

# CHERRY BOMB

A terrorist's Nightmare!

Willard Thurston



# Cherry Bomb

A Novel by  
Willard Thurston

## **PART ONE : TREE HOUSE**

### ONE

He was dimly aware of another body count. Already three that evening. The spectacle of murder and mayhem fetched a large audience. The stylish TV announcer had a dulcet voice, painstaking makeup and hemorrhoid-ready composure. Then another young body, this time found nude, the sometimes condoned art form, in a quiet ravine -- a pastoral 'still' life. Ready, incendiary assault seemed to be working its way upstream.

Randolph Glasser's ailing wit then abdicated: the national audience, him included, was treated to a series of carefree snaps of the murdered youngster, one a knockout pinup with arms rapturously outstretched. The use of Eros to assist, if not solicit, compassion, struck him as the gratuity added. A sexy beat to caress calamity. To gentle Eros we commend thee.



He was, of course, not then flush with latter-day ecumenicism, with wholesale tolerance. The maxims of Proverbs and Einstein came to mind: The curse causeless shall not come; God does not play craps. Gamely, a later estimation, to quote Steven Hawking, averred that God not only played craps but sometimes threw the dice where no one could see the numbers.

The slick chromy news hour often did this: duly palled or purpled his sensibility and composure -- put him at indiscriminate risk. He might acquire an immune deficiency -- become susceptible even to radical notions. Sex can sometimes endanger human life folks! Or, less demurely: rid the world of love mongers — join a devout terrorist team! Eros, after all, was a fine old leveler, full of quirky designs, brutality itself the least conspicuous when sexually energized. Every impetuous ravisher knew that. Somedays the news hour, in its stintless tumult and luminous glow, seemed imbued with the editorial dash of Heavy Metal (amplified distortion), such that needy wastrels like him must leastwise take note of a modern axiom: the certifiable maniac got the publicity, a large audience and, pertinent to his own scribbling, many readers. Purveyors of kinky pandemonium, of method assault, were hiring, openly, without quotas or ceiling. The media flogged all manner of sensational bods; bookstalls and news stands often burst with what seemed to him dewy fresh crowbait; even discretion and propriety got routinely spiked at comedy clubs...undeniably, solid assured fury was booking.

He recalled then an inaugural moment on Canadian television: the interview of three able Canadian lawyers, then joint authors of a pictur-

esque novel about a nerver who left his victims stuck up on totem poles without their heads. The book was dedicated 'for all the Fathers/Mothers', the 'slash' symbol germane Randy mused. The interview closed with one lawyer taking notes while studying a pretty female nude being drowned in a transparent bathtub (a fussy waxwork tableau), observing his subject with the intensity of an ornithologist as the take faded. During the interview the pleasant host (Peter Gzowski, in his brief tenure as a CBC television caddy) unearthed one bone of concern -- sections of the book were smutty and gratuitously sadistic he thought -- an offering the dedicated authors sniffed disparagingly. One was especially disappointed when a good writer didn't 'go for it.' Restraint was thus a drag, and stateliness, restraint's old handmaid, coy and unwieldy. Indeed, handmaids were then in great peril themselves.

At one time, on witnessing such alert entrepreneurial hazing, supercilious Randy would have immediately risen and dashed off yet another *oraculum*, a speaking-for-the-gods letter. But that reflex was now quite dead. He could read the writing on the wall as well as anyone: either he languished as a nerd or helped oil the adrenalin glut: a hack or rake. Toned news would go on regardless. He could see the scenario all too plainly: when the crazed psycho came at least to *his* household, *It* may have found the latest mindblower lacking in convulsive hideousness, and come to upgrade the raw inspiration.

He decided he must get down to real bodies. Fiddling with concepts while the state burned was getting him neither riches nor solace. Humor

itself was now often slasher frenetic. Everyone was suitable mainly as shark bait, knife-edged fish tailings. Succulent birds especially, ingenues and patriots, got flayed alive. Why not invest in an old reliable scaremongery? How did the medieval torturer decide on the ‘angle of agony’ anyway? Was it not analogous to the ancient painstaking method of ‘trial and error’, the very method that eventually served to produce things like the first wondrous Stradivarius, which gave forth a rapturous ‘vocalise’, so poignant to the passionate heart. Weren’t such ideas hippocampus bog-gling? And wasn’t the hippocampus grateful?

*...As they slowly pushed the gagged, trussed, straining form, already collapsing collarbones, into the hissing crematorium feet first, conference highballs in hand...*

That was the ticket. None of this body snatching simply to get the dishes done or the vacuuming. Out with expedient and sometimes useful conceits like disingenuous (disguising secret motives), epigone (filching another’s achievements), narcosis (relying on a forgiving stupor, usually by drugs), eristic (fondly if cantankerously argumentative) — all such crutches unnoticed in a hemorrhaging text; parasitic qualms or doubts purged with nary a semi-colon!

Frenzy: the reliable tonic.

Now, in many films, a racy rock score accentuated primal throb while the nastiness surged, percolated. Afterwards, the pathos usually ‘catharted’ (sorry) all over the place with old reliables like the Barber Adagio for Strings -- terminal airs. A veritable cataclysm of sensitivity. Poignant, even commitment songs, came now with reliable, visceral accompaniment,



the suave sexy beat. Wall to wall pop music often gave pathos itself an intoxicating pulse. Well, he was a knucklehead, wasn't he? As usual, he was one of the last to notice -- the custodians of designer trauma actually letting the bestial images flow as the Flood, a rock score drowning the storm, or soupy edits of Albinoni or Pachelbel making it hoarier still. Having a ball, occasionally ankle deep in tears or spit grease, watching their tales squirm on bonded sheets. Then off again joyously — to the bank!

Of course the daunting part was Randy's covert suspicion that he might simply be incapable of employable sustained toil -- of becoming a successful fruit picker, say -- a wormy idea that could turn even a snob's fruition, and he seemed indentured to learn the terrible truth. It was but a short distance from his tree house into the tree itself. Indeed, he seemed destined to view the human scene through the parted branch -- as he did now, noting that Herb, his landlord, was home from work and preparing to cut the grass.

For years Randy had strolled through that South Surrey lane, inspirational notepad at the ready, heeding the character of the backyards, including the variety of arbored cabanas and summerhouses, which numbered perhaps double the average of two per block. Always he slowed before the lath house, suggestive of a gazebo, that straddled three stout maples about eight or nine feet up. It had two windows, a cedar roof, even a cable-vision hookup and modern draw-up ladder. What hermit or waif enjoyed such digs? He never saw anyone in the yard which had a plain unused look except for tidy packages in a garbage stall in the fence.

Then the owner of the property, Herb Spooner, a professional portrait and wedding photographer, gave him his first summer job. Herb needed a retoucher and saw some of Randy's artwork in his high school yearbook. Herb took the student portraits; Randy had drawn caricatures of each graduate, the deft brush work of which Herb found, in its photographic realism, extraordinary. Herb suggested the retouching job to Randy who, at seventeen, eagerly and quickly learned the basic retouching techniques. Thereafter, for two days a week after classes, and on Saturdays, he brushed away blemishes and obtrusive features from Herb's lacy brides, crisp nurses and fey students. He also opened lazy-lidded eyes in group photos, added subtle waves to straggled hair, improved the cut of a rented tux, spruced up wilted bouquets, even vivified flower beds in late-summer parks and added tiny sparkles to umbered jewelry.

Eventually, though, the brides and nurses and students began to look all alike. He would arrive on a Thursday and not recognize his work from the Wednesday. Wedding parties were the same mural with holes cut for the cajoled faces. Even the 'candids' took on a spent, effete look. He lost interest in photography, very nearly drawing itself, and impulsively resigned -- but not before fixing in fond memory the 'maple tree house' Herb had built for the foster child who was ruefully returned to Social Services after Herb and his wife failed in six months to right a decade of neglect. "I'm too old," Herb told a neighbor. "My wife needs a rest."

A year later Randy staged a 'chance' reunion. He had gone abroad after precipitously quitting university and returned intrepidly determined to

be a fine condescending author. Words, he imagined, defied retouching. Herb stood across the fence behind his lawn mower pushing back his glasses, gesturing. Finally he shut off the engine. When he learned Randy was looking for an inexpensive place to stay he jokingly pointed to the vacated tree house, sturdy as ever. That was two months ago. Randy, much to Herb's surprise, initial amazement and belated dismay, moved in. Now Herb stood below preparing yet again to cut the grass without offering any gesture of greeting. Randy circumvented the lobby to remove himself by consenting to more retouching. Herb's wife Babs, a watchful homebody, was cautioned to hold her peace -- for the time being. For Randy it was a spartan abode and constrained atmosphere, but he had nowhere to go. He was then nearly indigent. His single parent mom had yielded up most of her modest savings to a stipulated stay in a nursing home, then promptly died, and long ago he estranged himself from an older stockbroker sister. Now he sat on the tiny propane biffy -- his one 'privy' addition to the room -- and listened to the sputtering engine below. Somehow the thread had again eluded him.

-- Yes, that was the ticket. Horror. Menace. Nowhere to rest. Something ever maniacal lurking beyond the pale...but who, what? History helped out here. Though again, his rendering was rather timeworn.

The handy Pol Pot came to mind and the fearless Argentine Colonels. Also South African tire 'necklacing' as purification, catharsis. Then there was the Afro-Asian-Arab and Soviet bloc giving Idi Amin several standing ovations in the United Nations (Paul Johnson, Modern Times). Amin,



though, was now old hat, likely the only thing he never ate. ‘Husbandry’ had a new essence if all that reputedly went into that notorious refrigerator did. To imagine the younger Amin as an Afrikaner or Republican was to discover untrammelled immunity. Akin to the suspicion in many North American minds that Ronald Reagan would not be an improvement over say someone like Leonid Brezhnev -- both ‘conservatives’ in the press. Even a CBC vizier like Lister Sinclair could, in a Vancouver Institute Lecture, imagine in ‘Reagonomics’ a coming social fiasco the match of the world’s Marxist juggernaut. Now you can’t get much more spine tingling than that! Akin to finding that freedom and fairness are incompatible. Why should the lucky ‘other’ enjoy two good kidneys? Better bones? A hobby-focused job? A prettier wife or husband? Inequity was infinite. An inexhaustible storehouse of horrors! Melodrama personified! And for the devout voyeur -- an endless passion play. An interminable *carnevale*.

It was really quite simple: a moral consensus no longer existed, rendering accord itself a fraud. Who’s left to honor an agreement? The obligatory details were telling: the blood shouldn’t be congealed, the violence demonic if not pandemic -- the regrettable monstrosity in us all (the demotic Apollyon); the savagery nimble, inevitable, tearless (pornographic). In short, lots of splendid light bods candied in the ravine.

It was then that the hyper-allergic Herb began sneezing. Between snuffles he managed to exclaim, “Oh for gawsake!”

Herb was an asthmatic who suffered from hay fever and a pervasive immunity to modern medicine. His wife Babs would glower from the kitchen

window, shake her head and move away. Herb would try yet another spray, lozenge or injection, then gag or hiccup for a further week, occasionally face down in tepid sink water.

But the sight of the unattended mower and long grass was too much for Randy. If he climbed down and finished the job he might be saddled with it for life. A good deed, even a modest good deed, refused to be revoked; kindness, for instance, you reluctantly willed to be without once you made the effort -- another scary tale, which he often sidestepped. He swore at the lawnmower. The bugger hadn't even turned the motor off. Finally he climbed down and with his fake passbook in hand headed for the bus and Expo 86. The much applauded Vancouver transportation fair that engaged even a precious gadfly like him.

But his sense of freedom was short lived. Almost at once his avowed love of decorum, of genteel habit and seemly expression began goading, taunting him during the ride: there were some things the lyric few mustn't do. One of these was yielding to stolid acting out, doggerel flight, nimbly sidestepping all risky effort. The ingrained hustlers simply hadn't paid sufficient attention to the exemplary form, the decorum of the courtly romantic essence, both its treasured hope and absolved pathos, a decent human sensitivity he envied yet couldn't transcribe. Such was the self-calumny as he sat on the bus, noting the few blades of grass stuck to his shoes. The impact on him of the early balladeers, prosodists and symphonic melodists, still free the jarring screech and thunder of digital electronics, he could

never shrug off, a visitation that promised to brook disappointment, even dread, help make one into a civilized human being -- but not likely a veteran aisle sitter, an unpardonable pauper like him.

## TWO

Vijay Kurtz, a valued mercenary thug named The Juggler, was getting bored with the Scream Machine, the mint monster roller coaster at Expo 86, the popular transportation fair in Vancouver. As a student of carnival he believed Western folk mesmerized peons. Connoisseurs beware. He had listened carefully to the rapturous screaming of the sweet young buds as they arced through the vertical loops. The tease of terror. A perpetual lark. Such a short distance to stealing or making bombs. Electric circuits! A life near an edge, where the screams alone might determine the acuteness of the dream. Adrenalin seemed the invincible fix and you manufactured it yourself. Someone once said it was like feasting with panthers.

He wandered back to the Plaza of Nations and sat beside a skinny *luft-mensch* with grass cuttings on his shoes. A group of exercise junkies from the B.C. Kootenays was determined to show a little sweat and a lot of form. Fancy sausage polyester. Among them a sculpted pregnant belly, minus the natty over shorts, showcasing a smooth blue fundament. The wonderful open exhibitionist mind. Beauty programmed to molest, show the world the *corpus delictum*, free of telltale sag, redundancy, chits and modesty. Pious carnality. Neo-predestination! A middle-aged gent next to him



smiled raffishly, and with a wave dismissed an impatient wife waiting behind. The sluggards especially were galvanized. Exhibitionism made for great intimidation. Keep it up gals, another encore, yes. Show us the peeled, straining, bow-strung, rack-taut corpus, there is no spectacle like it. The master puppeteer at play.

But for Vijay it was a fleeting diversion. For a perpetrator of acute terror, the tease gave off a mere spoor. Grateful was he the zero hour approached. He awaited a final dead letter drop. That night the special package would be delivered by launch to the specified pier and lodged in the designated scow -- so he shrewdly guessed. With a little speculation the outcome was easily presaged: late tomorrow, he surmised, an abducted, recently-retired army lieutenant colonel in say Anacortes would be shown the innards of the package secreted below deck of the 'adrift' scow and allowed to make two phone calls before being released. Within a few hours the Iranian Party of God, with adroit Soviet complicity in purloining the nuclear artillery shell, would levy many exactions on the Yankee devils. Vijay imagined a clever warehouse master-sergeant conceiving the sale of the shell. Would he discover by now he hadn't duped his generous client as intended, but had in fact given away the real thing for his gelded facsimile? Would he ever learn of the second willing entrepreneur in his outfit?... So Vijay pictured and traced the probabilities. Planning like that upstaged working the political hatcheries -- smarmy rookeries like the U.N. And what, this time, must the Yankee Devils surrender to Allah -- intelligence, cash, requisite arms? Likely all three, including a self-imposed si-

lence about being so coerced by the current defense strategy. Vijay was so certain of the broader exaction and outcome that he felt a little disappointed Western logic of eschewing the Big Bang was so predictable. He suspected there might be a future leak of an arms sale -- a nice convoluted touch, the tough President Reagan scrambling to stay the ready-made panic, the mutual-assured way. The Soviets too were disposed to cooperate when the itching in say Northern Iran, the distended Soviet underbelly, augured another noxious rash. The other bilateral reason to assist the Defenders of Allah.

How Vijay relished the implied, the incipient fear.

And yet he was not optimistic. More and more he felt stuck in an endless, pitched, internecine battle, while the real freelance action took place in blessed virginal places like Canada, the natural resource mecca, where pretty innocents might seek ever flimsier mandates and guises to go public in. Where all manner of devotees of the age of Aquarius might work protected by exhaustless charters of rights and entitlement, bills of lading he thought of them. That was a choice community for flinty Vijay Kurtz. The one nearing critical mass, the one where footloose craving took on nubile form. All causes become chic in such a land. Designer license! Aesthetic anarchy! Some said the land of the peacekeepers was destined itself to explode, rend itself in half -- declare its two solitudes. Some said. Well, he'd been upstaged before. Freedom was on nobody's side.

He got up and wandered back to the fair concourse, ending finally before the undulating Highway of the Future, a playground sculpture consisting of a grey concrete ribbon of highway hosting a plethora of vehicles, from a sub to a helicopter, a fin-tailed Caddy to a dirt bike -- all in a battleship monochrome. He wondered if the sculptor was a closet diviner as well. Given the possible quake of a shoreline, Andreas Fault nuclear explosion, and the resulting ash...the Highway, with its buckled roadway and grey matte vehicles, ended with stark empty boots and sneakers punctuating the ragged severed end of the Highway of the Future. Horror was fun.

### THREE

Despite his resolve not to, Randy found himself in another pavilion lineup. The exercise junkies at the Plaza of Nations were all rather homely he decided, sadly. Pedestrian bones in the latest non-disguise was not down on his list of musts. Nor the cool, faceless bohemian who took up the seat next to him. Khaki dry sack, wind-chilled hair, and a jaunty stubbled mug. Chichi insouciance, revolutionary ease! How assuaging to play the rebel, the rectifier. Better to stick with the plain humor of Expo 86, the hi-tech transportation fair that failed to move its crowds. He waited over an hour to see a seven minute conjuring trick in a Spirit Lodge in the GM Pavilion with a magic Chevrolet-canoë. Touching illusion otherwise humping a piggyback message. The chronic pollution factor.



He recalled how the able Expo CEO sold gamy magazines through a distribution network, and how the CEO's biographer and castigator, a modern humanist, felt the lack of an old-fashioned decorum -- namely the intolerance of people engaged in *dernier cri* sex! It was also the year a wily personal ad for a bi-male companion appeared in a Vancouver paper specifying 'No Socreds' (the populist Social Credit Party was then in power), leaving in doubt the question of past Socred performance, post-coupling chatter, or virulent morbidity.

Yet the modish fair opened on time and the people came like today in droves. And they seemed to be enjoying themselves, behavior Randy found agreeably ironic.

Despite another interminable wait, this time to enter the Canadian Pavilion, he managed to smile at a historic mail-dispatch motorcycle rider -- filmed in the pavilion's hyper 3-D theatre. "So I'm late -- write a letter!" the rider seemed to say as he drove his vintage bike inches before your nose. As impervious was a young Chinese acrobat balancing many plates full of ticklish little glasses filled with what might have been purplish *Crème de l'Amour!*

But he had not come this day to Expo to see the exhibits and he didn't know if in the end he had the nerve to pull it off. He wanted to play a trick on the Russians. It was that piece in the Vancouver Sun that bugged him, the interview with one of the Soviet Pavilion hosts -- homesick for the USSR and all that -- no poverty in the serene Motherland, no unemployment, inflation, delinquency, major crime, drugs, unattended sick. No

mention of things like timeless pollution or certificate rubles. So unlike American flumdidle, with its flagrant showcasing. American glasnost would blush a yak. No, what gadfly Randy wanted to let loose was a stinging reminder that, for Soviet shills, genial, jovial Expo would one day come to an end. The Cuban Pavilion, with its elegant 19th Century carriage in front (“the beginning of communal transportation”) was also a tease, but somehow the Cuban communist struck Randy as the peerless cynic, Cuban dungeons, from all reports, being as low tariff as any. But detached from his commissars, the Russian, who still might be seduced by a forest mushroom -- there one smelled hope. Still, the parting message had to have a bite. None of this hail-fellow-well-met, hell-of-a-swell-guy stuff, but a reminder that Soviet authorities were still among the world’s leaders in spotting and purging undesirable genes. Twice he had passed through the Russian Pavilion and carefully selected his target, a suave oily host whom he imagined flush with goods amassed on this latest junket to the alien planet. (Randy had been spying on the chap for a few days). This day Randy circled the lower floor twice more, looking absently at the hovering satellites and massive metallic head of Lenin. What other pavilion had such an icon? He could think of none. But there the prophet was, the size and force of a wrecking ball, even eyebrows and lips squared into geometric salients. As the beloved Peter Ustinov once put it, in over-voice against a poignant soprano in an ancient, candle-thick Byzantine church, “It’s not the belief that counts but the quality of the expression.” Randy wondered what the selectively finical Mr. Ustinov would award the expres-

sion here on a scale from one to ten. Finally he lurched toward the languorous pavilion host. It was now or never, the time to separate the goats from the polecats.

“You look tired,” he said deferentially.

“A long day, yes,” said the host.

“Homesick?”

The man still seemed unsuspicious.

“Yes, a little. One is homesick always. But, Canada, is nice place.”

Suave, bravura Randy was nearly splitting and must have come a hairbreadth from guffawing, choking and dumbly fleeing. Somehow he kept on. Most likely the host did not know he had been an exclusive target over the past week, that someone like Randy had patiently yet implacably sought and followed a group of Russians on two separate shopping excursions, the second of which concluded with the host’s purchase of a new mobile phone and a Digital W-VHS. The first trip was little more than a jean safari, taking the shopper to some exceptional bargains. Grateful, Randy bought a pair himself. Now the moment had come. The man was smiling impatiently. Randy just barely silenced the exhortation, For God, Harry, England and Saint George, before moving closer and saying in a low voice:

“I’ve little time. I’m instructed to tell you to get rid of the phone. It’s a plant. The SIM has some incorrect prompts. Your messages can go to other address hubs without your knowledge. You’ve been tailed the past week. Repeat: get rid of the phone.”



The man's face suddenly became as remote and apathetic as the head of Lenin opposite.

"I know nothing of this," he said with a model expression of fatigue and latent disgust.

"I have no further instructions. I am very sorry."

The message delivered Randy fled, keeping his face cement hard, stealthily scurrying in and out of the crowds, feeling fairly certain no one followed him. He crashed at a distant McDonalds and ordered some Chicken McNuggets and a vanilla milkshake. Even then the laughter within was confined to a knotted stomach. He decided he had either simply made an ass of himself, again, or teased to the quick. If the several émigrés he'd read over the years were any guide, the man might at least put in a sleepless hour or two that night, perhaps thinking how nice it would be to live in a country where you could buy a sophisticated messaging and recording device without provoking the interest of cavalier snoops. The host would surely remember the fracas at the video supermarket checkout -- how a trio of raucous shoppers had complained of misleading advertising -- while the host's salesman, after fetching the host's order, was accosted by the shoppers. Randy had paid special attention to the heated exchange. As had the host. And so nervous scapegrace Randy now gulped the last of his milkshake, straining for the last noisily sucked-up drop. Then, his hunger slaked, fled again as he hotly pursued, pausing in various shadows to survey the crowds for stragglers who might have a special interest in his growing and newly chaffing unease.

## FOUR

For several seconds Vijay saw nothing but the empty niche. The small slot in the elevated expanse of rock, one of the ancient granite formations on Burnaby Mountain, was absurdly empty. It was the first time in his busy career that a primary missive, via a dead letter drop, had not arrived.

An hour later he waited silently and rigidly in a phone booth in The Station, the refurbished former CPR terminal, the designated call box that month. The crowd in the rotunda was Friday afternoon animated, its happy expectation further aggravating to his protracted pique. In a tranquil place like Canada's West Coast, crucial arrangements were not supposed to get interfered with.

He let the ring continue four times then deftly snatched the receiver from its cradle and affixed his tiny mike. After the formal exchange and brief stop test, he asked what the hell had happened to 'Lara'. Later, in his housekeeping room, the decoded reply now paraphrased in his mind to glean a mood, continued to pall. His suspicion of an unhappy Soviet field man was on target.

*The Rusky clammed up. Someone put a bug in his ear. More likely his liaison. Wants a 48 hour wait. New venue to come.*

Forty-eight hours. And a new drop off site. Vijay suppressed an uncharacteristic sigh. But he could do nothing and it would be a panic when he could. He wanted to break something yet knew that time would

come. He looked down from his cracked window onto a bleak street and lone rummy who paused to hawk and spit. He could have throttled the sot without compunction, snapped the spine like a withered cob of corn. As readily would he have obliterated the entire dumbly pulsing throng at Expo 86. At that moment his contempt for mankind was seething. Blipping his mind was the silly listless teenager who sat beside him in the outdoor pavilion, grass cuttings on his shoes. Probably the layabout's main accomplishment that week.

He sat down and turned on the ancient television, a regular old red eye. A prospective mayoral candidate eulogized Vancouver as a nuclear-free zone then complained the government was not providing all its citizens sufficient opportunity for a decent life. Many people would be hungry, homeless and hobbled that winter because of Expo 86; many citizens displaced, shortchanged, snubbed, forsaken...*unhousel'd, disappointed, unan-  
eled*. Such ingratitude and incompetence in lotus land! In a veritable Shangri-La — the wealthiest, easiest, least demanding place on earth. Likely in the history of homo sapiens. Ha! It seemed scarcely believable that such obtuse sentiment might prevail here. More and more Vijay relished the thought of blowing the asinine place to kingdom come.

## FIVE



Randy could not recall Herb more self-absorbed. Then, in a quiet deliberation that portended dread, the prize-winning photographer said, “Oh my gawd!...”

Herb stood sniffing over the viewing counter in the single back room that served as a sorting, editing, spraying, framing, packaging, mailing and storage area. Randy sat in an oversize closet before a fold-down desk top and worked on half-a-dozen portraits of an overexposed and sunburned executive whose nose and forehead glowed a pure light magenta that contrasted almost phosphorescently against his otherwise dusky complexion. Randy glanced over at Herb, suspecting his boss unhappy with the finished work, then relaxed when he saw the proofs -- test prints -- which Herb had marshaled before him. (The ‘proof’ was not necessarily what one ended looking like.) He held a pile of the small prints in his hairy ever nervous hands, laying them out one by one with the care of a tarot reader.

“How in hell’s name?...”

Randy could take no more and rose to have a look. Instantly he recognized the collection as the proofs from the group portrait, formal and informal, of the graduating class in evening dress at the Winfield-Cranmer School for girls. Specifically then before Herb was the ‘informal’ set, where the assembled girls might do a bit of clowning for the camera. In the past this usually included showing a bit of leg or pulling an evening dress seductively off one shoulder. Over the years the resourcefulness of the graduates was occasionally ingenious. This year, however, the somewhat nearsighted Herb, while likely ‘decorously’ looking away, had ex-

posed at least one negative that was indeed without peer. Now he looked as if he might bolt through the back door to his car. Then as readily he stopped, woefully undecided, as if he had just demolished a dog slurpy. “Too late,” he said finally, faintly, stoically, just before hunkering down for a token appraisal through the Agfa lupe, a small eight power magnifier. Seconds later he resembled nothing so much as a numb baggage-caged spaniel. Randy then recalled the proofs were a duplicate set destined for the studio presentation folders, the first set having been dispatched to the school directly from the automated lab — to facilitate a printer’s deadline. “Dear me,” Randy said, suddenly helpful. “Three, altogether. All in the second row. One with a damn good sense of timing.”

Herb slouched silently on the room’s lone stool, arms clutched in front. Randy wondered if his landlord would ever breathe again. The Winfield-Cranmer School was one of the economic pillars to the studio. Each year the mostly wealthy parents arranged separate top-of-the-line sittings for their preppy daughters, often with accompanying family portraits. One year the grads wished to do ‘something different’ for the assembled portrait (to Herb’s easy shrug and glibly closed eyes). The result was the record of an inoffensive jape -- thereafter a feature of graduation the matriculated damsels insisted on. But now -- “rather a neat fire starter,” continued Randy, as he studied the single flammable proof through the Agfa lupe. “Mind you, only the one sweetie timed her nimble bit of headlight flashing..”

Herb remained in a state of unmannered shock.

“...About a Six, I’d say, perhaps a Seven, if you like soft-paste porcelain.” Randy was doing his best to be forensically observant. “A nice pair of drawers too. You can just see the lace. Brussels point, I think.”

Herb shot some spray into his nose and inhaled once like a bladder wort. For a suspended interval he looked newly adaptive, anaerobic.

“Why not say the first set was airbrushed by a randy retoucher, then retouch these? A sort of Wonder Bra.”

“Shaddup,” Herb said softly, belatedly, to nobody in particular, once more without a nose.

Later Randy did recognize the oddly cherubic face, though he never told Herb. He had no wish to interfere with Herb’s fine solo embarrassment. The face was one among a bevy of teenagers who figured in a jean ad for an American distributor. All girls jumped in the air like Toyota salesmen just as a vintage airplane flew above straight toward the camera. An American photographer gave Herb the job of adding to and thickening the grass at the bottom. On the Expo concourse board the jeans were cropped out, leaving the jubilant waving arms, agreeable smiles and, mainly, the classic airplane. Some concourse artiste had drawn a mustache on one of the models, the same girl in the proof before him who so deftly synchronized her teacup exhibition with Herb’s shutter mechanism and electronic flash.

Randy was in the gazebo when Herb returned from the meeting with the directors of the school. He and Herb had left the studio together after the phone-call summons -- Herb to face the daunting headmistress,



Randy a fragrant cool in his tree house -- a neighbor's redolent lilac bushes were then in bloom. Herb was sneezing when he returned and headed straight indoors. Later, as he continued sniffing like one slurping soup, Randy overheard through the kitchen window the sorry tale of the inquisition.

