

DYAD



A Novel

WILLARD
THURSTON



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Willard Thurston

PROLOGUE

Queen Mary University graduate Aram Mir gazed out the window of the river barge at the tree rich embankment along the Volga river. Aspen, Birch, Elm and Maple fronted the taller evergreens behind, mainly Spruce and Pine. He was struck again by the presence of yet another solitary boy, one of several he had glimpsed that day on the pathway near the river's edge, some accompanied by a small dog. It struck him as odd, given the gregarious nature of most teens. At least those he was conversant with. Did some share his special dilemma, his guarded secret?... Or were they a symptom of how life in Russia remained a reclusive juggernaut, the Russian male leaving this 'tearful vale' earlier than his European cousins? The presence of the boys struck him as perhaps prophetic. The 'long lapsed believers' he imagined. In a country laden with beautiful cathedrals, attended now mainly by tourists.

The recent letter from one Brotherhood sheikh he also deemed augural. 'Your status in the cell is already problematic. In part because your

Arabic remains so poor. But you have been a sturdy help in the past and the council does not forbid what you propose. That is not the same as an endorsement. But you know best. We await the results with cautious curiosity.’ The sheikh, he knew, was likely sympathetic but prudent enough to sit on the side. A regnant Agami Salafi who learned what was proposed was incensed, and his English, when he chose to use it, emphatic. Are you sending in the clowns now? To wallow in the mawkishness that Jewish bluster has so shrewdly exploited? The sheikh had advised Aram to take a short break — see his stern ever restive mother who had returned to Yaroslavl, her birthplace, and assess the security at the lone Mosque there, then decide if his new tact was apposite as he first thought. He found his elderly widowed mother to be her usual cagey if not proudly dour self — his conversion to Islam a nebulous page in her memory — and the mosque ably functional and nearly whole once more, though the worshipers had dwindled somewhat since the attack during Ramadan in 2008. As it had in the past, the classic structure with its finely arched windows and slender ivory minaret revived in him a sense of apprehension, the coming of valuation and judgement...where one stood alone.

The house of prayer. A fortress of the soul. So long and hard to build, to immaculately sustain — the truism that left him trusting that his novel plan, which perturbed if not dismayed the elders, adroit and timely. Indeed, as he recollected the sheikh’s circumspect words he faintly smiled. A year ago a school fellow studying English called him a ‘rebus’ — a word or image puzzle, often the thing or person liable to misinterpretation he

claimed. Even blame. As for the sardonic outlook of his mother — innate self-flattery he suspected — it may have sharpened his own sense of purpose, the understanding that pointed the way! Such that a duteous Muslim entranced by Rabelaisian posturing would be a singular rarity if not an oxymoron. Such a one finding in its blithe derision the means to abet his ‘struggle’, enhance his Da’wah, might incite a fatwa! It was going to be an interesting week. Perhaps that’s why he liked to travel by water when feasible. The reassurance it imparted. One of God’s first gifts. You speak mainly in a foreign tongue one dogmatic Egyptian student said. A moment of reckoning. To this critic he had pensively replied, “To understand your opponent you must know his language, his habit of thought. Then confront him with it.” A precept Muhammad may have slighted — so heedful Aram mused. His Armenian father, who died two years before, was disgusted when he learned his son had become a Muslim. “The biggest mistake of your life, so far.” Father did not believe democracy dissonant, nor Islam anything but a mug’s game. But for Aram, the Modernism Zeitgeist was not the ‘disambiguation’ it purported to be. There was a malaise in the West that was shortchanging it’s promise. Islam, he believed, had features that might prevent an unmitigated Fall. But he was not optimistic. Humans were a very ‘susceptible’ species. Still, he would proceed. Allāh was not an existentialist...not a ‘neutral’ investment advisor.

ONE

On first entering the production facilities at Glow Worm Films, a blossoming adult film enterprise in a hard luck suburb of Tarzana, California, Joseph Sall, an edgy heedful teen of a Canadian mom and American father who was the grandchild of a Senegalese slave, misinterpreted the direction given him to the reception area and found himself in a dimly lit hallway that opened suddenly into a brighter corridor, the further end of which contained a low dais where the casting for a new film was apparently underway. A man in a medical smock and a fashionably dressed, heavily made-up woman appraised two female candidates who were partly screened from Joseph's view by a ringed curtain. Both appeared to be nude. A young man, also nude, stood in a doorway off the dais and absently waved at Joseph. Momentarily distracted, Joseph almost bumped into a girl standing in the dim hallway who apparently waited her turn. Nearby an older deferential woman, also smartly dressed, noted a bruise on the girl's lower spine as she undressed and asked how sore it was. The girl glanced at Joseph, saying, "I'm fine, really." Joseph hung his head and moved off pretending indifference. Had he ever seen a prettier girl? Said the woman, "I'll get some makeup on it before you go up," "Great," the girl answered. "You'll be a shoo-in," the doting woman remarked when the heavily made-up woman approached from the well-lit dais, a sight Joseph furtively took in glancing back. The pretty girl returned the look, her smile sickly he thought.

When he at last found and entered the reception area, a sullen faced

girl at the reception desk looked at his frail form with a smidgeon of disbelief. “You want to work here at Glow Worm Films?”

“Yes,” Joseph answered, attempting all the while to look as earnest as he could. Bronx born Hejaz had been firm on the point: You can be dumb as a cow, cause heaps of confusion, but if you’re sweetly earnest and willing all is forgiven. A useful American excuse.

“Mr. Dyck is the casting director. He’s on the phone at the moment, but shouldn’t be long. Please take a seat.” At last she smiled. “If you’ve come all the way from Glendale...that bag must be pretty heavy.” His back pack had a festive Glendale K-9 insignia.

As he sat, Joseph experienced none of the diffidence -- or languor -- he had the evening before. A hairy, thick set man who stood in the adjacent studio wearing what looked like a surgical gown suggested to him an odd carnival celebrant. Spiky multicolored hair — someone had consorted with a peacock? — crude tattoos, many piercings, and a straggly goatee contorted with elastic bands. That the qualifying entry into such a world might be reliable erections erased the lingering sniggers. *Shirk* did not even approximate what he sensed in this alien recreant space. Slowly he recalled Aram’s special eulogy. ‘Words for distracted worshipers,’ as Hejaz dryly put it. Joseph suspected the singular Aram, their cell’s newest tactician, had his own treasured reading of the Hadith, and a Salafi’s regard of sensual indulgence and cosmopolitan mannerism.

Do not be swayed by the cynical description of the Celestial Virgins by Western stooges and wiseacres. Their sublime nature can never be corrupted, nor their attention

diminished. Their pervasive presence is paradise itself, their purity the essence of the restorative power of the the fiery cosmic spirit. The essential transformation is the goal of jihad, the ritual purifying of the self, and thus the excision of prurience, dereliction and ready cynicism -- the glib 'carrying of tales' we must reckon with.

Hejaz had added, with a shrug and smile Joseph knew well, "Aram has a guarded respect for the long-standing members, yet balks at zealots prompting him. The fervid mentors who foster hatred short sell apotheosis and reclamation, he claims. Why the keepsake poetry -- the pith of sanctity, equanimity. Charis. A word he likes. As he's said more than once, 'Jihad is a life struggle against iniquity and acedia -- not a fast track to a feast.' Aram had persuaded some Elders to consider the new tack. The venerable sheikh scowled when he heard what Aram specifically proposed, yet chose not to intervene. It was said that Aram referred to the prominent ever censorious Salafi, who lionized execration, as 'The Great Virgin Gamekeeper'. Aram lived a very dicey life.

What particularly vexed Joseph now was the fine slender woman seated near the man just inside the studio. A more perfectly sculpted face, Persian perhaps, he could barely imagine or, he winced, a more kindly expression. She appeared to be naked -- he could see only her face and upper chest -- and seemed to await the shoot that was being readied. In the back of the room two persons worked to ready light boxes and baffles. With a genial nod she told the 'peacock' he looked nice. He grinned and said he liked this studio. "They take their time." The woman then smiled at Joseph. "Maybe next time," she said with a cordial wink. Assorted iron

manacles and a shiny gaff hook hung from a stanchion inside the studio. A stage hand cleaned the hook. One of the larger baffles in the background suddenly moved to reveal to a startled Joseph a naked, thin, very young teen abiding the suave conversation of a bearded man as she toyed with her curly hair. At first Joseph imagined the girl a boy. She would be the same age as Abdul's sister. She sat on a long thin table swinging her legs, the kind of utility table sometimes used for water boarding. Leather restraints hung from the sides. Water boarding was the media's topical ex-coriation of the bigoted West, an ardent colloquy to chastise the virulent infidel. "Our precious retainers," Hejaz said, likely quoting Aram. The distant bearded man gestured with his hands as he spoke, occasionally fingering the girl's boyish nipples. An older bald man approached. The girl leaned back on the table and widened her legs. The two men spent some time inspecting her in a studious silence. The bald man briefly fingered her with a surgical glove then said after a belabored interval, "That's fine. Thanks." The bearded man grudgingly nodded then offered an exaggerated palms up gesture of regret. The girl rose, snapped up a wrap and swept past Joseph into the rest room area. She perhaps hadn't bought what the bald man said Joseph thought; she looked angry and briskly rubbed at some tears. Her presence was a goad: her wavy hair the color of an alabaster bowl his mother cherished, her slight form a seamless soapstone figurine he once coveted in a bazaar. Joseph heard the heavy man, the peacock, say to the Persian girl as the two men moved off toward the back of the studio, "-- A dose. Not always apparent."

“She’ll get over it,” the Persian woman wanly replied.

Just then a hardy buxom blond entered the room on elevated heels in a tight red plastic dress. The peacock smiled and gave her a thumbs up salute.

“You got balls, Core,” the peacock exclaimed after making eye contact.

The secretary was fondly confused.

The peacock continued: “Core played She-harem-sadie -- for the 1000 and One Night Blow Out. Ejaculated all over the Mini Stallion.” He turned to Joseph. “A squirter like you’ve never bloody seen. Mix with her you wear a rain cape.”

“Core?” the secretary said, more incredulous than ever.

“In a dark wig,” Core absently answered as she studied a work calendar.

“Blew everybody’s mind. A real monsoonie,” the peacock continued.

The secretary was further confused. ““Soonie?...””

It was then placid Joseph whispered, “Some truths we deem self-evident..this being the first”, and left the room after releasing the lock-on timer to the canister valve. The reception-restroom area and studio were soon filled with a phenyl isonitrile mist, the result of a masterfully constructed stench bomb — the handiwork of one Aram Mir, a chemistry buff and wild card jihadi with a commanding sense of smell. The stench he described as the breath of a Komodo dragon on steroids. Six people were rushed to emergency. All survived. With, for a time, hyper sensitive nasal tissue.

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The stench bombing of the office and interim video taping studio of Glow Worm Films was only belatedly attributed to ‘explosive material’, there being costly gas and plumbing complications before. The sex trade community and its diverse patrons were particularly shocked and outraged — at the presumed bombing, not stolid plumbers or gas workers. At first, the culprit or culprits were thought to be deranged Americans; enough there to go around. But when an obscure group called Shaheed claimed responsibility, the media was at first flummoxed -- such a novel, quirky act beggared belief -- but finally, urgently sought explanations from security folk while convening debates about freedom being a cherished value (in a largely insouciant society that brooked, even winked at, the vivid showcasing of lifelike bondage, torture and rape, including novel acts of defecation). Some ardent libertarians took time to remind one and all that being narrowly judgmental was in essence a trap — an aberration of die hard Neanderthals. As perhaps expected, a few doughty Neanderthals were less vexed and may have comprised a sympathetic constituency. One ‘rye head’ was quoted in a neighborly bar crowd in South Bend, Indiana: “You’d think the assaholas mighta done this before and saved us all a lot a piss ass tickies. The flics those subdrop wonders made are total skags.” Later that night the Kick Boxing boyfriend of a lap dancer who starred in one of the ‘skags’ punched the critic’s porch light out but good.

The facility itself was quarantined, some neighboring buildings painstakingly fumigated and sanitized. A veteran crash hotel owner boarded up

his run down holding for a time. The sex trade community mounted a the-
atric protest march attended by hundreds if not thousands. There re-
mained among some local reporters the suspicion that the group responsi-
ble for the ‘bombing’ had intended to target the property next door, then
owned by the flamboyant son of an expatriate Iranian businessman. The
mushrooming speculation soon animated a plethora of self-dramatic con-
spiracy theorists, one of these idling over the use of ‘a rusty dusty Hydro-
gen Bomb’. ‘Holy Shit’ and ‘Chili Killi’ got airings as well. Some claimed
the instruments used to detect the residues within the canister itself were
substandard; others that the amount of water and chlorine based decon-
taminant used were deliberately excessive; still others that the investigation
team was sluggish, incompetent and unsympathetic. Bungling, dead-end
officialdom was soon, again, ‘the Arse Cruncher.’ The same day, the
members of the Behr Brue Bankers Club swiftly departed the revolving en-
trance doors holding handkerchiefs to their noses. The reason for the sud-
den departure was promptly determined if not readily explained. A dis-
gusting odor had suddenly filled the 2nd floor lounge, then spread via the
closed air conditioning system to the rest of the building. Gasps from
many members were sudden and frantic; one promptly vomited in the
street. The puzzled expressions were ‘phantasmagoric’, one earnest wit-
ness later said. Another stolidly wondered if some escaped zoo animal
had somehow got inside and died; talk about stray pythons and other ne-
glected animals was topical. Others imagined some kind of juvenile
prank. An ornery bystander noted that several sharpie bank executives

who attended the club had been given large bonuses despite their banks' pending bankruptcies. Three of these he named. "Bound to cause a stink," he said. The laughter was rather anemic among the onlookers though, for many were already at sea in the Wall Street tsunami.

Two days later a putrid abattoir's smell issued from a busy San Diego abortion clinic, its staff and some patients robustly coughing and expectorating in the street outside. Two phalanxes of pickets eventually faced off, one stressing the millions who would never see a sunrise, the other that such 'sunrises' were sentimental tripe. The day the pickets converged, a meeting of the directors of Nixit, a wholesaler of unexcelled feral video games, suddenly broke off. Said the teenage avatar of distribution, "One you guys not bin regular?..."

In due course Shaheed 'selflessly proclaimed responsibility' for these attacks as well.

TWO

"Excuse me. You seem to be in one of our seats."

The heavy bearded man looked up at the stylish middle aged couple and frowned. For a moment it seemed he would not budge. When aware of others looking at him he sought his ticket, then stared at the number on his armrest, then the one engraved on the floor between his bespoke shoes, as if a large unsavory insect crawled into his theatre space. By then an usher approached and requested to see the ticket, which the heavy man relinquished with sullen deliberation.

“Sir, your seat is two rows up -- Lower 5A seat 7. Please. This way.”

With some annoyance the stout Mr. Dorfman rose to his feet and shuffled past the patrons in the row, stomping on a couple of toes yet offering no apology. Indeed, his mind was a welter. He would be closer than ever now —five rows from the stage in fact. He made an effort not to look inconvenienced —which in fact he was, now that his presence was manifest to the patrons in the lower orchestra section of the theatre. He felt a flush come to his face -- such that he almost turned and departed the elegant gilt, plush and crystal chamber, only to decide more people might see his face if he did so. Once more he trod on some toes to find his assigned seat, where he sat like a catatonic child, except that few such children weigh over 130 kilos. His conscience was a riot of voices then, all shouting him down, calling him scabrous scurrilous names. Yet he was strangely possessed. The temptation that led, nay snared him to attend this performance at the new London Apsara Club was now electrifying, what a pressed classicist might assign to a Zeus-sized libido.

The racy club was rumored to be the inspiration -- one well-paid reviewer called it the mythopoesis -- of Konstantin Alexandrovich Borozov, known to media gate mouths as ‘Kissy’, reclusive brother to the Bratva Pakhan Boris Ivanovich Borozov, known to virtually everyone else as ‘Bossy’. If Boris Ivanovich was now in prison, due to a recent rash of exploded bodies (actually the messy murder of a prosecutor who happened to be the protégé of a rival mob with closer ties to the Kremlin), his brother no longer enjoyed the relative anonymity he once savored, for he was now the

focus of several ongoing investigations, though about all the current diggers could unearth was his backing of a new chain of clubs, the London Apsara being the handiest to zero in on, which featured a dance company that astonished reviewers with its prowess, despite the token randiness and youth of some of its soloists. One of these, ‘Devi’— from the late marquee — was a young lithe wonder the bulky Mr. Dorfman had become obsessed with. A displaced houri of Paradise he thought, this odd Circassian or East Slavic Apsara. His obsession was sufficiently humbling that he had to assume an alias when he ventured to steal away to attend another performance. His steadfast guilt added a finely hallucinogenic, seductive voluptuousness. Thus did stolid, fervid Ammon Farouk, an Egyptian who had attended London Metropolitan University, where he was clandestinely known as Ding Dong Farouk, elect the name Dorfman -- he could manage what he believed a German-English accent -- because being German he felt would confer a certain stature and anonymity in England’s naughtier clubs, though he hadn’t reckoned with the possibility that he might be seen as a simpleton -- after the lead character in the satiric British Channel 4 series, Gravy Train. He had always envied those Saudi princes whose wondrous leisure and legendary stamina supposedly mesmerized the demi-monde in Mayfair. Were he only ten years younger and not such a dogmatist, so belatedly aware of his calling, his Da’wah...still, he ventured on, slipping into the new Apsara to glimpse this miraculous Devi who had metamorphosed into several sprites over the weeks he tracked her, this night appearing in a temple costume of flimsy pendant intaglio above a shimmer-

ing translucent skirt that kept the voyeurs, including himself, diligently alert. The slender but well-toned limbs and fluent moves stirred in him a desire he had not felt since his adolescence, only now it was even more thrilling in its nostalgic incantation. He yielded up an audible sigh or two as the gold intaglio flitted about the sinuous torso to reveal a stunning timeless beauty -- until, that is, she began performing with what could be an Arabian sword on a rug he'd not noticed before, the very design of which resembled that on his chosen prayer mat! If it had been his desire to one day stalk and ravish the creature, these stray impertinent props incited a rage in him he was barely able to contain until the end of the performance, when he briskly strode backstage determined to throttle her. Ammon was a menacing alpha hippo when provoked. After barging into several rooms offstage, performers and stage hands fleeing in terror before him, he found her in a wardrobe room looking over a fancy-dress ball gown. At first she seemed merely annoyed that a roisterous fan could gain admittance to her. She called out just as Ammon lunged at her, tearing the cotton wrap she wore, revealing a form stunning in its flawless doeskin, the pert breasts each a peerless dove-like Upcher Ammandoux. It was this revelation that momentarily distracted him, such that she managed to seize a hair or hat pin and stab him in the eye. The slender fountain of blood that issued forth was incredulously witnessed by his one intact eye, at least for a moment or two; soon he could see very little. The ensuing pain itself, including a belated beating from the club's bouncers, was not cathartic. His stolid use of 'devotion' -- He went to give the sinner a recitation

of some Hadith-based precepts for guilt-ridden infidels, which prompted the angry crusader reaction! --- just managed to stymie the congregating bobbies and goad a detective inspector to consider charging the dancer with aggravated assault, though by then the girl had vanished. His admittance to an acute care hospital was a further trial as his Egyptian identity was sorted out and a temporary NHS Alliance card issued. By then he was sternly taken in hand by some Sunni clerics who happened to be attending an educational conference in East London. The hospital was relieved to engage their auspices for the treatment of a foreigner. Much later, at the hearing before his Mosque's shurā council, Ammon's plea of a devotional pilgrimage gone awry proved somewhat underwhelming. The scowls on the faces of the principal elders seemed unanimous. A Muslim Brother now identified as the patron of an Iblis under a false name in an attempt to redeem a pert cabaret dancer did not enhance his credentials as a dedicated Islamist. 'Cyclops' indeed!

That same week a charter rights' group filed a complaint about police laxity with the British Institute of Human Rights. A group of lawyers also worked to see if the club fomented ethnic antipathy.

THREE

Hejaz Naseem faintly smiled, exhibiting an expression rare and stupefying as a bloodless week of repose. Despite his American college education, or perhaps because of it, Hejaz seemed at times the very nemesis of levity or

even solicitude. A toothsome irony, which in part prompted the notable smile, was that Aram Mir, their cell's wily mentor, was that very minute marching along side the Shriners wearing one of his many clown guises in the Pacific National Exhibition parade in Vancouver, Canada! Hejaz had just received Aram's e-mail. 'Marching with the Keepers of the Mystic Shrine.' Aram said he enjoyed consorting with mystic potentates. Indeed, Aram wore so many hats, as they say in the West, that he seemed at times the Genie of a reconstituted Aladdin. The mindful jihadi had been the prompter and animus of their new tack: Target what many Americans also loathe: such Americans are our latent exploitable constituency! Our waiting 'reserves'! Life for many in the U.S. will only become more impecunious and exacting in the coming months and years. The selfless, purifying tenets of jihad will take on a new 'relevance' -- a word they like. Also, less noise for us up front, less outlay when you attack the house of an Iblis. Particularly when you create a real stink. Only live people can smell!

And, Hejaz calmly reflected...they had just begun. He knew Aram had problems with several Brotherhood tacticians, but was sufficiently adroit to play a wild card now and then. He wished Aram well. The savvy jihadi had said, more than once, that 'among animals one treasures a sense of humor.' Perhaps if Osama had not been so 'voluptuous in his earnestness'...Aram's words themselves could convene a tribunal. The sheikh's 'silent approval' itself was an entreaty to the spirit of Sunnah -- the meaning of Muhammad's words, habits, practices and tacit approvals! Aram was riding a very 'windy' camel.

Thus, on this relatively calm day as Hejaz sat playing an ancient board game with stolid Abdul in his drafty office in Agami, outside Alexandria, handily vented by a tanker truck with failing brakes, his lingering amusement, as we've noted, seemed out of character. Aram's clown caper, plus the stink bombing of Glow Worm Films, Behr Brue, the abortion clinic and Nixit -- all contributed to the lurking hilarity. But now, a further diversion -- baby food. Baby food! The subject resurfaced as Hejaz waited out woolgathering Abdul. The work of Catherine Whyte, an American Broadcast Network journalist honored in OO Magazine, had just outed a baby food scam in Russia, its formula substandard nutritionally. Baby food. The Western readers of OO Magazine might be alarmed by substandard baby food. From the troubled Russian Federation! Was that not an improvement he wondered? No mention of babies starving world wide, parentless children, forsaken kids generally -- or, for that matter, affluent children stuffing themselves with bad food, eating their way to an early illness. No, deficient baby food was front and centre that month. The other world atrocities vigilante Hejaz was attuned to were on a back burner that day, though his list was long and growing, his enumeration of now a dirge that might resurrect some venerable tenets in the Hadith -- becoming as it were so indicative, self-evident to the devout. Aligned with wily Aram, Hejaz had some talent as a scold. That very week he recorded the fiery rant of an American talk show fulminator, whose words served as an ongoing poignant indictment of the demonic West, Hejaz' primer and almanac, which he used in the recruitment drive for their cell's soldiers, Joseph Sall

being the inaugural ‘special operative’. The talk show fulminator’s apt angry words were a ready benefice.

“I tell you, ladies and gentlemen, this country is in big trouble. Our government and too many of its toadies are playing footsie with busy future’s sharpies and their mercurial computer traders, collateralized debt obligation spinners and the hegemonic shareholder lobby. Outsourcing itself remains a gauge of success for keen CEOs. Yes, I know, it’s a mouthful.”

Hejaz recalled how the man often paused to field a theatric grimace.

“They slight our prodigious historic debt, our impervious public sector unions, fat children and out to lunch teachers; our Marxist imbued professors, obtuse parents and their infant beauty pageants, half-cocked gun fanatics, who think rifles protection from an emergent fascist state with drones and hellfire missiles; our pervasive drug culture, recreational and medicinal, mischievous and insular computer hackers, texting hopheads, the growing hoard of expectant codgers. Also, and I can only regret the list is so bloody long -- relentless fomenting advertising, exponential pollution, locust swarm pornography, rabid video games and music that tout and etherealize all manner of mayhem, rage and beastliness! One of the ‘memes’ that tends to denature meaning itself. Think of our many fine actors who glamorize thuggishness and sport nonchalance, insouciance -- the so suavely cool.” Hejaz might add -- in the bailiwick of the aforementioned Whyte -- the wholesale ransacking of former Soviet industrial cities to squirrel away an obscene fortune (assuring the criminalization of the new élite), thus strengthening many wayward cartels, the agile lobbying of

many governments, businesses, NGOs and members of the U.N. -- all run of the mill stuff. No, substandard baby food might upstage them all this month. A reminder for flinty Hejaz that independent Western women were not enamored of child care, breast feeding being such a drag and child rearing itself a millstone. Not a surprise, given the caddish and incontinent behavior of many Western men. The peerless glad handers of the world. Who deemed cupidity an economic necessity while being hectored by their cheeky dolled-up women.

As we've noted, Hejaz was a veteran castigator.

Who now came again close to smiling. The cover of OO Magazine, his latest successful 'mootard' to visualize and encapsulate Western fetishes, put its heroes on its covers and there, this week, the pretty face of a youngster barely out of a training bra who had -- one must not be diffident here — ably and courageously fingered crime boss Boris Ivanovich Borozov, known as 'Bossy', half brother to the more elusive and enigmatic 'Kissy', for selling adulterated, nutrition scant baby formula -- 'inadvertently' Bossy's minders claimed. Poor inadvertent Bossy. Shorting even your children. As a keen student of Western cant and crotchets Hejaz was often blind to turpitude elsewhere — parenthetically the ageless perfidy and vendetta that spawned it. In his regard of the West he sensed dupery in the Zeitgeist, the infatuation with progress, the sojourning of credulity. The panacea of plenary entitlement. The early Greeks once championed a diamond hard sense of elegance -- Nothing in Excess. Now the credo seemed to read: Without Excess Nothing, or Nothing succeeds like Excess.

Hejaz' hatred of mind sets archly progressive was a kind of vocation for him, a stamp collector's ordering of paradox — such as the patronizing of ethnic diversity while touting social fusion, finding the energy to work only at things you are finally galvanized by, slighting discipline itself as a possible noxious concept, a right-wing hang up, exhorted exertion a corrosive force, violence its dividend. All febrile trials and scolds must go. The implicit Western feminist creed that had pretty well stifled Western reproduction and robust self-reliance. Baby food for all. Safe, affordable, ever nourishing, not a wily fish bone in the lot. The belief in a Western Providence seemed unshakable. For which the West, in all its glib presumption and peremptory smugness, could infect the entire planet; of this alone Hejaz felt certain, as a hot cindery wind dusted the air about the game board and gave to gritting one's teeth a baleful effort. The picture of the journalist, the youngster who had braved spying on the Russian kleptocrats, her accomplishment there, however modest, considerable and unfeigned, reminded him that the seemingly protean energy in the West was the bugbear, freedom itself the awesome formidable tart. You could make a mess of your life with no effort at all in Her thrall. So he believed with all his heart. Though someday, like today, as he recalled the seraphic face on the cover of OO Magazine, he sensed an urgency that took his breath away. He looked up. Abdul was showing signs of a rare impatience. "Your move." Abdul spoke in English for he knew that Hejaz, like Aram, poorly understood Arabic. Another of our 'burdens' the sheikh said, in a moment of uncharacteristic pique.

“Yes. My move.” Hejaz picked up a large grain of sand off the game board with his thumb and forefinger. “In a grain of sand.” He and Abdul often talked in riddles.

Abdul smiled. “I prefer an orchard with many fine fresh water pools -- the early paradise.”

“The pools of Amarna.” They had worked for a time with an archaeological team at the special site.

“Ha. Many grains there now. Many, many grains. Only Aram may count them.”

Again Hejaz dryly smiled.

The news of the stink bombings reached Catherine Whyte, the newly celebrated journalist at the American Broadcast Network, while on an overdue holiday in Vancouver, British Columbia. The story was still vivid in her mind as she watched the Pacific National Exhibition Parade, its carnival atmosphere a fitting distraction she thought. At first. It was the Shriner marchers who incited a rare, novel wonder. Western butter and egg men dressed up to resemble Ikhwan or Saudi potentates struck her as finely droll. The Ancient Arabic Order of the Nobles of the Mystic Shrine -- at home in the land of the Great Satan — now marching by a Big & Tall Shop, escorted by various clowns. But she had more than jovial pantaloons to contend with these days. Her expulsion from the Commonwealth of Independent States, now the Russian Federation, despite her current celebrity (her face on the cover of OO Magazine) was becoming a no-

madic adventure. She lived then in a professional limbo, her work in Russia suspended for a time for her own safety, the assignment from her new boss, a stolid bureaucrat from the U.N. — Darin the Deplorable, she named him — still in escrow. That she might end up working for a Western ‘apparatchik’ was a peccant irony. Later that day she would read about the ‘brazen Apsara attacker’, whose grainy media-filed picture intimated a canny resemblance to herself.

Ammon Farouk squatted on a new Heriz carpet which lay on the trellised, plant-filled terrace of his large apartment in the Zamalek district of Cairo near the Qasr al-Nil Bridge. The sprightly flora was the the soulful work of his wife Atiyaah who loved and got many of her decorating ideas from slick Western magazines. One of these, OO Magazine, he had casually fetched from a coffee table that morning -- a magazine that should have been secreted in the women’s quarter! Seeing the cover turned his usual expressionless, weathered sun brick face to granite, the patch hiding his injury shifting its alignment. For a brief moment the notion of a clone eclipsed, blinded his reasoning.

He smacked his head and looked again. Yes, the same bloody infidel hell whore! The face would not escape recognition -- so uncannily like the very accursed one who had cost him his eye. But how could that be? This child-woman was not a cabaret dancer, precious gem smuggler holed up in London’s East end, so his minders concluded -- but an ABN journalist out of Los Angeles working the year last in the St. Petersburg and Moscow en-

virons. Catherine Algaea Whyte, an apparently sturdy reporter at ABN now with the reputation of both an Ar-Rakīb (The Watchful) and an Al-Hasīb (The Reckoner). As the heady moment lapsed he decided the world was full of doubles. Satanic doubles. Yes. The only explanation. His disgust with himself and Western glamorizing of concupiscence -- The Great Shayt'ān at His Most Ingeniously Heinous (one Nour Party publicist had chosen the words well) -- would only be expiated by cutting off the head of the foul Apsara tormentor, this hopped up houri. Would that he never had been lured into the swank clubs she performed in...he had never purged the vagrant, capricious lasciviousness that shackled intemperance with enduring shame. His anger with himself and the furor she incited performing with a prized sword -- on what looked like his very own Senneh Kilim rug! — caused him to storm backstage to throttle her. Except that God had questioned his timing. More or less. And now a tony face so like this infidel mutilator smiled back at him in rich glossy color on the OO cover. Well, the other jinn, The Devi Who Fortifies Earthly Gifts — from a raffish marquee at the club — would not likely dance in London again. Pity. He looked again at the magazine cover and once more fielded the suspicion that they might be related.

For Dr. John Mayo (no connection to the clinic he always said up front) the cover of OO Magazine also stirred a timely resonance -- as had the stink bombing of Glow Worm, Behr Brue, the abortion clinic and Nixit earlier that week. Were some jihadis at last catching on? Becoming

adroitly discriminating in their targets and weapons? Not likely he mused. Like Osama et al, most were still committed to apprehending the cosmos, the 'omneity', by demonstrating their imperviousness to the often profane nature of mundane life. Still, one of the elect could hardly have deployed a more 'earthly' weapon than the one someone used on the four targets. The front page of the paper he read on his daily ferry ride to Manhattan headlined both stories of the ABN reporter and the 'bombings'. (Spare details of the Apsara attack would spike a late edition.) He had long been a ready champion of fascism, especially lamenting its sullied promise and modern vigilant vilifiers. Only the mind-set of many intrepid European stalwarts and a small touchy clique within American Republicans kept the corpus from languishing. The Soviet Russian failure was now a curse and blessing. Thus, this young journalist's venture into the den of the beast -- as audacious and gamy in its way as the recent stink bombings -- was both remarkable and puzzling. How indeed had she done it and got out? There seemed more to the story than the article disclosed. He smiled. The spirit of fascism was oddly being revived by the Sunni Da'ish, the 'True Believers', who began blowing up the Middle East, also locales in the smug intrusive Western world, in response to the baneful sectarian rule of Nouri al-Maliki in Iraq. No quixotic Shia dregs or slick conniving mealy mouths would run things for them. The Glow Worm attack he first thought an oddity, a jape even. Some college kids having a go, acting out another delirious joke. But Behr Brue and the clinic suggested something else, despite their kindred parody. Indeed, John Mayo sometimes won-

dered if he and some Islamic purists, as often as not Sunni, given aspects of their suave repudiation of the progressive, multicultural, anything-goes West, were fraternal twins, outriggers on the same boat. It seemed the world was coming apart, again, anarchy abounding, which usually spawned or consolidated more sets of angry factions and cliques. A friend of his once remarked while viewing his library, "John, I trust that Robert Michels' book *Political Parties* remains a Mayo staple." "Most days, yes," John promptly replied. "One of the early seers," the friend suavely resumed, "oligarchy being the political Phoenix, today's 'corporatocracy' with its government toadies -- which the dreamers trash in their talk and twits." They had been on holiday discussing the West's malaise, specifically the arena where entertainment and media join hands. They spoke in the Windmill Café in Lynden, Washington. Lynden was a conservative, religious, agricultural community in Washington's North West. They had just returned from a desultory round of golf at the nearby Shuksan Golf Course and were willing to do a bit of compensatory exclaiming. His friend had begun with a practiced snuffle, in a voice intended to be heard beyond the margin.

"Many writers and scenarists in today's entertainment industry are having a field day, so help me, creating Armageddon mayhem, paranormal aberration in the wings, all in high definition -- sometimes 3-D! Ha! Is it not ordained -- this irresistible shambles? The beguiling glamour of assault. For our so versatile natural born killers." He then directed his remarks to an older couple seated nearby. "It's hard to look away isn't it? News cast-

ers relish sensational behavior, the squalid often hosting the barbaric. If it bleeds, it leads. They know their jaded audience. Being an arbiter of appetite is the headiest of elixirs. But that's just one aspect of the travesty." He turned to another couple. "The day's video games are acutely polarizing. The games' authors stumble over themselves to embellish the shambles, sometimes with a spiritualized quest or two to perfume the carnage...the frenetic edge of rock 'complimenting' the turmoil." An elderly couple politely smiled, vaguely nodded. Fluently John added, conscious of a widening attentive audience, "Well, the programs you speak of are often as not dismissed as just that -- games. Which are more and more mimicked, to the extent the censor might acquiesce, by major network sharpies. Let's face it, graphic calamity may be a sop for the 'abandoned' — in both senses — male youngster, and excuse for the disillusioned, accusatory female. Moreover, sensual binging itself is now a pro forma entitlement. An internet staple." He looked about at some newly 'tuned in' faces in the room and smiled. "Just for instance -- one of the ongoing travesties -- boys can now vicariously enjoy the prettiest teens on the planet without the slightest exertion; an onanism that mocks the historic quest. The voyeur and siren as soul mates. What's expected when no one's expecting — to freely quote the unromantic Jonathan Last." By then most everyone in the café was begrudgingly if nervously alert, a few joining in with reinforcing litanies of their own.

But that exchange subsided this day as John rode into a sun etched Manhattan on the ferry, the missing towers a reminder and entreaty, his fo-

cus then the topical matter that month for the OO editors: substandard baby food. The heyday of the business and clan criminal. The blithe subversion of stolid, sturdy culture. So he believed this day more than ever. The Statue of Liberty passed by him on the island ferry. Such a statue with an ironic message...honoring, welcoming not the unfortunate but the randy self-assuming lucky...he liked the ironic idea, and penned a sketch on the margin of his crossword. Then he had another idea which he liked even better, and penned that beside the first.

Zoya Belova Stolbanov, the supple dancer who had been attacked by a Muslim extremist after a performance in the London Apsara, sat in a sunny room in a suburb of Bern that overlooked a market where an onion festival was underway. The annual Zibelemärit. She still could barely believe her singular luck. Lively children played about some stalls throwing small onions at one another, the occasional adult grabbing one by the elbow and shunting him off to a citizen volunteer. The charming medieval look of the square gave a storybook atmosphere to this her latest pied-à-terre, so different from the chronic dilapidation and of her old smelly flat in Moscow...where fairytales foundered. In her page boy wig and little makeup she imagined she looked like the Little Snow Girl or perhaps a lifelike Stone Flower, two folk tales she especially liked. It had been a busy week -- astonishing in that the medics at the Bern clinic should be her current rescuers, indeed, in their way, her co-conspirators! One in particular who arranged for her to flee London -- even provide her with a Nor-

wegian Schengen Area visa ID which dubbed her: Lisa Galina Christian-sen. Lisa, rather Liisa, had been her mother's Finish Christian name. Providence. The troubled mother who insisted Zoya learn English, believing her daughter might one day work as an 'a-political' tour guide.

As she watched the lively children she recalled her own early years, when the doctor who first attended her mother from time to time also gave her a thorough once over. His name: Dr. Felix Muerner. If she later wondered about professionally disguised abuse, the utilitarian nature of the tests and examinations addled suspicion. She could not remember much of the early details, but knew that Muerner retained some kind of vested interest in her general health if not her wellbeing. Something to do with the drugs her dissident mother had been given before she got pregnant by her luckless Russian partner. Despite her deteriorating condition, Liisa kept the sorry affair to herself; Zoya was after all the net result. The lurking imputation, which Zoya learned about after her mother's untimely death, was that some of the drugs might also affect the offspring. Had she not been singled out, taken in hand by Muerner's team, she might still be a ward of the psychiatric overseers who caged her distraught refusenik mother. So she believed, though the whys and wherefores remained illusive. It was the amicable Dr. Petrus who greeted her on her arrival at Muerner's Bern clinic -- a week ago today. He invited her to join him in the cafeteria the morning following her arrival where, after they selected their breakfast fare, he forthrightly steered her to a table for two in a corner. That meeting replayed in her mind with wondrous vividness. If she

couldn't remember the specific words, the recollection of his voice reclaimed the mood as well as some particulars. He could not speak Russian, but in English they might communicate, though she had him repeat several phrases.

Initially, in a near whisper he told her her wig and altered makeup were good, her coming thus uneventful. "You'll be seen -- observed -- as one more patient. Best not to try to hide you away...cue the sometimes curious." Often he glanced at the scattered cafeteria patrons, the early risers, then at Zoya, who hadn't eaten for some time and wolfed down a smoked salmon omelet. When she alertly looked up he added, "We have much to discuss." A further survey of the few patrons seemed to satisfy him, and he looked at her anew with amiable wonder as he too picked up knife and fork. After allowing for a spate of treasured mastication, he began in earnest.

"Now some details we should revisit. Most I'm sure you will be familiar with, others you may have slighted or forgotten."

After a turmoiled sleep in the modern spotless out patient clinic that first night, Zoya still felt airborne with wonder, the breakfast itself a rarefied treat. Could she be dreaming, hallucinating? What indeed had she overlooked, or not known? Probably a lot. The doctor's words seemed to come from an absorbed medium. "It's best we recall the beginning," he said as he settled back, coffee in hand. She readily nodded. Facts might defy a dream. He stared at the space between them for a protracted moment then discreetly smiled.

“The history of your courageous dissident mother is fairly well known, and has been documented by some émigrés who have published memoirs. Her harsh treatment is a measure of the anxiety the party cadres had for her at the time. In short, she was influential. It was the late Lysenko period remember, when all behavior was deemed malleable. Find the right drug and all would be well.” Again the discreet smile.

“Before getting pregnant with you, your mother Lisa — yes the same, a coincidence by the way — was given some drugs that may have altered her makeup including even that of her children — the late consideration and worry. Muerner certainly thought so at the time but was not in a position to curtail the use of such ‘curatives’. As you must know, he was one of several German medical researchers the Soviets dragooned after the war. Yes?”

This dated fact Zoya recalled as one more in the day’s edgy details. Use of the word ‘curatives’, which she had him explicate, also jolted. She faintly smiled. “Continue, yes.”

“Sadly, Muerner discovered that the Soviet medical authorities he worked under then were nearly as dogmatic and unsound as the Nazi practitioners he often disputed with -- at one time almost ending up in a camp himself. Naturally part of his, and now our interest and concern, is how you turned out — what effect those medications may have had on you over time. I never met your mother but Muerner was upset by both her classification and condition. She died when you were eight I believe.”

Zoya adopted a smile.

“It is a feature one must endure in our sometimes importunate profession. Though the culpability of some physicians define, indeed encapsulate, the idea of obscenity. I can only say that your excellent health relieves many of our apprehensions. But we should continue to check you out for some while to come. We would be negligent if we didn’t. We will always be interested in your well being, and the clinic will always be available for assistance, questions and consultations. You will see one of our excellent surgeons later today I understand. To suggest changes that will give you a new altered face. Every bit as pretty I trust. Dr. Hirschstein evaluates most of the clinic’s cosmetic interventions. I do understand your desire and need -- to lose Ammon’s vengeance seekers. Yes. We’ll help too with a new ID card.”

Again her adopted, residual smile. The words did not ease her misgivings about the early career of Felix Muerner nor what his exact role in the treatment of her mother and herself may have been. Still, she was willing to let the explanation stand for now; you don’t shoot the messenger. Very early on she knew all too well that her mother had been a problem for some Soviet authorities who were, most of them, real storybook ogres. She vaguely recalled Felix Muerner, the German medic the Soviets supposedly ‘recruited’ after the Great Patriotic War, but believed an associate was the one who actually ‘monitored’ her mother, and herself as a toddler. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Muerner opened the clinic in Bern, from whence the later examiners came, the one doctor, Nils Petrus, becoming a kind of father figure for her, in that he was a heedful racon-

teur in explaining things. Briefly the world seemed less discordant in his presence. Indeed, she began to look forward to their private semi-annual and then yearly sessions when he examined her, the physical aspect devolving over time to mainly routine inquiries. By then she was too familiar with mind sets that molested, abused, importuned, and had no anxiety about Dr. Petrus. When she fled the London Apsara after the assault, her first phone call was to Muerner's Bern clinic. Dr. Petrus was not available, but the receptionist knew immediately who she was and put her on to Eve Kielice, Muerner's long time parter and associate who, after a brief muted discussion with another party, told her to be on a street corner near the Green Park Hotel later that night. It was all vividly surreal at the time. Indeed, she almost didn't go. Yet a black Mercedes arrived at the suggested hour and she was hustled into the back seat and covered with a raincoat. A Mr. Weyker, a large menacing man, sat beside her and told her to keep her head hidden. They arrived minutes later at a Thames boat club and boarded a sizable yacht. That evening they crossed the channel, to anchor before a small village. A second Mercedes materialized on a quay and drove to Lille where she was put on a train to Bern with a wig, dark glasses and the new identity papers with an early picture from the Bern file. If she was anxious and disoriented at the time, the composed, cool-headed Mr. Weyker proved to be another Petrus, despite his size and bearing, and she felt, again, that if Providence had given her the hat pin, it remained as caring and mindful here. In Bern she met the engaging Dr. Petrus who explained that no one there believed the initial story of a 130

plus kilogram Muslim being attacked by a slight ballet dancer. She also relearned that her case, the state of her health, remained a priority for the clinic, given that her mother was an early casualty of the potent drugs the Soviets used over time to fashion exemplary citizens...though in the end robots would do. Hence was she welcomed to stay in Bern for a time as the clinic's guest under her new name, which bestowed, reinstated her mother's first name. Her fairytale escape had thus far not disappointed.

Welcome to the Bernese Oberland!

Belatedly she deduced, from the media poop and a couple of samizdat street folk she kept in touch with, that the manager of the London Apsara announced her return to Russia, hoping to discourage any revenge minded jihadis from seeking her out at the London club. He forwarded a note to the club's casting director in Moscow warning him that 'Devi' would no longer be welcome in London. That neither he nor the Moscow director knew where she was after she fled the club was of minor importance; wherever she was the Apsara managers wanted to fend off all revenge minded jihadis who were haranguing the London police to find the Murdock tabloids' 'intrepid assailant'. The club would be under a cloud for a long time, as would the chain's managers in Moscow. Once before, when she was deemed an awkward asset -- when she tried to suborn a too conscientious Apsara program director -- some cheery wag suggested she seek work with Lavrenti Ganyanov, which then meant being methodically raped on one of his internet porn sites. Ganyanov had photographed her years ago before 'erotic' photography graduated to shaved labia and clini-

cal minora. Then he posed her as a Fifth Century Greek sculptor might have, upright, bemused. She was just thirteen. A kore he called her. Now he tended to specialize in gyno skits where stern ugly medics gave pretty teenagers abusive physical examinations. Even her late esteemed reputation as a dancer would not reinstate her elsewhere given the Muslim avengers at large. She might be a fugitive the rest of her life. Her last performances in St. Petersburg, finely balletic despite the program's token randomness, had garnered standing ovations: Russians still had a fondness for 'unforsaken' talent. Her liaison with a procurator's investigator, who was instrumental in jailing a colleague of the Moscow manager, only certified her as a 'lasting liability'. Many Muslim nationals, particularly Chechnyan patriots, remained an ongoing scourge in Russia, though some vexed critics accused the FSB of planning some 'outrages' itself in order to lionize and advance its champion, Vladimir Putin. She had some diamonds and two ikons she never told the investigator about, and believed they would be enough to give her a few months start, if she remained invisible. A friend had performed in the Los Angeles Bellerophon Club and Zoya dreamt of arriving there in a crate of caviar! More than ever she was determined to find a home in 'Tony America'. Preferably with a new face. That would be the tricky part. Yet she believed she could find a surgeon who would listen...and she had diamonds enough for a payment...in the end her desperate belated decision to call the clinic directly may have saved her life.

Deftly she sought out the copy of the OO Magazine she'd taken that morning from the apartment's tidy library and looked again at the cover

with a mixture of wonder and amusement. We all have doubles she told herself. As had the reassuring Dr. Petrus. Though the similarity here was startling. The attack had ushered in a realignment of her life and fortune. But for Plombiers' whim to add the sword and magic carpet in one part of her act, she might still be captivating audiences there. "Timeless story-book artifacts," he called them, their so playful savant. He had added: "The modern cultural goulash. Universal broad appeal -- Kissy's 'wiggle room'. How to gentrify bawdy art." So said the self-dramatic Plombiers, who was not loath to find employment with the new entertainment barons, though not before she had him write down those precious words for her. Bidding on the costume itself, an ancient temple girdle and religious crown, was an Apsara tradition and, on the night before the attack, fetched a five figure sum that was pledged to a senior's shelter.

She was convinced an attentive Providence had placed the long hat pin in her hand that awful day. She had been in the wardrobe room examining a Nineteenth Century masked ball costume -- for a program then in rehearsal -- when the attacker arrived, whom she first imagined a too exuberant member of the audience! As she sat looking at the surprising cover, she sensed the time for a tectonic change, a realignment of her prospects, had materialized. Yes, a heedful Providence had given her the weapon -- the only explanation -- a Providence she now felt would not abandon her in her determination to forge a new life; to once and for all dump the chic swines and earnest cons and their Cheka 'irregulars', who sometimes threatened to rough her up when she elected to 'act out' -- do something

assertive. The procurator's investigator had saved her from a mauling a couple of times, and she liked the man, but he too must be ditched in her new life. Only with a new identity and domicile might she avoid the goons who must now be working to find her. Providence again would decide. Petrus agreed that the clinic performed wonders in changing human faces and bodies. And that if she was determined...his doubt was momentary. Promptly she had declared, "Put that in record, please. Determined!" Petrus fondly recalled a bit of Pushkin then, followed by his trademark wink. *Love, hear my plea/ Hark to my prayer/ Send back to me/ Your visions fair.* "Pushkin would be sympathetic," he said. "Even with my mediocre rendering." Once more she inspected the wig that would be a strategic prop until the transformation was complete. The 'coming out' of a new identity! A new viable human being. She looked again at the growing milling crowd about the market stalls. A tear came to her eye. They use onions to induce tears. For an actor, not a fugitive.

Dr. Petrus spoke with Gervase Maistre, Muerner's clinic secretary and minder of protocol later the same day he conferred with Zoya. Gervase's office outlooked one end of the Japanese trail garden. The velvety texture of the mosses on the dappled rocks that studded the stream to the goldfish pond seemed to match Gervase's early needlepoint chairs and the Damask and moiré window sheers -- one of Petrus' private, fond observations.

They greeted one another with polite inquiries about their health. Gervase's standard response -- 'Pretty rotten' -- Petrus accepted as an iconic sobriquet. His opening question Gervase repeated aloud with emphasis:

“Should Zoya be told the whole story?” Hmm. One of the conundrums. Muerner believes the time is not yet opportune. He still worries that those who helped him with the covert removal of the Zoya’s twin, Masha Kusnetsova -- our special ‘Catherine Whyte’ -- could be harmed if the knowledge got out; two of those facilitators, as you know, are alive still. Masha’s death certificate might be re-examined for one. Zoya miraculously survived the meningitis she contracted as a bab -- the cause given for Masha’s demise. Moreover -- unlike Zoya, who has always been overtly examined -- there is still testing Muerner wants to do on Masha that depends on a ‘perceptive nullity’, as he calls it, the subject not anticipating or fixating on them. The study of Masha has been done largely by stealth, her doctor’s records examined covertly -- an initial consideration, and a challenging undertaking over the years. She’s been attended by two doctors that we know about. Which relates to the environmental variable in his study of the two -- situating the one in a beneficial family while eliminating the effect poignant self-knowledge can have on a study of comparative health and disposition. The testing I understand is almost complete. Then the matter will be reconsidered. And now with the specter of Farouk the Terrible, it will be easier to protect a single Stolbanov. Learning of an identical -- ‘one-egg’ --- twin would perplex, skew the testing, and could endanger both girls if the knowledge got out. Catherine’s adopting mother would also be needlessly perturbed. Had Muener attempted to remove the ‘surviving’ girl -- Zoya -- his study would suffer, and his role in the hospital possibly be curtailed. Even a prison sentence.”

A brief tenured silence ensued. Which Petrus rent with a digression. "If she proceeds, Zoya will have a new face when and if she meets her twin."

"I feel certain they will meet one day. A day we must prepare for."

"One of the givens."

"In due course Muerner will introduce her to the key players -- likely using Willardson as a conduit...the indispensable Willardson." Both men shared an in-house smile. "Aram may be involved by then -- or Hārun, as he's known to a select cadre over here."

"That may be a gamble."

"Muerner is an optimist. Most utopians are." Again both men smiled, less buoyantly perhaps.

Catherine Whyte's last social evening at the American Embassy in Moscow was a curious mixture of raw nostalgia and relief. She was congratulated on her work in Russia and told she would be missed in the months to come. No one mentioned the fact that the Russian Federation had in effect 'kicked her out' -- revoked her work visa. A last minute invitation to attend a party at the Moscow Apsara, one of the Borozovs' chain of private clubs, sorely beguiled. A handsome buff chap who presented himself as an Intourist Director wished to escort her. "You need, I think, a long night out. Too much ne khochestsya." She guessed him to be an FSB sitter, which his self-absorbed manners and swank attire suggested. Several members of the embassy staff were also going, and encouraged her to join

the party -- the type of entertainment she had shunned during her stay. "The club is the very best in Moscow -- and features some very pretty boys and girls." The tale of the assault in London by a vexed Muslim was then making the rounds. The dancer -- whose face resembled hers and was the object of the attack -- no longer performed there or in St. Petersburg, her last stage in Russia. The show was sensational Catherine was assured, and invitations scarce. "Russia breeds top-drawer dancers like rabbits and most need work."

In one washroom of the Moscow club the import of her current situation hit home as she studied herself in the mirror: she was actually leaving -- had to leave -- a country she had endured a love-hate relation with for nearly five years. It was then she noted what could be a blood stain on the worn tile floor. So. Another reckoning in this awesome Land of Long Nights? -- in Colin Thubron's fine words. The carmine stain recalled for her the ugly contretemps between the crazed Muslim and the Apsara dancer in London. The stain here seemed a recent spill. The inimical Devi no longer performed at the gamy chain of clubs. Perhaps she too had ended a love-hate connection: the club's use of balletic artistry to excuse a pedophilic carnality; most costumes were skimpy and many performers looked or were very young. Some of the masked dancers were reputed to come from venerable dance institutions throughout Europe. Probably just scurrilous hype Catherine thought, and was amused she would have been invited to such a place on her last night out...in the Russia spawned by the likes of Stalin and Shostakovich -- the black tunnel

with its sliver of light. And now a clubby chain of Apsaras...which had long since left their Gandharvas for this Russian Bear Hug. From the few rumors and a single grainy newsprint picture, she guessed she bore a remarkable resemblance to the fabled dancer, and would have liked to meet her. It seemed this lone stain might be her one reminder of the late performer, who had so suddenly (fortuitously?) disappeared. Understandable, given the reputation she must now have among jihadi reckoners and her edgy managers. So Catherine guessed...as she viewed the livid spot. Some deeds have a long shelf life.

FOUR

The interview for OO Magazine was perhaps a little taciturn, but space was ever at a premium and Catherine Whyte not yet the enigma or rebus she would become in the months to follow. Also, her interviewer, a rather plain mudlark of her trade, was probably a bit jealous of this cute pert newcomer who had so suddenly and emphatically established herself as a celebrated if not top drawer journalist by identifying a Russian vor in a vast baby formula scam. The preamble set the tone.

‘Catherine Whyte has a gamin even elfin quality that belies her focus, diligence and undoubted physical courage. Her expression often reflects a droll acceptance of her success, and her poise encapsulates a long-standing humor that must derive from her many assignments in the late, baneful Soviet Union and the later, much troubled Russian Federation. Her ribbed beige sweater and plaid jumper reminded me of a prom gal on the last

day of school. And 'school's out' is just the mood she communicated, being slated and at last resigned to take an overdue vacation. We began our talk with the nub of her investigation -- the careers of Konstantine 'Bossy' Borozov and his elusive brother 'Kissy'.'

OO: What initially interested you in 'Bossy' Borozov?

WHYTE: The remaking of a pariah.

OO: A former ideologue becoming a tycoon?

WHYTE: No, a one time KGB racketeer becoming a shill for Western style capitalism. His grandfather was one of the vory v zakonye, the thieves-in-law. Law serving as a double benefit there. He's broken with that acetic tradition, becoming one of the tsekhoviki -- the late 'anything goes' crime bosses.

OO: You're alluding to the business empire he assembled?

WHYTE: Empire yes. Over three billion in just under six years.

OO: He's now in prison due, many believe, to your exposé of his baby food scam.

WHYTE: He's in prison because he murdered a prosecutor who happened to be the protégé of a rival mob; in short, he pulled rank.

OO: Are you at all anxious about your own safety now?

WHYTE: My work merely confirmed what has become all too apparent. Such that he's shunned by his peers. Who don't want any more publicity right now.

OO: His brother, Kissy, is less impetuous, is he not?

WHYTE: And from all accounts having a ball.

OO: Why do you think they call Kissy the ‘Maenad’? That’s a tough orgiastic woman isn’t it? Who reputedly mangled animals and even children in ancient Greece.

WHYTE: They say he’s hard on dolts and naifs -- the metaphorical equivalent, for the charitably disposed, of animals and children.

OO: An obsessive human, then.

WHYTE: No, he’s a creature, clever and assured. Like his brother, I don’t think his humanity gets in the way at all.

OO: But in the fall of Soviet Communism you must sense a kind of windfall.

WHYTE: A benefice perhaps for humanity at large, but the complexities and miseries proliferate -- well beyond Russia itself. Many wistful Marxists reside in the West. For now, today’s terrorists adopt and shill aspects of that ideology.

OO: The story is not over then.

WHYTE: Hardly. History is the unending drama.

OO: Perhaps it’s in our genes.

WHYTE: Perhaps.

OO: Thank you so very much.

The return to her original home on the Washington coast was a seemly change from life lived under the current kleptomaniac tovariches and their retainers at Gazprom and Rosnett. The gangs of thugs serving the many new dons made life for the hoi polloi every bit as exiguous as before, if per-

haps more luridly sensational, in that the sudden chaotic settling of scores was more dramatically and publicly enacted, bystanders as vulnerable as the select target of the hour. With the passing of the Gorbachev interim, Russian genes were still being 'purged' with as much hauteur and precipitancy. Or so it seemed -- the collateral damage being more inescapably obvious in the wake of glasnost and perestroika and the connived at weakness of the community police. The Fates since The Fall were particularly noisome in Mother Russia, in Holy Rodina. Moreover, Catherine was tired of the sermons her conscience served up for her. By fingering one manic brass cat she had barely cautioned the others, the proliferating others, likely making their craft more enduring as they perfected their scams, grand larcenies, threats and brazen assaults. Her new public persona -- celebrity being both a crimped and exposed condition -- barred her from further pursuit of such tycoons in the fledgling Russian Federation, and might even reduce her to a stateside job at ABN (American Broadcast Network) the remainder of her career. Her editor at ABN was a cozy realist: "Bossy has a lot of pending charges, it's true. I wouldn't go back though." She too knew that the expulsion likely wouldn't hold up in court but contending it brought its own protracted dangers.

But that was that...and over there. By comparison the warm, safe, lenient, beautiful, comfortable atmosphere of the Pacific North West in late June seemed surreal if not immutable, as statistically satisfying as the district environs (beyond the main cities) she left were often chaotic, chilly, forlorn, ugly and alien. Her well habituated caution was a curiosity in luck

fraught America, this providential historic experiment, this permissive nation with so little festering history. So. A land she loved now harboring a vixen. Not easy being a tiger, especially a pretty tiger; a rare endangered species.

The plane ride home was an adventure itself. She made good use of her window seat to document the outside vistas -- from a fire red dawn that outlined a section of wing, to a later sun corona that framed the plane in a cloud bank, to the pale whale tale of Cape Cod below. (An electric storm had re-routed the descent.) What keened these images was the seat mate who stiffly silently looked straight ahead of himself. He struck her as Persian or Arab, his profile sufficiently magisterial that she regretted not being able to record it as well -- the impertinence would have been unforgivable of course. She was reminded of a traditional Sunni injunction against rendering, particularly 'idolizing', the human form, yet felt it misplaced here. She had a ready smile if he happened to look her way, which he never did, at least that she noticed.

She told no one of her return to the West Coast, except her sainted mother -- wanting time to settle in on her own, free of media scroungers and nosy friends. Even Michael, her on-off boyfriend in San Diego, she kept in the dark. She sensed he had a new friend -- hardly a surprise given her repeated absences -- and didn't want to be surprised or embarrassed. She would touch base with him in due course. She had been friendly with an ABN copy writer in Europe who turned out to be an avid believer in the paranormal -- an 'influence' she didn't need in her ongoing assign-

ment. An invitation to a camping holiday in Kefalonia she hadn't replied to. She liked the lad, but there was no future in the relationship and decided silence was her best move given his late wheedling persistence. In Russia of course she lived a celibate existence. The romantic snares there were too few and too hazardous. Hence her renewed wonder at romantic life here, the distractions so many, varied and, in their way illusory, the casualness itself a fine tease. Careful reconnoitering first seemed a waste of time in this rush for life. Particularly after a protracted absence.

Thus, in lieu of the usual or anticipated reunions, reconciliations, chirpy parties, she took a trip to Neah Bay on the Juan de Fuca Straight, thence to Port Angeles, Oak Harbor, Anacortes and the San Juans, passing through Eastsound to find a B and B near Friday Harbor — a sojourn as much to re-confirm the area's near Mediterranean climate. She knew the locale from her college days, but never felt a need for a secular baptism in a treasured spot -- a sudden urge to wash away the care, anxiety and official rectitude of her Russian juggernaut. If the beach area she sought did not accommodate a nudie haunt in her earlier visits there, the change was a reminder that freedom and leisure were not incompatible and might be enjoyed by a country's select minorities...she smiled: her patronage of her 'especial' America was on a roll. A muscular brute stood on the pristine sandy shore like a Colossus, testing what looked like a sextant. A pretty red-headed girl sat on a log nearby reading a book. Soon Catherine was waist high in that day's gentle swells to affect the baptism she felt entitled to, an act she would never have entertained in Russian. The thought itself

brought a chill and rictus smile. When she first waded in, the Adonis sauntered by and grinned. Compared to the full bodied book girl she must resemble a Belsen teen she thought. He continued on with the gait of the wantonly self-assured, only once glancing back as she impulsively removed her suit near the waters' edge. He was about as physically robust as they come. But again nowhere on her radar, his presence much too close to the ape thugs surrounding the Borozovs. What Catherine did not notice was the ageless man who stood looking out over the surf behind a distant boulder. He had an older telescope and scanned the horizon as if searching for a sailing vessel. His dress was nondescript, what you might expect of a working stiff on his day off, unlike his distinctive, classic Persian profile.

On this his second trip to the United States -- to identify the body of his wayward son and bring him back to Lebanon -- Kalid had decided to take a second look at the country that poisoned his only child. A student at Western Washington University (Kalid's cousin Nissar lived near Spokane), Israr had fallen in with a group who turned him against his faith. He and two students died in a car crash. Israr was driving. Kalid believed he was then on drugs and tried to object to an autopsy on religious grounds. (The less he knew the more he might learn to stoically endure.) But he was unsuccessful; Israr proved to be drunk.

Kalid had been a fisherman and taken a young Israr with him on many trips throughout the ancient waters of the Mediterranean. The waterfront Israr may have frequented -- deduced from his few spare letters — turned out to harbor a nude beach, a late discovery in Kalid's perusal of

the breaking waves. He snorted. The irony was a bitter discovery. A slender pale woman who likely did not see him approached the water and suddenly removed her suit. He was almost certain it was the person who sat beside him on the plane. Thin, small breasted. Shaytān's child. A jinn of desire and temptation. He now disliked her as much for his despondency as his anger. He was further vexed that she appeared to be a good swimmer and as pretty a youngster as he'd seen. Indeed, he realized she was the first such jinn he'd seen entirely in the otherwise illusive flesh. Suddenly she dived into a snowy crested wave and disappeared, to emerge many yards further out, a bit of flotsam idling in a trough, except for her laughter, as carefree and buoyant as one might imagine. Once more, as of late, he had trouble breathing. Such a beautiful coastline, with such forsaken debris littering it.

Next on her solo re-communion with this Land of Nod, Catherine sought out the old haunts in the parkland she traipsed as a youngster just across the border in Vancouver, Canada, where she had often vacationed with her reflective yet devoted mother. Wearing a dark wig and shades she booked into the Sylvia Hotel on English Bay -- still not altered to accommodate the PC name wardens — using one of the aliases she'd been assigned for the bolt hole passage her handler at ABN's foreign desk had concocted. Her first day was perfection itself: a warming condolent summer sun, baby blue sky with meringue clouds, and a faint breeze rilling the lilac gray waters of the bay. She had considered more remote vistas in either

Deep Cove or Whytecliff, but to confirm her escape she must touch down at the most nostalgic landscape of her past, in this case the interior of Tweedsmuir Park. Now considered banal by some or, as the brahmins declare, gentrified, she wanted more than ever to recapture some of the early durable moments, when fun and nature seemed indivisible and infinite. Thus, sporting an old pair of jeans and a sleeveless cotton cross wrap -- something she eschewed in Russia -- her swim suit beneath, she headed out to the central lake area, at the last minute leaving off the wig the better to savor the flirtatious breeze, while subtly adding to the fancied makeup. She met many cordial folk on the main walkways and asked a couple of them to take pictures with her operative's camera. Rekindling a smile from the past she posed by several of her salad day haunts, including the barren crag near the old lighthouse. No one appeared to recognize her. A happenstance that helped foster a sense of release. One too earnest lad with a forearm tattooed in Celtic knots failed to pick her up.

Yet as she approached the interior, the starker memories from her Russian saga tailed her in the reflections of the Thetis Pond -- the dolls and masks that might hang from a pine tree, in the Greek sense, as beings removed from a sorry earth, the too real faces she had seen slip beneath the livid surface of daily tragedy. The memories especially of the crones in the provincial villages lingered as a burn. This unassailed beauty here, so impervious, so free, so readily abundant and accessible, seemed the very quintessence of tyranny, bequeathed to the campy denizens of the West Coast. The Land of the Immortals. She put her camera down and sat

on a rock, near the fractured stump of a giant cedar, likely felled in an early windstorm, which now intimated a miniature keep or donjon laid to waste, the inhabitants long since scattered.

And then, as if on a perverse cue, one of the erstwhile survivors stood staring at her from a nearby tree trunk — an eye to eye discovery, of an old co-conspirator, practiced truant, siren wrangler and trusty faun — an ageless school chum by name of Pachis, who this day recalled for her in his nearly nude state a very special kind of goat as he nibbled, or pretended to, what appeared to be salvia or lady's slippers, reminding her that he was an artist of the new school, who took his time slowly undressing her with his glazed ungulate stare. If the surreal was not new to her, it seemed to rally itself here and now. "Pachis?" He didn't answer, this camera conscious goonlet, whose enforced calm she could feel, as if he labored to resist a locomotive. His appearance was a galvanic shock. Gamy happenstance was as alien to her now as finding herself in such a locale with nothing to do! Coincidences were always suspect in her trade. Meeting such a wiseacre here revived her psyche's vigilance. Someone like Pachis could well be a district fink for a slavic Fulminator -- with his zig zag lightning!

While he followed her about one of the fresh spring ponds, sharing in their old silent take on I spy, she thought the while of Kissy's odd pseudonym, Maenad. A quirky name. For Maenads were frenzied women of ancient Greek mythology as likely to spook and kill children as swack Satyrs or mangle animals, a simulacrum of the modern era, where men are

men and sheep are nervous. The sheep here were definitely nervous with Pachis in the vicinity. When they reached the Hermes fountain, her darling became animated as she rolled up her jeans and waded into the pond, he following like a muskrat, his thong bottom swollen and taut, suggesting he was alert as she imagined. They eyed one another with risible disbelief for several seconds when they stood finally a yard apart knee deep in the cool clear water. "My word," she heard herself say aloud. "And in the flesh." Her coming incipient laughter became a third presence, the humor sardonic.

"So."

After another lascivious take of her he said, "I spy a nymphet."

"Is it possible you aren't really here?"

"Most everything's possible."

"If I ask how accidental this is would you tell me -- for old times' sake?"

"If fate is an accident."

By then she had assumed the worst, yet still held out for a providential coincidence; she was determined to stay the gremlins this day.

"You haven't changed," he said with a becoming smile.

"Nor you."

"Eighteen, what, nineteen years?"

"But yesterday."

If she had never backed away from a conundrum before, the confusion now bared a tipping point. Yet the recollection of a much happier sensu-

ous time regaled the caution. Nostalgia can revel in the vulnerabilities. She was on holiday after all. And willing to do a bit of gambling. Gambolling if the Fates were distracted.

The kiss was tender and, as before -- long before -- finally mutually savored, his remembered fluent hands sculpting her arms. Slowly the wariness she anticipated dissipated. Talk, suspicion could await their turn. Abstinence animates desire, makes the heart grow hoax-able, stubbornly plaintive. Nature was again but one, nimbly gravitational. She might dare to be free. For a time.

In the favorite private sun glades they had explored as teenagers, both the landscape and their own pubescent selves, they now discovered they were too be-mused or mesmerized to do much more than regard one another with ironic wonder. Was this bucolic creature actually my 'first'? "Catherine the Great," he said at last. "Here." This pronouncement convulsively teased. Thus the early protocol to 'get comfortable' when they reached the margins of the inner lake was duly honored, their outer clothes soon laying side by side on a nurse log. The further sudden mutual recognition prompted more raillery for her plain two piece cued a fond memory. A nearly identical set he had sketched her in — the very first time! With stagy nonchalance she sauntered about in these memory togs as he unburdened himself of the thong. Recapitulating a nostalgic gesture he traipsed the trim selvage of her halter top, then fetched and pulled out the waistband of her briefs to squint at her mons.

"You've hardly changed -- physically at least. Our first time you had

what you have on. Underneath. Snuff-colored.”

“Like old times, then — like, as in ‘simile’.”

“That’s a puzzle.”

“Maybe we’ve changed.”

“Ho, ho. Said the naiad to the sailor.”

As they wandered about in this rarified pre-coital effulgence, he adorned her hair with a lily garland, and slid the soft fabric of her top off one resilient breast -- “the favored of the two,” he said, surprising her. They were thigh deep in the grotto pond then, remarking how the place was redolent still of pine, juniper and lilac, volatile oils of remembrance. For a time the sun gilded the dewy trees as sunlit coral, their limbs flashing as electric water streaks. She stubbed her toe on a stone and paused to soothe it. He set her camera on an adjacent stone and set the self timer.

“The hamadryad is watching,” he said.

“Lucky fellow.”

With a certainty and acuteness that was uncanny they re-discovered the shrubs about the private kimono of grass they lay on over two decades ago. Finely memorable but much smaller, the kimono now barely admitting two pliant bodies as he began as then, kissing, alertly exclusively caressing, her fear of pregnancy still paramount, her animus thus slowly beguiled. So, it was still possible she mused as the desire kindled. Only later, after a brief repose, a lucid stillness purloined from T.S. Eliot, did she notice some artificial lilies in the nearby pond bright with luminous paint. Pachis, her aging earth artist, had almost certainly been there earlier. Re-

calling his graffiti mania only keened the poignancy. It seemed he might have prepared for this, meaning she was likely being tailed even in this unfettered land -- the sudden release of their former selves now an articulated consolation. How easy it would be to photograph one in this thick sheltered wilderness she sadly thought. She felt slightly sick, but managed a tight smile when he took and kissed her edgy hands. The quiet gesture was short lived, his next words a veritable fire siren. "I've recently got a grant from the Fischer-Bakey Foundation. Illustrations for a book. Minoan Greece. Come to my studio. It's in my pad in Yaletown."

The Fischer-Bakey Foundation was one of Kissy's art fronts which, in addition to several galleries and a coterie of artists, included period furniture and glass blowing factories, and a cabaret style show company. All in their way Trojan horses she believed. A means to assuage the struggling authorities and distract the competitors. Yet she decided she dare not reveal her knowledge of this. At least not yet. She faintly smiled. "A possibility," she said.

Kalid sat on the plane in a similar aisle seat. The window seat was occupied by a young lad who played a video game. His mother sat next to him and chatted on as if Kalid were a recording device. How he missed the discreet silence of his erstwhile seat mate. It was an ambiguity he could not resolve. The mother here was an Episcopalian who volunteered at a food bank. She did not like the way so many young people acted these days. "They have no respect for themselves or others. They have no

sense of shame.” It was obvious this woman would not be sympathetic to the bathers he had recently seen. A discrepancy that puzzled for his earlier seat mate had harbored a decorous, quiet politeness; he knew she waited for him to speak first, yet could behave like a wanton. As he endured the wordy monologue he pictured her pretty form negotiating the crested waves. The gilt-headed bream he caught long ago near Tyre were no more agile.

FIVE

It was a wary but determined Catherine who chose to visit Pachis’ Yale-town studio residence, a second floor abode over a wicker furniture store. Ashen clouds umbered the sky, the sun an astral smear. He suggested mid-morning. “The sun’s often the best then.” This overcast day seemed to herald her arrival she mused.

When he first opened the door he seemed confused, demure even, as if he had either forgotten the day they agreed on or doubted she would come at all. “Have I come at an inopportune time?” she dryly asked. He was a moment responding. “I’m in the middle...no come in. Had to fit in a sitting...her day, the model. It’s fine, she’s sociable.” “You’re painting?...” Catherine asked, barely hiding her amusement. He called out, “Viola, okay if we have a guest?” From the interior came a musical voice, “All copacetic.” Again he hesitated, then said to Catherine in a muted voice, “You can maybe entertain Amy. My daughter. Her school was cancelled today...some flu bug...really, glad you could come. No time like the present.” He adopted an impromptu resolve; too obviously he had been dis-

tracted, yet seemed pleased to see her. Inside the front room, which expanded into a skylit studio, he flipped through some large wall leaning canvases, saying, “The new commission, a series of paintings entitled *Musing the Maenad*, portraits of an enigmatic Minoan community of mainly striking women, with the occasional male, usually a soldier, grimly looking on from the sidelines.” Catherine was surprised by the title, and amazed at the rich period settings depicted and remarkable liveness of the models Pachis used. The studio itself was a small museum of period artifacts. “From the foundation,” he nonchalantly said. “Props and inspiration.” Pachis’ model emerged from a hallway, a tall striking redhead in a vivid paisley gown. “Hi, I’m Viola. Footloose and...except when I’m posing.”

Said a tentative Pachis, gesturing toward Catherine, “An old school friend — Catherine. Wanted to see the studio. The new work.” The explanation seemed still born. Said a buoyant Viola, “I’m a perpetual student, Tibetan Buddhist, and part-time model -- I need the money.” Viola showed no signs of recognizing Catherine and Pachis remained circumspect, as much Catherine suspected to downplay her sudden coming. Pachis’ young daughter, Amy (her mother had taken up with a CFL hopeful, Catherine later learned) liked to squeeze paints onto Pachis’ easel -- at his direction -- which she did now, but scowled at her father’s model. “Another nudie,” she said. She became particularly caustic when Viola backed her gown on a chair, calling her a “freckled tutti-frutti”. Viola’s mother-of-pearl skin, especially her cheeks, shoulders and upper chest were dusted with a veritable spectrum of freckles. Amy was further net-

tled by Viola's ingratiating laughter and mod comment at this characterization. "Well, that's a holismo." It was then that Catherine realized how much Viola resembled the girl at Friday Harbor. She was also surprised by some near life-size figure sculptures in a composite green-grey material in the margins of the studio. "Where did you get these?" Pachis looked at her first with confusion then reserve composure. Said Amy with a pout, "He got a big pile of play dough." Viola suddenly blithely laughed. Belatedly Catherine noticed one sculpture very similar to Viola's form. "Your father is a talented man," she said to Amy with a ready smile. Amy seemed momentarily satisfied and allowed herself to be propelled by her father into an adjoining sitting room where a jig saw puzzle was laid out on a gate-leg table. The conversation there was brisk but amicable. "You do the next sunflower and finish the border." "Why?" "You scare my model." "Okay." Viola suppressed a sudden fit of laughter.

"So when did the sculpture stint begin?" Catherine asked Pachis when he returned. He shrugged. "At the beginning. Always. I've started working in stone -- marble. I share a studio now in San Francisco. Fairly old stuff, the near life size."

Catherine did her best to accept this new discovery. Her former lazy and unfocused friend this resourceful, animated, accomplished? She had indeed been away, 'out of touch'. So it seemed. With care Pachis uncovered the in-progress work on his easel -- a portrait of Viola standing before a grotto of lustral bathers, all of whom, including Viola, were nude. "Part of an initiation rite," Pachis dryly remarked. "Not my cup of tea," Viola

promptly added. “But the painting -- gorgeous!” With some help from Pachis, Viola resumed the desired contrapposto stance, one hand resting on a hip.

As he worked, Catherine and Amy finished the nearly completed puzzle, then played a few mime games as if to engage the still, lucent sculptures, critic Amy soon complicit with that most seductive of cajolery -- imitation -- carefully aping the posture and movements of her mentor, a natural cue to Catherine who was soon singing and leading Amy through the choreography of some Slavic folk dances she knew and loved. Occasionally the not quite synchronous duo could be glimpsed from the studio looking like the rump of a camel duo, to prompt amusement. For a time Amy too began giggling at the infectiousness of the antic, which Pachis finally complained of, knotting as it did the stomach muscles of his model, whose laughter seemed perdurable.

When Pachis broke for the day and sonsy Viola left, a yawning Amy was led to a distant room for a nap. He and Catherine talked on the glassed-in balcony. Ornamental fig trees faced the street, screening two cane-seated Hitchcock chairs. She sought more info about the grant he, suddenly and impetuously, a portrait of her ‘Castilian side’. “How one survives a Maenad,” he said. Catherine barely smiled, still trying to assess this brusque, out-of-the-blue request. “You think so -- do tell me.” “Nothing to tell.” In no time, to her further surprise, he found a dress -- which he insisted she try on, hastily helping her remove her street garb. But as he arranged her in the seated patrician pose he sought, he disparaged the

light, which had become heavily overcast in the meantime. “Too soft for a catbird...”

Catherine was mildly disappointed as she stroked the sleeves. “Actually quite nice -- this frock. The pose a good isometric for the shoulders.”

Absorbed he continued, “...But not a mythical beauty, an ignis fatuus.”

