus recruit. As he chain smoked he saw the dilapidated farm, the lame distraught mother — he still had little idea what they did to her in the psychi-

atric lockup — the beguiling children, the younger conceived by a different father before the mother's commitment to the clinic. Zoya was a 'one-egg' twin, her sibling dying of meningitis as a babe.

Instantly he had seen the possibilities of the older maturer child: a young mathematical whiz with brilliant powers of recall, eager, diligent, indignant, ardent skier, rhythmic gymnast, English already excellent, saddled to a dotty often inebriated step-father who seemed oblivious to his coming internal exile, in contrast to the slight, distraught but ambitious mother who once championed her first child before she antagonized the authorities — the mother who seemed, when Vassily learned of her, impatient to banish her current alcoholic husband, Zoya's father — who served perhaps as a reminder of her fall from grace, though Vassily doubted there was enough left of her individual self to fine tune the details.

The second child, Zoya — the surviving twin — was not a prodigy. An indolent student, 'cool', sly, defiant yet, oddly, the sole mourner of her father's predicament, something Vassily realized later, though it wouldn't have mattered much in any case. At the time he chose to overlook what he imagined to be a ribald and likely incestuous relationship. Whereas, he saw in 'Zia a classic state adoption scenario, where the 'orphan' could become another jewel in the Kremlin collection he himself helped design, cut and polish, with enviable adroitness...not so very long ago.

He had been looking for a suitable country landscape to train a company of agents slated as visiting agricultural students in Canada, where they would upgrade information on NATO cruise missiles on site near Cold Lake, Alberta. It was a posting most GRU operatives welcomed for it contained little risk — Canadians were a remarkably insular, ingenuous, generally unsuspecting breed — and afforded many regular recreational gambits, in keeping with Albertan's devotion to hockey, hiking, curling, skiing, golfing and fishing. Vassily was testing some new high-frequency radio equipment in a comparable geography near Kazan when he came

upon the potty actor lathering himself in a galvanized tub in the front yard of an old stone cottage with a newer log addition that had never been finished. A bottle of cheap vodka sat prominently on a lath chair beside the tub. An extraordinarily pretty youngster of perhaps twelve or thirteen had just doused the gent with a pail of water — somewhat too tepid for the man's liking. He grasped her sweater and almost pulled her into the water with him. The exclamations, Vassily recalled, were nimble and conspiratorial. When they sighted him, with notepad and watchful eye, the girl broke into brisk sniggering. The man poked her in the ribs. The girl was invitingly ticklish. Neither appeared intimidated by the distant stranger. Vassily had simply smiled, casually nodded, and went on with his manifest duty.

Several weeks later, as he surveyed academic and party records of young students with exceptional IQs and exemplary Komsomol activity, a chore he undertook several times a year, he was struck by the photograph of a multi-gifted youngster with a remarkable photographic memory and what was described as 'quiet perseverance'. The face vaguely reminded him of the girl he had seen by the tub with the eccentric elder. Who was also left handed. When he confirmed the address and school station he was nearly satisfied it was the same domicile and that week determined to find out; for if she was the singular Anastasia Kniažnin, mathematical prodigy and model Communist youth with exceptional recall, what was she doing openly fooling about with an old naked man in a vintage tub during school hours? The brief summer break ended a fortnight earlier.

He had his driver park the dark Volga near a power substation, well out of sight of the cottage, which sat on the fringe of newer dwellings housing a grain farming collective. A small ravine and hillock of spruce and poplar separated the cottage from the rest, all of a frame construction, unlike the older river stone and log of the modified isba. The collective



was one of the showcase farms tourists glimpsed on their well-coordinated tours. From the highway and visitation sites the cottage remained hidden by the trees. Vassily imagined it once a gamekeeper's lodging or, as he drew nearer, a coach stop, for he could see what appeared to be the remains of a stable behind. The buildings were perhaps too awkwardly placed to be useful as a restored historical site, for the substation they overlooked served as well a munitions factory a quarter of a mile off.

The yard was as cluttered and overgrown as before. Two tractors sat rusting amidst dense scrub at the base of the hillock, which he made note of. Also, part of the ravine was discovered full of clandestinely stashed grain.

He circled the cottage once, carefully observing it through field glasses from the blinds of the ravine and grove. A cardinal principle in his method of recruitment was to know as unedited as possible the environment his prospective candidates grew up in. From the child's record he learned she had been admitted to the region's Institute of Technology at fourteen — another fact that indirectly heartened and cautioned, for she had thus worked her way into that uppity district's Komsomol council before her fifteenth birthday.

In the past decade he had placed four youngsters in universities in the U.S. with appropriate legends and rotating mentor-guardians. All but one — who died of leukemia — had in the succeeding years reached positions of vital importance to the Kremlin. And all were educated and serviceably 'conditioned' by socialist minded American professors themselves! How droll that so many wistful Marxists should reside in the U.S. It was a stratagem Vassily perfected, and it earned for him the coveted citation. Early in his career he put together three simple facts from which he derived a workable and ideologically assuaging synthesis. First: recruitment of capable persons had become an arduous, competitive task in the late Soviet Union, its exceptionally gifted young being more wary, resentful and

suspicious than before, especially of an intelligence network with an insatiable contempt of complacency, leisure, inexperience and immaturity — as defined by the state. Second: America had nurtured many enclaves of subversive resentment, including several of her finest universities. Third: the most useful spies in America were invariably home-grown Americans. Thus Vassily decided the GRU should begin recruiting younger persons — those whose idealism was still viable — and carefully educate them in, and at the expense of, the U.S. It was a shrewd, hard, audacious scheme which initially struck his superiors as too speculative.

He was acknowledged another nearly commendable humdinger and further deployed on difficult housekeeping chores. He had spent a brief time himself in America in his younger days, as part of a spetsnaz team in Canada stashing caches of arms for the anticipated war with America, codenamed Cedar. He had also, on his own, stolen a selection of rust resistant grain seeds from an experimental farm near Swift Current, Saskatchewan, that proved to be essential in salvaging a portion of the harvests during the late awful Lysenko period. A ‘rogue adventure’, so described at the time, that would have got him shot when he returned to the Soviet Union had the Lysenkoists remained in favour. Finally he did convince one aging restive department chief that his recruitment scheme was at least worth a try, and the results were nothing short of galvanizing. Within a decade, three illegals, all of whom first entered the U.S. in their mid-teens, had acquired strategic positions in corporations the Pentagon contracted to, also in liaison staffs of the State Department, and begun returning quality information — and they were as resolutely committed to Soviet ideology as any of the more stolid professionals in their Rezidency. All had attended Ivy League schools, one Yale, the other two Columbia, where they learned many sorry truths about the U.S. of A. and its grandiose military industrial juggernaut, as espoused by many of their fellow students and at least one popular American President, as against sketchy and immature re-

membrances of life in the U.S.S.R. Indeed, at an early age they had been lifted out of the wearying morass that is the lot of most Soviet citizens and given full audience to the privileged, stylish, bitter and sardonic liberal-Yankee critic, an overwhelming experience for the young transplanted idealist. The intent was to prepare the Russian youngster to see such libertarian virtuosi as players in the American entertainment industry, essentially debonair scolds no sane community could long indulge — for their very remedies insinuated the kind of anomie or ‘normlessness’ many Americans seemed destined to foster even cherish. The Vietnam war was anathema to American students, the horrors of the ‘boat people’ sad but deserved, the fanatic Khmer Rouge befriended by Noam Chomsky! Even the Soviet leaders were amazed. Indeed, assured, self-dramatic public anarchy, of whatever stripe, was for stern Vassily the cardinal index of a moribund society. Rational liberality was the heady oxymoronic illness, as if rationality might be philanthropic — the ‘powder monkey poltroon’, he quietly pointed out to his budding patriots — and long ago he put his ideological house in order and got on with daily tasks. His sense of utopia, vis-à-vis la dolce vita, was as vivid as any. He fretted over many habitual obsessions in the Soviet Union yet continued to maneuver behind his special veil of tears, which offered occasional (how else would one recognize it?) happiness -- all that might legitimately be expected: a harsh but durable credo.

However, the fabric being hung before him in the days he began to investigate the Kniaźnin family was fashioned from a very irregular fustian weave. The cottage seemed unoccupied one day while several groups of workers toiled in adjacent fields. He was at first distracted by a line of women stooking alfalfa hay, puzzled by the pale sheen to their coveralls which, in closer range, yielded a light fleshy mirage: in the heat the workers had shed their work clothes and worked in pale underwear. Particularly teasing among their number was a lively youngster who reefed her al-



lotted swaths some distance from the others, very near a field where a group of oil-smeared men worked on a crippled all-crop harvester, or rather had paused in their labors to view the scene that Vassily judiciously took in — a comic drama unfolding with much Russian stealth and deliberation.

One of the mechanics, concealed behind a long broad swath, wormed his way toward the girl, who sometimes grasped her whiskers in a highly suggestive manner. At the edge of the stand of poplars Vassily could plainly see both the nearer stalker and the more distant girl, whose young figure was absurdly outfitted in a momentous bra which housed large heavy bulbous contents. Just as the stealthy Lothario sprang to his feet the girl, whom Vassily now rather doubted was the student he sought, took from her bra a moderately sized turnip and hurled it at the intruder. He ducked just in time while a second, thrown with amazing rapidity after the first, landed a direct blow to the shoulder that deftly knocked him off balance. The highly accurate pitcher fled toward her comrades who shied toward their coveralls when they perceived that the young man, now the butt of many ribald insults from his noisy partisans opposite, might follow. But the young gangling Romeo, too obviously bested, merely gave his molester the craven finger and returned to the harvester and the blessings of his howling comrades.

Vassily had been caught up by the performance before him, which only foiled his curiosity about a young minx stooking hay during school hours. This minx was not the student he sought. During the harvest season all residents helped out. Quite openly, to many appreciative whistles, the minx exchanged the expansive bra with a well-larded raker who had simply tied the girl's top, a plain singlet, about her ample bosom. Was there any sight more humbling to male optimism than the slavish woman in full-blown, naked, late maturity Vassily wondered, or more reproachfully seductive than a young stripling already hosting lambent contour? As the

stookers returned to their labors he decided it was time to get on with the business at hand, and returned for a second reconnoiter of the cottage, using the near stand of trees as a blind.

The middle-aged chap last seen scrubbing himself in the galvanized tub was newly observed standing outside the cottage. Flushed and unshaven, he engaged in an insulting mimetic altercation with a thin haggard but still elegant beauty Vassily imagined Scandinavian. She stood in the doorway to the cottage, the man an unresolved distance apart, leaving and returning, when returning prepared to withstand a barrage of blows. Both parties breathed onerously. Neither spoke. The man finally slumped down near a charred picnic table. A small mongrel wagged its tail up to his waiting hands. From the threshold the woman shouted something Vassily could not make out then slammed a screen door. The man pulled an object from his pocket and offered it to the dog. The dog turned it down yet continued to expectantly wag its tail. The man popped the substance into his own mouth and began to lecture the pooch. Vassily sat down in the birch grove and waited. It seemed his young quick student had grown up in a family that classically produced clever delinquents and timely if not peerless saints. He must bide his time for yet half-an-hour on this fine fall day. By then the placid but heedful stookers and loud machine operators would break for lunch and their disparate conversations might be effectively tele-taped.

Later, examining the exchanges, he discovered his newly discovered genius had this adventurous younger sister, a small detail somehow omitted from the exemplary school file. A lacuna that prompted him to investigate the mother's past, an adventure in itself as it turned out. Liisa Mäkelä Uhlgren, a Finnish honours student in linguistics, had been married twice. First to an intelligence service GRU officer, Karol Mieczyslaw Kniażnin, who had been killed in Afghanistan. He had met Liisa Mäkelä at a political academy, who had, by the time of the last stages of the Af-

ghan War, a formidable reputation as a refusenik. It was apparently a heady rushed romance, despite the disagreement over the war, which surfaced in the last letter Liisa received from Karol. Though some of the letter was censored, it was apparent Karol would, must honour his commission. Liisa's daughter by Karol, Anastasia Aleksandrovna — someone sought a Russian connection — was removed from the family at an early age, the turmoil caused by the mother the reason, and raised by an uncle — a cousin to Karol Mieczyslav, who was a devout, indeed, exemplary party member — a rare bird indeed, Vassily thought, if it were true.

The mother tried to abduct the child and was sent to Perm for her effort and given a regimen of 'redemptive' drugs. Vassily recalled that the hangover of the Lysenko period hadn't yet cleared, such that it was still believed that behavior problems were simply a matter of a suitable cocktail of drugs. When it was belatedly discovered that Liisa Mäkelä was two months pregnant, a further citation was appended to her indictment — 'attempted treasonous subordination of a camp guard', one Iosif Nikolaevich Stolbanov — who probably had nothing to do with the conception — the timing was off and he was never a camp guard. From the spare but telling evidence, Vassily suspected Liisa had been raped by a camp guard or commandant. Nothing unusual so far, he thought, though he would have handled refuseniks differently. But it was now all too apparent that the exemplary student he had chanced upon at the Institute was the winsome, once removed Anastasia. The story of the mother ended with the birth of twins, one of which died of meningitis, and her return to a collective farm as a common labourer, along with Iosif Nikolaevich, though by then her health was poor and her relation with Iosif unclear. The surviving twin, Zoya Stolbanov, appeared to be as inspired a delinquent as her half sister was a dedicated Komsomol activist. Zoya's putative father, the wag Vassily saw at the cottage, was a former border guard who had been dismissed for drunkenness and disorderly conduct. The later union with Liisa was likely



one of convenience, given the mother's abject situation. Someone may have taken pity on her. A couple with a child might be sanctioned a cottage. Again, nothing unusual, Vassily concluded. Though he had at last found his Wunderkind.

## FOUR

The brute was for Louis not a happy sight. Cody, her makeup restored, agreeable and attentive following her first show of the evening, which drew a partisan applause and several enquiries about her after-hour schedule, sat chatting to the powerful, bejewelled, red-haired Lothario whom Louis took to be the Orange Julius man, Cody's latest stud-in-waiting. The primed, scented hulk obviously pumped iron in the heavyweight category, yet this night wore the gold chains about his open robust neck like a martyr. Cody's transparent blue eyes followed his every gesture with a Magdalena-like empathy as he enumerated some of the day's trials that included, in Louis' imperfect overhearing, a rash business partner who turned out to be gay and a secret admirer. Cody already helped shoulder this cross by tilting her curly head and softening fine expressive brows. A thin magnolia-flowered wrap criss-crossed her torso leaving a layered neck opening which, seated as she was, encircled by a massive arm, allowed a private view of her cascading left bosom, slightly more erogenous than the right Louis recalled from his own enamored encounters with that frock. The hulk suavely continued the litany of his travail, Cody listening with the devotion of a slightly dismayed madonna which, given her open pliant eyes above a wedge-shaped jaw, made Louis think of the wrenched canvasses of Van Gogh — the contorted resilience of credulity above pain. Louis loved her quite as much as he had any evanescent human apparition, and though he would not have presumed upon her frequent amours, now felt slightly sick. He knew a thug when he saw one and feared Cody

just might be serving the strangers who had so recently found him so inexplicably objectionable.

Cody abruptly quaffed her Perrier, excused herself, rose and kissed the hulk lightly on his thin Tartarin lips. The magician was about to begin his act and Anteros, his snakes and Cody, would follow. Again the entr'acte dancers collected their costumes and Louis looked about for the performer who had earlier approached his table and retrieved her realistic eye from a martini glass, which she pretended to restore and so vouchsafe her reputation as an authentic Eye Popper, the malapropism not bothering her or her audience. She also produced in one performance a hand puppet of the Cookie Monster who lustily devoured her against a carefully programmed blackout light. Now she drew Cody's attention away from the beefy lady-killer, a word Louis ruefully happened upon. Cody suddenly burst into laughter and arm-in-arm the two girls sauntered down the rear corridor leading to the — 'mint', Cody said — Selket room, where the performers donned costumes before a long bright mirror that reflected on a wall behind framed photos of the celebrity patrons who thereafter stayed away. The Eye Popper held the remnants of her costume in front, exhibiting a mignon's clean-limbed back as she disappeared with the taller sveltely muscular Cody of the voluptuous heart and chest. Zyta or Zita, Cody called her. Twice. Louis sat numbly looking on, his mind a disconnected welter. Then someone equally surreal indirectly addressed him from a table across.

"You want a photographer — see him."

Anteros, seated at that adjacent table, had suddenly and inexplicably spoken to the hulk, just before vanishing to his own dressing room.

By then Louis was quite speechless. Zyta? The Eye Popper?

No — a coincidence of names, a mishearing, bad acoustic. So why had Anteros smiled when he left? Anteros never smiled and generally lampooned photographers, believing them in point of fact mirages. "Take

their lenses away and they cease to exist,” the wrangler once said, in his soft canny undertone. Louis tended to agree and always felt a certain reassurance when the gypsy acknowledged his presence — which this night he mainly hadn’t, preferring to glower at the crowd about him. Cody said he had fled Czechoslovakia years ago without the blessing of the authorities, then returned to clandestinely squire a brother into Austria, so perhaps he had reason to be distrustful of picture grubs who made livelihoods from taking people unawares.

But no — not that Zyta. Not here. Even though the young fluent figure, from the back...he did his best to proffer a condolent smile for the hovering hulk as he pulled up a chair to Louis’s table, saying, “I may have a job for you.”

The hulk seemed to await a show of elation. Louis did his best to look at ease. He remained wary of doing business with people who expected a display of enthusiasm for unstated projects, as though all photographers were exigent yet expectant — which many invariably were.

“I need a photographer who knows his way around Photoshop. Melding, filter work and such.”

Louis felt his scalp begin to tingle as he said, “I doubt I’m your man. I work in a rather old-fashioned way.”

“I thought some of the pictures you did of Zyta were super — she thinks so too.”

Louis sat as a bruised sphinx. ‘Super’ was not down on his list of accolades yet he nodded appreciatively: never object to another’s taste unless you can soundly, safely and equanimously thrash him.

“It’s a large job, and may require several days work. You busy at the moment?”

“Moderately.”

“Got a card?”

“ — Zyta?”



“Yeah. You didn’t know. She had some plastic surgery a while ago. Wanted a wider face and not so many freckles.

For the better part of half-an-hour Louis listened to the hulk — who indeed possessed flame colored hair and was called Julius — discuss in detail a job that was a near repeat of the last. In a series of snooty sci-fi pics, by an anonymous artist — “A team project,” Julius said in passing — several subtle alterations were to be effected, including the interpolation of live persons. What especially irked was the hulk’s — Julius’s — expert grasp of both photography and computer imaging. When Louis haltingly, belatedly told of the ugly events following his work on an earlier set not unlike the ‘Zyta Tableaux’, as Julius began to call them, Julius promptly, vacantly asked, “You think there’s a connection?”

“Just superstitious,” said Louis, bitterly, incredulously.

“That’s a pity,” said Julius while fingering his own large knuckles, as though they required tempering. Louis felt decidedly testy and very warm. He imagined himself a suddenly vicious lap dog — with someone blowing in its ear. At any other time he would have welcomed a dialogue on the photographic arts, but he could not escape the arsenal scent of a brass cat’s thug, who seemed bent on serving up more confusion and terror. Finally Louis clammed up.

That’s when Cody returned after another much-appreciated show which he barely noticed. She too displayed amazement at his strange aloofness and even odder indifference over a commission. “Louis did Zyta’s old pics? Louis, they’re beautiful — and you never even said anything. Holy hell, you’ll be famous. Maybe rich!” She then archly suggested he had been pill popping. “You know how it is. Again!” For Louis it became a hoary pantomime, the victim led silently, oafishly to his special fate. In the end, the arm-twisting became simple insinuating amusement. And this, in Cody, he could not stand.

So a day was fixed the following week when Julius would come to

Louis's studio with a friend who would bring a set of pictures that promised to be every bit as haunting if not consequential as the last.

Said the hulk, "Tell your supplier you've got a new granddaddy; that'll cap a few jolly beans till the job's finished." Louis was by then too numbed to ask what the man meant. Offering a wide indulgent smile, the hulk left arm-in-arm with a mesmerized Cody. Louis found himself staring at the ageless Anteros, who now resembled a mute iguana soaking up the ethers of the nearly empty club, as waiters and two cashiers noisily tallied and allotted the take, the magician fetched left-over props from the stage, and the club's manager vigilantly inventoried and locked away the stock of booze. "Zyta's sick," someone said. An intimate urinary infection was forensically discussed. The bleach Zyta used was a suspect, then the club's dirty dressing rooms. "Has nothing to do with it, idiot," said another. Zyta appeared briefly, looking wan and put upon. She lingered briefly by a back table where two large well-dressed gentlemen rose up and escorted her to a stage exit. Not once did she look Louis's way. The night seemed full of a furtive menace. His will had vanished as the magician's jar of milk. But for her laugh he hadn't this night heard this Zyta speak — a lack suddenly, startlingly remedied by an oath and stream of thickly accented inventive, which ended in a fine summation: "Both you — half-ass promos and king-size shits. You specially." The trio was out of sight then, behind the gaudy backdrop to Anteros's set. One of the fire doors closed with a resonant cannonade, a leftover from Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture.

Louis decided the spirited voice might be Zyta's. The recognition rendered him more queasy and derelict than ever.

## FIVE

Vassily looked forlornly at his stereo turntable. He had a special liking for

the richness of the older LPs. The drive mechanism had run slack while gears jerked and spun preventing a uniform rotation. The Berlioz Requiem did not lend itself to erratically alternating rpm's. Until that moment the desperate robot had somehow righted itself after a fillip or two. On this night of nights, however, it gave up, even defying all adroit attempts to remedy the impairment. Vassily Sergeevich was not amused. Pandemonium as a mechanoid was far too jingoistic — in his estimation.

He had reached his comfortable, cluttered book-laden flat intending to let the inspiration of the Godhead, through the genius of the ever stoic Louis-Hector settle the dust in his dark cave: often the Party giants were ugly, brutish, short-tempered, relentlessly rooting and pig-headed, but rarely heedless and witless as well. He had decided a personal vendetta among some current strivers was frenetically under way, and Frieda Van Eerden, née Anastasia Kniaźnin, the illegal operative, stood implicated as a suborned player and must be vetted — now with her step-sister fattening the suspicion and distrust. It was a situation too explosive to fiddle with, yet fiddle he must; he had banked on a little night music to baffle and soothe the clamor.

Thus far the facts he had isolated were these: a) Frieda had vacated her Los Angeles operations' cell; b) With alarming coincidence, her sister, Zoya — whom Vassily had spied in the field that hot fall day, a truant and budding thief — had disappeared from a dance troupe in London after an altercation with a Muslim; c) Astonishingly, the Western press described the attack in the Apsara as an assault on the Muslim!; and d) An unknown officer in the reshuffled intelligence section, or a party enforcer, cognizant of Frieda's existence (illegals were rarely known to more than their case officer and his chief), had urged someone in the GRU to engineer the return, or disabling, of a potentially embarrassing agent — as a means of insuring her isolation from the delinquent and the delinquent's embarrassing 'humint' — her telling insider poop. 'Embarrassing' for just who Vassily



wondered. The whole business seemed absurd. The very timing was as intimidating as the insinuation (at least at Vassily's level) that an adroit illegal might somehow be baited, co-opted by an intrepid information peddler! Moreover, how would such a scapegrace even know of Frieda's existence? Had the powder monkey so nettled or embarrassed a top level Soviet cadre that any and all options were 'go' ? In Moscow, the rumour had London dockers brawling with the Russian officials dispatched to find and return a 'substandard' caviar shipment. Two freighters were searched. Moreover, no reliable British contact could vouchsafe the girl's whereabouts — whence the bone-rattling urgency: only someone with a lot to lose would chance — must chance — recruiting the GRU, the SVR being otherwise, sometimes, less discreet.

From the interrogations of her few friends, Myshin believed Los Angeles to be Zoya's destination, and he had to estimate the degree of risk Frieda herself now posed — what likelihood, given the press stories, that she might contact her fractious incendiary sister and learn of the sister's dirt on some Russian poobah. If Frieda could no longer be relied upon to assist a muzzling operation — the quarantine of Zoya or, if demanded, something more immediately lethal (Zoya was a known drug pusher and hence an induced OD would credibly suffice for either option) — then the possibility existed that both girls might be classed as 'unduly prejudicial'. Vassily was expected to submit a succinct character appraisal that would underline the elementary distrust and enmity between the two. His statement would further pad out the protocol of a formal department investigation and so indirectly reassure the top-drawer brat sufficiently to stop swilling absinthe. Otherwise, the peristaltic convulsions could disturb the entire Directorate, and thousands of man hours would be lost to non-productive backlogging and maneuvering. The central worry was that Frieda might turn up in U.S. custody seeking asylum, or be discovered consorting with CIA legmen. And as he familiarized himself with Zoya's noi-

some history, he wondered if those were no longer remote possibilities

For a couple of years Zoya was a performer in the chain of Apsara clubs owned by crime boss Konstantin Borozov which had outlets in London, Los Angeles, Baku, Marseilles, Frankfurt and St. Petersburg. Recently, in the London club, Zoya had confronted an angry Muslim, whom she stabbed in the eye with a hair or hat pin. She survived but fled the club and subsequently vanished. Understandable. The owners would pander to the Muslim goons who sought to find her. That she might end in a crate of caviar headed for Los Angeles suggested someone head tripping. Improbability was ever a consummate tease. He tried to imagine the goons' reaction to a missing 'caviar imp'. She was an adept thief, smuggler and con artist, this twin of a refusenik mother, whose sibling died of meningitis shortly after birth. He learned from Myshin's brief that she was reputed to be the friend of an investigator who worked for a Moscow procurator — further evidence of a resourceful tale bearer. That she cut short an apparently promising folk dancing career to perform in the Apsara Clubs remained another irregular puzzle piece. She was a beauty — in the lithe rhythmic gymnastic mould — duly reminding one that Russian delinquents, when determined, were a peerless breed.

And so Colonel Vassily Ablesimov firmed up Myshin's inter-department memo, having little difficulty positing bad blood between 'Zia Kniaźnin and Zoya Stolbanov — at least as youngsters. That would not be enough of course, but he would not posit circumstances that begged for verification. Because he was as anxious about his early evaluation of 'Zia, nay obsessed, he immersed himself in revisiting, via a few tapes and the incisive notes made at the time, the colorful background and early life which, two decades ago, he concluded would not jeopardize her capability as a career illegal — recollections he now sought without his requisite Requiem.

Almost from his initial interview with her Vassily detected rumblings of a pitched battle on the home front — which ended in her removal to the

home of a Soviet ideologue uncle. She sat rather rigidly in her school uniform upon a bright new chair in the school prefect's office and had not touched the cookies and milk a cafeteria attendant set out. She knew her family was often under scrutiny but did not realize she was the chief interest of this inquiry, and hence seemed to anticipate more domestic mayhem. Indeed, she had eventualities so worked out in her mind that Vassily was a time tallying the extent of her forward perception — her calculated diminution of meat vouchers (and favours), the additional hours she would have to spend in queues, the number of calories she might imperviously salvage from her school cafeteria for her mother, when she was allowed to see her, and the sly discontented individuals she must forthwith be wary of after her pathetic stepfather was finally, irrevocably 'removed' — which he was half-a-year later. Vassily had not encountered a thirteen-year-old as determined, alert and resourceful as young Anastasia Kniaźnin.

"You don't like cookies, 'Zia?"

He listened to a tape of their first interview. He had just entered the vacated schoolroom where she sat. Moments before a door decisively closed.

"Yes." The voice an imposed deadpan.

He remembered winking at her. "I taste them first?"

"They won't kill you."

"Ah, so you've had them before."

"Well, I'm alive."

"And you think that's extraordinary."

"If you had eaten Katya Arkadyevna's baking you might think so."

He remembered being at first irritated by this youthful impertinence and had witlessly picked up a cookie and taken a bite. It was indeed awful — no flavour or sweetener and the oatmeal stale — but he felt some obligation to ameliorate if not discourage the resistance facing him.

"I think Katya Arkadyevna will have a busy future.."



He now imagined a faint smile.

“I’m told you like a good mathematical puzzle.”

“Sometimes.”

“And memory games most of us play at badly. Also Pioneer hiking and skiing, and can do a decent double twisting vault.”

An impassive nod then a timely yawn, he recalled.

“You also play a bold game of co-ed chess. Runner up in your district. You might even beat me — if I had eaten too many of Katya Arkadyevna’s scrumptious cookies say.”

“Probably.”

The poise and assurance seemed congenital. By then Vassily knew that ‘Zia’s Finnish mother, Mäkelä, for whom ‘Zia bore a love-hate ardor, became a religious convert after her stay in Perm, and had read aloud parts of Revelation the Sunday last, with special reference to the dread Seven Seals. The next question seemed ordained.

“I’m told you like the films of Ingmar Bergman.”

At first, ‘Zia barely shrugged — one of the few times Vassily perceived a show of confusion. Then, with her next words, she neatly if incredulously pursued the imputation of the remark.

“You believe in God?” The question was the more eloquent because it was placed without noticeable pertness.

“Yes of course.” Candor was his own special pomp and circumstance. Yet he strove to challenge not amuse, a recollection that harried him of late, disingenuousness being candor’s eerie echo.

“You may get in trouble.”

“Almost guaranteed.”

My stepfather doesn’t think much of God. Or did. Do you like your job?” This question rarely surprised.

“Yes. Very much.”

“My stepfather would envy you.”

“Do you like your stepfather?”

“Not much. He prefers Zoya I think.”

Vassily was by then well versed in the family goings on, especially between stepfather and his favourite ‘twin’, who teased in the gamey confidential manner of the child-woman. She and the indulgent boozier were excoriated by the troubled mother. The conversation Vassily stealthily taped that first afternoon at the collective contained several sarcastic references to Zoya’s loutish guardian. Poor Zoya, an older woman remarked. Zoya had a bruise on a cheek that day. (Vassily later learned the blow likely came not from the father but the distraught mother.) Zoya played the generous sympathy well. “Most days he’s all right,” she said equanimously after the condolences were in.

The late family infighting began Vassily belatedly learned when Viktor Nikolaevich Stolbanov, a former officer in the Federal Security Service — Border Guards — assaulted while drunk a traffic militiaman who requested his pass. His once promising career had been impaired by a mischievous streak aggravated by heavy drinking. He was demoted and began drinking more heavily than ever. One night during a bitter quarrel he was stabbed by his wiry indomitable Finnish fiancé, Mäkelä, a former translator of Scandinavian languages whose first husband died early on in Afghanistan. For her part, Mäkelä was sentenced to three years compulsory work as a janitor in a notorious women’s prison. When she balked at that demeaning job, she was sent to Perm, where it was discovered she was two months pregnant. Given the official account of her ‘insubordination’ there, Vassily wondered if she had been raped by a guard in the prison. She was an attractive woman. Her fate might have been quite different if she hadn’t encountered in Perm the German doctor the Soviets had recruited after the war. Felix Zveno Muerner was quietly at work refuting the lingering Lysenkoists and carefully monitored the drugs given the

mother. When she gave birth to one-egg twins, his interest in their fate keened as well, an interest that apparently ended with the death of the 'older' twin. It seemed the doctor planned a double blind test over time to identify the effects the drugs may have had on the twins.

In Mäkelä's absence, Viktor Nikolaevich apparently stiffened his resentment to 'Zia's socialist idealism and model scholastic and Komsomol achievements, according to a party caseworker assigned to the family in the mother's absence (more to see the gifted 'Zia came to no incidental harm). One afternoon in a drunken fit he tore up 'Zia's school uniform and several of her notebooks. The caseworker petitioned and got clearance for a formal psychiatric evaluation of the stepfather and placement of 'Zia at a private Cheka school. On the eve of the scheduled appraisal Viktor and Zoya stole away to Leningrad where they were apprehended together off hours in a hotel sauna. The father was charged with possession and attempted sale of stolen jewelry and semi-precious stones. Zoya said she was given the jewelry and stones from a party official who had been making advances toward her, a story in part verified when a second rendezvous with the man was staged. The official must have been a dimwit Vassily guessed. Subsequent to the mazy court appearance, father, Zoya and the conditionally released mother, were sent to an older collective as farm laborers and Anastasia permanently billeted at the accelerated school in nearby Kazan. Vassily came upon the rustic scene of the potty bather and his water bearer a year after the family's arrival where Zoya, now free of her half-sister's invidious example, zestfully entertained her audience of molested men and the lonely protective women who loved at a distance nimble resistance to male duress, laughing heartily when the turnips bonked the unsuspecting Lothario. Zoya's popularity enshrined that of the heroine who upstages the district bully then suffers the town wastrel — her putative father — willingly, if not gladly. The relation with the father, for instance, appeared to be mainly foolery and some chicanery; the sub ju-



dice charge of incest was shelved, Isosif Nikolaevich being dismissed as an impotent drunkard (a doctor's evaluation) and potty voyeur (the lawyer's assessment). So Vassily poignantly recalled the first glimpses of his protégé's early life, intimating as it had the chariness and longing of the too-bright adolescent, the knavish stepfather a focal point of her vulnerability and anger, the harridan mother, likely then at her wit's end given her treatment in Perm, a cantankerous goad: a textbook case of adoption by the masterful magisterial state!

Only one item in the scene Vassily had forgotten — the mutt, called Skavki, who had warmed so to Isosif Nikolaevich's outstretched arms. 'Zia saw the pet as the stepfather's namesake. Vassily was particularly alert to the uncommon name and wondered if the christener knew its erstwhile significance. The name literally meant scavenging mongrels but was used in spy craft to signify clumsy small-time agents. The neighboring reservoir, placid, warm, alive, so removed from the dark oily chimney...sometimes he believed he served simply as the coincidental tutor, that her young cogent mind was made up long ago, the antic grief of stepfather central to her determination, strengthened by natural, state-confirmed talents which might overwhelm domestic tragedy. Her modern Soviet school and its gymnasium, he remembered, had been perched on the edge of a valley, or rather coulee, a feature also chiseled by bleak and formidable forces, where he had gone on several walks with her, once with the genial mutt.

He got at the paradox of religion by returning first to the New Testament injunction to give Caesar his due...and went on to suggest that what Lenin wanted, in substance, was exactly that; whereas theologians were chronically dissatisfied with their spiritual allotment, being essentially as ambitious and worldly as Caesar, and so the first perversion was instated: the church would want eventually more to deal with than men's souls. Vassily's clincher, or so he thought, was the fact that the people found little opium in strict adherence to God's laws, and if priests had not usurped a

secular mandate God hadn't intended, Vladimir Illyich would have had much less to ridicule and denounce.

He then went on to point out that atheism was really a pure form of kinship, for it gave man no one but himself to blame for his more impacted problems, and so acknowledged the free will God Himself allotted his creation! By then the more mature 'Zia, inured to her tutor's commitment to a taunting God and molested man, was actually chuckling and suggesting in a demure voice that he would surely be sent to the local stockade, where re-education classes were assigned, and where her stepmother sometimes 'helped out'. Vassily assured her his God would keep his council even there, but that on the important point — that of systemic progress — he and the Party were united as Siamese twins...a metaphor that had not then struck him as odd. He further took great pains to assert that variation, one of life's delights, was not possible without order because anarchy, the generic definition of freedom, was unlimited variation and hence no variation at all, a mathematical precept 'Zia understood well, for she already distinguished between the structural forms of multiformity and the initial conditions of chaotic events.

They had just reached a small creek that meandered through the plain opening off the coulee. The twisted, thorny bushes bordering it were loaded with black currants. It was here Vassily explained how the measure of a country's integrity was the quality of its witness, its 'eyes' — a lecture that was also part of his many impervious recordings, the protocol of lasting witness...

Had he really said all those things, as his notes affirmed? His paean to form and order was embodied in the dual warning that many countries, acutely in the West, had forfeited control of their destiny because their God had evolved into a popular entertainer and investment barker. The forgone result: an unwillingness, even inability, to toil or look 'ridiculous', democracy's mass-produced narcissism, and hence its tailor-made neuro-

sis. A by product was a disproportionate status given the soft sciences; social scientists as augurs was the essential message here — little predictive capability but explanations for everything; humans as reflexive beings.

He had not waited a response.

Inflation, he continued, was as much the difference between what one expected to be paid and what one would pay from one's own pocket to have the job done, as it was an exclusively fiscal or monetary matter. Attitudes determined entitlement, and entitlement was now a political goal seam. And if the democracies were less philosophically robust they still could beguile, and their economies were technologically adept at making pretty posh tools and stealthy weapons.

Then he got personal...and unsociable as Plato.

“Always a great urgency is to know as clearly as we can what other powers are up to, however unpleasant. If we don't understand who may wish to harm us, and how, we are at a disadvantage. We can hardly manage on trust alone. Indeed, trust is often a kind of crutch.”

Such canny topical words.

He suggested that knowing what's going on, what the intelligence community must establish, is a great test of a nation's self respect. Our Soviet world becomes a confusing place if our information is inaccurate. (At this stage he had felt obliged to skip the chapter on the use of disinformation the Cheka bosses historically refined.) The scientist knows this, as does any dedicated observer. Hence you need dedicated observers, searchers. They are the precursors of wisdom, wouldn't you think? If we overlook a peril perhaps we deserve misfortune. In the background he remembered hearing the sounds of a tractor, and recalled seeing a disc harrow moving in the distance, opening a seam of dark soil...so the goading memories flooded in, not the least being his avoidance that day of discussing Soviet latent paranoia, its distrust of most objective strivers!

He poured himself another cognac, silenced the taped dissertation, and



listened to the distant night sounds — the muffled neigh of an American crooner in the apartment below him, the bleeps of a distant siren, the faint welt of bald tires on the uneven snow packed street.

It had been of course an embarrassment to discover his prospective protégé had a stepsister who was an imp — who stood implicated in a spate of crafty misadventures. It was gallingly obvious someone of importance busied himself in keeping Zoya's record low key, less apparent who that person might be and how he or she conspired to keep the precocious delinquent out of a reformatory. It made his recruitment a kind of defiant gamble — which, given his impatience with stolid Soviet protocol, may have spurred him on.

After another shot of cognac he returned to the fated coulee and a newly inquisitive 'Zia.

“What if I decide I don't want to become an applicant?”

They never spoke of 'spies' or 'spying'; indeed, the notion was soon irrelevant. Elegance itself: *veni, vidi, vici*. “Absolutely nothing. You will carry on as before and pursue those subjects you have demonstrated extraordinary ability in. We may be disappointed but we will try to understand.

“Will I see less of my mother?”

When this question was put to him Vassily had not yet decided if the mother was, from 'Zia's point of view, a liability or not. It seemed then that 'Zia herself harboured confused feelings. Vassily's answer was again deftly forthright.

“I'm afraid so. You will in fact, the further you progress in your career, see less of your family. And finally, if you are motivated and selected to become a professional candidate, you will be expected to absent yourself from your family for very long periods.”

The displacement of doubt, and unseemly age. Such model candour before a juvenile.

Yet he never for a moment doubted the goal: to seal a capable youngster's esteem with a noble estimation of the Party. The necessary deed...and from 'Zia's last words on that particular warm summer afternoon, he imagined again how it was to conceive and rouse the Soviet soul, which his steely paradoxical belief in was perhaps the single heresy the Party might excuse. The expedient artist!

"My uncle, like my father, was a brave and patriotic serviceman...who did many good things."

Once again he stopped the tape. The earnestness had taken its toll. He needed the Berlioz more than ever. Or had Berlioz himself seen fit to withdraw his services? The problem with the cabal was the dilemma when the able practitioner departed, as 'Zia, the illegal 'Frieda' may have done.

Sadness, the sole lyric left...the grandest of chords.

## SIX

Louis eyed the stranger carefully. Julius, the orange hulk, stood watch a few feet distant, near the door of the studio. The newcomer, whom Julius brought as promised, seemed more ophidian than mammalian, not unlike Anteros's python Louis thought, with a complexion every bit as durable and eyes as aloof and fixed. He turned the pages of Louis's portfolio with dramatic spurts, as expected of predatory creatures. From the next room Cody exploded with an extraneous, curt, exclamatory guffaw. She leafed through the pages of a lurid graphic novel. Only Julius smiled, and silently signaled not to bother her.

They stayed no more than ten minutes, never unbuttoned their expensive coats, and departed in a stretch limo. Julius winked, said someone would be in touch very soon then, following a cursory inspection of the

street, cued the chauffeur. For Louis the visitation reinstated his own special purblind funk. He imagined himself freeze-dried.

He was of course delighted to have Cody back, but annoyed she sounded off when she did — a preoccupied snort that came just as the two vigilant eyes got to the controversial illustration section of the portfolio, the fanciful deceitful photographs that divided Louis's audiences up the middle: craft masquerading as art some said; very fine craft, period, said others. Louis was happy with any comment at all, as opposed to mute appraisal — in the present case coincidentally italicized by Cody's sudden backstage expletive.

He locked the front door then joined his ravenously preoccupied bird who manifested still an occasional titter — this he noticed from a kneaded lambent mid-drift, which peeked between the bottom of a T-shirt with Elephant Country on the front and a pair of very faded jeans. She had just varnished each of her toenails a two-tone green and blue after a falcon collar of Princess Khumet from Dahshur (pronounced with distracted ease), which she sometimes wore in her act with Anteros. Another guffaw, this more in the order of a chortle — disbelief resisting amusement. Cody was then reading the National Enquirer.

“Someone you admire?”

Cody held up a resisting finger, determined to finish the piece. Finally she collapsed in a mêlée of her very own breathless roistering, her heavy loose breasts vivifying the taut fabric of the tee shirt.

“A Ruski escaped in a shipment of caviar! After stabbing a Moslem.” More laughter — from a sympathetic comrade. “God, I love it.” Another sentence read. “Oh. She wasn't in it, just nearby in the container.” Then another outburst, savouring her own supposed gaff.

Louis decided she was just about perfect and grabbed the nearest camera.

“Oh christ, I just got up!” A hand shielded her face as if fending off a



blow.

Louis exposed four frames.

Both hands came up, revealing more of the undulating tummy.

Finally Cody brought her knees to her chest and looked away.

Louis sought close-ups of the colorful toes, now wriggling like seabed polliwogs. Cody looked at him sternly, accusingly. Reluctantly he tuned away, believing the gesture a sham, limply relinquishing the camera to its corner shelf, verifying first the camera back to the exposure log to reassure himself he had in fact been shooting the intended raw format. When he turned around Cody sat stark naked in a yoga pose with legs drawn up and back behind her shoulders. She began to laugh, realizing as she did so she couldn't untangle her limbs — which made her laugh even more. At first he was lasciviously entertained, then faintly alarmed. Finally he pried one of the golden bows free and dutifully knelt to kiss the still-listing, open, invalided thigh. The laughter continued, ebullient as ever: Cody of the sun-burnished flesh, except for an oasis of blonde moist calamine, her amusement tickled by a topsy-turvy world and her own bewildering effect upon it. That sinuous lips could frame such an Eden.

“Neato Louis,” she said at last, lightly stroking his thinning locks.

Later he lay by her thinking of his bizarre hapless trade — both ingeniously lifelike and gratuitously deceptive. Likely the most misread of the crafts (he never ranked photography an art; too many givens) and, for him, the least edifying, because one was ever seduced to believe the eye furnished a primed, telltale image of the external world. Even the healthy human eye, so much more versatile than any camera, told lies all the time, which the camera embellished, perspective alone being a problematic distortion for all lenses. Only pornography seemed to foil the unreality. Where the eye alone commandeered the erogenous landscape — the beauty he lay beside now a heady inescapable focus. What often bothered him about his profession (he really thought of it as a kind of opium club

— but that was another matter) was its disregard of its own influence, its leverage. Dourly he believed most subjects could be, and were, routinely vulgarized. Food photography was then a type of pornography he believed — more acutely detailed surreal seduction. Sensuality was simply a naughty, wide-ranging subject, anyway you served it. Part of the reason it was so much fun; the edgy reptilian brain stroked, palliated for a time. The age's wise men were those who would make it ennobling, therapeutic even. The joke about humans aping animals did not flatter the apes. The siren impulses that ruled the gonads of *les visuels* had long ago worked their way into the living room of middle America. The entitlement apparition that feasted on ease and celebrity.

Fools, dolts, nincompoops!

Even respectable publishers now humped slick books that showcased bedlam, like the Asian family being swept away in a flood, the crazed father with a knife holding his babe out a skyscraper window (which won a prestigious award), the 'humanistic' witness of an execution in a state gas chamber — visceral scenes of assault. Today an audience given.

Louis looked over at Cody, now asleep, sprawled rather ungainly at his side. The flinty realist would remark this the reality of life — the replete exhaustion, spent form, akimbo limbs, drawn mouth not quite agape, skin puckered here and there by age and too much sun fun, eyes shut dreaming (not likely of him); and the same ardent authenticator would move in and take a thousand shots, then in a comfortable edit room seek out the frames intimating the 'gestalt', the nexus of the scene's 'anima', or similar layered arcana that driven editors sought for 'subliminal showcasing'. As if exercising editorial comment one of Cody's arms swung back hitting him on his chest. He might have complained but for her sudden bout of snoring. He sensed how ridiculous his concerns were in that age. Yet he doubted the preying 'realist' could give back a penny's worth of trust or hope or civility. What film could ever describe for Louis the emotions

stark and tender generated by Cody's collapsed, double-duty form, its slightly-beyond-its-prime-but-still-valiant musculature, desert gaunt waist with distinct umbilicus oasis; or the face that held still the cast of a slightly impudent but awkward (conscionable?) smile, lips that not long ago spoke so simply and knowingly of the gawky besotted lout heaving within her, eyes now shut that wide open lured with flecked cerulean lagoons such eager mariners...what film could ever delineate the quality of these convoluted emotions, so bound up in those torpid limbs with the stout vines of lust, longing, despair, nostalgia resisting the creases of renunciation...well, he was a bit of a nit, a Jacques who 'might suck melancholy as a weasel sucks eggs'.

More to the point, he was angry at becoming so listless. So the world might gobble itself up or inflate to the residues of thermonuclear spectra — the trick surely was to get a good seat in the media booth! Can you not hold that ten to the minus sixteen bang just a bit longer? What could the guilt ridden voyeur do anyway but look for more stars and trust they came with their own Shakespeares and Dantes. "Louis?" Cody shifted onto her side. Louis had been nervously wiggling a foot.

But all this came before he read the fine print of the new contract. Within a month he might pay off the remaining mortgage on his equipment and condo. What hornswaggled modern mortal does not find succour in that?

## SEVEN

General Myshin stood with his back to the door when Vassily entered. The framed portrait of Lenin, if housing a window instead — the faceless building had no outside windows on that side — would overlook a small



park, the Moscow Ring Road appearing as a thin pale mirage near the horizon. A skating pond in the centre of the park hosted a scrub hockey game, some of the participants Vassily recognized on entering the building as members of a visiting mime troupe. A small gaggle of children hovered about the edge, one of these in tears and bawling. A tall thin man in a colourful scarf attempted to comfort the tiny martyr, the crabbed face of a massive babushka nearby — a parody of the smooth sappy face that coolly checked Vassily's person and papers upon entering the hermetic SVR intelligence directorate of the new Russian Federation.

The secretary quietly closed the door leaving Vassily and the General alone in the sparely furnished room that otherwise served as a salon for model sailing ships, the focus of attention being an intricately appointed replica of what Vassily knew to be a hermaphrodite brig, a two-masted ship square-rigged forward and schooner-rigged aft, which sat above a narrow fireplace flanked by a cane-framed daybed and intricate steel cabinet that housed hardware for data transmission. A monolithic polished Empire desk featured as centerpiece a scale model of the latest nuclear attack submarine, its state-of-American-art sonar-elusive propellers one of the GRU's inestimable coups. The General remained standing, turning only to see Vassily seated in one of the two chairs facing the desk.

“MVD anti-fraud investigator Pereversev will join us. He is well informed on the Kniaźnin and Stolbanov histories. Before he comes I fill you in: Frieda Van Eerden was contacted by an embassy cadre and taken to a safe house. An edited transcript of the formal inquiry you will study in detail. The questioning in part concerned the discovery of a miniature paging device in a broach she wore. She stated the item a routine necessity where she worked and inoperative outside. A perhaps frank declaration, given her abrupt accession, which still vexed her questioners. It's circuitry is still being assessed. It's uncertain whether she knows the whereabouts of the half-sister, who has indeed arrived in Los Angeles — con-

firmed. An American businessman may be the busy patron. Who may have met the delinquent here. Frieda has been returned to her flat. It is judged the delinquent may OD in a major hotel. Lieutenant-colonel Vadim Morozov, one of the Embassy's new trade commissioners, heads the operation. He also supervised the questioning of agent Van Eerden who, he duly concludes, will remain discreet. The reason given for her absence was her suspicion that she was being tailed. Still to be affirmed. Questions, Vassily Sergeevich?"

Even the impassive General Myshin could not disguise the irony in the question. The fact that the mail-clad Morozov was put in charge spoke volumes. A headstrong brass cat representing an old KGB faction that kowtowed to Presidium hardliners was a definite rebuke. His presence in Los Angeles attested to the stature of the party big shot who wanted Zoya circumspectly muted. Vassily, expelling a tusk of smoke, felt the pervasive well-conditioned calm that arrived with unwelcome news.

"Is there any more detail about the reason behind Frieda's hiatus?"

"She claimed she was being tailed — the individual cited is currently under review. We have a description but no identity as yet. How's your report coming?"

"I have it with me."

The remark helped displace the tension, for it meant the General's deputy and 'illegal' groomer had promptly acted as urged, namely, to vouchsafe Frieda's dislike of her 'neurotic and mischievous' family, and her presumed anger if one were 'piloted' to seek her out. Thus the General would be less vulnerable in reassuring the mysterious bigwig who might think the step-sister illegal a menace if handed disparaging or incriminating information...Vassily was acutely aware of the difference even an hour could mean; more than one career hung in the balance in rearguard maneuvers, and sometimes the orchestrated delay kept down the number of 'inapt' moves. Vassily had declared himself and the General was cau-

tiously grateful. If Frieda was discovered actually colluding with Zoya and her telling insider info, Vassily could be embarrassed and possibly reprimanded. A pragmatist would resort to ambiguity. But Vassily believed the General worked to keep the status quo and needed all the ammunition he could muster. Of course backlogging Zoya's past mischief was another matter. The General abruptly sat down and opened the dossier before him. A buzzer on the switchboard purred, which the General responded to as an afterthought or a ritual mime. A tiny voice came from somewhere near the sub. "General, Yuri Pavlovich is here." The General released a function key then touched a button under the lip of his desk. From a lower compartment a dumb waiter containing ice, glasses, and bottles of Glenlivet, Remy Martin and pre-revolutionary Armenian Ararat brandy rose up in glittering splendour. A moment later investigator Yuri Pavlovich Pereversev entered, paused, then crossed to the two gentlemen. The General did not look up.

"Yuri Pavlovich you have not met Colonel Vassily Ablesimov."

After brusque handshakes the inspector sat down beside Vassily and retrieved a voluminous transcript which he plunked down on a corner of the desk. "A bestseller," he announced in a sleepy deadpan. "My American publisher wants a second opinion."

The only response from the General was to complete filling the glasses on the forthright instructions from his guests.

"The chippies do manage," Pereversev added, mulling a yawn.

The General was then at work on his own concoction. Vassily again debated the ritual as cajolery or parody — pimping for the SVR being cause for rare commiseration!

"A synopsis of events introduces each transcript," Perseverev said after gratefully accepting his drink.

"Give highlights only of the first surveillance folio — the coverage as complied by your predecessor. Age, year, and location, and identify all



party members in contact with the subject.” It seemed Zoya’s past turned out to be sufficiently full to occupy many nights checking the mutual vulnerabilities. Suggesting someone had indeed acted in haste. Pereversev took a long pull from his drink then sought in his case a second thinner volume, which he brought forth and opened with a seasoned resignation.

“We should note at this stage that Zoya Belova was born to a refusenik mother held near Perm, though that period which extends for two years remains classified. The first entries in the prosecutor’s log begin with Zoya’s enrolment in the junior at-large program of the Kiev arts academy, age 12, September 1981. The first record of deviant activity: two American fifty-dollar bills were used to buy a shoulder-pad pouch of Georgian cannabis. Detained, searched and questioned by collective provost” — Pereversev rubbed a blood-shot eye — “Galina Viktorovna Prokovsky. Over night detention. All charges dropped...district prosecutor Viktor Akimov...subject claimed she believed she was buying a black market medicine for her father, from whom she was given the money. A local physician vouchsafed an irregular prescription, poor bugger. The subject professed no knowledge of how her father obtained the money. It is suspected the subject did some procuring in her collective. Wonder of wonders.”

From the outset a clear pattern emerged. At an early age Zoya had developed an adroit skill at fabrication to sustain ‘wantonly delinquent and degenerate tendencies’ that must have been the envy of every petty swindler and thief East of the Dnieper. But more interesting still was the number of times she was ordered to sit for a spell of rigorous counseling, which concluded in record time, Vassily thought, then sent for similarly brief periods of observation to a psychiatric clinic in the suburbs of Kiev that was attached to a long-term care hospital for ‘indisposed’ Party veterans (a discreet retreat). Twice she was subpoenaed to preliminary hearings, but never held over to the juvenile assizes. She seemed to have at least one benefactor with daring and pervasive influence.

Two occasions in which she risked removal from the shield — the cannabis possession and a later gem-jewelry caper — implicated mainly her father, and pointed to an early conspiratorial pact, with the daughter unusually protective of her frail codger. Vassily vividly recalled then the morning when the grizzled man soaped himself in the galvanized tub and tried to pull Zoya in after him. Had the girl's laughter not been free of care or intimidation?

One serious hearing followed the apprehension of the pair in their hotel, along with the gem haul, where Zoya made inspired but seemingly candid excuses for her 'invalided guardian'. As a minor she was not implicated in the possession and attempted fencing of the gems, but from the sidelines railed against an additional charge of abuse against Viktor Nikolaevich. The two were apprehended after hours in the hotel spa. Zoya claimed she was not 'indecently attired', as the arresting officer reported, but became so during the search for the gems. More to the point — her father suffered from an arthritic shoulder and took deep-heat massage when the means was available; the technique she learned from a district nurse. Had the prosecutor not been unduly cautious, the sessions' judge might have sentenced more robustly. As it was Viktor Nikolaevich got one short prison term and a second suspended sentence.

The more up-to-date transcripts that investigator Pereversev himself compiled were less conclusive because Zoya was by then apparently better prepared to anticipate surveillance and sting operations. The evidence was highly suggestive though: she had most likely graduated to trafficking in high-grade cannabis and cocaine, pharmaceuticals, smuggling lifted credit cards and, on one occasion at least, chic lingerie. Yet at most the militia investigators found her to be a 'disturbed non-participant', for which veniality she usually found herself assigned to the pleasant Kiev clinic for another short stay for 'observation' — simply discreet whoring, most likely. Unfortunately the institution had no regular counselling staff and Zoya

had been ‘treated’ by several of the medics, all of whom more or less vouchsafed her restlessness and essentially benign high spirits. Vassily was only faintly amused, and accepted a refill offered by the poker-faced General.

“I think young Zoya Stolbanov is a pioneer,” the sleepy Pereversev at one point ventured. “Who works an extra bit harder. Just for whom the bell hasn’t yet tolled. Sorry. Bit of a Hemingway...”

“How sure are you the same counsellor presided at no more than two of the evaluations?” The General was unconvinced so many personalities would lend themselves to an ongoing dissimulation.

“I can find only the Prokovsky woman in attendance more than once — and her only twice.

The General glanced at his own notes. “And what do you know of — Galina Viktorovna?”

“Not much. No relation to Lev Prokovsky of course. She was a psychiatric nurse, friendly I hear, attractive, and not a volunteer — I still have to confirm this — in a lockup in Perm where Zoya’s mother was... billeted.”

The switchboard purred anew. The General responded again in a slow adoptive measure. “We’re here,” he said, releasing the blinking key in a flinty silence that continued for a long half-minute which neither Vassily nor Pereversev interrupted. The tall gaunt form of the Deputy Chairman of the SVR finally entered and solemnly laid three tapes on Myshin’s desk, turned and left without acknowledging either of the General’s two visitors. It was enough: a discreet acknowledgement of jeopardy and who they might contend with. Another airless moment crept by, then the General resolutely stood, quaffed the remainder of his scotch, told Pereversev to get some sleep, and tersely instructed Vassily to see him the following morning at nine sharp.

Vassily departed the General’s office with the three tapes, one of



Frieda's interrogation in the safe house in Los Angeles (its content beamed to a Soviet satellite a day before), the remaining two highlighting the confounding Stolbanov saga, which a dog-weary Pereversev had relinquished to an FSB field man when he discovered therein the gravelly voice of a Soviet Vice-Admiral in conversation with Zoya! The recordings were promptly assigned a discrete SVR audience.

Several days would pass before Vassily assayed the diligence the General mustered that cold March night. To demand — and get! — such limited SVR acquiescence in releasing (actually returning) the tapes was rare and ominously obliging, both above and below. Young Zoya Stolbanov must be a new dynamic player. Nearly as amazing would be the General's request for a traveling visa and 'updated' passport for his decent, reflective spy tutor, who for almost two decades had not made extensive in situ use of his excellent English.

## EIGHT

The work which orange Julius and his chary companion brought was solemnly underway. Louis performed then in a languid protracted dream — without nerve or haste, or much anxiety. He seemed to have bypassed death and redemption. There was no reality beyond this reality. He imagined himself a kind of concentration camp veteran.

Cody came and went, came and went — phrases she would find humorous, drolly lamenting, as she often did, the men in her life who 'came' — haplessly heartily and for her prematurely. She identified herself as 'an honorary bisexual', a depiction of life as devious pilgrimage and eight letter word. Her most durable girlfriend, a one-and-only who esteemed antiquity and sapphic luxury, committed suicide in her presence with seem-

ingly perfect nonchalance — she shot herself with a pistol a former girlfriend bought her for protection, an act Cody never quite assimilated. For Louis, the robustness of her laughter chided a mordant squint. And then to be of no help: he was not among her predestined mortals, like the Egyptian queen, the ‘best wife’ she resolutely believed herself the four-hundred and thirty-eight reincarnation of.

Only with Cody, and her lavish imagination and sudden jarring self-absorption, the spectacle was sometimes vexing as well as touching. Louis was perfectly reconciled to being a few grains of desert dust awaiting oblivion.

‘Poor Cody’ he thought, in a rare credulous mood.

She was at that time gone — with a classically handsome coke pusher who likely had her hawking for him by now. Just before she left, her agent got her photographed in a slick European skin magazine from which she gleaned an offer to co-star in a ‘big-budget’ porno flick — which she turned down when the Latin mignon showed up. She had been away now over a week and Louis nostalgically recalled her return from an earlier ‘furlough’ — the royal queenie demurely ensconced in his favourite siesta chair when he returned from an exacting but inconsequential day. She sat mending a tear in her Will Bill Cody chaps. “Hi, I’m here, skinny as ever,” said the affable voice, as if nothing had happened, her manner genial and palmy as a cheerleader on a winning team. Only a slightly swollen lip corner, and that artfully made over, suggested another path abandoned in her frenetic wandering. “I’ve made some curry,” she had said as she held out the chaps, inspecting them candidly. “Thanks,” she added disarmingly, duly, almost primly, as though he had somehow made the costume right.

He looked now at the vacant, elegant maroon-leather chair. Traces of her nail polish clung to the foot stool.

He had been incensed seeing her so mutely barklessly naked in the magazine. He had imagined the world might not commandeer his des-

mene queen as well. He got drunk one night and bought up several score copies of the issue — all he could find in his neighborhood — and burned the lot in his fireplace, a task that took him through the night and into the following dawn. He awoke to find a single copy still readable which he listlessly opened to a ponderous article, buried amidst the swollen pudenda, written by a former university president, who berated affluent Americans for harboring complacent civil right's attitudes. He pitched the book into the grate and started the fire afresh.

Now he felt the tight disgust giving way to self-pity. If he accomplished all his paymasters wanted would he not just as readily consign his own work to the flames — in the end? Could he find anywhere in his easy-going self the resource to spurn this second windfall and equanimously return to his trashy clever rendering of the American dream? If it was only just a game....

He decided he did not, and so continued with his extraordinary chore. Other new faces, including one of Cody, he interpolated into settings every bit as uncanny as the first. The original menace lingered as cosmic microwave noise that grubby extenuated weekend. He put from his mind what might happen when the work was packaged and delivered; he would then be awesomely, bizarrely debt free with money in the bank. Perhaps he should hire a body guard and become jaded enough to shun all rueful gypsy-flavored amours.

Sometimes he debated seeking out a struggling journalist who would publicly air his story. But not for long. He had worked for a brief spell during his undeclared apprenticeship as a police photographer and would not soon forget the silent purple-red hulks that stained the pavement in the neon-searing hours. The sty in one's eye. Such memories kept him mum. His present sinistral good fortune seemed raffishly fated — his wry Kismet. Never had he believed in Providence or a decent God — too good to be true. One might simply escape notice — with luck and not too much



show. Thus was he mordantly alerted when he answered his insistent phone and learned that a young woman, who had given his name as a surety, required emergency surgery at Mount Inyo Hospital near Lone Pine.

He froze. The clerk phoning had few details except that she believed some bones were broken. Did he wish to stump up the expense because the girl, one Martine 'Cody' Norstrom, had no insurance and would in consequence likely be referred to a public hospital in Keeler or even Fresno, a move that would delay or shelve orthopaedic surgery — not generally a good idea in such cases. Louis accepted the responsibility for all costs, nervously recited the numbers from his medical card, then had paged and spoke to a nurse on the emergency ward who confirmed: compound fractures to left tibia and fibula, contusions and abrasive lesions to face and left arm. She would shortly be conducted to the X-ray facility. Otherwise her pulse was good. She was conscious and alert when admitted. Apparently she had been skiing and collided with a tree. Louis thanked the nurse and said a short tight prayer.

Cody slept when he was ushered into her room the following morning. He had elected to sign into one of the hospital's guest rooms, where he passed a sleepless night, in part exacerbated by a call he diffidently placed to orange Julius, only to hear Cody's jaunty yet eerie recorded voice invite the caller to leave a message — 'After the Sleigh Bells'. He identified himself, the circumstance, the hour, told Julius he would be a little late with the pictures, and left the hospital's address and number. He stared the intervening hours at the hospital's colourless corridors and the dim night lights in the four bed ward, which gave off the heady disinfectant aroma of pine needles.

Cody lay on her back, head and shoulders raised, her left leg imprisoned in an elevated cast that extended from painted toes to mid thigh. Smaller dressings patched a forearm, wrist and jaw. A nurse said she

might be in traction a week, but other than the fractures, in which four screws were needed to bring the bones in line, Cody had “sustained minor lesions only.”

For several formless minutes he sat looking at the rather haggard face nestled in yellow-blond salad curls. An outside haze lent a blue-grey monochrome to the room, relieved by Cody’s brilliantly painted toenails, no longer the green-blue he recalled but a turquoise blue flecked with tangerine. He could imagine only a custom-bonded auto paint being that lustrous, indestructible.

He was about to return to his room when the form on the bed stirred.

“Hi.” Coyly Cody glanced at him and her cast. “I’ve been awake for a while. You looked tired. I hoped you’d go back to your room. The nurse told me last night. Sorry.”

“I didn’t know you liked skiing.”

“It’s a dumbo story. The ski kept going...the jerko harness or something. Don’t know. You’ve been a saint.”

“The surgeon says you were lucky.”

They both laughed at this, softly yet buoyantly. Quickly he was in her arms and uncertain if tears or moist eager lips careened his unshaven face.

## NINE

Sonja left a note. A bridge game would be in progress ‘till elevenish, when he was urged to join in the canapés and conversation to follow. The soirée took place at the home of the director of the National Council of American-Soviet Friendship, but a short block from their apartment. The director’s wife and Sonja were fast old buddies and bridge fanatics. Vassily could not stand the game — rather the time spent at it — but would duti-

fully collect his wife, making elaborate excuses, which served for about half the scheduled tournaments, leaving the other half a test of forbearance and concentration, for he hated being beaten by any trial however randomly fated.

Thus, not yet knowing what contest lay ahead at the behest of the cryptic General Myshin, Vassily placidly affixed the first of the tapes Pereversev had earlier ingenuously relinquished to a rival department. The tape that Vassily dreaded but longed to hear, which he would listen to last, was the tract beamed from Los Angeles to an army satellite and thence the SVR Central Directorate. He prepared for the worst, a vigilance that would keep him alert to important resonances in the indexed melodrama of the Stolbanov family.

The first footage contained conversations recorded almost two decades earlier, just before ‘Zia’s basic training commenced. Lurid domestic tumult was about as interesting to Vassily as bridge, but he listened intently to several excerpts, following Pereversev’s highlighted verbal overview, which roughly divided into three categories: spats with mother; finagling and sometimes witty jousts with father, followed by oddly quiet moments, and rare desultory exchanges between Zoya and her stepsister ‘Zia.

From his initial routine investigation so long ago Vassily had gleaned the following: Zoya’s and ‘Zia’s mother, née Liisa Mäkelä Uhlgren, grew up in Finland and later Sweden where her father, an oceanographer, was on loan to the Finnish government to improve water quality and fish-seeding strategy in the Baltic Sea and Gulf of Bothnia. While in Moscow on holiday Liisa met and eloped with a Soviet army intelligence officer, Karol Mieczyslaw Kniaźnin who, six months after the marriage, died in a helicopter crash near Ashkhabad on the North East Iranian border (the official account a terrorist sabotage). Liisa was four months pregnant at the time. When Anastasia turned six Liisa had acquired the reputation of a ‘refusenik’, and ‘Zia was placed under the care of a guardian, an uncle of



the father who had little sympathy for ‘Western inspired fault finders’. Liisa’s second charming but budding dipsomaniac ‘husband’, Iosif Nikolaevich Stolbanov, served in a Western corps of border guards. He seems to have been smitten at first sight of the widow who was denied an exit visa and detained when she tried to return to Finland. It was not a promising beginning. It appeared that Iosif Nikolaevich assaulted a check point officer, for which exertion he was given a disorderly conduct citation. For her part noisome Liisa was sent to a psychiatric lockup in Perm to undergo ‘re-education’ training — essentially given a regimen of psychotropic drugs — where two months later it was discovered she was pregnant — with twins — one of whom apparently died when she gave birth, though Vassily suspected one of the twins may have been given to a state agency as a further check on the smart refusenik. In due course both Isosif and Liisa ended up in a state farm collective as field labourers, young Zoya alert to the inklings of calamity. Isosif had been finally dishonourably discharged for ‘habitual drunkenness’. It was apparent in one exchange Vassily taped with another collective worker that Liisa had taken a heroically critical view of Soviet military incursions into Afghanistan and Northern Iran. Because Iosif was named as the father of the twins the collective’s marshal assigned them to the same cottage. To a distraught Liisa the marshal said, “You can spout off to Iosif Nikolaevich in your spare time; preferably when he is drunk.” If it seemed now a heedlessly cruel billeting, for ideological radicals were treated badly then and space was ever at a premium on farms in that period. Vassily presumed someone wanted Liisa to suffer some kind of a verifiable breakdown and thus an indefinite stay in an asylum, someone at Komsomolskya Pravada or Znamya perhaps — two of her targets at the time. Iosif Nikolaevich wrote to the marshal saying he was most grateful to be “yoked to a nutty frigid martyr.” Oddly enough, it was Iosif’s finely droll sense of humour that seemed to keep the pot off the boil in the cottage. Moreover, it was apparent Liisa

had a child she cared about and hoped, if she behaved, might be allowed to attend school with her first child. The intervening antagonism passed to the sisters, though by then ‘Zia was billeted at the new school. When together, on weekends and holidays, Zoya sided with the wayward, often clownish Iosif Nikolaevich, ‘Zia, by then an active Komsomol Pioneer, less the touchy mother than not-at-all the dissolute, in her eyes, father. ‘Zia of course, then a ward of her new Soviet guardian, basked in the deference shown young prodigies of dual scholastic and athletic flair. Both girls excelled at rhythmic gymnastics and Zoya later at folk ballet, though as a cutup she never quite acquired the dedication to make her dancing accountable — at least not when it counted.

Less and less did ‘Zia spend time at home. Even her vacations were taken up with the extensive training that watchful authorities assign prospective luminaries. By the time Vassily met her in the schoolroom she had all but turned her back on her parents and sibling and was ripe for a further commitment to her Soviet godfather. By then she had also become the focus of an engaging if fanatical gymnastic’s trainer — the same gentleman who for a time served to stir Zoya into a brief eddy of ambition and self-discipline. What intervened filled the second of the Per-eversev tapes, and it was nearly midnight before Vassily got to it. He planned to work through the night, gleaning background information as opposed to resting a sluggish overworked head in preparation for his meeting with Myshin the following morning.

Again there were few surprises in the conversations, and also disturbingly few clues to the identity of the person or persons who initially distracted the energetic Zoya and decreed her defection from the exacting career in which she managed a brief if irregular debut as the youngest understudy in a Bolshoi-sponsored folk dancing troupe.

It was soon apparent the relationship with the father was not witlessly sensual, as at first suspected. In all the encounters he was too drunk and

often whimsically or greedily self-effacing to intimidate or coerce. Indeed he seemed bent on turning himself into the penultimate fool, one who divines his own salvation in an imposing destruction — and he badly needed a sympathetic audience.

It also became clear to Vassily that the daughter who lingered to hear him out — the beguiling, by turn catty and serene, pawky and impetuous Zoya — may have adored her foolish guardian. Vassily discovered himself touched by the sly endearments which the father in his drunken musing was too suave to render restive and the daughter too lenient to interpret as abusive. Had ‘Zia ever been taken in by her strikingly permutable, fond, humorously vulnerable half-sister, Vassily wondered — a being ‘Zia’s unofficial guardians likely never saw? In one sequence Vassily was several minutes into it before he realized it was not one of Perseverev’s recommended passages. It transpired thus: “My gawd, to cheat your own immaculate guardian. Cunning little sun spot.” Iosif Nikolaevich then groaned and gulped.