"It would be a damn clergyman's daughter," Herb said, less for Bab's benefit than a careless deity. "And on the board. As if I screwed her myself."

"Herbert!" said Babs, shocked at her husband's newfound lexicon.

"She apparently encouraged the others. And I get shafted."

"Maybe you should have been more attentive."

"More attentive?..." Herb then laughed, rather whinnied, Randy thought. But the sanguine moment quickly passed and Herb continued, more baleful than ever.

"You know what this means? Do you?"

Babs was silent.

"I'll tell you what it means: it means doing more package weddings for that showboat Italian, that's what it means. God almighty -- more bilious home-made wine, more freebies, more fights, more bad cheques, more promises, more threats. And more damn sweat marathons in that damn Bloedel Conservatory. Jehozephats!"

Then from Babs came the remark that left Randy blaspheming his new hideaway.

“Well why not get that layabout out there to do some of the weddings? It isn’t as if he can’t use a camera.”

“He’s a nit-wit.”

Babs took her time answering. “That’s what you often say weddings are for.”

Herb’s ambiguous silence was then for Randy a concise theatre of cruelty. With dispatch he descended his ladder and proceeded to get lost, once more taking his credible Expo passbook -- just in case he ran out of places to hide.

## SIX

Vijay had driven half-way down a night-dark Burnaby Mountain with his new missive when his headlights limned an ugly scene. Two collided cars completely blocked the road. As he was desperate to proceed across the border to the newly-revealed inlet where the remote relay materiel would be delivered, he rammed the nearest of the vehicles, pushing it aside before speeding on his way.

Ten minutes later he parked the stolen car several blocks from his housekeeping room, carefully wiping the steering wheel and door handles before summoning a cab. He figured he would be across the border before sun-up, restless yet happily on schedule. Not pleased, mind you, with the traffic on Burnaby Mountain at 3:00 A.M. on a weekday morning, but what the hell. He was in a hurry and not about to risk trying another

route down from the high parkland. Soon it would be over, before any news editor had time to speculate.

But for the tense Soviet Pavilion host, a GRU courier, the incident was altogether hair-raising as he ran down the tree-thick slope to the further roadway frantically fingering his mobile phone. To be hit by one nincompoop, then another. At that hour! He would have left immediately but his car would not start. Then to be rear-ended, deliberately. Bastard! It would happen to him, there, then. First a speeding lunatic then a mysterious masher -- out of nowhere. The unshaved man in the older Lincoln, the car that first slammed into him, was equally livid. "Hey you, shorty, where the hell you think you're going?" By then the special courier was lost in the trees that bordered the roadway, feverishly running and persuading himself the rented car could never be traced to him. But the chap in the first car had seen his face...though in the dark, while drunk...it was doubtful...diligently he swore again. He had briefly debated killing the sot but decided the publicity would be counterproductive. He now pictured the unknown deputy rezident sitting deathly silent. The anxiety over the untimely warning they -- he! -- received in the pavilion had never let up. So incredible, so preposterous, it had to be considered!

-- But the third car, not a drunk -- yet driving like a jerk. The first crash, yes, an accident, but the second ramming -- a cool maniac. What was gained by it?

He rallied just before leaving the last stand of pines.



To be in such a hurry! Why not -- the delay, the new exacting deadline, someone dangling by his scrotum. Ha! Talk about a tight schedule.

Without further remonstrance he scampered down the remaining slope, slowing only to recall the location he'd hurriedly given the pavilion director on his mobile. Engine trouble he said. A dark car approached slowly two minutes later. Once inside he was nimbly driven along a railway track with looming elevators opposite. He would be left two blocks from the overflow residence. He snorted. His wife said only a sweet onion got to go on holidays like that. The following morning he would ask the director of liaison services at the pavilion to report the theft of one of its rented vehicles. The missive had been delivered. Period.

## SEVEN

Dr. Roger Allard 'Buff' (after his light hair and staunch manner) Rutquist, the Pastor of the smart Underhill United Church in Vancouver's Point Grey, was experiencing a tense dream. Twice his wife asked him to cool it and twice Buff had turned over, but the subject of the dream was that night immutable. Elsewhere it comprised one of his pet peeves, which unfortunately he was unable to present in sermon form, to wit, the durable morass, if not buffoonery, of human sexuality, the arch hilarity visited by the Creator for reasons the Gospels were unclear on, upon His humble product, man -- wo-man being a diffident spectator, except in Buff's sub-

versive dream, in which even she seemed bent on joining the laugh track, for better or worse.

The excruciating aspect of the dream was the female therein: not some monstrous Venus of Willendorf, or similarly corpulent object -- but his own too-real too-pretty daughter, wearing too few of her many modish clothes. Earlier that day he had been ensconced at a meeting of the board of directors of the Winfield-Cranmer School when the proofs of the graduation class group portrait arrived. The headmistress, Mrs. H. (Hatty, or 'High Hat') MacGregor received the ticking package which came directly from the lab, due to the lateness that year in having the portrait taken. Several of the graduates had attended a citizenship conference in Ottawa and the sitting was necessarily postponed. The headmistress, proud of her school's durable tradition and record at winning scholarships, national debates, and science contests, easily elected to let the board members preview the proofs. As the meeting itself was bogged down on several chronic problems -- the age of the building-and-grounds superintendent (a school original who balked at retirement), another cut in the provincial budget which would interfere with the chem lab update, a leaking roof on the gymnasium, a sobering estimate on the cost of the new school uniform — the directors were most receptive to a diversion. The initial and largely patronizing laughs at the proofs of the 'informal' portrait, one of the yearbook's sonsy back pages, were replaced by an uncomfortable wakefulness when Mrs. MacGregor herself fell suddenly silent. The other members had either handsomely chose not to be found looking too closely

or were still denied the select frames when the confident headmistress abruptly changed color and demeanor.

“I am afraid we’ve been the consignee of an arrantly offensive prank,” she said at last, very slowly, after determining the rest of the board must not be denied a detailed look, anxious also that someone may have already glimpsed one of the offending prints. “I’ve decided it would be sorely patronizing to attempt to spare you this embarrassment, Dr. Rutquist. I have no explanation whatever, except to say that the laissez-faire attitude of our photographer, Mr. Spooner, is singularly misplaced.”

She then simply handed the most blatant of the offerings to the suave Dr. Rutquist, who smiled even more disarmingly until he realized it was none other than his baby-faced Maureen who sat with a theatrical wink holding the top of her strapless gown just below two alert young nipples, redolent in a hue of rose bengal, the skin creases above, where the garment had pressed the swelling flesh, adding their own subtle parenthesis. Nearly as disconcerting was the glimpse of frost stockings and fine lace beneath the partly-hiked skirt, leaving the cool image with him of an ice-fast fjord. For a full four seconds the urbane well-spoken Doctor of Divinity was undecided, his mind alive with impious gremlins cajoling him to display -- ironic tenderness, resilient humanist disappointment, stoic calm, frugal anger, immaculate silence?... Emphatic dismay was eliminated as the seconds passed. At last he managed a rare selfless aside. “I suspect the photographer may have been a dupe as well, Mrs. MacGregor. Please ac-



cept my very deepest apologies. I will of course speak to Maureen straight away.”

When it was determined that no less than three girls were part of the jape, though less consummately than Maureen, the directors were suitably alarmed but duly commiserative. Heavens! -- the age, the times, the books, the tapes, the fads, the exuberance! -- and a most careless if not malfeasant photographer who would be formally rebuked, fired and, if the school’s lawyers warranted, charged with contributing to the public mischief, for all girls were just sixteen. As contrary was the fact that only callow-faced Maureen matched the timing of camera shutter and strobe light to nimble flashing, the other two revealing barely half as much on different proofs on that steamy gymnasium stage, while the progressive Ms. Scobie, the geography teacher, strolled in the back of the auditorium as an unobtrusive supervisor keeping nosy distracting students outside.

Mrs. Rutquist took the news calmly enough. It was her longstanding contention that Buff had spoiled the girl, their only child, who demonstrated at an early age a tomboy robustness the father delighted in and the mother progressively imagined suspect -- facts which daunted Buff’s dream as it progressed that night. The initial childhood dandling, fussing, joshing, kidding, palsy-walsy picnics and hikes, led in turn to palmy team sports, field hockey, volleyball, track-and-field, water polo -- then, latterly and unexpectedly -- the hammy but sly theatrics that parodied the jockism, twisted the very exuberance that once served him as cherished delight and fond reproof, especially on their many camping trips, often to accompany

a sports event, when the latest evanescent swimwear vied in the rough-and-tumble of field events with fatigued shorts, sometimes sans underwear in the rapt impromptu backyard play...how he had needed those moments when the beauty of his own flesh sang before him, nates that seemed the genius of a frescoed lunette or spandrel. Surely the Maker of such beauty did it with eyes open, so Buff imagined until the mid-teens when the energy and candor of his daughter metamorphosed into robust parody, to convention as ongoing joke, life on the radical impromptu side. Life as subversive wit or nothing. The sacred and ideal the duo one guffawed loudest at. Partly, or solely he believed, the result of her theatre pretensions, and her mother's quiet championing of such preciousness, particularly as it accrued from participation in that prickly semi-amateur ensemble, the Dog the Father Etc. Theatre Sports Company, managed by a recently-arrived jaw smith. "It takes one to know one," said Maureen as seasoned imp, to her mother's silent collusion. The director was otherwise celebrated in their city's artistic community as a inimitable innovator with his clever confrontational theatre -- pandering to all that bypassed conviviality, familiarity, Buff said to himself, keeping quiet and smiling cordially.

The unthinkable yet galvanic dream had continued mercilessly that gaga night. Where he seemed to be stuck in a kind of *commedia dell'arte*, embodying without disguise the ready source of entertainment: a prurient, disconsolate pantaloone skirting the focus of attention, to piercing jeers and sharper missiles. At centre stage the Prince's own fool, the theatre director, arranged the scene in the proof, only now there seemed to be no clothes at

all and the pose a lewd maenadic tableau. Buff fled the stage, a craven nit, mocked by the modern rendering of Providence itself.

Then dumbly, soporifically awake, standing in the kitchen with a glass of stout, he dimly, lumpishly recalled a round table discussion of church doctrine with the Council of Elders of the Seven Departments. The probability of it happening fused now with the edgy nightmare itself, his mind a welter of confusion and miasma, his memory of words so teasing beggaring certainty. Yet the Elders had, or so it now seemed, long since disposed of God as 'loving Father'. "Many children have no father, loving or not, and given the norm, may thank their lucky stars," said one of the flintier elders. Or words to that effect. But then the determined Mrs. Simpson was always pushing the boat out a distance, barely moving her lips as she spoke. "It's no wonder he's described as a ghost or spirit. A swank nobody who's never home."

As Buff now acutely if freakishly imagined, this conclusion or words like it, received a round of stoic assent. It was as if his face were encased in an iron smile. No one could follow the scent of modern drama, the new passion play, better than Mrs. Simpson. Such unbelievable words, conjured now as never before, seemed relentless. If he doubted his recollection, even his consciousness in this bizarre fit, the voices in his reeling mind were loud and clear. No longer a theatre of the absurd.

"I think it's also high time we drafted a formal apology to all the Native Peoples that Christianity, specifically the United Church of Canada, has sordidly sought to convert and mainstream. We must recognize the spiri-



tual wisdom of all pagans. Their totemism or animism should be our own animus to special study. We must apologize for our missionaries and schoolteachers. Our principal Moderator must do some begging for a change, get down there and bump with a few big smart mommas.” In this, Buff’s aberrant memory fit, the surfacing of her feisty ideas addled as they chaffed. Hadn’t he heard words like them before...but as singular, trendy as they came to him now? “If some Anglicans can contemplate obliging Zoroastrians, Shiites, Pelagians even heedful Wahhabists, an upcoming short list, we can bloody well accommodate a few strapped Gideans, Esters, Rolfers and Gymnosophists.”

The Elders were occasionally nodding he recalled -- but at such spend-thrift wisdom? Had he really heard...was he not now hallucinating? Only the one elder who was hard of hearing belatedly joined in. If Buff could barely credit such words now, her tone itself was emphatic enough to indemnify his mushrooming pique.

“We must also consider that life begins — in the eye of the beholder. All opportunistic infections, in whatever guise or at whatever stage, become endurable when we give the nod.” A few distinct amens.

“We must also strive to sustain asylum, to provide sanctuary for the multitudes of brutalized sisters and rare but not to be shunned brother. Not all men are Barbary nincompoops.” A few gestures of optimistic acknowledgement -- so Buff now surmised. “We will not leave hundreds of thousands of unknown unfortunates lingering on the murder rows and death throws of American imperialism. Personhood is precious. Like the curse

of AIDS, everyone has a responsibility, especially the grubs who just may avoid infection.”

This time the tempered applause included a few quiescent bravos that seemed now to echo in the silent kitchen, as if coming from a town crier. Buff was aghast, convinced he must be dreaming!

“As well, we dearly need validation of our gay ministry. People are entitled to their own private opinion but it is abundantly apparent our Task Force investigators speak with a single voice. There are no second-class humans. The church ministers to the many legions of sisters and queens and trash any cavalier omnipotent who thinks otherwise. You do not have to come to us, our Heavenly Epicene will bloody well seek you out! And to that end I hereby table our plan to Elevate the Lower Digestive Tract, to make it as eminent as any trick purse that pretender Mary had to offer. Blessed be the fruit of whatever. Let me be frank: a versatile tush is worth an extravagant jellyroll any day, and is every bit as durable in our sight. Also, if we may talk -- two Bathshebas, two cherry bombs, guzzling, jiggering and scrabbling away -- as Saint-Saens said of technique, ‘a stiffness overcome is a thing of beauty.’ Any randy tom who thinks otherwise can just bugger off to Rome!”

That was when Buff noisily self-consciously snorted, startling even himself and once more provoking his wife. Was he then awake, not dreaming?... From the bedroom Naomi pleaded: “Buff, for goodness’ sake sake. You’re nattering away. Take some Nytol!”

After a moment's consideration Buff headed for the bathroom. He was appalled, buffaloed. Was he hearing voices? Speaking in tongues? He was only slightly reassured to find the old haggard face staring back at him in the gilded mirror, not some mix-and-match hippogryph. The thought of the Creator pleading historic ineptness and temporary insanity, negotiation uppermost in His mind, was not, as it turned out, ameliorated by the earlier late-night glass of stout.

But just when he was again swaddled in the sheets, Mrs. Simpson had discovered that man mastiffs and milk snakes were kith if not kin, beef the barbarian's meal, and assisted suicide the acme of noblesse oblige; necrophilia too was not to be slighted, being expeditious, victimless and cool for hapless lovebirds who felt that death shouldn't crimp free will.

How easy to care for a starving leper...said the beleaguered unitarian.

But when he awoke the lingering miasma had fused with the indelible light of day.

## EIGHT

The house lights slowly began to dim. Randy had come to the packed theatre, finally on his own. His few friends, acquaintances rather, were busy elsewhere. His most recent companion he vexed by failing to write while she was away visiting an estranged parent dying of cancer. "Christ, I spend night and day in an acute-care ward and you come up with a single postcard, then talk like an art critic." She and her mother had had for the first time a heart-to-heart and stilted figurative Randy was rebuked.



So he came to the Dog the Father Etc. Theatre Sports Company to chasten his pecksniff ways, though he sought a seat near the back, electing not to become one of the impromptu players. At the last minute he decided not to sign the Participation Release Form — the affidavit that exempted the company from any liability should the participant take away ‘lasting metaphysical preoccupations’ -- though rumor suggested the so-called impromptu skits were pre-staged.

He was vaguely aware that select members of the ‘audience’ could be intermittently singled out for study, much as say a South African black might have been summarily detained and interrogated, though the circumstance of the onslaught varied and was touted to be at worst efficacious. The critics were generally liberal with praise for the ‘provisional troupe’, with its sparse set and occasionally clever costumes.

The first few offerings were perhaps designed to mislead and lull. Suggestions for situational skits were taken from the audience. The perennial proposal of ‘an unendurable pleasure indefinitely prolonged’ was enacted as: a compulsive voyeur, glancing from his rich porno assortment to spy his former wife lustily embracing in the apartment opposite his own -- the wife, to Randy’s surprise and fascination being none other than the bright exhibitionist in the Winfield-Cranmer portrait. The next suggestion, ‘a marathon man’, became: a recently abducted lottery winner who had guiltily and anonymously given his wealth to charity. The lead kidnapper, played by the director of the company, was totally convincing as an acutely distrustful xenophobe.

The suggestion of 'The Loved One' took longer to devise. Finally a stiff form was carried out on the shoulders of bored and yawning pallbearers to a pianist's quirky or inept playing of Chopin's funeral march. Twice the pallbearers circled the stage before placing the rigid form on a hastily set up catafalque of several in-line chairs. As they withdrew they adopted a slyly turgid pace, a cyclical hip-wamble, anticipating the pianist's drift into syncopation.

In response, one of the shoulders on the deceased began a provocative swivel, followed progressively by the entire form -- movement that startled then mesmerized the pallbearers. Soon a young beauty rose up to begin an unusually limber burlesque -- to coincidentally reveal the best legs Randy had seen that year. As much to foil the prospect of sensational nudity, a stage hand fetched a spray of roses, which was presented to the performer just as a filmy body stocking began to molt. But when the performer began tossing discretionary buds to select persons in the audience, mainly women, the pallbearers began to howl like wolves, echoed by a few wags in the audience. With dispatch the form was hastily re-draped and returned to its impromptu litter, after which the pallbearers departed offering a manifestly grave performance of the funeral march.

Thereafter, things began to smoke, as the pianist might have said.

A putative reporter asked questions of an alert member of the audience, who belatedly but thoughtfully nodded his approval. Should Western women go topless more often -- to give Playboy aficionados a sense of belonging? Do you think we should drop the age of consent to thirteen --

in keeping with Canada being a tolerant place? Maybe even have those who remain continent pay more taxes?... Throughout it all two members of the audience began to insult one another. The more obtuse the comments of the interviewer, the more the two antagonists got worked up. They were soon calling one another exclusive names -- flea-fucker stood out in Randy's memory -- a spirited and inventive exchange that provoked occasional nervous laughter in the audience. One luminous chap in a front row was particularly entertained. After he vented a stray horselaugh the ranters suddenly stopped dead in their tracks and looked stiffly vigilantly upon him, the entire cast following suit, as a spotlight vivified his presence. The man was dressed in a lurid vinyl jacket and loud shirt, one more genial visitor to Expo, so the audience was led to believe and, ostensibly, a newcomer to confrontational theatre.

The man's 'family' was with him, a wife and young son, both then suitably embarrassed. Suddenly the company's talented junior, agile and cherubic-faced Ms. Rutquist, ventured forth with a large automatic weapon. After the cast leveled a critical broadside at the man, she cocked the firearm and sprayed the ceiling with realistic jackhammer fire. Parts of dusty lighting fixtures fell from the flies.

The amusement of the audience flared into shock. The man rose and was pushed back into his seat while the inquisitors took their turn flaunting the success-as-excess screed, the man emerging as the original, undeserving lout. At first he seemed further entertained, even as his jollity waned -- as the interrogators became less antic. 'You think lucky shmucks



deserve rights? To live well in a stolen land? To burgle Mother Nature? To marry a flush Libra? To dress like a jockey?’ As the accusations rarified, became preposterous, he proudly stated that he could not be bribed. His wife looked at him as if she had never seen him before. The odd but not witless reply only further galvanized the grand inquisitors. Bribed? Bribed! Was the man a player? Randy wondered.

All the while, barely noticed, a heavy mustached man had risen from the side, nonchalantly approached the proscenium and for a moment seemed ready to depart the theatre. Instead, wanly smiling, he effortlessly leapt onstage, walked over to the current leveler and delivered a lightening swift punch to the man’s nose while, with equal dexterity, a deft kick-box shoe to another’s groin. Both men doubled up in a graphic pain the partisan audience found rather satisfying, at least at first. Not so the players. Then the man, with the same methodical grace, proceeded to scatter the remaining members of the cast -- the curious or dazed still looking on. The less mesmerized fled the moment the first blow was delivered. The groans of the actors matched in eerie counterpoint the dismay of the mock dunce who sensed a reprieve. The Winfield-Cranmer gunner, the last to leave, swore robustly while taking energetic but wild swipes at the attacker’s face, at one point tenaciously grasping his sleeve. For an ambiguous second or two the man might have been intrigued, until a single deft swing detached his false mustache and left an ugly scratch on an upper cheek. His reactive jab was barely perceived. One saw mainly the girl fall as a dropped sack. By then the audience exuded a growing incredulity, the

front rows rising and backing off though not leaving. The man seemed undecided as he kicked down one of the stage's minimalist doorways. Then, flexing massive shoulders, turned and left, as apathetic as he came, using a side exit. In doing so he gave watchful Randy a close scalp-tingling look. The face revealed beneath the heavy hair was the chap who briefly sat beside him in the Plaza of Nations.

The remaining minutes in the theatre were charged with disbelief, wonder, and guarded disapproval. At one point a somewhat puzzled policeman wandered in listening to the halting sentences of a distressed player. A companion officer looked on in a pleasureless scowl. The audience, all the while, loitered and remained cagey. "Are the policemen also some of the performers, I wonder," one wide-eyed matron posited aloud.

When the first paramedic team arrived, shortly after the fire marshal, some in the audience still seemed to imagine the performance ongoing. Then a constable spoke over the speaker system, informing the remaining onlookers that the show was indeed over, and everyone should leave as quietly and promptly as possible by the rear exits.

Randy was among the final dozen or so who pulled themselves away.

The local news the following day was of little else, the descriptions of the injuries at times picturesque. Photos of four bruised unamused faces impressed the front pages of both dailies. A local TV special ponderously diagnosed the episode, vehemently impugning the suggestion of police and paramedic collusion. The central guest, the director of the radical

theatre, spoke forthrightly as he displayed a tender and engaging swollen jaw. “It was not so long ago that actors were sometimes roughed up by their audience. The Shakespearean actor came prepared.” “Will you modify your act?” the interviewer wondered. “Not likely,” came the measured response. “The advertising has been substantial. Ticket sales are encouraging. The show will likely be extended.” “Will you hire some bodyguards?” “I doubt it. The whole thing was really a bit of a fluke. But we’ll see.”

The mysterious assailant remained just that. There was no consensus among the police witnesses except that he was well built and hairy. Some thought he looked ethnic, others not. Randy sympathized with the confusion. He could draw that face, perhaps as apathetic a human visage as he’d seen, its dun taxidermist’s eyes benighted by heavy brows. He wondered if he should attempt such a rendering yet hesitated. He cherished anonymity. But could he do otherwise? How else was he going to distinguish between life and the theatre — the confusion of which was his age’s inimitable achievement. The opportunity was well-nigh irresistible to the devout snob and gifted artist.

At last he sat down to his easel and from imagination delivered what he believed an estimable spare sketch -- two, one in profile, one three-quarter. Then he rose and captiously set out to find the nearest detachment of the Surrey RCMP.

## NINE



Vijay brushed a towel over his newly shaved head then reached for and positioned the 'balding' light brown hairpiece. The new disguise progressed nicely. Once again he looked carefully at the scrap of newsprint taped to the washroom mirror that featured a credible rendering of himself drawn by the 'Surrey artist' who apparently witnessed his impetuous assault on the Dog the Father Etc. Theatre Sports Company. Flexing sore right-hand knuckles he inspected, again, the facial gouge left by the tigress he finally belted in the mouth, likely rusting a tooth or two. The nail slash had become infected and would take its time healing. He replaced the flesh toned bandage and added a few touches of color to the slivers of white gauze that poked out beneath. Relax, everything cuffs and collars, pretty face. Don't let a manicurist ruin your day.

The night before the relay mechanism was tested and found highly functional -- meaning he was now indispensable. He guessed the barge containing the nuclear shell would be released from its moorings that night...an audacious champion of the Prophet on the blower soon after, perhaps early the following morning...by then he, Vijay the Indispensable, would be eating ice cream at Expo and planning a bit of non-theatrical restitution. The following week he would board the Steveston fishing boat and at sea when the chosen reporter locked onto the odd behavior of the National Security Council. He had no difficulty filling in the blanks, connecting, assembling the juggernaut! Never had he been as alive nor as irreconcilable. A near perfect record. But for one scarlet diacritical mark.

As he left the building the wall-eyed tramp who infested the lane sat propped against a refuse container. Vijay paused, lifted a twenty from his billfold and tossed it at the man's feet. "Have a ball, amigo." As he walked away he added, to himself, "When my business here is over I put you permanently out of misery." For an instant he glimpsed in the distraught form the leftover of a redoubtable hatred...justice as a blind woman he could never imagine.

## TEN

Randy was not happy about the 'Surrey artist' making page two of the Province and page one in the Surrey Review. It was the first time his cockloft seemed accessible to the mob below. The RCMP constable who matter-of-factly received his statement and sketch assured him his name and identity would be kept confidential. He phoned to complain and was told the department hadn't anticipated the media interest and the matter would be investigated. "To be concluded during the coroner's hearing," he said to himself as he hung up the pay phone. Oh well, there must be two or three really competent freehand artists in South Surrey. At least. Never again would he give a private statement to a police constable in a bustling office.

Yet he was a bit of a ninny -- to return to Expo as he had this day for a peek -- to see if the redoubtable host had vanished or was chained to

Lenin's rock. You colossal idiot he said to himself. Idiots, he assumed, were ever conspicuous. He even sat again at the Plaza of Nations, though with heavy dark glasses and an old floppy sun hat. A contingent of liveried German dignitaries, feather plumes lavish as any bird-of-paradise, strutted about the lower stage, backgrounded by some pretty rhythmic gymnasts whose essential routine was to change weight from one leg to another, almost as an elevator operator might while away boredom. So be a cad as well, he said to himself; you're the only person not having a ball on this sun-drenched afternoon.

As the initial main-stage show concluded he was distracted by a chap dressed as a department store mannequin affecting to be a robot, the first of the entr'acte entertainers who would mingle and interact with the crowd seated beneath the Plaza's high glass-and-tubular-steel canopy. The man shuffled and swiveled about, limbs locking and releasing like a turnstyle. The marginal audience sat attentively silent. He stopped opposite Randy and jabbed a finger at Randy's amorphous hat while lifting his own as a steam-cock. The crowd was newly expectant and Randy grudgingly relinquished his oversize cap, replaced by the robot's own fedora.

The robot sought first to confirm, particularize Randy's soft creation, converting it to many things, from a jockey's cap to a coquette's bonnet. Giving up, he set it as the owner wore it and began a pantomime of the owner's spare but stilted disapproval. All the while Randy had the unsettling suspicion he had seen the fellow before, even as the man's eyes appeared to fix him in amber for later scrutiny. At one point Randy imag-



ined someone in the audience being clued to his presence. When the fellow made signs of wanting his dark glasses as well, Randy snatched back his hat and replaced the robot's, then mugged a smile. A few in the crowd were a little miffed. Pointing to his watch, spoilsport Randy rose and left, heading toward the busy fair concourse.

Under way he remembered that an attractive solo Quebec dancer was scheduled that day to perform her expressive comic mimes to Cajun music at the Xerox Theatre -- in the direction he was headed. As he walked, the redolent restaurant in the South East Asia Plaza passed on his left. Again he sniffed the menu, one from several ethnic buffets and diners where he mooched a meal when the fair opened; where he had benevolently strode in, press card conspicuous, the senior editor of his exclusive publication, *Troche*, which had one lone Xerox duped edition, devoted to an assiduous examination of the Lower Mainland's finer pastries, their place of purchase and appropriate accompanying beverage, only cravenly a tokay or pear kirsch, best a classic Ovaltine mixed with Amarula. But he had misread the Expo schedule and discovered not the exuberant dancer as anticipated, but a Saudi mimic blowing and puling into a mike as: a soaring jet engine, water gorging down a drain, and other confluences, while a small Saudi orchestra sat idle behind him, cellos adrift in full white skirts. Suddenly feeling lonely and grotesquely hungry he left the theatre and walked in a broad arc that placed him back on the main concourse in the opposite direction, continuing until he spotted a bright airy pizzarama where he ordered a milkshake and sat beside a happy duo, the girl hosting a mouth full

of braces and a half-smile that intimidated a young Maureen Rutquist. He found himself trying to match her companion's face to that of the lithoid pug etched in his memory. Another chicken hawk, he decided. Was it not amazing how many people now resembled the effortless masher?

He finished his milkshake on the concourse, bypassing the Soviet Pavilion -- once again. It took guts being a daring prankster, especially when rallying a hardliner. His swank alter ego continued to mock and goad him as he headed toward the West Gate and home. Yet when he hesitated half the fair appeared to be following him.

## ELEVEN

"The wrong barge?..." A quaintly incredulous Vijay sat beside the tall stranger on a park bench near Stanley Park's Cathedral Trail. It was just past midnight. A minute before, each had turned off his flashlight after the exchanged signals. The stranger presented a stoic demeanor.