Quizzically she looked up. “What? Silly and old?...”

Briefly Pachis scowled. “Always the reporter. Take that off; I’ve another costume, for this misty forest light.”

Fully bemused she said, “I trust the light is not the nugatory item here. By the way, what’s with the plaque behind us? Who is Louis Führ?”

“I share the studio from time to time. Goes out front when he’s here.”

“Not an alias.”

“No.”

“I trust Amy will approve. Of another ‘on tap’ model.”

“Amy sleeps like a log for a couple of hours in the afternoon. Her mother’s doing. An early dynamo.” He expended an inveterate sigh.

Shortly he emerged with a quiver and short Greek-styled tunica that bared one breast. Dourly she decided she had more to gain as a player than critic or interrogator, despite her suspicion that the flat could be bugged. They moved back into the studio where, with his usual despatch, he helped her change. “As Artemis, the Huntress, you’re an apt Borozov Fate,” he said, once satisfied with the prospect presented by the new costume in the pale light -- short and flounced with a single shoulder broach -- which apparently intimated the desired pose. “In the red clay mode --

early Greek stuff. With arms over head...in the eye-stalk pose...like so, the arms framing the face. And yes, I saw the OO piece. Some story.” She nearly balked but wanted him to talk. When a swift rough sketch was done and the palette primed, they spoke in measured tones, her curiosity feeding complaint: she might ask some pointed questions looking like a tart.

“For a virgin, this maid ‘Arty’ whacked a lot of stags.”

“You managed to hit one on your own. I read the OO piece.”

“A tiny hit.”

He leaned back for a moment as if momentarily distracted. “There’s a gala, a celebration of a new salon in the works.”

“What works?”

“For which I need a nymph. A kind of Hebe.”

“Who she?”

“As I said, a nymph.”

“A dime a dozen.”

“You can look the part.”

“What’s this fête you hinted at?”

“As I said, the opening of a new salon: Mannered Period Art, mainly. Some modern stuff as well -- with a figurative bent.”

“Some of your new work?...”

“A sampling from the new book. Some other stuff as well.”

“The new patron at Fischer-Bakey? To showcase the someone we know...I get a special invite?”

“Be my guest.”

“I accept.”

He worked in silence then at his usual brisk pace -- his speed in both sketching and painting a revived memory -- pausing only as she flexed, stretched her arms.” During one such pause he said, “You’ve survived then -- the Russian caper.”

“We’ll see.”

After resuming painting and carefully reworking a brush stroke, he said, matter-of-factly, “This opening gala -- a director at F-B is throwing it. By the way, the chap they call ‘Kissy’ Borozov -- the guy who heads F-B -- has made application for a temporary resident visa -- in Canada. The director said as much. You already know, I expect.”

The comment startled and puzzled. “Always a puzzle, Kissy.” The import of the remark took a while to sink in. She did her best to hide her unrelenting wonder. Kissy? Canada? And why would such a director tell Pachis?

“Tell me more about this opening -- this gala.”

“A showcase for some F-B artists. And some of archival works -- that somehow survived the war. The period stuff.”

“The stuff a few sharpies may have salted away.”

“They have some of the best painters in the world, the Russians. There are many supposed, missing masterworks. Should be interesting.”

“Lost and hidden fakes. The shadowy Billionaire’s Club.”

“I mean what I say.”

Then, to his surprise and dismay, she insisted on having a peek, the better to be inspired, she said, and faced the canvas before he could intervene. She was relieved to find the figure fetching but ambiguous, so far, due to his brisk impressionistic style. With some effort he managed to contain his pique, leaving their words more edged and stilted than ever, her humor this day no longer on hold as she viewed the painting.

“Pachis, love, how fly -- Artemis as a nautch dancer! A quiver but no bow. My word. How will she ever bump off a Maenad, exactly?”

With a show of calm he took this in. “Just what snotty old Ambrosia wondered.” He had little idea who Ambrosia was but was desperate to match her mythological smarts.

She was a moment responding. “The nymph who owned a liquor store?”

“It worked out nicely in the past.”

“Poor old past it snotty.” Then she got restless. “You don’t find it odd that a buccaneer like a Borozov would take up an ancient little known theme — for a toffy color plate book? What’s it called again -- Musing the Maenad?”

Pachis smarted. “If he, or whoever, is involved he must like exemplary art. The fabled project.”

“But why this project, do you think?”

“You must ask him.”

“Ask his close-lipped flunkies you mean.” She all but despaired that day of finding out much from this self-sufficient faun, who likely saw his

late patron as an overdue dessert. "Have you ever met a Borozov -- Kissy or Bossy?"

"No. Never gave it a thought."

"Pity."

Later, as he cleaned his brushes and regarded the well blocked image, he remarked that he still needed a 'mink' Hebe, as he put it. She lay then on the studio couch, where they'd left off, the costume serving as cover to a pillow, some late afternoon shadows dappling her pale gamin form, not inappropriate to a nymphet she wanly decided, her cute looks a lingering trial -- nearly as exacting as her intermittent but careful inspection of the flat and studio, which thus far yielded no telltale sign of a bug implant -- the observant Amy aside who, Pachis again insisted, was still asleep and the studio door wedged shut. As she watched him diligently administer to his brushes -- he too was naked then -- she thought again how absence makes the heart grow gullible. A quite beautiful Adonis he would make in a painting by another.

"Are you catering now on the internet?" she asked.

"For the series. The illustrations for the book." He looked up expectantly. "I still need a model for the one girl. A Cup Bearer to the gods."

She smiled. Even as a teen she had the reputation of a fearless drinker. "I somehow think you'll manage. But I'll pass. My toenail polish has a bit too much stammel."

"You mean red."

She smiled. "The impenitent color."

“Said the happy bolshi.”

Abruptly she rose to fetch her clothes. “It’s getting on. You promised me a ticket to this gala.”

For a moment he seemed undecided, an auctioneer expecting perhaps another bid then changes his mind and sought the ticket. She kissed him tenderly on leaving and said he might use a different deodorant. (He had a rather gamy smell that day.) In the taxi she decided her stay in the Land of Nod was over: the ticket entitled one to a day pass to a gallery in San Francisco. On her way out she had passed a work in progress, a realistic rendering of the Statue of Liberty, the face below the torch incomplete. A blocked space at the bottom was also a puzzle. Pachis did not embellish his pics with words. Yet it seemed some here were in the works. But she was too eager to leave to broach the subject.

Hejaz was reluctantly amused by the poster. Was Aram widening the circle of his ‘waiting reserves’? The accredited artist, Luis Führ, a temperamental artiste, one of the Fischer-Bakey stable, had created a visual ‘jape’ -- to perhaps compliment the rancid smell? So it seemed. That he might portray The Statue of Liberty so was a hoot. Aram’s ‘humor’ was heavy in the air. Hejaz thought then of Andreas Serrano and his Piss Christ, knowing that Serrano was perfectly safe even applauded defiling the Christian cross so. Serrano, the purulent prophet. Not unlike Führ, who sustained the West’s terminal burlesque. He had rendered, or one of his dog bodies had, the Statue of Liberty, in beautiful robes holding aloft a

torch, a lurid smirk on her face, the caption reading: *Give me your wankers, diddlers, unlucky grifters and jacklegs, peach thieves, stung cuckolds, sneakin' deacons and subdrop drudges, and I will lead them to The Come Kingdom!* Aram was conversant with American 'wheezers'. "Carefree children finger the razor's edge," someone said. Even the elder Borozov might snort, given his truck with 'glad handing' Americans. Would being an indirect sponsor of such buffoonery help Bossy endure a protracted incarceration? Though with the Russian nesting or shell dolls you never knew. Indeed, the phantasmagoric doll likely did not know itself. The picture of the red clay Artemis also needed this day, though for a different reason. They had to get some equipment in that flat and studio. The journalist's artist friend was an opportunist, but not yet a reliable player. God knows how much he really knew or guessed, and how much she had already pieced together. The restiveness Hejaz felt was not something he would own up to -- the lack of real time info from the flat and studio -- one of the ongoing 'requests' that Aram had underlined: "Remember it is Leatherby's words and acts that are important as the ABN chick's. And any pics, particularly of the reporter. The paintings themselves are a low priority -- for now." Some priority. Thus far all they had were the photographs taken in the park, some of which Abdul had pinned on their daily program board.

Hejaz looked up suddenly with surprise. Ample, sandy robed Aram had come in noiselessly through the cellar. He was on his way to Saint-Jean Cap-Ferrat to see the deputy Borozov. Codadad he called Kissy, the lad dealing with the nasty princes. He also called Kissy Lieutenant Kijé

and sometimes the *figurant* -- a word Hejaz had to look up -- thinking the while that if Aram knew the Qur'an and Hadith as well as his studious word play, he might just make a good Muslim.

On seeing the pictures of the two love birds in the park Aram dryly said, "Bossy needs a pound of flesh, our back-water croc." The rebuke was palpable. "Won't do however --- too much landscape and shadow. Hard to interpolate elsewhere."

Hejaz tried to smile. Bossy had specifically demanded pics and voice recordings in the studio and flat. It seemed somedays that Aram was using this lack to fuel a larger feud, bring it to a head. Aram then glanced at the picture of the mock Statue of Liberty poster on Hejaz' computer screen and shrugged. "Should do well this. Subversive cheek Americans tend to prize. A constituent right -- the audacity that refreshes." He seemed both amused and disappointed.

Bossy's message from prison had been blunt. Feliks, the elder of the Vyak brothers, the new cut outs, sought Kissy out at his St. Petersburg compound, where they sat in the period salon, the mixture of real and faux artifacts from the ancient Egyptian Amarna period an elegant if insular audience. The encounter would leave Kissy awash, struggling to avoid being sea sick. Feliks was, as usual, archly, vicariously vindictive. Kissy had seen a media picture of the Apsara dancer who resembled the American journalist and been struck by the similarity. Bossy, in turn, thought the curiosity inconsequential and mentioning it a bum steer, a dodge. "What's that

name, the pizda -- Ob-something -- Oblomov: Kissy,” was Bossy’s comment to Feliks. The fact was Kissy’s Apsara Clubs were a pricy extravagance, white elephants for hard-nosed Bossy. Who took some pride in snubbing them. ‘One dumb fuck, Kissy. Our Twinkie.’ The cultural opprobrium brought on the club by the injury of the Muslim was the last straw. The nutso dancer there still at large. But the paramount insult and jeopardy remained the ABN reporter’s revelation of the baby food scam which directly impugned Bossy, a ‘wounding’ that was unbearable.

Feliks was up front with the injunction. “No mistake. B. wants the bird waxed.”

Kissy shrugged. “Well, for all intents and purposes...”

“‘Intents’! It’s a bad show. She’ll be on to the art game in no time, the prize copies Ganyanov’s team have produced. And talking to Willardson, the Paleomena art guru, sooner or later. So. ASAP.”

Again Kissy sought a lay by. “Well now, a demise will set the press alight, an accident may leave her a heroine with more time to write to a larger audience. The options are limited given B.’s ‘licorice laundry’ of late.” He smiled. He always prided himself on his English, a few select phrases he might now embellish his Russian with.

Feliks continued as an obdurate male nurse. “It’s been suggested you do something with this artist she’s screwing. He’s got a Fischer-Bakey grant and she’s head up to learn what’s happening stateside. We know this...a secretary at ABN. Reputation, remember, is her ace. We deal with that. Bug the guy’s place, get some racy photos and mask her into Ameri-

can lobbyist Chuckie Warren's hot tub with his tarts. A current chickie there may be an intern at the state department. Whyte'll be stiffed at kosher ABN. Her reputation compromised. Then we work on her so-called investigation. A death won't help. But that's just one aspect of the travesty.. She's leaned on Warren before to get his dealings here with Rosneft. B. likes the idea. Especially the internet possibilities -- putting her there and elsewhere. A good start. The park pics won't do. Difficult to transplant. Too many tones and shadows. The placement must be 'immaculate'. B.'s word. Someone like Ganyanov I think."

"A tall order. She's no dunce."

"You have a reputation for finesse."

Kissy smiled. It was not an unreserved compliment.

When Feliks left, he made himself a very stiff drink. The fact was the 'Whyte Bird' was a near paragon for him, her resourcefulness alone a seductive trait, let alone her daring. If the net result was rather small potatoes in the scheme of things, her success was nonetheless notable given the climate she worked in. Moreover, the Shaheed comedians had not thus far managed or chosen to bug the studio and flat.

But there was another cinder in his posh crib: he happened to find the woman additionally fetching in a carnal way, her sylph like loveliness a fine tease. She aptly fleshed out his own fondness for the early Greek notion of nothing in excess, a rarity given the age's excessive illusions. The law of parsimony -- the nub of elegance -- was a tenet of his in appraising both art and women. And he was, he was not loathe to admit, taken with her.

Some bugged footage of her in a Kiev hotel he still looked at from time to time. The way she brushed her hair, as if the act rekindled memory itself, reminded him of his mother, one of many nimble ways she commenced daily chores. He found he loved everything about her. The bemused way she sometimes looked into a mirror — likely suspecting she was being observed, though they never saw her looking for bugs. Her fluent nimble ablations. Her auburn hair -- almost blond in bright light -- the Belleek patina of her vernal form, relieved by an incisive toddler's bum, to say little about her poise and intelligence, her dedication, her canny judge of character, the humor he believed to be droll and innate -- calling one surly Serb border guard 'Heinzi'. The 'package' seemed definitive. He believed she knew she was being observed and recorded, but presented herself as a rather careless, exhibitionistic journalist who liked her liquor. Later they realized the scotch was in fact tawny tea. Her watchers were obviously distracted from some of the goings on. How well she disguised her real intent, her use of Russian officials themselves, her requests for seemingly innocuous information that contained nuggets to add to her info cache. Then there was the time she put a trailing beeper into the seam of an attaché case of a secretary who made known she was going at last on a cruise, when in fact she continued to deliver drafts to a Swiss bank from Bossy himself. The payees were somehow backlogged to the pharmaceutical firms in China Bossy did business with. The secretary had been careless tending her attaché case. A late supposition. The very lack of fingerprints suggested an accomplished team. Thus, he would be playing a long hand,

as the Brits say — allotting the ‘finesse’. Though he guessed that withholding the Fischer-Bakey grant was B.’s ace in the hole to get Pachis on side.

He couldn’t sleep that night and sat in his expansive study like a sullen, pensive watchman. B.’s ‘behest’ was a face off. The quandary loomed as an unexpected and inconvenient canyon. Then, despite all, his face morphed into a wry smile. Yes, that just might work, take him part way through the unwelcome valley. Yes. Finicky, but a possibility.

It was the mug shots of the evocative Ms. Whyte taken at an Interior Ministry post that initially cued his interest and imagination. Such a profile he was recently familiar with. Yes -- the profile painting of one Greek Akrotiri maiden or kore, the very one, his own credulity facilitating his need. The match of the two profiles he believed sufficiently close to accommodate the plan he envisaged now. The Minoan age had a special place in his fondness for its originality and able women in particular, given the self-confident outgoing way they were depicted in Minoan art. The idea of a gracile female bull vaulter cued both wonder and awe. And now the hint of an atavistic double -- in his pliant yet observant mind. He decided that night he must add to his collection of Bronze Age kores by way of an exceptional mural. The effort may amuse the ‘bird’ herself one day and, for a while, keep the barking dogs at bay, off the scent. They were sometimes slow reckoning a novel ruse, the nuanced feint -- here, the journalist showcased as an historic icon. The art work would give her a beaux arts face and an epochal charisma. *A je ne sais quois* that should excuse some spry social adventurism -- thus stymieing a tycoon bent on shaming

her, using conventional norms to do so. A finicky exercise yes but, he believed, feasible. The more he considered the idea, the more he believed discovery and recognition the animus of craft, romance, durable humor and exemplary art, and immediately got to work planning, commissioning a bas-relief mural based on the Akrotiri original. “A very rush order,” he told his secretary early the next morning with blood shot eyes. “Put everything else aside for now. Tempis fugit. I’ll frame a prototype canvas myself.”

That night he savored again moments from the tape of her Majestic Hotel stay. The nimble if rather frantic way she one day pressed a blouse -- the hotel laundry was then shut down. The application of her subtle tea rose lipstick. The way she drew back her hair to wash her face. Her faintly paunched stomach a conjurer’s curve, her surfacing breasts in the soapy bath the match of her cameo face.

That same day, John Mayo, another sapient connoisseur of the arts, was celebrating his commissioned painting of the Statue of Liberty over a flute of champagne in the Bungalow Lounge in the Fairmount Miramar Hotel with his gamy artist who, following his sixth glass, was feeling transcendent. The initial toast acknowledged the placing of copies of the painting in several venues. Some near progressive classrooms. Where they would be belatedly discovered -- leaving the insinuations open ended. The social freaks of the world were after all spreading like herpes. Self-dramatic and self-exonerating. Irresistible. The deed was splendidly ac-

complished. Pachis had given the original photo a ribald photoshopped face and a venerable painterly aspect. Mayo had added the text. A private joint stock effort.

Zoya Stolbanov's aging aunt Tatjana -- not a dissident -- was at first alarmed by her discovery of the OO Magazine cover. She was still poignantly aware of the twin who died of meningitis at birth, unlike her precious, resilient Zoya. "We all have doubles," Zoya said dismissively, still convinced the likeness was a fluke. Zoya had invited Tatjana to come to Zweisimen for a holiday. A 'safe' holiday. They had just returned to their lodge near the rail station after a tour of some Simmental farm houses. When informed of Zoya's surgery in Bern -- her jaw line was already altered -- Tatjana softly said, "I fear I may never see the finished product." "Only skin deep the change of face," was about all Zoya could think to say as the mutual tears abated.

"You liked the name Lisa?" Her aunt was finely touched that fate bestowed her sister's name on the child before her.

"Of course. Providence. Many morning stars I name Lisa. Or Liisa."

As Zoya/Lisa wiped some drooling yogurt from her aunt's lips she kissed her hair and tried once more to engage her attention. Family matters were ever a conversational prompt, though she knew Masha's death was still a lingering sorrow for Tatjana. "Tell again about 'Zia." Anastasia -- 'Zia -- was the step-sister who left home at an early age to attend an accelerated school sponsored by the Ministry of the Interior. Zoya saw her

only once after her departure.

Her aunt shrugged. “Cheka. Best guess. That first snoop said as much.”

“More than snoop, yes.”

Again her aunt shrugged. “She left. Never returned. Just so. What other organ does that to your children?” She waved as if shooping a troublesome insect.

The story of her putative father Zoya knew all too well. A late drunkard with a dishonorable discharge from the army, who died in a ditch filled with grain the farmers did not want falling into the hands of the ‘loyal confiscators’. Whereas Anastasiya’s Communist father was an officer Hero of the USSR killed in the pre-war skirmishes in Afghanistan — long gone by the time the twins were born, the outcome of a frantic tryst Zoya later guessed. The details of which remained sketchy, her mother’s demur about the matter before an inquisitive child an unnavigable ocean. All Zoya ever got was a sorry smile and another wave of the bruised arm and a mute unfocused stare. “One day,” she would say, as if promising to read a neglected fairy tale. Zoya believed her aunt also knew about the affair but honored her sister’s secret. The first few years of her life Zoya spent visiting the lockup near Perm where her stubborn dissident mother served out her sentence, becoming more and more ill-defined, unrecognizable until her death, her late facial twitching a terror to behold. All the while Zoya cared for her feeble, scapegrace, father, whose sly humor and wry acuity -- when he was sober -- kept her attuned to the curiosities of the un-

forgiving state. Had he been more robust and fearlessly candid, he might have joined his wife, though he was once locked up for a disorderly conduct citation. Her own young life as a truant and budding delinquent established a reputation that her sylph-like beauty and talent as a dancer only seemed to perpetuate. Her stay in a folk dancing troupe was curtailed when a party hack took a fancy to her. The hack was a scout for a new chain of clubs then being created. Apsara meant little to her then. But she decided she'd better give performing there a try when some pending charges were abruptly suspended. If dancing had been the only requirement...her shortcut to maturity may have been less arduous.

She helped her aunt back into a welcomed rocker. The veined hand touched her face. "You were so pretty."

"I will be again. Sooner than you think."

"What I 'think'. So little these days. But you and I have come. Here. My only one. The voice has not changed. My incomparable 'Lisa'." Her low voice broke off, her silence a requiem. Some tram passengers were then embarking on the platform opposite. Soon the village would be invaded by more sauntering well-fed tourists. Some of whom would have tea in the café below. The distant storybook uplands, Zoya noted, were particularly lush that year.

Ammon looked at his stepdaughter Dilsat with an expression of stunned disbelief. His wife Atiyaah looked on from the kitchen silently shaking her head. He could not believe it: this slip of a girl actually talk-

ing back to him! In English! “You will speak to me in Arabic!” Calmly Dilsat answered: “You talked to the bobbies in English, explaining your cuddle with your sharmuta.” Into the brief, scorched earth silence she added, “You’ve said here more than once I’m becoming one.” That was when Ammon struck her. Immediately Atiyaah rushed to her stepdaughter’s side, retrieving a kerchief from her gown to touch a lip that began to bleed. All allusions to his ‘English adventure’ scored Ammon to the quick; the embarrassment lingered as a rank smell. That a step-daughter might invoke his pariah status roused the maniac in him. He was speechless. All along he believed himself a negotiator, a careful adjudicator, a practitioner of wasat. His anger these days astonished him. He hadn’t reckoned that the burden of guilt might be debilitating as well as excruciating. All he could manage now was to confront her in the very language she chose to duel with. Thus, in English, while enduring a stabbing headache, he shouted, “You will so marry Ahmed! Period! You will not return to England to study more nursing!”

The ensuing silence disoriented both parties.

Dilsat was registered as the daughter of an ordinance officer killed by the Russians in Afghanistan. Ammon’s barren wife Atiyaah had arranged the adoption. Her inability to conceive -- a failing Ammon attributed to her alone, though he had no other children he might point to, despite his many sexual trysts -- would have dissolved the marriage had she not come from a distinguished princely family before whom his humble background remained a stigma, a blemish; he had luckily, importunately married above

his station, which his current reputation did nothing to enhance. The too pretty Dilsat worked in a field hospital in Cairo and, on a recommendation from the director, applied for and got a scholarship to Leeds University to study nursing. She returned for a summer break and emphatically reminded Ammon that she did not like timorous, small, ungainly Ahmed and would not marry him. Ahmed was also sympathetic to Sufism, an irritant for Ammon, yet the wealth which he inherited from a distant Great Mufti would be sufficient to enhance Ammon's status in the Mosque, at least as a benefactor for the poor. But Dilsat was not to be persuaded, let alone commanded. "Maybe I'm no longer a virgin," she said with awesome resolve in her Arabic accented English as she dabbed at her lip wound with a sterilized cotton ball Atiyaah had fetched. "Want to take a look?" Ammon was by then speechless, his face suggestive of a waylaid camel about to spit. Finally, he looked at his wife and loudly demanded, "What is she saying...what is she saying!" Atiyaah looked at him with undisguised disgust, but said nothing. Promptly he was on the phone to the Egyptian styled Mutaween, the religious guardians for the Promotion of Virtue and Elimination of Sin, and demanded a team from the hospital come to the house. Even as he finished he could barely believe he had acted so. His mind was a welter. But his authority was in question here, and a man unable to control his women was a lame stallion, one suffering from cerebellar abiotrophy, as he thought of it. Dilsat looked askance at her stepmother who took her by the hand to another part of the house. "You can be a monkey," Aiyaah softly said when they were alone, her

quiet resignation a further goad. “You can’t be serious?...” Dilsat exclaimed. Atiyaah simply looked away. “We’ll talk later.” Dilsat in turn ran about the female quarter of the apartment but found the available doors all locked and began screaming. Which no one in the suite paid attention to, though Atiyaah sat covering her ears. Ammon sat with his eyes closed and his fists clenched. He must...he must. Ten minutes later the team arrived, two scarfed male members of which bundled Dilsat into a bedroom, covered her mouth with tape — her language then a lexicon of street insult — and with the help of a third cut away her lower clothes and held her legs apart as the doctor inspected her. A flummoxed Ammon decided he was not to be fobbed off and looked on, only to be dumfounded by the discovery that she had not properly shaved and the tattoo of a small bunny’s head defiled her hip. He left the room in a state, thinking he must thrash the whore the moment the team left. What other option was there? Petition to have her stoned?... The doctor however was not the ally Ammon imagined, nor expected to encounter in such a disciplinary team. As he removed his gloves in the hall outside the bedroom -- Dilsat huddled within, silently shivering, her gag removed -- he remarked that he had not heard such colorful language for some time, but that the question of coital activity was not conclusive. “It’s hard to tell sometimes these days, as active as some forward young girls are. The activities, menstruation devices and the like. It is possible she has been partly breached, yet she could still be a virgin. Just conceivable.” But the glower on the marshal’s eyes, who stood nearby, said that this was no virgin. Ammon glimpsed Atiyaah stand-

ing further back in the hall, a tall skinny bird of prey waiting to pounce. She towered over him by almost a foot, and was thin and hard as a rake. Not a real woman at all. How would she know anything about this? She could not attract a beggar. But for her position he would have taken more wives. As for his stepdaughter...he could no more tolerate her impudence than his own besmirched reputation. He must act, and would indeed petition to have her publicly beaten or even stoned...but for this shifty gutless physician. Whose diffidence ironically absolved a troubled Ammon for not proceeding as he otherwise might have. "I trust you and your wife will have a serious talk with her, sooner than later, maybe have the clitoris nicked; we don't remove it these days" -- the last word from the quack as he packed his bag. It was all Ammon could do to refrain from dramatically kicking him out the door. Instead, he went off to his expansive study to pray and consider his options. "See she is locked in her room!" -- his late inflamed directive to the house steward. Yet he could not concentrate on his devotions. He had objected to Dilsat going to England. Obviously not strongly enough. He would take some coffee with his friends and assess the matter. He had shuffled prayer timings before. He was invited to stay the night with a neighbor and collect his thoughts -- demonstrate the heedful judicious care he once was esteemed for and hoped to reinstate. He solemnly returned the following morning to find Dilsat gone. Vanished. "What have you done?..." he incredulously demanded of his wife.

"She asked a servant for some tea. Khalil."

"Why Khalil? He's an idiot! He let her go?..."

“He is dutiful but knew nothing.”

Again Ammon was richly flushed and speechless. His anger once more listing, careening, breaking free.

Atiyaah gravely continued: “He may have been given a sleeping draft in the tea. I found this in her bedroom.” Ammon dumbly looked at the medicine vial Atiyaah held out for him; it had a Leeds’ Belle Isle Pharmacy label. “She likely got the keys from him. A sleeping drug, as you can see. Donormyl. It would have given her enough time to get away.” Atiyaah doubted the drug had immobilized the servant but trusted that Ammon would not know this. Mild mannered Khalil had taken pity on Dilsat.

Ammon sat down rubbing his head...only to suddenly impulsively arise to strike his wife, who caught his hand and just held it firm. He was often surprised by her daunting strength. He suddenly felt faint and again sat down, almost missing the chair. His factual presence was eluding him. “You’re the one who needs to see a doctor,” the tough sad Atiyaah said as she left the room. “With your weight you’ll have a heart attack!” Ammon sensed he was drowning.

The same day he could be heard throughout the house ransacking Dilsat’s room. He was determined to find some incriminating evidence of her wayward life in London, something to spell his own miasma. He did discover a photo album, many pictures therein showing Dilsat in Western dress, and in some of these wearing much too little of it.

“What’s this?” he demanded of Atiyaah.

“It’s an album she brought for my sister and myself.”

Ammon jabbed a finger at one picture, his composure somewhat less incendiary now that he had this factual evidence. “And this?”

Atiyaah fetched her reading glasses. “She joined an amateur folk dancing class.”

“So why is she half naked?”

“She is not ‘half-naked’. They rehearsed in attire matching the performance costumes. The sark is a traditional part of the costume.”

“So who are the stooges?”

“One is a dance coach from the Akhtamar group, the other” -- she squinted at the picture -- “I don’t know; perhaps a prefect or some such from the school.

“And the single one in the niquab? Is that a joke here?”

“That’s Dilsat at your great aunt’s 80th birthday celebration in the Mosque.”

Ammon slogged on. “And the sleeves on the dress?” Ammon was close to spastic laughter.

“From the head scarf of your great aunt’s first burka.”

His rancid humor suddenly eluding him he promptly stabbed at another picture -- of Dilsat in a gym skirt. “And this?”

“The school had an exercise requirement. She went with a friend who came from Lebanon. Janine.”

“And the rest -- the more salacious ones?”

“She met a photographer in Leeds. On the campus.”

“Who took pictures of her half dressed!”

“I think not. How do you see that? She is respectfully dressed in all.”

“She wears the makeup of an English tart. And no veil. Some pictures are signed.” He too squinted at one picture. “Louis ‘F’ something.”

“He obviously liked her. Dilsat assured me it was only a wish to have something for me. She did not care for him.”

“Yet you hid away the entire bundle.”

“Which you promptly found. We did not ‘hide it away’. You silly man.”

Again Ammon made as if he were to hit her, his anger with his despondency once more convulsive. Atiyaah stood her ground. They stared at one another for half a minute, Ammon’s wavering arm raised, their mutual hatred manifest. Again Ammon sat down, thinking his wife a malicious jinn and his oaths feeble, given in a shelter. Still, he was already assembling in his head the team to find Dilsat. He would kill them both. He would. He must. Absolutely. The apostate before the dancer infidel. The pictures of Dilsat had spawned in him a lust he thought centered on the dancer. Her ‘beauties’ a scourge! He could explode!

A week later a letter arrived from an anonymous source, a page ripped from an Italian Vogue which contained two pictures of a girl who resembled Dilsat. In one she was half naked. Louis Führ was the accredited photographer. ‘You’ve waited far too long!’ was scribbled on the page in thick black ink. Ammon was taken to emergency after he saw the page.

Oddly enough, Felix Muerner also saw the Vogue piece by Führ and

believed the model, who was unnamed, a rare example of the singularly blessed in his aesthetic judgement, and made enquiries. The model was Russian, one Karen Guk. Later that week Mutaween agents searched Ammon's residence but could not find the scrapbook. Atiyaah said she burnt it. Ashes in the incinerator confirmed her story. "It was a silly childish mischief," she woodenly said to the sullen marshal who seemed relieved; some recent street demonstrations had injured two of his team.

SIX

Cocktails at the opening of the new Borozov art gallery and museum in San Francisco came with an assortment of visitors: truckling groupies (one of these protesting an artist who painted heroic scenes of traditional native hunters hunting whales), fondly exclaiming patrons and their guests, fulsome brokers, diffident arts cognoscenti, patient docents and impervious crashers -- all rather reduced to insignificance by the size of the hall, a facsimile of an oversize bunker Catherine thought, though the finished aspect of it suggested the work of a cutting-edge designer, with emphasis on 'cutting'. But there the obvious dystopia lapsed. Surrounded by what she considered estimable works of period art -- some guest pieces from the Moscow Art Salon and the British Museum -- she took up a floor stance and flute of champagne with three double-trouble cupcakes: the ebullient Elana, a talkative friend of an importer she knew to be connected to one of Kissy's shipping companies; Cody, a blond comer, one of the showcase docents; and an unexpected Viola, very Brahmin in her sari and as gen-

ially ingratiating. Catherine's new hair style and makeup foiled identity as 'Catherine Whyte' but not Viola's recollection of Pachis' impromptu friend. What interrupted her heed of Pachis' 'school friend' was Elana's seamless paean to the Egyptian chair Cody occupied, a splendid copy of an ancient Amarna throne seat. It transpired that both Elana and Cody were Egyptofiles, having spent a former life on the Nile, and both were caught up in the nostomania of the singular Amarna period itself. The two were soon comparing notes on the creatures they contended with in the court of Akhenaten -- his flinty mother Tiye and a ministerial ogre named Ay. It became apparent they also imagined themselves reincarnations of Nefertiti, but seemed loath to apprise the other with the fact. Said Elana, "Well, as one of the choice best wives, and not at all an earth mother type...well it was a difficult time." In their current incarnations the voluptuous Elana and the equally ample Cody had obviously contended with meagre upstarts before. By then genial Viola and Catherine had wandered off to discover two of Pachis' Minoan paintings, one featuring Viola, who seemed touched by the discovery. "He can paint, Pachis." Mutely Catherine savored Viola's sudden absorption.

Anachronistic beings proved to haunt other venues as well. In the main gallery Catherine's sudden flatfooted discovery of her 'metamorph profile', as she would come to think of it, left her speechless. One side of the main gallery was taken up with a large mural print based on a Minoan mosaic, its extravagance ghosting the model, a nymph, possibly a Hebe, who came ready made, the likeness to herself deeply unsettling...until she

realized that Pachis had apparently nothing to do with this offering, which was based in fact on an enhanced archaeological rendering in a museum near Phaistos on Crete -- a compounded vexation that prompted her to look at all the artifacts with renewed vigilance. Was she dreaming, hallucinating? The mural, a reconstruction loosely based on an Akrotiri original, was credited to the intervention of Konstantin Borozov -- the enigmatic Kissy! Hence, her discovery of the plump Paleomena art expert David Willardson sitting in a dim corner alone and mute, was irresistible. But she wanted the identification to come from him not her.

“You look cross,” she said.

“Exhausted.”

“Borozov can have that effect.”

Willardson was silent for a time, then said, as much to himself, “Too many ghosts.”

“They’re that good?” she asked, glancing at about the salon.

He seemed both bemused and perplexed . “As good as their patrons.” Turning to look at the mural he added, “It is a wonder. From a period that continues to amaze if not perplex. Not unlike Kissy himself I think.”

“It’s all ‘Greek’ to me. But not just a jape then -- in your estimation?”

At last he warmly smiled. And motioned to an alcove harboring a set of period drinking vessels. After a greeting more honored in the breach, they settled together on a bench to gratuitously study a wide shallow kylix, an ancient Greek drinking cup, a smile easing her features. Said she, with some wistfulness, “Even with handles, tipplers must have spilt some.”

“The problem of liquidity in great art.”

“Just so.”

“There is also somewhere here a drinking vessel -- which overflows through a tube in the stem when too amply filled.” He paused, as if someone was prompting him. “I know what you’re thinking. And I’m no help. Coincidence.” He promptly added, “You’re far better looking, if that’s any consolation.”

“Not much.” She smiled, too cutely she imagined. “Ghosts you say.”

“Well they’re scary enough -- the orphans in the collection. That Kokoschka in particular.” He referred to a self-portrait that was defying expert diffidence. That a connoisseur like Willardson might be uncertain about some of the pedigrees meant Kissy or some of his cronies had likely struck gold. Liquidity indeed! The earnestness of the docents tended to bear this out. At the outset of her tour she had examined an elegant Attic pithos, prompting the nearest docent to take up a seat by her. “The piece, please note, is Fifth Century, assembled entirely from fragments. Discovered over a wide area. I still find it amazing. We nearly put it behind glass but decided it had to breathe.” The man’s demeanor was more consternation than incredulity, she thought, as if she might be a possible doubter. The recollection vividly returned with Willardson’s comments fresh in her ear. Some of the accepted masterpieces would be set cheek by jowl with the curios or orphans, as he intimated, the better to insinuate or addle their provenance? Her suspicious mind was alive with speculation. The shy Paleomena expert was not a crusader however, and here he seemed in-

clined to mollify rather than caution. Though her pensive mood, which she indulged, must have presented a challenge. The art world was ever a belittling conundrum for her.

“You once said of the venerable Hermitage that it was a Phoenix,” she ventured. “That rose out of the Nazi ashes.”

“Yes. But not a Nemesis. Nor an Erinnyes -- the angry one.”

“That sounds to me like a cop out.”

“Well, you are a sturdy young journalist.”

Again her ready warming smile she was beginning to lament. “Aren’t you curious about what’s actually going on -- here?”

But his voice was ever stoical and genial. “The cleverness of some humans is never in doubt. And technology has long since muddied the pool. Yet we try.”

“Fabricators and poseurs relish getting caught out though. Sooner or later.”

“Then we must be exceedingly patient.”

The quick exchange mandated a brief pause.

“Including the mural?...”

“Yes. A happenstance to be savored. They don’t call Kissy a necromancer for naught. Living so close to anarchy and outlawry as he must. In most of his salon assemblages there is always a canny dare or two. And often a laden puzzle. He is a kind of magus. A self-disguise perhaps.”

She thought for a moment. “A greedy cormorant pretending to be

what -- a mythic raven?"

Willardson barely nodded. "His stock in trade. Given the embarrassment you've indirectly caused his family...he may just strive to confound. I'm told he works on many projects." He paused. "Have you ever considered that he may be the obverse of his brother? Not really a 'Borozov' at all?" Another interrogatory smile followed this layered explanation and suave question. He seemed loath to acknowledge her doubt.

Catherine duly smiled. "I can count on you then for a revelation or two? In due course? And no, it's never occurred to me -- Kissy not a Borozov."

"You'll be very near the top of my list."

Before leaving, she had one last look at the mural and its slick poster in the gift shop. Again she was confronted with a likeness that intruded. Leaning on the exhibiting table, she sensed a fine campy absurdity and imagined she was blushing.

"So help me it's you. In the flesh!" The gallery sales clerk was beaming.

"A face card profile. More card than face, I think." To herself she said: once flattered, twice credulous. But the clerk was on a promotional roll.

"Perhaps we can rethink reincarnation after all."

She didn't respond to this and had no difficulty appearing steadfastly diffident. Finally she said, "A rather common face I think."

"Oh no, not at all! A profile you remember."

The comment only heightened her urgency to lose herself in the milling crowd -- to stay in motion, 'transitional' as the chattering classes say, and minimize further possible comparison. By discretely blending into the *mêlée* she managed to avoid both Elana and Cody -- Viola was nowhere in sight -- and their ongoing reincarnation drama. Everyone seem absorbed by the exhibits, though a couple of onlookers smiled at her and fondly pointed to the mural. She smiled, dismissively shrugged. No one had apparently connected her with the OO Magazine cover -- where she did look like an adolescent cuddle bunny, an image she was determined to outlive.

If she chose to be wryly amused by the mural, she nevertheless invited the ABN art guru to pronounce upon a facsimile of the original, which she discovered via the *Paleomena Guide to Ancient Art* in the U of Cal's San Francisco anthropological museum, trusting the guru must find it arbitrarily and slickly transcribed, and thus foil the arcane insinuation -- that such an ancient look-alike might exist. He studied it for a long minute before commenting. She too was teased by the museum work, which was closer to the Borozov rendering than she had anticipated. The guru was amiably expressive.

"I understand it began as a pointillist sketch from the original mosaic. The archaeologist transcriber may have added some lines -- the original fragments are always hopelessly scant -- but overall the delineation seems adroit. For the period. You're not an immortal are you...?"

Again the insinuation intruded, as if she had colluded with someone.

Having just returned from a rawly awakened Russia, she found herself susceptible to fluent erudition, however inopportune. The guru continued:

“The detailing will be pedantic for some of course. The fussiness makes it look rather drab over all -- more so than the original, I’m sure. Too assiduously ‘fractal’, as some experts might say. We wish to see more than we ought sometimes.”

“So you’d conclude it’s fairly well done. Not a spoof.”

“Well, fair to middling. Some Akrotiri originals have been imaginatively ‘fleshed out’ by fussy dilettantes -- and have many renderings. Critical opinion usually frowns on such reconstructions. Like the Labyrinth at Knossos itself, the historic actuality remains elusive.”

Though his commentary was as nuanced before other examples in the gallery, her mind remained a distracted welter. Had Borozov got to this gallery’s curator as well? And for what for gawdsake? The whole exercise seemed, however ingenious, sophomoric at best. Her ready critical opinion. But no, the curator had been expecting the mural for some time. A delivery strike had delayed its arrival.

That night she stood beside her mirrored shower door, her hair up to reflect herself sideways in the sink mirror as a Bronze Age kore. One might be flattered, she thought, imitation being...yet the gamy question lingered: what might a hoodoo like a Borozov gain by discovering, if he did, and hawking such a ware? Moreover, it must have cost a bundle to fashion the thing. Being cautious as he normally was...well she couldn’t just let the matter slide. If Kissy had concocted such a distraction, either he was go-

ing bananas, or he had something imposing and likely egregious up his sleeve -- either way, she had to find out. Coincidence she had long since ruled against. Her nose and profile might, in a great stretch, remind one of an Akrotiri maiden, but here the resemblance was importunate -- meaning, she surmised, an extravagant joke with possibly ulterior purposes. Beyond the suave adulteration of an historic artifact. The execrable reality in the protracted Soviet disintegration she never confused with a daft day dream. But here in the West the mixing of reality and fantasy seemed a veritable goulash.

Cornering her fitful boss, Darin, the next day, she made her sly pitch. The smell of rye whisky permeated the bright glass encased office. His cronies had recently left.

“Given Borozov’s habitual subterfuge, the salon might be a good place to start. No less than David Willardson sensed the retrospective look to some of the period stuff.”

“Retrospective, hmm.”

“He used the word ‘ghosts’, which usually means liquid -- possible bankable representations of illusive masterworks, the ones alluded to by period writers and art historians. It is a calculated ruse to float some ‘iffies’ with the sturdies. To flummox the ready criticasters. Willardson intimated as much. Divide and rule; mavens hate backtracking.”

“Yes, I’m sure.”

“I’ll need a couple of sleepers and an outside sec....”

But like many adepts, she sometimes underestimated the opacity of her

boss. A further late night confab with Darin the Deplorable merely headlined his specialty: When in doubt try servility. They sat then in the mirrored boardroom lounge, their reflections ghostly in the dim light, she in her most stylish pant suit, he an overly starched shirt that smelled of perspiration. Said he:

“The board decided that digging up too much dirt on the Borozovs will hurt some moderates in the Duma. Make it look like the whole shebang is moribund.”

“It’s a form of *ignoratio elenchi* -- a worse crime justified by a minor.”

“Well, we all have our pet trolls.”

“We don’t all affirm their good looks.”

Then he all but floored her. “Why not consider the new feminism? It seems to be grappling with many of these ethical issues. We need to get up to speed on that.”

She dryly smiled. “Um -- situational ethics, deviance as reproof of convention, consensus as racist and patriarchal...organic tits and ass....”

“Within reason,” he said without commitment.

“Reason as a camp digression,” she replied, still unengaged.

“Yes, well, in so many words.” By then he was annoyed.

“So: the new feminism. Neither feminine nor really an ‘ism’.”

“You should be a natural, I expect.”

“You’re scuttling the whole project then?”

“A ‘time and place’ thing prevails here I think. We must give democracy a chance.” He was leaning forward then, his elbows on his knees. The

Thinker with Piles, she thought. My Arkansaw lizard.

“So: cook, rook and look books.”

“In so many words,” he said finally, deliberating the while on her earlier cogent, ‘artful’ words. “We might sweeten your pension benefits. It does come under review this autumn.”

He lamely smiled before he left, leaving her to deal with the close flush that had come over her. She had to act, do something. She would be hurling *objets* in a minute, sweeping the mantle of keepsakes, as they did in the dramatic flics. She badly wanted to whack somebody, become a plenary terrorist. Coward! Bastard! She decided she’d better get to her gym. Fast. There is a doggerel to compensation she had long ago discovered -- when the big boss sucks. With her it often emerged in the gym -- ‘bam bar-dolatry’ she thought of it, for the crocks, gassbags and earbangers. Her on-off California boyfriend Michael, then an ad salesman at ABN, was treated to an arduous sampling of it that afternoon as he hefted and moved a body bag for her fluent kickboxing jabs, being unprepared for the vigor of the blows nor her rather seedy gym attire.

“This boss of yours sounds like a real piece of work.”

“Counter change. Which you make by making strange. Like so!”

“Whoa Boudica, that blow was a haymaker.”

“Just hold the fucking thing up, Merlin.”

“We’re close here to indecent assault.”

She was aware her neglected gym duds had seen better days. Now they might serve as consolation for their neglect. Liven up the herd. So

she surmised. The kick that followed was particularly savage. Said a head up Michael, "Holy Hannah."

Releasing the selvage about her bum she said, "Just hold the smeg thing up you blockhead. They come at you obliquely, right?" Michael had not seen her this incensed before, nor quite as insouciant about her dress. Several times he looked about them wondering who had noticed. "One more like that and we'll be sued for malicious intent. Or public indecency."

She narrowed her eyes and affected a smile. "What about half a dozen." Michael laughed. "You couldn't...you could." Then barely negotiated his ground as a succession of blows reined down on the moving dummy, her pink groin edging further into view with each blow. Little did he know what was in the offing that day, the next round of which was spelled out during one of the few pauses on the gym floor stations when he spied the swim suit in her carryall.

"Not the Canyon -- now, today? In this weather?"

"I want to take a dive."

He took a breath. "You haven't a crush on this Darin chap by any chance?"

Briefly she eyed him with unfeigned pique. "No."

When they arrived at their select water hole, a rocky channel honed by the stream that carried the overflow of a spillway above, she climbed immediately to the top of the arching cliff, her 'bardolatry' shrill as ever as they surveyed the marbled water below. "A pool to poach the sublime

and free the quick from pantomime. Poetry for a porker.”

By then his patience was wearing thin. “You go. The emergency wards are always crowded this time of day.”

Again she looked at him with droll sobriety. “Always stuck with the available audience. So. A further dare to rinse the pall...a narrow channel headfirst fall. It’ll do. For a career bastard.”

In stupefaction he watched her perform a nearly credible swan dive into the deepest greenest channel -- the risk of such a plunge leaving an ache in the pit of his stomach. Her slicked head emerged from the foaming nebula like a comet and he worried she might be dazed or hurt. When he too reached the bottom he was further astonished to see her following the cool shallows to the outer steep trail race, her pale skin a uniform patina of goose bumps, her pretty bum spurning her suit. He yelled after her, an alien petulance in his voice. “It’s pushing supper time.”

“We’ll spy on the Dollyvarden. Or whatever.”

“The sun over here is glorious” he said, a catch in his voice, after settling on a spar of granite strafed with warming sunlight.

“So be a manatee.”

Later, by the deserted and now darksome head water, he found himself entertained again by the combination of freckles and goose bumps, her bosom being but a larger variety beneath her seamless suit.

“You’re cold.”

“It’s peaceful.”

“Well, the ‘burghers’ have split, haven’t they? I made some chili this

morning.”

The pause that followed was indexed by a sudden shiver and a curt nod with her arms newly crossed in front. He lamely sighed. “Got it out of your system?”

Another pause, this time edged with a seedy smile. “Let me take your trunks down and see,” she said.

After a protracted and lamely contested tussle, it was her light swimsuit he peeled aside as they settled on the still warm sandy earth, taking her cries of “swine” and “pecker head” as simple companionable rhetoric. But he was surprised by belated yet sustained plainsong rapture he’d not heard before as he kissed her a second time.

The following day few words, many moues, and a curious wistfulness summoned by a scrapbook, her elfin self ensconced on a divan in the bright sitting room of her rented strata suite which overlooked a park. He could not recall seeing her so bemused or maddeningly desirable.

“I want to go back to Greece,” she said at last.

Again he was dumfounded. But managed to ask, “The Darin-Borozov connection is on hold is it?”

“I want to discover Hebe.”

“Who’s that?”

“As far as I can tell, a nymph with keys to a special wine cellar.”

He snorted. “Where exactly?”

“The islands. The Dodecanese. Greece.”

“It’s rather late isn’t it?”

“Not for the raki.”

“No, not for that.” He was by then aware that her earnest proposals were usually the most casually placed. And though he tried, he drew a blank on the Dodecanese. Somewhere near Greece he presumed. He was too miffed to ask what raki was. She wrote her mother after their arrival on Rhodes, enclosing some pictures.

Dearest Mum,

I’m basking on a balmy beach, not quite naked -- meaning I’m free, for a time, of ABN if not situational ethics, vide the trio of jay hawks near the quay that M. managed to include in the picture frame. I suspect the constabulary will take its time telling each woman to ‘clothe thyself’.

M.’s smarty friend owns the Lotus racing car in the one pic. For the newly retired schoolmarms he says! A nice seat for me and my neglected guitar on the beautiful fenders. I actually pooled an audience this day!

We’re off to Old Rhodes Town tomorrow, where the cats are many and free! In Faliraki M. plans to enter the wet T-shirt contest, while I resume my study of raki, the strong sweet cordial we bought a skinful of on Crete.

Copacetic if not compos. Do take your medicine.

Love and a miner’s hug, Cathy

But that junket too proved to be short lived, as another of the antic and disconcerting coincidences intruded.

The day she found time to leisurely take off on her own, ending up on an ocean shingle not far from the cruise ship harbor, amidst some ancient and much appreciated lava rocks, her ubiquitous Pan suddenly, grotesquely materialized in the afternoon gloaming, nearly naked and fondly drunk, a pair of horns perched on his forehead, a short tail in his hand. It appeared he had come from some happy hour in the guise of a faun but had lost or abandoned most of his costume along the way. Swatches of hair still clung to his thighs. She was reminded of the German pagans who vacationed there. But if the initial discovery was confounding, she soon discovered it was less a warning than a prickly invitation.

Of a kind she'd survived before.

"My god, they're everywhere," he blurted after a convincing double take. "This one striped," he added, accenting the last syllable. Catherine's bikini was patterned with horizontal ribbons of blue and taupe. He lunged toward her but was too looped to steer a direct course and after barely eschewing some jagged boulders collapsed a short distance from her feet, where he extended a hand that fell just short of touching her. "And nowhere," he concluded, electing to stay put and wait out his newly arrived dizziness.

"What in hell's name are you doing here?"

"Trying to get laid. She came over this way...then disappeared. Pretty thing. Then poof." Again he squinted at her. "Skinny tike."

Sitting and crossing a leg she studied him with begrudged affection, deciding he was not quite compos after a couple of smelly retches. But be-

fore passing out he left a cautionary flea in her ear, words that rather belied a crapulous state.

“I’ve come to Rhodes, oh kind one. To sculp a, a forgotten...something. Venus like. Borozov trade edition. Come s,see for yourself. Garden museum. In the Castle. Of t,the Grand Masters.”

“That’s a public gallery you nitwit.”

“There’s this a,annex...off behind somewhere. Private place...before...”

Seconds later he lay sprawled and snoring, his left leg twitching from time to time. But the spectacle did not entertain nor, when the twitching stopped, concern. If she had been generally livid, disgruntled, she now narrowed her focus. All a facetious story, she decided, were Borozov not mentioned. The sudden compression of her world -- again! -- left her acutely restive and resentful, a reaction she experienced only in the newly, strangely aberrant West. With unremitting dismay, the import of his arrival and the event he alluded to put her back in the thick of it, all shore leave curtailed. As she studied him she brooded over the fact that he knew where to find her, for she had deliberately sought that day a venue of her own to indulge her erstwhile rock collecting hobby. Even as he slept, or pretended to, she could imagine someone’s eyes upon her. Yet before leaving she took a towel from her carry all, neatly folded it and placed it beneath his head -- only to conclude that his stupor was a fine method act. Which likely paid well.

While retracing her steps along the shingle her suspicions grated as, in her abstracted haste, her sandals slipped and slid. In sight of the colorful

bay condo they had rented she imagined she had a prowler. Barely was she inside the suite, unlatching the window shutter, when the man slipped by a second time, his manner for a Borozov goon oddly hesitant she thought. He glanced in the partly opened window but without focus or apparent intent, his concentration fixed on the matching unit next door. He seemed perplexed. Standing very still in the room's side shadows, she felt certain he hadn't seen her and that he bore an uncanny resemblance to the docent who touted the pithos in the salon! She could distinctly hear his last words to her then -- 'assembled entirely from fragments'.

When the brute left she took stock but was only half relieved to find nothing out of place and nothing missing -- such was the involution of trade craft. That night she and Michael turned off all the lights before bedding down in the dense shadows of the garden to keep watch. But no one returned. Although she had willed them to silence, his whispered queries relieved the tension.

"You said he looked confused."

"He kept glancing back, as if confirming the suite."

"You don't think he was inside?"

"No."

"You're certain?"

"No."

"But fairly."

"Yes."

"Would they be that concerned? Go to that much trouble?"

“Try to imagine Pachis, stinko or not, finding me on his own.”

“A planned coincidence? Isn’t that a bit obvious? Especially for a Borozov?”

“He’s at work on something. He’s not a cynic about his art. At least its ‘statutory liquidity’. A quote from a friend.”

“And he wants your approval. Pretends to.”

“Before you snort, let’s see what the damned thing is.”

But the unusual warmth of the evening conspired against her basic injunction, and he was soon fondling her in an adept manner, his ardor, on this holiday, that of a stymied Achilles for his Briseis she thought -- the recent stolen prize still savored for its regard and newness. “*Mein madchen ohne uniform,*” he said as he proceeded. The briefs and halter were the first laxity she’d yielded to that warm night. But she was not then an easy mark, the pique of being so apprized soon manifest as she finally firmly removed his hands.

“Michael...we did agree.” “I didn’t.” “Tough.”

The next day, in a sleep deprived haze, in a small plot just off the Garden of the Grand Masters, touched by remnants of an early mist, they discovered the ubiquitous Pachis silently, imperviously at work amidst a handful of patient admirers. The rustic period setting -- the ancient Mastic trees, the stone arched walkways, the vivid plantings in the amphoras -- no one paid much attention to. The Greek model for this kneeling, soi-disant Venus or Aphrodite could have been one of Bossy Borozov’s lithe super sirens, and the nearly completed work -- the arms and hands had been done

independently -- in a faintly striated blue-grey clay, no less arresting. The museum guard seemed to expect them. No one spoke. As far as she could tell no one was unmoved, about half the audience as beguiled, she decided, by the real Venus, so factual in her dimpled flesh, if a bit modern for a Greek eidolon. Which raised an interesting question, she mused, for there was no female equivalent of the male discobolus say -- the ancient Greek Aphrodites and naiads being nearly fussy compared to the modern athletically primed woman, as this otherwise naturally endowed beauty plainly was. The Seinfeld joke played then in her head: 'For your information they are real, and they are sensational!' The modern curiosity being that while boobs might be ample, figures were supposed to be spare -- to the point of invisibility. Whereas the Greek kore was just the reverse, a barely cambered torso on a stolid frame, reflecting perhaps the homosexual latency of most Greek males. Or perhaps not. But here a seemingly satisfactory balance was apparent, with little or no surgical intervention. Hanging gardens indeed, in the most lyric sense. Hemispheric, yes, but proportionate to the mass and providential to gravity. She had perhaps listened to Willardson too suavely expound on the idea of physical elegance.

Then a further annoyance surfaced. This statue, the pose at least, she had seen before. It took her a few minutes to narrow the field. Such that she left Michael for a prompt trip to her car and her laptop's satellite signal, to find and copy a famous art plate that confirmed her recollection: The Kneeling Woman of the Baluba Area, an African masterpiece -- Pachis' sculptural theft, and Borozov's what? A 'trade edition' Pachis had

said. Not a Western Venus or Aphrodite.

As she studied the print in the rented Citron, the telling argument resurfaced. It had long been a select gremlin of hers, the sway Western Culture held over the arts. Vide the matter of beauty so often heralded as lithe, Attic elegance, in the age of cosmetic presumption, peer genetics and open exhibitionism -- the body left standing on its own. Words, symbols irrelevant before the inculcation of 'imperially slim' 'proportionate' Fifth Century Greek examples. Which the merchants of commerce and the internet recruited with such unwavering dedication. Realpolitik? Why was it that in the West the concrete rending of beauty took on such a seductive or molesting animus? That a Borozov might be behind this concoction only added to her confusion and dismay.

Hence, the revelation of the 'bowl ladies', as she earmarked them, signaled the end of the holiday, both figuratively and factually, the remaining quietus being a brief return to the quaint spa at Kallithea with its eccentric canopies and intimate grottos. Though Michael had been shown a copy of the Baluba artifact his indifference lingered, which the quiet of the spa seemed to amplify -- where they stood for a time in silence looking up at the Moroccan purple glass stars in the ceiling vault of the main grotto. He was the first to speak.

"You've ruled out coincidence?"

"The poses are identical, the trancelike mood, the bowls."

"Is it worth getting vexed about?"

"The skin trade that hunky dory for you?" The fact they were both in

swim attire then, hers a seamless one piece that limned her gamin figure, faintly amused, his boxer shorts a circumflex to his buff masculinity.

“Maybe this Borozov fancies Western art?”

With a sigh she began anew: “He’s maybe looking for political capital...think about it. A lot of Westerners are weary of multiculturalism. Of being maligned even vilified for being largely themselves. Nudity -- lean, detailed Pericles-era nudity -- prompts the fascist Aryan ideal, which rouses and sells products. And attracts droves to Hollywood and the internet. Muslims included. The animation of it all is sobering, is it not? The patents of a universal ‘vogue’. I don’t know what the Borozov’s are putting in their vodka these days, or who they’re talking to, but it’s not a typical venture.”

He was then oddly distant. “I wonder what went on here?”

“It’s the setting for one of Pachis’ paintings.”

“The pagan stuff.”

“An initiation rite. For gamy Hellenes.” It was the setting for one of the paintings she saw in Pachis’ studio in Yaletown and at the San Francisco gallery.

“Gamy, eh.”

“The ‘Attic grace’ Ezra Pound was so dismissive of.”

“Clear as mud.”

One final trip to Symi rounded out their stay, to the steep hillside terraces she loved, as did the lively island children, one following his coterie of young phone card hawkers in oversize shoes, stopping every second step

to back up and retrieve one or the other shoe. The sun was a warming spangle that day, their tired limbs stuck in an amber aspic, the bay beyond a medium's mirror. He massaged her back and neck on a terrace patio bench, a pergola full of ripening fruit overhead, the smell of aniseed and dill in the air. Yet even as he stroked her neck the tenseness loomed, his lingering diffidence seditious.

“You really think Kissy that soft on -- what did you call them -- Greek kores?”

Dryly she answered. “Triumph of the Will is live parian marble. The new utopian eugenics thing he appears to be into. One of his newer sidelines is the collection of human eggs for god knows who. A discovery when I was investigating the baby food scam. At the time I thought it unusual but relatively unimportant. At the time. The research into ‘eugenics’ has, of course, augmented the traffic exponentially. All the ‘growth factors’ directing so much research.”

“Well, it wasn’t much of a ‘triumph’, was it? This Triumph of the Will.”

“They seem to refine it though -- each time around. Look to the babes on the internet.”

“Yeah, but will such small beer ever catch on?”

Catch on? She sighed. The golf channel was his spare time preoccupation.

On their nearly mum return the divide seemed implacable: she an inscrutable Harpy to him, he a heedless Boeotian to her. An advert that Wil-

lardson sent her heralding Pachis' upcoming gallery showing of the 'bowl babes', merely hardened her disposition. The original 'bowl babe' was thus upstaged by Pachis' late rendering of a rare 'Aphrodite' -- beauty as sleek story-book Attic Atlantis splendor. In her shorthand, a tool of Real-politik, a concept that ever intruded these days.

A week later she looked at the creamy, life-size sculpture painted to a patina of Parian marble, which sat adjacent a perched, pinched rendering of the dark Baluba carving, as if expecting a rebuke. To connive with such a bias seemed insane yet inevitable. Her aggravation with her discoveries in Greece had torn away a shield, an aegis. About all she could conclude was that her old school chum, Old Horny, was in thrall to a clever shylock who apparently wanted a select pound of flesh -- for reasons that strafed with confusion. Her faun or 'fawn' had wanted a nymph, a Hebe! The 'she' who brought the gods their ambrosia, their 'river' to elysium. Well her absent father seemed at times a lodger she sometimes bumped into. He too liked his dollies. His pound of flesh. But what Bossy or Kissy Borozov were really up to simply baffled and confounded. Borozov's 'trade edition'. What in god's name did that mean?

That evening the mirror, mirror on the wall mantra had a decided crack. The encounter with Pachis haunted her return to the West, for he was her chief lead to learn what Kissy Borozov was really up to on this continent. Her wish to flee from Pachis' surround, his figure mania, was resisted by his likely ties to the tycoon. Which meant getting cozy with the artiste sooner than later, abetting his painterly adventures for one --

cravenly posing and getting laid, the last a tolerable escapade. However, the thought of a Borozov looking on gave her the creeps. Bossy especially. She was certain his conglomerate backed sites that exploited the internet fantasies of craven men, and used all manner of guile and images to do so, celebrities, however transient, being a select item. Getting a righteous faultfinder on a scabrous site would be a nice pound of flesh. It had happened to pretty hopefuls before. Pachis was in an awful hurry to realize his nymph. She wasn't sure if she was being paranoid -- six years in and out of Russia can do that -- but the thought of being spied upon by Bossy's minders, a bug or two in Pachis' flat -- feasible if Pachis was in hock -- brought a slow burn. Just the sort of thing a vengeful thug might find entertaining -- a first blow, so to speak; one could indeed end up a page-turner on the internet. And likely out of a job. But looking for a pinhole lens in Pachis' flat and atelier -- or passive listening device for that matter -- would be especially hard, given the talents of Borozov's field bravos and the endless clutter and rough hewn stone in Pachis' abode. To neutralize such bugs -- if found -- would tip her own hand and likely endanger Pachis. Hence the dilemma for a new toffy celebrity. The other reedy question was Pachis' own regard of her. Did he see any singularity useful for his work, independent of a Borozov, or was he merely 'in hock', as she supposed? Her Pan certainly liked her once, if a while ago, and seemed no less enamored now...but then one can act the part when coerced. A cracked mirror indeed. And yet the dare had always been an entreaty for her, pertinent peril a spur to action and understanding. Leaving Pachis

now would further distance herself from what she was beginning to imagine as an intensifying ‘black hole’ -- in Russia and beyond. The gravity that stifled revelatory light itself! The metaphor that intruded, informed her sense of Western progress’. The enlightenment that blinded.

And so, in the week that followed, despite her best intent, Pachis belatedly got a call on his cell phone. That too could be bugged but it was the least suspicious means of touching base. She had to find out what was going on with the Fischer-Bakey Foundation, the possible consummate fakery and fraud Willardson hinted at. If Kissy was the *soi-disant* director, a vigilant Bossy would be lurking in the shadows. She also wanted to learn if Pachis’ elegant, period, siren diorama had anything to do with the eugenics-inspired industry Kissy was serving. ‘Image’ seemed the sine qua non then, and the seemly-salubrious daemon a heady futures’ paragon. The faun himself was obviously in on the ground floor of Fischer-Bakey, or so she suspected. And being a sometime irascible bloke he clammed up before censure or hindrance. He seemed pleased to hear her voice, though he could be drunk or had a frog in his throat.

“Pachis? You’re compos”

He was a moment responding. “We talked about it -- the book I mentioned.”

“Remind me.”

“I’ve got a commission.”

“So you hinted: the new patron with deep pockets and unusual tastes. Happy days. What kind of book again?”

“Two histories, that meld. In a shared Greek-Egyptian myth about how a Minoan aristo became a slave and finally an Egyptian queen. The legend of Nitocris. A beauty with agile intelligence. More ‘sphinx-like’ I guess. Beauty that can transform itself. ‘Transmogrify’ someone said at F-B.”

“No Hebe.”

“Change of plan.”

“That seems sudden.”

“Different tack. A mythology more ‘metamorphotic’. Another word around. So I’m told.”

“By whom?”

“The foundation preamble -- in the preface. Someone called Feliks.”

“So why me? Lots of paper dolls about.”

“It was the chance encounter. It got to me. You still there?”

“An amazing coincidence.”

“Providence put me there. Most happily.”

“So. Providence. Figure stuff, right? Viola’s second, or third stand in. You’ll keep my face unrecognizable. Keep our pact intact, yes?”

“If you insist. Pity though.”

“So nice seeing you on Rhodes.”

“Kismet.”

“Well, a ‘K’ somewhere.”

The ancillary problem of course was that Michael remained an opportunist and ran hot and cold. Had he been more companionable she may

have declined Pachis' overture. In the end she decided, or rationalized, that Risk was the Name of the Game here -- the fast track to learn what the F-B foundation was all about. Why she should 'figure' in such an exercise necessitated her faun expanding on his involvement. So: eyes open, arms crossed. Well, it was a start.

Thus, still anxious to see where the fated string led, she returned to Vancouver, got faintly drunk and patiently posed for a week in his messy yet amenable studio in Yaletown, festooned with fragments of early Greek frescos, columns and murals, and its commodious well cushioned day bed with the nearly life-size acrylic kores looking on. Minoan came easily to mind. And the word labyrinth. The studio's nooks and crannies for bugs she intermittently ransacked, without revealing her purpose she hoped. Her pertinent remark set off a quick exchange.

"Pachis, parts of your studio are covered in a Bronze Age dust."

"Which the cleaner is loathe to remove I guess."

"She's that conscientious is she?"

He thought for a moment. "A study in ageless sloth."

She also wanted confirmation of the daughter's whereabouts. "Amy's now in grade school, you said, and staying with your aunt on weekdays."

He easily nodded. "A benediction."

He had sketched her many times as a teenager. Looking at these early drawings they were entertained by how little she had changed in two decades since. Which he proceeded to affirm. As expected, his ardor was the match of his passion to capture her on a tabula rasa canvass. Promptly he

sent her off to a change room to ‘get comfortable’, calling after her: “You’ll appear mainly nude in some scenes, partly nude in others. Where I’ve nothing suitable, it’ll be easier to add than take away. The costuming is all vintage stuff.” This terse explanation, which only teased her suspicions, she decided to accommodate for the time being, a patience that was soon put to the test. With his usual intense presumption they spent some time salving her to get the subtle sheen he sought. It seemed she was in the cave of a cyclops. He also asked her to shave, saying the contour of the mons, her ‘peerless labia’, were diminished otherwise. “Why? Who’ll notice? You’ve discovered the charms of pedophilia in your mature years, your age of assent?” “Never much liked looking at a lousy toupet. And in some scenes the torso should be timeless.” He gravely added, “It’s also nicer to, well, osculate.” Ignoring her dry amusement, for there was little to remove, he devoted an interval to rendering her a nacreous child, availing himself of the excuse to excessively expound on his recondite purpose -- the realization of the breathtaking nymph whose sculptural presence was an elemental ‘she’. Which she realized she must have a passing resemblance to when he had finished, her skin then a lustrous Krems cameo. The curiosity was the ease, presumption and briskness with which he proceeded, for the earlier teen artist had been agreeably and seductively tentative in his suggestion to draw her ‘unattired’. Because she was perhaps curious to know how flagrant the North American tomcat scene had become while she was away, she looked on with droll amazement as her limbs and sex were so freely apprehended, as he handily spread her before him

adroitly wielding a No No Razor, fondling her the while as the razor honed her skin, her certain arousal, which she finally undertook as comic relief, a mere given, the glassine kiss that followed a historic curiosity. Even her belated orgasm was his to affirm and minute, as if his mastery of such rules of order was now legendary. “The afterglow gives you a special patina.” “Yes, Titian.” Thus did he fluently persist in this practical endeavor to realize the embodiment of his fabled creature, later pausing only once to reflect on the outline the canvass presented to him. The surprise for her was the elaborateness of his Bronze Age ‘tableaux’, as he called them, their painterly rendering -- ‘minimally abstract’ he claimed -- three of which lined the walls of his outer studio, each with spaces left for his special pale Minoan aristo, a discovery that framed the main puzzle: why her? The thought that Borozov had a sly gambit up his sleeve still vexed, though she doubted this work would interest any internet satyr nor her identity be manifest to a colleague. In due course she was reasonably convinced there were no hidden devices to record their amorous gambits. And he was discreet -- Amy whisked off to sundry activities on a long weekend with a care worker Pachis had used for some time. Haltingly he explained: “Amy can be a pest somedays...stragglers and art. The care gal knows I’m busy right now. She’s a bit of a prude. But likes Amy. She shuns the studio. Fortunately Amy likes her.”

“‘Stragglers’, eh? Somedays you remind me of Talos.”

Pachis scowled. “Who? Remind me.”

“A bronze, Bronze Age daemon, forged in the foundry sense, by a chap

named of Daedalus.”

Pachis shrugged, saying, “Ah him. Versatile chap.” As he sometimes did, he handsomely smiled and winked at her.

She too smiled; he swims like an eel she mused.

The atelier itself she repeatedly inspected and could find no suitable cranny or implement to house an impertinent fiber optic device. But, she reminded herself, she was not a current expert. The daybed itself was hidden by a backdrop curtain and a fresh air conduit. As long as it stayed where it was!

The day she posed in a fanciful Greek cape -- a chlamys he called it -- he worked in a fast silence that seemed immune to interruption. Questions about Borozov must wait their turn. She could still hear him whisper hiss on that sun dog day, when the skim light from a South facing off the skylight was ‘ineffably’ right. “You embody it. A universal kore. And posterity will thank their lucky stars.” She was mainly all sardonic candor then. “In the words of one celebrated toff -- What’s posterity done for me?”

“The riddle of the Pneuma.”

“Pneuma? The great mundane fart?”

“The fiery comic spirit no less. Pneuma!”

“The inspiration for mod terrorists.”

“I think we need some more gin in your drink.”

She affected a snuffle. “The pornographic Nazis reveled in the thin pale Nordic nude you know. Aren’t you being a tad patronizing?”

“Elegance is spareness, nothing in excess. The pith of creation. No Asian sumptuousness, luxury, surfeit. Or cruelty. Lucent marble throughout.”

“Where did you read that?”

“The front of my mind.”

“Sounds like you’d prefer a boy.”

“The elegance, the law of parsimony, applies to both. And no, I don’t know anyone at the FB foundation. I simply applied for a grant. I’ve only met the one assessor. This Borozov ogre you keep mentioning draws a blank.”

One blocked in sketch -- which he hung near the daybed when she first asked about Kissy -- was a fine diversion. The sketch, a swiftly-completed head and shoulder portrait, was done on a day when her demure must have shown for he found her gazing pensively into a mirror. Working fast as he did also astonished, for none of this compulsion and verve she recalled from their early days. Then she had only seen a very cute male animal and decided the time was overdue to learn what the fuss was all about.

His lecture this day she decided to ignore; he was too absorbed, too doctrinal to expand on the arcane F-B Borozov connection. She must be satisfied glimpsing the main work that day, the emerging kore in the chlamys, its serene poise and pastoral beauty an enticing revelation. He continued to work mainly in silence, nodding occasionally and engaging only in fleeting abstractions about his special patron: “Those who can, do...chaste motives demean, mortify art.” “Mortify sounds a bit precious,” she re-

plied Then again the protracted silence, his canvas coming alive with a rich other world. The perdurable question was timed she hoped to coincide with his cresting satisfaction.

“To what extent am I a substitute for someone else do you think?”

“You are an original.” He barely smiled.

“You don’t see any reversionary form, apparition?”

He looked up with momentary confusion. “The mural...in the salon?”

“That too.”

“All apparent serendipity is coincidence.”

“Is it serendipitous?”

“It is an agreeable development. A reincarnation of sorts. Perhaps you once consorted with an Immortal.”

“Like your consorting with a special patron now.”

His sarcasm suddenly erupted. “My yes. Especially with this Kissy chap you keep on about. Must be a natural at spotting prodigies.”

“You’ve met him then.”

He indulged a grimace. “The boney assessor, yes. As I’ve said.”

“He has a name?”

“Ganyanov, Lavrenti.”

The name didn’t ring a bell. “So why did he want you to recruit me?”

He smarted. “The talent spotting is left to me.”

“No suggestions?”

“No.”

“A tacit trust.”

He looked carefully at her then but gave nothing away.

“So you are in hock. And must bite your lip.”

“I’m creating an immortal -- a daemon, as the classicist might say. The patron, whoever he is, is only a page turner.”

“He knows the score then.”

“He has an appreciation of exceptional talent.”

“Will I ever meet him.”

“Who knows? He’s maybe a hermit.”

“I wonder. ‘Aloof with hermit-eye I scan, the present work of present man -- a wild and dreamlike trade of blood and guile, too foolish for a tear, too wicked for a smile.’ A word to the wise and winsome.” Was it Coleridge or someone else? She couldn’t remember.

He vaguely smiled as if at some private joke. “That’s nice.”

She regarded him with a mixture of diffidence and wonder. Who would have thought?...

But a week later the mood of engagement with her artist changed. Some days the cocksure lad appeared perturbed, inadvertent. One day’s preliminary sketch itself looked rushed, ad hock. The scene in the partly completed painting depicted a board game, the awaited image of herself to be inserted that day would present a woman seated at a tray table, the game pieces a set of Egyptian funerary figures. But he could not find a pose to his liking, nor a suitable costume to approximate the vintage dress required -- an intricate threaded girdle, a short tunica, and a deep collar of beads and jewels. Catherine had never seen Pachis so irresolute. He be-

gan a series of hurried sketches -- he always worked at breakneck speed -- but quickly despaired of each one. She imagined the day at an end when he approached and fondly kissed her. Half an hour later he began sketching her as she lay, changing the pose with each new page, their humor then wavering between droll and jocose for he had never sketched her so before. "The abs danced when you snickered," he said appreciatively. "Abs yes, so very important," she mused, "always a posthumous treat."

The antic interlude abruptly ceased when Amy returned early from school. The disheveled scene was one a child could hardly assimilate Catherine thought as she hastily sought a wrap. A school Brownie orientation lecture that Pachis had forgotten about was scheduled that afternoon. Parents were requested to attend. He and Amy left in a precipitous hurry, Amy looking back with a glower as they departed. She had never seen Catherine as Viola. And as far as Catherine knew Amy had never seen Viola as she was briefly this day, wryly smiling and limbs askew. Luckily the care worker had remained in her car.

While dressing she took stock. The realistic sketches, torn from his pad as he proceeded, lay as scattered shards on the floor which she fetched and stacked on his easel. On some he had spent a while realistically detailing her torso. Well, they were only sketches. His natty 'distraction' that day, if that's the word -- a porno meister's aging Lolita -- lingered as a stale joke now that she had calmed down. If she once assumed Amy to be the lone studio snoop, that assessment seemed again this day optimistic; Amy was a fine sobering reminder. She could sense her anger foiling her otherwise

languid, amused state. How had she been so focused, dedicated, sensible up to now? A lust for life a chronic jape in the free, leisured West? She had anticipated an interlude of serene lovemaking before Amy arrived and now felt cheated and rebuked.

Before leaving she looked again at the flat and studio. The rough brick-work was the problem, so many chinks and nooks and sculptural pieces to set a device in. The likely niches once more disclosed no implant though. So was her trust of the dynamo and his arresting art misplaced? The rare pleasure he gave her a liability? She did learn a salient fact that day: Pachis had an editor in this assessor at F-B who cued the illustrations -- the 'page turner'. Another tidbit also alerted: the story line was likely incomplete -- the board game scene being apparently an unexpected, unplanned for addition -- meaning sketches she had yet to see if she stayed on. The pesky haunt was still the advent of the world wide net, a cute daring celebrity a fine louche tease on it, her hard won journalistic credentials foiled by a nugatory amusement. And all this to try to learn what a mobster was up to on this continent. She was about to leave when the urge to sleep became imperious. She was exhausted by the day's events and import, and far from certain how she should proceed. Activity itself seemed mazed, warped. Her secretary at ABN wanted the duration of her visit. The day bed never looked more inviting. Soon she was ensconced in its enveloping cushions in a housecoat cover, a fey smile lingering on her parted lips as she recalled Pachis' hectic efforts that day.

When she awoke the balcony windows revealed a pale rainy day. She

had slept in and was covered with a duvet Pachis must have added. The wet street outside shivered in its asphalt armor. The day ahead threatened to be invincibly grim. An addict's down time, she mused. She thought of his comment about Greek parsimony and Asian sumptuousness. "A little surfeit please...in the hard light of day," she said to the starkly empty room. The 'nothing in excess' had become an excavation -- a flinty emptiness. Pachis was then in the tiny kitchen brewing coffee and busily readying his daughter's lunch. "No, an apple is much better than a tart." He invited, at a distance, his model to agree, which she briefly suavely did. "Much better than a tart!" Almost at once he realized the gaff: his models garnered little esteem from his green-eyed daughter, particularly one discovered nearly flagrante. Moreover, he was peeved this model had been so smoothly patronizing. "If she was really awake she would agree. On her own!"