Father and daughter played poker. Zoya gambled swatches of toilet paper, Iosif Nikolaevich his vodka; if Zoya won she dumped one more once of Vodka in a flask she would sell to a farmhand; if she lost, Iosif would take a drink and accept three squares of paper. Both players sometimes used and abused an antiquated Russian. Zoya began one interlude.

“I never cheat, babushka.”

“Ha. Babushka. One day I show you the (slurred speech then a cough) the legendary Iosif Nikolaevich and teach you some humility.”

“I’ve seen it and I wouldn’t offer it to a pike. Another two or three?”

“Ha! None, vixen. You will fertilize the fields and I will win a medal.”

“Lotus-eater.”

“Ha, squeamish are we?”

“What bilge!”

“Pretentious little vulgarian! Go to the devil!”



“So who’s full-of-it now? You better call, little onion man.?”

A pause, then a wheeze.

“And a cellar cheat!” Faint disappointment in Zoya’s voice; more sounds of swallowing.

“The last — I swear on the head of Ivan the broad jumper. Three J’s.”

“Ha!”

A chair slides across a plank floor.

A scuffle, much laughter, shouts and whoops. Iosif had apparently absconded with the remaining vodka. At one point he begins singing snatches from *The Happy Tiller*, a nearly ingenuous folk musical (the official theme, to encourage more births — predictably hammed up) then playing in the district. Zoya joins in and attempts to outdo him in mock earnestness and wistfulness.

A final encounter: grunts, fine swearing from Iosif, then sounds of two bodies collapsing.

A quiet, teased by wheezing laughter from father and total silence from daughter.

The pause lengthens, fewer inhalations.

“Back, you lost.”

“Sharper than a serpent’s tooth be a temperance maiden.”

“Where did you read that?”

“A stage hack. A celly who wrote a stage play no one liked. Spent time in Britain.”

“I’ll bet.”

“Old Shaky. On the boards. My Englisher period. Words, phrases the guards didn’t know.”

“You’ve had enough.”

“I’ll go mad.”

“Promises, promises.”

A second, quieter moment.

“Salomé, daughter of Herodias, dance for me.”

Demurely, after a pause: “You can’t have both.”

“The Tetrarch has a sombre look.”

“Bedtime, for all dirty old Englisher Tetrarchs!” Zoya was suddenly determined: sound of a body being pulled up then slipping back to rest with a bump. “Christ!”

“Some good we mean to do...”

“Well lend a hand then.”

An unsteady body is apparently at last upright and scrapes and stumbles to a nearby cot with noisy springs.

“ — Stand up for honorable bastards and the human factor. A drink. Someone. Salomé!”

“So much for dancing.”

“A drink or I am blind.”

“Dirty smelly old toper.”

“Were I but five years younger...”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“Dance for me...my swimmer.”

“No.” The Voice was suddenly bitter, then given to a sigh. A glass clinks against a spout and a putatively large drunk gurgles out.

“So when does non-Englisher Herodias return?” A daughter’s formal, drab query.

“Tomorrow, my chipmunk. I think.”

“You give her a bad time. Somedays.”

“She’s a viking.”

“Ha.”

“Go away cat mint.”

“Toadystoolie.”

“Nonsense.”

More creaky springs, the wisps of a coverlet, a light switch giving over. Then a boozier's thin but still articulate voice, occasionally unsteady but never irresolute, given to ironic quips about Glasnost and Perestroika, New Thinking for Our Country and the World: "...eyewash and grease paint, perfumy arias, fumble bumble wiggies...in tights!...Englischer honor!"

The remainder of the segment consisted of soft snoring, of footsteps, first in shoes then stocking feet, the striking of a match, a lengthy inhalation, a measured silence, followed by one side of an old Emmy Lou Harris record, which was also in Vassily's collection. The song, Evangeline, a favorite. When the record ended: utter quiet but for an inebriate's noisy and laboured breathing.

Because Vassily Sergeevich was never a womanizer the final few selections of Perseverev's tapes proved something of a revelation. By then some party hack was invigilating Zoya's young life. He had assumed most whores put in largely listless days and poltroonish nights; thus was he surprised if not a little awed to see how much control a clever prepossessing understudy of that profession can exercise with apparently little compulsion.

Indeed, Zoya's brief visits to the Kiev clinic for 'observation', which the General curtly catalogued as carefully planned trysts with grateful and likely influential party and government apparats, turned out to be dextrous entertainments which Vassily felt a raffish twinge listening to while his wife was elsewhere making model excuses for her dedicated workaholic husband.

For one raspy voiced patron — the vice-admiral (the only voice thus far identified; Zoya never mentioned names) — she danced to music that Vassily imagined Moravian, then gave the old barnacle-back what appeared to be an expert back rub. If there was any sexual contact it was imperceptive to the intent listener; indeed, after the music stopped the man talked incessantly about the joys of sailing and a sailboat he and his son



were building. Dull stuff to all but aficionados Vassily concluded.

In another segment a group of naval officers (one ship, a missile cruiser, was mentioned in passing) were treated to the nimble Zoya shooting via vaginal muscles ping pong balls into tankards of rum and vodka. The betting was lively and extravagant, likely entire paychecks squandered by the end of the evening. Other girls serving less theatrical gambits were also present, one an off-duty nurse. Vassily was not quite sure how female anatomy adapted to lasciviously propelling ping pong balls into tankards and blowing out lighters at specified distances, and a host of other antics the din denied any dedicated listener from discerning, but the swabs obviously left with archival stories that would reverberate across the world's oceans.

In one lull Vassily could just hear a pointed exchange between Zoya and one of her watchful admirers.

“So what about a small torpedo? How far?”

“I’m a peacenik.”

A burly laugh.

“Well, a firecracker then.”

A bored female chortle.

“What you doing after?” The poor man was in earnest.

“We’re parading in Red Square.”

“Ha, ha. Yeah? For what?”

“Goofball torps.”

More burly buttery laughter, joined by a seconder.

The burly page turner continued.

“Listen up little fucker. I can hit any target on the globe without leaving my ship.”

From the seconder: “Shit, the cuts I lay lay end up in maximum geosynchronous orbit.”

“What if she only wants a hundred American dollars?” A woman’s voice standing in for Zoya.

More gusty self-conscious laughter. Then a limp pause.

“Hell you’re joking.” A voice momentarily dismayed.

“Not any more.” Zoya’s quiet tuned voice.

More laughter, now from many sources.

Then a voice above the din: “Comrades! A capitalist sub in Soviet waters!”

“Head up for Murmansk,” one of the swabs blurted.

Laughter, boos, then something fell with a clatter.

Then a husky unknown female voice, in a snit: “Oh go piss up a boldard.”

“Bitch.”

The stung male appears to be restrained by his fellows.

“Boris old boy you’re soaked.”

A string of oaths.

“And a huge bore” — from a third female voice.

More swearing. A scuffle ensues. Masculine grunts against mixed company taunts. The fracas lasts a full minute. The hotheads are finally restrained or exhausted.

From the voice, now heavily breathing, which doubted Zoya’s price: “Where’s the cockroach bitch?”

“Away from morons like you — short selling her twat.”

Several stoic groans.

“Horizontal integration!”

“You Asian idiot — you think she came here for the likes of us? They just wanted a tape for chrissake.”

The question said it all, a summation that Vassily concluded some time ago: Zoya was settled as part of the Party’s black-market capital stock. More keenly than ever he wondered who her handlers were and how these tapes served them, and what part finally he must play in this mottled history. He decided she could make a fine Trojan horse in ‘Zia’s America.

The remainder of Pereversev's final tape Vassily skimmed over, anxious to get at the tape of Frieda's interrogation. In so doing he felt denied a choice diversion, like a rich dessert hastily put aside, yet soon found himself bitterly absorbed in the new tape's stolid solemn voices, specifically the mind set of a mindlessly transplanted old KGB heavy grumpily dealing with a cultured and erudite scientist. At times Vassily was stupefied. Someone was truly desperate. None of the questioners were particularly competent. He could not imagine the exercise being part of a coherent plan; almost assuredly was it an extenuated gaffe. The perpetrators had not even managed to play to the tape! He never ceased to marvel at the contempt he could feel for homegrown boneheads.

Even Frieda ('Zia) had at times to explain some Cheka protocols to them, which she did with a politeness they either obtusely or miserly misinterpreted, finding it, as overheard in an aside to a Captain Morozov from a Georgian with a head cold, 'provocative and defensive', as if such comment was somehow conducive to eliciting the discrete reasons for her recent silence. Even Frieda's calm insistence that she was being followed, which regrettably had not then been verified, may have won out had a broach she wore bypassed the questioner's concern, as it may have her own the day she was suddenly and unexpectedly taken in for questioning — itself a breach of the code for handling illegals. Just who had identified her as such still remained a mystery. Because she was so summarily ordered to accompany the agents who finally surprised her — undoubtedly making her wonder who indeed they were — the discovery of the device remained ambiguous. The one able member of the team of investigators, a radio ferret, spotted it — egregiously late in the interrogation.

The ferret was making a point in reference to providing Frieda with a 'tracker', a disc implant (a tiny device that unobtrusively paced rival, i.e. CIA, radio waves) to log, collate and confirm methodical tails. The comment was followed by a pause, further whispering, then a sharp command.



The small broach was handed over and Frieda's voice, by then weary but apologetic, said the 'dactyl' was a simple routine radiation detector monitor she wore when working in the remote sensing facility of the Paleomena space research complex, where she was currently employed as an engineer, researching phased-array radar.

A hushed but intense debate among the interrogators ensued, largely indecipherable on the tape — a violation of procedure that could severely embarrass Morozov, who yet seemed incapable of moderating or clarifying it. The device was apparently more complex than expected.

The Georgian urged the director to abandon the premises forthwith. But to where, under what auspices? More whispering, edged with recriminations. Then the radio expert announced that a tiny section of the device was missing — and both items, he believed, rather irresolutely Vassily thought, were necessary for its immobilization. A stark quiet followed this disclosure. Someone swore softly. The question loomed: Must they summarily abandon the safe house, risk being identified themselves, and delay the urgent questioning. More cantankerous whispers outflanked Morozov's testy indecision. Then Frieda's anti-pathetic voice slipped into a tense pause: "It must be in the car, or somewhere coming here. It's not sturdily made." More whispers. It seemed most members of the team wanted to bolt, Frieda or no, while the stolid Morozov, groping still to comprehend the multifarious significance of the broach from his radio expert's rushed words, remained apparently undecided, if less incredulous. The dissenters soon regrouped. Only an X-ray survey would reveal a supplemental or back up implant, one said — suggesting that even in leaving they could be monitored. Under his breath another called Morozov a rube — a word that nonetheless slipped out into one of the abrupt, ominous silences. "Is this true?" Morozov demanded of the radio expert — meaning the X-ray. The expert, now also on the receiving end of many questions, said he could not be sure.

What happened next was far from clear. The tension was electric, the animated whispering resonant as a power cable. Finally a consensus favoring flight emerged, though not before Morozov ordered, on the advice of the radio expert, that Frieda be placed in one of the leaded car trunks when they departed, with additional insulation provided by the agent's suit coats. Morozov's rough resigned voice then ordered the premises cleared.

At the Soviet Trade Legation headquarters in L.A. where the offices and facilities of a Referentura had been established, Frieda was scanned, along with the device, neither found to harbor materiel offensive to the Russian Federation. Throughout the formal questioning her voice was aloof and toneless — an oddity, for Vassily's recollection was of a particular musical timbre, manifest despite her impatience in the earlier segment of the tape. At times her responses in the Referentura appeared to be printed before her. Had she perhaps given them the slip after all? The awkward drama would be complete if she had. Once only did the transcript seem authentic. The female officer in charge of the physical screening had made a special log entry: Why, she asked, did Dr. Van Eerden leave her shoes on? "Because the floor is like ice," came the wan response. All attire had been minutely examined, ostensibly for the missing part. Soberly Vassily listened as the requisite nyets were officially read into the log from the checklist, including subversive nipples, which one older KGB team had on occasion falsified into tiny courier pouches. By then Vassily suspected the shakedown was deliberately abusive.

The last segment of the tape dealt with the planned abduction and return of the 'renegade' Zoya. Vassily smiled: the party entertainer now a renegade. Frieda had been emphatically instructed to shun all contact, but remain alert. A special squad would do the body snatching — if necessary in the guise of a trauma team servicing a victim of drug-induced delirium — a datum kept from Frieda who, Vassily assumed, accepted all the earlier instructions — if he could believe the earlier toneless voice to be hers,

which he decided most likely was. Inevitably a newfound diffidence must follow. Only chemically or surgically can strong able personalities be checked, once provoked — a cardinal understanding among most Cheka psychiatrists. Vassily was then quite bitter — and annoyed with himself for not better controlling his anger. The assiduous planning, schooling, camaraderie, hope, trust, durable dedication — all slurred by crude institutionalized suspicion...and a clever tart.

The phone rang on the table where sat Vassily's untouched cognac.

"What have you been doing you old grouch? Hello? Vassily! I'm sending Irina's driver to fetch you. Oh, and bring my throat lozenges with you. Bye."

He was not given time to answer. He was too astonished. The maniacs were still at it! Suppressing an oath he put back the receiver. He felt distinctly irresolute, his peculiar miasma at that moment. Perhaps it was time he devoted more hours to bridge and cashews and nasty old Boris Gudunov. And at 1:30 AM. He tried to remember the affection for his round durable wife that visited him from time to time, and encouraged him to recollect earlier hopeful scenes...the too-brief naughty period.

But once outside a surgical cold entombed the night, and layered his concerns with a numbing frost.

## TEN

General Myshin stood near the intricately rigged brigantine with his back to Vassily. This day the phantom skating rink was full of toddlers and talkative mothers clapping their fur-gloved hands. Vassily felt queasy. He was unrested, badly shaved, and a bolted egg moldered in his stomach.

"How long since you went to America, Vassily Sergeevich?"

At first Vassily thought the question rhetorical.



“I left in 1988 General, after nine years placement.”

“What do the Yankees call a carrier deckhand?”

“‘Swab jockey’ comes to mind,” Vassily said without pause.

“And a casting directory? For films, theatre.”

Vassily paused. “‘Mug book.’” One possibility.

“And specious talk?”

“One fine word is ‘flumdiddle’ — another, ‘flapdoddle’ — but at street level one must first name the neighborhood to find a current apt equivalent and register. America slang, particularly in the ‘hoods’ is highly adaptive. Takes a while to fit in.” Vassily was becoming alarmed.

“‘Spinks turning daisy’ means what where?”

“Most likely a black pimp toadying for a ‘Nark’. I believe the expression may be dated, and possibly a plant.”

Vassily knew that one thing you did not do was hurry the General, but he also knew that idiomatic American verbal expression was not paramount in the General’s mind.

“And a boss who makes excessive and exacting demands?”

“Ah, there the Americans excel. They may even rival us. How long do I have?”

One snort and the General turned to stare upon a thick file on his desk, inscribed with Vassily’s code name beside a top secret insignia. “Y o u leave in forty-eight hours Vassily Sergeevich.” A decisive pause, then “— We’d better get at it. Our slippery Zoya has a head start, and your able illegal is far from clean, as you must know.” He then paused as if an intrusive fly had come into the room. “One other matter has cropped up. Per-severev noted it and believes it relevant.” With minimal effort Myshin passed an American magazine to Vassily. Called simply OO — suggestive of two observant or agape eyes. The cover that month featured an American ABN (American Broadcast Network) journalist named Catherine Whyte who had fingered crime boss Boris Ivanovich Borozov, known as

‘Bossy’, in a baby formula scam in Western Europe. An engaging youngster with a dry smile. Who looked remarkably like Zoya Belovna Stolbanov!

Placidly Vassily asked, “Perseverev imagines there’s a connection?”

“It seems the mother gave birth to twins. One supposedly died at birth. There is now some footling debate about that fact.” In response to Vassily handing back the magazine the General promptly said, “Keep it. You may want to box someone’s ears with it. ”

With that the General sat, opened a folder, and began reading aloud the precepts of the commission that Vassily was to undertake at 16:00 hours the following evening, aboard Areoflot flight 620 to Kennedy International. It seemed he would be put to the test sooner than he imagined possible. He would liken his return to America to that of the elder ‘family’ member brought to the trial of an apostate — the specter of the past summoned to right the waywardness of the young.

## PART TWO

*Limbo...a last dance...*

## ELEVEN

Angus Dowd, the skeletal CEO of the International Paleomena Corporation, smiled into his weak sugary tea. His brash ambitious colleague across the hall had declared himself at last, and must not be allowed to regret the decision until the last moment. The auspices were never more awesome: a spectacularly diseased carcass — suggestive almost of an AID’s victim. He added four more lumps to his tea. It was only a matter of time before

the foaming Pechenpaugh discovered the closure. Yet before the dust settled the circus beauty would be installed so that all spectators might be distracted, including the cankered stallion himself.

“Daphne, why don’t you do your Christmas shopping today?” Dowd spoke sweetly into his intercom. Daphne Charles was his able personal secretary and esteemed tease.

“It’s only March, Mr. Dowd.”

“You will avoid crowds.”

“I’m broke.”

“That is pitiable. But is it remissible? I have so little experience in the matter.”

“I think so, Mr. Dowd.”

“Daphne, you’re far too thin.” A fond honorable mention.

“Yes, Angus.”

Angus Dowd found women by and large a lamentable species. They excelled only at bellyaching he decided several decades ago, when his own sexual preferences were still ambiguous. But as he grew to recognize the pristine beauty in slender soprano-voiced lads he found other faults as well. They were often seduced by popular entertainers who seemed to him androgynous golems or smarmy cherubs, or intellectual con artists with filmy visions and solicitous melancholic vulnerabilities; or spidery moldy sloths who derided their balls because sex was after all a hectic multi-lane street; or dishy aromatic beefcakes who haunted the soaps with ersatz sex and engaging smirks. Absent in the female psyche was the aesthetic hierarchy of transcendent Titans, of which Angus Dowd imagined himself a lingering archetype. Thus the advent of the exclusive ZYTA phenomenon, that strange futuristic forecasting by Paleomena’s new (prospectively sentient) computer named Able, which continued to amaze if not perplex their savvy engineers and scientists, seemed to him a choice property for in one exercise it presaged a futuristic community where



liberal-minded men became mangy maundering soreheads! Whereas, famished moose like Pechenpaugh, now bawling information to a lead factotum, saw in ZYTA's knotty social scenarios a return to *le droit de seigneur*. "Like where have all the Bolshy pricks got us?" Angus might be wrong of course, much of the scientific data was still inconclusive — after how many months? Yet the futuristic social saga the signal presaged in the one trial did look satiric, topsy-turvy. Was everyone surprised but Angus Dowd? Well almost — but Muerner played his hand very close to the vest and Pechenpaugh was the resident social-science scoffer.

ZYTA was a strange business, the acronym formed from an odd lexical ikon in many of Able's graphic 'tableaux'. There was even talk that some of the data may have come from an adventitiously-placed high orbit satellite — some outer space signal hitting upon an apt receiver in our solar system! It was a joke at first, but the complexity of the computer's output some specialists thought to be well beyond its predicated capability. One chap on Thirteen said Zyta was a Polish fortune teller he once knew. Thirteen was the floor — to minimize outside interference — in their remote sensing facility where all incoming space signals were collated and indexed. Without doubt ZYTA was initially a conundrum, bewildering, perplexing, so nearly absurd, but for some of the later data...Miguel, the project's leading genius, was not entertained. Indeed, for a time he was downright distraught; he didn't have an easy explanatory out. The data that Able was providing seemed to defy the constructs that defined it. Angus was not a computer geek but knew from the start something was wondrously inapt.

So what was ZYTA? Again Angus asked himself, more as review than query. If he had to explain the event to Daphne — though of course he never would; research secrets you keep from wary dimpled secretaries — he might talk of its insular exclusivity, its 'lordliness' — yes, its importuning grandeur. Peter Selby-Smith, the one comedian on the project's inau-

gural team, had said its ‘noblesse oblige’ — as the initially confusing welter of data evolved into more comprehensive and comprehended bits.

One: The futuristic world — both its science and landscape, arbitrarily code named ZYTA — derived from a compilation of data fed into the world’s first test of sentient or ‘thinking’ computers, which Paleomena led in R & D, modeled after their initial living cell molecular computer.

Two: The first readings of how an earth world might look in several hundred years, given the intelligence of its population, climate and geographic character, at first perplexed then galvanized the project’s ablest scientists and engineers, particularly a novel route to quantum gravity — which seemed to transcend the parameters assigned the computer. The arrived data interposed mathematical models that tried their experts. The rumour that one of Paleomena’s space vehicles had picked up and relayed an unusual, i.e. ‘alien’ message — still discounted by the sci-fi wonks on Thirteen — persisted. At least in the coffee klatches. The imputation was deemed a practical joke by the Paleomena department heads though no one was guffawing just yet.

Three: The predicated scenes of this future civilization (such civilizations and their needs being a Paleomena obsession) were beguiling from the beginning — and latterly alarming.

Four: Scenes from the startling new world — what Peter Selby-Smith likened to ‘tableaux’ — were fixed in a landscape not unlike their own, though some of it looked, well, stolidly enhanced.

Five: As yet ZYTA was deemed a Paleomena exclusive. A few rumours got out, along with a few pirated renderings of the tableaux. But a suspicious groundswell had been scotched by a set of slyly vulgarized tableaux — Pechenpaugh’s brainchild — featuring a hopeful starlet, acting as a ‘coochie showgirl’, Pechenpaugh’s phrase, which were displayed in some picture galleries and several graphic novels.

Even Daphne was satisfactorily distracted. “So who’s the doll?” She

and Dowd stood looking over the shoulder of an office assistant who had just bought one of the photogravure novels. Daphne was munching her noon apple, about all she ever seemed to eat.

Dowd had smiled at her response. It was exactly what Pechenpaugh had wished. Even his secretary, with as lively an imagination as any, focused on the tony players, not the setting. The very joke of it had become a serviceable property.

Angus of course did not disabuse Daphne's (partly correct!) assumption that a clever camera man and printer were in part responsible. The distraction of show biz was ideal if — and the possibility had not been ruled out, certainly not by Miguel — the new computer delivered one day all it seemed to promise. Were that to happen — the hard data accompanying the tableaux somehow sorting itself into discrete, useful, not just tantalizing precepts — then the possessor of such knowledge would be blessed with a technological windfall — by any earthly standard. Miguel said so, and Miguel rarely committed himself — not unlike Daphne, whom Dowd often teased yet never attempted to suborn.

Thus Daphne was momentarily silent when he strode into her office and placed a sizable cheque on her blotter (a supplement to her Christmas bonus) and told her to scram — for the day only, of course.

*“Naturellement,”* she said, wryly if belatedly concurring.

He delighted in the wonder, latent sarcasm, and final feigned nonchalance that took hold of her. Her nimble lithe boyish form then flexed into the animation that only an Old Testament mob would have coerced him into admitting he liked. To concede such a thing publicly would betray his vaunted singular philosophy, which seemed to lose half its validity in the telling, especially in an age that shrouded ecstatic sex with death. (The effective drugs to combat AIDS were just coming on stream.) Yet he savoured as long as it lasted the wry smile that lingered upon the unadorned lips of his tawny, calorie-purged secretary as she sought her purse. The fi-



nal broadcast look took place at the door. She turned, saw in his small natty reptilian form the weathered paradox of the age, and left displaying a calm that perhaps waned only when she disappeared into the elevator.

The reason for the cheque was not fanciful, however. Dowd, as much as he entertained himself with the sights sounds and perfumes of his princeps secretary and her chosen moods, was expecting a caller whom he wished, for his own special reasons, to see alone and unobserved. (Ordinarily, he would have sought out a dewy lad-secretary fresh from college were it not for his wish to appear orthodox and the discovery of Daphne in the pool, with her faintly androgynous figure and impressive business school credentials.) Thus he was not displeased this day to see her leave. She would return to accomplish new tasks with her customary speed and panache, and he anticipated more months, years — well, until she got pregnant, discovered pasta, or slashed her wrists — thoughtfully guessing how close that vernal spare form came to the striplings he cherished. One silk dress in particular, which had survived two summers, spilled fluently over a burnished torso and helped allay many hours of tedious necessary toil. Yes, yes, he had a closet fondness for his secretary. Whereas the creature who would advance through his office door within the next quarter hour garnered no physical allegiance from him whatever, but her mind — alert, defiant, heretical, turbulent — was another matter. Her coming would be a kind of interrogation, and interrogations Dowd loved more than sucrose, to which he was addicted.

Some irritable folk would pronounce Dowd a bigot. He would agree, flattered, and pronounce bigotry the only sane way. If hypocrisy be the tribute vice pays to virtue, then virtue would be poor indeed without its paymasters.

Of course, he would add, after winking at a silently bemused Daphne, that bigotry was earned, like an indulgent holiday. It was the accolade that sanctioned feasting with panthers — to borrow one of his mentor's

finer images. Pederasty on high, for instance, was a kind of sub rosa Nobel Prize: the many-too-many need not apply — though many did, and of course made complete asses of themselves! Angus Dowd was never more scornful of ideologues who sought to make rapt sexuality ‘respectable’, and so neutralize the dare — the anticipation, the sail-filled adventure, the salt wit that a hazardous journey engenders. He would not argue the point in public, you understand, for to do that was again to contend with the feckless multitude: he would have been embarrassed by a wholesale adoption of his mores as he would those of the progressive gay, who had already obsessively, witlessly doubled their civil jeopardy! Such a one had been the best comedic critic of conventional bonding around, yet now seemed eager to put aside his misgivings and join the cabal!

Hence the coming of the incomparable feminist, Ms. Gloria Leibowitz, the Jew-dame-Liberal, to his office study was of paramount concern. And he wanted her to be at home, so he dismissed as many of his observant factotums as prudence allowed on working day. He had not the slightest interest in her anatomy or philosophy (which was eclipsed by dogma anyway — to date), nor her evaluation of him. She was simply one more strategic live-wire to scare the humble moral minority away from acquiring a taste for exotic dishes — as we’ve noted, only an élite, who must survive as Phoenixes do, have earned the right, according to the wisdom of Angus Dowd.

With a sense of franchise, then, he observed the coast free of gawky spectators when the emphatic Ms. Leibowitz entered. He knew she believed him to be an anti-Zionist (which he was to the extent he believed the Diaspora one of civilization’s genuine boons — for washed and unwashed alike), a plenipotentiary Catholic-Conservative (which he believed the one true aspiration), a misogynist (which as we’ve noted he would acknowledge with humility and grace), and one of the richest and most influential men in the United States, indeed the world (which no one of account would

contest).

In short, Gloria Leibowitz would have torched Angus Dowd in a second, given half a chance, but regrettably her feminist rag needed money and Angus Dowd, even before she knew the involuted ironies he indulged, had sent her foundling magazine one of its first large cash donations, and thereafter yearly sums — discreetly, unconditionally — and she was not about to give over Moloch's treasures, especially when she believed Moloch a mediocre curator in the first place. Moreover, it had been a bad year, advertising revenues nearly down, and she wanted and expected the sum to be increased — what Dowd as much anticipated though he was not told so over the phone.

On entering the office she managed a prompt smile, which he matched after rising briefly in greeting. Charily she sat down on a Queen Ann chair near the large mahogany desk and crossed her still elegant legs, which once earned their keep modeling lingerie and pantyhose.

"You've lost weight," she said without commitment.

"An intimidating secretary."

"Ah yes, Daphne. The child of my former husband's wife's cousin."

"A plaited world."

"Does she know you give freely — no, I take that back — sardonically, to the cause?"

"I think not." His eyes were perhaps the only live aspect of Angus Dowd, and now his eyes began to dance.

"I detect a fondness for her."

"Frequently."

"Isn't that a betrayal? Of sorts."

Gloria often spoiled her remarks by adding stray nuances that Dowd interpreted as a tic of the meagrely educated ideologue.

"Of sorts, yes. But she rarely complains."

"Yes. I spied her in the street. She looked as if she'd won a damn lot-



tery.”

Dowd kept his smile perfectly respectable.

“So — that’s new.” Her eyes fixed on a silver-gilt Orthodox icon he had relief framed.

Dowd delighted in watching uneasy minds puzzling out contrarities and inconsistencies — his sense of hierarchy against the cynical duality she imagined him serving, indeed embellishing.

“I think you know why I’m here. It’s not to question the largess of the past, though I’m grateful for every cent. Regrettably I need more, now. Today.”

He drew forth a plain moroccan-leather book from a desk drawer and looked up with a faintly commiserating nod.

Gloria took a breath and continued resolutely — Dowd would have said prophetically. “I need almost double. By 4:00 PM.”

“I take that to mean — 400,000?”

Gloria was about to promptly concur, then impulsively resisted the open handed gesture.

“Two of our advertisers defaulted the over dues. Day before yesterday.”

“You’re playing Santa in March?”

“Ha! They were both companies with extensive dealings with Paleomena, a conglomerate I believe you control, with a carefree hand. Christ!”

It was the escaped, irrational invective he had waited the entire morning for. Now the harpy would have to beg. Yet not the slightest acknowledgment was offered; he retained only an expression of immured patience, obdurate necessity.

“Ah,” he said.

“They’d been with us half-a-decade.”

“Of course.”

He opened the book, uncapped his pen, then waited, almost as an indentured scribe.

“Look, I came here hoping for...three fifty. Four-hundred would be a blessing. However well undeserved you must think.”

Slowly he wrote in the figure, signed his name with a deft flourish, separated the note with a neat tear, slipped it into a blank envelope, then sat back and studied his visitor with a directness his eyes nearly subverted.

“My accountant is of course a learned man. He might have a suggestion or two. I’ll lend him to you for a day or two.”

Gloria was again caught flat footed.

“Holy crow. I will of course return the lad intact.”

“Excellent. Now we must eat.”

Gloria hadn’t expected an invitation to dine and momentarily looked undecided.

“Daphne, I feel, needs a role model. Someone she admires who’s not afraid to partake of gourmet food.”

“That’s why you sent her away?”

“The pool of gossips here is not always reliable.”

“So she’ll get the word from a trusted ‘other’ source.”

Dowd handsomely smiled.

Such gourmet fare Gloria had partaken of perhaps thrice before she decided, when she elected to settle in.

In a sunny alcove off the boardroom, furnished with Carlos IV chairs — a paean to Gloria’s ‘nice old-Met slipper stuff’ — Regency pedestal table, gold flatware, spun porcelain, and halcyon landscapes, two waiters and a French chef unobtrusively toiled while the sprightly fluent conversation ranged: from the theatre season (a disappointment to all but ‘punkers’; Dowd’s slang was rarely up-to-date and rather all-inclusive), to current films (disappointing even to natural-gas critics like Rex Reed); from the recent skirmishing in Chechnya-Ingushetia (where the Soviets were again

taunting insurgent fanaticism), to the proliferation of domestic fanatics with ever more obscure causes, and proposed news (media showcasing) brownouts of acts allegedly committed by them; from the plethora of virtuosic musicians as an index of prosperity, to virtuosic cartoon caricature as esteemed death wish; from impervious tax creep to plebiscitary government and the fact of ‘mediation’ replacing culture — meaning perpetual ubiquitous animosity (in Dowd’s view); from infant mortality in Managua to the nemesis of abortion (over half-a-billion dead socialists that year in the world, according to an approving Dowd; conservative folk usually carried to term), to the black market sale of fetal material, organs and tissue, a lively ‘growth’ industry; from ‘black holes’ evident in many parts of the earth (areas so polluted only virulent bacteria flourish (Dowd suggested predatory nature had to have somewhere to regroup), to a promising AIDS serum (patronizingly mentioned by Gloria in passing); from fixed drought to free trade; from continuing academic spoil in the social sciences to the status of women, still in doubt to all feminists, to the budding career of an ABN journalist, one Catherine Whyte who had been intrepidly investigating Russian mafiya dons — to eventually, almost lackadaisically (with the dessert claret), a new charming operetta by, oddly enough, a former pugilist and dive pianist, the prodigious American nonesuch Arnold Storrier.

Dowd astonished Gloria with his detailed knowledge of one of the reigning macho chaps of the decade — so newly, confoundingly gifted and unpredictable. As a media freak, Arnold had begun to stupefy select élites.

Said Gloria, “He’s one of the wunderkinder your friend Muerner daydreams about?”

Said Dowd, “Felix does make an effort, though I doubt he would have willed such a history. While a teenager Arnold diverted the world as a street brawler and kick boxer in promotions in mainly third world countries.”

“Where injury is the consummation.” Gloria had little patience for



what she deemed camp idolatry.

“Yes, he does have a reputation. As a self-styled fighter, to settle a score with an Indonesian promoter, he did ruffle a few feathers.”

“How do we know it isn’t just all hype? The work of some Mad Man hustler.”

“He does have the most vigilant following.”

“So he pays well.”

“Melts in your mouth — the dark chocolate truffles that Andre makes.” Dowd wasn’t yet on board.

“Have you met the Hercules? Or whatever.”

Dowd smiled. “Yes, at the reception held for the debut of his operetta *Coriolanus’ Cat*.”

Gloria stopped nibbling. “What?...”

“Yes, it was a rather hole-in-the-wall affair. The *Il Piccolo Teatre* in Milan barely seats five-hundred. But it was sold out the four nights it played.”

Gloria managed a snuffle. “Only four nights. Goodness.”

“Yes, he has an annoying habit of only engaging short stints. The dynamo’s curse, perhaps.”

“Angus, I do appreciate a good joke.”

“It was his talent as a brachiambrate, an inverted hand walker, that amazed the audience — and the antics of the cat for that matter.”

Gloria had had enough hype. “The Portuguese sweet bread is delicious. Wonderfully filling.”

“Splendid. He has other talents of course. He will soon perform as an accompanist for the international soprano Marian Fitch. Yes. Her regular accompanist came down with a very bad head cold, apparently. He and Ms. Fitch ‘get on’, as they say.”

Again, Gloria looked as if she might gag on the delicious food. She had met the mezzo-soprano and heard her in Bizet’s *The Pearl Fishers* a year

ago at the Met. Dowd's piffle was becoming so flagrant that she badly regretted being so 'outgunned'.

Dowd was then obliging. "Perhaps your editors might consider writing about the age's silent, uncomplaining males."

It was then Gloria, with some impatience, changed the subject. "Do tell me more about Felix Muerner's Bern Cat — I mean 'Clinic'."

That evening she ransacked all possible info outlets and was indeed astonished to find she had entirely missed the story of the Arnold chap, essentially an underground saga, which threatened to surface with the chap's wondrous pending accompaniment of the remarkable Ms. Fitch — which was indeed scheduled for Carnegie Hall that month! In her obdurate hunting she also discovered that Arnold Storrier was a Reno card shark, a dive pianist, and a graduate student in applied mathematics at the University of Pennsylvania. She went to bed that night with a headache, half wondering if indeed Felix Muerner had achieved something ineluctably awesome at his Bern clinic. For the last tidbit of information she learned about Arnold Storrier was that he was for a time an outpatient at the clinic.

In the coming week she learned that Arnold did indeed turn out to be a late protégé of Dowd crony, European tycoon and medic-geneticist Felix Muerner, whom Dowd nostalgically or whimsically — Gloria couldn't tell which — marked down as an eccentric who had always dreamed of fashioning a collegium of durable supermen — a facetious and noxious remark for Gloria which was, at the time, blunted by the arrival of the luscious ripe gooseberries and tamarind tea. She decided, again, it was a Dowd hallmark to both entertain and perplex. Arnold Storrier likely did exist. Was international hype now so overblown that only mythic Titans would ensure payoffs?

It was just past ten when she returned to her tiny office the following morning to stare at the cheque for a stoic half-minute before dialing her

anxious publisher. It was then she recalled with a groan the long-handled spoon that accompanied the first of the soups — the safest way to sup with the Devil!

## TWELVE

Lanky Professor Emeritus, Timothy Abathnot Ashly Scargill, gazed up rather moonishly in the half light of early morn at the Moorish maze ceiling of his Santa Barbara snugery. He had just balled, in all positions of the first of his ten instalments of the Kama Sutra, his young, freckled, pliant mistress, coincidentally one of the notable research engineers at the Los Angeles constellation of the Paleomena multi-national. She lay now curled at his side, her seamless pristine back marbled against him. Not long ago she removed one of his hieratic hands from a vanilla breast: she needed sleep, she said; sorry. He had actually hoped they might proceed, after a short delay, to the second of his carefully parceled installments. He was vaguely aware some nonsense had overtaken her at work which confiscated sleep. He was also aware this was the first time he bedded her that month, and the second time that night she had not permitted the usual philandering as he called it during the pauses. No wonder he was somewhat less than magnanimous at that moment — her afterglow had apparently petered out. Young people were supposed to have more energy and stamina than that! He pictured the rumor mongers at Lutece, sip, sip, life size automatons before a trough mirror: “Why the dear chap at last abandoned her because she simply couldn’t keep up — and her half his age! You simply do not toy with a Keynesian!” It wasn’t after all as though he could take her somewhere, to Konstanz or Montreux say; his wife would not put up with that. And he did count on these weekly trysts, now sadly reduced, unlike the neon-mercantilism he had to speak on that night, once



again flirting with hedged tariffs. Would the general public always be at the mercy of conservative aberrations? Always the usurers hidden...in their dam posh snuggeries!

He switched on a narrow-beam reading lamp, fetched a manuscript from the headboard and began to read softly.

In the modern-day diversified corporation, it is somewhat easier to place an operation in escrow that modify it. Overall, an ingrained impulse resurrects in the executive the manifestation of the manufactured good. We factotems (he didn't note that he had misspelled factotums) who concerned ourselves with industrial input in the aftermath of the Viet Nam War were overwhelmed that the steel barons might choke on silicon...

"Ash, darling, I need some sleep." Frieda moved further away.

Scargill was on the point of a rebuke when he decided simply to continue, in a lower volume.

It is some years since a gifted student at the Berkley School of Business Administration deemed it her or his penchant to embrace mysteries that must occasion...

The sheet suddenly smartly smoothed beside him. Frieda move to the guest bathroom, her Attic nakedness ebbing in the marginal light. This was really too much!

He got himself up, approached the door, found it unlocked. Frieda stood before the basin mirror, an arm raised, about to apply a slave to narrow blisters below a taut breast.

"Ash, please get out."

Scargill mutely eyed the bizarre scarring, just below each breast, lesions unnoticed in the closeted shadows.

"Good lord!" he said, preemptively contrite.

"You're not responsible," Frieda wearily stated. "Out. Please."

The door closed on a flummoxed Scargill. What had the headstrong youngster got up to in his absence? In no way could he resolve such marks

— or sores! Brusquely he re-opened the door.

Looking into the mirror Frieda crossed her arms in a prescient fatigue that deflated his intended query. “It’s not contagious, Ash; fact. All in due course.”

He pulled the door shut, almost dutifully returned to the bed, sat and lit a cigarette. It was macabre. The manuscript of his speech lowered up at him. Keynes was no help dealing with kooks or bizarre events. He could work out no synthesis at all. The marks seemed too precisely stationed to be accidentally placed, or inflicted. The only thing he could make comparison with was a deep scratch, or burn. But there? What kind of nonsense?...

He was on the point of rising when Frieda emerged fully dressed in a smart pant suit. Directly she collected some earrings from an end table.

“I’m late. I’ll call soon. Luck with the speech.”

“But you’re...okay?”

“I’m fine. Got caught in a turned tow rope water skiing. Didn’t even notice it at first. Must run. Bye.”

He barely heard the entrance door close. He found he was becoming short of breath and lumbered to the main en suite and the inhaler vitalizer. A lone peignoir, bought for her last Christmas, hung askance in the linked wardrobe. Strangely, the prospect of losing her had never before sunk in, and he was appalled at the emptiness — now depriving him of air it seemed. He recalled the quiet way she deflected his hands last night — which he had taken as a desire for more forthright clinches! Why had she not told him? He remembered all too well the colloid softness of her and faint vanilla musk — but nothing to hint at a wounding like that — which, the more he thought of it, seemed to defy her explanation. He had not seen her plainly; it was dark when they returned and she came directly to him. To have kissed, however briefly, and remember only lenitive smooth cupolas...pure rent: the classic view. Water skiing? What kind of non-

sense?...

He decided the creature was getting to him in ways she likely didn't deserve. He was not much interested in the topical larks that went on. He had made a play for her and she agreeably joined in. He had confided to her edited yet impressive details of his advisory government activities — disclosures he sometimes felt a little sheepish about after; but the comments, which seemed to him now analogous to ready if seemly lifeboat confessions, had always cleared his mind. He needed someone to help oil the often turbulent waters, make him relish again the intimate palliates of life, and this she certainly had accomplished. If she suffered a misfortune, she did not seek his aid; indeed, she left him and his protective instincts the moment the discovery was let. Good luck to her; he longed to see her again but must return to his sphere of influence, in the present case his limited expertise with tariffs, and the brisk questioning that would follow that year's final West-coast Radford Lecture.

He rose and headed for the sauna; the masseur would be there in half an hour. He sincerely hoped she sorted herself out and sought suitable medical intervention. In the shower the memory of cameo nipples scaled before him, memorabilia he named them, which never in his embrace had become the hardened inspiration of machismo writers.

At the banquet he would pray for her return.

## THIRTEEN

Angus Dowd skimmed the latest in camera report on the progress of their sentient computer program, specifically the ever startling results of the computer's facility for anticipating solutions to exotic complex puzzles — more and more the ZYTA salient. A meeting of the Princes — the pre-



eminent executives of Paleomena, of which he was plainly the most deserving in his well-reasoned estimation — was scheduled for eleven. As he expected, Arthur Pechenpaugh, the shaky blustering plug he shared the top floor stable with, had committed himself to the efficacy of the ZYTA signal, bell, book and candle. The man's nerve was legendary, also his past phenomenal luck. But unless Dowd was mistaken, which he rarely was, the testy swayback was about to break a leg.

In his bid to exploit the ZYTA program. Pechenpaugh — from the outset — had vouchsafed a quick inexpensive and safe sea water desalination package on the merits of preliminary data from ZYTA. In return he was to garner a large pool of investment capital that especially the Saudis were nervous about in that day's market, yet were persuaded to commit to in the end. If the deal proceeded and was fruitful Pechenpaugh would confer upon the corporation a footing in oceanic engineering it had coveted for years, and earn the undying gratitude of its elderly chairman, Max Paleoginanis — who in consequence just might name Pechenpaugh his successor.

But!

And here Dowd presented the absent world with one of his seraphic smiles, which the knowledgeable knew were scarce as unicorns. And who should partake of this rare earth phenomenon but a watchful Daphne who, lips eschew in disbelief or entertained awe, stared down at the patent leather gnome from his ormolu corniced office doorway, flanked by pewter sconces and Siamese Buddhas.

“Ah, Daphne, you've located it,” said Dowd with unusual acclaim, referring to a dossier on one of the ZYTA project's lead researchers, Dr. Miguel Ibarria-Gomez, whom Pechenpaugh had likely suborned. Dowd was methodically seeking out the weak spots. He was mindful also of cat-soft corduroy culottes that ended just below admirable knees. Daphne placed the heavy folder in the space he cleared for her on his then unusu-

ally cluttered blotter. Noting her distraction he said, “I suspect Miguel is receptive to young gamin concepts.”

Daphne gave Angus one of her Not-Today looks and prepared to leave.

“As the street Arab knows his way around sly overweening authority,” he added with a tolerant gesture.

What in God’s Name was he on about now she wondered and, as she closed the door remarked, “Oh boy!”

Once more Dowd savoured his intricate, involuted and obliged world.

“Daphne,” he piped into his agate-faced intercom. “I do need an ‘internal search’ as well.” He referred to the formal requisition of a communication tap for Stanton in security.

She entered a minute later. With a ready simper he received the folder.

“That is a charming frock. New?”

“Recent.” She avoided his eyes.

In watching her leave, he tried to recall her expression the day he gave her a ‘first installment’ on the Christmas bonus. He looked up the date and again touted himself master of the froggy pond.

The meeting in the oval boardroom of red ochre, blue and gold Mycenaean decor, dragged on with the tedium of awkward melodrama. Pechenpaugh, ever untuned soap box bluster and lament, again reviled poor stolid Susanne Rothnie, Miquel’s former able assistant, much as Dowd expected. The speech was in poor taste: you don’t speak scurrilously of the dead you’ve contrived to ruin yourself.

Pechenpaugh was convinced at the outset that Susanne had secretly ‘misplaced’ segments of the ZYTA data and absconded with pertinent information. His evidence was the usual con-flab of select innuendo — now likely mostly his own — and one tiny slip in Susanne’s reading of ZYTA’s carrier symbols, which an affable, myopic, middling executive, David Willardson, innocently helped document. But it seemed Pechenpaugh had

this day at last glimpsed his own demise and berated his chosen scapegoat more ruthlessly than ever. Thus, the inner logic of Dowd's preferred scenario held firm: if Pechenpaugh lost his footing, better to have him anchored to erstwhile incompetents below than rumored assassins above. So the indefatigable Susanne suffered an 'accident' — she was a bit of an idealistic ninny; several times she had allowed herself to endorse the advertising tactics of environmental ideologues who constantly dogged the corporation. It was not done sensationally or luridly, but Karl Voden, their nuclear power expert, who now sat opposite Dowd clenching and unclenching his fingers, had been embarrassed at a shareholder's meeting. Water from an older reactor had leaked into a fresh water stream. Whereas Miguel, then the ZYTA hardware director, had always been a security headache. He wanted to go public — where his distinguished genius remained influential. Yet he was finally as chary of the misuse of ZYTA as young blithe Peter Selby-Smith. Both, in the end, welcomed an exclusive Paleomena project, though for different reasons. Lest he forget.

Dowd gave Arthur Pechenpaugh another month to stew over his losses, then the newest of the Princes, the prodigious Felix Muerner, would demand a full accounting, and resurrect the pitifully bungled evidence — a tape Arthur tried to implicate Susanne with. Ha! The livid Pechenpaugh would know only at the last minute and his veteran associate, Angus Dowd, would wear a lugubrious face. Fanatics are ever their own most consummate enemies.

Even the anthropological dissonance in the future civilization ZYTA was disclosing seemed uncanny — so close to Dowd's own sobering vision. As technology accelerated so did the preoccupation with form — the discovery of the esthetic 'gravity', or cross-cultural ideal. Once there, the ugly, stolid and rashly deviant were easily identified — as young P. Selby-Smith stated with such immaculate sarcasm.

Dowd smiled once again: his exemplary social wisdom would one day



be in great demand. In a later ZYTA scenario the conventional sexual distinction was maintained for sadistic entertainment only — all that was left in dealing with yourself, now in your one godlike image! It was a tract Dowd could have written himself — without the help of a sentient computer. For instance, there was for Dowd a vision no more distressing than redundant males scrounging to ape the newly fabled paragon or ‘daemon’ Arnold Storrier — a nightmare surely even for Felix Muerner.

The meeting over, Dowd returned to his office to find it deserted. On such a carefree Friday afternoon his staff accomplished their lone act of solidarity at precisely four o’clock. He found a note in Daphne’s small neat hand tucked behind the top-right medallion of the Florentine prie-Dieu, his disguised music centre. The niche was used for personal messages, the oval medallion turned to a horizontal position when on ‘active’ duty. The note read: ‘Stanton wants meeting at Tuileries at 20:00 hrs. Re: Dr. F. Van Eerden. D.’ The Tuileries was an elegant cluttered restaurant with arched ceilings, bizarre echoes and often vociferous chatter, all of which made electronic eves dropping a formidable challenge. Stanton, Dowd’s security chief, had never succeeded himself in adequately monitoring the place, and came to regard it as a good venue for private words. In his contentment, Dowd had momentarily forgotten the sudden departure from Paleomena of Dr. Frieda Van Eerden, a remote sensing engineer who curiously left off a forwarding address — the flea that now returned to his ear!

At first, Reg Stanton’s hunched complaining form, inclined as if expecting a clout from a headmaster, seemed more pressed than usual. He appeared relieved to see Dowd. A large bowl of creamy lentil soup deluged with croutons — for a spastic stomach he said — was already half consumed. Without pausing for pleasantries he filed his bewildering story.

“It’s a real trick getting near the gal’s place. The landscape’s full of cagy busybodies. I suspect one other agency — not rooting for us at the

UN. A real smooth legman. Russian maybe; he looks Slavic. Then there are two out-of-nowhere bozos so amateur it's embarrassing." He paused to cool his mouth with a snowy-peaked hot chocolate. "My boulevardier spotted the first guy, a tubby, entering the building — two nights running. The second time a police cruiser shadowed him on the street as he approached, almost picked the dude up — no connection though, I think. The guy's just plain obvious. And you won't believe who — David Willardson. The second guy, one of Pechenpaugh's goons, came only once — the second night Willardson showed up."

Stanton appeared to indulge a coming belch but instead opted for an intake of air — which included some crumbs from the croutons. He nearly gagged, and was a leaden pink when his active handkerchief at last disappeared and he waved off the concerned waiters. He apologized profusely and swore at the soup. "No offence intended," he reassured the steward. He returned to his story when he and Dowd were again by themselves, Dowd hiding his dismay with a show of empathy for his pressed snoop.

"On the second night it seems the tubby, Willardson, was in the apartment when the other arrived. One of them, likely the goon, was a gorilla — hurling stuff right and left from the resonance tract we got across the street. And he bad mouthed Paleomena and Frieda something fierce — yet seemed to be talking to himself. Funny, no? That type'll use every club in the bag. I think we need more backup."

"Yes, perhaps you do," Dowd said at last in a distracted manner, just before signaling the waiter and changing his order to a sorrel soup, blini pancakes and caviar. When the waiter left he drew Stanton back to the first of the noticed legman, the presumed Russian operative.

"The guy's a pro. Yawning finesse. My team briefly spotted him the second night, taking infra-reds of both bozos, coming and going it seems. We almost missed him; he was pretending to repair a street lamp in a bol-

lard almost a block away. Full van and everything. Even a guy in the squad car waved to him. But we hung around and got a hotel number. The one camera we got a pic of him using looks like their standard conversion.” Stanton paused to clear a tooth. “You know, now I think of it, the guy was a tiny bit obvious. Maybe he wants to bargain.”

If a neutral observer had then looked at Angus Dowd he might say the immaculate diner had discovered something untoward in his companion’s soup. Even his friend at last held back a portion of the confection, which he plainly enjoyed. But then the same observer would just as soon place his attentions elsewhere for the conversation resumed as before. Perhaps the distinguished little man simply experienced a rare bit of qualmsiness.

But Angus Dowd had ceased to think of food at all. The revelations of a presumed Russian as well as the lumpish Willardson — Paleomena’s art custodian and curator — being dedicated Frieda watchers pulled the rug from beneath him. If the Russians were onto ZYTA, the coveted capital pool that still hung in the balance, largely a result of Pechenpaugh’s problematic desalination package, might be dissipated; as well, the future of things like the stealth floater, a high orbit attack laser, then Paleomena’s versatile if still flawed space-orbiter wonder, might also be in jeopardy before a new, deftly inquisitive snoop: an alert research engineer like Van Eerden could provide sensitive information on both the laser and aspects of ZYTA as well. And if the corporation’s foozler Willardson was involved, then Dowd might consider an early retirement, for he sensed imminent disaster — an impulse he nonetheless quickly recovered from.

“And you think Willardson remained in the suite when Pechenpaugh’s goon entered?” In audible form the question amazed.

“Certain. The only outs were the balcony and front doors. We know Willardson came via the roof lounge and balcony — he actually fell off the low roof overhang into an forsythia planter on the larger balcony. The other guy used an outside elevator and the front door — must have. But



no one left before the gorilla began throwing things around. Which makes two bodies there for a time. Though only the gorilla's voice is on our track. Willardson left about ten minutes later — in one piece. One other thing.”

Dowd managed a lenten smile.

“The one street guy I had look at the back of the villa Pechenpaugh has visited. A lot of visitors. Had him keep an eye. He photographed a garbage truck leaving the back end. The garbage was interesting.” He presented Dowd with a couple of pictures. “The shoe — in the one clear plastic bag.”

Mutely Dowd stared at the picture.

“One of Dr. Eerden's.”

Dowd was at first apathetic. “What makes you think so?”

“This”

Stanton's second picture showed Dr. Van Eerden lecturing a group of techies in a computer lab.

“There's a connection?”

“The shoes she's wearing.” He gave Dowd a magnifying glass. “The same pattern or stain on the one in the bag The left one.”

After a moment's perusal Dowd said, “A fairly common design I should think.”

“But not the scuff or stain.”

A third picture, dual framed, compared the two shoes.

“Matches up. A water stain most like. The shoe in the garbage's been torn apart as you see. The stain's still visible. They match. Microscopically. Same shoe Mr. Dowd.”

The silence in the room was momentarily deafening.

“Back of that villa you say....”

Then and there Dowd elected to undertake the following. One: He must not further alarm the moribund Pechenpaugh. Two: He must ascer-

tain more fully the corporate allies and disposition of Felix Muerner. And three: As of that moment he would supervise the investigation of Van Eerden himself, giving Stanton whatever materiel and backup he needed. So determined, he further consulted his watch, made yet another decision, then sought the dessert menus and ordered a pear schnapps and a 'large' slice of the maple sugar cheesecake, pushing the remaining blini aside.

That same afternoon he learned of their missing satellite. The one Able was supposed to have 'connived' with. A dark sky indeed.

## FOURTEEN

Frieda looked at her reflection in the plane's tiny washroom mirror. It would have to do. Her makeup artistry was exhausted. She daubed the damp towel over her ribs. The cosmetic application seemed moisture proof. Was she overly cautious? Nothing lost by it. They would change into diving gear on arrival and she didn't want puzzled observers either before or after a dive, and on a small vessel privacy was sometimes a coincidental luxury. Such vagaries. And what turmoil?

She glanced at her watch. In a little over an hour they would touch down at a private airfield near Gasmata in New Britain, the staging area for her trip to Truk Island and search for a compact high-orbit satellite, launched in Europe, which Able perfected or — as the supposition went — was 'commandeered' by some alien signal to devise ZYTA. So Miguel had dourly ventured before she left — a possible 'outside' signal. The buggerish imputation. And diamond hard Miguel was not a fantasist or a speculator. The satellite, a delusive superseder of the deadly stealth floater, had been losing altitude for some time, then abruptly plunged into the Pacific two nights ago. If Paleomena recovered the vehicle it could retain its

monopoly on the rarefied radar deflector that she had helped design, and whatever else the satellite had banked in its memory and not transmitted. She believed she had a fighting chance to find it first. More than her shaky future depended on it.

Replacing the blouse she restively elected to add some touches to her face which she realized was haggard beyond necessity; particularly the skin beneath her eyes, congenitally faintly bluer than the rest, which looked then melodramatic.

She also chafed over the necessary and exacting request she had made of Luther, her diving provisioner. At that moment she felt like some screwy perturbed orbiter herself! Until half-an-hour ago Luther believed they undertook to document coral migrations in the area — more mayhem — due to the obsessions of Felix Muerner, this time the pursuit of select oceanic minerals — quite literally the numberless molecules in sea water, including gold, some of which he had apparently discovered how to harvest in the wake of Pechenpaugh's stillborn desalination undertaking — news Frieda at first found merely pathetic. Only a very grand crackpot...but no, the stories could not be discounted, the alteration in sea flora in one area of the Bismark Achipelago off New Britain, likely due to the enzymic conscription and subsequent displacement of planktonic reserves, was too well documented. The fanatic was obviously up to something, likely hand in glove with Paleomena. Frieda had finally fitfully daringly joined an independent faction determined to find out. In doing so she had to reschedule a deadline set by the Rezident, who was obsessed with Paleomena's orbiter program. But there too she balked: the essential scientist in her at last lectured the spy! Almost imperceptibly had she discovered how invincibly she belonged to her speciality (a distinct facet of creditable, wondrous, blameless Nature!) — and thus to those tasks science peculiarly warranted. Soon a second scheduled rendezvous had been abandoned, and the Rezident's goons hauled her in for questioning — a



juggernaut she barely survived. What she had disclosed was sufficient for her release and promise to behave. Her subsequent flight from both Paleomena and her vigilant GRU handler brought about a strange mixture of exhilaration and resolution — what a terrorist must experience, she thought, as if she had glimpsed herself for the first time — only to be routed from such heady sentiment by the sudden coming of her all-but-forgotten, delinquent half sister! She found herself nervously laughing in the small round mirror as she collected her makeup paraphernalia. When she opened the washroom door a brawny woman stood waiting outside, one of the biologists brought along for the original assignment of documenting the unusual coral deterioration. Frieda faintly smiled and stifled an apology; she was returned a grateful grin.

She had not foreseen the combined operation, but finding and retrieving the suddenly plummeted satellite took precedence. Which left one lone bargaining chip with the Rezident — to locate, track and ‘debrief’ her rogue step-sister — though her out-of-the-blue arrival spelled mayhem. The marine biologist and the oceanographers would not welcome working from the second smaller ship, but she needed the speed and equipment reserves of the first. And the first group must not know the purpose of the second — for everyone’s protection. They had contended with Paleomena’s tortuous ways before and she did not anticipate any resistance. Poor Luther. Would he ever forgive her? Perhaps, if no one got hurt...she looked out upon the bright raw cloud quilt below. On the first leg of the trip a tiny distinct silhouette of the plane appeared on the white cumulus within a sun halo. It was a phenomenon she had seen only once before and wondered if a mystic might see an omen in it. The cloud cover lifted over the Marshall Islands, which emerged as colorless paramecium against a deep blue stain. Minutes later the packed clouds returned. Luther offered her a shot of whisky which she gratefully accepted. “Helps in the cold water,” he said. “Let’s hope so,” she replied, then motioned to her pil-

low and her need to get some shuteye. She would allow herself a single half-hour of rest while listening to a tape provided by one of the engineers that included sections of Strauss' *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, a fine piece in sub-orbital flight for a fugitive she decided. The music evoked a detailed tapestry where the events of the past year reproduced themselves with haunting vividness. She couldn't exactly place the point-of-no-return, though her sister's tussle in London and subsequent disappearance which she learned of incrementally through her minder in the Rezidency, forced her to confront Cheka intransigence as never before. At first she was simply angry. Only the SVR with FSB help, could, would field a search for such a gamey trickster, select whore and petty thief. Someone in the Cheka or military-political hierarchy must have an awful secret or suspicion. Vassily would surely not approve. The mischievous trollop had never been an ally, and now might canker a newly budded life! She thought it passing strange she should be anything but Dr. Frieda Van Eerden — Anastasia Kniaźnin a mere, former, obliged self from whom she was the estimable reincarnation. But Zoya's sudden coming — she was reputedly using an alias then, a nom de theatre at the Apsara — Zyta Krupka — yes Zyta! — added a splotch to the political landscape. If the powers to be had sent Zoya to America to seek out a newly elusive half-sister, such a quest could have rearranged the priorities of an entire directorate! Such omnibus questing could only be hatched in desperation — a variable she had not considered in her new purposeful existence. Zoya, a mischievous truant, petty thief and summer whore, now possibly networking the GRU, FSB and SVR! Again she yielded to a nervous incredulous laugh. Was it not just a little 'outré', as Daniel might say? Add to the above the advent of Paleomena's new prodigious sentient computer technology — a teasing sixth sense — and the confusions proliferated in geometric amplitude. She seemed herself in a high release orbit — about to fly off into a gaping dark.

Yes, Able's ZYTA or ZYTA's Able was as much to blame, if blame there were, for her new poignant indecision. The camaraderie among the superb Paleomena scientists — really a bracing conspiratorial involvement — left her feeling an alien at first. In the end their respect she wanted above all, which meant pursuing an unwavering scientific career — not a subversively ideological one. ZYTA disclosed the greatest 'discovery' of her career — her gifted self and newly esteemed vocation! The ancillary experience of dealing with the imperious directives from the Paleomena Princes left her suspecting all power politics! "The hallmark of the grandest of snobs," said the most blithe of her astute new pals, the very bright and persistent Daniel Frank. God, such dire collisions. An asteroid belt. What things to ponder as the Strauss tone poem fetched her imagination. What might not ZYTA accomplish? What had Zoya, now also known as Zyta, already perpetrated! Could Frieda ever look happily upon her mischievous estranged half-sister again, or resume her career as a liberated scientist?...

As the wine and homemade goulash seasoned the concert of Strauss, Stravinsky and Gluck, she discovered herself oddly, even wantonly, cheerful, aroused by the very abandon of the events, their near, ineluctable riot! as if she could play the part of a free dynamo after all — and dam bloody well! It was an élan she had noted in some spetsnaz companies, and occasionally in her own work, when a significant formulation was finally detailed. Again she fought off a subversive smile, which she did by reminding herself of the American plutocrat Ashly Scargill, whom she seduced and got to talking — when his wide mouth wasn't full of filet tartare, his own academic blether, and sometimes her — about his trials as a former presidential advisor, from which the GRU et al were likely that very minute backlogging details of influential government advisors and lobbyists liable to coercion or enticement as well as their likely actions in the future. She never really learned what it was about the man a U.S. president might



find useful or interesting, for he was both a parvenu and slick unoriginal economist — this from an unsuspecting Peter Selby-Smith — a finding Frieda found apt. Her knowledge of economics was command driven but Scargill seemed a squeamish interventionist, as well as a ponderous and meretricious raconteur. But he was politically alert, highly placed, and occasionally wryly entertaining, in a glibly ‘radical chic’ way: he gave of his privileged insights in hopes of impressing her. She recalled the bewilderment in his eyes when he saw the unusual lesions, and his concern when an insinuation of contagion set in. What a vain lucky aparat — American division. But one more in the band of cocksure groppers.

So unlike — how expressive the thought was — brilliant, resilient Daniel, that irreverent, gifted charmer and tempter, only eighteen when she first met him, a fluent free-spoken colleague at Paleomena, and impetuous pest during the brief sonsy interlude when they still thought ZYTA an entertaining accident or joke. How would he have responded to the sight of his — fancied elder sister? — standing before the mirror in Ashley’s guest bathroom, ribs ringed in pale sores? With disturbed, fascinated speculation? Hardly shame — or insulting insinuation.

And what an adventure those symptoms told — precipitated by her step-sister’s rumored coming. The word was out. The stigma of Zoya in Los Angeles set off an explosive chain reaction — on the eve of her own imminent duplicity? Had someone sensed her unease — in the department or a cutout at Paleomena? Was GRU or SVR exploitation of such a sibling credible? As a ‘fishing’ gambit? Yes it was.

Instantly she recognized the perils and swiftly prepared for the GRU and/or SVR to question her in safe houses she would not be permitted to identify. She applied herself to the task of how to plot her own whereabouts in the forthcoming weeks and months: she must know how to arrange an escape, with outside help if necessary, though not likely CIA, for there too her career would be sidetracked. With care, and the orbiter as

ace, she just might succeed in getting the Cheka to leave her in limbo. But for the coming of Zoya and her possible instruction to ‘salvage’ — shame! — her sister: Frieda’s vexing presumption. Luckily, as it turned out, the GRU trio already seeking her for past truancy descended before her plan could be implemented. Indeed, her lucid refutations before these questioners may have served to briefly indemnify her. What they would have made of the lesions Scargill later saw would have greatly prolonged the interrogation. She knew from intervening transcripts about such interrogations, but was surprised by what she thought of now as ‘a carnal adventure’ — having to strip and be examined before a team of invigilators who by then too obviously didn’t trust one another, especially the tracking broach she wore at work and had no time to remove when she was seized. The strip search was abusive, as no doubt intended. Scargill had nearly done as much to her in his more inflamed moments. After an apology and warning to diligently keep on at Paleomena — the broach was found to be innocuous beyond her work space — she left the Referentura with a more or less clean slate, the one oddity her high blood pressure — one of the initial tests — which merely indexed the suddenness of the interrogation.

The very next day she had the essential paraphernalia assembled to keep track of her whereabouts — including minuscule diode, tubed chemical power cell, which she proceeded to meld into the stitching of a contour bra, additional amplification to be furnished by the broach wizard Miguel had designed to discreetly signal a member of his group in the Paleomena lab, which the Cheka radio expert finally concluded was inoperative outside her work, as she had stated. Now it would serve a wider field and was placed within the stitching of a coat cuff — a coat she could easily promptly shed. A computer would plot her future movements for up to forty-eight hours. When she stopped for more than ten minutes the transmitter would cut out and the receiver record a tiny asterisk. She housed the receiving apparatus in a vacant garage she leased. Now that the

Rezident had a plausible explanation for her recently abandoned meetings, she would be left in peace — for a time. That her cover had been ostensibly blown was a measure of the desperation. If she worried the technology she planned to deploy might be topical with some GRU experts that anxiety lost its edge when the radio expert first overlooked the broach, then found it innocuous. In fact, she felt suavely confident until a week later when the fine plastic tubing of the power cell split and slowly moistened the fabric of the bra. At first she sensed perspiration, the belated discomfort attributed to once again wearing a stiff bra. The mess was later discovered in a public washroom — prompting yet another headache: what manner of industrial poison may have been in the tubing? In searching the internet she learned that some of the chemical elements could be absorbed into the bloodstream, though the long-term effects would not be onerous for very small amounts where no open sore was involved. A mild Ph-basic salve was prescribed, which Frieda promptly sought, swearing devoutly.

But nothing sinister happened. Mainly mild second degree burns she diagnosed a day later, likely from a dilute acid, as the information she gleaned inferred. Not enough to interrupt a scheduled tryst with her plutocrat — to keep the new GRU watchers stable and occupied. Seeking medical treatment after the initial interrogation could put her on the conveyor back to Moscow. She would see the lights were kept low with the lusty Scargill. Again her nimble laughter dimpled her stomach. What a night it had been. She was back being pressed and prodded by the stern nurse in the Referentura clinic, a brief stark recollection in this limpid hour devoted to relaxation, which soon resumed — one talent acquired in her clandestine career she would never regret. Again she wondered, looking out upon the fleecy clouds below, as inviting as a down mattress, what may have transpired if, instead of Ashley blundering upon her that morning, impious Daniel had observed his neat colleague dressing the torso he had



made such pretty sketches of in its pristine cast days before. The question humbly begged an answer.

During the dog days when the ZYTA phenomenon was entertainingly suspect, the Princes seemed uncertain what to do with their experts, the genies who had conceived and designed the computer that outperformed expectations, richly complicated by the stray signal from a Paleomena high-orbit satellite which the computer was enlisted to interpret — the beginning of the intervening perplexity and wonder! The experts themselves were caught up in a kind of limbo, the summary department invigilation that descended adding to the dismay. It was during that suspended time when Daniel began his ‘investiture’ of her, as he teasingly put it. During a noisy hour in the cafeteria he confessed to admiring her from afar, though not because he wanted to bed her — though the idea had crossed his mind — but rather to paint her. Nude. At the time she guessed it another of his charming adolescent fits or ruses, but soon realized he was in earnest. “I’m a lame Romeo anyway, and likely to remain so until some Valkyrie comes to the rescue, so to speak. But the thought of you not being preserved for posterity makes no sense...if not already then someone must, soon...you’ve seen some of my work...I would be honoured...even while sounding a little desperate.”

“You want to paint — me?”

“As God is my judge, and resident art critic.”

She wanly smiled.

“Yes.” The plight in his eyes had been excruciating. If memory served.

“This isn’t then a conventional portrait sitting you’re suggesting?”

“No. Not exactly. Though it certainly can be on the agenda.”

“Will it help you get a good night’s rest?” Everyone then on Thirteen had been hung over with the indecision.

“Almost certainly.”

She now thought of that footling interlude in her assiduous, importuned life as the initial awakening, the realization of herself as a distinct person, a being with an individual manumitted body — possessed by heady, vaunted, sovereign urges! To be a free being. A triumphant self! Also sprach Zarathustra!

She had indeed seen his work. Two galleries in San Francisco were then showing some of his figure work with other artists. Mathematics had apparently derived from his preoccupation with differential form and manifolds. He acted as a medical illustrator for a time, which served to enhance his polymath studies of history, mathematics, computer imaging, and finally archaeology and anthropology. Paleomena retained him as an earth-science consultant — most recently to assay the verisimilitude of the ZYTA's cultural constructs; by then ZYTA was being deployed to play out a variety of variables, from the particle physics modeling to cross-cultural aesthetics in physical anthropology. He confessed he had long desired to paint her. But unattired. His digs boasted an ancient Byzantine sofa where the late afternoon sun was, he said, 'luxurious'. He would not disturb her sleep. The timing of the request — as much a plea — was annoyingly apposite. She was then all but committed to a new life, making thoughtful excuses in her letter drops for occasional delays. She desired discreet undemanding company and above all, that particular weekend, a more private place to stay than her own apartment. Happy auspicious Peter persisted. How unattired is 'unattired', she asked at last jokingly. What came between her and scandal he said with some diffidence...though by the Monday she had accommodated the lunar poses he craved. It was on that sober Monday morning that she discovered the other conundrum — the face on the cover of the OO Magazine in Peter's study. The ostensible face of her step-sister! who she had reluctantly followed the exploits of, including an attack by a patron in the Apsara club she had danced in for a year or more. We all have doubles she mused, though without much con-

viction or enthusiasm. It seemed as if she was indeed locked, encapsulated in a dream.

“Dr. Van Eerden, we’ll be landing in approximately an hour. You wanted a call.”

Frieda looked into the friendly eyes of the biologist, who was expecting a child in four or five months, a fact the woman had not declared on her application. Suddenly the pleasant insular reverie about Peter was marred. God, what if everything went badly? Did she have the right to involve — entangle! — all these people in such a desperate operation? Might she not get sick herself before it was over? She imagined Daniel Frank looking for her then — in the seminar room near the hearty aspidistra.

“Thanks. Any gin left?”