"I repeat: the area transparency was set in the multiplier wrong side up, reversing it. The coordinates for both finding and deploying the barge were dead accurate, but the forward team used only a rough tracing of the coastline -- we are cursed with minimalists these days. Hence the original survey fix was inadvertently reversed." It was a mouthful, the need for such a disclosure now a necessity. Vigilant Vijay understood, but was slow to believe. The stranger, disliking silences, kept on. "The coastline jumble was I assume largely ignored: not unnaturally they elected to observe the 'given' coordinates. The buggerish thing is a barge so like the

one we drafted would be stationed in that area. It just would be,” he added, touting his rage. “And that bastard barge, with our jewel now lining its hull, now lies near a log boom on the North Arm Jetty.” It had been a jaw-breaking admission, not sanctioned by his cell, yet one he hoped would salvage some time if not trust.

“So where is that?” said Vijay, once more apathetic.

“The East side of Point Grey.”

“By the University endowment lands.”

“Yes. Not far from Wreck Beach. No pun intended.”

Vijay grunted. He had availed himself of its nudist vistas a couple of times in his travels. The layered quiet that followed was broken only by a renewed breeze and the rustle of fallen leaves scurrying between their legs. The tall man was himself momentarily speechless, word bound.

“The thing can be removed, taken away?”

“Of course. Naturally our timing allows some flexibility. A mixup in registration is being sorted out. A launch will be here tomorrow evening. Be at the foot of the old Wreck Beach trail fifty yards south east, at nine. Wear the thermal patch.”

“There won’t be boats headed for the fireworks? A lot of onlookers?”

“Not many this far west. But a few. They’ll help distract the harbor master.”

“You think so.”

The sarcastic comment angered the tall stranger. “It’ll work. Just try to cut the monkey business. You’ve no longer got a mint passport. We’ll

have another soon, but for the time being -- keep off the stage. No more 'reincarnated groundlings' -- so he said, for you direct. A phrase from the local rag I think."

"Bully for him."

Again the pause soured. The tall man wasn't sure what the phrase meant and was piqued by the possibility the hulk beside him might -- a further goad, which prompted him to say, "You've got a lucky star, I hear. Can't do any harm. See you tomorrow cocksucker."

As the dark form disappeared Vijay felt the rage seep to the bone.

Once again he was reduced to the status of a roller bearing, expected to perform as a deft assembly line -- and silent captive if that were necessary. Vancouver was a torment he decided. Flush with the pretty year-round innocence he coveted, and now removed as a canal on Mars. His anger was dispersed among all artists and doughty actresses. One of each one day, soon...without the usual preamble. He stood and wrenched the bench from its mooring, then headed back to his seedy hotel, admonishing the tree trunks with his boot as he went.

The stranger, now out of Vijay's ear shot and infrared reader, kept to an easterly trail that took him finally to Beaver Lake and a second bench near the overflow stream that meandered to Burrard Inlet. His Soviet contact, a special ordnance liaison, emerged from the shadows and together they walked in a counter-clockwise direction about the pond, bathed that hour in a moon-mauve sheen, the water lilies clustered as the inky iris of a large dark eye. The occasional duck sought to test the fastness of the cool



night with a short gabble. The air was moist and full of autumn decay. The Soviet got straight to the point.

“The artist and smart aleck in pavilion may be same person. Not many great artists in Surrey. An old man with poor sight, a few others, and a near good caricaturist. But the other, yes. Most likely. The styles make nice match. In yearbook the face looks right, according to the pavilion source.”

“But there surely is no connection?...”

“He mentioned mobile. Late model. ‘A plant,’ he said. Now it’s gone. Yes, mobile.”

“Was it used?”

“Very big mouth our host.”

“It was taken from the pavilion?”

The Soviet was slow in answering. “The overflow residence.”

“Any reports of other thefts?”

“None.”

The tall man shrugged, mugged a cough. “A simple theft, no?”

“I assure you -- nothing. A complete nothing. Worse than nothing. Laser information shipped over month now. New theft points to special snoop. Some tracer iterations originally came scrambled in phone memory. That much I tell you. The late signal could redirected.”

The imputation of a ‘shared’ information cache in circulation fetched a second cough from the thin man. “Pretty farfetched.”

“Something fishy. Maybe. I think you find this artist and see what he knows.”

“That may take longer than we have.”

“Too bad.”

“Really, I’m sure it’s nothing at all. Just another petty theft. Vancouver is full of yokels. More dopeniks than the rest of Canada. Maybe the continent.”

“You argue like diplomat.”

The tall man was aptly upset by the expert’s news but he did not break stride. The Soviets were still ignorant of the misbegotten and misplaced barge, an incommodious fact he would conceal as long as possible. The irreplaceable expert would vanish without trace if that fact got out now. He could end up as fish treat.

“Admit it, you’re a worry wart,” he said suavely.

The Russian remained grossly silent.

“Of course I’ll get at it -- tonight. Just reassure everyone that everything is on target. The old Anacortes lieutenant will contact his former Bangor commander day after tomorrow -- with a sober face.”

“You will make tape of interrogation. Tomorrow night on mountain. Same time. Else I pull quick sorters. You get those last minute.”

“Fine. Tomorrow, the mountain. In the meantime -- eat some zakuski, enjoy the fireworks.”

“Just find buttinsky. I see fireworks before.”

For a moment the tall man thought of drowning himself in the ebony pond, but the moment passed when the Russian was out of earshot and sight. His swearing then grizzled the air. The fact that the problematic barge had been requisitioned by the Expo directors for the final night's fireworks was something he prayed he would never have to reveal, less explain. The Juggler would think of something. Must.

## TWELVE

Buff Rutquist and his wife Naomi sat in the hallway off the emergency entrance to St. Paul's Hospital. An early fall sun gilded the buildings beyond the entrance's wide bay windows. The nearest trees were bereft of leaves. Several times Buff rose and paced by the windows watching the traffic gradually thicken and slow. A full busload of commuters disembarked in the still frosted street. He was about to sit down again when, from a door off the admitting kiosk, a smiling bloodshot doctor arrived, a mask fretting his neck.

"Maureen's just fine Dr. Rutquist, Mrs. Rutquist."

Naomi quickly put by her magazine, sight-unseen, and stood by her husband. One tired eye of the doctor might have been winking.

"As we thought last night, the one central is lost, I'm afraid, and maybe one lateral, and she'll have a sore lip and gum for a while. But the jaw is intact, the nose untouched and the concussion mild -- no evidence of con-

fusion or memory loss. An orthodontist will take a look later this morning. I've left a message for your family physician. Should be around by noon I think."

"You don't think then the concussion serious?" Naomi was far from assured by the marked amiability.

"There's no symptom to support such a worry -- no affect or imaging evidence. We made sure of that. She seems a hardy young lady."

"We're grateful for everything you've done, Doctor -- ."

"-- Philips. All in a night's work. Wish they were all as copacetic. She's kind of drowsy -- the analgesic -- but you can see her."

"Copacetic my foot," said Naomi in the car. "He'd talk like that if she'd lost an eye."

"Nam, I really think we got off lightly."

"Lightly! I don't see that. Going around the rest of your life with a hole in your mouth."

Buff was tired, and impatient with gestures. "They make excellent implants these days. You've got some yourself."

But his heedful wife did not seem to hear. "-- That one poor actor. He was still dazed when they brought him in. And that awful dance. I was actually rooting for the gorilla at first."

Buff drove the remaining blocks to their home in silence. He knew something about the theatre of the absurd. But about the participatory theatre of aggravation, or whatever it was, he imagined himself a falling buffalo, blunder bussed into obscurity. He was vaguely aware his wife's



championing of such preciousness had waned: she too had one-too-many anecdotes to contend with. That night he dreamt about Mrs. Simpson giving confrontational theatre her blessing: “Fired-up protestors have as much right as anyone to say their peace.”

The following afternoon, Maureen was barely in the car when the fractiousness loomed anew. The dedicated daughter insisted on visiting the theatre first, despite her mother’s ready disappointment.

“They are that important, are they?”

Maureen simply directed her father to park the car near a colorful produce market.

“Won’t be long.”

Naomi looked soberly at the colorful stalls as her only child crossed to crossed to the converted foundry. A stark white banner cut across the marquee, ‘Temporarily Closed’ scrawled upon it in scarlet strokes.

“She’s as pigheaded as you were once.”

“I promise to have it out with her later. Right now I want to get the revisionist home.” He had fancied saying sans-culotte.

But that conversation too was rigged from the start.

“Daddy love,” she said, plying his adopted primness, as her tongue flicked the gap in her front teeth, “we reopen next month, with a couple of extras backstage. There’s no problem. I’ll have a temporary partial by then.”

She sat on the patio chaise barely interrupting her reading of the latest sheath from Amnesty International -- her late reading these days -- while

her father paced back and forth crackling his knuckles. “We simply do not build pyramids any more,” she interposed. “Even your own church admits it’s screwed up a whole lot of lives. For the very last time: negotiation works only when we know, not imagine, what actually confronts us. Everything else is relative.”

He had been round the old negotiation bush so many times he felt physically bent. Who was left to abide a truce if all standards were ‘perceived’? As for the reality thistle, the last time they ended arguing over ‘assumed’ human aggressiveness. “Humans are not by nature aggressive!” shouted an unusually inflamed daughter, just before whumping the swing door to the pantry in a decisive exit. “Except when jawboning with you!” she called back from afar. Glancing at her now, clad in the unassuming grey sweatsuit she seemed then to live in, seated in a yoga squat invigilating the world’s indexed atrocities -- to glean dramatic copy! -- he suspected he was a lame disciple and shallow witness. The once fluent vitality had set as a vice, a leg-hold trap. He could not even find the resource to attempt a prayer. Talking to God had become an adjourned meeting of the parole board.

Later, in his study, he could hear the rhythmic clank of her weight station and imagined a large metronome marking out the final countdown.

## THIRTEEN

Randy was suddenly entertained by the photo before him. He imagined in the still unaltered picture a happy face that might have, at one time, graced a Huggies' diaper package: the elemental corporate visage — benign, content, smooth, monolithic. One of the few times he felt obliged to do nothing.

“I think this one should proceed on its own. The one tiny mole may in fact be an heirloom. What do you think? The complexion is practically a Dove commercial.”

Herb was busy setting out film for the two weddings that night — one of which Randy had been impressed into doing. “I feel you can handle it. A wedding a month will also keep up your unemployment...and the rise in cable-vision.” Herb seemed not to hear his ace retoucher's comments, his customary manner in dealing with unwelcome impositions. “Think,” he said at last, still abstracted. “What are you doing?” He sniffled less giving offhand commands.

“The portrait of a cherubic bank president -- along with some other unsuspecting VIPs.” Herb remained silent. “For inclusion in somebody's annual report. Total dedication.”

“They all go on the same page, no?”

“Well, facing pages.”

“Same thing,” said Herb, diffidently inspecting a portable strobe battery. “That art director, don't forget, likes a nice buttoned-down group,” he added, reiterating an earlier remark. Randy said again he was exempting an original. “Right,” said Herb, still bothered by the unrespon-

sive beads in the side gauges. “Done,” said Randy, easily shifting the print aside. Herb then suddenly recalled something, a crucial detail. Quickly he stepped over to Randy’s retouching table. “ -- Yes that one. I think we better put in a few creases. As a precaution.”

“Put in.”

“Um. When I first photographed him the art director suggested adding a few lines here and there; didn’t want a smooth youngster sticking out on the executive page. It’s the way bankers are.” Randy quickly added, “Like to look cool but in there like flint; no crybabies or dilettantes.” Resigned, Herb continued, “Just add a few lines maybe about the eye corners and lips. Like a good chap.”

“Ah.”

“That should suffice.”

“Child’s play.”

Herb grunted and continued sorting the wedding paraphernalia for the weddings that day: four Hasselblad bodies, six lenses, twelve backs, thirty rolls of Vericolor 220 film, two automatic 400 watt-second strobes, both with separate cable connector, two Linhof tripods, two extra camera-back slides, and unobtrusively, for himself, a compact flask of vodka and extra nasal spray. Herb was a belt and brace man. He resumed speaking like a pressed embalmer.

“You’re to be at the bride’s house at 2:00. At 3:00 you go to Our Lady of Sorrows on Slocan, then to the Bloedel Conservatory. Try to be there first. Remember the receipt. Then straight to Masaccio’s on Com-



mercial, where you'll be till the end. Try to steer clear of the near relations and friends of friends. I sometimes put in an empty back and flash away on quarter power."

Remarked a distant Randy, "You said before: they never order."

"Once a year, maybe. The house wine at Masaccio's wasn't half bad the last time I was there...the homemade stuff varies. If it tastes homemade I usually drink a little, wait a little. There used to be a handy fern box somewhere. Try to look interested. I'm telling you this as a durable taxpayer."

But by then Randy was silently, forlornly at work on one of the senior vice-presidents, a chap with lumps under his eyes the size of crash bags.

"When you finish with the bigwigs, you better do this -- I promised Masaccio -- he'll be looking for them when you come."

Randy was handed a set of small prints which Herb fetched from an overhead shelf, four in all, featuring a man relaxing on a sandy beach, tall palms filling the background. Randy looked up, perplexed, annoyed.

"What do I do here?"

"Remove the neat pile of clothes at the bottom."

Randy surveyed the photos. On one corner of the man's blanket lay a pair of sandals and a discarded bikini.

Herb continued in his once-removed manner. "Masaccio doesn't want his family to see the swim stuff. His wife has a short fuse and owns the business." With a snuffle he added, "Think of yourself as a kind of bomb remover. What do they say — disposal expert."

“But they’re all glossy surface prints!...”

“You might have to spray them with a clear lacquer after.”

“And chamois between coats? In this weather? It’s not tempting spontaneous combustion?”

Herb sneezed, then told Randy it was not a boom year.

## FOURTEEN

For a long time the heavy restive venous man stood in the phone booth beside the motley neighborhood confectionary. Too long, thought his grimacing partner seated in the full-size Ford outside. The man in the booth hung up a second time and waited. His partner continued to staccato tap the edges of the steering wheel. The phone rang once more and was promptly answered. The conversation was shorter this time yet apparently every bit as unyielding. A block away an old but stately parish church drew many smartly dressed celebrants to its heavy doors.

The man returned purple-faced to the car and sat in silence for several seconds before speaking. “The guy must be questioned tonight.”

“You said he just entered a church with a damn wedding?”

“He says we do it now. Later it’s supposed to get worse.”

“Holy smoke there’s maybe two hundred people inside. And still comin’.”

“You think he’ll leave the same way?”

The driver shrugged.

After another pause the first man said, “We apologize, flash a badge. He’s immediately wanted for questioning. Molesting a kid.”

Both men sat in silence pondering this scenario.

“Before or after the service?”

“Before.”

“Sounds like a real fire ass, this boss of yours.”

On entering the church the two men discovered no one, at least in the vestibule, who spoke transparent English. Simple genial nods from two older couples met their initial queries.

Without further ado they marched into the auditorium and down the aisle where the ceremony was about to begin, many curious faces following, including that of the busy ushers who were obviously not expecting two meatballs thumbing respect. A mellow Italian tenor began serenading from the choir loft at the back of the church.

“Where’s the photographer?” the first man demanded of the priest who, with the groom, best man and six groomsmen, congregated at the front.

“Please, can you not quietly wait at the back?” said Father Rosario, who had a full rostrum of weddings to get through that day.

“Police. Urgent.” The first speaker flashed a fold-out badge which he hastily returned to his hip pocket.

Father Rosario pointed to the rear loft then closed his eyes. The two men looked back to see a skinny lad fiddling with what appeared to be a tri-

pod. Presently a camera pointed down at them. They glanced at one another then rushed to the back of the church, past many rows of watchful guests. Belatedly finding a rear staircase they pounded up the narrow steps followed by two complaining ushers, the sounds thunderous in the vaulted church. All the while Father Rosario, known as one of the last of the holy fathers (not yet marching, publishing, or amending) lidded his eyes and barely moved his lips.

Then the sudden peeved descant swearing of the photographer, well above the growing rumble of voices, widened even the good father's ancient eyes. The sound rent a slight pause as the first of the intruders attempted to pass himself off as a police officer. When one usher suggested the badge was nothing more than an elaborate chauffeur's decal, haughty and suspicious Randy quickly said the two were more like goddam bloody collectors there to seize his equipment -- a comment that swiftly earned him a corp of sympathizers for by then the loft was jammed with robust Latin witnesses. The subsequent threats, accusations, insults, pushing and shoving soon lead to a wholesale fracas that echoed throughout the old building like the shunting of boxcars. The organist and small fastidious tenor were seen huddling behind the organ. A camera suddenly lurched free of the tripod and fell from the balcony nearly striking a young mother and babe, a chance miss that riled individual members of the audience, including all the ushers and groomsmen. By then many young bloods bounded up the staircase, including the groom who, unknown to Randy and his would-be abductors, was a daily communicant in the martial arts.



Indeed, guests in the congregation were sufficiently peeved to tolerate a fight. “What wedding is complete without it?” the indomitable mother of a bridesmaid would remark later.

The net result -- at least until the tenor resumed -- was that the two goons, though no slouches themselves, were finally shoved and pummeled back down the stairs and delivered to the entrance of the church in a greatly disappointed state, just as the bridal party arrived. The buzzing groomsmen, backed by a legion of auxiliaries, followed the two aliens as they fled to their car and, after gunning the motor, sped away as angry fists thumped the trunk.

“Hey Randy, you got some good shots, eh?”

It would be his investiture to ward status.

“Not very. The corn holes,” he added, looking after the car and trying to sound disgusted, while a sense of impending doom upstaged his precious sense of the absurd.

Thereafter it was as if Hannibal himself were sent packing: the ritual of commitment in Our Lady of Sorrows Parish Church was that afternoon historic. Each phrase in the exchange of vows seemed an original benediction. Only Father Rosario heard the stately phrases with unbroken resignation. One small bruise on the groom’s forehead the lovely bride kissed with touching solicitude as the ceremony closed. Nor was there a bridal entourage attended by a more conscientious photographer, even if his first camera was likely trashed in its fall from the heavens. Of course, the photographer’s poise and earnestness was not entirely whole. He sus-

pected, knew he was in big trouble, that the night's festivities must come to an end. But he had never been a blood member before and tried very hard to imagine the staying power it might confer. Several times he resisted contacting the police -- doing so seemed insulting before such willing, galavant friends. Moreover, the police had recently let him down. Resolving poignant quandaries entreated, demanded a proud secret organization! As an elected, elevated survivor of mechanical WASP confiscators, he was not about to complain. At least not just then, his indecision on hold. He had a job to do.

"Holy jees," said the breathless driver in a peevish voice when the two were safely out of harm's way. "I've busted a finger -- look at the sucker. Life a fishhook!" But when he looked over at his companion he suddenly felt much worse. "You're gonna pass out? Man you can't do that!"

## FIFTEEN

The voice at the other end was, for a time, gruesomely quiet.

"I told you never to call me here."

"So? We got clobbered. Al is barfing, spitting blood, what can I say? He ought to be in Emergency. You said it was straight up."

The distant voice quietly asked where the photographer was.

"A place called Masaccio's. On Commercial. Yeah."

A further quiet seemed to flag or chill the caller.

"-- You want a stiff on your hands?"

The calm or glacial voice, belonging to the tall gent that Vijay and the Russian met the evening before, demanded an immediate rendezvous by Burnaby Lake and urged the caller to be there in less than ten minutes, signing off with the clipped injunction, “No hospital. Repeat: no hospital.”

“Okay, okay.”

It was a half-acre of scrub abutting the water, hosting mainly dense thorny bushes and a few ratty birch trees scratching the twilight. The Ford pulled up beside the BMW. The doors opened simultaneously.

“He’s, I dunno.”

The tall man, his eyes alert to the surroundings, barely noted the slumped form in the front seat.

“Get him out.”

The driver readily obeyed. The flaccid body was brusquely removed, flopped on the ground, the pockets quickly emptied.

“So I just go ahead and zip the glowworm.”

“No, I want him. Tonight.”

“How do I do that for fucksake? Look at my hand.”

“2:00 A.M. On the mountain.” The voice was haunted and barely audible. Then two strangers, one wearing a kind of skull cap and fingering his cheek, emerged from the shadows and climbed into the Ford.

“Why not,” said the driver, his one arm dangling as if detached.

The tall man watched the Ford pull away then smartly rolled the unconscious body into the water, quickly returned to the BMW, started up and

drove swiftly but circuitously to an address on south Fraser Street. Whistling the while snatches of Hava Nagela, he carefully monitored the lights behind.

After passing the brightly-lit storefront twice he turned into the alley and parked at the back. First he checked the lock on the rear shipping bay that served his customized exercise and weight station business, then ascended a private outside staircase to the second floor where his plush modern gym was housed. A few devotees were finishing up in the ballroom-sized chamber that was chock full of faintly sinister contraptions fashioned from stainless steel and black vinyl. Full-length wall mirrors alternated with glossy murals of glistening torsos, both Herculean and Amazonian, some caught in panned motion. A few units hung from the ceiling like oversize mobiles, others projected as megaliths from the vermilion broadloom.

“Oh Mr. Kruse, good evening. Just going. I’ve put the new mailers in your office and turned off the downstairs lights. Just the two clients left.”

Cadmus Kruse nodded to his secretary as she collected her coat. Her boyfriend smiled weakly from a wall couch. Waving back with a show of camaraderie, Cadmus headed toward a rear station where he recognized a bulky lineman from the B.C. Lions defensive squad assisting a dewy hale youngster who was working out on the new composite swing toner. Cadmus was further amused by the girl’s cutoff T-shirt and worn sweat pants. But not, as he approached, a bruised jaw, which he initially suspected may



have come from an accident -- on this new machine! But the conviviality of the conversation between the two allayed his sudden pique.

Turning off the unneeded lights he overheard the nymph complain of a periodic stitch which the lineman suggested might come from some cramping in a lower back muscle. Four resonance sensors issued from her mid back just below the cutoff. The chosen contraction maneuvers had barely imprinted the digital readout. "Hard things to isolate but a real high when peaking," continued the lineman as he rearranged one of the sensors and reset the foot anchors of Cadmus' latest design, a free-frame inverter from which one locked into a boot harness in varying degrees of slope, from horizontal to vertical, against a pelvic brace and rotation stabilizer that left the participant free to concentrate on individual pacers and so bypass one central problem of some conventional stations, the imprecision in isolating discrete muscle sets. "You're getting a few read outs now," the lineman said.

The girl was soon groaning she could feel "Eons of neglect".

"Feels okay then?" cautioned the mentor.

"Feels great -- really. Thanks."

"I'd stay within the quarter-arc for a week maybe." He pointed to an area on the readout, again to profuse thanks. He stiffly smiled, packed some towels into a carryall, then sauntered toward the men's change rooms, bulky arms spread like outriggers.

Face down, the girl continued to flex upward in a back-rotation. Cadmus approached the machine from behind, kneeling to adjust the unit's

spirit level. “Amazing how sensitive this baby is,” he said as he glanced at the kneaded tummy and hint of nuder contour beyond the waving cutoff. He recalled an underwater picture showing a woman leaning over an ultrasound scanning pool, a pale anemone suspended downward. Looking again at the girl he realized he could see less than he thought. Had she done something or did he imagine? He moved in front and smiled as he looked at the readout. The girl grimly smiled back.

“You’re new, I think.”

After an intake of air she concurred. “As of this week yes.”

He elected to introduce himself. “Cadmus Kruse, owner-manager and general dogsbody.”

Another intake. “Hi, Maureen Rutquist.”

“Don’t overdo it now.”

“God no way,” she said, finally relaxing. The cutoff, he realized, had been bunched in front.

Sensing a slight self-consciousness Cadmus turned away, and had wandered part way back to his office when she briskly called after him, adding, miffed, “Hell sorry, I’ve forgotten how it rises.” She had miscued the slope setter and become locked in the horizontal position.

Cadmus loped over and deftly flicked a second tiny switch near the girl’s wrist that reversed the counter balance. As the frame slowly righted itself she smartly reached down to disengaged the shoe anchors, her young arms sleek as corning ware.

“Thanks. Was beginning to feel like a sleeping yo-yo.”

“A common mistake; the later models will have instructions printed on the brace,” he said, helping her remove the sensors while taking note of a portion of shapely small breast through an armhole, part of which bore the lividity of a second bruise. Then he made the connection.

“ -- You’re that actress -- at the new theatre.”

Maureen flashed a professional grin.

Cadmus easily converted his show of surprise into concern. “I thought so. The story in the papers...sounded a little risky. Experimental or something isn’t it?”

“Not really. Some jerko got carried away, decided to trash the show,” she said, applying a towel to moist cheeks while taking note of her inquisitor’s digressive eyes. “We reopen tomorrow night.”

“Did they ever find the guy do you know?”

“I don’t think so. They have a good sketch but so far no arrests. Actually, I think it would be a shame if he were.”

Cadmus did not have to pretend surprise. “You would?”

“Sure. You can’t have a gutsy theatre without risks. It’s what people want. And need I think. The freer the better. The theatre’s simply got to make some sense of the behavioral bust we’re in.” Sensing his amusement she continued: “The problems have outstripped our past parameters of experience. We need new models, whole new constructs to play to.” The soft towel formed then a busy cowl about her face. She sensed the preciousity of her words yet felt goaded by the man’s half smile...which Cadmus imagined a thoughtful expression.

“It’s pretty confusing to a ‘dumb-bell’ like me,” he suavely said.

She offered a wan pout as she daubed hanging ringlets, keeping up the promotion. “We’re going to do other stuff as well. Shaw, maybe, next spring. With a twist. This season we’re trying to hit a few nerves -- get people thinking beyond the conventions.” She began wiping strong shapely arms. “People easily get complacent. At our theatre everybody sweats a little.” She whiffed an armpit and managed a coy disgust, presenting to the larcenous eyes a beguiling candor.

“Sounds like a hell of a show.”

“It is -- you should come. The theatre’s one of the best total conditioning cultures there is.”

Cadmus nodded, indicating a probability. She, in turn, nodded agreeably at the machine, then promptly departed for the change rooms. Watching her leave he continued to doubt the likelihood of briefs beneath the sweat pants while approving, below the cutoff, a waist marginally narrower than the hips -- not just another unfinished boy then.

When she disappeared he switched off the remaining studio lights and headed to his office where, just beyond in the foyer, a stately man in a dark suit rocked back and forth on his soles.

“Can I help you?”

“Oh yes, hello. Dr. Rutquist. Waiting for my daughter. Maureen.”

“No problem. Have a seat. She shouldn’t be long. There’s some hot chocolate behind you.”

“Oh really. Thank you.”



It appeared as though Dr. Rutquist was about to patronize the surroundings when Cadmus excused himself. "I'm late with a couple of calls -- back in a jiff."

Decisively he crossed into his office, quietly locked the door and froze as if expecting a further interruption. Then in one fluent motion he swung into the large sculpted office chair and summoned to his desk computer the coded access program that cued the building's many tiny robot monitors, normally activated from a station in the secretarial office. But this program included one camera secreted behind the rear vent of a locker frequently without a lock that focused on the women's tiled shower stalls. He was annoyed to hear some brisk swearing in a part of the room he could not see. Just barely he picked up sounds of a nearby locker door opening and closing. Then the hair at the back of his neck began to tingle. He could have sworn he heard two voices, when he was certain Maureen Rutquist was the last and only one left on the premises. But the voices seemed distinct and surprisingly sonorous.

*We declare thee by this act set free from the danger of excommunication in which thou stoodest.*

The lower voice then gave way to one of higher register -- a voice Cadmus recognized as Maureen's.

*I thank you -- shit -- I thank you. I thank you.*

The deeper voice returned.

*But because thou has sinned most presumptuously against God and the Holy Church, and that thou mayest repent thy errors in solitary contemplation...dum de*

dum...do condemn thee to eat the bread of sorrow and drink the water of affliction to the end of thy earthly days in perpetual imprisonment.

*Perpetual imprisonment! Am I not then to be set free?*

*Set free, child, after such wickedness as yours! What are you dreaming of?*

By then Cadmus realized that all voices were the creation of the young intense actress, whose natural voice resumed:

*Give me that writing. Give me that writing. Light your fire: do you think I dread it as much as the life of a rat in a hole? My voices are right.*

Cadmus soon got bored. Though a few lines toward the end of the recitation reclaimed his attention -- particularly one about chained feet.

*...To shut me from the light of the sky...and chain my feet so that I can never again ride with the soldiers nor climb the hills.*

By then her thespian ardor was flagging. "Christ. What a drooler!"

The words faded as the hydraulic door to the chamber hissed. Cadmus fled from his office onto the salon floor just in time to bid the fine reverend and his expressive daughter good night. As they descended the staircase to the ground floor the daughter complained of her father's presence. "I told you not to bother." The mother, the good pastor replied, had insisted. The girl was as pliant-angry as they come, Cadmus decided, thinking of the bruised armpit and sliver of breast.