On arising -- Pachis and Amy had left to register for a reading tutorial -- Catherine strolled about the studio, at first impressed by several tableaux she would appear in, only to find a side passage, almost a crawl space, she hadn't noticed before. Indeed, it was all but hidden by a stack of framed but blank oversize canvasses and a half-finished portrait of what looked like Yeltsin. The passage led to a narrow vaulted room with some packaged art supplies and a large canvass that initially amazed, then startled and shocked and finally nettled. The name plate titled it The Sale. Smaller letters underneath read: Commissioned by Lavrenti Ganyanov. The scene featured a nude young woman seen from the side back, being

exhibited at a lavish, late Bronze Age Egyptian court, a young Akhenaten and his courtiers eyeing the pretty and vulnerable form. One of the courtiers was about to take her hand, as if the experience was new, embarrassing. A sensational comedown. Something a peeress newly sold into slavery might experience. What especially alerted was the realism, not Pachis' style, and her belated recognition of two faces -- both lobbyists in the Russian Duma. The woman's slightly turned head -- she looked away from her audience -- was likely hers, the figure credibly hers. Pachis had not altered this face. Yet the pose was not one she could remember. If the picture itself was engaging and finely executed, the court sumptuous, the color a radiant paint box, the imputation that unknown images of herself might be entertaining a potential adversary irked -- pictures less nuanced than this one. Some 'sale'! Moreover, her hope that Pachis' profession of ignorance of Borozov's flunkies was genuine had suddenly, dramatically dissolved. She knew the late versions of Photoshop could do wonders with digital photographs, yet presumed the painting before her to be free hand. The surface brush strokes looked authentic, though the uniformity of the style made her reconsider the possibility. The day's printers were a wonder as well. The prospect it hinted at -- images of herself floating about in a feed lot limbo -- made her slightly sick. She looked again about the studio but could find no space or object that might serve an audio or visual plant. Though not being a top drawer expert she was again far from certain. Her anger touched off a confrontation with Pachis when he returned. At first she didn't want to reveal her new knowledge; a finesse

gamble she played well before; only clever barbarians have self-defense she reminded herself. But his presence set off an IED. He was, as she expected, dryly nonchalant.

“It’s an outside order. The guy from the foundation. The name plate means nothing to me. As such. Another patron.”

“The gents in the painting -- friends of the pal?”

“What d’you mean?”

“If you have to ask you may be luckier than you think.”

“Guess I’m blessed.”

“Pachis, this is not a happy discovery. I’m leaving. Now.”

“Oh for crissake!...”

SEVEN

Ammon strained to listen. The team he sent to ‘deal with the dancer’ had found no leads. The jinn had vanished. For now. But by combining the two groups -- the one looking for the dancer, the other the elusive Dilsat -- had yielded information about the stepdaughter. This must do for now. The cell phone signal he awaited was initially poor, but the voice at the other end recognizable, that of a former Mutaween marshal in the Guardian Council of Nayef Saud. Ammon was slow to answer. “Amman? Jordan? How could that be? She would never get that far.”

The voice at the other end was not in doubt. “The pictures we’ve taken thus far are a match. And she’s changed her name.”

Ammon was dumfounded. She must have had help. “You’re certain

she's alone -- acting alone?"

"She's living as a street person we think. The best cover under the circumstance."

Ammon could barely believe. The pampered child living as a 'street person'. His silence seemed to cue the coming question.

"You want her taken or not?"

Again Ammon seemed undecided. The caller even detected what he thought to be a sigh -- not the muffled swearing Ammon was unconsciously venting. "Yes, yes." He had made up his mind, he must proceed. Must.

"If she strongly resists?"

"She must be returned!"

Ammon was dumfounded. Jordan. How could that be?

Kissy Borozov looked out at the distant vista from a telescope in the Dubai Ritz-Carlton executive apartment and thought how bizarre it all looked, the steel glass and Tedlar babels, all mainly empty. And in the distance, from this height -- water and sand, the sand an ocean of seamless hejabs in the heat warped distance. No wonder they want to explode things now and then. Such relative emptiness, barrenness. Motionlessness. The silence seemed immutable the few times he had actually been in the desert. How ironic that their lone benefice, their black gold, should lay bubbling out of sight below ground. Or that mainly foreigners, alien drudges and connivers might retrieve it for them. Such contempt these de-

scendants of Saudi warriors, kidnappers and marauders had for stolid toilers, craftsmen, facilitators, who built for these warrior princes ever more lavish palaces, not unlike this one -- even as the warriors' distrust, hatred and contempt mushroomed. Mushroom indeed. Where could they possibly 'fit' in Thomas Friedman's 'flat earth'? Their very essence thrived in a steep acerbic hierarchy where the unworthy, those who slighted the Lion of God, must be execrated -- their ineluctable Jihad! The opportunities for a buccaneer seemed endless in such a wide turbulent sea. Ensconced in their palatial edifices, the crafty princely rulers mustered shadowy and sundry suppliers and purveyors of the subsurface jihad: explosives, arms, telecommunications, special forces tactics and training, digital pirating and replication, drugs, pornography, prostitution (the virgins of paradise had no booking agent), smuggling human mulligrubs and desperadoes, recruiting privileged fanatics and precious political holdouts, even conjuring nuclear dreamscapes for the dedicated hate mongers...the lucre flowed like water from a cloud burst. Which he knew was anticipated this day. The odors of greed and covetousness and menace masked in this soaring hotel by scents of balsam, jasmine and attar of roses.

The letter from his brother demanding a face to face meeting he had hastily put aside. All in due time. Having the pit bull locked away made his work easier, more serviceably adroit...the details might be refined. He recalled a phrase attributed to an American president. We don't do nuance here. The younger, overlooked, jilted Kissy, never given his due, ever patient, alert, judiciously ingratiating, slyly accommodating, devoutly 'nu-

anced', forging ahead below the scuttlebutt radar. Then to meet, inevitably, the new bold if not rising Sunni player -- the inimitable Aram Mir -- the trade name that stuck. Dedicated, tireless, smart and hard-core. Impeccable manners disguising a cagy resolve -- in a numinous Armenian who converted to Islam in his late teens. A musical Russian mother, his late professor father a member of the British-Armenian All Party Parliamentary Group, who worked for Technochem CJSC, perhaps cuing Aram's interest in chemistry. A committed evolved terrorist who would meet only with one vor at a time, in this case Kissy, as his cell's escorts ranged about the hotel's grounds, watching especially entrance ways and lifts. The elder convicted Bossy was then tucked away, continuously monitored, all advisements and directives vetted; the hippo minus his tail, someone said. Aram was known for his artful directness, and wasted no time on formalities. At least in the past. The evidentiary past. "As you must know, we've changed tack a bit -- by patronizing the ready-made constituency -- those Westerners who find 'Western' impiety and presumption regrettable we are. The lingering bad smell...of the bloated beasts."

"Yes, your targets have broadened." Kissy, who had overheard an earlier exchange with a suspicious Bossy, didn't let on that he was in fact relieved. The over all destruction might be less, and elusive accord more negotiable for all concerned. After a proprietary smile, Aram proceeded with his new itinerary, expressing it in a kind of reverie:

"...The amoral commercial advertising community that best succeeds when multitudes are shamed and envious. The more squalid banking

firms, the ranker film and digital game makers and peddlers, the headquarters of a scampish 'hauteur' cosmetics giant...perhaps a lawyer or two who thrive off the above. A pervasive touch here and there, with reference to an obtuse ad or deed, serves the useful 'buts'. *Yes, lamentable the mootard enterprise took a dump...but!* Liberal solipsisms abound. Producing many angry Americans. The media blowhards 'need' to indict is self-serving -- the implicit excuse for staying on."

The pause that followed was electric for Kissy. He salved his wonder about the words by recalling that Aram liked the word 'mootard' -- keen licensed freebooters. He also rather liked Aram's reference to cosmetic hauteur. A feature that turned some nervous gals inside out, the intimidating face of beauty always a bugbear. Silicon, botox and collagen seemed now heavy industries! If labiaplasty, the latest chic surgical intervention to re-sculpt a keen porn star, was a bit outre -- an undertaking by one of Ganyanov's plucked poules -- the age's racy videos tended to quicken and vivify the regard of bods -- the 'virtual' aspect becoming less and less noticeable. Continued the mindful Aram: "We must be patient, more focused. A smaller target also means a smaller vapor trail." Still, he looked this day rather brittle Kissy thought. He had been strung out in Basra at the time, sorting out some recent chaotic rivalry there, and had come this day to his late patron and facilitator -- expressly and exclusively the understudy Kissy -- with a precious jog-trot fatwa from a reigning sheikh, which urged the elimination of an artist who had taken some racy pictures of a pretty but unnamed Persian-looking girl shedding a stylish burka. The pic-

tures, given a painterly rendering, had been posted on a viral internet site. The girl bore a close resemblance to the willful society daughter of a former Usra deputy. Kissy had not seen the pictures but in preparing to meet Aram learned from Feliks that the girl in the offending pictures could well be a look-a-like, an Olympic archer hopeful in fact. A Facebook page suggested as much. Haplessly, the burka as sensational pornographic prop, a budding meme on the Net apparently, had been enough to prompt the fatwa.

The artist, wryly named Louis Führ, a former recipient of a Fisher-Bakey grant, customarily trafficked in smutty trash -- in his case 'artistic' fashion photography -- a Western bent, racy chic billboarding the road to anarchy for an indulgent, entitlement racked society. Well, more or less. But here he had apparently touched a nerve. Cheeky exhibitionism, 'entertainment for wags and wiseacres' -- Feliks' phrase -- was not a Muslim *divertissement*. As he proceeded, Aram scrambled to vitiate the arrant deed, so Kissy thought. "The juristic ruling will of course be communicated, the Sunni protocol of *injuria* inviolate here. A wart that may, for a time, upstage our current strategy -- the other things to do." Which he continued to quietly invoke as recompense perhaps. Such 'japes', as Kissy thought of them, were always a mindful assortment: "We've considered indelibly inking a few patrons of child brothels, smoke bomb a Victoria's Secret factory after hours, actually raise a crack house. A natural constituency in the West is as vexed with the wiles of the Great Satan -- in a nutshell. We bring them onside. In due course. With exemplary patience." Kissy

sometimes wondered just how robust this new tack might be. Blind a sadistic pedophile or two? Castrate a ponzi magnate? Probably not. Too craven -- and in their way impugning aspects of Sharia cruelty itself -- for the witty yet spiritual Aram. Though few people would strenuously object to raising a crack house. At least in private. The Ummah must innately approve. After all, the houris were there for strivers, not those dying to avoid the of pain of growing up and old. It was all Kissy could do to keep from sniggering. One could make a mint in this climate, most safely in the West -- parenthetically in 'multicult' oases like say Canada, where he had applied for a visitor's visa. A judicial oasis that sojourned many immigrant malcontents, cheats, defrauders. Indeed, the English population there had it seemed canonized apology itself, 'sorry' being an iconic response to slighting or inconveniencing another. A large country with a tiny population blessed with abundant natural resources -- which paid for their enviable benefit programs. A sizable French community had little interest in the country at large -- thus assuring some societal fragmentation and government debility. A ready made nest for observant cormorants. Who could rely on a sound banking system that had yet to be dismantled. Your money was as safe there as anywhere. Being adept getting your select collateral into it was the membership fee. Once there, the neighborhood wolves were largely kept at bay. Allah be praised. He would have a visa and work entitlements resolved within the month. Though in his sarcasm he recognized a soul striving for a better place, somewhere.

So whose face am I really looking at today he wondered as Aram drank

now from a double espresso, a view of Dubai City's Jumeirah Mosque and Burj al Arab in the distant haze beyond the balcony's arabesqued plexiglass. The jihadi had seemed diffident about initiating the day's specific order of business -- his declaration of the fatwa suggestive of a feint, one a boon fellow must acknowledge. Almost plaintively Aram continued.

"The artiste. Always the artiste."

"So. All ways."

"I think he'll be more useful as a missing person than a corpse. The smarty opportunistic Führ. Who fancies 'honorable mentions' among the glitterati."

"A disappearance."

"He is prone to taking off now and then."

"An indefinite disappearance."

Aram picked at a tooth. "'Indefinite' may be best. For a time."

"An enigmatic note, left behind, perhaps."

"We know his script."

"Of course."

"There is another matter."

Kissy smiled. "I'm sure." At once he anticipated the crux of Aram's unusual sullenness: the real ungainly order of business, which may not be slighted.

"This Bern Clinic I've heard you mention. In passing. The new 'eugenics'. Passing itself off as a remedial clinic. I've been given an earful."

“A progressive research facility.”

“Part of the dissolution, I learn. The canny fraud. The current wisdom.”

“Finding cures for Parkinson’s, ALS, Alzheimer’s? Finding what genes do the dirty work? And those that may, well, inspire?”

“Creating the pretty pain-rid, pleased dolt. The come kingdom. The latent promise of eugenics. The showcasing of winsome possibility. The consuming head trip...which our memorable Farouk has reminded us of.”

“Harvesting perfectible eggs, well-documented sperm?”

“Eugenics.”

“Well possibly. Over time. Beauty and health that perverse for you?”

Aram was a moment responding, as his usual ironic expression returned, suggesting he was not an engaged player here. “The current low-down suggests it is an eyesore. No human has the wisdom. ‘Dialectically’ an apt target.” Aram’s lidded eyes rather confirmed his lack of enthusiasm here. The apathy of a mere envoy. Kissy began to read between the lines, debating the metaphor ‘eye sore’. And smiled, even as he tallied the late handsome remuneration for providing the same clinic with superb eggs and sperm from which the wizards there were undoubtedly fashioning all kinds of versatile cells and robust tissue cultures, as well as mapping the genetic blueprints for the idealized comers down the road. Moreover, the demands grew almost every month. The fact that Aram might be engaged to impair the enterprise came as a shock and cautionary

surprise. Aram had never appeared so stolid, phlegmatic, nor this reductive. The dedicated Brothers must indeed have got under his skin, questioned his bent, called for an act of contrition -- smell alone not being an abiding ruin.

“What do you propose?”

“Blowing it to ‘kingdom come’ -- convoking the status quo ante. Eugenics is a silly influential Western fetish.” Again Aram’s inert face was one Kissy did not recognize.

Kissy smiled even as he winced. “Well, it’s not the exclusive concept it was. But bombing? With explosives? Pretty healthy babies that much of a disappointment are they?”

By then Aram was speaking as an automaton.

“Allāh prizes all children. All. And knows best how to make them.”

Kissy was not amused. Aram had never resorted to such arrant earnestness or, in his estimation, flagrant obtuseness. One of the influential sheikhs must have got in the way. An ogre not appreciating Aram’s heedful sense of purpose. One convening a motion of censure. A trial to affirm loyalty. Could there be a tangential reason even? Someone who worked at the clinic, an influential Muslim perhaps, who helped restore an American combatant, even about to go public, believing the clinic’s miraculous reconstructions one of God’s benefices? An apostasy not to be connived at? Perhaps if the sty could be removed.

“But why the facility itself? And not an individual or two?”

“One does not second guess Allāh. It is written.”

For the first time Kissy looked at Aram with some dislike. This was not a scenario he anticipated nor a being he remembered and wondered if Aram was not perhaps playing another of his assessment games.

“You don’t think the clinic, in its way, actually precipitates the decline of the Great Satan...by making the invidiousness, the comparative misery razor edged? One point of view.”

“We are not prepared to be patient with Polyannas, with Leibnizian optimists. ‘The putrid essences.’ A recent quote. The social cancer has metastasized.” Again Aram seemed to be dealing with a bout of gas. Finally he looked up with a louché smile. “We have some needs and will be in touch. It is long overdue...I am told.”

Again Kissy smarted. This was new. A knife edged facet he had not anticipated, and wasn’t sure how to dull. Too obviously he had his work cut out for him.

When Aram left after his wrenching handshake, as if to tighten his request for what seemed a boatload of plastic, among other materiel, some of it ‘stench bomb’ constituents as before, Kissy sensed an impasse he hadn’t seen, less guessed at. He actually liked Felix Muerner, the clinic’s head, believing him an astute, ambitious yet civilized man, and felt now a dilemma as poignant, if not as disruptive, as that posed by the exceedingly pretty Catherine Whyte. At one time, he too fancied embarrassing her -- put her on several internet cites, casting her as another abundantly confused American. Seeing her reaction. But the more he saw of her and read her copy the more he doubted such a comedown would suffice. The

elegance of some silver samovars ever upstage tarnishing. Moreover, she seemed to represent the best mentality left in the West and prized many of the same engaging things he did -- decorum, work, disciplined candor, wry empathy, a love hate tryst with truth, painterly art, 19th Century music -- a late discovery as she worked Pachis' sound system -- in short, a sober if persistent wish to seize the high ground, as he once did when a young reporter at Komsomolskaya Pravda, thinking the 'intellectual conscience' might be heard. The effort was short lived of course. His conscience and nerve took a lengthy detour. Had his brother not thought him salvageable he might still be a senior tour guide at The Hermitage. Bossy's trade in art works -- one facet of his otherwise bloated hucksterism that slighted both art and artists -- was breathtaking at first, then merely bewildering as the constant suborning press-ganged one into the family trade. Now, with his noisy locked-up brother demanding a comeuppance with ABN's Catherine Whyte, he was, *mutatis mutandis*, facing an unknown Aram over the Bern clinic. The irony here was that Führ's reputation equally resided in the talent of his dog body, Pete Leatherby, nicknamed Pachis who, in addition to his talent as a sculptor and painter, and superb airbrush artist -- Führ's handyman -- had produced several beautiful paintings of the lovely Catherine Whyte -- achingly beautiful for Kissy, who barely resisted his own recognition that he might have fallen in love. No woman before had affected him this way. He wanted to know her better but instinctively knew such beauty might only be admired from afar. Eidolons have no home. Her own innate impetuosity might harm her in the end, but he did

not want to have anything to do with that end right now. So he would bide his time: introduce her to the art world as the exemplary kore he believed her to be, an original to be savored at a distance. Sooner or later she would consider the craft and taste of the mural's artist. The ancillary satisfaction was that she would be dismayed by the attention -- an innate dislike of exhibitionism being one of her defining principals. In due course he would look over Bossy's shoulder to savor the pics from Pachis' studio -- to see the cat in her current fair and unpolluted flesh! Her laughing flesh! The vorovskoi and some party heavies looked to him to run the show now that Bossy was working at arm's length in prison, mainly because Bossy's younger brother was the least worrisome -- the least dangerous -- to the other clan bosses. It was a perilous position, but one he was determined to outlive. In part, a determination spurred by the coming into his life of a perceptive Persephone he believed to be real, his missing 'avocational conscience' in the too, too solid flesh. And now an improbable Aram had revived his vulnerability, stymied his regnant wish to act as a peerless bondsman, for whom smarts forestalled the use of force.

Again Ammon was astonished. Obviously this later team was second rate. He almost spilt his coffee. The voice on the phone was unapologetic though. The fugitive had 'come home'.

"Cairo is a messy place. We'll find her. Sooner or later. She won't get out again."

Ammon fought down his anger. "You said before she looked unwell."

A slight pause ensued before the voice responded. "It's not a good place for street people."

"I want her alive."

"That is understood."

"What do your friends in Khan el-Khalili say now?"

"One sighting. They think."

Ammon was all but speechless. "She must be found."

"Of course."

The disturbance down the street from atop the walk-down staircase to the intimate El-Mashrabiah restaurant, one of Kissy's favorites in Cairo he visited at least once a year, was only exceptional in that the young woman two putative religious marshals obviously wanted to seize had eluded both long enough to create a scene, which only incensed the abductors and terrified their target. Yet she managed to escape a second time, only to back herself against a wide indented shop front where her options were limited. There were no district police about -- not unusual -- and the few street folk at that hour only too keen to vanish while looking back to see what was happening.

Ordinarily Kissy would have paused but a second or two before climbing into his running armored limo, the supper over and his guests long departed. But the behavior of the woman was frantic, her very life likely in the balance. The one abductor had produced what looked like a taser, an uncommon weapon in that street at that time. He doubted the marshals

were legitimate state officials -- abductions were frequent then -- and would plead a dedication to Allah if confronted. The second man had at last cornered her and seized her arm. It looked as if the struggle was over, but another incident in that seething metropolis. For whatever reason -- Kissy would mull the matter over days later -- he did tell his three body guards to intervene. The sight of their submachine guns sent the abductors and remaining onlookers running in opposing directions, the girl, younger than Kissy thought at first, obviously in pain, falling to a kneel, holding her wrenched arm. "What do we do now?" Peter, his lead guard asked on his cell, looking at a distant Kissy as if at an apparition. "Put her in the car." Briefly Peter indulged his talent as a method actor, this time affecting galling bewilderment, but proceeded as requested, saying with unexpected calm in Arabic to the crouching and very wary girl, "Lookit, we're leaving the area. Want a lift? Your boyfriends won't take 'no' for an answer a second time." When the girl looked up at him gesturing that she didn't understand, he repeated the words in English. She seemed to relax with the last transliteration. Then, to Kissy's amazement, he heard her answer via the cell phone two times in the two languages, the last in a surprisingly good imitation Peter's Russian-accented English. "You might as well bump me off here. Save some time." Peter was no longer the method actor losing his temper. Who in hell had time for games like this at a time and place like this? A crowd of sly gawkers was regrouping. He looked back at Kissy then gritted his teeth. In English he said, "This is a one time offer kid. I give you five seconds to think it over." Slowly he

counted out the seconds looking at his Rolex. On the fourth count, after looking at Kissy and his grand vehicle, she got to her feet and allowed herself to be squired to the slowly moving car as Peter diligently scanned the area.

She was put in the back with Kissy and Andrei. Igor sat on the rotary seat, his PPSH-4 sub-machine gun in his lap. Peter drove. They all glanced at her with as much disdainful habit as curiosity. Kissy was surprised to find her so young -- perhaps still a teen -- and looking as though she had been living in the street for some time. Dirty, no makeup, emaciated, matted hair escaping her shawl, what looked like a hematoma above her left eye, hands bruised and scraped, clothes tawdry despite her long skirt's expensive make and cut -- the one clue that may have prompted his action. He was both entertained and curious. Her features suggested to him Circassian more than the Arab lineaments he had initially surmised, and he deduced she was exceptionally pretty beneath the grime. The ride back to his hotel was in silence. So Pygmalion, he said to himself. 'Pyg' being his operative prefix. He wanted her to be the first to speak. Yet she held back, as if anticipating what it was she might do or expect next. At last he said, "I can put you up for the night. You'll be quite safe and unharmed. Provided you answer some questions." She nodded as she wiped at an aberrant tear. It had been a busy week, the earlier visit to Ras Tannūrah one of the trials he had to undertake to identify and retain some of Bossy's mercenaries. As was suspected, several new faces proved to be plants from a rival mob. He had not been attending to business.

And had to attend an assessment session with the big 'B' the very next day. As he looked into the central rear view mirror, at his 'Pygmalion', he smiled. He believed he smelled of garlic.

Bossy's 'prison' was a stripped down dacha once owned by a Baltic importer. The walls Kissy presumed were both shell and sound proof. The largest of the rooms contained: two period chairs, a couch, a wide video screen Bossy watched continuously, and Bossy's prison secretary, one armed Sergei, who rather monopolized the conversation. It was said he lost the arm in an elevator accident -- in Kabul.

"We understand your use of the front end stuff. That Egyptian court thing Ganyanov photoshopped -- The Sale -- was clever but not really 'net worth' as we say. We now have a few frames that should work. One F-B chap had a heart-to-heart with the artist. You were kept up to speed on that I understand. Chuckie Warren is the asset here -- one late tub companion being a house intern -- all but assured. Put Whyte in with the current groupies and she'll be a six-pack joke for a year at least. An ABN goldbrick. No chick turns Warren. Ganyanov, our net guru, has another idea. Where you come in. The video B's watching features a new Enfilade model, Karen Guk. As you know, Bossy bought Enfilade some time ago. A careless lesbian liaison with a Russian mink no less, would likely finish Whyte at old true blue ABN. We know ambitious Karen will meet Whyte on her new fashion feminist beat. Whyte's boss at ABN has pretty well guaranteed it -- her change of assignment. She can prowl the art

scene so long as she reports on fashion and the ‘new feminism’. A ‘switch hit’ beat I imagine. An art snoopy we’ve really got to stay on top of. Really.” To himself Kissy mused: so, still mad bad and dangerous. But Sergei had his eye on the plan’s detail. “You must see that the Enfilade couturier and film maker Antoine Plombiers is introduced to Whyte. Karen will be a model at his shows and initiate a come on -- a nice contingency and lead for a Borozov obsessed journalist, is it not? Karen is a stunner and a fine actor. Her English is good and we’re getting her into a top American college -- something she’s wanted all along, apparently. The staging of the rendezvous will be recorded, intimating a professional and ethical lapse, a newsy pulled by a mafiya moll. An anathema for ABN’s current CEO.” Sergei faintly smiled, as much to himself. Kissy rather doubted Catherine Whyte would be that gullible, but knew his opinion wasn’t pertinent here as Sergei plodded on. “There are other options in the works. One impinging on the egg traffic in the Montecito spa you helped set up. Some time ago.” Kissy belatedly nodded. “We know Whyte will do some egg digging sooner or later. It’s a subject that’s bound to come up in her new job. We might even get one or two of Plombier’s models to sign on with the clinic. Thus Karen may play several roles -- the kind of masquerade she excels at. We’ll keep you posted. It’s coming along. We may yet learn who the deadheads are here.” He did not shake hands with Kissy when he left, offering instead the merest nod.

What ‘deadheads’?...

When he was alone, Kissy, who badly needed a tonic then, relieved his

anxiety by revisiting his extended talk in his wooded mansion on Kamenny Island in St. Petersburg with the engaging fugitive, Dilsat al Haiq, the name she proffered after many reassurances. His exclusive home he thought best for an anxious fugitive. Her coming into his life, with the current push-shove pantomime, was now fortuitous it seemed. How curious she might be the very one to ameliorate Sergei's scurrilous script. Even Aram's stray disapproval of eugenics and the Bern clinic. His Arabic being minimal, spoke spoke in English.

Not entirely to his surprise, her mother was a Jordanian, a secretary in the Government Tenders Directorate, who had been raped by a Saudi prince, the subsequent child seized by an agent of the prince when the mother threatened an international suit. A week later the mother was killed in a car crash. The child was given to Ammon to acquit the prince's 'indebtedness'. One of the prince's goons had driven the car. The child's father was said to be a deceased Pakistani intelligence officer. Ammon's wife, the observant stoic Atiyaah, had quietly filled in some details when Dilsat became a teen. "A bad story," Dilsat had said, Kissy's questions about her past opening a wound. She explained, in brief, the details of her stay in England, her adoptive father's gruesome ire on her return, and her desperate flight. Yes, a rather common tale he thought. Even with the ghastliness -- almost trite. "My stepfather is very exacting. My stepmother does her best." A persistent welling tear mirrored mention of her stepmother. Wiping it she added, "If she's not in a hospital or prison now she may be praying to be admitted." Again she paused, as if even this infor-

mation was or could be a betrayal. Finally she said, after a laden smile, “The next group will simply have orders to bump me off...most like.” With some satisfaction Kissy noted that the jeans and blouse his correspondence secretary had purchased fit her well. The grime had made her look thinner than she was.

He decided he knew enough to press on with the important matters. Time was of the essence here. “Can you verify the grades you had at the Leeds school? You said they were good.”

“I was there only a year and a half, and I’m afraid to solicit them myself. I don’t have a transcript with me. As you will understand.” A dour amusement engaged them both.

“We can attend to that,” he said finally. “You obviously enjoyed your brief stay there. Is it something you want to pursue -- some kind of medical career?” She was a time responding, as if her answer wasn’t surprisingly self-evident. “Of course.”

The waters of the Neva Delta that overcast morning suggested to Kissy an ancient gunmetal patina. A timeless haunt. They sat in a small period study that outlooked the cereus garden bed that housed the Queen of the Night. Two hydrofoils careened the opposite side of the distant Neva, zippers opening a seam. It was the best domicile for her then Kissy thought, given his prospective plans for her.

“The dance lessons you mentioned -- that so incensed your stepfather -- they were more than a whim I understand.” Again her answer was defensively simple. “Yes.” “Are you any good?” he promptly asked. She an-

swered rather wistfully he thought. “When you look up my marks you can also check with a teacher at the non-resident academy.” He imagined her scrubbed face then a lucent pond apple.

“What eventually might such training lead to, do you think?”

She looked at him directly then, her expression pending, selfless. “A month ago I...well it’s hardly, well, germane now is it? A word my English teacher liked.”

“Desire is always ‘germane’.” He smiled, as much to himself.

She looked away. “Well, you get caught up in the thing, the intensity...it’s a demanding art. I was never discouraged from thinking I might fit in. In a corps de ballet, maybe . Eventually.”

“If you had to choose, which would you give priority -- medicine or theatre?”

“You ask the hardest questions.”

He smiled but waited, with a growing satisfied patience.

“I felt most alive at the academy. Where I come from women move very little. Hard when you’re pregnant most of the time. Or in hiding. Trying to.”

He decided then her disgust with her lot was likely incontrovertible. He thought for a moment then sprung the question he’d been eager to ask.

“What if you had not two but three choices?”

Her prompt amusement was unfeigned; indeed, she looked at him for the first time with a mixture of wonder and the initial wariness he had seen in the limo. “I have a suspicion this third option is maybe unsavory.

Even for me,” she added with a lax smile.

“Indeed, it can be. But if you can imagine a more challenging and engaging way of making a living let me know.”

His comment had the desired effect. She wasn’t to be patronized. “I’ve had people toy with me before. Still. I haven’t got a lot of options right now have I?”

He smiled. The more he considered her the more he was convinced she would make a resourceful field agent. What she had gone through in the last few months, once even getting across the border into Jordan, likely following dissident refugees, struck him as phenomenal. With some decent training she could be exemplary. Her accomplished English and innate Arabic very helpful, though he realized she tended to shun Arabic; it had been a way to annoy her stepfather she conceded. But how to broach the subject of becoming a field operative -- with a fugitive from a harsh fundamentalist Muslim family? She would need some plastic surgery -- to a face already nearly perfect -- and a totally new legend. But the possibilities, given his current and future difficulties, were staggering. A true outside independent! He smiled a second time. Providence does not come beckoning. He felt certain Chuckie Warren would not slight a timely hint to avoid a snare. Or the directors of the clinic -- a topical discreet warning, from a needy and heedful client. An unsuspected invisible outsider with an initially misleading letter...

“What are you telling me?”

“They had guns, automatics. Three of them.”

“They took her -- in a limo? Her?” Ammon’s incredulity was beyond recall.

“As I’ve said.”

“A Russian limo?”

“Perhaps. Hard to say.”

“You got the number?”

“It was too far away.”

The pause was electric. “How do you mean ‘far away’!” The momentary silence was miasmic. The vision of his team running off scared scored his consciousness. Even his hirelings had balked.

“ You have not heard the end of this!”

EIGHT

In the hard light of day one sometimes needs a disguise. On returning to her Santa Barbara suite after her snit with Pachis, Catherine found a spare note from Michael saying he would be in Dayton for a week. “I trust Pachis had a ball.” His final, not inappropriate, comment. He had not taken kindly to her decision to sound out her old school pal and the art project he was engaged in.

The disguise she anticipated making use of now -- given her apparent conspicuousness on this continent (where she had once imagined a relative anonymity) -- came in the form of some select makeup and a wig a spry friend from Paramount had loaned her which she now fetched from a

nearly bare cupboard. The note was still attached: "Does wonders for the cash flow, if you must shop at Mondaine, or the Bird Cage -- the new boutique bazaar. Saving on hairdressers is a bonus at both joints."

As she stared at the wig on its polished ebony stand she decided it's thick helmet of hair -- a medium razor cut -- would be a start for a descent into Hades. If Kissy Borozov was to be her Nemesis, as Michael intimated, best be discreet, be read not seen. Come on girl, show us your trip and boat...your dead man's hand! Viola's nob spa might be the place for a trial run...also a stab at the de rigueur feminism and affiliated art sharpies she must soon report on -- in stoic recognition of Deplorable D, who must be obeyed! He had agreed to add the art scene to her investigative beat. "If it's not too far afield. Nothing outre."

A day later she stood in the Landowney Gallery, a weigh station for slick traditional minded art, which then showcased some of Pachis' late work, its Borozov connection she had yet to establish. Convinced the disguise was a success, she openly, languidly pondered the sylphs before her on the wall. If her new look did impart anonymity, the late tableaux in the growing collection called Musing the Maenad, did not. Pachis' nymph ambrosial -- not the Hebe first mentioned but the mythological lass called Nitocris -- bore a fulsome and insinuating likeness, given the acuity of the satyr's delineations. His promise to alter her face had yielded to a whim, or injunction from a patron, to keep the alterations minimal, though she decided a newcomer would not make an immediate connection. But his interpolation and exposition of poses she couldn't remember posing for took

her breath away. She could remember none of them. Moreover, if there had once been a distinction between figurative art and sirenic erotica the criteria eluded her now, though she was keenly aware that all 'esthetic' criteria were deemed presumptuous in her modern era. She recalled in her college years stories about frat boy's early 'smokers', even meeting one of the retired warhorses who entertained at such fêtes. Racy pictures were still a rarity back then, the Playboy philosophy just getting its nurse maids in tow. Now, the excursions embodied on tape and on the Internet promised clinical detail of some of the cutest teenagers on the planet -- which most men would enjoy only on their computer screens, as they faded into oblivion doing so. Beauty that exhausts because of its Hyperion sleekness and clarity, availability and ubiquity, at least visually -- the least amenable and most conspicuous non-possession. Thus the more aggravating perhaps. She mulled a peevish snit while realigning the wig to ease an itch.

On the gallery terrace she sought a breath of fresh air. A rather 'knotty' point, she concluded -- her intrepid 'fawn' beholden so to a resourceful buccaneer like Kissy Borozov. But a buccaneer who was what -- regaled, in waiting, undecided, playing possum? What in the world was she to such a project? Was this but one more ruse whereby a Borozov flummoxed an otherwise resourceful critic -- the gadfly who impaired the status quo? With worse to follow? But at such expense? Were his tactics, so unlike his brother's, that involuted? And was she not an apt sucker for such a sly jape, if that is what it was? Had Pachis' suave entreaty -- knowing as he did her wit and daring, her selfless even audacious pluck -- sustained

this charade? And where did these 'other' images of her come from?

That night, alone and feeling a little sorry for herself -- especially as she was out of scotch -- she reviewed the sorry situation while kneeling on her bed in the manner of an Egyptian scribe. Guilt too was a heady elixir.

People were acutely visual these days, carnal display a live fuse, a fact anarchists find galvanizing and totalitarians useful. Are you listening Pachis, wherever you are? The fact that she might sometimes be energized by nimble sex and athletic adventure seemed then on hold, though she doubted she would be the fastidious bystander she was now when the buff handsome Michael returned.

How curious she had let Pachis ply her so, keeping her pert and attentive, the light on his canvas and palette a flame in a darkening forest. His concentration in such moments she never doubted the veracity of. If it was a performance he left no soul nodding in the audience, sleep itself being something you took on the fly. Or so it seemed.

She had her work cut out of her. So.

Hejaz set the package aside after seeing the messenger departed unnoticed. The package contained the picture book Pachis had illustrated, ostensibly using the gamin reporter for the main character in the Bronze Age tale of a Minoan aristo who becomes a slave then an Egyptian queen, a myth Hejaz found sufficiently interesting to look it up on the Net, reading the intro in the Corybant Press book, a kind of apologia for Western health and beauty faddists.

The Bronze Age legend of Nitocris, an able Egyptian Queen who built the Micerine Pyramid, began her life as a Greek slave. It is one of several such tales that transpired behind the old tattered veil of epiphany modern eugenics would bypass to rescind our fated ends, make us all into serene beautiful immortals. In the later Age of Pericles the idea of physical and mental beauty, the human as divine, the divine human, remains perdurable as the transcendent idea of spiritual salvation. The jaded Olympian gods realized early on that being attractive, credulous and mortal was a fail-safe drama, a reliably captivating passion play. Why humans were so fascinating. Their lives dramatically nasty, brutish and short. One reason Zeus killed off the Heroes and their daemones was they were becoming banal, familiar; they had shucked the dread of their own demise; they were becoming too godlike. Not unlike the miraculous transformation of Nitocris.

The book was called *Musing the Maenad*. Hejaz snorted. *Maenad!*

The curiosity he soon realized was that this collection of photos could not be images of the journalist Catherine Whyte. She was never in Tabriz, as far as he knew, certainly not recently. Indeed, all the pics in the book were likely based on photographic originals and taken in Eastern Europe. Mainly of an entertainer, a dancer and petty thief his cell now knew as Zoya Stolbanov, who bore a remarkable resemblance to the reporter. He tugged at his beard. The embarrassment was they still not had bugged Pachis flat and studio. Masooma had tried, but not contended with the tracery of motion sensors Pachis had installed to keep track of his adventuresome daughter Amy.

Hijaz looked again at several pictures through a magnifying glass. And thought again of the West's late infatuation with thinness. Pretty nim-

ble sinews that elided fat and ungainliness. He was astonished at the likeness. They could be one and the same -- twins! -- this daring American journalist and the Russian tart who, in addition to dancing in a swank club, was reputed to hawk icons and precious gems -- the very one who put out the eye of the the problematic Ammon -- one and the same. He could barely believe his eyes. A near dead ringer. In the expletive flesh. The more he looked the more he was convinced: possible twins! Or had the advent of cloning jumped a decade or two? Was there a more craven presumption than believing oneself worth duplicating? His hatred of the West was on a roll. What Borozov would make of this he could only imagine. But Musing the Maenad was not the only offering in the package. A set of photos tucked in an envelope was overlaid by the book. He was astonished to discover there the Apsara dancer in Chuckie Warren's hot tub when Charlie was last in St. Petersburg -- the very ubiquitous tub Feliks, Borozov's bag man, planned to mask the journalist in! But here the specified 'she' was already 'in' -- slouching at the edge, likely nude -- the curtained enclosure hid part of the figure -- a beady eyed Chuckie standing thigh deep in the water looking her over like a morality marshal. Another picture showed a naked creature from the back, almost certainly the same urchin, walking at dusk along a deserted pool deck toward the incandescent curtains of the tub, a pithos or amphora balanced on her head, the vessel likely filled with pot and coke. Charlie liked buds young and *objets* antiquarian. A more breathtakingly slender modern figure Hejaz had never seen. The Western gods did some shameless things to their women.

Skin of the finest vellum, sinews fashioned by a fussy German ceramicist. Just the denizen for Charlie's hot tub outside the U.S. Hejaz had learned a thing or two about Chuckie Warren, for Aram was a connoisseur of Yankee tycoon retainers, their lobbyists being high on his list. Hejaz could hear Aram fluently expounding on the subject. Charlie's ruling passion had opened a mine of information, especially for the Cheka. The early covertly taken pictures of him with a senator's young daughter the Cheka used to 'guide' the influence he wielded in the Senate. It arranged a wide array of introductions to business and political mavens useful to the United States whom it had suborned. The introductions widened Charlie's pool of likely pool companions and every one was happy. His reputation had in sly ways even enhanced his talent as a power broker. Had he been married with a family things might have been quite different, but bachelor Charlie was known as a dynamic self starter. A doer, fixer, a man of his word, his jovial tub a work hub for harried pols and pirates, and the crème of ambitious consorts and starlets, show lounge performers and fashion plate hopefuls. His comment about being a Tequila worm in the spritzers entertained for a season at least. His reputation soared when he helped get the Senate to delay indefinitely deployment of new missiles in some breakaway republics. He putatively saved the American taxpayer a bundle, eased tensions with the Russians (a mere postponement) and several edgy Europeans, and entertained a score of pretty wannabes. As long as he was on form in the Senate, his close house colleagues were known for their wry shrugs, as much from envy as perhaps admiration. Indeed, get-

ting into the hot tub put some of the gals into a tony sorority: another notch in a rock canary's guitar, the entry of an agent of influence into an aspiring actress's directory, a job at a select ad agency, mag or zine. In the U.S. it was the house interns Charlie's colleagues were concerned about. Two applicants were quietly 'expelled' after Charlie pleaded ignorance and overwork. "I don't mix business with pleasure," he apparently said to a concerned ad hoc committee. "The business sometimes gets done but the pleasure always suffers." Pictures of Charlie dandling one applicant on his lap in the water remained in an FBI file. A conventional heroine like Catherine Whyte in such company would be sorry news for sturdy third rail ABN. Putative whoring as scoop, tabloid 'infortainment'. Though the trend seemed inescapable. The media cherished hypocrisy. As some people cherished attention.

But now, it seemed, the possibility was likely 'old hat' as some Westerners say. Hejaz regretted he could not be there to witness Feliks' or Sergei's grim recognition of the fact

NINE

Flushed, fey, rose apple Viola, bless her, was only too keen to introduce a prospective member to the spa which an aunt had given her a year's membership to. "Oh for sure...you'll love the solarium...yes, Tuesday's great." Catherine believed her new look would foil identity, and that Viola would be her usual amiable, airy, onanistic self. A risk, but an odds on gamble. She introduced herself over the phone as an acquaintance of Stanley

Leatherby, the artist. "I think we briefly met at his studio. You mentioned the spa at the time. His work is now on tour in several European salons."

"That's awesome."

The tour of the old spa, modeled after the Roman installation in Bath, England, began in a balcony off the solarium which overlooked the azure colored 'cold' pool, the subject of scrutiny there Old Boney, a skull someone had donated as 'the ghost of male things past'. The skull sat on a wide bright shelf facing the pool. Viola was keen to be of service and instruction.

"Some cryogenic pod went off and the widow, an early active member, brought a facsimile of the skull of her husband here. 'He liked the sun and naked babes,' the widow's supposed to have said. Anyway, the joke's acquired cult status. It gets polished and waxed every month I'm told. The 'mortmain' some call it."

"I see," said Catherine with studious intent.

"The 'in' joke you see, the spa's freedom from male scrutiny, the nudist conceit here a partisan option -- some words I picked up from a member."

"Very swish."

"Trendy stuff, huh?"

"Keep the bastards away so we can decently die out."

"Something like that, I guess."

Both girls smiled, Viola with less alacrity.

Because the spa also featured a dome reminiscent of the Crystal Palace, the solarium and cold pool were pellucid in the late morning sun.

Such that it was immediately apparent Old Boney would have been happy here, if allowance were made for a lone male member amidst the ‘nudist conceit’ where the age requirement of eighteen was not likely rigorously enforced. Nor the etiquette of lesbian demur. “Not my bag though. I’m a ying yang jill I guess,” Viola averred. Catherine was amused that being openly fond of boys in such a venue might need a dispensation.

Later, as she sunned on the warm pool deck, she overheard Viola responding to a sonsy inquiry in the pool. “Who’s your pal?” “She’s a fiend of Stan Leatherby, the artist.” “Lots of those; I’m sure I’ve seen her before.” “She’s on a holiday, apparently.” “Another layoff?” “No, an ‘idyll’, she says; I think that’s what she said.” “Maybe you can introduce us...in the cafeteria?”

But the idyll waned when Catherine took a self tour of the facilities and learned about the pretty bright college kids there who had contracted to sell their eggs to the spa’s fertility clinic. “Oh they come and go, but generally have a hoot,” said one beaming counsellor. A nearby watchful student named Karen was more dryly informative -- in a faintly slavic accent that alerted Catherine. Unlike some of the younger bathers, Karen was attired in a discreet dark one piece, which enhanced her lithe leggy proportions.

“It’s supposed to be like, um, bad PMS for a week or so, for around sixty-five thou. Minimum. If you’re in the top tier.”

Catherine was at first astonished, then amused. “A kind of WYSIWYG -- What You See Is What You Get --- gene pool? A kind of hustle, no?”

That day two of the young naiads bathed semi nude, an antic the poised, businesslike Karen had thus far eschewed.

“It’s kind of expected here. On Tuesdays some approved female brokers visit a room off the solarium. C’est la vie.”

“You’ve never been tempted?”

Karen’s response was immediate. “It’s a quick way to be overlooked. If you’ve got it why bother?”

Karen, a business major, and by far one of the sleeker of the candidates, had two prospects that day and calmly awaited an interview after a workout exhibit of diving, balance board surfing and flex gymnastics. She had long since passed the required SAT tests. “Lots of physical electives, none a waste,” she said. In a quiet shaded archway she and Catherine decanted the presumptions. Catherine decided to keep her queries free of any ethnic curiosity.

“Would a desperate parent be so obdurate, so fastidious? So credible?”

“Why not? Rich folk do as they like. The stuff doesn’t always go to unlucky couples.”

“How do you mean?”

“A research clinic in Europe. Bern. Switzerland. So I hear. Some of the eggs.”

“May I talk to you afterward?”

“I’m not sure; you’re maybe a media scout.”

“I work for an ad agency. A copywriter.” Close enough she reasoned. She believed her wig and new makeup remained efficacious.

After their chat Karen agreed to a further talk if she remained anonymous and they met in a discreet location -- conditions that happily suited Catherine. In the gray hush of an older museum's ceramic figurine collection -- a late afternoon venue mutually if belatedly agreed upon -- Karen, fetching in beige shorts and cashmere top, admitted to a diffidence about some aspects of the vetting procedure, but wanted entry into the upper tier contracts. They parted that evening before the sun-gilded gate to Karen's stately college. By then a mutually honored candor prevailed. When at last Karen turned in, her late words lingered as a modern sale of indulgences. Catherine's subsequent notes began with her leading question.

"You said that pictures of parents and grandparents were important."

"Further back too if you have them."

"Were you surprised by that?"

"They take a detailed family history." Karen had shrugged; being the only child of a single parent mom the ready family album was small.

"You mentioned a lot of tests."

"You are told up front -- an expanded California SAT, a physical with lab, balance, stress, color discrimination and music intonation -- how close to perfect pitch -- and fluency tests."

"Fluency -- what's that?"

Karen was a time answering. "You know what liquid fingering means to keyboard and string players?"

"Only vaguely."

“Simple enough -- the, how you say -- incremental -- spreading, opening and closing of the fingers, oval tracing with wrists and ankles -- limbs in general -- how smooth, continuous and geometric the moves are. They put a transmitter on your fingers and limbs and record the moves.”

At Catherine’s squint, Karen demonstrated with a straight taut leg, rotating the ankle with pointed toe in a circle about twelve inches, making what appeared to be a steady, fluid and faultless geometric circumscription. Then, noting Catherine’s approbation, did the same with the other foot, equalling the feat of the first. A shared amusement ensued. Also being able to fully and independently close each eyelid without squinting reinforced the fluency index. Apparently.

“And the stress tests?”

“The lung heart capacity measure, and the ‘ups’ -- sit, pull, push.”

“What about the balance assay you mentioned?”

“You stand on one leg, eyes closed, bend your knee, touch your nose -- one cut off test they say. Then head stand, hand walk -- how far -- all open ended tests. You do your best. Also a spin test -- for dizziness.”

Again, Catherine nodded with a tacit if awed acquiescence.

“You mentioned an expanded SAT.”

“A great emphasis on symbolic logic and statistical deformations.”

“You never meet the buyers?”

“They can, with permission, see you through a faux mirror, like in the pool, except it is private. Supposed to be.”

“I detect a smile.”

“Some ask to see you nude.”

“You don’t think that’s out of line?”

Karen chanced a precious aside. “Some brokers maybe bank on perfection.”

“There is such a thing?”

“You never wished to check out a gal’s ‘twins’?”

“Not often. So.” Karen regarded her then with faint -- disbelieving -- humor. Jovially Catherine asked, “Any other ‘electives’?”

“They try to spot drug liable constitutions.”

“Is that possible?”

“Supposed to be indicative. The receptor templates for addiction we all carry, they say. During arousal you are supposed to elicit your own catalytic index. Words from the preamble.”

“That sounds specious. Put on.”

“You’d have to be an endocrinologist to follow it I guess. Does it matter?”

“Some would think it would. So what’s sampled?”

“The cerebrospinal fluid and some lower limb arterial blood.”

“That seems complicated.”

“The probes are small. No worse than a diabetic lancet.”

“Do you have diabetes?”

“No. A friend of a friend does.”

“And the samples are taken during what, sex?”

“They give you a massage.”

“Who’s they?”

“Two nurses.” Again Karen detected a hint of disapproval. “Well, nothing’s sacred any more, right?”

“And you’re not putting me on.”

“It was all told the day before. It’s optional, and lucrative only if you are clean. And exceptional.”

“It seems disingenuous.”

Karen became apathetic. “You want a picture?”

“It would fill in some blanks.”

Karen looked newly bored, which was subverted by a distant smile. “You’re gay?”

“No.” Catherine just managed to edit a sarcastic comment.

Karen stifled a waiting yawn. “First you get a European massage. One assistant puts the probes in when you are relaxed.”

“You said two. The nurses.”

“One up, one down. They keep your pulse on a plateau for about five minutes, or until you come.”

“Why doesn’t the candidate just masturbate? Or bring along a friend?”

“Too erratic, apparently, for the standardized testing. Too ‘stochastic’ they said.”

With a diffidence that she hoped didn’t show, Catherine remembered venturing on. “Standardized...can you be specific?”

“About the massage?”

“Yes, the manner, the routine they follow. Do you mind? I am willing to be convinced.”

“They appear to follow a body grid. One works the neck, shoulders and chest, the other the legs thighs and pubes. It is very nice.”

“Is there penetration?”

“They massage the glans. Some candidates have not had vaginal sex.”

“But surely the request would alienate some prospective candidates?”

“As I said, it’s not mandatory. Outside the SAT, a subject can alter any test she wishes. Though apparently few do.” Karen barely shrugged, her lidded eyes carding a smile.

“And that’s it? You’re through?”

“The final option is to stand for a minute in the view cubicle. You stand and slowly turn about a few times.”

“After the massage?”

“You shower first. No makeup.”

“I thought you felt that wasn’t necessary.”

“It was a toss up. I was feeling pretty good then.” Again, the near smile that foretold a wordy tease.

“A minute can be a long time.”

“Some want to see your sex.”

Catherine hesitated. “How so?”

Karen suppressed an impious yawn.

“You’re joking.”

“Some judge the entire ensemble I guess.”

“Including the look of the sex?”

“Type, pigment, position, density and distribution of pubic hair -- that is a quote from the clinic intro. With your assigned conductor.”

“Part of the canon.”

Karen shrugged. “Some brokers do not fancy much groin hair. And some early lesions do not show on blood tests.”

“But such specific genetic components are something of a crap shoot, surely?”

Karen was unmoved. “You have it, you can pass it along.”

“Did you comply? I am curious.”

“I did only what I thought necessary.” It was then too obvious that Karen was losing interest.

“Was it all worth it do you think?”

“I am in the top percentile. The best dollar tier. And you get useful tests you might not bother with.”

“You mentioned a facility in Europe you thought received some material.”

“In Switzerland I think. Bern. Eggs and sperm. The boys visit a place somewhere nearby.”

Catherine hadn’t anticipated a ‘co-ed’ operation. “There’s no ‘business’ connection, I assume. No mating of the paragons.”

Karen shook her head. “Not here. That I know of.”

When Karen locked her bike to the gate’s front stand, Catherine had decided the buyer or buyers must be queueing up for this top drawer candi-

date. She tried to imagine what fussy Willardson might have thought: the legs of a Balanchine dancer, the torso of a middle distance runner, the face of a Eurasian of Slavic Desdemona, the poise of a downhill racer, the will and acumen of an arbitrager with the marks in statistics to prove it. If Catherine wondered at the rationale for the assessment, she would soon be disabused of any possible empathy for a would-be parent. A day later a brief phone message arrived from Karen, which read: A new tie-in for you. Late today on my dorm terrace for details. If 7:30 PM is not good, we have to make it sometime next week. By then Catherine was aware that Karen led a busy life and arrived on time, just as the sun peaked over the common, giving one side of the gabled square an amber aura, the other a dense royal purple. Karen, a deep gold ray of light etching her chin and bare shoulder, sat at a pedestal table on a terrace just off her second floor digs before a coffee thermos and two mugs. Catherine was promptly shown a postcard of a swank villa where Karen had been asked to go for an interview. Catherine was easily incredulous.

“You’re to go for an interview -- to this lair in Montecito?”

“One of the brokers is a Sunni pop star..he told the spa director I should attend an auction.”

“A what?”

“I stand to draw a larger fee. He has some exclusive and very wealthy buyers, apparently.”

“You believe him?” The incredulity in Catherine’s voice was more shrill than she intended.

“Enhanced economy, both ways.”

“You’ve lost me.”

“The spa provides a standard rating evaluation, but nothing up front. What is there to lose?”

Catherine was newly resigned. “When?”

“Week after next. Just after mid-terms.”

“An interview. Not a ‘social’ call?”

“There’s more to it.”

“I’m sure.” Only when she looked up did she realize Karen’s calm demeanor was not companionable.

“You had me -- us -- tailed, right?”

“What are you talking about? No -- absolutely not!”

Karen looked at her interlocutor with dry-eyed candor. “The broker wants me to bring you along.”

Catherine was only momentarily flummoxed. “He, they... saw us together at the spa. Anyway, doesn’t that rather disqualify him or her as an astute appraiser? All things considered.”

“What if he knew you worked for a cable network? Or whatever.”

“Well he’d be mislead. In any case, why would he want me along for pete sake?”

“You tell me.”

Catherine was confused and wary. “You’re not really considering going?”

Again Karen’s placid stare was both daunting and captivating. “I just

know he suggested I bring you along. Presumed you were a candidate, maybe.” Following another lapse, this one less onerous, she added, “You’re interested, right?”

A diffident Catherine replied, “I think you better go by yourself.”

“I think you should come. You do too, I think. An adventure invites trust.” Karen’s regard then seemed less vigilant.

Catherine barely smiled.

“Just so.”

Half heartedly Catherine mused, as much to underplay the exchange, “Montecito. ‘Brutal,’ as they say.” As expected, the squib seemed to pass muster.

Languidly Karen shrugged. “They mainly read the market and real estate press anyway. I’m told.” The imputation was palpable for Catherine: the residents of Montecito were not that interested in public spirited scolds or enquiries. Making Karen’s earlier head up concern a ploy or example of her posturing. Karen’s curt smile followed. Such that Catherine wondered who was the target, the subject of interest here -- she, or this twenty-some wonder who rather defied the probabilities. Her suspicions then were many and treacherous as the potholes in a Russian industrial city. Could this paragon be a shill for a Borozov heavy? The possibility framed the reality. If she believed she had approached the girl at the spa, she knew such encounters could be adroitly staged. Yet it was hard to imagine Karen anything but her own master, her own helmsman, and her private school an exclusive community. Cautiously she decided the charmer’s cool

was just that -- exemplary and innate. A being where ichor not blood coursed the veins. And she was tempted. This wily importunate Sunni was an interesting if stray puzzle piece. "Enhanced economy class -- both ways," Catherine added as if to settle the matter. To her relief, Karen too fondly smiled.

But after a night out with a new user friendly Michael the idea of joining Karen in her stagy auction at the villa lost its appeal. The whole business seemed at times inevitable if not banal. It was sobering to think how the marketplace had 'hatched' one more way for young women to sell their bodies, ambitious Karen would do well, but the idea of participating was repugnant. The requisite period for the fertility drugs to take effect would be dreary and she hardly wanted her genes hawked to a stranger or an institution. The tests Karen enumerated were exacting, some of them likely specious, some certainly invasive. Moreover, was she keen to glean copy for a tale that might petrify her position at ABN? Wanker Darin would likely find the story important (titillating) and keep her in the trenches for months. Was her new job at ABN so necessary, rewarding? Yet her instincts told her something else was afoot here and to slight the matter at this stage might be premature, an expedient cop out. The mob smelled explosive money like a bloodhound. Women's eggs were taking on critical mass. It was the possibility that incensed. The 'grin and bare it' exploit.

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If Hejaz resented the demand to channel pics of the ABN journalist to

the elder hard-bitten Borozov -- as Abdul said a humiliating waste of time -- he was continually struck by the uncanny match with the cabaret performer. His curiosity about the two could be a nag, a confusion he might ponder when he was alone. The carnal female presence foreshadowed a breech, a disorientation in Sunni fundamentalism. The ardent Arab adventurer faced a reckoning as a conniving lecher. Perhaps. He still did not know if the elder Borozov knew of the journalist's double, and wondered if Aram was impatient and demanding enough to substitute some of the one for the other. Discrete pics of each girl might convince Feliks that the hot tub was already filled. Moreover, the picture collections of both girls were expanding, Zoya's even more extraordinary than the journalist's.

The Russian wanton, he had learned through Aram, had performed at the Apsara chain, Kissy's exclusive private clubs -- a combination casino, fashion showcase and live theatre-in-the-round -- now in Paris, London, Marseilles, Vienna and Prague, in addition to St. Petersburg and Moscow. Only members and their guests might attend the performances, none of which were videotaped. All recording devices were left at the door. In the St. Petersburg theater the double had apparently danced an enhanced role of Titania in Antione Plombiers' rendering of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. For the gamy French impresario and, presumably, the stolid Russian managers, Apsaras were universal, sprites for all cultures and occasions. A Devi here, a Peaseblossom there. Implicit nautch dancers all, though Zoya had apparently given her performances a 'balletic turn', according to some trifle critic Aram mentioned. The setting in the late St.

Petersburg production incorporated rich greenery, background birdsong, and near nude dancers blending and emerging from the greenery. The ‘ballet’ was especially designed he was told for wealthy voyeuristic codgers, of which there was a reliable constituency world wide. Rumor had it, perhaps initiated by Kissy’s own touts, that beautifully crafted face masks hid some of the finest young dancers in Europe. Two pictures featured Zoya in a lush meadow surrounded by adoring gnomes, the thyrsi of the gnomes framing her elegant arabesques. Aram said the more observant or simply garrulous of the mossbacks claimed the thyrsi were used for more abusive purposes, a perception not universally shared however. As no cameras were allowed in the theatre the debate animated not a few late brandy klatches. Veteran voyeurs too had their pedants. So said Aram, who had a special fondness for addicts of lascivious entertainments. “The ready shill.” One of the pictures was a copy of a poster on the marquee, the blurb reading: The Glenn Maiden the Gnomes Play with Five Nights a Week! The poster featured a pretty elegant dancer wearing a cloisonné style face mask and little else, the arabesque dance move she struck a panned frame. The show was a sell-out five nights a week. The fetish for seeing younger and younger women seemed ordained -- worldwide. The only women the Western and Slavic effete could manage perhaps. The end of the end. So Hejaz deduced.

Several non nude pictures were taken during an early rhythmic gymnastic competition. If Zoya was not a winner she was obviously a contender, her long limbed form agile as they come. These constituted the earliest re-

cord he assumed. The later pictures showcased a folk dance troupe and a bejeweled Indian temple dancer -- an unusual presence given the voluptuous form of most such figurative icons. Hejaz had not yet reckoned with the jaded audiences in some parts of the catered world. There were some family pictures, which surprised. One with a mother who appeared to be crippled or injured, and two with an older man, an relative perhaps, who participated in an antic young Zoya may have planned, the setting a grain field where she took a turnip from her blouse (she appeared to have two such turnips) to throw at a farm yokel, a pile of hay serving as a blind for the attack, the older man a grizzled scarecrow craning for a look while cradling a bottle of vodka. There were several pictures in a school uniform, and one with an attractive girl who looked nothing like the mother or Zoya. The two girls seemed to be close though, for Zoya stood behind making faces and derisively gesturing at the demure friend who sported a stoic smile.

She performed for at least one Russian photographer with sites on the internet, one Levrenti Ganyanov, an ancient profligate. The few pictures Hejaz could find were unusual in that the gamy Ganyanov had taken mostly full figure shots of young Zoya Stolbanov posing as a Greek sculptor might have positioned her. Despite his more salacious work, Ganyanov was obviously taken with exceptional proportion and symmetry. 'Bones matter' someone had written on one of the pictures. Hejaz snorted. Yet he was cravenly disappointed she had not, it seemed, posed for Ganyanov's 'raptor camera', as he called it, sets of shameless pictures -- the

amusement and laughter of the models as conspicuous as their starkly factual bodies. He looked through all the Ganyanov files but could find only the one small set of the Apsara performer, the pictures studied and tame compared to the rest, which featured a herd of brazen beauties. Hejaz could barely believe it -- such flagrant posing fun, hilarious. The sets with two and three girls even more incredible for him. A heinous sin so fondly enacted, so prettily captured. He had never seen women so, their intimate fluids so incontrovertibly 'there'. Were they diseased he wondered? It looked like pus. And the color, the delicate white pinks...after the finest light silks his mother wore...he was furious, dumfounded and archly aroused. They did not even have hair...but the finest camel skin. The smooth patina bothered, alarmed him. He had little idea such contours even existed. The whores he sometimes consorted with were lumps of drying brick compared to these doe like denizens. There were no images of hardcore coupling though in some one girl managed to smoothly minimize a good sized dildo, a device called a 'prickler', so named because of the tiny thin strands that protruded from its penis member. A second smaller salient touched a part he did not know existed, something called a glans, which looked suspiciously like a large pimple in some frames. Again the expression of droll amusement of the girls, even enjoyment mauled him. The set began with one toying with the device as a youngster playing with a hand gun, then led to the incremental insertions and lastly an expression daftly euphoric as the device was fully in place and the battery switches caressed by a loitering hand.

His excitement was both overwhelming and vexing. He had not mauled himself so since his teens. Only his hatred, his utter contempt sustained him. Pink was surely the color of hell. The girls on the one site were aliens, sinister malevolent beings not of this earth. Shāyṭan's proliferating masterpieces. About pornography in general Aram had said, "It is the way some people try to stay the boredom, gild the ennui." That Aram might be so dismissive struck Hejaz as flippant. Was he so immune to Western corruption and dissolution? He thought not. Hejaz recalled then a recent abrasive exchange with the maven. Aram had been the first to raise the likelihood of the dancer and journalist being a match. "Borozov must know about this Apsara dancer. By now." Meaning they had been tardy in assembling and passing on the pictures. Hejaz did not like the idea of being found negligent, untrustworthy. "A late discovery," Aram had added, as if cognizant of Hejaz' unease, a perception that only added to his pique.

"Ammon is determined is he?" The tone of the question betrayed a rhetorical slight; Hejaz had as much contempt for the obsessed rapist as the teaser.

Aram slowly turned to stare at Hejaz, as a father might look upon an impatient youngster. He then smiled. "Should that concern us? The showcase murder of young girls advances the cause of Islam, you think?"

Hejaz scowled. "Not my understanding of 'young'."

"Ammon may yet experience an epiphany then."

Despite himself, Hejaz could not stifle his vexation. "You use words

like a fakir.”

“Which we all are, more or less.”

TEN

A last minute decision to go had not been resolute. In the taxi Catherine debated the matter until the villa’s entrance loggia and tiled walkway lay before her. A better manicured landscape was hard to imagine. Willardson might have said the estate was more palazzo than villa, with its Florentine vaults, red tapered columns and light ochre capitals, a distinction she recalled as she studied the steep entrance gallery lined with Eastern medieval-style mosaics. She decided she had to get out with Karen more often. The grounds seen through the columns broadened into an expansive well-groomed Eden, Olive trees and wisteria bordering the main path to the garden, a distant tea house and further Love Pavilion.

Two stout Asian gentlemen checked her surrogate ID and invitation as four motion sensitive cameras filmed the greeting. At last they broadly smiled and pointed in the direction of the tea house. “Just follow the main pathway.”

As she walked, taking in the profusion of rare scents and exotic colors, the tale of a revised Genesis was recalled. Said the raconteur: If two Asians had been the originals in Eden they might have eaten the snake instead and all would be well. Something inside of her said being here was not efficacious though, that the serpent still resided somewhere. On seeing the stone staircase that led to the tea house she again hesitated and in-

dulged a scowl. The physical peril in the CIS and Russian Federation was at times immutable -- violence might come from any quarter. But here the jeopardy seemed elusive as the fragrant breeze. Karen would be on the steps, as agreed -- the gamy Karen, a beauty for all occasions. 'Beauty is Nature's brag, and must be shown....' (Her slog with Milton was not entirely in vain.) So was she in or out? In this illusive isle of time. Well, she had returned to the West looking for a change of scenery and freedom from surveillance, threat and pursuit. The likelihood that she might become a 'specimen' in this idyllic setting -- a thing to be stared or gawked at, appraised, evaluated -- was a fine irony. She smiled. Joking in Eden was an apostasy.

The discovery of Karen sunning herself on the upper walkway steps was a surprise, more so when she approached and realized Karen's long hair was her only cover. Though appearing abstracted Karen was the first to speak.

"I came early. No one's about. The sun's too nice to pass up. Rather choosy about tan lines."

Catherine amiably smiled. "You look very nice. Not what I expected."

"Another minute and we go up."

"You said swim suits in the park."

"I have a carry all behind the stone rail. The tea house at the top -- it's ours for the afternoon. You will like it." With an ineffable smile she added, "The 'come kingdom'."

The jest did not immediately register with Catherine for she was then

placing the birdsong while savoring the serenity of the grounds -- Italian in inspiration perhaps but English incontinent in evolution, as if the original planner had a late carefree inspiration or particularly blithe client. Coleus and day lilies grew in abundance about severe implacable succulents, vivifying her own prickly dilemma. A central pond reflected philodendron and a miniature Sugar Loaf mountain, again suggestive of a world apart. Additional surprises and distractions, however many and ornate, Catherine was determined to manage as only a reporter 'on the aerie' can.

In the tea house Karen's easy exhibitionism embodied a further taunt for she was in no hurry to fetch her bikini. After looking over the tea house she lolled on a low rattan chaise, her figure an art class hologram, her egret eyes rarely leaving her silent companion, an attention Catherine hadn't expected and must have looked restive for Karen produced a stirrup cup of anisette Sambuca with a canny smile, her unexpectedly pithy words enhancing the come on. "A genteel swim suit, you have." Catherine had put her one piece on under her street clothes. Karen continued, "You are what they hype: smart, fair, thin. I wish I had a second bikini...for my Clea...who, um, fits in so well." What flagged Catherine was her apprehension of the lean rarefied beauty, a novel experience that daunted as it teased. The mention of Durrell's Clea, the only Clea she knew, also disarmed, Clea being a tonic for the lovelorn, intimating a vulnerability -- in what seemed a focused Justine! -- that began to freak her out. Durrell was one of her 'escapes' in Russia. If the possible jeopardy registered, Catherine was too to engrossed if not smitten to remove her-

self. When Karen rose to put on her bikini she paused to smooth her hair, allowing Catherine a close view, her light roan skin hairless below her head and free of tan lines. "You want to see the complete picture, right?" After a dry pause she added, "Trust enhances an adventure, yes?" It seemed the presence of 'the copywriter' had been shelved. At least for now. Karen added, her tanned elegant back to Catherine as she tied the stays to her string bikini, "My sun screen is good, if you want."

And so, in the fussed-over garden the two Eves loitered by the koi pond, as requested, where the unreality of it all seemed to Catherine to confirm her new subversive second nature. For if Karen's earlier apathetic words teased, her easy, even, fond manner here suborned. The insinuation -- that they were fast friends -- she adroitly played to, displaying a new dry bonhomie. "The carp are lining up. Yes."

In due course three men dressed in white robes ventured from an annex, one carrying a period lute, a detail that added to Catherine's sense of speciousness. The matter at hand -- the egg sale -- was not mentioned; they might have been ingratiating delegates at a horticultural convention. The mysterious Sunni handed Karen the instrument and suggested she try it out on the rocks by the Cleia Temple, where the echoes were 'exquisite' -- an area nimble Karen found without waver, a stone work terrace that ended in a warm leafy grotto. Said a diffident Catherine as they approached the first fern bed, "I take it the 'interview' begins about now." Karen smiled after a brief survey of the surround, then easily slipped out of her bikini before settling to play the lyre, easily remarking, "The totem

sun.” Catherine looked off with a select moue and knelt with her suit in place.

“They’re to be serenaded?” Catherine ventured.

“More or less. Very clear here. You could use the sun. No one will come. It is not how they operate.” In response to Catherine’s dry smile she added, “He is a registered broker at the spa. And voyeurs usually, um, keep their distance.”

When Karen looked to her lute Catherine pulled a curl from her wig over an eye, and discovered for a second time that day an automaton acting on her behalf as she lay on her back by Karen’s feet, out of sight of the pathway and annex, waiting out a footling interval as Karen diligently tested and tuned the strings.

“I trust you have some idea what’s going on.”

“The written proposal will help.”

Catherine was only momentarily taken aback. “You’ve already had a peak?”

“Word of mouth only. So far.”

Absently Catherine recalled the ‘friendly handshake’.

But Karen was feeling her pre-eminence. “I think it is in the bag; no consolation prizes here.”

Catherine smiled, in spite of herself, her skin white as the Mallow border to the entrance of the bower, her daring all the more tingling as she reckoned with a burgeoning insinuation: the villa they had come to could very well be one of Kissy’s ‘out take’ centers, a coordination nub and dual-

service estate at the ready, a fact gleaned in her earliest research on the wiseacre, which now belatedly implicated Karen's 'mansion'. The main residence might even have harbored a residency before the collapse, to serve an ancillary function now -- spying and recruitment for his commercial empire. Eggs included. And now, in the midst of this swank paradise, a strange beautiful hoyden with wide strong shoulders, fluted navel, perfectly embossed chest and period lyre, whose insouciance could be breathtaking...her tan total, ancient and fussed over as the chords she played, a smile touching her lips...beauty that knew its worth and prided daring. For a time Catherine lay in the quiet bower, in this confessional cell, a mislaid desire warming the calm, Karen's baroque musicianship a welcome and condolent surprise.

During a pause Catherine spoke.

"Any qualms? Giving up a genetic being so after yourself?"

"For at least eighty-five thou and a layoff in Grindelwald?"

"Giving in effect a child to what -- some mideast broker?"

"An egg or two."

"Still, your blueprint for a unique individual."

Swiftly and without demur Karen replied, "One more poor rich brat."

"You seem to have it all laid out."

Karen suddenly smiled and put the lyre aside without comment. Then slipped down to kneel directly behind and above Catherine, studying her upside down face with ironic candor, before lifting her head and shoulders onto her thighs. "They began like this..." -- fated words as the long brown

fingers began to stroke Catherine's neck and shoulders, the deft fingers briefly idling when again the charmed voice spoke. "They spend a time tracking the upper bod first."

The short laughter Catherine decided was her own as Karen unhooked the shoulder straps to Catherine's one piece, then paused, awaiting a diffident cue, before turning the suit down, a slow revelation Catherine stopped at her hips, the lean sylph newly perched at her side.

If the first caresses were not quite magical, Catherine's recoil was only momentary. "You are very truly lovely," Karen's voice continued after a time, the breezes too stealing in and traipsing the oyster white skin. "We have plenty of time," the voice amiably asserted. "We are invisible here," she added, coddling one to yet another level of anticipation as the passes flowed to the fabric hips and cool thighs, an overlooked sigh escaping. Again a pause, as the egret eyes sought a waiver, before continuing with the fluent, artful passes.

But as the recognition itself further possessed, amazed, beggaring certainty, Catherine put an end to the captivation by displacing the liquid hands. A scintilla of sobriety followed, as Karen sat back with amenable concern. The blush, Catherine suspected, must have reached her toes as she restored her top. Karen knelt stroking Catherine's idled calf and instep then, causing her subject a frission of pain as she manipulated the ankle. Even in the suit, Catherine could not remember seeing herself so rawly factual, nor so elfin beside Karen's finely segmented body, the navel alone a sculptor's dream. Only then did she realize how Karen's inner lips

hung down from the nether curve of her haunches like a couple of stubby fingers, a lad finding an opening, a sight she found troublesome, intimating as it did those porn babes who might get all the the king's horses and all the king's men inside. Karen, noting the look, again gave her every opportunity to retreat, to end the interlude then and there, finally standing and briefly stretching, exhibiting the well defined, proportionate sinew that otherwise defied disparagement, her buff triangular back and plenary bum with its neat gluteal arc a near incarnate match of Michelangelo's David! With as much solicitude, despite her shivering, Catherine too stood and flexed idled arms. After a bemused smile, Karen retrieved and replaced her bikini. Catherine wanted to disarm, tranquilize the incident, but couldn't find the words. Instead she said, but without conviction, "a bit of a flounder," while looking in the direction of the annex. Karen genially, belatedly nodded, but as much to herself, for she was already elsewhere Catherine thought, planning, executing trial runs, her mind an ongoing abstraction of itself. "A salty tide," Karen said after a time, musing again as much to herself.

Before leaving, a further request intruded to delay Catherine's much sought departure. They were both asked to stand nude for a minute by the Aegeia Shrine -- an open sun bright area. Karen took up the exploit with her usual ready nonchalance while Catherine held back. "It's not what I anticipated," she explained, her snit with Pachis rankling still: posing so was not then a diversion. "They take their time," Karen remarked, the imputation being that one might reconsider as she once more removed

her bikini. "Your coming was nice," she added. "One tee'd up plus." Catherine forced a smile. "You look great," was her lone fey comment as Karen sat waiting on a mossy rock outside the tea house fingering a toe. "They are here," she said at last...so here is seeing me. Wish you were here."

If it was a time coming, Catherine's belated regard for this Artemis was a discovery that scrambled her sense of self and the beings of her own mythology; the creatures native to this garden she knew nothing about. What the nub of this aberrant longing was eluded her. Karen's fine silk hair was a wonder, as was the oddly thin yet lyrical voice with its slavic nuance, so given to pithy words. The assurance too was a marvel, as notable clothed or nude. A growing hankering to 'embrace' this eidolon was becoming debilitating, a yearning with no nostalgic antecedent. She was at sea here. A recessive gene or two newly activated? The stark lithe form, so conspicuous, so telling. Her inner cautioning voices were being upstaged by something else, a stranded siren's cry for help?...

Standing alone against the pale marble of the shrine, Karen's beauty was replete in its factual detail, a rich full color medical illustration heedful Catherine felt culpable taking in, her new unfamiliar fascination numbing in its acuity, an absorption that delayed her seeing the stealthy intruder -- with his East German Praktika camera -- a curiosity that seemed to have but one explanation: Kissy was taking in both the forest and the trees! So unlike the one robed broker, a denizen from a casbah, who saw only the graven image before him, his raised hands frequently gesturing wonder,

amazement. This same broker suavely asked Karen to put her hair up and apply makeup -- he held out a compact -- a request that incited a rare scowl in his paragon. Who yet did as asked and stood for another long minute as the two brokers looked on, changing her stance as requested. The approbation of the two was manifest, their nods a fondly shared wager.

Karen was fulsomely if rather awkwardly thanked when they desisted. By then the Praktika gent had disappeared, though in that luxurious foliage it was hard to tell. Catherine was almost certain he hadn't seen her. In any case, his camera when she spotted him, was pointed at Karen and the brokers. His presence begged the question of his purpose of course. The fated witness Fate may not have convened.

On returning to the tea house Karen smiled, saying again, "I told you, the 'come kingdom'." An indefinite moment followed, which abetted a sisterly embrace and eleventh hour kiss. After which Karen lowered the shutters, drew her hair off her neck and shoulders then, after an engaging smile, approached and calmly unbuttoned the blouse of her tarrying companion. The following kiss was numinous for head up Catherine as Karen's hands traced the thread pretty seams...the interlude soon after on the chaise a revelation: two pretty serpents with sleek arms and legs recasting Eden, the one's heedful composure a belated reconciliation.

The next day, as Catherine emerged from her dress closet and passed the pier glass in a silk teddy (one of the coming-out benders on her return) she couldn't help wondering if it somehow showed, the dalliance by an-

other name. Was polymorphous perverse, and the daring that went with it, Pachis' reading of her amatory disposition? The fact that she had finally not lost her nerve in broaching Karen's own Attic body set the querulous tone of that morning after. The curiosity loomed afresh. Some lines from Dryden intruded.

Our souls sit close and silently within,
Their own fast webs from their entrails spin,
When eyes meet far off, the sense is such
That, spider-like, we feel the tenderest touch.

So: a Maenad-Borozov morning! Hence the resort to the interrogative details. Mirror mirror standing tall, who's the vainest of them all? The chick with an egg, the buyer with scratch, or the gadfly in a Mondaine teddy? Karen's visit to the villa with her in tow added the footnote she could not ignore. Did the Sunni ghoul know who the second damsel in that choice bower was? If Kissy Borozov had hit upon yet another way for young women to sell their bodies, the enterprise had now become a must see for herself, in all the fleshy detail, despite her earlier reservations. The disconcerting curiosities -- her discoveries of her recondite self, the enigmatic villa itself, the mysterious Sunni -- all begged for explication. The risks newly mandated. Ironically, such a story would fall within the purview of her new job. Even Darin the Deplorable might spruce up his toffy condescension, the throne king 'cogitating' on his ample bottom. Somethings you only see when ensnared. Moreover, daring had always

been a seductive element in her work. Here it pertly reasserted itself. For one, the villa was registered under the name of Leonid Antonovich Chizhov, a banker crony of the Borozov's who, as far as she knew, never crossed the pond. An ABN search confirmed the registration.