After a short intent recapitulation of her plan she pushed aside the oceanographic map. The gin was beginning to relieve the compulsion to concentrate and denigrate. Also, as the plane circled to land, she felt faintly dizzy. So many thoughts to card, edit. A tiny interval left, coveted, the frenetic activity so proximate...the silvery surf perimeter of New Britain’s Southern crescent reminded her curiously of the gown she wore for the honorarium — at Felix Muerner’s hillside estate! So pleased Paleomena had been with several of its young researchers it staged a celebration and retained the Muerner ‘Summer Palace’ to display its munificence. She looked on the eccentric debonair Muerner that afternoon with a wan curiosity. Then she was oblivious to the inner complexity of the man and the awesome research he engaged in in his clinic in Bern. She had got drunk and overate. The meal was perhaps the apogee of her gourmet experience; the conversation, she recalled, a perfect blend of wit and attractively displayed information. The sunshine in the aviary was blissful — and she was able to deliver to the GRU the radio bands Muerner used to communicate to his European partners!



Less exuberant, but as touching, was the night she got the rotund David Willardson, the shy, ingratiating corporate clown, and Pechenpaugh's confessor and unhappy decoy, to assist her in bugging up the slanderous tape Pechenpaugh tried to slur Susanne Rothnie with. The incriminating information on the tape was reduced to a series of unbecoming rasps and snorts, the bathos of sleep -- Willardson's rattled snoring! Poor Pechenpaugh. Poor David.

The recording session took place the week before she confronted the Zyta muddle — the coalescing eye of the storm! Willardson had come with her finally, to piece together the innocuous tape that hastened Pechenpaugh's demise as a Paleomena techno broker. To be invited back to an attractive woman's apartment to 'stage a snoring', as he called it, fetched one of his durable smiles. He performed admirably for her microphones though, through several tapes, before she was satisfied and permitted him the tranquility of her guest suite. Later he would ingenuously assist her team by pinching the codes to Muerner's latest private switchboard — a deed that Muerner may have watched from a monitor himself!

What fools they all had been. She wondered what Muerner would do with the gracious watchful fool, who eyed her so alertly in the small kitchen the morning after the tape was delivered — another keen attention she was not prepared for, being unslept, bone weary, rawly exhuming her options. She smiled. An innocent old bachelor making her feel like a harridan or overworked tart. Sweet sad watchful David.

"Rather a titty litter," she recalled the young peerless Daniel remarking as he surveyed his work that first weekend, more pornographic it seemed the day after. She wondered now what Willardson would have made of the collection.

Luther touched her shoulder. "The field looks pretty bumpy, Dr. Van Eerden. Better buckle up."

The composed interlude of retrospection was over. She looked over

the restless waves and recalled a particularly devastating hurricane that had been christened 'Frieda'.

## FIFTEEN

Gloria Leibowitz looked upon the throng through a rarely-sipped drink glass spiked with caution, loathing and a dash of envy. She recognized the faces of several grubstake columnists and society illuminati, a de luxe film magnate and a lubricious senator surrounded by ingratiating fobs and flakes, a straining art savant or two, one of whom once assessed such ingrown coteries as 'family jewel collectors'. The beaming senator sidled up to a rock canary "I'm really a huge fan." "Yeah, name me a song," the flinty gal replied. The senator suddenly paled. Thus the discovery of John Cook — the dour, caustic, cultured critic of film, music and the theatre, who regaled his admirers by continuing to review and in the main learnedly and eloquently revile an entertainment Babylon that produced a handful of tolerable intellectual treats a decade — brought a compensating smile to Gloria's lips.

"John, you look overawed." As far as she knew he hadn't yet remarked on the artistic pretension of Arnold Storrier, this evening's party being in part a celebration of its advent, in particular the production of his lyric operetta Tyche. Gloria knew the critic didn't like feminists much and watched carefully as he took her in with his usual sedulous pout. "Well, it's not the thing one expects from a former rowdy. Pastoral lyricism you expect from a Nineteenth century romantic not a newfangled gladiator." He referred to the enigmatic Arnold Storrier, the author/composer of the operetta, the debut performance of which was being self-consciously fêted here in the lounge of the new San Francisco Music Cen-

ter.

“Am I going to have to wait to read a film review of the movie to discover if you liked the original?”

“Well, as I anticipate only abjectly venerational notices, it will seem an act of *lèse-majesté* to say it attempts too much. And that happy ending it slaps on might be revised. But as modern musicals go...one may concede some surprise.”

“You could recommend it.”

John looked rather glum for several seconds, still in consultation.

“ — With some reservations. A bit maudlin of course, especially when that damned chorus of superannuated soloists he dredged up for his own cathartic designs wavered forth.”

“The man is maybe nostalgic for — timeless precepts. Gentility, say.”

“I suppose, but rather gung-ho.”

“You once described Arnold Storrier as a ‘burgeoning stud farm for upgrading baboons to donor status.’”

“Well, at one time he ineluctably qualified.”

“John, I want to know what this *ouvre* does to his status as donor material.”

“Gloria, he’s either a universal savant or a collective.” He then added wanly, “I don’t know. There’s a fine rumor about that he may receive an E.J. Solvay Prize in thermal physics.”

“How nice,” said Gloria, at first bemused, though not for long; quickly she recognized the lovelorn look of paradox.

“The world continues to confound,” he quipped, giving her figure a brief once over.

“Says who? About the prize.”

“One of the tenured swells.”

“That sounds a little patronizing,” she said, rather pertly.

He lightly winced and took a token swallow from his drink. “Propriety



always has its own special fatuity.”

“Yes John.”

They parted, she resisting a scowl. Being correct, adroitly correct, was ever a kind of infiltration — a goading trumpet on an ethereal summit for the street-embattled feminist.

“ — Oh he won’t show up till late of course. He’s still too sober, Felix says.” The senator’s wife was speaking.

Gloria sought a better position to view the patron, a small dapper man reputed to be Arnold Storrier’s scientific mentor and sometime godfather. He was also a director of the world’s largest multi-national, thence one of the Paleomena Princes, as they were sometimes touted. The distinctive characteristic she recalled was the oversize head and the voice, faint and nearly soprano pitched. She also noted a sprig of something green in his button hole and a curl of hair in the same company as an elf lock. Perhaps a wig. He wore a fixed smile and chatted with an executive editor from Playboy, who spotted her hovering nearby. Somehow the vivid luxurious arbor of roses behind him reminded her of the pampered buds Playboy cultivated.

“Gory! All decked out — just like the marchioness in the operetta,” the editor suddenly drawled, pointing her out to the distinguished patron. An awkward interval was in the making yet the Playboy toff was happily impenitent. “Gloria Liebowitz, Dr. Felix Muerner. ‘Old Glory’ to her barracados, ‘Gory’ to the rest of us. Past Miss Utah.”

“You must be pleased — for Mr. Storrier,” she said to Muerner, noting her interlocutor was drunk.”

“Oh yes. Though he makes any homage a trial. He’s flattered of course, but likes to hide out with a few copper noses first. Remembers names better, he says.” It was a line Gloria had heard before.

“And does super-ma’am fancy felicitous opera?” The Playboy toff grinned raffishly.

Gloria ignored the remark, though she wanted to retort that unsung superwomen filled over half the audience. Instead, she asked when Mr. Storrer began writing music. The question itself seemed surreal.

“Truly I don’t know. He’s always fooled about keyboards. I do know he liked the libretto — it’s based on a childhood story — one of the few memories he has of the early years. The play of Fortune — Tyche. He was largely amnesic after the Cambodian incident, you know.”

“Good old VC!” said the toff with a fine show of stoicism.

Muerner was momentarily embarrassed, or pretended to be. “— No, no; nothing like that. He was simply a precocious delinquent. As a very young teen he fell into a private fight circuit sponsored by international racketeers. Cage matches. A kind of cock fighting only using teenagers instead of roosters. Mainly in Third World capitals. He was first brought to our attention early in 1996. Referred by a colleague. You’ve not heard the story?”

Gloria obligingly shook her head, believing the question rhetorical.

“Well, he was taken by a group of thugs from a foster home in London. Facilitators for cage fighting and Western pedophiles. He attacked one of the shark promoters in a hideaway outside Bangkok, where he had been sent. A nurse who once worked in my clinic brought his plight to my attention. She then worked for *Médecins Sans Frontières*. She knew I was interested in exceptional youngsters and suspected he was being tortured. In short — when my team got to him he had survived two months in a jungle lockup. As it transpired a Khmer terrorist group seized the promoters and their charges, knowing the promoters had money. It’s an onerous story. But for the nurse, a Thai, we may not have got him out.” Here Muerner paused to indulge a mordant chuckle. “One of life’s rare serendipitous escapes. It still amazes. The man is of course extraordinary from several standpoints. We recognized the singularities early on. But to be brief — only his memory of that period was impaired. The pro-

motors were ransomed off, not so the fighters. The terrorists set up betting matches of their own. Arnold is a stellar brawler. Was a fine earner. Some commentators wonder if the aloofness and diffidence are in essence defensive.”

“Might they be correct?” said Gloria into a portentous pause, wondering the while if any of the story were true.

“He learns quickly. The media have given him a martyr’s status. He fancies playing the cool, much tested Hercules, I imagine,” said Muerner without embarrassment. “Compensation, perhaps. People love an accomplished survivor. Very few media folk recognize plodding and modest courage, or historic mysticism. I doubt he would have it any other way.”

“Your intervention is damned appreciated, nonetheless, Doc,” the Playboy elder said just before bolting the last of his drink. “We think so.”

Gloria could barely keep from snorting. But in the weeks that followed she began to comprehend the allusion to Arnold Storrier’s prodigious talents, those of a polymath savant one columnist said, and she did confirm that he first went to Bangkok when thirteen under the sponsorship of an outfit called Sports Majesté. The story ended with his hospitalization in 1991 for what was described in a Hong Kong tabloid as ‘an inflamed ear, dehydration, ecchymosis and nausea.’

In due course she learned he also played tennis — with a grace and craft that confounded professional experts. This singular talent first surfaced during an exhibition tennis match between the number sixteen seed and the insular hustler-challenger. The seed lost \$50,000. After the game several reporters crowded to get a comment from the wunderkind — yet mainly nods and lenten smiles came in response to their needy questions, indeed, the barest token acknowledgement of their bustling presence; he might have been alone at the seaside. One sad reporter, more obdurate than the others, though they were all remarkably toadyish Gloria thought as she watched the video, guessed Arnold had not heard his question and



asked it again, and again, stumping in the intervals — ever expectant — to fiddle with his mike. The hapless chap appeared intermittently in the frames of three different networks. He seemed at times a deadpan comic engaged in a droll pantomime. But his earnestness triumphed in the end, got him edited out, but not before Gloria began groaning with several million other viewers. An excuse-ready spokesman, citing defective sound, followed. An ad for Coor's Silver Bullet, ended the torment. Ostensibly, Arnold had a hearing problem.

The match itself bordered on the unbelievable. Arnold's chief weapon was his serve, but it was slow articulating. Several times he double-faulted in the first set, which he won finally after an interminable number of break points. By the second game of the second set the machinery was apparently in place and he aced his opponent the remaining games, except for a single ambiguous point, which his (by then) testy adversary objected to the referee's calling of, and which Arnold relinquished during the next volley by standing idle while the ball bounced by him. It was a merciless afternoon, the audience disbelieving, applauding rather sheepishly by the end.

But the unexpected and nearly roisterous finale to the event came during the presentation of the cash award. When the cameras focused on Arnold, the man simply stood there absorbed in his earlier funk. He seemed quite oblivious of what was expected; he might have been standing in a checkout line. The pause was irreparable, helpless — whispers began, some titters, a guffaw or two from the loser's quarter. Then with perfect nonchalance he walked up to the sponsor waiting patiently by the livid master of ceremonies, smiled and took hold of the cheque — at first it looked as though the cheque might tear but the dazed chap finally let it go — then walked off the court like a shopper with weeks to go till Christmas. The slowly swelling uproar became deafening. Many boos, but a sizable number of rowdies cottoned to the performance — Arnold did have

a small following — and nearly drowned out the rest. The brash Arnold Storrier had again mused the growing number of sports gainsayers who deplored the growing drug use among major athletes and their conniving promoters and managers. Gloria too disparaged such behaviour and knew the media had an insular, indisputable performer on its hands who would serve many interests, and she further knew that many touchy reporters were slow to assimilate such a fact.

A week later, when the subject of the silences was beginning to wear thin (many reporters are finely self-serving analysts), a clever cocky newcomer asked Arnold if he really preferred boys to women — again a question placed on a live feature coverage, which the censor did not delete, a decision that apparently cost the invigilator her job. Gloria suspected the whole incident staged. Perhaps the fact that the singular question was answered promptly and naturally — Arnold had actually opened his mouth in public! — in a faintly Austrian accent! The ‘awakening’, as one reporter called it, so stunned everyone that a momentary paralysis set in.

“I think (‘sink’) actually I prefer ladies who are maybe unhappy with their sex.”

The reporter was an agile lad, yet even he was a few seconds getting his next words in coherent order.

“Many jocks might call such people — such ladies — well a little neurotic.”

“Yes, I think that is it. I like neurotic ladies. They are the historic challenge.”

“Any gals come to mind, Arnold?” By then the lad and Arnold had exchanged professional smiles.

“They dislike the honorable mention. One madam, yes, the matriarch — a sibyl I think. Leebowits, G. But I never returned the call.”

It was perhaps the fiftieth time Gloria had felt slandered and immediately phoned her lawyer, who was annoyingly well-informed.

“Yeah, I was actually watching the program. Glory, the guy’s got warehouses o’ dough. You want the bluer details of your life ‘deleted’ in the media? They’ve been neglected for a while now, right? And given the confusion of the words let alone their vulgarization, I doubt you would have a case anyway.” A pause. “Want me to ask Sheila?” (Sheila was the most recent partner and only female to grace the firm’s letterhead.)

“I think I want a note to his agent demanding an apology. At least!”

Which to Gloria’s surprise she ostensibly got, before an afternoon talk show audience in which they both participated, though the Arnold making it spoke in a remarkably dissolute Georgian drawl with a deft earnestness that Jimmy Cater sometimes blew with a grin — a fact that actually caused Gloria to burst into aggrieved laughter — a laughter no wayward southerner ever elicited from her before. She promptly regained control, despite an after burn partly fueled by John Cook’s epithet ‘collective’. It was apparent Arnold had metamorphosed into a clever popular ‘naif’. An adoption he proceeded to perfect.

In the coming weeks his public conversation became endless, digressive — but rarely from the same source. From the southern bubba he suddenly had a Swedish parent, then an Italian — then he wasn’t sure, speaking in a Bronx accent. The reporters always had their facts from the last encounter straight which Arnold went on to dispute, in a genial earnestness that provided yet one more bald nearly coherent scenario. He became known in Gloria’s magazine as Alter Pop, and in the sporting world as The Punter or Jo’Strap, after his sly abuse of reporters who had taken his last words as evidence of disinformation.

“Well, I cannot be held responsible for a media that thinks truth plain; I have a responsibility to my audience,” he said in a rare moment of limpid wit which few garrulous witnesses made note of. By then Gloria was becoming impatient with the Broad Punter Phenomenon, a by-line in the Los Angeles Times, for the media had become so involuted in its reportage



that quite literally, as she editorialized, “the encrusted words were giving the audience chest pains.” She wrote a long essay berating both the obsequious media and a “bright child who ought to better discipline his gaga foster parent.” The trenchant column got her a spot, opposite Arnold, on the CBS late-night talk show, then hosted by a shopworn but still handily abrasive Don Rickles. Gloria wasn’t sure what had happened when it was over, but she did find herself more exasperated with Rickles than ever and far less clear what indeed Arnold Storrier represented. At one point in the lively exchange she even managed a masculine simile of both Rickles and Storrier as historic robots, with indestructible engines and hopeless electric circuitry. Rickles began the show with a sly patronage of Arnold’s Solvay prize.

“Arnie, congratulations on that winning ticket. Never bet on the pony myself. Great photo finish.”

Arnold stolidly nodded. “The picture taking is the custom. For the record.” A dismissive smile. “The ladies appreciate pictures.”

“Arnie, careful — Gore’s taking notes.”

Gloria stifled a convincing yawn.

“Okay Leibo, you’re on; no more blood sports; meet our award-winning noodle, yeah.”

The allusion to horse racing had entertained several members of the audience. The Solvay Prize had in fact been awarded a week before. Yet Rickles pretended the information the usual flimflam and said to Arnold more than once, “Relax Arnie, my lips are sealed. No embarrassing questions.”

Rickles then grimaced at his audience and picked on some of the rowdies, leaving a few wondering why they had not been insulted or held in contempt. After a lengthy commercial break, in which Arnold rather ostentatiously absorbed himself in a consultation with his i-phone, Rickles got down to business by staring at the i-phone.

“Arnie, Leibo’s obviously taught you a thing or two.”

By then Arnold had returned to his suave Austrian American.

“She went to school of hard knocks.” He then tapped on a side table.

“Code, ya? For what Arnie — ‘great knockers’?”

The audience clapped its approval over a small chorus of mainly higher-pitched hisses and boos. Arnold shrugged.

“Arnie, just nod, eh?”

Arnold looks about the audience. “The land of nods, jah.”

Answered Gloria, also looking about, gesturing, “How you impress an expert committee.”

Arnold smiled. “The lucky quant.”

Rickles pretended or was confused, as was the audience. Did Arnie mean the other ‘word’?... Rickles cautiously consulted an aide. “The censor cleared that? Fine.” He then whispered to Arnie, “Keep the big words kosher. You really meant — pole, right? What you push things around with. Or something. Market know how.”

A few partisans were again lustily for and against. Rickles, to a floor manager, said, “Clear that row can you. The censor’s up-tight.”

“Diarrhetic, more like,” retorted Gloria, a quip she regretted, but the mood was not conducive to measured responses.

More huzzahs.

Rickles pretended alarm as he sought out the assistant director. “His lordship hiccuped? Fine. Being dirty in Esperanto is okay then? Fine.” Then a demure aside to Arnold, “Arnie, we’re okay. A little dicey, but okay.”

Arnold reverted to his lidded half-smile — a kind of cute bed-routed Oblomov, Gloria thought — one of her favorite Russian fictional characters. After the laughter died down Rickles wiped his brow, now drenched with rivulets of perspiration. “Where were we?”

“Censoring your guest,” said Gloria, distinctly, with a broad smile.

Richles looked intently at her. “Liebo, you use Polygrip?”

The audience laughed in unison.

Said an earnest Arnold, “What is ‘Pollygrib’ please?”

Matching Arnold’s gravity Rickles said, “The stuff Maidenform puts in their bras, Arnie.”

After the laughs, Arnold added, “You pronounce it so, jah? I say always ‘bray’ — as in brassiere.”

Rickles put on his best non sequitur look. The audience groaned.

“As in ‘bonny’. Ya.”

Arnold pretended confusion.

And on and on it went: Rickles, Smithsonian pander of the lear, gamy innuendo, broadside slight, leading on the bright but unacclimatized ‘foreigner’ with his ingratiating and inappropriate answers, mainly in an Austrian American, which Rickles marveled at in the manner of a well-paid stooge. Gloria tried a few times to kindle a flicker of directness but found the effort giving Rickles a Catherine Wheel of allusive wise cracks.

At last she gave up, and so was surprised three minutes before finish when Rickles invited her to comment on current political events and, after some sly arm twisting, on the plight of domestic romance. Arnold listened in silence then, the audience soon becoming restless.

Rickles dumped a few remaining scatter-shot insults into the final fifteen seconds, the tensors dimmed, and the crew hastened to clear the deck. Thus it was a surprised Gloria who received the flowers in the lounge after the show from one of Storrier’s factotums; the preoccupied Alter Pop left the moment his mike was removed after a brusque handshake. The card was both an apology and invitation to dinner. Gloria immediately chucked the — for her — lordly buds into a trash can, but kept the dinner invitation — to which she was late, due to a last minute irritation with the frock she had on. When she was about to leave, and already a good twenty minutes behind schedule, she decided Arnold was not entitled



to even the modest décolletage the dress displayed. She was perhaps twenty years his senior but still in her late forties an agile if less slender woman. In her writing she espoused the dignified persevering parent against the slick distracting cosmopolite, and decided as she arranged a silk shawl before the hallway wall mirror that she looked too accommodating and rushed to change. Ordinarily she would have smartly turned down an invitation to dine privately with a man she hardly knew, had every reason to deride both his motive and civility, but she decided to go the moment the ostentatious buds crashed into the waste container — an impetuous act indulged before several members of the crew which she upbraided herself for later. Actually, she would have preferred to put the unexpectedly fragrant petals into her apartment piezoelectric air freshener.

## SIXTEEN

No sooner had Dowd returned to his baroque townhouse from the meeting with Stanton at the Tuileries than he felt the pulse of his wrist signaler: a cypher message was being decoded on the computer in his study.

The report originated from their space orbiter headquarters in Modesto and told of a Dynasty-type satellite's descent to earth in the vicinity of Truck Island in the South Sea. ZYTA had been instrumental in designing the research capability aboard the high orbit craft. What Frieda's team didn't know was the satellite was a clever surrogate, intended to ferret out their identity by descending, though it was not intended to fall where it did. The replacement team on Thirteen were still playing catch up. The message was jointly sent only to their South Pacific research station and to Dowd. Pechenpaugh, Voden and the other Princes, would not be told that night: Muerner was moving decisively and, it seemed, mercurially.

Though he would not be happy about the satellite falling where it did.

Dowd placed calls to both orbiter liaison, the Paleomena Tower, and Muerner's hillside estate. Muerner was at none of the above locations but might be expected by midnight at the Tower penthouse, to where Dowd repaired forthwith after reviewing the capabilities of the satellite and dispatching two of his private bloodhounds, one to report on the late activities of David Abercrombie Willardson, the other to begin discreetly questioning the remaining colleagues of Dr. Frieda Van Eerden, the engineer who so mysteriously left her post in the remote sensing lab of the Paleomena space research complex. It was there the satellite had been modified according to precepts acquired through ZYTA. He thought too of the ambitious little defector whom Voden and later Pechenpaugh had put to deft use. The colour plate book that Louis Peak contributed to now had a modest following, mainly among sci-fi groupies, who served nicely as timely distractions. Later, of course, when ZYTA was more properly understood and severally patented, the anonymous artist might be given a laundered reward...yet Dowd had misgivings. Not the least of which was Van Eerden's unexplained flight, added to the coming of the slippery Russian tart.

Felix Muerner, however, seemed altogether optimistic. They sat in the empty penthouse screening room, the lights dimmed to a soft reflective mantling.

"No, no Angus. ZYTA is still in the clear, of that I'm certain. Why Frieda left when she did — or the happenstance of our piccolo player, as Cressman calls the canny Russian tart — are more non sequiturs that will sort themselves out I'm sure. And may well confuse our Neighbours for a time. Remember Frieda never abandoned that pack of ideologues on Thirteen — well, she was in on their speculations and suspicions, which the Russians may have been fine tuning all along. Some will scramble to find the dummy vehicle. We get to see who they are and stay linked to the real McCoy. Simple."

“Cautious dedicated expense. And clever use of signals.”

“Exactly. We’re a progressive firm.”

“The location of the dummy’s splash down does not concern you then?” The topical intrusive question.

“A small glitch. The crew on Thirteen is improving.”

“And if Frieda is perhaps a spy?”

“Irrelevant — at least for now. Her faction, or whatever it is, has lost. Spies are a measure of our success. Ours and theirs!”

“I’m still troubled that even the likes of Willardson is found visiting Frieda’s abandoned apartment.”

“My dear Angus, the man is a scow and adrift. At sea, lost and putrid. Well, that’s a little hard but you know what I mean. I’m told he even attempted to buy — as part of the corporation collection — one of the bogus gallery tableau!”

But the amusement Muerner seemed to expect in his colleague did not show itself.

“He wanted something and knew Frieda was away,” Dowd said quietly.

“He and at least two others, I understand.”

“Does that not bother you?”

Muerner was silent for a moment, then resumed in a soft emphatic tone. “Angus, the important point is that the ideologues, our so conscientious in-house rebels, are coming around. The satellite ZYTA targeted or stumbled on — if that remains the current supposition — is ours. It was expected the Russians would sooner or later do some fishing. And others. There are no secrets any more, only good long range plans.”

But Dowd was primly resolved. “The Russian, according to Stanton, is top drawer.”

Muerner wryly smiled but remained impassive. “I wish Stanton was ‘top drawer’.”

Dowd continued undaunted. “I was simply surprised to find anyone in



place so soon. And I am not reassured that Pechenpaugh's toady Willardson had access to the apartment of a suspected subversive and possible spy."

Muerner then rose, rather impetuously Dowd thought, as if to extricate himself from the well-reasoned distrust. He paced before the large projection screen and was about to reply when he began to examine a small blemish on the screen itself, which turned out to be a shadow coming from behind. He threw a switch on the forward panel and both men watched as the screen lifted to disclose an open laptop on a table near the storage loft. They stared at the oddly situated laptop in silence. Dowd was the first to speak, observing carefully the newly fixed cast to Muerner's concentration.

"It tells a tale, I presume."

"It is an oddity being there." Muerner seemed to await his own explanation. "The log said the comptroller's gang was the last in here. To view some holiday scenes. I wonder what this computer accomplished that the main console could not. When did Arthur leave today?"

The question baffled Dowd. What would Pechenpaugh be doing fiddling with a single unusually placed computer? With or without the comptrollers. "Noon. His usual flight."

Dowd could not recall Muerner more thoughtful. The youngest Prince pushed at his elf lock and kept looking from the computer to the raised main screen. Finally his vision froze on the computer, like a tennis spectator stopped in mid frame. The comment that followed, almost an aside, was even more enigmatic for Dowd.

"A clandestine theatre, perhaps."

"I'm delighted to think that's important."

"Angus, old darling, our shopworn Arthur has likely been looking with unusual caution at some pics. A private screening — away from his office. I suspect he left in a hurry or inadvertently. Intended to come back to take

it away yet didn't."

Dowd was then flexing fingers in opposing symmetry. "Felix, I would be grateful."

"I do know Arthur hates contending with mechanical gadgets. To go to this trouble, here...?"

"Perhaps the subject matter was sensational." Dowd looked up to find the maniac wryly smiling.

"Daphne told me recently you were swift as a March hare."

"Did she!" Dowd thought of the March cheque he'd given his impish factotum. "I will speak to Daphne. Arthur, of course, rarely takes my advice."

"He may blow a gasket — piston even. Lots of faulty prospects in an old jalopy."

Dowd was not pleased with Muerner's abrupt return to his insular jauntiness. The maniac had obviously conjured up a scenario relating to the stray computer that he seemed prepared to keep to himself.

The confusion lasted twenty-four hours before the denouement of the Canny Computer, as Dowd thereafter thought of the episode, was candidly revealed. As a result, Zoya's arrival and Frieda's disappearance became a further convoluted puzzle.

The new facts were disclosed late afternoon in the rare manuscript library that overlooked the lichi-chinaberry grotto in Muerner's Los Angeles Italian castle estate. Low sunlight radiated the Came Glasswork windows. Dowd had received a discreet invitation a day before. As he spoke Muerner displayed his characteristic unconcern after Dowd took up a comfortable oversize sofa chair. If Dowd had expected a measured discourse on the day before, he was in for a shock. The information divulged that afternoon was indeed a revelation. And for a doughty perfectionist like Dowd it was at least disconcerting. Muerner affected the role of a graduate seminar tutor, an act that did not endear him to his lone 'student'.

“Our video librarian confirmed Arthur came to the gallery when the comptrollers left. Arthur said he would tidy up. I suspect he reviewed the surveillance tapes of the studio of Louis Peak, the photographer and retoucher Karl Voden commissioned.”

Dowd fondly smiled. “That is significant?”

Muerner too smiled though less readily. “You’ll recall Arthur had him carefully monitored and mildly frightened. He is as you know rather head up these days. Well, it was the excellent video bugging, especially of the studio loft, that confirmed the resemblance: Zoya Stolbanov — our anonymous Zyta — uses elaborate styles of makeup that quite disguise her features, a protective instinct, I’m sure. I know you’ve seen some of the tapes. You may recall that during the photographic sittings she made herself up to suit the particular tableaux Arthur fancied — siren, Artemis, Europa, Iole, Egyptian Best Wife — the presentation of a protean central player, a job she handily undertook in the loft just before shooting. She’s also had some plastic surgery. I happen to know the surgeon well. He assured me the face was pristine before he began. What is still unclear is whether the two girls, Frieda and the stray Zoya, are in cahoots. Though what they are up to does not impede our present agenda.” Muerner then nimbly smiled, while Dowd looked a little coerced. “Naturally the excitable Arthur was upset and resisted the suggestion of a plant, a scout, as long as he could — the imputation of our Neighbors getting involved. The unseemly Camorra!” Blithely Muerner added. “So let’s have a look.”

Throughout the viewing Muerner several times froze an image from the tape, magnified it, then switched to a split frame that featured comparative pictures of both girls — Zoya and one central creature in the original tableaux. Astonishingly, it was the later brief domestic scene between Louis and Cody that Muerner seemed then most absorbed by, an insouciant turn Dowd was unprepared for and indignant with.

But for Louis Peak, in the company of his lame honey-gold bird with



with the bulky knee cast, the period Muerner found merely diverting was a professional and emotional high. Assiduously he toiled on the new assignment — adding ever more nuanced images to the amazing scenes. He suspected he was being watched, paced, but never dreamed the extent of it. Cody seemed perfectly content to place her invalided self at his disposal for the indefinite future — a month or two at the same domicile seemed a decade in her reincarnated lore. She sunbathed daily on his small balcony; only the occasional helicopter sharing with Louis, thence Pechenpaugh et al, the un-mummified vision of his bronze-flaxen treasure. In short, Louis worked an exacting shortened day in his darkroom in a state of sexual exhaustion. In a period of six days, and perhaps twenty amorous encounters, he believed the prodigal Cody to be satisfied only twice — the sight each time historic. Cody in flagrante mocked all courtly romantics, though between trysts she listened to Louis's feeble musings with the solicitude of a Penelope. But an hour later, if Louis strayed beyond his darkroom or retouching easel, lapis lazuli eyes addled all diligence. Sometimes, just after, he imagined himself the loving tutor Senmut — as in the ancient stone carving — bound to Princess Nefrura, another being Cody believed herself an intermittent incarnation of. Pechenpaugh's planted sensors had delineated all these rapt collisions, yielding a bare relief outline of the figures in the bright skylit bedroom, "sculpting", Muerner said, "an early renaissance entablature motif, less the undisciplined energies. Only the cast keeps it strangely civilized don't you think, Angus?"

"I shall take your expert word, Felix."

"Have you never imagined nimble Daphne behaving so?"

"I should imagine Daphne quite incapacitated with a broken limb. Especially with all that horrid graffiti on it.?"

"One couplet from Troilus and Cressida."

"Yes, I'm so sure." Dowd's tone was soporific.

"Thersites, Act Two. I read it on the balcony."

“Pechenpaugh deploys a fine system.”

“An itchy part of the cast she can’t get at. Drove her nuts one day. All the poor molested chap could do. ‘I would thou didst itch from head to foot and I had the scratching of thee.’”

Dowd awakened. “I am of course delighted Shakespeare is still taught in Pomona.”

“Our not so stolid photographer, Angus. I’m actually pulling for the fellow. I’ve got a watch dog of my own standing by, just in case. Arthur’s a bit rash these days.”

Then Dowd got patronizing. “In a round-about way Felix, I believe the following line in the couplet says it all.” And with that the immaculate gnome stood and strode out, though not before hearing Muerner’s counter-tenor rendering of: ‘I will make thee the loathsom’st scab in Greece,’ angel heart.”

Just what the determined and decided heady female of the species is up to, Dowd said to himself. But thoughts of Daphne lingered in his consciousness, and he felt a little angry with himself for leaving brusquely. Hardly the time to be distracted by oafish lovemaking!

Muerner watched the one encounter, which he likened to an undersea adventure, to its climax (one of the stirring dyads Louis would not forget), both bodies equally lovingly convulsed in the end, ferociously disposed to sleep — which Muerner decided was as good a place to release the denizens to a halcyon deep, and get on with his hazardous piloting of Paleomena and salvaging a purblind mankind!

## SEVENTEEN

The hushed turquoise sea Frieda knifed across in the hydrofoil was uncom-

monly flat that day, an expanse of tabled chiffon creased by a coursing bow sprit. The shroud of a distant storm hung fasting in the sky.

The satellite had escaped detection or already been found by another — the lingering vexation — and she listlessly fell back upon documenting the coral migration in the area, in the ongoing exacting attempt to indict Felix Muerner and indirectly Paleomena for violating the World Court's Law of the Sea Charter, namely the enzymic-electrolyte recruitment of diatoms to attract and relinquish select proteins and minerals in sea water, which Muerner's oceanic group likely amassed in elusive slurry beds. Unfortunately, as was habitually the case, the perpetrator was far better equipped than the warden; this day Luther radioed that two varieties of echinoderm were in a weakened state and likely unable to continue to function in that area's now irregular food chain. It was her fifth day at sea and third dive. She ran a fever and her white blood count remained eerily high. The cause elusive.

Below the ocean surface the insularity of the great silence was broken only by the neighboring sounds of regulators and the distant but close bumping of specimen cages as the divers selected one more suggestively frail creature for further microscopic study. She followed Luther to a stray fragment of coral, perhaps six meters long, much of it still in viscous health — sea fans, zoanthids, polps, anemones and sponges — several hundred yards from its home population. A recent displacement then. It floated in a sun-flecked aspic twenty feet below the surface barely touching a slope of the continental shelf. Schools of fish darted erratically about its projections. Luther had written in the log that the anomaly had been documented over several days, that the characteristic homeostasis with surrounding symbiotic populations was becoming chaotic. They descended further to the ocean bed off the shelf where other divers pointed out with a curious enthusiasm the barely pulsing echinoderms she had come to see. Several divers intrepidly expressed victory signs among the strands of bub-



bles. Everywhere they looked in that vicinity the curiosity affronted — from limp creatures to strange clouds of tiny salmon colored fragments. For a brief half-hour Frieda believed they might at last secure some concrete data.

Then a disturbance nearer the surface attracted all eyes in Frieda's company of divers. Luther made the sign for Shark Swarm — a persistent problem with so many feeble species about attracting other predators — and headed quickly toward the activity; he carried with him extra cartridges for the heavier chemical dischargers. The local guard divers armed their own prodders and turned in the direction Luther had taken. The disturbances soon moved beyond vision perimeter. The document divers gingerly resumed the survey.

She had reached a shallower sea bed where the light fingered down bright enough to read by. The sandy floor was littered with a motley array of torpid creatures. A large ray listed much as a rocket with defective gyros. She was on the point of signaling the team's lone oceanographer and asking via their radio masks to what extent the migrations might influence residual sand banking when the hull of a massive vessel silently hove above her, heralding a deafening unheard concussion. A second heady plonk ruptured the air lines on two nearby divers. More resonant rushes left seething fizzles to surrounding waters. She was then disoriented and suffering the recognized unfamiliar — an acute migraine. Her head cleaved and throbbed, her heart pounded erratically. She tried to remove ballast. The immobilized body of a diver floated against her, his mask a solid crimson pool.

Somehow she reached the surface. A blurry salient loomed. Something latched onto her tank harness, dragging her forward. Tunneling some waves, gasping in the hollows, she glimpsed a gray crab-like crane hoisting one of her team into a dark opening in the side of what she believed to be a modern stealth frigate. Seconds later diverse divers hung,

lurched above the waves in sky diving postures, then were trawled into the immense hatchway. Hands took hold and swung each into a galley. She sensed her own rise as a reverse fall, a silent film in rewind before an abrupt halt. Too dizzy to stand, someone hefted her into a sitting position. Another loosened her ballast harness. People talked, rather lips moved in a vast conch quiet. Divers with odd weapons returned from a wide gangway further up. Someone's nose bled, another an ear. Gear was released, waterproof zippers opened, an identity bracelet attached, someone helped her stand, a hatchway grew in size as her feet stumbled, floundering in floor conduits. Her knees suddenly buckled, just before she was strangely imperviously airborne, gliding on a gurney. Tangled hair scraped past a second smaller hatch where someone looked carefully into her eyes, holding back a lid while taking her pulse.

Next she was cognizant of an elevator while retching, choking. Several forms newly congregated. Her throat was soothed with a swab of something warm and sweet, an arm was needled, the figures about her blurred, ghostly.

She imagined she never quite lost consciousness. She could remember vague maneuvers to clear the tracheae, then an oxygen mask affixed to her face while busy fingers worked about her head. By then she rode a wave of emotional buoyancy. The world had sheepishly come right beneath a bright white light and people were delighted. She imagined her old GRU tutor smiling down. Enter a wounded father and lame mother, newly reunited, showing grateful silent countenances from the end of a bed. Someone bore a medal in a champagne flute, another a large bouquet. An intimate enthusiastic audience burst into applause as she ascended a dais, to the additional slight whistle of a lone bystander who reminded her of young Daniel Frank. Beside him a person who resembled the journalist on the OO Magazine cover. So the imaged scene played out.

Then she lay in a small carafe-clear room that smelled of piquant herbs. Or was the sea itself encapsulated? Gradually she came to make out the stark hypobaric chamber, her own tapered contour housed in a hospital gown beneath a taut sheet, an IV apparatus near an oxygen unit, a slight list to the pallet bed and white form of an attendant beyond, a strong large being who wrote something in a chart. She thought with sudden clarity of the concussed body that floated against her after the first round of explosions and wondered what had become of the pregnant biologist. Just barely could she raise her hand, which seemed a vestigial, alien appendage.

Nothing and everything made sense to her. Scenes shifted erratically. She was moved into a compact stateroom and visited with further medical evaluation. Someone — Muerner? — had boldly acted. So she rummaged in her ever dissolving consciousness. But why save any at all? Surely better to have the entire company lost. Were there not capricious storms then in the area? To go to such trouble to keep some alive — an extravagant gambit surely. She felt the vessel veer starboard. The engines remained remarkably quiet — turbine boosted electric drive, possibly, or was she still deaf, partly insensate?...

A masculine woman entered the stateroom, took Frieda's pulse, and fluently gave her charge another injection. "Doing nicely, hon."

She could hear! She believed she asked what was going on as a new caul of euphoria enveloped her.

She fell asleep imagining Daniel dining on a hermit crab.

About the same time, in his villa in San Clemente, Arthur Pechenpough had just finished cutting his ugly toenails — a job that was becoming more and more contentious — the nails a rhino hide of coruscations. But this night he was expected to dance and he wanted to keep the physical complaints to a minimum. A masquerade costume of a period French



aristocrat lay upon the bed. His tall doughy figure was clad then only in plaid monogrammed briefs and period silk stockings with merciless garters. He knocked back a large bourbon, shivered luxuriantly, then hesitated over another refill. He was already slightly drunk and studied the glass as if it merited attention. He replaced it atop the sacred African pedestal stand with its carved caryatid female figure, from whose pointed breasts his bourbon flowed. Ever since his vexing infatuation for a British-educated half-caste, whose mother was the daughter of a matriarchal freedom-loving Peul, one of the ever thinning nomadic pastoral people of the Djenne in Mali, Pechenpaugh had acquired a taste for 'primitive' art.

The proud creature worked at Paleomena's international banking headquarters as an exchange buyer. In her spare time she freelanced as a cosmetic model, with daring eyes and spare elegant arms and torso, rendered somewhat less exemplary by thinnish legs and big feet which she shrouded in long full skirts. Pechenpaugh was immediately smitten and proffered many gifts, some even of considerable value. The liaison lasted two years, by which time she had capital enough to launch her own line of jewelry and cosmetics, whose colorful imprint and application she derived from a style of her mother's decoration, a strategy that won her products a small but exclusive following. Both Frieda and Susanne acquired necklaces.

But the adventure left Pechenpaugh strangely parched: her ivory core with its mysterious fire-proof nerve he could neither arouse nor affront. He seemed the vainglorious hunter in a taut plain-burnished heat that glazed his sight and enflamed his ardor. Her resilient pneuma he glimpsed in the smooth mahogany skin that never seemed to welt nor wet...a sensuous tableau behind a turning Persian veil...a deft elegant sufficiency from an exasperatingly harsh 'insufficient' land.

The creature had her ears subtly stretched and perforated to accommodate slightly more decorous variants of vintage designs. A month after the ordeal, the delicately laced and hooped lobes graced three pages of the

American Vogue. Pechenpaugh accompanied her on one of her sojourns to the marketplace in Djenne, where she further amazed with her business acumen and aesthetic judgement, which finally touched a multitude of North American women ever eager to revise spent self-esteem. His adopted penchant for primitive art was slighted by her decision to sell some of his gifts. He also began drinking, rarely to preachy excess, but frequently to doleful states. Her absence he felt keenly, poignantly even, when the French costume was placed upon the bed with immaculate care by his manservant, the grandiloquent lace suggestive of some frothy mawkish courtier. He would have gone to the ball in a New Britain Tolai mask and shield and little else, except that his most recent conquest, a divorced tallow-skinned librarian with as great a love of alcohol, was anchored in the Eighteenth Century, especially in the bustle of Jacobin France. So, to the masquerade in honour of Paleomena's first half-century (also, secretly, the third anniversary of ZYTA's coming and realization) he would go as satin ceramic Louis XVI, his sallow consort as Marie-Antoinette.

Could he be less in a partying mood with his career at Paleomena in such disarray? The embarrassment of the wretched tape, the patsy now turncoat Willardson up to his own mischief, the growing imputations surrounding Susanne's death, the new and protracted spy mess, the gadfly Peter Selby-Smith...no, this was no night for celebrating. He felt something in Louis XVI's greatcoat pocket. What, more billet doux? Berni (short for Berenice) often spiked his clothes with stiff crumpled notes, usually covertly inscribed with uncharacteristic ribald comments. On this one she had simply drawn a large oval blimp with many tiny hair-like limbs. The large face wore a broad smile. He withdrew from the dresser a small magnifier to read the neat diminutive script.

*As I lay in my bed on the flat o'me,  
I was shocked at the sight of the fat o'me,  
So to keep my nerves steady*

*I concocted and edited  
This luminous, lim'rick anatomy.  
No matter how grouchy you're feeling,  
You'll find the smile more or less healing,  
It grows in a wreath  
Around the front teeth  
Thus preserving the face from congealing.*

And this bearded lick from Marie-Antoinette, Pechenpaugh said to himself. He had never been comfortable with sly naughty allusions and recalled his surprise the night she went home with him. It seemed up to that point drink would be their sole joint enterprise. He snorted as he made too much of the dual meaning image of the oval blimp. He then clumsily fiddled with the buttons of the silk shirt. Among the lace he imagined her low owlish voice intoning the 'fat o'me', one reference likely to the leftovers of her surgically pruned and tucked torso. She drank to escape and, he suspected, to put up with the likes of him. She had been a noble creature in her undisfigured youth, her legs still those of a show lounge dancer, and he was not unmoved by the fact.

But even her cozy appeal to his sensual instincts was largely in vain: that night he was angry with his own thorny collapsing world — the intemperate Saudis who turned turkey, the ever snooty fastidious Dowd, the precious Mullah (Muerner), his own incompetent field men who could report so little — even Willardson being now a damn bloody suspect! "Goddamit all to hell Berni, you've saddled yourself a spavined stallion!" he heard himself say as he stood before a full length mirror and placed the heavy peruke over his unruly hair. He was vaguely aware that a guillotine had finally separated such curls from their ineffectual wearer. He swore again, and regretted not being introduced before the crafty little dancer caused such a stir at Voden's private club. A clever demanding whore is always a damn nuisance, Berni, but when she turns out to be a possible team player



working for the Neighbors....

“No bankable GGs this year,” he said to himself with a foreign earnestness, while staring at the long extravagant cuffs.

Also, about this time, in a small flat near Dodger Stadium, Gloria Leibowitz wrestled with a similar imposition: how to play a part unsuited to her essential nature, certainly her professional mores.

She was preparing for bed, a rather stately ritual in her case, for her body was a temple she refused to abandon to the barbarians who clamoured to pull down the vestiges of sinister stratification — the pride of physical endowment for one, so in cahoots with the pharmaceutical mushroom of female desperation and historic intimidation. Many unctions, tinctures and herb mixtures the lay observer would do well to relinquish attempting to describe, were deftly applied and removed, but with a liquid grace that same observer would not eschew, and by so doing quicken the conviction that her single offer of companionship that night, which she turned down, was likely unworthy. Only one human Gloria disliked more than the smug unobservant male, and that was the equally assured impetuous femme who believed Gloria gave too much slack to the enemy and too abstemiously to her own ideological kin. The sad fact that beauty seemed the fifth column against which the feminist movement struggled in vain, was for Gloria a pun she simply must endure — as urbanely as possible. She had in fact tried two androgynous liaisons and discovered that a jealous male was no less harrowing than a wounded comrade-in-arms. Also, when quite literally all was said and done, he might prove as entertaining when appropriately encouraged. The fellow might even be inspired: the awkward powerhouse incestuously eager to please was enjoyable as any Beethoven rondo.

Such were some of Gloria’s thoughts as she stood on a double-weight Behgooy carpet in her white tile bathroom and wound a full cotton towel

about her then Bordeaux locks. The outsider, if given to a wide delectation of female casts, would note with pleasure the strong unique figure, somewhere between the Eve of the Ghent Altarpiece of Hubert and Jan Van Eyck, and a buoyant non-tristful Toulouse-Lautrec. The viewer would be especially taken with the salients of flared breasts above a relaxed tummy as the noble creature sat lotus like in a cold hip bath reading with a magnifier the fine print of the contract that was the pith of Arnold Storrier's so recent ingratiating 'proposal', which he had presented to her in the course of their 'conciliatory' supper date. But despite the attentiveness of a fine translator, she found no words she would, could object to. Either she said no, and remained more or less demurely silent, or she signed on.

Her remuneration was to be a liberal payment up front, plus conventional royalty on net sales. Who would not pay handsomely for the rights to the story of a budding Apollo's weekly routine and deeds? It was that untold tale she was asked at the end of the strained meal to undertake in detail in candid prose. The only insistent caution in her mind was the eventual use Arnold and his cohorts — Muerner say — might put the exercise to, but she could think of nothing in the least embarrassing if, as he promised, she would have full jurisdiction over content ; Arnold did not even ask to preview the installments and there were no taboo subjects. Were his projects, scientific and 'runic' — her word — then so agreeable and salubrious that a feminist's accounting of them might stymie influential philistines? Was Muerner really behind it all? Imagining a media foil for ominous future scientific goodies? Would her own credibility suffer if her reports turned out to be largely sympathetic? But was that dubiety not outweighed by the immense captive readership she would gain? Dear God, was it not positively galvanizing — for a not so tiny dragon slayer, seemly emperor confessor, brilliantly endowed and dedicated journalist? The possibilities were endless before a growing straining audience.

She gradually added hot water to the bath, having made her decision, and as the warmth enlaced her groin made a note to comment in the first installment upon Arnold's penchant for blue water sailing, a pastime that demanded some concentrated research. She decided the man was not likely the 'collective' John Cook spoke of — though she could not rid herself of the aberration that such things might be possible. Some scientists were ever ahead of the norm.

Yes, Arnold, let's have a look, a long careful look — and I'll crucify you if you attempt to cross, spoof or dandle your biographer before the final installment goes to press.

In another part of the globe, almost but not quite the antipodal match of the bath Gloria finally reclined in up to her v-tanned sternum, Frieda Van Eerden had just climbed into a hard, crisply sheeted bunk. She too was awed by intrusive happenstance, but unlike Gloria could make little sense of it — and wondered if this were not part of Muerner's strategy. No one would tell her why she was singled out, or what happened to the rest of her team. Her new questioners were vigilant but kindly, gracious even, and sometimes downright disarming with their knowledge both of herself and her plight, particularly the head boy who sauntered in the background and occasionally placed a comment or asked for amplification of a statement already tabled. Physically they made no demands at all, and the medical attention she received appeared to be state-of-the-art — both for the slight, as it turned out, head injuries she sustained in the savage raid (which she maintained it was, despite the disappointed, indeed 'hurt' expressions of her quizzical audience), and the anemic side-effect of the earlier transmitter's chemical cell. Physically she had rarely felt better. She was rested, ate her restricted highly-tailed diet with witty personable folk who, while not expansive of their roles or purpose aboard the Shivalik-style frigate now anchored before a breathtaking but unnamed



Melanesian isle (the lone fact she picked up in their conversation), were nonetheless dryly cheerful about the folly her team had ‘indulged’. She was initially angered by their presumption yet, despite several outbursts, remained incapable of scoring their affability. They had a job to do and seemed beatifically resonant doing it. Perhaps that was what finally got to her. Everything exuded a methodical pertness, down to the parsimonious thermal mattress coil that stored and expended energy from her own body during the night to diminish the net loss of the next — one of the many technological innovations that impressed and stymied her. At times she imagined the second law of thermodynamics postponed. Such things knocked her galley west: nothing awes and challenges a well-trained scientist or engineer like exemplary technology.

They went to great lengths to assure her, to even define an ethos and metaphysics pertinent to their resolve. One fellow who bore an uncanny resemblance to Peter Selby-Smith drew upon a detailed overview of Adam Smith, F.A. Hayek and Ludwig von Mises to prepare a perhaps brilliant yet for her foreign critique; her own under-exercised philosophy was left to limp along behind. The words could have come from a Pythia. ...Oakeshott is another comparison and he thought Hayek had erroneously created an ideology. And by favoring ‘academia’, you are limiting the knowledge pool to institutions that are pretty well controlled by the left. She managed to stifle a smirk. Another wizard, a muscular Austrian (it was his presence that brought home the realization that all her attendants were highly favored physically), drew upon an inventive common-sense psychology — and what seemed an encyclopedic knowledge of classic Slavic literature — to engage her with insights that exploited the acutely-realistic will to freedom, against which the liberal sense of entitlement always seemed faintly touched. Arch polemicists are fire proof when in the majority. Finally, she just sat back, resorting to a mild sarcasm when things became too settled. Usually then the fun began, and the new Peter would burst

forth with a wily epigram or two that often resulted in lively japing on both sides — causing her amiable questioners, evaluators or estimators, or whatever they were, to wonder if they had not better give up that day. Moreover, she had no idea why she would merit such interest! Or what lay in store.

But during the rest periods, when she climbed into her cosy bunk, the deep resentment welled up. She didn't, couldn't belong — here! They were captors and likely murderers, and she was no supple buccaneer. Even detente, at least with her, did not appear to interest them, only the sanctity of their philosophic might. The Muerner utopian paradigm. Their method and lofty purpose was too fixed to permit bystanders. She learned nothing about the fate of her ad hoc diving team, and said nothing about her precipitous, underfunded operation to document debilitated ocean fauna, let alone her hunt for the downed satellite. Such words would have been redundant; they seemed abreast of both operations. The fact that she suspected she had little that was new to tell them made her presence, her survival all the more puzzling. As often as not they seemed to be studying her manner of response as diligently as the ideas her words conveyed.

But this was all before her visit to the picturesque tropic island with its rising volcanic chimney, where the ash grey antenna rich frigate she left behind revealed its awesome dimensions, not as grand as a nuclear carrier but near enough, which served in her reckoning as a comprehensive oceanographic research facility and staging area for a myriad of well-coordinated projects, some undoubtedly serviced by satellite — so she surmised as the cutter slowed to reflect the island's yellow-jade waters. That such an enterprise could bypass public scrutiny seemed a modern grim fairy tale.

## EIGHTEEN

“It is a mild risk, Angus. Please let me reassure you: she knows very little and will simply perplex the Soviet agent, whose name incidentally, on the Canadian passport he carries, is James Edward Stanhope. He is, according to our information, a GRU colonel, one Vassily Sergeevich Ablesimov, last observed in this country in the eighties. I would guess he was some kind of professional mentor and she, it turns out, a likely step sister to the entertainer Voden and Pechenpaugh were so enamored of. Perhaps not surprisingly, their blood types match up. The world is connected in satisfying ways.”

Dowd was then assimilating the voluminous papers Muerner had minutes ago delivered to his scrutiny, including Frieda’s corporate medical file and a clinic blood test of her sister who suffered from bronchitis on her arrival here and was treated at a Paleomena sponsored clinic as an indigent. He and Muerner sat in the damask study off the rare manuscript library. A strong fire huffed in the large fireplace, above the chimney piece of which hung a geometric study of a jolly horned deity.

“Yes, Felix. As Voden used to say, one ear perfectly fine.”

“In the end — after radioing an area storm distress — we simply let her fast a while, gave her a mild sunburn and a short-term amnesic drug, then dumped her in the travel lane of a sedate freighter bound for Seattle.”

“With four of her divers — one of whom died. Might that not be interpreted as a provocation?”

The understatement made no imprint on Muerner. He preoccupied himself with the steaming concoction in the chalice before him on his desk. One ingredient was not right. A vial dispensed a grey powder into the brew, which was stirred briefly with a seal-top spoon before being again sampled. Satisfied, he leaned back in his chair, placing the cervical



vibrators on mild stipple.

“Possibly. Two of the divers are in our employ, and will tell the proximate authorities about hunting for the satellite, factual storms, sunstroke, hallucinations and such. A death will not be exceptional. A few others may yet be found awash in diverse locals. The whole lot were awful sluggards. Frieda exempted, not an employable expert among them. I suspect she’ll simply run out of steam — if she ditches the GRU. One day she will reconsider Paleomena. She’s good in her field and can fill us in on many aspects of our cousins.”

“Willardson, I see, is listed as ‘recouping’. What may I ask is that?”

“Certainly you may ask, Angus.”

Dowd had long since learned when to accept the duenna silence.

“Arthur is at last settled in the Swiss clinic, I see.”

“Yes. Most regrettable.”

“What will we do with the photographer?”

“We are a team, Angus. I’m open to suggestions.”

Dowd took a moment to dampen the pique he felt then. Hardly a team, he said to himself. But he knew the challenge must not be slighted. He collected the papers into a neater bundle, then sought an index. Finding the page he scanned its listings.

“He does not know of ZYTA — in the peerless or atavistic sense.”  
It was both a summation and latent query.

“I think not.”

“He perhaps suspects the tableaux have exceptional origins.”

“Yet he accomplished the retouching of the second set in a highly acceptable and conscientious manner.”

Dowd loathed plodding, but it was expected of him now.

“He perhaps will soon want public acknowledgement of his craft and accomplishment; perhaps he’s become tired of being a sleeper.”

“Yes, perhaps.”

“So: it is time to have some outside curator discover him.”

Muerner was also becoming impatient. “If he gets restless...we may act. Till then he’s on an extended leash. All to be done. Science fiction is a wide field. Invariably pretentious and often simply steadfastly wrong.” An insular smile followed.

“Ah.” Dowd removed his half-frame glasses and began cleaning them on his shirt front. The action seemed to enable him to reassert himself.

“And the tape Arthur concocted?”

“Irrelevant: the Saudis have no where else to go...Angus!” Muerner glowered over the rim of his chalice.

“Yes.” Dowd checked his glasses obliquely against the fire, replaced them and looked alertly about the room, then closed his eyes. “Young loyal Peter Selby Smith was, alas, a braggart. Two letters to a friend in London. ZYTA had turned him into an eloquent diviner, something the social sciences rather lack.”

“I would be grateful if you would let me see those letters, Angus.”

Now it was Dowd’s turn to maintain a swollen silence and attend to his beverage, an Irish coffee embellished further with a sweet light molasses. It was his own unsought ace: an eminent physical anthropologist’s cross-cultural collating of ‘Apollonian’ physical splendour, those physical traits that seemed hegemonic. In ZYTA’s case the emergence of such paragons seemed to accelerate aesthetic squalor and pandemonium elsewhere. A simplistic provocative thesis for some — but not Felix Zveno Muerner who was then, at least in Dowd’s reckoning, particularly anxious not to overlook information that might complicate his own alarming intuition, and his virtuosic research in transformation neurosurgery, neuropharmacology, and the growing promise of genetic engineering, now assisted with ZYTA’s inimitable insights. Was it not amusing the inconvenience Peter’s problematic thesis was rumored to have cost the maniac seated across, who continued to believe in and seek the affective-aesthetic indices of a utopian be-

ing? What gave Muerner's mania its piquant quality was the fact he took all critiques to heart — he actually believed a transcendent human possible, and Peter's two letters deftly positing the ZYTA dilemma with concinnity, i.e. corporal (body and mind) symmetry, balance, harmony, somehow better defined the problem. It was an anomalous chink in the formidable armour which Dowd hoped, in his lifetime, to derive inherent satisfaction from. As we've noted, Dowd believed humans keenly attached to improvement and entitlement, an abomination.

“Angus, you do me a disservice.”

“Felix, the letters may be spurious. Only when I am satisfied of their authenticity, will I sanction their release. It is, after all, my responsibility.”

And with that the meeting came to a slyly amiable, abrupt conclusion.

Dowd and Muerner would of course continue to share in the astute merchandising of ZYTA's ever more galvanizing information, but the critical details of Peter's ontological comparisons, as discretely outlined in the letters, Dowd would classify and quarantine under his mandate as the corporation's internal auditor general, its long-standing 'housekeeper'. Thus he might shroud the physical-aesthetic nexus — for a time — the enigmatic chapter ZYTA's electronically parsed 'civilization' shared with their own, and so pointed with chilling insinuation to an unwelcome fate, given the fact that the 'enlightened' science portended by ZYTA was now pursued by earthlings like Muerner — with analogous parameters! Angus Dowd was not about to allow the maniac yet one more 'final' adjustment. The tinkering had to stop. The time had come to count heads, and unfavored Angus Dowd would be among the chosen. His sex demanded it. The 'adjustments' he measured in half-decades, and by then he might too be putrefying in the great genetic sump — or up in smoke!

When Dowd returned to his office atop the Paleomena Tower, another message awaited him behind the medallion. This time the news brought with it the content of the Unicorn itself. Clipped to Daphne's memo was



the coded telex he had coveted for over a year. His own Asian mediator had renegotiated a lion share of the fretted capital pool through an alternative grouping of brokers, for both the desalination and Sinai-Negev Paleowater mega projects, which meant he, Angus Dowd, and not Pechenpough, might bask in Max Paleogiannis' last smile. He must reconsider the oxymoron 'banker's trust'. He was now free, for a time, to stalk Muerner's grand design, which seemed at times the very essence of dreams...which every sanguine moron seemed to accept. An immense intellectual aquifer of his very own.

## NINETEEN

"Will you be staying long, Mr. Stanhope?"

The hotel receptionist waited with an idled smile, stylus poised. She had one ear on an altercation going on in the office of the Maitre d' across the floor; someone was on the carpet. The evening last, a roast of Arnold Storrier, got out of hand. Don Rickles unknowingly called a Russian diplomat seated at a front table in the Amber Room a 'wetback' and, to a waiter, 'You can't dry the guy out? No heat pads? Pity.' The man, with a head cold, had ambiguously coughed several times during a strategic pause in Rickle's spiel. The incident would have passed without notice if the diplomat, one of the few not in Cheka harness, was by himself. But next to him sat the bulky Vadim Morozov, Frieda's lead interrogator, demoted to the rank of babysitter in the consular staff. After the cough the diplomat nodded, smiled then swiftly inadvertently sneezed. Fondly incensed, Rickles picked up two large napkins from a waiter's station and rushed to the diplomat's table, saying, "That \$200 club sandwich talks a lot, I know. A larger tip might help." He then looked about the room. "Anyone got sprayed?" After another bracing sneeze from the diplomat,

Rickles lifted a dome cover from a nearby table and made to clamp it over the head of the diplomat. Having missed the preceding antic, his back to the on-comer, Major Morozov, whose English was marginal, stood up and in the way, apparently to seek a restroom. Momentarily off balance Rickles fell, colliding with a chair. The crowd held it's breath. Rickles scrambled to his feet, smiled luridly; the impassive Morozov patted him on the shoulder, as a tavern tough might ply a bystander. Rickles immediately put up his dukes; Morozov seemed suddenly confused, then miffed. Rickles told him he had the right to remain silent and consult a lawyer. The incident was both a tease and discomfort for Vassily Sergeevich who was seated near the back — a typical response to life in litigious America. The house detectives were unsure what to do. Was Rickles progressing with his act or what?

Then a kind of slapstick took over, another curiosity of Vassily's new life — animated confusion. Rickles had martially poised his fists a split second before the undecided Morozov sat. Morozov thumped his table, shrugged, and was about to rise when Rickles querulously sat, confronting Morozov with an intent appraiser's stare, saying, "I'm cool. No embarrassment, sony." All the while the diplomat, recovered from his initial disbelief, attempted to stifle the smoothly functional and sometime menacing Morozov, who rose again but seemed to freeze in midair, a twisted smile engulfing his face.

Two waiters at last converged, to one of whom Rickles said with entrepreneurial flair, a camera in close-up, "A great export wop. Find out where he trains."

Rickles suavely returned to his seat beside the room's 'ring master' who offered a buttonhole and ice pack drawn from a wine bucket. What Vassily did not perhaps realize was that the comic then delivered himself of a fine if deceptive monologue, berating Arnold for idly standing by — not out of confusion but 'fancy-dress ball's, and the audience too high and

slavered to notice. Vassily applauded as loudly as anyone and decided the new Sheraton Touchstone Inn had the bustle and turmoil he desired — for cover — and registered the following day.

“About a week, mam’selle,” he said to the receptionist, whose attention had returned, the contretemps in the office of the Maitre d’ now background noise.

“And just the one piece.” He was then offered two rooms, one with a better view of the bay.

“The lower will be fine.”

The United States, arrived at after a lengthy absence, however much one had studied the beast in the interval, is a moving spectacle in parts of Los Angeles on a late Friday afternoon. Vassily never slighted his trust of mutable crowds, one relatively safe place for able field men. His commission, to find and evaluate, initially without their knowing, both Frieda and her sister Zoya, then await further orders, was not of his choosing. But the General recommended no one else. In short, a command performance. Either the General would be rid of his toffy special deputy once and for all or he would be promoted if the deputy proved successful.

The first and, as it turned out, lasting sensation in glimpsing ‘the Industry’ was the uncanny pressure on the denizens to fervently avoid — the checking traffic signal, the non-air-conditioned room, any non-galvanizing social event or commitment, the late night public transit system with its unprogressive males, lower East L.A. (for the same reason), unhedged investments, terminating leases, doubled up police cruisers (the measure of ad hoc terrorism), long entertainment queues (the only queues Vassily spotted), street hawkers, ambiguous panhandlers, destitute street folk — edgy escapees everywhere.

Above all, Americans knew how to cruise.

But even resilient, well-read Vassily was not prepared for the severity of the anomie — ‘normlessness’ — as foreign to him in his often fond recol-



lections of America as his lapsed trust of the United Nations. The first glimpse of Downtown Los Angeles as the bronze-red carrack beneath the orange smear, then the body in the gutter foiled occasionally by silk chiffon, garish makeup, whispering limousines, floating venders of colorful fare, all brooking the dry abrasive clutter and spare stark architecture — these he remembered, or was prepared for. But the degree of bitter estranged resentment he was not. For the first time in his life he had intimations of getting old. At times he imagined the whine of weapons, visioned tracers approaching in slow motion...with luck and fearsome energy you just might dodge the lot, but in the end someone somewhere, almost on the hour, elected and in sinistral ways vindicated repression. He pictured many eminently deserving Gulag inmates — a paradox comics like Don Rickles so (imperviously?) understood. It seemed a genetic and moral twilight was finally to be glimpsed, as if democracy had at last completed its task and delivered to the planet a race of undeserving poltroons — poor in body, soul, and mind, despising most of all humility. Strangely, the baleful warrant of an arctic wilderness exile somehow lost its punitive edge in parts of Los Angeles, despite the comparative abundance. Even the fellow-travellers he met were often unsparingly clumsy and petulant. He did meet people who not quite stayed his optimism — the uniformed school youngster who stopped to give him directions, the elderly short-order cook who made his favorite coffee custard, the occasional cab driver — but the unhappy ravenous multitude was not to be consoled he felt. The street level entertainments were sometimes amusing, but too often witless -- given over as much to cultural savaging as theatre; Sodom and Gomorrah would surely have despaired. The creatures had lost the knack of sinning — and craved release. Perhaps most unsettling, or liberating of his anger, was the obliteration of sex. He dealt in the streets of Los Angeles with neither man nor woman. Gross parts of each, rarely a harmonious ensemble.

Yet compared to his adventures the following weeks and months, he would concede he had indeed heard and seen nothin' yet. The astonishment never ending.

In attempting to find agent Frieda van Eerden and her Russian sibling he looked to her last employer, the Paleomena Corporation. He made use of the Freedom of Information Act to identify some of the company's government contracts. This information, coupled with Frieda's most recent reports to her Rezident, alongside several prospectuses obtained over the counter at the Paleomena Information Center in Modesto, verified those critical areas in remote sensing where Paleomena worked with the Pentagon and NASA, the research which likely involved Frieda. The case officer had some leads but all were dated. Vassily, in his hermetic bower, hadn't realized Frieda was silent for so long. It was obvious someone in the department did not share his enthusiasm for her craft, which often was methodical and accretionary, at least in the beginning. So why then was he, her early tutor, here? To prove a department critic right by failing to vindicate her silence, or provide some breathing space by succeeding — finding his illegal using a deeper cover for more arcane work, say.

Presenting himself as a private dick he boldly asked a secretary in personnel at the Astronomy and Astrophysics Research Centre to let him glance at the file of a woman (Frieda) who had, he claimed, left a newly invalidated boyfriend and a small child. He wanted to know her employment status to see if a suit might be launched. The secretary was an older gal who, Vassily rightly guessed, had it in for insouciant young gold diggers. The woman vouchsafed that Dr. van Eerden was indeed employed at Paleomena — though then in the new Plasma Physics section — and “was damn well paid, though you'd need a court order behind you to get her file.” This, of course, Vassily knew. What he didn't know was whether the classified researcher was still a fully benefitted employee, which the secretary indirectly confirmed. It was apparent Frieda's later reports were com-

paratively brief and spare on hard data. Her case officer said she had been onto something crucial and was being particularly cautious, but admitted her recent protracted silence was unexpected.

For almost a week Vassily labored to verify Frieda's late assignment, and the circumstances surrounding her sudden departure — both as it turned out from her spy cell and Paleomena! — which the same clerk confirmed a week later. Nothing made sense to him — least of all a public story about Paleomena disappointment with its research into sentient computers — a tale the GRU certainly wasn't buying into. He saw the sensational ZYTA Tableaux in a poster in a Broadway shop featuring a lithe human-like alien who went by the name of Zyta! Credit for the highly technical, imaginative and sometimes suggestive illustrations, was given to an art consortium (The Unicorn Group) with Paleomena listed as a leading patron — a fact that both bemused and cautioned.

He also learned of the decline of board members Arthur Pechenpaugh and Karl Voden, and the gravitation of company stewardship to fabled financier Angus Dowd and a newcomer, bio-medical genius and futurist, Felix Muerner, whose given or adopted middle name, Zveno, 'linchpin', struck Vassily as perhaps prophetic, for Muerner's Bern Clinic was in the vanguard of experimental surgical interventions, tissue and gene research. But the recent behaviour of his protégé, given the seismic shifts at Paleomena, opened an already inflamed wound.

He was mildly entertained by a form letter discovered by stealth late one night in a secretarial pool's neatly annotated log file with an over used password. It was the stilted quality of the language of one particular letter that caught his eye. The letter, from a funeral director, requested donations to place a wreath upon grave site '4/789 in the Benediction Grotto, in memory of the late David Abercrombie Willardson,' while a Paleomena executive of the same name had two nights before suddenly but not lethally crashed from the roof overhang into a shrub on the balcony of



Frieda's unoccupied penthouse suite! Minutes later Vassily photographed the portly chap as he struggled down a fire escape. Now, added to the picture of the live if inept Willardson, he uncovered an invitation to sponsor a wreath at the grave site. Had the man no family then, no 'loved ones'? It seemed the Senior Vice-President, Arthur Pechenpaugh, to whose office the letter was sent, was miser as well as a bungler, for someone had circled the economy package of 'artificial evergreen decoration'. Vassily confirmed there was but one Willardson at Paleomena, the head art collection curator, who did indeed outlive his layaway commemoration day, as Vassily thought of it, but through what convoluted circumstance he never would learn. The facts defied a join. Thus far his leads ended with this one curious letter, which he had dutifully copied.

Hence the sudden yet discreet appearance of the stranger and the message he bore — from the Paleomena Prince himself, Angus Dowd — caught Vassily askance. At first he wondered if his career was not finally over. Was his trail so transparent and disruptive that an august powerbroker personally sought his hide? Was he but a pawn to some pre-arranged Cheka ploy? The stranger, who identified himself as Stanton, said his boss was interested in a mutual exchange of information, but would not persist if Vassily wasn't interested — an option Vassily assumed to be unpleasant. Luckily, he was still working solo.

The meeting got off to a rousing start — after the swift, scented lift to the Los Angeles tower penthouse — where the small compact Dowd, behind a massive Empire desk, drew from a dossier an old picture of Vassily in a somewhat compromising posture — third in line to an older robot cash machine, a camera lens peeking out his carryall at the digit counter. Vassily's cover occupation and guessed Cheka status were written in a bold hand below. This sobering opening move was followed by an equally jarring gambit. Anticipating his guest's ripe unease, Dowd pressed on with his adroit speech.

“Vassily Sergeevich, you and I have, I suspect, a great affection for Dr. Frieda van Eerden.” Here the compact Dowd sat back in his high-backed cordovan chair and crossed his hands in front, looking but not focusing on the photo. Vassily could just barely believe his ears. “I have no wish to interfere with your business here, but I would like to know what has upset one of our ablest scientists.” What Dowd did not tell Vassily was that Frieda had been diligently monitored by Paleomena during her assignment in the sentient computer program. Dowd then further looked through the file on his desk and said, agreeably, “ — Raspberry schnapps, with a coffee custard — yes?”

“And a dash of bitters, yes. On the custard.” Vassily did his best to look appreciative.

Dowd coughed up a bit of phlegm before pressing a concealed button on his Empire desk and speaking to his secretary in a quiet but determined voice.

“Daphne, addendum: bitters. Yes. No, on the custard. With my usual.”

Daphne entered with a tray after a short interval in which Dowd stood and apportioned his desk to accommodate the refreshment and two memory chips he retrieved from a valise by his chair. Vassily imagined the girl one of the rare slender American adolescents with lithe muscles toned by aerobic and Nautilus exercises. He also suspected Dowd maintained an heretical interest in her. The bitters sat discreetly in a vial beside the custard.