He returned to his office and watched through a front window as the father fetched his key by the door of a compact sedan while the daughter crossed the brightly-lit street to a dingy sports car and chucked her carryall behind a front seat before ducking inside. Momentarily a young man rose

from the driver's side and sauntered across to the father. After a few words and sudden handshake he returned. Seconds later the sports car swiftly pulled away. The father waved briefly, but remained standing several seconds before opening his own door.

“Take that, dadeo.”

A debonair Cadmus checked his watch, returned to the anatomical desk chair and, after retrieving the face mask and conduit, took several full draughts from the canister of pure oxygen housed in his desk.

## SIXTEEN

By the time Randy finished photographing the bride, the palmy Bloedel Conservatory atop Vancouver's Queen Elizabeth Park was a combination sauna bath and Italian Chamber of Deputies, each voice delivering itself of a unique aria-addenda that surely made the arboretum's exotic birds perk up and take notice. As it was, with beads of sweat running down his face as a swimmer surfacing, and the guests having an 'agenda' of their own, he felt a full and presiding humility. Several of the bridesmaids, even the bride herself for a change, were voluptuous beyond decency. Yet he might have been a eunuch. His weariness from presuming to line ebullient people up like bowling pins, then frame them with the Herb Spooner smile, was acute, and yoked to the worry about what awaited him when the evening ended -- the wrath of Aguirre, perhaps, visited in the same

Amazonian luxuriance. Among mellifluous pagans like these the Presbyterian might complain.

As he took the requisite close-ups of the bride and maid of honor, identical twins and both youthful Sophias, he decided he'd better once more get down on his sore knee. Herb was particularly sensitive then about capturing too much cleavage. Bodies made for sin and sin alone he said to himself as he grimly exposed, softer-rendered this time, the standard litany of full length and three-quarter poses: royal and chummy, serenely looking at the camera and candidly themselves, the maid of honor diffidently eyeing the bride's ring...the con brio part the discovery that the honorable maid was an inveterate flirt, despite a vigilante boyfriend who seemed the one mismatch in the whole ensemble. The least macho of the groomsmen, he was an overweight, small-eyed and apparently very wealthy scowler, who had not increased his popularity that afternoon by misplacing the pants to his tux and delaying the ceremony -- thus making the arrival of the two goons when they did a blessing for Randy. Suppose the two had come when the wedding party just left the church, minds set on the park and reception!

Again Randy was distracted. Good lord, was such loveliness not the premier torment? And endowed with wealth as well. Often, the more affluent the bride's parents, the plainer the bride. How many times Herb returned from West Vancouver or Shaughnessy with pictures taken in swank settings, the star attraction, tensely fussed over by cosmetician, hair-stylist and couturier, a homely soporific creature rehearsing a smile. If the pre-



sent Sophias might yet convert their nervous eunuch photographer into a satyr, the brides of the Architectural Digest settings often invoked in him a settled charity. It seemed a life of rage, tears and exotic drugs was as certified as the gems in her tiara or the exquisite ice sculpture sweating out her reception.

Then, almost like a reefer break, it was over. The remaining grandparents and select relations were duly recorded and the celebrants returned to the Conservatory entrance, beyond which a stylish Chinese retinue waited quietly except for some playful children. As he struggled out with his two cases of equipment, perspiration stinging his eyes, he was met by one of Herb's competitors, a tall flamboyant Russian-Canadian who, unlike Randy, travelled light. Val, or Valerian Apollinariovich, conspicuously released a wide linen handkerchief from a breast pocket, offering it to Randy as if giving alms, kopeks, to the escaped laughter of several persons in the waiting party. Randy merely smiled as best he could and struggled out past the emphatic Henry Moore sculpture, 'The Knife Edge', onto the expanded parking lot, the cement covering of a large reservoir, arriving at last before the studio's second car. He was pleased to see the wedding party dallying along the elevated walkways and fountains -- time enough to get to Masaccio's first and so abide Herb's method of always leading not following the bride. He carefully looked about the parking lot but could see no suspicious displaced person or persons.

Masaccio appeared disappointed to see Randy. He had apparently expected Herb and felt denied a professional presence (an 'award winning'

photographer), also perhaps an old sparring partner. He accepted the four retouched prints, which had confiscated Randy's afternoon, with the casualness of one receiving an unsought business card, quickly stashing them in an inner coat pocket. He then handed Randy over to Ugo, the hall's floor manager who, happily for Randy, was a natural humanitarian. Quickly he took Randy in tow, pointing out where he might deposit his equipment in a small annex by the strong smelling kitchen where bushels of crabs and prawns in stacked mesh hampers sat before copper cauldrons, and ceiling-high hutches of lasagna faced large black oven doors. On side tables a company of plump girls were assembling antipasto dishes, and scurrying to long banquet tables arranged as fingers about a curved dais bedecked with a cake in the form of a parapeted palazzo.

"Over three-hundred guests," Ugo said proudly. "Very nice people. A cousin of the bride's mother is related to a Frescobaldi. Unfortunately he couldn't come."

A few minutes later Randy was summoned to the hall entrance by a tall bearded man with a mouth full of gold teeth. The man's wife and young son waited solemnly between a faded print of Vesuvius in Eruption and the portrait of a bridal couple set within a brandy snifter. The man wanted a picture of his family with Masaccio who, when fetched, smiled generously. "Not at all Mr. Al-Sadr," Masaccio exclaimed, apologetically departing after.

The reception was much as Randy anticipated, the fruity wine tolerable, his glass never more than half empty. He took many pictures, each

set improving over the last, his anxiety occasionally eclipsed by the sanguine chatter. There was a fight off a rear balcony that overlooked the park, but the combatants danced tolerably near one another minutes later. Near midnight the male guests hoisted the groom onto ample shoulders to regale their champion gladiator. When the bride returned in her traveling costume Randy could just stand upright. During the removal of the garter he was on one knee, touted by those nearest an okay sweetheart. Just before the bouquet was thrown and the couple sought their messed-up getaway car through an arbor of arms and hands, he had given up his camera with his last roll to one of the celebrants and lay as a corpse on a narrow bed of aligned chairs. Ugo looked on calmly and sought a friend to drive him home. It was a willing subordination. With luck he would be escorted into the burglar-proofed studio, where he planned to spend the night ensconced on the chaise window seat Herb sometimes photographed his debutantes on. It was the maid of honor's boyfriend who in the end was charged with the good deed. Randy was supremely grateful and slumped in the passenger seat in a warm stupor.

The front door to the studio was no sooner negotiated than the shadow came from somewhere to assist the driver with the equipment and drowsy photographer. Randy no sooner realized his peril -- the driver was solemnly grateful for the assistance -- than a sudden brief temple punch snuffed out consciousness. The deft but inconspicuous blow was the work of an expert who easily gathered the newly limp form in his arms, assuring the escort he would look after the drunken bum. He deeply apologized on

behalf of the studio, said he had just learned of the late collapse, expressed his thanks, wished the escort a good night and safe drive home.

## SEVENTEEN

Three cars were parked near a lookout point off the West Marine Drive causeway. The night was cool, fresh and speckled with stars. The rear license plate on the car nearest the roadway, a large dark four-door, flashed against the oncoming headlights revealing a Washington registry. Another spacious vehicle sat in near darkness beside a small sports car which was more noticeable because of its lighter, dust-laden exterior.

A boy and girl stood by themselves near the fence that marked the edge of the embankment that descended steeply to the water thirty meters below. The girl stood backed to the boy, the boy's arms locked about her, their focus of attention the barge whose dark shadowy presence lay inside the North Arm Jetty, a tightly packed log boom further out. The boy, a young physicist with an abiding interest in pyrotechnical detonations, and a contender for the Canadian Olympic Team in the pole vault, spoke quietly, deliberately to a heedful Maureen Rutquist.

"It's a reinforced-hull model with added ballast. About as stable as an island. We set out the cylinders tomorrow afternoon." He kissed her neck. "For the finale. State-of-the-art."



“You ever think how many food hampers all the Expo fireworks could have bought? Even just the final night’s?” As she spoke she returned his venturesome hands to her laminar midriff, fingering them beneath her sweatsuit top.

“ -- The ones the manufacturers, wholesalers and their employees would have bought with their wages and profits?”

“No, the people who do without state-of-the-art fizgigs.”

He was getting a little impatient with the inquisition.

“Nobody will starve in this country because of the Expo Cherry Bombs.”

“From the expert himself.”

“Why pick on the fireworks -- and not the rides, the candy floss. The jugglers? The theatre sports!”

She was silent then and resettled her head against his shoulder, her hands newly indifferent, though his memory of the ineffable discovery was for the moment sufficient, the most exotic polymer crude by comparison. Again her words distracted.

“What about all the pollution, all the smoke? You said yourself the chemical composition of some of the explosives was ‘contingent’.”

He imagined her smiling. Withdrawing his hands he hugged her with mock ferocity, a clinch that slowly turned mutually isometric as they swung slowly from side to side. “Green peace girl.”

“Maybe I’m curious.” She pushed him away. They stood facing one another, their profiles framing the distant smudge of the barge.

“The gases virtually all oxidize on explosion. A tiny bit of particulate dust gets into our pores and turns us into rabid anticommunists.”

Rather awkwardly she kept him at arm’s length. “Always a serious bastard.”

He seemed pleased with this assessment.

She looked at him carefully, detecting all sorts of latent sarcasms. He was at last chagrined.

“Ms. Fairfax, I presume.” Earlier they had been discussing Oscar Wilde.

“So, Algy.”

“So, the acidic salts might, well, pickle a few molecules of plankton.”

“What about the freshwater reservoirs on the North Shore?”

“Catchments.”

“Yeah. And what about the nearby residents?”

“Or the fumes. Mingling with stray sewer gasses.”

“Yeah. That too.”

“So what about them?”

She turned away then, disengaging his arms. “I think I want to go for a swim.”

His mute attic stance suggested skepticism.

She shrugged. “I’m still all sweaty -- not from you. I never like showering at that gym.”

An ambiguous nod.

“No reason, just don’t. Mainly it’s just so peaceful here. Sorry.”

“It must be all of twelve degrees. Where?”

“Half-a-mile or so, back.”

“It’s a bit dark.”

“Not that dark, especially near the water. The lights from Point Grey.”

She turned then and walked toward the car. He followed blowing noisily on his hands. She perched on the fender when he approached.

“You’re serious,” he said, digging for his keys.

“You can wait, maybe.”

When they climbed in he hesitated before starting up, then brightened. “The Cove is likely less Siberian.” Jerry’s Cove was a busy pub near the university gates.

“So where’s that?...”

“Touché.”

Half-an-hour later they entered the water at the base of the rise to the lookout station near Wreck Beach. They were soon surprisingly warm and energetic, he following like a muskrat, the lingering image of the pale form by the water’s edge luring him on. Both were good swimmers, he slightly less practiced, such that he felt pressed when she struck out toward the barge. He called after her but she continued on, arms stealing across the plum-dark water. At first he doubted her resolve, then swore softly and followed, setting his pace and breathing for a long haul.

He almost ran into her.

“I’ve got a cramp in my toe,” she said, incredulous. They were treading water a meter apart.

“Best to rough it up a bit.”

Alternately they drubbed the stiff ligaments, she once dropping beneath the surface to do so, returning undecided.

“It keeps coming back...I wanted to see the barge close up.”

“Sure.”

They looked at one another with new joint amusement. Then abruptly she made for the beach he, faintly disappointed, slowly following, his senses alert to splashing that signaled her position and speed. Lights from the roadway above occasionally skipped through the trees. An older quiet two-stroke motor launch passed them as they rounded the point. “Everything okay?” someone yelled. “Heading in,” he shouted back.

After reaching the shallows they kept only their heads above the waist-level water, a growing wind keening the air. They moved slowly, momentarily uncertain where they’d left their clothes.

“You didn’t say we’d have to get out,” he said, returning from a rise and accidentally bumping her shoulder. After another chance nudge she briefly brusquely caressed him.

“That help?”

They tumbled and separated into a deeper pool then again hit a sand bar that rose almost to the surface before slipping into a shallow, distinctly warmer pool. He recalled how somedays trapped ponds of water left by the outgoing tide remained several degrees above the mean, like tepid bath water on especially bright afternoons. The pool was about a meter deep and they walked on their fingers, the sand beneath part of a fine sifting



mixture, fully alive. At the opposite edge they paused and kissed. Never before had he rested against the full length of her and found the experience, in its novelty and unexpectedness, perhaps the highlight of his life. They floated on their sides, an arm or elbow cantilevered for anchor and support. At one point she drew back: he had forgotten the sore gum.

“Sorry.”

“Dont’ be.”

Briefly she lay unmoored above his lank denser form, floating about like a summer skiff, touching intermittently. “The worst possible way,” he exclaimed, her fluid self never quite in place. She seemed for a time unsympathetic then broke into laughter, her stomach alive, undulant. “ -- Better than standing up in a kayak,” she managed to say between outbursts. She had been a ranking K1 racer in the province. This convulsed them both, quickly turning the conspiracy into surrender -- into his anguished and her plaintive sighs as they pitched and yawed against the edge of the sandbar, she an elusive current, he a failing salmon. They tarried at a no-return stage when the veteran two-stroke craft was heard once more approaching. For an instant his unallied motion, barely a caress in the rising water, and the steady putt-putt putt-putt of the old engine, actually synchronized, the craft sufficiently close to obliterate their newly stifled giggles, which became convulsive just before she pushed him away and scrambled the last few meters to shore.

It took a minute to find their clothes and towels. By then he was chattering, she complaining anew of a seized toe. At one point she sat and thrilled as he worked the phalanxes back and forth.

“God you are cold,” she said between sighs.

“Warm blooded,” he said, rubbing and wriggling the knotted sinew, proffered and withheld according to the pain. At last she extended the foot flexing toes in a delicious agony free interval. “I think it’s one I wrecked on stage that night.” Gamely she fitted the sole to his chest. “Thermal induction,” he said tracing the warm alluvial thighs, even as a shiver swept over him. She pulled away when the caresses got inspired. “Too gravelly,” she said, then swiftly assayed his hesitation. “Later, O happy dagger.”

Immediately she was up, retrieving clothes, white shorts rising as an ensign, gaining the steep path to the car while swimming into her jersey, he several steps behind, hopping, chattering, one leg free, trying to fit a shoe. In the parking lot they noted the addition of a third vehicle, an oversize van. “Another da,da, dumpster,” he said, in a convincing stammer.

Inside his chilly Kitsilano basement apartment the small camp heater was tempered and lit, clothes peeled, the condom furtively sought. Soon shower water surged behind a partly closed door. He would remember most distinctly the incisive yet female symmetry, rain-pearled, and her fey comment. “The missing *kore*, a somebody once remarked,” she stated in response to his solicitous soaping of her shoulders and back, his hands less knowing, acquisitive than the alert actress she remembered with wily dis-

taste. The pattern on his bath curtain of nubile creatures had been reduced in the truck of time to grainy newsprint, now shrouding a fresh seasonal catch. An hour later she watched him as he lay fast and silent as the North Arm Jetty with its dark barge which would soon be towed to the Expo site for the firework finale. On the street outside some kids were noisily returning from a party. It was almost light. She thought of her parents who settled early with their respective books in their respective twin beds. When did they last make love she wondered? They likely indulged their anxieties at supper, and now might be silently awake wondering where their restless daughter was and when she might return.

Very quietly she entered the tudor cottage in the early dawn to find the two magogs downstairs sharing a mug in their dressing gowns, her father craggy, unshaven, her mother immaculate as ever. She drew a tofu salmon loaf from the refrigerator, a date bran muffin and carton of apple juice. “I spent the night experimenting — with the physicist!” she called out. The assertion came out wrong and was met with night-stalker silence. Briefly she looked in at them. “He’s likely an okay book. A little nutty about his fireworks that’s all. Which you’ll see in a couple of days.” Goaded by their stark quiet she added, “Please set the ‘alarum’ for about noon,” then, confection in hand, sauntered off to her room in a gyro-even gait, leaving the learned folk staring at their clammy feet and wondering if the experiment could ever be a success.

## EIGHTEEN

As the car moved Randy imagined himself a bright orange shell, a large Halloween pumpkin, his head housing a flame within, fingers of the flame licking his face, in a silence redolent with the smell of excrement. He had performed badly before the 'theatre critics', the Inquisitors, who waited under the quonset dome on Burnaby Mountain. It seemed he might be the final casualty to end calamity. Somehow peace would prevail after. His holocaust had come plasmic dense, compressed.

Odd he should recognize the Dolphin Theatre on Hastings Street, bundled as he was in the passenger seat, a strange upswept vision, its marquee lights blinking like a heart machine. So perhaps he was alive after all. The curiosity baffled him, almost as the cosmic quiet when they first arrived before the dark quonset hut, his senses alert to every creature out that night, every tiny thrust of insect wing upon the rank fall air, bottled in a mote-sized universe where echoes became fusion reactions.

And then to have nothing, absolutely nothing to say, nothing to add to his own lexicon of screeches and hoots and warbles...he had surely mimicked the spectrum of animal vocalization that night, from banshee to piercing piglet while mounted as a hectic spotlighted bat. His initial story of a prank they laughed at.

Then, in due course, with spittle oozing and mouth agape, a termination. The final blow truncated all pain below the neck, except perhaps for one gimpy arm, hand -- enough to push a wheelchair, perhaps, join the



paras on their marathons of hope, one frail hand buttressed, pressed to the rim. So he freakish imagined.

The final blow had been a blessing. Before: ringing pandemonium. After: simply a pumpkin head, square eyes flashing, umbering. Was it perhaps a kind of resurrection -- without a body? The molten orange globe before God got to it -- before the seasons, noble beasts and day of rest; merely the fiery conflagration, heavy molten flux...flowing past the empty Dolphin Theatre? He still twitched at the distant words, the conversing of aliens, chigger whispers. Suddenly the pumpkin lurched to one side and almost slid off, hanging by the sheerest thread over a dimpled sea, swelling, smelling of a deep. Down down the pumpkin fell against a bosky surface breaking into heavy sparks, the man before him not a coachman but a boatman, pushing off.

So. The change was real. Headed out to sea. It would be his last night out.

“You’ve a lousy job,” he said at last to the dark form. The face he had drawn so carefully but could no more imagine did not immediately answer, surprised perhaps the voice returned. When the form did respond, Randy sensed not a mandible mantis but oversize earwig, a clerk, a *fonctionnaire*, a person he had often dueled with and won!

“It’s a job.”

So. Not even a last minute dialogue, as in all the great books. He was on his own. The last night out, a missing corpse, stinking, dissolving.

Then, oddly, he could make out the lights of Expo 86, the fair he had tried so valiantly to engage, make cause with. The memories flooded in, an incipient memory dredging. The brief re-engagement a surreal wonder. He prayed there might be time enough for a few memories...thinking of the grand metallic sculpture near the West Gate, The Rowbridge!, a mythical ship spiked high above the fair on two shiny pins, stuck in a wilderness of blue, fixed to the sky's turning, stainless oars scraping in a faint mechanical shudder as they moved at their precise funeral pace, a ghostly metaphor for himself then. He thought of Highway 86 with its ominous rilled roadway, grey forms, and empty sneakers.

He still thought with an imaged smile of the Quintrin, a type of *volante*, the handsome early 19th-century two-wheeled open carriage prominently displayed before the Cuban Pavilion with the disclaimer that 'it represented the beginning of collective transportation'. A thing of beauty. Not a pumpkin.

How odd that such memories might be retrieved, now, at this hour. How one might think without a body attached. If he dreamed, the reality beckoned.

He thought of the exotic boats of passage and the bird women of Thailand and Indonesia, also their wooden bells and drum gourds. He thought of the Hong Kong Pavilion with its scaffolding of bamboo, an intricate web ('From Silk to Silicon!'), and the eery blanched humans frozen within it. He was still confused. He might look like one now.

He thought of the Fram, the great Norwegian curve-hulled ship that reliably 'popped' above the polar ice -- and of the stately, much loved Pacific Swift, an 18th-century brigantine painstaking readied at the Old S.A.L.T.S. shipyard on the Expo site, whose launch he would now miss. He thought of the Swiss Pavilion's vertical Jollyball -- pinball -- machine, with its relentless steel bearing taking the long way to a Swiss hotel. He thought of Roman chariots cheek by jowl with sleek aristocratic robots.

He thought of the many game board communities rendered as so many homogenous cubes, only their modes of transportation realistic. He thought of round western eyes staring at him from 'Chinese' artifacts -- perhaps staring wide-eyed at the display of vintage, terra cotta royal-tomb figures who scolded such emporium trifling, or neglect of a crumpled lad working in slow motion to place and paint a three-masted ship in a bottle the size of a lipstick container, his tiny bent brush moving with the deliberation of a snail to find the missing daub.

He thought of the Ramases Pavilion with its colonnade of Brobdingnagian engine valves and stuck granite treasures; of the Czechoslovakian Pavilion with its modern electronic artifacts bourn aloft by baroque human sculptures, lovingly crafted, and all, if memory served, smiling tenderly.

He thought of the tucked away denizens in the South Pacific Pavilion with their proud erections; of the erotic terra-cotta forms in the Peruvian Pavilion so near the centuries-shriveled Nazca mummy, huddled nearly as

he must be now...how he would have liked to listen once again to that blithe hectoring Barbadian on his old scratchy telephone.

He thought of Swiss rail switches, German signals, and British search and rescue paraphernalia. He thought again of the Russian 'wrecking ball', with its cubed lips and sightless gaze. He thought of wordy Canadian coal lumps and fast-talking fish who kept their heads even in a tin of salmon. And large quilted tapestries as padded cartoons. He thought of the many concourse performers, once more seeking work, as he was not. And for a last time imagined the harbor craft shaped as a Sea Monster with spotlight eyes staring down spectators near the fireworks' barges.

It was dark when the boat's motor was idled. He sensed a swing, a lurch, a splash, salt water masking the eyes. The first time he'd completely submerged as a young swimmer was near a log raft in the sun-flagged water of a prairie creek, cozy greens condoling partly submerged logs. Now a mere suffocating grayness, intimating his horror story was all but over. Without the slightest vicarious thrill.

## NINETEEN

Vijay parked the car just off the winding roadway on the cliff above Wreck Beach. Two hours of warming sunshine remained of the clear afternoon he estimated, a brief interval to himself before his extra-ordinary evening departure -- about the time the second-last display of Expo fireworks would sequin the night. As he checked the lock on the trunk he noted a remaining spec of blood on his forearm. A bit of saliva easily



rubbed it off. Reflexively he checked both hands then, whistling lightly to himself, padded down the steep jagged incline designated Trail Six.

When clear of the concealing foliage at the bottom, he was amused and cautioned to find the notorious site still harboring a handful of bathers -- a few undoubtedly, somewhere, to monitor the barge. Almost at once he found himself sufficiently an oddity to remove his trunks. A light evening chill touched his back as the sun mulled his front. It was not the first time he'd resorted to such a disguise. Had any pressed spy hunter before surveyed the beach's carefree bods, searching for a particular face, he wondered, as he walked to the water's edge. Nearby a lean Adonis stood ankle deep in the lace-hemmed ocean. Hitherto the macho princeps in that area, he seemed surprised to see Vijay. Behind him seated on a quilted throw, her back propped against a log, a uniformly dark-tanned, ashen-haired woman had just put down a book. Beside her sprawled a second, younger, more slender man, his wide light eyes staring up into a deep indigo sky. Obtuse panegyrics escaped his lips while a leg, a knee, bounced rhythmically. Another serviceable head, Vijay thought. Not you, you flaccid cow he said with lidded eyes, taking special note of stretch marks on the woman's abdomen and weighted chest. The perennial daughter was either curious or delivering a warning. The Adonis looked then bored, less certain of his pose.

Twenty yards out a snub, hoary, wooden sailboat sat reefed on a sand bar. An old gent, gaunt, brown, skin crenellated in ancient folds above stained trunks, stood near by, thigh deep, all but invisible in concentration.

The incoming tide occasionally swayed the craft as a groggy top. Audacious Vijay decided the boat, once afloat, could offer a discreet look at the barge, and serve to pace one or two of the other sentinels. Resolutely he strode out toward the abstracted gent.

“You think it will ride high enough?” he asked as he drew abreast the man, the sun newly divided by the looming hull above, the waters either side a salmon pink. The smell of brown algae was particularly heady, reminding him of a stale prison cell. The old man continued to study the conjunction of incoming ocean and pitch. Finally he shrugged and sloshed to the further side.

“Maybe I get some help,” Vijay called after him.

The gent rounded from the stern to stand opposite. “The tide was a peaker when we got stuck. Dunno.” For the first time he looked directly and earnestly at the newcomer. “You got some stout buddies hereabouts?”

Vijay waved as if dismissing a triviality.

“In the next while its now or never, I guess. For now, anyways.” The man fingered a grey chin stubble, all judgement suspended.

Vijay walked back to the Adonis and asked for a hand. The young man seemed relieved, or amused, and tentatively agreed as he cast back to his companions. The woman paged her book and watched as Vijay approached. Silently, still focusing she listened to his plan to dislodge the craft. He would need help. All he could get. Duly satisfied, she reached for a man’s pale shirt, slipping it over her singularly factual, once splendid

torso before rising. The young lad, though willing, floundered and Vijay, assuming the candor of a compatriot, hauled him to his feet, lugging him toward the ship, an arm just under his shoulders. The lad seemed amazed to be upright, and was fully as smooth and delicate as expected. Vijay guessed the woman a lay protectress, patented earth mother, and not likely a spy. By then she was fully alert, heeding the minutiae of his palmy attentions.

He waded out to the seaward side and pressed the boy against the bow incline, just below the plimsoll and, turning to the others, said they should arrange themselves so and push when he shouted. By then a few sightseers had converged and another two young men joined the team. Seeing everyone in place Vijay headed to the stern, knelt in the water with his back to the rudder (to raise and slightly rotate the opposing push), his head just above the cool bark-flecked surface. Lacing hands through the rudder stay he shouted to the others to push just as he gave a monumental heave. Following several knotted lifts, only about half correctly timed, the water was heard sucking about the keel. Seconds later the ship leaned to the shore then slowly righted itself. After nudging it to a comfortable depth Vijay helped boost the spry old gent, then loud with good cheer, up the side and clambered over himself. “Jolly decent, jolly de-cent!” the gent exclaimed grasping his liberator’s hand. The others waved and whistled from the water, prompting the gent to call out, “Come on board and have a cupper. All of you, please!”

The trio was only momentarily undecided, to Vijay's pique. A narrow ladder the old man fetched and proudly hooked over the side clinched the matter. The unsteady goose fleshed youngster climbed up first, with assistance, followed by the woman plucking at her captive shirt, then the quiet manly Adonis, much smaller coming from the cool sea. The other two helpers remained in the lazy water, the one perhaps resigned to flatter a jealous or disinclined friend — perhaps, Vijay counseled himself, waving a careless goodbye.

The slicked group sat about the small wheel well looking not so much pleased with one another as curious about their host who promised a homemade wine and sweet meal biscuits, which he went below to fetch after conferring with Vijay on a suitable reef and carefree tack. Soon the forestay and main sails were catching intermittent breaths. The young druggie looked like one seeing the world for the first time, his slender frame yielding to a light shiver. It was all Vijay could do to resist chucking the other three overboard as he set a course to take them on a slow close pass of the jetty. The wind was light but growing. The woman asked what he did. A longshoreman, on holiday, he said. Her follow-up questions were candid and faintly insinuating, but with each answer she seemed reassured. Her language fitted the bias of a social worker. She also turned out to be both chaps' landlady. The round eye called her a "block mother," a characterization that brought forth laden chuckles from all three. She sat with legs entwined, arms folded, leaning against the nude god, the druggie a bum's width apart. When the boat headed east the remaining sunlight



bronze-blinded their faces. Vijay apologized and sought a more acute tack. The woman fondly complained then smiled, eyes closed, as the warming rays returned. Vijay cast all three as bystanders only.

The elderly gent rose up from the galley with a gallon jug and tin of thick stale biscuits. A dark liquid spilled into plastic cups and was drunk in a hesitant quiet. The lad suddenly rose and stood unsteadily, apparently mesmerized by the setting sun, seeing a vision of exquisite variety. His fluent if garbled phrases séanced the naked evening quiet. After a time the woman tried to get him to turn away and scolded her friend for not assisting. “My god his cones’ll be hamburger.”

Finally they pulled the stargazer back to the cockpit cushions, into an awkward slouch, squibbed by a slight sinistral arousal. The woman looked at the adonis who in response remarked, “The only part of him that never really crashes,” then absolved the joke with a short implosive laugh. Patronizing smiles ensued which however Vijay barely noticed. Seconds before he had been startled, astounded by the discovery of a launch idling on the far side of the barge while two men went aboard, arms laden with sections of metal scaffolding. Several canisters stacked in the well of the launch resembled the bores of a rail gun! Something was radically direly wrong!