So: a bon chat bon rat, you in your airy cloister. Olympian Artemis, with her sleek limbs, will-o'-the-wisp hair, and ripe vegetation had shown her the low gate into an enchanted or haunted garden.

Almost as an automaton she fetched a regional ordnance map and eyed the open gully that must lead to the pertinent waterfall from the estate's water garden which now misted the back of her mind. She had always been a collector of maps, timetables and itineraries, a habit that complimented her many investigations over the years. But as she looked and planned her route up the rise to the villa from the mesquite spidered ravine, the vivid memories of her 'fall' still drolly entertained. She had of course believed all along that sex was a multi headed creature, but until her encounter with Karen the ways of men like Pachis and Michael had been sufficient. Even now, despite his moods, it was Michael she deemed to feel most comfortable with. Perhaps it was the dismay at having someone of Karen's street smarts discover her essentially callow, unfledged state that chafed. Perhaps she was still smarting from Pachis' supple manhandling of her the week before -- a person she had deemed an eccentric but an unassuming and tenable teammate years before. Perhaps it was the protracted abstinence in Russia that made her vulnerable to any and all gaiety, dalliance. Later, as she climbed the steep sandy path that led to the es-

tate perimeter, the ‘interrogation’ ceased: not guilty! She had a body, and it dealt with her ego, endorphins et al as best it could. Period. She would live to tell all one day. With a belated amazement did she realize she’d been climbing for nearly half-an-hour, beginning at the public wading pool and its rocky lace-wing waterfall that descended from the scarp above, the ascending pathway bordered with catclaw, argave and arrow weed.

The discovery of the route astonished: the waterfall, she now confirmed, issued from the water garden of the Montecito compound -- one might walk in, on a dare. Looking back, the curiosity became an entreaty. She had to learn what really went on in the estate. And to do that you had to resort to stealth. A planned set of intrusions, if necessary, the first a care-laden reconnoitre.

This urgent need to explore the villa itself on the sly Michael found impulsive when he discovered her in her dark ‘cat suit’ as he called it -- cap, tank top and coarse tights under a tight sleeveless turtleneck, and mylar knee highs over the tights. Her presence in this outfit prompted a throaty guffaw, such that Catherine too sensed an impatience she might be wary of. She stood then stiffly looking out through the venetians at the cyan haze of the distant hills. With some impatience she said: “There’s no easy way to get a take on the place. Anything obvious the spin doctors would have nixed.”

Michael looked at her at last with a resignation she often found seductive. “So why not hire someone?”

“She or he would undoubtedly miss things. No good snoop likes ab-

struse assignments. Besides I would have to pay her or him myself. In his present mood Deplorable D. isn't granting stipends let alone paying hirelings."

"And if they are 'particular', and you get caught?" He poured himself a third cup of coffee, an unspoken signal of a potentially long day.

"A topical celebrity they'll likely kick out." She barely smiled. "A reserve move -- the show-tell bit."

Cooling his first sip he proffered a scowl. "Are you so sure? As an 'upper tier' candidate, why not just join the queue? You can pass as a prize cat. Most days."

"'Most' may not be enough. Anyway, I doubt there is a 'queue', as such, and I would learn only what the promoters convey. No. I have to find out how defensive and retaliatory the outfit is. The villa could even have been a residency at one time. It's certainly's got the look, the cupola aeralis and leaded windows. That you don't find out via e-mail or interview."

"Well, I'd let your lawyer at least know what you're up to, the one with the sharp private investigator."

"Done. Yesterday, actually."

"I'm sure he was pleased."

"Delighted."

It was all she could do to look away as he touched her hair, believing his concern genuine...a plaintiff smile could lead to an affectionate interlude she mightn't recover from.

Thus, on assignment again, as she characterized it, did the domestic drafts abate. Activity is a fine cure all. Only briefly did she wonder if Karen had an inkling of her past, of the few daring excursions she had undertaken, with twinges of fear that defied gravity, to uncover the corrupt and sinister. Her early prowess as a tumbler and rock climber made her more adventuresome perhaps, but also more resourceful and thorough. As the wise man said, truth and privacy see eye to eye.

The climb to reach the water garden was more physically arduous than she estimated the day before. If there were some beam splitters at the perimeter corners they would have been activated by now. All well concealed she concluded after reaching the shadows of a hedgerow that afforded a view of the main entrance while the sun descended. As the house staff departed her ease of entry at least seemed ordained. But she wanted an outside reconnoitre first. How ironic it should be a durable, homey place, with warm reflections and snuggling vines. Not unlike the timeless and easy steadfastness of Karen's early 20th Century college!

If the security seemed lax, below par, her heady daring discounted the likelihood. A growing suspicion suggested the compound could be a multi-task redoubt, what indeed the Cheka once deemed a residency. Then, through an ornate window, a medley of bodies and genial faces, a United Nations élite, including her boss! This discovery came as a splash of cold water -- what in god's name was the weasel doing here? In such company? Looking again at the window glazing and casing she decided the voices within were likely immune to passive listening devices. That at least one

window blind had been left open prompted a further debate with herself.

As she sought out a secondary entrance she nearly ran into two heavies standing on a repair scaffold taking a leak -- security yard bulls bored and spoiling for action. In the deep shade of a mullion she knelt, waited, listening to the conversation at one remove; complaint, she recalled, doubled as soul food.

“Jees I had to piss.”

“You watched the film?”

“Yeah, kept waiting for something to happen.”

”Fat chance.”

“Can you imagine, this statutory lay kick boxes like Bruce Lee.”

“Bloody pitiful.”

“I mean, how spooked is the thing going to get, man?”

“I can taste it tonight.”

“Yeah, some nights the flics don’t cut it.”

“That one babe in the casino. Something else.”

“The one who pulled the sharpie.”

“The Sunday face.”

“Yea, for sure.”

Keenly Catherine listened, wondering who the ‘sharpie’ was, and puzzling out that ‘Sunday face’ probably referred to the girl’s haunches.

“Vitaly said a broad like that could make over seventy thou here -- can you believe?”

“They know where they’re comin’ from.”

So, she thought, at least one boss chap called -- 'Vitaly'.

"He says they even have them strip at the spa, then finger fuck some to get at the back end drug stuff. Some blowjob."

"Better believe it. Some brokers see the entire package and manage the angle."

"Angle. Right."

But in craning her ear to listen, she had lost count of the footfalls as the heavies left, and summarily sought a move curtailed as it began, the large figure swift and sure binding an arm -- her arm! The embarrassing lapse -- not in a Moscow tenement but balmy Montecito!

"Okay, okay," she pleaded.

Said the robust guard, a tall good looking black, "Think you ought to pay your respects before rushing off."

"I said okay!"

"We get so few callers after hours. You cool now?"

She nodded and he released her arm. Then left an opening: "You're not the first you know. We thought we'd give you a chance to skedaddle -- nosy Nancys usually bail out sooner than later."

"I guess."

"Why is it nobody believes what they say about security? Can't read the fine print, I guess."

"Something like that."

"You're one poor bullshitter lady." Then he surprised her. "The job talk a real magnet eh? Those two jokers."

Again a dilemma that aggravated menace. Could she have anticipated any of this -- a Borozov duo trading scurrilities while summoning backup? In thinking they would stand down after their conversation ceased was her initial gaff, the shuffling steps of the one she imagined as the two. They must have seen her earlier. 'Impetuous,' she could hear Michael say. The black, not one of the scaffold lads, was thoroughly conversant with arm restraints. A second guard frisked her but without gratuitous insult. She couldn't help wonder if the commentary varied over time. Leave? My gawd the words were a magnet.

They took her identity papers, Olympus, and outer clothes, leaving her in her tank top and tights in a stonework cellar with a goon who, improvidence being a mugger, reminded her of Deplorable D. As peculiar was an Arabian chap who came from the shadows of a corridor to stare at her as if by chance -- no less, if memory served, than one of the gents who regarded Karen and herself on the fated visit. They stood apart for several seconds. But Catherine was keen to admonish the lingering silence.

"A keen eye for the ladies, have we?"

"Ladies, yes."

"Ribs, legs, or babbling brooks?"

He answered after carefully looking her over. "If your skin is as good throughout, you may do very handsomely."

"Before or after they kick me out?"

"We must see...they have a protocol about such visitations here. I feel certain we shall meet again. *A bientôt.*"

With that the chap turned and disappeared into the darkened corridor. Again the goon told her to relax, assuring her she would be attended to shortly. It had been a busy day. Not to worry.

But the eerie calm dragged on. The prospect of the villa being some kind of legation or intelligence annex seemed possible, given its perimeter guards. She wryly recalled how the Russians were past masters at keeping foreign directories and registers bogus, behind or out of date. In such a chary state she imagined the head wolverine sniffing the facts: First: She was a sturdy journalist guilty of trespass, not an ingenue stolidly making up her mind (her lawyer had been firm on this point). Second: If charged, ABN must suspend her for a time (she was too good to fire). Third: If Kissy were involved here, which her instincts told her he was, he prided himself as wit not mug; for now his 'man in Montecito' bided his time; after this chilly wait they might chat. Possible. Fourth: She would be booked, according to protocol, warned then kicked out. Possible. Fifth: She would not be harmed -- in the bone yard sense -- and resistance must incite. Sixth: She manifestly was, lest she forget, a claustrophobic gadfly sitting in a dungeon!

Twice stung, Thrice mad, Thrice mad Petrograd!

If the poetry of motion on hold did not suffice, it did relieve the occasional shudder. What's keeping the swine? Perhaps she did arrive on a night when 'nobody's home' and they had a dilemma on their hands. Moreover, she had learned very little about the mysterious estate, which re-

mained just that. She tried to eschew intimations of the malevolent, as Michael intimated. Was she overcompensating -- trying to convince herself that a gamy teenage siren was not about to transfigure her life? How easy leisure, idleness stroked the sinews of sensuality and familiarity -- and distrust.

The other curiosity was the room itself, some of the equipment reminiscent of platform trusses and shoring. Then she wasn't sure. Some pieces had a sinister look. What you just might consider finding in an older KGB punishment cell.

When the black yard-bull re-entered it was with a newly edged resolve. He conducted her to a bright modern washroom, not a bog she noted, and told her rules had to be adhered to, even as he seemed unenthusiastic about the necessity here. Security clearance tout court he called it. Put on the the gown...loose hair, nothing under, all clothes to the proctor by the door...the house authority on lingerie, she mused. The second time he issued the instructions his manner was testy. And he was huge. Schnell, schnell! she imagined someone shouting. So. Not the mutual embarrassment she imagined. Reluctantly she decided to comply even though she believed the injunction injuria. She ached to see what really went on here, rash as that might be. Article Four: resistance must incite...even as she brooded on the craven nature in her excuse. Resistance here, moi? 'Remember, don't be obnoxious. Pretend to be rather dumb and terribly earnest. Let them 'patronize' you.' Her lawyer's late begrudged advice.

When she approached the door, clutching her gown with a demureness

she tried to disown, the soi-disant proctor, another black a near match of the first, perhaps a twin! was suddenly thoughtful as he regarded the clothes she held out to him.

“You got nice travel gear here.” He held out her spare but expensive shorts. “Where’d you get this? My old lady has a birthday coming up.” The yard-bull was paying attention.

With impromptu if desperate casualness, hoping for a civil response, she said, “Who else, Chuckie Warren.” But she was disappointed.

“That’s one round dude. So where’s his place?”

“I think he’s bankrupt.”

“I hear you -- the real artists face the rain.” He then looked at her with a fine droll amusement -- suggesting this conversation was as rarified and antic as before, and she was caught up in a charade she’d forgotten the subject phrase to.

In turn she was led into a small cubicle before a sullen woman seated at the foot of a gleaming examination table. Some of the high mirrored vitrines she guessed could house cameras. She planned to balk at the exam to further learn just how shirty the outfit was and thence what might be afoot in this upscale cloister, this ‘crown jewels’ keep. A long shot but one she was prepared to take. The place posed a riddle that warped even her dismay, for she believed it full of a dark past and furtive activities now.

But on seeing her the woman brightened, smiled and beckoned as if they were old campaigners -- so it seemed, her words surprising and unexpected as her sudden prompt cordiality. Catherine was about to declare

that she was there under duress when the woman jauntily spoke.

“Hi there, I’m Grace. Joe, our grounds security head, said you were a ‘waste of time’. Meaning of course that you’re not a worry. Moreover, all this is inappropriate until you sign on with the director anyway. It’s one of the bluffs we use to stiffen our security -- to find out how innocent an intruder is. If pressed, we get the local sheriff’s deputies to check out an obnoxious prowler. So we’ll just sit here and talk for a few minutes. When the proctor arrives with your things you can leave. They -- Joe, Nick and Vitaly -- have exercised due diligence, so nobody’s up a creek. We do get some angry mischievous kids from time to time. A month ago one young brat tried to add a permanent cyan dye to the spas’s pool water. One that didn’t get an offer here. Some of the egos you wouldn’t believe. Iceberg Lettuce -- one of the steamed rejects Joe named.” Grace’s short reedy laughter was high spirited as it was infectious and Catherine, more intrigued than ever, easily silently nodded as Grace continued. “It seems they, the broker assayers, get more demanding each month, but what can you do. They pay the piper, and pay him well, the darlings.”

Again Catherine nodded, doing her best to convert her now rabid curiosity into nonchalance. But Grace was grateful for an audience. “Ordinarily I do some physicals for the upper tier donors and I guess because I was working late tonight they figured I could see you -- make a second assessment. They mainly wanted to make sure you weren’t concealing something. You’re not unlike some others I’ve heard of -- curious, want to look the place over on the sly. Sometimes media preps, like you. The directors

don't approve of course and they've had to set an example or two. How you got as far as you did is an embarrassment for tonight's detail and they don't want or need another warning. Believe me. So. Coffee, tea, cranberry juice? They can't hear us in there so don't be worried about my going on. I can say someone like you would have no trouble getting top dollar. I rarely see such a promising Zelda, ha, ha. For one, you've no piercings or tattoos. And a lot of kids these days have them. For many buyers such marks and mutilations are a complete turn off."

"Why is that, do you think?" Catherine couldn't help asking, even as Grace's perceptions seemed more and more in league with her own.

"Points to a faddish syndrome -- the herd mindset. Beauty without grace. I'm quoting one of the draddy psychologists. A complex business, but I tend to agree, I think. Most days. If you have to so alter things, you probably lack the goods and strength of individuality to deal with reality on your own. That's also a quote. Reality's a bitch though. A swine and a bitch. Somedays complaint's the only game going, hon. It's now a 'style of address', as the shrink says." Grace's brisk laughter seemed inexhaustible, and her reassuring chatter both matter-of-fact and jaunty, despite the fact she often seemed to be talking mainly to herself. Catherine flashed a smile, mindful of the house mother before her, the goose bumps on her own arms a revelation. Was Grace but one more distraction in this house of many gables? Grace added, with amiable interest, "You live in this area?"

The question seemed innocent enough.

“I’m staying with, visiting, a friend. A friend who goes to the spa. And got an interview here.” Catherine shrugged, hoping to appear stolidly curious. “There is a lot of talk -- about the vetting procedure. Just wanted to familiarize myself, I guess. Maybe even meet someone on the Q.T. You have evening seminars I understand.” She hoped the group Darin was seen with would constitute such a gathering and cue a comment.

“There is a lot of talk, love, some of it silly and sensational. Just remember: the folks here are dedicated to harvesting the best eggs going at the spa, set some very strict guidelines and pay handsomely. It’s these guidelines that likely antagonize the ones who don’t measure up after their audition here. The aesthetic and health issues in this country are a minefield.”

“Why is that, do you think?” An earnest question.

“Well, folks confuse health and beauty with what the marketplace hawks, don’t they. All the stuff we’re supposed to have. And be. Sad really, but that’s America. Love us or bleed us.”

“I always thought DNA was a recombinant dynamic, meaning that what you see and measure is not always what you get.”

“Yes, but the desirable traits, and there is a growing consensus here, don’t hang out with old serendipity. The gene genie is out of the bottle. You don’t have it, chances are you actually don’t. Genes are the cartoon you cannot rub out, hon. The tests do the spade work.”

“But is it a humanizing exercise? I sometimes wonder. Does the question sound naive?” Again, Catherine was doing her best to prolong the

dialogue, just as the smiling proctor entered and placed Catherine's effects on Grace's examining table.

"I don't know about that. Progress is a dual edged sword, but humans like to live on the edge. Otherwise we're taking up too much space. Skinny-hat-stands-a- go-go, the wizard says. Today's swish gals." Grace's ready laughter seemed at times robust enough to excuse humanity itself. "Well hon, I talk way too much, and you must be anxious to leave. Use the screen in the corner if you like."

As she dressed, allowing Grace to help straighten the turtleneck, Catherine began placing some of the questions that lingered, in hopes of finding out if her imagination was working overtime. The outcome this day did seem suspiciously benign.

"I still wonder if it's really necessary -- all this physical assessment," she began, and was surprised by the candor with which Grace now addressed the issue.

"Well, in your case I doubt it. But it's become a bit of a racket -- in direct proportion to the money available. Good eggs -- and sperm -- are a main source these days for any number of business folk. Most of it still on the QT. A lot of youngsters are unsure at first but willing to settle for the bonuses. The figures do keep going up. The bidding can be competitive."

"Bidding. I had no idea. You solicit sperm as well?" The consternation of Catherine's words merely fixed Grace's genial attention.

"Hon, humans don't tango solo. The real useful cells come from a zygote I'm told. Part of the growing underground economy. We don't do

the melding here, of course, we abide by the current laws, but the presumption about the eventual use of purchased egg and sperm is not rocket science.”

“And here I thought it was the eggs, mainly.” Catherine was having little difficulty appearing both stolid and serious.

“Well, a lot of our applicants are unsure what it’s all about. At first. What’s involved -- especially the inconvenience. Some hang around, comparing the few brochures out there, wondering if the cash is ticketed and whether they will sign a release.”

“Oh my.”

“Caution we don’t discourage. Better late than...as the bride said. Though coming here as you did, dressed as Mata Hari, did alert one of the worry warts, I must say. The security folk have had visitors who bring in a variety of concealed devices. Newsies usually. Why we should attract such attention I don’t know but we do. But when the Sunni chap saw you, he assumed you were in for a peek -- and would split if you weren’t in earnest. I must say I’m curious why you came as you did.”

Her disbelief growing, Catherine continued with what she hoped was an embarrassed smile: “I met a chic candidate at the spa. Who got an interview here. I guess I wanted to verify her description of the place. Had the evening off. Can you not tell me more about the criteria used. They seem to be a departure from conventional norms.” Such words she doubted Grace believed, though again her ready response reassured.

“Remember ours is a special assessment clinic, hon. The mandate and

criteria are private and classified. The marketing is done elsewhere.”

“There’s no supervisor I could speak to directly?”

“No, hon. You must put all queries to the spa’s registrar. I can’t say her staff won’t expand a bit -- you are a rarity -- but I’m just an old gandy RN. Who can’t afford to retire.”

“Excuse me for asking...I couldn’t help note the guests in the large conference auditorium.”

By then Grace was straightening up the room, replacing a chair, as if this overtime session was indeed over.

“It’s a plenum of the overseers, I believe. Who periodically review the clinic’s mandate.”

“The ones who approve what -- the aims, the physical criteria?”

The smile Grace fixed on her then was less indulgent. “They must show a vested interest, according to the charter -- research, culture, politic will to abide by existing rules. They set the standards for the shopping list and broker’s code.”

“And such criteria are classified.”

“The brokers insist on it. Hon, it’s getting on. And I still have some evaluations to write up. Put your pretty head to rest. If you’re secretly here to earn some extra cash and you haven’t got an audition and broker by week’s end -- I’m a cockeyed optimist.” Again, a reedy chuckle filled the room. Despite the apparent benignity and geniality, Catherine could not ditch her suspicions. Perhaps she had dwelled too long in the land where in Colin Thubron’s words ‘the nights are longest’.

When she was ready to leave, Grace pointed to a wide hallway that would lead to the main entrance. "A proctor will be along shortly." The villa had many rooms and as many maze-like corridors. The hallway was as much gallery and loggia as a passageway. She could have been in a period Italian palazzo. In her present suspicious frame of mind the rich yet serene beauty of the area was almost a rebuke. Beautiful tapestries lined the walls, one entitled *The Fates*, after a Giovanni Antonio Bazzi mural, featuring ladies you did not dispute with. Further along a sculpture of a First Century copy of the *Esquiline Venus* by Praxiteles in which the arms had been added -- 'judiciously' the plaque advised. As unbelievable as the gleaming marble floor decor, faux or not, much of it patterned after the *Sala Regia* in the Vatican she believed. The surreal aspects seemed seamless.

Finding herself still on her own -- no proctor in sight -- she continued on alone.

In an expanded narthex a series of sculptures aligned opposing walls, all life size, one side given to male figures, the other female. She imagined the 'marble' some kind of epoxy though it was hard to tell, the intimation of creamy marble uncanny. What was not in doubt was the modernity of the figures depicted, all the males reminiscent of Greek antecedents, the females modern leggy hoydens -- very cute 'boys' with slim but observant hips and small pert breasts. Not a *Playboy* bomber among the lot. What was also arresting was the pornographic nudity -- no body hair, the nipples and pubes fastidiously detailed. One may not hide from the body regalia

in this gene store. Each example, as attested by a small plaque, featured idyllic concatenations of proportion, limb articulation, cambered musculature, facial lineaments -- every one a unique paragon it seemed. One would have a hard time choosing, all else being equal. Even the short stylized coiffeurs had a halcyon presentation. The future casts of genetically engineered boys and girls? Prototypes slightly improved upon here? Bods definitely left standing on their own, as the wise woman said. Designed by elegance-infused minimalists. The matter seemed pertinent, given the insipid fad for monster boobs, pun intended. Heading on her own down the main hallway proved irresistible. The sudden opportunity to do more reconnoitering prompted her to turn into a side corridor where she would pretend being lost if she were stopped, a state she decided she would not have to affect. Beyond a display case of idealized portrait busts she heard someone talking on a cell phone. The exchange was not amicable. "She left? On her own? Nice. No, not the main gallery."

She listened to these words behind a faux column near a second side corridor. She could hear someone hurrying along the main gallery in the opposite direction. She walked quickly but smoothly to another intersection and turned left. The corridor here was dimmer than the one she left and housed stacked boxes along one side. Some contained leather bound book collections, others faïence tiles, others borders for the tiles. Further down the corridor a door to a salon or lofted study was slightly ajar, the walls covered in woven and glass bead tableaux. Some bookcase shelves were empty, and the visible furniture, a silk-upholstered daybed and a lac-

quered period cabinet, looked either moved or newly installed. She wanted to see more of the room yet could hear footsteps inside and hurried on.

The passageway led eventually to a spiny of light from a doorway one had to pass through to continue. Two lads stood just inside, one fingering a belt or what might well be a weapon. She was about to turn back when the two approached with stoney grins and a wily proposition. She listened with as much equanimity as she was able to muster; neither were soup jockeys. Initially she said, "I'm sorry, I got lost. I'm looking for the public entrance." To which the larger of the two stolidly smiled. "We have a problem," he said in the manner of an apology. She tried to look appreciative.

The surreal aspect continued when the gent 'invited' her to stay the night. "We have some very nice guests suites. We'll discuss our dilemma on the way. Please." After a short silent walk, the shorter of the two firmly taking her arm, she was shown a lovely Edwardian suite -- otherwise endowed with modern plumbing fixtures. If she was registered as a guest, they explained, security would not have to file a report. "You wouldn't want your network told of your coming this night now would you?" the gent advised, his face pockmarked from what she believed severe frost bite or burns. "You are a promising candidate and a report would sideline an application."

A forbidding silence followed this lordly assessment. They knew she was a journalist; the imputation that she might be an egg seller a fine ruse. Acceding to their imposition entailed a further 'adventure' Catherine as-

sumed, yet she did not want to telegraph her suspicion and discomfort; if the cryptic Borozov were involved he'd be alerted by now. She suspected she had been videotaped, as would be likely in a room such as this with its many crystal facets. Moreover, what was Darin the Deplorable doing at a conclave of egg brokers in what could well be an old residency? As per usual the tycoons led a hectic life. Cool Karen said they wanted a good look. Well the suite was a treat for a lass with a spare night on her hands. She shrugged, nodded her assent, doing her best to pretend accord. The price of eggs! The second stockier man then stepped forward -- the 'carrot' bearer she assumed.

"You can of course leave, but you'll make things a lot easier for us if you stay the night. On the registry log you'll appear as a guest of Grace's not a snoop. A stay that won't append a citation or your record at ABN. If you need to make a call, use the phone inside the room. The public outlets are closed and locked after hours. If you insist on leaving, please call the proctor on the room phone and he'll arrange a taxi. The basket inside contains among other things a smoked salmon sandwich, a fruit medley and champagne. We don't have an after-hour kitchen. Unfortunately."

He wryly smiled.

Their departure was nearly as ominous as their coming, a call to the proctor a spur to further intervention, she guessed. Not so 'innocuous' she suspected. So. They knew all along or belatedly discovered who she was! Grace was a fine performer. The room itself was both stylish and lovely, with expansive arched windows that overlooked a blossom-laden trophy

garden. The fruit and health snacks, she noted with some amusement, fairly bristled on a sideboard -- for a special guest, one might assume, not a resolute snoop. With great reluctance she decided to stay the night. Let them patronize you, remember. Her lawyer would make enquiries if she didn't contact him within two days. The extra day was her addendum.

It was all wildly incommensurate -- the convolution and fussiness extrinsic to a buccaneer like Bossy Borozov. Even Kissy for that matter. Or so she thought. She did not have such a fond opinion of herself to think the big 'B' would take this trouble to wing a sly buttinsky; she would have been lectured, roughed up a bit perhaps -- an assault more nearly satisfying to a vengeful adversary than threat of a mundane physical -- and sent packing ages ago. She had played along thus far, alert to the details, but learned very little. She might take a leisurely bath in the swirl tub, test the many creams and soaps, all top drawer she guessed, and dry herself in the balmy air jets and thick burnous towels. A Cheka detention cell at the Waldorf: the world modern, worrisome if not terrifying, obtuse, extravagant and unbelievable, perhaps incomprehensible. Returning from the swirl bath she passed one of the room's myriad reflections and stopped for a flinty look. What's up doc?...

ELEVEN

Kissy especially liked the sprawling villa near Cap Martin on the Côte d'Azur. The rather seedy state of the Romanesque Revival architecture and the wild wood if not wildcat gardens kept showoff parvenus like Bossy else-

where -- usually at the Hôtel Ritz. The old cloister housed a chapel, as much to facilitate meditation as meditation he mused. Tangled garden pergolas nestled on a set of Moorish arches. Such raw beauty also bored cultural blockheads like Bossy and lay just off the decorative stonework terrace that overlooked a copse about as close to the Greek notion of a paradisaal 'orchard' as Kissy had thus conjured or discovered. A suitable place, Kissy felt, to deal with a demand meeting from the wily Aram Mir, the self-styled rogue Islamist who kept them up to date on the vagaries of several rash Sunni rulers and their 'adopted' fanatics. But this day Kissy had the uneasy feeling Aram had come to intimidate.

Kissy sat under the middle pergola -- an outdoor Mosque he thought of it -- as the robust, sandy robed Aram arrived by himself, the estate's steward helplessly gesturing from the terrace. Aram's body guards would have fanned out throughout the grounds, doubling up at the perimeter. The greeting was the usual perfunctory affair. A stoney look and nod. Kissy began by pouring Aram a mineral water.

"So. You mentioned some urgency in your 'communiqué'." Hardly a 'communiqué' of course, but he liked to affirm Aram's eminent appraisal of himself. Kissy assumed some deadline had been moved forward.

"I have made a list. Straightforward." Aram placed a hand written page on the tray table. Kissy took it up with his usual look of ready suffering, which became more obdurate as he studied it. "Make a hand written copy," Aram added.

“The rare ‘perfume’...and supplementary plastic. A lot of the both. Especially the latter. More than the original. You’re going to raze the Eiffel Tower? Garnish Big Ben?”

“The executive tower of Fornax Film Productions.”

“In Los Angeles?”

Aram’s silence was that of an impatient parent before an obstinate child.

“The whole building? Raze? In the ‘scriptural’ sense?”

Aram barely smiled.

“But Fornax takes up only a few floors, does it not?”

“Some other floors are mainly the video distributor they use to peddle their prurient and sadistic offal.”

Such language Kissy had not heard before from this panjandrum and wondered if he hadn’t been listening all that carefully in the past.

“A lot of broken bodies. If we’re talking...demolition. A lot of inconvenience. Not too entertaining.”

Aram looked coerced. Not enjoying this. His grimace a novelty for Kissy, which increased his suspicions. “They make a series called Tsuris. They should know, theirs being as perverse as nature allows. I have a tape of an executive planning session. The ever greater provocation to garner an audience. What they can get away with with the censor. The episodes now air several nights a week. Acutely detailed torture and mutilation, frequently of young surrogate Playboy women. Viewer discretion is advised. For ‘immature’ audiences. They quote eminent Western writers to excuse

their cunning flagrancy.”

“Aram, we’re entering a distant orbit here.”

Again Aram looked as if he might expand, offer some kind of excuse or explanation. There was no enthusiasm in his words. The jester had vanished. Recently chastened by an influential sheikh, Kissy wondered? The newly aloof Aram continued, “When you are more discursive we’ll talk again. We will expect the material the end of the month. The usual offshore drop.”

It was perhaps the one time Kissy was not altogether relieved seeing the back of him -- this new Wahabi-like manifestation. Who had no time to chat, yet insisted on a face to face meeting. What in God’s name had got into the man? And what the devil was meant by ‘discursive’? Did he think Kissy was wearing a wire? Whatever trust had been there before seemed abeyant now. And why should he be surprised, dumfounded? What might he have missed, neglected? He could barely imagine Aram being ‘coerced’ to commit such a devastating act. Was he on some new medication perhaps, in the grip of an obsession brought on at last by a brutally ascetic life? Would Sergei even consider requisitioning that amount of plastic for one? Though he suspected Bossy would likely assent to the request. The more fool him. And why had Aram not sent a message first via the usual channel? It was obvious the ongoing assessment of the younger brother was ‘ongoing’. At such times Kissy felt his brief tenure was over before it began. He wondered if that was all there was to it -- the perceptive Aram sent to vet the stand-in performer. That Aram would un-

dertake such an evaluation seemed out of character. Still, they would listen to Aram.

That night Kissy watched two episodes of the specified program, Tsuris, and tended to agree with Aram, or whoever, that a new level of inane American 'earnestness' was at large. So what else was new? The crimes were sexual in nature and detailed the harassment and torture of pretty women, girls mostly, the 'insets' of the assaults all carefully designed to push the censorial envelope, one nude partly burned body glimpsed in a passing frame. The obscenity, beyond the psycho babble, was the use of literary quotes to 'legitimize' the tenor of the show. He laughed at some; the very ruse the Playboy mavens used to 'legitimate' pornography. One project he had toyed with now seemed overdue, a book he once contemplated writing. The Runt Book, a social history of Modern Man. The dedicated delirious excuse-scripted Playboy. Who once had a wife, even a lingering double standard, now a harpy chorus of feminist lip. Fools, dolts, nincompoops. As for Tsuris...only a very jaded audience would regularly watch such programs, he imagined Aram stiffly exclaim. The audience's ensuing boredom the next hurdle to overcome. The popular, apparently, lurid realism that made reality ever more stodgy, such that only destruction, misery and mayhem might restore the simulacrum. If he was not shocked, the ubiquitous presence of such entertainment surprised. The audience for such fare would be harder and harder to glean in the future. The snuff film sophomores. More and more he sensed, despite his reluctance, the topicality of 'jihad'. Just when he was equanimously falling in love. He

thought of his bust of Nefertiti and wondered if his love of beauty was not partly to blame. The problem with democracy -- the returning, 'boomer-anging' iron law of hierarchy and oligarchy. Robert Michels in *Political Parties* said it as well as anyone. Presaging the beauty, intelligence and will that molests. All that. So why not let the huge peccant beast die a natural death? It's offspring were already ailing -- fat, inactive, benighted. Putting a bomb under its bum would only rouse its vindictive wrath. Set off the conflagration. Was that what Aram's minders wanted -- a total unambiguous war of the worlds? As vouchsafed by a newly sardonic Aram? Or was Aram, as first imagined, simply testing the the stand-in?...

The other problem, almost as pressing though not as consequential, at least not yet, was what to do with the prowler -- his very own inamorata -- who had obviously tried to case the villa at Montecito. The pictures they now had of the sapphic interlude would serve more than one purpose, the soft ambient light in the tea house sufficient to 'enhance' the images. He was disappointed of course. That she might be seduced by a harpy like Karen Guk suggested a sly wanton nature or, he strove to believe, a calculated ruse to learn about the whole enterprise that centered around the Montecito hub. A prospect even he did not welcome at this time. The egg business was important for the clinic but would not sideline her for long. He was assured by Vitaly that she may have glimpsed some of the materiel in the basement, where the moronic security detail had initially placed her. A cellar that just happened to have a sampling of advanced stainless steel fuel rods, some of which Vitaly's team were in the process of evaluating

with a turned American expert. Would she have known what she saw? To a layman they could be stanchions for a children's play center. He knew he was grasping at straws. If she had a good look she would not be in doubt. He drew the collection of digital photographs from the folder on his desk. There seemed little doubt the seduction was real, the debonair Karen excelling at her 'liquid fingering'. Oddly, he imagined both women participating, Karen herself given to unfeigned enjoyment. Both lovely in their way of course. Artemis and her doe. Two serpents reconfiguring Eden. The actions to follow he had just been briefed on -- the need to compromise her arrival at the villa. Make it look like a secret assignation. The why and wherefore. With the 'retired' General perhaps. She would be drugged of course and remain oblivious of what transpired. Likely propped up for a shot or two, a glass of scotch nearby. Someone would likely be seen making love to her, her identity briefly apparent. The digital pics would be a minefield for him. He had to keep his wits about him, meaning he must dine that night on something delicious.

The bedroom overlooked a Stygian pond, its lead glass windows double-spaced and likely triple glazed. The lone coverlet big as a scarf. The bright bedside light appeared to lack a switch or accessible bulb. Co-operate: Red Magoo cannot see in the dark. Welcome to The Aquarium! -- the phrase some GRU wag (a rarity to be sure) dubbed the headquarters in Yasenevo. Catherine had tried to find possible sensors and lenses in the suite but could not confirm any. A not inappropriate scenario she decided

-- alone in the lair of the wolf, who hadn't yet decided what to do with her, but had heard stories about her illustrious dimples, et cetera. She snorted. Such credulity would demand this kind of verification? Well, her lawyer and his investigator would take action day after tomorrow if she hadn't contacted them, which she decided not to do on the recommended phone -- a time frame a Borozov henchman could have guessed at. Thus did her newly menaced state of mind configure the interlude in this cool pavilion, her cooperation again a precipitous gamble she labored to play out. What a performer they had in 'gandy dancer' Grace! She was then so belatedly undecided a tear smarted a cheek. But after sitting in a darkened corner of the bedroom, realizing that dozing so might result in a cold, for the air conditioning seemed in high gear, she sauntered to the bed, slipped down on the surprisingly soft mattress and drew the narrow duvet over her, suppressing a snigger when she discovered that it was electric and also controlled the light switch. Soon she was warm enough to test the silk sheets, her curiosity about her own sensuality an apparently ongoing experiment, for she fell asleep musing on the days events, and her own largely unrehearsed and unrelenting daring.

The following morning a further electric shock on awakening: a set of her work clothes was primly laid out on the day bed, replacing her stealth ensemble. They had obviously paid a visit to her suite, reminding one and all they went where they listeth. As if to rub it in, they sent the stagy style mad Elana to draw a morning bath and fix her hair, another gambit best not to resist -- hot poop being the creature's special bag. As

Elana worked on her sullen client, still damp and wrapped in an oversize towel, she talked nonstop, raising many new and daunting questions. It was all Catherine could do to reassure herself she wasn't going mad. Loopy Elana helped with the comparative example.

"You phiz in a chino, honest injun. The general is a mensch and likes one dress for breaky. You could use some sun. I use the Enfilade sun blocks with dual moisturizing. Cuts down on the free radicals too."

"Who's the 'mensch' general? One of the free radicals?" Catherine tried to keep her rank curiosity in tow.

"They warned me about you. He speaks to many of our guests."

"He's a real general?"

"Oh for sure. Retired rear admiral of the fleet at Arkhangel."

"All the rust buckets."

"Not with subs like the Kursk in the water."

"The Kursk?"

"The most fantastic underwater leviathon ever built. More like a palace I hear."

"A submarine a palace? Isn't that the one that sank?"

"They told me you were a great comedian. There, now doesn't that look fantastic. I wish I had a neck like yours."

"Maybe not today." She was amazed that Elana did not know about the Kursk.

When Alana took her leave, she left behind a costume, a gown, suitable for dining with the General. A droll Hobson's choice, given that the

apprehended business weeds had disappeared...the day's recommended 'work gown' being yet another tease, at least for the time being. So. Again skint in a bright room, a body spied on, possible sites for tiny lenses a distracting exercise. What do they want, in this 'naked egg' bower? Something was atrociously amiss -- Borozov playing a footling game like this? Perhaps his pseudonym was not fanciful...and he too fancied the quaire, a hybrid form, Elana and the many others for show only, this newly planted boyish form a recondite treat. Ha! She sensed a warming glow to her skin. Even cold one may blush in. Shall we dance, she imagined the nameless general exclaiming. To her surprise if not amazement the frock was a near perfect fit. The dream showed no signs of concluding. For a moment she imagined dining with the enigmatic general in the lovely over-size soft burnous bathrobe.

In a linen, crystal, silver plate and chandelier dining room, its large arched view windows overlooking hedges of scarlet azaleas, she and the general sat with two chess mavens, the one consolation being the satisfying warmth of the gas braziers throughout the room. The general mugged a smile -- a sly photo op, perhaps. With cup mate grins they approved her dress, so like the one Pachis had fetched for her 'Castellan' portrait! They all agreed -- the new Russian couturiers were wonderfully savant. She listened in silence, trying to piece together any stray or resonant words. All in vain. They assumed she played chess, which she didn't, and talked at length about the current chic strategies -- usually a waste in their estimation. When she coyly asked why they thought she was here the answer

was airtight. Why to improve on her chess game, the better to field the probation testing. Many of the brokers played and loved chess. They admired her dedication.

Breakfast over, she was escorted to the front entrance rotunda, where her ‘arrival’, so characterized by a proctor, was suavely treated as a mere mix up in addresses: she had obviously wanted to visit the newer spa, its address along with an introductory gift certificate to its services promptly furnished. Thus was she free to go, a development that surprised and drolly entertained, but not impede. On returning to her room for her things, her work ensemble hanging in a closet, she was determined to undo all of Elana’s banal handiwork...just as the dizziness and nausea hit. Soon she crouched by the wardrobe while the scene faded into darkness. Dining with the general had been a limited success.

Vitaly had not been pleased by the phone directives coming from Sergei, Bossy’s international field marshal. “Whatever you’ve got going Sergei, it’s not playing well here. She’s an ABN journalist for pete sake, and this other business is not what we do here.”

Sergei resumed in his usual spare monotone. “The sedative lasts a few hours so keep her there over night, then send her on her way. Let Alana and the team do its work. Insurance. Just make sure she has no material evidence of her stay. Easy enough for a whizbang like you.”

“She obviously seen things -- no, I don’t know exactly what -- but we’ll be on her radar for some time. I think an accident might be the best, all

things considered.”

“Absolutely not. We’ve plans for dealing with her and its imperative that she leave bright-eyed and bushy-tailed.”

“Wide-eyed for sure.”

“So nice chatting with you.”

TWELVE

Awakening, rather slowly, ‘coming to’ in an equally strange and quiet room with what she first imagined an acute state of paramnesia -- remembering scenes and events experienced for the first time -- Catherine again doubted her sanity, certainly her surround. A parquet side table displayed English quill boxes and vintage inkwells. But in an adjoining room before a cheval glass the probabilities intruded, though they too made little sense despite their glaring likelihood. As she sat before the mirror, barely noting the sparsely furnished storage loft or the lovely gardens below leaded windows, her face and form looked decidedly meretricious she thought. The list was not long but unyielding.

1) She was dressed in yet another of her business ensembles!

2 A strong sedative had likely laced her coffee.

3) The photo op with the stiff laconic general may have a louche sequel; she had not dressed herself so, nor applied such makeup. And she smelled of a strong mint bath soap she could not recall Alana using.

4) Any evidence of a carnal liaison must muddy her coming, to say the least.

5) A note by the bed, next to her wig, said a taxi limo was on call to take her directly to an address of her choosing.

6) The mirrored face before her looked bathetic and inescapable.

7) So. Round One -- Whyte. Round Two -- Borozov and company.

She would awake, surely. No single nightmare prevailed over time. Or so she imagined.

At home, incredibly and incontrovertibly at home, ensconced in her own think tank -- her very own modest swirl tub -- the idea of assault malingered as an example of the lone tree falling in the primeval forest...no one about to confirm it. Yet whatever happened yielded no telltale mark or stain; she was alive and apparently well. More than less. She decided that consulting her own physician was a must.

By the morrow, after a lengthy sleep aided by a pill of her own choosing, she had all but 'snapped out of it' and began the day by calling the scapegrace himself. He would espouse ignorance of course -- so she believed -- but his readiness to discuss the matter and tone of voice could answer a query or two in her own mind. "Pachis, love, I need an info package, from a friendly brown nose." But he grunted and rang off offering a paltry urgency: so he was in hock, poor lamb, and might not talk to busy strangers. Stay clear of her for seventy-two hours she could hear some cut-out telling him.

But as she began writing out her thoughts and guesstimates in her work notes, the anticipated call arrived, the voice anonymous, the words terse. The newly wary artist had put out after all? Possible. Dear Pachis.

The voice on the phone, notable for a slight sibilance, tersely directed she do the following:

“Come alone to the Cayuse park at 2 PM, sit in the middle concourse and keep looking in front of you. No wig, no heavy clothing. Someone will cue you with an open palm waved in front. If you look back the individual will see you are a stranger and pass on by. Don’t be clever. This is a one time offer. It’s imperative you come by yourself.” Pachis or not, the bizarre narrative seemed then self-perpetuating. She bridled her anger and debated what to do, before deciding there was no decision to make.

The Cayuse was a rock bound coast near Seal Beach, back dropped by a rising bluff that divided at the scar into a series of shallow gullies -- concourses leading to an expansive, mainly rock and sand plateau. A secluded haunt, dress optional, a place she’d never been to nor, as she drolly recollected that day, tested for sound bytes. How the Russians daunted trade craft! In the end she almost didn’t go; crap shoots she tried to avoid. Now more than ever. Luckily the wait was short, the arrant eye invitations growing by the second when the hand passed in front of her eyes. The voice could have been that of the original phone caller.

“The erosion caverns above are screened by several large boulders: stand on the uppermost foot path next the largest, no questions, hands away from your sides, eyes always forward. Remove the shirt; a bikini’s okay if you’re a shy hiker.” Her sideways glimpse of him when he left revealed a strong nude Adonis! She curtly, dryly guffawed. Of the many

sun bathers about, most she thought were interested in her presence not her schedule, a guesstimate that offered little assurance given the import of her arriving there at all. Thus she easily returned to her car, only to pause and begrudgingly, heatedly change her mind. After a moment's reprise from her swearing, she removed her shirt, checked the hook of her top, grimaced, and retraced her steps.

On the upper path she stood, contrapposto, looking out over the distant bay, hands on hips, as the taut agile shadow sidled in behind, the punctilio at once hardcore, her wry self put to the test as he instructed her to stand behind the boulder and keep staring forward while he sought to vet her hairdo, barrette and latterly her bikini. About what she expected and raked the environs for onlookers, not entirely encouraged she saw none.

"The digital honer you used on one of B's secretaries was set in the lining of an attaché case I'm told. The operational wizards must have been impressed!"

"Bless them."

"We're well screened here by the boulder. If you have a camera chum across the canyon he will be disappointed."

After her hairdo and barrette passed muster, he asked her to reverse the top of her bikini so he could see the cups. Which she slowly did after an arid laugh. When finished he slid her thong off her bum. Her brief recoil seemed to further goad his concern. After an ambiguous hesitation he impatiently stated: "It's the gusset seams I want to see. As you must know. Orifices are not always that efficient and rather old hat."

“Please be advised or I’m leaving.”

“Widen your stance a bit.”

With one hand she kept track of his progress in examining the suit. If she anticipated a more intimate probe, she debated how she might smartly belt him without attracting the notice of any tribal oaf below, let alone one who may be gawking across the chasm. Then suddenly, unexpectedly his voice became buoyant, human as her bottom brief returned with a snap.

“Today, righteous, you appear to be clean; we can talk.”

“What do you do in the wintertime?” she asked as she straightened her suit, resisting to look behind for stray witnesses.

“Go skiing. You want more details I’ll see you at the lookout scarp above. There’s a hollow there you can sit down in. Same rule applies: keep your eyes forward and no questions. I’ll do the talking.”

She had not spied a lens nor human being across the chasm and warmed to a pleasureless flush. Again she debated following her interlocutor’s instructions, but knew going back was as tedious as...though she did say, emphatically, “I’m not keen on going where you can’t be seen.”

“It’s a good spot for private words. If you won’t come fine, but you’ll miss a tale you know nothing about. It involves your life in and out of the Russian Federation. And earlier. A lot earlier. A story for alter and firesides, as the poet says. There is no danger in the telling of it, but the recognition of its pertinence will change your outlook. And maybe your life.”

“And here I thought you might have something important to say.”

But his footfalls were already out of ear shot when she finished. What to do? With a scold's misgiving she followed the prints his large feet left in the sandy path, which indeed led to a pine studded dip that was discrete and secluded. As he said -- a good place for private words -- which proved to be summary and daunting in the warm communal sun, incredible as they seemed fantastic, were it not for a few stark, aberrant memories of her own. As he said, she could and did sit out of view of any dedicated rubbernecks, while he was screened by a thicket of sassafras vines, his naked form a large jigsaw puzzle, his speech pithy and brisk, which she listened to with a forensic resolve, several times biting her tongue.

"The general was a sub commander who got sick from radiation poisoning. He's better now and acts as a facilitator for Kissy Borozov. The breakfast with him will serve as a pretext -- many guests enjoy dining with him. You know now you were drugged. The real purpose of the ruse was, as you must have guessed, mustering the evidence of a tryst -- to bargain with you later if necessary. An opportune deception. There's more. Unrelated to your stay at the villa. A complex story.

"You were an adopted kid. Your birth mother, an influential dissident, figured in some wildcat drug interventions -- in a Soviet medical clinic, one of the early lockups. Someone badly wants to know what long term effect the drugs your mother was subjected to have on you, among other things. As I said, it's a complicated story. You were born in 1975 on a collective farm near Kiev, and have a twin and a half sister. Think: bespre-del. We'll be in touch."

He then left swiftly, surely as he came, his seamlessly tanned backside suggestive of Polyclitus' Doryphorus (Spear Bearer). Bespredel -- unmitigated lawlessness, wretchedness, perversity, hopelessness -- the lingering Russian state of being. Trade craft! His words amazed, dumfounded. It was their tenable credibility that shocked, scored. Her mind was a wilderness. Was he then a mere cutout sent to taunt, confuse, disable? Her instincts said no. Such an operative would not sit among the groundlings. He had weathered all the risks and imparted too much detail to be an adjunct courier. She had anticipated a vetting, which he accomplished, without being gratuitously assertive; so she chose to believe. Her 'sun day' spy. The KGB, later the SFB, she knew had relentlessly spied on her in her hotels, such tapes now part of a secret and impregnable archive she assumed. It was not the first time she'd chanced a fall -- going this day to the Cayuse -- to reassure a potentially serviceable messenger. A daring confrontation at a Georgian border post, which belatedly confirmed her exemplary press identity, had lulled a chary and disgruntled customs official, whom she had targeted, into negligently providing information about one of Borozov's contraband teams. Yet, despite her ordeal and gamble then, she hadn't been as pent up as she was now. This late messenger's comments left her indigent, a pauper, beggaring the old questions about her origins that surfaced from time to time, and now caused a rash of suppositions. It seemed she'd been turned to stone, to look out upon this trite vista the rest of her life. She -- an adopted child? Her sweet dear mum a surrogate parent? A Russian twin -- and half sister? The few memory lapses she'd experienced

throughout her life returned and lingered now as a kind of hangover. She recalled other disorienting times, on a sabbatical or holiday...though there had been other occasions too, all of which eluded any medical cause excepting too much booze...not that she had vigilantly pursued the matter for her regular physicals with her doctor were propitious, her factual memory exemplary, and her assignments never dented as a consequence of the lapses, which now took on a greater and onerous magnitude with this stranger's daunting intimations and insinuations. Could it be? She a long standing object for what -- an ongoing clandestine clinical assessment? As she looked down the embankment, she reassessed his caution in meeting her -- how the large boulder below would have screened her presence from the naked cruisers and wannabes but not perhaps a witness across the gap. And the trailing signal she' planted! She smiled to think he might imagine her trying it a second time -- given her near failure with the first. The straw or thread that broke the camel and eventually sent her packing. A rare coincidence of bandwidths she later thought! Though not discovered before the transit route of the formula was confirmed. By then Borozov obviously wanted her out of the country. Both the Cheka and Interior Ministry folk likely wanted more time to backlog some of her maneuvers but were overruled. An impressive credible fact! Borozov the 'doer'.

The following morning began thus not as drama, as anticipated, but cartoon, a sense of half-tone tints and deeds 'dicing' her life...of the voids in her memory curtly filled in by a chance encounter, a 'doodle' at the Cayuse! The suspects were conjured and reviewed in the shower then over a

largely untouched breakfast: the special school, a particular nurse, her sometimes nebbish mother, the toffy stranger beholden to her father, the fitness instructor who came highly recommended and got her on a vitamin and muscle toning program to remedy an ‘eating disorder’, even getting her mother to agree to brief stays in an area clinic. Then there was the time on a brief holiday in London when she got high as a mooner only to wake up in another chic clinic. And what in god’s name might they be looking for during these ‘visitations’, these putative -- covert -- assessments? How could one possibly know what mischief went on in a Soviet lockup over three decades ago? What long standing effects might be thus assessed, affirmed, recorded, if the drugs or whatever were as potent as her interlocutor intimated? And why the secrecy? To coddle her devoted but timid mom -- who might or might not be in on the secret? To blinker the subject herself, cognizance being a pesky intervening variable with some some ongoing assessments? Or, most likely, to protect some of the ‘facilitators’, the person or persons who got her out? Was she then a walking time bomb that might explode? Was she leading a shortened life, her usual robust health simply a foil to some insidious deterioration? And why this revelation now? Could it be a sly Borozov gambol to both tease and addle her? And, more pressing and vexing, was she already on some internet site being raped while drugged? “We’ll be in touch,” the Cayuse chap had said. To accept the episode at the villa as yet another involuted intimidation mauled. And introduced the other vexing question -- how much detailing would she entrust to her boss? Presumably one of the ‘ple-

num of overseers' to the egg custodians. Who so placidly shied away from reality. Thus meeting Deplorable D. in his Hill's retreat that weekend to tell him of Kissy's possible gambit in egg marketing was like informing an illustrious steward that the oysters were off. Standing against his garden's vivid lush bougainvillea he seemed immune to any gadfly bite.

“Well, until your B. initiates a shabby future's scam here, or the like, with associates the FBI are wary of, we must be fair and patient. As I've said before, stories that tend to buffet frangible democracies are imprudent and partisan -- to say nothing of the sensationalism we do make every effort to nix. So how's the new feminism progressing these days?...” She didn't confront him with his being at the villa nor disclose her own curious and dismaying adventure there. She did visit her female doctor for a thorough checkup and allowed herself to be reassured that she still had the pristine body of a teenager. “Well, a lot of today's teens aren't that fit, are they?” “Relax, you're not one of them!” In response Catherine mugged a smile.

But the week that followed was uneventful on the clandestine picture-parent-poseur front. And the Cayuse chap sent no calling card. It was a limbo she hadn't anticipated and could not get her ducks in a row for further reconnoitering. The application to the egg clinic sat unattended on her home desk. Her picture had been published several times since the inaugural OO Magazine cover, and her anonymity diminished. Thus, given her boss's query about feminism, she let her new ABN 'position' establish a momentum, give her a rise. She could write about the day's 'feminism'

in her sleep. Known as the Life Force Guru with the research grunts -- her pompous in-house title -- she fancifully proposed to byline her actual title as the The Krafft Lady. But Krafft (i.e. Krafft-Ebing) failed the DDT , the Deplorable D. Test. She: “Well, it’s all about untrammelled adventurism, isn’t it? Natural, healthy, victimless and fun.” He: “Provided you keep it civil of course.”

Thence, as LFG she attended a rehearsal of one of the spring fashion shows in the new MGM Grand, a line by the sometime film-maker Anton Plombiers -- the current Enfalade designer -- and found, her slagged astonishment rekindled, the now busy Karen modeling a fabric-print dress, the pattern a pastiche of her own face! As entertaining was the recondite label, βροποζοπ, a fanciful insignia of the OPUS group, one of Kissy’s Russian residuals that had bought up the Paris based House of Enfilade. The highlight of the coming show, beside the appearance of tony Karen herself, was a set of gowns that seemed spun from the finest Steuben glass. Said ABN’s fashion editor about Karen’s presence in one, with Catherine’s blessing: “A cool cucumber in the borscht belt trade, wrapped in the finest Steuben condom.” Suggesting to Catherine that she didn’t stand alone in the breach. Still, the old Nineteen century notion of ‘Forlorn hope’ -- for those in the advance guard of a siege company -- seemed apt.

Later, on an open plaza that overlooked the ocean, agile Karen, looking like something from Ali Baba, performed balance gymnastics with a magic ball as the rehearsal wound down with a display of minimalist lingerie/sportswear, behind which slipstreamed the ‘debut’ of a new theat-

rical makeup applied on near nude models to ape the tighter swimsuits -- a pert sales gambit that required, apparently, a full 'dress rehearsal' to see if heavier pigments fully adhered. More and more she imagined the prodigious Kissy in the offing, and sighed without compunction. Such was the new tycoon she mused: engaging, seductive, patronizing, suborning, ruthless, toxic, atrociously successful. His byline had not surfaced by accident nor provincial awe alone. Maenad. Rather hard on 'dolts and naifs'.

Afterward, in the bright make ready area, Karen's egret eyes were alert to one and all, the spell she exerted all but ineffable, the haunt of a chimera. She had been part of the programmed finale, wearing a beautiful silk sarong, her star dusted hair jouncing as she sauntered. She was the first to speak.

"Glad you came."

"You look great -- tony frock that first one, all faces."

"More in the real show."

"Any surprises?"

"I am free, after."

"The egg scouts tea'd up, are they?"

"I am free after."

Catherine smiled. The thought of Bossy's or Kissy's liege lads possibly exploiting this paragon was more than she bargained for, and her own unrelenting curiosity, given Michael's ongoing philandering, an endurance test. Was she, just perhaps, something of a Maenad herself after all, as Michael carelessly teased, excusing his own occasional inadequacy? They

studied one another in the make-ready mirror, Karen's folded arms framing herself, a poised Artemis seeking unsuspecting prey. Nearly Man-Michael's form...only leaner, smoother, intermittently softer, better proportioned. Fortune's being.

If she managed to depart the rehearsal with a promise to attend the 'real' show and hang around after, the note on her desk further blurred her identity. Her secretary had attached a snippet from *Quidnunc*, a tuxedo tabloid, which contained a photo of Pachis and ostensibly herself (though identified as Coren Wily, a model) standing next to Abram Salakhova, the celebrated art collector/industrialist, the picture taken at a London gallery earlier that year. Her secretary's note read: "You have a twin! Clever girl. Frances, our page designer, says she saw someone like her at a spa in Santa Barbara. Must be a cock up at *Quidnunc*. Not the first I imagine." A further surprise was that Pachis was identified as a friend of Louis Führ, the mod photographer of fitfully adventurous women.

The prospect of a 'double' dismayed -- a likelihood not to be slighted for she did not recognize the photo nor the dress, making it either a mischievous pastiche or evidence of a 'twin'! Could Pachis be abetting a life she was still unmindful of, that of a Russian dancer sporting an alias? Possible. The magazine was dated two months before the attack, after which the dancer vanished. An archive editor at *Quidnunc* confirmed the identity. "It's the name our reporter was given; a model we have no background material on, though she was a friend of the Russian art collector -- the reason for the picture." How the curiosities these days baffled and in-

timidated. Wilde's Lady Bracknell had weighed in on one aspect of the subject: to lose one parent may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose both smacked of carelessness.

But surprises often gang up on one. Like the revelation at the Cayuse, the parcel from David Willardson arrived out of the blue the following day, and promised to further umber the horizon despite the whimsy of the covering letter.

Dear Catherine,

Apropos your interest in Russian 'arts and crafts', a new publishing house, Corybant Press, roughly attached to historic events, is promoting a book you may find topical. I send you my advance copy for a preview. The silent publisher is Felix Muerner, the Bern Clinic maven and new European head of the Paleomena conglomerate, my erstwhile employer. I also enclose an invitation to his clinic's 40th anniversary party. DW

The invitation card featured a water garden and some elegant figure statuary, paragons all. The works of Louis Führ were to background the fête at the Sonoma estate of the enigmatic Muerner. She ruefully speculated that Führ and Pachis constituted a second dumfounding conspiratorial team.

When she got to the book she already had a scotch in hand and a homebody's pique at meddling neighbors. As she perused the slick pages, she heard someone raptly swearing in a voice she could not disown. A fable of Minoan Crete featured a heroine who was at least a close match of

her own spry self. While the pics vexed (her mood at the moment for, to the best of her recollection, she had posed for none of them), the story presaged the time of the catastrophe, the sudden calamitous end of the aesthetically rich Bronze Age. In late mythical terms, the period saw the first tears, rents in the ancient veil of epiphany -- i.e. the advent of a new human monstrosity humans could not finally transpose with the demise of illusion and myth (epiphany), now enjoined by the advent of modern genetics, which indexed the idiosyncratic soma nature deals us. The book was entitled, *Musing the Maenad* -- another rude curiosity -- with text and composite pictures by Louis Führ, the protagonist a Minoan aristocrat who ends up as an Egyptian queen (the Greek version of the tale of Nitocris), her Minoan roots and court life, including a stint with a Dionysian sorority, the Thyiads, all but begging the possibility. As Catherine considered the virtuosity of the illustrations -- each image or tableau an assembly of many discrete images, all given a painterly aspect -- the prospect of a raffish double of herself began to dismay. She set the scotch aside. The fact that dear Pachis had illustrated the book further puzzled in that the final 'tableaux', as they were called, contained no poses she had struck in his Vancouver studio. At least none that she could remember. Suggesting that his sole interest in her was to provide the Borozov's with private images. Which turned her stomach.

There was more.

On a randomly selected page, featuring a sun flecked garden, her proxy stood with chère Viola -- Pachis' late model! -- both women eying an

owl and a snake in spreading oak tree. 'Following a Cloudburst,' the spare text intimated. The period setting thus transfixed as much as the 'stand-in cajoled. Under this very tree in the antic spa of Kallithea, near Old Rhodes Town, had she watched a cat stalk a young bird. Then, on another page -- more consternation -- a meeting of her double with Pachis the faun -- on a shingle like the one near Faliraki where she had met a posturing Pachis!

As she ventured further into the handsome pages, she canceled a late supper invitation from a newly, rawly returned Michael. She wasn't feeling quite herself. (Meaning: don't call at the last minute -- particularly when your date may be a multiple personality.)

Then she did something she hadn't done for a while: fetched her apricot brandy -- scotch was then less agreeable -- and began prinking before a mirror in a baddie getup Michael had given her for a weekend lark some time ago -- a private joke. Which, having absented himself that evening, he must miss. Now, looking at this Kirdis maiden with a trophy penis about her neck she mused that the Cheka were after her body all the time -- spying, the old Soviet way of boffing the wise man said. The ostensibly flattering remarks of cagy Grace made her look at herself anew, bemused that her nearly callow form could yet serve as a model of something rarefied, the unblemished pale skin perhaps something a Kirdis maiden might find entertaining. Hence the imputation seemed not unapt -- the form itself, free its pigment, inconspicuous but balanced, proportionate. Nothing in excess. But nothing. So like the model in Führ's book. A book Felix

Muerner, the enigmatic utopian, had seen published. She snorted and bot-tomed another two fingers. She was at sea here. Amidst this wobbly ever deforming mirage. Musing the Maenad. Ha!

Her last recollection that night was studying the book's lustral initiation scene, reminiscent of a painting she'd seen at the earlier salon showing with Willardson -- a painting not a photographic assembly she had as-sumed -- the setting now acutely familiar, the cozy grotto at Kallithea where she and Michael stood but a month before. Despite the celebratory masks of the bathers, she felt the breath on her neck of the sirens adminis-tering the rite...the initiation of a young kore into the labyrinthine realm of what...a tribade or Thyiad sect, full of Maenads perhaps? Not ones for decorous veils. Thus did the old supposition reassert itself. Was Kissy a closet monstrosity, a variety of epicene or transsexual then? Obsessed by a clever consequential journalist investigator, who happened to recall a fa-vored hoyden or some other favorite hobby horse? Who fit, evoked a favor-ite historic fable or two? One real, one embodied in fantasy? If the pros-pect once seemed far fetched, an idle spare time amusement, it finely nee-dled now, her nose already aflame. She had never met the illustrious and enigmatic Felix Muerner -- who endorsed the book -- but knew the reputa-tion of his Bern clinic to be exceptional, though she wasn't sure what they did exactly. But no gaggle of Maenads would keep her from his clinic's ce-lebratory party! Though she doubted the bugger would himself attend. It was known he was elusive and distrustful as a mullah. She also needed to talk, without remorse, and phoned the always agreeable Willardson the

very next day. Her suspicions that weekend were open ended. She had never been so rudely muddled.

“That’s a tall book you sent me.” She sat in bed with a a stomach biter in hand.

“Quite a beast isn’t it.”

“You don’t think I participated -- posed for it -- do you?”

“The possibility was entertained. I am told that Führ has assembled a phenomenal photogravure archive and is given to that modern humbug -- photoshop fiddling and retouching. I don’t know about your other friend.”

“Well I didn’t. Never posed for a photographer. At least while conscious.”

“I rather thought not.”

“Can you not give me a fuller genesis of the book?”

“In all candor, it arrived on my desk as dramatically as it did on yours. I get a number of such pretty encyclicals each month. Along with invitations to some or another event, this one being a perquisite of course. I may uncover a few details in the interval. We could meet on the terrace that overlooks Muerner’s Japanese gardens. It’s a restricted area -- usually for the fogies. We might converse there. If I find anything notable sooner, I’ll let you know.”

“You’re on.”

“I trust you’re in reasonable health and coping.”

“Do I sound that bad?”

“Well, there always seems to be something engaging going around. My own physician never fails to reassure me of the prospect.”

“Well...maybe one too many last night. Over the book. Some pastiche. I presume I’ll get to my sainted mother first.”

“Oh I think so. It goes on sale this month in Greece, of all places. Someone, I suspect, wants an early verdict. So the window of opportunity -- to warn your fellows, if that be necessary -- should be ample. And I doubt, if the critics aren’t enthusiastic, it will have legs elsewhere.”

“What do you think?”

“Well, the dual Egyptian-Greek story of Nitocris is sufficiently remote and disputatious to addle a few nit pickers, though the attention to artifact detail is striking, to say the least, so I’d give some odds on its clever promotion -- at least in Europe. Americans tend to be underwhelmed by antiquity. Yet who knows? I do look forward to seeking you at the fête. As you know, you are my favorite news hen.”

“A lame contest right now.”

“Enjoy the sabbatical.”

“Ha.”

Kissy put the book down with a lenient smile. The object of his ardor had never been more fondly showcased. The sobering regret came with the recognition that though the book’s mythological heroine was inescapably earthbound, this was likely not the journalist who adroitly fingered his brother, but a home grown player called Zoya Stolbanov, an uncanny dou-

ble who, had they been paying attention, was featured in several Russian entertainments, including one dance group at the Apsaras. Under their very noses she was -- until she stabbed the stray Muslim. He vaguely recalled a dancer whose makeup mask foiled identity, and whose self-importance irked the club's directors. Only her popularity with some audiences kept her on apparently. But he couldn't recall seeing one of her acts. The gaseous irony was the fact that this Zoya was already pictured in Chuckie Warren's hot tub when he and some business cronies holidayed in St. Petersburg. Kissy laughed aloud. The match was uncanny. Feliks would be dandling his upper plate like a hot potato.

The verisimilitude in the book, he must admit, was both sobering and edifying. So. Catherine Whyte not quite unique after all. He was still amazed she had done most of her investigative work in Russia herself, patiently suborning a few customs officials and mid-level bureaucrats no doubt. The supplementary fact that Muerner or one of his mavens had taken an interest in Führ's output only enhanced the aura that must engulf her sooner or later. And Kissy's bull headed brother wanted the paragon bird iced. 'Waxed' as Sergei put it. It would be an exacting season. Just how she was persuaded to actually pose for some of Leatherby's own early canvasses struck him as odd. There was no mention of a wider family in her professional biography. And her interest in the art world was a new ABN deployment. A blithe 'twin' at work in a Borozov club would have complicated if not foiled her work in Russia and likely nixed her stint with Leatherby. Her CV identified her as an only child. Surely, with her

reputation and career blooming, she would have balked at Leatherby's offer, found it derisive even. Was she that desperate to follow the Borozov trail stateside? All Pete Leatherby had was a Fischer-Bakey grant, which he won entirely on his own. The artist really only came under their radar when Whyte returned to the United States. They had followed her from Eastsound and Friday Harbor. She must have known as little of his early varied work as they did. She could not have known of his association with Führ. The mix and match of painting and photography. Which produced a style neither one or the other, however 'photographic' the final look, Pachis being the one who often tidied up Führ's flighty, disorderly work. The dilettante and the salvager, if not redeemer -- as he thought of it. And where, in tarnation, did the one damsel end and the other begin in their work? Where some painterly images and discrete photographs might have melded? Did the journalist confuse Leatherby's early mannered style with his entire work? Führ's trademark salacious output would surely have put her off. Was she still enamored of Leatherby -- an early teen Romeo? The excursion into Vancouver Canada certainly suggested she could be. In any case, Führ, with Leatherby's help, had showcased a singular, understated beauty. A plural unity! A dyad. Perhaps that was her early presumption -- no one would notice her in the period costuming and minimally abstract style Leatherby used at the time. 'No, not her,' an acquaintance might say; 'We all have near doubles in this life.' Yet he knew the American tabloids would salivate over the story if and when the identity was revealed. It was a wondrous tease. That could slight an earnest jour-

nalistic career.

His discovery of the original Akrotiri mosaic, a revelation for himself at the time, only added to the piquancy now. That particular mosaic invoked his special object of desire and prompted him to showcase it with some slight changes to more nearly match the profile of his inamorata. He looked across the Moscow River's Stone Bridge from his Moscow office at the magnificent Cathedral of Christ the Savior -- which had been rebuilt from the ground up after Stalin raised the original -- and tried to picture it as the Taj Mahal from its garden vista, to remind himself how the inspiration of a woman might transform even the landscape! The one satisfaction was that the use of the Enfilade model seemed now supernumerary. If the intent was to sully Whyte's reputation as a journalist, the deeds of her double would soon be manifest on several continents -- so he believed -- the identity of the one sufficient to absolve the career of the other. The tea house photos had now no specific utility. Trying to harm a comparatively well-known and liked journalist would now be as craven as savaging an audacious captivating celebrity. He picked up the book again with a condolent smile. But for the dump Aram left on his doorstep, life would be nearly whole.

Hejaz flipped through the same book Kissy then treasured, but with a mixture of confusion and uneasy disgust. The prospect of a 'double' was, on the available evidence, a near certainty. As far as he knew Führ worked in Europe, his home studio in Frankfurt in fact. So what would a canny

reputable journalist be doing posing for a blowfly like him anyway? So: two illusive targets for angry Ammon? Would he be satisfied if both were killed? Hejaz' disgust with heedless Muslims rivaled his hatred of presumptive Western and Russian infidels. More and more he wanted to tell the Borozovs to go to hell! Aram's droll humor was little help. And now even that seemed to be ebbing.

THIRTEEN

Muerner's Sonoma mansion nestled in lush parkland of tall hemlocks, bamboo, azaleas and ferns, circled by a moat full of silver fingerlings. The setting sun edged a moss carpeted walkway with luminous gouts of emerald green.

After leaving a sullen Michael at the winery bar, her coolness toward him persisting, she found Willardson, ever bemused, on the gallery terrace, which most of the celebrants had thus far eschewed, finding Führ's early work sufficiently problematic to incite a kind of town hall debate, the initial salvos of which retarded escape. Well, the chap obviously has a fascist's infatuation with Nordic sylphs. Catherine had been relieved to find the illustrations here free of her Doppelgänger, and Musing the Maenad mentioned only in the catalogue. Willardson she found in an apathetic slouch, his elbows resting on the railing overlooking the moat. She joined him in a quiet perusal of the splendid further grounds, a natural Sequoia park, and decided she liked the slyly avuncular curator because his language, though ornate, stroked and informed as it teased. She was thus im-

patient, if a little daunted, to get the words flowing, knowing she might exercise a little preciousness herself. She began: "You look finely parsed. As always. If I seem a little light weight tonight, the old deconstructionist has lost some weight."

"Splendid. Yes, indeed!"

She was pleased to note the satisfaction he took in the silk frock which showcased her creamy shoulders and back.

"That looks like an Ungaro."

She smiled. "A fair imitation maybe."

He silently gestured to dismiss a triviality.

"An impetuous question first: You thought the pics in the book, the Maenad thing, extraordinary. If memory serves."

"Yes, given their provenance, and the plainly ambiguous 'she'."

"You've never believed in phantoms I trust."

"Well, the Russian mafiya can ham it up, without trying of course, but I can't see what they would gain here or why they would bother. If indeed Kissy is in part responsible for the book, which I suspect he is." He wanted to say that there were only so many enlightened connoisseurs in the world but resisted possibly kicking down an open door.

"So it could be just a hoot, an anomaly to amuse. I'm sorry; I'm dealing with a few bugaboos these days."

Willardson took a moment to respond. "You may find the following interesting. As breaking news. There is a rumor, only a rumor mind, that comes from our foreign desk, of a Russian who pulled off a coup the near

match of your own in daring and craft in sleuthing the baby formula scam. The person in question, a dancer and model apparently, absconded with some precious gems and rare ikons owned -- likely an appropriation -- by an old buccaneer on the General Staff of the New Russian Federation, a former chief procurator who diligently looked after himself. One of the lady's suspected aliases being 'Coren Wily'. Does that name ring a bell? Outside of Quidnunc? Yes, I read it periodically. Some photographs of the dancer, when a young teen, appear in an early collection by one Levrenti Ganyanov -- a Russian photographer with a largely unenviable reputation. Whereas Louis Führ, a darling of the tarty chic, is credited with the illustrations in the pretty storybook I sent you."

Catherine was a time taking this in. "The girl with my face card profile. You're not making this up, I trust."

"The dancer performed latterly in the London Apsara under the name of Devi, where she had a contretemps with a Muslim. It's likely she posed for some of the images used in illustrating *Musing the Maenad*. I take it, from your expression, that this news stirs a resonance or two."

"'Two' is the operative word."

"Shall I keep my ear to the salient ground then?"

"I would be grateful."

"Is there any likelihood you're related? She does not appear to be a phantom."

"I wish I knew. Truly. Her own situation rather doubles the peril of trying to meet her. Though her whereabouts now are unknown, and my

secretary's enquiries dead ended."

"Well then, a fine absorbing puzzle."

"Which I'm doing nothing to perpetuate, believe me."

"Knowing you as I have been favored to, I can't imagine you getting caught up in a trivial pursuit."

"Trivia -- the problematic issue here."

"I trust your natural instinct for survival is not diminished."

Catherine lamely smiled.

A series of huzzahs from the ballroom suggested the debate about Führ's work had reached some kind of standoff, Michael's voice figuring plainly among the critics -- those who felt the collection was manifestly technique masquerading as art. Since his latest amour had gone off, he was doggedly mindful again -- imagining her recent stint with Pachis agreeable. She sensed a frisson of excitement that both teased and appalled; in such a mood Michael could be keenly possessive and grimly obdurate.

Said Willardson, "I think the show is about to begin. After you, mam'selle."

"Hmm, isn't it wisdom before vanity?"

"Absolutely." Again he gestured for her to proceed, adding, "Incidentally, I think Führ retains the copyright for the pictures in the book, despite a possible collaborative effort. He and your friend may both be Borozov protégés. A possibility."

"A dour conclusion."

In the ballroom, the Borozov/Muerner connection was indeed up for grabs, as stories of their adventures and tutelage made the rounds -- all of which regaled the notion of Führ as opportunistic sharpie. To sojourn the slur, a testy Michael stood in for a critic who thought Führ “a clever Pandarus!” Willardson doubted Michael knew much about the Trojan aristocrat or Janus’ uncle in Troilus and Cressida but felt the comment a fine slur of an upstart. Calling one of the riled docents a “dumb old coot” titivated the debate, the ‘coot’ himself a sturdy heavyweight. Dear liquored Michael was all too keen to ‘take him down’-- as someone later said -- reminding Catherine that guilt served to keep the whimsy on hold. Everyone seemed to anticipate a sudden Muerner appearance, perhaps hoping he might foil the contretemps -- he was known for dramatic comings and goings. Willardson drolly suggested that were Catherine to look carefully, she might find some physical paragons among the guests whom Muerner, in his capacity as a transformative medic, had a hand in ‘finishing’. It was, by and large, an exceptionally attractive congregation. By then Michael had calmed down sufficiently to straighten his cufflinks -- usually a sign he was about to undertake a ‘full measure of response’ -- though from the distance they viewed the stand off the dynamics were hard to estimate. Then the strident voice of the docent, the adulator of Führ’s work, suddenly cracked and he was reduced to a hoarse whisper. Several sniggers ensued. By then most patrons had lost interest. Michael looked let down.

Catherine handsomely smiled.

The evening’s finale, which was summarily announced before the com-

batants reached a verbal dead end, featured a spirited dance ensemble re-configuring parts of Rossini's *Il Signor Brushino*, a pastiche full of willful mistaken identities and incontinent buffa effects that featured eight 'prodigy' danseuses wearing similar gaudy face masks -- "in deference to the academies they likely attended," Michael ventured, on first seeing the skimpy costumes they wore. She tended to agree, as she took in the idyllic forms Muerner seemed to be a curator of, for the near perfect bodies of the dancers, men and women, appeared to be interchangeable. The night ended with as fine a champagne as she could remember and, at closing, mutual mass hugging of the posturing, cordial and stoic alike.

'Well, it is a labyrinth,' she said to her mirrored face the following morning. She was not good at negotiating mazes like the eugenics one Muerner tracked. As much as she remained wary of esthetics, she found herself indulging its complex discriminations of late. Even Michael, more or less exonerated, lingered only so long as she shed her robe and climbed into a swirl bath. Looking at the rich foam about her she mused, "You wouldn't think of a witch's brew...such sweet bubbles." Said Michael as he wiped off his remaining shaving lather, "Your point being?" She smiled. "My current state...in a strange stew pot." As he applied the aftershave he said, "I think you like stews."

"My lion and unicorn. You think?"

Michael shrugged and left after giving her a brotherly kiss.