“Not a great assortment, I’m afraid,” she easily said before departing.

“A hopelessly impertinent lass,” said Dowd, just before he returned to his seat and proceeded, eyes closed, to lay out the ground rules. Again Vassily had to reassure himself he was awake. He was particularly irked to find the sly offer persuasive. It was nearly as humiliating as seeing his cover suddenly blown — a discovery that intimated some kind of sell out in his own department. In summary Dowd proposed the following:

Vassily was to receive in installments a set of recorded conversations—initially a heated exchange of ideas between Felix Muerner and Frieda; later, less formal dialogues with two persons, one business one pleasure — contingent upon Dowd learning the details and severity of Frieda’s “sub-clinical schizophrenia — what we may call it for the time being. A mutual interest.” A puckish smile followed. Vassily was advised not to return to the Soviet Union —for a fortnight; after that period he would be urged to quietly leave the United States.

It was a long list, Vassily noted, while mentally tallying his *de jure* jeopardy. He suggested they might at least begin and hope for the best. Dowd agreed and handed over a single chip — to be complemented by an interesting precursor on their next meeting, scheduled to take place in exactly forty-eight hours.

A brisk handshake closed the meeting. Vassily was only slightly amused. Schizophrenia indeed. It was as if he conversed with the director of a Soviet psychiatric lockup. As perhaps intended. But an hour later he wryly found himself reluctantly sympathizing with the ineffable Felix Zveno Muerner, whose distinctive high-pitched yet modulated voice opened the tape. It was a fine dilemma to hear a cardinal enemy think as you. He and Frieda were locked in acrimonious debate, somewhere in an exotic clime, if the background birdsong and whispering surf was authentic. Vassily was poignantly aware of the time expended in listening but he simply could not repack his curiosity. And a bitter gremlin within him refused to inform the General of his ‘lost’ cover until he’d heard the tape to its conclusion. The words were a veritable call to arms. Muerner began the exchange.

“Why could I so easily abduct and scatter your entire crew? Because they represent the metastasizing morass of incompetent experts, my dear, who will destroy what remains of our proficient age if we let them. I realize you were hard up and in great haste, but expect for Luther and one bi-



ologist, you had scraped the barrel bottom, Frieda dear.”

Frieda was apparently stung. “You mean — resist you!”

“Not at all. Many in your crew were belatedly alarmed at your priorities — you’ve heard their statements — and easily decided that even a sinecure is preferable to a furtive adventure.”

Vassily was astonished. He had no idea what ‘crew’ Muerner spoke of, but he recognized a kindred spirit in the man’s complaint about institutional incompetence. His own special poison. He also wondered how thoroughly Dowd or Muerner had edited the tape. That the tape would include a long philosophical harangue stuck him as fanciful, feigned.

“You have been buried too long in your lab lair. You haven’t seen or at least carefully observed the trends at street level in our metropolises. Our admirable efficiency in reducing infant mortality — once nearly irreducible — and our expansive education laxity, have created a class of derelicts both social and pseudo-scientific. Democracy has thrown up not only a multitude of rootless automatons who defer not the slightest gratification, but a generation of social ‘scholars’ who cling to their professional jargon and romantic nostrums as blindly as punkers. The offspring of the former are making public areas uninhabitable, educational systems custodial and prone to misandry, entertainments horror freak shows, welfare and penal systems black comedy, while the second pretentious clique continues to make ever more wooly excuses for the first. If you looked carefully at the credentials of your crew — even you, with your empathic sensitivities would be chagrinned. What did you possibly hope to accomplish?”

“We are all human beings.”

“On that point I wish we chose to disagree. I define humanity with a more credible authenticity.”

The pause that followed bristled. Vassily was by then sorely intrigued. His protégé had obviously undergone some kind of metamorphosis — which Muerner himself curiously wished to rescind.

“And now the love mongers are bankrupt. Of both ideas and money. They’ve discovered the Good Samaritan is no longer flush. The whole demotic rule simply has no viability except through cannibalistic means. The aesthetic collapse began ages ago. I intend to leave the drowning rats to sink or swim. They have noisily proliferated on my — I would love to say ‘our’ — ship long enough. We must begin somewhere, Frieda, the witless prologue has overstayed its entertainment value.”

And on it went, a long hour of it, with Frieda ever more silent and steeply sarcastic before her cogently fascist maven. Vassily could not have written a better screed himself. He only objected to the hegemony Muerner allowed the marketplace — Vassily’s provocateur of the ‘terrorism’ that hived off credulous narcissism and cupidity — the entitlement mandate. Both he and Muerner believed in a pre-eminent authority of a few individuals, and neither expected a stepfatherly deity to be of much use in fashioning the details of social engineering, especially in a consumptive democracy; the historic danger being the pre-eminent authority’s distrust of its replacement. They also accepted as a cornerstone of their constitution the ageless fact that generosity could not be mandated or indentured. But Frieda either was distracted by recent events or had simply forgotten much Vassily taught her, for she could enlist no theoretical foundation to temper the onslaught. She remained a fine fluent thinker, but only in the intervals. She was easily outmaneuvered when an unanticipated criterion was invoked. For instance, Muerner objected to Frieda attempting to be both a Marxist and a scientist — an ipsedixitism he called it. The painful fact was that Vassily would agree — using Muerner’s concept of science. Science left to its own infatuates vindicated stratification.

Vassily was especially surprised to find Frieda yoked to a slippery liberal socialism to find her way, a creed he ever felt honor-bound to ridicule. At times she seemed the confused disgruntled novice who cannot yet manage nor trust more elegant hard-edged ideas and must resort to egalitarian

nostrums. And it was a worthy enemy who was trying to bring her around!

The subject of social democracy was Muerner's chief anathema, and newly liberal Frieda seemed quite powerless before the awesome brilliant rage. Propriety was a human right only so far as the 'human' earned it; freedom was the wellspring of all rights but only the adept individual was free; free speech did not obtain for the badly educated and incompetent — they existed only on charity, and charity could not be drafted. The rhetoric was at times airtight. Poor Frieda. Poor Anastasia!

"Marxism and Divinity," said Muerner, "Allies or Antagonists?" Frieda seemed to have momentarily forgotten that when one arranges rhetoric in such ways the purpose is to find sarcastically for the rarer view. Muerner might just as well have said, Abolitionist and Pusher; the wry marriage followed as slyly as a stolid tautology.

Truth, Frieda feebly interjected at one point, was not a monopoly of Muerner's, of people with his mindset. Unhappily, the day the tape was made his wisdom was largely uncontested.

Truth, Muerner eloquently reminded her, was accretionary, memory the paramount faculty. The essential denouements of human experience lay in the past, he said. The crucial episodes had all taken place, and the gleaning of the scattered truths was now the pre-eminent task of the social philosopher.

On and on the glittering oratory went. Frieda resisted by appealing to the axiomatic limitations of science — often with a bloody this and that. In one line a pithy distillation of her newly acquired liberalism surfaced in sorely plaintive tones: "And I'm to admire your detachment and bloody great style I suppose? The consummate bore-baiter." So, style might enhance philosophy. The molested intellectual indeed.

Vassily swore silently at Dowd, and indirectly Felix Muerner. To listen on was to affirm his blown cover. At times it seemed he was coming apart.



What crew? What bloody crew! Yet the tape hinted at more and different voices...how uncanny of Dowd to know the addiction of his prey.

Whence Frieda's liberal bent came, a bearish Vassily was to learn in the next recording — all from the same consignment he guessed. Two voices 'materialized', as the first of these might have said, a nasal-toned complainer and highly-placed academician Frieda got to talking, endlessly and wide-ranging, much to the delight of the tactical liaison staff — whose technicians had managed to bug the man's hideaway in Santa Barbara. His words — in some cases suggestive of Frieda's own! — were interleaved elsewhere in the tape with those of a younger, gamier mentor; Frieda had two Casanovas going at the time, one tactical, one more or less chummy. Vassily assumed this second section of the tape part of Paleomena's surveillance regimen which Frieda may have suspected yet seemed unconcerned with 'playing to it'. The second unsettling voice, which seemed to be unrivalled, for few distracting comments interrupted his thoughts, was a wily witty anarchist Frieda actually listened to other than for bits of information that would help the cause. By then, Vassily decided, his once committed and adroit illegal wanted out. He simply had to know more. Before leaving America for the last time....

The transcript with the first Casanova, the plutocrat economist, featured mainly the man's precious, sometimes long-winded anecdotes and aperçus. Vassily was initially surprised at the man's accent, until he realized it was a Canadian maven speaking, not a Yankee expert. What also surprised, in Vassily's hard logic, was the eminent circles the man travelled in. It seemed few important officials in the State Department, liaison staff at the Pentagon, the House Appropriations and Ways-and-Means Committees, the Office of the Budget, even the Press Secretary's personnel, he was not on easy familiar terms with. In the earlier Carter administration he was the economic *éminence grise* for many presidential advisors. He was a Professor Emeritus on loan then to the West Coast, his specialty budget

control. He presented himself as a Keynesian pragmatist. He was also a concise study in liberal optimism. Vassily could have used segments of the recording as an exhibit in his own succinct seminar on American politics. Like a kind of tenured Paraclete the man held: That the treasury was a regrettable but necessary breeder reactor of spare cash: “Observably it’s got to come from somewhere, I told him (a congressman), and as long as you luddites refuse to impress taxes...” That private wealth can sustain legions of poor: “If the bugger (a publisher) desisted for one season poofing about in his silly extravagant yacht thirty thousand — and that’s a conservative estimate — would be alive in the Horn of Africa next year.”

“Bad apple sailors,” Frieda wanly replied, barely interrupting the treasured monologue, which continued by postulating that a humanist school system will insure social tranquility: “Lookit, what each human wants is a modicum of respect, for his culture, his tastes and lifestyle, an optional church or two and a school to teach kids about tolerance as well as vocational skills.”

“Sounds like a lot,” said a sleepy Frieda with a yawn. Prompting an advisement that the system of justice badly needed more flexibility and trust: “I tend to think the guy a rather flagrant poser and the black community deemed him a racist; let’s consider he did shoot the guy in the face.”

“He was terrified — it was then or never,” said a miffed Frieda.

“The decisive moot point,” retorted the academician.

His elliptical prose, which he sometimes read aloud to Frieda, was also instructive: “I am really quite far from being at odds...In more obvious fact...tariffs are in no slight measure...will not be so persuaded...the tendency to a proliferation of...has recently addressed attention...is judged in undue measure...it seems not unlikely...I have little substantial sympathy...must occasion astonishment...” Yet for three years Frieda had elicited the pertinent intelligence kernels.

But it was while listening to the intimate conversations with the para-

mors that Vassily began to identify the dull ache within himself (distinct from his anxiety about Dowd coming to possess such transcripts as well as select dope on a GRU auxiliary), which otherwise resembled the distress of bolting much American fast food. As the words of the tapes disclosed their story, he detected in himself a foreign queasiness, a fastidiousness he had not felt before. His perplexity with Angus Dowd was then acute.

He was not unfamiliar with intimate sound effects. Indeed, the *boudoir* conversation of a target was sometimes crucial. Though in the Eastern Block the urgency and dispatch of the couplings, more often than not, precluded the leisure, the insouciance of eroticism. The participants, at least at the clandestine level, were too rushed, too cold, too impassioned, too fearful to indulge languorous wiles, complex fantasies. A robustness kept the trysts largely functional. But in the present tapes the ambience was pure caprice; what one noticed time and again were the routine embellishments, which pandered and chafed.

Vassily hardly underestimated the rigours of field men, but some aspects of their labor he had left to the council of others. Very atypically, he soft-sold the recruitment of homosexuals or any perplexed soul unless the need was immediate and crucial. He believed the enlistment of capable and if possible conventional professionals, though harder and longer coming, was as useful over time and more fail-safe. Yet he would concede that happenstance was part of the trade.

In a similar manner he elided the role sex might play in a given assignment. He knew all his students would be well and unceremoniously counseled in such matters in due course, and dourly left off any addendum of his own. Beyond the technical details of spy craft, he deemed his responsibility the intellectual ‘bonding’ essential to recruitment, and he prided himself that none of his protégés had thus far disappointed their masters. His record in fact was without blemish: three exceptional, strategically placed illegals sent weekly and monthly information the Soviet rulers consulted



hourly. And none of these individuals, he believed, was currently at risk. Until now.

His sole advice to Frieda, which could be construed as relating to her role as a ‘female’ agent, was that she should never undertake a task or liaison she felt unable to control. One gambled, he had assured her, knowing well the words were his private counsel, only when one could afford a loss. Where the salients of an operation proved wildcat one must trust one’s instincts, usually the first ones.

Now, however — listening to the plutocrat recollect points in a recent speech, while peevishly remarking that only an over-engaged little showoff found rusty dusty coupling anesthetizing (Frieda had apparently dozed off after seeing to a condom and lubricant) — or the unabashed delectations of foxy Daniel with his electric wit, fond sketch book, and exuberant direction of some wayward pose, against which Frieda one day smoothly quipped, “ Peter, khydozhnik, chelovek, quit slumming and get to work!” (It was Frieda’s occasional use of pert Russian words and phrases, which she claimed she was then learning, that clued Vassily to the affection she held for the lad). These incidents, in a veritable sea of allusions, underlined the malaise he felt, and caused him to again reject American trust of immediacy and candor that was so inimical to a heedful Russian. Many times he felt he was simply an accessory and choice gull. He had rarely witnessed people lasciviously prey upon one another quite so impulsively, narcotically, though it must be said debonair Daniel did have entertaining hopeful antics in the intervals, when he and Frieda worked together over a puzzle, compared notes at meal- or snack-time. Perhaps that’s why his influence was pronounced: busy heedful Frieda had found an engaging Van Veen — Nabokov’s lad in *Ada* or *Ardor: A Family Chronicle* — and vicariously savored the wily candor. He taught one how to play again. Chief among his ongoing heresies was the one all young people find irresistible: anyone over the age of twelve was not to be trusted. He claimed he was

about ten and Frieda a still recoverable thirteen — a differential that roughly fitted their mean ages of a ‘mature’ nineteen and a ‘pubescent’ thirty-something. Then a gamy encounter over a computer game reimposed for Vassily the possible isolationist fate of familiarity when humor waned...though the humor here seemed immutable.

An argument over the correct name of the taxing puzzle left them both ardently diverted — Tiresome Irons, said he, Tiring Irons, said she. A scuffle followed. Vassily believed beer spray the main instrument, though one brief skirmish ended when Peter began slinging dollops of a mango-flavored yogurt. Frieda locked herself in a room and Daniel stood outside loudly wondering how many of the sixty-four hexogram configurations of the I Ching they could convert to sexual postures. From inside Frieda told him that the Hanoi Tower, with its three phalluses, offered more opportunity and solace to inventive geniuses like her, then suddenly opened the door and plastered him with what appeared to be a container of water. (Earlier there had been the sound of a faucet.) The lovemaking that followed this was at first one-sided and aggressive, a kind of desultory rape, and Vassily found the final more or less involuntary expirations of his pupil unnerving, and as worrisome as the listless words that followed.

“You bottle the flavour of mango, sister.”

“My Prince Onegin.” The voice for Vassily was both chagrinned (possibly) and likely retributive.

A street siren came and went. An indefinite pause, then Peter spoke more directly. “You said yesterday you regretted my involvement with Paleomena. ‘I hope you don’t regret it,’ you said. You holding back?”

“Probably.” The voice remained unengaged.

“I’m a stubborn sort. You often say.”

“I’ve decided it’s none of my business.”

Daniel was irked. “Susanne told me you’re a fence sitter.”

Frieda was nonplussed. “Susanne talks a lot.”

“I’d like to know. You can be a savvy flirt.”

Something new had begun or Frieda changed her mind — the sound of a pillow being plumped. Peter sighed and apparently desisted. When Frieda again spoke she seemed in earnest.

“Does it not bother you how you’re committing yourself, further — another three, four years?”

A ready Daniel responded. “There might be a need. Noblesse oblige.”

A silence. Then a further lament or summation. “Events being otherwise.”

“Is it another chap? Want me to interfere.” But as quickly the wiseacre was distracted. “You’re a genie in this light. Even with fruit. The missing tableau!”

No response from Frieda. A drawer was smartly opened and closed.

Daniel then wryly reflective. “I can probably defer to Arnold Storrier.”

Frieda at last joined in. “That’s handsome of you.”

“Anybody at Paleomena?” Daniel had apparently begun a sketch. Vassily could just make out as stylus whispering over a sheet of paper.

“No.”

“Does he have a name. A handle? — No, leave the elbow where it was. Thank you.”

Silence. Perhaps a mute warning.

Wanly Daniel continued. “Some gold mines?”

Yet somehow her route was complete. “I’ve never used his real name.”

“Oh dear.” Mock alarm.

“Call him ‘Able’...as in the Bible.”

After a brief pause a prompt query — “He’s dead?”

Indistinctly, from a further chamber, “They’ve tried often enough.”

“They? Must be a brute this Able.”

This time Frieda engaged a pause. “A shepherd. In a desert.”

“No slouch then.”



From Frieda more abstraction. “He lost a hand, a finger.”

“Rather nosy was he?” Growing boredom in Daniel’s voice.

“He saw a lot. It was enough.” A tap is turned off. Someone, presumably Frieda, returns to the room.

Daniel’s voice was again animated. “Excellent. Fredi...you are ravishing. I mean spit to die. I could devote a millennium to each one.”

Another pause.

“What do I do in the meantime?” Frieda in a pallid voice. Daniel laughed. Yet the question lingered.

“Help me learn all about those Hanoi Towers, I guess.”

The remaining tapes simply served to underline that plaintive note, exemplified by the phrase, It was enough. The possible irony Vassily tried to assimilate.

Dowd’s set of recordings formed a telling narrative. Daniel distracted as he entertained, the plutocrat Scargill alerted, admonished and, in the last sections of the recording, the wily anthropologist Peter Selby-Smith estranged, provoked and dismayed. His impious comments about the Paleomena Princes may have triggered Frieda’s belated consideration of ZYTA’s potency and promise. The brilliant anarchist with a rapt poetic fondness is the modern pied piper, Vassily concluded, every bit the match or counter to the ‘liberated’ woman. His very wit alerted one to ZYTA’s initial understated portent. The philosophical fluency Peter cultivated seemed the true nexus of their conspiratorial friendship. The acumen of a fox, in the tongue of an accomplished yet sensual soul, is an awesome thing. It fell into that grey area of schizophrenia — and here in the hands of a wit to boot! — that Soviet philosophy and psychiatry were as powerless to deal with as the psychopath was to a doughty Catholic conscience. Some things man remained singularly unequipped to deal with, except perhaps as a musical or artistic virtuoso, and one of these seemed to be the comprehension of himself — parenthetically his terribly divided ‘self’.

But in Vassily's scheme of things pestilence, famine and anger ravaged the land, and the prudent wayfarer learned what he could from his past then made his bed. What he could not presently know would not influence daily obligations. The student of manners, style, and the flights of criticism, operated as a rogue ship, which the heedful either saw battened down or maneuvered into a different sea — such were Vassily's reflections on blithe, self-dramatic irreverence. And so as he listened he allowed himself to be only mildly entertained. He would remember few of Peter's stylish pronouncements, for he was by then nearly despondent. Somehow his own ideological redoubt was shadowed by his pupil. Her ornate disappointment sullied his outlook. Never before had he felt so slighted.

With endless backtracking and artful explanation he managed to keep the meetings with Dowd and the recordings a secret. He told the Rezident only that he was anxious about his standing with Dowd. He pointed to a single shadow, who was verified a Paleomena agent and a one-time Frieda watcher. He was soon working (saddled) with a backup.

The topical information about the corporation's contracts he was able to provide the Rezidency helped allay his anxiety were he ever 'noticed' in the Paleomena Tower. The recordings Dowd provided he listened to via head phones in the Los Angeles Central Library. He swam daily in an Edendale spa, occasionally played chess in a nearby park, and also assessed potential contacts in the civic officials he came in contact with. He was irritated to find the words in the tapes lacking serviceable details, except for Muerner's mention of a 'crew', and not a little chagrined to so rely upon the ongoing discretion, cooperation and affability of his adversary.

When at last he traced both Frieda and her twin, he had to ask for a postponement of the meeting Dowd requested. The sisters were engaged in a too strenuous cat and mouse game with several stalkers to honour any prearranged gathering. He concluded, with some chagrin, that Zoya was

acting on her own. He did provide Dowd minimal documentation of Frieda's hectic daily life: the many guessed (backlogged) peregrinations, two abandoned addresses, one verified disguise (a wig, moulded mouth-piece to distort the lower cheeks, dress and sandals found in a janitor's trash cart), and the name and postal address of an environmentalist lobby she sometimes assisted. He was hunting many shadows he told Dowd, in so many words. Dowd nodded a tacit acknowledgement. Vassily's one hope was that Dowd genuinely sought a discreet meeting with the former research engineer. Vassily even requested of the Rezident and thence Moscow more time to make his evaluation of both Zoya and Frieda, and to appraise a shy 'executive' in the Paleomena Corporation, whom he met at the spa. (The man who so neatly allocated his own moves!) The answer was swift and direct and, despite the ornate coding, came surprisingly from the interlocutor himself. Do the necessary minimum. Get the finger out but keep it handy. Myshin.

Vassily agreed: the only way to maneuver in America.

## NINETEEN

Gloria Leibowitz, the newly commissioned biographer of the Storrier Saga (her journal had been bought by Random House and expanded), sat with flushed cheeks between the oversize showpiece himself and Antoine Plombiers, a blossoming couturier, budding auteur and, of late, Arnold's mentor of things ambiguous. One of Antoine's friends, a cellist, had a crush on Arnold. Antoine told the friend the queue was very long and Arnold likely right-handed the rest of his natural life.

The trio had taken an impromptu Moroccan holiday. Arnold liked to gamble, Antoine to bazaar shop, and Gloria to upgrade her rag's sense of



North African cultural mores. Now they endured the last gasps of a happy hour. They had just returned to LA via a liquorish flight from what Arnold cast as the last Casablanca poker weekend ever. He had given out, after a week of unsportsmanlike threats, that no more would he suffer the harum-scarum business transactions of the area, where sanguine billionaires still might be zealously and remorselessly bled. All the variables had become ‘intervening’ he said. Glory had in the past written with fond disgust of two vices Arnold often indulged — hustling and gambling. She soulfully berated instincts that promote the calculated defeat of stolid combatants. Her dislike of gambling was less scathing because the odds were at least uncertain — but another drug with ‘patented’ impurities. Her phrase. But in her journal her recriminations were somewhat blunted, for Arnold was then using the proceeds from both lapses to fund a fleet of partially solar-powered sea-going vessels which had already found willing crews among the boat people of South East Asia, whose continuing exodus was newly noticed when an ingenious capitalist offered them contract training and eventual work — aboard the modern tall ships, a projected fleet of eight craft that would ferry all ‘fair trade’ goods. Gloria found the offer entirely admirable, despite the chorus of iconoclasts and their martinetts who pronounced Arnold a slimy opportunist milking world tragedy for his own regard. But Gloria remained equanimous. Arnold had proved to be a politically inert genius who dramatically, if impulsively, decided one day to put to the test a design he envisaged for an inexpensive, efficient and environmentally benign way of getting goods across waters. To date he had not made a cent from the enterprise and initially had to strong arm some of his former Asian tycoons, some of whom were now in newly transformed governments — via a shelved submission to the International Criminal Court — to help underwrite the project. Moreover, Gloria was easily seduced by the exhilaration of ‘air-borne’ sea travel. She spent a week winnowing out the satisfactions of servicing huge mizzensails and

fine tuning the stars to the horizon through the vernier scale on a Plath sextant, even upon a pitching bridge, while her poor secretary heaved her guts out a deck below. A dozen times she shared with Arnold a rotating watch which in perplexing ways infected her with the unexpected, often touching, sometimes potty, spendthrift enthusiasms he imparted. He seemed to belong to the sea, in the manner of a rare winged creature in this ‘wind-obeying deep’, and she found herself mildly regretting the fact, though usually only when she lurched into an interval with nothing pressing to do, a rare occurrence aboard the Tau, the inaugural test ship. He was both a kind of Billy Budd and Captain Ahab, and on dry land a sobering sight when nearly drunk, especially with a black, swollen, nearly closed eye, the result of a lead-crystal bourbon glass hurled by a patron after the final game of 5-card draw poker in which, for an extra undisclosed raise, Arnold had pledged the first serial rights to his own journal — a breach of contract Gloria learned about later, when it no longer mattered. The money was electronically settled by the loser, a player who demanded a rematch, a covenant in the casinos Arnold frequented, where one’s word was as sovereign as the cards one gambled — inside. Outside, beyond the former gaming palace’s gates, one left nothing to chance.

And now the trio, Arnold, Gloria and Antoine, seated in a stuffy gangrenous lounge, waited for a militia team to give its blessing to an entrance foyer that a kook or terrorist had attempted to blow up. A hostage was taken, eventually released ‘unharm’d’ — the requisite euphemism — then the kook shot himself in the head. A rumour said he had planted more than one explosive device, and a special detail now swept the area. Gloria always amazed herself at the stoic docility with which people accepted what was now deemed inevitable: the incessant disruptions caused by manic or berserk individuals. Sociologists argued tirelessly over the concept of maximum incoherence or ‘absence’; everyone else simply got out their peculiar knitting. It was at such times that Arnold’s discerning and

unsettling friend, the dapper Antoine, dated couturier (Nineteenth Century chic), modern art and queer fish connoisseur, essayist, poet and optimistic poofster — the gifted auteur — became indispensable. He was at his best explaining cultural rectitude and interpreting Arnold's anachronistic infatuation with heterosexuality — also despairing of the current rush to marriage among his chosen tribe. "When the institution itself is dropping ballast." The affable smiles were an invitation.

"We were the finest critics of traditional yoking at one time. Now a disturbing number of my cherubs can't wait to tie the knot, the upcoming euphemism for garrotte. People today are poorly instructed in harness hitches and slip knots. I believe there's actually a knot called a cuckold's neck. Sadly, Arnold's Windsor needs a special lad to put it right." Unfortunately Arnold was not a resilient drinker and could not then be relied upon to appreciate the fine points. The topical and troubling curiosity was that black-eyed, nearly soused Arnold was actually engaged as the piano accompanist for the accomplished, crippled, elegant mezzo-soprano Marianne Fitch, who would give a benefit for the B'nai Br'ith in approximately four hours. She had heard Arnold play some Schumann at a party — to everyone's astonishment — and thought his presence at her recital would enlarge her audience with flush curiosity seekers. The fact that he learned her pieces in record time, as was bruited among the sycophants, also augmented the fond doubters. In consequence, Antoine was more supercilious and apocryphal than usual.

"It's altogether too macabre. And you, you shameless bawd, slyly encourage the booby. You are simply too, too much. And a Jewess as well. What are we coming to when the seeing-eye dogs savage the blind."

"Antoine, you're sounding like my neighbor's hairdresser."

"My dear, someone must at least act the part. If we cannot rely on the modern Odettes to lead the way." He looked again at Arnold's bruise and rolled his eyes. "And what can one play looking like a shanghaied ste-



vedore? Dame F,fitch will swallow a pit. Perhaps we might manage a fubsy strip show instead. That frock of yours, my dear, does not bear wearing.”

The comment was not unapt. Gloria had been rushed leaving. She slept like a log on the plane and wore then the same rough-chic navy outfit she sailed in. It had a rather rakish tear in one shoulder. She found herself pulling a neck-slung sweater further about her.

Antoine eyed the gesture with flinty gamesmanship, then looked quizzically at Arnold. “Yes, it m,might work splendidly. If he can remember any honky tonk d,ditties.”

“He’s off ditties. You, of all people, should remember that. After that Astoria bash.” But the word ‘fubsy’ still resounded in her ear.

Said Antoine, “You can allow your c,countryman suffer another c,catastrophe. La Vierge.” In French it sounded both elegant and naughty.

“C’est la vie.” Also indirectly true: Gloria was what Antoine called ‘an aspish dove’ who, while excoriating terrorism, disclaimed the exclusivity of Zionism.

“P,patronizing the Jew as victim but not as victor. A delicious ripe girl. It is t,too much.”

It was then that Arnold startled them both by placing and stretching his fingers on the edge of the table as if on a keyboard. Soon his fingers suggested the playing of scales, in thirds. Perhaps. He still rested his head on a briefcase softened by a rolled-up blazer. Both eyes remained closed — correction, one eye closed, the other had still to open on its own. The sudden movements suggested a peripheral computer printer suddenly lurching into activity.

“Now that is what I call superb legwork,” said Gloria watching the newly active fingers.

“He radiates trust. Note how he rests his head. He is playing by ear. One ear the fundamentals, the other the overtones. A t,too delicious

genius. A boxy lad — if one may use that insinuation in mixed company.”

“The show goes on.”

And it did.

Arnold, the child cage fighter cum kick boxer and ultimate gamey competitor, mathematician and engineering physicist, investment sharpie and gambling hustler — the better known ‘hobbies’ — and now, ostensibly, a pianist of classical spirit enamored of vocal richness. The upright ‘ensemble’, he and Dame Fitch, walked on stage at Alice Tully Hall ‘in a credible Pre-Raphaelite glow,’ as Gloria would write in her notes, ‘but once at the piano Dame Fitch calmed down and the evening was more or less hers due, perhaps, in no small part to the accompanist’s surprisingly syntonic and deferential playing.’ Antoine had attempted then abandoned with a sigh a cosmetic application to the bruised black eye. The audience had at first held its breath. Then a few stray laughs, which Gloria was partially responsible for instigating, cued the spoilers to an appropriate out, and a gradually swelling amusement took hold, even belatedly shared by the inflexible Dame Fitch.

Arnold did not, of course, welcome the trappings of a freak, and in anything he undertook rather ruthlessly aped the best in the performance tier, smitten as he was by the ‘knock off’ label that had stuck for a time. His pianistic pretension was no exception. Chiefly, he got tired of the insouciant matinée mould that had set about his ‘laminated, deckle-edged talent’ — this tropism from a society column in *Vanity Fair*. The suspicion that he might just be a polymath savant was beginning to haunt a few former critics.

Endowed with perfect pitch and that rare associative skill that aligns the finger configuration to a given melodic line did not complicate his ability to readily sight read most music. While very large hands and fluent reflexes facilitated what is aptly called ‘liquid fingering’, he nonetheless real-

ized at the outset that the memorization required to master a bravura virtuosos's repertoire would likely take some time, so he began to create his own singular collection — easier, more fun, and handily provocative — opening first the few timeworn doors available to ensemble players, his debut performance with some gifted amateurs (scientists all) from M.I.T. His performance with Dame Fitch was the result of a sprained wrist of her long-standing accompanist and a social gathering where Arnold discovered a rare re-conditioned 1936 concert Beckstein with a vintage Alpine spruce sound board in the hosts' continental drawing room. He began softly playing it before the guests entered after coffee, was discovered and politely urged to continue, which he did to some surprise. The guests were further entertained when Dame Fitch approached the piano and began humming a tune of Franz Lehár Arnold was fondly improvising. One guest jokingly suggested Arnold would make a fair accompanist — to Madame Fitch's erstwhile amusement. Well, the rest is history. And probably the first music Arnold learned note perfect. At the outset he generated considerable amusement, though a few observers were struck by what they imagined considerable if upstart and footloose talent (recalling his sudden intrepid debut as a scientist, precipitated by a paper he wrote while still an undergraduate). But musically such innuendo was well behind him when he walked on stage at Alice Tully Hall wearing 'an absolute beaut'.

Otherwise, what the attentive audience awaited, in addition to the soprano's ravishing voice, was the control an adventurer's temperament exercised as the nether partner. The emerging synthesis proved irresistible. A transcendent voice was never better served one critic wrote. Another said he might still believe musical marriages were made in Heaven. Thereafter Arnold seemed bent to the keyboard as if he had discovered a regnant science. Something happened at the concert — a venture free of Muerner, for one. Afterward, returning from the celebrity party and lightly drunk, he told Antoine he had "glimpsed the heady salubrity of lieder." Antoine



perhaps winced, recalling the concert's program, which Dame Fitch decided had to be lovingly humorous or not at all — given her venture with what she suspected to be a guilt-ridden showoff. The first half consisted of an unusual folk fest, playful transcriptions of better known symphonic tunes given a Lehár élan or wile with chaotic but euphonic latinate words as lyrics — “two bohemians plundering another,” said Antoine. What the music made intriguing were some baroque ornaments — a scam for the purist, but “musically sound and fondly evocative of the spirit of the works” to another. The crowd was charmed, and if Gloria was not misty eyed herself she thought she detected Antoine opening his more than usual. Wrote one reviewer, “a prodigious duo discovering themselves is a moving spectacle.” “A rare and wonderful servant-savant,” from another, the lone phrase Arnold lifted from the papers the following afternoon and brought with him to his next practice session.

The second and final portion of the original benefit consisted of two elegant musical pastiches — one of lesser known Jewish folk tunes, the other a vivid tapestry of the Music of Bernstein and Sondheim. It was a triumph: a virtuosi recognizing, howbeit preciously and ingratiatingly, the genius of the other — a minor embarrassment Dame Fitch was readily forgiven. Even Antoine was amazingly decorous and discreet at the party that followed. By then someone had given Arnold an eye patch, which he wore with the panache of a fine patriot. At the public reception, held in the loggia, Vassily Sergeevich drolly wondered if perhaps Arnold was a variety of neurocyborg, a being the Soviets had toyed with then compulsively and erratically researched. Thus was he again tempted to believe ZYTA had delivered awesome goods to her Paleomena custodian. He wired Myshin for assistance, and a day later was informed a team would be in the U.S. within the week. Vassily was to maintain a holding pattern and remain alert.

However, the phrase ‘rare and wonderful servant-savant’ alarmed Felix

Zveno Muerner, especially when he realized the import it had for Arnold — for his entirely human superman. It was then Muerner began to doubt the wisdom of having incorporated in his protégé a romantic's aesthetic bias, gleaned from the memory of a modern Thomas De Quincey (Willardson) — which should have produced in such a robust constitution and polymath intellect a less impulsive more mature genius. As it was, his Prometheus had discovered gentility and developed qualms about man burning his neighbour — letting a heartless nature decide.

The following week the Secretary of B'nai Bri'th announced to a group of directors a take from the concert, dinner and record contract of just over six-hundred thousand dollars. It was further decided, with Dame Fitch's sought and received blessing, that part would go to help Arnold with his solar-assisted sail ships. Despite the relatively modest sum, it was one of the few times Felix Muerner felt outflanked. Charity he believed the nub of dependency. The entropy in generosity.

## TWENTY

Frieda was doing her best to assimilate the discovery of a 'reincarnated' Zoya in America! A scrambled jigsaw, motley pieces misplaced, forced. One could make little sense of the — 'mildewed' tableau!

Leading the entertainment pages of Los Angeles Times was the story of the opening of a new club, the Bellerophon, which Frieda imagined another of Karl Voden's gaudy pastiches. One touted performer was a European with sturdy ballet training who had performed in the European Ap-sara chain. She was called Lisa Galina Christiansen and Zyta Krupka, depending on venus. She had been in an accident and had some reconstructive surgery — thus eschewing any confusion with the American journal-

ist. Her dancing was never better though, one reviewer wrote. She specialized in popularizing roles of classic Eastern heroines including Scheherazade, Durga and several Devis, her audience attuned mainly to the lissome craft — ‘where the gods are young.’ Frieda would not have paid much attention to the story but for a few biographic details: an unfortunate mother Soviet authorities disapproved of, an unlucky father, and a twin who died in childbirth. Despite all, a ‘meteoric rise in Russian dance academies’ — as the canting reviewer assured. No mention of an attack by an Islamist. Frieda did not recognize the face, but one rare costume featured in the article, including a fancy eye mask, Zoya, and only Zoya, had worn at the Apsaras. Did the Cheka worry she might be bumped off by the Islamist’s butchers prematurely? A fatwa had been declared. The fact the delinquent came with the apparent blessings of Borozov’s minders and Interior Ministry investigators hinted at institutional contrivance. The timing was troubling. The implication that someone at Paleomena might be working with the the SVR — Foreign Intelligence — made her cringe. A sister a lure to pace or reproach a problematic sister. Such provocation a Cheka speciality.

It was a shock almost as deranging as the sight of Zoya’s form embellishing the vulgarized tableaux in the Burbank gallery to hear the measured voice calling from a pay phone just beyond her most recent hideaway, a tenement space she had rented the day before. At first she despaired: the Cheka calling from a stakeout? But the voice, Vassily’s ancient base voice, assured her she was in no imminent danger of abduction or assault and requested a private meeting, at her pleasure and choosing; he added that he could not restrain the nay sayers any longer if he did not know what she planned. He further assured her that if they met he would urge her to return to her calling, and be prepared for the worst if she refused. The grace period was over. He gave the number of the pay phone, told her to return his call within two minutes or she would not see or hear from him



again. When she called he gave her the address of a waterfront oyster bar and said he would meet with her alone for a time. If she remained when he left, a second person would join her. This second person was one of Angus Dowd's security agents. He would also come alone and only talk. She almost didn't go — the prudent thing to do she thought.

They sat on stools facing the street. Shel had carefully studied the environs, then silently him, concluding he came unattended. She imagined her own face a lifeless mask. Almost forgotten was the granite cast of the man, including his pock-marked face and the Asian cast to his eyes. He did not presume upon her caution. Moreover, he was hungry, in the way many Russians are venturously hungry in America — a measure of the remembered Russian austerity that left her less patient and convinced she really had nothing to say, her ongoing heady resolve fixed and necessary. His mouth full Vassily faintly duly nodded. It was a terrible wrenching spectacle that only increased her impatience.

When at last he pushed away his dessert, a custard with a wide assortment of condiments scattered on top, and drew from his lumpy coat a pear kirsch to add to the coffee, he began speaking softly and distinctly, in Russian.

"I believe from observing you this past week that you have decided to defect, or at least strike a bargain with our scrambling Neighbors."

"I have decided very little."

Vassily paused, but without gesture. He suddenly doubted the explanation he'd fabricated for his presence in Los Angeles would satisfy. Instead he alluded to the furor over her recent lapses.

"I'm here simply to determine your current activities, and assess your sympathies. It seems the General may yet be requested to interfere." He had not attempted to engage her eyes, and added more kirsch to his coffee, now almost clear, before continuing. "If you decide to stay here you will need help." A further swallow of the kirsch firmed up his facial muscles,

to herald a mindful resolution. “I suggest this: I stage an attempt to kidnap you, but will fail and be caught by the American team Paleomena has recently recruited to find you. I will be placed in U.S. custody and exchanged in due course for someone the U.S. or one of its allies want returned, or some other favour. This I am prepared to do. If you set out to contact someone in the State Department or the FBI on your own you will fail. You’ve not perhaps assimilated Paleomena’s reach and connivance with the the State Department and their Russian brokers and jobbers. The order is not to kill but to maim. An ‘augmented’ accident. A physical and mental invalid. I have until tomorrow night to bring you onside. Happily or unhappily.”

He then paused as if waiting her entry, yet still did not look her way. She had forgotten how compulsively he smoked, a fact he seemed to appraise as he set the cigarette aside on his custard plate. When he started again his words contained a plaintive foreign note, and she realized he was freely perspiring. His presence here suggested a reduction in service stature that must be disagreeable, indecent or untimely. So she presumed.

“I ask you to come back with me now. You will be discreetly returned, via Mexico and Havana, perhaps demoted, but not severely reprimanded. Your talents will not be squandered. With a formal apology and detailed explanation you will soon be deployed, likely somewhere in the Federation, but the post will be commensurate with your acknowledged abilities.”

She mutely smiled. Such a ‘reinstatement’ would take a year or more. And could well incorporate some form of sinister coercion. She all but marveled that he could deliver such a speech with a straight face. Again, silence seemed her best option. He continued after glancing at his watch.

“If you do not come with me now, and wish not to return, you should be in your modest room tomorrow at twenty-three hours. I will be apprehended in an attempted abduction. You must present a struggle, not too resourceful I think. I will see a chosen group of CIA street people have

not lost me. It is your best way to enter U.S. custody — free of Paleomena. My failure will cue the CIA, thus isolating, hobbling Paleomena.”

The alcohol, she assumed, helped credit the quiet ominous words. That she might find the offer antic or disingenuous was the bugbear without name. He, in turn, kept to himself the fact that his most challenging ruse would be permitting incompetents to follow while appearing convincingly elusive to his own wary operatives. Yet he believed he could pull it off. Just. To Frieda he continued thus: “The General of course knows nothing of this option. I do not beg. You are an adult. When I finish this cigarette I leave, and walk slowly. On the morrow, if I drink alone, you have my condolences.”

The traffic beyond the restaurant front had increased and Vassily smoked his final cigarette in a lingering cocoon of smoke, which cast his face, his profile at least, in a kind of death mask. His offer indeed seemed to her slyly ingratiating, even preposterous. She had not imagined an intimate conflagration, but carefully worded pronouncements failed her. His presence brought with it both the old preciousness and imperiousness. How could she explain ZYTA to him — in many ways forever a layman? She said nothing. But he had one further surprise.

“Your half-sister Zoya remains a target. The fatwa has not been lifted. So far she’s eluded her hunters. I have no mandate to find her, but someone somewhere is still determined she ‘sprouts wings’, to use a fine bit of American idiomatic lingo. Better a murder here than there. You alone may survive.”

He released three bills to the counter and was gone. She had no intention of following, but his last words baited the confounding coming of her sister. For a brief moment she thought this might be another sly gambit, a way of keeping her negotiable, near to herself — routing an impetuous trust of freedom. And it seemed to be succeeding. She almost chose to ignore the shuffling chap who took up a stool near her — the other half of



the stillborn compact with Vassily that night. His sidelong coming was nothing compared to the tension that newly gripped her. But one more clumsy messenger. Somehow he verified Scargill's self-identification of America in *A Decade of Doubt*. It was beginning to show. The man was by turns visually slattern — the cheesy camp look — and smugly genial. He seemed to have no idea he lived in America in the Twenty-First Century. And she was just beginning to realize this. Without the ineffable ZYTA would she ever have noticed?

"I won't impose on you miss. A yes or no is all my client wants. You staying or going?"

Frieda stifled a laugh. The terrible part was the man seemed in earnest — he actually expected an on-off response. For one brief dread moment she thought of rushing after Vassily. But the moment passed and with it her renewed commitment to her lone gasping self, and the embattled ZYTA — to the last dogfight.

She uncharacteristically told him to piss off, paid the cheque with Vassily's three bills and swiftly left, moving away from the static Vassily who stood in the shadows of a store canopy. The shuffler too came after her into the street but, like Vassily, did not follow. Unlike Vassily he seemed perfectly satisfied with her response.

"She stays," Stanton told an impassive Down on the ninety-fourth floor of the Paleomena Tower a few minutes later.

"She said as much?"

"No, she told me to piss off."

"And that follows?"

"No, but you see I've seen the repatriated ones. They smell of ketchup and look like cut cheerleaders, or footballers who flunked the draft. This one had, in my estimation, Mr. Dowd, a trunk full of unfinished business, and was hot to get at it. Had I been Arnold Storrier himself I doubt I could have flagged her. And she left the crummy waitress a handsome tip:

you don't burn your hard cash when you're off to the Lubyanka. That's my considered opinion, Mr. Dowd."

"And you don't think she and the Russian agent may be handling that unfinished business together?"

"Wouldn't sweat to it but, a funny thing, I thought the guy in tears when he came out. And they weren't from the joint's food, which incidentally isn't half bad if you're economical and most of the time hungry, like me. Also, the guy was slow giving the cabbie instructions. My guess he was stood up."

Dowd sat very still for several seconds with his eyes closed, his fingers flat upon his desk. He was thinking of methodological laxity allied to acute visual perception — a not untypical American characteristic, and decided Stanton may have a point.

"Thank you Stanton. Please proceed as instructed."

## TWENTY-ONE

A grimly resolved Vassily awaited in a noisy truck stop with his backup team as the hour approached when he would proceed to Frieda's one room hovel. Someone used the word 'patsy' in remarking about a recent Yankee film — which intimated in his mind his own thankless chore, now so flagrantly near. How readily one sat transfixed in America — before the fated, oncoming frame, reel!

Not a block away Antoine Plombiers, affecting his demure persona, attracted the notice of several guests, including Gloria Liebowitz, at an exhibition opening of paintings and diverse objets d'art of two celebrated West Coast artists — both feature notables in Gloria's rag.

Antoine's intimidating syntax had announced himself to a soft spoken

receptionist, a quiet committed girl named Tiffany, who vetted the invitations with studied patience until Antoine arrived without his and requested at once three Golden Slippers. “There’s only champagne and it’s served with the alderperson who will be here in due course.” The alderperson, a feminist confidante of Gloria’s, was to bring a commission from city hall for one of the artists to create a set of murals for the new headquarters of SARA (Sexual Assault and Recovery Anonymous) which Antoine called ‘priors’. The alderperson, also known as the ‘croaker’ among select Republicans because of her low pitched voice, represented perhaps Gloria’s single unblushing venality — the resolute pacing and patronizing of career politicians. A comrade too zealous by half, the woman yet represented a constituency, the single parent in a large, dense Mexican-American constituency in Los Angeles, which contained an irresistible block of votes. Thus far the electoral boundaries kept the vote modestly assertive but Gloria hoped to change that, and even worked with diehards to see it accomplished. As we’ve noted, Gloria’s feminism favoured the ‘of necessity’ muster: where the patriarchy behaved as feral tomcats, women, especially those with children, needed protection. That many fathers behaved so merely confirmed her mute suspicion of the cocky machismo male. Thus with a nimble smile she saw the treatment Antoine received from the chary hostess.

To Gloria he said in his cultivated lisp, “My dear, I am charged with g,gate-crashing.”

“It’s called mentoring now days.”

Tiffany was at once slaked by Gloria’s appearance and politely inquired if Antoine wished to check his coat and cane. Antoine wore about his shoulders a camel hair spencer and carried an ivory swagger stick that concealed a pepper spray canister and mechanized blade which had unnerved more than one rowdy. That this implement might be deemed a cane Antoine could not let pass. With a dramatic turn he whispered to Tif-



fany, “The c,cane, my dear, is a select halberd.” Tiffany professionally smiled, happily oblivious to what was meant. Antoine then arched fine brows, though not at the girl, and took Gloria’s hand.

“I have come to see the works of art — I will explain them as we go. And by the l,look of things, my dear, I think we ought to p,proceed with some dispatch.”

In keeping with his specific gravity, a coterie of charmed and leery on-lookers soon surrounded them. At one stage the group stood before an assemblage of tiny musical instruments. By blowing on, strumming or hammering one of them you touched off a programmed accompaniment of the rest. It was claimed the computer that alerted the remaining instruments did so with a singular adaptation to each’s individual’s exertions. It was one of the show’s highlights. A small crowd waited Antoine’s turn. It seemed for a moment he might pass by with another of his plaintive hums. Instead he elected to blow upon the trumpet. The resulting cacophony was awful. Indeed the artist, then at the periphery of the group, badly smiled, then frowned, and began tinkering with an engineering component.

A few sniggers surfaced.

“Of course I d,don’t play accurately, most any s phi,incter manages that.”

Gloria valiantly remained silent.

Before another exhibit, one of a series of Stations of the Cross in which a young hermaphrodite was crucified in vibrant realistic tones, her small penis fully erect, Gloria said quietly to Antoine, “The artist is reputed to be a quite exceptional atmospheric technician — compared to George de La Tour.”

“The pro-active d,dauber.”

Before another display two young women in stylish fatigues debated a photo of a more or less conventionally handsome, muscular, nude and

erect jock. The caption read: Diminished Responsibility.

“No longer the Supreme Court then,” said one.

The other laughed in an impromptu falsetto.

Both girls easily moved on, one thrusting a knowing hand into her companion’s back pocket.

“A regular couple,” said Gloria.

“Our f,fair ladies.”

“Well, ‘fair’.”

A little later Antoine was more or less silent, simply tilting his head to one side with a faintly stoic expression before the ‘exhibits’. He said as they concluded the tour, “I think it is time to eat; I know a delicious little cellar.”

“I accept.”

“During the apéritif I will explain the entire r,ruse.”

After pausing to retrieve Gloria’s shawl, and a final a bientôt to Tiffay, they waltzed together into the dense fummy evening air.

At a crosswalk, to which they repaired when Antoine spotted a flower stall across the street and insisted on buying Gloria a ‘sprig of something n,natural,’ they were nearly run over by a small dark van. The vehicle stopped just in time, the driver redolent with abuse, a burly chap in black fatigues with smudges of lamp black on his cheeks. At least two other pairs of eyes peered from the darkened interior.

Recomposed, Antoine sauntered on after lightly knocking on the bonnet as if to summon good luck. Engine in throttle, the van crept forward, hurrying Gloria but not Antoine, who maintained his balance by jabbing the shielded head of the walking stick against a headlamp. In doing so he neatly, inadvertently punctured the lens to the headlamp, the plastic shield to which was missing. The van stopped, the driver molten with insult, barely restrained by another in the van. As the noisome words mushroomed Antoine straightened his lapel carnation. By then a ruckus had

broken out in the van itself. Gloria dragged Antoine the remaining few meters of crosswalk. Twice the door to the van opened, twice summarily closed. The van jerked forward, paused, then careened the corner out of sight, leaving a distinct smell of burnt tire.

It was not the first time Gloria had witnessed such immaculate calm on the part of her old school chum. He claimed to have many times suffered the thrashing of beefy boys and long ago discovered there a perverse purification. Speaking staidly as a UN ambassador he added, “How may one possibly partake of rude bumptious company except as ‘boeuf gras’, or resist teasing such guileless splendor? Only through charm will you make the self-conscious among us reconsider.”

But that night Antoine’s veteran cool would wreak consequence far beyond the accident or antic of breaking glass, for in the van scrambled four CIA button men charged to nab a Russian in the likely kidnapping — exfiltration — of a GRU agent. The signal to alert the CIA street steam when the van was in place was a two-second on-off flash of headlights. Two working headlights.

The livid quartet frantically sought a vehicle to commandeer, succeeding finally in depriving a citrus grower of his camper, only to smash into a motorcycle while hastily parking the two vehicles in an alley — to transfer paraphernalia and reassure the van owners, a husband and wife on their way to a housewarming, that they assisted Uncle Sam by yielding up their means of transportation, a premium sacrifice in Los Angeles. In an adjacent ice cream parlour a patrolman gave tongue to a raspberry cream cake and heard with a missed swallow the trashing of his Gold Wing Honda. The subsequent sight of armed men swearing at his bike and upbraiding the anxious couple opened adrenalin floodgates. From the blind of a garbage bin, his revolver levelled, snarled upper lip a trim raspberry pink, he yelled “Freeze!” The exasperated oaths of the darkly clad men only added to the patrolman’s sense of climax. He had recently been admonished by



a senior officer for under-performing.

Backup cruisers arrived within the minute. A warning round was fired over the heads of the camper thieves.

In the meantime Vassily Ablesimov had dourly set off with his team to Frieda's address. But to his relief — also chagrin and bitterness — the room, a roach-haven alcove with a single washbasin, was empty. The squalor alone seemed alive.

They waited half an hour. No one returned. Vassily's act thus came to its unapplauded end. He had delivered his final speech, and would not electively watch the remainder of the performance.

About the time Antoine began describing the age's 'hostage galleries' to a bemused Gloria in a nocturnal hideaway, Frieda sat in a small office of the Orchid Club — a stopgap job she sought through an employment agency using a fake identity she cobbled together — confirming the credit marker for a Siggi Macht, a character she immediately doubted, detecting from the audible query he made for a larger supper table to Desmond, the club's floor manager, a faint sibilance that intimated a slavic patrimony. Newly tense, she pulled the dark wig further forward and checked the excessive makeup in a pier glass featuring a period Budweiser ad. The intricate nook, designated the toll booth, was set back of the central stage lodges near the office of the tycoon owner, a Mr. A.J. Lachance she had yet to meet. In the toll booth she contacted, with client assent, several banks to confirm credit ceilings. She also provided entertainment schedules for the security folk — the people who monitored what stage, guest room or gaming table. Desmond, the floor manager, had simply instructed the regular employee, Poppy, to let 'Anna' assist at the 'score board'. The talkative girl was carefree about the club's security regimen. "The usual story: they think everyone's a crook or head case. A friend of mine works here as a masseuse, claims all the private parties are routinely monitored. The security detail act promptly. You're unhappy about some-

thing just shout. Good for morale I guess. To quote Gloria Leibowitz, ‘The mentality behind the place is essentially elitist; the Rabelaisian lads go elsewhere.’ You don’t know Gloria?” Frieda shook her head. “Anyway, the sweeties, mostly older very rich geezers, are even accustomed to the med card now — for the private engagements. That’s progress I guess. Luck of the draw and all.” She interrupted her narrative to say, “ — Oh no, those tabs go directly up here. Like so. The ones we never question. Best not to even see them.” There weren’t many Frieda noted, and most had Arab or Asian names. Then Poppy surprised her.

“Of course they all loved Lisa. The dancer. In the supper theatre. Who’s now at the new Bellerophon. A couple of the older sheiks you just pushed upstairs were fascinated with her and brought many gifts. My friend tells me she has a repertoire that includes belly dancing and tricky Indian murdras stuff, as well as ballet of course. Yes I know — ballet! We’ve quite an assortment here. Have you ever seen her?”

“I don’t think so.” That this ‘Lisa’ had recently performed here took her breath away. At times she seemed awash in a fish bowl.

The willing mentor, persuaded at last Anna could carry out the fixed routine protocol, as well as apprise and humour the shorties (the rare piker or blackleg), left just before the arrival of a Mr. Roald Licchavi, who spoke in a fluent Oxford English and had arranged for a party of six, mostly American businessmen. His tab by midnight had reached a sturdy six-figure sum. One man from the group requested some accompanying music by Saint-Saëns — *Salomé*, to be precise. “For that new girl.” The message was relayed to Desmond who was again just outside the toll booth. The voice making the request belonged to Ashly Scargill. He seemed disappointed ‘the new girl’ was then at the Bellerophon.

Somehow the evening passed. As usual Frieda’s vigilance sustained her. She was not optimistic about her chances but saw no alternative. This night she needed a particularly safe hiding place and had sought out

this job at the busy Orchid Club resort. On the very tails of Zoya's performance here! The camp suggestion had come from Daniel himself. "You want to hide for a time — work in a night club." Thus, her plan was on track. She would only concern herself with personal imbroglios and the official trappings of staying on in America when her efforts to secure a stable public audience for ZYTA were exhausted. She was convinced she would function best underground, being too great a target and bargaining chip in bureaucratic hands. She was particularly wary, in part she believed the result of Vassily's daring selfless plan which she spurned. The one calamity. So far.

She hastily extracted an additional payment from Mr. Macht's American Express account, later converting it to cash for herself. Some blithe customers were generous with tips. Mr. Macht's associates were in a jubilant mood when they left. One joked about Uncle Sam coming across once again. The slavs had a fine word for it, Macht said. Then he pronounced *pripiska* in a credible Russian. Frieda got a brief look at the man, placing him as one of the escorts seen with her second 'American' guardian and GRU 'nurse', a stern but unassuming woman with whom she stayed as an au pair while completing her studies at MIT. The man had called several times. Each time Frieda saw him enter a taxi from her small third floor window. The woman supported herself and her charge by working as a registrar's assistant at Harvard. Frieda wondered if it was one of the Cheka arranged marriages; she had detected a certain visual telegraph system between the two, one sign of long-endured trials.

"I have not seen you before." The sudden stray words from the toffy English voice startled her. The man stood in part shadow near the club's employee entrance. A small green-space park further down led to a taxi kiosk which she planned to use that night to get to a hotel.

Frieda did not speak to the well dressed stranger, nor move off. The man partly blocked ready access to the street and she resisted causing fur-



ther notice by returning inside the club; she had been one of the last to leave. The man did not look athletic, was in fact small and rather fleshy, and she felt reasonably assured she could thwart an attack if such were planned. Yet the more she hesitated the more cautious she became...his watchful face more and more like a hyena, an SVR borzois, as they were sometimes called, a street slogger about to signal backup. Instead, in the same confident voice, he asked if he might escort her home.

“You knew I would use this exit.” An apathetic witness statement.

“I was told you might welcome an escort.”

“How nice.” Her prompt glibness appeared to delay his response, and whatever gambit he had rehearsed.

The voice idled. “It is easy to say no — at this stage.”

Such words! Glib, mocking. So she imagined. An innocent escort of almost any kind would have been a boon at the moment...never had she craved solicitude more nor so readily distrusted kindness or thoughtfulness.

So: it was all over then. Onto the conveyor! Up in smoke!

“I’m sure you’re right,” she said at last, playing the trivial pursuit, then shouldered past into the side street, anticipating he must follow. Easily he took her arm...numbly, mechanically she walked on. Just before the park entrance a dark-windowed limo awaited, its exhaust a snaking vapour trail. She easily broke his grasp, a final craven impulse perhaps — but to his ready astonishment and her amazement and wonder. His hesitation and dismay seemed in fact wholly genuine...intimating, following his pained disappointment, a blessed windfall, a gift of Providence! No other body materialized. Dear god, she might as easily walk off! He had even reconciled himself to a parting! She almost burst into laughter. Instead she turned, smiled and climbed into the limo. When he joined her, rather stiffly she thought, she asked why he was in that area.

He answered only when they were underway. The street lights further revealed him as the Indian with the rolling speech. One of the managers,

he said, suggested the new cashier might welcome a ride home.

Frieda had little difficulty appearing amused. Was one of the managers an SVR cutout?

She spotted two possible shadows in the street folk: a taxi driver with one watchful passenger. Then a cyclist caught her eye, a sidecar attached to his vehicle.

“You are a dancer also?”

She laughed. “Of sorts.”

She said no more. He was taken with her. He noticed her the moment he entered the club he said. His parents were British and Indian. He was a naturalized American and worked intermittently for the United Nations High Commission for Refugees. He also owned the Padmapani and Tara Textiles Mills, and was a director and principle shareholder of Consec, a robot computer research company. He lived in a villa modelled after the Shedzadeh Mosque. He was not religious but loved the arts and architectural motifs of both Persian and Vedic inspiration. He pronounced himself an informed hedonist with allied and pragmatic business instincts. He tentatively, delicately caressed and kissed her hand as he traced the outline of his life; as intricate as a woman’s hand is the Ka’ba story he said, and as a priori. He spoke in mellifluous tones of mystical phenomenon she was too tired to sort out. She believed herself more or less lucky, and made no effort to resist him. The cyclist followed to the gates of the estate.

She was wanly amused to see the dress front open before the large gilded vestibule mirror. The pale sliver of flesh added its own depth of reflection to the rather shabby wrap and frock. In the car his voice had been menthol anointed but forthright, his obvious desire cultist yet deferential, even, in his stilted protocol, amusing — a fine parody of her graceless, furtive, clandestine world. In the high vestibule before the large mirror he saw her wary exhaustion and did not persist. “Perhaps tomorrow you will permit me to show you the gardens.”

Her need for solitude was thus sensed and honoured; for a time she lay bemused and awake in a large oval room with ornate tile work niches that housed gamboling deities. In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate...the arabesques stymied all ungraciousness...ZYTA would, could wait...had waited....

In the coming weeks she allowed the infatuation of her opulent Indian to blossom and the lavish attentions anneal psychic and ideological riffs. She imagined herself beginning anew. For herself and ZYTA! In due course. She needed a hiatus she told herself. She conjoined in the end the sensuous ritual of Roald's form of Nepali courtship — where the 'Gods are young'.

She married Roald Sambara Licchavi within the month. ZYTA became a distant faint glimmer perceived briefly on terraced nights before the gingered, claret-marinated plums arrived with the cocaine — and the ubiquitous body guards fanned out for the night.

Her content had a durable smugness to it she wryly sensed. A necessary sabbatical. She might even take a liking to being the Tara he imagined her. She was luxuriously pleased and commanded a veritable army of graceful concordant advisers, votaries, rusticated paranympths — as she thought of some older attendants —and household servants. Her rare understated beauty had finally achieved licensed institutional status.

## TWENTY-TWO

Felix Muerner looked out upon the ornamental shrub garden from the Chinese drawing room. He liked particularly the lichen-softened stones and mossy stream banks. These alone facilitated miniaturization — of a



scene into which the tiny but heroic play figures of his childhood might ‘realistically’ fit, many of which he had sculpted himself, to enact his personal Pelasgian Creation Myth, which began with the Goddess of All Things, his own timeless Eurynome and her protean serpent Ophion. Most of the garden’s bigger, brightly flowering flora gave the show away, and most of these he could not name. He knew the azaleas and hostas, but the clethra he guessed at — there by the nearest sword ferns, perhaps.

How vivid the memories of those ecstatic moments as a child, when a troupe of small metal (later clay and metal and finally clay alone) daemons coursed the lake and forest landscape of his youth. Had the intricate Erector Set, his *deus ex machina*, from which he fashioned his grand ships and siege engines been given elsewhere, or he been ordered into the sports lists his father cherished, his life might have been quite different, baring the Nazi era — if he were to take seriously the words of stolid Doc Wilde and his Neo-Adlerian theories, Muerner’s psychiatric windjammer and reliable tease. Doc Wilde, a psychoanalyst, headed the clinic’s smallest department.

“-- Scars! What did you say, Eve?” He had lost the thread.

“Well, to be precise, small healed lesions at the sagittal inguen, and a recent incision over the lower transverse arc of the liver. The stitches, an older type, likely recently removed.”

Eve was the clinic’s oversight marshall as well as Muerner’s partner in harboring the spiritual grace they used to deal with improvidence, initially the horrendous early Nazi chapter they survived by cunning and mutual support. An indispensable factotum, in the present case a medical diarist who maintained up-to-date archival notes on the changing physical aspects of his chic or ‘gifted’ Wunderkinder (the ones with marginal interventions only). She was a special genius, a perceptive and ageless beauty inclined to understatement. She played the piano well with exquisite hands, the third and fourth fingers of which displayed an amazing independence and dex-

terity — one of Muerner's many early interests in her. She reported now on the latest Arnold Storrier physical.

"And you say the opening over the liver was not closed when he was admitted to emergency?"

"Yes. It appeared he attempted some kind of histological section — he would not elaborate — except to say the internal pain became greater than anticipated. That's when he called. I believe he's performed similar operations on himself before this, but not as extensive."

"And the other impudent cuts are, I suppose, his rather candid duel with sexuality — at least its urgency. To instate what, I wonder? A demi-garrote, some kind of floating 'ball-cock', perhaps. Always the mechanical engineer our Arnold."

"'Here in body only,' he's reputed to have said to Plombiers."

"Our prim Apollo. My doing, I fear."

Eve barely smiled.

"And what does the goodly Wilde say?"

The third body in the Chinese drawing room belonged to the clinic's psychiatrist who then clutched a string of prayer beads. Muerner found him childish and strangely reliably wrong in his diagnosis. Time and again by simply turning his assessment on its head (sometimes a bit of a trick given the jargon), and a realistic appraisal might be forthcoming.

"A deep rooted plea. Nothing less. You savage yourself to prevent a loss. I did warn you how lonely it can be. He burned his latest notes even — the last two years efforts. The trustees at MIT must be furious, to say nothing of some Pentagon chaps."

Expecting some kind of retort but hearing none he winked at Eve then fluently continued.

"The compulsion aphasia cues I said then — and now. Have them, use them. Leave the man his soul."

"We did."

“Some.”

“Yes.”

“Well that sum is not ergo — and its dimpled ergo we need. My god, he’s a disaster waiting to happen — the subject for a seminar we ought to convene.”

If Wilde was his usual reliable self, Muerner reasoned, then Arnold had interrupted his scientific career, at least in academe, because there were other things he simply urgently wanted to get on with, free of all distractions — an unabridged gain! And yet to destroy — burn! — the fruit of a burgeoning career, however upstart, in applied engineering physics (muon-catalyzed fusion), the lush fruit of a burgeoning career! It was a radical departure, the irony being the cues Wilde spoke of — essentially the conditioned release of a romantic classicist’s instincts into Arnold Storrer’s makeup — now seemed to be directing whole scenes. To deploy more of the same might precipitate a total truncation — not resurrect Wilde’s ‘balanced’ re-alignment. That the fey ponderous Willardson, a poetic chucklehead in Muerner’s wry estimation, may have been instrumental in derailing a prototype superman, a robust polymath, turning him into a humble student of Lieder and a fledgling pianist and composer, however promising, was macabre.

“The operetta is popular — a sellout for six months I read.”

Eve’s placid voice was not reassuring to Muerner. Her comments he always took at face value.

“About the entry into the liver he said nothing?”

“No,” Eve said promptly, “except for his inability to complete whatever he was up to — the unexpected pain, as I’ve said.”

Wilde was a little miffed his remarks were so swiftly skirted.

“Really Felix, one does not rationally perform major surgery on one self. With as far as I can tell, little or no anesthetic. The man yearns for a sympathetic audience.”



Swagger impeccable Wilde, thought Muerner. Of course what the psychiatrist didn't know was Arnold's ability to control whole networks of pain. But some pain one could not mitigate and remain neurological articulate. This Muerner was poignantly aware of. So what was the laconic, spartan protégé ingrate up to? Besides lessening, for one, his need for fornication.

— And Arnold's friends of late. Was that not as great a rebuke? A feminist and a sodomite! The sodomite promoted to secretary. Wilde, you are a great tease, Muerner wanted to say. But as he had so terribly underrated the influence of Willardson's rarified sense of proportion, his rendering of concinnity, of balance and harmony — the beauty of equanimity he called it — which seemed to reinforce Arnold's solicitude — his care or concern for the ineluctable effects of innovation and transformation. A main theme in his operetta. The imputation being that things like transfiguration, metamorphosis — Muerner's universe — fragment identity. The imperious image less the communal soul. The dissolution of the human group. "A master stroke!" Wilde had suggested about Willardson's influence.

The sway of overweening sentiment, Wilde old heart.

So. It was time to have a fireside chat.

As if in anticipation of this Eve said with an offhandedness that distracted Muerner — "The sooner the better, sayeth Arnold. He would assume you would be curious."

In a rustic eatery in the noisy city, an equally disappointed human, also aware of needling circumstance, was at that moment begging for some kind of renewal of his relevance to the human group. But unlike Arnold Storrier, Louis Peak frequently misread the signals. He had paid farewell to Cody once again, as she waved back at him from the disappearing Porsche — but an hour before the heavy man was dragged from the stalled

car, knocked to the sidewalk, a fat envelope snatched from his inside pocket. Another collision in the ongoing traffic of daily life, thought Louis, barely observing the note that fell from the envelope, unnoticed or ignored by the attacker. The surrounding pedestrians cowered to doorways and shop interiors; no one attempted to help the victim — no one in the street. A confectioner called the police.

Louis sipped a cooler in a deli coffeehouse and watched the two patrolmen examine the prone victim, make assessments; a third asked for witnesses. The victim appeared conscious but disoriented. A trickle of blood braided one ear. Louis felt he had nothing to offer; the assailant had his back to him throughout the assault. The stray note had vanished. “Café entertainment,” someone said, to a few nervous chuckles. In the ambulance the man suddenly fitfully struggled to free himself but was coaxed back.

Louis returned and was inside his studio when the odd aroma hit him. He had encountered nothing like it before. Rancid yet somehow sweet. A candied rat he said to himself. But in his study the humour sickened. The room had been ransacked, once again turned inside out, the Apple computer he loved mangled, many of his DVD’s cut to the centre, his archival chip files sprayed with an acrid gluey substance, some of his shelving split apart, the cheaper laminate beneath the veneer slit crossways — a feat he gazed at open-mouthed. He could find not a single pic of the tableaux. The miniaturized overlays and print masks, the memory chips of the inimitable Zyta, whom he photographed with such patience and ardor — all were apparently gone, or liquescent, dissolving. Faint streaks scored the studio walls. Some kind of scanner had likely scrutinized every panel. The movement of the device displaced the dust and grime of a decade.

All his cameras were ‘shaken down’, blanked out. He had often imagined being again visited by methodical, ruthless professionals. The earlier intruders were not nearly as thorough. He found he was crying. The

work required to see himself ably operative seemed simply beyond him. Could he survive six months in such a crippled state? Was the destruction thus purposefully outrageous?

Then he recalled the thick saffron envelope the attacker took from the prone form not twenty minutes before. A packet of manila envelopes, six by nine inches, lay scattered on the darkroom floor before him now. The envelopes he sometimes used for proofs for clients. He could feel a shudder that reached to his hairline. The envelope taken from the man — less the stray note!

He ran into the street, to the area where the assault took place. It began to rain — the first and only downpour that early spring. A few stray droplets then a cascade. He could hear the sluice of the gutters, smell the stale sweetness. The few blood stains on the sidewalk began to fade. He saw in one grate the small print, a portion of a test, Zyta's half-face, just before it disappeared into the storm drain below.

As Cody might say — an 'astral event' in the arcane cycle of reincarnation. The half-face vanishing into the whirlpool, not unlike the face that swept passed him on that Northern Stanley Park seawall, without hint of greeting or recognition. Would the face reappear aberrantly a third time, in a baffling guise he might again observe and dumbly wonder at? If he got through the night?

Returning South, to a quiet grotto in a manicured surround — Muerner's Japanese garden — Arnold Storrier met with his visionary mentor-doer. It was late afternoon, and the star set — Muerner's preference to sunset — rendered the shaded greens mulberry, cochineal and claret brown; the time when spirits scent the day's boredom and jewelled dew reflects the globe. Muerner wished to give his protégé the setting for his newly impertinent soul; he wanted the words to flow, to see the ripples, the brook transparent. In short, he wanted an explanation, however cursory



or articulated.

There was no animosity. Arnold was ever a wary optimist and Muerner scientist enough to recognize a shortfall. The mentor simply wanted to glean a few ‘whys’, and if Arnold had few at the ready, both men would acknowledge discrete compacts.