Summarily he turned the sloop about, causing the old man to spill his wine and the druggie lurch onto the woman’s lap. The old man blurted his surprise. The other two exchanged puzzled looks as the woman arranged her arms, wine and biscuit, about the newly flagged head. Vijay

said nothing.

The short interval it took to remake the waters off the beach was strained and mute. No one challenged the obdurate mood or decision of the surrogate captain. They looked away, instinctively, if belatedly, the woman quietly confirming a substitute evaluation, so obvious all along. Vijay barely noted the old man's confusion, the disequilibrium of the youngster, the matronly fingers caressing the smooth temple, and was over the side after reversing the craft when their beach reappeared. "Sure a damn funny turn around," said the skipper shaking his head. "A bit mental," said the Adonis, unmoved. Yet in shared wonder they stared after the knobby form as it plowed through the slate waters, its headway unusual to its wake, as it fairly pounced on the shoreline, lunged across the sand and disappeared into the thick green mantle halfway up the cliff.

"It's not so surprising; you never really feel settled around such a person," the woman summarized, recrossing her legs as she cradled a flushed cheek. "It's the sureness that clues you in. No empathic function." "I'm grateful he did what he did, mind you," said the skipper, still open to leniency. "Oh yes, of course," said the woman, foiling the lad's fiddling with her shirt. "But they often have a fixed agenda." Otherwise she looked pervasively generous: the flight had proved novel, rare kind of escapade. She eyed the Adonis with newfound esteem, his hand then negligently lost in her lacewing hair.

Minutes later they waved the old skipper goodbye from the water, the lad lazily backstroking, the compensating lovers shouldering one another's

arms. When they reached the shore the woman noted they had that stretch of sand almost entirely to themselves.

## TWENTY

Lithesome Maureen sat demurely on the edge of the barge beside her tawny lover, the alert pole-vaulter who, that past hour, had worked diligently with an engineer to measure and mark the positions of the launchers for the final night of fireworks at Expo 86, a spectacle touted unique on the West Coast. Amused and pleased was he to discover her paddling around the log boom in a yellow racing kayak attempting to keep her smile inquisitive. Now they relaxed, feet dangling over the edge, the sun just descended. The middle-aged engineer, an American film producer in his other career, rechecked a large design map in the motor launch. The barge was being slyly outfitted by the jetty to mislead competitors, one of whom was seen casing the main False Creek station, and any environmentalist zealot who might feel obliged were he to spot the state-of-the-art apparatus soon to be in place. The Harbor Master too was keeping mum about the private agreement over the moorage with the barge's owner. He was still puzzled by the original mixup.

“What’s the new oval patch at the end?”

Before answering her most recent question, the pole-vaulter studied her smooth feldspar legs, nearly as incisive as his own.

“We wondered that too. Probably covers an old sump: it was a tanker

barge at one time.”

“You never did really explain the pots. Sorry, casings.”

He looked away, from beauty so focal. “For the heavier launchers. The g-force they impact could list the other barge, make some trajectories less precise. A possibility. Tomorrow night’s plumes need a fixed place in the grid. The layers might otherwise overlap and some configurations could be screened.”

“You still think it’s safe hanging around?”

“I think so.” Their musing eyes met, inches apart.

“I don’t believe you,” she said in a singsong delivery that somewhat weakened her assertion.

“You’ll miss a pretty great show.”

“I’ll miss it anyway. Final curtain’s about eleven.”

Momentarily they were distracted by the close passing of an older stubby sailboat and its ancient skipper who nodded complaisantly.

“Looks like they grew up together,” he said.

She pretended not to hear, observing him then with pliant candor.

“What big ears you have.”

He squinted, looked away.

“Did you wash today?”

“Not in that ear, no.”

“I do detect a sense of timing.”

“Equipoise,” he said after a bit, stroking her outside thigh.

“Ho, ho, ho.”



But the expletive only rallied the expectation.

“Will I see you later?”

“Maybe.”

“How’s St. Joan doing?”

“It’s been postponed.” The spell lapsed. “Again. Father Dog wants another two weeks of skit parade. I might get away tonight. Save me a place in the Unicorn.”

“Sounds good. When?”

“Around ten.”

He nodded with a muted thanksgiving she found seductive.

Minutes later he watched her paddle back toward Point Grey. The swift sure speed she attained quickened the ongoing dilemma. Did she want a combatant or pal? Or were they one and the same? He could never make up his mind. He had a mathematical sense of complementarity but with emotions it hardly signified, nor the notion of equivalence, if intimacy was to have any staying power -- he had little interest in a clone of himself. And phrases like equal opportunity were essentially tautologies -- otherwise how could you ever tell? Or trendy tricky parity -- what could it mean but equivalence, and propter hoc, equality? Which reduced to homogeneity if all complaints were to be absolved, inequity being infinite. Only plaintiffs might imagine it something else. Yet there was fascination. He felt like an explorer rationalizing a hazardous shortcut. He doubted the opportunity would return again in any lifetime. Like exploding a fire-

work. The fleeting brilliance was all there was. You planned for another or stayed planted in the dark!

More aggressively, if less buoyantly, a similar debate preoccupied his actor-lover as she prepared to leave that night for the theatre -- the last of that week's skit parade. The night before she had warned her parents she 'might be late' — a toffy pronouncement that had added no panache to her evening and clearly upset theirs. What galled most was the incommensurateness of it. In the end, by giving, you simply got taken. The straight-away chap enjoyed himself regardless and she willed for herself that 'regardless'. Was she then a Principal Boy, a 'pissy queen', as the older gay actress asserted? And what for godsake did that mean? Should they not speak of many sexes instead of two or four -- boy boy (macho), girl girl (handmaid), boy girl, girl boy, boy-girl boy, girl-boy girl?... Weren't the variations a near jungle assortment, even without the example of transsexuals and hermaphroditism? How could you settle anything with virtually everyone different? Yet did she not want to be 'wooed' — and by an able male practitioner? Perhaps she simply wanted to make love to herself, as the disappointed veteran intimated? God knows she could do it as well — better — than the neophytes who had thus far tried. In time the pole-vaulter must improve, but what then? The oncoming AIDS rut, which he spoke so authoritatively on? So unlike say -- acting. Surely that engagement was self-sustaining. The power of the good actor was mesmerizing, the sheerest manifestation of power, an entire imagination surrendered to your own. Was it not a handsome bonus to score as well with one's

beauty, a kind of triumph over even your fellow actors -- sometimes horny even? Why, you felt as though you could screw the whole dumpy thieving world, certainly the awfully eager chap next to you -- an idea that filled a pause the night before when, while applying makeup she mused, 'He thinks he's Romeo, but who wants to be in a gig with a lot of lifeless bodies. Beauty rarely sleeps. The harvest of a knowing eye. Hum.'

But returning home that morning the 'mating issue' seemed as debatable as ever. Though the nub was plain enough. To seize that randy impertinent stick and ignite its ancient roots, you hurled its pretty custodian into a pyrotechnic of ecstasy that defied acting. You were left with a vanquished cloud whose exhaustion screened your own magma -- your own ready, outbound repertoire. It was nearly as bad as lulling your audience to sleep, nay, driving them home to their beds! The good actor kept you up till her end, of this she was certain. And might not the good and beautiful actor fancy killing sleep itself?...

This impious notion reached and pleased her when she was in her room and, slice of cornbread in hand, skimmed the script of one of the company's prospective plays. One line in particular amused her, it's ambiguity not likely of the author's choosing, though it could glean many laughs and be played several ways. The short play comprised a series of vignettes in which a single performer portrayed six women, three who worked as strippers and three who had retired from the trade. In the needy line the performer mused to herself, "I've been dancing for stiffes for years, I might as well be embalming them."

It was the unflattering ambiguity of 'stiffs' that wryly stood out. The average stripper's audience was hardly comatose, for one. Why would they come? Surely no self-respecting performer would concede she put them fastly to sleep. Conversely, why would one embalm a horny client -- your paycheck? The kind of stiff she last night transformed into a satyr required no balm.

The inelegant line came from *A Particular Class of Women*, a rather earnest one-woman show conceived and performed by a Toronto actress which had recently played to full audiences in Edmonton's Fringe Theatre Festival. Father Dog wanted a takeoff of it -- a 'burlesque' of burlesque -- scheduled for Vancouver that fall and had asked Maureen to consider the part. The original was a solicitous, hammy role, sometimes unaware of itself; their parody would be slyly sophomoric. There were a couple of skin scenes which she could play in a customized body suit that inflated to a mighty humdinger shape and measurement. (The assiduous director worked for a soft-plastics extrusion firm.) The main striptease would essentially be noisily letting the air out. Mock 3-D glasses could be offered on sale in the lobby (the proceeds to corneal research), and later earphones. A few nonchalant gents in the audience might wear codpieces the size of carryalls. That sort of thing.

She was not all satisfied comedian, mind you. A matched melodrama it would be to turn the lordly goats into dumb porkers, showing them who in effect wears the pants, even if little more than a sliver of pizza. Yet nakedness could be apocryphal for the pretty actress -- a mindless, pandering



ploy. Awkwardly, the line about stiffs was a defensive pun. All tit and no swish. Bawdiness was meretricious, extraneous to authentic narrative -- or must become itself the swift, sudden double-whammy enthrallment! -- to quote their agile director.

And with that subversive comment in mind she rose and after a moment's indecision retrieved the strapless bra-slip she had worn with her graduation gown. It was perhaps the most risqué item in her largely functional wardrobe -- bought especially for the occasion -- a sheer stretch affair that fitted beautifully, subtly enhancing contours. She was on her way to the shower when she passed the mirrored closet, stopped for a brief inspection, then sought the garment, which she now held in front as a bull-fighter might a small cape, performing a paso doble of her own behind it. When she slipped it over her head and smoothed the rills the essentials were more detailed but still, she thought, discursive for young physicists, especially the nebula of sex dinging the fabric.

Finally she turned off the main floor lamp, leaving only the more dramatic oblique light from the washroom and slowly removed the frock whistling a honky tonk ditty. Then she folded the two outer mirror panels to form a half hexagon and looked carefully at the jaybird form, its full back, side and front, making a second global inspection in three-quarter turns with the weight on the other leg. She decided the businessmen in Vancouver would be sweating more unctuously were she ever to perform as the original script intended, or even the lone blitz foray she contemplated. For a delicious minute she imagined the general hush. Whistlers

were a rarity in the city's mainstay theaters. She sought her makeup kit and touched up the discolored lip and small mole by the lower rib, reassuring herself both 'dissimulations' would not otherwise compromise her integrity...for the author-playwright honesty was grittily important. La-di-da! She decided she sympathized with the pole-vaulter. Until she tired of him he might break a leg.

Then she quickly showered, swiftly toweled, and sought the fifty-minute power nap she willed before each performance, her very own Chakra exhaustion, expunged of all perchances to dream.

## TWENTY-ONE

Cadmus Kruse sat smoking silently and alone in his darkened office. It was almost a year since he last gave up nicotine. Had his oxygen supply not inadvertently run out and he not needed something to anneal the old nerves, keep him thinking alertly, pragmatically...finally at dusk he stole to the confectionary down the block and bought two packs, the same furry faces hovering nearby. The words still rang in his ears as he took in the first few puffs.

"Imbeciles! All of you!"

The anger was momentous, Allah Himself speaking. Afterward, the Russian marched off into the darkness of the park leaving Cadmus by the lividity of the pond, frantically searching for a reason to call the irreplace-

able expert back. Now the matter was out of his, their hands. Happenstance. The Sacred Baboon! Thick blood, or clots of blood...nothing less than an élite spetsnaz company would take over and likely dispose of the device without so much as a murmur in clandestine circles. The Night-Comer.

Of course the one detail their own pressed specialist overlooked was the possibility that the larger fire works launchers just might trigger the time-to-detonation transducers when the shell was fired from a howitzer -- even minus the special counters, the Soviet encryption foils -- which would make for a very deluxe fireworks display...the Russian basilisk was not amused. Was he simply mocking, infecting Cadmus's team with a toxic insinuation? A poison that disorients, paralyzes, impugns? Cadmus still half expected to suddenly sourly awake. He had spotted the car across the street at dusk, two part-time goons. The professionals would be nearby. To have goofed so thoroughly, so relentlessly, almost supernaturally -- Super Natural British Columbia! Would the spetsnaz team even be in time? If what was implied was true? No, the Soviets would indirectly seek diplomatic intervention before that happened; and the Americans would be anxious as anyone that the news remained sub rosa. The Soviets were after all not players, only backers. They disappeared like water in the desert when the caravan got lost, yet plotted as remorselessly as any OPEC sheikh. They were the original escape artists — and first unavenged slave masters. To have worked so hard to build up his business, to find he could occasion-

ally help the failing Mukhtar...now another incidental death, beside a meddlesome artist. How adroitly balanced, even staid it all seemed now.

And the maniac, the chap they called the Juggler, was he not in their employ all along? His situs mastery legendary? Why else was the Russian so resolute, so knowledgeable about how to proceed? Surely he had a much earlier warning -- an angry perfectionist reporting the misplaced barge with the new paraphernalia upon it. Was the Russian simply not too damn dramatic when he finally heard from an apologetic Cadmus -- the Juggler having timed his call to Cadmus on strict instructions? What did it matter? They would be mopped up like so much spilt beer -- a smell no one paid attention to, believing it germane to the district. Had the wily insinuating Bears planned it so all along...to follow the nerve pathway? As his inhalations became longer and his hands began to steady, he mentally dandled yet another option, even as he sensed being chained to his seat -- the dial tone absent the moment he fancied, willed, an out...to be expected. He looked again through the curtains onto the street and wondered -- for the umpteenth time -- how far he would get. Another hit-and-run perhaps, a break-in, or simply a disappearance. The pawns came with few moves...without the single constitutional phone call. His legs then seemed quite artificial.

After cutting the outside cable Vijay signaled the driver across the street, then proceeded to attach the trip wires on the rear staircase. The body should fall about twenty feet; thereafter the office safe would be emphatically rifled: Plan One.



If Cadmus chose the front entrance, in effect sanctioning a full grilling -- Plan Two -- he might even survive. The Cheka was not unduly harsh toward ample fugitives, if there was a further need. But Vijay doubted Kruse could endure the role of pariah, of lead pander and informer. The man was a two-bit sultan, a suave racketeer with a malingerer's cowardice. You need guts to face a Soviet grilling, let alone the retribution that may follow from your own cadres. A suicide was the easier option. Now his clique, nay the whole faction, would itself be suspect, hidebound. Muscle-bound! Showy muscles often compromised overall performance. He would enjoy beating the vain sot into oblivion. Another pompous numbskull given his dessert.

However, his own plan -- the unofficial Plan Three -- was the most aesthetically arresting. His one care being that Fate would permit only the destruction of the numbskull. The young actress, the other human who had marked -- 'masked' -- his life, who indulged in her theatre a burlesque of force, of might, he may not have time for. The deft slash, now inflamed, required adept clinical intervention, proscribed for the time being. The rezident was emphatic here. 'You carry an identikit, a smell.' Plan Three was thus in jeopardy. Yet, if he pulled it off, the death he planned for Cadmus the Clown would be an apt prologue to a reckoning with the brazen actress, so deserving an existential encore -- were his Kismet not so parsimonious. Time had always worked against him, perhaps this time even reality, as defined by his paymasters. Was the nuclear shell itself even real? XM 785 -- but a clerk's number. He could readily imagine his well-

screened patrons using such bait to bag the more wildcat networks, to trace the latest maundering of the Defenders of Allah.

## **PART TWO : MAD HOUSE**

### **TWENTY-TWO**

Randolph Glasser was maybe at a gallery -- or perhaps a cannery. Somewhere. He knew he was not among the living: no one scowled at him and he was no longer hungry -- a mixed blessing. Yet the scenes, the tableaux before him were lurid as remembered, his unease every bit as septic. Like being stuck in a musty room, a warehoused commodity that didn't quite meet accepted standards yet defied deposition. Something like that. Bound to smell and ooze a bit in time. The ooze settling into its surroundings....

It was curtain time Saturday night, October 11, 1986, at the Dog the Father Et Cetera on Granville Island just under the main downtown bridge network. A full house sat alert and expectant as the lights dimmed. The patrons had come anticipating the worst -- in short, a roisterous good time. Angels and savants could stand in line.

The company's last round of dramatic fixes dealt with contempt, ethnic elitism, and a vulgate sense of fascism. Tonight's offerings would disclose fascism and masculinity as old locker buddies, kibitzers at least in

rape, genocide and necrophilia -- the standard jockstrap stench. The theatre marquee read, in part, 'Guaranteed to Save the World from Pandemonium'.

The Royal Canadian Mounted Police Musical Ride was the first civic staple to be discovered sprayed with preservative. Horses came out riding constables -- the usual false-form comedic horsemen reversed. After the ride and return to the stables, the horses and riders appeared as separate actors. The riders, played by female actors with attached noses, pointy ears, and thick long eyelashes, polished up bridles and saddles, and groomed nervous unattired males who clutched about them the standard blue and gold RCMP blankets. The nonchalance of the riders was of course fluent — even while shoeing a becalmed male, i.e. fitting him with a brogue.

The with-it audience seemed to agree that men reduced to nervous mares, executing stilted regimented maneuvers, was an overdue hilarity. Only Randy Glasser, now dead, or badly refrigerated, sat sardonically looking on. But then even he was astonished. A female classmate who had died before him in an auto crash suddenly 'materialized' at his side. His hair was surely alive and tingling. The girl, whom he liked yet ever antagonized, now appeared as a kindred shelf mate -- while enjoying every minute of this footling pantomime.

A short essay of his, buried away in his desk, which would later be pitched unread into a Glad trash bag, was he felt topical. He had illustrated it by drawing an elegant lady rider lovingly carrying a distraught

horse through a venturous forest -- an underworked point, to be sure, that women made exemplary mounts, which he hoped to fox-trot with now. But the reaction he got from his classmate when he flashed this 'cartoon' was that men were every bit as freaked out on horses. "You ever hear of a male jockey?" Randy was only momentarily intrigued. Jockies, horse lovers? Whipping the daylights out of some filly toward the finish, running the guts out of drugged stallions -- horse lovers? It was a disagreeable use of 'love', but one he realized he might have to get used to, if he was to become anything but a swank observer -- in this disconcerting limbo.

"Why is it you see mainly young girls in riding academies?" he belatedly answered back. His classmate took this in with a twitch to her mouth. "It's simply a dumb conventional habit." "No ecstasy involved at all?" he urged. The girl twitched again. "You've confused the issue. No one carries a horse for gawdsake. It's riding that counts. Watch the show."

Randy decided the joke was his alone. He stood accused of horsing around. Affirmative resolve did not play games and knew the ropes. As Freud said, there are no jokes and passed a life proving it. And with no jokes even less sex, simply more method assault on earth and great silences beyond. It was all coming true. The insomnia of witness.

Like a case of shingles or sweating before the atomic core of Vijay Kurtz, or a crackling tinder-dry Middle East, particularly in the Jihad swelter. There you negotiated with some very high horses.



“So how in hell does a bobbin carrying a horse relate to the uptight Musical ride?” his companion said, further amazing Randy that his soliloquy had been heard at all.

“Great cultural resolve, I think. Standing on one’s own, regardless. A Feminist precept. No perks. Boils down to a matter of bones -- mainstay elegance, stature, mobility. Beauty is no longer skin deep.”

“That’s a big help.”

“I’m afraid so. Bones bare the beastly beauty: bones bear up or rattle our poor cage. The bones decide. Gravity’s nude.”

The pause darkened.

“I think only a crackpot would draw a girl carrying a horse.”

“I think the animal lover can do naught else.”

“Naught?...”

Thereafter, she returned to the show before them. Yet he continued mindful as ever. He suggested that cultural nag was not unlike cosmic drag (a cart before the horse): only auteurs felt fine *in* the saddle. The one honorable job left was mopping up. He could cite Mother Theresa on that. Some folk wanted to look good both on and off. Then there were those who wanted the brute to look good, content, well-cared-for at least -- a decidedly modern female empathy, he felt. The clues were part of the wider show.

For instance, just before he ended in his watery grave in Howe Sound, he had strolled through the RCMP stables at Expo 86. Both mounties and horses made a good-looking team -- elegant structure, fluent co-ordination

in both camps. Only the horse had a better behind. Mountie breeches often denied the wearer a bum (fear of comparison or too long in the saddle maybe). Anyway, the mountie bum could be all lurking cavity, even as his nobby calves, sculpted in lustrous chestnut leather, were the tease of any genteel Houyhnhnm. So: even odds thus far, more or less. But the natty T-shirt, which the swanks wore when grooming their horses, polishing bridles and such, presented a dilemma for the female mountie: a bra resembles a harness itself under such flimsy attire -- another beastly humiliation, no? And without a bra you can easily miss a beat.

“Only an uptight nerd would notice,” his classmate interjected.

To which he replied, as amply as he dare, “Him especially. The perpetrators of modern fashion have spent decades rapturously studying and monitoring what makes for arresting flesh. Today it is the only real flesh left. Designers lose their jobs -- the shirts off their backs! -- for failing to have a sufficient number of people take note. Resentment and disappointment sell more fanciful halters than gravity has apples -- which tends to explain why quantum dynamics, with its many tiny swells and shells, is a ticklish investigation. So few bones, you see: no ‘specific’ gravity, as yet.”

His companion was again absorbed by the live performers. Calmly Randy continued.

“To ‘Maintain the Right’ -- in humanistic parlance -- is to happily tend the beast. The Musical Ride is the modern game of stolid humans as gentrified-asses, capable of strutting to a regular beat, with nervous flesh to chide the male for daydreaming of titular reward or a connois-

seur's leg up." His companion faintly smiled: one of the horses had briefly veered out of alignment in the formation. "You don't say, Polonius."

The next offering of Father Dog, however, proved less deductible. Religion was a sorry bean. You even had Christian clerics themselves pulling for the parodists, for those who would turn God into a chauvinist boor unable even to make up His mind. Whereas a female deity would have decided long ago that she really wasn't that interested and returned to things like her pulsars and photons (accrued interest and travel). Man's a beast so put him away. But in a gentlemanly way. Randy was by then thinking of the Berlioz Requiem to get through the night -- for what followed left him a sullen malingerer.

The issue at hand was a papier-mâché crucifix of an obese woman that disappointed a few critics in the front row. A crucified anorexic was found elitist, little better — as was a playmate figure with a dour medical précis posted above. The company then swiftly retried Judas, acquitted on grounds he was slandered from the start. Pontius Pilate and Saint Paul were sent down as a shirker and agitator, respectively. All three lacked 'empathy' -- the diacritical rendering of sympathy. Jesus got off with a warning not to patronize his mother, indulge his peculiar conceit, nor condescend to the woman by the well. And stick to his carpentry.

Randolph was a little let down when the skit ended without God being exemplified as a Gibbon or Killer Whale, or some further addendum to the Mystical Body. But when a comely lass began reading from The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women, in particular The Castration of the

Pen by Erica Jong, he listened in silence, barely recalling the sensuous verses of Alexander Pope, especially the 1st Canto to *The Rape of the Lock* -- now a background shroud, the merest cosmic noise. *What dire offense from amorous causes springs; What mighty contests rise from trivial things...*

But he was really a bit of a dolt: the ex-communication was easily foretold, the phallus being inelegant all along — today risky and impolitic as well. A sick feminine woman on the cross was not the subject of *The Messiah* yet he was too swacked to reconsider how the early church fathers wallowed in a goading homophilic ecstasy, adding innumerable muscle tremors and knots, fiddling endlessly with the waist cloth, some authorities sanctioning unadorned ‘misties’ -- all, in the end, designed for what, to soften the skeptical lady, make her a sympathetic consort? The poser of the ungainly question -- How else was it to be accomplished? -- was liable to be stoned to death. Passion, as stated, being newly dangerous and undeservingly seductive. So: he might worship the modern woman, paint, sculpt, film her in every more stoic determination, but could cohabit only if he was: a selfless and rather homely utopian, an androgynal hobbyhorse with superb timing, a large modest genius with unflagging regret (convulsed with sensitivity, especially for past atavistic, laconic insensitivity), or an enlistee of the new presidium-style protocol -- not a great change from the past, but with fewer playable variations, variation being reliant on a main theme, unlimited variation being no variation at all. As the alert Oscar Wilde had one of his unduly miffed characters postulate on the alternatives -- ‘a passionate celibacy is about all we can look forward to’.



By then Randolph's doughty classmate was applauding heartily as more arrows were shoved into a female St. Sebastian -- or so he imagined -- played by the lovely student he remembered with such fondness, now a bloodied stage martyr. He tried once more to sleep, found again he couldn't, then listened on as the players shifted to deliver a pasting of chauvinist South Africa in a dramatic poem about penetrating into the front line states and beyond, ejaculating (sperm as poison), and wondering why everybody seemed so reasonable; discrimination equalled indiscriminate AIDS -- killing humanity. If it was a sendup, he missed the bridge.

Then the earlier team of vigilante revolutionaries came on stage, automatic weapons belligerently seeking complacency. A perky dead-silent pantomime went on for two or three minutes, the cadres stalking the aisles, looking for someone, becoming not quite comic and thus further skewering the ominous quiet. While the search went on a separate actor recited examples of The Worst Possible Opening Sentence to a gothic novel. One offering was sufficiently silly that the cadres swiftly turned on the reader and trundled him off stage: bathos and zeal back to front. Footsy and kill-the-pig. Or he had missed the point entirely. Or imagined...

"But don't you get it, it's really just a roast — hitting bull's eyes every time, right?" The stand-up comic's rite. And out." His airy companion had decided to offer some timely advice. "Look smartass, you've got to learn to hate the crime but love the person. That's a Buddhist idea, see. You've had a ball, now its over. Think unisex. It's a workable synthesis."

"Caesar as potentially every man's wife?..."

After a slight appraisal she briskly said, "For sure."

"Some think that's why Rome overlooked the barbarians."

"Well, if that's so, Caesar was simply way ahead of his time."

The logic seemed immutable.

"The basic thing," she continued, "is that the masculine hangup with ascendance is fear of dying. Women endure attrition, exhaustion, decay. They can outlast any fucker. That's why women get stuck with unpaid housework and men get to goof off. The masculine ego is always taking off, a real treky enterprise trip. Silly mothers stacked to paradise. Sometimes a brother. Anyway, the flight of the patriarchal soul. The proverbial gospel trip."

Every gesture Randy could make seemed inappropriate.

"Lookit, if you're being nice out of habit just remember that Judeo-Christian convention offends women as much as Mein Kampf offends Jews.

"No, I won't forget that."

"I mean, my gawd, you hear of American football coaches drawing cunts on their tackle dummies!"

Randy badly smiled. Poor eager sots, he wanted to say.

"Gawd."

"The times."

"A bunch of mutual bullies and crybabies."

"What do do?"

"Christ, do something. Go and scrap a Trident submarine. Recycle a

woman-hating Hemingway novel. Rape a pro-lifer if you're really stuck. You're got a damn Y-chromosome, use it!" It seemed both proper and disastrous not to take her at her word.

The standing applause was rudely affectionate and prolonged.

## TWENTY-THREE

Maureen peeked through a narrow separation in the curtain. Each night since the attack, she and her fellows who had confronted the maniac carefully surveyed the theatre audience. All the principal players believed they would recognize the saboteur were he to reappear. With or without a disguise.

It was the second-last night of Expo 86 and Maureen planned to join the pole-vaulter on the fairgrounds at ten to watch the laser show and fireworks. They agreed to meet by the IBM information kiosk near the B.C. Pavilion. It would be her one opportunity to see the augmented display staged the final week of the fair. The finale on Sunday coincided with a late rehearsal of Saint Joan. She had begged off this night's Act Two fatigue duty, the revolutionary-style scrutiny and scapegoating of the 'audience'. Her replacement, a housewife and mother who came late to acting, seemed eager to wield a submachine gun.

"You'll be late," the woman said, smiling.

"Just my luck to miss the bastard," said Maureen, still dressed in the

prickly pear suit of St. Sebastian.

“I think you scared him off,” said one of the regulars.

Maureen closed the gap and turned to leave. To her stand-in she said, “He hooks to the right, remember.” Easily they hugged. “Shoot yourself in the hip, comrade.”

The tiny loft she shared with the female cast had been breached that night by a couple of boyfriends. “No fornication in the dressing rooms, please,” someone called to a couple kissing in a corner behind the horse-mountie costumes. “Two minutes,” the manager called from outside. Maureen, swathed in her ivory, scarlet-ribboned body stocking, sat amongst the company of fatigue-dressed revolutionaries, some smudging their oiled cheeks with lamp black. As she pulled out the hooped arrows, a dynamo in the mirror behind worked the loading chamber of an automatic like a mastered Rubik’s cube. The one veteran actress and fluent dipsomaniac gazed at her reflection and purred. Another performer pushed in to scrutinize her complete ensemble. “Why should just the cute boys go to war!” More suavely the veteran commented, “The best there are, gramps.” Said one of the suspect boyfriends in a nasal voice, “How can we prove ourselves in combat if they won’t protect us from the women.” The hisses were shrill and prolonged.