Well, he did overdue the champagne, she though, and was dealing with

a 'morning after'-- leaving her alone with her 'dusky' thoughts, which were sometimes best sorted in silence. Including the man-Michael daemon. How to sojourn such a one. Such a wary one. *I'll see you again, whenever spring breaks through.* Whenever. Noel Coward could not have said it better. Spring could be a long time coming. She was having a sullen time that day...the marbled waters of the spillway pool she and Michael haunted a while back too near in her ongoing recollections...a restless memory pool that vivified daring. Detecting illusions was a risky exploit, that she knew, like broaching underwater the granite facings to the physical pool itself, the understanding being that diving from the cliff above into such a charybdis was hazardous but confirmatory, the proof of living. Now, with The Cayuse revelations, and her subsequent reflections, came a resurfacing of past things -- like the fact that she really did not look like her selfless lovable and now putative mum, who still believed her favorite child the young olive in Athena's gaze. Even now the name, Coren Wiley, a fabrication no doubt, served to implicate past bespredel or obval in Holy Rodina -- the putative land of her birth! No, the periodical had not made a mistake. "The picture of Ms. Wiley is one of several and conforms to our illustration inventory." So said the paper's archive supervisor in a late advisory. So: a double, a Doppelgänger visible to others as well as herself. Who seemed to have vanished from the face of the earth. Wiley indeed.

Again, it was her new job that she looked to to provide a swift serviceable distraction from the returning, re-vivified recollections. If female perplexity was one aspect of her new job that daunted amusement, the

advert in the latest OO Magazine proved irresistible, given her interest then in the experience of calming waters, and here the initiation of ‘Staged Lustral Bathing’. The bold face quote beside the picture of a snooty New York model read: The muses speak -- of a new beauty spa which, among many singularities, boasts a new electrolyte bath that convenes the sauna-birching cycle. Here top Bopoζoω model Chanticleer tingles for salubrity. The fact that Chanticleer resembled the ineffable Karen Guk took a minute to absorb.

Well, tingling for salubrity would require the usual intense dedication on her part...thence did she find herself in the acclaimed spa on her way to the cold pool from the cauldarium when she was unexpectedly accosted by a willowy, range fed beauty whom she did not know.

“I’ve information you may want,” the beauty said.

“A lot of it about.”

“Sit in the Finnish bath afterward, keep looking in front of you and don’t converse. Please lap an extra towel if and when you are ready.” The Finnish bath, Catherine remembered from her initial reconnoitre, was a quiet, steamy, anonymous preserve, the towels there luxurious and enveloping.

In this last and warmest room of the baths, pale forms mingled as Karen’s thin cool voice suddenly addressed from behind. “On the left side they tend to leave you alone.”

The articulated left side, suggestively the Amy she-male sanctum, the statuesque Karen then approached, the side darker than the rest yet esoterically

clear, nearly free the dense shrouds of steam. Maneuvering a lethargic Catherine onto the wall plinth made them roughly the same height.

With the ease of a matador Karen shed their rich toweling, leaving them as inmates, pledged, pressed as tyros, privacy assured because it seemed newly irrelevant. Deeds thus to confess, affirm... the egg momma or scalper a painterly soul in transit. So the numinous interval transpired, words slippery as dew worms, perspiration pearled...that Karen might be a shill for a Borozov ruse was apt, if baleful and largely unplanned for -- words of doleful wisdom as Karen's lean finger traced a newly budded breast, an electric thrill, the kiss that followed tenderly, fluently hers. It was the period when Catherine decided she was what they mundanely call 'undersided'. It lasted that long weekend. The great bracing rinse wash...with scents and sense to ween understanding. Such commentary she later wrote in her diary, with an articulated fondness that belied chagrin. The pictures, however, were another matter.

The later historic scrapbook complication was not the photos Karen gave her of herself, but the few dozen she took of that intimate weekend. The original collection included Karen's first forays into the world of commercial modeling, entitled Very truly Yours, which Catherine would treasure always: images of a lithe well-defined teen with will-o'-the-wisp hair and little makeup. Before the Fall, Karen had written on the folder cover. Inside, the pics included: her egret eyes framed by an arabic head dress captioned in Karen's own writing 'Bit part in the short film Oasis'; a hammy Charles Atlas pose simply captioned 'Ms. Uniate'; her amused

head emerging from a digitized zygote titled ‘The great egg broker’ (a computer pastiche); and two lovely profile nudes, one standing -- ‘Stolen backstage by a determined prick at a show in Kiev’ -- and one kneeling in a retail ad -- ‘My first nympho shoot,’ the glib retail copy of which read, *The lather says it all -- Incence!* The deliberate misspelling a reminder for Catherine’s of her surprise over the second set -- the pictures of them together! She had not been aware that some moments were captured with what must have been a concealed camera. Initially she would prize the lot, but consign them to a very private drawer in her study. They augured for her the recognition of a disposition, as opposed to an obsession or aberration -- which, unfortunately, did not mitigate the eventual evidentiary consequences. She had not dwelt on the possibility of Karen’s duplicity, that the numinous interlude in the tea house had also been recorded -- that Providence, in short, might be nodding so. A measure of the timely seduction.

The flinty denouement began with a terse voice mail summons from Deplorable D. “A matter of some importance; noon today suits me best.”

The lads had settled in the glass screening room just beyond Darin’s office, their voices just audible, the doors not yet closed, where the thin voice of DD droned on: “Think of slavery and savage tribalism in Africa. Like kinky sex, it’s always obtained, but it’s not something you lay on a mixed discipline committee.”

The door to Darin’s study was also ajar, the room empty. She entered and sat down in a chair before his wide desk. He entered moments later,

closed and locked the door. Without comment he drew an envelope from a drawer and placed it before her saying, "The contents are a recent delivery -- from an anonymous source. I kid you not." He sat down gesturing that she should open the envelope, which she did after a second take of her hide-bound boss. A set of photos emerged. She looked carefully at each one, an oddly pretty muster given its provenance in an Edenic tea house and Karen's art nouveau maisonette, a distinct reminder that vodka and gin are a M.A.D. duo. That wily Karen might be a stinger-treeshaker had crossed her mind but not tempered her esprit. Some of the blithe moments captured by those frames she would fondly remember always. Yet now, this day, her sense of being jilted bore a sudden adolescent piquancy.

When she looked up Darin was starring out his broad window that faced the Aon Center with its checkerboard facade. His well rehearsed words seemed to come from a recorder.

"It's going to be a bear to tame. Do you, we, want your sapphic pur-
lieus in our sight for the next year? Our Life Force Editor a 'Krafft' card
who instructs busy homemakers? Our sponsors are not incontrovertibly in-
souciant. The Board, then, may suspend with a year's salary, with the op-
tion. I will of course try to keep the audience to a minimum and your
portable pension fund in tact. About the best I can do." He seemed satis-
fied with his performance and looked at her with a cagy smile. "You were
never really happy here anyway, no?" She too smiled and was a moment
responding.

"If I change my mind...you'll be the first to know. You'll hear from my

lawyer. In due course.”

Then she rose and left, not wishing to prolong the hearing, his sudden bewildered expression one she would treasure for a while. Her anger she had handily decided was best kept on a leash. Always best to leave the pin-head in a quandary. She doubted the Board would sack her, but contesting the issue would be acutely messy. She would need time to work it out. She felt she could easily pass the matter off as a research venture in her capacity as a refined, gourmet savant on ‘feminism’ -- a job he had urged her take on! Though a story that would acquit some of the pictures eluded her and he had several cronies on the board.

In the taxi she mulled over the salients: If she was not a Messalina, she was married to ABN -- to Caesar -- whose wife must beggar suspicion. Well, The Professor-of-the-Art-of-Puffing had spoken. She had liked Sheridan. Otherwise, she thought of cameras, as often as not, misleading news tools, in her wish for words alone, by, of, and for themselves; to be read or heard not glimpsed, not show-cased, not touted!

Such a sweet creamy off-the-cob romantic! Seduced by a ambidextrous siren.

The sunlight in a neighborhood park was lush that afternoon, and she spent it carpe diem, the gin on hold. Not for a long while had someone got under her skin so. She had verbally scuffled with Deplorable D. many times, but never before thought of murdering him with such panache. Karen was another matter. Paragons live as Titans, their own torment and actions beyond the pale. Were the pictures with Karen thus enough --

in the eyes of Darin's shills? Was she still to learn what went on in the Montecito villa via a set of salacious prints that suggested she fancied being drugged and raped as well? Remembrance of the awful smell of the villa's peculiar soap now made her nauseous -- just as a body suddenly emerged out of the leafy ether of the park, one she could not extemporize, a pug, an incubus, an ample presence that stifled breath itself. In trying to ignore him she inadvertently backed herself into a hollow tree, where he approached and softly stated:

"The Cayuse has more storytellers than butterflies, and one may be on the ridge tomorrow at 2 PM, talkative if a bit rushed. We do require able versatile talent, as you will have guessed. Our benefit is that Kissy is not Bossy; our problem is that Kissy is not Bossy."

She kept her mouth shut this time, mainly because she was speechless. The timing of the encounter stuck her as diabolical. That someone might send such a goon! Now! Knowing precisely where she was! Moreover, what was really meant by such an entry and pronouncement defied both credibility and comprehension -- his presence alone an IED. Her world suddenly shrunk to a coal cinder suggestive of the rocky fissures in the Cayuse. On leaving he left behind a further incendiary taunt:

"You'll recall what too many innocent Germans said about Nazi rhetoric: You do not eat a meal hot as it's cooked. A sadly modern homily on the West's exhortation of the nanny state and its lifetime benefices. Which the credulous many-too-many so easily take up. The perpetual New Deal."

Her mind reeled with the audaciousness, the presumption, the lordly hooey. Her darkly lidded eyes told him to piss off despite her attempt to ignore him.

As she watched him leave it was all she could do to keep from hurling a rock. Bastard. That someone would send the swine -- at this time, this hour! Dear god. That a stranger would know her particular situation and where to find -- her! It was all too apparent the redoubtable Karen had some gamy friends or resourceful tails. And then to be so so shamelessly baited, condescended to...and for what? Some cryptic Fascist organization trying to what -- recruit her? Her! Get the OO girl on their side? The narrative salients were as elusive and menacing as cave bats...when all she sought that past week was to find out what in effect might never be 'found out'. To let a strange, new promising entanglement blossom a bit, discover if she was what she imagined she might be or become, if her impatience with sly Michael and brazen Pachis were catalysts, provocations she could no longer ignore. Karen's open address and candor seemed a sabbatical, even now. "Canny bitch," Michael had said, alluding no doubt to the bait of the siren's elegant looks. The postlude in the spa, the so-called Finnish bath, had all but obliterated and consumed her, made her a full fledged player in the weekend that followed. That such proximity might be so satisfying, so numinous -- a word she had been overusing of late. At that moment, the ache for Karen's approach was enervating.

Returning to the Cayuse was a little like itching a no-see-um bite,

disbelief goading obsession. The rake's progress. She sunned this time on the parapet in an old two piece that had relaxed with age. The only thing it fully concealed was her pique. Let the bugger or buggers find her this time. As she pretended to doze she could feel the strong intermittent breezes feeling her up. The Cayuse chap might be less Argus-eyed this time. What amused was how readily she blended in with the many mangy groundlings there. The instruction, in a soft modulated voice, came from a gal seated back of her, who may have been there all along.

"A well-built gent by the ranger's lean-to at the top is waiting. Stand on the closed side and face south."

"How long will he wait?"

"Not long."

Rising, she took in the gal, an older tough but beautiful woman with a melancholic face...another creature not enamored of her assignment nor the locale Catherine imagined.

A gent in corbeau shades materialized from a corner of the closed side, less anxious this time about being seen. A couple of Lotharios squatted nearby jawing and drinking beer with two earth mothers. The corbeau gent was about to speak when a shrill scream from the showers off the lower parking lot rent the balmy atmosphere. Everyone turned to look down at the stalls. The ensuing silence seemed to lull the general concern. "Just another kid fiddling with the hot-cold inlet valves," one of the beer drinkers said to a few chuckles. The man in the shades, awkwardly hesitated then swiftly fled, scurrying down the path behind the lean to. She

doubted he would return. Not the Cayuse chap she decided.

At the parapet many of the sunbathers had also left, and she tried to imagine a select team minding the encounter. Which had somehow failed. As she took note of the raptor eyes upon her, she felt newly fastly alone and promptly left.

That night she engaged Michael in a test of loyalties, both personal and esthetic, to wit a voyeuristic encounter, her discovered nude form a waiting odalisque -- a reliable turn on for him and test to see if his caresses were as bold, imaginative, satisfying for her. Her late discovery invited further investigation, indeed a kind of inquisition. Unlike her love making with Karen, it was indeed a kind of mauling, though also in its way restorative. The beguiling power of passivity! But the trysts could not be compared, his mandate more straightforward and compelling. Yet this night he seemed aware of a special need, and heedfully stayed his time, giving her accordingly the solace she craved...in her seemly wish not to eschew half of humanity.

The next morning she noted he slept in -- the poor lad was perhaps exhausted after all -- and promptly phoned David Willardson to ask if he had any more 'ghosts' to contend with. He, in turn, invited her to a lecture at an older gallery that showcased eccentric period art in West Hollywood. "It's rumored to be suffering from my neglect. The gallery not the lecture. Which we needn't attend."

Spotting him in the atrium she fetched herself upon a lone, faux Greek or Roman pedestal, her flamingo wrap top and beige skirt both aces in her

wardrobe. Slyly he squinted up at her, pretending to light a cigarette.
“You look very civilized. And you want to talk.”

“Very much.”

“I need a duck. Upstairs is a quite nice belvedere and the sun is out.”

“One urgent question.”

“Be it short.”

“It gets me to the pertinent set of questions. You’re a fan? You never said.”

“Of Führ or your bohemian?”

“The Maenad artist. Both I guess. Some illustrations look photographic, some painterly. Most some kind of fusion .”

He smiled. “What’s it worth?”

“I’m nearly broke.”

“Yes, I heard. Pulled the old plug.”

“Cashiered more like.”

“Maybe for the best, all things considered.”

“May depend on your comments.”

“My god I hope not.”

“You always were an escape artist.”

“Dearest she, it’s the daily grind.” He paused to reconsider. “As for Führ, et al, including Leatherby perhaps -- the work is deft, deceptively simple. A clever ‘composite blend’. Suggesting a purpose or need beyond the purely expressive, perhaps. Disseminating, promoting, touting a timeless ideal, an eidolon. The slick traditional craftsmanship alone will pique

some devout neologists. I suspect they work as a team. Maybe through a intermediary. Whose utopian bias they accede to for obvious reasons.” Again he affected holding a cigarette and pointed above.

“Have you figured out who does what?”

“The ‘figuring’ is ongoing. The modern goulash. No one solely guilty I suspect.”

The belvedere of the main tower had recently weathered a storm, the air was alive, sweet and playful, the sun playing peekaboo with the clouds in a lifting haze. They sat near the parapet smiling at one another as co-respondents while she kept her breeze rilled skirt respectable. Willardson, in turn, who sensed her mood, got immediately to the point.

“It’s a sporty marriage, Leatherby’s blending of Führ’s photoshop compilations -- the most likely prospect. Where one begins and the other leaves off is the riddle, as intended perhaps. The human figure as idealized composite, all-exclusive. The heady ‘promise of things to come’. The brush being somewhat more versatile than the lens alone. I should add that, in my opinion, you see in Kissy Borozov the mediator, the con-niver or mediator, the but not the broker. Kissy, unlike his brother, is more *philosophe* than brass cat, his dealings with Felix Muerner a key I think to a love of esthetic nuance, shall we say. The empyrean space. A vision beyond his mordant mundane family.”

“Empyrean -- Kissy?” The comment surprised her.

“An obsession yes. His art patronage, given its subjects, bears this out.”

“The age’s de rigueur ‘eroductions’....?”

“To the extent that the erotic may be deemed expressive yet exclusive. He does harbor a sensitivity to decorum most anarchical artists lack. Particularly those trying to exonerate licentiousness. At least what we see in his salons.” Catherine mutely, wryly smiled, but listened on as Willardson savored another intake.

“Muerner, now, is an *éminence grise* with an eye for able and gifted artists whose works verify his esthetic judgments about form and its articulation -- which derives in part from the Age of Pericles -- the sense of the human as divine, and the divine, human. The empyrean ‘trust’ a friend of mine calls it. I remind you that Muerner is a top drawer geneticist as well as a career Leibnizian optimist and -- if I may indulge a little sagacity -- a champion of a resplendence that reliably sells products as well as the invidiousness sewn in fashioning them -- the latter being the point that’s often slighted, the proof of stratification. Which the shrewder entrepreneurs like Bossy Borozov help to screen.”

“That seems a bit of a stretch.”

Yet the lecture continued.

“The picture book, I suggest, is but another herald in Muerner’s media pageant of durable health and beauty -- a presumed engine of the progressive West. I suspect some of the performers in the book are composites of body types he’s scoured the globe to find. Yes, the very sinews of utopian presumption and enterprise. The ‘perfectible’ body needs after all a complaisant mind. If you treasure lithe form, symmetry and harmony, the mental landscape also begs for complementarity. The holistic being. The

obverse of the the mental ogre and physical monster.” Willardson then savored the first full inhalation from his cigarette. “From your silence I trust my words may echo some intrinsic thoughts.” The smoke seemed to escape him without exhalation.

“I was hoping you might comment again on the mosaic. The ‘birds of a feather’.”

“I sense it’s a coincidence -- not denying that coincidences can become inspirational. Or conspiratorial. The ‘two’ of you an identity, a dyad.”

She smiled, as much to herself. “Yes. But do tell how does one go about investigating a wary *éminence grise*? As far as I know, and you’ve not disabused me of the fact, that Muerner may in fact be an icon not a person. His clinic a kind of shadow Mecca. Or, I don’t know -- Medusa?”

“I think I may have some information on that in due course. And you’ll be the second or third person in the world to know when I do. He is reputed to be a universal genius. At a very young age he began his medical training in late Nazi Germany, though I believe he never became a Nazi.”

“Will this info come fairly soon?”

“For the patient at heart, very soon.”

“Promise.”

It was then apparent he’d said all he intended to, and began to point out changes to the metropolis skyline that he approved of. “They finally got rid of that old AT&T monstrosity. Even managed to leave some palms.”

That night, after an Italian supper out with her lesser stolid half, as she now thought of Michael, she sought again a candid comparative appraisal -- both to reassure on one hand, and counter the other. Playing again to his voyeuristic instincts would also help decide if his consequent lovemaking was as considerate as the night before. She was amused to find him pensively taking up her challenge -- the impious dare -- as he found her before a full-length mirror, house coat backed to a fauteuil, the book turned to a conspicuous page that dangling from her hand, the stance of the figure there and in the mirror soon analogous.

“Any similarities, Hephaestus?”

It took him a moment to decide she was serious. “He was the cobbler who nailed a goddess, right?”

“The smithy.”

“And ugly as hell, wasn’t he?”

“The same. So?”

He adopted a convincingly conscientious demeanor. “You want an unvarnished covariant analysis, right?”

“One in one.”

“Well -- same eyes, lips, nose...same face in a prototypical way. It’s a word you’ve used recently.” He then Paused.

“What else?”

“Freckles, chest...navel.”

“Yes.?”

“Hair.”

“An identical twin, you could say.”

“Her legs may be a little better.”

“It’s the angle.”

“They seem thinner, longer.”

“Not by much.”

Their eyes met in the mirror

“I like your ears better.” It seemed the candid display was inviting suspicion.

“Hers are pretty okay.”

“I like yours better.”

“That’s a relief.”

“This is not just about identity, is it?”

The question surprised her, particularly when he fetched the house coat and set it about her shoulders.

“It is, actually.”

“Never doubted you were you.” The comment surprised her. As did his look of sobriety. “Until now,” he said. “You’re a mystery these days. Not sure I’m up to it. Too earthbound.”

“So.”

She was fond of him yet, for the first time, needed an excuse for being ‘stood up’ like this!

“Hardly a mystery...I should think,” she said with some wistfulness, thinking that she couldn’t have been more factual standing as she was.

“You’ve changed.”

“So.”

“Don’t know the rules of this new game.”

“It’s hardly a game.”

He wanly smiled, touched her hair and left the room.

This was not like him at all she thought. The suspicion now was that he might need an excuse -- to keep her at arm’s length -- the better to take in the others in his current playbook. She was casting about for an explanation here. Had his manner sometimes seemed expedient -- despite the engaging fun? All along she suspected he was too good looking, too macho, too immediate, too possessed of himself to admit another. Was that it? That he would easily tire of a steady diet of her? But being the essential Lothario he would not cavil at coming back at his convenience between conquests. And she would likely be there for him, baring the arrival of her special esteemed prince. Still, she wondered if her mindful regard might not dismay such a beau ideal, such a touchstone. It had been her unsung triumph in Russia -- avoiding the snares. Allowing for the fact that eroticism, in that general melancholic drabness, seemed an impertinence. At least for her. And the Russian male, for all his reputed stoicism, was anything *but* around his poule. The cad, complainer and brute extraordinaire. So she came to believe. The rigid unforgiving male hierarchy. In a rigid unforgiving society.

But that socratic debate with herself ended when he suddenly returned with two large glasses of Armagnac. “Got to get the warbler stoned first,” he said. “She’s a screech when pissed.” If the ensuing interval was not

quite numinous, the final exhaustion was plenary.

As Michael placidly and soundly snored, happy Viking that he was, she re-visited the book to re-affirm her growing suspicions about her double. Was that really a tiny mole near the umbilicus, or just a dirt/dust mite on the print plate the editor had missed? An oddity she had correlated standing before the mirror. Or perhaps a dedicated ‘titivation’ of the artist? The jury would be out a time on that one. She closed the book, turned off the light, and stared out at the dark skyline salients of the city, thinking they would get some rain after all. Listlessly she wondered, again, why one might be so focused in hell, so awash in paradise.

Then, in the midst of her romantic angst, a sudden, late breaking development from Willardson -- some new evidence to be pondered and evaluated, which he left unspecified over the phone. “A supper today at my maisonette would be splendid. Some rather nice sole has come into my possession, and I’m determined to see it meetly taken in.” “Can it be a latish supper, 7:30 say?” “Make it 8:00.”

The sudden invitation rather stanching the self-pitying miasma. Dining with the kingfish, her special ‘heart man’, was to ride on the side of felicity if not salubrity. Hence the quandary she sometimes indulged on how to dress for a visit to the maven -- one of the reliably fun games she enjoyed. His ‘cultivation of her best instincts’, as he once defensively put it, seemed a subtext of his sleepless decorum which, she had long since concluded, ruled out passion. The ‘Swiftian problem’, a colleague of his once remarked -- the physical or rather libidinal, too often being a ‘dumbing

down', an ablation, the entropy of familiarity. A reckoning for the mindful idealist. Hence their relationship thrived on festive affection, the purest form of it, so she thought, which she was not about to slight nor take for granted. Thus the urge to offer something other than her conversation, her often endless, plaintive, one-sided questions, which he had over the years taken up with amiable yet meticulous concern. But this day she seemed more willing than ever to 'get the engagement right'. In fact, she changed thrice before heading to the elevator, the final switch a return to the original tunica blouse, high in front, slit low and loose at the side, such that he might obliquely indulge the voyeuristic instincts she believed all men heir to. But the set of stark anatomical prints that lay on an exhibit table in his maisonette study which, sherry in hand, they gravitated to after her arrival, made a fondu out of the truffle. The prints on top featured a nude male figure standing as the famous bronze statue of Poseidon or Zeus, about to hurl his trident, or perhaps thunderbolt. Here, however, the form was human, in a variety of factual somas, from the ostensibly perfect, nearer the center, to the nearly grotesque at the edges, the face alone softened into a generalized mask.

"Yes, I thought you would be interested," he said as they surveyed the collection. A friend sent them, suing for an urbane opinion. All from Muerner's archive. A private file, apparently. They're called 'genetic counterpoints'. All drawn by a computer from the specific geonomes assigned to it. Unfortunately my friend didn't, or can't, tell me how he came to possess them. Though he did enclose an interesting letter, which

I'll get to in a minute."

The centrally situated images she recognized immediately. "Good lord, something like the Cayuse chappy -- in more than one body!"

"Could you identify the one you met?"

"He wasn't keen really on my taking a clinical look."

Willardson's dry words did nothing to temper her droll amusement. "By 'counterpoint' my friend refers to the gross anatomical speculations Muerner's team of morphologists have worked on a single genetic example -- the hypothetical transformation of specified assemblages of genes. How slight changes may affect a chin or knee cap, not to put too fine a point on it."

"I presume 'gross' the germane designation."

But he was not to be derailed. "All within the realm of possible genetic manipulation -- of the currently coded strands my friend, a rather earnest chap, assures me." He then looked up at her and winked.

She was still chuckling to herself as she noted the progressively arrant deficiencies in the images, the last almost comic. She immediately looked up to find Willardson standing directly in front, staring with an alien resignation at the prints, his voice now more condolent.

"You recognize the fellow then, the central example."

She smarted at the verisimilitude of the figure before her, and its vivid clinical detail. She said, "Quite possible."

"I ask because the contents of the letter have a contingent importance if you do."

“Contingent?”

“Which we will get to in short order. But I must also ask you to glance over these as well. Please be assured, I’m as perplexed as you will be. But feel you must see unedited what my friend sent.”

The resignation in his voice was such that she took up the second folio with a mixture of camp curiosity, and soon, arrant chagrin. Immediately she identified the second person in this third set of ‘gross anatomical’ portraits. She tried to put her dismay in perspective.

“My word -- a little like someone I know.” Not a little, she said to herself. She looked up but Willardson appeared abstracted, staring off beyond the desk, not taking her in as she imagined. Even as she returned to the renderings she could barely believe. She inwardly smiled at her conscientiousness in dressing that day, while here the nude form was manifest, the likeness to her self dismaying, even the generalized face suggestive of a compeer. She derived some consolation from the fact that he had never seen her so. What possible satisfaction she might take in the fact that the examples nearer the putative idyllic center were the most like her, eluded her: the images were a razor wire. The ‘body snatchers’ who compiled the pictures confounded all suppositions.

Willardson glanced again at the folio. “The subtext speculates on the genetic ‘accidents’ -- the extreme examples, the deformities -- give the potent drug regimen the mother was on for a time, before becoming pregnant I should add. As happenstance would allow, some leg sinews are apparently ideal on the central example -- the patella, fibula head and media

condyle at the knee and annular ligament on the ankle. The fortuity that has not been ruled out. Over all, an exemplary well-articulated skeleton -- according to the notes. There's more -- all pointing to a serendipitous assembly of the central example. The subject's hands, note, exhibit an exceptionally long fourth finger. ”

“Yes I see that.” Her own hand, then poised on the desk edge, was similar to the central example before them, an incidental finding she lightly dismissed.

“These renderings are recent formulations, of course -- backlogged to the profile Muerner had of the parents -- one of whom was in a psychiatric lockup at the time, where the experimental drugs were administered. The Lysenko period lingered then. A special cocktail of drugs and conditioning was what was needed to put things aright -- to amend aberrant behavior and create the ideal Soviet man and woman. Many ascribed social deviants and political dissidents have been used over the decades, the long term effects no longer conjectural. The extreme examples are postulates on possible anatomical oddities that derive from vascular and tissue anomalies, as the notes intimate. As you know, Muerner likes to cover the bases.”

“David, you've lost me.”

“I suspect not. But I too, you must realize, have only begun to take it all in. I trust you are not disappointed I endeavored to follow up on the confusions we shared at our last meeting.”

By then she was carding specific details. “The drugs, you're intimating, may have altered the mother's offspring? The fetal genes so concatenated

-- if that is the word -- to produce what, an anomaly, a freak? At least the possibility?" Again she felt warm, and was once more grateful Willardson earnestly took up her point.

"Only a 'freak' in the extreme postulates. Normative even winsome possibilities have not been ruled out. My friend has discovered only these examples. And claims no identity or understanding of the specific drugs the mother was given."

Catherine crossed her arms in front and stifled a sigh as she did so. "Hard to fathom. Such manipulation. Such a fate. This Muerner seems a bit ad lib." She was too embarrassed by the centrality of the 'winsome' examples to speculate on their origin. Fortunately the face was a generalized mask, despite her initial presumption.

"I assume you've had doubts about your background -- but decided that your mother here served you well, had devoted her life to you, and the question of your past would be an aggravation."

"Discretion being the better part of valor. I regret you had to run into this, David. It's as puzzling for me as it must be for you."

The following pause she deemed the working out of a truce.

"Would you like me to withdraw? Leave the thread alone. You may have all these folios -- the only samples I possess. I shall tell my friend that his quest and presumptions are miscast and possibly mischievous."

He fetched and topped up her a third glass of sherry. They continued to stand, less the decanter, as if summoned before a magistrate.

"No. It's something that's overdue. You're probably the one person I

trust on this side of the pond so maybe it's just as well. I've often suspected that something was going on behind my back. Well, sometimes suspected. But as it was nothing that interfered with my career, my activities or my health, I tended to shelve it. But the belated fact I've come to apprise, is that my dear mother is not likely my mother. Which leaves one in a forest. My stepfather, as it now appears he is, is little more than a lodger. The imputation that my real mother was incarcerated...callously drugged, whatever...that's a mindful. Let alone the effects a maven like Muerner thinks likely."

"There is some evidence for it in the letter, which I'll fetch presently. Your half sister -- by your American mum -- is aware of any of this?"

"I rarely see her anymore. Margaret. Her fashion career -- she's a model -- takes her abroad much of the time. It seems an ethnic nose is less neglected in Europe. I doubt she much cares. She's a free spirit, as they say. A freak yet not a freak. I know you're not a fashion devotee."

"Unlike fashion, genetics is a costume that's hard but apparently not ultimately impossible to alter -- the modern mantra. And here, in the West, an inimical credulity tries to re-skirt reality. The adepts in places like the Bern clinic are today in the vanguard of the body-mind couturiers. The genetic pageant still in production." He paused and studied her with a cordial detachment, finally saying, "It may be time you met Hārun."

Again he had eluded her. "Who the heck is Hārun?"

"A busy mystic. Who bears for you an important grudge. He also goes by the name of Aram. Aram Mir. But to and for me he is, simply, Hārun."

He lives a complex existence.”

“David, your sherry is delicious. But you’re playing possum here.”

“Of course -- the letter.” Which he produced from a drawer in the viewing table. “There are also some family photographs. But I think you’d better read the letter first.” Which she took up and read aloud without interruption.

March 24, Bern

Dear David,

The enclosed family snapshots were part of a file on a border guard, one Viktor Nikolaevich Stolbunov, booked by the KGB 15th Directorate -- government installation security -- after a disorderly conduct citation. The picture at the left shows a putative half sister ‘Zia (Anastasiya, last name Kniaźnin). This inference comes from a former kolkhozy commissar. He too has an interest in the family history. Zoya Stolbunov, the dancer, appears to be on the right, above and below. Her name appears on the back of the respective photos. Apropos your interest in the late book Muerner sponsored, I thought you might have a look. Do let me know if your friend looks anything like the quizzical Zoya. Is she the journalist on the OO Cover? I will fill in some of the details when I’m convinced we’re on a sturdy branch.

I can confirm that the mother, Liisa Stolbunov (né Uhlgren, also the likely mother of Anastasiya), entered a Soviet medical clinic as a ‘re-education patient’ in Smolensk where she was given a regimen of what we now call psychotropic drugs. It appears she became pregnant during her stay, the likely outcome of a rape, and ostensibly gave birth to twins. An abortion was never sanctioned because her Soviet minders wanted to see the effect of the drugs on the offspring. Muerner himself was recruited by the Soviets after the war, as you may know, and worked for a time in Smolensk. He completed his train-

ing as an endocrinologist in the Third Reich -- he was sixteen when he graduated, and was for a time seconded to the clinic at the Struthof-Natzweiler camp in Alsace, near Strasbourg. In Russia he worked as a medical statistician during the late Lysenko period, serving for a time at the clinic where Liisa Stolbunov was first committed -- a history Ms. Whyte will likely want to detail sooner or later. He kept two sets of statistics apparently. His second secret set was eventually used by the lobbyists who discredited some Lysenko loyalists. It is likely he was instrumental in getting one twin out of the Soviet Union -- possibly not entirely on humanitarian grounds. There is a death certificate of one Masha Kusnetsova Stolbanov (likely Catherine Whyte) who purportedly died of meningitis shortly after birth. One may assume, given his eugenic bent, that he wanted a double blind test to assess the effects of the drugs given the mother, in two different environments, a shuffle he's capable of.

'Zia's father, a respected intelligence office, was killed early on in Afghanistan. The putative father of the twins ended his days in a lockup in Perm, the last of several such domiciles apparently. Sadly, my trail ends here; records of the half sister and second twin have been expunged from the available archives. At least those currently opened. Zoya Stolbunov is the sole child registered to Liisa and Viktor Stolbunov, though her whereabouts today is unknown -- or concealed. Her last known appearance was as a performer at the Apsara in London, where she disappeared after an encounter with a Muslim extremist who apparently lost an eye in the mêlée.

Most cordially, age quod agis,

Alex

Willardson smiled. "Three European sisters -- a heady possibility."

Looking at the four photographs, Catherine sensed a slight seismic list

to the room. The resemblances with a much younger Zoya were remarkable, given her own 'family' album at the time. 'Zia' -- Anastasiya -- she noted, was as different as her half-sister Margaret.

"David, please, keep it up front. I know you usually do."

"So you really didn't know the specifics of this history -- at this stage."

"Until my encounter with a chap at the Cayuse -- a long involuted story -- I had only an inkling that my dear mother had a secret, about which I lacked the nerve or need to ask. Such a devoted parent she was that it seemed heartless to press such a question. Maybe I was just impatient with all the current hoopla about propriety and inheritance, and discordant, inconsolable birth mothers -- all that -- and ducked out. I don't know."

"Alex Ifraimov was an assistant curator at the Hermitage, and kept me up to date on activities over the years. He served as a plant for the Cheka at one stage, acting abroad as a buyer and artistic representative but really reporting on stray trends and the like, artists and agents maneuvering outside the regimen, possible defectors, though I doubt he was too observant about such traffic; it's never wise to know too much in such a climate with the corruption in high places as rampant as it was and is. He did keep a secret set of notes based on KGB documents: directives, target lists -- collaborators, gunsels and chisellers, forgers and forgeries, insider sales -- which he hid under the floor boards of his dacha. He's about to have the collection published in Britain where he now resides. As far as I know he was never suspected of being anything but a loyal Chekist drudge, and be-

believes it's time to 'come clean' -- well, reveal some players who no longer count I presume. Today he has a cadre of research assistants." Catherine barely smiled. With a pause to unctuously clear his throat, Willardson continued:

"Now Hārun, yes dear Hārun, known also as Aram to select players, the child of an Armenian father and Russian mother, eventually devised the means for Alex's defection, and has many contacts in the mid and far East. I suspect he is behind the recent rash of stench bombings in the U.S. A possibility. He actually studied chemistry at Cambridge. He began at Queen Mary University, where the KGB tried to recruit him -- yes, a revelation -- but fell out over Chechnya. He's had to adopt many guises to avoid KGB nimrods, a measure of his acumen and dissimulations, if you like. He now, I understand from Alex, keeps up with some of the terrorist cells in Southern Russia. He is a Chechnyan sympathizer, of course, a patriot not a terrorist. Though he may despair of such a distinction. I do think he can and will provide a general overview of events that may elucidate some of your own concerns -- for he knows the Sunni prince who serves as a principal egg and fetal tissue broker for the Muerner clinic. Also -- I am coming to an end -- in assessing Russian medical interventions, Hārun may suggest to you some drugs that relate to the Cheka's medicine chest, a kind of vade mecum of behavioral modification agents which were used, and may continue to be used, on troublemakers and terrorists -- Chechnyans being high on the list. Intimating a drug cocktail similar to what your birth mother may have been given. The consequences of

which have prompted an ongoing observational study -- one must assume. The clinic's -- likely Muerner's -- presumed ongoing interest in you. And your putative double. Or twin."

Catherine briefly silently shook her head. Willardson paused for a moment, as if newly short of breath, before continuing.

"It's all connected I think -- the love of power, self-aggrandizement, and envisaging a progeny of Wunderkinder who redefine 'human'. The irony being the neater, more precise and elegant one tries to be, the greater the ensuing mess and animosity one often creates."

Said an apathetic Catherine, "How reassuring."

Again Willardson paused, sensing a further unwelcome flush.

"It's a bit of a long shot, in your case, but right now I think we should cover the bases. Get you off and running. I shall give you a likely address."

"Likely? A real brick, this Hārun?"

"More than you will think at first, I dare say."

Catherine was decidedly diffident. "Where did you come across a player like that?"

Promptly he said, marshaling a reserve determination, "At an auction house in Paris. He wanted my opinion of Johann Georg Paul Fischer. Something about an engraving that depicted a Muslim satrap. A long story. Surprising as it may seem, we share a trust in the worth of esthetic elegance, democratic leniency, when well informed, historic debate, classical European music and philosophy, and the therapeutic value of intrepid

humor. Also an appreciation of the Islamist fear and dread of most of the above. I also met him at the Zürich Kunsthalle a while back.”

“You share a lot.”

He snuffled. “Hārūn’ knowledge of the destructive propaganda from the madrasas -- the one persistent aspect of Islam that seems designed to destroy all humanitarian hopes for cultural tolerance, understanding and complementarity -- helps one understand the brutal compact.” He paused and took an awaited breath, as if going further was for him heroic. “It is an ongoing question among some observers -- the promise of ease, delight, elegance, pulchritude, and hence voyeurism -- advertising -- in generating Western cupidity and supposed dynamism.”

“Do you?”

“The resurgence of eugenics some think a clue. Which points to a formidable hierarchy. It is a highly politically incorrect presumption, of course, meaning it may be nearer the truth than people are comfortable with. Americans, some say, don’t envy as much as they aspire. A simplification but not I think simplistic. On the whole, they do seem to resent less the success of their neighbor than a dearth of opportunity for themselves.”

“There’s a difference?”

Willardson sat down, drew out a monogrammed silk handkerchief and blew his nose. “Sniffles accompany portentous monologues I find. The onerous precepts. Where was I? Yes.

“It often is a perceptual problem the ‘American way’; people do overlook things. But it points to a democratic sensibility -- not shared by many

cultural élites. Moreover, inherited intelligence plays a larger role than the collectivist progressive pays heed to. The question is: do comfort, leisure and security blunt intellectual exertion, the will to learn and understand; certainly the need for it is less when you're securely well off. Enjoyment can be a morass in the end. Also, does this same comfort debilitate the biological proficiency of a species. It seems we constantly face either a cultural twilight or a moral barbarism, a protracted dissolution or summary terror. As our bodies relax our minds conspire. Yet art, elegance, if I may used the word, transcends both. Both ingredients in the lineaments of joy, I think. And as such galvanize the individual. If Cleopatra's nose was a personal benefice, then Michael Jackson's may be a baleful advisement today, pointing to an aesthetic intimidation if not squalor. Sexual stratification is readily apparent in an open and free democracy. One is on one's own to find one's way, to find a mate. Literally left standing on one's own. Hence we arrive at the paradox -- of beauty and intelligence that molests. We try to blunt it of course, by demeaning, vulgarizing the aesthetic -- the beauty myth -- all that -- a ruse that may work for a time."

Her impatience was by then antsy. "Oh come on. Sorry."

"Don't be. The beings who possess it are often the avid scoffers."

"So the Muslim hates us because we are decadent. Fine. But hooked on beauty, comfortable salubrity?"

"Why is it Sunni Islam, by and large, never countenanced the portrayal of the human form? Particularly the humanly realized idyllic form. Was it always so vulnerable, so prostrate before it? Can humans envisage the

‘godlike’? In men and women? The virginal houris awaiting the devout Muslim male in paradise are not there by accident. The conquerer after all, uses up much sexual energy in his militant jihad. Yet when the conquerer rests he subverts his own dynamic. It is the power of the female. Which the Muslim innately distrusts. Yet constantly dreams about.”

“David, let’s stay with this Hārun/Aram dude. At least for now.”

Willardson smiled, knowing well the familiar ennui and even antagonism his pet commentaries sometimes induced.

“Being a witness to Islamic radicalism, Hārun is mindful of the vilification of Western materialism, and the credulity that convenes and incites it. He believes the Islamists have been distracted, some would say molested, not by the energy and vitality of the West but its endemic indulgences: its promiscuity, drugs, acutely invidious advertising, pornography, aesthetic touting of carnality, the arrant violence in its entertainments, many of which thrive on cruelty alone, often against the weak, the malice embedded in much of its slick advertising, and its endemic waste. I’m paraphrasing of course. If you get him to talk, he has a cogent assessment of the cultural ‘normlessness’, the anomie that may invite it. He also has an insider’s track on the clandestine use of fetal material world wide, surely another of the new epiphanies -- which ties in nicely and severally with your own topical investigation, yes? The problematic soma again. We meet from time to time.”

Catherine patiently smiled.

“Yes, to the nub: he is very lately involved in a project that you will

have a mutual interest in, I trust -- which relates to a Russian fugitive, the very being who appears to look like you and has roused the ire of a fanatical Islamist, a Muslim Brotherhood radical who served on a Shura Council, a kind of Minotaur who's ventured out of his labyrinth. The very fanatic who saw your double perform at the Apsara in London and apparently went berserk backstage. Zoya wasn't seriously hurt but the angry Islamist lost an eye in the assault. The club's enforcers handed him over to the Muslim guardians there. This is all recent news by the way; I see Hārun less often than I wish. If Zoya is related to you, and the odds seem pretty good, you have a busy adventure before you. You and/or your double may lead Hārun to this terrorist, whose cell has taken credit for several recent bombings in Afghanistan and Pakistan. It's this terrorist Hārun wishes to retire."

Catherine was aghast. "You're telling me now I may have a killer maniac looking for me. Hum."

"He's not looking for a journalist, obviously, but your similarity to his target is a sobering reality. I know you've been careful since your return, but you are now likely less safe than you were. An added precaution, no more."

"Happy days. So he has a name, this bugaboo?"

"Ammon Farouk is the short name given in the English tabloids. A great grandfather on his mother's side comes from Kashmir. Rug merchants in the main. I've not had a lot of time to follow up. I spoke with Hārun last month. The attack on the Apsara performer occurred three

months ago today.”

Catherine had lapsed into an expression of dour incredulity as Willardson continued..

“If Ammon had not made such a spectacle of himself in a foreign country -- Muslims like Hārūn generally do not cherish homebred numbskulls acting out abroad -- your double would likely be dancing still. With this Brotherhood Minotaur we are well beyond the maze, the labyrinth.”

Catherine wryly chuckled. “The only doll I know who got mixed up in a maze with a Minotaur eventually hanged herself.”

“Well, she was an awful romantic.”

“And quite dead in the end. David, I can’t help feeling you still hold some inconvenient cards.”

Willardson sighed. “You have it in one. The part, I think, that does not quite fit is that this Ammon was at one time reputed to be descended from the Umayyads, the founders of the first Sunni caliphate. It’s hard to imagine a personage of almost mystical stature being so heedless, so reckless. Particularly in a public arena. Which suggests to me there must have been something in the act itself that incited the furor. Something even that touched him personally. It’s only a supposition but without it the available evidence seems woefully incomplete.”

“And for want of a better plan you want me to scrape acquaintance with this illusive Hārūn.”

Willardson smiled and waved a finger. “Hārūn is not the easiest chap to get to know, but he is up on what scores the radical conscience. The ref-

ormational Muslim must find an excuse for his current unease -- and the ongoing presumption of the West is a great piquant tease, is it not? To gene or not to gene, for instance. To concede the Creator's mediocrity, even blundering. Pretty and emancipated Western women being one great 'bug bear'. Peerless beauty so open to the public gaze. Zoya did perform in several dance-theatre pieces at the Apsaras. In London and St. Petersburg."

"Bug bear, eh."

By then they sat in Willardson's commodious oak study, his several thousand books, many custom bound, neatly shelved below a paneled ceiling of fluted arabesques, carved in rare hardwoods, which provided a mutedly detailed firmament. He sprawled on a fauteuil, a scotch balanced on his considerable stomach, she curled up in a gilded enclosed armchair, known as a *voyeuse*, nearer the radiant fire, pear kirsch in hand and the remains of a Madeiran nut cake on a side table, to which he had added, with some persuasion, an Irish cream ale chaser. He had long since offered up his guest room for the night, an option she was on the verge of accepting. Latterly he had wandered off on several diverse subjects, the last the drop-front *secrétaire* by his desk, circa 1750, which had been designed for a woman's use, a purchase he had negotiated on a visit to a private salon to assess a Watteau...his modulated voice all the while, she thought, serving to excuse his heed of the complexities she inherited. But by then she was well beyond being slyly patronized or cajoled, and elected to enjoy the serenity his rooms seemed to exude. But she did have a lingering question.

“How would you get inside Muerner’s cabal, if such it is? To learn about the new medical Svengalis. And incidentally whether my biological mother was in fact an ‘experimentee’, as you’ve framed it, and what exactly happened to her.”

“Depends, on whether the chaps in the know still worry about endangering the person or persons who got her child out, and whether they might trust an outsider who cannot be suborned. They do run shy of the chattering classes. If their genetic research bears salubrious fruit, as they anticipate, they may be more forthcoming. But as of today, too many contentious issues surround the presumptions behind their work. As for opening the door -- nothing short of an initiation into their Eleusinian mysteries, I should think.”

She smiled. “Meaning what, exactly? For a reluctant pinkie.”

“Well, take up the cause of the Svengalis, offer your services on the QT. Want to write a book. Make out you are a secret if reluctant admirer, that sort of thing; project great earnestness and insufficiency. Disgruntled Babbitt’s can be seductive finds, the late convert being the exemplary believer...off the top of my head...the old stew pot a little cold.”

“Ah, as simple as that.” Again she smiled, but this time mainly on her own. With a mutual amusement they toasted one another in silence.

When at last she padded off to bed, already half asleep, the light kiss on his forehead still moist, he sat for a time staring into the embers, thinking that she was indeed an embodiment of his central thesis -- how beauty lay in the mind and being, not the fleshy disguise; that the ‘nothing in ex-

cess' she epitomized was the clincher, to the extent that the ineluctable 'nothing' might not itself constitute an excess. He could not think of a human whose understated physicality -- in its proportion, balance, articulation, tone, sheen -- better matched her intelligence, candor, humor, perception, resilience, resourcefulness, equanimity -- her sanity. The 'accident' that begged the question in and of his mind. Was there a part of her not finished, chased, as it were, by an ethereal master? Well, he was a bit of a quixotic sot wasn't he? But he doubted many people were cognizant of such beauty, of its myriad subtleties, Muerner excepted perhaps. That she had come dressed as a kore in her Spartan tunica also amused him, though he immediately realized the costume was a sop. How camp that she might proffer such curtained glimpses of all the somatic nuances, the near pornographic inklings or ticklers the pedant in him itemized -- *latis-simus dorsi*, *anterior serrati*, *external obliques* -- so fluently toned in her exercise regimen, the very definitional muscles the classicists celebrated so, as do the Muerner wise men, the very acuity to frame the cambered softness nearby. Nothing in excess. But in excelsis this 'nothing'. He indeed wondered if her real mother had, despite her ordeal, delivered a pair of veritable *Wunderkinder* -- one of which Providence delivered from the Soviet cauldron and its obsessional new man-woman brew. If he was to fancy one of her sex she would be a *Dulcinea* to be sure, which made his judgement suspect.

After a last grog shot, he wished her well, with the droll tenderness he traded in, then decided he could use some protracted shuteye himself. He

thought again of the stark clinical renderings they had looked at earlier, and the near embarrassment caused by her stubborn chagrin. Before departing the study he had a second look. The being pictured there, a plausible likeness, was surely all a young discerning tyke might ask for. Like the alert, feckless and lubricious imp he once was.

Abul began the exchange with Hejaz, who had just returned from Los Angeles where he attended a friend's marriage and re-booted Joseph Sall, who would soon 'bomb' a second derelict mortgage bank. They began to play their favorite board game but discovered one of the pieces was missing. They sat for a time like stalled automatons.

"She's headed to the mosque you say. Likely to meet red-eye Aram."

"Seems so."

"He's uses the alias 'Hārūn' over there."

"He's sympathetic to Sufism isn't he?"

"A follower of Abu-Joseph al-Ghazali. Well a sympathizer."

"Rare given where he came from and espouses. What he's done."

"Neither devout nor a mystic. He shouldn't be underestimated though."

"No."

"They fancy the sea. The gift of water."

"Yes."

"Can't be all sordid."

"A good general. Lots of ideas."

“So it seems.”

The silence that followed this pronouncement had an ambiguous edge neither man wanted to acknowledge. The smarter jihadists were often the discretionary warriors. The specialists. Hejaz harbored an envious dislike of intrepid innovators like Hārūn, and wondered if his own mission here should not be carefully re-examined. He was beginning to notice his lingering distemper. Even his mood at prayers was then irreconcilable to his circumstance. Aram’s ‘humor’ seemed more daunting than ever.

Dilsat looked at the neatly dressed servant for a long moment, seeing a form before her that could inhabit a period English household; she had watched episodes of the original *Upstairs Downstairs* when she was in England. The servant’s name was not Sara, however, but Dasha, and her English heavily laden with expressive Russian add-ons. Parenthetically, the last two days lingered in Dilsat’s mind as storybook make believe. She had slept so soundly in this attic room’s cot that waking was a worrying experience; each time it took her a few seconds to realize she wasn’t carelessly nodding off in some abandoned market stall. The recognition that she was alive and comfortable seemed itself a mirage. The room she was given overlooked a section of garden that elicited for her images she’d seen of the Peterhof -- pretty braided pathways in a cluster of colorful flower medallions and stately statues. The suspicion that something sinister awaited her in this sumptuous villa had not abated but was attenuated by the servant who arrived to enquire after her health, a delicious looking

breakfast set out on a trolley. “You’ve got the right room?” Dilsat politely asked, only to elicit a throaty laughter from Dasha, who responded from the bathroom, where she had gone to place some towels, “Mr. Borozov has habit of courtesy, neplokho, want to know guests are, um, ty v poryadke -- OK. A doctor come after breakfast.” The thought of contending with another medic promptly alarmed Dilsat. “I’m fine and I’ll leave very soon. Thank you.” But Dasha, a girl about her age, urged her to calm down. “Mr. Borozov worried for you, the bruising, the cut on hand, and wants doctor. Be relax. I am here six years. Great place and Mr. Borozov great employer. Paver me. A true Alyosha Mister B. You stay I think. Easy to get cabbie you want. Up to you. I least stay, eat and see doc. Ne boysa. You fine.”

Dilsat looked at her injured hand and spread it on the soft cot where she had crashed after her late talk with Konstantin Borozov, the unknown ‘Kissy’,

“I draw bath. Food stay warm.” The servant then gestured toward a walk-in closet. “Clothes maybe you want. Some in back. Size me -- for you. Call button on bed board and desk. Hope you be here for while. Poka.”

When the door opened Dilsat almost followed the girl out to forthrightly request the cabbie that was promised. But the surroundings were so agreeable, her late exhaustion so hauntingly vivid, that she hesitated, then lay back on the cot and gazed into the relief scallops in the ceiling. All white nun’s hats she thought. Then she got up to look at the clothes.

Their very modesty surprisingly appealing, reassuring. She fetched a piece of warmed toast from the trolley and headed toward the bathroom. Binding her injured hand in a towel, she gingerly turned on the faucets in the copper tub.

The doctor, an attractive middle-aged woman, arrived with Kissy after breakfast. In the bedroom the doctor found Dilsat's blood pressure, temperature, and lungs all satisfactory. But the facial lesions and sorry hands were another matter, which she dressed anew. She spoke to Kissy afterward.

"She's been through a lot. And may even have a cracked rib or two. One knee is also badly bruised, and the left ankle lightly sprained. I don't think she need be in hospital -- the ribs will heal on their own -- but she should take it easy for a few weeks. I'll come again tomorrow."

The following day Dilsat agreed to a frank talk with Kissy and the doctor. Dilsat's account of her recent adventures included details she thought she would never tell anyone, ever, including the fact that she had become an adept thief. But it was cathartic, she soon realized, to get some things off her chest. The doctor asked questions about her early life, childhood diseases, inoculations, interests, general health. Kissy she thought seemed unsurprised by her story, yet listened with a heedful silence she found faintly puzzling.

After the doctor left she candidly promptly asked Kissy why she was picked up. "We almost didn't," he replied with a grin. "But you are here, and can stay until you feel well enough to leave." He then surprised her

with an invitation she nearly gagged on -- at least initially. It began innocently enough after he checked to see they were indeed alone, a maneuver disguised as the act of fetching a package of cigarettes. So Dilsat suspected. He offered one to her which she refused, her anxiety once more ganging up on her, though his quiet soft manner continued to disorient. Being alone with him also meant the words themselves were a kind of subordination. A tack she deemed as observant as her own. If she anticipated some sort of unwelcome advance, his words soon transposed the possibility.

“I hope you can and will stay for a while. For reasons that are not altogether philanthropic.” He smiled, as much to himself, she thought, and began again with a new resolve. “In short, I’m in need of a select investigator who is not drawn from my current pool of associates. To wit, an outsider. From what I’ve heard of your recent flight, and some deductions of my own, you seem to be just the person I’ve been looking for. We might discuss the matter in the forthcoming days, I trust.” He smiled, as much to himself she thought. “It’s a position that pays well but will require a new legend for you -- new name, identity, passport, and training. Please be assured, all persons you subsequently elect to call friends will be of your own choosing.” Again he smiled, as if he’d neglected something, yet kept on. “It’s an important even crucial job, that may save several innocent lives. You should I think find it interesting. If I’m wrong, well, you are free to leave anytime, without explanation, as Dasha has inferred. It must be a private compact -- exclusively between you and me. A third party may in-

tervene later -- but only as a conduit of information to me.” After a brief silence, distracted perhaps by another thought, he promptly added, “Your injuries will of course heal as well here as elsewhere.” His last smile, she decided, was unfeigned.

“You want me? To work...for you?”

“In a nutshell.”

If her impulse was to resort to laughter, his ever patient regard kept her weighing the possibilities. “I’m told I’m a good sport but a bad actor.”

“I suspect your expositor was only half correct.”

Her prompt chuckle seemed to clinch the matter.

A fortnight later, they sat under an Arabian inspired pergola off the terrace of his Mediterranean hideaway. A secretary who introduced himself as Feliks worked at a table near a back staircase decked with orchids. He spoke quietly on a cell phone before an open laptop. Wisteria, Cypress and old Olive trees bordered a further garden pathway that led to a refurbished chapel. She could not imagine a more unexpected or pleasing setting for the introductory training of an agent, and the proposed shaping of her new identity. The pending assignment, her first, was not without risk and she marveled at her own engagement with it. The prospect of both gaining a new identity and foiling a terrorist attack struck her then as providential. What better way to assert the civilized mandate she was beginning to prize -- that one might live confident in one’s ability free of solemnized fear and retribution. What she didn’t know was that Kissy had decided Aram’s request for a large quantity of plastic, some of it PETN, in

addition to the carbylamine chemicals, was in fact a warning. Someone else had decided the Bern clinic an apt target. Aram intimated as much. A prompt discrete word to Muerner was in order. But not through the usual channels. It must come from an outsider. Kissy then worried about disaffected renegade agents. The chaste messenger sat before him.

“You want me to go to the clinic in Bern and apply for a ‘lower limb radial fibular reconstruction’.” The wording still amused her.

Kissy staidly nodded. “The one injury you had during your ‘peregrination’ -- the one roof top flight you described -- needs attending to by a specialist, especially if you want to dance again. The clinic is second to none for bone work -- one of Muerner’s chief interests in fact. Bones set the stage for all acts, he claims.”

“And you also think a slight alteration to my nose will help guarantee a freedom from the menace posed by my stepfather? However attached I am to my nose.”

“It is only a suggestion. Already you look...well, have already distanced the image connected with your past.” He knew Dilsat was impressed and perhaps amused by the new make up and hairstyle, as well as the simple but fashionable wardrobe. He continued, “I cannot slight the alteration of course. A Western Botticelli nose -- which can be again altered, restored later on -- will seal the new identity. Give you an unparalleled freedom of movement. It is a highly arbitrary decision of course.”

She was silent for a time. She knew the recommendation was sound, yet felt it a betrayal of the ethnicity she still identified with. Scheherazade

becoming a Botticelli muse. Some tale that. But she had decided it was a foregone conclusion and changed the subject, bringing up the ‘other’ profile she would assume at the clinic.

“You’ve not fully explained why the clinic might be a target. It’s not in a war zone -- it doesn’t help or secrete rebel partisans.” Kissy had debated telling only so much, but decided the messenger must be alert to the strategic circumstance.

“It derives, I believe, from both Shi’a and Sunni disapproval of human images, particularly idealized renderings by humans themselves. The suggestion being that God the Creator left some things unfinished. Somehow lacking. The work of a plodder, an amateur. A matter of *shirk* I imagine.”

Dilsat couldn’t help smiling. “Do you think they may have a point?”

Kissy smiled; more and more he deduced the girl was a find. The question defined the answer. “God gave us a brain. We are capable of both empathy and idealization. Islamic medicine was at one time the finest in the world. Without it, I doubt the Bern Clinic would inhabit this era to evolve as it has. Thanks to some Muslims, the lights never went out in Medieval Europe. To live is to sing and dance, my sad mother used to say. She never got to...in any case, the surgeons at Bern can be instrumental in putting you back on your Terpsichorean feet. I know the clinic director. He too wants to see human beings thrive. An article of faith. Sadly we live in an age when precaution is a precept.”

Dilsat sensed some exhilaration listening to this frank declaration and calmly nodded. She felt obliged to add, “The better angels of our na-

ture.”

“You put it well.”

“A phrase I picked up in an English class. An American president said it apparently.

“Abraham Lincoln.”

“Another ‘Abraham’.” She smiled.

“Yes, another. One of the best.”

She stifled a laugh, electing to return to the mundane. “Another question. I’m still anxious about the timing of the message you want me to hand-deliver to the clinic’s outpatient director.”

“The security protocol at the clinic was designed by an ex-KGB technician. Which means it’s as good as circumstance allows. The pending attack will not take place for several months. The materiel necessary for the anticipated assault will take some time to assemble and deliver. Your treatment there should be complete well within that period. The directors will alter some security measures utilizing the head-up in the letter. We live in fractious times. We do the best we can -- all of us who care -- to minimize the casualties. But again -- your stay there will be uneventful, except for the benefit you’ll receive. It is only a beginning. The team you’ll be working with is already being picked. As I’ve said -- you can leave, exempt yourself from further commitment. But we must know your mind soon. It is a gamble, but I’m convinced you won’t be returning to your home anytime soon.” The ‘gamble’ was as much one of his own, but at that stage it mattered that he might befriend someone he could trust.

Dilsat was still dotting the 'i's: "One of your own bodyguards -- your 'watchers' will remain with me throughout my stay in Bern."

"He will be registered as a relative -- who often accompanies a family member during such treatment. A cousin."

Dilsat briefly laughed. The classic French movie *Cousin Cousine* she had seen in England and particularly liked, but had no intention of reenacting it here. "I think I'd prefer an uncle. On my stepmother's side."

"Done. An uncle it is. A distant maternal uncle."

"So, in the end, the nose alteration may be necessary. Longterm. The discrete identity, as you say."

"We shouldn't preclude it. At least at this stage. Our cosmetic prodigy here has left you pretty as ever but not perhaps unrecognizable to someone who knows you well. The surgery will be a further guarantee. It is a serviceable intervention."

"Can we go over your assessment of the clinic and its situation again? You did talk generally about some attitudes toward it."

Kissy smiled and was silent for a moment. He decided it would not be prudent at this stage to inform Dilsat that her stepfather could be a facilitator in the cell that maneuvered to attack the clinic, that his embarrassment with 'Western' houris was sufficient for him to find some scapegoats. Kissy's main concern was that the clinic should be warned from an unsuspected source with 'familiar' credentials, as the coded message would make clear. He strove to appear to members of his staff as an incidental philanthropist -- helping out a stranded teen in Dilsat's case. A ruse he

had outlined for her. He had aided innocent unfortunates before. He thus responded to Dilsat's query with the following:

"Admittance to the clinic is carefully regulated of course; it accepts referral patients only -- from designated specialists, who have a code system for identifying suspicious applicants. Remember that Muerner suffers from the misrepresentations of his past -- his Nazi chapter -- and has been particularly vigilant in insulating himself and his work from fanatics. The Swiss authorities have long since cleared him of any criminal collaboration with medical authorities in the Third Reich and generally prize the work of the clinic. We do know the chief terrorist players; they've been on our radar for some time, and we are detailing a plan to thwart them should and when they undertake to harm the clinic or its staff."

"They would have researched gaining access to the clinic, then. As a patient or patients."

Kissy smiled. The prompt deduction was, in his eyes, a further measure of the girl's acumen. "Patients have histories though. The referral process itself acts as a vetting operation." In the end, Aram had been helpful here. The earlier meeting with him, as it turned out, was but a test of Kissy's own loyalty. The unusual quantity of plastic Aram solicited that day had already been delivered -- from another source. A snub Aram could not ignore! His so recent dead letter advisement was a solemn warning -- and a further assurance that Kissy was still a confidant, a member of Aram's team. Part of the message identified a type of explosive that a suicide bomber -- a patient -- could have surgically implanted, also

lodged in winter clothing. ‘Patient’, indeed. The pretty woman before him would be the clinic’s harbinger of the coming attack.

The timing was crucial. In the week past Kissy discovered that the charges against Bossy might be expanded -- a late galvanizing development. A risk, but the jeopardy of the clinic would be less time sensitive -- Bossy would have acted impulsively given the insult -- and the explosives Ammon’s cell received thus easier to track. The clinic would survive this bout of insidiousness. After Dilsat’s treatment Kissy and his new team would be in Canada, expanding the network of tipsters and lobbyists there. The land where business and pleasure might be enjoined, his art-tagged income stashed in comparatively reliable Canadian banks! He was already working on a revival of *Kismet*, which showcased the wonderful lyrical music of Alexander Borodin. A revival of Lermontov’s play *Masquerade* with Khachaturian’s haunting incidental music was also in the works. Which he sometimes felt only a gifted Armenian could write, its waltz one he often imaged dancing to, with a bell of his own fanciful idealization -- such as Catherine Whyte. An expressive wistful lyric with engaging momentum. Dilsat herself was far from assured she knew what was really going on but had come to trust her patient, considerate and adroit rescuer. She now raised another of her lingering concerns. “You’ve not been too clear on what has happened to my mother. Fanatics sometimes take reprisal on close family members.”

“We know she is still at her residence and appears to be in good health. We will keep an eye on her of course. Since the episode at the Apsara, it

is unlikely your stepfather will harm a faithful Muslim wife from a prosperous influential family. We have some leeway time here. Like your stepfather, our terrorist is no longer an ālim in good standing. He will be a further embarrassment if his cell is shown to be ineffective -- its attacks thwarted or discredited, its militants caught or killed. It is a challenge, but to do nothing is no longer an option. As the Arab proverb says, a falling camel brings out the knives. But soon you will be an entirely new person -- new identity, legend, passport, perhaps even looks. Though I know Muerner will be challenged to try to improve on the original.”

“I’ve heard stories about former secret service members -- who can never leave once they joined.”

It was a matter Kissy had to down play, at least for the time being. “All past history. Sad, but past. Your stay with us will be up when you choose. It is the third clause in your contract which includes a generous separation pay packet. We will only demand that some names not be divulged and you give us a few months notice. It’s a shared trust.” All too poignantly Dilsat understood the word ‘shared’, which she took in with a light smile. Kissy looked into his hands with a residual care before continuing.

“As I’ve said earlier, it’s a life you will be a natural at. As for the present venture, you’ll benefit from the ministrations of a peerless bone expert, have ample opportunity to contemplate a new nose -- even sound out the mavens at the clinic about their utopian vision. Always an esthetic dare. Which, if you think misguided, you can ‘walk away from’ should you choose.” Kissy lightly shrugged even as he ably smiled, poignantly know-

ing his words were less that forthright. His move to Canada remained the option that preserved his sense of self.

Dilsat had long since appreciated Kissy's dismissive irony. "Some walk."

Briefly they shared a mediative smile.

"Where did you learn to talk so well?" she belatedly asked. Her own study of English remained an ongoing adventure.

"Books. Many many books." She was surprised by the trace of sadness that came over his face then; she had assumed books were a blessing.

"How many languages?"

He was a time responding. "Russian, French, English. Mainly. The 'Ineffables'."

What she had no inkling of was the miasma Kissy wrestled with in recruiting this talented innocent. It could all end badly. Best not to spell out the recondite 'ifs'. It was part of the game. You play the hand you're dealt.

FOURTEEN

Catherine's initial meeting with Hārun was not promising. Willardson had given her a time and address she went to with nearly the same diffidence she sought out the bravo at the Cayuse. The Moorish-style building, serving as a mosque and welfare center, a kilometer from the Montecito villa she labored so to explicate, served both as goad and omen. A female janitor who mopped the front steps threw up her hands at the mention of Hārun's name, but pointed out a gent propped against a shaded arcade pil-

lar near the entrance. "I ask him to move...he tells me he a Mujaddid sent by God." She loudly guffawed. "Security mans joke with him. He see kateeb here." She partly relented. "Maybe pilgrim. Maybe prayer." Replacing the mop in her cart she dismissively shrugged and moved on. Catherine thought the man, the enigmatic Hārun, cataleptic or drug idled at first, conversation unlikely if not impossible. Though this impression was short lived, his initial words teasingly arcane -- what one might expect from a well versed con artist. Though pretending to be a Mujaddid, one who appears every century to revive Islam, was surely a bit ambitious. Sitting as he was she recalled the honorary prayer known as Eid Salah. She'd done some reading about Islam. But when he obliquely eyed her, she approached and proffered David's letter of introduction, then quietly but forthrightly explained her interest in the topical genetic maze and the Muerner clinic. His dismissive silence was palpable. He responded just as she was about to take her leave.

"The news hen wants to learn the riddle of the egg."

"Yes."

"David Abercrombie sends me the Maid of Orleans."

She tried to smile. "No voices or visions though."

"What can you want?"

That he might be ill-tempered as well Willardson hadn't warned her of, but the banter was sufficiently brisk for her to stolidly continue -- say her piece in full.

"David said you may have some insight into the exploits of the Russian

mafia. The Borozov chapter. Biznesmeny variety. The closet masters in Holy Rodina. In particular the use of reproductive material that seems to convene a ready market in Europe and the Middle East -- for extraordinary genes, an exploit that may have an ugly partisan nexus. He also believes I have an uncanny resemblance to a Russian émigré you're trying to track. I think he may be right."

"David is an optimist."

Their eyes briefly met. "I believe so."

"A Celt."

"A credit all round, yes."

"Very round." He barely smiled. "You know O'toole's Law?"

"I've heard of Murphy's -- what can go wrong, will."

"O'Toole thought Murphy an optimist. Mind games -- all there is."

She had the feeling he had recently suffered a misfortune, for he did not resemble the chipper gamester Willardson had described. He must have sensed her impatience, for his manner improved.

"So many minds. You help me stymie a terrorist; I help you see the Pneuma."

She thought for a moment. "That's the fiery cosmic spirit, not a lot of hot air, right? So who's the 'terrorist'?"

He had returned to his unfocused indefinite look. "You have a double, a Doppelgänger, who's causing a great stir. David and I have talked about it. It is more than a possibility. He informed me of your possible coming."

"So."

“I think we should retire to a more venerable place. There is a mihrab around the corner that backs onto an observation and instruction room for cooperative infidels. Where you will begin by learning to like strong coffee. Please pull your shawl closer to your face.”

When they were settled in adjacent seats, looking out into the vast airy sanctuary, he softly fluently began:

“Your double is being pursued by a Briareus who was wounded by a nimble Slavic dancer. He lost an eye. The eye of a Beholder. Briareus is the ‘hundred-handed-one’ of ancient mythology. One of Mother Earth’s first children, who never grew up. Despite his many flunkies, his many limbs, he is as limited in his pursuit of your double as a cyclops. He has picked up some bad Western habits.”

“The one eyed monster. With a big appetite. So he fancies her.”

““Our hearts know in silence the secrets of the days and the nights.””

In recognizing the words of Kahlil Gibran she almost despaired. A mystic in search of a terrorist and a Doppelgänger was not in her estimation a promising strategist or ally. But she did not doubt Willardson’s late codicil: it was at least worth a try. And the man’s English was surprisingly good. And so, in an old but princely mansion, not far from the mosque, their second venue that day, Hārūn began the convoluted tale of her double, detailing the narrative as they inspected some of her patents -- specifically some period dance costumes she’d worn in a Moscow revue, five of which now hung from headless mannequins in a bright room rich in flowery arabesque panelling. They sat on a cushioned dais near the costumes.

“You had a plan in mind when you collected these?” she asked.

“Forensic items. One has some of the terrorist’s blood on it. He made a mess of a wardrobe in the attack. They tell a story.”

A servant entered then and after a nod from Hārūn came forward with a lunch tray. Catherine declined the lamb and cous cous but accepted a flat bread and pot of jasmine tea. Hārūn took up a cup of richly scented coffee. Again he stared off into the distance as he began, as if a shadow theatre played before him.

“The Russian Soloist we call her, a daring performer, incidental thief and smuggler of precious gems and icons. The terrorist we wish to retire, a busy trader and broker in his other life, apparently entered her dressing room and assaulted her at the end of a performance. He has a fondness for dancers and a princely expectation of his desserts. Some kind of struggle ensued. The net result being she stabbed him in the eye with a needle or hat pin. There is undoubtedly more to the story for she not only survived but managed to give the slip to his bodyguards, the house heavies and the late-coming bobbies. He was acutely embarrassed -- he almost spent the night in a seedy lockup -- and remains something of a pariah in his own community. The one eye may be permanently blinded. And yes, he’s now referred to as the ‘cyclops’.

Catherine carded a smile. “I’ve never much cared for hats.” But Hārūn was attuned then to the story not page turners.

“It is a complicated narrative. There are many tangents. Our terrorist, for instance, also facilitates fastidious buyers of tissue cultures, both

eggs and embryos, like the Bern clinic. Some say he simply wants to see the creation a pair of perfect occidental children he can skin alive. His loathing of the West is a vocation. His traffic with the buyers may in fact serve to better identify those groups he wishes to ruin. He is a former soldier of a Society of God lieutenant who broke with al Qa'ida. 'Not moxie enough,' the lieutenant is reputed to have said. Who knows. We believe our terrorist is now using some of the buyers to target the clinic itself -- one of his crochets being the invidious comparisons that genetic engineering invites, in the absence of a god. He fancies himself a purist...since the attack."

"'Fancies.' Trouble that," Catherine responded with campy ease. "You know his real name?"

"His short name is Ammon Altakhsas Farouk. He has used several aliases, one fanciful sobriquet being al-Wahhāb. "

"The Saudi 'excuse'. Must be a head ache -- this Ammon."

"Survival handily carries one along."

"So who is the 'we' that want him 'retired'?"

"Several marshals in the Islamic Reform Movement. An influential Saudi sheikh or two -- who don't appreciate fumlbers in their morality brigade. Possibly a faction in the Russian mafia -- a late development."

"The trustees of the the Bern Clinic are in the dark I presume."

"Not for long I expect."

"Can you tell me more about the Russian interest?"

Again he looked away. "You would know the secret of life? It may lie

in the promise of life. It is in exchanging the gifts of life that you shall find abundance and be satisfied.””

“That’s a big help. From the same oracle I presume.”

“I understand from David that you may be deficient in your estimation of the younger Borozov brother.”

“I’m sure I am. I’m not an expert on Great White Sharks either but their victims are hard to ignore.”

Hārūn indulged a wan smile.

“I am a good listener.”

“The embittered Ammon is the one we must focus on. He has been out of control for some time. Several recent suicide bombings point to his influence. The immediate concern. His hatred is wide ranging. It is the pattern of his dance we’ve been tracking. His late habits and trade craft, such as it is. Which will determine his likely theatre of operations and identify some of his accomplices. His attack on the club performer came as a surprise. Our messianic fiend cherishes a hate, an antipathy, a distilled misogyny the soloist somehow fomented. Sooner or later he must, will find her. A priority, we believe. A high-risk quest -- for him.”

“And he’s not looking for a tête-à-tête. So. Dead or ‘dead’. This soloist.” An intimidating revelation, if true. How ironic that she might be in such peril in this free commodious land, the ground of which she kissed on her arrival. She knew the Borozov’s would easily connive at her demise, but were unlikely to bother with a mere gadfly an ocean away -- after all she had barely made a dint in the business conglomerate they had assem-

bled. But this new peril she might still be oblivious of. She wondered how much Willardson was aware of this yet wanted another to spell it out. Hārūn placidly continued.

“He is not ingenuous our cyclops. At least away from fleshpots and blue-eyed sirens. But you are safer here than on your own. His search for his attacker is a recent but consuming undertaking. To the best of our understanding.”

“So how will he find his ‘eyesore’? This Minotaur.”

Hārūn took a time responding. “Being a thief and fugitive, the soloist could very well travel here to hawk her wares, mainly gems we think, disguised perhaps as an egg donor. A tenable cover.”

“Here? Treasure and eggs? Here?...”

“A voice alone cannot carry the tongue and lips that gave it wings.”

“Okay, okay.”

For the first time Hārūn studied her directly. “Always useful to sound out the air heads.”

“So what happens now?”

“One option would be for her to present herself to the clinic as a donor. She is almost certainly short of ready cash and would be as invisible here as elsewhere. She would enjoy the anonymity of candidate status, a sequestration the clinic helps foster, while identifying some of the brokers -- who tend to buy and sell more than reproductive tissue. If she has some precious gems with her, say, she will find a ready serviceable fence. It is a distinct possibility. Coming here is not as far fetched as it sounds. She’s

vanished, meaning perhaps a new identity. She was a friend of a procurator's investigator. A new legend would facilitate an ocean crossing. Difficult but not impossible. Though the odds may be somewhat slim, it is the likelihood we must play to. We know that one of the Apsara performers sold her eggs to the Fertility Center in the University Hospital Southampton. Another has recently applied. Our soloist would be aware of the money offered, but would not approach such a facility in Britain. But in America -- she would enjoy and anonymity not available for her now in Europe."

"So: a possible application to the clinic. My word. We meet in an egg clinic. How piquant. The 'we' being me for now -- yes?"

Hārūn again looked abstracted. "It would put 'her' out of harms way for a time. Especially if she elects to stay at one of the residences the clinic retains -- this villa being one."

"A clinic residence -- hey ho."

Hārūn smiled.

Catherine winced. "Am I a windfall or what!"

"It's a safe convenient nub. The office of the registrar and clinic itself are nearby."

Catherine's amazement took a moment to abate. "But you intimated that the embarrassment the terrorist suffered in London sidelined him. Sent him to the dugout."

"A temporary stalemate. He cannot long sit idle; he has too many business obligations. And now with a busy dance bug up his ass -- he will not

sit still for long. The likelihood of her coming here *is* feasible. A supposition we can play to, exploit.”

“With the putative double. The ‘we’ being a team, yes?”

He politely smiled. “Of course.”

She too drew a smile as Hārun rose only to lead her into a sunny atrium, then summon a masked dancer wearing one of the soloist’s costumes, and a poetess who recited some Vedic verses in a high pitched voice. He seemed immune to her confusion and barely concealed apprehension.

“You and we, in turn, must learn to emulate her pattern of the dance. Bring her alive, in a singular but accommodating place.”

Catherine tried to smile. “It gets a bit mazy.”

“Clear as the morning light. The necessary steps.”

As she watched the sinuous creature before her, the form and movement reminded her more of Martha Graham than a nautch dancer. Sensing a limit to her patience she asked, “So what does the doorkeeper suggest we do? In concrete terms.”

Quite suddenly the music and dancing stopped, the dancer and poetess withdrawing into an adjoining room. He stood directly before her, his eyes, she thought, assessing her mood, her credence and resolve. He seemed persuaded.

“We make you into the Russian Soloist. Hawking her wares. Here. Staying in the villa. Where she can be glimpsed from afar.”

“Awesome,” she said vacantly. Then, “You’re really not serious?”

“Awesome, maybe.”

“Me.”

Again he faintly smiled.

“But what really is the likelihood that he or his goon would come across me here?”

“It is a small world. His criers see into the mists. His cell’s informers extend to this continent. We put about some piquant rumors.”

“You exchange pleasantries now and then?... Okay, okay. So he’s on the prowl. But what...about the soloist’s language? She speaks English?”

“With a rich slavic accent. Very easy to mimic.”

“I can’t believe this...so I learn to sound like what -- a cockney wolfing potato chips. But what if she really shows up on her own?”

“We will have two superb players performing one part. Twice the power to bag him and set the players free.”

“Whew. Ha. Powder puff and powder monkey. Or some such. I can’t believe this.”

“Come see the world that your other ‘she’ never leaves. From her cabined peephole.”