“I have perhaps the greatest difficulty understanding the burning of your theoretical energy packet notes — of what — half-a-decade’s distillation of methodical calculations and models?” Muerner scattered some fish feed on the pond’s surface. Pigmented trout darted from the margins, some richly defined by glancing shafts of sunlight that penetrated the Butterfly Maples.

“I think it was the simplicity, the compactness and inexpensive cost of the prospective device. What a fool might do with the potent apparatus in the end.”

“You are not slightly embarrassed to condescend to fools?”

“I don’t want the responsibility. You have nearly all the information. You present it to the energy barons and their political hacks.”

Such words Muerner had not heard before and wryly smiled as he ran the fish treat through his hands. “I have not the charisma to carry such a message. I would provoke too many radicals. You are different. You would succeed by the fondness you inspire...the illusive trust. Without cheap energy the coming decades may be very dark.”

Arnold softly said, “To lose half the world, to stay plugged in.”

“Part of the moribund three quarters?” Impatiently Muerner added, “Yes, well, the important matter is what you retain — of the crucial equations and engineering design.”

Arnold elected to be silent, which Muerner indulged. The sky was then a graduated heliotrope from the vault to a begonia pink through the trees, which had begun to turn, the aroma of caramelized sugar from the late Katsura leaves, then an Indian red, occasionally wafting toward them.

Arnold smiled. The question was he knew largely rhetorical. The memory Muerner had modulated for him was it seemed immutable. The important figures were engraved in a well-lit crypt. Burning the notes simply kept out friend and foe alike.

The figures and models Muerner spoke of applied to one simple fact: energy — cheap, abundant, simple and compact — whether for lasers, generators, furnaces, engines — the variables had coalesced. Much of Arnold's experimental work at MIT and the Lawrence Livermore Laboratory enucleated the remaining inessentials. The results pointed to small, awesome, serviceable components which, as he intimated, almost anyone might readily work and consort with...and inevitably settle snits with. Once and for all. Efficient devastation without pollution!

But Meurner, who had maneuvered out of more than one technical cul-de-sac, seemed willing to bide his time. He produced two cigars, prepared and lit them, handing one to Arnold. They smoked in silence, the evening lengthening before them. A mellow sweet aroma, perhaps melding with the Katsura gave pause to the bodyguards standing a short distance off. One closed his eyes for a moment. Where else did one find scents like that!

Arnold was the first to resume speaking.

"You never did tell me where and with what you began. What I was — in the beginning."

"No."

Both men seemed resigned to the lack, though not perhaps mutually. Muerner expended a perfect blossoming smoke ring.

"Is the past always that inimical for you?"

"No, quite the reverse," Muerner replied buoyantly. "Mine is highly seductive. Most of it," he added after a moist cough. "The Nazi period was unpleasant, as my quaint but congenital, contra tenor voice reminds me. A stale gay joke perhaps. Your IndoChina adventure must have been as

bleak. But I think there the U.S. finally publicly dishonored, castrated itself. The tragedy of the Boat People was intransigently slighted, as were those South Vietnamese soldiers and officers who fought selflessly for American commanders who had long since surrendered to the political juggernaut. The much condemned drug problem among American servicemen, for instance, was in essence a budding homegrown transplant. American patronage of rulers it sought to subvert was not unusual for the time, but the credulity lingers still. The belief that democracy is a cure all for long standing theistic and imperialistic cultures. The irony of course is that Ho Chi Minh City, once known as Saigon, is still the only vital and remotely civilized community in the region. But another variety of ‘comrade criminal’. Tom Hayden’s obscenity.”

As if he was a diffident listener, Arnold changed the subject.

‘Have you seen the musical?’

“Yes. A deserved success, I think. Tender. Perhaps apologetic.”

“You were surprised.”

Muerner was about to relight his cigar when the end blossomed in a light gust of wind. “Surprised is not quite the word. I have rarely witnessed so refined a sense of mischief.” He noted Arnold’s amusement. “Decorum too, you understand, has its infatuates.” A model smile. “But to sum up — ” Muerner did not like the staidness of the interval just before dark, and glanced at the pale cloud- veiled moon. “ — You will embark on a romantic adventure while ever remembering your scientific patrimony, specifically those formulas that made even your earlier notes spectacular. You will amaze to a degree I can only guess at, but your old following will stay largely in tact. Hence, we await a return. In the meantime, we complete a paradigm brother, perhaps two or three. You have my blessing — and trust. Perhaps, I will yet see what Willardson kept to himself, what curious poetics have inspired such a changeling.”

If Arnold smarted in silence, he gave nothing away.



“Eve tells me you hunt your past. I tell you this: your calamitous early years nearly eclipsed your peerless talents. Environment is crucial to development but independent of talent. I sensed the composite abilities and acted. I fear only that I have been too taken with the Renaissance — with the broad mastery it conferred upon so many. The indebted gift of grace. The Willardson taint. Perhaps I must settle for the splendour attached to the essential learning. Perhaps the lovely embellishments have to go.”

The cigars were finished in silence.

The security officer who savored the aroma of Muerner’s special tobacco noted the smaller of the two men rise and return to the summer house of his villa, the larger, after a pause, to the waiting limo. He was amazed such simple acts could be so accomplished, so final.

## TWENTY-THREE

Antoine Plombiers was speaking.

“My dear ‘estuary’ (Antoine’s late epithet for Arnold), the way you pply Gloria is too, too charming. It’s almost as bizarre as the way Gloria welcomes being cclose-hauled. I would use the word ‘keel’ but such pre-fab vessels have no dauntless mystery.”

They sat about the wheel well of the Boundary Lily.

Arnold responded matter-of-factly, “She agreed it was overdue. Grasping the roots.”

Given Muerner’s silence on the matter, Arnold was determined to seek out his origins, however layered or convoluted, and he had commissioned Gloria to do some digging for him — a job she accepted with a fine disciplined calm.

Said Gloria, after lighting a cigaret, “The home reality, family threads.

The unending drama. Your stock and trade, Antoine, n'est-ce pas?" A condescending smile. "Our mazed humanity. Life's toil. Your infectious language, Antoine."

The first speaker was not appeased. "I see n,nothing rem,motely healthy about toil. It is r,remarkably salubrious to dream. Or w,watch a d,demonized child throwing up. But there is nothing more p,precarious than toil. One may be observed. Recruited."

These words were heard by a small number of guests gathering on the slips of the Holiday-Harbor-Cabrillo Marina for the celebration of the maiden voyage of the Boundary Lily, Arnold's first solar assisted sailing ship. The entertainment for the fête was devised by the age's burgeoning impresario — the epigrammatic Count Antoine Philippe Mirabeau du Cresse-Plombiers — in the shortened calling-card moniker. His latest venture was a classic-style dance theatre in which select musicians, both classical and folk, were 'background animated' by the dancers as they played on stage. For instance, the venerable violinist Joseph Silverstein played his Guarnerius violin against a distant backdrop of sylph-like forms that vivified the poignant lyrical solo that closed *Ein Heldenleben*, the lone form of the fiddler against a mobile frieze behind which intermittently formed a Medieval tapestry. Such unabashed artifice had become a Plombiers hallmark. On another occasion a Peter Ustinov mimic, impersonating an esteemed choreographer, took a nubile ballerina through a routine in which his critical interventions — cryptically embodied in the fillip of a finger or toe — were reverently converted by the girl into unfailingly elegant inventions, followed by the ballet company. The stately and ironic voice of the mimic invoked lyricisms that served to rally the moment. "A 'dawn, with silver-sandaled feet'...like this dear."

However, the program this time on the wharf by the Boundary Lily put aside all past romantic idylls and began with a spirited 8 step hornpipe! The Jig of the Ship, as Samuel Pepys called it, tin whistles consorting with

fiddlers and bagpipes, the dancers decked out in an assortment of 19th Century sailor costumes, the same Peter Ustinov minimalist inspiring comic agile inventions by the dancers. Frieda, who had always dismissed Mr. Ustinov as a splendid Soviet dupe, given his earnest documentaries on Russia — one featuring a ‘lone’ early historic tundra cadaver (“...with a mouth about to speak...!”) — now actually began to enjoy the entertainer and his touched plaintiff’s voice. Antoine, of course, believed the human voice the paramount instrument — the violin being a tolerable sibling — and without at least one lyric practitioner, exaltation, however momentarily alive with wit and movement, was impossible. He may have ruffled the feathers of a few balletomanes from time to time, but ever since Arnold Storrier granted him a substantial budget to continue with his many diverse entertainments, his devotion to the pure instrument became idiomatic in each. The evening was a delectable success and the interest in Arnold’s innovative ships deftly augmented.

Antoine’s divertissements were often sought out by an affluent and swank clientele, one show piece commissioned for performance in the Europeanized quarter of the mosque-like villa of Roald Licchavi. A banquet was given in the galleried dining salon, the walls of which presented *trompe l’oeil* dada pastoral scenes with hidden lascivious detail only the vigilant might see, while an Aubusson rug, richly patterned in floral arabesques, screened less abstract sprites seeking amorous relief below. Six elegant Venetian chandeliers above wall and doorway moldings painted to imitate carved masonry, added their own wistful touches to bucolic scenes. A fine involuted setting of Antoine’s pastiches. The ballroom, the setting for the scheduled show, contained more *trompe* statuary, beside or behind Baroque carved-wood sculptures.

The ‘introit’ to the show was Antoine’s supper quip about Arnold being a ‘briny b,beadle’ (in finding more work for Gloria) which prompted one of the guests to pronounce Antoine a disciple of the Baroque, which



in turn ushered in a conversation drawn from an unknown play Antoine promoted years before, without seeing to production. The play, entitled *Two for Cheek*, and was a transplantation of *The Importance of Being Earnest* to North America's burgeoning liberal love monger — as fastidiously devoted to form (precise quotas, hair-splitting affirmative action, white male misandry, any studies oblivious of European influence, and all art that 'touted' reality, et cetera) — as any Lady Bracknell. The chief characters were Randal and Jock. Randal, a supercilious Antoine, fondly lamented Jock's — Arnold's — eating habits and craven patronizing of Gloria. It continued thus, most dinner guests ingenuously taking the words at face value — for a time.

RANDAL: Goldilocks, Gloria is a very special lady. She still thinks girls might be friendly with boys. And before you have your way, you will have to clear up the whole question of Cecily.

JOCK: (in a strong Austrian accent, while continuing to eat): You think I would know a chap named Cecil?

RANDAL: Cecily.

JOCK: Cecily?

RANDAL: The last time you shacked up in my noble lair, with a decidedly d,deciduous companion, you left something behind. (Retrieves a small elegant vest cast.)

JOCK: You've had it all this time. How rotten. I paid almost somebody for some.

RANDAL: I wish you would. I'm damn short.

JOCK: Well not when it's found.

RANDAL: I see. Anyway, I see from the inscription that it's not yours after all.

JOCK: Verpiss dich.

RANDAL: Yes, but it isn't yours. It's a gift from someone named Cecily, and you know no one by that name.

JOCK: She happens to be the one living oma.

RANDAL: Ho! Grandmama. You come from a p,progressive family.

JOCK: She is a sweet lady. Lives in the Vineyard. Just return it, fotze.

RANDAL: Yes, but why does she call herself the ‘unlicked nymphet Cecily’ if she is your g,grandmama, and lives in the Vineyard? ‘From the unlicked nymphet Cecily, with her fondest love.’

JOCK: So? Some grannies have runner noses, others racy minds.

RANDAL: Yes, but why does your gr,randmama call you her uncle? ‘From the unlicked nymphet Cecily, with fondest love to m,miserable Uncle Jack, the man who may have everything.’ I don’t object to a runny nose, but why would she call her nephew her uncle. Besides, you’re p,plainly a Jock not a Jack!

JOCK: Arshfotze.

RANDAL: You look like a Jock. You answer to if often enough. You s,sound like one. You even (whiffing the air) have that special ‘presence’. In fact, you’re the darndest looking Jock I’ve seen. You’ve been mooning us all along.

JOCK: I am Jock in the city and Jack in the Vineyard. And the stuff was given to me in the Vineyard, depp.

RANDAL: Ah well, that rea,adily explains why the unlicked nymphet grandmama, who lives in the Vineyard, calls you her dear miserable uncle. Whenever you’re ready. (He gestures to the guests, a few of whom softly applaud.)

JOCK: You are a dullpen opera. Schweinepriester..

RANDAL: Excellent. Slow and stately. The whole thing. I’ve long suspected you of b,being a cheeky Twofer and my instincts are infallible.

JOCK: First the antacid. (Some piecemeal laughter.)

RANDAL: Now please be good. (Hands over a packet.)

JOCK: It is so very simple duncauf.

RANDAL: My poor turd, the simple things in life are income tax forms

and Marxist philosophers — we shred both eventually. (Blows a mock kiss.)

JOCK: The old wicher who adopted me left a will. (Resigned sigh from Antoine.) He left a small sum with the proviso that I knock up his zickig grandmother — she was a little younger then. And she calls me onkel. Only a relative would think of such a thing she said.

RANDAL: Oh dear.

JOCK: She is very bright, a great looker, and almost nearly untouched.

RANDAL: And where is this marginal untouchable?

JOCK: Nicht in the Vineyard.

RANDAL: Oh I believe that. I've Twofered all over the Vineyard. But you still haven't said why you're Jock here and Jack there.

JOCK: Leibre.

RANDAL: Ah.

JOCK: 'Poontang' the urban specialists call it.

RANDAL: I'm sure, schwanzlutscher.

JOCK: When you handle a protégé...

RANDAL: I know the feeling. The anticipation. 'Ya'.

JOCK: When you take on a protégé you adopt a low moral tone. Most days. They tend to listen to you then.

RANDAL: Isn't it so.

JOCK: Take work.

RANDAL: That is a dare I presume.

JOCK: No, just a proposition. (To the audience) Er ist dummer als die Polizei er laubt.

RANDAL: Ah.

JOCK: Anyone can work his ass off — even a jerk. So the guy who does maybe a little short upstairs.

RANDAL: How de rigueur.

JOCK: What intelligent cat can take the risk? It's the lie of the land.



Vom Schicksal bestimmt!

RANDAL: Very often, yes.

JOCK: So, to deal with the independent, the unabhängig Cecily I've decided to be this dedicated yuppie, decorated Vietnam vet, great looker, talented but also loaded — the entire sickie schmear. He gets the shit beat out of him for purely theoretical reasons. Then he discovers the guilt trip. He can't get enough weeping and hugging. It's the guilt and regret that, well, parts the cymbals. That's the truth, filthy and tortuous, arschgeige.

RANDAL: Truth is beauty, you g,gargantuan stud, hence the popularity of deformity and hideousness.

JOCK: Verpiss dich!.

RANDAL: My divine p,pisshead, dry acrobatics is not your forte. Besides, the main preoccupation of society is navels and buns — and what can p,possibly be more enduring.

JOCK: I rather like legs. And tits. Especially tits. Die weiblichen Brüste.

RANDAL: Yes, but tits are misogynous.

JOCK: Misogynous?

RANDAL: Yes. To admire 't,tits' is to suggest that some parts are g,greater than the hole — an insidiously chauvinistic outlook. (Groan from Gloria.) Only navels and buns are hunky dory. Everyone owns three. Here the voyeurs can gloat in peace. We've obliged by becoming a race of pro forma nudists. The naïveté is exquisite. And you, my dear p,precious Jock, are a masterpiece.

JOCK: I prefer I think a little feminist lip. Frechheit. Lights up the marquee.

RANDAL: A lofty sentiment. The feminist sits atop her p,pedestal greasing the pole.

Rises from a few damzels, general laughter. Someone wanted additional advice about the greasy pole.

Roald Licchavi was pleased with the progress — thus far. Frieda too, he noted, was amused by the wry words — a hopeful sign. Since the birth of their son the marriage had unexpectedly altered. The amiability Frieda displayed at the outset of the marriage, a near tease of his own meticulous carnality, was slowly replaced by a diffidence, an introspection that had at first foiled then blighted their discourse. He had for a time even rid himself of a choice mistress whom Frieda seemed to coyly make allowances for. But his wife was unmoved; he must do as he wished.

A specialist informed Roald about the classic forms of postpartum depression, but very little in Frieda's behavior corresponded to the doctor's criteria. She delighted in the antics and care of the child, Roald Jr., and still assisted the *mise-en-scène* of the elaborate pleasures he pursued; but the participant in her had gone — most nights he seemed to entertain solely himself, his wife the front row of a forbearing audience.

At first he saw in her state the resurrection of a Western prudery which, when he reflected, may have been there all along. Had she not behaved as one impetuously molting a past, and once the shedding was more or less complete, found herself shocked by the vital tegument underneath?...such were the notions filling his mind just before he selected one of Antoine's entertainments to relieve the disenchantment, and perhaps in some rare nostalgic way revive the *esprit* of his wife-mistress — whom he did not want to abandon, at least not yet.

The contingency that weighed the balance would be the result of an investigation he secretly initiated into his wife's past. Frieda was glibly disparaging of her life before they met and of late strangely active outside his estate. He had been given to assume she once lived the usual deflected beset life of an orphan and foster child — another pattern in the veil of tears he believed the ongoing spectre of morality mandated. Like most career voluptuaries he saw in enchantment and delectation the demise of vulgar cheerless duty, which often ended in autism and/or pandemonium. This

had never before been a real point of contention with him — he was, after all, a student of the arts that promoted rapture and euphoria, halcyon mental states, and a fortuitous entrepreneur who made the pursuit of such an exquisite life possible. But now euphoria itself, as reflected in his observant but apathetic wife, seemed tainted. Indeed, it was chiefly Frieda who lately imposed considerations of sacrifice upon him! The sources of his anxiety were twofold:

First, he came to doubt her prior reclusion and artlessness. She knew and had done far more than she let on. Her curiosity about many of his investments and apprehension of period artifacts was sometimes slyly shrewd. A political acumen made light of much American myth and bluster and his own ethnic-familial excuses. She could be particularly blazé when the cocaine or another palliative worked its humor. Homegrown Americans rarely savoured caviar. Her very methods of hygiene insinuated complexity. Depilation she assented to with wily amusement, to accommodate the nautch costumes and a sculptural form of lovemaking. Her otherwise gracile musculature was surprisingly well toned, including what seemed like a prehensile perineum. Nor would he soon forget the efficiency with which she broke his first attempt to take her arm.

Less apparent, but as plausible, was her anticipation of his curiosity about her habits and past, and the likelihood of an investigation being underway. All feints — hers, his, and finally hers — offered clues to her present ‘chivalric’ despondency — when around him. He had made enemies, both physical and spiritual, and like many Asians the hidden or esoteric was keenly double-edged. He execrated deception and acted piteously when evidence of duplicity or disingenuous was uncovered in the actions of a servant or retainer. For him it was the touching of pitch. The irony was that Frieda had never been more desirable in light of his misgivings. The pregnancy left her with a melded relaxed form closer to his ideal of obedient wife, less disturbingly intimative of the expensive, slinky wanton,



whom he might purchase for more arduous trysts, but purchase only. Essentially a man who wished for one consort, and that consort beautiful in a sovereign temple way, Frieda then epitomized his yearning. Thus his disappointment might be the more implacable, and he suspected Frieda perceived this. It contributed to her lenient but insular observance — words that came to him late at night. Thus the sight of the illusive, distant, nirvanic wife, so newly delivered of his son, smiling knowingly at Antoine's conspiratorial wit, both encouraged and cautioned Roald Licchavi, as he contemplated his new life.

Among the guests, a patronizing doubter declared himself.

"Is it not easy to pick on the ladies?"

Said Antoine, "Being anything assertive these days is difficult — the rewards are second hand. Most merely keep time, like the joggers."

"Sad," said one attentive listener.

Then Frieda spoke, her voice, for Roald, surprisingly nimble and sure-footed.

"And how do you regard the fair sex, Antoine?"

Antoine immediately sensed the tension and answered with a stagy roll of the eyes, and a stammer free diction.

"Many women become tropes. The Bible and Qur'an would be impossible otherwise. The Hindus tend to mix and match. Women will be the final arbiters. Judith we remember. Holofernes is all but forgotten."

The awed silence that followed these words was mesmeric — given their origin. The quiet conciliatory mummering that followed was sufficient to preclude further lucid eavesdropping on the banquet conversation — as Roald became aware when he listened hours later to a highly filtered tape of the table talk during the meal. He was particularly interested in the words of two guests, one the wife of a congressman who might one day be useful, the other the friend of a bumptious Paleomena senior vice-president, Arthur Pechenpaugh, not yet to be given up on, though the man

seemed to be losing his foothold in the corporate hierarchy. The congressman's wife was the instigator of the conversation.

"I'm told she almost didn't come. I can imagine some poor seamstress staying up half the night to let out that frock. Beading like that you just don't spread around. She wears it like the Edwardian Lily Langtree wore that first black dress she became identified with. 'Simple insecurity,' Hedda says." A self-congratulatory laugh. "The cut is remarkable of course. One would never know she must be ten pounds heavier."

"I think they both suit her — the dress and the new comeliness."

"Dear Berni, you needn't be indulgent. They say she has turned into a perfect bitch and poor Roald fears for his pretty dildoes."

"Ethel, that is atrocious."

"You think so?"

"Berni, you must get some contact lenses."

"Hardly that."

Roald was amused by the offhand comment about objects that were part of a prized exhibit in one of the most treasured museums of erotic memorabilia in the world — his own private collection! Invidious Americans! To think such footling and inelegant objects might still be serviceable dispensations, in that efficient day, was but one more rapt delusion of the prurient mind. Most objects in his museum served merely to call attention to man's distractingly boorish hedonism. 'Gullible,' he called it. He had occasionally placed some objects on loan. The New York producers of a recently discovered anonymous Elizabethan comedy had enthusiastically sought six of the satin-brocade dildos. One went missing and the company had a lawsuit to contend with. Roald's belated cause for perkiness that night was the object's discovery and return, though the eminent corporate gentleman alerting Roald to its presence, in one of the guest bedrooms, Roald first greeted with dismay. Later, in reflecting on the object's return, in good condition, Roald discerned a promising omen — a timely

introduction to Angus Dowd. The festive evening had not flouted its promise.

Angus Dowd, of course, reviled the hazards of gamesome festive occasions. “Vivacious halfwits” — one of his more laudatory descriptions of chirpy café society — were always trouble. The centre of gravity ever shifted and aligned persons lost their bearings. But Antoine’s entertainments — to which Angus had on one occasion stooped to fabricate his own invitation — were another matter entirely. He recognized an exemplary aesthete and fellow sojourner, and had attended many of the eclectic’s divertissements. He had avoided a meeting because of Antoine’s prominence in the gay community. As we’ve noted, Angus Dowd coveted privacy.

That night’s show was as memorable as any, and Dowd took a forward seat in the converted ballroom. In the closing act, a comic ballet, the dancers were again seraphically enshrined, this time by the voice of a coloratura soprano who sang the paradoxical Mozart *Missa Brevis* in F major as a kind of Colette ensconced in a lavish bed, reminiscent of the baldachino in St. Peter’s, where the words of the text fairly pranced to the paradoxically spritely Neopolitan dance melodies — with understated embellishments from the dancers. The second part of the evening was the soprano’s comic rendering of solo parts of *The Marriage of Figaro*, with the detailing of the flamboyant roles by the dancers, one of whom Dowd recognized as the Russian girl with the plastic surgery to her face — now complete apparently. She had performed before in Voden’s select lounges, and now a career as an actress-dancer flowered. ‘The Inimitable Zyta’ imprinted one marquee. It was all working out rather nicely. She was applauded vigorously during the curtain calls. Muerner had signed the two final cheques to her surgeons, Pechenpaugh being then no longer custodian of their chameleon fund.

The performance over, the ballroom was readied for a masquerade or,



the invitation said, Un Bal Costume, what Dowd would call an anti-masque. Before seeking a washroom he heard an assured Bostonian voice describe it as “*une pièce bien faite*” — the words of an aisle mate, a pompous lad he was somewhat miffed to see hazing the girl beside him. Had the lad demonstrated a less facile manner Dowd might have shown some interest. As it was he left as soon as the foyer emptied.

A bath/dressing room, an opulent cotton-shirred chamber with a crystal chandelier, adjoined the washroom, and a second door in this led — to where? Dowd found the Shivji villa splendidly designed and painstakingly constructed, and yearned to see more. He tried the door and was surprised and delighted to find it open. A key protruded on the other side.

He closed the door and stood in a spacious bedroom lit only by electric candelabra on an Italian credenza. A lascivious wall scene en grisaille beautifully underplayed the jade green bed covering and canopy, all in gold appliqué, including an ornate headboard tapestry of a chimera stitched on the back curtain of the canopy. On the expansive bed, laid out in sleep, two pretty spent bodies intimated a naughty postcard. The one form invoked an El Greco odalisque, had El Greco rendered such a creature, for the limbs were elongated and in the marginal light ethereal. The second body curled as the unborn, parts of the livery from the first clasped to his breast. Portions of other costumes lay about the bed and floor. Dowd had difficulty imagining the scene coincidental to its luxuriant design — particularly its satyric aspect, given the reputation of their host.

Initially he imagined the slumberers — both cocaine inebriates he guessed — male and female. Then he wasn't sure. The side-prone creature, slender and pale, he had subscribed to the gentler sex, but nearer was stuck by a mere camber of breast. A wide upright hip, with limpet cheeks, twisted away from shoulders smoothed to the bed, a hand beneath the head, the under arm eggshell smooth, the face burnished in a bronze-gold makeup, the hair swathed in a yolk-yellow turban. Stands of carnel-

ian body mail lay on a pillow in the clutches of the youth curled at the foot of the bed. On moving closer to the side prone figure he noted prodigal nipples above the sternum and costal cartilages, each painted a ruby red. The pelvis, so turned against the graven ribs, formed an alcove of timeless mystery.

The particular poignancy Dowd felt at that moment was weakened by the discovery, as he moved to the other side of the bed, of a loin decoration which mocked the genitalia, a multi-colored finely-seamed 'auto-suck' vagina. He felt gulled, cajoled, and was about to leave via the washroom when sounds of a door lock being thrown, which he could not place, caused him to slip behind a dressing screen near the washroom. He reached the screen just as a false door in the wall painting opposite opened to disclose two costumed youngsters, a Hussar and an English curate. The Hussar, the lad who sat beside Dowd during Antoine's dinner entertainment, brandished a polaroid camera. Dowd was too embarrassed, if also intrigued, to leave, and remained behind the screen, observing through the hinged interstices. The dominant Hussar took in the room with a commanding sweep of his eyes, waltzed by the screen, fetched a jar from a cabinet in the washroom, locked the washroom door, took off the coat of his ornate Hussar's costume, then the trousers. He wore no underpants. His companion looked on with preoccupied satisfaction. The half-naked Hussar gestured toward the bed.

"Behold the charmeuse! *Une belle tourure!* Moxy Midge says the sedative wears off in a couple of hours. Tempus fugit!

He approached the bed and exposed a polaroid film.

"Fantastique!" He glowered at the other form curled on the edge of the bed. "Sacredie!" He lifted a foot, pushed the curled form which careened to the floor, slowly unwound, blinked, smiled, and padded from the room through the vented doorway.

"Now to business, Samuelson. You do the honors."

Samuelson knelt and applied a condom and lubricant to the very large and somewhat curved Hussar.

“And the *charmeuse*. The twat tidie can stay in place. We’ve a little brown business to attend to here.”

By then Dowd imagined himself a gnarled Polonius spying evidence of a felony, with as much monumental ineffectual pique.

Samuelson required detailed instructions, the abusive imparting of which the lad obsequiously accepted. The *charmeuse* — Dowd was further irked by the glib identification — the Hussar then rolled onto her front, lifted her pelvis above bent knees. “Please note the knee-chest, genupectoral postion, which you covet in your most flagrant wet dreams.” After a second application of lubricant, the Hussar proceeded to instruct Samuelson in a ‘hands off’ demonstration of ‘beam hefting buggery’, with biographical asides.

“A decade ago the *charmeuse* was a sullen uppity *charmeur* — actually a bit of both,” the Hussar declared, his ornate busby wagging like a blunted tail. “An intrepid surgeon resolved the dilemma. As you will shortly partake of.”

A palsied Dowd, ever fearful of beastie boys, listened less to the words than their supercilious tone, learning in turn that the earlier *charmeur* had adroitly humiliated the Hussar in a college debate and restitution was sought. The photos would establish the circumstance of the ‘satisfaction’, which naif Samuelson, with impatient instruction, documented with the camera. Dowd pitied the lad having such a witless barbaric tutor. The performance left him irascible and restless to leave, less a troubling relish that teased him during the assault. The girl was a singular paragon.

He stayed his own arousal by considering how the vengeful recreants must be suitably punished. Several scenarios teemed in his mind. To storm out now made his own position ambiguous, and from past fracas he knew he could be easily overpowered, perhaps injured, while the delin-



quents fled before he could rally support. He saw neither rowdy contrite nor desisting at his appearance. He further fumed at the maze of deft excuses. Yet he could not move, even imagined himself paralyzed.

Then the Hussar sidled to the edge of the bed, his sleek bundle in tow. The slight change imposed on Dowd a distinct sense of *deja vu* as the girl's aquiline back hove to. The prominent cervical vertebrae and wide low scapulae had he not observed many times in his office as Daphne knelt to retrieve or return documents from the lower wall cabinets? He was further stung to see a faint tan outline that seemed to match in oval contour a low-backed sun dress she had worn that week! He began to shake in a novel way he found himself unable to control. He lapsed into a dumb irresolution which twinges of a scurrilous sexuality made harrowing.

The episode swiftly concluded as the Hussar removed the loin mask and excursively applauded the surgeon's handiwork. "Looks like he did give her a vagina...yes, two fingers at least." It would be a long time before Dowd rid himself of his witness to the obscene and cowardly assault, or the virginal derisive Samuelson testing the slight woggle of breast on the incurved torso — or the sight of the motley 'tidie', a toy astray on the carpet, replaced finally by a nosegay.

When the vented doorway closed Dowd stole to the bed, hesitated, decided against straightening the legs or drawing remnants of the stipple gold costume over the new-mown form though he did remove the nosegay. Looking a second time upon the burnished face he ruefully decided the creature was indeed Daphne Charles. Directly he sought out Roald Licchavi to whom he explained only his impertinent exploring, the discovery of the distressing body, almost certainly drugged, some inauspicious blood, and the presence of a vintage sex toy. He suggested Roald might want to summon a trusted medico; rude encounters sometimes ended inadvertently. Roald Licchavi would later smile and decide that Angus Dowd was the man to cultivate at Paleomena, not the brash bumptious Pechenpough.

By the time he left, Dowd had elected an appropriate chastisement for the two satyrs and their sleepy accomplice. The Hussar was then positively identified, his father a petroleum engineer Paleomena retained as a consultant. Further inquiry revealed the identity of the Prelate and the lad who left. Dowd also hoped to interrupt the delivery of the photos. The strategy adopted was that Daphne would be left to her own conclusions and ministrations...the physician would be quietly, discreetly attentive, the host duly alarmed by some unhappy rumors...Dowd discovered he felt for the fated girl a tenderness mixed with a desire that had eluded him since his early teens and which, he primly decided, must be exorcised in his own austere and circumspect way — both the desire and his flinty obeisance to it.

As for the Hussar, prelate and their accomplice, the following punishments were privately exacted with the ignorance of all three fathers who were informed of the assault. Each father gave handsomely to a charity Roald patronized — as honoraria for his entertainment at the villa. None of them withstood the threat of a public prosecution — one of Dowd's lawyers showed them the draft of an indictment based on the statement from a witness who wished to remain anonymous unless subpoenaed. A gamble but one Dowd suavely welcomed.

The boys in turn were apprehended by a team of Roald's security bravos, blindfolded (hooded), whipped upon trestles, their backsides covered with leather pads, then given rohypnol injections and left in a heavily policed district of Los Angeles where they were booked for vagrancy. The Hussar's Maserati was later found badly dented and parked on a nearby side street. None of the boys could account for their whereabouts. The Hussar's reputation for adventure didn't help the case. Two of the fathers gave handsomely that year and next to two superb but financially troubled symphony orchestras. One father even earned an honorary citation from his Knights of Columbus council.

Thus Dowd accomplished the first half of his particular purgative bargain with himself. As we've observed, the meticulous gnome looked upon deviance as an earned consolation, provided decorum, style and the civilities were not crudely or unkindly mocked. The Hussar and his ignoble panders had violated all the rules and suffered the consequences. Dowd reserved for himself and his sin of prudent cowardly default the discipline of pursuing but not finally possessing what a new fancy in him fondly sought — something he thought himself truly incapable of desiring. He would use all the potty charm he possessed to win Daphne over to what Stendhal would call a sympathetic seduction — what a canny pietist might reasonably anticipate — then quixotically, solicitously (Daphne must not be slighted) abjure the reward, perhaps by seeing her introduced to an eligible consort or husband. That prospect, he dourly presumed, was about what the debased Pharisee in him must honor.

Yet he would have been the first to note the finer dependencies — such as the profane sometimes being a fastidious reverence, or the sacred an innocent parody. Had, for instance, the limp faun the Hussar kicked from the bed not locked, as he left, a second door beyond the trick doorway to the sumptuous guest bedroom where the drug-aided abduction, rape and sodomy took place, Arnold Storrier would have blundered into the room and quickly put an end to the piquant barbarity.

But the door he found locked and ventured instead down an adjoining corridor in search of a study where an inebriated friend of Antoine's may have 'mis-laid' his guitar — the friend was then being coaxed to perform with the usual lame excuses. On his way Arnold passed a lone pensive woman seated on the lowest step of an umbered staircase that led to an upper loggia. At first he did not wish to intrude — the woman's pensive look appeared private and unwelcoming. Yet he wanted the instrument, offered an apology and pressed quietly by, detecting a slight shudder in the form as he passed, a reaction he sought to disown by explaining his



search. In response the woman, whom he then recognized as the elegant Madame Licchavi, pointed out a door further down the corridor, lightly smiled and urged him on his way.

When the instrument was at last giving forth elegant motifs of Granados' Goyescas, and the marginal audience suitably rapt, Arnold again sought out the staircase with its shadowed occupant. He had above all been charmed by the voice, a pure musical timbre, despite the apparent unease, whose elusive vowels he believed more nearly British than American — like one trained with a mouth full of sweets and some of the sweets stayed. The more he considered the few words the woman spoke, the more he willed to hear more. Such a melodious depth, that of a mid-register viola, he had recently listened to from a fine 'dark' soprano whose speaking voice intimated buoyancy and ready wit, whereas the voice he now craved to hear again, though every bit as rich, had been demurely polite. And he was further daunted by his inability to better place the voice geographically. Perhaps another of his late seductive romantic preoccupations, as Muerner might have suggested with some distaste.

The staircase was empty when he returned, though a small and puzzling memento regaled his quest. A fragment of what appeared to be a delicate gem-beaded corsage graced the lower step near the staircase balusters. Further up lay an even more perplexing frayed swatch of pale chiffon, laced with tiny crystals of pink and pearl. A quite wonderful perfume issued from the material, a portion of a dress's cap sleeve he thought. He then vaguely recalled the fabric, from a dress Antoine extolled in passing during the banquet — something associated with ocean coral. Antoine had, of course, been speaking of Roald's fair, 'under water' wife, and Gloria, who rarely sided with Antoine's fond pronouncements on rich epicures, agreed that Roald had done himself proud. "More than he deserves," she had added while regrouping — Roald after all inspired much feminist contempt with his cultivation of ornate parochial menages where

women were the indulged prizes many women find irresistible. All this Arnold recalled as he lingered on the steps that the private and immaculate Frieda Licchavi had sat, in a solitude that now appeared unpleasantly circumstantial. A wily dark curiosity had been summoned. Understated beauty was ever the exemplar in his estimation. The purest of choir voices.

Gloria noted Arnold's preoccupation when he returned to the ballroom and considered the possibilities. Men as simple suckers remained her principal presumption, though something about the beauty in question, perhaps her reserve, and her single droll question to Antoine, suggested extenuating awareness.

Gloria had at the outset of her employ imagined Arnold a bit of a rake, but as her journal grew she discovered very little to report on that front, not that she felt it a crucial part of the story, but its absence pointed to a lack. The fact was he had no girlfriend — or boyfriend for that matter — or he practiced a stealth she saw no evidence of. His mail was often pathetic. Hundreds of adolescents of all ages proposed everything from ashram-style joyance to serial concubinage — the printable offer from the girls. There were rumours — mainly from Muerner's coterie — of psychic scars left by the murky Asian adventure, but Arnold rarely mentioned that experience and Gloria, though ever curious, respected what she called 'bone matters'. She had discovered a proximal renaissance man, a possible universal genius, with a belated, guarded philanthropic streak who, once resolved, often displayed a misleading nonchalance as he quietly steadfastly proceeded. Even his stellar accomplishments in the field of thermodynamics, which he appeared to have temporarily sidelined, at least in the short term, though he continued to review many journals, was said to be a late galvanic but unheralded exploit. Nor was he the autistic megalomaniac the press toyed with — that she had concluded first hand. But just what generic engine drove him she sometimes believed only an as-

trologer would guess. He continued tirelessly to see his fleet of solar-assisted sail ships into production and, despite the many proposals from respected agents, gave mainly benefit concerts, the most recent a White House command performance that won plaudits from a leading critic for the synthesis of architecture and lyric splendour. The fingering displacement of some harmonic lines alone prompted the critic to pronounce the music Orphean not Faustian, the sight of the performer putting it together numinous, the actual physical virtuosity of the playing unobtrusive to the seamless lyric vibrancy produced. So unlike the antics of many if not most showcase pianists. Thus far, Arnold's piano and the two-act operetta earned him the status of an 'exemplary canonical composer — a bar sinister in the musical escutcheon of Richard Strauss.'

He continued to play exhibition tennis, in the manner of a Las Vegas hustler, where he earned many dollars each month without seriously interrupting his daily schedule. He was ever reprovved for his gamey approach to the sport, yet no one doubted his proficiency when intent and head up; he had been beaten only twice in the twenty-odd matches to date, and each defeat came early in the series. He now earned a minimum of a hundred-thousand dollars per contest, the dare slowly goading the upper seeds to see the upstart chastened. In his brief college days he had been a track-and-field competitor (mainly a 'hurler'), and a mediocre tower diver. More recently, and more leisurely, he went sailing, played master-class chess, 'blind pig' poker, and gave sold-out lectures to canny mongers of chance in Las Vegas — a small outlet for his idled mathematical and statistical genius. As a coming American phenomenon rumours attached to the man like barnacles; his flight from academe remained the only anomaly — one he mutely left in escrow.

The burning of his notes and experimental data at MIT remained the single dismaying biographical datum. It earned him the undying ingratitude of the scientific community, unacknowledged hosannas from a few



‘greens — socialists fearful of the military industrial complex, anti-science feminists and carbon-obsessed environmentalists — and an indictment for breach of contract destined for a high court, a litigation he was ticklishly fated to lose. It was here Gloria felt genuine alarm because the defendant seemed at times indifferent. Chief Council Allan Dershowitz discreetly shook his head. The consequences of a loss were vivid to all but Arnold, apparently. The total claim could run into many millions, and a prison sentence was not improbable. Two letters from Arnold’s early mentor and physician, Felix Muerner, produced no amelioration or respite. Arnold’s main obsessive preoccupation then was his past — specifically his parentage and childhood, the first so far eluding detection, the second lost in some kind of amnesia he was on tenterhooks to explain. If he suspected Muerner here he never let on, though for Gloria the possibility seemed tenable. Muerner said he had taken in a foundling — making his influence, given the foundling’s prodigious feats, less preternatural. It was here Gloria provided some solace for she was a practiced historiographer — having traced her own motley (‘indiscriminate’ she said) lineage back to the expulsion of the Huguenots. Her Jewishness was actually the result of a mere four generations of liberal-minded Europeans, one of whom married a shtetl beauty and adopted her religion. Before that her genes dispersed through Catholic-Protestant slug fests in the tessellated lands of Central Europe.

Arnold, however, had only the barest record, the lone concrete document being admission papers to a reformatory when he was twelve, after he had ‘contributed to the retirement of two foster homes’. His cage match era grew out his spats with his fellow scapegraces. The later records were uniformly depressing until he was discovered in the clandestine Asian kick boxing circuits by Felix Muerner. Thereafter the menacing machine was discovered, in precipitous stages, to be a musical and mathematical savant, though he exhibited none of the notable liabilities of many savants,

his mathematical talent ranging far beyond identifying dates and prime numbers. Muerner turned him around, he said; indeed Arnold's mathematic talent shoe-horned him into the esoteric physics he became famous for, the later particle formulations becoming the minefield he one day summarily shunned. He had acquired a Manichean distrust of 'applied' science, and a secret (and seemingly hopeless) wish to begin anew — the one confidence thus far shared with Gloria, which she ruefully left out of her journal. Thus his extravagant anxiety over origin and vocation gave his biographer both an urgency to her inquiry and many glimpses of the man beyond his shell, where the fragility was sometimes disarming, despite the 'showy' equanimity, a discovery that reinforced the haunting thesis that the female better adapted to neglect and loneliness.

Thus the confusing sight of the solo laconic Arnold Storrier logging interest in a married woman whose disposition, interests and intelligence he might only guess at — one of several equally fetching women hitherto impassively overlooked — opened for Gloria familiar hazardous territory. Only the remarkable Marianne Fitch had Arnold paid court to, and that patronage seemed entirely a theatric musical attachment. Dame Fitch appeared happily married, Arnold and her husband jointly planning many of the operational details of their recitals. It was rumored Arnold's new, mystical full-fledged opera, *The Pneuma*, then in rehearsal, was in part undertaken to give the crippled Marianne a stage signature. Gloria believed the 'lyric marriage' a happy coincidence, for Arnold began compiling — 'hoarding', he said — themes and 'fanciful orchestrations' years before. If Gloria sometimes played surreal matchmaker, she gave Marianne pre-eminence, but now could not be sure. Moreover, tarred as he was with the indictment sought by MIT, Arnold was in no position to complicate the life of the influential, hypersensitive, private, reputedly grudgeful Roald Licchavi, a regular patron and funder of telemechanical research, including that undertaken at MIT. Gloria had intimations of a feral animosity

that ended not in a court of law but a dueling ground.

Thus was she alerted to see Arnold return to the ranks of celebrants looking more self-absorbed than usual. She particularly desired an early uncomplicated end to that evening's festivities because her own escort, a visiting classics professor, had so far displayed great tact, a practitioner's knowledge of French cuisine, plus a love of sailing she hoped, sooner than later, to amplify.

As they filed into the limo, the Storrier group, once more spearheaded by Antoine, planned a tour of several prodigal cabarets. Gloria was mildly reassured: she sensed that nothing momentous would transpire the remainder of that evening and so leave her journal lacking heady information. The last few entries had been rather bland. Her friend's offer of a vintage *Chateauneuf-du-Pape* and fresh strawberries while ensconced in a waterfront carriage fetching as anything the town's boob traps or shine boxes were showcasing. Besides, she felt an obligation to eschew institutions whose performers ended lying on snake-infested catafalques, as happened in a dive called the Nekhbet she once blundered into.

## TWENTY-FOUR

Dowd had nearly decided that the ghost rental of the Louis Quinze Suite in the Touchstone Inn for their weekly strategy meetings was an extravagant exercise in forbearance if not caution. Watching Stanton wolf down the pâté de foie gras almost as a goose might itself bolt a meal, was akin to watching Pechenpaugh gag over his recent embarrassment. He wondered if Stanton ever took time over his meat. Did his mainly clandestine life simply proscribe all leisure or dalliance?

The decision to meet him and his lead proxies in the Inn was to mis-



lead the ‘other’ in situ snoops. Likely Russian Stanton thought. Such a group could be servicing any number of clients. The one gamble was making Daphne part of his own team. By then he had discreetly unearthed the salient details of her sorely androgynous past (a thin, intelligent, tormented ‘boy’ who belatedly but soberly sought female indemnity). From the outset of her employ she proved exceptional — her tact, social alertness, deft quietly ironic manner, honesty and an omnibus memory. Thus, when he suggested she might assist Stanton and delegate some of her office chores, she displayed her characteristic Quaker resolve, a sign he had come to accept as approval; enthusiasm, he now surmised, had sometimes incurred remorse for her. He also had momentarily forgotten the simple fascination espionage is to newcomers. And for one who had passed most of her adult life vigilant to the harassing predatory nature of others, suddenly becoming one of the pack was perhaps a wry toothsome high. Indeed, he could carry on displaying the old ironic lightness that so eluded him on that inevitable Monday morning when her oddly static form, staring into a void, chilling even to her morning Ovaltine, nearly left him despondent — a rare mood for Angus Dowd. Her absorption confirmed that the ‘incident’ remained unresolved; Stanton had not intercepted the photos and the felons’ chastisement could hardly be disclosed; such a side-show could have legs.

Yet now she seemed to share his relish at the spectacle of Stanton picking a tooth with a Gorham pickle fork while gazing up at the Chinese tea papered ceiling as if a helpful reflection of the fork’s maneuvering appeared there, bending briefly to snatch the linenfold off the carpet, all the while talking from the side of his mouth.

Of course most everyone in the room recognized the antic and happily looked on as Daphne offered him more pâté. “Thank you, Daph. Ye ol’ brawns wag keeps the corpse on call.” Another helping slithered to his newly-cleaned plate. The comment was neatly ambiguous: a popular deli-

catessen occupied part of the hotel's underground mall, where he often snacked when on his own.

Daphne quietly sought a napkin of her own, which Dowd took note of as he reflected on his generally pleasing if expensive fortune.

“Now,” Stanton resumed, “about the Ruski wizard I’m not so sure.

He’s disappeared. Early retirement maybe. His replacement is a cold moe with no lips. Stock Cheka wrangler and swineherd.” Again he sought the pickle fork. “As for Lady L., its the outings we’ve come to anticipate — using irregular routes, the occasional odd stop on the way. All business locales so far. Bankers in the main. Also some philanthropic foundations. Something up or on hold I’d say. A couple of times we’ve ended nose to asshole with the swineherd and Roald’s pit bulls. Daph’s got some late details. The dancer, however, is another story. Never seems to sleep and travels these days with a goddam circus.” Stanton focused on a memory pad — “Promotional agents, a Czech gypsie called Anteros, fashion-tabloid types, a couple of bodyguards, a Mercedes dealer — the stay ons. What’s odd is that both birds play footsy with, so help me, a third squad — all monkey rate, largely recruited from street crud. You don’t keep roach goons round that long without a damned bit of nose out of joint. My gut says something will be messy. Future maybe but messy. My guess” — he then burped — “some security cell passed along the hat. To outsiders. That lone operation has all the marks of a bod down for the count. The team even hijacked a private van. Left the owners on a street corner. The reckless driver later roughed up a parking attendant and the bouncer in a restaurant. Everyone in my front line squad worried about ending up as material witnesses if they stayed too close.”

Dowd listened as one hearing his own thoughts, less the mod expression, and mentally completed the summation. One: Zyta a success — both as actress and gamy distraction from the ineffable *ZYTA*, now the casked, fermenting spirit of Paleomena’s brilliant future hegemony —

which the Russians had investigated with likely limited success, discounting Frieda's contribution. Two: Muerner was dismayed by both his latest Wunderkind and Peter's wry pronouncements. Three: Zyta's implicit jeopardy from some Russian source, whatever it was, had surely lapsed, as had her jihadi menace — perhaps the new face and identity helped here; only trivial matters leave a forwarding. Four: her sister, now removed from the ZYTA phenomenon, idled as Lady L. Someone sooner or later would challenge her identity as Frieda Van Eerden, the bastard waif left to the mercy of the Yankee state after a boating accident swallowed her lone surviving relative — a story Dowd at least admired in its detail. And Five: the lone holdout of the original ZYTA team, Dr. Miguel Ibarria-Gomez, was coming round to a jesuitical settlement. If anything, it was the very aptness of the season's turnings that continued to expediently soothe. Providence. The sound of Stanton chewing baby prawns brought Dowd back to the moment's reality. The shells proved to be insubstantial for him. Except for a single tiny claw, his plate contained not a trace of the garlic seasoned litter when the *coeur a la crème* was served. Again he picked at a section of upper plate that historically lacked one bicuspid. Dowd decided he must keep the team in place for another month. By that time Muerner would also welcome a full reappraisal.

But the surprise highlight of the session was Daphne's recounting of a brief and rather self-conscious meeting between Madame Licchavi and Arnold Storrier that very morning in a bustling trendy sports boutique! The reaction of the others, including Dowd, was immediate. The atmosphere in the room changed dramatically; curiosity and urgency had joined hands. Daphne herself seemed somewhat awed by the attention. Stanton let loose a tuneless whistle that deftly set the tone. Not for the first time Dowd saw, and was mildly upset by, the great performing sense his secretary harbored. Beneath the placid exterior lived a fine versatile actress.

“One unusual thing,” she continued, “was the purchase, sought by Mr.



Storrier — a pair of hiking boots.”

“Maybe he has a yen to climb the Eastern dome of the villa,” said a momentarily waggish Stanton, now nursing an Irish coffee. He referred to the Licchavi villa which bore a resemblance to the Shehzadeh Mosque in Istanbul.

“But you see the boots were for madame. He was insistent and paid cash. They looked highly functional and came with custom crampons. It’s not a shop Madame Licchavi patronizes. She looked anxious most of the time, and left on her own by a rear entrance.”

This revelation produced an open silence, which Dowd softly interrupted. “I think you may be on to something, Daphne. I’ll see Stanton adds an extra watcher to your group. Felix Muerner will be grateful as well.”

“For sure,” blurted Stanton, just before he signaled Daphne for a refill and lifted one of the silver epergnes to light a cigar.

The bi-weekly meeting ended with all postings in place. In Daphne’s venue — the discreet surveillance of the Licchavi household and the movement of Roald’s newly active wife — the personnel allotment was increased to include two more street folk. Also, the option to hook up to Paleomena’s ABN’s traffic helicopters was detailed and prepared for installation on the morrow. Dowd watched through his opera glasses from the suite’s tinted windows as the group randomly filed into the street below. The ‘boyfriend’ waiting for Daphne would take her home, change cars in an all-night garage, then return to spell another near the Licchavi villa. As a consort of Arnold Storrier, Muerner would insist that Frieda be closely tailed, and where possible kept from harm. Dowd saw the wisdom of this though he felt no personal affection for the woman; she had come too close to casting ZYTA’s pearls before the captious multitude. Saints he did not abide — so unlike clever, gnostic witnesses like himself. Did not Daphne’s new found will and finesse derive from her fixed observance of

another displaced human, the enigmatic wife of Roald Licchavi, also scourged perhaps by atonement and realignment? Did it not neatly fit the mould of an Eastern geometry? The flaming circle of Shiva's arms humbling all within, or a Ka'ba, the fiery stone from heaven sent to house and purify the perturbed soul? He was disposed to allow such metaphors of the East to pervade his thoughts. As he sat in his limo homeward planning the morrow, the resonances of man's will he likened to the layering of Damascus steel! He found himself wondering if Daphne ever thought of perfumed lamps burning lustrously on dark nights as she took up her watch.

Early the following morning, electively within a scene from Arabian Nights, when quiet seems to echo the distant whispering waterfall, or rustling snake, Frieda Licchavi looked on mutely as her restless husband took his leave. She had thought of finally locking her apartments, but decided to do so was imprudent. At present.

He came as he often did, being a natural nocturnal, just before midnight and stayed usually until two, when he went to the first of his five daily meditations. That night he switched on the soft outside lighting that detailed the arabesque window grilles, and stationed a free standing oil Devotee lamp by the bed. He had liked her best in the guise of Tara, and of late in the green form. At first he wanted to use vintage pigments but his own physician warned against it, even with the underlay. Instead, two very young artists he commissioned painted the intricate constituents onto his wife in sterilized hypoallergenic pigments, a labor that took an hour. The doctor had the glycerin tempera tested and gave his assent; Frieda was then indifferent. Her own personal maid, a superstitious nosy woman, who seemed at times as much un objet trouvé as Frieda, was at first chagrined then diffident as she wiped up after the artwork was complete, averting her eyes from her favorite lady painted in the attitude of the upright goddess, one lotus hand positioned between the breasts, the other just

inside the knee, the wider of the two recursive crescents formed by the legs, once clothed in vintage jeweled pajamas and slippers, later silken strands of precious gems interlaced with painted motifs in olive, murrey and indigo on a nude form, the detailing that night extending to three small heart shaped arabesques just above the labia, which had started Frieda laughing as the poor artist persevered, florid faced, his frail urchin's hand showing signs of strain, desisting only when his subject relaxed, stretched, and once paused to ditch her amusement and blow her nose.

She danced drolly yet campily to nagara, tabla and sitar in the oil lights, the musicians curiously sequestered in a minbar walkup, while her focused witness sat Buddha-like in a tile-work mihrab, both dancer and a-historic spectator mildly drugged. The villa fused both Hindu and Buddhist expression as they were in places like Nepal, where the gods remain blithely active. An early recognition of Roald Licchavi. Thereafter the baths were drawn, the incense lit, while sweet smelling emollients glossed lenitive fingers, absorbed with a knowledge of physiology and accomplished eumetria to fluently sculpt the ransomed spied-on flesh...which Roald would assist with the first climax before entering her.

Afterward she would lie alone vaguely listening to a faintly stammering void, her disbelief her lone ally. It was their only contact then. He had no abiding interest in experimental science or politics or, for that matter, much art. As an essentially one-dimensional voluptuary, he engaged, once the early anticipation had ritualized, only a tiny part of her, but the intensity with which that part finally responded in both the narrow and broad sense — the carnal and phantasmal, the treasured abuse — at first amazed then dismayed. What was it Daniel had said, quoting a second author — the sensual mind a perpetual feast? Daniel was a closet prude of course, but one who embraced the nexus of the senses, not their isolation and specialization. Roald had interpreted Nothing in Excess to mean quite literally Nothing. But for his titivated luxury, its prurient sumptuous-



ness, surfeit and underlying subjugation, his life would be a wasteland — her belated reckoning of his obsession and her connivance with it, indeed her effacement in its momentum. Which seemed ordained until that trivial confusing night when Antoine arrived with his witty performers....

She still spied the hovering motorcycles as her chauffeur took her on her rounds, the café patron who kept one eye trained to her unease. To leave the seraglio was still the hapless heroic choice, and her frequent drugged exhaustion, so allied to the ongoing disenfranchisement of her memory, her soul — which she had once interpreted as the reverse! — returned her slyly, ‘custodially’ to the exquisite haunting mihrabs, her beautiful Persian miniatures and the cosmic alchemy of light in her rooms, the lambrequins of the arcades, the friezes etching the muqarnas, and the inculpable child beneath; to her prayer rugs, spectral cushions, music centre, hair dresser, the delicate yet munificent curries — the manifold attentions embroidering the edges of her sheared life, including Yathrib with her morning tray, daily itinerary, and secreted Remington. Did she not wryly, commiseratively greet the young artists who came once a week to briefly transfigure her disembodied self into the green Tara?...

It had all been so until Roald allowed Antoine’s ‘gamic’ performers visit — with the alert, sprightly, carefree guests and their fireproof laughter. That same night, again alone, the sight of her pale turncoat skin, once a sought, consolatory strategy, suddenly became a discordance, an ikon of collaboration, realized for a galvanic moment that keened the dolorousness when it returned — from when the next high might be narcotically sanctioned...the berserk interval when agony might beggar intensity her specialist knew instinctively when to interrupt, and now she resented the abstention: forfeited was the pain she might later judiciously rebuke him with. To have become so pliant, tractable, knowable. That he could husband then disburse energies with the same methodical calculus, her entire being rendered a molten core, an inheritress throughout, the brief, ortho-

dox, even decorous union so fleeting, the rest encompassing a massotherapist's eudaemonic manipulations, a variety of aphrodisiomania — she had struggled to find the words — in which her own peak established the practitioner's — that simple, that elaborate, elsewhere arguably generous. For an hour or more her figuriste patiently and no doubt lovingly worked mainly about her feet, back and neck before sculpting her breasts and igniting her sex, his sorcerer's hands, releasing the arcane tide; the obliterating end of the flood, she even thought solemn. And now — a post-orbit languor, the foreseen future capitulations, so ardor soused, so wantonly, licentiously idolatrous...again the laughter peeled the vision, the cocaine persimmons still untouched!

The nursing child...a truce and hiatus. The wife-mother a budding convent Mother Superior. The child serving to disburse anxiety and foil the evolution of a liaison cravenly intense.

During the second trimester the atavistic attentions became ornate and dismaying; four leading couturiers designed cosmopolitan and byzantine frocks for her; a dramatist was commissioned to write poetic monologues on the phases of pregnancy, which proved to be seductively charming, and the second of Antoine's divertissements, entitled Lovelock, first staged at the villa, became a critical success later off Broadway, where for four months Frieda had a small but pivotal part, her lines subtly changing to match the moods and image of her condition (a few lines of her own Antoine privately interpolated). A video was made of an induced four-colour image of the infant in the womb, cine and still photographers were contracted to take monthly in-house sittings, including the water birth, destined for Roald's exclusive collection. Photographs taken of the two byzantine frocks Frieda liked best were published in the American Vogue.

But with the interruption of the nocturnal visitations, to uncomplicate the regular feedings, came the regimen of attentions she at first ingenuously lavished on the child, with the help of a devoted nursemaid/nanny

whose own private miracle was water.

Yatrib, always it seemed echoed by Roald's specialists, waxed pastoral when Frieda bathed with the child. An advisements from one of the specialists. Yatrib readily assisted when Frieda entered the skylit Egyptian frescoed wading pool — where Roald Jr. first floated, dabbled about, on a small vinyl raft-mattress. He loved every minute, naturally held his breath and remained wide eyed when Frieda gave him brief trial dunkings, and usually bawled when the gig was up. Many months later he was taken to the deeper alabaster mineral pool with the Amorite relief murals. The chamber was in essence a solarium with a host of tropical plants and trees — one of the infinities of her chambers. From tiny projectors in the surrounding trees, slivers of multi-tinctured light formed slowly shifting holograms over the pool surface of Persian miniatures from the Baghdad School. Quintessential storyboards from a manuscript of the *Khamseh* of Nizami, circa 1540, told of groomed mythic landscapes, desert paragons, and the blazing Ascent of the Prophet. Equally amazing was the subtlety with which the images grew in lucidity as one entered the waters: a geometric abstract gradually, magically imprinting the recognition of form and nature. Even the jewels in the crown of the ascending Prophet were lustreously faceted. The holograms might also form below the surface — inviting Roald Jr. to put on his goggles to view the scenes underwater. An ingenious way to 'seduce' a child — Roald Sr.'s word — into discovering the wonder of water. As the hologram moved about, so did the child, Frieda keeping watch. It was the one time she might forget her own dilemma. Even the thorny Yatrib seemed to fade into the background. The 'investiture', was a bonus, and for many months both mother and babe 'marinated' (Roald's words) in the picturesque womb. On days when Frieda's ablutions were merely functional — due to an anticipated engagement — Yatrib gently chided and the outing was sometimes abridged. But by the end of the third year Frieda was becoming restive, impatient with the fussy



elaborate rituals. The many specialists Roald retained spoke of a retentive meagre world in which a child must not be stunted or risk isolation. The danger of unwitting neglect was denounced as the ever-returning blight. Unwitting! Frieda smiled. Before catty Yatrib and the omniscient Eastern Medicasters, her lament registered as waspishness. Roald Jr., as suasive inheritor, must not end up in a neurotic hex. Frieda's incredulity became petty testy exclamations in the forbidding pauses. Yatrib threw up her hands. " — The child displaying impertinence, sensing the intimacies of the zenana? Madame, please." Frieda was fed an upgraded sedative, and sensed a kind of creeping catatonia in the ever exhausting encounters with possessed husband and child-changeling. As she watched the dreamy tableaux in the pool, she vaguely subsumed the many ways Roald Jr. was precocious. Roald Sr. pressed esoteric tutors on him and shamelessly bribed with sweets and extravagant toys. Frieda knew that some Asians, especially Hindus, were known to spoil their male children, but encountering it first hand was disconcerting. One day she found Roald Jr. with an exquisite toy that uncannily resembled herself, yet neither her irritation nor conviction of indecency sustained itself. She was once more an outsider, the doll the 'necessary heart stone, given her growing emotional ankylosis!'

But the series of events that caused her to threaten Yatrib with dismissal and finally lock her chambers — which required the discreet services of a locksmith — were unrelated to her domestic malaise. Yet they drove her beyond Roald's stable of experts. The first incident followed the second visitation of Antoine and his engaging company to the Shivji estate.

The Petrarchan poem-play *Love Lock* had been moved to New York, where there were several demonstrations outside the theatre on 42nd Street. Despite the wistful and sometime ironic overtones, the play-poem was essentially a celebration of tradition, monogamy and fidelity, and for several radical women's groups, annoyed by the patronizing tone and

stumping for an upcoming daycare bill, the play indemnified the wrong kind of lady. The pickets were orderly, though one particularly cold October night a group noisily huddled just inside the foyer. A cavalier Antoine ordered them into the street to ‘solicit small change’. Due either to his words or sarcastic notice of their granola attire — the anecdotal recollections over the coming months varied — a lusty slap rewarded his presence. The groupies were fairly straining with venom when Frieda arrived with some professional associates of Roald’s, including a wealthy banker and his heavy, personable Spanish-Catholic wife Rosanna, whom Frieda saw too little of and Roald loathed. The picket ringleader watched the limo arrive, noted Frieda’s departure to the stage entrance, then flashed the reverse of her placard when the dark majestic Rosanna entered. It bore the jibe — Pope Joan — directed unmistakably at her, for the crime of directing an adoption agency that infiltrated abortion clinics and offered durable assistance to women who carried to term. Indeed, several of these mothers ended up on one of Arnold Storrier’s solar-assisted sail ships. One doughty lass signed on announcing that if she was going to be sick in the morning for several weeks or months it might as well be while sailing — a passion hitherto compromised by a timid stomach. The idea, a headline grabbing human-interest snippet, caught on and several midshipmen — the Storrier Foundation eschewed monstrosities like midship-person; indeed Gloria felt that traditional words were offensive mainly to obdurate progressives — sailed the Boundary Lily in pregnant states. There were complaints again of exploitation or ‘wildcatting’ as it was deemed, mainly from union flacks, but the institution of family shipping, in part perfected by a small number of the Vietnamese ‘boat people’, to whom Arnold extended free leases for the first two years, became tenable because it was cheap, mutual, and scored points with environmentalists — then noisy and often eloquent lobbyists in the U.S. and European houses of assembly.

When the imposing Rosanna entered the theatre she ignored the pro-

tester but tripped on a curled foyer mat. She went down with a promptness and finality that coincided with the display of the Pope Joan placard. The concern of the patrons was immediate, but for the groupies it was at least a pyrrhic success, particularly when the woman ardently swore at them then slipped again in an impetuous attempt to rise mainly under her own steam.

She was at last helped to her feet, entered the theatre without comment or further assistance, went direly to her seat, and sought attention only during the intermission. It was then Frieda saw the bruised knee and elbow and learned from the box office the circumstances of the fall following the protesters contretemps with Antoine. By then Rosanna wanted the matter ignored.

The pickets abandoned the theatre only after the first curtain, and Frieda commiserated with her friend in a dressing room occupied by a young pregnant English actress who played the expectant wife. Both urged Rosanna to lodge a complaint with the New York civil complaint review board. By performance end someone had altered the theatre marquee to read: Babies for Sale, and underneath, Pope Joan, the Lebensborn Connection, followed by the phone number and street address of Rosanna's organization.

Frieda, piqued by the Nazi slur, immediately called one of Roald's lawyers. The man was away for the weekend, according to his answering service, and a second number given. With a steely impunity she roused a colleague, a woman who responded in a flat apathetic voice. Frieda explained with almost spy craft economy the pickets and the misuse of the marquee. The colleague said she would look into the matter in the morning, then sullenly added, "Mind you the bitch's been a meddler for years."

Frieda was at first speechless, then further numbed by the apparent futility — on all fronts. "Please do what you can," she said finally.

When she arrived home Roald met her and complained of the late



hour, which he could forgive, unlike the presumption in raising his solicitor. Frieda was at first calm, at least outwardly, a demeanour Roald readily accepted as contrition. To her condescending Shahryar — the ill-fated Mughal prince — as she then imagined him, she curtsied and proceeded directly to her private apartments, he trailing after. Promptly she prepared for bed, readily changing into a tart's ugly body wear (impulsively bought the week before), and fell asleep staring sightlessly at the blurred image of a perturbed satrap pacing back and forth between the Kang H'si palace vases, two of the holdouts from her busy apartment days.

The following morning a laconic note arrived with the breakfast tray, in Roald's florid hand. She was to be at the solicitor's by eleven. "A summons," she told Yatrib, who had just scolded two housemaids for loitering — ogling — the sunny garden terrace adjoining the study and reclusive bed-sitting rooms, chambers Frieda had decorated with some Chine treasures, antecedent to the Persian miniatures in her bath and salon. But the note rendered Yatrib conspiratorially silent while Frieda lost her temper. She threatened to dismiss the woman — an idle boast for the staff Roald appointed — yet Yatrib was suitably distressed. Frieda informed her a locksmith would come in her absence and must be circumspectly received in the servant quarters, if Yatrib valued her employ. "I do understand, madame," said the watchful Yatrib as she retrieved the largely untouched breakfast tray. It had been another impulsive strategy on Frieda's part, but one she willfully carried through. That same morning she also decided to eat most of her meals outside the Licchavi household — a recourse she later swore abetted her alertness and resolve!

The one single act that unravelled the domestic knot was her overdue decision to consult a young lawyer outside of Roald's family of 'solicitors', which she did the morning following the meeting with Roald's chief legal council where she apologized for her impetuosity; Roald had seemed relieved until he joined her in the limo and berated the casualness of her con-

cession. She told him he ought to listen to his genial, lenient-leaning experts more often as she affected a smile.

The young lawyer was in fact recommended by the feminist Gloria Leibowitz, a fact Roald was left to discover on his own. Frieda rang Gloria at her office, citing their introduction at the first performance of Antoine's company at the villa. Gloria indeed remembered the otherwise agreeable voice and spare words of the beauty who had so far eluded the veteran column gossips, despite a persistent record as being one of America's ten best-dressed women. Still a beauty herself, Gloria never acquiesced to political intimidation, but remained alert to well-favoured beings alive with complaint.

But as Frieda spoke fondly of Antoine's roundelays, Gloria recalled her own juggernaut — the often rueful roundabout of serendipitous endowment, especially physical splendor. The irony to redress the imbalance (make oneself a little ugly) was no help. Such endowment, when added to a patchwork schooling, the common lot, equalled many years of fogbound jostling. It was not the relentless maneuvering that irked now, but simply the loss of much private reflective thought — that may have rendered the inevitably frenetic moments more fun. As a fussed-over teenage model she sold millions of dollars of lingerie, and a lesser amount of booze — facts that incessantly dogged her intellectual affirmation. She had made an execrable movie in which a dedicated stunt girl ended as a paraplegic after a safety harness broke. Minutes before the girl's splendid torso undulated for closeups in a love clinch. Gloria had now less contempt, if that were possible, for the unstinting pornographer than his slicker more omnivorous advertising cousin — both she sensed to be self-possessed bullies. Offensive vulgarities like 'erotica', so often used to flog not craft or romanticism but adolescent narcissism, which even the feminists themselves tried to resurrect to stem the torrents of pornography, also depressed her. Belatedly she had come to rethink the indemnities of stolidity and inanity — the pre-

tension and conceit they tended to blight. Institutionalized split-and-blitz — the dazzling product and life-style blandishments, the hawking of nubile greed — was deleterious, ill-gotten and terminal. Gloria often mused how America's most banal haunted its beauty pageants, it's faddish exercise and health bars. The fat-scourged exhibitionist peddling the salubrity of robust hearts, while patronizing invidious voyeuristic tension, was for her a reigning pestilence on the sleepless networks. No wonder some young illiterate males were out savaging the community: opportunity, health and fashion were polishing the craft of intimidation.

In a few escaped wistful comments Mrs. Rana Sambara Vajra Licchavi had revealed herself such another beset princess....

Antoine had been Gloria's sole resilient companion during the worst time, when she finally walked out of the studio that had assumed she knew the secret truths about stardom. She was twenty-four, had contravened her latest contract, would likely be sued, was broke and without work. Antoine's indirect counsel came close to a benediction. You merely squander yourself before the insatiable lens, my dear. The ranks of beefy boys in the front r'rows are never satisfied until they eat you alive, and even then the c,clods end up with indigestion. No, my dear, you must strike out on your own. Put together that shameless r,red rag of yours; I daresay I can scr'rounge a few francs myself. Don't sit rudely on the fence. Truth. my dear, lies dead in the middle when it si'its there. Either f,fuck a reigning stud ingenuously before the camera cyclops and have done, or tell your wily producer to sod it. Let the gamy auteur w,wend a creeper up another trellis, or whatever venus trap the cr'rafty voyeurs have in store (the new film was a clinical cinéma vérité take on date rape; Gloria was to play a shy, mousy teen with a vindictive mother). Gloria made a lifeless comment about the film being as much a guide as entertainment, its realism an *aide-mémoire*. My dear, said Antoine, the imagination of the nation has been progressively d,dimmed by studious realism. We cannot tell fiction from



fact any more. The producers simply want to see your inestimable torso strung out, a delectable sight I'm sure for the inappropriate sex — but only in quaint Byzantine lodges where one can attend such naughtiness in peace. He added, with closed lids, that if medical science could get over its crazed prodding with ingenuous contraptions, the world might be light years ahead in solving the riddle of disease — a heterodox hypothesis that needed Gloria to this day.

It was decided Antoine was a pietist poofster, but one of high caste. They discussed the truism of hypocrisy being the tribute vice pays to virtue. Antoine said he always expected to get his money's worth. By then Gloria sat in his lap with her arms about his proud bulging head, which stoically endured the attentions of a chosen brat. She did not love him but was stuck by the fact that the one human she could have shared that moment with was finally not interested. That is why the earth teams with so many fancy cripples, my dear. The guilt felt by the terrible Jove is baroque. But my darling Rosalind, I have a few queer fish of my own, dauntlessly waiting.... With that they said their adieus and Gloria committed herself to publishing a magazine that might glean the wisdom of her late stark re-visions, however gauche those revelations may be to the *laissez-alier* libertarian.