It was a sight that gradually entertained -- Maureen, seated before the expansive mirror reassessing her discolored lip, nude but for a towel and shorts, her makeup almost removed, the St. Sebastian body suit hanging nearby, the company of slangy, mock-menacing, green-khaki guerrillas be-



hind. “Eyes right,” someone said prompting an instant of open amusement. She too laughed while yet fingering the towel about her neck, pretending to wipe away a remaining swatch of releasing agent, an antic the older actress noted and Maureen sought to disown. Thereafter she ignored the inquisitive eyes and fussed with the lip, remaining seated until the eager partisans were called to their battle stations. But as she quickly slipped into jeans and pullover she realized she was not unmoved by the attention. “It’s something everyone should seek out at least once -- a matched pair,” the daunting woman had said, fastening to the dare the reedy intellectual lure. That inveiglement Maureen avoided because the woman was too much her very own watchful mother. A realization that dealt its own fine insinuation, she thought.

But the notion lost its edge when she emerged from the theatre and saw the familiar lights of the Expo aurora. That wide vivid scene proclaimed a durable mix of girls and boys having fun. Gaiety, vivacity was the exception among in-turned relations. To have a rollicking good time you needed a certain underlying innocence -- ‘possible only among strangers,’ she handily said to herself as she headed for the boardwalk that passed below Mulvaney’s Tiffany-checkered restaurant, the further darker end of which berthed her kayak. She could feel the conventional reclaimable generosity well up within her as she paddled across the haplessly named False Creek (a narrow, dredged, utility waterway) to the small marina and the elegant hull of the Pacific Swift, the scale-model of a vintage sailing ship assembled and launched from the Old S.A.L.T.S. shipyard on

the Expo site. Five years ago she had sailed about B.C.'s coastal waters on a masted frigate sponsored by the interdenominational Sail and Life Training Society -- one of the highlights of her young life -- the essential enjoyment of people as enchanted willing children, still removed from the straining imperatives of sex. The Pacific Swift, modeled after an 18th-century brigantine, would shortly be towed to Victoria for the outfitting of tackle and sails. Thence it too would carry more young people through the showcase waters off the rugged coast, teaching them the technical and cooperative skills of seamanship. Now, in her kayak, she paddled by the hull twice, once stopping to feel the cool smooth timber before stashing her light craft beneath the pier near a squat older sloop. She was cautioned to discover a police launch moored nearby yet could see no one about or onboard the gently rocking craft.

After a careful scrutiny of the immediate environs she skipped onto the embankment and over the low chain-link fence that extended down from an Expo field office and repair yard adjacent the the Old S.A.L.T.S. dry dock. A few people strolled beside the quay, enjoying the one area of the Expo site where you could move freely. A stone's throw beyond you reached the sloping back of the massive Egyptian Ramesses II Pavilion where a talkative crowd snaked back and forth before the entrance. She had met her friend several times on site, usually after the fireworks, allowing herself to be propelled by his quiet enthusiasm to most of the rides and all the pubs. Their impromptu introduction took place near the Ramesses colonnade itself. He had been preparing to take a picture of the

pavilion. She strode by with a few members of the cast and a sleeve button on her jacket caught in the circlet that linked his camera bag and shoulder strap. They were both caught off balance. After a brisk joint apology they parted only to be smartly pulled back toward one another. The ensuing disengagement of the button proved both ticklish and slow. By then he had taken her in and was asking many questions, some in the form of chary invitations. “You haven’t seen the Irish Rovers!...” They ended that first night not in the Rover’s noisy Unicorn tavern but in the Rose and Thorn, the mossback pub in the British Pavilion where, during a fussy ID check, he casually voiced a fancier’s knowledge of the single malt scotches offered there as an exclusive in Canada -- talk that nicely parodied the doorman’s scrutiny of Maureen’s young face and driver’s license.

From the beginning he served as a baffle to the overwrought attentions of the veteran actress whose social vision divined ornate neuroses, particularly in conventional pairing. The disappointment in her lean face when she learned who Maureen was meeting was unsparingly pathetic. To allow oneself to be publicly chatted up by an impetuous homegrown stud was, as the Nemesis-eyed woman said later in a letter, akin to suckling a Priapus. His words were unsuspecting though, nor those of a natural talker; he was instead putting forth considerable and unusual effort on her behalf.

Almost everything about him heartened or paced, including a degree in engineering physics, which she learned of incidentally that evening when he expanded on his love of fireworks. Had the lineup that first night



at the Unicorn not been interminable they might never have met again. Her noisy distracting crowd, which he hadn't anticipated, turned out to be Unicorn bent and enlivened the long lineup awaiting an inside table; only a few were willing to try the Rose and Thorn. There he calmed down and eventually described in near poetic language the most transient of nature's flowers -- fleeting wide-plumed fireworks. Their chemistry was simply speeded up. Now, as she passed the Ramesses columns once more, she recalled him wondering aloud if such immense verticality typically rose up or hung down. They are simply in between Melchior, she had quipped. For support. A lot of support. A few seconds later he asked who the hell Melchior was. When she evasively referred to "just another smarty" he said a Melchior was also a pole-vaulter he knew. That was when she learned he was something of a firework himself, soaring near the Canadian record -- an unaffected remark that now seemed minutes old as the Space Drop vehicles whispered softly above the thicket of voices on the concourse. Ahead of her stretched an aurora of fairground overhang, the blue-and-red monorail streamers and a bevy of spotlit marquees, logos, and detailed billboards of exotic space hardware. The crowd itself moved as a dense fluid atmosphere. The leaves on the Linden trees by the California Pavilion and Korean fretwork canopy had just begun to turn and drop, the timely end of a pleasant generous season. She wanted someone to be close to that night and was conjuring up a felicitous moment when the heavy man hove into sight, walking on her right, converging from a small waterfront plaza. He came within twenty feet, forcing her almost to a halt



to keep that distance, in effect jamming her further into the throng while he seemed to move unimpeded. In the same measured walk he crossed to the entrance of the Telecom Theatre where he turned to stare after her as a shaded stealth satellite. Her sensation was initially one of lagging stage fright. She continued to move forward, even as she looked back with wavering and annoying trepidation. But as suddenly he vanished. She cursed her sudden disorientation and puckish looks, the young impious face that seemed fated to tease and estrange. With senses so scrambled the least initiative became precarious. Reserves were drained just assaying her whereabouts. Twice she passed the West Gate -- a folly that defied explanation. If a part of her strove to seek out an official at the gate, something else kept straining forward, some catty demagogic anima that willed to demonstrate its independence; she had marked him once, she might do so again. Her strong elegant legs seemed to move independently of a mind advising caution, holding out, voting against catching up with the ogre and drawing him into a fray, screaming as only a determined young actress might. Surely that would ticket the bastard, give him a notoriety he couldn't slough off. Surely. Numerous happy Expo celebrants must defuse, arrest an open assault. So she thought, while remaining unresolved. Almost debating the matter aloud she spotted him following perhaps the distance of a softball pitch. Suddenly she bolted while passing the Roundhouse with its black steam-shrouded engines.

At last she worked as one, her destination the lively crowd and sensuous music at Zorba's Greek restaurant with its renderings of benevolent

Vancouver celebrities smiling down from the outside facade. No sooner was she inside, however, amidst the happy clientele than progress was stayed by a belly dancer who lingered next to a keen patron holding a large bill. Someone demanded she sit down. She squeezed by the sensual lady and accosted a busboy on his way to the kitchen. He in turn wrinkled with preoccupation and pointed to a formal chap standing outside on the terrace. When she struck out in this direction the heavy man blocked the pathway, a bandage scoring his cheek, a slash of war paint against a violet, night-dark complexion. For a brief minute she played a kind of checkers game with him moving from one table to the next, striving to gain access to the suave host who also moved with great zest from patron to guest -- while the dark sturdy form, half-masked, ghosted the intervening space. She kept saying to herself how silly it was. Just tell the first sober face what's going on. You've got a voice for pete sake. If that person proves too timid or aloof tell another.

She had almost made a complete tour of the restaurant when the belly dancer moved once more toward her truncating the shortest route, the swart blank face following in her wake. The two seemed to bait her together, the dancer's eyes especially alert to the newcomer's movements. Not again, dear, she seemed to say. Not here. Here, above all, rudeness is forbidden.

Mincing, prinking bitch thought Maureen. She let the dancer pass then spoke complainingly to an attractive couple who seemed alerted until the heavy man also approached the table and said in an astonishingly def-

erential voice, “Maureen, Mrs. R’s been waiting some time now.” He smiled leniently at the young distracted couple with a stoicism that careerist Maureen read as masterclass putsch. The couple seemed concerned, yet cognizant of a youngster who might well be a brat. She was astonished, fully aware how her young immature face must deceive. Quietly he added, “We’ll miss our bus.” Her extravagant reaction, instantaneous and full of needy oaths, rendered her simply petulant, even hysterical. “...This isn’t happening...that’s the most ludicrous, stupid, crappy, served-up...!” The black-suited host she originally sought approached and, taking her by the arm, led her to an exit. There he asked her to calm down. All the while the heavy man existed as a model of propriety and stoic devotion, his gestures those of a long-beleaguered guardian prepared to go home alone. “Mam’selle,” the wary host said at last, “please go to the West Gate. The closest, easiest, also best person to tell. Please. Thank you.”

This said he displayed in an engaging smile an obliged trust of them both, then left her on the concourse and returned to his genial celebrants. Calling him a hopeless jerk, and her ‘guardian’ rather worse, did not endear her cause. Turning dumbly to her stalker, still subtly exhibiting the lenient gestures of a quaker, she suddenly, yet almost lackadaisically stepped forward and struck him, twice, once hitting his sandbag neck. Ineffectively he put up a lagging arm in a show of defense. When she paused she could hear ambiguous murmurs from some tables on the terrace, and among a tarrying audience of passers by. “Just piss off will you!” she yelled at last. Lucidly he told her to stop behaving like a child. She turned and stomped



off toward the West Gate. An older lady asked if everything was all right. Maureen hesitated, long enough only to hear his reply — “She’s determined to stay, I guess; she and her mother had a tiff” — followed by a scintilla of laughter. Briefly he spread his hands, palms up. She could not believe her senses. The sucky wormy performance had bagged an audience!

To gain access to the West Gate she had to wade again through the crush of bodies filling the central concourse. Within this amorphous cell, ever changing its constituent shape, free movement required unflinching will. Once she found him directly behind her, his low voice strangely confounding. “I had expected more from an actress.” She jostled some folk next to her and found herself jostled back. A young girl called her a bitch. He was momentarily gone, then when she wasn’t looking his low voice somewhere scored her attention anew. “I could have put a ribbon on you, many times.” Again her anger swept away restraint. She stopped, turned and called him a string of choice names including, most adamantly, a coward. As a noisy harriidan she at least got attention. Stonily he concluded she was an impossible child then bled into the throng. People looked quizzically at her. A heavily made-up girl said looking after him, “Don’t go away mad now,” to further marginal laughter. Again the jocular response was so hopelessly inapt that Maureen all but searched out the director. Instead she turned and continued more irascible than ever, cursing not putting on more makeup.

Twice she passed the tall official near the re-entry turnstile, her mind still recouping. So she got escorted him, made a statement. What then?



The bastard would still be at large and she have accomplished nothing. Think girl, think! Did he not risk a great deal by stalking her here? Wasn't his openness a pushy arrant gamble in itself? Could he be absolutely certain she hadn't alerted someone -- set out to do some fast tracking of her own? She believed he was somewhere watching her, carefully judging her performance...the swine seemed to know that side of her well. She realized a conference with a grounds official would give all away; her partly-chosen predicament was not something communicated quickly, like direction to the nearest monorail stop. She moved then into the shadow cast by the West Gate's restroom station where, certain he was still before her, she might think and observe without an audience.

She had of course told the pole-vaulter the pertinent details of the assault on the company and knew he would be readily, unsparingly supportive. Might the two of them not do some baiting of their own when they finally met that night, while another slipped out for sturdier backup? Was there not at least a possibility of cornering the bastard? Whereas, if she simply skipped out now, the scene would remain every bit as skewed and unresolved. Soberly, she realized her friend would not arrive at their appointed rendezvous for another twenty-minutes. She'd come early to take in the fair on her own for a time. She'd seen so little of it.

In the end it was as much the dare that thrust her back to centre stage as her disgust with taking what she imagined a wimp's exit. She also decided the more or less stationary crowd gathering for the fireworks along the waterfront could be a useful thicket for a nimble rabbit -- particularly

if sometimes on all fours! It was this dense static mass that finally impressed her -- made a deadly assault inherently difficult. Certainly conspicuous, discernible. Not something he'd want. So she imagined. In due course she would meet her able friend, swiftly explain, and regroup. So she chose to believe.

Her decision made, she decisively struck out for the waterfront promenade where she could reach the fireworks crowd as quickly as possible. Why hadn't she seen it before? Her two current options seemed then obvious: the relatively open space near the water, where an assault might be nimbly drawn out and thus conspicuously viewed, or the packed unyielding mass facing the firework's barges where you moved as a mole or not at all.

## TWENTY-FOUR

From his muzzy bootless bower restive sightseer Randy was astonished by the thug's incontinent assurance -- and the young actress's avid if naive resolve. He would have elected the wimp's way out, given how crowds could in fact assist an efficient killer. With stint-less foresight and princely luck he just might stave off a few hazards: he had been startled to learn how easy it was to indirectly influence events on earth -- where he was himself so effectively stalked, abducted and slain! In his new condition he couldn't dramatically alter immediate, set circumstances — send in a SWAT team, that sort of thing. He could, however, give a few things a

gentle nudge now and then, and those nudges often amazed in their net result: akin to altering the genetic growth pattern of a clan's nose by redirecting a certain pollen, and so stamp the character of a forthcoming age! The Cleopatra factor he thought of it. The clever part was predicting an irreducible result -- what the singular nose might in fact accomplish, undo, even as the variables extended to the infinite. Given the temporal restrictions here, the nudges were exponentially exacting. Yet they existed.

Now it was simply a matter of squeezing out an extra few minutes, somehow. He knew Maureen hadn't anticipated the lengthy distance separating her from the rendezvous beside the B.C. Discovery Pavilion. The crowds along the waterfront varied in both density and motion. It would be a tricky calculation. The terrible part was he could just as easily make things worse. That too was gratuitously attainable. The paralyzing possibility. Time and Life, he no longer doubted, played on nobody's side. Everyone 'Here' seemed more or less reconciled. The eminent, unobservable Zookeeper one day decided determinism was a vapid sinecure and presto -- fright and danger, and occasional excitement when one was immune to menace. The whole trial package might explode, vanish without trace. Fireworks was a tricky business; beauty upstaging intelligence, not the other way round. His old classmate briefly looked in and registered her disgust. With the U.N. facing more budget vandals, the world's needy piteously multiplying, the world's weapons and nuclear arsenal going to seed in ethnic hothouses, et cetera, what in god's name was he doing fussing with a spoiled bitch actor? "She almost deserves a shakedown. And you

sit there in an idiot funk.”

“Please carry on,” said he, freely waving her by. “You save the world. I’m trying to get from the Pink to the Blue Zone at Expo 86.”

“You’re bananas,” she said just before drawing away. “Talk about a vintage snafu.”

That distant remark coincided with Randy realizing his pretty charge still hadn’t traversed the Green Zone, a fact that now compromised his plans for the Pink. He swore vengeance against himself and, as the saying persists, dug in his heels, an expression he sensed considerable nostalgia for. An excruciating two minutes later he feared his meddling had cost the girl her life. Inadvertently she glimpsed the knife and momentarily panicked. If Randy hadn’t nudged one Expo patron to step out of a concourse floodlight, to hinder the ogre’s sight line, she never would have glimpsed the blade. Such common minutiae were readily consignable. The timing was off however and the weapon discerned in a heavy sleeve. At times he felt like an air traffic controller attempting to redraw a downed radar screen. The intent might be estimable, the attempt ever risky. Yet he seemed to improve as he played, like the compensating insomniac. Mustn’t give up now, old sock.

Then he wondered if he shouldn’t simply let the clever young actor handle more of it herself. She had quite miraculously recovered her presence of mind and was again avoiding her attacker with considerable aplomb. Down the line of course lay a medley of dangers, as he vividly foresaw, any one of which...though the hazards themselves arose in



clumps. From there to there, yes, likely hunky dory. But there, by or beyond the expansive Soviet Pavilion and things got tricky. A nearby monorail station both shaded and perturbed the crowd. Astonished, he watched her heading toward it away from the waterfront walkway. She perhaps misjudged the congestion about the busy playground area designated Child's Play, or been possessed by some maternal instinct — didn't want to involve youngsters. The psychosomatic data needed to field such a question would a while just to tabulate. Impulsively he elected to reduce the movement of the two to a rigidly physical, almost chiaroscuro pantomime. Why hadn't he done it before? Dinkelspiel! He found himself flagrantly determined.

As she passed the gyro rides below the monorail station the first moment had come. And he could do nothing. The variables swarmed as the crowd thickened. The chain of incidents he might trigger by redirecting any single discrete movement could be tragic. He put his hand to his mouth and held his nonexistent breath. The ghoul was practically on top of her, the crowd about noisy, sluggish, apish. Fitfully he viewed the entry wound euphoric Vijay Kurtz had planted in his acutely graphic mind. The lung would be collapsed, the windpipe and vocal cords in primary shock. She would fall quite undramatically, help arrive much too late.

Then, horrifically, she disappeared from view. Frantically he raced through a series of visual planes to find her crawling on hands and knees through a mêlée of legs, her stalker looking about rather peeved. For an instant Vijay had neglected the exclamations in the crush ahead of him.

When he did comprehend his anger flared. The prey emerged by the Saudi Arabian Pavilion heading back to the waterfront. Then an opening in the press of bodies allowed him access before she could clear the main crowd, a gap Randy too late realized he might have closed somewhat: the young boy could have dropped his cone, on which the girl behind slipped thus causing a hiatus, a few steps further on, the girl's later fall not as serious as first imagined. One of the precepts up here — collateral mishap was a sign of disfavor! Again Maureen all but disappeared, this time resorting to a half crouch, moving diagonally from the Asian Specialty House and its rooftop waterfall to emerge on the Air Plaza amidst the panoply of auspicious if eccentric airships and balloons. She paused briefly by the early tri-engined plane with a white plaster mechanic standing atop a stepladder, her mind again susceptible to haste, reconsidering too the sharp scream that would at least place her in a defensible cocoon -- just as Randy concluded he needed but a parallel energy capacitor, a single human whose nerve and ferment matched her own. He was bitterly disappointed to find no one about who might serve his coalescing plan. Nary a soul. Everyone was either too content or too exhausted: exploitable urgency and acrimony were scarce afflictions at Expo 86. He almost overlooked the nearby scene that so slowly and erratically gleaned his attention. Something was happening on the terrace beneath the plastic rainshroud of the Praha Restaurant in the Czech Pavilion, and Maureen was headed in that direction. Would she not see the refuge it might offer? Decent lighting and a few close witnesses? With a few nudges could he not

get her inside? The more he looked at the restaurant the more he looked! Yes, that just might do. The necessary momentum was already underway. The barest increase, a slight additional crescendo and voilà -- the entire scene might be transposed. One well-placed *sforzando* ‘nudge’ and the kinetic force he sought was abundantly at hand with enough surplus clout to decompose any historic deviant. That would do surely. Just don’t bruise it old darling. He had never really performed impromptu before and this ‘doing’ demanded great precision and poise, the emotional satisfactions of which promised to upstage all past efforts. He rubbed his invisible hands and urged a slight increment of exhaustion on the girl that would keep her resting in and about the wonderful air machines a few seconds longer. Well, well. A deftly-orchestrated Merry Prank then, Eulenspiegel.

The scene that unfolded in the restaurant was being played out by two of Randy’s favorite human beings: mayoralty candidate Harry Janos, lawyer, lover and leftist leveler, and columnist Doug Till, patriot, faithful husband, decorated war veteran, prisoner of war, and perhaps Canada’s lone vintage conservative. Just moments before, Till and his wife were seated on the covered terrace next to guess who -- none other than an unusually debonair Harry and a pretty heedful woman who were just finishing their entrées of the roast duck with its special blend of caraway and salt rubbed into the skin. Both men laughed aloud at first. To imagine on a coincidental night out that Fate would place them cheek by jowl in the same restaurant was lumpy oatmeal indeed. If Till felt constrained to request a different table he quickly changed his mind. Besides, the restaurant was full and



they had waited nearly half an hour. Grin and bear it he said to himself, and pray the gamy prophet kept his mouth full of food.

Conversely, Janos was at least grateful his entrée was finished. Till had always given him indigestion. Perhaps he might return the favor. “The duck is excellent,” he said, hoping Till would cravenly order something like the filet. And he was dead on target. The avidly-lauded duck was the offering the Tills had come for especially. Very quickly Randy decided he had two things working for him: Till’s annoyance at being seen concurring with Janos on anything, and Janos’ determination to appear knowing and suave before his younger attractive companion. By keeping the adrenalin plentiful he hoped to bring the inchoate rush to a head, the sizable energy packet he needed to forthrightly ‘nudge’ events. Neither man would suffer unduly and Vijay would be indisposed long enough for Maureen to both contact an authority and make the rendezvous with her boyfriend. If he could pull it off he would be content for a decade at least. This promise he offered up to any stray invigilator who might be watching.

As if on cue Janos got the fracas off to a promising start by audibly telling his observant friend that Till could afford such a night out because he, Uncle Harry, had recently granted struggling columnist Till an interview. Till threw his head back but said nothing. At first. His wife smiled. Randy pushed every switch he could find into its red band and forthwith Janos asked Till if he had enough for the duck. “I always pay my way, comrade,” said Till. Said Janos with a cartoon smirk, “Pretty nice place don’t you think, Till? Hardly expected a good ol’ boy showing up in a



commie palace like this.” To his attractive friend he added, “Till is a feisty red-baiter. A bit mental on the subject, otherwise not a bad egg.” Said Till stoically, “Well, I always like to see what a country’s aristocracy is eating.”

“See what I mean,” snapped Janos, “a mental case: he can’t order a goddam meal without mouthing off like a fuddy-dud.” To Till he said, “Sorry, no Chicken Kiyev.”

Till audibly said to his wife, “I seem to recall the Kremlin dining on Chicken Kiyev during the Ukranian famine.”

Thereafter the words became glazed with select poison. If Randy was incidentally sympathetic to the veteran, this night he wanted Janos’ rhetoric to be persuasive and galvanizing as ever. Nothing propels a leveler better than the strychnine pinch of his own resolve. Putting God in His place in a keen and adroit manner is the headiest of elixirs, and Randy needed all the righteous indignation he could summon, his protégé, as he now thought of Maureen without apology, a stone’s throw away from the restaurant and closing, as he expected, her assailant in sly diligent pursuit. The timing had to be perfect. He pushed all switches into the purple band. Beyond that you needed a special dispensation. Janos was soon redolent with indignation. His young friend flushed but impressed. Even the waiters were seen occasionally covertly nodding. Harry’s critique of Western narcissism and materialism attained fusion potency during the Armenian brandy.

“ -- And the Expo fireworks! Those damn pointless fireworks...while

there are unemployed forestry workers who don't have a pot to piss in!"

Till of course matched taunt with taunt, lashing with lashing, the rising harangue drawing the manager and scolds from nearby patrons. Yet Randy kept all available energy packets rammed into the purple band despite the many shocks he received when one slipped back into the red and he sought to return it. Eventually he could see a kind of aura about himself -- he was actually glowing -- a bright molten form astrally visible! Suggestive of a tiny moon-lit astroid. He was astonished. So: he represented more than just a litter of uncharmed quarks after all.

Then Till abruptly turned off and shut up, leaving Janos half sitting, half-crouching, still more Bakhunin bitter puckering his tongue, the manager patiently trying to intervene. The timing was utterly crucial Randy knew, the energy even in the purple band marginal -- so he went for broke. Just as the manager imagined a hiatus, Janos started in again and Till, after a further token effort at disengagement, rose to the occasion and grabbed the bill from Harry's table saying he could afford both, something few privileged Soviet or Cuban or Nicaraguan citizens could do. As encore he called Harry a crappy old babushka, in response to which the fist that Randy glimpsed earlier rose in the air, intending nothing more than to swipe the bill back from Till or simply emphatically knock it out of reach -- just as Maureen swept by, having unzipped the plastic rain cover at the end of the terrace, followed by a nonchalant Kurtz. In her haste she bypassed the main entrance to the terrace restaurant, the projected destination apropos Randy's 'nudges', and scampered out the opposite end of

the terrace. Kurtz quickened his pace and passed Harry's table just as the fist, poised as a lateral upper cut -- now propelled by the unauthorized force of the black band -- swung out to seize or obliterate the bill. Instead the mighty swing, nearly sufficient to stun a pig, caught a preoccupied Kurtz with a bull's eye to the groin as he strode past. Randy had intended a grazing clip to the chin but again the timing of his last nudge was off — and the arc began a bit too late. A Hollywood sound-effect's man could not have produced a more sinister sounding thud. Kurtz hit the floor, Randy proclaimed, like a turd from a tall horse, while Harry shrieked in pain, holding his hand before him as if thrust into a meat grinder or a So-cred 'bond' fire. Till, no longer incredulous, helped Harry back to his chair and urged the manager summon emergency help. Harry looked as though he might faint, the man on the floor like a beaked worm. The alarmed guests stood looking on as so many witnesses at a café bombing, which Randy decided it very nearly was as he worked feverishly to minimize Harry's trauma. The initial survey disclosed several macerated carpal and metacarpal bones and compound fractures to the lateral bones of the forearm. He crammed two year's work of the world's finest orthopedic teams into the next seven or eight seconds (accidental or provisional schemozzles might be so attended to if the human expertise was stable and enduring). The man on the floor began retching convulsively. Randy decided Kurtz might suffer a little longer. At last he sat back to watch a belatedly anxious Harry painfully raise his arm, after taking in the man he'd just zapped, and litigiously say to himself: 'Well, your Honor, I just don't



like being pushed around, I really don't. And this bloody eager chap just happened to get in the way.'

It was Randy's inaugural celestial satisfaction. Soon he would reduce Vijay's injury to that of a severe testicular hernia, enough to keep him immobilized for a time. Initially the blow had badly bruised the acetabulum and displaced the sacroiliac joint. But first and omnivorously he watched in full-spectrum display the meeting of the two lovers. A memorable moment, full of authentic feral alarm in the pole-vaulter as Maureen told her story. A group of Expo guards, officials and city police stood about the terrace and restaurant entrance when the two returned. The relief Maureen felt on seeing the prone bent body taken out on a stretcher was as thorough as mortal woman might manufacture without preternatural help, which Randy decided would be impertinent to augment. The girl, he reminded himself, was just the tiniest bit disappointed. The accident deprived her of the finale to a febrile baiting exercise, though any latent grudge she felt was countered by her essential relief. She gave a full statement to a serious young detective just as the fireworks laced and brocaded the sky. Later, on their way to the pole-vaulter's car, a short block from the fair grounds -- Maureen had decided to retrieve her kayak the following morning -- they dallied in lickerish clinches in doorways, lanes, the hidden receiving bay of a pub. Doing so she roused the poor lad to an ardor that made the drive to his flat adventuresome, the final event, a mauling just inside his front door, a kind of duel to the first dying, foiled by an unprecedented and magnanimous (almost self-consciously hilarious) mutual ex-



haustion, a dithyramb Randy watched till they both slept. It was perhaps the first time doubter Maureen felt the dichotomy of the sexes worth excusing. The pole-vaulter had never been as high in his life. But Randy's delectation of Maureen's naked form as she slept, turning occasionally with the fluid grace of a jaguar, was cut short when Randy's etherial classmate stormed in wanting to know what the hell was going on.

"Well, as you can see," Randy responded somnolently, "all heavenly bodies are majestic, even at rest."

"Jeezez I'm not talking about that you airhead. I'm talking about that animal terrorist you neglected and let escape from the hospital."

"Moi?"

"Yes, you you podunk!"

"Oh come on."

"You actually took away most of the pain, didn't you? You even reduced his injury you fruitcake! You screwball!"

"My sweet bee eater, the police were there, the..."

He was abruptly cut short.

"You think that nervo is going to be confined by a few rookie constables? And if that is not bad enough -- you have bloody well ignored that son-of-a-barge out there!"

"What barge, where?"

"Holy Geronimo!..."

The girl was upset, an alien vexation distorting her usually resolute look. Randy felt distinctly uncomfortable and quickly sought interior

sectional displays of the barge then, his consternation growing, a detailed lay explanation of the complex apparatus before him.

“That’s awful,” he said at last.

His companion looked away, over an ocean of contempt. “And you sit here covertly watching a porno flic.”

It’s the only way you can decently watch a porno flic, he wanted to reply, but didn’t have the nerve.

“Christ. The lectern in the Simon Fraser University quadrangle will be burned to a crisp.”

“Well they say its an ill wind...well surely there’s something we can do?”