Catherine smarted. “Sounds like Keats.” Hārūn’s English continued to amaze.

He looked at her with constrained wonder, then softly stated, “England does not have a monopoly on poets.”

“Of course.”

But she was not to be derailed.

“Will this impersonation not complicate my twin’s life? If it gets out -- as you imply. May it not alarm her? Prompt her to act -- carelessly perhaps?”

“Sooner or later the twain must meet, be joined, reconciled. It’s likely she’s seen the OO Magazine cover. The ruse here is a first step.”

“A big first step.”

“A best defense is often a bold offense.”

If she doubted both the sanity and salubrity of her surround, she was tempted at least to facilitate the main deception -- if only to better find her bearings in this chimerical world where, as Muggeridge once said, everything was true but the facts. She hated quitting a scene that begged for deconstruction. One of her inveiglements, as she liked to call it, when the gin was plentiful. But, but....

“You can of course leave now, with our blessing.” It was, she decided later, perhaps the one forthright comment he made to her.

“How soon must I decide?”

“Soon.”

“There is a ‘point of no return’, yes?”

He forthrightly nodded. “Once you learn the dance -- her habits, manners, actions -- it’s best you see the matter to a conclusion. The identity will be a long shadow. Elsewhere.”

“But no assurance -- of success, or discovery.”

“Her presence and well being is a key to the resolution. She is, after all, an escape artist.”

“So I pose as a donor. A candidate. But won’t that alone be a giveaway? If he’s as familiar with her looks and nature as you make out.”

“No. Skin deep you are a good match I’m told. However, simply being here will reveal an anticipated aim, an intention. For the cyclops’ informers.”

“You imply having a team working on this ‘ruse’.”

“The very best.”

“But if he can learn through his spies of her coming here -- it’s not entirely secure this multi-task villa?.”

“The art of self-defense requires that some moves, some deeds be known. What is witnessed by stealth or accident will serve as an unwritten *surah* for this Islamist.”

“So he gets to see me ‘smelling the roses’ or whatever. What’s a *surah* again?”

“A pronouncement of fated truth. More or less.”

“That’s a mouthful.”

“What is true and what must serve as fact are rarely the same. One must know and feed the adversary’s susceptibilities.”

Concluding that her concerns for her safety were likely existential in or out of this roundelay, she sought some factual answers.

“What if I first want see the clinic’s prospectus? It is a key to understanding this sappy egg trade. One of my concerns.”

“We do not patronize the clinic. The presumption of your donor status will be a given -- in your coming and residing here. You will see.

During the spring break several youngsters fill our guest rooms. The gardens and fountains here, modeled after a historic park in Kabul, attract select adventurers.”

“Yes, they are lovely -- the fountains and flowers. What I’ve seen so far. But what if somebody checks with the clinic? This pit bull will surely sniff around.”

“The fact is you are a shoo-in there, regardless. Staying here would make such doubt inexpedient. It is your presence here that matters. And it will be an easy enough matter to get a name on their files.”

She was a time putting the matter aside. Finally she asked, “If you could candidly say...how dangerous is it?”

“The team of sitters I have for you, if you take up the challenge, is top drawer. The terrorist’s team would be instructed to undertake an abduction. Such Wahabists favor ceremonial executions. Something they can do at their leisure. Remember, you are as safe here as elsewhere.”

It was the moment she nearly balked. It seemed ironic that this enterprise should be so daunting compared to the ugly situations she weathered in the Russian Federation. She risked assault there many times, yet the risks were more assessable. Here luck itself seemed ‘futures’. But the prospect of actually seeing, meeting her twin, a prospect to disarm the worry, was the gravitational nub. She had to see where her life thread lay.

“I have to see the clinic’s prospectus.” Her growing curiosity had foiled all diffidence.

“One of our female minders will secure one. If you decide to follow

through with our plan, you must let us vet all outside communication. A prospectus will not be difficult to acquire.”

“Well, let’s begin with the clinic ‘broadsheet’, with emphasis added.” A document, when confronted, that proved to be blithely infuriating in its presumptions, audacity and exactions, such that she decided she had to see into the shadows, throw some much needed light onto this growing and essentially clandestine industry. If she distrusted sheer anger in Russia, here it seemed a concordant necessity. The possibility that Willardson was in on all this from the start finely amused.

Thus was she nominally cast that day as an applicant for the program of élite donors -- which necessitated the semblance of preparing for an audition, a stolid test of general appearance and physical dexterity, the mundane sine qua non for any further consideration. To wit: being observed on this Moorish estate working at what would be interpreted as a dry-run tryout, a sort of calisthenic road test -- for *all* strategic witnesses. One of the in-house agents, known only as Barbara, a tall strong woman, a former Olympic skeleton sledder, outlined the strategic nuances of being glimpsed but not really seen. “We don’t want the identity confirmed too soon, for several reasons. First, we want to learn where a snoop would hang out when your presence here becomes suspected -- we have a good idea of the likely spots in the neighborhood but we want corroboration. The name Corin Wiley will be placed in the spa’s candidate registry, as well as a Latvian freighter’s passengers’ list -- on her entry visa -- details one of Ammon’s minions will discover in due course. We have our own

gate mouths, who will tell of a look-alike candidate among the ‘perimeter prowlers’, as we call the area café crowd. Such news travels fast. Second, we want to determine how such a one communicates to his field handler. If you look carefully at the translucent curtains throughout the villa you’ll find they are constantly in random motion -- slight random twitches to the knots and crosses in the fabric, making it difficult for a camera to register a distinct image. An inaugural precaution for such a strategic, deceptive hub as this. In short, we want the suspicion of your identity a time consuming job to affirm. We hope to be cognizant of a spotter and his whereabouts within a week or two. The likelihood of your double coming here is credible. We’ll keep you up to date on events as they happen. Hārun and my team will be discussing other matters in due course -- mainly your attire and daily routine.”

“You’re sure a crack shooter won’t have a chance?”

“Not if you follow our instructions for your movements here. Moreover, they’ll be too busy trying to confirm their suspicions about your identity. Allowing time for us to pinpoint their players. Besides Ammon will demand an abduction not an onsite killing.”

Catherine said very little from then on, listening to the suggestions for her dress, actions and makeup, which were formulated from late descriptions of her double lifted mainly from a Moscow tabloid that featured a piece on the Apsara chain of clubs. Simple enough, she assumed, though the inference that she could pass as Corin Wiley remained a trying intimation. After inspecting the suite Hārun showed her that night, with its dis-

creet perimeter guards, she agreed to proceed on the proviso that she would have at all times a cell phone to an outside source, which Hārūn agreed to only if she would use it in an emergency.

“Which there may be.”

“Only if you decide so. Your privacy is assured, and the grounds are as well protected as any legation”

She wryly smiled. “Not a great consolation.”

Belatedly he wagged a finger.

But it was the prospect of fleshing out her past and meeting a possible sibling that opened an acceptable vista. She’d been in tight spots before and developed a sixth sense of the signs that prompted one to flee. She promised Hārūn she would persist. At least for a time. Michael was not thrilled with the huggermugger nor the assignment being so open-ended, but seemed pleased she had found a gig worth pursuing and appeared reconciled to her leave taking for an indefinite period. When she rang off she imagined him promptly calling his latest pet, but didn’t have the heart to dial his number again.

And so, in the early morning, the contrived show began -- nominally for egg scouts, specifically terrorist sentinels -- the occasional security detail ghosting the margins. Hārūn suggested that her twin may in due course learn of her ‘impersonator’ -- and possibly seek out a room in one of the area’s inns or pension lodgings, if she could find the means to travel here.

“Another curtain call.”

“A possibility.”

She summoned a private resolve. “You are asking a lot.”

“You’ve arrived in a good harbor.”

“God or Allah willing. That’s not a sarcasm, by the way.”

To prepare for the calisthenics part of the initial examination, she rehearsed her own Adoration of the Sun exercises, while the cool Barbara watched in a seemly silence, who later told Hārūn that the eponymous Corin had a “cool presence, and durable poise -- just what you’d expect.”

Despite the laden invigilation, the light in one selected chamber of the villa, a high vaulted atrium, seemed ethereal, recalling for Catherine the ‘unity of the real’, a phrase in the Qur’ān. The irony worked to sojourn the sumptuous mischief: the temptress once again performing on a consequent stage...well a surround imitative of an Apsara stage. While doing, in turn, the exercises Barbara prescribed for a innovative dancer, in weighted sandals, she found herself reflected in the myriad jeweled eyes of the rooms gilded screens. “All the lotharios have been banished from the grounds,” Barbara remarked, with amused candor. With mock wistfulness Catherine said, “So. No ripe ‘flesh against flesh...until the morning cup. That’s Sappho not Kahlil, by the way.”

Another matter was not so easily disposed of. Barbara outlined the situation. “The team suggested it. I tend to agree. On her own your double is an inveterate teaser. Here she would be especially cautious. Watchful, observant. We’ve concluded you should have a hand gun -- discretely housed in a hand bag -- easily glimpsed on occasion. Hard edged objects are less ambiguous than soft. Guns are eye candy here.” Here she paused,

as if recollecting an apt story, a hiatus that was momentary however. “We’ve also concluded that we should better disclose an identity, a factual presence.”

“What does that mean?”

“Appearing sometimes in brief summer attire. The brokers of our Minotaur will be looking for a form as much as a face. All activity should appear routine, casual. Not defensive.”

“‘Brief’ eh. How ‘brief’?”

“I’ve persuaded Hārūn of its utility.”

Catherine indulged a gamy smile. “Flashing what -- my toenail polish? A plucked eyebrow?”

But Barbara was carding the details. “Maybe a brief swim suit -- sunning in the arcade.”

“Lookit, it’s hardly likely a bod will be the match of a face. I’ve no tan -- which she may very well have. Won’t the game then be over sooner than later?”

“A small risk. But prudent requisite. And from what we’ve seen, and been told -- sorry, private vulnerable sources -- the dissimilarities are negligible. And she has no tan. You are a likely match in every respect, except that your teeth may be better. She is as you say an exhibitionist, a nightclub performer. An unambiguous identity -- for our watchers.”

“They’re -- he’s -- that discriminating?”

“His obsession will center on the recollected habits and form.”

“But if she’s that good a performer aren’t we also way off base by my

'boning up' for this audition?"

"You share a talent. By the time his spotters learn of your presence you will be practiced and accomplished."

"You're really rather desperate, right?"

"The odds are in our favor."

Catherine was a moment responding. "Accomplished.' Sounds long term."

"You have a talent for dissimulation."

"So this 'insouciance' or whatever that appears to be useful in matching me to my twin -- how and when?"

"May I suggest you try the solarium hot tub in the morning. It's well screened by the old cloister -- it can only be seen from the penthouse of the adjacent villa -- but will afford a more distinct image. The glass is match-grade military rifle proof. Though, as we've said, Ammon will seek an abduction, not a shooting. You'll wear dark glasses in and out, to keep the compilers busy. You'll rehearse some arabesques here off the entrance atrium after, not too near the curtains. She is a conscientious trainer apparently. The costumes will progressively match some of hers. The signature costume she used consisted of a head-piece, a royal crown, a pajamas-style skirt and a belt girdle, a zaraband -- of Rajputana inspiration. It is a precaution. A safeguard."

Catherine indulged a scowl. "But no top. On what I saw."

"She sometimes wore a wide style of appliqué pectoral. Which we have. Another recollection to affirm a presence."

“How long do I do all this workout-rehearsal-display stuff?”

“Until the Minotaur leaves his lair.”

And so, after her dip each day in the solarium hot tub, she towed herself in the nearby loggia arches, the better to grant the anticipated spooks a glimpse of the pale kore, the large dark sun glasses leaving her commensurately underwhelming she thought. Some days Hārūn squatted nearby, his observance that of a fastidious head hunter, immune to the heat, nestling to protect his back, binoculars and cell phone ensconced in a snuggler...a large cat on the loggia's cobbled limpet shell flooring. What surprised was the ease one adapted to a kept life, given the Moorish aesthetics and regnant solicitude. Still, she wondered what Karen would have made of the childlike spectacle she now effected. That her double might be, or had been, the target of a possible pedophile lingered as a stale joke. But she decided the show must go on -- for the annotated trial period.

“Do you think anyone is paying attention?” she asked her keeper who slipped by one day as she lay on a thick Turkoman rug.

“Our Cyclops is about to drink unwatered wine!” came the quiet reply.

Which she recalled had signaled the end for the critter. “God let's hope so,” she said to herself. She then turned face down, giving the putative eyes a peek at her best part in her candid estimation.

“I haven't heard any rumblings from the cave,” she whispered a day later to Barbara as she looked out from the loggia with a pair of binoculars.

“In the fullness of time.” It was Barbara's lucid voice that answered,

more distant this time, so different from Hārūn's faintly nasal stridor.

Some days the filtered light intimated the presence of a third reality just beyond the walls, as on the day she rehearsed with one of her double's capes, the whisper and zephyr of satin silk before the recondite eyes which she was assured were about in the adjacent villa. Colored screens filtered the light for this and the later exhibitions, when the Rajputana head dress and flecked intaglio skirt upstaged the cape, a fond replay of the earlier known 'travesty' when she was attacked. By then Barbara, a former modern dancer, now a judo master, was directing the performance, proposing the steps and devising the makeup -- a precious staging that amused as it amazed. Occasionally Catherine would catch sight of herself in a dappled wall mirror, a light smile conspiring with collyrium eyes and beeswaxed lips, her torso a live arabesque, an Apsara who melded into the sun gilded chambers. Hārūn's distant allusive patter seemed less hortative then, though she had decided that he was likely gay, a problem for a Muslim, his presence an abiding reminder. But it was in the very dancing, her mastery of the moves Barbara devised -- from Sangeet Natak Akademi promo films -- that upstaged the arrant tease, the arabesques that fused her aerobics, eurythmics, with the spare insinuations of belly dancing in the 'intermezzi', as Barbara called them, the breathing spells, where the caleans, the water pipes, a late restful habit, were not far off. Afterward, a superb masseuse would chase away the lingering cares with her herbal essences, and 'chase' was the word Catherine thought of -- how fine gold work is polished, caressed, 'chased', to reveal its lustrous patina. The craft

of a silent czech whose eyes intimated another Montecito Grace. One night Barbara took over with seemingly authority, sculpting her spent student with a solemn thoroughness. It was the best massage she'd had before or since.

Then an old poster -- a stray extra it seemed -- appeared on a table in the villa, an advertisement that told of an earlier performance in a nightclub in Marseilles, the Cavee -- in a raven black wig! It sat in the gloaming of an arcade chaise for a day without comment, then vanished. "Coren Wiley is making the rounds?" she asked Barbara. "Sadly, her performance at the time was cancelled because of a bad ankle," Barbara replied -- invoking a stiffness in an achilles tendon Catherine experienced the day before. "That's a relief," she said with some keenness. But like Hārūn, Barbara too seemed a universe apart that week, glued to her ever busy binoculars and cell phone -- in Arabic, German and English.

A sudden break in the daily routine was mandated by a new ploy, a kind of masquerade, a further manifestation of her 'coming out'. "Another means for our soloist to be in-corporated," as Hārūn put it -- the day he conducted an auction on a loading bay by the artificial lake which extended via a canal to the water garden of the Montecito villa -- in effect an exceedingly brisk, upscale black market. "You want me there, in person?" "Coren Wiley, yes, stealing a look. For her a kind of hajj." "A black market a hajj?" "Her Mecca, yes." On show: several items reminiscent of those Kissy had flaunted at the opening of his salon, also some new and beguiling objects, including a set of Russian ikons and a much assayed bust

in a blue veined marble. All this frumpery, as she thought of it, was the coincidental setting to stage what Hārūn called “a new revelatory appearance!”

In a pretty hijab with a face veil, a niqab, she and two similarly dressed women -- she assumed -- hovered about the brokering, items of speculation, amused that so many of the male buyers found it prudent to dress alike, some even sporting a mustache similar to the one fastidious Hārūn cultivated. He was obviously concerned for his own safety and dressed his bodyguards accordingly. When her niqab ‘slipped’ at the tell tale moment, to attend to a minor adjustment to the hijab’s crown band, the disclosure fetched an immediate enclave of onlookers whose hush was mesmeric. The face to ‘efface’ a terrorist! The contentious pale Apsara -- in the flesh! The sudden silence among some buyers seemed deafening. The one time Hārūn openly smiled, she recalled. “Seeing, beholding, not spying, seals the options for our cyclops. One broker had a cell phone camera.”

“You’re sure.”

“Our cyclops will be apprehended within the week.”

“God willing.”

Later they compared notes in her sitting room off the solarium. She had just washed her hair and nestled in a large wing chair in a thick robe, her turbaned head suggestive of a caliph suffering an envoy, deputy or scribe. By then she came to empathize with him over the exactions and presumptions of the ongoing performance, for she had indeed concluded he was gay, a predicament for a Sunni. The loose flowing robes he lived in

concealed a medley of weapons and at least two cell phones. They spoke warmly of the fire sale -- of her sensational proximate 'coming out'.

"It wasn't just a bit craven?"

It was the interval when Hārun disclosed some topical information she was only partly relieved to hear.

"Only now can his field agents attest to the fact -- of your identity. What his minions spied before was but a tease for the cyclops. A mistaken informer is always at risk around a fanatic. But after such a heedless act in public he could hardly not be convinced. The face attests the person. Failure to act now would be an apostasy. It is time."

"So the face is officially out. On record. The molly maid is in residence."

Calmly Hārun replied, "You may keep your heart in wonder at the daily adventures of your life."

"I may get few calling cards." She helped herself to a second peeled kiwi fruit.

"You may glimpse the Pneuma."

"I haven't a clue what you're talking about. Pneuma. A lot of hot air. In my general parlance."

Hārun looked at her with what she deemed amusement, then said, "It's time you took some time out, took up some selective reading. Indoors. Visited our study rather than the pool. For the next few days. There is now a document there that may interest you. A kind of manifesto and charter. Which relates to the founders and patrons of the Bern clinic, the eggheads

you wish to ‘candle’ -- is that the word? Anyway, see in lucid detail. The whys and wherefores. The ‘eye’ of genetics.”

“There is such a thing?”

He smiled.

“A treatise you’ve been awfully Garbo about.”

“And a man woman said, speak to us of knowledge and self-knowledge.”

She had long since decided that Gibran was his prompter in dealing with her. “So what is this domesday book? A lordly tome to snooze by? Is that it? I hide in the library as the cyclops leaves his cave?”

He was a moment responding. “The sanctity of one contract is at stake here.”

Try as she might she could not keep a perfectly straight face. “Sanctity, huh. What contract? Hārun!”

“It was agreed. One of David’s stipulations.”

“David Willardson?” Her ready incredulity surprised even herself.

“It is partly my choosing. I didn’t want to distract you from our mission to entice the monster.”

“That distracting is it? This ‘book’. Hārun!” She thought to herself: So. Willardson. The friend at court.

“It is overdue. The presentation of this document. For the lion hearted.”

“Praise be to who -- Saladin?” The chivalrous Twelfth Century sultan of Egypt and Syria she thought a beguiling invocation. She knew the

canny sultan had sent Richard the Lion Heart some snow and fruit to cool a fever.

Hārūn merely gazed into the clearing morning mists. “Yes, for the lion hearted,” he said with a staidness she hadn’t noticed before.

“Well, my late night reading has been rather slim.”

To honor the closet pact with Willardson, and her ongoing success, Hārūn set before her the following day a document that transfixed, as he intimated: a political manifesto, spawned by heed and cupidity, what he called ‘the revelation of the Pneuma’ -- another fire sale offering in her estimation. She barely got beyond the preamble. Social engineering she long ago decided was largely a mug’s game. Though she imagined the muggers getting better at it, with few of the hoi polloi following what they were up to because it was esoteric.

“It is a Western document,” was his spare comment. She took it up a second time, as much to waylay the vexation.

The tract exalted in a presumption of genetic change and the promise of what she deemed Hayek-style capitalism. The world was too small to avoid the inevitable -- that only hard science and technology could resolve the larger problems of scarcity, pollution and dread, and science flourished best in a laissez-faire community. Borozov, Konstantin Alexandrovich (Kissy) and Muerner, Felix Zveno, were among the trustees of the think tank. Research at the Bern clinic tended to affirm the main conclusion: chromosomes were a hard constituency. There was a lot of talk about form, structure, intelligence and probability theory. Also a presumption of

the mental landscape paralleling the physical: the key word being ‘coherence’ -- essentially, the iron law of parsimony -- the very elegance of scientific presumption and its attendant ‘faith’. The general acuity of the world population was believed to be in decline: those who might wisely, thoughtfully, humanely provide for children were having fewer of them, and the public might never be aware of the fact in a ‘progressive’ democracy. In short, the people needed to solve the complex problems were becoming a progressively smaller part of an expanding population. Would there be enough? In the given time? The toffy pending questions. Global warming in another dimension.

That she didn’t understand a word Hārun took in his stride. The discovery of a Borozov -- the younger brother, Kissy -- among the trustees only added to her wonder and dismay.

“Kissy as a probability theorist...who would have imagined?”

““The classic liberal chose to exempt himself. Yet could not contend with his dreams.””

“But why now, all this carnal, complementarity stuff. If that’s what it is. The mental somehow paralleling the physical.”

““You would touch with your fingers the body/mind of your dreams.””

“I’m listening.”

As much to himself he said, “It’s time. To see what the wondrous Felix Muerner’s dreams are made of. It’s not a Muslim view, but one must try to understand; only then can one adroitly pick and choose the salubrious and beneficial from the superficial and invidious.”

She sighed, yet assumed that the horse trading of the clinic, the basis of all this soma business, beings elusive and wondrous, was about to be revealed. As much to herself she mused: "So the veil of epiphany, or whatever, is to be lifted. None but the snazzy bright daughters, the esteemed egg mommas. The precious paragons who drive our Islamist bonkers." She looked up at Hārun. "The thought keeps elbowing in."

"The distractions of beauty, of the too-real Apsara."

"I can't imagine a better tour guide."

He surprised her by solemnly nodding and briefly grimacing. "It's time. To see, to find the 'thread' through all this -- the purpose behind and work of the Montecito spa and its allied assessment clinic. To confront Muerner's utopian vision behind it all. His special beast, his animus. You wish to write of its craving. And in time its elegy."

Catherine smiled. "My word."

He looked then as though a door had been carelessly opened, a secret chamber about to be apprized, as if he was conceding a point he labored to resist. A resignation she felt honor bound to trust.

Ammon was pleased with the plan. The child with the club foot was only too keen to raise the institution that so slighted god's design and will. She believed her affliction was caused by her great grandfather's decision to allow the Shia festival of Ashoura -- in remembrance of the death of Imam Husayan. A mockery of Sunni righteousness and lucidity. Some explosives would be fitted into her peritoneum, the rest in her heavy volumi-

nous gown and coat. The faith of the girl Ammon found exemplary. On the day she arrived for an examination of her foot a section of the clinic would be leveled. It would be a sign. The end of the beginning. Only in the West did one fiddle with the inessential molesting detail.

FIFTEEN

Dilsat was initially amazed by the network of modern buildings overlooking a snow white park, no edifice above three stories, their glass facades revealing interiors of pearl gray and, as she deemed it, motile medical staff in crisp white uniforms. ‘Motile’, from her nursing lingo, meant an absence of loitering -- a pastime in the women’s quarter.

The security tended to confirm Kissy’s description, inconspicuous but likely ubiquitous. Multi-lensed cameras were fitted into the soffits, all doors framed with heavy astragals, and alarm stations placed every six or seven meters throughout the facility, each resembling a small climate control keypad. She assumed they alerted the staff to more than fires, electricity malfunctions, or medical emergencies. In addition, the lengthy admittance procedure appeared to served as a means to further assess a patient, whose sensibility would be, Kissy said, as carefully ‘diagnosed’ as the remedy sought.

A Russian makeup artist had fashioned her hair and face into an attractive and largely unrecognizable being. Her first look at the finished product left her smiling and almost aghast. “We all have many faces,” the diligent artist remarked. Her passport identified her as Yasmine Romila Aziz,

the granddaughter of a former Nawab. She dressed as a modern European business woman. The current clinic registrar, a jovial woman named Heidi -- the regular employee was then on holiday -- seemed full of companionable good will.

“I see from the application that you had a snow board accident.”

“Yes. A dare. From some ski pals.”

“The number of skiers and climbers we see grows each year -- as more and more retirees think they can get back to the slopes and rock faces. The optimism would beggar a Scientologist.” Heidi had an easy deadpan manner.

Dilsat smiled, doing her best to ‘join in’.

“You can be examined this afternoon, and enter the rehabilitation outpatient program tomorrow, if convenient. We’ve just had a cancellation.”

Again Dilsat sought to engage. “I’ve read a lot about the clinic. There is a tour?”

“Not as such. Much of the work is classified. In some cases ‘Patents Pending’ for the research underway. You’ll see quite a bit before your regimen is complete though. See how the tail wags.”

Wag indeed. Dilsat recalled some late thoughts from Kissy, ideas she had him elaborate on. If she could not remember all the words, his attitude, his humor invariably engaged. “The clinic caters of course to the bias of ‘improvement’. In stubborn disease, exceptional injury or textbook anomaly. Muerner’s esthetic sense animates some tissue and genetic research, but that is kept in house. Examples of transformed persons emerge

of course, but the contract with the subject does not allow referential publicity or self-promotion -- and the decision to proceed comes from the clinic arbiters themselves. Muerner's Wunderkinder bias has a classic Attic splendor component, of course, but he doesn't broadcast his purpose. He believes the seduction of the paragon will be entirely sufficient to inculcate a respectful mindset over time -- as genetic manipulation becomes one day proficient in its transformation of both the human mindset and body. It's a touchy subject for a lot of people, but he's a private Svengali not a public crusader. I doubt he even believes the general public a worthwhile constituency in any case. A bit of a fanatic yet highly esteemed by his colleagues. Not one to easily dismiss. Or slight."

Heidi was again reassuring, as if to catch her breath. "The long bone resident here is a genius. You'll be back on point in no time. She'll even have some suggestions for improving over all performance. She too was a dancer in her early teens."

"Is she new?"

Heidi was surprised by the comment. "Fairly new yes. She's had a lot of experience. Doctors Without Borders. She's been in Syria a couple of times. And Yemen. The 'boneyards' she calls them."

What Kissy did not tell Dilsat was, in his mind, the necessary omission. He believed the time frame would amply allow for her treatment to be completed. But the unexpected silence from Aram -- who had never before failed to 'touch base' at the appointed bi-monthly time -- was worry-

ing. He suspected, hoped the lapse was but a new internal struggle that Aram wanted to keep in house. Kissy had been in touch with Muerner through his own physician and learned that the letter Dilsat delivered merely confirmed what was anticipated: one day an assault from a fanatical faction. Dilsat returned with an encrypted summary from Gervase Maistre, the clinic's protocol minder. For bookish Kissy, Gervase's words intimated a commanding improvidence, far from 'a divinity that shapes our ends' -- one of Muerner's select quotes. In fleshing out the sober wording, Kissy brought the stoic Gervase alive.

"The rumor mill has indeed suggested such an attack, surprising as it seems. Someone has widened the envelope, decided that cutting edge medical research has indeed crossed a line. Something we've not discounted. A large file of recent genetic engineering inceptions -- Muerner's ectypes -- has gone missing. If the theft -- if that is what it is -- were the work of an investigative journalist, it would have been headlined by now. Hence we look for a newly disgruntled or suborned in-house snitch. It is unlikely an attack will come from a stray outside source. As you know, Swiss authorities are strict about incoming munitions. Thus a cross-border attack would be elaborate and exorbitant. The clinic's property is too terraced, elevated to accommodate a truck bomb say. I believe the most likely scenario is a patient admitted with dual active explosives, one planted by surgery, the other in her or his apparel. Islamists are not lacking for bombers these days -- who more and more come in many ethnicities, sexes, ages, deformities and illnesses. It would be an unusual patient,

with a congenital malformation perhaps, even a sports or theatrical performer...an obstacle course or stage accident of some nature. The clinic watchdogs are good but not infallible. There is a lot of experimentation ongoing -- the use of exotic fluids and semi-solids that enhance some explosive materials. They haven't yet a nuclear device they can fit in a womb, but the poetic license must be well-nigh irresistible -- one of Muerner's finely sardonic comments. The timely letter from your cutout, the girl with the injured leg, Muerner and I have jointly taken up -- with much gratitude. She will be assigned to a fast track treatment regimen of course."

Kissy put the paper aside and close his eyes -- to think again how some Sunni Islamists were determined to assert their hegemony -- over Islam of course, but particularly the progressive ideas as envisaged by Western presumption, the élan of which slighted their Tawhid, the core of their belief. The notion of freedom, especially 'pluralism', being a form of lèse-majesté for them. The less abrasive Shi'a many Sunnis didn't even consider proper Muslims. A droll sobering fact. And they had unlimited funds. Anything is possible. Kissy had been discreet. The ghost inked message in the otherwise innocuous note Dilsat delivered, appeared to originate from the UN's International Telecommunications Union. A letterhead Kissy had used before.

The alertness of Gervase would not diminish the irrevocable reality though. It was the one time in his life Kissy had put someone he cared for at considerable risk. Aram was another matter. How he might fit in all

this, given his late predicament, his place and investment in his cell, was one of the inopportune puzzles. In watching several episodes of the popular cable TV show *Tsuris* that so incited Aram's opprobrium, Kissy concluded that the subject matter did constitute a departure. He must pay more attention to current popular obsessions -- here the depiction of wanton and often explicit torture and murder, frequently of young pretty women, children sometimes, the problem of censorship vitiated by the insinuation of a 'serious subject' with gratuitous quotes from ranking authors to let the audience know the producers were observant caring gentlemen. BDSM apologists, augurers. Blooding such cads or ingenues, dumping a few gallons of theatric blood on their homes and businesses, one of Aram's early pithy suggestions, did not seem inordinate, were the plastic not requisitioned as well. Aram might also take satisfaction in the fact that the lead producer of the program was a Jew. Aram, a sardonic observer of cultural matters, said repeatedly that the Jews excelled at everything -- even getting persecuted. But just who was 'obsessed' here remained elusive. Kissy might add a quote of his own from the peripatetic Lawrence George Durrell: 'We are the children of our landscape; in the measure to which we are responsive to it.' And what was the landscape today? A video treat for a bug-eyed spider? Still, he did not have stature enough in the organization to foil the more obdurate in Aram's community. Bossy's compulsion to make money at any cost was the one given, and state-of-the-art explosives were more lucrative than stage blood or stench bombs. Protracted strife was invariably profitable. A reality a 'Mae-

nad' should savor. Aram's late connivance with Kissy to deter or at least postpone an attack on the Bern clinic was an act to waylay his Islamic 'bosses'. But because he had done it so surreptitiously meant that he was no longer one of the 'directors'. The one plus with Bossy was that the clinic, and its growing -- seemingly metastasizing! -- egg and tissue wants, had more earning potential than a restive Islamist or al Qa'ida gang looking for plastic explosives. With some careful arm twisting...yet the darker horizon loomed: the presumption that the lesser brother might be seen as a quisling, a two-faced fumbler, a sorry summer soldier.

Hejaz looked up at Sayyid, Aram's replacement, with a puzzled smile. He had slipped in the back entrance as quietly as Aram sometimes did. He and Abdul played soccer together while at Birmingham City University in England. Yet Sayyid's sudden appearance at the field office in Agami was disconcerting, his coming unexpected and ominous, his words blunt and caustic. The blustery weather seemed apt. Aram was apparently in disfavor.

"All materiel henceforward will come from another source. The Russian service is ended."

The other 'source' Hejaz knew to be a cell in Pakistan.

"All communication with the Russian Feliks will be cordial but noncommittal. He has handled delays before. He will be informed in due course. The initial payment to our new source has been made. You will admit only to a confusion over targets."

It was indeed a sobering realignment. The fallout would likely descend on the sappy, ‘ambivalent’ Kissy. Kissy the addled Maenad. Bossy would be furious and act accordingly. Kissy a mere mythic being after all.

“Will the delivery schedules still be vetted by this office?” It seemed obvious they wouldn’t but Hejaz was not willing to bow out yet.

“The network with the Borozov’s will take a while to extricate. Sit tight. We’ll be in touch. Keep up the picture traffic Bossy is obsessed with. A useful distraction for now.”

So: he and Abdul were temporarily reduced to picture grubs, to porno traffickers. Some vocation. God willing they would, must find their way back to the center of their universe. He wondered if Aram would survive. Had the sheikh bent some ears? Had Ammon? Whose rabid obsession with show-off beauty now centered on the Bern clinic. Apparently. When out of reach, blow it up....

SIXTEEN

A discreet tour of the ‘gene palace’ near Montecito -- Catherine’s request had been agreed to and fast tracked -- began with the secret viewing of a live physical assessment, which Hārun’ initial description of proved as daftly unreal in the flesh. At his suggestion she donned a head shawl with a droll smile. Ensconced behind a lattice screen -- a confessional she thought of it -- they viewed a portion of a male audition, where select subjects, mainly Caucasion, were initially studied in a set of required poses.

“Do enlighten me. And take your time.” It was the period when Hārun

seemed elsewhere, a body without a presence. Though the words remained smartly engaging.

“One aspect the gnomes want clarified is the question of gene documentation in sperm and egg. Does a state akin to satyriasis, say, produce a fuller and hardier index of available traits? The consequence of what’s been called ‘unbridled passion’.”

“That’s an enormous help. But please continue. The scene is not, well, unbecoming.” She had, in their time together, been warming to Hārūn’ stilted language, and found the exemplary gents being assessed a tolerable sight.

“There is a growing suspicion that a comfortable and sedentary life, especially when neurotically stressed, vitiates both miscellany and multiformity in genes, meaning a full cache of possible traits is crimped, leaving offspring less potential statistically which, the hypothesis asserts, may be maximized only in a fervent and busy life. Hence the initial quest for a strong vital presence.”

“The marauding warrior, yes? Pillage, plunder and killing -- the innate self starter.”

He barely smiled. “With this set of brokers we are, as it turns out, not far from the mindset of Ibn Saud and Abd al-Wahhab.”

“Rutting fanaticism. On the fly. Sounds like a trustworthy mate. The scene before us is germane?”

“The brokers are previewing select individuals who have demonstrated exceptional strength, stamina, rich sperm counts and reliable erections. As

well as pleasing shapes and higher than average intelligence on the standard SAT test.”

“You’re not kidding are you...you can actually find such males?”

“Eugenics is an earnest business.”

“Earnest. How do they get the sperm? Without shortchanging the esteemed rut.”

“A facilitator gets the party underway.”

“A tart.”

“A well favored, well paid facilitator.”

“Why are the brokers all dressed so much like you?”

“They all have a fierce respect, or need, for anonymity.”

“Isn’t it arrantly patronizing though -- all these desert robes?”

“It is a reliable dress to conceal the individual. And his effects.”

But Catherine was already on to another of the many curiosities.

“Why are some of the subjects kneeling?”

“Some brokers look to the shoulder line of a planted archer as an indicative sign.”

“That makes enormous sense.”

“An atavistic quirk. Warriors of the desert, perhaps. The one broker was an Ikhwan militiaman.”

“The Bedouin Brotherhood. Beast well jolly. They all look much alike -- the lads I mean.”

“The idyllic form tends not to be idiosyncratic.”

“And they can count all fingers and toes, as you’ve suggested.”

“The cut off level is a standard IQ score of about 135. The higher the greater remuneration.”

“And the youngster in the back.”

Hārūn looked up, initially unaware of the boy it seemed. “Likely a specific contract sale. A broker with highly individualized criteria and ready buyer.”

“Cute. For a pedophile?” She glanced at Hārūn but detected no reaction whatever.

“Unlikely. Here.” Then from the genie a rare fit of impatience. “I think it’s time to move on. In the stoa behind this arena the sperm are matched to exemplary female eggs in auspicious combinations by computer. Once a pairing is agreed upon by the broker, the computer program posits a probability ectype from the geonome profiles.”

“An electronic crap shoot.”

“The stakes are high.”

“What again is the take?”

“For the headliners, if their eggs and sperm are plentiful, healthy and fully attested, sixty thousand plus for the ladies. Somewhat less for the gents.”

Catherine was a time lulling her own impatience. At last she merely asked, “Why all this emphasis on the physical? Surely other measures are as telling?”

“The physical, in its detailed nuance, provides initial indices that tell as much if not more about the general health and well-being of the individ-

ual than paper exams. It is so assumed.”

“By whom?”

“The marketplace.”

“That’s reassuring.”

“What would you buy -- a beautiful mind, or a splendidly revealed soma with a beautiful mind? The standard argument. Disfavor often spawns disfavor.”

“Who knows? But is rank exploitation that salubrious?”

“The fulsomely visual is now a commonplace.”

She wanted to say that some folks might choose to disagree, but felt the issue nearly an anachronism these days.

“Tell me again where I fit in in all this, and please don’t edit out the ‘fulsome’ bits.”

“It is now known I have a very special candidate. ‘Your beauty finds you worthy...like the running brook that sings its melody to the night.’”

“A catchy tune. But does it civilize?”

“One of the excursions of freedom.”

What continued to puzzle and amaze Catherine was Hārūn’s general lassitude, the heavy-lidded eye and faint sweet smile -- all of which served to parody the astuteness of some of his remarks. Or was she simply another hopeful romantic taken with deft placid observance? Still, his words continued to command assessment on their own. Even if, as she suspected, he did not prize them himself.

“You said I might review some of the individual clinic assessments.”

“We have cam renderings of three such evaluations, for both sexes -- one exceptional, one average, one unacceptable. I suggest you watch and listen to them all with Barbara. Before you come to any fast conclusions.”

“I’m listening.”

“What you will hear, during the video, is a reading of the fuller notes made by the examiner after the presentation -- a transcript an overseer can review if there is a question.”

“Are there often questions?”

“Background material usually...an incorrect address and the like.”

“Well I’ve seen the boys. And I have no doubt they welcome a facilitator offering them a good time after they parse irregular verbs. I assume the chaps who aren’t turned on by milkmaids don’t obtain, as they say.” Again she looked at Hārun without discovery. “In any case, I would like to see what happens to at least one lass, to fine tune my growing wonder at what has happened to the West in my absence! The egg becoming such a sine qua non. Defining the chick.”

“License, ease, entitlement, science and technology complicate mating.”

“You’ll be around to answer some questions? I realize it’s not encore entertainment.”

Hārun barely nodded, giving nothing away. “I think Barbara will make a peerless docent for the individual sessions.”

“Well, let’s get ‘cracking’”. If dangling participles interested her slightly more than jujubes and coin machines, she believed the physical

haunt of women held the key here and were thus the crucial players. In a private theatre off the loggia, she and a condign Barbara watched the images captured by two wall mounted cam corders in a bright room, the later written notes given here a virtual ‘voice over’ narrative.

“The setting must be disconcerting for some candidates.”

Barbara smiled, nodded.

“And they trust the DVD’s are secure with a pin number?”

“I presume they do.”

“These overseers -- they do a follow up?”

“Of course. These youngsters are not dumb and have been known to both fake and contrive achievements, even file attributes on the sly. The latest performance enhancing substances can sometimes elude the standard conventional testing.”

“You believe it?”

“The drugs today are many and complex, and ubiquitous. Some cynics say that Olympic and sports medals generally might go to the athlete’s pharmacologist, not the athlete.” Barbara paused, appearing newly determined, as a pianist starting over. “As Hārūn has said: we are interested in the tracts of the Minotaur. The working standards set by the clinic...are incidental. For us. But we understand your interest.”

“The Montecito’s clinic’s reputation must be in tact though. No untoward media publicity.”

“It has a top drawer forensic lab, which serves a district medical examiner. It is a key evaluation center and egg/sperm provider for the Bern

Clinic in Switzerland.”

“I take it the routine lab work on the current set of candidates has been completed.”

“Yes. Though things like the histological indexes they’re assigned are filed under the pin number.”

“Which means what exactly?”

“That a broker must make application to the spas’s director to receive a full profile, which is carded to a password and pin number assigned internally by the clinic.”

“But the buyer does get to see the candidate.”

“The eyes are usually blocked out at the pixel level. A contracted buyer gets a separate discrete picture of the eyes without makeup -- to determine color and shape.”

“So the identity of the donor is more or less secure.”

“If she is a legitimate donor. The contract makes it difficult for a tabloid hack to maneuver inside the donation process.”

“And if she were a reporter?”

“Journalists face a privacy, confidentiality barrier. Impersonation can invoke a contract violation and identity theft is a criminal offense. The vetting process includes a thorough background check.”

“Which is known to the candidate.”

“Some candidates are more suspect than others. The presumption of all custodians -- with gold in hand.”

“‘Moscow Rules’.”

“Yes. ‘The cripple...who can yet dance.’ One of Hārūn’s aphorisms. He’s very mindful of his truck with Islamic purists.”

They each smiled, though not at one another.

An hour later Catherine returned to her suite and brewed some loose herb tea. Oddly, her Doppelgänger was a teetotaler, suggesting either a reformed alkie, health groupie, or newly devout believer. Catherine opted for the first possibility, since she had thus far gone along with Hārūn’s refusal to hide some gin in the suite. “The risk is...ongoing,” he had mumbled. If only the bugger knew.

With a strong fragrant cup in hand she tried to make sense of what she had just witnessed. Had events in a decade overtaken her so? And was the operative word obsession, nonchalance or apathy? Yet how could they not care -- surely a mate, however temporary, is a sought out source of trust and repose? Or is pleasure and appearance now the cardinal be alls? The Without Which -- Nothing? She sat back in her room’s bolstered daybed and closed her eyes, several times cuing the sound recording of the tape Barbara had arranged for her to review. The supplementary over-voiced words of the evaluator seemed even more flattering the second time around. How indeed had it all begun?... Before beginning she briefly looked over the log of the general knowledge and ‘cognitive ability’ tests and was impressed by one candidate’s fluency in both. In describing a candidate familiar with Cervantes, Machievelli and Wittgenstein, and exceptional in covariance coefficients, fractal geometry and continuum mechanics, i.e. rheology, the evaluator’s remarks sounded like a foreign lan-

guage. She had wanted to see this candidate's tape but it was not included in the set Barbara had given her. "Some candidates sanction only specific brokers access to such."

One elective and unexpected assessment centered on a candidate's sense of humor -- how adept at double entendres, punning, inventiveness in devising limericks, and a naturalness with irony and parody. Catherine was further amazed at the adroitness of at least two candidates who 'juggled' the above in conversations that dealt with the world's absurdities and conundrums. "The least able often dispensing the awesome advice," was the capsule comment of one candidate regarding the advice of PC fanatics. "Energumens" she called them.

But these remarks were mere footnotes compared to the physical assessment juggernaut. The Muerner factor, Catherine began to think of it. The body left standing on its own. Ogling all the possibilities. A master's degree in ogling. Thus it was with some diffidence she watched and listened a second time to the first of Barbara's proffered tapes -- the one being entirely enough -- which featured an exemplar female machine, a special candidate who was working on an MA in pentathlon training, a putative paragon in a form fitting singlet with Google on the front, wearing also a narrow repoussé eye mask. The session began with a general review of the skin sheen, integrity and resilience, hair-nail 'candescence', the examining hands of the examiner, an attractive middle-aged woman, deft, brisk and thorough -- an oddly staid exercise as it progressed, save for the escaped laughter of a youngster discovering the sweep of the autonomic

nervous system and the cachet of being a treasure apprehended in awe. If the girl's face looked somewhat banal -- but another Garbo clone from the face cream ads, so Catherine thought -- her form was about as ideal-elegant as they come. Lean, lithe, 'meetly toned', as Willardson might have said. And tall: five feet ten inches and 146 pounds. A very pretty healthy down hill skier and pentathlon athlete. Almost at once Catherine found herself finical, vigilant and querulous. How discerning a gawker might become seemed to bear out Barbara's terse comment. And as she watched, Karen's mining of her own sexual ambivalence resurfaced. "You've neglected some boys, yes?" she cold hear Karen placidly state.

The girl appeared to easily converse with the assayer, an exchange not on the audio transcript, which featured only the fondly patronizing voice of the evaluator as she reviewed the initial survey notes of the candidate before her: "I've taken special note of the muscle fluency tests of all limbs and digits-- including the independent flexing of eyebrows and eyelids -- being able to close either eye completely while leaving the other fully open, proving again to be a reliable index of overall liquid tendon and muscle fluidity, which the candidate has excelled at in all limb tests. The standard default measurements also approximate the upper tier ectype, including the median arches of the feet and each toe's symmetry and placement similarly exclusive, each five toes a reverse match of the other set -- happy tiny faces the lot." Here the examiner inserted a chipper laugh which Catherine tended to mimic, for the detail was again an in-house, partisan language. "If the feet are somewhat longer than the exemplar default, the

flexibility and torque of the arches is uniform and exceptional, the clearance vault jump several inches higher than the default.

The narration then essentially skipped a beat, or so it seemed now.

“The legs and arms are also exemplary, not only in their proportion, alignment and length -- note rectilinear alignment of humerus with bones of forearm -- that bracket a near perfect 34 25 34 torso. Note also the overall clean well-defined musculature -- what more and more anorexics should be made cognizant of, for the diet to maintain the exercise regimen this candidate follows is sturdy and satisfying -- such that there is nothing here for equivocal advisement. Though a re-examiner may want to confirm the innate flexibility both rotational and orthogonal of the limbs and trunk for future reference. The lower limbs are lithe yet unusually strong -- a measure of the training regimen this candidate has followed. The gluteus medii especially well defined. As are the iliaci down to the sartori and vasti. I could detail the knee and calve muscles but the picture we have before us is nearly textbook. No anatomical illustrator has pictured a more trig leg; indeed, my commentary this day may seem not a little redundant.”

Catherine stopped the tape to refresh her cup, smiling at the low pitched voice of the keen examiner who, she imagined, could be a dyke and, in an age of genetic discrimination, should be thought a fit observer and arbitrator. When she resumed the tape, the candidate amiably smiled before pulling the singlet over her head and backing it to a chair to stand nude and akimbo before the examiner who also promptly smiled. The

nagging suspicion that the assessment henceforward served a male proclivity keep surfacing. But because she was undergoing a reassessment of herself she wanted to know the topical prattle first hand. The examiner eyed with obvious satisfaction the revelatory detail. If the latinate words tried Catherine's layman's lexicon, she could hardly imagine a more idealized pictographic female example.

My word. Yes. The torso *is* exceptional. The deltoids well defined, the dorsi, serratis and obliques all distinctly parsed. Likewise the albae and subclavii distinct from the infraspinati. The umbilicus a near perfect floret. The platysmae and trapezi fully instated. The greater pectoralis a substratum for the breast tissue which is itself remarkable. Though somewhat smaller than a B ectype, the cambers are perfectly spherical and matched, hemispheric yet rising, without excessive lateral play, to a spiculum at the retrousse nipple, and amply set on the long torso well below the wide shoulders, enhancing both the shoulders and the sternum plane, leaving a defining bracket at the heel of the greater pectoralis. Remarkable.” For a time the voice ceased as the girl presented the standard front, side and three-quarter poses for the cameras, hands akimbo and above the head. Again the girl handsomely smiled as the clinician palmed her breasts. “Despite the concise contour definition, note the uniform resilience, an example that may in fact redefine the standard for uppermost candidates. Please note the eminent tissue resilience and absence of any granularity, also the geometric definition of the nipples when pointed. All the while the clinician kept shaking her head, letting on that they were in-

deed blessed with a nonesuch. After a short apparently apathetic conversation, which was not part of the sound track, the girl readily nodded. This lack Catherine took up with Barbara:

“We can’t hear what the examiner actually said to the girl.”

“No. All incidental comments are considered...extraneous.”

“Pity.”

The clinician then had the girl stand in full view of one camera. The candidate has shaved her legs, but left the underarm and pubic hair untouched as requested. Both of a fine soft quality -- essentially a Two -- and sparingly distributed, with little hair on the inguen, upper thighs and none above the mons. A central cleft interlacement of hair displays a natural combed lacery to the mons. The underarm hair is similarly spare, soft and fine. Again a Two. Please recall that a three or four is the normal caliper.

Another point she had confronted Barbara about. “Pubic hair is big ghee is it?”

“Much unruly hair is generally...not prized.”

The tape however was a model of gratuity.

“If I may permit a subjective assessment, a footnote, the candidate is as uniformly pearl white and subtly defined as a detailed ceramic -- one of which I added to my own personal collection this week!” The girl appeared to laugh, then stopped as the examiner placed a new linen on the service table. “The waist is a subtle female arc to a fully convex bum with a dimple to the posterior auricularis, somewhat smaller than the B Ectype but every bit as contoured. The thighs though strong do not touch below

the inguen.? With a further nod or cue the girl sat on the inclined table and flexed her knees, fitting her heels in the placement cups which the examiner lengthened to accommodate the longer legs.

It was here Catherine nearly bowed out. Her incredulity was becoming acerbic. Only the prospect of finding something untoward kept her alert. The examiner carried on as if giving her audience a favorable weather report.

“As was seen in the upright stance, the labia are also exceptional in their matching camber and sloped taper.” On a further nod and smile from the examiner, the girl fluently salved her vestibule from a vial handed to her. “It is interesting that the minora, except for the clitoral sheath, remain contingent even when the lower limbs are extended. Please note the smoothness, incisive equilateral definition and sheen to the lips, the overall pristine salubrity of the vestibule tissue. And the distinct caul setting of the clitoris -- almost a ideograph drawing of the glans. The vulva, note, is readily tumescent.” Again some apparently affable words were exchanged which were not part of the transcript. “And yes easily orgasmic.”

“This too is germane?” Catherine had wanly asked the heedful Barbara.

“For one tier of buyers.”

“Right.”

Wanly Barbara continued. “Several diseases leave early inchoate lesions. Which in some cases may be more apparent in arousal...the clinic literature posits the possibility.”

She couldn't resist. "The dear 'crotcheteers'."

Barbara agreeably smiled.

On a brief willing nod from the girl when she had finished, the clinician then typed something on her computer and a startled Catherine watched as a large robot was ushered in riding on its own caterpillar tread with two gowned aids.

She had looked at Barbara who was then inspecting her nails. "This is a sleeper."

Without looking up Barbara said, "They call it Cuspy, sometimes R-Too."

By then it was obvious that Cuspy was a very lucky robot.

"It's how the clinic gets around the question of assault, is it? The department of the interior?"

Again, Barbara appeared to make some effort to assert herself. "It houses several sensors that provide digital readings -- no pun intended. The orgasm is a logarithmic manifold. Cuspy incorporates and tabulates all epidermal and epithelia probes. Which are now being placed, I believe." She seemed inclined to say more but desisted.

In droll dismay Catherine watched as aids swabbed parts of the girl's body, adding electrical conduits to several patches on the skin surface. Cuspy's organ, itself attached to a plethora of conduits that led to a mainframe, was porous as a sponge. The girl was repositioned in the chair in a more declined position. One of Cuspy's armatures was fitted to the upper chest, while its organ, which issued from a kind of calyx, was fitted into the

vulva. The calix itself housed what looked like a hive of sensors. The voice of the narrator continued: “We find the present position the best for the sexual interface assessment with this candidate. It is the most comfortable and the easiest to accommodate the slope of the vagina. The numerous external patches pace the many sensors within the robot itself. Our candidate has agreed to a full set of readings, during latency, arousal and prospective orgasm. These in turn will be correlated to many other specific readings relating to organ health and fitness. Needless to say, we are grateful for her participation. She has asked that the attendants remain during the interval.”

For a time it looked as if Cuspy was himself on the lamb, yet the hint of an awakening in the girl was soon manifest. As she gave herself up to the stimulation, actually ‘tweaking’ the robot from a small console by her hands, the clinician continued with a blow by blow account: “The candidate is not a virgin but has had only two partners to date. She has orgasmic sex, usually oral, with her current partner about three times a week and has no sign whatever of a STD. As one can see even at this stage, she is naturally well lubricated, the vestibule lactescent, the clitoris completely indexed from its caul.” By then Cuspy was slowly ‘withdrawing and interposing’ the narrator said. With the setting of a timer the overt performance began with, as Catherine recalled, a proficiency she had rarely witnessed, a slowly accelerating delving and surface stroking that within a protracted minute produced a slow rivulet of ejaculate as the girl, happily recoiled, folded in on herself, which the attendants helped mitigate by hold-

ing the girl's head while caressing her neck and spine to a relaxed standstill. Catherine had read about such alacrity, but never witnessed it until now. The orgasm indeed seemed interminable. "The orgasm can be multiple and sustained; referentially sub-clinically spastic in its completeness." When at last she signaled a diminution, the girl began robustly laughing, dimpling her cleanly muscled torso while the attendants helped her to her feet. As then, Catherine discovered she was also beguiled, as well as astonished and dismayed. The fact that she had recently succumbed to an incomparable enchantress, brought a frisson of recognition if not alarm. Given the plethora of images she was exposed to in this video, she too would have had no trouble caressing this lovely girl, a fact she would remind herself from time to time -- at least until she had more time to evaluate her own latent instincts. More and more she realized the power of pornography to besot -- to short circuit all manner of manners, politesse, urbanity, compassion, sagacity and finally she believed love. What duo -- of the several sexes -- would ever survive a steady diet of such molestation, that swiftly surfeits the anticipation, the background felicity? Natural, healthy, victimless and fun. Was not pervasive entitlement a drug in and of itself? And with such opportunity so flagrant who bothers with collateral effects? The examiner ended with a footnote, reminding the viewer that a full color print of the subject's eyes were available in print form from the clinic registrar.

"Raw talent I think they call it," Catherine had said to Barbara. To herself she also thought: so much for modesty as a romance trigger; the

fine modern commodity culture is taking up the slack. Was the terrorist they sought to eliminate really a terrorist she wondered? Yes he was. For he could easily blow up this tier one bird and feel nothing but pride doing it. But then most of the terrorists she'd seen would never themselves make it to the upper tiers. Might that be part of the problem -- being sexually misprized in that insidiously invidious age? As ugly as sin was taking on a life of its own. Yet throughout the section they watched together, dedicated Barbara could have been watching a toothpaste commercial. Well, she was one of the snake wranglers wasn't he? Still, Catherine decided she was largely an ignoramus here -- if that were not a contradiction in syntax. She had been too drolly, sardonically absorbed to opt for judgment; now she felt the urgency to conspiratorially proceed and demand some answers. A labour of love. Barbara, she decided, would have a different and perhaps less apathetic take on carnal appraisal. They talked that evening in a quiet Persian accented study, a fading sun gilding the walls.

"What difference could all this possibly make? I ask only for information."

There was a lengthy pause, which she feared might be terminal. But Barbara's sober voice returned, saying, "Frigidity is not entirely undocumented."

"Well hardly here I should think. For pete's sake. And even if so, isn't the nurture thing crucial here?"

Barbara seemed to debate the point of continuing. "If arousal is not

conspicuous and thus prompt, the documentation of the egg is diminished, leaving fewer viable traits in the standard genome. Sensual engagement is a crucial matter. The girl you and I observed knew what she was doing. Her endowment and performance, and salubrity, may well double the rate.”

“Tell me again what they stand to make.”

“A handful today -- seventy, eighty thousand each. This candidate likely more. Half when she agrees to take the fertility drugs, half when her eggs are harvested.”

“And never ever in harm’s way?”

“The pyramid would then collapse.”

“A pyramid covers a lot of dirt.”

“Why perturb the original when you will one day benefit from, even own, an enhanced copy?” By then Barbara seemed resigned to hanging on.

“What do you mean ‘own’?”

“We are in the realm of unprecedented wealth, sumptuousness, ruthlessness and power.”

“Tell me.”

“It’s not apparent?”

“But why submit to this rigmarole? If money is the object, the beauty we just saw could realize any number of lucrative advertising or promotional roles. She’d be a natural as a top sport model, surely.”

Barbara was a time responding, and when she did she seemed to be ad-

dress a larger audience.

“Modeling is not universally acclaimed today. Particularly in the feminist self-reliant camp. To say nothing of historic cultures. And today’s working models tend to be mainly anorexic and/or amply synthetic. Some people consider modeling little better than whoring -- a form of extortion with an essentially uncultivated gift. Moreover, the world beauty scimmages are considered rather gauche. The intelligent woman wants an engaging career not a sinecure. Hence the popularity of things like economics, journalism and the law. And of late engineering. Conspicuous beauty in a strident democracy is an embarrassment. But here one may be paid sub rosa. The beauty is not tarnished, gainsaid. And may benefit both an infertile couple and a budding promising science. Invariably the successful candidates have a sturdy college program underway -- again the testing heavily favors such ability and resolve. Habits bespeak the character. The providential bonus is a healthy physical attractiveness.”

Then Catherine was direct. “You don’t of course expect me to attend to all this?” The incredulity in her voice was palpable and unexpected.

But Barbara surprised her. Making her wonder again how encapsulated her information was -- the drip feed she seemed connected to.

“It would be risky. Physically you are strikingly similar. That the informers have long since confirmed. Clinically some incongruities would be apparent. Knowledge of a blood type could be a liability. Beside, you have already bypassed this level -- simply by being here. Now we simply wait, and observe, as you enjoy your ‘sabbatical’.”

“What guarantee do I have that I won’t be accosted by one of these hectic brokers -- one who could be a stand in for the terrorist?”

“My team, our team, is astutely vigilant. Such a person would have to approach the front desk monitors and concierge with an advisement from the clinic. Too obvious. His team will first confirm her presence, as they will have by now. Then decide on a plan to effect an abduction. By then we’ll be tracking their messages. He’ll be neutralized very soon.” Seeing Catherine’s diffidence she added, “It is inevitable.”

“So no guarantee.”

“Coming here remains your best option. For your safety and your research. The team here is exemplary.”

“The invisible team. Sorry.”

“Yes, the best.”

“Something I’m not too good at -- hanging around. A limited shelf life.”

“The Minotaur’s apprehension of impatience may be a plus. The imputation that the soloist is bored and about to split regardless. Increases his urgency.”

Not to be outdone Catherine added, “You’ve not a colleague named Theseus?...”

“The soul unfolds itself, like a lotus of countless petals.”

“Some unfolding. Sorry.”

“The soul resides in articulation and symmetry. Beauty is its ecstasy.’ Hārun, I know, talks a lot. But don’t doubt his resolve.”

Catherine chuckled. “The Magus.”

With some deference Barbara replied, “The designation may be apt here.”

“No condolences then.”

“Absolutely none.”

“Exhibitionism being a genetic tic, is that it?”

“You are an able player. Discrete but fully alive. Without it we would never trap the ogre at this stage.”

Later Catherine reflected on how the show-off factor was itself animated by the apparent enthusiasm of the audition candidates. If she had been amused by some, vexed by others, she had, she would later confide to herself, seen nothing yet. It seemed ‘les visuels’, from Sartre’s lexicon, had proliferated exponentially. Thus was she alerted when a spa supervisor approached Barbara to suggest a top buyer wished to see their ‘in house candidate’ in the villa’s open gallery off the solarium. It seemed a broker had already negotiated a retainer for her eggs. The ‘top buyer’ she presumed to be an agent of the troublesome Ammon, the obsessed Cyclops. And entry level maneuver. She went immediately to Hārun.

“You did not mention any guest appearances. And how the hell did he get this far?”

“It is a late, unexpected, and altogether crucial development. It is, for all intents and purposes, an act of desperation. By requesting such a viewing he either has some doubts, or he’s desperate to proceed and prepared to disregard the dangers. His operative will provide many leads. He will

see the performance and record parts with a cell camera.”

“Well, you better spell it out. And prepare for a flat ‘no’. This has gone on rather long enough.” That she even remained to hear him out would later summon a grimace to her face. That she credulously accepted his assurance of her verisimilitude -- that she could actually pass for the ‘soloist’ in such a ‘command performance’ -- would entertain her the rest of her life. Such was the dynamic in the prized fishbowl. “I see a repeat of the London Apsara -- less her needled or hat pin.”

“As I’ve said -- Ammon will be fully aware of the exceptional nature of his request. His operative will only have in his possession the clothes on his back, with the exception of the camera -- which will be carefully examined -- and he will be fully monitored.”

“So the cyclops won’t leave his cave. Yet.”

“No. His man will leave without interference. And so confirm the Corin Wiley personage Ammon’s team has centered on. We can follow him with greater precision than before. The countdown has begun. Again, you are in no danger whatsoever. And, as we have often said, you can change your mind. It is for you to decide. Please consider, it will not be him -- but one of his field men.”

“Two eyes instead of ‘one’.”

Hārūn lightly smiled. “Neither as large. Whoever. He will come and leave with the shirt on his back. And his cell camera.”

“You must think I’m a siren.”

“I’ve not heard you sing.”

A day later she sat before a two-way mirror in a cubicle off the gallery -- presumably analogous to one of the rooms Karen spoke of earlier -- looking at and disbelieving the face before her, the hair, makeup and costume closest to the available pictures of the intrepid ‘Russian Soloist’ as the Celestial Nymph -- the last performance attire at the Apsara Club where her Doppelgänger was assaulted. So, who is aping who, in this guessing game that seemed to blind with light and startling pink flesh. The protocol was precise: she was to ‘sit before the two-way mirror in the late Indian costume, enter the larger salon, and perform a set of Sun Adoration calisthenics.’ Hārūn had altered the original request by saying that the performer had injured herself recently and would have to scale down her performance. That such a caveat even materialized amazed as it confounded. Surely she would be revealed as a stand in. The Indian getup itself concealed mainly the performer’s eyes and hair. “You surely can’t agree to this. You risk losing his interest altogether...he’s obviously looking for some telltale mark or characteristic. And you are asking a hell of a lot. Again.”

“It is a gamble. But without it we will have to act peremptorily. The field agent will have a finely planned bolt hole. We must keep him ‘close’, as the prudent say. He is now a visible lead to the cyclops.”

An incredulous and wary Catherine scrounged for a realistic assessment. “Would our closet clone, my double, be that tractable if she’s as cool and cocky as you say?” To which Hārūn nodded, but without commitment, making her realize that her ongoing concern to ‘get it right’

might be a gratuity here, thus begging how necessary some of the other deeds she undertook were. The hour arrived with her misgivings no less raucous. Again the unreality, the illusoriness seemed a veritable invitation -- the magnetism of the covert, the enigmatic, the audacious, the aristeia -- from whence phenomenon like the Minotaur appeared. Appearance! Whew! Thus, it was -- now or no. The very moment materialized, as if by divination, where she was scheduled to perform alone in the appointed gallery, actually a large and empty salon, all in earshot of a vigilant Hārun on a radio net. He assured her no broker would accost her afterward, though she now wondered as she waited before the mirror if that must not be the essential next step. No, he assured her again, no broker. None whatever. None. Zip.

And so a very fanciful debut loomed -- a begrudged command performance! Was she a 'fail-safe' looney or determined lynx? The twin, or the twin! The face before the mirror was reproachful, and lamely resolved. 'Velleity' came to mind -- the least degree of volition. How was even that possible she mused as she awaited her cue in the spare but elegant costume? She had latterly 'rehearsed' in it several times before the mazy curtains, after some artful persuasion. Again she mused that the only things he wouldn't plainly see were her eyes -- the collyrium framing two hawish eyelets. The intaglio costume and sheer skirt slipped about the moving form like a water break. Bodies! 'Bodeful' bodies. The manly excuse. Hārun's undivided proximity was severally tested on the voice activated phone just before she entered the lofty space. Inside a last call to the

helmsman seemed obligatory. “My god, what a room. The light is harsh and it’s colder than a witch’s tit. Also a potpourri gas chamber. Tell me I’m in the wrong place.”

“The glass menagerie at the far end is the faceted array of two-way mirrors some brokers insist on; do the set before it.”

“Lovely. Two minutes tribute.”

“No one’s counting. He’s here, the cyclops.”

“Bless him.”

“Accept the poetry. ‘Like the tempest she shakes the earth beneath us and the sky above us.’”

“Yeah, yeah. The ice maiden. A bloody smooth floor too. This is madness.”

“It may be the most useful thing you do in this lifetime.”

She curtly laughed.

As she approached the multi-faceted array, she was not amused by many images of the doeskin youngster before her, but as she began the stretches, arabesques, tournants...the intrigue teased. If she did not see her ‘patron’ she was startled by a strange deep voice that promptly filled the near distance, a voice both musical and suggestively Dari, she thought. “No top, no choli,” it said with some testiness. Readily done after a silent oath. Choli -- the lad knows his attire. A close call slipping out of it -- to nix the hesitation that betrays dismay. The prude, she reminded herself, was the ‘adopted’ one. “The chamber smells!” the voice added with even more censoriousness. And behold, within the minute -- the scented air

from a ceiling vent ceased. English she decided was possibly a late accomplishment, making the scene even more rarefied. More and more she doubted this witness a skill of an honest-to-God terrorist.

With surprising aplomb she began -- only to cue the testy voice again. "No, no, no -- no dhoti. As you did in London. You did not hide your beauties." Catherine could hear distant muffled voices. The request chafed. Yet again she seemed to behave as an automaton. Get on with the gig, dharling. Easy enough to remove a silk thong -- hardly a dhoti. The translucent skirt the merest morning mist. He wanted a detailed look. Thanks to Pachis' Occam's razor he would. Letting pubic hair grow out was a pain.

In due course she performed her routine twice, actually sweating the second time round, a plaintiff's recourse, maintaining the fluent, measured tempo of tai chi, completing her final extensions directly before the mirror, the lingering chill of the room adding to the sense of qualmsiness, her 'beauties' being manifest. Still, she could barely imagine him mistaking her for Hārun' soloist -- the one with the leggier legs that must intimate other differences as well. Faces may be homologous, figures almost never -- over time. Perhaps in allowing herself to be baited so she really wanted to force the issue -- remove herself from the ongoing confusion. And menace. That Hārun urged the performance daunted and puzzled. It seemed he had the more to lose.

When she had finished the light immediately dimmed and the lofty chamber reverted to an ice palace. In looking about her one last time the

intimation was palpable: the faceted glass array suggestive of one enormous bug, its compound eyes a beady mosaic, waiting a tug on its digital membrane.

And then the ‘sabbatical’ was over, summarily over. Even the maid service was restored and in high gear when she awoke the following day. Hārūn waited for her with a large six figure cheque. “Our payment, for services rendered -- double the highest fee paid out this week.”

“A costly dumb show.”

Hārūn faintly smiled. “Ammon’s witness wore a credible face mask. Yes, the Minotaur sent a lookalike emissary. The secreted camera phone clinched the matter. We were able to record the pictures it sent. You are a peerless match.”

She squinted at him. “Well one jaybird’s much like another...” She was about to say more but decided her role as resident critic had ended.

“He’s affirmed his conclusion to his cell. ‘It is the *shirk*,’ he said. The unforgivably debased idol.”

“So when can I be a citizen again?”

Hārūn easily smiled. “Give us a couple of days.”

The conversation with Feliks was brisk. The caller, one of Bossy’s yankee contacts, who spoke in a Caribbean inflection, seemed fully conversant with current events.

“The signal was not hard to track. Ammon used the work ‘shirk’, which confirms the identity of the dancer -- in his mind. We assume she

will leave soon. With the identity confirmed she's no longer on a sabbatical. Given her early coming to the villa, the feigned egg sale would be nearing an end. She won't stay put for long once she's been paid. She's been lucky so far."

"How long would you say?"

"A day or two. She's been there a while now. She was seen some time ago in the spa's parkland estate. With your 'candidate'. They fucked later in a tea house. A busy puss this Guk of yours."

"A day or two you say."

"We can find no contact with an outsider. Meaning no trade with an editor or publisher. To date."

"It won't be long in coming if she's acquitted whatever contract she had with Hārun."

"Her disappearance would end the matter."

"But leave an opening for one more investigation. Broader this time. Including the ministry. The Americans will insist on it. Hārun will track the proxy in the meantime. Some face mask that."

"Your call. We log her whereabouts in the meantime."

"Yes. Keep me up to date. Hourly, if the proxy proves more gung ho than we think."

"Don't think there's any urgency there. Ammon's never been a fire ass. His London bummer excepted."

When Feliks folded his cell phone he wryly smiled. A jihadi 'proxy' waxing the Whyte bird. Again he entertained himself with the prospect

of the two girls being finally in cahoots -- one shilling for the other. Unlikely, but a faint possibility. Either one dead would clear the air. Leave a bead on the other. Bossy would approve. But Catherine Whyte as the Ap-sara 'dancer'...this Ammon must have biddies on the brain. Who could have thought. Twins!

As Catherine cast a final look about her rooms, the atmosphere was that of checkout time at a Holiday Inn. Through her window a new pod of hopefuls filled the private garden, marinating in a resplendent sun. Her own sojourn ostensibly over, her bags packed, she received an invitation from Hārun for a sit down salutation and ventured onto the well-screened terrace to spend an hour reviewing events with the ever languid mentor, whose torpid gaze suggested but another pallid neglected fakir or lethargic bureaucrat. Thus his come-on to stage a dramatic finale, a bravura coda, caught her completely off guard.

“The last show wasn’t the final divertissement -- the Saturday skin flic? Hārun!”

“You performed splendidly. And our terrorist has these days a moist eye. He thinks one of my minders is a secret ally, and we expressly wish to oblige that thinking. He’s desperate. ‘Even those who limp go not backward.’”

“Oh gawd. Do your voices or your Muezzin ever let up?”

He briefly smiled. “You heard us out before; please do so now. Again, you and only you must decide.”

“Hah, hah...only me.”

But it was left to Ann, one of the sentinel captains, and the spokesperson on Catherine’s second trip to the Cayuse -- the extent of Hārun’ team often unexpectedly reassured -- to complicate the already dense and involuted drama, which she did that night in a sauna reserved for the distaff radi-club, the few shadowy female field agents. That Hārun might be a lead player in such a team continued to amaze. She wryly thought of the term ‘embedded’. Several agents patronized the sauna and its gifted masseuse, most, according to Ann, part of Hārun’ team and, with the exception of Ann, unknown to Catherine. Unlike the steam bath where the assured sleek Karen had materialized, all the patrons here sat discreetly wrapped. When the steam became dense, Ann began her spiel in a soft German accented English.

“Let me preface my words by saying you can leave when you wish. You have well acquitted the original compact. But you will find this second ending, this coda, as Hārun calls it, useful later in your investigation, for it will finger some major players we could not otherwise identify.”

“The ending that never comes.”

“It rarely gets this close. Already we have detected an ongoing plan to marshal an attack -- in this case a bombing of the Bern Clinic. Yes, I know, not what you would expect. Not that it will happen, of course, but it’s a lead we must take up. The team needed to do the job will be exposed. A suicide bomber will trigger the blast. And his or her identity someone like Ammon will be cognizant of for he has urged if not helped

plan the attack. Indeed, he is a member of the Rulers Council which selected the target. Removing him will scramble the plans and timing of the attack. They are paranoid about leaks. Where you come in.”

Catherine sullenly sighed. “Run the scenario through again.”

“Now that he has located his thief, his ‘soloist...”

“You’re convinced he really has?”

“Our evidence affirms it: he left a dead letter for a Brotherhood cutout that declares a positive identification...in consequence of which we’ve learned, through Hārun’s mole, that an abduction is in the works. It won’t happen of course.”

“‘God willing.’ As the devout Muslim says.”

“Please be assured, the cell has been infiltrated. Ammon will be apprehended in due course. We plan to show his death as another embarrassing lapse. Asleep with a whore, who left. A heart attack -- he is badly overweight. We’ll want to keep the fallout radio active -- for the so-called moderates. In short, we will wrap up an extended cell, its main players and head, and red flag its shills. Already the media have deduced from Apsara staff and a police investigation that Ammon was the attacker not the dancer. With such a sordid revelation in the works, the fatwa loses its credibility. To insure its nullity we want to stage the death of Corin Wiley -- an alias your twin has used.” Facing Catherine’s sudden mute askance look, Ann swiftly added, “Yes, exactly that. A drug overdose. As you can imagine, we need a credible stand-in -- to play the deceased.” Again, before Catherine’s growing incredulity, Ann promptly continued, Yes, I know,

sounds exacting but hear me out. The tactic solves many issues and leaves you free of future menace. A short stay in a morgue for identification is all that's required, from where you will quietly leave. The staff will all be participants. The stay is necessary to accommodate identification and the growing media interest. It is been carefully worked out, including a legend for Corin Wiley herself. An uncle will identify the body for the coroner's office. The Quidnunc picture will be featured in the press."

"It seems like a bad horror movie you leave early on."

"Your only part will be to lie in the morgue for half an hour or so. In a body bag with a secreted medi-air cylinder."

"Sounds madcap."

"Sadly, you will never know just how carefully its been worked out. Nor the years we have tried to stymie our Ammon. Yes, years. But again, it is for you to decided. There are some benefits for you and your twin. But we need a credible body. Too many risks with a dummy. No pun intended."

"Ha. Credible. The day's euphemism." As if to obviate her misgivings, Catherine remarked, "He actually thinks I was the Russian spellbinder... unbelievable."

"Well, he's not saying a lot right now, but he never would have sent the letter had there been any doubt. He would have vanished immediately. He used the work 'shirk' in the drop which is about as infamous for an Islamist as Baal was to an early crusader."

"It sounds unavoidably risky and awfully complicated this plan of

yours. To say the least.”

“Not at all; you’ll be hidden in a secure hospital annex.”

“So. He wants his pound of flesh. I have a hard time believing any of this. What does a head weigh anyway?”

Ann studiously thought for a moment -- “Most women a little over ten pounds, I think” -- then mugged a smile and resumed. “His hatred is his vocation, remember. Since the attack it seems to have centered on those who champion Western notions of perfection. ‘Beauty that molests’, as they say. The clinic being an opportune target. Revenge too for a past grave insult -- dancing on a blessed space -- his prayer mat we have learned from London authorities.”

“A Muslim prayer mat -- in an Apsara?”

“‘A timeless storybook artifact -- the flying carpet’, the director, Antoine Plombiers, is reputed to have said. Yes, it was part of her act.”

“A fine comedy of errors that man.”

Ammon is determined. A taped beheading might enhance his *éclat* with the radicals he is now cozying up to. Which our plan nixes. He is desperate now that the media no longer supports his initial story. He is fond of saying that you can do anything with swords but sit on them.”

“Napoleon or Tallyrand said as much -- about bayonets. How will I know he is ‘well and truly departed’?” Words Hārun might have used she surmised.

“A sordid demise will set off a shock wave around the jihadist world. As I’ve said, we plan to stage his death as another keenly embarrassing

lapse.”

Again, Catherine was baited by the details. “And you think it likely -- this shock wave?”

“Certain.”

Catherine thought for a time -- or rather attempted to deal with her own dismay. Though she did realize such a demise would end the jeopardy of her double. As much to end the nettled debate she said, “I’ll have to explain my absence to my mother.”

“That is a given.”

“How long before I can resurrect myself -- as myself -- and seek to discover the whereabouts of my putative twin?”

“Give us one month.”

“She’s not well, my mum, and savors my calls. She’ll need a lot of reassuring.” She wanted to add but didn’t -- both of us, for that matter.

“Our contacts are senior LAPD detectives and the examiner a personal friend; you’ll be watched and guarded at all times. Your anxious mother may be briefed, but not your stepfather, who would not recognize the name Corin Wiley in any case. He’s on a sailing jaunt in Thailand, as you must know, and likely won’t learn of the story. Your stepsister Margaret may contact you in due course. By then we’ll trust your judgement. Your mother, I understand, is cognizant of your past investigative work. We will give her a note from you advising of your need for discretion, for staying ‘mum’ during your temporary absence. From what you have told us your mother is your favorite partisan.”

“She too will think it preposterous.”

“The best laid plans sometimes are.”

“And you need a decision tonight.”

“His team will act quickly now that his quarry has been identified. Our alternate strategy must be promptly fielded should you decide you’ve had enough.”

To herself Catherine thought she had. Enough. Then, as a cloud of steam momentarily cleared, leaving her a brief glimpse of the chamber’s denizens, she changed her mind. The chance of being free the identity charade was appealing. What she couldn’t accomplish...one might even get a good night’s sleep and resume some investigative research. An unmitigated sabbatical this time. Free of DD and hard hat ABN. Yet she was all too familiar with stories that defied endings, resolutions. Life didn’t honor tidiness. The one consolation was that her twin might be released from further harm.

“You’ll deliver the letter to my mother yourself?”

“I will even take a tape if you wish. A phone call is out, of course. Your stepfather or a friend could be with your mother. She will be carefully but not intrusively watched of course -- during your hiatus.”