Thus the call from Frieda Licchavi at first entertained her, the opening reminiscence jointly convivial. But when the reason for the call was tabled — the misuse of the marquee header — Gloria wanly sighed, less so as she learned that five theaters in the Broadway district were converted to the same message. But another slugging match. Gloria knew Rosanna, and though they championed different ideals, she had never picked a quarrel with the outspoken lady. Several times the magazine investigated her agency's sales pitch and concluded the contract was indeed pro-life but not condescendingly so (Gloria could be absolutely Victorian about contracts), and when Arnold was discovered signing on the first crew of the Bound-

ary Lilly Gloria she was surprised to find Rosanna previewing the nursery Arnold's marine architect had incorporated into the design of the ship — itself an unexpected innovation that Gloria was not untouched to discover.

Frieda sought an apology for at least the strong arm work, the forced entry and breaking of all but one marquee shield. She believed the persons responsible could be easily identified; they were not professional protesters she said, and the vandalism in the other three theaters may have been done as an afterthought because Rosanna acted as a patron only for Antoine's work. Gloria was asked to recommend a lawyer who would seek a public apology and prepare a tort for specified damages should an apology not be forthcoming. All legal expenses would be borne by Antoine's theatre company — which meant, in Gloria's reckoning, Arnold Storrier. Gloria realized the circumvention of the Licchavi retainers might be a sore point and didn't bring it up. What smoothed the doubt was Frieda's recent and apparently mutual friendship with Antoine, and the scuffle in the foyer of his theatre. As she proffered her own lawyer's number Gloria sensed being a sucker for female assertiveness, however removed from the central fray, much as she welcomed attention from any august quarter.

That same afternoon the lawyer phoned Gloria and said he would pay her a nifty retainer to turn up *Birds of Paradise* like that. All the female secretaries hated her at once he said. Did she screw he wondered? Or pay by grant? Gloria yawned. Alfred's scurrility was rarely unpredictable. Then he surprised her.

"She asked me to arrange a meeting with a good accountant. Wants all expenses to come from the theatre fund, but she will privately reimburse the theatre's main sponsor, Mr. Arnold Storrier I believe — a proper young miss — from a source I've determined to be Swiss. I trust you Gore to keep this editorial to yourself but I would like to know what's mouldering. I smell bad breath."

Gloria belated joined in. "So she's discreet. What could be simpler?"

She doesn't want the family money conspicuous."

The mute pause was not reassuring.

"Meaning?"

"Alfred!"

"O.K. You're the boss."

"Lookit, I've a mountain of leaders on my desk and some long faces beyond. If you want to spell it out I'd be grateful, otherwise please go and do what you do best."

"Gore, she has no money of her own. It's a trade secret. I'm a talking trusting jerk this day but I think you're holding back."

"So she has a friend." Gloria was mildly intrigued but also restless to get on with her own multifarious chores.

Again the huffy pause.

"It's like this, Gore, and may Allah forgive me: there's talk of a separation. If we're seen servicing a cheque from an unexpected source — a reserve investment fund say — we will have the Licchavi warriors up ours. Half of them we do business with. Yes, us. You maybe didn't know. I simply want to find out if the account is discrete and clean, and/or if this cheque is the precursor to establishing a claim. Do a little prodding. She likes you a lot, I can tell."

Now it was Gloria's time to sample a quiet.

"Gore, you still there?"

"Whose 'talk'? And what's this 'claim'?" By then her feature editors were listening in with her connivance.

"Well, the schnoz tells me the warriors are striving to tidy up some ends, which naturally includes us. Sorry, can't specify. Meaning: maximum coercion. If the lady has a separate claim she's covertly engineered to a closet fund, then the parameters change. The coercion gets messy. I have no way of affirming this but I suspect Roald Sr. wants the child and a new consort. A difficulty under the present marriage agreement, which I



also cannot discuss. Why he would after meeting Madame only Allah knows — maybe He wants her Himself, assuming He's a He, a pretty good supposition I think. That's what my long nose says and when I doubt my nose I run into things. Usually backwards. A single cheque in Swiss law is often enough to establish joint title. A sizeable cheque mind. The Licchavi clan loves revenge as much or more than treasure — a staple you may have encountered yourself. They manage it by token generosity up front."

By then Gloria caught herself doodling on one of the leaders. It was not like her to overlook the guile of a gold digger, nicely endowed or not. She looked up beckoningly to her senior editor who drew a long face and proceeded to cancel an engagement. Gloria had pushed the pile of leaders across to her with Carte Blanche written on top.

"Alfred, I'll do what I can. Over and out."

"Oodles of luck," said the assistant editor after Gloria had hung up.

"Wish her luck," said Gloria.

"Who's that again?" From her senior editor.

"Freddy L."

"The Lovelock belle?"

"The same."

"Did you know the author put all nine of his names on the printed edition?"

"Yes, Antoine. He apparently likes christenings."

"He's also supposed to have rattled them off when some hospital clerk asked him to register the night he had his chin attended to — the night the picket socked him — yes — hardly a scratch. He apparently insisted an intern give him at least a couple of stitches. Had to bribe the chap in the end. You don't believe me."

Though by then most women in the office were smiling amiably.

Gloria went directly to Arnold.

When she entered he sat at a trestle table, his back to the door, in a tile-work kitchen with lively hand painted doors — the work of some children in the apartment complex who visited him from time to time. She had never been in this room and was surprised when McClelland, the ancient, gracious Black manservant, brought her there. From Arnold's posture in the chair, thumb and forefinger framing a chin, she recognized a reflective mood he could be stubborn about abandoning. Even McClelland had been unusually quiet. But the object of focus seemed more readily apparent this time: an ornate set of bagpipes beside a tartan uniform on a chair opposite. It seemed she might be optimistic: she detected a faint humour about the juxtaposition of reflective man and suggestive costume and instrument.

“You’ve taken to skirts, have you?”

“They call them kilts, lass,” he said in a stolid thick Gaelic.

“And squeezing the homebodies?”

“An’ weal see then about that.”

With that he rose, dropped his trousers, backed them on his own chair, strode to the kilter opposite and proceeded to don the apparel of a Highlander. The entire maneuver was deft and nonchalant at the same time — an amazing economy of motion — a Storrier hallmark. When he began he wore a teeshirt with the legend of the sports firm he endorsed on the front and a pair of shopworn shorts. He stood finally in stocking feet with tunic, kilt, sporan, busby — and pipes — more or less in place.

“An’ thou, whatever suit thee, Auld Hornie, Satan, Nick or Clootie, we’ve a bonny piece to share for auld lang syne.” Taking in Gloria he said, “Takes a bit of raw getting used to.”

After a few groping wing-like motions of elbow the long sneeze began. A register was then established and Gloria listened chivalrously to a recognizable rendering of Scotland the Brave. It struck her as awful but not so the musician, who seemed entirely satisfied when it was over. Bemused he

returned to his seat and resumed the limed demeanour she encountered when she first entered.

As much to himself he said, "According to Antoine, 'Anyone can play accurately'."

It was a typical instance of Storrier nonchalance in familiar surroundings. He seemed to arrange his life to compartmentalize essentials, including the privacy and solicitude of others, yet was capable of suddenly disappearing without notice or appraisal. To a newcomer the action might be appear ill-mannered, even manic. Once aboard the Tau he quietly went for a mid afternoon swim as the ship anchored by one of the San Juan Islands in the Pacific North West. The sun was glorious. He headed out toward a larger island perhaps a nautical mile off. A few minutes later McClelland hastily set out in the pinnace with instructions not to hold up supper. The pinnace returned a couple of hours later in a golden sunset a short distance behind Arnold, his glistening arms arching through gentle swells. Late afternoon had brought a press bash with guests assembled fore and aft in natty seaboard garb savoring a coppery sunset and champagne cocktails. With negligent ease, if not serendipitous timing, Arnold climbed the side rigging and nodded affably to the whistling crowd as he picked up a martini, jock-strap naked as he began the swim. He had summarily elected to swim both distances non-stop that day. "And what would he have done I wonder had you not fetched the pinnace?" Gloria asked of McClelland later. "The same," the tall Black said impassively. Gloria smiled. "He does carry on." McClelland nodded, wistfully adding, "He wants to get away from Muerner I think. And himself." He then excused himself to treat a couple of jelly fish stings.

A second incident came during a celebrity aquatic competition sponsored by the sport equipment manufacturer Arnold signed a multi-million dollar endorsement contract with. The event ended with a hot-dog diving contest which served as an advertising loadstar of the event. Arnold had



been signing autographs for a swell of admirers and was late for the diving contest. The judges and audience waited with some impatience for Arnold to come and take his turn. When he arrived he went straight to the tower and performed his first dive in gaudy shorts which remained behind on the surface in a tented puddle after a frantic hot-dog display of one careening helplessly from a great height. A burly arm stole from the surface and dragged the suit back under. But in his ease or zeal or whatever it is that decrees the proficient swimmer remove himself from the pool as though propelled by Poseidon himself, the suit slipped again, and eight television cameras and nearly a billion viewers world wide were ‘snowed’ as the insouciant Arnold freed himself of the limp suit in one clean feet-together leap, barely interrupting his amble to a dressing room while the live audience whistled and a stoic McClelland waited with a more suitable swim suit. When the poser prepared for his next ‘dive’, the seat of the new suit was emblazoned with a Chinese dragon and, in strident lettering, the name and logo of a Cantonese restaurant Arnold patronized. The amused crowd applauded as Arnold came second in the competition (a 500 pound wrestler had a matchless belly flop), and first in the Heft a Wet T-Shirt Trial (balancing four beauties seated across a horizontal flag pole) — despite a complaint that two of the pole sitters wore lighter polyester T-shirts instead of the regulation hygroscopic cotton.

Such exhibitionism seemed to affirm McClelland’s comment about Arnold wanting to shed his skin so to speak, become someone else. Someone away from, unconnected with, the numinous imperious Muerner. The strain of ‘immaculate’ conception, given the drug regiment Muerner had initially swaddled his protégé in. Part of the story she must tell. A thought that coincided with the end of the bagpipe offering of Scotland the Brave.

“Danny Boy’s not a favorite, I’m afraid,” she said with a perfect poker face.

He pronounced a word sounding lie Peebrrrock (Piobaireachd).

Gloria handsomely nodded.

“A technique for playing the pipes.”

She had wanted to laugh, but the face then before her was not then amused. She was becoming a little restless, unforbearing.

He drew from a satchel on the chair nearest him a piece of paper, a copy of the sacristy records from a kirk in Aberdeen for the year 1976. Two names were underlined. She could make out neither. “A Mackie barin,” he said with some gravity. “A remote possibility. Maybe worth following up.” The Gaelic had all but vanished, replaced by the faint, affected Austrian American.

“Of course. I have an editor friend in Edinburgh. Call her tomorrow.”

“A mutual friend stumbled on it. Her own background needed some firming up. Best to keep her name by ‘n’ by. For the time being.”

Gloria had never asked a favour of Arnold Storrier, but her instincts told her now was the moment to see how strong and provident his romantic nature might be. She knew he was not a gossip, and eschewed familial strife, especially that of associates. His hankering for some roots of his own seemed credible. So far he had nothing beyond the reformatory records — and Muerner’s arrogant utopian impatience with ‘trivial circumstance’. But she was not in doubt about his interest in Frieda — likely the ‘mutual friend’ — and if that infatuation-at-a-distance proved to be illusive, chimerical then the elevated, recondite, cribbed Madame Licchavi must represent a piquant dilemma indeed. The vestiges of Gloria’s own romanticism framed them as a fated match, the handiest of guesswork to be sure, but understandably persuasive: two gifted orphans discovering their plight — a ghostly past. Thus it came as a surprise when the information she sought was so freely guilelessly dispensed. Again she wondered how he so easily came to trust his curious ever skeptical biographer.

“Arnold, a friend of mine needs some impertinent information,” she be-

gan, as much to break the concentration as initiate her quest.

The silence continued, then, just as she was about to elaborate, intaking first an overdue breath, he responded.

“You are interested in the Licchavi household.”

Immediately she responded. “Yes. There is a rumor of a rift. A usually reliable source said Roald is, well, in a willful tidying mood these days, and may act rashly. Recently a friend asked me to recommend a lawyer...which I did.” She had yet to decide if the friend’s call was disingenuous.

Arnold rose and approached the kitchen counter. Paintings of sedate Sandhill Cranes and their chicks filled one wall, intricate Delftware scenes the others. The imagery always amused her. Indeed, the entire breakfast room with its light yielding French doors, creamy white cabinetry and fabric chairs, was as close to the idea of ‘feminine’ as she was likely to brook, which lent an unexpectedly pacific tone to the man before her, now washing some fruit.

Said Arnold just above the sound of flushing water, “Roald Sr. has the reputation of a connoisseur.”

Gloria decided to let that pronouncement stand, unedited.

Arnold added, “Something too of the voluptuary. The result of some ethnic richness.”

“He is not one I readily find excuses for.” She was not happy with this assertion but also not then overly expansive.

Arnold broached the table with the fruit and a chilled Pommard. He offered Gloria an exquisite strawberry, sedately moving to pop it into her mouth. Instead she took it from his hand, informing him that her stomach worked independently. Belatedly and jointly they laughed at this, and Gloria was a time swallowing the fruit.

He then sat down, poured two goblets of the wine, then began scooping out a soursop, talking as he ate — in words and intonation Glo-



ria had not heard before.

“Unlike Roald, Felix Muerner grew up with no father, the stories say, and a pretty but strict mother. Muerner’s family owned garment factories and a stable of prize Friesians. A head start I think. Before the National Socialism redoubt.” A momentary smile caught his face. “Both Roald and Felix, in their way, seek to upstage history...and the eccentric gift of self. Modern magi, both I think.” Not being an easy talker Arnold’s words were sometimes a bit frilled. “Antoine has helped here,” he added with a limp smile.

Gloria was amused. “So! All ‘trump and solemn heraldry’. Eugenic edenic divisions.”

Arnold seemed not to have heard. “His wife is you know a scientist. A good one the Paleomena stories rightly affirm I think. A talent it must regret losing. We have just begun to talk.” After a brief pause he added, “I think you should tell your friend to expect a squall.”

“Not entitled. Discretion not up to it.”

“I have no influence. Roald’s a shrewd Indian con man. The one consolation perhaps.”

“You sound some days like a dedicated diarist yourself.”

Arnold toyed with this, refilled her goblet. “Um — not a scribe then.” The ambiguity of the remark — not being a mere witness — sobered the moment. He said he had become his own dervish, out of sheer whirling...hope.

“An awful lot of tropes.”

Whereupon they proceeded, after Arnold fetched another bottle, to get rather drunk.

The notes Gloria made of that morning still stir. Never until then had he talked of his past. There had been a heedful Thai girl, he said, when the wine was fluently at work, whom he could not find when released from what he called his Khmer Captivity, a sojourn, in answer to her inevitable

question, the diary he kept would expand. A promise to hand it over was extracted then and there. He still had some editing to do; it was too long. She indulged a snuffle. He said he was deleting only what anger brought to observation; there would be more than enough dirt to dish out. She urged him to get on with it. He admitted he still retained notions of finding the girl, Jillian, of Laotian and Thai parents, her father a professor likely murdered by the Khmer Rouge, her mother, a poet who vanished with her daughter. The phantom Khmer civilization at Angkor Wat added its own piquancy at the time: the stone jungle. He didn't elaborate, saying finally he doubted anyone in the Licchavi household could shun its historical ghosts. By then they both were silent. The allusions had spread out like pollen.

With as many hiccoughs and doldrums the later chapters of the Licchavi saga in which Frieda played her luckless part painfully unfolded. Gloria got some of the details from Frieda herself, who belatedly discovered the second principled and plucky companion she might have trusted earlier. Antoine added his own sardonic footnote, but with a foreign languor. It seemed he too had been unprepared for the extremity of the events.

Arnold sent a note, disguised to come from a jewelry appraiser, to Madame Licchavi one week after the eventful night Arnold first met her seated in the shadows of the staircase. The note, which Roald received, announced the finding of a section of beading, perhaps from a style of broach-corsage, with a single precious inlaid stone which, after expert examination and assessment, was believed to come from the rare Licchavi collection. Roald showed the note to Frieda, preserving a strained silence. There was no mention of the tussle that tore the frock, separating the corsage. He had left in a snit and not seen the corsage on the floor. He only recalled that his wife had left several earrings and a bracelet worth a small fortune behind in unlikely environs. Only a single earring had been recovered thus far, and Roald remained alert to the shrewd misuse of his riches.

At first Frieda was perplexed; momentarily she had forgotten the loss, the circumstance being but one of a series of recent imbroglios, some physically abusive, with Roald. She agreed the finder or recoverer of the gem should be received and, if suitable, given an apt reward.

Arnold hired a private detective to arrange delivery. The man presented himself as a jeweller with whom a young man had lodged the setting and stone for evaluation and cross-the-counter sale. Smaller stones he rarely quibbled over, but one of two carats...well, the young man, noting his consternation, attempted to retrieve the item but fled the moment a security guard was summoned. The unusual faceting was determined to be the artistry of a Brazilian designer who, in turn, produced the gem's bill of sale and address code to the Roald Licchavi estate.

The man gratefully accepted his reward and had just departed when Frieda realized the expected reproof might be slighted, shelved. Roald, in an amorous mood that night, sought to exercise his generosity. Indeed, as Frieda later related to Rosanna, she nearly overlooked the inner paper the fragment had been wrapped in. On a similar matrix paper had she many times conveyed encoded messages to dead letter boxes in the dead of night. It was after Roald departed that she retrieved the scrap, spread it under a good light, and saw there the hint of the script that required but a mild solvent — in her case a nail polish remover — to reveal itself. At first she imagined it a directive from her Rezident and was only partly relieved, she said, to discover instead a request to meet a comparatively young swain — the 'staircase visitor' — alone in a large sportswear store the following week! He would return the perfumed fragment of dress which had been attached to the corsage. If she did not come he would honour and not further intrude upon her privacy. Sullenly she recalled the earlier domestic argument and battle royal with Roald, the damage done a favourite frock and consequent loss of the corsage. Roald had really only left off when he sensed they might elicit an audience.



In the end she burned the note and kept the rendezvous, hiring, at considerable expense, risk and difficulty, three outside bodyguards. The Cheka shunned the use of ‘alien’ escorts. Of course Arnold had done some homework on the enigmatic lady and learned of her resignation from Paleomena and, from Antoine, of the wistful poetry she composed for her unborn child in Lovelock — on inkless paper, to eschew Arnold’s nosy, inveigling experts.

The meeting took place. Frieda remained silent throughout. The man’s size and rather somber looks further perplexed her suspicions. Arnold wished to buy her something — as recompense, atonement and possible *aide mémoire*. Absently, drolly she pointed to a pair of hiking boots. A salesgirl was summoned.

She answered none of his questions, discounting the occasional smile that acknowledged his persistence. Only a fool or reporter would have expected chatty replies then, she told Rosanna. Such a meeting too nearly resembled the summons she might receive from Roald solicitors. Then why go? The wish to see into the depths. He asked if she was vexed by his attention? He assumed she was not indifferent or she wouldn’t have come. He also wanted to know if the arrival of Felix Muerner at Paleomena alarmed her. Or if something, some event or policy at Paleomena itself disenchanted, vexed her. Had she abandoned her science, her career?.. Was she content as she was now?... Such uncanny topical confounding questions. Yet, despite her patient smiles, she felt she had given nothing away. Despite his size and presence his queries seemed pacific enough. She detected no threat or menace in the wording. Or warning.

Finally he told her all he knew of her orphan past, the legend Vassily and the General had cooked up — Muerner’s input — and asked to see her again. By then the first tabloid photographer was sighted and they left separately via a rear exit just after she accepted a second note. The fragment of dress he had decided to keep, he said. Later, in the limo, she care-

fully examined, tried on the boots, and felt a nostalgic rush at their hardy look and faintly prickly interior. The new message was longer and required a magnifier to read. It ended with a mathematical code system he proposed to use thereafter. Later she told Rosanna it was the tone of the messages that allayed most of her suspicions. Simple facts of themselves are too easily marshaled to dissemble. She was surprised to learn of his long association with Felix Muerner, of the loss of much of his own past and anxiety over unknown others monitoring events in his hectic life (Muerner again). He sensed he lived on a kind of probationary tenure. She was less surprised to learn of his interest in her, though the ready candour of the admission dismayed. 'I've really only met two persons I couldn't slight an affinity for. The first disappeared in Indochina.' (Such words at first troubled; Frieda did not welcome another canny infatuate; she was after all making careful daring plans of her own.) But the care with which the meetings were arranged intrigued her also, and she went, sitting usually in silence as his somewhat thin but genial voice, its unwavering Austrian tenor reminiscent of a senior Von Trapp, reviving for her a topical unsentimental landscape. At times he summoned up a memory of an earlier meeting, the humor of it leading the way. His restraint was also a draw. She did not withdraw her hand the time he first sought it, but the distant smile on her face silenced him the duration of that meeting. 'I'm not really a free entity,' she did manage to say.

Then he suggested a pretext she might consider: a greater involvement with Antoine's theatre, where Antoine and a select friend could be relied on to furnish serviceable alibis — specifically a librarian who would welcome occasional help preparing research texts on set designs and costumes for forthcoming productions. But this prospect Frieda realized Roald might show an interest in himself and abruptly shook her head — actually her first conspiratorial response she told her pew mate (she and Rosanna often sat together at an Episcopal Eucharist or sometimes Evensong in ex-

pansive naves). Frieda acknowledged the coolness on her part (gypsy autism Arnold quipped later), yet at the outset perceived no other option. His attentions, however flattering, could complicate her own prudent strategy, which Gloria's lawyer anticipated.

Her decisive plan devolved about the discovery, just before leaving Paleomena, of a covert Russian account to pay ongoing and future bribes. In taking over the office of an engineer Paleomena had temporarily employed, she discovered some old vouchers jammed at the back of a faulty drawer. The design motif proved to be identical to the drafts consigned to her. But the vouchers, unlike the bearer drafts she received, also contained codes that identified the central account, which turned out to be a fraudulent insurance fund. The engineer had likely been the paymaster who, as far as she knew, was still in harness, for his cover had never been blown. The final draft she had cashed bore the identical border design and warrant marks.

To begin, Frida decided to reimburse Antoine's theatre with a cheque drawn on the Licchavi Swiss account — a discreet first step. By establishing a claim there she ended her de facto dependent status. The marriage settlement, which fortunately her euphoria at perceiving herself free of the GRU and Paleomena had not prevented her reading, made allowance for joint title to this working trust — though only, in the fine print, via the usufruct of simple direct use. Roald had of course provided lavish stocking accounts to pay her personal and household expenses, but he had never vouchsafed access to any of his major funds — and the one nominally cited in the marriage agreement now listed preferred equities of well over a billion Swiss francs. He was at the outset a munificent gratified lover. The generosity up front game. A second cheque drawn on the Swiss bank she would deposit in the closet Russian insurance fund. With care and nerve she believed she could perplex and deadlock Roald and the Russians long enough to buy a few months peace, time enough to arrange a new be-



ginning. Arnold had by then convinced her to respect and trust his own security detail. Frieda said later it was her one clever maneuver in the whole adventure. ‘Typical Cheka.’ A remark Arnold would never forget.

At first their rendezvous were managed through the excuse of endless fittings for a new wardrobe, until the couturier’s assistant, a gentle elderly Madeiran woman, whose beautifully cut and stitched garments were one of the designer’s hallmarks, complained abjectly that the reputation of the firm, already lamentable for ‘not getting things done’, had worsened, and Frieda was asked to come more swiftly to a decision on several recent fittings. It had been the best excuse: Frieda slipped away and returned through a rooftop exit to an adjoining building while Roald’s watchdogs played poker in a van across the street, and a Cheka tail slouched by a street mask vendor stand. She had long commiserated on select embroidery embellishments with the ancient indomitable woman, and there were tears on both sides when the secret compact was aborted.

A single brief exchange of notes followed a trip to the dentist, another a last minute visit to a florist to buy sprays for Antoine’s second gala which Roald had shunned — to Frieda’s ardent numbing protests. The locksmith arrived the following week, Yatrib was sufficiently intimidated to hold her tongue, and that night Roald found the door to his wife’s apartments expertly locked. She did not expect a clamorous scene — she did not answer his calls — yet was rather disappointed none took place; the release would have served her well then. But she knew her husband’s mind. Her act gave him a formal leverage he did not perhaps welcome but found sufficiently consoling to desist after two sets of unanswered knocks. In her bed-sitting room Yatrib knelt to beg the intervention of the Prophet.

Then suddenly a resolution. Despite the further exaction it entailed, the ensuing freedom it promised was a benefice. Once again she gambled — the ongoing game. Would she ever find a regular comfort-

ing sleep? Or wake from it if it came? The game plan they worked out together was daring and at least pragmatically satisfying. She believed she might yet make use of the durable, impulsively-purchased hiking boots. Arnold told her later it was like his first experience of hang gliding — which had actually carried him out to sea and back. “For me, it was like topping poor St. Simeon,” she retorted, paging a book on historic fanatics.

At first she derided the idea. The man was an ingenuous brain-stormer after all — too theatrical by half. But the actual plan of escape, the one fetched at a newsstand kiosk on her return from the florists, was adroitly, minutely detailed, and she placidly consented to be ready. She had nothing to lose really: if they were caught Arnold would be charged with trespassing and out on bail before sunrise; she would be as she was, with perhaps one more incident chalked up to Roald’s tally of perfidies. The GRU and evolving SVR would remain vigilant regardless. It was the one plan that insured a decisive head start. To attempt to lose her watchers somewhere in the city would simply cue the captains of the wider nets.

An outside grille to her autumn bedroom (not then in use) Arnold planned to remove and hoist her to the roof in a climber’s sling. From there they would repair to the Western-most dome overlooking the gardens and forested area at the back, then clean fall in set lengths to ground level. Once Roald’s security detail at the estate gates was bypassed the rest was relatively easy; the detail would be distracted by a staged accident and *mêlée* in front. McClelland helped out here. The villa’s morning room, study, library and gallery, dining room, game room, sun and drawing rooms took up the three middle floors, the kitchen, pantry, utilities and garages the lower floor, the autumn bedroom a corner front on the fourth floor. Frieda spent a month monitoring the ploys and movement of Roald’s estate guards, and smiled at the clamorous distraction near the front gates on the appointed day. Thus, as she heard the gritting sounds of the grille being displaced, she looked with unheralded fondness on the riches

she would not likely see again. Roald Jr. had been asleep when she looked in on him, his serenity chilling in its facility. He was her main recrimination, in a time of expedience. But he would be removed from her presence in a few months, taken to a Brahmin household, then to the school Roald had attended. She would see him ever after as a venerated guest. He would be conditioned to look upon women as privileged servants. One of the specialists convinced Roald that his wife's modesty was 'inculcating a latent priapism'! Modesty indeed. The Cheka used language so, then indulged a contempt for the fools they necessarily subverted with it. Peter too had been acute in explaining the conceits of power mongers. The fact that Roald Jr. was the product of a concubinary flight had lost its pathos, but the child would eventually relate to her only in a formal sense. Roald's family had never liked her, and would be diligent in seeing that she became a dim memory in his life. There might be a time later on to recoup lost years, resurrect an unrelenting past — children don't always abide the wishes of their elders — but that time was years off she believed.

She was permitted one small valise, which included a single frill, a shortened version of the cap-sleeved dress Arnold discovered her sitting by the balusters in, doubting the unity of psyche. In the original several corundums adorned a permanent shoulder corsage. The fabric was beaded at the hips in a raspberry that faded upwards to pink and crystal, the Krems skirt knife-pleated over straight chiffon. She hardly noticed him then; not five minutes earlier Roald, who never liked the dress's slinkiness nor its décolleté — which she so recently suavely requested her Madeiran artisan lower further! — demanded she change. Roald had urged her many times to shun the proposed design. That last private harangue before the staircase ended in a scuffle when he attempted to rip the neckline and hasten the garment's demise. It was their one emphatic dogfight. The corsage and a shred of the shoulder-cap were severed. Roald never attempted to accost her again, learning again then that his wife possessed



combative skills he must eschew. As the outside grille slipped from its moorings she thought of the boxlike instructor who had drilled her in the art of self-defence and the body's acute vulnerabilities. Roald would never know how lightly he was dealt with that night.

The ascent in the sling was just short of magical. Slipping down the hawser on the other side into the garden could have been accomplished without sheering off the lovely nails she belatedly decided. Eve indeed!

It seemed they were aboard the plane in matter of seconds, though the ride to the tower and waiting helicopter took twenty minutes, and the helicopter another half-hour before the small airfield lit with mauve lights shimmered below. A downpour hit just as they touched down. In the plane as it taxied into a sudden lift they looked at a slicked version of themselves they had not seen before and found entertaining: he could not remember her liberal ears; she hadn't realized he was such a round head. "Quite Slavic," she said.

The release was uniformly dumbfounding. Even the coming exacting engagement in Zurich atomized before the seven hour flight, with single refuelling stop in Newfoundland. A friend of Rosanna's consented to a short lease of a chalet in the Pyrenees where they would go after Zurich, part way by air, part by train, part by car, the final kilometre on foot. McClelland and a small contingent of security folk awaited at or near the chalet.

The shyness was another numinous if unhallowed revelation. They had barely touched till then. He rather quaintly kissed her hands and saw a ghost of the smile that so daunted him before. Her silence was partly the treasured deflation, partly the realization that her companion was exceptionally wide and towering in the narrow seat beside her. She recalled he had once been a puzzling monstrosity. The press shots of some early body-building hijinks were particularly unappetizing, as were the earlier fragmentary kick boxing tapes of a youngster who began his competi-

tive career as a cage match fighter for some London gangster. A waste of energy and mock-up of aestheticism was how Gloria editorialized the body building, the cage match dueling as unrelenting ghastliness. Moreover, the man seemed or could be no less menacing now. The irony being that had the Svengali Muerner not intervened, they would never have met. At their pressed secret rendezvous they either walked or sat, ever in anonymous apparel, in parks and gallery nooks. It had been the mind and voice that engaged her, and she was vaguely aware that latter aspect of herself had initially charmed him. Now the languor, lingering disbelief, breathless almost ludicrous anticipation contributed to a silence that made physical presences loom. She noted his hesitation, his heavy restraint, not that of a satyr, and squinted at him with a half-closed eye. It became for her a pleasant interval to await his response, which was finally the artless purchase of one approaching a quiet but alerted young deer, easily seeking only the salients of her face. It was entirely a novel experience for her — to be guilelessly, compunctiously cherished. She found his stately solicitude thrilling she thought because it was so nearly preposterous. She wondered aloud what part of her he would devour first, and as they both wrestled with a proximate schoolyard giggle they seemed somehow bonded forever, a couple of reunited smugglers or footballers. It was then she conceded to herself she may indeed love the man but the deliberate finality of it awed her. Her life had shifted too seismically, her renewed self-reliance become so consuming that she suddenly did not want that plateau she had gained — regained! — to move, that its very frozen decorous tension was part of her own wind-swept soul, and to lose it now might indeed be a new collapse. She had never before thought that cleaving might mean also a lessening of oneself. Roald had ever been the able clinician, never a ready co-conspirator.

“Poor bear,” she said. His arms relaxed, as if their very weight prompted her words. “I don’t know what to call you? You know perfectly

well you have a ridiculous first name.”

The words suddenly lit their sleeted stage in a Pompeian hue. He had seen that facetious glimmer only really once before — the night of the first banquet, in the question so unexpectedly and mischievously placed before gay Antoine. She said with mock earnestness, “It’s never been a favourite with snake charmers.”

Promptly he answered, “I’ve never much cared for snakes.”

Her smile he noted could be friendly between being precipitously derisive. But now it was as if she hadn’t heard him. She was perhaps still duelling with the troubling ‘first’ name. He imagined her considering at least two appellations. “Can I help with the sorting?” he asked.

“No.”

Finally she ensconced herself against him, her head resting just below his chin. She could hear a heartbeat through the damp of his fatigue jacket and was a little disappointed to find it beating so slowly.

“I think I call you David. He was a king, in his own way — also a genteel potterer Paleomena couldn’t quite suborn.” She suddenly straightened. “Now that I know whom I’m traveling with I choose to dry out.”

With that declaration she lifted aside his arms and headed for the rear of the cabin with her valise. A king and a potterer he said to the small storm turmoiled window, the wing beyond a listing fin cresting pastel washes of early sunset. Rain tears coursed the pane. A potterer. Genteel. But he felt in his heart it was what she then most needed — obliging (in both senses) vernacular consideration. From a king! A piece of cake he said at last with a slight rasp.

Rosanna would write in her diary of the following week that the four days passed with the felicity only nimble lovers can bring to a fête, and ended with the wrenching notoriety — that broke upon them all like a mistral.

The Zurich chore was executed without complication. A computer



friend of Arnold's at M.I.T. configured and beamed off a research satellite the strategic glitch in file readings that authorized the sale of a specified number of shares — the indispensable document Frieda required to withdraw funds from the trust. A private detective in Zurich snatched the authorization from a computer at four A.M. At ten thirty Frieda herself presented that note along with her real wish to indemnify the damage done to all the theatres, including Antoine's. The bank's manager was eager to accommodate his eminent visitor and dispatched the funds immediately, accepting the relatively modest sum as a warranty of honourable intent. The unusual, though not prohibited, appropriation was duly logged at noon that same day. Roald learned of it that afternoon. He was as surprised that his wife knew of the account. Frieda's putative half-sister Zoya was then in the cast from the London Apsara giving a benefit performance at Covent Garden which Frieda morosely talked herself out of attending at the last minute. Thus the itinerary remained appeasingly locked in place.

McClelland greeted them at the chalet that evening with a meal he cooked himself, which included pepper pot, metagee, roti, plantain, stewed peppers and challots, pickled garbanzo beans, and for dessert sapodilla ice cream.

Frieda herself phoned Rosanna a day later and begged her to come up. "We've discovered all this lovely Flamenco music and no one to teach us the moves." Frieda had been eating and laughing at the same time. Sportive voices filled the background, Arnold and McClelland calling out mythic names! "Not there Ares, no, over here, here! Easy now Sibyl." Somehow several goats had entered the pantry. The uproar until they were removed was a fine skimble-skamble McClelland said later.

The friend who owned the chalet played classical guitar — whose music they discovered — and Rosanna once taught Flamenco dancing at the Madrid Academy. At fist Rosanna was hesitant; she could hardly in-

trude on a de facto honeymoon. But she went, after much pleading, and discovered a slightly addled, rapt couple playing ingenious tricks on themselves, McClelland and the cook, and some of the security staff, sneaking off after supper to the beautiful orchard, returning by dark to a discreetly billeted chalet. The discovery of the music, in particular Arnold's — now 'David's', though where that name came from Rosanna never learned — superb playing of it on the old square grand, incited a kind of infatuation. Frieda was a wonderfully talented dancer Rosanna discovered, almost she guessed a sometime professional. Yet all that observation got was a friendly hug. All three ended dancing to some records Rosanna brought. Such pupils! A little too dotty to take on the road mind.

When Rosanna would insist on a rest, the two swanks pulled out a variety of infernal puzzles, most requiring great plastic and/or mathematical skill — Rosanna had been hopeless she said, and had heard of none of them: Baffling Burrs, the Engel Enigma, a dreadful Pyramid puzzle, and several silly computerized forms of *écarté* she could hear being played late at night, even as the intervening silences intrigued. They cheated ferociously and called one another such names. Each a fearless endearment it seemed.

But when the skirmishing lapsed, usually after the evening meal, the serenity that descended became positively baroque, and Rosanna, McClelland and the cook fled to their rooms, as the security folk fanned out. The night Rosanna left the two warring sweetkins did the dishes, and found even that chore mesmeric.

The inaugural meal that McClelland prepared was gobbled up after the hike with spare conversational interruptions. Talk was still precious then and the daze of acceptance not yet worn off, or rather not evolved into the later ardor. Frieda was once again struck by the abiding care two individuals can so parsimoniously and elegantly display for one another. She even sensed overtones of jealousy in watching the two. The swarthy

McClelland was taller than Arnold and only slightly narrower. He could be a durable sixty-seven or a provident forty-four. He was a widower with five grown children, all a blessing it seemed. He had been a stevedore, a Marine marksman, an amateur palaeontologist, a sailor and carpenter — whose patented canoe paddle made him an independent fortune. He was a superb cook and invested part of his fortune in a tobacco plantation (before smoke-free probity and punctilio) renowned for a pipe blend whose fragrance, a muted all spice, impregnated the kitchen. His expression held permanently the sinew of a refined melancholy. His dignity allied to his proficiency was mesmerizing. He was also eccentrically religious and deeply superstitious — a fact she learned in stages. Frieda found several examples of small bizarre markings on windowsills and threshold that amused her at first until she realized that Arnold himself was not indifferent to them. He claimed the man's intuition had twice proved uncanny and providential. "Out of how many castings?" she asked, feathers sticking from the corner of her then pomegranate-red mouth, after she had partly demolished a pillow over his head. "Two," he had simply said, before cleaning the settle of plumage from her chest.

Still later, just before they slept, she asked if any readings had been taken that weekend. No, but McClelland had been highly optimistic.

"Was he!" she answered, with a wifely primness. But her face then was in darkness, and the twist of mouth and single half-cocked eyelid she often arranged to give herself away with he could not see. He reached for her stomach in hopes of detecting a slight laugh dimple, but that too was endlessly smooth.

If he was given a time to relive that ineffable period it would be the first hours they were entirely alone. Not because it was the most radiant, or satisfying, but simply now the most unreliably recalled. It had been fraught with all kinds of sedate gremlins, which usually convulsed them both in laughter. He was not even certain he had entirely convinced her



the trip was worth while. She had returned from the aft cabin of the plane, curled against him, her feet tucked beneath her on the seat, and after a languorous yawning apology promptly fallen asleep. She even snored. He was not in the least tired and sat staring alternately at the growing darkness beyond the window and the reflection of the inert form pillowed against his chest, her combed-out oriole hair the one hopeful offering. She had surely guessed, ruled on his infatuation and finally gone along with the plan — which produced her physical release but not a glimpse of her predilection once the escape was made. He had no firm ground on which to presume anything, and his pensive mindful unfamiliarity with women — with humans generally — starved him of reliable clues. His one consolation was that she perhaps did not know herself, given the complexity of her past life.

To date he had passionately, selflessly sought only one woman, and her sudden loss with the unborn child in an awesome Indochina jungle remained a pristine and a too poignant mystery. They had both been relative novices, their love clumsy yet blissful. The irony itself fostered a special fondness. He became an accomplished lover during the pregnancy, so he chose to believe, the advent of the child providing a reformation of that carnality — before the sudden disappearance of both mother and unborn child. Abducted he believed, though he had not proof. He knew her archly traditional family distrusted him. But if technique in the later liaisons improved so did the casualness, leaving him at one point to consider fornicating in and of itself a persistent begrudged disappointment as well as an unrecoverable waste of time. Forthwith he calmly learned the bold steps to surgically intervene and impermanently lessen the need. He had even accomplished the task finally himself, without anesthetic (he willed a psychic immunity from Muerner, and feared for his alertness), a fact that spurred him to more esoteric interventions.

What a fool he had been then, a restless voyageur, full of his own im-

maculate promise. Were it not for the chagrin of being one night towed bleeding and yelping back to Muerner he might still be at it. Yet he had rediscovered in those interventions a feral nervous system that might be slighted by heady heroic circumstance — the wounded combatant who felt no pain in his shattered leg. Being in love, he fancifully imagined as the ever larval lust maturing into affection, into a panoramic involvement. The cruder drive the sire of changelings ever febrile, meretricious and arrogant; the more involving suasion the harbinger of greater perspective and lasting symmetry. A perfected prelude and fugue, say. In his fondness for Frieda he imagined that harmonious realignment of the senses — what he lamely called in one too felicitous moment ‘the dolphin of serendipity’. “Ah,” she mused. “Another divining rod,” and formed her pillow into a club. “Yes, bottle nosed,” he replied. They had been drinking.

But that incident came later, when they had finally belatedly come to terms with their needs, and discovered the mutual resonances that give harmony its solidity.

Thus the confusing mental landscape of those very first hours belied the beauty, the auburn russet loveliness of the hike, and the first glimpses of the whitewashed chalet with its fragrant citrus trees, patch of hardy Kikuyu lawn and sprightly flower beds accented with Sunflowers. The hike was in part an acknowledgement of their very first moments together alone — the expensive so casually purchased boots — and a ploy to flush out unbidden observers. Another team shadowed their progress, inspecting for signs of cautious prowlers. But none were seen and McClelland posted the enigmatic signs of good — ‘preoccupied’ he said — Fortune.

The meal before the wide window arches framing the terrace and a vintage garden shed, in the antique kitchen smelling of McClelland’s sweet tobacco, ripe figs and anise, was no sooner ended than the reticence loomed anew. He imagined he had a brilliant subclinical autistic on his hands.

She seemed fascinated with the rustic beauty of the new surroundings but unable to bring it into focus. Her only specific requisition had been a discreet hiding place for a few days after Roald learned of her flight and use of the estate account. He would act impulsively she thought, possibly against the wises of his advisers. She would know how to proceed in due course. A smitten Arnold completed the logistics of the Zurich-Pyrenees junket.

He did wonder if he had misread the spirited amiability of the final notes. Was her display of cheerfulness and conviviality a means to a well-screened out? Did she doubt his trustworthiness, which she must suborn till the last minute? None of these questions was ever really answered. Either she had intended no match, foresaw perhaps a future cash recompense for his troubles, then changed her mind; or she simply carefully appraised the options as she went — he was still half inclined to believe the latter. Implausible acute anticipation — the flavour of those first reeling hours! They strolled in the twilight on the terrace and through the trees, both the manicured fruit trees and the orphans at the perimeter. She had paused near the perimeter by some unattended olive trees, hardy survivors at the margins. Only later did he see the beautiful chiffon dress hanging unused in a closet. She wanted finally to steer clear of the waxed memories — so she dryly explained.

They went indoors and silently watched the sunset. She coaxed him to play something on the elderly grand. He ended playing Satie, with a wistfulness that went apparently unnoticed. When he paused he found her asleep. She awoke convulsively seconds later and soporifically but plaintively sought her room. He returned to the piano, to play his transcription of the 'Air' from the Holberg Suite by Edvard Grieg. When he finished she was seated at the far end of the room, in a limpid chemise.

"It was lovely. I didn't want to disturb you."

"I didn't think you'd hear."



“I hear like an owl.”

“My playing that furtive...”

They regarded one another with candid amusement for a time, which rather defied the swiftness they were suddenly in one another's arms, the kisses ravenous. McClelland, yawning while consulting his watch fob, was the last to see them that night, the creak in the staircase giving the buoyant twosome away, Arnold hefting his love over a shoulder like a prized himation, the laughter quiet, conspiratorial. “He gon ta help a sistah out.” McClelland said to Rosanna in the Caribbean lingo he sometimes resorted to, followed by the well-versed chuckle.

The missing frames in the prelude yielded to a chiaroscuro keenness the following morning when the hint of daybreak ambered the darker outlines of his room. He was first aware of someone lying on her side holding one of his hands. A knitted afghan shrouded the figure. She was matching her smaller span of fingers to his. He smiled, which she belatedly smoothly parried by a soft neatly apathetic declaration: “— Not even a handful.” The louvered window framed her head, a penumbra face. Was the remark full of incipient mirth or an accountant's assessment? Questions followed her like a rolling mist. Yet fewer of her words begged for more. He had said she arrived with his sun. And on cue, as he carefully watched in measured anticipation, the first rays of the rosy fingered dawn began to detail her fine spun hair. She matter-of-factly took up both his hands as if to appraise their worth. “Historic David.” She might have flipped a coin before neatly pulling the afghan over them.

He awoke about noon, convinced there was a lenient God who occasionally sanctioned enchantment. He lay on his side trailing relaxed fingers over the ineluctable prize he had just uncovered, covered and again uncovered, to a lay smile. She was whiter and heavier than remembered, the two maternal sentinels a Rose Marie pink. Begonia, she said. Peach cameo freckles dusted her cheeks, shoulders and chest. He lingered about

the beautiful fold whose smoothness in the dark had momentarily alarmed. Even now the shock of its nude candor, so childlike, slyly accusingly confronted. She stirred but did not open her eyes. “A long story...it’s agony growing out. One day...” She moved closer to him and displaced his hand — sending it on its tireless pilgrimage. “In a bit. It belongs to Atë,” she said rather stoically after a plainsong sigh. Between fond murmurs she added: “The ancient Greek goddess with a reputation for criminal rashness...one of Antoine’s allusions...who was driven out of heaven and bedevilled the sons of men. Making them so blind they blundered into things.” The pause that followed was anti-climactic. “A Cloutie in the details.”

“A cloven hoof...?”

But by then she was well on her way, further exclamations tongue tied...her excitement a benediction.

She awoke a second time to reproof him with candid eyes that slowly creased to ready esprit. She stretched languorously, newly alert, teasing with a pyromaniac’s worth.

“So, poshlotsy?..”

It was perhaps the beginning of what Rosanna would later refer to as the ‘commedia all’improvviso’ stage — comedy on the fly, so to speak, which endured until the end.

“You didn’t hear,” he said.

“I am total princess. Anastasia.”

“So I must content myself with being c, content.” He had stolidly opted to adopt Antoine’s manner.”

“Once a B, belge...,” she promptly responded.

“Big man ting,” he responded aping Jamaican McClelland.

“I think you mean stinga.” The later convulsive sighs caused McClelland to shut the kitchen door.

She really was at times quite merciless Rosanna told Gloria months

later when the subject of happiness was broached. “I think he could best her only at those fiendish calculus puzzles, and even there she cheated adroitly, apparently. The poor fellow was smitten. In a knightly genteel sense of course. He can look the brute but only around boundaries. I cannot speak for Frieda, though I think she was at least fond of him then. But there remained a distant something, perhaps a simple disbelief that things might change for the better...I doubt any of us will know it all.”

Rosanna related several overheard encounters, one as she was about to leave an upstairs linen closet, at first unaware of their presence nearby. Arnold was being ‘just slightly presumptive’, to use Antoine’s characterization.

“Of course perfect pitch is essential. And not always in obvious ways. Method, as you call it, simply sweats...before the — real thing.” An awkward endearment.

“Hit dem keys bro,” Frieda retorted in, as Rosanna said, ‘an ersatz slang she picked up somewhere, and used to pickle Roald with toward the end, apparently — in conversation with her lawyers.’

And later:

“ — Speaking of methodology — ”

Frieda spoke, rather drunk; they sat on the terrace gazing at an array of wines, Arnold chin in hand, eyeing the lambent tints of late sunlight cast on the slate table top.

“ — The reds definitely have the guts, the savvy, poshlotsy.”

“Life -- a cabernet,” he softly said without turning.

“From the hun himself.”

Arnold, Rosanna said, was intoxicated regardless, though she never saw him blotto, as Frieda nearly became that afternoon and following day. Pretending to be so Russian!

“You’re not a social drinker,” she said shrewdly.

“Runs in the family.”



“Hah!” Then she mellowed. “ — Is proscribed subject.”

“One day I’ll commit the lot. If I ever find them.”

“Comrade...”

Frieda rose to get closer to him, swayed off balance yet landed on a chaise that seemed providentially placed. Arnold ended up on his knees.

“Lopsided bottle,” she wanly said.

With a show of earnestness Arnold performed a credible Cossack hell-and-toe with the bottle balanced on his forehead. Rosanna said his physical prowess was always a mesmeric discovery. After the folk dance, he easily gathered up the bibber and headed off to her room. Said she, head back, hair a live waterfall, “Take me to the authorities,” and began laughing while releasing her halter. Rosanna said later to Gloria. “You know what it can be like! Poor McClelland. In the kitchen he was always drawing the curtain or closing the door, telling the cook to hold or hurry the supper. The following morning Arnold, breakfast tray in hand, passed me on the stairs. Seconds later Frieda was heard to say from her room in a hoarse voice, “David, dear...” I could not hear what happened but care-free laughter followed. That laughter. Lyrical and prophetic.”

Thumbing her diary journal Rosanna reflected. “She had an unexpected insouciance. It was partly sheer relief, I’m sure, as I think did Arnold. But another might easily have construed a dotty exhibitionist, particularly some of the guards. To sunbathe quite like that. And drenched in oil. Then that unprepared for laughter. Yet should one wonder she was so effusive. To be finally free of the other nonsense. One evening they joined us briefly on the terrace. You get what I call a real gloaming over there. Frieda was still nappy and wanted to know Arnold’s age. The question had been placed earlier. ‘So how old is old? Less the cock and bull.’ That rally startled everyone nervously laughing, while the minx feigned a smile. ‘Old enough,’ he fondly said.

“There were and are lots of stories, of course, some likely embellished.

In that catskin quiet you imagine all sorts of things. They could have gone off on their own but Arnold wanted a safe haven he told me. The cook said the guards were the most conscientious when there was no moon. The two apparently returned through the orchard that second night, he carrying her I gather, she picking things out of his hair. Well, to make short an earthy story, a guard got alarmed by the noise — from the orchard. Our cook thought it a cat. Ha. You can imagine how head up you'd be given the possible danger.

“Well, the alarmed guard called the area leader whose name was Paul and reported either trouble or someone breaking protocol. Paul, who was nearest the lovers, radioed back and said that everything was A-okay, if a bit noisy. The caller is supposed to have plaintively remarked, ‘Didn’t think you and Breitkopf — Breitkopf incidentally was a cutie — were so copacetic.’ Paul then assured the head up caller that the infrared was twenty-twenty and totally absorbing. It’s an awful story, but likely not fanciful. They were at times a spectacular twosome I have no doubt.

“The end of the idyll, however, was haplessly prolonged and wretchedly confused. Roald’s investigation into his wife’s past had produced results. The headline read: Billionaire’s Wife Russian Spy. Arnold managed to keep his rancor, his dislike of Roald, mainly to himself. Frieda had sparsely detailed both her stay at Paleomena unlike her disenchantment with Roald, but left her origins shrouded in ‘just the dreary lot of an orphan,’ Her roll as an illegal was left in escrow. Arnold knew of her plight with Paleomena from Muerner but was bewildered by the public revelation. The presumption had been that Roald would not want his contracts with the Pentagon jeopardized, even less an imputable complicity with the GRU made public. The paper appeared unexpectedly minutes before Frieda was to board the train for San Sebastian. They had planned to meet in Geneva once the court dates were fixed. Now, in addition to the ominous public revelation, was the snug detention an official inquiry could

warrant, foiling the legitimacy of her claim against Roald. Arnold had arranged an escort — but at the last minute suggested she seek political asylum in Portugal. Frieda seemed to slip into a state of suspended animation. Arnold fell prey to his own dismay. Everyone was miserable. Frieda had apparently discounted her husband's acumen and internecine cool — the other side of that highly-tempered Saracen blade she had so fleetingly glimpsed: he would cleave his own future to circumscribe hers, for he would now be a subject of investigation by Moscow, London, Brussels and Washington. The money trail alone could take years to sort out. The Soviets especially were red-faced. The GRU suffered a vintage media embarrassment, the network Frieda had served would have evaporated. The nets of international scrutiny began seining all Licchavi enterprises, national and international alike. Industrial maneuvering for all and sundry business associates (East Block ghosts included) became nothing short of breathtaking, media eagles ravenous for inside details for months. The relatively innocuous draft had ignited a firestorm. The plume of a volcano one columnist wrote. If government officials were implicated the legal magma could scald for years. Frieda's secret trump card of embarrassed Cheka 'cooperation' was extracted from the pack before the game proceeded. That was surely one of the terrors. "The eruption of a subterranean choler." So said a ruminative Rosanna.

The forthcoming days were steadfastly execrable said Antoine, failing to add the flashing bit of wit that elsewhere might have illuminated some mote of reasonableness. As it was, for Arnold Storrier and his friends, a newly revealed Apollyon nearly had his day. And to think the legal system contorted the reality and the truth — that was and is the 'quintessential dread' said Gloria's obdurate editorial.

The underlying cause, if such there were, the one duly overlooked or slighted, was simple, primeval, scorched-earth-style resentment, fanned by an invincible historic carnality. Roald's grandmother, a rebellious descen-



dent of Arab royalty, was seduced by Roald's grandfather, a vitiated and dispossessed Indian Raj, whose parcel of land the Indian government had twice confiscated — once for strict redistribution, then mainly political hygiene after an interim corrupt and bankrupt government sold back at exorbitant sums a few limited procurements. In the chaotic meantime Roald's father, Ashok, was born in a refugee camp in Pakistan (the mother had been abandoned by both her family and her lover). He grew into an exceptionally handsome, clever and defiant man, a chic malcontent who became — after an agent spotted him in a police lineup and got him screen tested — a popular Indian movie star. He had steered through the wreckage of several marriages and liaisons by the time Roald was born, the net result of an affair with a British barrister's wife, who was divorced after she refused to abort the child.

For a hectic time the young divorcee and young Roald lived in Rampur with Ashok. A former teacher, she returned to her profession when Ashok threw her over. He continued to provide for Roald but rarely saw the child after. Too English he reportedly told a friend. Despite the many Licchavi scandals, including rumors that one of Ashok's wives had been burned to death under lurid circumstances, Roald's mother never displayed, at least in front of Roald, any rancor toward her former lover, and insisted Roald be respectful during the rare visits, ever mindful of the money sent for the 'untouchable's education' (one of Ashok's favorite asides), the lion share of which she placed in a trust. She was in her mid thirties when her only child was born and lived a chosen spartan life after. Thus the ornate, luxurious, gregarious, sometime notorious and much publicized life that defined his father, Roald glimpsed from afar — at first.

It was one of Ashok's familiars, a sculptor who made death masks and realistic acrylic mannequins, who cued Roald's early interest in figurines and mechanoids. A teenage Roald came to apprentice to this campy artist; later he would eagerly study anatomy along with electronic and me-

chanical engineering, and eventually run a factory that produced sophisticated industrial automatons, also sensational mannequins which could be staged and photographed as live models — the indirect offshoot of one of Muerner's team's accomplishments in the new millennium with mechanized artificial limbs. Prototypes were used in movies the aging Ashok later directed, as elegant background fauna. By then minimal yet fluent movements in the mannequins themselves were possible. Once, a celebrated female star fetched a scimitar and lopped off the head of one of these to settle an argument with a derisive director. The grimmer aspect of the story was that she nearly mistakenly judged the mannequin to be a self-absorbed extra silently awaiting instruction in another quarter of the same sound stage!

When he was fourteen Roald discovered in the sculptor's archives photographs of a European girl who resembled his mother. He later learned the girl was not his mother but one of Ashok's conquests. Ashok dallied with her when she was still a teen, returning a decade later to perplex her marriage to a struggling inn keeper. Ashok commissioned the sculptor to create miniatures of select conquests — his 'kasabi' gallery — usually from photos he took himself, this pretty girl being one. Roald never confronted his arrogant father, asked about the commission, nor showed anyone the photographs he copied by stealth. The pictures became a kind of talisman, the embodiment of a beauty he cherished beyond mortal friendship or even love.

In a racially turmoiled England, where tensions were then feverish, his mother became an evangelical Presbyterian and late budding puritan. In consequence of which young Roald imaged himself newly kithless, her late rectitude a denial of his sensual creed. Her one heady lapse she never alluded to. The covert photographs were to become the inspiration that ameliorated his obliged life, the compensatory lodestone of waylaid affections. Thereafter he began to 'flesh out' his own rapt nostalgic delusions

with this central unassailable figure so like his mother, whom he had seen only once live and unadorned, and that when she scolded him for leaving a dirty sink. She stood with towels hastily folded about her hair and tumid middle, her mature Junoesque form an adventitious revelation.

By fifteen he came to embellish his 'other' life with the arts of Hinduism, especially the civilization of the Newars in Nepal where the temples of Hindus and Buddhists touch one another — where the gods were frequently sensationally young, he observed. A historian would have noted that his peculiar melding of Brahman and Buddhist, and later Muslim, was decidedly European for reasons that are perhaps less clear; some would cite jaded eccentricity or doltishness, others, like Muerner, a cultural-esthetic entropy or collapse — a collusion with the modern sensation wracked era. Whatever the cause, the words and art at least were for Roald inviolable and interchangeable, as in the thoughts of the Fourth-Century poet Kalidasa:

Who was the artificer at her creation?

Was the moon, bestowing its own charm?

Was it the graceful month of spring, itself

Compact with love, a garden full of flowers?

That ancient saint there, sitting in his trance,

Bemused by prayers and dull theology

Cares naught for beauty: how could he create

Such loveliness, the old religious fool?

Later grafted to this was the Persian inspired architecture and idealization of the Mosque, its alchemy of light and sensuous muqarnas and arabesques. The very inspiration of his Taj Mahal a European princess. In Roald's eyes always the dark slanted visage of his father tainted innocence — made one's companion an accomplice rather than a lovely commiserate charge. In those early photographs of the girl, in a seated repose, the sole of the tucked foot touching the matching thigh, the lovely round-eye's



cameo face and slender chaste frame prevailed. His perfected vision, a silent blond Tara, could redeem the sly graven images. The discovery of Frieda, who uncannily resembled Roald's numinous girl, released the goddess from her frame. For a time, the season of infatuation, a new ecstasy was born: the goddess actually responded to word and touch! But when the charm let up ('the eighteen month maximum' Antoine said of all crushes), the human remained, and Roald was unnerved to discover the delirium of the flesh just that, not a balm to a separate other entitled to error and un-suborning affection, sustainable only by joint esteem. "Will a promissory note do this night?" Frieda once wanly said to him when his desire for her was remorseless. He was in no mood for puns. She might finally climb back into the matte print!

As the lively wife revealed the unpacked, independent side of herself, he saw only one means of restoring the wonder — the sensuality must be overwhelming, sovereign, plenipotentary — as it was for him. Was the success not vouchsafed in the litany: Where the gods are young? He must entrance this daemon, this jinn, a challenge he had arduously schooled himself in all his life. The poignant vulnerability was Frieda's own isolation following her flight from Paleomena and her spy cell — the second mooring trailing beneath the waves. And of course the wealth, always the slipstream wealth, noted Rosanna. For a time Roald beacons the golden ring, the midnight lamp of passage.

Thus the roboteer's lusts were steadfastly hoarded. For all dedicated he donists pleasure is greater when quietly, minutely planned and staged. Moreover, what resourceful woman has not imagined one day salvaging and showcasing an attractive 'maligned' recluse. The versatile Frieda once responded handsomely to Roald's adventurous gambits, which she initially interpreted as propitious and proprietary and actually encouraged. The sardonic twist was that her later listlessness framed these encounters into something more resembling a caricature or jape. And of

course Roald misread all the signs. In the early stages of their married life he was delighted his goddess appeared susceptible to charm, and this enhanced his own meretricious anticipation. Frieda was several months pregnant before she began to glimpse the involuted dependencies, and too chronically exhausted and often high, to engineer subtle resistance. Then came the hiatus brought by the child, the recommitment to the requisite task of civilizing her husband and saving a marriage. The final recognition of a vast subterranean despair came with the discovery of a large soft pliant toy realistically, indeed minutely, modelled after herself! The discovery turned her to stone. Then Roald's quacks spoke out, in droves it seemed, alternately soothing and plangent, underscored by the silent protestations of Yatrib, all of which vilified her unheralded pique. The suspected sedation in her food coincided with Roald's growing malaise — which he so absently elected one day to relieve by staging one of Antoine's divertissements that would later take the West Coast by storm.

The meeting on the staircase set the timer on the densely packed dismay and unease. When the debris settled, nothing had been resolved, and the dreamscape was twisted beyond recognition. Added to the looming Cheka menace was Roald's many obsequious underworld hoods. An early discovery and untrammelled terror.

The pigments in the metamorphosed green Tara soon ran with her pervasive tears.

## TWENTY-FIVE

Suddenly the interrogation ceased. Vassily was despatched to another barracks and told to spruce up. He still hadn't seen his wife. She perhaps did not know he was back. And his blown cover was still his acute secret...so he imagined in this novel isolation; quietly he accepted Angus Dowd as a

man of his word.

Yet his questioners remained puzzled on many points. His suspected connivance with Frieda seemed in the end needlessly lax and makeshift. Why had the girl been allowed to disappear? Their doubts teemed with implanted hypotheses, none matching his plain homely answers.

“You meet comrade Van Eerden in a café, arrange a further meeting, then completely lose track of her. What must we think, Vassily Sergeevich?”

“That the pupil outwitted her master,” he answered with unwavering modesty.

His stay in America was examined minute by minute. His one embellishment and lifeline: the chance encounter with the senior Paleomena executive at a chess seminar and tournament, who might prove useful in the future because he too was so openly disenchanted with U.S. foreign policy. (He did not mention Stanton’s jarring overture.) His one holdout: the offering he made to Frieda before leaving the café. He explained the meeting as a means of appraising her state of mind and, once that was established, either trusting her with a period of grace or seeing her reeled in forthwith. He sensed a confusion within her, but no verifiable coercive agent — which he might identify and isolate only by observing her on her own. Watchers were placed. He was convinced, up to the time of his departure, that she had not gone over to the CIA. He was also convinced she still had ties to the computer experiments at Paleomena which he would promptly sever if he brought her in. Yet the dubiety lingered.

He had expected the protocol of the interrogation lasting perhaps a week. He anticipated the use of sleep shear and possibly drugs if he ran out of explanations. He believed he could be demoted but not formally reprimanded. He might forfeit his medal and be retired early on a reduced pension. His wife would stay by him, and tirelessly stare into the endless winters.



He was amazed so few questions concerned the flight of Frieda's sister. Her secret was it seemed no more cause for alarm — a void in the questioning that irked him, suggesting a coverup, for that 'secret' had been a collateral reason for his precipitous posting. His own precise queries about the fate of the girl impatiently bored his questioners. Then the lights dimmed and he was lodged in the comfortable room, given a decent meal, and told to shape up to meet the General.

The lingering awkward question was why he requested a prompt return to the Soviet Union. Suspicious listeners could easily subvert his words. Restless in the U.S.A.?... Ideology was hardly germane, and moreover paled beside the binge — in pragmatic seeking brains. That Frieda's intent itself was problematic, amidst a society generating energies it had no means of marshaling or controlling, was for his interrogators a cop out.

Yet when the formal questioning wavered unruffled Vassily stuck by his thesis of a community, a society in dissolution — that rendered the evaluation of a spy's real motive or motives arcane. Either they brought such operatives home sooner or risked infection. The earlier removal, after all, had been a standing recommendation of his for years.

He had wryly decided to end his interrogation with a smart academic lecture on 'the grand American malaise' — the incessant orgiastic shapes and colors, essentially the metier of pornography he'd marvelled at. Not the America he remembered. Clothes now were metaphors for ecstatic imposition or baited innocence. He went to one musical, inspired by the legend of a young naif hung in an Iranian prison, where the confusion mauled. The girl was interrogated and martyred to rapt rhythmic music. Sound for him that was libidinal, pleasurable paced cruelty and martyrdom! Indeed, the hypnotic beat homogenized all messages from cat food hawking to spiritual proselytizing. The bountiful land full of: Ain't Got No Satisfaction. Everyone in America 'soulfully' strained, theatrically grim-

aced; always her popular singers, to give agony and lack of entitlement a popular endorsement; filmmakers, to hawk their voyeuristic love scenes and high-tech shoot-em-up encores; newspapers their detailed, serialized stories of murders and mayhem, or political ‘exposes’ that defied the existence of an honest broker anywhere. Were the turmoiled people who went below ground in the silos any different? Russia was hardly an antidote to such obtuseness, but at least its leaders were not enamored of ingratiating negotiation, of chin fests and pod speak, to invoke two idiomatic expressions. The odds makers had their eyes on Putin in the coming months, the iron man who touted a durable slavic culture not the numbing mishmash Americans paid court to. Vassily’s own creed was, he knew, anomalous. One flinty eye on the Party, one sore eye on the Gospels. From a Deity who sanctioned free will....

By then his interrogators were glazed with tedium, smiling with an ironic languor that slowly, ineluctably hobbled Vassily’s spirited tirade. How had such a flak ever risen in the Service...let alone been posted abroad? General Mushin of course found in Vassily the luck of the fool, whose philosophy was the usual hokum of the (inevitably!) failed intellectual — to be used at will! Life for the General had been marshaled by a juggernaut of unwieldy fates and he imagined no letup. Instinctively he felt the Party machinery to be routinely corrupt and self-serving, riddled with political minefields. The rigour of the man was such that the concept of relaxation meant occasional inebriation for a brief interval between midnight and dawn, and the rare fustian rebuke of a colleague momentarily yoked to the same task. He trusted no one and took note only of success — in the Party or its technical and scientific affiliates. That person or body might be listened to, carefully; then one might proceed. He despised his superiors when their manipulation of him was extraneous to Party policy and diplomacy — as he suspected when he was elected investigator of the acts and intentions of Zoya Stolbanov, Soviet tart and thief whose tal-

ent as a performer masked both lapses, and to what extent her flight to the West implicated her step-sister Anastasia Kniaźnin, code name Frieda Van Eerden, Ablesimov's gifted and now problematic illegal, who was spirited away from her dysfunctional family while still a teen and enrolled in the school that identified her as a suitable candidate for training as an illegal — another of Ablesimov's nervy protracted interventions. The General was as vigilant and testy then as now, while the intense and improbable Vassily Sergeevich seated himself in the one chair opposite.

“I'm told you've contracted a dread disease, Vassily Sergeevich.”

Vassily decided the riposte would be his sole commiseration, and said he only regretted having had so few opportunities to do so.

“American cheek sits lamely on you, Comrade. But I'm relieved to see you can still practice it. You leave tomorrow, same flight. You are commissioned to see your scurrilous protégé does not completely foul a West Coast nest, as detailed in your memorandum. The Paleomena business you leave to others. You will be briefed fully in the Referentura on arrival. I tell only the outline.”

Vassily was momentarily transfixed. Returning to America. The only viable explanation — to serve as some kind of decoy, a pawn readily, safely forfeited...the General's words passed over him as the stench from a slough.

“You will report to me once a day direct. If agent Van Eerden, the current Mrs. Licchavi, is the mysterious depositor in the service account, you will meet with the husband's retainers and strike a bargain. You will demand a reimbursement of the note drawn on the special fund and remind them of its inviolate status. Licchavi too has made use of it. He does not welcome notoriety, is anxious for restitution and may be pumped. You will pretend to assist him with his own contract on his wife, agent Van Eerden. Yet her death — it has been decided — must in no manner implicate us. An assault in keeping with her degenerate lifestyle is being planned. We



must be in a position to implicate Roald Licchavi, if necessary. Questions?”

Vassily weathered the affront, the outrage by placing an unrelated question. Did the General learn what the previous fuss was about — who it involved, why, how? Did Zoya Stolbanov actually have an unwelcome secret?

The General was about to level a formal rebuke but changed his mind. A sentenced man may be permitted an impertinence or two. He indulged a smile.

“The fellow never really learned to read or write. And was determined no one should know. One of the old guard. A deputy who knew was caught altering important documents in his place. A fine example of the diehards. A hardliner. An ‘elder’ from the Andropov group. He was a persuasive yakker. Memorized swaths of party dogma. He died last week. Of a heart attack.”

Vassily managed a brief snort. The General remained commissar blank, his ongoing diffidence to current events locked away. He was a Putin man. Vassily then wryly laughed (to divest the tears), thumped the General’s desk and proposed a toast. “To luck — and immense balls!”

The General grunted and summoned the dumb waiter in his desk. Two scotches materialized.

An ‘elder’ and ‘hardliner’... Vassily was almost amused. Who couldn’t read or write. “How in god’s name did he manage?” (For Vassily the question was double edged: How indeed might he manage — being so derisively fated?) So was Myshin invited to disparage the culprit who had hornswaggled an entire Directorate. With a show of forbearance the General stood and paced behind his desk, his habitual response to shelling out unprinted answers, a stately paean to candour...on the eve of a summary farewell.

“Elderly hack. Radiation victim. Removed from school. Convales-

cent. Became a farmer — yet climbed the ropes. Presidium candidate some time ago. Genius with recorders. A secretary knew, a janitor and an assisting director. Composed wordy speeches for Chernyenko on a tape recorder. Shrewd ass. Learned Marx, Lenin from tapes. A good story teller. Patriot and whoremonger. A narrow stolid network of skills.”

“And how did the little inveigler find out?” (So little?)

The momentum of disparaging a Party curmudgeon who had made the last months keenly unpleasant kept Myshin going, after of course leveling a look of stoic sufferance on his bookish deputy.

“He liked to sketch. Watercolour. Gave one to her. She wanted his signature. That he could manage. Was drunk of course. When he finished she wanted an endearment also. Below the name. Apparently she suspected all along. Got the first of several bribes then and there. He broke down before the interrogation began. A nut case for a time. Nameless. Then the timely heart attack.”

And that was all a stricken Vassily leaned about the mysterious big cheese who let the old guard down, who in part caused him to enter the U.S. to see an old ‘Soviet’ secret kept. Sixteen hours later he arrived for a second time in as many days at the Los Angeles Sheraton Touchstone Inn.

Leaving the Inn via the parking lot exit when his taxi arrived was a tall lithe buxom blond with a valiant half-grin. Another sad pretty, just past her peak, strung out on lapsed hope, a waylaid observer might have said. So Vassily thought. She wore a light silk dress imprinted with stylized clam shells, no stockings, shoes too elevated for her naturally sauntering walk, and little else he guessed. The dress barely concealed the seamless form beneath. An orange sash curled about the still lean waist. The low-slung breasts formed a suspension bridge of the fabric in front, held in place by narrow shoulder straps which she fitfully replaced. She left the building with an uncertainty, a lingering chagrin, which matched in per-

fect contrast the durable composure with which Vassily approached the desk. For an instant he glimpsed her profile and back as she passed an arched window front. Just such a woman he needed at that moment. By the time he crystal-gazed a cognac and furtively eyed a well-heeled dessert, a rueful Cody was thumbing rides to a property in Pomona. A talkative carpet cleaner, his mouth full of tobacco, offered to drive her to Dodger Stadium. Upset she wouldn't come to his pad nearby he called her a string of names. A black tanker driver left her at a junction near Monterey Park. He was very large and much too silent. She needed air. The next two drivers wanted to know her rates. The second of these, to whom she declared she had none, rather than wishing him power to his elbow, and wanted only a lift, drove her into Pomona and the doorstep of Louis' townhouse. He asked if she wouldn't change her mind, bartering to buy her a used handgun. Impressing a gun store card upon her he departed wearing a satisfied grin.