“Yeah sure. You might want to have a listen to the current conversation between the happy Ruski bomb removers. Even they fancy gambling for chrissake.”

As Randy raced through the pertinent exchanges, some by phone, two in Stanley Park, one in an engineering office in Port Coquitlam, it became plain the informed consensus was the device wouldn’t go off, the complex stand-in timers should not be activated by the fireworks launchers and the barge’s jewel could be disposed of later, without incident. Whereas an open declaration to one of the legations would badly perturb the fragile status quo. And media notification would cause its own half-life storm. The indecision remained though. There was a possibility that something unexpected could happen, and removal should remain a consideration. They would await a decision from the rezident.

“So what’s the problem?” said Randy sitting back.

His classmate once more looked away, her incredulity bordering on the bathetic. Wryly, sluggishly he decided he’d better check out the mental states of the decision makers. A minute later he stared long and hard at the chief removal expert’s disposition profile. The man was a master at self-deception -- and blazé about the bomb. He actually willed the destruction, believing half the world moribund anyway, and the foretold Armageddon, overdue for impatient utopians, the true final solution. Randy was speechless.

“ -- A nice kick in the head, no?” his companion said at last.

It was also too obvious, from the detailed summary he just fixed in his memory, that no conjunction of energies existed to alter the flow of events, at least none ready in time, leaving only the recourse to an emergency response team, an option no one in this afterlife might appropriate. He and his companion could nudge and rescind but not alter a probability already statistically accomplished, human fanaticism itself being largely immune to nudges. In the current mundane drama, fanatics only participated. Indeed, the suspicion lingered that the celestial big shots enjoyed multifarious fireworks as much as anyone.

“So, does that mean we might as well turn back to the happy fated groopers?...”

The words were no sooner out of his mouth than they tasted of soap. Spoil-sporting was out of season. But what could he do -- have done. His philosophy of attending to the individual was the extent of his resolve.

The needs of the many-too-many were ineffable, infinite, cosmogonic. Take it or leave it.

The girl was obviously leaving it. She walked out of his shell with the finality of a teacher who had just flunked the entire class. The possibility of a solitary millennium or eternity loomed before him. Oh well, weren't a lot of clever insects supposed to survive? And weren't these capable of extraordinary evolution and, for the connoisseur, inestimable beauty? Unthinkable as the prospect was of no longer hearing Rossini or Mendelssohn, or watching the sexy Maureen beguile a shower, he would just have to look and listen more carefully when the crickets took up their hind-leg fiddles. All to be done. As a kind of insipid chaser he noted the efficient device was in fact a radiation enhancement bomb not an 'explosive' type. The Simon Fraser lectern would likely remain, a dubious consolation he kept from his smoking companion.

However, when sleek Maureen woke a second time the next morning, and seemed less certain about the esteemed rapture of the night before, Randy was moved, nay besieged, to find her looking to the stars for council, as if a boundless capacity for both open curiosity and abiding maturity was in danger of terminal collapse, or irradiated half-life cynicism. He warned himself he was simply a dupe, easily infatuated with estimable splendor, the first perilous step to -- misfortune and imbecility. Yet he decided he'd better have another go at the celestial machinery. His isolation would be far worse if he left off now. Only on storybook earth were his treasured optimistic dreams ultimately realizable.



Again he was oddly, imperturbably determined. He would keep the nudges going till the designer of the Jollyball Machine in the Swiss Pavilion ran out of inspiration, about the most any mortal might expect of a plodder. For those who inadvertently missed that paragon exhibit of Expo 86, the Jollyball Machine was a vertical pinball circuit that a steel ball bearing traversed on its eager way to find succor at a Swiss Hotel! It coursed everywhere at first, from an uncooperative bank to a cavalier gondola lift, from a wrong unforgiving staircase to a nearly disastrous pit and pendulum; from a slow boat on a spooked lake to a fanged tilt-a-whirl going nowhere at the speed of light. Yet back and back the stubborn ball went on that roller coaster ride, it's determined momentum invincible. Was it not a wonder when a machine actually throve as a machine, the peri-apt of its maker? The timeless resolve to seek a refuge, a haven, was in essence an endeavor that would keep most guys and dolls on the ball and all festive fireworks propitious! His own credulity seemed then capable of unextinguished flight!

## TWENTY-FIVE

Everyone in the lower mainland was getting up Sunday morning to go to the fair.

For spread-out Western Canadians the spectacle was astonishing, like seeing your navel after a long winter or discovering a neglected but lovingly assembled tuck box. Parents seemed less putative, children less petu-

lant. Old and young shared smiles.

Putterers moved check by jowl with buccaneers, plucked faces with bearded, painted ladies by unkempt drifters, promoters by panhandlers, toothless by unweened, gnomish next the officious, squirts by mossbacks; a lot of callipygian on all sides! The ones who stayed away were likely climbing sheer rock faces, undergoing emergency surgery, killing slugs, or heading for Wreck Beach, the lower mainland's human zoo. The crisp clear morning dazed below a spectral sun and flash-blue sky. Those who had used up all their Expo passes, who waited in front of hotels for buses to take them back to Calgary or Spokane wore long faces. For them carnival had ended a day too soon, truncating the anticipation that would grace the last full day and night of Expo 86, the final night of fireworks being touted a singular epic event on the West Coast.

People came in many sizes, striding, skipping, running, ambling, coasting in battery-powered wheelchairs, carried aloft on codger's backs, struggling mightily on canes; in ubiquitous shorts, t-shirts, sweat suits, jeans, sneakers; in daring woven stretch pull-ons, insouciant taffy tops and crew jackets. A curator might have noted as well: pristine gym wear and fatigues, weathered and painterly jeans, nauticals, stripes, whites, caftans, ponchos, blazers, cutaways, jumpers, Nehru jackets, sleeveless roustabouts, cashmeres, turtle necks, saris, buckskins, dirndls, maxi-skirts. Also: baseball caps, berets, Dutch caps, stetsons, narrow brimmed fedoras, turbans, kellies, headbands, skimmers, beanies. Hair styles: bangs, bobs, chignons, feathercuts, upswept, down-swept, straight, waves, roach and Roman-

esque, windblown, boogie, butch, mohawk, brush, stubbled. Skin patinas: veined, chamois, periwinkle, hamburger, mouse, burned and blanched. To cite a few nugatory details. Wise folk carried heavier sweaters for the sudden sodden evening cool. Cameras hung like august pectorals or unhooked dildos. Members of the Christian Motorcyclists Association came, honorary past patrons of the WCTU, Pit Bull breeders, Moonies, and at least one rapt Doonesbury reader. Keen souvenir hawkers and lovelorn Hare Krishna plied sluggish lineups. The strenuous media panic over AIDS was still months off, privilege castigators idled -- all manner of dereliction seemed as fleeting as the rare clouds. Even the blind quickened their step. Only a few bicycle thieves sought out faulty guards.

In short: a dynamic human race to which you ineluctably belonged. Only the most indentured of ideologues would gainsay the possibility. Particularly on that radiant Sunday. The expectation of a further long look was irresistible. The party where most everyone came, got up and mingled. As trivial and momentous as that.

Inimically, Buff and Naomi Rutquist lay awake before the alarm, both wondering about this unusual morning. They had tried to be understanding when Maureen begged off the remainder of that frightening messy and officious evening last, giving them as quid quo pro the pole-vaulter's number. "It was not inevitable," Naomi said when they first climbed into their twin beds. "You always flattered that impetuous side of her and naturally she took her cue." Said he, "I know I know -- you can only lose your virginity once." Said she, unprovoked, "You think so." Said he limply as

plea-bargainer, “Well she is almost seventeen.” “Just.” Yet both willed one final visit to the Pavilion of Promise that day, to pledge their troth, so to speak, and enjoy the last performance of the RCMP Musical Ride. They still did not know of Vijay’s escape via a washing chute in the Centennial wing of the Vancouver General, nor that for the terrorist that escape was the most exigent and excruciating exploit of his life.

Concomitantly, Herb and Babs Spooner planned to attend only the evening fireworks, to arrive on False Creek aboard a friend’s yacht about eight for a box supper opposite the Plaza of Nations. Now they remained on respective sides of the bedroom that Sunday morning, mainly because of a shared annoyance with what they imagined as Randy’s impulsive and insulting goofing off. The bride’s father had phoned to complain that Mr. Glasser got drunk, caused a commotion at the church, did not complete the wedding, and had to be driven home -- well, to the studio. Moreover, Herb had some demanding retouching awaiting Tuesday morning, following the Thanksgiving Monday, the final half-day of the fair. Otherwise he might have been in a relaxed state. Earlier Babs had too, out of habit, padded to the bathroom to rebrush her partial -- just in case. But the memory of caddish catfish Randolph stranded intimacy.

Returning to the primordial world, in the native bachelor flat, the self-sufficient Maureen lay on her side listening to the sounds of his intimate kisses, wondering to what extent a babe would feel different. The light of another busy day rendered it all rather pedestrian. She recalled the indelicate sight of a sow suckling a farrow of rambunctious piglets for whom the



flesh-pink teats served as a kind of fistular air bag they kept lambasting. She was twelve and visiting the barns at the Pacific National Exhibition. A sardonic shudder passed over her now, which he seemed oblivious of. Her maternal instincts were not then perhaps exemplary. Even as he framed her eyes and invoked her name she doubted the spell of the night last could be recaptured. So fleeting, so ethereal, its memory all but dissolved, the thrumming Aeolian harp yoked now to a fat sun...as she regarded mainly his fond lickerish infatuation. It seemed a hushed numinous audience, star edged, alone might reach and charm her silent whirling scream. Her beauty beggared the functional individual, turned him into a dedicated porker...a smooth nosy father she loved and loathed and willed to taunt forever. In a similar distemper had Vijay Kurtz two nights before, on his way to the theatre and thereafter Expo, planted the near-naked body of the old vagrant in the garbage bin. One deft blow and the man's squalid vigil was over. The neck broke like an old arid branch. Now, wearing an unvarnished grimace, he thumbed his way along Vancouver's Grandview Highway, a crude homemade sign reading Injured Logger hung around his slightly bent neck. He strove to be over the rockies if and when the blast went off. He had failed to find a suitable car in a serviceable bay. His injury limited the maneuverability needed for such a heist. He should have left, as expected, the night before by boat. He was now a pariah and thus on his own. He would head west then south and make contact in California. The oncoming delivery van looked most promising. As the truck pulled to a stop he smiled painfully, said he needed a ride to

Hope to see a sister.

“Climb in,” the bearded and rye-whisky-smelling driver said. “Just picked up this lousy one-way this morning. Know how it feels.”

But neither absorbed Randy nor his strenuous classmate saw the ‘logger’ climb into the van. Randy was feverishly going over the finer technical nudges to delay or modify a neutron blast; his classmate, who had concluded such scrambling unrealistic -- both she nor Randy forsook physics in school -- worked to keep as many medical personnel away from the deadly perimeter. She also managed to augment the numerical digits hurriedly written in hospital requisitions and clear extra spaces in places like the Peace Arch General in White Rock -- believing it the nearest major hospital that might survive the deadly radiation. At times she paused, like the fabled animal reconciled to an inevitable end. The logistics seemed to pale before the the political fallout, which she would have to leave till later. And to think she had nearly gone off to watch the newest magnum quasar shrug off its smoldering nursery and ignite a near billion new stars!

By noon Babs was doing the ironing and looking more cornered than usual. Facing his wife’s hung-jury manner, Herb, nasal spray in hand, found himself thoroughly peeved with Randy’s insouciant disappearance. “It does seem darned peculiar. Not that one should be surprised. He did pick up and head for Europe like a gypsy.”

Babs sighed. “He did leave a letter of resignation, though.”

It was the one point Herb could not disown. To simply have left, gone. Abandoning even his sketch pad and Stim-U-Dents. It wasn’t really like

their Randy.

“Think I should call the police,” he said at last. It was neither question nor statement, yet Bab’s incipient glower converted it to a resolution. Equally vexing with the complaint about Randy being disorderly and not finishing the wedding, was the discovery of the ruined camera. He must have really tied one on, the shyster. Moreover, wouldn’t he, Herbert Spooner, be in a further bind if his deft retoucher was not working by early Tuesday? Yes, he’d better call the Surrey RCMP. Wouldn’t really do any harm.

The inspector who came was already planning to pay the Spooners a call and surprised them both with his incisive questions and comments. Just that morning he began subsuming the disparate facts: the singular sketches of the theatre attacker by an artist, whose address, reluctantly given, was the same as the Spooners; the rude incursion into Our Lady of Sorrows Parish Church by two goons seeking the artist, with damage to the loft and staircase reported in detail by a lay priest; and the chap escaping from emergency being the same thug who savagely attacked members of the theatre company, including Maureen -- affirmed by the hospital staff on viewing the sketches. By the time Babs brought in some coffee both the inspector and Herb were unusually quiet. Wary Randy had never disclosed his making of the sketches, and neither Herb nor Babs regularly read the Vancouver papers. Each missed the issue where the sketches by the ‘Heedful Artist’ appeared. The television account simply sited a ‘Theatre Witness’. And when phoned, the bride’s father had given

only a précis of the ‘hooliganism’ in the church. His lawyer would call in due course. The incident at the Praha Restaurant and the inspector’s interpretation of it were also revelations. The circumstances were indeed upsetting. And Herb had noted nothing unusual at work. Certainly no sign of a break in or maniac stalking the studio.

“The facts are highly suggestive but we have no serviceable joins,” the inspector said at last. “Mr. Glasser was not likely an extortionist; the pictures were promptly published. We might consider a lone vengeful assailant but for the apparent planned assault by the two heavies in the church. We have yet to hear from all our inquiries but thus far our attacker, and/or attackers, remain unknowns.”

Herb was trying hard to think of something intelligent to say. The inspector beat him to it.

“I’d like to see Mr. Glasser’s room now.”

Herb had anticipated yet momentarily forgotten that likelihood and gingerly smiled. He was about to explain when he decided the inspector should not be delayed and forthrightly led him through the kitchen onto the back porch, the lawn, and finally to the slip ladder then in the ‘up’ position, which Herb pulled down then pointed up the steps.

The investigator was intrigued. “Not what I expected.”

Herb smiled. “He wanted a cheap place to stay.”

“I take it you built it for other reasons.”

“Oh yes.” Herb could feel a sneeze coming on. “We did more or less agree it would be temporary. For the summer mainly.”



The inspector remained censoriously silent, glanced about the yard and cautiously ascended the narrow ladder.

By then Buff Rutquist was adding a few topical touches to an old standby sermon — his consideration of Michelangelo's unfinished sculptures, those figures never made whole, given a univocal identity, and thus a purpose and sanctum, as he thought of it. He was elucidating the strictures of mundane imagination about the time Vijay Kurtz drove the van near Princeton swearing at his mushrooming balls, the pain newly acute. The sallow tattooed man in the back appeared asleep. When it was dark Vijay planned to dump the corpse and drive through the night. Strangely, his failure to deal with the girl eclipsed the portent of the explosion. His whole body throbbed, including the cut. He would need more antibiotics, perhaps even a robust pain killer. His rage was poisoning his life. Someone somewhere would pay to right these obtuse aggravations.

By sunset the crowd at Expo had swelled to well over 300,000 steadfast celebrants and long lineups still congested all four entrance gates. Expo traffic staff stood prominently atop garbage receptacles in the Plaza of Nations, megaphones in hand, urging the wall-to-wall bodies to go and come on respective sides of the monorail stanchions.

When the Strathcona Chinese Dancers began a traditional Fan Dance on the Plaza stage, accompanied by a recorded orchestra reminiscent of a thousand Viennese fiddles, Vijay was leaving the office of an elderly Penticton physician who gave him a sample bottle of Tylenol III and a prescription for a broad-spectrum antibiotic. Vijay explained the wounding as the

result of a chance encounter with a mugger, the hernia a slowly worsening complaint he would attend to soon. He paid for the visit with the tattooed driver's B.C. Medical Care Card. The doctor mentioned he was looking forward to the closing ceremonies at Expo on the telly. Vijay agreed they could be interesting.

When it was dusk he drove to the Penticton Game Farm near Lake Okanagan where once he awaited a dispatch. After cautiously piloting the van around the entrance barrier he headed off to the interior pens where, following another vigilant reconnoitre, he painfully hefted the body of the driver, bearing a few ambiguous head bruises, over the fence surrounding the Musk-ox. Almost immediately one of the hairy brutes charged and slammed into the form, three times before backing off. Vijay had considered using the Leopard pen, adding first a few deft slashes of his own, but the area assigned the Musk-ox was better concealed and easier accessed within the park. The driver had nursed a liter of rye when he picked Vijay up. Enough would likely remain to cue a coroner. Vijay left the van by the pen and hobbled to a closing roadside fruit stand where he hitched a ride back to downtown Penticton.

By 10:00 P.M. he headed East in the doctor's car to Osoyoos, planning to head south somewhere in sleepy Saskatchewan. About that time Maureen broke her temporary partial plate and decided to go on stage gap-toothed. It was toward the end of the first intermission and she had just pulled on her St. Sebastian body suit with its trick arrows, one of which scratched her. When she reached to adjust the mechanism a similarly pre-

occupied actor bumped into her knocking the interim plate to the floor where it cracked in two. After some lively commiseration from co-stars she told them to lay off: St. Sebastian sounded quite good with a slight lisp. On reciting an example or two everyone in the cramped dressing room concurred. “Fie and pith on it Mothy,” a kneeling telltale said, looking athwart an arrow that pierced a polyester-moulded breast as Maureen added more paint to her still faintly discolored lip. On stage St. Sebastian affected a thilly thwit delivery and the expectant audience loved it. “Dy-ink ith an art, like everthink elth.”

Also by 10:00 P.M. the Cambie Bridge, which traversed False Creek and overlooked the fireworks barges, was closed to vehicular traffic. At first two lanes only were shut down but the crowd soon swelled to a point where the police finally redirected all oncoming traffic and escorted the last Hydro bus across in an alternate lane under battery power. Photographers, banked four and five deep near the railing that overlooked the distant linked fireworks barges, freely traded lens settings and emulsion characteristics. Few noted the extra large barge in the set. Children scurried between adults and tripod legs, parents not quite keeping track as they pocketed stiff fingers. The evening cool belied the earlier Indian-summer sun. Inquisitive chatter was brisk and blithely self-effacing. Young hawkers offering tea, chocolate-and-oatmeal cookies, quickly sold out and returned to get more. The mood of the celebrants was as lively as the lights from the Expo waterfront that reflected in primary brilliance across lazy rilled waters, the palaver in part heartened by the immense array and vari-



ety of the ships and boats below, their peculiar lights fringing umbered dimensions. Elegant sloops and ketches, yawls, flying bridge cruisers further back, sleek launches, trawlers, pontoon rescue craft, catamarans, motorized dinghies, outboards, even some kayaks -- all gingerly jockeying for a good position, the harbor patrol craft directing, cautioning and admonishing on their megaphones. Even the south side of False Creek, an industrial storage site and railcar siding, teemed with people. A bullhorn on the dock warned people to stay away: several chemical tankers sat on the siding. The crowd thought the injunction suitably inflammatory and chuckled. Then a spotlight mounted on one of the industrial salients began to pick out groups of the visitors nearest the tankers, a few of whom nonchalantly left.

Many harbor craft approached but did not cross an invisible line athwart the creek a hundred meters from the fireworks barges. The Expo waterfront itself was packed scores deep. The Expo President's select company of notables sat patiently in the few comfortable seats in the Ontario amphitheater which outlooked the central barge where the attentive pole-vaulter was making last-minute checks. The imminent display would be unprecedented for him and the West Coast. He set off the preliminary test, an icy rosette that exploded 60 meters up, yielding a wind reading and diffusion/refraction measure. The crowd sighed and whistled its approval. No surprises. All systems go.

The Spooners sat in thick sweaters sipping Spanish coffees on the aft deck of an old converted seiner. Their hosts, a retired photo-supply whole-



saler and his wife, owned a string of photofinishing labs, one of which Herb patronized. The host was explaining, again, that his automated system and general laissez-faire policy precluded the monitoring of proofs. Herb had just returned from mounting a camcorder on the bridge and warmed his hands about a coffee glass. Babs wondered aloud how they would ever get out of the crush of boats. "With great patience," the hostess said stifling a yawn.

That comment Randy picked up when at last he focused on the new barge's group launchers. His classmate had all but given up. She was somewhere nearby sullenly trying to get a score of lower mainland physicians summoned to house calls beyond the fatal radiation zone. Was it not amazing that so few doctors made house calls any more? Her crippled father sat in a wheelchair atop Queen Elizabeth Park, her separated mother, living then in Calgary, replaced by a housekeeper, while her younger sister stood with a boyfriend near the small outdoor theatre by the B.C. Discovery Pavilion. She had decided, given the marginal nature of her options, that her relations would suffer least where they were. She nearly got the sister's boyfriend working late at his trainman's switching job, an option that would have delayed their arrival at the Expo site, though not sufficiently to keep them beyond the lethal emanations. Not the slightest probability arose of steering the two into the interior, to Harrison Lake, for instance. Nothing so distant could be invoked to upstage Expo. When she bombarded her sister with thoughts of Harrison Hot Springs the sister laughed aloud. She and the boyfriend were lollygagging over the phone,

deciding when he would pick her up. The sister impulsively asked if he would not rather go to Harrison that evening, then burst into laughter, both at the idea and her boyfriend's incredulous silence. "Harrison Hot Springs?..." he said at last, almost as an expletive. "Just a joke," the sister added, wondering the while where in hell the idea came from. She had been given to doing a lot of dumb things that day -- like absently filling a washtub full of water. But as she stood in the Expo crowd, acorn curls fetchingly back against her boyfriend's shoulder, Randy began to show signs of renewed life. Quite suddenly a simple artful idea hit him. Had his love of music been less keen he might never have seen, rather heard, a possible out. He was far from certain the idea had any real relevance -- he always was a technical dolt -- yet it seemed at least feasible if sound waves were significant -- here. Which he imaged they might be. Might. Better doing something than nothing. The hand wringing would be less excruciating would it not? So.

As he carefully reviewed the experiments that led to the design of the unusual fireworks being readied that night, he was amazed at the purity of resonance in the heavier launchers. The second, accented thump sustained a fundamental note very near the A thrice below middle C, establishing a ample wave front or crest that could, could it not, affect electronic circuitry? He had a vague idea of what a transducer was, and imagined something like that crucial here. Could just such a mechanism not set off some circuitry -- allied to the crucial pre-explosion timers, say? Well, why not? Computers weren't battle tanks. So, would it not be better if such a

wave front didn't crest? At least that is what his vexed mind suggested, as tenuous as that might be. His impatience and disgust with himself demanded he do, well, something! He was desperate and all options tenable. All. The 'hand wringing' again.

So what if the wave front were put 'out of phase', i.e. denied the crest needed to stimulate any transducers, a feat that could be accomplished by a vibrant sound made a split second before or after the individual launchers tonal 'hum'? The out-of-phase sound waves would collide, in effect cancel one another out and presto -- insufficient disturbance to -- whatever. Possible? Maybe. What was there to lose? Nothing. Immediately he began to amass and re-marshall all the cosmic noise in that gravitational pool of the Milky Way, converting it to partial and fundamental facsimiles. He would, in effect, speak as an upstart Jehovah -- in a voice so timed as to seem part of the launcher's whump while diffusing the sound wave to the sensitive receptors. They were surely speaking of only a few marginal decibels after all. He was amazed at the purity of the bass-baritone he could summon. Ha! A voice finally manfully bestowed from Above! For a fleeting moment he even forgot the stale warehoused aspect of his new existence -- until that is a truly awful sound burned his ears, the sound of someone on earth! very close to the fireworks, making a noise -- a groan of sexual lust -- that occasionally reinforced that lethal tonic A; in particular, the rapt sighing of his schoolmate's sister -- a growing rapturous voice hard by and sufficiently loud, invariable and perversely pitched, to reinforce the field resonance and tip the devilishly delicate balance. He was



suddenly furious, possessed of a rage he had never imagined. What in god's name was the nugatory bird up to? Such coincidental trifling could ruin everything. Yes, everything! With a horror reserved for guilt-ridden cads, he realized a chap much like himself served as the impudent lover-instigator; someone of mirror cheek -- on earth! -- was about to foil the purest note he had ever sung. The increasingly delirious earthy voice of the young lass would be just adequate to stymie his entire effort -- which as we've noted might only faintly nudge not direct events on earth. Once more his new life registered as execrable, full of waste and putrid essences. Frantically he fetched the contingent options -- sibilant surface wind eddies and the like -- all of which proved stillborn, due in part to an atmospheric inversion over the lower mainland at that time. And how typical -- of his trifling when on earth! Just the sort of fresh impertinent clinch he once reveled in. Talk about horrible, implacable coincidence: he imagined in his dense resentment the core of a black hole.

The fateful business began when a wire barrier about the easterly side of the B.C. Discovery Pavilion collapsed from the pressure of the crowd. The rush to a small forest knoll surrounding the entrance to the pavilion was on. Among the first to claim a spot near a lodgepole pine were the sister and her boyfriend. Given their position, somewhat removed from the rest of the model rain forest's new denizens, they began smooching. If the girl's older sister, Randy's former classmate, had been a rather austere type with wide set eyes and long straight hair, destined to teach Special Ed classes to handicapped children before her untimely



death, the sister was fairer, plumper, a sturdy hedonist and tireless flirt for whom the progress of Duran Duran was her essential curriculum vitae and spiritual transport. If she was still a virgin it was due more to the intimidation of the boys she necked with than happenstance or caution. Her present friend was only slightly more experienced, though not for lack of trying. As they kissed, the young lad's thumbs began to drop inside electric shorts. Because the girl felt somewhat more custodial toward her mature bosom, the tentative thumbs, still hinged to fingers outside, continued uncensored. When the boy, a couple of years her senior and, as we've noted, an intact rake, calmly suggested she have an orgasm during the fireworks, she gasped, displaying a practiced incredulity. When the import was matched by a further descent the girl began giggling, offering some resistance. Unresolved seconds later, the young Pan whispered how fantastic it would be, with a little prompting, to marry her peak to the final outburst. Fireworks like that come only once a lifetime he added sedulously. Randy ransacked each youngster's persona for some viable smidgin of shame or chagrin but found mainly mercurial appetite. The girl was a veteran nymphet. Indeed, her open decision to give it a try and so deny the fireworks something akin to a PG rating seemed anticlimactic, a near default. Only coyly did she make the heated lad promise to attempt no more than a caress as she backed herself to him, her curly head nestled against his shoulder, their arms intertwined.

And so the lurid countdown began. The girl was, Randy belatedly learned, also one of the world's easily orgasmic women -- a subject upon

which he had been enlightened by no less a mentor than Phil Donahue -- given to sustained, exasperatingly lyric sighs which the surrounding affable folk took to be an infatuation with fireworks and not a catalyst to the devastation of an entire city population. Randy might explode himself. As the slick voice of the Expo announcer began introducing the finale of the International Nights of Fire, the lad's fated right hand reached the satin nave, idling ever more insistently before what hoarse purpling Randy now imagined as the original critical mass. When the first fireworks' Chrysanthemums blossomed in the sky, the fluent launching of the nearby lass was hitch-less, sex-manual perfect. As the heady spiral began Randy somberly counted off the minutes remaining to the final climactic shower burst -- the critical period when the resonances of the multiple-launched fireworks would peak or crest the wavefronts -- and decided his despair was premature. Long before the initial golden phosphorescent Willows stretched into the sky, the girl's chin rose, head craned back, listing in a luxurious faint before the sovereign lust, her voice possessed of a new and redeemable vibrato. But again Randy's spirit was suddenly blanched: "Don't stop," she whispered, "the first one is always the littlest." The wretched boy was graffiti attentive and not a little grateful she had worn her wide poncho that night, his one spare vocal caution being, "Not so loud," to little avail. Though the crowd was then nearly wall to wall, the sighs were still stolidly interpreted by those nearest as an unabashed delight in fireworks. Randy kept alternately regrouping, re-channeling any lingering cosmic echo and rebuking the lad with the vehemence of an Ayatollah. Once again he

perked up when the second set of perfect A sighs were stifled by the boy's avid kiss -- two minutes before the finale and the instatement of the combined launchers. This second delirious outburst cued Randy's classmate, then in a despairing mute state, to glance in the direction of his oddly noisome bubble. Sufficiently alerted she came closer, remaining peripheral to his line of vision.

When thus the pagan undulations by the lodgepole pine began a third time Randy was fit to be piked, to say nothing of the precious lad, whose promise of discrete manipulation kept him teeth-clenched, barely restrained by the crowd, itself vocally grateful for the Comets and Cherry Bombs then exploding across the heavens. Randy's split-second rumble seemed all but whistling in the wind. His classmate, lingering behind, registered first stupefaction, then outrage, then chagrin, and finally, without the slightest self-dramatic moue, resignation. A full minute before the end of the International Nights of Fire she realized what her waggish companion was up to and remained keenly observant and gruesomely quiet. Conversely, Randy swore like a luckless broker as the joyful girl began again experiencing the kind of high Dr. Ruth hints at and Carl Sagan sometimes radiated when postulating life in the Cosmos.