“And you really think all this is necessary?...” The question itself seemed both ingenuous and pertinent.

Curiously, though Ann was a far abler and younger specimen than Willardson, she exuded the same wry candor that comes from a long understanding of the human dilemma -- so Catherine chose to believe. “It’s an

opportunity not to be missed.”

“You’d better detail the whole thing again, and take your time. Also, how long I ought to be incognito.”

Ammon could not settle his inner furies. On first watching the frames from the memory chip, he believed the creature in the vaulted chamber the same Circe, the same jinn. But now he wasn’t sure. It was the few camera frames of her when the lights dimmed that cued his doubt. She looked in that weak light heavier than he recalled. The pervasive soft light in the exhibition room rather obliterated surface patinas and scrutable contours. The gritty room in the hotel he occupied didn’t help; the smell of some kind of decay permeated the air. The confirmation of the face by the field agent -- one of his team who presented himself as a buyer at the embankment artifact auction -- had set the plan in motion. Now, however, he could not discount some belated misgivings after reviewing the digital pics a second time. This woman, he suspected, was heavier, and though agile, despite her favored ankle, not as sleek as the London performer. A more pronounced belly, for one and heavier thighs. The jinn would be a fugitive now -- to elude her pursuers -- and might have gained weight of course. But there was something else, which also now surfaced in his recollection, something he had only surmised after the fact. The woman he had so recently seen moved in a more measured, straightforward way. He had, with mounting regret, spent many hours ogling cabaret performers. The Marseilles and London dancer was a siren, every move she made de-

signed to captivate, arouse. The performer here was simply doing a calisthenic workout, frank and uneventful as watching a camel groomer. Nothing really salacious about it. The methodical precision itself so unlike the blithe spirited moves of the exhibitionist. They had spied her rehearsing in the villa, but the curtain shroud cut down on the acuteness of the image. Moreover, such displays could easily be a ploy. The face revealed at the art sale was a revelation. A positive identity his agent said. Viewing her perform so in the select audition hall engaged at the time but not now reassured. Something was wrong. He could not imagine his tormentor changing her bearing that much. He even sensed some embarrassment as she proceeded, the costume fuller than before, as if she had been perfunctorily coached. She was simply not as fluent and daring if memory served. In the end he sought a further delay. He could not imagine the journalist participating in this -- the thought that kept intruding. His cell liaison dourly accepted the unscripted pause. Then Ammon changed his mind -- again. Yes, he would go ahead with the abduction. And find out what this jinn knew about the goings on at the villa. The story about the clinic bombing should be current then, and the voices at the villa shrill and revealing. The thought of an interrogation calmed his dudgeon. Could she even be the journalist herself he again thought? Though such a one would hardly be trying to sell her eggs to a fertility clinic or rehearsing nautch dancing, or pass herself off as Corin Wiley. The journalist was not a fugitive, though she had taken a leave of absence from ABN, according to his sources. More undercover work, perhaps. With a reputation like hers, she

would not be touting herself at the villa. No, the dancer would be desperate, short of funds, and heard about the lucrative market for select eggs, as hers would surely be. A Corin Wiley had registered at the clinic, the dancer's alias they believed. Yes, this dancer was the elusive jinn, idled, closeting her identity, putting on weight, desperate and in need. Finding and interrogating her would settle many questions, the thought of finally beheading her urged the deed itself though he sometimes doubted his resolve. Her beautiful dove-like breasts the intoxicant that bedeviled. The breasts were the same. Which he had a raging thirst to caress and kiss. A delight he must revile, vilify. He must..must!

Dilsat noted the woman with the club foot and large elevated shoe getting out of the taxi the very day she left the clinic after her first meeting with the clinic's bone surgeon. Their eyes met. Dilsat thought she recognized the woman. "Hannah?" The woman immediately looked away. Hannah Nasr Dilsat had gone to grade school with. Dilsat smiled, shrugged, cordially approached. And now, in an endearingly nostalgic and empathic moment, almost blew her cover. The woman's club foot had been an embarrassment then, yet they had played together. They both disliked one or more of their parents. The woman now seemed confused, impatient, irritated even. Suddenly she waved Dilsat away. A frantic gesture Dilsat slowly but acutely fathomed. The ready forlorn stricken look was enough, enjoined by the long heavy coat. It was suddenly all too apparent from the scenario she had been given, had gone over in excruciat-

ing detail many many times. The two uniformed heavies that emerged from the car to block her advance clinched the matter; just such goons had tormented her the day Kissy picked her up. Dilsat was suddenly overwhelmingly convinced and hurled her purse at the woman, knocking her off balance as the one heavy turned on her. The driver who had helped Hannah out of the vehicle looked surprised then vexed and waved at Dilsat to desist. He might not be in on the plan. Dilsat, in her rush to avoid the goon heading her way picked up a large stone from the clinic's entrance flower garden and hurled it at the car, cracking a rear window and setting off the alarm. A second stone was in her hands when the driver too came after her, but not before Dilsat rounded on Hannah aiming a second stone as the woman hobbled off toward the entrance. Dilsat just managed to escape the clutches of the angry driver but not the suddenly deafening explosion. Only fleetingly she was aware of a vast obliterating silence....

It would later be determined that the signal from the alarm system may have triggered the delayed timer connection to the explosives. The clinic suffered extensive damage to its entrance, atrium and pathology lab. Six people were killed in the explosion. Two bodies would belatedly be identified. The three nearest the car were beyond recognition. Speculation about a fourth body in the debris had yet to be confirmed.

Catherine Whyte read the Times copy with a dismay that lingered as a very bad hangover. The Bern Clinic? If she was relieved that the clinic

would be functional within the month, the darker horizon seemed to confirm Hārun's comments about Muslim intransigence with progressive exploits, in particular 'beauty's brag'. But to invoke such a target? The research there a potential boon to many patients, many with intractable diseases! The immediate whys and wherefores entirely eluded her. She thought of the one Sunni broker who had been so taken with Karen. Seeing her at the open grotto had been a revelation for him, which he seemed only too keen to verify. To enshrine even. Beauty being nature's brag....

SEVENTEEN

Catherine's staged death scene in a hotel room was crucial to establishing an identity. A special team finalized the look of the deceased, giving her a somewhat jaundiced look. Evidence of recent vomiting and diarrhea would be discovered in the bathroom. The rosh photographs were taken of the body lying on a bed in a stylish house coat, the drug paraphernalia cluttered a side table. The sedative she was given began to work promptly, to buoyant reassurance that the corpse was a shoo-in. It had been the one problematic issue -- just how 'inert' the body should be. Catherine had balked at being unconscious. Hence a sedative that would relax the body but not dim the mind. They would have to rely on her acting skills, period. Which, with some menacing assurances, they did.

As an experience to encapsulate the surreal, her brief time in the morgue secreted in a body bag with inner zipper, medical air cylinder and

ear vent was a show stopper! Playing a corpse kept one oddly animated. During her brief stay on the examiners gurney she thought of the photo play of witness and how detective work was a form of spying, a collaborative peep show. She also thought of *dulce et decorum* and ‘tender is the night’. And keenly wondered what her peripatetic twin would make of it all? It was perhaps the first time in her life, she decided, she may have looked her age. A gothic muse, able to inwardly smile, without giving anything away! Her twin too she believed must at least anticipate a heady, newly unencumbered state. It was a numinous interval for Catherine. Necromancy had a new nuance, a new ‘face’. What she might get on with when her stay with Hārun’s minders ended, her ample payment in hand, freeing her of ABN. All future investigations would be limited by her own imagination. Former informers and contacts would savor their own assured anonymity from ABN. Deplorable D. faded as a sun bleached print. He had cravenly kicked her out; she would stay out. The board might even come to question his peremptory decision. Could her mother be relied on to keep the ongoing secret? Play her lone face card close to her chest the while? Catherine’s instincts said yes. In any case, someone would, must endeavor to vouchsafe her well being during the silent interval. As Ann promised, the livable body bag was a salutary cocoon with its slow air release cylinder, vents and double linked zipper. A short chrysalis stay in the Inglewood County morgue -- where the ‘remains’ of Corin Wiley had been sent. Despite the doldrum, she would do her best to remain a player waiting her cue.

A louche surprise awaited her in the elected morgue however. The advent of her scapegrace boss, who apparently haunted charnel houses, was a preternatural shock, his voice just beyond the identification bay a feral jolt. Keen to marshall the details from the medical supervisor on this juicy sordid death, he confirmed the name of Coren Wiley, which must have meant little to him, while remaining ever so conscientious to get the available facts straight. The supervisor seemed resigned to accommodate this earnest high-profile inquisitor. They talked in what seemed reverential tones, and for an agonizing interval she imagined the game could become more involuted still -- that this intruder might actually be shown the face of the deceased! She vowed to kill him if the opportunity arose. A blow from the medic cylinder would finish the bugger off, so she rhapsodized. Still, she was all ears. The inveterate cad was in his usual form.

“One must of course stomach reality in our gritty profession but this is sad -- a youngster like this.”

The supervisor’s voice now struck her too as forced. “Well the age has still to be confirmed. An uncle has been contacted and should be here shortly.”

“Will a full postmortem be performed?”

“Hard to justify, given the manner of her death. The family will be consulted of course.”

Deplorable D. seemed disappointed yet remained patronizing. “The family is always a consideration. If we cannot slight the details in our coverage, we will be succinct and unassuming, as is our standard of course.”

Luckily, Catherine mused, the troublemaker known as Catherine Whyte had already been cashiered. Would Deplorable D. be pleased perhaps that his gadfly's departure was indefinite -- that it might even rank as a disappearance?

To her inner self she said: How sweet the get beyond all this. Yet the stilted conversation reminded her that Coren Wiley was no longer a walk-on role for her twin. Perhaps touched off by Darin's intrusion, she was also reminded how antsy one could become when physical activity was curtailed; how suspicious, reproachful, vigilant, self-pitying the mute, immobilized being became.

Key recollections of her past doubled up then to taunt her with the earlier 'absences'. What was once deemed rarified lapses of memory now suggested a series of ostensible abductions...intimations she continued to resist but with less facility it seemed. Yes, she had learned much -- enough to fashion a galvanizing freelance story -- yet her own role in the health pageant had been italicized, and she resented the notice. In such a mood the voices off were discerned, barely audible at first, but soon confirming the arrival of her 'verifiers'. The medi-bag zipper was drawn back to reveal a face. A "yes" was faintly heard, followed by a barely audible "Oh god!" from a second observer. The shroud was returned. Several voices off. Then a protracted silence before the gurney began to move. The belated discovery in the 'jury-rigged' morgue was that she could not move an atom of her physical frame, while her senses remained keenly alert. The revelation infuriated and alarmed. The initial sedative may have been aug-

mented with a delayed muscle relaxant, a predicament scored by the fluid movement of the gurney.

A second eternity seemed to accompany the measured pace of footsteps as the gurney moved, signaled by the words of the lab sitter, who'd been there all along, as specified. "Won't be long now!" the hoarse voice above her said. The realization that she could at last move, a discovery arrived at slowly but surely, also reassured. With flaring determination she decided the time had come to find a safe house of her own estimable choosing. Again the words of the sitter were a release. "Your street clothes and effects have been stashed in the locker to our right, next a storage room you can dress in. As soon as I get the signal from the fire stairway at the end, the floor is clear. But you must hurry. A taxi will be waiting in the resident parking lot, at the base of the fire escape riser. I will leave now to cue the minders in the adjoining corridor. Good luck."

The flashlight from a security guard backlit the arabesque details of a glass partition on the other side of the storage room as she hurried to the fire escape...a wraith in a fine blithe hurry! The watchman, she decided, must have been part of the team. And stolidly stuck to the script.

Ann was waiting for her by the fire door with a rare hint of restlessness. With a catch in her voice Catherine said, "I'm still a bit dazed."

"Likely the sedative."

Catherine wanted to rebuke someone for not explaining more fully the drug she was given but decided the urgency of departure was, as Willardson might have said, 'hegemonic'.

Promptly Ann fetched from a staff closet the designated coat, suitcase and shoulder bag with passport, identity cards and special makeup kit, and together they headed toward the fire escape. Below the rusted tier of the riser a taxi waited and soon, with amazing alacrity, the specter of an austere beautiful Ann faded in the distance. It was the first satisfying breath Catherine had taken in donkey's years. A kind of rebirth, she told her devoted 'mom' months later. "I was in effect an 'illegal', a tenured escapee, in my own busy, shameless country."

That first night she spent in a large residential hotel, her feet up, luxuriating in a marinade of novel idleness -- in that she hadn't watched television for ages and dumbly sat before the cyclops screen, reminding herself that decency and civility were apparently recessive genes. The ads in particular, inane as most such blandishments are, were here vehicles for chic patronage and jovial desecration -- without the wit that gives satire its lease. She sensed anew the estrangement she felt on returning to the West. One of the stellar news stories dwelt on a the recent suicide of a teenage girl, the scenario of louche details from a face book page encyclopedic. Then an ad featuring a family -- dad, mom and the kids -- pushing a still decent looking van off a cliff -- in a lovely pristine wilderness -- as blithe prelude to buying a new one. She made a note to never buy in her lifetime a vehicle from that particular manufacturer. Another twinkling moment featured a couple of teeny San Quentin prospects discovering that chomping a new potato chip resulted in chaotic mishap -- vividly, acutely depicted cars crashing, boats overturning, skate boarders landing on their

heads, buildings falling on street folk. The two were ecstatic. More gratuitous details of the craven suicide followed. She imagined some alert Islamist using such fatuity to excoriate the West and recruit another coterie of dedicated bombers. You want your children to live in such an obtuse society? She recalled a journalist quip from the muddled, sublimely ineffectual peace conference in 1919 in Paris that followed WW1: the delegates there, the pundit averred, were working for “a just and lasting war”. A just and lasting war. Given the mess the delegates left Arabia in, the comment had legs. She wondered if she was really that far removed from the terrorist she had just sent to the houris. Or maybe not, as Hārun intimated. Was there not a general disgust with so many modern things that one tended to slight the anger and fury? To take it as part of the given? To give to fundamentalist raillery the ‘yes, but’ it never really earns?

So what did you expect, St. Joan? She knew all too well how easy it was to denounce and hate. To bind oneself to the myriad vexations of life. Another of the fine self-motivating, self-dramatic obsessions. As absorbing in its way as sex itself. Certainly the pornographic aspect. Natural, healthy, victimless -- existentially -- and fun. Fortunately she had purchased a new book on nanotechnology and managed to lose herself the remainder of the evening in a minuscule underworld she could barely fathom. A world that appeared to be as fantastically efficient as it was darkly, enigmatically protean. She fell asleep thinking of Michael and his close embrace -- one of the satisfactions of oblivion.

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Kissy looked out at the misted forest beyond the veranda of his Kiev dacha. Ducks were leaving the lake, clearing the trees. The setting sun lingered as a fireball scoring the lake.

Two deaths. One anticipated, planned for, the other not. He had learned via Gervase that none other than Catherine Whyte was involved in the plan to eliminate the formidable Ammon. The prodigious Aram-Hārun must have spoken to Muerner. Zoya was then in Bern, undergoing a realignment of some face tissue, but had escaped the clinic bombing. The loss of his recondite protégé affected Kissy more keenly than he anticipated. He knew the risk was considerable and had not been candid with her about the danger. Then the timing was off -- someone had used another's explosive materiel, which the mysterious 'other' must have had all along, suggesting Aram was not trusted by his Islamic cell in the end. Or himself, for that matter. Two employees in the admissions and records department were killed, a nursing supervisor badly injured. Of the so-called street people -- four in all, including Dilsat and another woman -- would never be positively identified. She must have tried to restrain one or more of them at the last minute. The destruction would have been far worse had the bomber actually set foot in the clinic. As it was, the records bay -- hard copy and digital backup -- was badly damaged, the extent of the loss not yet determined, the treatment regimens for some patients in an indefinite limbo. He had not yet talked directly with Muerner himself. But another of the awaiting reproofs. The one plus -- if such a word applied -- was that Bossy would be at odds with whoever authorized the bombing.

The clinic was a moneymaker. The minus was Bossy's ongoing suspicion of his brother and his ability to run the business, keep the noisome ducks in a row. The tragedy, which only he would bear, was the loss of the young, perceptive and resilient Dilsat who somehow adroitly limited the destruction of the clinic. He knew romance was out of the question, but the thought crossed his mind. Had she been five, ten years older...a witness a block away had seen the encounter and the unusual rock throwing. How Dilsat came to act as she did Kissy would ever after wonder about. In the Swiss press this 'countervailing' person was as mysterious as was the putative bomber. He might learn to live with himself, but not likely the gang his brother still believed he neglected, including the community of jihadis Aram once trafficked with. Finesse required players respectful of the game. It was perhaps time to leave.

Recollecting the explosion at the Bern clinic was a sobering confirmation for Catherine of Hārun's assessment of presumptive genetic momentum -- slighting God's divine design. The fact that the clinic target was so novel, in the jihadist's scheme of things, also alerted. The lesser attacks on Glow Worm Films, Behr Brue, Nixit and the abortion clinic, intimated a recent division in jihadi ranks, for no other stench bombings had taken place, at least that she knew of. For her it meant at least a pause before deciding on her tack with the Muerner mavens. The Borozovs would not be pleased with the clinic attack. Kissy especially if what Willardson said about his association with Muerner -- still one of the conundrums -- was

true. Compromising a mafia group's income was an unforgivable challenge. Hence, for her -- a holiday needing no excuse. A timely 'get away'. To quietly, calmly re-assess the dire involuted story.

Abdul read the story of the clinic bombing on the Aljazeera website with the apathy he was cultivating then. Almost a footnote, on the same site, he read about the death of Corin Wiley. Which must have stymied the obdurate Ammon. Boldly marshaling his team to rid the world of a tart as well as a 'tart baker', as he once described the clinic, was now a partial success. Despite his distaste for the clinic's mandate, Abdul tended share Aram's distemper with killing civilians. As for the other -- was the person identified as Corin Wiley even the Russian rake hell?

When he contacted Hejaz the issue still hung in the balance. Was Ammon responsible? Hejaz was a moment responding, and offered a caveat to the bombing of the Bern clinic -- Ammon's principal operation.

"There's likely more to the matter than the Swiss authorities are revealing." He paused as sipped from a cup of tea. "You've not heard the sequel I assume. Which is being 'shelved' at this time."

"What 'sequel'?"

Again Hejaz resorted to his tea before responding. "Ammon is missing -- has not made contact with his sheikh nor his cell since the bombing. Several members of his cell have been detained by Swiss authorities. Interpol is involved apparently. There is a rumor that Ammon has been found dead -- in a brothel."

“I assume you mean just that -- a ‘rumor’.”

“It appears to be connected. And there is some evidence that Aram may have been involved.”

“Is that surprising?”

“If he is, Ammon may be a pariah for some time.”

“What has happened to Aram?”

“Anybody’s guess. His genie may be working overtime. He may have begun a haj. The prized comment. Who knows?”

Kissy looked out of the Bellevue Towers that overlooked Burrard Inlet in dreamy Vancouver, Canada. The snow-capped North Shore mountains were distinct against a livid sky. A jet sat high in the sky, detectable mainly by a wooly vapor trail.

He told Feliks that Aram’s new persona as a ‘valid’ terrorist was likely a ruse to identify some hot heads -- the attack on the Bern Clinic an act unholy, obtuse and craven. Not Aram’s style at all. “It will simply anger and provoke people who otherwise might look the other way. Sleeping dogs rudely awakened.” Feliks had no ready response, or was told to say nothing. The news was likely still raw in his mind too. Bossy, Kissy knew, was incensed at the target and the fact the explosives used came from another source -- that source being a new rival for the inimical don. That Kissy had not anticipated this a lapse he might not overlook. A late implacable given.

Well here, in one of the last settled playgrounds, he might relax some-

what. The death of Corin Wiley he believed a set up. Ammon would be miffed by the news, were he still around -- which he apparently wasn't -- another puzzler. If the journalist had been recruited to be an 'understudy' for the specious socialite, she had likely abandoned ABN, and might now try to track down her peripatetic twin. A meeting he would wish to see. It was going to be a fine afternoon, the friendly cumulous clouds extending up the warm placid inlet. He presumed, hoped, Aram was well and had things in hand.

After the visit with her aunt, Zoya Stolbanov took a brief vacation in Constance. She was now on the Simplon Orient Express on her way once more to the Bern clinic, to complete her new face. The last of the operations was scheduled the day after tomorrow and would go ahead despite the attack. Her wig, dark glasses and elaborate makeup left her an unknown as she boarded the train. One gent asked her join him in his compartment, but turned away when she said she would be delighted if she could bring her aunt with her, whom she expected to meet shortly.

Now seated opposite two European women in stylish dress, the older occasionally snoring, she held a paper in front of her, gleaning more details about the clinic. Which apparently had remained functional. A director of vascular surgery was quoted as being optimistic about the clinic resuming its role as a pre-eminent medical treatment and research facility. So: the new face was still in the works -- and now urgently so, in that she didn't want someone casting her again as Corin Wiley. Whose 'death' raised a

lot of questions, especially since the journalist had apparently vanished too. As the verdant hills swept by her coach window, she noted how some distant staring cows resembled carnival rifle targets. She was reminded of the famous English mystery Murder on the Orient Express and smiled, for she was now a murder victim alive and well on a similar train! She worried about the journalist but believed her to be alive and well, being the escape artist she plainly was. The victim's background, at least that so far divulged in the media, was very different from hers. She imagined someone cooking up a legend like the KGB fabricated. Führ, she knew, was obsessed with Garbo looking females and was known for his photoshop manipulations and the painterly renderings of them by an American artist, some of which she had posed for. The Quidnunc picture was one of the few undoctored takes. She didn't like the oily-tongued Führ and his sly pornography. If anything, she had as much respect for the rank Ganyanov. Was there actually a body to affirm the story? Could the journalist be sorting out the debris? How she longed to meet her. The possibility was perhaps slightly more realizable now...slightly...the newly teasing possibility. She still had a couple of days before the scheduled surgery, and had recently read about the teaming history of Ephesus. She had been there briefly with her proconsular investigator lover Yuri while she still performed in a folk dancing troupe. She had one letter from him since the attack. He had cancer and feared he was not getting the treatment he needed. The FSB had questioned him many times. He strongly advised her not to visit him. "You are free, stay free." Grim advice she had, as

grimly, taken to heart. He closed the letter with: "Remember me as you once did. We shall meet again. One day." That letter became a touchstone through her ordeal. But she had lost touch with her Yuri and didn't know where to find him. He too lived a hectic life. But she would try -- soon. She had fallen in love in Ephesus. A past she might re-visit now as as a phantom Apsara. Enamored with memory alone. Memories that adorned a chosen place. Only a couple of days...yet a lot can happen in 48 hours. With some resolve she decided to postpone her arrival in Bern.

To Istanbul, Soke and Ephesus then. Time itself seemed stuck in a warp.

EIGHTEEN

With her new name, wig, clever makeup, passport, bank cards, driver's license and liberal sum of cash -- the duration of her 'demise' remained unspecified -- Catherine decided she had long wanted to see Turkey, the land that somehow masked its jihadis while seeking to join the European Union -- a nearly modern 'odyssey' -- and booked on the first available flight to Ankara, where she might slip stream behind the meandering flocks of tourists. In due course she planned to sort out her ethical basis for confronting the slippery Muerner-Borozov mavens, who had left a standing invitation for her to join the 'trust'. The discovery of Muerner's reclusive utopian bent -- the élite clinic being a revelation -- served as a further goad. Another egg scalper. It would be an interesting re-introduction given the clinic's current state. The psalm singers she now thought of the unlikely

Muerner-Kissy duo. The promise of future non-interference from Ann's coterie she took with a grain of salt; someone was always hovering at the margin of a conspiracy. But on the whole she believed they would leave her alone; for a time there would likely be observant tails on them as well. She regretted not being able to advise Michael about her situation but knew he expected a hiatus given her plan to reassess the villa and its benefactors. He would not be non-plussed for long. Pachis she believed a lost cause when his 'other' work surfaced. That he might be so duplicitous still hurt. Hence, sometimes wistful and often distracted, she became another tourist fondly in love with the timeless East, cognizant of the Tales of the Arabian Nights, where the deeds that fascinated and intrigued also robustly perturbed. Such was the gravity of that period for her -- to inch ever closer to the spirit of jihad, the tempering of one's own anger while reckoning Saud and Wahhab intransigence and institutionalized cultural hatred, which the genetic juggernaut was bound to aggravate. Had aggravated! The Great Satan's infatuation with peerless bods and polymorphous gratification seemingly insatiable; God being relegated an unimaginative miser and drudge!

Willardson's last remarks gave a fine spin to events, and her dour recollection of them remained acute. Her own interjections she was less certain of, but the seasoned connoisseur always seemed to leave his mark. She thought of Michel de Montaigne and his 'pithy dialogue of the mind with itself'. A veritable touchstone with Willardson.

"You must remember Muerner is the *éminence grise* who sets the theo-

retical constructs. The imputation of him being a neo-fascist means he must remain more or less sub rosa to direct his research. The panacea prospects of T-cells alone are heady indeed. The coming of the Eurymedusa. The beings of wide ability and cunning.”

So. The options seemed fixed. Whereas her holiday wandering soon expanded beyond the tourist meccas -- to better renew her sense of self amidst the sea of Hārūns. The radiant sun detailed the storied market stalls with variegated distractions, the scents of herbs and spices alone transporting. One young woman even waved at her in the jovial way tour members might acknowledge a member at a distance, suggesting the woman was perhaps nearsighted, a bus mate too eager to ingratiate. She even sought out one evening a sympathetic Western nightclub, both anonymous and polymorphic, where the collision frequency and momentum transfer was appreciably one hundred per cent. At least on the dance floor. The likelihood that she danced there with one of Borozov’s pugs coaxed her to mug a smile. How, she lamely wondered, might Willardson describe such a bender -- as a ‘skiffle’, as ‘midly eclectic’? Booze always upended a real and useful program. Yet she managed to get away without being picked up. Several hands coddled her during her stay but only in the gratuitous not third-degree sense. One cute lad did catch her eye, as well as a sultry Persian -- so she imagined -- who seemed the better travesty. Instead she sought a masseuse at her hotel who managed a dispersion of the prickly senses. The woman was a magician with sore feet and ankles. The shoes Catherine had gone clubbing in she gravely trashed on

the morrow.

Then, sauntering one afternoon on a new boulevard, a graven discovery -- a Borozov boutique! Which she stared at in disbelief. Grimacing she swept to the prêt-à-porter floor and began to reconnoiter the late collections, including some by the ubiquitous, multi-talented Antoine Plombiers. Easily she was persuaded to try on a frock or two. Before the cyclo-rama mirrors she discovered herself in several chic rags, and was diverted by the earnest demeanor she sustained before the luminous chatty sales gal. "I can honestly say you look good in them all -- and that almost never happens." "I guess the big 'P' must have had me in mind." The girl was surprised. "Oh -- you know Antoine?" "Sadly, no." Enthusiastically the girl added, "Antoine Plombiers serves several clients here" A short list of two assistant minister's wives and some kind of duenna followed. "Haven't we seen you here before?" "No, I don't think so."

Then, on her second week, when her solitary status was wearing thin, a preternatural shock, to put it mildly: a phantom, someone very like her absent Doppelgänger, stood alone on a penthouse terrace a short block away gazing into a dying sunset. Pale curtains in the expansive room nearest her fluttered in a playful breeze. With her Nikon Catherine took several pictures before the phantom slipped through the curtains and the room reverted to darkness. The traffic below made shouting futile -- an option she briefly considered. One zoomed face confirmed her sighting: an ethereal double fully alive standing across from her in the Byzantine megalopolis she had fled to sort out, in seclusion, the complications of recent events!

As she studied the face a set of parallel bruises about the lower jaw concerned, the question of their genesis a worry. She promptly visited the hotel only to learn from the concierge that the room alluded to was to be refurbished and would remain unoccupied for a fortnight. “Mostly for NATO and World Trade personnel,” he added. “This time of year it’s usually vacant.”

“Would anyone have occupied it earlier this afternoon?”

The man was puzzled and thought for a moment. “Only the cleaning staff. As far as I know. You wish to book it?”

“Later perhaps.”

“It is a lovely suite.”

She gratefully smiled. “I’m sure. May I see it?”

When they emerged from the elevator it was quite dark outside. The interior lights revealed up-scale eclectic decor and furniture in an open salon. “The new owner wants a more hospitable look. Hepplewhite I think he said. Should be ready in a week if you’re interested.”

“And no one was staying here today? I thought I recognized a girl standing on the terrace at sunset.”

“As far as I know only one of the chamber maids. But not at that hour. The last occupants, a French couple, left yesterday afternoon.”

Catherine did not want to draw more attention to herself and ditched any further questioning. There was nothing in the room to suggest a current occupant. The curtains she noted were drawn, the sliding door to the terrace closed and locked on the inside. She sat in the lobby for a time

reading a newspaper, but no twin sauntered over its handsome broadloom. But for her camera she might have entertained the possibility of a hallucination brought on by too many martinis. The need to meet her twin, know that she was hale, was becoming an overtime obsession.

The next day, ostensibly a courtesy of the hotel, via her morning tray, came a campy dare, a gilt invitation to the Reina, a popular night club in Istanbul.

*Antoine Plombiers requests your Presence
at a Preview of his Fall Winter Collection.*

Presence as in ‘apparition’ she mused. Though she soon learned that all guests received the invitation which included a cat eye mask. Some notables fancied hugger mugger. Plombiers reputation as a eurotrash designer among some fashion ‘Hominidae’, as he called them -- the veteran arbitrators of the day’s chic -- was perhaps sufficiently dicy to keep such critics incognito if they chose to attend. With her mask in hand, she readily sought out the club, which proved to be a captivating labyrinth with several theatre venues, one of its directors being non other than Konstantin Borozov, its elegant chambers exclusive to a rich stylish and apparently privacy craving clientele. Where Borozov left off and Muerner might begin in such a world she duly put on hold. Was the presence of the club in a Muslim country also a constriction on who might openly attend? In one washroom she encountered this enlightened graffiti: The age of wanton Olympic boys. She mused: Muerner the smithy; Borozov -- a Hermes, the

fleet messenger?

The pertinent fashion show, as touted in the invitation, was an energetic roguish affair: chichi gowns, svelte models and salty herms in cyan green body paint who in turn deftly parted skirts and filched tops to bare a line of yummy scanties. The models, lithe stunners all, smacked the herms with angry palms as they snatched back their attire. The herms looked confused and hurt and appealed to the audience who obviously relished the jape. If it was a performance the players were more or less adept at making it look otherwise. The curiosity for her was the impression of synchronicity, of a sly choreography that imparted a uniform enthusiasm which held the display together. She doubted Antoine the sole minder.

But the fashion show lounge was but one of many entertainments in this club.

In the popular Soma Theater patrons took in a re-evaluation of some aesthetic interventions -- cued by new plastic, reconstructive procedures. Function as well as beauty were articulated in a 3D film that floated before each spectator's eye in the small cozy theatre. The size of Michelangelo's David's gemelli and glutus maximus constrained some efficiency it was claimed, and were remolded accordingly. The knees of the Belvedere Apollo also figured in some re-articulations that abetted sprint running and cross-country skiing and were duly interpolated into the featured holograms. The figures' cult status as paragons had been putatively refined. The promotional message intimated that the interventions presented in this high-tec theatre were imminently possible. Was the sensibility behind

such ascriptions perverse, she again wondered? In proceeding with her own book it seemed she must hold some established esthetics at arm's length; more and more the criteria here were supererogatory, convened by a fascist sense of the ideal.

While debating leaving, she looked again at the club's play board and was surprised to discover that two of the club's directors were scholars of Egyptian antiquity. Easily joining a gravitational coterie she entered a corridor lit only by gas torches, to emerge in a large vault of a room that had been decorated in the style of a Karnak temple except that here the air-conditioning was excellent -- fresh and indirect -- and lush velvet fauteuils lined the perimeter, extras being placed by houseboys to accommodate this ample audience. A large golden mosaic of a wedjat eye filled the center floor. Two spotlights meandered about the circle. Catherine waited with her usual sufferance of the bathos and histrionics that often heralded 'fashion television'. Were the wait not so short she might have left. From the wings came a group of stylish women dressed in the long tunics or hiaks of ancient Egyptian peeresses, each bowing like a concert pianist before the spirited applause. The applause grew as stage hands brought in a set of period musical instruments: a large engraved harp, two odd looking lutes, two tambourines and at least one sistrum, a kind of rattle.

A gentleman dressed as a swank royal herald entered and announced to ready applause a performance by "The Amarna Players." He handsomely smiled and signaled for quiet. "Yes, we are tonight -- ladies. Royal consorts all!"

As one of the performers began a Eulogy to the Incomparable King Akhenaten, translated by a second reader, the ‘players’ added a nimble musical accompaniment that was highly entertaining for Catherine. Music that reminded her of the lyric tunes of Ernesto Lecuona, La Negra and the like, which she loved, miniature masterpieces he composed for piano. She was amazed. She doubted Plombiers had a hand in this. But who then? The poetry gave to the musical line a tenable reality, however anachronistic. And she had anticipated a tarty display!

In another venue she watched a troupe of clowns perform a series of ‘faulty’ airborne flips and tumbles, one catching a flier just as he or she was about to crash. The timing was exceptional, each miscarried maneuver salvaged before disaster. She imagined performers in the *Circ de Soleil* trying out new grand moves that spectacularly failed, the recovery as miraculous as the posh attempt, the virtuosity gleaning authentic audience sighs. Was Kissy recapitulating his own ups and downs Catherine wryly wondered? The laughter concluding each act was as spirited as the glowers and frowns on the performers were morose. Many shook their heads at the ‘unexpected’ audience reception, but continued to attempt more and more spectacular vaults and flips, sometimes saved at the last minute by jittery ‘extras’. Again the virtuosic athleticism seemed immersed in a larger whole, each near disaster flowing into the next. The urgency to see more of this odd entertainment center became mesmeric.

She visited three additional shows that evening. The first, hastily blundered into, a setting for traditional Sumo wrestling -- with an elaborate bet-

ting counter, the fat croupiers as fun to watch as the wrestlers, who ended up gamely wrestling with themselves! Perhaps the lone spectacle with no interference from a conductor's baton. Mainly ungainly fat served on a salver. Bossy on a lean day.

A fanciful dance theatre she found more or less by accident -- she missed the item in the program card -- also intimated something unexpected. The marquee specified two programs: The Amarna Players and A Mid Summer Dream Night. The first a performance by a female dance ensemble who, the program intimated, 'might have performed for a late Bronze Age pharaoh.' Their costumes ornate dance girdles and 'bronze chest plates and pauldrons, shoulder armor a charioteer might have worn', the tonal accompaniment a trio of lute players. At one stage the dancers paused in a frieze to frame the turgid pronouncements of an Oracle, whose ethereal voice materialized offstage, translated by one of the dancers. It was a captivating performance Catherine decided, again wondering who among the Borozovs would have sanctioned it. And where did these physical paragons come from -- these graceful warrior women who exemplified both beauty and strength as well? At one stage she even wondered if they might be more wondrous holograms! Their presence a numinous discovery. She was amazed.

The second offering, A Midsummer Dream Night, showcased a young, nimble, surefooted balletic ensemble, the dancers enlaced in wings, sinuous garlands and tresses, the passing moves of a corps of Peaseblossoms featly timed and stayed, leaned into, as they say. At one point she imagined her

own Adoration of the Sun exercises germane to the choreography! And she may, after Barbara's patient coaching, have performed them as well. But the later staging of this pastoral had an edge only accomplished dancers might execute. With ease and layered panache one performer, a credible Mab, changed from a fond partner to a stark ominous banshee as she scattered a gaggle of wood gnomes in order to apprehend the most agile glen nymph, identified as Titania in the program, a tall, nearly albino teen of no more than thirteen or fourteen, her sheer body stocking Acanthus adorned to mask carnal detail, who danced with a grace and certainty you'd expect from a gifted professional. She slipped through all the banshee snares with a liquid fluency that transfixed the audience. Translucent blades the banshee took up whipped the air like dragonfly wings. Without pause or apparent care the nimble Titania swept through the audibly whizzing wings like a will-o'-the-wisp -- all done to the Dance of Hours by Ponchielli, a choice of music Catherine marvelled at. Could this be a finely droll Kissy carrying on? After some particularly harrowing moves the nymph collapsed and was tenderly gathered up by the gnomes who had regrouped to confront the banshee, the gnomes coiling, enveloping their queen with what looked like wisteria and meadow fox tail. Without the opera glasses, lodged in an arm rest, the scene would have resembled little more than bits of fluff careening a water break. Several times Titania's limp form was bourn aloft in a spinal arch by one or another of the luckier gnome heroes, until a stately gnome dressed as Bacchus appeared, whose coming drew the others off to the margins, leaving the glen nymph

prettily sprawled on a wispy hillock. She was awakened by an ambrosial drink Bacchus delivered to her lips in stooped eurythmic reverence, amplifying the sinuous moves of the newly animated Titania as she awoke to enjoin Bacchus' embrace. The curiosity for Catherine was the choreography that apostrophized this coda. Not before had she witnessed a competent ballet company enact a seduction as lyric Tai Chi. If there was a move or gesture not finely crafted, she had missed it. That Kissy might be somehow responsible for such a performance stuck her as finely ironic. She could hardly believe. The applause in the sudden theatre darkness was deafening. As the lights returned a smiling Titania fluently curtsied to ardent applause. The troupe returned for several curtain calls. The pacing of the work itself had seemed virtuosic, the dancing what you would expect from a young, dextrous, enthusiastic company, less the minimal costuming and nymphomaniacal antics. But for their wings, tresses and pointed ears, both principles had been incisive figurines, the gnomes burdened with mock curved penises, much like their thyrsi. The applause was sustained and thunderous. As encore Titania performed one last grand *jeté en tournant entrelacé* -- according to the program -- for the happy audience then vanished in a finely timed blackout light. That many in the audience were women, including two matrons back of her, struck Catherine as significant. The two devotees were nearly as interesting as the ballet itself.

“You rarely see fluent topography like that in the older houses.”

The friend happily agreed. “The one some weeks ago was a real gem. Russian or Georgian. Older, of course. Sadly a dipydro who hasn't per-

formed for some time. Not unexpected given the attack she barely survived.”

“You hear stories -- of many impresarios who want her but are stymied by her hectic life. And now the vengeful Islamists.”

“I’ve heard she’s got a champion in the older Soviet hierarchy -- a former procurator in fact. Well an investigator.”

“Not one of Borozov’s?”

“No, much more exclusive than that? What I’ve heard, you understand. Someone in Yeltsin’s old shadow cabinet -- the procurator. One of the protégés. One of his young investigators was a friend, apparently.”

“Does the chap have a name?”

“I’m still making inquiries.”

“Good luck.”

Both women chuckled.

“They say she left here last time very suddenly -- a bunk she’s pulled before apparently. She did it differently, of course, more dance fluidity, fewer antics. Perhaps that’s why she left. The crowd was smaller than tonight’s. Though that last night she got a standing ovation.”

“I understand Antoine story boarded this performance. Our importunate gay.”

“It must be a great temptation for some performers -- le corps de ballet of the Kirov make far less. As long as the the pretense of anonymity holds more will surely come. The eye makeup alone is becoming an art praxis. One version that intimates ‘nesting dolls’ is in rehearsal apparently.

“It may enjoy a limited run in any case. The Turkish authorities are becoming more strict. I’ve heard rumors that it may be closed after this season. Something to do with the attack.”

“It’s a wonder it survived as long as it has.”

“Well with -- Russian mafiya backers, and flush European tourists. The sought out combination. Well, one mafiya backer. A stranger in his own house, apparently.”

The end of the performance engendered smiles, hugs and caresses with many members of the audience, a happy conclusion to an otherwise too lively bible study class Catherine thought. No dancer she’d recently seen performed with greater poise and dexterity than the slight Titania -- even daintier when next to her on stage. The circle about her remained fondly rapt, her dappled body stocking less theatric in indirect light. Her comparatively wide shoulders and long sleek legs gave the impression on stage of dramatic protean invincibility, making her swift assault by the banshee more plaintive, her ‘reincarnation’ with an unusually attentive Bacchus the more touching. Zoya, Catherine felt, would be a tony principle in such a company. She wondered if the smaller audience was any less appreciative. The face behind her own eye mask was decidedly sardonic at that moment. The DVDs on a display counter in the theater’s rotunda she previewed on a house player. Several fanciful takes on famous ballets filled the segments, the dancers mainly attired in thin paisley platinum or ivory body stockings and various eye trceries, which concealed their identity, their prowess as dancers unquestionable, most of them as Balanchine

syphlike as they get. She assumed her double was, or had been, a working headliner, but no names adorned the notes, and Zoya did not appear to be among the current roster of players. Not surprising given her reprisal-seeking head hunters. Pretty much what she expected. She asked about an earlier Titania. "She's a busy firefly," was the one direct answer she overheard. Others offered a sad patronizing smile. It was then she realized that some members of the audience could be part of the troupe's sponsors, and alert to current complexities. The many languages spoken put her at a disadvantage. Czech and Hungarian were alien tongues for her. She might get by in Russian, less in German or French. But not enough to elicit any telling information. She clung to her own anonymity with stubborn discomfort. Because she could not fathom the result of removing her mask, as some were doing to heightened exclamations, she kept it on. Her twin had pulled a bunk, period. So it seemed.

The last stage vista, perhaps the most elaborate, certainly the most expensive, was an auction for what she deemed the peek freek gentry, those older males who relied on erstwhile imagination -- the remembrance of things unequivocally past. The audience was almost entirely male, a mean age of about seventy-five she thought, except for a handful of escorts, each treasuring their elderly Croesus. The setting was an ancient Egyptian temple, dramatically lit. Braziers warmed the dim interior. Models touted as top drawer professionals were attired as court dancers or odalisques, their gold jewelery covering what loin girdles did not. The jewelry was auctioned. Late bidding enabled the winner who had purchased the most ac-

couterments on a single model to meet the model up close in a cubicle reminiscent of a private royal chamber that descended from the flies. All models participated. Five figure sums were not exceptional. The models -- lads all this night! -- were young, tall, lithe and mostly clean shaven. If she was tolerably amused, the aged gents had no such demur, obviously having a ball, only the occasional cane limited their hummy, wigged out fun as the models winked and postured as they presented their jewelry.

In the theatre entrance several sketches of the performers -- male and female, one sex on even numbered week days, the other odd -- graced a marquee, something she had missed on briskly entering. All were exceptionally well-favored. The women looked peerlessly slavic -- blonde wide faces, eyes blue and oval -- except for one poster in a shaded alcove. The recognition was a fine comeuppance. The eyes were adorned with an artful application of kohl, the near nude figure unmistakable. Had she not seen it so she may never have guessed. Karen stood between two priests, removing an amulet pectoral from her neck. She had never looked lovelier Catherine thought.

Later, alone and wistful in her room, she revisited her own performance of her Adoration of the Sun exercises before the demanding broker-terrorist. And wondered, again, what would have been the clue to Zoya's identity if that was what prompted the demanding request. Can even identical twins be matches when out of their teens? Not all kores are alike. Would her double have been similarly amused performing before the faceted eyes in the villa's circle theatre on another occasion? A likely sister, a

veritable twin, whom she stolidly enacted the murder of? It seemed she had carelessly opened a gripping but largely unreadable chapter that might not end well. At last, after a lame attempt to sleep, she phoned the desk and asked for a strong masseuse. Someone to ‘recast’ her current idling soma. “Of course, mad’moiselle, that can be arranged.”

She was not quite drunk and wrapped in a bath towel when the commanding Ilse arrived. Built like a pocket battle cruiser -- powerful, concise, emphatic -- Ilse directly set up her table. “So,” she said, “much like the last time. When was that -- a year ago? You’ve put on some weight. Good for you.” Catherine smiled, and all but shrugged as she helped Ilse position the narrow platform. *Much like last time? A year ago?* More and more the ostensible twin, the ‘other’, seemed indivisible, a virtual singularity, and Catherine’s ongoing complicity with the fact a live tableau.

As Ilse worked a gamut of positions, Catherine sorted the questions she wanted to put to Ilse without rousing her curiosity. Occasionally joints crackled with recreant energy, and momentary pain dissolved into sudden palliation. She would recall one leitmotif throughout the deft manhandling. “You need to get out more. Pale skin like that. Indoors is no good for gürwurz like you. You become Die frau ohne shatten.” Catherine smiled. She knew the Richard Strauss opera and began to place the key questions as Ilse worked the tarsal and metatarsal ligaments, perhaps as much to distract herself from the fluent manhandling, or to incidentally alert Ilse to any misapprehensions she might retain.

“I’ve forgotten when we first met -- I’ve been drinking a bit much these

past weeks.”

“I am not surprised.” The response being unanticipated, for Ilse was not being ironic, Catherine promptly sought a back up line.

“I assume that’s about my confusion not my drinking.”

Ilse briefly stopped, her mind only momentarily confused. “I was mistaken; I’ve not been before. We have not met until this day.”

Catherine narrowed her aim. “You know, I was accosted in the hotel lobby by someone who obviously mistook me for another. And seemed surprised I was not the person she believed me to be.”

With a show of apathy Ilse said, “You do bare a resemblance to one of the clients. A dancer. Some time ago.”

“They say we all have a double somewhere.”

“Somewhere, yes.”

“It is a curiosity.”

Ilse paused to prime more unguent on her palette hands. “Your face is maybe similar. But you are not as thin. And other things.”

“I am curious.”

“We should not discuss clients.”

“But you’ve already said I was less fit.”

“I was embarrassed by my confusing you with another. As I’ve said, your face a close likeness. You have fine skin...all that leftover makeup unnecessary.”

“A modern habit.”

“Should be discouraged.”

Catherine continued with what she hoped would be interpreted as a naturally chatty nature. “But not knowing this other client in question, I’d love to know the ‘other things’. Where the double begins and ends so to speak.”

Gravely Ilse continued after a solemn pause. “It is a difficult matter. You can be trusted I’m sure. But one never knows.”

“Just a generality or two. You have whetted my curiosity.”

“I shouldn’t have. It is not the generality.”

Catherine brightened. “Good lord.”

“Yes, that too.”

“You make me feel I’ve got a terminal illness.”

“No. You are the healthy one.”

“Well, that’s a relief. Though health is a comparative business.”

“You are not maybe an addict.”

Promptly Catherine added, “Except for information. That I’m addicted to. Yes, I know, nosey.”

Again Ilse pursed her lips. “It is a sad matter. Best left alone.”

Catherine too sensed a coming loss. “Anything you might suggest avoiding? A word to the wise so to speak?”

Ilse remained silent as she worked the calve muscles. The matter seemed closed for this fail safe trooper. “You have a life,” she said after a quiet minute. “Put the matter away. Relaxation is the essential.”

“Did you not say the last time that I needed a hobby?”

“Nie. Someone else. ”

“I thought for sure...aren't you the one who recommended a spa in Constance?”

“Nie. Maybe Hilda, not me. Yah Hilda.”

“Well, perhaps Hilda -- though I can't imagine I could be that tired.”

“You maybe drink more than you should.”

“Won't argue with that.”

“You have the same gladiolus and xiphoid process. Scapulae too. Yah. You could be double. ‘Spitting image’ English say. If you got out more.”

“Do I have any good features? You've got me a little alarmed here.”

Ilse seemed to conclude a protracted inner debate. “It is maybe fine, no harm. Yah. Your plantaris in back of knee will not give way so very soon. Too many times pas de chat. ‘Sore no?’ I ask her last time. ‘Yes sore,’ she said. Then she surprise with -- ‘So, please, if you me would you stay in this show?’ Nie I say. Good to change course. Too like octopus -- this place.”

“You think so too?”

“Good luck, I say to her.”

With some resignation Catherine asked, “What would you do? If you were her? I promise to be discrete.”

“Go to Old Rhodes Town for holiday. Yah. Then America.”

“Rhodes?”

“Lots of free cats and playful children. Good food. Yah. Germans like being among themselves.”

“I would never have thought of that.”

“Yah. Rhodes.”

“Simple.”

“Good. I think we have one or two relaxations left” -- one of Ilse’s rare but apt comments as she worked her way to the extremities. If it was not the most felicitous interlude of Catherine’s short life, it was certainly the most memorable. Karen would have appreciated Ilse. Perhaps even recommended Ilse’s late-recommended associate. “I have friend who needs work. She is good. She uses new shiatsu method. Very strong. I think you must like Marketa.” Catherine rather regretted having to promptly leave the hotel when the visitation was over. Slyly prying topical info from the wary Ilse just might compromise her identity if she hung around.

The following day before packing, a warming morning sun gilding her hotel furnishings, Catherine read the english language *Hürriyet Daily News*, some inner pages of which seized her attention, the events therein putting her up to date on English civic mayhem. A large stink bomb was remotely detonated in a theatre mall in London that was showing a film society series entitled, *Bio-Mass*, celebrating what was deemed ‘courageous artistic expression’. Several films celebrated ‘sado-masochistic engagement’. At the same time a second bomb was detonated in a butch bath house in a neighboring area. One gamy patron was quoted as saying, “The proprietor has promised to improve the quality of the shower soap.” Several patrons suffering from hypoxia were taken to a hospital. All were released the same day. A private home in the City of Westminster alleged

to be the source of an internet chat room that convened critics of Islam was also ‘perfumed’, although no one was apparently home at the time. The group calling itself Shaheed claimed responsibility for each of these attacks. Catherine was also impressed by the fact that the rash of protests against a Scandinavian paper publishing derisive cartoons of the prophet were so cravenly acknowledged by media ecumenicists in the paper. She also read about three graffiti artists admitted to a London emergency ward with strange arabesques painted on their foreheads. The lads were anonymously attacked after spray painting images of phallic icons on the outside walls of an auditorium used by a multi-ethnic group that included Muslims. No one claimed responsibility for these attacks. The Hürriyet copy was exceptionally spare and dryly headed, ‘Graffiti Artists Marked by Maniacs’. That very morning on awakening she had looked across to a bus shelter that was covered in hurriedly sprayed Arabic script, only to wonder if such expression was thought to demean public space. It was in this forensic frame of mind that she received with her breakfast a special delivery letter from the hotel’s executive housekeeper -- sent by someone she guessed to be an in situ agent, the Muerner-Borozov minder who was ‘on her case’. The spry words in the letter were engrossing as the two pictures accompanying it, a set very like the one Willardson had shown her a month before. Both pictures featured a classic Zeus or Poseidon pose, one supposedly elegant, one not. The unexpected letter piqued as it teased, and stymied her wish to depart. The impervious note, minus any salutation, read: *For the layman the weaker, less flexible knee many not arrest, nor the dippy*

elbow cartilage -- in the marginal examples -- but to one such as yourself, the many differences may be noted before finding for the 'plaintiff' genes. Semyan, the luckier of the Zeus incarnations in the set, awaits you by the terrace pool. FM

For all the precious hype, the initials served to amaze. Felix Muerner? A trustee or confidante with the same initials? She was only momentarily askance. A new urgency tinged with anger rushed her through her morning ablutions. She dressed as casually as her wardrobe allowed and packed in her carryall the mace a special ops reporter had given her. If fear concentrated the mind, active involvement steeled the nerves.

Then another sobering revelation! The chap sitting by the glassy azure pool turned out to be none other than the peripatetic chap she first met at the Cayuse -- who was likely the idyllic form in the figure set that accompanied the note! He introduced himself as Semyan and suggested a lone natural stone grotto off the the hotel swimming pool for a talk (and the lengthy rebuke she had in store for him). It was some time before they got around to the "clinic matters", as he put it. Indeed, he seemed puzzled, then miffed by her initial brusque insinuations. He was quick to respond to the first, vigorously shaking his head.

"No rape. Absolutely not."

"You harbor a fine sophistry about rape. You obviously knew what happened. You said as much at the Cayuse. Someone undressed and washed me while I was out. Why was I washed?"

"I don't know."

"And these 'others', the so-called medics, who did the examination --

were they as presumptive, single-minded?”

“Two persons, a man and a woman, came to examine you. You’ve been examined so before I understand. Vitaly wasn’t happy about it taking place there.”

“A suite in the villa. In Montecito.”

“I was there to see that the examination remained in camera. In private. No outside interventions. So no, I saw very little.”

“In camera -- wonderful. Someone there taking pictures?”

Semyan smarted. “It wasn’t like...what you’re thinking. ”

“Like what?”

“You were handled very carefully throughout. From what I saw.”

“But you didn’t see what they did?”

“No.”

“So who washed me?”

“I don’t know. Lookit, I think of rape as an assault. You weren’t assaulted.”

“Irish Spring being a reliable camouflage.”

“It was probably all the suite contained -- I said I don’t know. Some of the rooms there are a bit musty...there simply was no time for this, this ‘dalliance’ you imagine. My god, you’ve worked in Russia, the Soviet Union. You must know. Bodies are so many inconveniences for some folk. To be returned in pristine condition or buried without trace. I repeat: you were not raped, nor abused. You think Muerner would countenance such a

thing? You don't know him if you do. It was I'm sure a pre-set examination. Which has been undertaken before. Apparently."

She didn't know whether to believe him or not, discounting the humor of his sense of assault; the ineluctable facts were louche enough. But she knew he had words about Muerner and possibly Kissy she keenly wanted to hear, and thus fought down her anger enough to change tack.

"I hardly imagine it was a 'dalliance', but what it was I'll take up later. You can't be the first stray shill in this outfit."

By then the heat in the grotto was intense and they both sat on their robes on a shaded bench. Oddly, their swim suits could be a match. He continued:

"As I was about to say, we both are specific articulated subjects for Muerner. 'Lagan,' he says -- sea trophies."

"Cast off goods attached to a buoy. That's good."

"I'm not sure what chance or providence has allotted you -- but I take it to be exceptional."

"From whom?"

"From everybody."

"Muerner?"

"Especially Muerner, I should think."

"You've met him then."

"His secretary Gervase has given me a succinct assessment of my own circumstance. My fate."

"Felix Muerner is hardly a fatalist. You know his past?"

“Not in detail. Some say he began his career as a medical student late in the Third Reich. He was recruited by the Soviets after the war and seconded to a clinic that was directed by an endocrinologist professor, a Marxist, a futurist who was convinced that deviance might be eliminated via a new generation of mind altering drugs -- drugs that modified the general character but not physically debilitate. The general aim -- from what I’ve been told.”

“A tall order. You wouldn’t happen to know what happened to my ‘birth’ mother? It is one of the slighted or shelved details in all this.”

“Only that she was at one time a reluctant patient at the clinic. One of the refuseniks. It is a matter Gervase did not expand on.”

“So. Do continue.”

“I’m sure you’ll learn more. All I have, for certain, is the record of two foster homes, both of which ceased to take in kids after I left.

“Some ‘lagan’.”

Semyan smiled.

“What about this endocrinologist Muerner worked under? Any particulars there?”

“It turned out Muerner convinced him of the utility of double blind studies, given the potency of the drugs they were administering. The net result being the professor managed to get you out of the medical lockup, how I’m not sure -- a death certificate cited meningitis apparently. He entrusted your care to his protégé, so he imagined Muerner, who defected on an invitational lecture tour about the time you were squirreled out. The

details of which I'm ignorant of. I think it is time you met some of the mavens, the savants. Get a few more facts. Before you decide to bolt." He paused, as if expecting more abuse and innuendo. "Yes, I did and do find you attractive. But you weren't..."

He didn't finished the sentence. And she was sufficiently cowed by the suggestive details to pass on. For now. With a new candor their eyes met. Such a beautiful elegant male she had never consorted with, and that fulsome fact nearly prompted her to leave: de facto rape was not a sinecure for the splendidly endowed. Suggesting why, perhaps, the standard often rather ugly suicide bomber had a passion for mayhem and murder? The starkness of the inequity of life. The constant invidious glare. The probability had daunted her before. She continued with a dour smile.

"If I chose to, when and where do I meet these 'savants'?"

"Tonight in the terrace off the game lounge is good. They've been assigned a couple of tables at one end. It's a noisy club clientele -- impossible to be overheard." He studied her for a moment. "Come, you may be surprised." She winced and remained silent. "Well, at least engaged," he added. "What one would think."

She proffered a leaden smile. "You'll be there, I presume."

"Yes."

"And the general?"

"For sure."

"Any terrorists looking on do you think?"

He lamely sighed. "Always possible."

“What about the big ‘K’? Kissy B. Any trace of him in this coterie?”

“I’ve never seen the man. Gervase did not mention him being here. At least to me.”

“You never asked?”

“No. Why would I?”

“So how did you find or conjure me? I thought I was incognito -- was assured I would be by some able people I sought to trust.”

“Hārun is one of Muerner’s agents. Sorry. Hārun needed you to catch a terrorist, Muerner to continue to assess your own viability, hence the expedient examination in the villa. The details of which you can learn very soon. The explosion at the clinic likely complicated things.”

Looking at him and his persistently engaging half-smile she imagined a pastiche the Russian artist Anatole Krasnyansky delighted in: fanciful arabesques conniving to be faces within a risible assortment of musical instruments. What is it they say, hell is full of jovial clutter and color!

At the last he said, “Lend us an ear. All we ask.”

She still wanted to belt him but decided the moment was waning if not now inopportune.

Kissy did not hear the men enter. He had been listening to a CTV post Olympic ceremony featuring two young kids, one English one French, sing ‘I Believe’. Curiously the song prompted him to put on a tape of one of his wistful masterpieces -- the waltz from the Masquerade suite by Aram Khachaturian. The music always stirred in him a feeling of fateful

empathy, an ineffable sad animated loveliness that only an Armenian might write. He turned the volume up, slipped into a marinated reverie where he fancied himself dancing with Catherine Whyte in a ballroom of the Winter Palace, and not heard the door open. Three large men with a large trunk suitcase followed the gun shots. Kissy briefly glimpsed the silencer but heard only the first round. Not entirely unexpected he might have said, had he lived -- Bossy dead-heading the phthisic branches of his family tree, with his usual indiscriminate, arm's length savagery. His impatience with his restricted life had finally demanded some scapegoats. His Maenad brother had not been attending to business.

Kissy's weighed body was dumped in Howe Sound, while a body identified as Kissy's -- that of a homeless street vagrant -- was deemed to have suffered a massive heart attack -- and not several gunshot wounds. The coroner needed money to fight a pending lawsuit and was able to discount his diffidence about the identity. A second body was thus dumped in Howe Sound. A lavish casket filled with computer software, including several thousand memory chips, was airlifted via a private carrier to Moscow.

Konstantin Alexandrovich Borozov's simple but imposing gravesite would be erected near the former estate of Leo Tolstoy. His obituary cited a long-standing heart condition.

Aram Mir too was in Bossy's sights but had thus far eluded the team sent to confront him. Aram was planning to stink bomb one of Bossy's currency exchanges. Aram, the complex Muslim who was sympathetic to the Ismailis. Bossy would not have appreciated the irony that his brother

too was sympathetic to the self-assured Ismailis who had broken away from the main body of Islam to produce the famous cult of the Assassins. Aram had lived like an Ismaili, in the moderate sense, most of his life, but in his later years developed a deep dislike of the urbane ways of the Aga Kahn. "A too civil accommodationist." Words Kissy had put down to the impatience of a disgruntled idealist.

Kalid, Catherine's seat mate on her return to America, read the obituary with a renewed sense of loss. Kissy had contributed to the rebuilding of their aging mosque in Beirut. He and Kissy were on the council of the apartment strata they lived in in St. Petersburg when Kissy was a docent at the Hermitage. Kalid was studying the fisheries along the Neva River and Lake Ladoga. They both liked Raphael. The Russians would never learn he feared, how Islam's tribal feuds were one of nature's infinities.

Catherine learned of Kissy's demise on a back page of the Washington Post, the tone of the article dismissive of yet another shady buccaneer. Even his interest in art was slighted as cupidity and fraud. There was no mention of the Fischer-Bakey foundation, the Apsara Clubs or the Reina in Istambul. She had to know more but seemed barred from ever finding out what happened. Such crimes -- she doubted the story of a heart attack -- were spawned by a cultural hex. The Russian Syndrome. A desperation the wondrous Shostakovich, one of her heroes, struggled so gallantly to subvert in his music. She then listened to his mesmeric 2nd Waltz. One of her icons. A terrible awesome beauty. The proof of luck-

less fortune. Not unlike the waltz in Khachaturian's Masquerade Suite. Sorrow that conferred equanimity.

She was surprised to learn that Kissy had been living briefly in Canada. In Vancouver! A fact she had to check out.

NINETEEN

The eugenics mavens Catherine met in the pub room of the Ankara Hilton were benighted as Semyan hinted, an insider klatch at their vespers, conversation low but distinct and rich with presumption, amidst the surrounding din. A chimerical Ann looked on with a practiced grimace as Semyan and the Vyhak twins, Peter and Lev -- one the old familiar she encountered in the park! -- argued the merits of a Euro dollar. If life in the former USSR was exigent, Catherine thought, you at least fathomed the bathos; fervency there was as often a dissimulation, not an exaltation. Yet the dramatic onerous words -- the ongoing presumption of the lucky but transient good fortune of the West -- she had heard before and felt the dissertation essentially beyond comprehension or equivocation. Dissolution is often as not in the mind of the beholder. Instead, she spent the while examining the faces and gestures, the very language of the virtuosic minders of their presumed historic 'momentum', only to decide her sense of whimsy hadn't diminished. Later, after showing her to her room, the stiff general hunkered down in a sofa chair to explicate a favorite theory. She had decided to prepare for bed regardless; perhaps her snoring might foil the lecture that seemed to proceed independent of her presence. From the

bathroom she could see the back of his grey head above the sofa chair; not once did he turn to face her -- an act she deemed to be as much posturing as gentlemanly deference, for he seemed immune to reservation. He was proud of his English he said, and the dedicated KGB specialist who once instructed him. Her subjection to the body snatching he was a party to appeared to have slipped his mind, or was sufficiently trivial or nugatory to be winked at. A matter she did not bring up. She doubted he would be interested in her personal history anyway. Why would he? A meritorious panjandrum. Moreover, her quiet droll rejoinders apropos his commentary only seemed to animate his argument.

“No, we are not a Camorra, nor do we ply the media, though we are careful to vet our select players. You read the manifest: a natural order will arise over time, science and technology admit no other, a point Muer-ner can be especially cogent on. You wish to see the genetic horizon, mental and physical...well it’s gradually taking shape, and it’s a spectacular vista, as steeply hierarchal as any Cabana des Diablerets, in set terms. It is the real new Jerusalem. For all initiates.”

“Exclusive power and privilege tend to corrupt.” She said. She could have been reading bingo numbers.

“Especially when we fail to understand the power base. Genetic elegance soon stymies the fakirs. And is the basis of a sober, civil, respectful community.”

“Joking aside.”

“The story you write will be incomplete without a chronicle of your

own endowment. We all have antecedents; yours holds a prospectus few share I'm told."

So he was familiar with some of her history.

"More great expectations."

"Which we will never proceed to honor by moralistic pretension alone. Not a bad start."

No, not bad at all, for a juggernaut, she said to herself. Life in a nutcracker.

Then he surprised her. "From the weariness in your voice, I can tell that you are tired. I tend to talk a lot. Goodnight."

As effortlessly and patronizingly as he entered he left, a near grimace freezing his face as he directly and primly sought the door.

Watching him depart she sensed a slight disappointment: she had really wanted to hear more, so copious had the awesome and precocious commentary become. And she smarted at being baited so.

She was left in a limbo that weekend to entertain two options, namely a) join the suave enterprise and patronize the new utopian mavens to better see the mountain, or b) flee, in a literal sense, for her life, her articulated but particular life! You were chosen, predestined, they said, in so many words, now undertake the pilgrimage to the nub. Muerner and his cronies had all but given her a new bill of health. She might rise to the potential of her somatic fortune. Ironically, it was her exercise time -- when her physical presence was conspicuous -- that seemed to attract the hovering general and his treacle wisdom, which he had gleaned over a life of much

“travail and error” he mused. The pillars of his Valhalla were based on a handful of ardent maxims. Which he subsumed with mischievous satisfaction.

There is no short cut to maturity; Truth only ‘lies’ in the middle; Spread AIDS, rid the world of love mongers; and the clincher, Unlimited variation is no variation at all!

Meaning a sturdy if not rigid hierarchy of forms -- this last precept the sine qua non for the elegance and salubrity the brokers and their gurus took for granted. The visionary spellbinders. Ugliness, sloth, disease, dissipation and premature aging as temporal mismanagement. She could barely keep from snorting, failed liberal that she was, her nearly flawless skin and pretty limbs coyly reminding her of the snide coincidence -- which she was always poignantly reminded of around the general. While the seething angst, the energetic disassembly of culture around the world, indexed the terror for inferior beings. Inferior and miasma shared a genealogy.

Well, if the mavens spoke in Apollonian riddles, Semyan, the lad with the wistful smile who haunted the Cayuse, proved to be the resident Dionysus. The time out lad. Sovereign of all that is moist, he relieved one of dry demand decisions -- a piquant fact she used to excuse herself for not sending the suspected former ravisher packing. Like the general he too seemed to haunt her exercise regimen -- in his case her yoga session at the end of the day when he patiently joined in, with as much apparent dedication, only to finally part her gown and divide her against herself. Less a

conquest than a hallucination. String theory, he called it, giddy lyre practice. She imagined her acquiescence to it the result of boredom and the lethargy that foils the making of a crucial decision -- fair ground for the rummaging three-legged boyo. As direct and unassuming as Karen had been, he too gave her ample opportunity to flout his guile, to ignore or leave his presence. Yes I wanted to, should have...but I didn't! So he couched the belated plea. Until now.

Perhaps she simply wanted to know if he was a brute -- to inform her later arbitration of the matter! Perhaps she wanted to see if the exquisitely beautiful male was as precious to her...a curiosity that imbued their first night together. Perhaps his own precarious life made her the more desirable, her very presence an anticipated endowment, a votive gift...she perhaps would never know. But her predilections, she wryly decided, centered on the male animal and his terrible ache. Being parted against herself flattered her essentially compassionate nature. In the end the pleasure he gave her seemed an unexampled benefice, his embrace received as it was given.

But when he left, her repose soon lapsed as the early recollections charged the sleepless night, the umbered salients of her ineluctable past -- how she had been sent to a fine accelerated school and eventually learned she was a 'late blessing' from her dear mother who was recruited by such a research facility as Muerner's tentacled Bern clinic! Life for her began in earnest at that model school, which challenged, charmed and framed the happiest period of her life, each student deemed a 'special case', a 'life es-

sential to life'. The late recognition that she had been under some kind of scrutiny all her life knocked her galley West! A 'fortuitous test case' under regular periodic review! The 'dedicated expositors' -- possible stand ins for Hārun' guardians! The real identity of the 'soloist' whom Hārun characterized as her twin sister, as did the alert Willardson via his friend's letter, only added to the unrelenting wonder.

To review the pertinent facts, she elected to write an update letter to her sweet and by now perplexed mother. A 'private' letter she hoped the mavens would understand, and so decide to extend her grace period. A letter she let Semyan read, watching his wide sensuous lips open in resignation; a performance perhaps, but winsomely accomplished.

Dearest Mom,

I know by now that Ann has explained to you the necessity of the adventure I've undertaken. In due course the full story will be told; for the time being, however, you must be discreet. Trust me.

Some assignments are a kind of rebirth. Well, the gestation period here has been hangdog, to say the least. When I assisted in the rout of a single terrorist, I discovered a daring and committed Saturnian world, a culture that 'anachronises' culture. If bodies can be idealized to the point of invisibility (who would notice?) why not language, philosophy, faith, optimism itself? The terrorist bugbear it would seem. My special dilemma is

to faithfully tell the convoluted story. In short: How to can a can of very agile worms? Please bear with me.

If modern fertility precepts and genetic engineering are still esoteric and arcane, the able and unhindered practitioners are themselves committed gnostics. I find myself before one such 'cabal', which performs wonders (miracles for some) on a daily basis. Miracles, however, that have a Wunderkinder bias that may not serve a 'human' population well in the long run. The intervening variable, it seems, comes from advertising, which claims to demonstrate that some beings sell more products than others, if capitalism and progress may not be crimped. Meaning compassion is a lame duck. So say the phalanx of beauty babe brokers, who conjure a realm of designer zygotes poised to rescind the gift of life! If fanatics have a habit of self-destructing, that prospect seems on hold for the time being. I know this sounds a bit windy but the afterthoughts often bear fruit.

Think of you often; do take your medicine! When this is over you and I will take a long holiday together.

Love and a super hug,

Cathy

In the end, she decided that if they tried to disabuse her of these subversive thoughts, she was out, though she doubted they would try. How well they decked out the trappings of perception and understanding! As if to absolve herself from a commitment, the liaison with Semyan continued unabated, and soon migrated to a countryside villa near Bern, and a pri-

vate gate into an Asian-inspired garden, a walking steed completing the sylphic triad in this 'engineered' elysium. By then she was quaintly composed -- time itself entirely undemanding in a demi-paradise. The timeless, ageless, polymorphous perverse she mused. The sun in the quiet leafy garden remained richly variegated and lustrously warm. It seemed one might live within the spell itself -- which he might partly obviate by his stray commentary -- his in-between musing. One day Muerner slipped into their discourse. They sat on a patch of silk grass that extended to the lake, then laden with cherry blossoms.

"Rumor has it that Muerner began his crusade because of a drummer, a rock hopeful on the block; he could not believe America that dissolute. 'The ubiquitous libido beat that vulgarizes, trivializes all occasions.' Angry words to marshall a beginning."

"You said 'crusade'..."

"After humanity's fall from grace."

"No more charisma."

"Only the faded promise of civility. A 'paean to Aristotle' he once remarked. Though I never understood what that meant."

"Haven't a clue. Cloud-cukoo-land?"

"Well, a bit cloudy."

Their shared laughter seemed to cue the song of a hopeful thrush.

Her hours with Semyan proved to be both placatory and entertaining, though she had little doubt he was also sounding her out. "On the rocks," he called her distrust of the Muerner clinic -- a remark spawned in a late

gloaming on the edge of the canyon that fell away from the water garden, where he taught her to walk on her hands, beginning on a gentle back slope, holding up her ankles and arching her back...two sky clad mortals at the edge of the world, conversation the in-between caress.

“I may still wonder why a professional like Muerner would patronize a buccaneer like Borozov?”

“He gets the peerless material.”

“The risk is efficacious?”

“To the ardent research scientist.”

She returned to an upright stance. “Fanatic you mean, who you believe to be an expert one can trust.”

“As far as I know he has not harmed anyone.” He helped invert her once again.

“A fond idea of jeopardy that.”

“His concordance of human attributes you won’t find as harmonious elsewhere, I think. Plus an outpatient clinic that serves an observant élite.”

“Two fugitives like us.”

“More or less.”

One evening the eyes of a wild or escaped goat peered down at them, a furtive regard Semyan took an imaginary bead on. Catherine was more than incidentally curious. “They never look as though they are actually looking at you.”

“She’s enjoying a meal.”

“Old Horny.”

“They find grass in many places.”

“Does our being nude as newts make a difference?”

“She’s probably not come across Ecamsule bods before now.” Ecamsule was their daily sun balm.

“Tell me again about our genes.” She could imagine the goat assessing theirs.

“Ask Muerner.”

“I intend to.”

“Your birth mother was likely an early case for a clinic in the late USSR, where the Gandalf that Muerner labored under, proceeded with his interventions -- the Soviet fetish, making a silk purse. Well a durable purse -- the new Soviet Man, Woman.”

“So they say.”

But the explanation was interrupted by a fond look and emphatic embrace and, in due course, unrehearsed sighs that enjoined the retreating hooves of several goats, convulsing them both in spastic laughter. A ‘seminal’ moment she thought later.

Next day they rested on a parcel of grass by the warm overflow from the water garden’s hot spring. “A parian foot to addle a fakir,” he said, studying her feet. She laughed at the remark and thought: that is what he is, a fakir, a wonder worker if not a busy impresario softening her up...for Magus Muerner to re-cast her lot, the anticipated conversion. Is she in or out? The idea had flared often enough -- she an albatross, earnestly borne in the froggie pond.

Later, in the intimate shade of the grotto, he noted the change.

“You’re tired, bored...bothered?”

“Mostly if not entirely my fault.”

“You wanted more innkeeper jokes?”

“I’ve always been a sucker for able yet pensive heroes.”

“It doesn’t show.”

“Tomorrow I think I have to make a Gordian decision.”

“Have to...Gordian?”

Again she took in his sovereign beauty. “A dilemma lost...on all immortals and daimones.”

“So, a mythical whatever -- an ersatz dryad?”

“You are either a gifted teaser or very well coached.”

“That sounds neatly dismissive.”

“One sober night in what, five? Not bad. Considering. The sabbatical has run its course has it not? Gervase, the ubiquitous secretary, phoned late last night hoping for a yeah or nay. In so many words.” She looked at him with a seedy smile. “I know you won’t tell me, but I’d love to know the genesis of this interlude.”

He too yielded to a waiting smile. “I like you. You may be imagining more to it.”

“But you’re here. Not entirely by accident.”

“They wanted finally to show their hand. That’s true.” After a moment’s reflection he said, “In a way, you remind me of a hill creature. Motionless on a precipice. Undecided. Always wearing a mask.”

She smiled in spite of herself. He was a find. “The princes of darkness are gentleman, they say.”

“You see a darkness I don’t.”

As if loathe to see the Scylla and Charybdis in the sea lane before her -- she felt then like a haggard adventurer -- she dreamt anew that night of descending the razorback edge of her private Styx, both the river and its nymph, where peril kept one buoyant, observant, the cold clear water an ichor to steel soft bodied qualms and show life as it is, full of budding beauty and caverned menace, the subterranean view of the survivor! The one for whom life was italicized by a cessation. Whereas, the following morning, the arrival of the contract set the stage for a dry, mundane declaration of intent, all mythology dropped from the syllabus.

A Muerner factotum fielded her questions and doubts -- tempus fugit -- in a metal walled room that served as a file vault for the villa they stayed in, the rows of folders and boxes an oddity until she realized some renovations were ongoing in a large adjacent study. The factotum, a gaunt iron grey gent who introduced himself as Gervase -- the meritorious secretary to Muerner himself -- gravely smiled. “The archives here are mainly historic and irreplaceable. It has a history, this villa. A displaced Prokofiev stayed here for a time.” He pulled out a pristine document from a drawer, placed it on a highly polished conference table and fetched two chairs. “It serves many purposes this room, for the time being. Please. You have a copy. We’re keen to know your mind.”

Catherine placed her copy opposite and looked it over, again, with a pending unease. One outside issue had to be cleared up before she dealt with the contract stipulations.

“I have some idea why these periodic assessments of me were done covertly, but I’d like to hear the reasons from you. I also want to know, as you must realize, what happened to my birth mother and my twin. And my half sister Anastasiya.”

Again the grave smile, this time with a determined nod. “Sadly, the fate of your mother remains unknown. Shortly after your removal she seems to have vanished from the facility she was incarcerated in. It is a question Muerner has not abandoned, by the way. One day we hope to know. The archives are slowly opening up. For a time it seemed your twin might become a member of a folk dancing troupe, but something intervened, and she entered the vast post-Soviet underworld. As you know she performed for a time in the Apsara chain of clubs but disappeared after the attack in London. Muerner’s team kept track of her up until the attack, periodically assessing her when possible. She has always known of her ‘special case’ status with Muerner of course -- well his successor when he opened the clinic in Bern. Muerner will have further information. As for Anastasiya, she is a ghost. Her disappearance may have something to do with her mother. We just don’t know. Perhaps one day the pertinent archive will be opened to the public.” (It had been Muerner’s instructions to Gervase to keep Zoya’s recent stay at the clinic secret until Catherine made up her mind about the utility and worth of transfigurative interven-

tion and its eugenic muse. “We think the revelation should come from Zoya not a member of the clinic,” Muerner said.)

Catherine was disappointed Gervase’s commentary was so spare on details, but as there seemed little purpose in quibbling -- at this stage -- she simply nodded, looking off with a lingering wistfulness. “Do continue with the reasons for the covert examinations.”