She was relieved to locate the key buried in the third tub of Calla Lilies — appeased also to find no evidence of a replacement bird since her departure in the Porsche with the handsome Canadian realtor who sold coke and island properties in British Columbia, and disclosed himself as that rare bird, a utilitarian kleptomaniac — 'Clients are impressed by select giveaways.' They had crashed at the Touchstone on the return leg of an excursion to Las Vegas. They planned a full weekend but he stole off that night derisively swiping her purse and most of her clothes after a protracted snit over his promotion of questionable properties. He had called her a hypocrite. Well he would, wouldn't he. She couldn't even manage to leave room service a modest tip. Still, he had a nice car and lots of cash.

The interior of Louis' house always depressed her. He never got round to removing the last owner's floral chintz wallpaper, a style she could not stand. Every room brandished a separate bold motif. Even the headboard



of the walnut-framed bed Louis inherited had been covered. But she was tired and weary of complaint. The Canadian's smugness had finally got to her. And she lost her temper before his unctuous avidity. His paean to greed. 'Everybody scores — not nearly as well.' She discovered she also bled and quietly swore. Nowhere among her things was the necessary article, nor could she find any money. Finally she showered, placed a folded towel on the bed, and promptly fell asleep.

When she awoke the room was nearly dark and gave off a faint whim of paint solvent. She could vaguely make out a shape partly blocking the dim outline of a window. The form suddenly listed by her on the bed, a sharp object, a knife, thrust to her throat. "No fuss now princess," the voice said. "Cool is the word. Jus' tell where it's at."

"Where's what at?" she said, feeling the knife unsteady against her.

"The snow, dixi — anything with turnover."

"You're going to be disappointed."

"Angel cake" — she lay on her stomach and his free hand kneaded her flanks — "I'm not a patient dude an' a lot a folks regret the fact."

It was perhaps the twentieth time she had been docked by assailants wanting cash or drugs, but the first without something to offer. That fact struck her then as funny and she impulsively laughed, a reaction that startled her attacker as much as it finally did herself.

"You can have the chintz, all of it," she added, helplessly, just before he discovered and misinterpreted the viscus seam.

"A real honey sandwich yessir. Maybe like so 'fore we look round."

He turned her over, waded between her legs the blade palsied near a flopped breast. She fought control of her fear — and discovered again the welling up of a bitter humor. A great formless fatuity dribbling, leaking laughter...

Then a dull heavy thud, instantaneously joined by her scream and

sheer light filling the room. Someone had drawn the curtain. The form slumped against her, the knife clattered to the floor, the floppy weight sliding away to further disbelief. Three bodies materialized, two on the floor. The strong arm of the kneeling form rose and fell, meaning business. She took a bracing lungful of air. A bloodied face on the floor was tugged in a smear toward the door, Louis was discovered by her on the bed with a shirt. She drew herself into a huddle. Her name resounded over and over — from a hesitant familiar neglected voice. She thrust her arms about him — him now quivering like an enormous child?

It was not till the following afternoon that they lay side by side on the same chintz-plastered bed, abeyant, exhausted yet beyond sleep.

Returning the day before he found the soil disturbed by the tub where he hid the key pouch, guessed her return, then drove back to a nearby shopping centre to buy some groceries and flowers, settling on a crooked Camellia. He had wanted to surprise her and slipped to the back where he discovered the door unlocked, a fact he was prepared to rebuke her for when he cited the intruder. Quickly he sought a vigilante neighbour who brought a wrench and struck the first blows. Louis as well attempted to hit the man with the crock — missed, then dumbly sought to restrain his neighbor who had been robbed the week before. When at last he sat beside her, a stalk from the Camellia clung to his shoulder.

As he went over these details the intruder underwent emergency surgery at the Pomona General. The man was out on parole. Four nearby homes were broken into that afternoon, telling finger prints littering each one. Louis said he only just restrained his neighbor, who told police he was just ‘standing his ground’ in the end. Louis promptly if sheepishly agreed. By the time Cody lay in the crook of his arm, she asked if he still wanted a squaw. He felt she would likely withdraw the offer a day or two later and resisted suffering through that pronouncement once again. He didn’t know what to say. “I’d settle for the rest of the summer,” he said finally,

with ready dishonesty. He thought she began to shiver and reached for the quilt. When he looked back her face was old yet braving tears.

About the time a duty nurse reported to the stricken mother that her son was out of danger, a disguised Vassily returned from his first meeting with a new Licchavi retainer, a young lawyer the GRU set out to conscript immediately when Frieda was discovered reconnoitering their gold seam. Cheka agents fabricated notes in Frieda's hand, purportedly a secret file kept as part of a daily journal or commonplace book. These personal words revealed a chaotic inner nature that tended to corroborate some of Roald's Machiavellian charges before the court, including fetishism, onanism, monomania and mental cruelty — the frequent scolding of her child and the scolding of Yabrib. The notes would be instrumental in a divorce proceeding and would cost a great deal; the lawyer would serve as an intermediary. Roald's reaction to the offer would be carefully assessed before any bargain with him was resolved — Vassily's modest lead time.

For a time the GRU pandered to Roald Licchavi. A wronged mother cum Soviet spy with possible nonsuch access to State Department confidences via her husband's government contracts, was not a tale the GRU wanted then in International dailies. Indeed Frieda's ace, so she believed, was the intimidating option of revealing the GRU a beneficiary of information from the Licchavi empire itself and payments to it from the insurance account — the GRU 'gold seam' — which in the end became her second and more rigidly detailed problem! The likely breeches of American strategic protocol and their codes were immediately apparent for the Licchavi enterprises included several high-tech firms, hybrid blooms of Roald's fascination with mechanoids, some of them linked to Pentagon commissions for streamlining tasks in remote sensing and battlefield robots. Another story of Americans funding Soviet military 'expertise'!

The lawyer met Vassily a second time with a scowl: Roald was not



interested; he wanted a subversive — quintessentially a ruthless heartless spy — before the court; he seemed determined to give evidence in court for the existence of the GRU gold seam his wife had access to, independent of his own funds. Vassily thus expected the worst. A day later a new team arrived from Moscow.

At this time Louis Peak also reckoned with an unexpected imposition, but one he did not relate to his current dilemma. An environmentalist friend asked a favour. Would Louis photograph parts of the San Gabriel River and sections of the San Jose Creek to update a study of deteriorating West Coast waterways? Louis liked the fellow and said yes, accepting as well the modest budget.

He was photographing the second site at the time the lawyer proposed the sale of 'Fried's' notes. Louis's tripod perched on a rise of ground before a swollen backwater that resembled diseased flesh and stank mephitically, one of several dump sites that had in the past been used by clandestine disposal crews he was told. A spillway further up had been opened to flush some of the chemical offal into a nearby concrete basin where it might at least be isolated from the adjacent stream. A destitute desert willow and two straggled Mesquite bushes partially screened the view, the sad remains, along with a small concrete staircase, once painted pink, of an abandoned homesite. Cody sat on the steps sipping a coke. Louis's van did not start that morning; someone had lifted the battery. Cody offered to drive him in her battered green Jeep.

By late afternoon he exposed the final frame, the colors of the devil's own sump just beginning to fade. Minutes earlier some tones appeared to phosphoresce. He was looking about the willow tree for a mislaid lens when a large immaculate Mercedes sedan passed slowly, lights out, on the narrow roadway below him. It returned as gradually in reverse, coming to a full stop at the base of the rise. Two men got out from the back seat, the

first suggestive of a street goon, massive tattooed arms neck and bald head emerging from a weathered vest, the second man meticulously set out, a Nehru collar cresting a dark double-breasted suit. Louis could not make out the conversation. The first pointed to the spillway, with spare blunt language. The second man placed a comment that resulted in a belated nod from both men as they returned to the car, which departed in a hurry. “Don’t go away mad,” he absently said as the car sped away. He watched till it disappeared, after committing vehicle and plate to the final frames in his camera, trusting there was enough light to register the images. He returned to the Jeep with Cody who noted his fresh unease. “You see a ghost or something?”

“I think I saw some of the dumpers. Both the spook and his dumper. I think something’s planned for here. Soon I imagine.”

“How come?” A stubborn yawn.

“Below, on the roadway off the spillway. You couldn’t really see. In a dark Mercedes — La Habra, Placentia maybe.” He rattled off a number. “The lights went on after they left...I had a tele on. They pointed to the spillway then the hole. I think they plan to dump something...maybe in the spillway.”

“Did they see you?” Her voice alerted.

“I don’t think so.”

“Maybe they’re just engineers or something. Somebody goofed. More than bloody likely.” They argued through a late supper at a Taco Bell. What had specifically convinced Louis? Should the police know? Maybe they were just head-up watchers — like us, Cody said. I saw no uptight watchers, said Louis.

They returned together to the rise later that night. By then Cody was occasionally talking to herself. “Mind sleeping rough when you’re broke, kiddo? Not at all.” Louis had put two sleeping bags in the back and brought a camera with infrared registry. He remained till sunrise in the

Mesquite, seated on a removable front seat, thinking he was also perhaps a practicing paranoiac. Twice Cody sat facing him on his lap, the second time in her muslim teddy, with the disguised lower buttons. It was the first time they made love since her return. His part distraction with the night watch served to unite their peak. “H-o-l-y Hannah,” Cody said with some bemusement. He didn’t ask if she made use of her tool kit. From the way she kissed him after he doubted she had.

Her hair smelled lightly of sulfer the following morning. He rose late, nostalgically poached eggs in the small kitchen, tried to imagine her pregnant, and stole frames of her performing her wake-up yoga exercises on his, by then, favourite balcony. He could just imagine a livid mite of his own, clinging to that magnificent chest, thinking only of food.

## TWENTY-SIX

A radiant sun coruscated the elevated terrace where, beneath a Jupiter grape pergola, a warmed Angus Dowd had just lain aside the paper from his morning tray.

He was nearly convinced the Russian was back, or a well versed stand-in; he was also convinced Frieda had lost all contact with the fifth column that still managed to rifle a few of ZYTA’s secrets, though not enough to engage in serious coercion. The latest attempt to pirate its gems was stymied in the breach. The new techie in charge of security appeared to be top drawer. They still had to sort out his background, but so far he performed as anticipated. So: one technician sacked, another recruited; neither knew Dr. Van Eerden. The Pentagon would come to a floater deal in the autumn.

As for the latest jumble — Paleomena contracts with two firms in the



Licchavi consortium were brought under review. The more he looked at the Licchavi family the more Angus Dowd spied personal vendetta alone, mostly on the husband's side; from Stanton he learned of malicious personal allegations that could embarrass and legally sequester the wife, now apparently corroborated by a journal Frieda supposedly kept. That possibility interested him, for in the meantime he had studied, in addition to the information the Russian provided, Muerner's heated conversations with Frieda (such intellectual barnstorming!) following the South Pacific 'incident', from which she was released 'in a state of quite admirable bewilderment' — so said Muerner, who prided himself on filling in a missing chapter in her education. Unlike Susanne, she would land on her feet, he said, and be readily employable within a year. She might even reconsider Paleomena as a patron. Surely you jest, said Dowd. Muerner's response served as an affirmation for Dowd. "I am convinced Frieda will at least wonder if an ad hoc committee should run ZYTA. The inability to control the dissemination of potent information poses many hazards — none of which she readily apprehended. She departed a drained liberal, unlike Susanne, whom I learn she never really trusted — an interesting disclosure, yes?"

Hence the marriage to Roald surprised and nettled Muerner. "A grotesque suspension." He meant of course the sidelining of a promising Paleomena career — "even better backgrounded than Miguel's." He and Dowd calmly accepted the revelations of espionage, though Muerner seemed the more upset. If Dowd sometimes mulled over the possibility he had misjudged the magus he shared the tower with, he again rescinded the possibility when Muerner sarcastically pronounced on the future hostilities ZYTA indexed, while rumors told of his tense tinkering with the criteria for his human idolons.

In the meantime the two executives dissected chess, dispatched the business of Paleomena with unsurpassed skill, and spoke prosaically about Ar-

thur Pechenpaugh, perhaps the one impeachable racketeer Paleomena fostered. Yet the options had been limited: either ZYTA was contained, meticulously, judiciously assessed, or she wasn't; Susanne and, initially, Peter Selby-Smith wanted the knowledge universally shared. Pechenpaugh had masterminded both sackings, Susanne's tragically. Personally, Dowd did not care for either employee. Susanne belonged to that breed of Jewish ideologue that spoiled for him much romantic art — the cast of intellect that scourged hypocrisy, stupidity, bias, sentiment. Frequent exposure to someone of her temperament invariably rendered a genius like Mahler too insufferably self-dramatic, 'selflessly' morose. One was teased with the overtones of political correctness — 'check your privilege' — before sensibilities like that — ever a dilemma! Whereas Peter was likely a closet gay who made poor jokes about gays. The lad who gave Peter's letters to Dowd said Peter made advances while chiding the lad's presumption, then in the dead of night would phone to stiffly apologize. Sly ideological anarchy, intellectually cadging, and fawning dalliance — some of Peter's legacies to the pressed Frieda — all iniquitous to the perfectionist Dowd, for whom the contemplation of a soul striving valiantly but decently to resolve confusion and anarchy, brinkmanship and madcap japing, was a glimpse of predestination at work. Whereas Daphne Charles seemed just such a latent exemplar of that unfolding — and so recently his own poignant nemesis because of his failure to resist a scoundrel's abasement of it.

With deliberate slowness he moved the day of reckoning ever nearer. It was his way of keeping both ZYTA and Muerner in perspective. The pleasant office bickering renewed and continued — after the passing of that close week of private lament when the well-groomed mam'selle sat so thoughtfully at her desk, letting her Ovaltine get cold. Angus discovered himself restless and apprehensive — a near novelty. It was a week or more before her fetching half-smile rewarded an apt rejoinder. On that memorable day a determined college-newspaper reporter had wangled an inter-

view with Dowd, and ended by soliciting a donation to The Alternate School, a new training facility that would feature an acclaimed reading program for the ‘cognitively challenged’. Dowd cherished the euphemisms for the dolts of the world, both atavistic and deviant in the era of entitlement. Promptly, silently he wrote out a cheque — to curtail a maudlin speech and salvage as much cash as civility allowed. Did Paleomena employ any cognitively challenged persons the reporter wanted to know — not to be crimped. Before he signed his name Dowd casually pointed out a couple of people on the floor. The lad looked at Daphne who happened to be in Dowd’s office at that moment (actually to hurry the meeting along). She tolerantly smiled, giving nothing away. “That’s most encouraging,” the youngster said, surprised, adding that he had given up a hiking trip to complete the canvass that year. At that very moment Daphne’s computer expert was hefting bundles of printouts to the shredder, in his usual balmy, too-long-in-the-saddle gait.

“A neat cat,” Daphne remarked, leaving the youngster in a querulous state.

“Sorry?”

Said Dowd, “One of the unequivocally ‘earth bound’.” Then preened an imaginary whisker.

The lad, presented them both with an abeyant smile and left in a mindful if rather leery state, as Dowd basked in the rally of his co-conspirator.

From there the next step was more intimidating.

“Why did you ask me to come with you tonight?”

The belated question, so seemingly randomly placed in the course of the supper, provided Dowd with the initial solo opportunity he’d been anticipating. He rose in his visioned pulpit, the organ postlude at an end. Such a simple text with a dearth of simple feelings to sustain or answer it.

The quiet creature opposite, so captivating in the restaurant’s half-light, her long sylphic blond hair catching scintilla of light, the simple acorn



sweater dress corniced by the full high-neck collar, her tomboy face a delinquent's mask, openly daringly watchful. Dowd was reminded of the physical chasteness that had come to his office, despite the renewal of the conversational banter. Since the Lacchivi fête the off shoulder quicksilver silks were replaced by indifferent skirts and blouses — mundane 'catalogue' fare he thought — and, if he was not mistaken, a more fastidious comportment. He even sensed fresh impatience with some of his established tics — such as an unwillingness to use a 'dictaphone' — a chip recorder. His own investigation of the assault identified a prescription of Daphne's for a hormone which, when coupled with the sedative she was likely given, could precipitate a spell of depression — so Dowd learned from his own physician. Thus her question, at once pithy and transparent, he must rise to answer.

"I never knew until last week you might appreciate such an invitation."

Daphne was freshly perplexed — as anticipated. He knew he was being assayed for traces of whimsy.

"So what happened last week?"

"You pronounced judiciously I thought upon the uneven quality of some dishes at the Touchstone Inn."

Her brief smile seemed genuine. He winked then returned to his plate.

"And 'till then I was a hayseed, or something?"

"Not at all; rather more a conundrum. A Pandora free her jars and jams."

Again she regarded him with wry wonder. "Another pixie."

"*L'enigme charmante*. Yes."

This stalled her once again as she sifted for unsympathetic overtones. The commitment in her response alerted him to another apparent success.

"Angus, I see a young lad somewhere a tiny bit jealous. And maybe also nonplussed."

He gratefully nodded agreement.

“So?”

“Yes, Daphne?”

“So what are you going to hit me with on Monday or whatever?” She precisely positioned her fork on the half-empty dessert plate and sat back to study him with cautionary interest, brandy snifter poised, one elbow palmed by a hand.

“Someone’s getting the sack and I’m to, well, gleefully take over their job. Or you’ve finally discovered a pretty Venetian and wish to pension me off.”

“Such wily speculation. In one so young.”

“Not so young.”

He finished with his own mouse and sought a napkin. Being an object of scrutiny from one he cherished was an oddly goading experience for him.

“I shall provide the first clues next week, if you promise to dine with me here again.”

This brought forth a laden chuckle. “Now I’m really worried.”

“It is highly flattering to have an intelligent beauty pay attention. A benediction to wise old stoats.” His words, however, were more turgid than intended: he was newly aware that with Daphne he acutely heard himself speak — as a rather precious stranger! Thus her dry silence gave him the opportunity to sparely outline then invite her to the forthcoming Plombiers extravaganza, which Muerner hosted later that month, in honor of the spectacular success in placing in wide elliptical earth orbit a space telescope, launched in Russia, that had already returned much galvanizing stellar speculation about the edges of the universe. A growing number of astronomers had also perceived enough matter to hypothesize that the universe may not infinitely expand, indeed may be a brane (a membrane) adhering to a larger four or five dimension universe. “Always a drag,” said one of the researchers. But the celebration party of the launch

was but the beginning.

Shortly thereafter Daphne visited, with a group of hobbyist cosmologists, Paleomena's space complex and suited up with an astronaut for an acutely realistic 'sinker' trip through the Jovian atmosphere. This was followed by a suborbital flight in a new earth-vista vehicle Paleomena had researched and built. A third excursion took place aboard one of Arnold Storrier's solar-assisted sailing ships, with a stop near the Great Barrier Reef, where both Angus and Daphne took a seaplane to the spectacular Heart Reef near Green Island and explored the teaming coral life, so recently and controversially entrusted to a Paleomena consortium of oceanographers charged with reviewing efforts made in the early nineties to restore parts of the reef to pristine health via a chemical cocktail that was predicted to obviate the warmer water.

From there they flew to a vessel touring the Palau Islands as part of a promotional voyage for future Paleomena executive vacations. The invitees were personable folk of all ages, the bustle and entreaty of children augmenting the anticipation. The vitality and diversely talented, socially divergent and nimble-witted — spiritual, Dowd said — Paleomena elite spared no one. Or so it seemed. A dense week of office-tower diligence had culminated in an airy long weekend of sprightly oceanic sport and exploration, in the company of ageless venerable experts and agile protégés, from many lands — a kinetic mixture of style, geniality, relish, and brisk wit; only on peripheral yachts did Daphne witness the more soporific ambience of a clientele she associated with much sun and leisure. Such goings on could turn an impressionable girl's head she dryly pointed out to Angus.

Then a group of oceanographers from Paleomena's Maritime Trust Foundation joined them in one suspended lucid forty-eight-hour ardor, which did not overstay its idyll. The diver who befriended her returned to his ship and ocean, promising to write...together they had found a rare va-



riety of damselfish. Daphne wondered both at the timing and intensity of the interlude, including Dowd's ready if not planned disappearance. She had joined in weekend excursions with Paleomena's Third Estate (her crowd) and fought through the usual combination of hype, resignation and trashy fun — but amongst the Paleomena R&D nobility the company became an endearment in itself. It was at once part of Dowd's provocative knottiness and ineffable poise. The deference shown him by his 'ship-mates' was at times embarrassing (for her), yet his urbane conversation in the breath-catching intervals persistently entertained and often instructed. She had never enjoyed (anticipated) life so much. Romance, the purest species of romance, with the lively committed people she met seemed inevitable, and when that sometimes waned the words of her tiny host and his evocative suggestions for the morrow left her many days charm-bound.

She was hardly perfectly at ease however. Her life had been in one guise or another too contractual and forensic to assume the new pleasurable situation came with the compliments of the management. Yet her perception of a quid quo pro continued to elude her. If she might believe the first excursion a reward for exemplary services to the corporation, the interceding holidays, which showed no sign of letup, were easily interpreted as willing indebtedness — if she continued to accept the largess. Her boss and sometime mentor made no advances, and occasionally amused with droll or schmaltzy assessments of their day and surroundings. To her spare queries he merely said he was getting on and, never having had a child, was enjoying the solicitude that comes with age. The younger Paleomena professionals she met on her own were nearly as entertaining and most far better looking, but they seemed to fall into two camps: those she sensed to be intimidated by her closeness and service to Angus Dowd, and those who wanted to wangle information about the 'shaman', as one called him. Dowd's remark about being childless prompted her to remark one evening. "I have a new name. For someone I admire. The oceanic

wonder here helped.”

“Is it a sea creature?”

“In alchemy it’s the term for ‘first matter.’”

“Ah. Proteus.”

Daphne barely smiled. “You know the chap.”

“Old ‘disambiguation’.”

“Not what I would have said.”

“Enjoy. Like Proteus I intend to live on in legend.”

This produced a pause then spate of unintended giggling.

By the time they elected to chart an aficionado’s sail ship, an 80 foot ketch with sufficient shallow draught for the Bahamas, Dowd had plied her with several gifts, at first partly disguised as functional and obligatory paraphernalia for the trip -- a custom-fit radio diving mask, an easily set chronometer, the unanticipated heavy sweater and warm socks, chic topsider boots and fashionable safety strobe horn belt. Other gifts, not expensive but ever thoughtful, touched and were accepted in a silence where her flattered self vied with qualms about accepting such generosity.

The necklace was a different matter though, and she immediately refused it.

“Angus, it’s an heirloom — rather for a dowager.”

He shrugged and said, almost as an afterthought, “No one, I fear, will wear it as handsomely.”

“Already ‘historic’,” she added awkwardly.

In the same bottled abstraction he continued, “Only the largest three stones are of value. Many of the smaller diamonds are uncut. A discovery in a bazaar.” But as he returned the necklace to its velvet case he became more assertive. “Seems a shame to put it in a vault.. I trust your most recent heedful friend would agree.”

“I feel like a dive,” she said, with some determination.

“Perhaps one day,” he said smiling, invoking a future that perplexed

even more.

“Not negotiable,” she added, as one limited to having a final if needy word. Later, after the dive, and a brisk tryst with her current paramour — the man was married but not accompanied by his wife — she and Dowd basked in a splendid cataract sunset, the necklace incident haunting the gathering dark — the gremlin she decided, that altered the status quo of this joint sabbatical.

For three long days the famous photographer Louis Führ with a flamboyant entourage anchored near them off Cape Eleuthera. He had chartered a commodious yacht, a former navy cruiser converted to a swank sea-going grotto. The visit was part of a lavish, ongoing sea-lust commercial — to show off that year’s Off the Hook swim wear, and preview a small island nearby where he would begin work on a film rumored to be scripted to Antoine Plombiers. The creative director for the fashion shoot was the fulsome, high-maintenance Mme. Jacaranda Albricias, who needed few assistants and little amplification for her voice. Her reputation for ‘primitive chic’ and ‘uncompromising honesty’ made her a darling of the fashion tabloids. Among her models was a limber Artemis by the name of Margaret Burke, the step-sister of journalist Catherine Whyte. She centrally figured in most of the group shots, and was fawned over by Mme. Albricias during the individual shoots. It was obvious to Daphne they were lovers, Ms. Whyte the probationary partner. When she walked by Dowd’s cabin on her way to the bridge she heard a recording of Berlioz’ Roman Carnival Overture — an odd recourse here she thought. As the door was ajar she peeked in. He sat in his glider rocker gently oscillating to the debonair music. “The real real carnival, eh,” she couldn’t resist saying. Dowd opened an eye. “For the mossbacks, yes.” He noted her bikini. “That’s new. Mme. Albricias will be enchanted.” “Not likely,” she quickly responded. “See you up top. An ‘in-house’ dare.”

Führ’s ocean photo team spent one day recording Albricias’ models



both above and below water, some swimming in a ‘non-aligned state’ (free the editorially mandated swimwear) said one of the tabloid captions. A rolly polly photographer from Playboy lost his camera and himself overboard when a boom used to swing him across the water buckled. The poor man did not know how to swim. When rescued he lay as a beached whale, his mountainous belly a pork zeppelin to the swimmers who pulled him in. A trauma team arrived in time from a U.S. warship, where he was taken for further treatment.

It was something of a relief to return the following week to her desk in the Paleomena Tower. Even Dowd had waned somewhat before the circus like fashion shoot and unrelieved hype and posturing. With notes of a recent dictation newly beside her, Daphne suddenly realized she needed a clarification of an intended witticism — an allusion to a mermaid’s bent (refracting?) mirror. But her boss was away from his office. Someone thought he might be in the screening theatre, to which she repaired, to find the executive seated by himself in one of the editing rooms viewing a set of digital pics. She remained just inside the larger room, which lay in darkness relieved marginally by the light reflected from the small computer screen. The image then filling it was one of herself as she had swam through the sun-laced jade and aquamarine waters near the motor launch that served as embarkation headquarters for scuba and snorkel tours. Several of the divers carried photographic gear. The screen changed to another larger image of herself and several young divers as they hovered above a giant Pompeian-red starfish. The pictures were competently taken, presumably by one or more of the divers. Other images followed, all chiefly of her, innocent enough by themselves, though the dedication of the photographer, whom she hadn’t noticed, was unusual, given the background mêlée in several frames when Margaret Burke’s finespun form slipped by with a finning retinue in tow. Throughout this hubble-bubble, which she had kept to the periphery of, at least one photographer persisted

in observing and capturing her — the spare, spruce-cheeked Daphne. She was struck anew by the boyishness of her form — an ambiguity, not forgotten, that returned now with a piquant flush. She was pensively aware of Angus Dowd's sexual predilection. The attenuated look before her, only partly foiled by the bikini, less decorous when wet she noted, resurrected the haunt that jinxed her for a decade before a persuasive analyst proposed a solution. Her life had immeasurably changed for the better. No one any longer doubted the legitimacy of her sex; indeed she had been accosted on a beach boardwalk by a major advertiser prepared to hire her on the spot for a commercial to upstage cellulite — an offer she politely declined. Since her metamorphosis she had several enthusiastic if finally uninteresting companions, including the advertiser, who otherwise served as a kind of universal seal-of-approval. But now a subsurface image of herself was reinstated, fixed before her, almost a forgotten being revealed in that ocean, tessellated by criss-crossing ribbons of sunlight. The leanness seemed to her then as rattle-boned as any skeleton one might wish buried. And the most influential player in her life then was obviously fascinated by the nimble frozen trophy.

She did not intrude on what she believed an 'in camera' preview, and returned to her desk. She put aside the dictation that had prompted the break in her routine — and the subsequent rupture of a felicitous adventure perhaps too promising to last. What was she then to serve as — a handy, nugatory, vicarious entertainment? And was that intrinsically reprehensible? Was the faint translucence of the wet bikini a joint purchase, a coincidence merely, except in her mindful disarray — the old bugaboo of perplexing, hobbling ambiguity?

"Angus, I don't often play games, and I need some straight answers."

She had entered his office just before the end of her day and stood directly in front of his desk.

He displayed a too congenial smile, then told her to scram.

This response she hadn't prepared for, and his near-bristling preoccupation with a stout folder before him held her at bay.

"First thing tomorrow, doughty sparrow. Now get out."

He did not at first see her the following morning.

He entered his office, placed a copy of the N.Y. Times on his desk and prepared to do battle — his early morning workout. The paper was one of the apostasies permanently on Angus Dowd's hit list. She had counted thirteen letters directed to its editors in the last quarter, none of them published, though his standing order did forbid editing. Every third year the collection came out in hard cover at the behest of Lexington Books.

He looked up to find her patiently waiting by the Florentine *prie-dieu* and rifled his top drawer to find the monocle he employed on presumptive occasions. Then he sat back placing Armadillo shoes neatly on the desk.

But at once he perceived the aloofness in her wooden amusement.

"The Emirate billionaire didn't propose after all."

It was an old joke. An oil magnate from Abu Dhabi once left a note for Dowd on his blotter after a meeting, requesting Daphne's phone number and brand of perfume.

"I would like to know what you want, expect. From me."

His answer was forthright and hopelessly arcane.

" — A glimpse of paradise — and the week after next possibly Majorca as well, if you're free — my nimble bee eater." The sarcasm was buried in an immaculate poise and airtight solicitous smile, which she matched with one of her own.

"What do the digital images represent?"

Again his answer was boardroom impervious.

"Ah yes. Perhaps a decade of renewal — for me of course — and a slight infringement of your privacy. I told you I've discovered a faun in the works. To be acquitted when I see you one day soundly solvently hitched, or whatever it is young folk do today when one matched partner suffices."



As often happened, by the time Daphne confronted the ‘mutant gnome’ — as Muerner once called Dowd in Daphne’s presence — a furry sleight-of-hand brushwork had altered the canvas, and she struggled to recall images so recently distinct and goading.

“And if I remain single?”

“Well then, with your indulgence, we shall explore the globe, in bit-sized jaunts, in sumptuous and elegant transports, as civilizing connoisseurs. Highly speculative of course, given your beauty and brains.”

He then, with perplexing ease, neatly or duly sidestepped his own pomp and circumstance by dropping his shoes and speaking to her in a voice she had not heard before, as bracing as it was forthright. Angus Dowd may even have startled himself. For perhaps the first or second time in his life he felt an obligation to go public, and immediately sensed the recombinant wonder.

“Daphne, the Venetian graduate is a myth. You have always interested me. Your professional proficiency was a simple bonus. As I’ve told you, age brings a kind of suave impertinence; you wish to salvage some of the good you’ve depreciated if not squandered. You are as much a project for me now as an object of affection. I hope for, want, an affectionate daughter, whose company I may enjoy well short of incest. Gemeinschaft — with a lone codicil that urges, stipulates an advantageous life companion for the daughter.”

The electric pause that followed was about what Angus Dowd had anticipated, though Daphne’s lone short answer became the soliloquy he assiduously strove to avoid.

“Not much a daughter.”

Dowd did his best to exude grace if not stolidity. “Then alas I must be satisfied as one more ‘putative’ parent — that is the word I think — and observe the textbook dogma,” he said, returning to his aloof smugness, still optimistic about the bargain with himself, the final renunciation that

he hoped would foster if not guarantee her esteem — his paramount objective after all. He still had not confronted the possibility that his ‘renunciation’ might be an injury, a slur itself.

As we’ve noted, one of Angus Dowd’s pleasures was putting agile brains to work. The ironic, fated expression that came to her he would remember always, knowing full well his memory was the only place he could savour such awesome wonder or bemusement without apology. The trust he courted was after all a quicksilver commodity and might vanish precipitously. He faced an openhanded human who knew of his precious idealism, yet would not return a sarcasm, who wanted only her due, which did not include romantic fulsomeness or bully worship. In an age of technological miracle, non-mechanical wonders keep to the shade — Dowd’s trust of himself. And now he risked parting the protective branch! Daphne left wearing an expression of droll amusement, which rather upstaged Angus Dowd. It was as if he was a cartoon figure here, and Daphne had left saying ‘horsefeathers’. Indeed, for perhaps the first time in his life Angus Dowd sensed a dare he might not be up to. Or a slight he may have deserved.

Still, their travelogues grew in splendor and diversity, familiarity and candor, both to absolve and to accept and proceed. At one stage Daphne opened a travel agency, which she sold at a loss after nine months of contending with capricious weather, one too many venal innkeepers, a briefly hijacked airline limo (the hijacker, alone and high was finally overpowered), and a handful of organized and cantankerous cruise-ship victims whose homes had been burgled while they were away.

If she refused the heirloom, she accepted select pieces of jewelry — she wore little and that sparingly, a fact that enhanced his diligence in finding pieces she liked. He bided his time when she disappeared for a time, greeting her with treasured selfless humor when she retuned, knowing the timeless prince or surrogate bel-esprit had not yet arrived. He teased her with

a tutor's or renegade's wit during the day and retreated to Pushkin, Donne and Gerard Manley Hopkins on rare vacant evenings, some of which she shared. They worked at their usual frenetic pace in the Tower then fled to balmy climes at unexpected intervals.

People gossiped of course, and Dowd renewed his effort as pledged matchmaker while infecting the lively prattlers — leaving their suspicions in tact. One newsmonger burble went as follows:

‘That perpetual smirk looks like a love punch look.’ ‘How did you arrive at that conclusion, dear?’ ‘Well it's obvious isn't it?’ ‘Not for an old Abelard, surely.’ ‘You jest of course.’ And: ‘He gambles when she takes off. To mock what he might have spent on her I presume.’ ‘Well he was altogether damned lucky last night.’ He left the casino in question saying to a well-known blabbermouth that he was optimistically reassessing philanthropy.

For many months this convivial ‘investiture’, this amiable non-bloody sacrament held — Dowd's characterization. In his smugger moments he thought of it as the grafting of baroque invention onto natural spirit to produce a rare beautiful shade tree. Said spoiler Muerner: “A knotty old cherry on a slender birch. *Mutatis mutandis*.” Dowd took the vulgarity in his stride while wondering how Daphne's trialled sensibility might take the frisky metaphor.

One night after an oddly disorganized day — some luggage had gone astray and a discrete rendezvous with a new friend postponed — ‘Just another spring-butt skier,’ she said — they watched a Fred Astaire-Ginger Rogers film, Dowd intermittently glancing through the draft of an annual report. She had just returned from a gym workout and shower and joined him looking rather spendthrift in a terrycloth robe. Her hair at such times smelled of keen evening mists. Toward the end of the movie she wanted to dance and was surprised to find in Dowd a nimble partner, if a trifle ‘airish’. But he tired sooner than expected. Daphne carried on in a few



full turns, the loose robe revealing peerless legs and glimpses of a nude sex, before dropping beside him on the divan, as a cocky neglected flirt, her expression both dryly amused and resolved, as if she had decided his charade, his pantomime was up. Never before had he seen her so single minded, so undaunted. She simply added, “Tired of being the understudy.” If he was dumfounded he was also starkly flattered. Drolly, sedately, he proceeded to lift her in his arms, a small struggle with comic murmurs, and carried her to her room in the night fragrant suite. If the inaugural moment seemed surreal, disembodied for him — the world eldritch came to mind — the candid expression on Daphne’s face told him his pretense of benevolent patronage was up. He continued on as an automaton he thought later.

The robe vanished as if by magic leaving him seated on the bed beside her, touring the loveliness of her back, hoping to draw her into a postponed sleep, while her drowsy voice asked if the tracers might not extend their range, to which he responded, with some desperation, as if her novel nakedness was but one more speculative property for a proper English estate agent: “The celebrated South face masters an interrupted view...from pigeon croft to broad hummock and rolling clefts introducing, yes, the historic iliac plain...by, a, nether bell chamber with highly gluteal fold not the suspected moat round...fencing a smooth grazing land to pine hard calf and noble calcaneum....” Her background purring as a pampered cat elicited curt laughs from them both. “You risk buying only if you turn me over,” she said with fine solemnity. The words he accepted but by then had little compunction to resist, though for a few grim moments imagined doing so, her bemused invitation an absolution. She turned on her side, saying the manner house came fully equipped — “They reduced the size of the, the sugared almond but it’s there. The rest unexceptional.” He did his best to ignore her words and proceeded, in his mind at least, to identify excellent birdsong, grazing land, some timeless busts, and a lovely

chapel or musician's gallery — such being the lyric response to the initially shared caresses. But her beauty in its completeness, its telling admonitory detail, quite overwhelmed him, and they were soon making love like a pair of convulsive teens.

He was demurely told it had been quite tolerable, his mirthful charge sitting upright, touching his lips. "You want me on my knees?" The sleep encrusted voice might have been offering him a hymnal in a crowded congregation. He held her pretty too real face in his hands and remained slatternly speechless, except for the incantation her name entirely subsumed. He could find no words at all. Her head soon rested heavy against him, her drowsiness complete in its steadfastness, its unconditional trust. She plumped the pillow beside him, stealing a parting kiss and saying, "The audience wants an encore I think...."

Afterward, alone in his room, he showered and drank a large glass of Old Sporan. He was appalled, spent, and dumbly grateful. He believed he had given her some pleasure, and her late tranquility seemed as close as fate might grant to the genial content he envisaged for her. So was he any less a strutting grotesquery for not having sodomized her, on knees or no? A discursive wedding night is never really enough he told himself. By continuing the liaison did he not risk forfeiting a fine secretary as well as an endearing impish 'kinswoman'? The imagined daughter had quite banished him with her incisive nates -- 'cute as a bug's ear I'm told' she somnolently said in response to his passes after the robe or palla, as he thought of it, raffishly manifested itself on the adjacent chair to disclose a revelatory Greek eidolon, a too-earthly Artemis. "My poor Angus, my own Zarathustra," she had said. He had the paralyzing suspicion such nimble parody she picked up from him!

Thus, almost without warning a chapter had closed on Angus Dowd, his wish to seek an idyllic solitude lost in his own imperious and lordly management of deference. It was the first time in his life his magnificent

Tower took on an unsuspected lean, with his Artemis qua Dulcinea so decently tolerant of, if not bemused by, this museum oddity! His passage to a lost rarefied communion with his ‘other’ self was sustained the following night, and the happy, forthright, often febrile coupling, continued regularly till the end of that summer season. One night they attended a solo piano recital at the Bear Valley Music Festival by the prodigious Arnold Storrier, now touted a polymath savant, who was then being respectfully described as a ‘maturing duo-pianist’. It was an all-Verdi-transcribed program and Daphne lingered in a private elysium till the following evening when they boarded the plane to Los Angeles. So Dowd imagined. He knew Daphne loved opera, Verdi being one of her nonesuch dream masters and the Storrier chap a living Orpheus. Was he not flattered that she might share his company with the concordant of lyrical splendour? Yet as soon as they were seated in the plane, he sensed her returned mania for mute self-appraisal.

“So.” She woke to gaze at the poppy-red arc of sun traversing the horizon. “The embracèd summer, as someone I know might say.” She took and kissed his hand but continued to stare at the fiery sun, her expression the stoic masque she wore as a garland. He felt powerless to mitigate such exotic yearning. She perhaps did not doubt the exclusivity of his affection, but it was in the keen light dawn only the extravagant love of love, and thus of self, he might offer. And as entertaining as that had been — in its near virtuosity — he knew she instinctively ached for a far rarer and more impacted contentment: an unassuming, unmediated, fully matched domestic happiness! He wondered too in his ever circling regret that he ever thought himself a decent gifted marriage broker.

He saw too, so acutely in the growing arc of daylight, the young nymph of Greek antiquity called Daphne, one of the mountain nymphs who tore the impostor Leucippus apart when he tried to disguise himself as a girl, brandishing her coveted laurel, whose glowing leaves the enam-



ored Apollo finally crowned his head with, and ordered the tree evermore sacred to his special divinity.

## TWENTY-SEVEN

Frieda looked with a residual calm at the plain, nearly empty coat closet. Her entire wardrobe at that moment (what she had taken with her to the FBI safe house) hung from half-a-dozen wire coat hangers. For several seconds she indulged a recollection of a ten meter expanse bearing perhaps ten to fifteen million worth of designer creations. One lone item from that collection remained and that in modified form, hanging apart from the rest in the narrow space, as much a paean to the Madeiran seamstress's craft as a designer's showpiece. It was strange she could wear it now, and not during their stay at the country chalet. There it would have vitiated, adulterated the timeless rustic surround, invoked a presence she did not finally own. Even now, with the spectre of recent memories still sorely vivid, the act of once more making herself into a gift bothered her — and yet at that juncture of her life she sought to regale the 'David' she believed she might finally trust. She even resented the lingering taint that attached to that quite natural urge. It was the one thing she would never forgive — the disruption and hence distrust of her authentic self which the obsidian of her marriage had so contorted. She lifted the elegant costume from its hanger, amazed again at its weight and majesty. The flower beaded corsage had been restored. She could do little with her hair; the FBI and, she guessed, CIA interrogators had been friendly but the existence at the safe house remained spartan. They were at first incredulous her information proved so dated. Well, they did come late to the game, arresting her the day after the cryptic story broke. She mislead them on a few personal mat-

ters, and nearly got away with it. Not until the final week did she confront a competent examiner, also the more personable — not unlike her old tutor. She even detected in his mood and method the same tempered resignation. The irony was that her silences in the end told them most of what they sought. Her own baited arrogance, the result of the first two team's incompetence, got her in trouble in the end. Even now she could barely believe the many gaps in her story; the early interrogators were nearly speechless before the probability that whole months, years could be spent shopping, comparing, estimating, bidding, buying; being counselled, measured, fitted, exercised, coiffed, toned, pumiced, massaged, bathed, drugged...so devoutly 'poeticized'!

The cheque she eventually managed to deposit into the gold seam was a clever forgery, yet the net result was the same: a distraction for Roald and the GRU, a brief hiatus for herself. They smiled at this and at last granted her a change of identity and application for landed immigrant status. How silly sad and monstrous...and now all that remained to affect a measure of self-esteem was the lovely chiffon dress with its brocaded torso. A limbo indeed. The emerald earrings she decided were too large, they seemed to parody two red eyes.

He legal position vis-a-vis the divorce was still bearish. The court had taken seriously Roald's absurd charges of child neglect and mental cruelty. Modern word games still phased her. She was somewhat relieved to learn of Roald's own pending indictment from government trustees, though the prosecutors there were bogged down with the wording. The preliminary hearing to contest Roald's petition for divorce on the above grounds was scheduled in exactly seven days. One tiny week to themselves. Then another marathon of impertinent questions. She wondered how many concerts or endorsements the ordeal would finally cost — to absolve a love and release a past...divorces are made in Heaven Arnold said to her over the phone, probably quoting Antoine or some other arch eccentric. It was

part of her bargain with the FBI that she would be transferred from one of their safe houses directly to Arnold's estate house in the Hamptons. His enthusiasm forestalled her apprehension and, as she slipped into the lone pair of estimable sandals, decided the near perfect lady was ready and returned to the pass-check room where the larger of the two young men paced back and forth. On seeing his boyish smile and hearing such glib well-wishing she sensed the old enforced calm once more well up within.

Vassily Ablesimov had not properly slept for a week and was beginning to sense the disintegration. He believed the timetable he worked out to be sound, but whether the FBI team remained unpenetrated he could not be sure. He believed the new SVR, a bastard child of the KGB, then in joint-command of his Rezidency, had found Roald's background too serviceably quirky to pass up. A media saturnalia of his licentious antics, parcelled in installments, would be ideal for camouflage and especially coercion. Vassily's remaining confusion lay with the sudden appearance of the elegant jars — specifically the SVR interest in them — which he learned of from a debriefing held with a Licchavi footman who had been recruited through the lawyer. This gentleman identified the jars as receptacles in which Roald intended to inter select mementos of his wife (before her flight) — films, tapes, perfumes, jewelry, a lock of hair et cetera — and house them in specially designed muqarnas — rounded honeycombed niches set in a supporting wall-corner of his mosque-styled villa. The footman's SVR debriefer had been most curious for details. The jar's designer, a brilliant Czech glass blower, was even well known in Russia. At first Vassily was confused. His latest mandate was simply to help muddy connections to the gold seam — at the last minute he was withdrawn from the detail assigned to pump the Licchavi retainers and establish Frieda's whereabouts. He suspected an assassination team was in place long before his return to America. Then the elegant glass jars appeared, almost as an after



thought — leaving Vassily in a sour incredulous state.

The original plan which he back-plotted from the lowest operation level (where personnel assignments were more obvious), was to fake a separation of the wife from her FBI warders — suggestive perhaps of an impetuous act to strike out on her own — ending sadly in an ‘accidental’ homicide. He reviewed an old cross-fire ruse: the FBI plant would shoot the legit agent or agents, the waiting SVR agent would shoot the target (Frieda), the guns then exchanged, the plant’s first firearm left near the target’s body, the plant himself ‘wounded’ (surgically done the day before). The first stage — the fabricated ‘flight’ in the FBI escort taxi to the neutral residence with the plant onboard — seemed on track.

But then to Vassily’s chagrin he learned, through an older KGB liaison, a boastful chap and disgruntled sorehead that there might not be enough left of the body to stage a sad homicide with (Vassily had directly asked if an assassination was still being considered). Perhaps not, said the liaison, a smiling Bulgarian with many gold teeth — parts of the cadaver could be missing; hence a second, newer plan. This veteran KGB stalwart seemed delighted with Vassily’s confusion, making Vassily suspect the stalwart was there to pace him! So perhaps the interest in the jars was not entirely aesthetic after all. But the Bulgarian merely smiled and suggested the husband was full of sensational ideas. “Shylock we call him. A scoop for the National Enquirer. I predict a film within a year; Americans have a special talent for packaging and preservatives. Two of the jars seem coincidentally made for a pair of green eyes, or is it blue. A fine collector this Roald.” The Bulgarian’s gold teeth flashed in parting.

Such liaison officers were a mine of misinformation of course. Yet Vassily was not entirely skeptical. But what could he do at that stage? The fussy ghoulishness of the scheme garbled inquiry let alone resolution. Was someone scripting the intentions, the aberrant mindset of a ‘useful’ murderer? Such a killing, if ascribed to the husband, would help

salvage, via the barter, some of the gold seam money; the Licchavi retainers would then be under great pressure for the tidiest cleanest settlement possible. Vassily could not believe the husband that craven or crazed, but knew all too well what coercion the Cheka might invoke. Perhaps there was a singular embarrassment or ugliness yet undivulged...the Cheka remained a brisk clearing house for Satanic smarts, real or imagined, the imagined often the most potent. And in America, as in the Cheka, opportunity was king.

It was during those hours he might have slept that Vassily decided he'd had enough: his feelings then for the sorry girl were mixed, but he loathed being part of an unspeakable travesty. What could she now disclose after all? The stages of cocaine intoxication? How it feels to be painted green? Nor had he forgotten his own unhappy descent, and the patent likelihood he could be consigned to the final body count, a realization that concentrated the remaining options if he were to alter anything at all. In addition to loss of sleep, he had sustained a month in the street atmosphere of Los Angeles: his eyes and mucous membranes were inflamed and he had a temperature. All he had hoped to accomplish was the return of Frieda to American immigration authorities, alive and alert. The net worth of reprisal he long ago disparaged. It would be the last time he saw his pupil — and his last act as a demoted do-all. He could end being shot, a not unlikely fate regardless. His status within the Rezidency was now such that he might be assigned almost any bleak task.

Then his stewing anger prompted him to exclaim a loud — “So why not silence the ghoul, the Indian voluptuary himself? Well why not? More direct, less messy, maybe easier. For everyone!” He was amazed to discover no forthright inner dissent. He stood then beside a curb bagel and fresh orange juice stand, wondering if he could keep some of the pleasantly smelling offerings down. The more he considered the murder, the more he was disposed to attempt it. It seemed his exhaustion height-

ened his resolve. Was it not the protean self-servers who had spoiled the dream, for America and himself? As he asked the question he began to refine his plan and credit his chances...which even allowed space to save the daughter! If one of the FBI sitters would escort Frieda to Storrier's home in the Hamptons — the likely move — as he anticipated, he must be in a position to follow her at least that far. Which left him less than twelve hours to plant the explosive in the private railroad carriage or the mosque minbar, the throne atop the enclosed hierarchical staircase in which the maniac himself sometimes elected to address the faithful in his mixed household. Out of the question of course — bombing the villa, given the 'collateral damage'. He imagined the idea came from his loathing of Eastern, in particular Islamic, presumption and insolence; he had wanted to say, to exclaim, to many if not all Muslims — you worry me. You worry me! Thus he set out to plant an explosive device, a single, timed limonka, a fragmentation grenade he filched from the station armoury, in the isolated rail carriage — Roald eschewed flying — the erstwhile traveling hotel where Roald had, and would likely sleep, the following night, the grenade set atop a suspension damper. The timing mechanism would take some thought, also the audio feed to identify entry to the carriage. Yet both could be accomplished before Roald arrived with his bodyguards. He would dress as a railroad worker — a wheel truck checker. Astute firebug he silently said to himself.

In a like fit of remorseless energy (noble and troubled patricians sometimes think and act alike) did a determined Arnold Storrier study the photos of the large domed interior. He had not realized how open it was. His tourist's knowledge of mosque design came from the Byzantine prototype where naves were screened by arcades and heavy shadow, whereas Turco-Muslim architecture seemed to thrive on sharp well defined character and concentric symmetry. An easy shot from one of the half-cupola windows and credible escape in an unmarked helicopter from Muerner's then off-



shore research frigate or, from one of the many ground floor doorways, three rounds timed to a swift retreat to a nearby freeway....

But he didn't want to shoot the man. His special fury demanded a much more personal reckoning.

As his lawyers and investigators pieced together the details of Roald's career, marriage and sybaritic luxury (including many rumours about the jars), Arnold discovered an inner disorientation, a rage and unflattering miasma he had not experienced before. He doubted there was finally a plenary decorum for two people passionately fond of one another — they made up a litany as they went; but the acute knowledge of the detailed use of the other was finally a poison. Every lover was somehow implicated; the penetralia was flooded with interrogatory light.

In his mind ranged the execrable scenes of putting out eyes with Antoine's walking stick and the like. While the deed, whatever it was, must somehow be accomplished by himself. He could have found numerous hit men to do his bidding; for one Sikh clique resentful of Licchavi habit and fortune, a safe passage into the estate itself would have sufficed. Indeed, the very nature of Roald's offence trivialized vendetta, the incommensurateness of it before a liberal temperament — a murder to expiate the victimless crime! Arnold's anger was entirely unflattering, Roald a frail plump non-match when a Hydra need be confronted, not a patron of virtuosic glass blowing!

He possessed a fine hatred in his pugilist days, when he ached to obliterate, spectacularly 'kill' his combatant, though a death would have chagrined afterward; his opponents were rarely formidable and many managers on the take. But here he seemed on his own — and a gorged smelly insect filled the opposing corner. Instead of Antoine's steely walking stick should he not take a roach swatter and kitchen catcher? Or do nothing at all? Was there a homelier trait than sexual jealousy of such a being?

Thus a sense of unreality clung to him as he stole from car to car in the yard where the private carriage was berthed, a vague pervasive feeling of warrant, of *jus divinum* and *lex talionis* propelling him. The blot he wanted eradicated. A distracting electrical fire to divert the bodyguards — then a select blow to the neck followed by a torch of the man's stately wheeled transport — the result of a faulty gas generator if he was sufficiently conscientious. He dressed in wheel checker or 'car toad' coveralls and planned to hide in or near the carriage 'till Roald's return. (Roald had vacated his villa estate — then swarming with reporters — to the anonymity of his rail carriage in a yard off limits to the public.) Arnold carried the walking stick, had lubricated the mechanism retaining the blade, wondering if he could really do more than give the ghoul a bloody nose. Yet with cane, canisters and timers he came, prepared to do his worst. Such a peaceful evening. A doldrum day, dilapidated sunset. A yardman sauntered from wheel to wheel of a nearby freight train checking wheel surfaces, bearings and couplings. The Licchavi carriage sat on a separate siding as a storybook caravan, the lanterns on the open end the light standards of an old imperial flagship. The fire must not be extensive the observant Arnold noted as he checked the extinguishers in the nearest fire station, finding then — to his amazement! — a second dark form doing much the same.

Simultaneously they sighted one another and quickly took cover. The successive furtive darting of the 'other' intimated the worst to both men. Someone stalked the stalker and that someone was one clever bastard. The freight yard they sweltered in was a small island removed from the larger rail grid, thus an attempted escape would be conspicuous and, if the other were alerted, with the anticipated infra-red tracer, likely fatal.

Arnold swore at his earlier nonchalance, Vassily his watch as the precious seconds elapsed. They stalked one another for a long minute attempting to notice a characteristic response from the other — quick me-

thodical double-back, duration of pauses, erratic gestures that betoken indecision even fear. And what sort of damn oddball weapon the other carried! They were both dressed in dark grey with faces umbered. One carried a strange compact cylindrical device and stout salient, the other two small packs with what appeared to be a flare canister. Two conversing watchmen at last noted the activity, one of whom entered a call box to phone for assistance. Each of the dark-suited stalkers then suspected he had immediately three or more bodies to contend with. A yardman approached the pointing watchmen, looking toward the island, then jogged to a small platform office behind the carriage and sounded an alarm. Arnold suddenly saw his double dart to the larger track grid and disappear behind two hopper cars. He quickly followed suit, diverging about ninety degrees on a path that placed him nearer a broad expanse of warehouses. He traversed several tracks full of box cars then began running toward a peripheral, slowly moving string of tanker cars that appeared to be accelerating. At one point he was uncertain if he heard additional footsteps or indistinct echoes of his own.

As he slowed to listen a thick plank lambasted his shins and sent him sprawling into the oily gravel. The man was upon him levelling an adroitly positioned knife Arnold easily deflected when that attacker, who had decided on a swift quiet assault, realized his folly: in no way could he deal with strength like that! The large hands that came about his neck and knife arm had the grip of a mechanized mangler; he could feel his adam's apple collapsing into his windpipe. He pummelled what he could reach and miraculously broke away, catching in time the struts of a swiftly rolling tanker car, amazed at his own agility in boarding it. When firmly attached he turned, saw the brute struggling to stand, then falling to one knee. It was his last sight of the injured Hercules. He could find no suitable oath or benediction.

In the car the two FBI babysitters maintained an intermittent forced



chatter. She had seen only one of them before when she was driven to the safe house. They were very young she thought. One seemed rather tense. The vicuna shawl Rosanna fetched to go with the shoes she drew tighter about her and silently watched the ebb and bustle of humanity beyond her window. Throngs shifted in the evening light as so many moths flitting against stark street and signboard lights. She hated moths without compunction. Even Muerner was a friend in crowds like these, where anthropoid and reptilian wills prevailed. A young man peered in at a stoplight and whistled — a compliment that livened dread. It was one aspect of America she never really understood. The art of self-defence seemed as sardonic and unworkable here as a thermonuclear arsenal amongst nuclear-armed zealots. Destruction or enslavement was the inescapable offering; the meagre satisfaction was to survive for a time near the edge.

Then the car shot ahead. “ — Not one of ours,” said the driver as he tooled down a side street, which was conveniently blocked after their sudden turn by an old empty bus. Horns blared. A gang of youths yelled after them.

The second escort turned and said to her, “No sweat. Fully functional and on target.”

Was the ‘not one of ours’ one of Arnold’s Frieda wondered and tried to keep from shivering. One of the rear windows would not entirely close. The seat itself seemed at times unmoored.

“Damn!” The car bounded down a second lane, the suspension grating and squawking, the wheels bumping and dangling. More and more she wondered at the vehicle — one of the older hybrid models. Surely not transportation to trust in a pinch. More and more the incongruities taunted her. But the more real they became the more she sense the futility of it all. They were then on the edge of Chinatown negotiating decomposing alleys. Then the car bolted to a stop. Simultaneously the second escort was shot, her door wrenched open, several hands seized her wrists

and arms, dragging her out. Something went about her neck; someone injected a drug. She glimpsed an envelope, someone looking inside...there should be more. The driver spoke. The dress and shoes were valuable, another said. The driver swore in Spanish. A husky voice, that of a Slav she thought, said there would be more later.

She noticed all this almost as a spectator in an uncomfortable bleacher. The garrotte relaxed as she did; momentarily she felt cold, Rosanna's shawl had fallen to the ground. So: the first of two, three handoffs? Already the drowsiness, dizziness...she assumed it would be quick. The Cheka did not entertain abroad any more.

She was bundled into a second, more spacious car with heavily tinted windows, driven at high speed, no attempt made to cloak her head: the abducted captive would not be coming back. She partially lay in the back, the garrotte still in place, not quite asleep — the lingering puzzle....

She was traded once more, the value of the extra's again belaboured. It was the most cramped of the cars with intermingling smells of oil, vomit and the stagnant bodies who squeezed in with her. The wheels spun before the doors closed.

Barely awake and didn't care. As with Roald's strange Tara, a molted memory. The scene had begun to reverse, passing in a gallery, a witness to framed mayhem — Peter's sense of chaos or Vassily's pit, or Arnold's — what perturbation of Arnold's, or should she have said Muerner's? Salt water tears. And where was the prince, her special David. He had surely lost her in the labyrinth, airless, lungless....

They could manage little in the pinioned space, the costume the Madeiran seamstress fashioned for a goddess not an accomplice: the dedicated stitching would stay a pent-up frenzy, an impromptu, incidental assault. Inarticulate oaths versus noble threads! The neckline twisted, a corpus delicti glimpsed. A torrent of wonder for a wonder. Time was of the essence. The sight in the mirror caused the driver to brake and finger a badly

rent cap sleeve. A momentous slap, not hers. Electric recriminations, not hers. Several thousand dollars pissed away. The thus assault interrupted, postponed. The car gunned forward. A scary carnival ride...the car finally turning in a wrenching arc, headlights sweeping an embankment outlining a looming van, then freezing on a mud flat. A strong torch detailed the twitch of carrion, then the pale nonesuch. The stench of a lost midden, breath of postponed decay, sluggish islands slowly turning in a watery centre. A retributive death then. New voices robust in fraternal greeting and topical complaint — the dumb bastards you get stuck with. Practiced resigned sighs. More cursive lights across a dingy flat, a suppurating sump, touching also a dark van or coach, then blanching a tear-wet face, the fabric of collar and dress examined. Again mention of a precious commodity stupidly spoiled. Someone emphatically declared an asshole. Then a studious face close by. “Leave the shoes.” A sharp tug, then another. She almost fell. Another bitter complaint, someone in a hurry. More oaths and edgy insults which she nearly joined in as she was pushed toward the novel, blameless coach, the sounds of flowing water in the distance. Again and again the hand thumped, pushing forward, ooze for a time hindering progress to the newly opened coach doorway spewing a bright furnace of light, sheering the maze...

Then a piqued distraction, an alien commotion! Swearing, newborn, still born...suddenly a panic. A motor abruptly started, the coach door banging shut, leaving, tires suddenly furiously spinning. She might have sighed. New commands, a wallop backwards, backwards, falling stumbling into harsh smelly water rising. Sharper jabs to chest, chin, water teetering about, a body, her body a carcass newly sprawled, floundering...some shots, two, four...a sudden submersion then a wide spiral turning in grungy detritus, skirt dumbly trundling then tugging, the rinse of an impatient hairdresser, careless cold stinging lather. Somewhere else a scream, the burst of an angry god, somewhere, though not from her...



nary a word....

It was an act of courage that Louis later guiltily despaired of later: Cody suddenly running down the rise shrieking at the top of her lungs, perhaps as much at him as at the thugs below, hurling a camera at a figure who spryly ducked, as a flashlight intermittently picked out her running form, while he, Louis Führ, cowered helpless in the shelter of the rise's lavender bushes. "Over here for crissake!" Cody kept yelling back at him over and over.

Then that terrible moment after the flashlight went berserk and the shooting started when it seemed she had accomplished nothing — a horrible interval of surging disbelief, a pantomime prelude to the coming frantic dodging as she slipped between the car lights while picking up anything and everything she could find to hurl at them, one stone at least landing on its mark with splintering effect. Mindlessly he called her name from the bushes. Someone fired two stray shots in his direction before jamming into the wheel-whining sedan which drew itself with painful solemnity from the settling ooze. Another rock shattered a window. Two more shots punctuated the silence. Another crash of glass, yet he could make out nothing at all. Then the car turned on Cody. Louis was further astonished to see the second body lunge from the shadows, whitewashed by the headlights, and rake Cody aside as the car swung by, more shots issuing from the vehicle. Then several gunshots followed — a final set oddly evenly paced. The straining vehicle was heard sliding, careening then rolling, rolling! out of sight into an ominous distant crash. A terrible quiet followed. No one emerged — nothing stirred before Louis' wild gaze. Nothing! Only a faint rush of water reached his ears. Then a splash and man's voice: "Over here!" Louis rose up attempting to see once more through the tears.

Cody shouted from the spillway to bring the jeep. Louis lurched into

an ungainly hurried response. As he nosed down the rise his headlights picked out two persons, one being Cody, cradling a straggled form, sheathed in a badly stained garment hanging like a limp water wing. The weak light above the lowered back seat of the jeep separated him further from the scene as the stranger worked to bind a neck wound. The medical kit was not a waste after all. Cody dialled 911 on her cell phone. Louis returned to the driver's seat, keenly admonished by the sight of still oozing scarlet and the excoriating beauty of a tear-shaped breast.

“Louis for crissake.” He realized he drove too timidly back over the rise, the distant sight an overturned car partly submerged in the tailing pond. It was Cody's only admonition. The man seemed to know what he was about. Cody said a helicopter ambulance would meet them at the highway turnoff, and would be there in approximately ten minutes. The man could no longer feel a pulse. He continued to apply chest resuscitation and strove to kneed strangely twisted arms. Cody sought a second blanket. The awful intensity beggared Louis' anxiety. Occasionally the man paused, hunting for vital signs. The dress had caught on a stray whirl of barbed wire he said. And held. Several times he mumbled or cursed in a language neither Cody nor Louis could understand nor identify. He looked once at Cody and said in a fluent English, “If she lives you are chiefly to thank.”

The brilliant ball of light from the helicopter fixed an asteroid landscape about them. The stinging vortex of the surrounding dust and debris gradually diminished as the blades slowed. Two attendants approached from the copter with a kind of chrysalis and deftly fitted it about the body. The man described the injuries he knew of and also the blood type, a fact Louis was surprised to hear. Three police cruisers were on their way. Cody seemed oblivious to everything but the pale slicked head she held in her hands up to the time of the removal.

The chopper lifted into the sky and banked to an inland destination.

The man shook both their hands, again mentioned the address of the emergency centre, and hoped to see them there. The late arriving policeman took brief notes. Soon six patrolmen looked about the site, two shaking their heads. They hoped to talk further to the three ‘interveners’ at the emergency centre.

But the stranger did not come. A plainclothesman took their statements, separately. Louis was partly relieved not to tell his unheroic tale before Cody. Meeting again in the hallway of the hospital they were confirmed strangers. A nurse told Cody it would be some time before they knew. Thus far the woman lived.

The drive to Pomona was interminable though it lasted only twenty minutes. Louis could think of nothing to say. Cody sat in silence, occasionally backhanding moist cheeks.

“I’m sorry,” he said when they had pulled into the driveway.

“Me too,” she said, just before getting out and heading for the bathroom.

Later she sat for a long time on the balcony, arms extended, palms up.

“I’m bushed,” Louis finally said. “I’ll take the couch.”

“Okay,” she said apathetically, and he decided their autumn summer had come to an end.

What Louis did not know was that Cody knew the woman, had spent time with her at her desert house. The belated discovery keened the too few memories.

Vassily asked his two escorts if they might pass by the hospital. They would have time he said. One returned to the parked car after a short interval and said she was still alive. He seemed apathetic, as if she shouldn’t be. The two had tracked Vassily to the polluted waterway. One said a solitary ‘neyt’ on his cell phone. As they left Vassily saw the large man hobble from the limo, waving aside the assistance of a tall stately black. He



grasped at a walking stick that was too short for him. The man was Arnold Storrier, and Vassily watched through the rear window as he limped up the steps to the hospital. His own neck remained acutely sore for the grip the man placed upon him. Was it possible? He thought of the blackness of the shunting yard and their own umbered faces, and wondered at the ongoing neglect....

The plane was full. A woman with a Down's syndrome child sat to the rear of Gloria, two Salvation Army officers the three seats in front, and across and three seats beyond, the trio that continued to interest. The tired man had smiled briefly as she passed. He was seated between what appeared to be two large sullen escorts, both either unenthusiastic with their companion or their commission. As she was at heart a romantic she sensed in that middle face, in its hard ancient lines, a lingering stalemate very close to her own. The man she wanted had it seemed disappeared with the coming of the Happy Hour philosophers et al, with the entitlement injunctions that eclipsed romance, frozen packaged dinners she thought of them — yet she had not entirely lost the spirit of the quest. Her more doctrinaire colleagues said she sought a Neanderthal. Perhaps she did, in a way, for that chap had survived for a very long time. Her own father would have worn such a label proudly, and he and her mother would be married sixty years in another month. The mother worked as a chemist, the father as a chemist — alchemists both. They raised two children, the younger son a wanderer and sometime teacher of mathematics at Beirut University, killed by a stray bullet from somewhere during a riot. There had been no role models for her parents, as parents. The day's psychology, largely a politically correct dogma, was for her father the loser's dress circle, though in his way he was *pari passu* a superb psychologist himself.

She noted the middle man did not order lunch. The man surrounded

by two fixed points, the image of a troika coursing her mind, intimated that he shared something of her fate. Of this she was all but convinced. Should he not instead be seated beside her, listening and being listened to, ably teasing and being teased, keeping open the joyful pathways — and finally lustily visiting her with the seed that must bring her silent scream to life and learning? A romantic indeed. And had not the dynamics of this sonata been demolished by a paltry voyeur and his lame Playboy camera — all absolved, he believed, in the gilt framed prose of the Areopagitica on the walls of his massage parlours? The near paradise so glibly lost. It was the sheerest invincible despoliation...and did not the ever manacled genius before her know this to be true?

She decided she was likely just (whatever that meant!) upset by the public accounting of the Licchavi abduction. Method assault, the age's routine coupling. Glasnost that would blind a yak. She recalled the advice of a veteran British actor to a younger Hollywood dynamo. My dear fellow, do try acting, it's much less wearing and you often remember what you did afterward. It was another of Gloria's anathemas — the frozen method performer who could not piss without the role being zapped into him. Had the best theatre poets not gone out of their way to remind the audience the play was indeed a play? Not the day's conflation of theatre and reality. The method citizen's hunting Mr. Goodscript — the grand hegemony of reflex. Pavlov testing the Improv. Oh well, was she not just another middle-aged droopy?

Then, as if on cue, the middle man stood over her.

"Are you not Ms. Gloria Leibowitz?"

A chance to return the faint but agreeable smile and stanch her wonder.

"I believe we have a mutual friend. I would be grateful if you would deliver this letter for me." He produced a small half-bent envelope with Frieda's name on it and thrust it into her hand. "I had planned to mail it

but a personal delivery would be welcome. A long story, I'm afraid. Please accept my best wishes."

And that, as they say, was that. She had wanted to ask him to join her for a portion the ride but his return to his seat seemed ordained. The fated troika reformed and continued its inscrutable lament. For a minute she debated returning the call, wanting to know what the hell was going on — should she ask the captain to requisition a SWAT team, with honour guard on standby? Fifteen, ten, five years ago she might have done just that, prepared to try to knock out a window if the captain elected to sit on his backside and count the sunbeams. Instead she looked across the vast blue sky and lower cumulous clouds and guessed they would now be over America's heartland. Poor Jud. She looked again at the letter and the rigid cast to the letters — written thus: To Frieda Storrier. Was the man a diviner as well? But instead of yanking the chap from his sober reverie, demanding an explanation then, if acceptable, dragging him to a restroom and showing him how it was done in a Boeing 777 at 36,000 feet, she fell asleep, her last thoughts of John Cook and his gadfly sting about propriety having its own special fatuity. Dear, dear John.

The plane was empty when she awoke, except for herself and a patient stewardess.

## TWENTY-EIGHT

Her room overlooked the luxuriant garden and estate lands beyond, endowed with slender ibex, mountain hares, hedgehogs, red foxes, voles and a dead creature she spotted on an early stroll. "A Crowned Shrew," the gardener said. "Sometimes confused with the Harvest Mouse. Hard to say what happened." She smiled. "You keep the grounds in splendid shape."



“Dr. Muerner would have it no other way.” The man’s patient Swiss accent an invisible reassurance.

Below the terrace off her room soared hardy palms that endured cold Zurich winters. This day a Blue Tit briefly sat on the terrace railing, to be replaced by a pair of what she believed to be Red-throated Pipits. The variety of birds here remained one of the wonders, now free of the large glass encased aviary and attached bestiary. More Muerner freaks she presumed. A day earlier several varieties of still-blooming rare orchids were removed from their winter stay in the ‘palace greenhouse’ as it was called. Also in stages of removal — lush Daturas, day lilies, mallow and an angel trumpet tree. Guava, mango, lemon and mandarin orange clusters both perfumed and secluded the azure pool with its undulating electric sun steaks on this brilliant spring day, while the vivid paintbox birds she could not name perched on what she called the filigree dining chairs and tables. Muerner used the word *Alfesco* but she did not now the word and was stubbornly not in the habit of asking leading questions of her mephitic mentor physician, though she felt up to anything he might dish out this day. Though by taking it all in she suspected she conceded a point. Water lilies and papyrus propagated several ponds, providing a pithy habitat for the toads, lizards, salamanders and what not. She rather distrusted reptiles. The geckos always looked inherently mischievous. One presently lingered atop her bedroom mirror which reflected on the terrace opposite a pair of heliotrope macaws. Further out, atop a distant high stucco wall, the essential sheltering wind break to the manicured gardens, sat one of the fan-crowned cranes. The wind break itself bore a *trompe l’oeil* mural of jungle richness.

“What happened to the swans?”

Muener rounded to stand by her on the terrace and pointed to a screened waterway she hadn’t noticed.

“The Hawaiian geese have mated again, there are four healthy eggs.”

Impassively he added, “The swans and flamingos got rather noisy.”

“So the geckos are safe.”

“I’m afraid Angus is still fond of the geckos.

Frieda yawned. “Birds of feather.”

Muerner brightened. “I think today you look quite presentable. Your devoted friend may compose a second lyric opera.”

“Did Pechenpaugh complain of the swans?”

Muerner drew a long face. “He was a very sick man, Frieda; I doubt he noticed the gardens at all.”

“Did he get as competent attention?”

“In the end, yes. He did not always seek it, you know.”

“Like Susanne.” The comment emerged almost by stealth.

Muerner lightly smiled and turned to enter the sitting room.

“So: before Arthur — feral darkness; after Arthur — sweetness and light. Muirninochka.”

“Frieda, I think it’s time you looked over the agreement. You gain nothing by putting it by. His estate folk may yet rally to contest the settlement if you leave it in escrow. They may even object to the special school you’ve enrolled Roald Jr. in. Which would be a pity. He has a chance there. You won’t recognize him in six months.”

Frieda held back a laugh.

“Bright children are always salvageable.”

“I’m not to see him for several weeks.”

“For the best. He needs a new start. Please consider his current malaise, both custodial and cognitive. It can lead to a delusional state. Arnold will take him fly fishing next weekend. Arnold is a very engaging masculine male.” Each word Muerner emphasized. “The example your son needs. For a time.”

Frieda knew something had to change; she had long since run out of options...before a budding incestuous son. The ‘toy’ Roald had given him

was still stinging obscenity. She would trash it a second time if she could. She fed a hazel nut to the macaw then placed a hand on the railing as if to wait out a spate of dizziness. Then listlessly she tightened the sash of her aqua coloured morning gown and followed Muerner to one of the plump oversize chairs by the long bevelled glass table. Several forms shingled the sprightly Lalique top. Each required a signature. Muerner appeared delighted and spoke jauntily.

“A brief review: the first set of Mr. Peak’s initial set of photographs set the tone. Two frames clearly identify the plate and number and one of Roald’s fine enforcers, also a house steward who was plainly giving instructions to the model chap who drove the second go-cart” — he checked a paragraph in the first document — “a Saturn Aura Hybrid. I have no idea what that is but I am assured it is a motorized kennel designed by a cur. It now lies luxuriating in the ooze of a tailing pond. The bloated driver and two others were eventually taken from the interior. We do honor their passing.”

He smartly turned the page not looking up.

“To paraphrase: Having questioned the said premier goon, and receiving a full account of the first and second modified plan — the latter one Roald still claiming ignorance of — and including several statements taken in camera from servants in the Licchavi household who pretend ignorance of GRU involvement — Roald agrees to the following. I shall paraphrase.”

Here Muerner refreshed his champagne flute.

“One: that all pronouncements, without limit or qualification, of a derogatory nature lodged with such and such a district court, impugning the person and character of so and so Kniaźnin, alias Freddy what’s-her-name, are retracted, repudiated, recanted in toto, with proffered apology and, in deference to the acknowledged maligned party, the sum of such-and-such — which you have foolishly donated to the United Nations —



yes, lest we forget — while the perpetrator has placed himself in the care and custody of the state Psychiatric Evaluation Commission, the son in the care of the exemplary mother, future visiting privileges arranged exclusively at the mother's behest and discretion."

"Felix, I've read all that. Just tell me where you think he's headed. As plainly as possible. Also if you still think Roald Jr. really needs the care of the special school you recommended."

Here Muerner paused to remove a mote from his lapel.

"In answer to the second of your questions, the school is a necessity, but far from the penal colony you seem to envisage. And you can visit him as often as you wish. As for your first query — well he's crushed, mortified, perhaps permanently over the edge. His exploits are such that he many never walk free again. There is also a murder charge you knew nothing about. A colleague who disagreed a while back. A media Saturnalia will likely follow. And until he's sentenced I wouldn't rule out a suicide. The Cheka as you will know are adept at 'honour' killings. As for the GRU and your valiant tutor —well, with Roald as foil, they've toasted your files, and despite the fact you bamboozled them out of nearly a million Swiss francs, they do not now accept that you exist. I would give my big toe to be so favored — ditto your inestimable sister who, by the way, will play Peaseblossom in a new film of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* — with a voice over — also the ballerina in a revival of *On The Town* next season on American Playhouse on PBS. I would count my blessings. She may, of course, still be chary about publicly expanding her family, given her past hecklers."

"You've said little about Vassily..." Here Frieda paused, again intimating a coming dizziness. Muerner rose, quickly crossed the distance separating them and, after hesitating, gingerly cradled her head in his hands.

"We can eventually do something about these capsule migraines, maybe even convert them to their visual equivalents, also the hum. But

not for at least another week. We still have not mapped out entirely the damage done the cochlea and auditory nerves. I suspect you may have to use a hearing aid in the one ear, or be subject to these occasional attacks. Your preference to being deaf around the likes of me may change over time.”

Frieda simply allowed her head to be placed back against the cushion of the oversize chair. Muerner sat down opposite.

“Oh yes — how could I forget. Not of direct remedial interest but helpful in explaining the wounds. The cartridges used by the heavies were I’m told a new form of target shooting projectile, designed for maximum in-flight stability. Not intended to blow away the opposition so to speak, like a blunt nosed bullet. The pellet actually elongates slightly in flight becoming in effect something akin to a sturdy needle that requires a substantial resistance barrier to mushroom or fragment. Through flesh and thin bone — that part of the skull where you were most seriously hit for instance — the little jasper passed cleanly through without so much as tipping his hat. Barely a trace left behind. Apparently some packaging gaff mixed up the labels. An underworld tycoon stole a truckload, unknowingly, and farmed the lot out to several dealers, the net result being that a few score goons who should now be dead occupy precious space in several of Los Angeles’ emergency wards. Not a great consolation, I grant, but a tale nonetheless.”

“Overjoyed.”

“Splendid. That absolutely filthy waterway was another matter of course. The resolution of the subsequent infections, of which you ear is the lingering legacy, is now being written up as a dissertation on the mat-ing of select spectrum antibiotics, to be published jointly on three continents. My own lab has been instrumental in devising some of them.”

“You’ve said nothing about Vassily. Is that deliberate.”

Muerner snuffled, pulled a face. “I wish I could be more reassuring

here. Please be assured Angus has not been sitting on his hands. He is talking to a man in the consulate here. I wish there were more, but there isn't. Angus is persistent, as you know."

Frieda sighed. "A further word or two about Roald Jr. will be appreciated."

Muener absently retrieved a young gecko that had sidled into the room, dropped it over the terrace, then returned to the table, filled his flute of champagne, topped up Frieda's, lit a thin cheroot, uncapped and set out a gold pen for Frieda to use, then set about the room almost as a gymnast readying for a demanding floor exercise.

"Young Roald will need devoted and strict supervision for a time I would imagine. I have little clinical experience here. I've always worked with more or less cooperative geniuses. Nash, my head man, who is ever one-hundred and eighty degrees misaligned, says young Roald needs an open environment with many indulgent female models. My interpretation is Roald Jr. needs a closed shop with a couple of resourceful masculine companions — who share a conspiratorial respect for madame. Naturally I have asked for a second even third opinion. Part of your charm, and vulnerability, despite your lovely feigned look of imposition, is the manifest fact of your exceptional talent and basic loyalty, both distracted for a time but again whole. You even seek amends with the Russians by funding a UN relief project in their name, which they stolidly misinterpret. The last deserter one might say. My main concern is that you get on with your life, which includes the resurrection of your career. I do realize I've been rather cavalier in assuming responsibility for your recovery, but it was after all what Arnold wished. Very wisely I may add."

For a brief moment Frieda considered Muerner a kind of archetypal Puck, but quickly restored the barricades.

"What career? Devoted mum, pure science practitioner, loyal Paleomena flunky?"



“I think of them actually as symbiotic, as would any illusionist baiter. But I give science the pre-eminence and Paleomena the laurel. Some of us must know what’s going on, and those who may know must not be distracted.”

“Like Susanne.”

Muerner wanly mulled the point over before answering. “Again — as I’ve said — that matter devolved before my time. Yet I stand accused of a certain detachment, yes. I have always found the spectacle of the beautiful egalitarian offering a utopia that finally only she may thrive in embarrassing. She was one of Paleomena’s sad oxymorons.”

“Before your unflawed human.s”

Muerner remained silent, though a rare smile touched his face.

“You and Roald may have hit it off — oh christ!”

Once more Muerner held her head, then sought a syringe in the bag on the table. But Frieda pushed the implement away.

“Before you anesthetize me, I want to hear more about this grand wonderful aesthetic of yours. There is a nice story that Roald had some pretty jars made up, and you plan to bid on them should they go to auction.”

For the first time Muerner seemed liable to impatience.

“The dosage has been considerably reduced.”

“Felix, I don’t want to sleep.”

The syringe was sedately returned to the bag, which was slowly closed.

“I don’t feel this the hour to address human ascendance, poetics — or, concomitantly, classical glass blowing.”

“I beg to disagree. Glass blowing for sure. I feel an awful lot of hot air. Particularly with you in charge. Christ, they might as well have finished me off. You belong in an asylum, along with the rest of the wizard pimps!”

The result of this outburst was one more step-fatherly smile that angered her more.

“And I further resent always having to make myself into some kind of harpy simply to get at the unvarnished truth.” The rumors surrounding a recent meeting he had with Zoya had Zoya lunging for a paring knife. Frieda wanted to pull down that immaculate collar and see if the rumored scars were there. But she would use that insider’s information at a better moment. Of course equally taunting was the fact he didn’t press charges.

“I think you really do not savor such ‘truth’,” he said, returning from a second visitation to the terrace, this time bringing with him a turquoise green toucan on his shoulder. “You want an out — an out from the ineffable yet imperious fact of beauty, intelligence — including yours own, of course.” He offered the toucan the flute and a surprised Frieda watched the bird dip its beak in the flared rim. “An excuse to put it bluntly.”

“Christ...!” She saw Muerner start then relax as she waved him off and returned her head to the chair’s back pillow.

“He’s of little help sadly. Religion has no place for individual splendour, nor its politics.”

“Big deal.” Frieda raucously blew her nose.

“The simple scurrility of America and Western Europe is its democracy — its largely been a success, like no regime before it — many people are freely finding out just how awfully mediocre and feeble they are — naturally they are mad as hornets, and rebuke their looks and circumstance — the remaining indecencies of their servility.

“Rot.”

“But you see the drive to perfection cannot be stopped; too many talented people are in place and the prospect of utopia is mesmerizing. The only question is what life for the many-too-many.”

“The natural terrorists.”

“Of minor consequence. In the end they savage mainly their own brothers and sisters.”

He offered the toucan more champagne and Frieda, now head-up, was astonished to see the bird dip its beak again, knock back the draught, and immediately repeat the operation.

Muerner was pleased. “A fine cartoon in the New Yorker eons ago: two young toucans perched on a tree surveying their magnificent mother — who was all beak of course. Says one: ‘That’s mother.’ Says the other: ‘Wow!’”

“I have nothing remotely comparable.”

“You do: the sum of the parts.”

Reaching forward Frieda began signing the documents. Her silence an ongoing reproof. She said after a time, “I thought I’d better sign them before you get off on the jars and I puke.”

Muerner took up the thread.

“I know you think I retain too little ambiguity in my outlook. The colors you say are too bold and finally unimaginative. Well, in some cases they are.” He topped up both flutes. “This toucan for instance — the extraordinary color of the neck and breast feathers are a genetic twist, as are the remarkable eyes, which can now distinguish without help of smell and touch several kinds of nuts, and will one day be of inestimable help in understanding some features of our own vitreous humour and visual accutance. I have no doubt.” He fed the toucan another nut. “I have only the sketchiest outline of your time with Roald, but I understand from Roald’s own guarded retractions that it was also a kind of metamorphosis — but one that blurs the aesthetic sense, an aberration that contorts the civilizing force. Only our artifacts and offspring may please in the end. The jars Roald commissioned are the work of a remarkable and of course innocent craftsman. They transcend any obtuse use. Surely an in-between shade on the black-white palette.”

“Roach brown,” Frieda said quietly.

After a pause and release of the toucan Muerner began more staidly.



“I regret you think the matter untenable. Honor killing of course, however macabre, which I believe Nash mentioned in passing, only a monster could abide — an ethnic or Chekist monster. Which in no way will perplex the jars worth and disposition. It is their import as facts of design and manufacture that will triumph, regardless. I understand the temperamental artist was himself pleased. The larger tri-urn, for instance, whatever its intended function is, in its elegant rendering, a faultless masterpiece — so unlike the serviceable catafalque found in the van. One can of course only guess at the jars intended contents, or the disposition of an apostate donor.”

It was then Frieda rushed from the room and violently retched into the bidet. Muerner stood over her but this time did not attempt to hold her head.

“You miserable bastard — you miserable complete utter bastard!” she cried out between spasms.

“Lest we forget.”

“I think you’d better leave,” she said when the worst was over. Then, quietly, in the most pointed of her reproofs, after Muerner said that ingenious psychopaths were in fact legion in that molested age — “All your waiting beady bird eyes; I would call you an incomparable son-of-a-bitch if I didn’t feel for your mother.”

Still later, back in the sitting room, the nurse prepared a special poultice for Frieda’s ear with Muerner’s help, the patient lying upon a pearl gray daybed beneath a matching coverlet with a thermometer in her mouth. When the dressing was in place Muerner was about to leave then changed his mind. Frieda closed her eyes.

“There are some urgent matters.”

Frieda sighed; Muerner smiled, persisted.

“I strongly suspect you’ve never had more than three or four good friends, and you have it in your power — by giving way to despair, or treas-

ured funk, or whatever the chic word is now — to psychologically maim at least two; I'm made of sterner stuff. The most vulnerable one is a recluse without you. A self-contained natural as you were once. I'm not an apathetic bystander here of course."

Frieda looked at the nurse. "You know when the wizard's bluffing? Me neither." The next words were directed to Muerner and came out immediately when the nurse turned away. "You want to engage this scientist — just get out of the way. You see me as some patootie for your big boy and I'll get that knife where Zoya intended."

Very quietly Frieda then relaxed as the thermometer was reinstated, her face again reflecting a lurking nausea. As much to himself Muerner said, "Patooie." I daresay that was one of Vassily's vintage expressions. A philologist...of past things."

"Just leave him out." The voice was less assertive.

Muerner took a time answering. "Difficult."

Frieda and the nurse exchanged stoic smiles.

"A few truths should be reiterated."

"Splendid — just before I go deaf."

"One: a sad but noble truism: science is still the only workable tool we have; even the modern mystic, between visions, finds it useful, and if the science is no good everyone slips back into the ooze.

"Two: wise and brilliant scientists do not reproduce like locusts. The circumstances of their coming and maturing is a difficult labor. And despite the myths they are never self-sufficient islands. It has taken me a while to appreciate this." He ignored Frieda's wayward chuckle. "And one key to that is the emotional bond between exemplary individuals, capable of reproduction."

Instead of the further rebuke he expected she surprised him.

"You and Eve survived. In a maelstrom. Just our luck."

Muerner smiled, and after a brief consultation with the nurse departed

in his customary haste, leaving his pale charge with a headache only slightly less severe, and a faint nausea — which in the coming weeks disappeared as predicted, leaving the ear at about thirty percent of former capacity. Further testing was anticipated.

She didn't see her indefatigable patron-antagonist again that summer, the duration of her essential recovery — but for the ear, which Antoine suggested would be Arnold's side of the bed. Rosanna visited, small-talked and gossiped palliatively: "A late acquaintance, a landlord, gave Gloria a Ferrari then welshed. She's taking him to court for breach of promise. He's trying to get out of the lease he signed. His doctor claims he suffers from amnesia. Turns out the doctor is himself an impostor, a quack." Antoine came with several friends, including a shy Arnold whose limp no one could explain. Before their wonder he patiently shrugged. "I stepped on a bear's tail." "We shan't ask what the bear was doing," Antoine promptly remarked. Only Frieda appeared unamused by the explanation, knowing too well the GRU's bearish disposition. There was another explanation for Arnold's constraint which Antoine took up.

"He's f,fending off the frenetic dears and doing it badly. So out of practice, m,moping about like a disfavored aunt. A bar sinister in the MIT dynasty."

The allusion to the gravity of Arnold's falling out with the molecular science department.

Then Gloria came with Vassily's laconic letter which lacked a return address. Frieda took it up shanghaied with wonder.

"I kept the pretty shawl — my Gretel's crumb. I may have injured your friend. A dire mixup. I arrived late due to this incident. I am permitted to tell this much. A courageous lady, a pained but spirited witness, did you a good turn. Her name is Martine. Her boyfriend calls her 'Cody'.



If you survive to happily see daylight again you might wish to thank her. The East L.A. coroner will have the address. V.’

(On the conveyor, valedictions were ever sparse.)

Gloria left after a long night of talk, urging Frieda to try one day to put the tale to rest in a book. “Only you can tell it.”

At first they simply touched the bases: played cards (chess was too lucid, involving), read, made formal inquiries after the girl named Martine, fed the macaws and toucans, leased a chalet in Schönried, climbed to a discreet vista near the Cabana des Diablerets. His explanation of what happened was spare on details, the bare facts were haunting enough, though McClelland did furnish a few clues — he had picked him up limping from a rail yard. What rail yard? McClelland hung his head. Arnold badly smiled. “We had the same idea, I think. Your mentor and I. Remove the sty. Fate intervened.” She exercised a confessor’s patience the while — as she thought of it.

But it was his ignorance of her that most astonished. Was she a jinx, a spent soul seeking the silence and tranquility of a nunnery — a glass doll? His chagrin about his leg and legal entanglement also appalled. “All in due course,” he said. She hoarded her own secret, the rarefied letter — for compatriot’s ears alone she told herself. She didn’t want to add to his ‘visceral’ remorse. All in due course. Perhaps. The meeting with Martine ‘Cody’ Norstrom helped diffuse the diffidence or perhaps re-focus it — widened her view of the ungainly tableau. She sought but dreaded the meeting. Memories of that evening were still acute, nor could she decide on an apt show of gratitude. Arnold she felt might welcome a few days by himself to work through his own indisposition, his own detriment. She read the statements of both Cody and Louis Peak and realized she was indebted to them both — Louis for first getting them out there and taking pictures that identified the jobber who contracted the murder, and Cody for heroically distracting the lead assailant who, ignorant of the stray coils

of barbed wire, would have seen her lodged in the caustic hellhole below the spillway which the sludge prevented them reaching directly, the ‘ostensible deposition’ as it was called in the LAPD report — another ‘particular’ Roald noisily accused the GRU of devising, with the aid of one perfidious thug who had disappeared with his long list of aliases.

Moreover, Frieda worried that association with Cody could provide another target for Cheka revanchists. Somedays the strain, recalled from difficult field assignments, seemed the ongoing toll of sheer consciousness. The example of clever madmen re-enacting while on day passes, parole and suspended sentences (again at the discretion of very human specialists) the savagery they were duly found guilty of was a common byline. She believed herself still capable of dealing with a chance assault, but the killers that patient opportunistic apparatchiks might deploy were another matter. Did she want Cody known for aiding a Russian defector? Frieda knew reporters would keep her in their cross hairs. Only by disappearing might she find a measure of serenity and peace. Arnold had suggested a lengthy cruise on one of Muerner’s yachts, transferring to his latest sailing ship for a month or two.

Then there was Roald Jr. To feel a seismic unease before one’s child, as she had the first time she saw him after the attack, dismayed and exhausted. How to overcome the perverse conditioning the child was so relentlessly exposed to toward the end? Again, the most natural instincts seemed twisted beyond recognition. And the affection she once felt for the man attempting to convince her son the model train ran best on the tracks, was also circumspect. She might escape some of the anxiety by heavily relying upon him, but that trust demanded a fearlessness before a potential outside threat that she could not longer genuinely invoke. He too could be a casualty in the days to come. One near disaster, two really, had cleared the deck of comfortable lounge chairs.

But the presence of Martine offered a glimpse of a still warming sun-

light, a fearlessness or optimism, scarcely unobservant, that invoked the energy so recently misplaced. She resisted believing the élan was simply the interim 'triumph' of that day's 'exhebeesh schooling' — one of Muerner's phrases for the demise of public education.

Martine — Cody — was as American as her nickname or 'professional handle' as she called it. She was tall, blond-gold, deeply tanned, strong, friendly and self-deprecating ('Once a roadrunner...'), prettily and uncomfortably made up in a cream blouse and grey-green suit when she arrived, the coat folded on her lap, frost stockings descending to showy shoes with towering heels which in Frieda's presence she appeared to try to hide. Her face intimated a noble lineage with its blueness of eye, hint of rich nether Hapsburg lip and high wide cheeks. Only a bashful chipped chin suggested to flinty connoisseurs a vulnerability, in addition to the double-duty laugh lines that seemed a times both smile and understudy lament.

Cody was the last visitor Frieda entertained in her rooms above the lovely garden. It was late August. Several fledgling canaries, a cardinal and chaffinch, flitted through the sitting room. McClelland was then helping with details of Frieda's return to America, and his rare laughter issued from the entrance below the terrace the hour Cody arrived. He was still bel-esprit when Cody was ushered in. No Southern bell was ever given a more high-tone introduction.

"Sorry 'bout that," Cody said. "I missed a turn — asked him if he'd consider a swappo — my map for his. Seems I struck gold. A word a school friend used. A singer."

"McClelland was born in the West Indies. 'Swappo' may be what he'd prefer to do with me about now."

"Well he needs his head examined then. Between you me and the chameleon." Her eyes gaily traversed the room. "The holiday's been fantastic. Its a fairyland over here. I can never thank you enough. Madiera was



a dream. Spain too — the coast at least. And here in clean air land. — Hello Tweety Pie!” She waved at one of the young finches. “An you want to split — to LA?”

“For a time, then to Long Island. The plan.”

“You look great. No, really.” She shyly interrupted herself. “Guess we were all lucky.” But quickly her eyes fetched the enchanting surroundings, eclipsing searing memories.

The exuberance Frieda had not prepared for and quickly realized one does not entertain pulsars. Cody swiftly noted the smile, openly apologized, saying she sometimes had that effect on people. At times it was as if Frieda fell skating, a beginner, her anxiety keeping her on all fours. Even the meal she had prepared now seemed stilted and imposing. She headed for the less congested centre of the rink — acknowledging, without identifying him — the FBI agent, she said — who said that Cody likely saved her life in distracting one of the shooters; that Louis’s photographs were instrumental in identifying one of the abductors. She also repeated how she and her friend Arnold Storrier wished to set up an annuity Louis and Cody could jointly or severally draw from, convertible also to a trust or single cash payment...an appointment had been arranged for Cody to see one of Arnold’s counsellors before the cruise holiday to Italy and Greece resumed. She felt obliged to comment on McClelland’s memorable cuisine — “he’s a greatly appreciated showoff” — then steered Cody to one of the filigree tables by the pool where cold roast goose with prune and apple stuffing, celery root remoulade, and a Grand Marnier soufflé garnished with fresh strawberries awaited — barely stifling her urge to further patronize their cook.

But Cody was as fascinated by the garden pool’s extraordinary fish. Kneeling, her hand in the water, the moochers bore down at once, a rainbow of scales and fanning tails, tickling this seasoned ‘Egyptian’. She laughed. “Like the randy bozos on the Costa del Sol.”

As Cody ate, with opulent distraction, Frieda learned that she and Louis separated shortly after the fateful evening. “Louis is a home bod,” she said with a trace of sadness. Whereas she had jumped at the offer of the holiday, even though it conflicted with a commercial for Wide World of Carpets. “I used to do a waterbed line, but the birds do get younger and younger.”

Would she continue her advertising work when the holiday ended?

“Waeell...I’ll be about three months pregnant then, so maybe I’ll rent a small house somewhere in Portugal, and move in with a couple of cats. That’s where I’d like to have the kid. If I have it. Cheaper living abroad these days.”

Frieda was momentarily silent. “Does Louis know?”

“About the kid. No.” She stared at the soufflé then listlessly put down her fork. “I think the holiday’s great. But I don’t know about the other — the trust thing. I’m a real pushover, most of the time. You said the pictures were important.

“Yes. Very.”

Cody retrieved and readied her fork. “Photographers are a tacky bunch,” she said finally, and spoke no more of her caution with munificent gifts.

She stayed the weekend, swam in the lap pool in the mornings, and showed Frieda some exercises to flex a stiff thorax. They went shopping, saw one of Zoya’s — now Yevgenia’s — performances as Peaseblossom. While watching the performers Frieda silently keened over Muerner’s select generosity, Paleomena’s mesmeric successes, in part based on ZYTA’s discrete endowment and Zyta’s (Yevgenia’s) distracting caper, and the portentous asymmetry of genetic endowment. Muerner’s realm. She had lost touch with the independent faction that tried to independently audit ZYTA’s data. The faction itself, the last she heard, was being co-opted by Paleomena.

“She’s a neat lady,” said Cody afterwards about Zoya. “An agent’s dream I guess.” Said a complaisant Frieda, “I think you would get along with her very well. She has a special spirit. I’ve met her.”

Rosanna, Antoine and ‘a t,too pretty figurant’, returned from a shopping junket that afternoon. The young danseur was charmed with the lush setting, the serenity of the grounds, and shade-orchid Frieda reviewing her world in silk habits. In the bronzed kinetic Californian he found an earth cousin and drew forth a miniature camera. In turn Cody hid her face in an ironic gesture, her straining bikini one of Frieda’s that Arnold bought long ago in a carefree moment. Antoine, as savant and sometime critic, mentioned a diviner friend (Oscar Wilde) who thought photography a modern nuisance that changed wine into water. “Your friend knew his bozos,” said a reparative Cody, and promised to remember the line. Frieda silently committed it to memory as well. “Antoine has a droll sense of humor,” the figurant said whimsically. Who continued to find the setting and Cody an inspiration. Cody finally wryly cooperated. “The shots’ll maybe end a chapter I guess. ‘More verse less chapter,’ my pa used to say.” Antoine described the weekend as ‘boobgate’, with a trace of envy Rosanna thought. He told McClelland, “The air t,teems with notcheries.” Live Cody rather upstaged him.

Frieda spoke to Arnold about Cody’s stay when they arrived in the bare Stamford maisonette. While they viewed the chaste, newly whitewashed rooms, the packing cases and grey skyline beyond, the recognition returned.

“She has a couple of cats and can make a life. Not a fraud.” He put his arms about her with the continuing tentativeness she felt a growing need to scold. They sat on the bed like housebound siblings and began to play an improvised round of cat’s cradle with a piece of packing twine. She had just passed on a simple formation when he sought to scratch his chest. Following his hand inside the open shirt she touched the scarred



neck and shoulder, the legacy of a fire inside a stockade...also the more telling pits that implicated a sinister form of coercion, lone reminders of that bizarre stint in South East Asia, originally to settle a point of honor.

“Muerner’s surgeons obliterated the few I would have had,” she said. “You’d never know, without a magnifier. Invisible mending. Not like my popular hero.”

Listlessly he put down the twine.

She came very close to slapping him. “You ever think of leaving a few prints of your own?”

He listened in a limp silence, which she decided to match with a glazed reverie of her own.

“He could fix the moment, you know...they planned some kind of heist. The pretty trophies. I’m on tape somewhere for about a minute. Muerner helpfully supposed how they might begin.” She withdrew her hand. More emphatically she added, “Such a husband.”

He absorbed this without comment. That was when she struck him.

He sought the twine as she rubbed at her hand.

“What did you usually do afterward?” he said, despairingly.

The question surprised, leaving her sullen as ever.

“Wait for I don’t know, Godot...and a double Drambuie.”

“A busy life,” he softly said, not happy with the terseness but at that moment unable to improve on it. Her new select candor chaffed, and reference to Roald’s craft left him nearly despondent.

She was about to leave.

He said, “I did plan to confront him, you know...I wasn’t there train spotting.”

But the statement emptied into a void. She paused by the door.

“Just how...I would leave to the moment. I had Antoine’s walking stick — and some thoughts about arson. The special railway carriage seemed a fitting pyre. What you know, may have guessed.”

He looked up to find her pulling a stray thread from a sleeve.

“Then I ran into a contortionist, a security guard I imagined, at first. I was very wrong, but soon too crippled to matter. That’s as close as I’ve come to a requisite challenger. When I finally saw Roald in court I doubt I could have harmed him, except in pressing selfdefense. I doubt that can be arranged. I understand he only tilts with his legal beagles.”

She bit off a stray thread then promptly left. “Which he did rather well,” she said in the corridor.

“Touché” he said to himself.

The following morning he finished his breakfast in silence, pushing away that portion of sole he kept for the last. So she read his antics. Minutes later she discovered him rummaging through a wardrobe closet with a compact carryall nearby. Casually she remarked, “You can be a notorious prude you know — and not always terribly bright.”

“Prude sometimes, notorious I contest.”

She sat on his bed — rather one of the guest rooms — with an exclusive lower. He paused in his perplexing preparations long enough to take her in, before removing a topcoat from a rosewood valet stand. “You might want to watch the studio computer screen in an hour. It’s on standby channel. I need an audience. And a sympathetic witness.” The remark seemed to have the desired double-take effect. Just such occasional incommensurate deeds revealed the motley in their tense, extempore drama. If Arnold Storrier remembered one thing about the woman he idolized, it was her musical voice with its comic, ironic timbre when amused. Hence that day’s appointed, secretive, bravura strategy — so fetchingly revisited during the period that is touted the afterglow, in this case a toothsome moment coming several hours following — the Jar Smashing Incident!

By a delayed despatch Arnold informed the LAPD and his lawyer of his intentions. He gained entry to the main Licchavi residence as an offi-

cer of the Los Angeles Environmental Protection Agency, obliged to test the air quality of an older gas-furnace (a scam that took a private sleuth a week to concoct), went straight to the room with the rumoured wall housing the indescribable jars, barricaded the doors, set his large bag on a side table, assigned the miniaturized video-transmitter to a window ledge (Muerner reluctantly lent a Paleomena relay channel) and proceeded with two broad-faced hammers only Bhairava himself might have wielded to turn the edifice into dust — all of which Frieda watched seated in a catatonic Buddha-like state.

The shock of course was the discovery not only of the wall, really a style of mihrab, but the model of a startling, segmented, glass-ceramic sculpture of Frieda as a multi-armed green goddess housed within an inverted-heart prayer niche, which Arnold shook his head at before proceeding to trash it as well. The villa's security staff were at first addled, then began preparing for a siege of the chamber. LAPD's finest were well briefed by Arnold's lawyers at the appointed hour and arrived moments after the final fragment vanished into the sand pile. The wanton delinquent was promptly arrested, fingerprinted, photographed, arraigned and released on bail — whence directly he returned to his still-subdued, freshly sardonic bell-toned wench, saying, "You didn't, I trust, record the event. She looked at him with novel disbelief. "No. Will you spend the next decade in prison?"

"Muerner's warbler anticipates a conditionally suspended sentence: exemplary public service in perpetuity."

"So I have to stick around for a time."

"It won't hurt."

They were in one another's arms forthwith and, after a courtier's hesitation prompted by her unrelenting wonder, her 'David' made love to her with a passion and budding technique that exhausted him and at least left her feeling it would be a charitable idea to patiently await a repeat engage-



ment. The fact that Rosanna witnessed Arnold's decisive departure and return made for a further addendum. When asked, all McClelland could manage was: "Bound to happen Ms. Rosanna." Thus, as we've mentioned, it was during that second interval of joint truce when the discrepancy was noted.

"It seems hardly credible. You destroy the memorial then, what — despoil the inspiration for it?"

"The uncertainty principle and I never got on."

She smiled at this and turned on her side to confront him.

"To follow...such a nose." Which she skimmed in a caress miming a ski jump. "A reliable neck though. Horsey."

He barely smiled.

"Firm chest...soft sex."

He drew her away from the intimate caress.

"You need more sun," she said, raking his chest.

Arnold backed his head with a large hand. "You trust a man with an exquisite tan?..."

Frieda's cajoled protest was slow in coming but caused a series of select dimples he hungrily sought.

"So. Lie back and think of the Founding Fathers. That it?"

"There is no injunction that says you must enjoy it."

That was when she got vicious and he was a time getting her pinned beneath him. Said she, "That took a while."

"My dream weaver."

For a time they lay whimsically studying one another. She broke the spell by declaring: "If that's another lead into that awful Penelope-the-weaver joke you'll never see my navel again. What's funny?"

"Some days I feel like Adam. The Eden Adam."

"The wimp."

"Him, yes."

“This is a sob story...?”

“It has a political dimension.”

“So — sob all the way.”

“What was the People’s First Democratic Election?”

“Someone cares?”

“When God made Adam and Eve then said to Adam ‘Now choose a wife’. The heavenly choice.”

“My sly accountant,” said she, thinking that he and Vassily were a pair.

“I think you would have eaten the snake instead.”

Their bemusement soon fused in a lyrical embrace.

As she slept he noted again the handiwork of Muerner’s surgeons. The evidence of the wounding existed as barely discernible rills of pink, in part blended into the freckles that played about her face and neck giving her a timeless pastoral health. The proud russet seals against sun-shy velum, whose maternal history included the nurture of a love almost turned to absinthe, he sought with an awe that quickly summoned congeries of gooseflesh. She turned on her side crushing his hand to the fuller globe. Seconds later she sleepily interjected, “You get to smooch all the dynamite parts; some rule.”

“So many parts,” he said, as he willed an end to the latent unease and subversive memory.

“My fearless — explorer.”

A day later their exhaustion, and budding esprit, basked in a soft-hued, oyster fat cosiness. She lay on top of him looking with her characteristic whimsy — one eye partly closed in appraisal — into his expansive face. “It’s nice having someone along — not just presiding.” He was then too happy to think of ghouls.

Said he, “I still wonder which eye is the spy.”

It took him a moment to realize that she was the house comedian not him. “You’re a ghoul,” she said pulling his ears.

Later as he stood behind helping comb out her hair, then mid-back length, she placidly invited him to study her in the large gilt mirror. Their eyes locked in the reflection, hers newly candid, fondly estimating, tending words oddly certain, daring. “He was essentially a lonesome voyeur. And wanted finally, a pretty chimerical body.” With lenten grace she reached back up to caress his face. For a moment he thought of encircling the pregnable too-authentic flesh, the changeling forming before him, this creature of a thousand and one nights.

“Such a man.”

She said later, in repose, as he fondly stroked the growing coppery fleece and its still glairy seam, “May I be forever, well...a co-respondent, not another image. I trust you do understand.” A day before he had recorded the wistful Debussy Images and, as before, found her sometimes ambiguous metaphors a fine goad. He managed finally to face her with the Olympian cool acquired in kick-boxing arenas. “That means shoulder length does it?”

Christmas that year witnessed a Twelve Day extinction of the New York theatre season, including the most ambitious Plombiers extravaganza — a ‘pastiche’ (Antoine’s word) that required a half-a-dozen wardrobe mistresses and a hundred meters of back drops.

A storm began the evening of Christmas Day and continued to the feast of the Epiphany which, Antoine pointed out to an attentive Frieda and guests, was from the Fifth Century celebrated as the Coming of the Magi — the first manifestation of Christ to the gentiles. “My own David,” Frieda said quietly to Arnold, leaving the watchful friends fondly guessing. Much surface transportation was stymied and many parts of the state floundered without power. McClelland and Arnold worked on an old generator with limited success. Lights remained seance dim, shower water tepid. The entire East Coast as far south as Wilmington and East to Louisville was lashed by winds that gusted to near hurricane fury and



brought snowfall pyramids that buried a pioneer church near Hartford up to its steeple and two snow plows in Trenton. In one stretch of road two bodies were in mid-January found firmly frozen. Several airports were shut down. Roald Jr. had written two letters to Frieda, both promising, but would not visit her until the new year. She had talked to him several times by phone. In one he said he liked 'David', and, that 'David was a great stepdude.' A boyish laughter followed. Such wit Frieda had not before heard from her son, and felt a renewed affection for him.

Antoine made it to Stamford to see the 'happy touched couple' but became restless the second day, saying there was little more disconcerting than observing a 'distracted Hun thinking the Goldberg Variations love songs' — his metaphor for the obvious infatuation of the bridegroom. "At least p,play something Schuberty for your pregnant trull you m,malingerer." Frieda was alarmed to see him go, the most recent weather report ominous, but Antoine said a second offer of shelter from 'a most resourceful fish' who lived in New Haven would keep him perfectly warm and collected. He left fluffing his collar, urging Arnold call a professional to repair the in-house generator.

Then the weather briefly calmed, though the power remained unreliable. Oddly, it was perhaps their happiest time. Roald Jr. came early in January. He was learning to play the piano. Everyone said he had talent, and a fine performing sense. He gave his mother a poem he'd written. Someone in the school had been reading Ogden Nash and Noel Coward to him. The poem ended with the couplet, I have this hippocampus upstairs, Full of neuroglia-imbroglio airs.

Frieda ceased being sick by the third month — a month earlier this time round — and took prompt delight in some gypsy lore Rosanna told so well in the dim evening, in a sepulchral Spanish-English. Roald Jr. savoured plans for the summer holidays with a new sibling in tow. Gloria joined them for a weekend, also Marianne Fitch and her tall white-haired

husband who, with Frieda, Gloria, Roald Jr. and some neighbourhood children, made a giant snowman, ‘buried up to his waist’ said one observant youngster. Four youngsters from Rosanna’s theatre staff arrived on cross-country skis. One prepossessing lad, an architect, was engaged to a Miss Daphne Charles. “The Paleomena’s chairman’s personal secretary,” remarked Gloria. Several pithy stories surfaced about Angus Dowd. Gloria smoothly added, in a catch-breath quiet, that Daphne would continue in Paleomena’s lucrative employ. While behind the convivial animation the happy duo remained attentive to one and all, ‘making everyone comfortable’ (Rosanna’s verdict), except Antoine of course, who apprized happy heteros — pronounced het-Eros — with a ready rolling of the eyes and dry smile. Arnold told Frieda nothing until it was over — actually the evening of the 1st of February when the sheriff phoned to confirm the identity of a third frozen body. Rosanna was nonplussed herself recalling the tales of romance and intrigue she narrated those nights — while out there a real nightmare was so inadvertently taking shape. To think the storm actually accelerated the momentum! Frieda was not pleased Arnold hid the information, but shared his sense of nemesis and condign relief.

The countdown began when Roald Licchavi was given a day pass to travel at the court’s discretion over the holiday. He was assigned a Prison Escort Officer who was instructed to see his charge avoided any contact with the wife. In the morning Roald and the Officer flew to Philadelphia to see a new lawyer to assess the late charges from Frieda’s (Arnold’s) lawyers of: grievous slander, premeditated aggravated assault, the sustained abuse of a child — all conjoined to a difficult psychiatric assessment that had discomposed Roald’s family West-Coast lawyers.

The storm fell during the return drive to the Brandywine Airport. Two SVR agents in a waiting car yawned at the new snowflakes. A bent ticket agent cued the SVR. Both men were recruited by an officer in the

Russian Cultural Centre in Washington. They were dressed as highway patrolmen. They flagged the PEO's assigned car for a safety violation. One gave Roald's escort a needle, the other bound and hooded Roald. It would appear that the Officer suffered a heart attack and Roald fled the scene taking the officer's car and handgun with him.

A taped hooded Roald, his wrists tied behind his back, was driven non-stop to the Storrier country house in Long Island, the second car following at a distance in radio contact. The SVR duo lucked onto the concealing storm, seeing a chance to reach the residence more directly and discreetly, and headed out across a copse to reach the house. It was known that Frieda, Arnold, Roald Jr. and McClelland were then at home. One of the operatives would shoot at the house then shoot Roald to suggest an attempted murder and suicide. If Frieda was hit so much the better, but her injury or death was not then paramount. The essential job was the removal of reckless, vengeance seeking Roald — once and for all. Roald's retainers, already facing a judgement of at least diminished responsibility, were tidying up the many suits against the estate, including the Russian charge of embezzlement — siphoning funds from an alien account! A rash attempted murder would hasten that work. An ancillary wrinkle was to add to Roald's personal files, via the footman, late notes of an undertaking to identify the Keres — evil females released from Pandora's box.

The Cheka were leaving few stones unturned.

But the storm quickly worsened, the operatives lost sight of the house and eventually came upon unexpected vineyards. By then the wind was hurricane force, the snow giving way to a blinding hailstorm. While trying to backtrack Roald collapsed of an apparent heart attack. The two operatives decided to split when he could not be revived. A farmer looking for strayed animals two days later discovered two bodies huddled by an erosion barrier of young Laurels — hypothermia had begged a fatal rest apparently. Their identity would remain a mystery. A third body found



sprawled in a copse a mile off was identified as Edward Roald Sambara Licchavi. A handgun, the fingerprints degraded by rain and frost, was found nearby. The PEO's car and a stolen vehicle were found half-a-mile from the Storrier home. A nearly empty pack of Sobranie classic cigarettes were found in the stolen vehicle.

It was a dense chapter Arnold and Frieda jointly cast to the winds, despite the confusions it posed when the coroner's report remained open ended about Roald's presence in Long Island. Thus far no one disputed the Prison Escort Officer having suffered a heart attack.

"The GRU have rid themselves of their 'sty in their eye'," Muerner told Dowd. "Arrant voluptuaries like Roald would never venture out in such a storm. My guess is the two unknowns were Cheka heavies who drugged the PEO with some digoxin cocktail and abducted Licchavi." Dowd greeted the summation with a presumption of his own. "I presume you fancy getting her back." Said Muerner, "I doubt the Cheka will bother her again. Now that they can make of Roald what they want. Moreover, housewives are liable to get bored. In time. She headed our remote sensing team as well as anyone at Paleomena you know. I trust she's kept abreast of ongoing research. I suspect she's secretly counting her blessings."

Dowd indulged a snuffle.

Frieda went to the funeral with Roald Jr., a decision Arnold silently accepted and would wait patiently for them in the armored limo. He explained to Roald Jr. that funerals were not for outsiders. The day was aptly bleak and gusty. Roald Jr. said he understood, but with a solemnity that prompted Arnold to change his mind. The three sat together in a front pew. None in Roald's family acknowledged them.

The following day Arnold took the child to the stable to at last ride the great 'Cleelan Pony', Roald Jr.'s name for a horse in McClelland's stable.

But the horse was not in its stall. A groom said someone may have taken it for an exercise run. Roald Jr. was disappointed and kicked at some hayed manure. Arnold told the story of the pessimist who dismissed a room filled with beautiful toys as ‘just more junk’, while the optimist, in a room plush with manure, reminded everyone that ‘Where there’s manure there must be a pony!’. The joke earned a lone patronizing chuckle from the groom. “A real trotter,” Roald Jr. wryly stated looking about the smelly stall. Arnold smiled. “Promising kid,” the groom added. Seconds later the ‘Cleelan Pony was discovered with McClelland upon it, steam shunting from flared nostrils. The boy stood wonder struck before the large brown-black Arabian with the large black upon it, then obsequiously grateful as the familiar knurled hands scooped him up and onto the foresaddle, to grasp through the jersey the hawser arms.

That particular glee was recalled several months later as the lovers met on the elliptical bed (the transit of Venus Arnold once mused; Vassily Storrer had been born three months earlier). ‘David’ was playing a bucolic lyric on a small reed flute he sometimes took to their bedroom — the ‘intermission lull’ he called it — the tune that night elided by a flare of silk and newly available wife settling Buddha-like by him, inspecting, chiding stretch marks. “He kicked like a horse, little wonder,” she said, consigning the Chinese kimono to a fauteuil.

Corinthian marvel he said. Ionic ravisher said she as he smoothed tucked legs, the faint attar of breast milk mingling with myrcia. He thought of it as his own special libretto, chasing amidst lustrous flues, pyrrhic sighs and fine coppery fleece, the impervious kiss, the lone capital embellishment, if that is the word, he then sought which she accepted as one inured to febrile attentions. By then he was unapologetic about roisterous pleasuring a ‘historic Cybele’ — in a life eventually graced with four such busky, sometime affectionate, multi-talented children, a late research grant partly funded by Paleomena, the contract to which she wrote herself,

and a musical output that was ‘neither Liszt nor Richard Strauss, but full of Todtanz and Metmorphosen’ — so wrote an art critic in the New Yorker. A decade later the court appeals involving MIT ended; Arnold paid a substantial fine and was given a suspended sentence. The court did not contest Arnold’s exclusive entitlement to his ‘energy packets’ formulae, then locked away in his durable memory. Muerner paid the fine.

She welcomed being called ‘Zia, short for Anastasia, a near parody of her ‘David’, and became rather bossy, finding his daily happy preoccupation with his Rosenkavaliers and Ariadnes a little too entrepreneurial as the years went by. His intimation of writing a tribute to Anastasia — the soul of the Russian dream of restoration and reconciliation — earned him a kindly pat on the head, followed by a plaintive “Yes, yes Eulenspiegel”. She discovered some maudlin verses in an older diary: Wide the wide rampart she might find that quiet lake, and fetch the blooms to flush a loyalist with wonder more acute than any restoration promise. With a snort she promptly suggested he “stick to his musical clefs” — only to steadfastly leave the room to his open amusement and return with the allotted, two double pages of rolled-up newspaper they frequently duelled with.

On other days she would recall the triumphant ZYTA program, now sanctioned token public revelations (with the central nervous capital pool committed), and the ever extended reach of Paleomena. She still met with ‘Yevgenia’ discreetly; her sister’s ongoing worry was that Muslim antipathy, once incensed, was one of life’s infinities, and she resisted endangering another. Identities have a way of reconnecting, resurfacing. “One day we banquet together,” she would say, though Frieda suspected they would be pensioners when that day came. It reminded her of her ongoing tryst with Paleomena. Each year she received a Christmas card from Muerner, leaving open her full reinstatement in its research centre. All ended with: ‘Save the last dance for us.’



## TWENTY-NINE

Halfway through that evening at the Dartmouth College auditorium several squealing piglets were released into one of the galleries. The noise interrupted the formal debate, then in progress, between Angus Dowd and Ashly Scargill, which aired the gamy question: The Multi-National, Macrocosm or Metastasis.

“I am consoled,” said Dowd, after the pigs and audience had quieted down. “Mr. Scargill’s reference to toadying to the corporate mandate is obviously incorrect.” The brief silence was capped with a few raspberries and some meowing. A soft tomato splattered on the wall behind, some of the spill alighting on Professor Scargill. “If the evolution continues, as it will, we remain optimistic.”

Then, with perverse happenstance, a sweet young thing in the front row who was seen about the Dartmouth lily pond, released a very large toad from a briefcase. The creature hopped closer to Dowd, who finally scooped it up and placed it on the lectern. The creature stared up at him with a convincing intimation of rapture. A kind of pyromaniac anticipation settled in; the canny Dowd paused as long as he dare.

“The alert observer will note the experience, the poise, and inestimable reserve.”

More howls, which took a minute to die down. In the meantime Dowd took off his glasses and began wiping them on his shirt front. When the chamber was nearly quiet again, a piglet let out a frantic squeal as one usher gathered it up and headed for a doorway. Another was being chased by two students up and down an aisle. Another minute followed until a calm returned. Said Dowd, “Pray note the frantic pitch of the porker. Mr. Scargill’s upper register.” Frieda, who watched the event on a wide computer screen with Gloria and some of her staff, stifled an insider’s laughter: Ashly Scargill had a high-pitched peevish nasal voice.

One of the piglets bounded down an aisle, sniffed out the fireline before the dais, then bounded back up the aisle.

“And the omnibus cowardice.” By then Scargill was fit to be tied, but Dowd’s time had not yet expired.

Of course it was thereafter hardly convivial sweetness and light. Suspicious, goaded, jaded youngsters are ever supple and Dowd soon faced a number of equally unflattering allusions; moreover, prolonged involuted joking gets tedious. But he performed well in a hostile environment and Daphne had a lovely, tiny, marzipan toad sitting on his desk the following morning.

But if he once could savour such humour, that time had quietly slipped by. The announcement of her engagement came, in the end, as a switch hit and unheralded letdown. It wasn’t as though he imagined her a match for himself; it was simply the likelihood of losing the fraternization of a trusted servant and nimble playmate. Their extended intimacy had been a providential preserve that all but blurred his historical perspective. His cardinal principle of extravagant reward contingent on hard, lasting accomplishment she had transposed to blithe conventional fornication. Sardonicly, the intermittent thought of losing her was what kept his desire marginally heretical. But he was far too enamoured to see her identity again risk diffusion. My god, she even talked of adoption. A doughty homebody — a happy subversive under his very nose!

Then the budding architect turned up and the dilemma resolved itself into a very lovely dew. She would have a tangible prince — for how long no matter, it would be the commitment from a handsome intelligent cultured ‘other’ that counted, so he believed — and he, Angus Dowd, could continue to enjoy at arm’s length the company of an agile sensibility he treasured as ginseng to a Korean. He even got her promoted. She would ever be a horizon of loveliness, a flare of conspiratorial mirth — and he would be there to console her when the marriage failed, as he pre-

dicted it would (the day's young were ever leery of age and routine, two bent pedlars of unbecoming reality.) The one regret was perhaps to never know if she had taken him on because of attrition or the wile of adventure and *la dolce vita*.

That disappointment was akin to his discovering the un-vamped, worthy Frieda Storrier — or 'Fred', as she was then called in the society columns (one columnist tried for 'Freed' but lost) — answering a series of queries in Gloria's rag on the phenomenon of the scientist mother. Dowd recalled Evelyn Waugh's satiric description of the worthy citizen: stagy wisdom, discretion, sympathy, experience and contentment. All it seemed mercilessly there. In one of the paragraphs Frieda said science was what she practiced between seeing her youngsters blithely engaged in a new project. As he read the article he could imagine Muerner scowling and commiserating with Eve.

Frieda had elected to educate her children herself — with Arnold's mindful cooperation — an enterprise that ended in an expanded school being 'staffed' on rotating shifts by the scientists Frieda worked with who had planned their living quarters near the workplace. Laboratory and home were discrete but proximate. The school evolved into a kind of synapse between the two. Such was Frieda's thesis, which had intrigued Gloria from the school's inception — children being remarkably absorbent creatures before exemplary tutors. The early curriculum remained essentially mathematical, but flavoured in many guises, music being for one expansive scientist in the research group a fine early intro to both mathematics and poetry. Literature, composition and logic grew from this first 'musical' — a class in which Arnold became the home teacher. Games of both limited chance and what another scientist called limerick dexterity became conspiratorial period breaks. So far most everyone was optimistic. Work primers would be forthcoming. For the current directors the one essential acquisition for four- and five-year-olds was the habit of learning special skills



— those early hours of the day when one applied oneself unwittingly, forthrightly — the pal of habit consorting, in time, with memory, even nostalgia. The feel-good discovery. “A seven-year-old, given the bold incisive facts, can piece together the general theory of relativity with ‘relatively’ minor fuss,” Frieda remarked. “All she or he really needs is a teacher who knows in a variety of symbols what he’s talking about. That sounds facile, but the truth of the matter is too often neglected as impractical or idyllic. We only become strictly ‘practical’ when our options begin to disappear. Some neurologists believe that occurs when an inner clock puts a limit on the ‘brain stake’ or cell entitlement, if you like. When that happens we seem to be stuck with the inner mind geography we’ve already traversed — most readily when young. We continue to learn of course, but the exertion required is more taxing.”

Gloria added a footnote to the article, saying she’d rarely come across a parent so absorbed in the mystery of symbolic learning. “The magic is alive and coping,” she said of editing. She was in contact with an interested publisher. Dowd smiled and chucked the magazine into a waste can. Another bumper crop of modish meretricious panjandrums he forecast. He was ever touched by the credulity and credibility of able forthright people. So removed from his regard of the stoic soul. The recognition of the sobering emendatory nature — he thought of it as a usufruct — of deformity and loss. The only way to the exquisiteness of feeling. His ineluctable fact of life.

Frieda looked on with wonder and amusement. It had been a while coming — this belated reunion. The new Zoya — now Yevgenia, her plastic surgery long since complete — sat on a stool before the bright vanity applying the half-face Chinese white she often incorporated into her makeup while in Russia. She was still dancing at the Bellerophon, the exclusive casino and show lounge. Frieda wondered if Karl Voden was still expanding

his escape venues. The actual owners Zoya refused to divulge or didn't know. This lay stepsister, once thought an ogre come to distract, confirm, elicit?..had simply fled her own newly dangerous and complicated world. No more a mystery — her leaving, fleeing a hazardous existence in Russia. Frieda had finally phoned herself, saying she wanted to meet the step-sister — she had said 'sister' — who was keeping so many American Lotharios head up! Zoya had shrieked in laughter. "My 'Merican Babushka!" When calmed down she said, "Plastic surgeons finish. I am new career, free of boyars. New Yevgenia, has come. Commissars, you call them, shitting bricks. Big joke, da?" It too had once been part of Frieda's lingering worry, beyond the spy matter: the willingness of the Apsara managers to hand over a powder-monkey to vengeful jihadis; the underworld had closed punitive deals with such fanatics before. Frieda also now knew that a team of surgeons from the Bern Clinic had performed the facial transformation. Muerner had even shown her the before and after plates.

The newly factual Zoya was lean, pertly chic, brazen, slyly blunt, facetious when not sardonic — a package that foretold a hectic intimidating past. From a devout voyeur's point of view perhaps less benignly companionable undressed, especially when previewing her new face with its bolder angle of cheek and fuller curl of lip. She rose to catch a mirror profile of her pellucid newly-minted form, all hair below the craning neck removed. She had initially refused to shave. "They want fucking baby!" Newly aware of Frieda's discomfort before such a siren she added, "I think you go, before we have political discussion," while she nonchalantly settled herself directly before her rigid, tear-marked sister. An exposed groin, grazed with a few deft strokes of the body paint applicator, and all inner margins of pink were erased; so rendered, the uncertainty of nakedness beneath the shifting sliding filigree work of the costume became topical conversation with the stolid voyeurs — a sizeable number of the club's members apparently — as she danced. But a few additional facile strokes and her en-

tire body was preserved in the platinum flesh.

Then came the intricate lace-arabesque gold work Frieda had seen in more elegant pattern first in the tableaux — part of ZYTA's visual anthology. Somehow the appearance of that alien 'crewelwork', which Peter and even the shy Willardson had cooed over, became the final subversion, its gilding, gold damascening, enameling, once the setting of the crystal-gram (as Peter called it), the apparent escutcheon of ZYTA's humanoids' extraordinary power and wonder, now a fitted casse-sex. The creature taking shape before her would soon be breathtaking, for men and woman alike. An inestimable prize for the one, a suborning example to the other. She decided it was time to go. The trial outfitting was nearly complete.

““Zia, I am bloody pro, maybe. Not your brains, your big trust...what you see, Igor-Harry dreams. Little bit extra. I am vision for Saudi cyclops. Nothing else on offer. Your ZYTA is not for me 'heavy' experience.”

Frieda remained silent; Zoya promptly shrugged.

“Son of Mary, up in oneway mirror, why I permit crazy sister upset me? I ask. Politely.” The irreducible costume was nearly complete and satisfactorily assayed. A simple monkish habit would go over the gold work. “You have, ‘Zia I think, too sweet dreams. One big difference.” The continued continent silence from her sister was not what she wished. “I sell pastry. Sugar buns. Tomorrow go stale. Tomorrow come soon.” The filigree halter was fitted then swiftly released to the vanity for adjusting, as the lips were once again exercised before the expansive mirror for faults.

Frieda opened the narrow door to the outside catwalk, shaded by the club's elevator tower, which led to an adjacent roof and a lane fire escape. More rain. A pool at her feet reflected the satellite dish opposite.

It had been the early ominous supposition — Zoya some kind of a



scout, to be briefed as the shrewd or furtive Cheka plan proceeded — the achievement of landed immigrant status a sobering reincarnation for this powder monkey from the past who could blacken the cornerstone of Frieda's own vocation — her own spiritual manumission! By allowing images of herself to be interpolated into the 'fanciful' tableaux, Zoya — Zyta Krupka being an alias then — also helped distract from apprehension and understanding the majesty ZYTA had bestowed on them all, without favourite. Frieda saw in her sister a ghost of the apotheosis that began, according to clear-witted Peter, in the ancient Minoan Mediterranean, but now seemed poised to defy redemption: the eminent, the godlike had decided the image alone was good enough. So it seemed then as the droplets tapped Frieda's eyelids. Was she in any state to make such judgements? A practical person all her life, was she now capable of escaping a philosophical typhoon? Was man even worthy of ZYTA in his present circumstance? Maybe Muerner was right: only a superman might contest the future, and the production deadline was nigh. If ZYTA had not already been there...the terrible intimidating tease.

Suddenly two arms encircled her and Zoya's husky voice, choked then by a cold, declaimed, "Zee you feel starved but knocked up maybe." Frieda laughed but without a sound; only her stomach winced before her sister's embrace. "Screwty conception, yes?"

Frieda pushed Zoya indoors. The smooth clean form seemed a pagan-fascist masterwork.

"You want out of housekeep duty I tell someone you count take. Like before. Is safest place on earth. Here I keep eye on you."

Frieda was then out of earshot, scurrying across the shaded catwalk onto the further building — one of Zoya's escape hatches — and wondering if the dish across from the loft was solely used for entertainment. She had given her word she would meet with Vassily's American patron, the eminent Angus Dowd, for his sake as well as her own. Though Vassily's

situation was then unknown.

But the occasion of Daphne's musical nuptial was a combined benefit for both connoisseur and dilettante. A marriage of love and art. Antoine engaged many fine dancers and musicians. The select audience would give generously to the San Francisco Opera, once more in a pinch. Dowd hired the caterers and stewards, Arnold the hall — the new Los Angeles Music Box Theatre. The co-operation and generosity of dedicated music lovers he would later lionize before his bemused if languorous wife as she combed out her hair. Marianne Fitch sang from *Of Thee I Sing* and *Let 'Em Eat Cake* with a SFO chorus, and Winton Marsalis played Paganini, Ellington and Jelly Roll Morton — to standing ovations. The ballet performance was as engaging, from all accounts, if occasionally lascivious. The final act alone must have cost an extra hundred thousand or more, one observer remarked. Just before the curtain raiser Frieda had been in Zoya's, now Yevgenia's, dressing room hugging and jawing with her peripatetic sister who had registered something of a comeback that season. For a year a robust rumor had it that the star of the *Bellerophon* had crashed, had taken to drugs, was even seen among the deracinated beings in LA eating— symbolically or no — a raw sparerib while perched on the base of a louche civic sculpture before the newest commercial tower, the lingering result of having attempted to stab a ranking corporate Svengali — again paraphrasing from Gloria's rag. Only the name of the Svengali the story omitted. It was rumored to be Karl Voden. Yevgenia was still very much her own self.

“Motherhood that awful, hon? Yevgenia asked finally in desperation, herself just keeping the floodgates in check as the sisters appeared to look upon one another for an inaugural moment. Yevgenia had yet to mention Catherine Whyte, her likely twin — a story for another time — or the unfinished bust she had of a person who must have looked much like a younger Frieda. Un objet trouvé one of Roald's art collectors called it.

Roald, then vexed with his wife, put it up for sale. Yevgenia discovered the statue in an auction and absconded with it after setting a distracting fire. Perhaps one day — one day for sure. But the dust about her encounter with the Islamist had not yet settled. The fatwa had never been formally lifted. So far she had escaped her past, but the fear and suspicion never left. Once the media learned of her connection to Frieda — and Catherine for that matter — as it might if she were careless, both could be in jeopardy. It was one of the ongoing dissimulations. Yevgenia's hands slipped from Frieda's shoulders to her own hips as she stood back contrapposto to survey her womb mate, maturely pregnant for a third time.

“Twins,” Frieda said, fondly smiling.

“And what did Arn think you naming his kid Vassily?”

“It was his suggestion. I agreed naturally.”

Again they closed and hugged one another with tender ferocity. Separated, Frieda fondly surveyed, again, the beautiful new buxom woman beneath the light dressing gown. “Well they should be,” Yevgenia retorted. “It took the wizard months to get it right. The ‘righteous bro’.”

Frieda proffered a quizzically half-closed left eye.

“Oh hell, I barely got the blade — nail file — into his skin that one time. He suggested I should drop dead and rid the world of a roach. A real amateur compared to you. But he isn't trying to deal me out any more, the — what you say? — smarty at a party and nobody came. Thanks to you, no? Holy Rodina, the time!”

With great nostalgic vigilance Frieda watched her sister, now a Terpsichore palavered over by a core of many thousand devotees on four continents assume the costume of a can can dancer, the face, despite the revisions, still a pentimento hint of their shared inheritance, though the excessive makeup soon turned the remembered human into the marionette required for the performance. With practiced ease the voluminous petticoats descended over a wide pleated shift. The low cut bodice seemed to



lace itself in place. It was only when the final single luminous red garter was positioned that Frieda realized the celebrated culottes were seamed in a bright florescent red braid, a gyno cartoon on the gusset.

Without looking up Yevgenia said, “For ‘very good cause’ —so says the poofter. Some well-heeled heels in front row. Besides, with acre of chiffon about only satellites know for sure.”

Frieda kissed her sister and departed for her box to await the affectionately touted ceremony, which the dancers would conclude.

The marriage service itself was embellished by a series of contrapuntal bass and descant exchanges. A bass-baritone singer repeated the I Dos of the elegant Daphne, Marianne Fitch the responses from the lad. The Episcopalian Bishop who presided was assisted by two French horns and an exotic oboe. Underrehearsed, as it turned out, but the audience loved it, and the bride and groom survived as a fetching romantic duo. A swanny Russian interlude followed as the couple changed into traveling attire. Shostakovich’s humbly named Waltz No. 2. The event continued with the ritual of soulful trust — the bouquet — and carnal pother — the garter, not unlike the one Yevgenia put on. The Can Can performers swept on stage after, all Moulin Rouge éclat and all astonishingly alike except for the central dancer. Frieda mechanically handed her opera glasses to Arnold who surprised her by handing them on to Rosanna, who placed them somewhat emphatically on the balustrade. Frieda noted Arnold sitting with his eyes closed and wondered how deliberate it all was. She fetched back the glasses and decided Yevgenia was perhaps correct: only the satellites would know for sure, though she did feel sorry for two mild mannered friends of Gloria, a publisher and his wife, in the second row.

“It may all be a hoax,” she said.

“The fiddlers seem inspired,” Arnold said, seeking her hand.

Yevgenia eventually married her manager and came to reside between films and concert appearances on a large property in Nantucket. When

skimpy costumes were no longer a blessing and dancing an unpromising dare she turned to cheeky talks shows, her own blitzy chatter nearly as famous as her then celebrated roles on stage and in film. Platinum hair alive above a cameo face busied by a single rose, she became Nielsen magic. It was on a program with a bloody but still impenitent pagan named Rickles that she displayed a fluent political wit. The hour was beamed to the Russian Federation as part of a good will exchange prior to yet another round of GATT talks. It was the winter Vassily Sergeevich's arthritic widow Sonja got a zek from a nearby camp to pack the windows about her tiny cottage in Igarka. A month before she bought more yarn with the proceeds from a pawned watch Vassily gave her on their twentieth wedding anniversary. Vassily died of a heart attack. So she was told, though not where or when. She would knit a sweater for her nearest neighbor's grandchild. Sadly, her neighbour was not well. But for the knitting she might wander off into the coming storm.

Rickles, continually avoiding Yevgenia's motile cleavage, said, "You sure it's not too cold in here?" They had begun the show with two melting ice cream cones — a new organic desert advertised on that evening's show. Rickles was already drenched in perspiration.

Yevgenia slyly made the most of her Slavic heritage including, when she willed, a thick comic American.

"You speak for Demos in audience or Repros?" A presidential election was forthcoming.

Rickles made signs of a prophetic helplessness, then noted a languid lad in the front row — Roald Jr. to be exact. Arnold sat several rows back beyond the range of the tensors; Frieda watched from the Green Room. The twins were at home with the mumps. Vassily Storrier and McClelland watched from the Hampton workshop where they were putting the finishing touches to a scale model of the Santisima Trinidad, the largest ship at the Battle of Trafalgar.

Rickles spoke to Roald Jr.

“What’s so funny sonny?”

“You’re a scream,” Roald Jr. said with a show of near-perfect listlessness.

Rickles bounded to his feet, rummaged in a pocket and produced a large pacifier which he proffered to Roald Jr. “Eat it kid, and count your blessings.” Then cordially he asked, “Who are the jaybirds next door?” Two of Roald’s friends were also doing their best to remain royally unengaged.

“One’s a girl. The other’s her Latin stooge.”

Young Roald's show of boredom was virtuosic, if not atavistic. The girl waved her hand in front of his face and shook her head, not quite hiding her grin. The other lad flashed a toothy smile and politely shrugged.

To the co-anchorman, a giant teddy bear with a robust laugh, Yevgenia said, “He fools now with the tender boys? In the sunset year? Yes?”

Rickles stormed the dais, smiled raffishly at the oafish co-anchorman, then muttered to Yevgenia, “Keep it kosher Brünnhilde.”

Her cleavage lower than ever Yevgenia took another lick from the cone. “So: we cover up...no beachvare!”

Rickles stared at the trio. “Note the rubber plant look. Na na, na na na. An old nursery rhyme kid. You never learned it?...”

Said Yevgenia to the trio. “Such sweet boys and mainly girl.”

“Expensive rubber plants. Great colour.”

Some boos.

“Bite tongue you die of food poisoning.” An old joke.

Again laughter that loved vendetta.

Said young Vassily to McClland, “Rickles lives.”



## THIRTY

She lay starkly awake thinking of her deceptive, convoluted life, and the strange nature of her plaintiff self. At such time, often in the early dawn, she longed to distill his potency and give again the gift of possession — as another had so deftly done with her molten core, that part of her that might find surcease only if a knowing taker was at hand, one she could finally heartlessly trust. Akin she thought to the lyrical inspiration of his soulful quest, his inner ‘music-magic’, so tractable in its way to the mathematical genius he otherwise slighted. She was ever observant of his transcendent peace with her, his Orpheus encore he called it...no longer did he see her as a fated Eurydice.

Yet the lingering verisimilitude of her former life on as many dawns stung her. The reality of which remained a fall only his seamless affection for her on as many nights could retard, and rescind the awful pending thoughts...

An hour, or a few seconds ago, she came...on her own...into the closed chamber smelling of antiseptic, a room full of efficient instruments without restraints.... Two dark forms, umbered, eyeless, one commissar blank, the other a Principal Boy, removed her essential too lovely self, one layer at a time. As clones of the Greek craftsman Daedalus they worked, scaling the layers of existence, leaving her a being, a Daemon of imperious force and density, separated from mundane fascia that floated away like orchids in beautiful shimmering hyalences so beautifully sensuously crafted....

When he was away she sometimes dreamed of a conveyor and a furnace rich with oily smoke.

Also, when he was away, she imagined herself attempting to confront Muerner. She expected and sought no solace there yet ever wondered at his mood, his late sense of vocation. Was he still miffed his protégé superman had so completely sidestepped his parentetic calling, as she had with

Paleomena and the ongoing marvel of ZYTA, its patents now fixed or settling — parenthetical, for finally Muerner seemed indestructible and without peers: the unbalanced terror!

Her discrete research grant proved something of an orphan, a largess indirectly sustained by Paleomena, which she accepted by working with the latest enhanced radio waves from quasars to assess the deformation of space. But the geodetic network could also be used to pinpoint the location of air, sea and land objects on earth within a half-meter, a possibility Paleomena was as interested in as anticipating cosmic defaults. When Frieda finally demurred, Muerner told her once more that ideological patronage remained a romantic gamble and he was neither romantic nor gambler. Again he chided her for harbouring the most specious of modern complaints — disillusion, the obverse of which — delusion — only popular culture exploited and was destined to be buried by. Sooner than later. Only a community of exemplars in mind and body might finally ‘co-operate’ to encapsulate reality! Such was the vital dynamic. Then he offered her — again — a generous commission from Paleomena.

She rose from the bed to look in upon her children, endowed too with the love and purchase of a man scored by a remorseless science yet steeped in an exquisite solicitude that would suborn her resistance to aging and death — even the haunt about her special Vassily, who she feared had long since departed his allotted vale of tears. All her queries to Russian sources remained unanswered.

Later, as he slept, she thought again of asking a silent ineffable god for a resonant workable trust...as she once had with a deity of her own choosing. Then she might dream of simply running, marking time, on a tranquil blue-green sea wall, running even with others like her, as Zoya had done so long ago — providently in a marathon where the less able were given a head start. Where life was a measured pace, one step at a time...full, occupying, consensual. And in the dream she would remember

a singular man who seemed preoccupied with her as if she were a ghost, an omen, a daughter who would not break stride.

About that time the zek had finished re-stuffing the cracks around the widow's front door. Sonja's only mail that month was yet another overdue invoice for some flower seeds she had not received that spring. Yet the sun was out, and her arthritis somewhat less flaring. Perhaps some cloudberryies remained on the bushes by the river.

## EPILOGUE

He had kind of hoped She might resemble the Roman version of the Delphic Oracle, somehow serene, timeless, patient — more pacific than the Greek. But no; she obviously had a lot to do and looked rather pressed. He wasn't sure if he should feel sorry for himself or Her.

“Well so. You look a bit peaky.” Her words.

“I had hoped for a less dour ending.”

“You didn't do badly, given the scene, and the folk you chose.”

“Even so, leaving the heroine in a maze and her early hero up in smoke.”

“Ever the dreamer.”

“ -- So, that's all then.”

“Yes. But the darkness is brief. A short ride and you're there.”

“Will I ever know what really happened? Or what may come?”

But her smile was then directed to the patient boatman.