“Well, the first was Muerner’s wish that your bond with your new mother remain uncompromised -- that your regard of her approximated the normal. There was always the possibility that had you known your past you may, as a young adult, have sought advice elsewhere, or acted willfully, disparagingly, and thus introduced variables, both psychological and physiological, we could not control for. I know it sounds callous...Muerner *is* a resolute scientist and, in my estimation, a civilized man. Your mother’s situation was dire. Your twin came down with meningitis and was not expected to survive. Meningitis he used as the cause of your demise, to foil your removal. Zoya was sick for some time.” He paused, as if to edit a comment, then: “Please be assured you’ve been assessed by the best practitioners in the business. As you will learn, the clinic hires only top drawer professionals. The last worry was that some of the people who worked to get you out of the Soviet Union were liable to prosecution should your situation be known. Muerner kept this group as small as possible, but informers in that country are legion, as you know, and those persons who helped Muerner then put their welfare on the line. The quack he worked under was forlornly inept, though not unsympathetic, appar-

ently. I hope someday you will be able to meet the few who are still alive. For the time being we must remain discreet. Furtive deeds leave long shadows in Russia. As you will know. It is doubtful Muerner could have got both of you out of the Soviet Union -- he was lucky to succeed with you. Without the cover of the meningitis, you would not be known as Catherine Whyte, but Masha Kusnetsova Stolbanov. It seems highly arbitrary. I know.”

By then Catherine was more or less inured to some facts being spare. Especially from a deputy mediator. After slightly shaking her head she returned to the contract before her and looked up with a lax smile.

“I’ve never been told what exactly were the drugs my birth mother was given.”

“You may be surprised to learn that the actual cocktail is still largely unknown. We know of course what drugs can alter personality, but the actual drugs given at the time were classified. Muerner was essentially a statistician then, but knew from the effects they had on other inmates, as well as your mother, that some were exceedingly powerful. Devastating even. He also knew, from his own training, that such interventions could very well effect an offspring. Hence his wish to better comprehend the likelihood.” A wary Catherine, impatient to settle her own misgivings, returned to the contractual details.

“You wish me to live under an assumed identity for a period of five months.”

“Longer would be useful as the momentum builds.”

“What momentum?”

“The coming choices for researchers and medics afforded by the ongoing research into genetic mapping, activation and modification, stem-cell adaptations, various tissue growth factors, and the allied specialties. Some breakthroughs are imminent. You have a past that will ‘stalk’ aspects of the above. Keep us on our toes. This is Muerner speaking.” Gervase did his best to bestow a smile. “We have done our best to advise your twin -- to better profile the long-term effects of the drugs your mother was given. A historic example.”

“Two time capsules. So she knows of your interest. And has abided your examination regimen.” Stating the fact unexpectedly vexed.

“Until her disappearance.”

“It all seems preposterous. A phantasmagoria.”

“I’m sure Muerner’s recollections are acute -- not at all chimerical, as you suggest. He lived through them and survived. An accomplishment.”

“The memory that ‘transforms’ -- so akin his clinic mandate. One may presume.”

“If I may quote Muerner himself here, ‘More a remembrance of things past.’ In the Shakespearean not Proust sense I think. The providential ending. The sonnet that ends with thoughts of a restoration. He knows his Shakespeare. Sonnet 30.”

Catherine smiled. “My word. His reputation improves by leaps and bounds.”

“I think Thucydides put it best: ‘We are lovers of beauty without ex-

travagance, and lovers of wisdom without unmanliness.’ And old but not durable saw. For a factotum. Muerner lives his own poetic vision of course.”

“Clean starved for a look, I guess. You can quote me.” She returned to the contract with a Willardson snuffle. “The ‘mutual consent’ means I can leave when and how I choose to do so. But there can be no guarantee of my safety...or being liable to any further ‘purloining’ -- not being awake when the body snatchers come.”

“You have the wit, will and curiosity to sojourn adventure; we trust in your distrust. Muerner’s habit of thought has infected us all.”

“Which means?”

“Your importance to us precludes any laxness on our part for your well being. However you define it. Your future cooperation will be as you define it.”

Woodenly she kept on. “Repeat again what's expected.”

“Co-operation in our clinical updates. At your convenience, of course. Though I understand you’ve pretty well absolved the concerns here -- by being in such good health.”

“Please go over the genesis of my situation again...the questions abound.”

Gervase clasped his hands in front as if about to pray. “Your brilliant able mother -- she had a graduate degree in bio-chemistry -- was sent to a psychiatric ‘hospital’ for treatment of an adroitly captious attitude toward the state. To put it mildly. The Soviets, in the age of Lysenko, had down-

graded the study of genetics, but encouraged the development of a 'truth serum', also drugs that would make one swiftly, excruciatingly sick, as an interrogation tool. As well, they sought a regimen of drugs that would alter 'aberrant' personalities -- persons not yet exposed to the happy benefits of Communism. To accomplish the above, they had retained several scientists, a handful of them German prisoners of war, one being an endocrinology, who was recruited to assemble a palette of the mind altering drugs. Muerner was one of his assistants. I would give you his name but he remains a target of the KGB and wishes to remain anonymous. He managed to defect shortly after Muerner left and is at work on a book about his experience in the Soviet Union. His now 102. A completely disingenuous opportunist according to Muerner."

Gervase looked up expecting an 'editorial comment'. As none was forthcoming -- Catherine then was a study of pensiveness -- he continued thus:

"As a 'psychiatric' patient, your mother was given a series of chemical substances, some of which Muerner believed would alter her personality, even possibly skew her genetic makeup. As the Soviet authorities wanted to study the effects of these drugs in the domestic milieu, your mother was allowed to return to her home from time to time, and became pregnant by her second husband, though Muerner suspected she may have been raped. She had a lot of enemies at this time. In this trying state she gave birth to twins, who were to be studied in the clinic for an indefinite period -- again the Soviet bias at that time being that environment was all powerful, that

children especially could be brought up to standards that belied the nature of stolid or aberrant parents. Feeding, sleep patterns, health, disposition, cognition -- all were tabulated with children from putatively exemplary parents. Such statistics being the core of Muerner's work. It was the Lysenko heyday, remember, when things like inheritance were dismissed as a sly bourgeois ruse to slow and frustrate dynamic Soviet science. Well, the Soviet endocrinologist was alarmed when one twin developed meningitis. It seems Muerner's plan -- to get one twin out -- coalesced about then. He faked a death certificate for the healthy twin -- you -- then spirited you out of the country into the hands of a European adoption agency which was then sending some infants to the United States, given the turmoil in Europe. How he did it remains a mystery. He obviously had help. He did have some party connections, and was instrumental in invalidating the Lysenko legacy. His supervisor, the endocrinologist, seems not to have questioned the death of the one twin. According to Muerner several of the ongoing experiments turned out badly and the man was doing his best to scapegoat assistants. Muerner was initially blamed for death of the twin. A 'net mutual benefit' Muerner wryly puts it. He managed to defect on a lecture tour in Poland. A smuggler got him into Germany in a lorry. By then the endocrinologist had been demoted, and faced a medical inquiry. In short order Muerner set up the clinic in Bern with some friends, and entrusted your future evaluation to a team from the out patient department. A story yet to be told. Thus, if his interest in you is not entirely humanitarian, that same interest is compromised should you be harmed."

“Up to a point, I presume.”

Gervase’s face hardened. “Your twin was not so lucky, yet survived the meningitis -- remember, at the time she was believed to be the viable one, her twin having died. She displayed an uncommon willfulness as a child apparently, despite the prescribed conditioning, though by then, with the Lysenko heirs in disarray, the harsher drug regimens were under review and, as far as we know, never given to youngsters. In any case, she proved to be every bit as inspired a ‘delinquent’ or ‘refusenik’ as her mother. Her one school record points to a cagy truant and adroit thief. She did have talent as a dancer -- a fortuity Soviet authorities readily abetted. For a brief time she seemed a promising member of a folk dancing ensemble and performed for a time in a circus. A party hack eventually introduced her to the Moscow club scene, one of the late venues a blind tiger called the Ap-sara, a private club that eventually had some charter clones outside Russia. As you know, she disappeared after the attack in the London club. She may have sought asylum somewhere in Europe -- a late supposition.” (Gervase was of course minding Muerner’s injunction here. Zoya had been treated in the Bern Clinic and was living incognito near Zweisimmen, her ‘death’ a resurrection of herself she was only just adapting to. Muerner wanted all affective anxiety out of the way to cue his double blind study before a meeting with the twin.) “There is evidence Zoya consorted with at least one sturdy apparat, and managed to glean information about a bunco network that also put her in jeopardy, for two of the main players were at the time in the Duma. The fact that she was a thief as well, of art

icons and gems -- likely at the connivance of one of her Don Juans, one a former procurator's investigator -- tripled her peril in the that community. Hence her stalkers and our agents vied for her whereabouts. She was apparently good at playing one apparat off against another. There is a some evidence that she may be a manic depressive, and a drug addict. Hardly a surprise given her situation."

Catherine forced herself, again, to stick to the likely possibilities. "The time is surely ripe to me her."

"We hope and trust. Though Providence and circumstance rarely overlap. We do have many discrete and observant friends. One you've known for some time. Zoya's jeopardy has abated. A meeting should be imminent." He paused, as if expecting a curt response, but when none came -- Catherine seemed then highly abstracted -- continued.

"Now your mother's first husband was an intelligence officer who served in East Germany and was tried on conspiracy charges and shot. Part of an officer corps Andropov eliminated in his purge of Czech sympathizers. We believe his daughter's name was Anastasiya. She is the one who has literally vanished...from all the records we've access to...to date." Gervase stiffly smiled.

Catherine promptly, sullenly returned to the here and now. Her past was accreting like a cataract. "When will I learn what the clinic knows of my general general health? As opposed to my fated survival."

The question surprised the secretary-prolocutor, as Catherine now thought of him, for it seemed to slight the history he had divulged. He be-

came newly matter-of-fact. “As soon as you agree to the contract stipulations you will be fully briefed. But until that time we wish to retain information about some interventions. Research needs to proceed with minimal changes to the parameters governing it.”

“I’m that much of a worry? Some kind of time bomb?”

“As a matter of fact, you have naturally and, I may say, wonderfully, bypassed some of the more dire consequences that were anticipated. Indeed, you may be one of the rare exceptions that complicates several suppositions. I have it on good authority that this may be so.”

“Such an optimistic assessment is credible?”

“No specialist I’ve talked to has said otherwise.”

“So what happens when I sign on?”

“We will begin a thorough evaluation -- a series of tests, none of which will have a deleterious effect if that’s what concerns you. In part to verify our earlier assessments.”

“The so-called ‘double blind’ studies.”

“Please be assured those were the minimal measures. Nothing invasive was undertaken, other than some blood and spinal fluid sampling. But the questions of maturity and aging, given your mother’s drug regimen, will require your participation to fully assess. The ordinary measurements no longer suffice. Especially in the early mature years.”

“Some maturity. I have a week to make up my mind.” Catherine’s impatience was intensifying.

“Yes. But you may want to see some of the clinic’s beneficent interven-

tions before you write us off.”

“Indeed. But one additional question needs an answer now. Why would a wonder worker like Muener have consorted with a goon like Borozov?”

“Discounting your use of ‘consort’ and ‘goon’ the simple answer is the restrictions that only a sub culture can circumvent.”

“So you admit he’s a buccaneer?”

“A Sir Francis Drake maybe, but not a Bluebeard. No, that’s reductive. Imagine Dostoyevsky’s Alexei Fyodorovich Karamazov -- Alyosha -- beset by thoughts of Diogenes of Sinope, and you’re close. Well, near enough.”

“You’ve lost me.”

“It’s important is it? It’s a quote from a lecture Kissy gave to the Philosophic Institute when he was a post-graduate student. In explaining aspects of Dostoyevsky’s own life. We attended the same seminar. He’s missed by a lot of people who rather fear openly mourning his loss I think. He was not an operator, a hustler; his brother badly overshadowed him. He and Muerner got on. In their way. Sadly, I never knew him that well. The egg trade remember was only a business for Bossy.”

Catherine stoically smiled. “So I’ve been told. When can the tour begin?”

“Today.”

“How about a day after tomorrow? I’ve a few things to sort out.”

“Whenever you are ready.”

It was the late comments she’d heard about Kissy that left a wake she

was having a time swimming in. She looked up Diogenes of Sinope that night and laughed aloud at the image of a man holding up a lamp in daylight looking for an honest man. Kissy that wryly self-effacing? So embedded as he appeared to be in the Russian mob? If near the truth, the characterization was a trait she missed entirely. Maenad began to take on a new meaning for her. Hard on dolts and naifs could mean impatience with the never ending Russian mob feuds. What philosopher could excuse that ignominy? Which he too obviously hadn't. She had always wondered about the victim of the clinic bombing, putatively a young female, who was found near the explosion epicenter. Two of the bodies there were identified as male, the third, what remained, the presumed bomber, unrecognizable. And why had the one window to the car been broken -- one of the later forensic finds that may have precipitated the blast itself. A young woman was seen throwing a rock at the car at the time. Could Kissy himself have been involved, known something, if the late things said about him were apt? Someone was obviously working to silence him. Something was missing. Something she may never find out. She could not remember being so possibly, tellingly wrong about someone she had been so intently focused on at the time. Living in the shadow of an older brother who perturbed the landscape, Kissy appeared to be a clever impresario for his ganster brother -- an agent adept at white-washing failed or foundering deeds, also beguiling and stymieing critics with beneficent showcase art. In short a clever subtle influence peddler. Now that conclusion appeared to be based on an incorrect premise -- that the two worked hand in glove.

That night she sent an e-mail to the director of the Fischer-Bakey Foundation expressing a hope that Kissy's legacy might not be slighted -- his input to his galleries not expunged, plagiarized. Something she may have done long ago had she known what she was mindful of now.

Kalid read with some satisfaction the stink bombing of a videodrome in North Hollywood that specialized in violent digital games. In clearing out Isar's room he had come across many DVDs of sadistic assignments and games of barbaric animosity. Virtual death and destruction in livid color and heady surround sound. The head set itself looked like a device designed by a torturer. He was further humiliated by the many rap DVDs, some of the covers luridly malicious. He could barely believe. A son of his caught up in such aesthetic and moral squalor. He hated America then with a passion he could barely fathom. The thought that such 'entertainment' was available world wide was a further blow on an already painful bruise. He was, had been, a man of quiet rectitude, his chain smoking and rare manuscript collecting indulgences his wife finally took in her stride. He had even urged moderation in his ulama. But now? Was he simply an agreeable dolt, as his neighbor Habib said? He had never been in such a quandary, ever! And yet he never believed vehemence solved anything in the end. But what end might one now contemplate with showcase violence and self-dramatic grievance as cultural norms? Even the suave Western cynics seemed to be catering to a new vigilante constituency.

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The latest message from the sheikh was a sobering comeuppance for Hejaz. He and Abdul were to go to a camp in Pakistan for further training in electronic signal jamming. His camp near Agami was to be closed. He was to report to the cell commander within the week. All his current files were to be destroyed. He looked at the scattered grains of sand on his desk. His world. The sheikh had said nothing about Aram.

TWENTY

Catherine's first tour of the sanctioned research sectors reinstated all past intimations of the surreal. As sobering was her finding that the Bern Clinic was as involved in transformational surgery as it was in esoteric tissue modeling and genetic mapping -- Muerner's theories and techniques a world wide standard it seemed, at least to the cognoscenti who inhabited this elsewhere world.

"So what's happening here?"

She and her guide, a thin fair middle aged man who spoke English well in a strong Swiss-German accent, stood looking into a chamber in which the participant was lodged in a hypobaric capsule.

Said the docent, "It is the ongoing conditioning for a lower limb enhancement. Our client desired slightly longer and straighter legs. She suffered as a child from a mild case of rickets. Daily suspensions in an anti-gravity console causes the longer bones especially to lose some brittleness

and allow a greater facility in re-articulation and molding.”

“Her bones look pretty good.”

“Her regimen is well underway.”

“There are articulation devices, whatever they’re called, on her legs?”

“Given the changes the client wants, most will be accomplished by traction and bone sculpting outside the console. The devices you note simply keep the ongoing contouring concordant.”

“What’s ‘bone sculpting’?”

“Exactly that. Except that the machines doing it are massive and calibrated to cause small specified time recovery injury. Inside nine weeks you won’t recognize this client’s birth endowment.”

“And that constitutes an improvement.”

“The client has long since approved the contour, articulation and length. She is a volunteer in an ongoing study.”

“And you think she will come away with what she expected?”

“It’s actually one of the simpler procedures we do here. The slight worry is always that she may perceive other interventions that are not so relatively straight forward. But she was told that up front of course.”

“So it potentially never ends.”

“You can do only so much with the given article. That’s one reason why your own experience is so important to our understanding of wildcat interventions.”

“Some wildcat.”

“You continue to be a marvel, given your background, yes.”

How uncanny was Muerner's seemingly innate grasp of her sensibility, resolve and daring, she thought that night. The mystery of the unknown, keened by the portentous and ominous. In like manner her half-sister's pet name, 'Zia', for Anastasiya, continued to haunt. The missing royal, the hoped for resurrection of a lost era. The fate of their birth mother, confined to a Soviet medical ward, became a further catalyst to grimly see the matter through. What happened to her she would walk on coals to find out. What indeed would she become if the suppositions about her 'altered state' were latterly disappointing? It seemed like something the Brothers Grimm might concoct. One twin rescued and entrusted to the prodigious if not maniacal Felix Muerner, the other immured in a Soviet isolation keep until a teenager, thereafter evolving into a clever delinquent who could dance, her current health and whereabouts now remote as the arcane 'Zia's. The luckier twin now safe in a ritzy clinic keep; the other evading a past by affecting to be someone else. The useful and mysterious Corin Wiley, now deceased, no longer an alternate surrogate. One minding her circumstance; one about to index hers. Whose dreams framed a doorway toward which she listed, to a stark telling light....

One conversation overheard on her 'tour' Catherine made special note of. With her guide she passed an examination room where a young woman, while getting dressed, complained about her treatment at the clinic. She was visible from the hall and seemed unconcerned about her state of undress. Indeed, she stood in front of the changing screen as she fetched and hooked a bra, exclaiming to a nurse and doctor:

“This is so grody. So hard ass. You’ll take care of my birth mark, even my deformed ankle, but -- holy hannah -- run away like mice then I want bigger tits.”

The nurse responded, “The comments from the arbiters are emphatic. And it’s rare for them to take up such matters. I quote from the final report: ‘This youngster is a remarkably pretty individual, from any perspective, and her request is Pickwickian and thus beyond consideration.’ ‘Pickwickian’, by the way, means ‘foolish’. From the horse’s mouth.”

“Some horse. That’s probably how they see women -- brood mares for race horses. Nobody asks the mare how she feels.

Said the doctor, “It’s never been routine practice for the clinic. Enlargement is as much fad as a patented betterment.”

“Some practice. What a pedophile looks for, being the name of the game. “Pickwickian’ sounds about right. From you great nit pickers.”

Said the nurse: “That’s a bit harsh.”

Said the doctor: We do have an excellent counseling service.”

“Just great.”

Said the nurse: “It’s maybe worth a try.”

That same day Catherine did meet a candidate in a doorway to an inside corridor who was being assessed much as she was, though for far different reasons. He had apparently killed a young woman in a particularly gruesome manner and seemed amused that he might be an object of intensive study. She encountered him in that section of the clinic that took MRI scans. He awaited an appointment and was attended by two guards,

neither of whom she saw at first. He candidly looked at her as she passed and asked if she had screwed Muerner yet. The query surprised and irked. She was told by one emerging guard to ignore him, but she was not one to shy away from intimidating conversation. She also found it odd that he should be passing a window where a young woman was being examined by a buff doctor. The woman lay sideways to the window, her gown drawn above her waist. (Catherine was later told it was an image the examiners wanted planted in his mind before the scan and follow-up testing; he had been impersonating a doctor at the time of the assault. The woman being ‘examined’ was a member of the nursing staff.)

Catherine answered the rude inquisitor with her practiced calm. “You haven’t perhaps met Eve, his esteemed friend and colleague.”

“Just one more calculating bird.”

Catherine knew Eve had been in a Nazi camp as a child, where she first met Muerner, the very young doctor the Nazi’s recruited. Their story of survival and escape was one of the clinic’s sagas, which Muerner tried to downplay.

“Eve would find that a droll assessment. She is a survivor. Of a past few humans can appreciate.”

“You get around a bit don’t you?”

“Freedom is a great pimp.”

“Ha, ha, ha. Take a good look lady: you won’t see this sweetheart again in your lifetime.”

Much later would she recall Muerner’s invocation of his nubile genetic

muse. An abstruse expression that teased as it importuned...the words a canny measure of the man himself? The haunted mystic.

Think of the daemon...multi armed, a creature to tease apart the stoic soul...as the amused gods look on. How old the wish to be reborn, renewed, transformed. To be bored as the Olympians on discovering that mythic epiphany lacks real drama, incontrovertible climax -- the mortal passion play. The monstrosity that bares witness and will not go away. The labyrinth of the ever stewing brooding muse! Souls who must endure forever smartly complain.... the paradox.

Also, those first few nights -- when her memory was working overtime -- the figure of Konstantin Alexandrovich Borozov intruded almost every waking hour -- the 'Kissy' she first believed to be the uncanny genius behind the terrible big brother. The dare in the proffered zdorov'e! She still could not believe she might have been be so wrong. Surely something was missing in the telling of the man and his ways. During her frequent requests for further information from Gervase, he frequently cited Feliks, Bossy's personal secretary, who had gone into hiding shortly after Kissy's murder. The words lingered as a reproof.

"Oh, the Maenad. Feliks kept us pretty well informed. The uncommon Kissy. A head full of fine art, music and poetry, and an anger with modernity that a Maenad might envy. Loved the works of most Russian 20th Century composers. 'Transition music,' was his word I recall for most of the modern stuff -- what you might have to listen to as an orchestra tuned or played between main themes." Gervase paused, nodded to himself. "An alert mind idled, waylaid by subornation -- not always a plus

in his circumstance. He did have a good grasp of the economic picture though -- a substantial liability for free range Bossy. The use of the girl to warn the clinic was the last straw. Yes, you didn't know. One of his recruits. An attractive street urchin, at least when he found her. Trained her well. From what we know she was on her way to becoming a registered nurse. We think she recognized something...about the car...not sure what. Anyway, Kissy's training likely paid off. I think he knew his time was up when that act was discovered. Even going to Vancouver -- one of his favorite places -- was no sanctuary. Indeed, it may have been easier to kill him there than here. Less 'neighborhood noise.' Perhaps he wanted to die in a near paradise."

The pause was momentary. Gervase looked across at a speechless, finely bewildered Catherine. He seemed obliged to continue.

"Now did Feliks like the man? Yes and no. Kissy looked down on most of his compeers. Or he didn't really see them at all. He lived in his own world. Even the interior of his dacha was something out of the early Memphis court of Akhenaten. Feliks wondered if he imagined himself a reincarnated Egyptian. That art work called The Sale Kissy commissioned using Ganyanov's name as patron. It was Egyptian to the core, one of the sly ruses to keep the wolves at bay for a time -- a novel means to embarrass you they hadn't conceived. He flattered some of Bossy's pals by having Leatherby put them in the picture -- staring like hyenas. It did bemuse some of Bossy's minders -- and earned Kissy some time, a breathing space. He must have been disappointed that such a work -- it is a fair

painting -- was likely trashed. No 'Net worth' is the way Feliks put it. Not sensational enough and too artful, subtle. Muerner's secretary Eve has attempted to find the painting. Without success."

Catherine managed to mask both her wonder and relief. When her story was fully told the painting, if it survived, would have less bite than it did. Still. Easily she changed the subject. "Do you know how Kissy likely saw me -- what his take would have been?"

"Good question. He obviously was impressed by your work, according to Feliks -- something Bossy may only have found out after. It seems Kissy likely had something to do with getting you out of the country unscathed. Yes, I know, hard to believe, but the possibility shouldn't be discounted. One of the airline security officials has admitted as much. We don't know the details but it's something Kissy may well have devised. He was a complex figure of a man."

It was these last words that particularly nettled Catherine. She knew when her time was up in Russia and that promptly leaving was a priority. But her departure seemed at the time uneventful.

"What has become of the pictures taken of me on this continent? Some I've encountered already. I assume there are others." The subject still vexed.

"Also a telling question. The set Bossy ended up with -- some taken in the Pacific Northwest parkland, some in that Tea House -- both of which you now know about -- were never used by Bossy. For one, the unknown twin was already in Charlie's hot tub, so there was little point there. Also,

Führ had taken many pictures of your twin that Pachis used in his compilations. Feliks must have known Führ's pictures were not of you, for they were taken we now know in Germany and Russia. The intentional manipulation of some for a web site was never undertaken -- Ganyanov initially said there were too few useful takes; and later, when Zoya was discovered in the tube, such use was reductive anyway. In any case all the DVD's have disappeared, according to Feliks. I suspect Kissy destroyed them before he left."

This fact was also a mindful for Catherine. Again she shifted her tact. "What plans do you think Bossy still entertains, plans to undertake?"

"Well, if he has any he's keeping them under wraps. He's drunk on coke most weeks. His standing in the organization is beyond salvaging I think. Feliks left last month. Sergei followed. Feliks filled in some of the blanks, as you can see. He will have to be careful, of course. A 'missing person' for a time."

So: one brother dead, one incapacitated. Would the new dons be any less hostile to future enquiries? Possibly. They might murder one another but stood together against an outsider. In a way, her life seemed on hold. No real prospects and little desire to enter the lion's den again. So what might she say to her estranged twin? Who must speak some English. Catherine's own Russian was rudimentary. Perhaps between the two of them they might forge a dialogue. That they both might have been murdered by Zoya's trackers -- one mistaken for the other -- was the sobering endgame. Hārun's imputation was that Ammon was Zoya's lone bugbear.

Yet Hārūn must have known of other potential dangers. How ironic that the one place she might feel a measure of safety was among the very fascists who worked to change men and women from the inside out. Make us unrecognizable to ourselves. Some such deft plastic surgery would help with a new life, make Zoya less of a target, yet she wanted to see her twin face to face. Acknowledge a veiled beginning and indelible past. Without ‘appearing’ as a stranger! Heedful Gervase had one last bracing comment.

“Oh yes -- I do know Kissy particularly liked Debussy. *La Mer* and *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune* being favorites -- which you can imagine what Bossy thought of. One of the ‘moderns’ Kissy made exception for.”

It was perhaps the one comment that floored her. The raptly evocative Debussy work she too was particularly fond of and the association now of Kissy with her own ‘faun’ brought tears to her eyes. The recollection of the day Pachis was so distracted surfaced, his disarray suggestive of someone twisting his arm. Sadly she no longer might communicate with him. At least for a long while. If ever. Still, the memory of their time in the park would remain ever green. Nostalgia was all it ‘used’ to be.

The story about Kissy’s arrival in Canada dismayed Catherine -- at first. She assumed the worst -- a new network in the making. The one surprise was the fact he seemed to welcome the publicity! To augment his security, ‘safe keeping’? With some urgency she sought and re-read the earlier Toronto Star pieces.

Words that never quite measure up.

SELF-EFFACING BILLIONAIRE SEEKS RESIDENCE

The rumor of Konstantin Alexandrovich Borozov, brother of the notorious Boris Ivanovich, taking up residence in a suburb of Itobiko, was revived Friday when he was interviewed in a new restaurant near the airport. He said he was hoping to do more business in Canada and also forge closer ties to Canadian artists and playwrights. He has always maintained a low profile and is considered a recondite player in the family his tycoon brother remains head of. A keen Egyptophile, Konstantin, known as 'Kissy', is said to have an art collection that rivals the Late Bronze Age collection in the British Museum in London. When he's settled, he intends to fund a new department of slavic studies at the University of Toronto.

Then, but a short week later, a telling sequel:

DAPPER RUSSIAN PLUTOCRAT FOUND DEAD

Konstantin Borozov, the debonair Russian impresario, was found dead in a hotel suite in Toronto this weekend. The Russian Proconsul stated that the sometime artistic maven had come to Canada to discuss a production of The Cherry Orchard at next year's Shaw Festival. An inquest has determined that he died of a heart attack. His funeral will be held in Moscow. He will be buried in the Alexander Nevsky cemetery in St. Petersburg.

A very somber Catherine imaged an unclaimed body being buried in

St. Petersburg. Or no body at all! The further curiosity was that Bossy was still in prison and likely to remain there for some time, a fact that meant a new and unknown player had likely taken over the syndicate.

It was a time when sleep itself seemed articulated. Her truck with the Muerner mavens still in escrow. Especially the enigmatic Kissy. The question of progress, improvement had always been a canard for her. The securely well off seemed often bored, unhappy; the well favored among these frequently insouciant, discordant. Christ, she thought, was perhaps deliberately vague about the nature of paradise. Many rooms, he said. Many. Not unlike the Lubyanka, then. Humans did have a sense of hell: the red hot coal on the back of the hand. Pain, the great leveler. What then Heaven? How tolerable would that be in an eternity? Trillion and trillions of years. And, more to the point, what to do now! Agree to be a subject of further investigation by the clinic experts or flee as the fabled bat out of hell? It seemed a vortex was drawing her off the discrete edge where she took up little space and need. The testing Muerner wanted to do would be comprehensive and entail (if she joined in) a presumption of empathy for the mandate of the clinic, the ‘nothing in excess’ Willardson so esteemed in his guise as patient alert observer. She felt there was a show-off aspect to the clinic’s work, that implicated her need to see, to know. She was promised a meeting with Muerner but only after the testing was done. She was told he would be in a better position to answer some hard questions. The further delay seemed but one more ‘add on’, but the dealing was underway and abruptly leaving not in the cards.

Catherine agreed as much to the special assessments because she had to see what was being done in the state-of-the-art section of the clinic. Muerner's adulatory regard of her as a 'perfected ectype' she would take with a grain of salt, though the more she learned of the man, the less her sarcasm held sway.

In the end it seemed there was but one way 'out' -- to learn all she could. As experimentee and experimenter. The two way mirror.

The first scans were done in a 'byte' network gown that helped define the architecture of the thoracic organs. The elaborate scanner she found both intimidating and fascinating, for the apparatus was as complex as a laser bay at MIT. "Think of a particle accelerator parsing the structure as well as the cellular complementarity of the whole," the techie said.

"You've done this more than once?" she dryly asked.

"Many times." Then he added, "Though rarely for statistic exemplar like you."

"I trust I'll live to tell the tale."

"The radiant energy is no worse than your average cell phone. Muerner's input was in devising the means to record the articulation and tone factors co-actively. The shape and tissue soundness that define health and genetic 'solvency' -- a prosaic word Muerner likes. It's a much debated issue -- the discovery of the genes that define us. In the fullness of time the knowledge will be a net benefit of course. We must be discreet for the time being. When one understands the possibilities the work takes on a new importance and acceptance."

One idiosyncrasy of her endowment was a surprise. It came during a post-scan meeting the day her skeleton was studied. The examiner became excited as soon as she was escorted into the computerized viewing room. The amused kindliness was also plus, that led to a prompt wish to examine her hands. "One thing the early examiners slighted," he said. "Yes, as thought -- that long fourth finger. Exceptional!"

She was amused his first words might be so nugatory, in her estimation. "It's worth special mention is it?" she asked.

"Yes indeed. The presence of a genetic code for it is almost mythological, but there it is, yes, a find that will, in due course allow us to facilitate the independence of the third and fourth fingers when they no longer apportion fewer fascia, which will make for a more versatile hand and limb. We must get you into our tissue formulator very soon,"

"So. You want me to lend a hand," she said as he admired her finger.

"Yes. A bird out of the bush. Yes."

As usual, when she entered the specified lab, the equipment seemed altogether wondrous, necromantic even. The last of the intrusions, she was assured. One of the additional surprises was to learn that Muerner was 'just' eighty-five. She had guesstimated someone well into his nineties, given his past. "A child prodigy," she was told, who completed his doctorate at Heidelberg at sixteen, not yet eighteen when the war ended -- that made his attachment to Eve something of a gothic romance.

The clinic's assessment of her physical health and cognitive function took a week, the conclusion flattering as her own doctor's summation: she

was fit as a fiddle perfectly tuned, younger than the mean age expectancy by at least a decade. “So when does the anticipated ominous deterioration begin?” she asked the head examiner, a bracing older woman who reminded her of Grace.

“Well, if I must be frank, I’d say that when you reach your 100th birthday you may have to slow down a bit.” Even her laughter was that of a Grace twin. Though of shorter duration. “I’ve talked with Dr. Wagner, our General Assessment department head, and I can say our meddling in your life is now at an end. You are free to call on us at any time of course, but you’re no longer a predicated example. That’s official. The anticipated symptoms would be manifest by now -- and they plainly aren’t. Our wish at this time is to see how your twin has fared -- a patient undertaking. We understand you want to write the story of your past and want to examine us in great detail. Well, that time has come. Please be assured it’s been a pleasure for me to finally meet you.” The warm smile Grace too had the measure of.

“Will I ever learn exactly what drugs were given my birth mother?”

The question had had a life of its own, and now begged a hearing. With or without. The examiner oddly wryly smiled.

“Blunderbuss drugs Muerner called them -- why he’s remained so interested in their long term effects. The Soviets at the time were interested in behavior, but not underpinnings like creativity or empathy. You must ask Muerner when you see him. Though I suspect his departure from the Soviet Union had some caveats. One likely dealing with secrets the KGB still

‘incarcerate’, as Gervase is fond of saying. It is likely such information, if it exists, may not be available in our lifetime. On of those ineluctable things.

TWENTY-ONE

Catherine’s long awaited face to face meeting with Muerner was she decided an exclusive -- only his fast longtime friend and partner, Eve, looked in from time to time, usually to refill Muerner’s seemingly bottomless cup, filled with a brew from a demijohn. From Willardson she had learned that the beverage wasn’t coffee but some kind of ambrosial confection that had a faintly mephitic smell to it! After the clinic’s examination of her she was invited to his castle mansion estate near Erlach. A rare event she knew, and was asked to come alone. He sent a car to pick her up. As much hearse as limo.

The villa from the outside looked like a renovated medieval fortress, with drum like towers and bartizans, even a drawbridge, the interior almost as intimidating despite the wondrous artwork, much of it Inca and Aztec in provenance or inspiration, most of it menacing and millenarian. The delicate and still exquisite Eve ushered her into a commodious study with the painting a jolly horned demon above an Empire desk, reviving a wry memory. The paneled walls and ceiling were hardwood engravings, incisive fluent arabesques of Polynesian inspiration. But again of feral mingling gods and goddesses. The muted colors also hinted at dried sanguine tones, sanguine in the dark sense.

When he emerged from a *trompe l'oeil* door vent, the spectacle was complete: A thin timeless youngster with an elf lock and what she believed to be a sprig of hart's-tongue in his lapel. She could almost imagine a child suffering from Hutchinson-Gilford progeria, except that this 'child' was free of the hydrocephalus, skin lesions, osteoporosis and arthritis you would expect on such a subject. Eve was a long standing cameo beauty, not quite anorexic, but full of a life-seasoned gaze that had long since reconciled irony and generosity -- so Catherine elected to believe. It was not what she expected and felt a little less uncomfortable with her nagging misgivings about 'progress'. She would have her work cut out for her facing these two veteran mavens.

One of Muerner's habits was to preface any comment with a lapsed smile -- a smile begun then elided. "I am grateful you elected to favor us with your cooperation. The work of discovery continues and you've helped the clinic in inestimable ways. Only our future work will realize the extent of it. But you have some questions. I do regret it's taken this long to get some words from the hackney's mouth." With the idled smile he sat and fetched his enigmatic drink.

It seemed the questions Catherine had in hand increased exponentially since her arrival. She decided art would be a mutually prized subject and smiled after casting her eyes about the room.

"This may seem impertinent, but I'm surprised not to see more early Mediterranean art -- late Bronze age paragons. The period that seems to

be enjoying a rejuvenation.” She tried very hard to keep her gaze civil as she thought of Pachis’ late work, Kissy interests, and the clinic’s focus.

He was a moment responding, looking into his cup as if the answer were unclear there.

“Classic form alone is less satisfying for me than energy, particularly energy that derives from feral cultures like the Aztec. That may seem facile, but the one precedes the other, and energy is a troubling necessity.” Then, as he often did, he changed horses mid stream. “I inherited this bunker from a colleague, who was a bit of an fanatic. I never really understood him. Something I missed.” He glanced about the room with a diffident appraiser’s eye -- so she fancifully imagined. “The art connoisseur Willardson was taken with the place. Got drunk as a skunk one night to prove it I suspect. The after supper entertainment he joined by falling off a banquet into the midst of a core of realistic headhunters from New Guinea. Performers of course. In a slo-mo dance sequence, menacing spears et cetera. He spent a night in one of the clinic’s intensive care units. He had us worried for a time. It is the civilized man’s nightmare -- the transcendent culture of the mentally maimed -- like the Aztec. Dear David.”

That she really didn’t understand a word didn’t detract from the intensity of the moment. Here was the Muerner the public likely never saw. Reflective, musing, even relaxed as he assessed his own surround -- which had engaged fussy Willardson. Then once more an abrupt change.

“You will write a story one day, a book. The clinic may be presented in an artiled light. To be expected, even encouraged. The informed watch

dog is always a help. I hope you finish it. And that I live long enough to read it. You are familiar with the Soviet GRU. That experience will add a nuance or two.”

The aberrant statement surprised her. As did her prompt detailed answer.

“Glavnoye Razvedyvatelnoye Upravlenic -- Soviet military intelligence agency. My pronunciation is improving I was told. The conjuring of the credible. Oleg Penkovsky comes to mind -- a Western mole at the time of the Cuban missile crisis. There have been others. It’s a difficult subject to research. One agent in the Borozov group was a solid fuel engineer whom the GRU may well have recruited. But my work at the time centered on the Leningrad pharmaceutical cartel, Soviet lobbyists and UN procurers. As far as I know its agents worried mainly about survival.”

“Did you ever hear the name Vassily Ablesimov?”

“No. Not that I recall.”

“A small matter.” His smile summarily brightened. To await as a witness a first candid question. Which Catherine had no trouble fielding.

“The matter that weighs in the balance, so to speak, is why I and not my twin was removed from the clinic we were born in.” For the first time she eyed him without concealing her solemnity.

Muerner smiled and looked off into the orderly Japanese garden beyond his study’s window.

“Well, first off, to cite some of the considerations for settlement here. The selection of a new satisfactory home on this continent was contingent

upon the adoptive child being healthy with no history of disease or abuse. At the time your twin had contracted meningitis and the tacit sub rosa agreement among my trusted colleagues was that one child must remain. There is a death certificate somewhere that affirms your demise. As to your placement in the West, any information about your real origin would have put you and us in a legal limbo. You might have been relegated to foster care until your fate was sorted out, thus compromising your welfare and education -- for us the intervening variables. Were you not well treated we would have another variable to consider in evaluating what had happened to your mother -- and thence to you. If you were brought up in an exemplary household we could presume that any unusual conditions that beset you as you matured might be attributed to your endowment and not an unsavory, chaotic environment. I may add that finally getting you out of the Soviet Union was a trial -- we almost didn't succeed -- and we were not about to endanger those who assisted in the removal, nor the periodic assessments of you and your sister's general health given that achievement. Which gets us to your second concern."

He briefly looked at her with what she believed to be a cultivated empathy and took a sip from his enigmatic drink. The prudent scientist. His first comment, about finding suitable parents and home, she had taken as a given. Yet was grateful for the confirmation. He put down his drink and folded his hands.

"Now the substances your mother received -- both oral and intravenous -- were potent and pervasive. Like the earliest cancer drugs, they de-

bilitated some cells and wreaked havoc on numerous others. They did change behavior -- essentially by turning the subject into an easily controlled automaton. A kind of living dead. It was still the era of the Lysenko purists, who believed behavior was the be all. In truth, I did not know what exactly went into some of the concoctions -- I was little more than a statistician then, and some Soviet archives will not see the light of day in my lifetime. If ever. But I did want to know what the early dramatic effects were, for some of the symptoms your mother exhibited were bizarre indeed. And with identical twins from a refusenik mother -- the outcome of a rape I suspect, though again I have no firm evidence -- well, I was determined to see the 'net result', so to speak. And I only had so much time. I had barely a week to issue the death certificate and effect the transfer. Sadly, I don't know what happened to your mother. She was still alive -- just -- when I defected. And until the files from that era are opened we may never know. Indeed, it's likely some files from that lockup have already been destroyed." Muerner's subsequent hands up gesture was, Catherine believed, uncontrived. Though with clever maniacs one could never be certain.

"Now about our subsequent interventions -- our so secretive inspections -- once I had left Russia for good. The teams we used to file the updates on your general health were drawn from the clinic, the scheduling of which caused some inconvenience but was a priority. We managed to contact one of ABN's senior editors, who eventually became your boss. Yes, the incomparable Darin. Who is broadly informed about the Bern Clinic.

We inferred that we had information on some of the leading drug companies here and abroad and wanted to compare notes. You were in and out of the Moscow environs then and Darin was most helpful in keeping us abreast of your whereabouts. I detect a smile beneath that moue. I'm sure you're better off away from his auspices." He swiftly continued as if his train of thought was an express, so she dryly imagined.

"Now about the examinations themselves. Yes. Mainly blood sampling and a general evaluation -- jaundice being one suspect, macular degeneration, blood pressure, even at rest it can tell one a lot, dental development, spinal fluid samples, various membrane swabs...also skin and sinew tone and bone articulation. This last I admit may seem pleonastic -- but your mother was an exception and I wanted to know what you inherited and what was stochastic in that inheritance -- what might be aberrant. Muscle shape and tone, for one, is as often as not genetically rough hewn. And the drugs your mother was given could very well have influenced your health, even your genetic makeup, for they stymied some motor and perceptive functions and altered the body's homeostasis. Some individuals have little distinctive nature or definition, period -- which indexes those who exhibit distinct traits. I sense your impatience but the matter for me was not to be slighted. You were several times -- eleven or twelve I believe -- carefully examined and x-rayed with a portal device. The findings were always encouraging. Indeed, it was hard to accept the pristine nature of your health. The nagging suspicion was that we had missed something. It is all too apparent from the most recent tests that we didn't. You are more

exceptional than we ever anticipated. I trust you will one day come to accept if not appreciate our oversight.” Catherine sat for a time in a theatric silence, as if waiting a line from a prompter. Muerner genially nodded, continued. “I think I’ve covered the bases. Your health and appearance continue to defy the probabilities. Any serious conditions that related to your mother would have manifested themselves by now, in some way or another; the accepted given. You should live a long and productive life. You’ll find us cooperative in seeing that you do.”

“I still find it hard to accept the fact that the purely physical matters that much -- in the making of a civilized life.”

Muerner smiled and drew a folder from a drawer in his desk. “An odd phrase -- the ‘purely physical’. Please consider the illustrations here. Several variants of a knee joint and the attendant soft tissue that works it. Tell me what you think.”

Reluctantly Catherine looked over the display, aware that by participating in such an evaluation she was conceding a point. “I presume the central image has some kind of precedence over the others.” Indeed, the others outside the three central images looked rather forlorn -- misshapen and ungainly.”

“All examples come from putatively healthy people aged thirty, given a month or two, and all share similarly exemplary cognitive abilities.”

“And such a knee will improve things over all?”

“The examples at the margins will not support an average frame over a seventy year lifetime. Many back and hip problems will onset in middle

age. A host of other problems derive from this debility, including the side effects of the medications prescribed. We are 'one' being. No inessentials."

Catherine tried to smile. "So, some folks compensate by doing and discovering other things -- the stellar accomplishments possible given a sedentary or difficult life."

"If you could pick your knee of choice for a child would you then leave it to chance, to a set of genes that may already be aberrant over time -- the sequencing deformed, phthisic, as in the marginal examples? The one knee will allow a full and active life, with plenty of time for reflection, contemplation -- free of pervasive pain. Perception, learning to read and calculate -- all are enhanced in a hale individual, in a well metabolized corporal soundness. Which a civilized culture can sustain. It is that culture that determines the flourishing of innate gifts. Also the squandering of them."

"It's not a subject I'm ably conversant with."

"All things being otherwise equal, the choice is not irrelevant in my estimation. I may add that the idealized knee here depicted is very close to your own. Please believe that I strive only to inform; Providence is not even handed."

"It's just that I've always believed that things like compassion and generosity spring from hardship not convenience."

"Life is never convenient. At the best of times. But it can be less chaotic. An article of faith. Without it science would be an impertinence."

Catherine was at last keen to change the subject. "My mother might

have sided with the 'science as impertinence' idea. But my chances of ever finding out are very slim, it seems."

"Sadly, as Gervase must have told you, the KGB archives have only been selectively opened. I doubt we will ever learn her fate. The worse you behave toward someone the less you want the world to know. It is one of mankind's greatest predicaments and characteristics."

"You did not mention my twin. What may have happened to her?"

"I believe David has filled you in on a few things. Your twin remains a protean player. She seems to have inherited a constitution as sound as yours, though she has poor teeth -- not a surprise -- and hepatitis C, which was being treated up to the time of the attack. She indulges in cocaine from time to time. Perhaps to alleviate some dancing injuries she's sustained over the years. We also believe she has been assaulted, and likely raped. On two examinations the assayer noted some telltale lesions. She has also been treated for chlamydia. Successfully I might add. Unlike you, she came to rely on the clinic for support when she got into trouble. Her trust was essential, vital to keep track of her. We readily treated her, when she requested it. The important desideratum here: her own volition in seeking help. No examinations were done covertly. One of our staff helped her after the attack -- got her out of London. She's still in Switzerland I believe, but wants to find her own way with a new identity. She inherited most of your genes I suspect, but has lived a rougher life and, I suspect, trusts in a special Providence. One of the fated variables. We trust you will meet her in due course, and that she can fill in an absent chapter

or two. For the reasons I've given she did not know she had a twin. We are scientists here and medics, sometimes consultants, rarely mentors."

Again he tasted his drink. Seeing Catherine looking off, perhaps absorbed in a private moment, he easily continued.

"Your step sister Anastasiya vanished at an early age, as you know. Muerner thinks in her early teens. The father's name may have been Able-simov. Vassily Ablesimov. It's a murky area -- that involved the KGB we suspect. I trust you'll learn more one day.

"Now Zoya's father was...well David via Alex has explained about your parents as well as anyone can. Your twin was very sick after her birth; you were well. We initially believed Zoya would die. She nearly did. We sought a home away from the Soviet nightmare for the healthy twin. On this continent. The results I think bare out the selection. You had a good schooling and an agreeable home life -- largely due to your American mother. You have a de jure American half sister -- Margaret, your adoptive father's first child -- who leads an adventurous life I believe. You meet from time to time."

"From time to time."

"A model, I understand. Working mainly in Europe."

"An ethnic nose -- which I'm sure you could do wonders with -- is less a liability there. She's too obviously attached to it."

"The one picture I've seen is enchanting. A beauty for all seasons."

"It's one of the derelictions, not meeting more often -- both of us are to blame."

“You don’t, I think, really like her.”

“She sees me as a prude and sluggard.”

“Hardly a good judge of character.”

“She likes the word ‘gweep’ -- overworked stringer.”

“One of the passionate few.”

The question finally surfaced. “Will I ever see the file you accumulated on me? My sisters?”

“I believe Eve can arrange for a preview. They are part of the clinic’s private files. But you are entitled to a look. Eve will of course be present when you do.”

“And such clandestine inspections of me are truly over?...”

Muerner smiled. “You’re a sovereign client -- from now on. We can only suggest.”

“That’s not a definitive answer.”

“Independence is a good we all treasure. Yes, you are entirely on your own -- to the extent you seek it.”

Muerner then suddenly rose, smiled and proffered a hand, which she perfunctorily took. “You’re part of the clinic’s history. A sacred trust.”

Catherine and Eve together regarded the surprisingly ample file in a mute stillness. Catherine opened it with the calm of a bunco dealer. The evidence of each visitation was put in a separate folio. Fourteen in all. Twice as many for her twin. The folios themselves for herself began when she was three (she was adopted when she was eleven months) and ended

when she was thirty-two -- just over one year ago. Zoya's began when she was one and a half, and continued to the year last. All Catherine's were done in camera after the age of seven. Zoya was aware of her monitoring from the start. Given the stipulation of the double-blind comparison, no attempt was made to alter her life. The papers in each folio comprised graph tables, measurement print outs, physician testimonials, and some x-rays. Eve was underwhelmed by the items and sat patiently awaiting their return. After reading through many of the dry detailed findings, Catherine took up the few x-rays with some wonder, trying to keep her equanimity in tact.

"So. User friendly bods." She glanced at Eve.

"Professionally done and assembled -- each file. You both continue to defy the odds. Indeed, you've been the subjects of of at least one lengthy seminar."

"As luck would have it."

"Of course."

"When I get to my own story, will I be permitted to use some of this material?"

"We would have to vet the book. Science is routinely vulgarized today. We generally publish only what is verifiable and what we deem culturally affirmational."

Catherine wanted to draw Eve into a conversation about the *Wunderkinder* of recent German infamy but decided she would only be impressed by the woman's prudence, knowledge, adroitness and dry affability.

She had seen enough. She had been an item of special interest -- which had now lapsed. She had to get on with the rest of her life. As her sister would she hoped. As for the enigmatic Anastasiya, she must be patient. All she might do.

TWENTY-TWO

The second call she made when her sojourn with Muerner et al ended was to her old mentor David Willardson. The first call was to her anxious mother, which she realized could be satisfactorily concluded only when she visited her; the tears almost obliterated her mother's words. Only a palpable physical presence would do. Willardson proved less plaintive and answered almost at once. She imagined the phone nearby and he well into the scotch.

"Catherine! How irredeemably splendid!"

"Hi. Yes me. The 'sabbatical' is over."

"O surely not."

"A book is underway. About recent things. An editor at Viking has been listening. Yes. A very modern epos. The reanimation of eugenics."

"Oh dear. You know about Margaret of course."

"Margaret? No, I haven't been in touch for ages. As far as I know she's in Rio on a swim shoot. Or was. What's the latest?"

He paused to indulge a smile or snuffle -- so she imagined. "Überhaupt Führ has surfaced once more. Some recent works are on tour. Re-

cently at the Kunsthalle Bern no less. And a Margaret Burke figures -- literally -- in several of them.”

The words were, in their way, a tonic. “Good lord Margaret and the führer. Small world.”

“There’s more. A Russian lass we know, one Zoya Stolbanov, has had a face lift. One of Muerner’s surgeons undertook the work. She’s been in the Bernese Oberland most of the time since her flight. A late revelation from peripatetic Alex. No longer a ‘twin’ I’m told. A new legend too. This is confidential information of course, and I needn’t be identified as your source for it.”

It took a long moment for the words to settle in. “My word. You wouldn’t be kidding of course. Whew. Glad I called. A day in May. In and around Bern you say. I’ll see you at the gallery?”

“Only Attila on a bad day will thwart a visit.

“Any chance of meeting my new ‘improved’ birth angel?”

“A likelihood I would readily give good odds on. Though she’s not an idler like me.”

“David you’re a rare collection.”

“Old and musty. The charm of antiquity.”

That Zoya may have been a patient at the clinic all along added to the consternation. So. Was Zoya there when she met Muerner? Did she know then of her twin? Muerner et al seemed more suavely necromantic than ever. An ‘odds on’ reunion. So. It took her a while to adjust to what she deemed a ‘featheredged’ prospect.

When Catherine entered the gallery she spied what she believed to be her 'new' twin angel in animated conversation with a debonairly gesticulating Willardson. So at last: her 'self' in a new aspect. A late long-awaited chapter in the ongoing saga, their Russian past a retrospective. That day's memory would linger always: the inaugural face-to-face sighting of Zoya (the face now recast by a Muerner esthete) perched on a spare pedestal by a parian Marine Venus -- so unlike Pachis' modern banal nude. A frank impenitent face, wary, pretty in a trendy sense. She turned to stare at Catherine with an odd composure. Perhaps seeing herself as she once looked rekindled incendiary times. The speechless hugs and tears that followed were accomplished behind the Marine Venus, Zoya's strong arms nearly a permanent embrace. "Angel moy, Angel moy," she kept saying. Then: "I dream this day. Dream!" Though the words were soon supernumerary. For some time they resembled Siamese twins joined at the chest.

The gallery showing of Louis Führ's new work was itself a wonder. Zoya had begrudged attending yet was keen to test a new identity. The curiosity was Führ's model for several of his pictures -- none other than Catherine's estranged half-sister Margaret, who was engaged in some kind of plea bargaining with him when they first entered the main salon. Margaret was actually on her knees in a theatrical supplication. The issue seemed to center about the use of a picture that was part of a private collection. That Margaret might be that dramatic seemed wantonly out of character, if memory served. Catherine was also surprised to find Zoya so tentative on seeing Führ, and surmised an exacting chapter in her dealing

with the extravagant artist.

Said a motherly Catherine, “Not what I expected; even Willardson seems a fugitive in here. My Russian by the way is poor.”

Zoya took her time. “I not know Margaret ‘sister’. Peredishka. Very important. ‘Merican’ I learn from you -- the New World.”

They hugged again.

“I know it -- perediska -- ‘breathing space’. I am surprised by Führ’s artificial limb. Is it knew? Don’t remember seeing it before.”

Führ then held a print in the artificial pincer of a lowered arm. The image showed a figure model standing in absurdly oversized boots.

“Always hand in pocket. ‘One arm bandit’ MVD call him.”

“He spent time in Russia?” When Zoya didn’t answer Catherine added, “I didn’t know.”

“Very long story.” Again Zoya’s quiet prompted Catherine to move on.

“How did you meet Margaret? I knew she liked the Caucuses, and joined in climbing vacations there.”

“Long story. I tell you sometime. Her friend is yenta snitch.”

“What friend is that? We see one another very rarely.”

“Must be here. Together often. Rich hot-doggie dyke.”

Catherine suspected that the presence of half-sister Margaret was surprising as the presence of Führ himself. Yet Zoya, in her dense watchfulness, waived explanation. At least for the time being. Margaret’s late fashion agent and regular companion (Catherine had brushed up on her sister’s recent past), the theatrical Madame Abricias, they later encoun-

tered with a rather tipsy Margaret in tow at the gallery reception. She greeted Catherine and Zoya (Margaret was still ignorant of Zoya's identity) with a fail-safe smile. She fondled a lock of Margaret's hair the while. The gesture reminded Catherine of Hitler's limp wrist wave to his adoring crowds. If the presumption had been that Margaret was not gay, the use of an influential agent was a benefice few models slighted. "I'm so pleased to meet you at last," Mme. Albricias remarked. The intros proceeded apace, the smiles fulsome. Catherine introduced Zoya as a copywriter she met in Russia. "Very good at her job." "A most elegant copycat," the siren said, extending a hand, which an aloof Zoya almost didn't take. The extravagant Albricias continued: "It is a stellar evening. Several of Louis' recent prodigious pastiches you may not have seen. Margaret is featured in several of them. The collection tours seven European capitals in the coming months. I particularly like *Endangered Species* and *Horsepower*." Said a wryly amused Margaret, "I trust my sister is no longer in hock to ABN." She looked in turn at Zoya with a bemused smile. Said Catherine, "Not in hock, no." She decided Margaret was sufficiently pie-eyed to contort or slight personal matters, and said assuringly, "We'll certainly re-examine *Endangered Species* and *Horsepower*." "You are in for a talismanic treat," Mme. Albricias suavely added, her tone of voice sufficiently solicitous to prompt Margaret to lid her eyes. Said Zoya later, to no one in particular, "Albricias is snitch and hard ass quaire. You know I mean."

When they ventured to seek out Louis' work, Catherine was a little disappointed Willardson had left. He didn't look well, she thought. But she

knew that photoshop art was not his cup of tea. And he obviously did not want to abridge her time with Zoya. “So, what do you think?” Catherine asked when they faced Horsepower, a pretty picture of a leggy rider in sleek riding kit carrying a horse through a rough feral forest. “Horse maybe not ‘veggie’, as you say.” They regarded Endangered Species in silence. Margaret was attired in a costume made entirely of endangered animal skins and feathers, photographed atop a lone snow-capped mountain peak -- perhaps the one place one could take such a picture. One entitled Oil Embargo pictured a woman’s toiletry, lipsticks, unguents, perfumes and a nude kneeling woman seen from the back -- likely Margaret -- all encased inside a cosmetic jar. Another, Sunshine, pictured Margaret in a tony frock on her knees pleading with some deity while surrounded by overside dishes and a large bottle of Sunshine detergent. Yet another, Ding, Dong, Dell, pictured Margaret as a Safari hunter relaxing at the end of the day, boots shucked, one foot immersed in an oversize shot glass filled with (presumably) scotch, her long elegant legs issuing from white cotton shorts, her open kaki top barely hiding her breasts. The showing ended with several nude pictures of Margaret, mainly of her fluted back and sleek legs. One in particular was as seductively elegant as Catherine had seen. If Führ indulged some whimsy in the series, his fondness for Margaret was not in doubt. Catherine believed these images were created independent of Pachis, yet they bore a stylistic resonance that reminded her of Musing the Maenad. The F-B foundation funded the exhibit, a fact that once more teased her fermenting memory. The suspicion that

Kissy and Führ could at some time have compared notes added to the ongoing wonder. She also wondered if Felix Muerner had ever been exposed to such a beauty.

It was in Catherine's top of the hill condo that the twins opportunely explored their complex lives, the week before them free of obligation. One sunny afternoon they sunbathed in the solarium. Zoya wanted to sun, which she rarely saw, she claimed, Catherine to cull some answers. They had a half-sister, did they not? Yes, Zoya said, they had an older half-sister. She was called Anastasiya -- 'Zia -- and left Zoya's home for a foster family when she was eleven. "You've no idea what happened to her?" Zoya all but winced. "I tell you GRU recruit her -- you believe me?" "Of course, if that's what you think happened."

One of Zoya's new but treasured amusements was the natural, unaffected demeanor of her Yankee twin -- at least around her. Zoya, it turned out, had never been close to Anastasiya, and apparently contended with snitches, cruel gossips and worse all her life. Something Catherine soon accepted as a given. Being suddenly free of such contingency would take some 'fiddling' Zoya told her twin. "Patient, please. I am resetting modem."

Catherine asked again about Anastasiya -- about 'Zia. "You can appreciate my curiosity."

With some impatience Zoya said, "Guy who visit often...not boyfriend. I get info one day from reliable source. Not surprise. 'Zia very bright."

"How so?"

“Bright! Mathematics, physics -- ‘Zia Einstein.’”

“A close or necessary friend then -- this chap you mentioned?”

Zoya candidly regarded her twin then exclaimed with dry amusement, “My sister Catherine Great friend of siloviki!”

That she might be characterized as a security official made Catherine laugh. “It’s been a long time -- being in the dark. Do tell.”

“No names. Please. Best now...for now.”

“Is he, this chap, still around?”

“No comment please. Apartment is great place. Sun! Special gift. I live here while, yes. Be your writer copy.”

“Copywriter. Of course. As long as you like. I told you I may have to move though. I’ve got a couple of offers, but they don’t pay as well as my last job.”

“Russian ‘bear hug’. Never same after. I stay brief time, after week I have big picture in mind. Maybe film. Plombiers’ friend making film. Casting one day soon. I go for big debut. Memory. Like Cat.”

“I hope it works out. I’ll be all ears.”

Despite Zoya’s solicitude Catherine’s curiosity kept egging her on. “You must know how curious I am to know if you met either Borozov. A question that’s been stewing long before we met.”

“What’s ‘stewing’, please?”

“Badly wanting to know -- if you met either Kissy or Bossy.”

Wanly Zoya responded. “Kissy head Apsaras. Nice man mostly. See him very little. Big brother swine. Like Plombiers...sometimes. Schitzo.

Very nice here. Tell you one day.”

“I’m so hoping you will tell me something about Kissy...he’s one B. I likely misjudged.

With mock earnestness Zoya asked, “You in love with Maenad?”

“You know...no. Certainly not.”

“Style geek. Kissy. Music, art. Dance bug. Sometime poet. Maenad they name him: hysterical cunt. In Canada for time. Maybe not happy.” More pliantly she added, “He look, yes.”

“How so -- ‘look’? You went out together?”

Zoya broke into brisk laughter and squinted at her sister. “After tub stay with Yankee Warren, he ask about knitting.” Her laughter resumed, but was soon spent. Then, as placation: “Shy man. Everyone at club say he nice fellow.”

“You liked him?”

“Not now. Later. Time for think -- dream. *Na zdorov’e!*”

“Out of vodka I’m afraid.”

“Ha! Vodka all they have in new Siberia.”

The unease of some of Zoya’s remarks framed a lament -- so Catherine guessed. She decided her twin’s glazed look should no longer be interrupted. Although she also keenly wanted to hear more about Chuckie Warren.

In the coming week they visited several of Catherine’s favorite wilderness haunts. In a stony hollow filled with gaunt Ironwood and Tamarind

trees they discovered an unexpected and solitary stork. Catherine mentioned a recent news story about a family of storks that had escaped an aviary in San Diego. “Nice bird for me,” Zoya answered. “Flew coop, you say.” For a time they quietly studied the bird, who seemed as interested in them. “I think we call someone,” Catherine said at last. “I think so too. Bird unhappy. No perch.” On her cell phone Catherine briskly talked to a park ranger.

The same day they went to a secluded spot in a nearby desert. A late afternoon sun cast long shadows. Beyond the dunes they saw a naked couple walking toward a distant old river bed. Suddenly venting mutual laughter they stripped to the skin to look at one another with renewed wonder. They decided they were indeed a match, the main oddities Zoya’s leaner form, tan and new face. “Ruskie double headers,” Zoya said with a dry smile. That evening they visited the grotto pool below the spillway that Catherine and Michael explored a few months earlier. “You come here with boy?” Zoya asked when they were chest deep in the cool water, which she seemed oblivious of. “Sometimes,” Catherine answered. “With girl?” Zoya continued. The question surprised Catherine. “No. Why would you ask?” “Story about you and model in Moscow.” Catherine briefly smiled. “A long story.” Zoya shrugged. “No big deal. Happens. Nice here. Clean.” Catherine later learned that Chuckie Warren was “regular handy man” as Zoya put it. “Big daddy. I carry hash for him. In ancient pot. I balance on head in walk ‘round pool. He look mainly. He and camera. Many others in tub.” Catherine smiled. And decided soliciting more

details would that day be impertinent.

The story about the Plombiers film Catherine learned from a journalist at ABN who followed the dynamo's late career. They kept in touch after Zoya left and periodically met in the coffee parlor of an older independent book store. If Zoya had been mum about the affair, the peripatetic journalist seemed keen to bring her former colleague up to date.

"Antoine's wish to make a 'fashion film' about Saint Joan quite literally set the stage for what was touted a 'peerless part'. One Russian's audition took the cake. A newcomer -- know nothing about her. Yevgenia Yerokhin. That name mean anything?" Catherine shook her head. "The rumor is a name change -- for the credits. Understandable. Plombiers I understand was impressed by her 'hungry English'. Apparently, she'd spent a while in England, enough to read her English lines with 'yummy Russian vowels' -- Plombiers' phrase. She must have been initially flattered, the proposed film was amply budgeted and Plombieres himself would direct. I saw the script. Very period, very gaudy, as would be expected, but also starkly lurid -- which ruffled some feathers, apparently -- according to one breakdown artist -- the guy or gal who specializes in making sets and clothing look faded and worn.

"For instance, the smooth plastic armor this Yevgenia would wear in the film was beautifully crafted but translucent. And she was to be nude underneath. Said the prodigal Plombiers to a German tabloid, She'll be seen as a luminous aura -- an Ester, Judith, Deborah.' The great attractor. Small tensors will line the plastic. The creative team also devoted a lot of

time to the auto-da-fé, specifically the parting of the flames to show-case the burnt figure -- to assure the executioners that the apostate had not escaped and was in fact a woman. An airbrush artist was retained to render Joan as charred tenderloin. A historic incident, Plombiers claimed. He said, 'Her gown was rubbed with salt petr. It would have gone up in an instant.'"

Said Catherine, "Sounds like the 'other' Plombiers I've read about."

The journalist briefly nodded. "He can be obdurate. No question. His Joan I'm told wanted a body double for the scene. Plombiers wanted, well, the real thing. He told one of his paymasters, as quoted in a tabloid: "The look will be stark, galvanizing after seeing the maid so amazingly alive in the armor, then stiffly paraded at the trial." His sense of historic veracity is decidedly flexible. As you may know.

"Well, even the airbrush artist was dismayed when he saw the proposed rendering, I'm told, which was to be the first scene to be filmed. The day she was to be 'burned' -- painted in burnt umber and ochre pigments -- I'm told she was peeved to find the entire film crew awaiting her appearance. Anyway, she split, then and there. She may have been, I think, simply pissed off by then with the whole venture and needed little excuse to leave. As a prized newcomer she may have felt she needn't start with this.

"When she told Plombiers she was leaving, I'm told he looked as if he'd fallen pray to an April Fool's joke...I get steady copy from a costume mistress in his company by the way. His cute star simply didn't like the film, she said. But it's historic, he supposedly said. A tale for all ages. The

opportunity of a lifetime. She must have smiled for he mumbled something about a contract -- which she still had not signed apparently, a fact she duly reminded him, a lapse he was apparently ignorant of, so rapped up was he in the production. It was one of those encounters insiders treasure. Ballsy for a new actress. There's a rumor she had some work done at that awesome Bern Clinic. Hard to verify of course, given the clinic's security regimen. You've met her I think -- at Führ's showing in San Francisco."

"Briefly. We compared notes on life in Russia."

"That must be a story."

"One day -- who knows. I'm sure we'll learn more."

What neither the journalist nor Catherine knew about was the cache of gems and two ikons Zoya had nicked, estimating they would keep her nicely flush for a year at least. She had one more heist to make and rented a cliff house near Solana Beach to stash it. The *'objet'* intrigued and was likely worth a bundle given the gems in the head dress. The day Catherine visited the house she was surprised to find the jeweled bust she was sure she had seen -- at Hārun's fire sale on the loading bay by the lake! Zoya only belatedly understood her twin's rare, solicitous expression.

"I forget. You never see her. Anastasiya. 'Zia. Half sister."

After a second careful look at the arresting bust Catherine said, "A friend showed me some photos a while back. One was said to be of Anastasiya. This bust does seem a little like the portrait I was shown. It is a

curiosity. I'm sure I've seen it elsewhere. How in the world did you find it? Is it really anything like her -- like Anastasiya?"

Zoya indulged a sarcastic whim. "'Find?' How you think I 'find'? I go to fucking MVD?..."

Catherine fondly smiled. "I gave it little thought when I first saw it. But seeing it now, here. It does evoke the face I was shown. I suspect I'm imagining -- with your coming and so on -- the wonder of it all. She vanished early on I understand."

"She leave when I am nine. Who knows? Nice bust. Like her. I saw it, wanted it. In salon in Frisco. Maybe copy. Maybe other 'Zia. Maybe no. Maybe best you think like 'Merican: Sweet Fanny Adams." She ended her statement with a stoic shrug.

"A fine puzzle. Including how you got it -- which I won't ask. Do you see any significance in the way it's mounted? As if on a serving plate?"

Zoya brightened. "You too Original maybe statue, this part top. Maybe.

"The craftsmanship suggests a wealthy patron somewhere."

"We find 'us'. Maybe we find her. Maybe. You think so."

"A great story. Waiting to be told."

TWENTY-THREE

She had all but reconciled herself to the 'alluvial flow' of her life when the unstamped package arrived in her mother's mail box, addressed simply 'To Catherine.' A first edition book of Chekov short stories and plays

with no return address which first confused, then teased, then alarmed -- then, much later, after she had the parcel forensically checked out by an explosive expert, took her breath away.

Only after a very tearful reunion with her mother and following many halting, mutual attempts at updates, did Eileen fetch the parcel which she had not opened. "It was a surprise. I don't think it came in the mail. It was just in the mail box one morning. No postage either. Or return address. But a lovely hand addressed it. Is it someone special?" Catherine had looked at the parcel askance. And immediately phoned 911 -- to her mother's growing alarm. A day later the parcel was returned, the wrapping paper perfunctorily restored, with assurances from two plainclothesmen that the package was innocuous, did not house an explosive device or embedded poison.

Catherine explained to her mother that her stay in Russia had vexed some unfriendly people. Her mother nodded, patted her daughter's knee. "Well you're here now, and you promised me a good long reminisce."

Catherine stayed a week with Eileen and chronicled her stay in Russia, and subsequently here in the U.S., with a detail she felt certain Eileen would not remember, though she listened with the avidity of a lynx at the telling. She mentioned nothing about her Russian origins, leaving the story of a babe put up for adoption intact. She easily smiled at her mother on the night she took out and removed the wrapping to the enigmatic parcel -- following its return from the forensic lab. The discovery of a Chekov first edition -- in Russian -- floored her. It was both a benefice

and a possible threat. Messages among the vor in Russia were sometimes delivered in abstruse ways. She was dumfounded. Her mother immediately sensed her quandary and smiled. "So it is a surprise. From someone you know?"

"Momsy, I don't have a good explanation for it arriving here. I wasn't expecting...it."

"It is such a lovely book, beautifully bound. Like the Folio Society that keeps sending me things. Margaret gave me a Christmas voucher one year and they've never let up."

"No, it's not from the Folio Society."

"But you are happy with it?"

Her mother had been such a devoted fan, as well as a vigilantly conscientious parent over the years, that Catherine could only smile and give her a hug. "Yes momsy, it's a fine gift."

She then put the book aside and helped with the supper. The housekeeper Molly stayed to sup with them. Catherine listened to the topical neighborhood chatter as one stuck in a time warp. 'Monsy' was living in the past. And apparently enjoying every minute of it -- at least that night. She made no mention of her absent husband, who had apparently left one morning and never returned, though a check arrived each month from an address in Glendale. They had not been on speaking terms for some time.

Later that night Catherine's rabid curiosity kept her leafing through the book's pages. Her limited Russian helped with some passages but her quest for 'something else' kept her examining the book itself, less its con-

tents. She was about to shelve it for the night when a folded page slipped out from a fly leaf. Her intense grip had likely prevented its release. First she looked at it on the floor askance. Such poisonous devices were nearly a commonplace. She was on the verge of dialing 911 again when she suddenly picked it up and unfolded it with a stoic grimace. The lab would surely have noticed...her impatience was a relentless goad at the time. And Momsy, she assumed while looking at it, far enough away not to be in jeopardy. Perhaps it was that thought that urged her to crouch over it as she retrieved it. But the paper turned out to be simple but elegant note paper, a letter written in the same beautiful round hand that addressed the envelope. In English. It began with what may have been an unsteady flourish -- the writing initially rather crimped.

Dear Catherine,

I have some hope that Providence will put this note into your hand without stipulation. The person I entrusted it to is discreet but must remain anonymous. Such a parcel delivered 'normally' would invite too many snoops.

I have of course no way of knowing whether you will ever receive the book, let alone this letter. But only Armageddon would prevent me from writing it now and consigning it to this tome -- a late lone solace in a sorry protracted life. I suspect you will never be able to scold me for writing it. The dye has been cast. An imminent overdue departure. So I suspect. Sorry -- as they often say in Canada, my late new and too brief domicile. I had at one time entertained the lovely fanciful notion of actually meeting you...so I must content myself with this prosaic note.

The Chekov book is somewhat dog eared, as the English say. Indeed, my finger

prints are on every page. Prints that will never be compared to my set on file with the Cheka. Please be assured I tried to keep Bossy's minders preoccupied as long as I could. 'The Sale' worked for a time. The mural give me a 'time out'. Not long enough of course. There is another matter. The security officer at the terminal you departed St. Petersburg is now being questioned. I tell you this not to win any kudos but to point out how fate deals with stolid minds. The guard owed me a favor and was to allow a Finn a boarding pass. He was busy with a luggage issue and thought you were the Finn. He is in no trouble but your leave taking is now under review. Providentially, I won't be around to 'fill in the blanks'.

The one solace is that Bossy's reputation is now so bathetic, so soiled, that he may spend the rest of his life in prison. And with me out of the way his enemies -- and yours by proxy -- can now stand down. Even Sergei has left. It was your courage and resource in disclosing one of Bossy's scams that revived in me a nostalgia about trust and the gift of grace. The Beast in The Beauty and the Beast is a fine epigram.

I hope you meet your twin one day. Free of all contingency.

I wish you well, and will leave it to Chekov to plead my case.

Please think of me sometimes with an attitude more wry than sardonic.

Ever after,

Konstantin

One of the phrases in the Chekov book that had an asterisk beside it took a while for her to translate. In the end she came up with the following: 'I would like to be a free artist and nothing else, and I regret God has not given me the strength to be one.' One day she would get someone in the Slavic Department at UCLA to confirm her wording. In the mean-

time she would consult a public library's English translations. That he must have anticipated his untimely end was a disengagement, a haunting postlude she could barely fathom. That it could inspire as much disbelief as disappointment also amazed.

The revelation -- as she later thought of it -- defied the odds: her enemy's brother a secret paramour! Right out of Tolstoy she thought. Though whether it might rank as tragedy she would be a while deciding. It was almost too bizarre to be true, yet the words in the note rather defied sarcasm. She couldn't even remember what he looked like. Not a twin, of course. No, not a twin. It was the only unsought love letter she received from a boyfriend, then or now. That fact must be taken under advisement.

She spent the next few days in a kind of suspended reality. Too stunned to cry, too stymied move on. Her retrieval of one picture of Margaret she bought at the gift shop in the salon brought only a brief respite. A back-lit nude of her tep-sister walking down a grim stone-lined channel into a stark obliterating white light. She doubted Margaret had ever been more splendidly exhibited. But it was the unexpected caption that caught her eye, a quote from William Blake that invoked her own regard of human splendor -- 'Terror, the Human Form Devine'. The curiosity for her was that the whimsical Führ might chose such a phrase. If it was his. Suggesting to her how some humans coveted their god-like dream. It seemed dreaming, reflecting was about all she might resort to then.

EPILOGUE

The barge port at Shlisselburg, just North East of St. Petersburg, was exceptionally busy and humid that day. The island fortress on Lake Ladoga near the Neva reservoir gleamed in a morning sun, the grass about its ancient dun towers an emerald green. The town itself was full of young tourists doing the Neva on the cheap. For two days Zoya had reconnoitered the departure bays, her new papers in hand. The freighter Yezhov, a propane tanker, was the newest of the ships then at anchor, also the sleekest. Dressed as a common laborer that morning, she followed a group of crane operators who walked to their positions complaining about life in scrappy tones. One of these was less discordant. He was also the oldest. And, if she was not mistaken, likely the most heedful -- at least in her pressed mind. She approached him just as he was about to climb the ladder to his airy operation's perch. "I need to get to Svirstroy, to see a friend who's not well." When he curtly told her to apply to the passenger terminal, she added, "I need to depart soon. I may not have long. The cruise ships this time of year are full and there is no public air service to Svirstroy." He studied her sleek smooth face candidly for a moment or two, the shrugged. "I can't help."

"I can pay. Well. A two payment offer. The second on arrival."

The man looked about him as if someone was trying to pinch his lunch box or steal ahead of him in a lineup. For several seconds he said nothing, then, in a lower apathetic voice: "See Semyon in the timber office. Say Dimitri sent you. Show him what you have." Again he looked at her, his

expression nearly hospitable. "A friend...best I can do."

That was roughly four hours ago. She could board the Yezhov to share a room with a retired nurse. Her new papers had established a new safe identity. Semyon examined them with a patient smile. A couple of small diamonds lay in one of the folds. He retreated to a back room where a muffled conversation ensued. He returned smiling. It could just be accomplished. The other would not be needed he added, returning the diamonds. He added, "The nurse is a relative, an aunt, and will welcome a companion. You can board anytime. Should be in Svirstroy tomorrow afternoon. You have my condolences. My own mother died a month ago."

"I'm so sorry."

"Look after yourself."

That night as she lay on the hard bunk of the forward cabin she dreamt again about arriving in America in a crate of caviar -- a dream that, in its way, had come true, though Providence ruled out the caviar. A limitation she would accept. But this day, before heading to the land of her dreams, she must see Yuri one last time, the procurator's investigation who had returned to his place of birth to die. He had terminal brain cancer. He claimed that bathing in the cold fresh waters of Lake Ladoga had cleared his mind, cured him once before. He would, must try it again. She had forgotten how smooth a river barge could be. Sometimes only the further bank attested movement. A small boy walked alone along on a path near the embankment. Looking at him, his stark solitary presence, she wondered how her smiling fortune might reduce her to tears.

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A grimacing Hejaz looked over the new windy camp with a mixture of enforced calm and lasting obligation. A pretty bird he did not recognize flew out from a tamarind tree and scooped up a small crab in the sand. The crab had come some distance from the water. It too was covered in sand.