Then a miracle happened. The lad got embarrassed and began whistling at the fireworks in hopes of screening the tuneful sighs which, as the moment took hold, went swiftly deliriously flat -- the most exquisite flat A below middle C Randy had heard, first a quarter- then half- then three-quarter wail worthy any fervent minaret crier recalling the world to a lim-



pid peace as the Cherry Bombs obliterated the lower sky. The girl's piquant tones even startled Randy's watchful heavenly companion. The timing couldn't have been better -- what you'd expect of a consummate programmer. Wonderfully it appeared as if he planned it so, to the last tonal nuance. The all-out mastery looked positively prodigious, even his classmate stymied by a buoyant inclination to acquit.

With each increasingly sovereign surge the girl's voice went lower and flatter still -- all the time avoiding the lethal tonic A. For the very first time in his sorry existence Randy imagined actually doing something. His ethereal yoke-mate stood behind watching the blossoming fireworks as he self-conducted, unstopped the heavenly organ and roared like Jove -- an astonishing, almost numinous revelation, like seeing a mythical beast materialize in a great tapestry (not rather some telltale leachate on a warehouse shelf). Randy did his best to make the discovery of his classmate behind an utter even embarrassed surprise, after which he collapsed back to the median plane of his wave function, his bright glow fading, though not without a few sweaty sparks spiffing off into space. He managed a self-effacing smile, to comport himself as a gracious concert virtuosi. He half expected a token rebuke but even that evanesced. His former classmate seemed moved by the effort, even though she belatedly realized that his grand aria was in fact irrelevant. Perhaps he didn't understand or hadn't had time to bone up on the actual fuse mechanism, as she had, being calmed and placated by the discovery. The shell was in fact governed by a radar proximity fuse. Which remained in tact, and would withstand a firing force of up



to 17,000 g. But she knew he had tried, done his stolid level best. And she was getting tired of admonishing a lout whose education and imagination seemed irreparable. She was also newly aware that he might be the only boyo in that corner of the cosmos. At least for now. She smiled. Some times you have to make do with the sluggards.

Conversely, the more Randy looked at her, the more his confusion grew: she was actually unerringly pretty, a Pleiad he'd never noticed before, possessed of a lambent sylphlike nebulae. It must have taken him ten to the minus sixteen power (a relatively long time up above in the interminable wait) to realize that far from believing his clever exploit a lucked-on misdemeanor, she may be inclined to acquit, accept as a given the likelihood he hadn't been vicariously ragging another pretty drugged human. He couldn't believe his eyes. She was even loitering about his cosmic shell, looking at the few mementos he'd picked up in his afterlife wandering. She stopped before a moonish lens cover left on one of the Apollo landings which a solar storm had eventually charged and pushed off into space. He still anticipated a sandpapery lecture. But she merely replaced the cover and turned to look candidly upon him. There was no mistaking that wide Cassiopeia gaze, so lucid, empyreal. He doubted such a felicitous conjunction of the spheres would occur for several more eons and spectacularly fled into her arms, grateful celestial wraps were so insubstantial.

As for the couple in the B.C. Discovery Pavilion's rain forest, they remained locked together long after the ground about them returned and

was vacated. It had been Randy's last 'nudge' to release the lad from his rancid furor. Seconds later the two were obliterated by the outgoing crowd, abandoned entirely to their very own insular, bewildered, desperate longing.

## TWENTY-SIX

The Reverend Buff Rutquist was writing in his diary. He had decided to give Expo 86 a favorable rating despite the wood sculpture outside the interdenominational Pavilion of Promise. The carving symbolized the dilemma of commitment in the face of bad luck -- an impoverished mother balancing a jug of precious water on her head while her babe slipped from her arms and headed for a fall. An estimable theme, except that he found the work needlessly stylized, a caricature even of the woman, a distinctly dull clodnocker look, thick as a plank. Must modern art ever be so insular, inapposite? The times were hard on waxy traditionalists. More than once Maureen had called his sense of beauty fascist -- in other words, according to his lexicon -- pagan!

But manifestly the pavilion was a success. The ministry survived to the end of the fair despite several scrappy moments when the funds dwindled. The building's stylish roof evoked inspirational comment from a lotus blossom to a Carmelite's flowery hat -- surely happily ecumenical given the intended artistic motif of a dove. His next sermon would deal with sharing and cooperation, themes he had neglected. The spirit of

Expo gave him renewed hope he might line up behind his church elders less plaintively, believing the Eucharist must triumph in the end whatever the current folly. If the makers of the Spirit Lodge, for instance, the magic tableau vivant of the GM Pavilion, esteemed the powers of craft and illusion, they charmed many thousands of visitors with their integral dancing spirits. Buff made a work note to comment upon blithe spirits. That struck him as a suitable epitaph for the fair, despite the later frozen lineups. Wasn't the lively expectation the measure of the success? Yes, he must get in the habit of expecting a knockout credo from his modish church.

But these genial thoughts were concocted before the rock beat began issuing from Maureen's room. The uncommon success of Dog the Father et al permitted her to buy two new speakers. With alarm Buff noted the fresh flowers Naomi brought to his desk that morning shaking, actually quivering in the lovely Imari vase she picked up at a bazaar. At first he imagined a mild earthquake. But with each of the accented thumps, which the wall and corridor seemed to amplify, the flowers vibed in near-synchronous accompaniment. Suddenly his dancing spirits were less nimble. That beat was the pulse of the Apollyon, and if there were no Apollyon, then that beat surely must invoke, summon Him. He was nearly prepared to reconsider H. Reinhold Niebuhr's thesis of man being moral, society the corrupter, an idea that accommodated shared sinning -- catalyzed by the savage hypnotic universal beat. But that excuse no longer worked for him. Augustine's and more recently Solshenitsyn's discovery that the beast lay within had resurrected his own lost, quaint, ridiculed belief in a

hierarchy of souls, which the Bible but not his church expounded. His initial witness of cherished young Maureen boogieing to an orgiastic drum had been merciless, perhaps the first intimation his celebration of her nubile form was more on the order of an entrapment.

But now the beat, which stirred even the late hardy buds in his Imari vase, seemed capable of obliterating two millennia of struggling civilization. Surely if hysteria, catatonia, even golemism were fashionable panegyrics to describe a rock band, as Maureen pointed out to him by placing a review of a rock film by Pauline Kael in *The New Yorker* (one of his earthly teas) before him, then what chance humility, compassion, sacrifice? Surely Ms. Kael's enthusiasm was a harbinger of the chic 'super' ego that might flinch at nothing. Dear Lord, even enlightenment and message songs came now scored with a libidinal onanistic beat. If missals might be fun, then catharsis was an obscenity. What was the spirit of Mary Magdalene, the sorrow of Job, when backed by conga drums? Would the promised new Christ go to Golgotha doing the latest beguine, bolero, boogaloo, belly bod, hip hop, even as the lash leapt to the beat -- as it did in parts of *Jesus Christ Superstar*, that bewildering terrifying part when the guitars and drums reached orgy pitch -- when the Savior was scourged and Buff's daughter boogied more seductively than ever. Wasn't the confusion of violence with delight the only likely result? And wasn't that precisely what his idiotic church willfully downplayed? Giving in to such 'throw away' music. All reflex buzz and whump. Marrying elimination with creation, innovation with reveling. Thump thump thump. The drummer in a witless ec-



stasy that even flowers must pay attention to. Thump thump thump. Who couldn't forget the pervasive pain -- and be ever more vengeful when the narcotic pulse ended or was interrupted? Thump thump thump.

There was little flirtation here: the beat had to be indubitable (the only time he would use such a word), supreme, sure, emphatically anticipatory. The galvanizing omnipotent beat -- sovereign, eclipsing, extirpating. It could bowl you over. Seduce, flatter. You established a cosmic time signature: the protean principle of uncertainty quaked before the beat.

Then Buff could hear the clank of her exercise machine. Clank thump thump. One could hardly get more regressive than that. Clank thump thump clank thump thump. Push and shove in concert.

At last he had enough and stormed out of his study, strode to her door and without thinking angrily opened it -- something he had not done for years. Starkly before him, clad only in a pair of worn briefs marked by a tiny maroon stain on the gusset, she lay on her back, legs upright swinging apart in ankle harnesses attached to sliding wall weights: an oversize sling-shot taking aim. He quickly closed the door though not before the clanking stopped. He muttered something about the sound being hopelessly distracting. Seconds later he heard the implacable thrust of a door bolt. Throughout it all she said nothing, or nothing he could make out.

He turned and went back to his study. The sculpted sweated form, suddenly overtly stilled, privately pulsating, had involuntarily scolded him, defaced his otherwise reasonable pique. The clanging resumed moments later, more assertive than ever, followed as editorial comment by a new re-

cord with razor-edged guitar scoring an endlessly stopped beat. Then the music and clanging abruptly ceased: he was, he might assume, still more than a lodger, a last-minute reprieve noted just as he left for the garden and the old summerhouse to sit among his wife's prize begonias, where he attempted to dismiss the incident and carry on with his sermon.

Yet that aspect of his daughter's commitment also distracted him. She seemed of late to be working on a form that would parody his very notion of femininity, especially her shoulders and arms, surely of late the envy of any young stripling. What uneasily returned to his memory was the scene that greeted him the day before when he fetched her from the gym. Since the attack the understanding was that either he or Naomi would see to it that the impetuous daughter got a lift: neither wanted her using the car on her own. The daughter complained of the delay and threatened to hitch a ride. Naomi overheard and became unusually expressive. Languidly Maureen acceded.

When he went to the gym to pick her up he politely inquired after Mr. Kruse and learned from the receptionist, a vivacious gossip woman, that the owner-manager had been oddly absent, couldn't be reached, and hadn't called to cancel appointments. The staff was not amused. A special confusion arose over a video camera left standing by one of the latest exercise units, an apparatus that plumb bobbed the body for digitally-monitored maneuvers. By then Buff and the receptionist overlooked the gym, the exceptional apparatus midway across. "It can be especially good for low-risk hyper-ventilates as well as lumbar and sacroiliac neglects -- as

young people sometimes are,” the woman promptly explained, sensing diffidence. It had been for Buff a daunting surprise to discover soaked Maureen geometrically flexing on the complex unit near the conspicuous camera. “The funny thing, no one seems to know much about it -- obviously a dinfo or something, you know a detailed promo, yet there’s nothing doing in the daybook. Even the lights by the camera are rare in that they convert to ultraviolet illumination. Mr. Kruse always was a locked-in techie.” The receptionist seemed to enjoy herself, her boss’s puzzling negligence an opportunity.

“How long did you say Mr. Kruse has been absent?” Buff entreated, as much to keep the information flowing.

“Two nights before last -- and just with a new season underway and an upswing in bookings.”

In the car Buff’s detached daughter barely shrugged, her newfound wariness still in play, due, he believed, to his blunder the other afternoon, though he had noted that the outfit she wore in the gym was cleverly casual -- louche came to mind as he mused how age was unforgivable, so unsightly, so often addled. If he comprehended less he suffered from an ornate guilt for doing so. “Have a good workout?” he said at last trying to sound unassuming.

“It’ll do,” she answered staring out the window.

“I was very annoyed the other day, and acted rashly.”

“Forget it,” she said interrupting him. Barely stifling a smile she added, “You may see the entire package on stage ‘round Christmas.” It was a sim-

ple goad: she had all but decided to play the new part, that of the stripper, in a cartooned body suit.

They said no more the remainder of that strained drive home. Just the day before Buff was informed by his tense wife of the most recent thespian exploit -- 'the charismatic renewal of nautch dancing' -- indirectly quoting the whimsical director. They had sat in silence, the gadfly stings sapping sufferance. In the summerhouse these scenes flashed before him as treacherous as a debate on liberation theology. Stupid as doves; clever as serpents.

Early the following morning the police inspector who presided at the Praha restaurant imbroglio suddenly arrived to interview Maureen again. The man's expressionless cornstarch face was out of place against the close-kinky hair and natty blue suit. He offered no apology for the early visit, seemed himself unrested, and waited blankly in the living room while Naomi went outside to fetch her daughter who played with a neighbor's roisterous mutt. The two women emerged together from the kitchen, Maureen in a damp sweat suit, Naomi a flowered morning wrap with light pyjamas floating beneath it. Maureen discarded a smile, shouldered her busy towel, peremptorily sought and sat on the sofa, one leg tucked under.

Again the inspector went over the events of the Expo encounter then asked a new question. Did Maureen know any of the concourse performers, particularly the jugglers? Buff glanced at his wife who in turn faintly shook her head. Maureen answered with a businesslike "No." The inspector seemed undecided for a moment then drew from a briefcase a set of



juggler's knives, narrow triangular blades ending in rawhide handles. Had she seen these before? They were stolen from an Expo performer and found, along with some gauze bandages, in a carryall in a locker at the gym Maureen patronized. Also in the carryall was a collection of dramatic readings entitled, *The Queen of the Dark Chamber*, which the inspector now produced. After flicking through a clutch of pages he paused, bemused. "One part's been underlined. 'Thy mouth...is like a pomegranate cut with a knife of ivory.'" Sedately he tabled the open book before Maureen.

Promptly but nonchalantly Maureen said the knives drew a blank then, taking up the paperback, smiled. What was funny the inspector wanted to know. "It's obviously not been read," she answered. "At least not by an actor."

The inspector seemed satisfied with this then asked if the copy was hers. The question startled Buff while Maureen remained suavely disengaged. "Hardly," she said, stretching her arms and looking at the inspector with an intimidating mixture of boredom and drollery, suggesting to Buff she was performing.

"We also found, in Mr. Kruse's office, a well worn copy of a play called, *St. Joan*, with your name on it."

To Buff's amazement Maureen seemed to absorb this too without heed. Daubing her cheeks with the towel she said the old copy was one she often carried with her and must have mislaid in the gym for it had gone missing. Whereas the other book was as much a puzzle to her as the

knives, one of which she picked up, cursorily examined, replaced. These movements the inspector carefully took in. He then glanced briefly at Buff before returning to his usual abstracted mien.

“And you cannot recall Mr. Kruse saying anything that might relate to an upcoming videotaping, perhaps for promotional purposes?” The ‘perhaps’ alerted them all.

“No. I rarely saw him.”

If Maureen had intended to say more the impulse was readily dismissed Buff thought.

After another untuned pause the inspector rose followed by Buff and Naomi, and latterly Maureen. He suddenly thanked them all for their trouble, his doughy face belying the genial words. He put in mind a sub-surface being, the head a glutinous antenna, the clothes a lucky hermit’s shell. He startled them by recommending a specially-assigned surveillance team for about a month. For Buff and Naomi the suggestion was topical; several times they had discussed the wisdom of such a shadow. “I have no objection,” Buff said after a moment’s politic reflection. “Do you, dear? Maureen?” In that portentous atmosphere the question seemed coy, ingratiating. Already they had asked Maureen to suspend her jogging for a time, relegate her exercise regimen solely to the gym.

“Why not,” Maureen responded without commitment.

“Have you no more leads on the strange man?” Naomi asked askant, as if the question were being deliberately neglected.

“I’m afraid not, Mrs. Rutquist.” For the first time the inspector formu-

lated a show of concern. “The identity on his passport, bank card and driver’s license -- part of the hospital records -- were all fabrications. In short he remains an unknown. I’m convinced only that he is clever and dangerous. We must not forget Maureen believed she saw a knife.” The actual tone of the remark startled Buff, striking him as underplayed. How swiftly he might doubt. “As for Mr. Glasser’s disappearance, or now Mr. Kruse’s for that matter, we can only guess. For a time I think we better keep a discreet eye on all of you. A minimal precaution.”

“You did say team,” Naomi interjected, her committee voice assigning details.

“Yes. You likely won’t know they’re around. Please act as naturally as you can. For a few weeks. It’s one option we can exercise.”

The inspector then turned, approached and opened the front door with a deliberation that suggested he was ever appraising the house’s security potential. Naomi continued with patient compunction. “And when did you decide on the plainclothesmen?”

“Actually they’ve been in place since shortly after the escape.” The inspector stepped outside and glanced about the entrance, still preoccupied. “I wanted a careful look first. I hope you can understand. It was not a light decision.” They could all hear Maureen censoriously turn back into the room.

A guarded Naomi glanced at her daughter. “It is disturbing. And altogether puzzling.”

After another lax pause the inspector frowned, nodded once, then

headed out to his car. Buff was a little disappointed he could see no one in the street, even as he wondered about the detective's notion of 'discreet', a mental query he kept from his wife.

"He could be an alien," she said as they watched the car drive off, her eyes also tuned to the neighborhood. "We have really so little say." Her staidness of voice had resumed.

When they repaired to the comfortable worn family room off the modern kitchen, Maureen sat in an unusual quiet outside on the sun deck, her image distorted by the many lead panes of the original doors. Buff had never seen her more distant, obdurate -- reminding himself that they might have bought the redwood patio furniture; the plastic stuff looked cast-off when weather dinged. He doubted it would be possible to get her to suspend her jogging for long. They had thrashed the question out a couple of times since the attack. She was adamant. She couldn't live her life in coventry, she said. When he deigned to describe the pertinent historic demesne, she had simply left, as she did now, loping off to the back fence to engage the mutt, leaving them staring after like a couple of abandoned spirit gates. Buff's subversive thoughts were then as limpid as new toadstools in the lawn. He sensed a whole legend missing, his grownup child a pirated artifact. Despair I can handle, he said to himself, recalling a lexical sermon; it's hope that can maul.

Disillusionment was also on Vijay's mind, though in less debilitating form to be sure, as he crossed into California from Oregon, after assuring the border official he harbored no citrus fruit in the car. What might dis-



arm a failed humanist simply peeved an able executioner. Had he not gone to the trouble of arranging an adventure for his actress-provocateur, he might have departed equanimously. As it was he felt robbed of a fine dual vengeance, his camera a guest star to an apt binary plan...the whirling girl would not have been harmed, nary a scratch, simply, perhaps, perturbed...how he liked skirting the edges of meaning. A fine pit and pendulum! A body defrocked of its soul? She might never know if Fate willed her a space and gravity aloof from his.

He was beginning to think like a mystic himself.

Theoretically, he would argue that the corpus put the idealist in a dive every time. The banality of it always inspired him. By cultivating the ideal presence or apparition one willed one's own demise. For a virtuosic cynic like Vijay Kurtz the theory of relativity was simply the wise man's infatuation with chaos. Those seeking order, clarity were often diffident about its discovery. One delighted in connections mainly as exceptions. The dramatic ploy! Happily he believed his own self-sufficiency sufficiency that afternoon on a roll.

For instance, the media's captivation with terrorism was surely one of the keys. What would the terrorists, ethnic, racial or economic, do if tomorrow not a word was henceforward written or spoken to acknowledge their deeds except say in a kind of index beside the stock market figures? Rwanda 750; Belize 45. Detroit 600, Boise 29. News without tumult was a Nielsen anachronism. Vijay would remember best one late-night telecast on CBC-TV. In wanting to hear about the picketing of a visiting Ameri-

can warship he had dialed into an attractive CBC personality who hosted a program called The Journal. It was the question she placed before an authoritative guest that tellingly entertained. The program had been devoted to the massacre of many airline passengers by nervous hijackers on a grounded jet after the jet's interior lights went out. The host and guest were tallying the moral balance sheet. That such a ledger might exist at all was the salient point. By giving the extremist a say you immediately distorted the bottom line. "Did the terrorists lose?" -- the final question from the attractive urbane woman. It was the presumption that the terrorists had a chance of winning at all that instructed. The woman was in earnest. Indeed, if Vijay saw a more touchingly decent and informed face in Canada -- in North America! (Europeans being rather more blasé) -- he could not remember it. That lovely anxious face stood out. What could charm or win over such a beauty but grace, decency and strength -- all defined by their lack. It was her eloquent desire that made his day. He was as essential to that scheme of things as intelligence, resilience and art itself. What, after all, did compromise -- negotiation! -- achieve finally but the misprision if not the denial of truth (inequity being infinite)! And what was sane hopeful man without his truth!

He, Vijay Kurtz, helped keep humanity precious -- so he resolutely believed as he turned into the campsite for the night, casting about for a lonely pilgrim to share a recumbent idyll. He would be a model of patience and consideration -- and leave at least one human that day reviving optimism. He could even innocently lie beside the creature listening like a

quiet knowing stoic...it was the crudity of violence that gave violence, finally, a bad name, reducing the Liebestod to a messy peek show. Pulling under an overhang of lofty birch he felt his accessibility, his openness, could swallow the world.

And the world seemed to be tarting itself up for such a meal.

## TWENTY-SEVEN

Who was it who said it was better to know a morning after than never experience a night before? It then dawned on Randy -- reluctant to let the impertinent joke pass -- that the idea was at least problematical. Indeed, such expressive authorities on the 'night before' as say Richard Wagner would find the matter a pale conundrum. Wagner was much on Randy's mind of late.

Oblivion, Wagner hinted (for some critics positively cajoled) was the only legitimate afterglow. The uncertainty of surviving to the morning seemed directly proportionate to the exquisiteness of the night before. You wanted splendor, ecstasy, you didn't fancy rent control. By all reasonable measure, Randy mused, after his singular encounter the past night (actually an entire week in earth time), one should be oblivious after. The dawns in a hospice paradise were every bit as gauche. He was also paralyzed by the suspicion that delight, Here, was seasonal -- that he might wait a millennium to continue the affair, the wedding night being hardly

enough. At that unenviable moment he considered the music to Tristan und Isolde suitable only to learn differential calculus by. Or German grammar if one was really strung out. Letting it direct anything else was to court disaster. To get one's quarks in a state of cascading fusion -- the molecular dynamic of the union had of itself spawned a nursery cluster of White Dwarfs -- was to rediscover cloud-cuckoo-land, knowledge but limited function, inevitable friction, the Second Law -- all that. Watching her vigilantly stomp off to attend to neglected entropies he felt awful. Someone told him it had to do with the collective cumulative resentment. "Only when all of us, including Us, have suffered everyman's pain, will the least of these be satisfied, stop bellyaching and goofing off." Randy had immediately recognized the voice of a once famous English actor who had been around -- Here -- for some time. His very presence begged the question.

"What in the world are you on about old chap?"

"That when each individual soul suffers what every particular soul has endured -- only then will we be free, non liable."

"Not a Comedy of Errors then," Randy glibly said.

"Here there are no jokes," his mentor stated calmly, adding a retributive snuffle.

"Well, I've already gone through one excruciating death," Randy said, accordingly.

"One."

"One was enough."



“There will be doubters. That it was the genuine comparable article -- compared to their own.”

His mentor’s silence then was appalling.

“You’re not really serious?”

“ -- The ineluctable scam of being ‘forgiven for the asking. Most people feel fobbed off, slighted, and are reassured only by everyone else suffering their particular pain. All deaths for all humans. Each and every one.”

Randy was decidedly incredulous. “So how many agonized deaths have you experienced, you puncture proof pundit?”

“I’ve been at it a while. Working through the pain, agonizing deaths and executions in Elizabethan England. I look in on the France of Francis II sometime next year. Or so. Daunting stuff.” It was then Randy noted the chap’s quarks had a spin more tilted than his.

“What?”

“How do you expect we shall ever implement paradise? One bitter apple spoils the entire turnover. We daren’t not remember, not know our neighbor’s suffering. It’s the current Nemesis-racked supposition. The Human reckoning. The only durable reckoning that allows for a care free afterlife.”

“Memories to share, I presume.”

“Only Up to a point, alas. You see, the topical presumption is that once you’ve been high burned at the stake a couple-of-dozen times you learn how to relax a bit. After that the skin flaying, quartering, disemboweling, acid baths, excrement dunking, rat gas, radiation frying, asphyxia-

tion, dehydration, stoning, crushing, impaling, ravaging, body part hacking, raging sickness -- to list a few -- may come off with barely a twitch. By the time you rise to protozoal, parasitic, bacterial, viral and algal infections it's a song. You don't even leave crude arabesques in the change-back rooms. So you should be warned that there are those who spy in this inurement and acclimatization of memory -- learning how to relax, well, endure -- a fraud, a malingering. Thus we will likely have to approach each impaling and mashing, each searing and sundering with the discomfort of the original. The only fair way. Indeed, some of the impetuous ones may have to begin all over again -- if the need for a guilt-free afterlife cannot be shunned. Best be prepared."

A further snuffle.

Randy was at first a little dazed but soon rallied. "So why don't we get after the swine who started the scam -- all this bloody forgiveness bunk?"

"Oh the Big Cheese is on a gourmet guilt trip. But apparently can absorb only so much. We'd go on like this forever if we were to rely on Cheesy. Can't stop fussing they say. Desperate I guess." Randy's expression seemed to please the sober speaker. "It's hard at first, I know."

"What do you mean 'fussing'?"

"It's the disappointment -- the recognition of a lack of, well, foresight. Can't get round it. It's shrouding all forbearance. Makes for much anger -- the density of spite some call it -- murderous black holes peppering the whole. None of us yet know how it will end. Even Cheesy it seems -- who was initially too easily satisfied with the rite of confession. A lot of

disappointment about that. A lot. Many of us were rather hoping to partake of the advertised paradisaal afterglow, the restful peace of oblivion. But the resentful, the ones who feel they were bilked on earth — the folks in the ‘pain panacea’ faction I’ve mentioned — feel doubly shafted, and expect a reckoning. A Human reckoning, as I’ve said. ‘I suffered way more than you, why should a mere confession excuse you?’ The crux. Thus the consolation of a discrete death and sweet ever after that some souls still dream of remains elusive.”

And so a baited Randy once more mutely assessed his filmy or ‘cheesy’ existence, this time without his dedicated classmate, who he observed a little way off stubbornly attempting to make life somehow more smooth below while steadfastly ignoring the awesome tremors above. Her Higg’s bosons never looked more breathtaking. The rest of her sub-atomic particles were practically drooling it seemed. The informed reader will recall that the Higg’s boson is the tiny delicacy other quarks and leptons hungered for to gain weight and stature!

He somberly noted the hazardous fireworks barge was pulled out late the following night with, as he’d noted, the Harbor Master’s stolid bankable connivance, the nuclear shell retrieved and dispatched to a phantom submarine, the unmoored barge itself found the following afternoon floating near the Richmond marshes. It turned out the Russians had given the terrorists faulty quick sorters; they never intended the shell should go off. They only wanted to embarrass a strong American president. As per usual, Randy hadn’t done his homework.

The firework's expert was of course vexed to find his pet stage gone from its False Creek vista. When informed of its whereabouts he speedily went to retrieve it and was only marginally relieved to see that none of his special gear had been stolen. Someone obviously had a good look though. And cleverly fiddled with the Harbor Master's log. He reproved the pole-vaulter for not hanging about for a time, as agreed. Instead, the ardent youngster, discovering his inamorata no less willing, if not as ebullient, had returned with her to his small studio apartment and smaller sagging cot, the thin mattress of which they eventually moved to the floor where the lovemaking became obstinate rather than irrepressible -- a marathon dare -- a full sense-spectrum recapitulation of which merely added to Randy's celestial distemper, particularly the finale.

An hour before dawn, when it seemed the lovers might finally unwind and get some shut eye, she asked him to sodomize her. Both Randy and the pole-vaulter were shocked, though the pole-vaulter got over his dismay sooner. "I want to know what the fuss is about before you start making the rounds," she said in the face of his wry surprise. "You said last night I was the first. So. Tempus fugit."

But before the tryst in fact began she started giggling and packed her tacitly relieved lover off to the shower where she joined him a few minutes later and, after some mutually evasive apologies, quite astonished with her suppleness in the tiny cell. "Do you have any normal joints," said he amazed. "Every one," said she. At once the compensating conventional pairing became earnest. Being partly chagrined to begin with he easily



engaged her partisan empathy. Randy calculated there was nearly enough refuge determination in the lad to launch each of half-a-dozen Comets, Bombardos, Kamuro and Chrysanthemums. Whereas her own catalytic energies might have turned the gunpowder and titanium oxides into grains of talc. Indeed, the satisfactions seemed nearly stainless until about noon when a corrosive argument surfaced. The harsh words were all voiced before Randy could devise a suitable intervention. It started over the simple matter of letting the sun in: she wanted it, he didn't, at least not until she was dressed. "The guy across from me is a high tech Tom."

"So," said she, pushing back the curtains, a piece of multi-grain toast clenched in her teeth, "he's maybe seen more than me then!"

His wary silence was such that she wondered aloud how candid a 'happy sodomizer' could be. He resented the imputation in a ready disengaged quiet that vexed her more. "But it's so simple," she said, "you could have fucked me all morning like that. Shade boy!"

A minute later they were not speaking to one another. Seconds after that she left, saying she didn't want to see him again until he sorted himself out. To add to the pole-vaulter's ire she left wearing a new T-shirt fetched from her tote sac with the following written large over small but incisive breasts: When God Made Man She was Only Joking! Too late Randy got him to think of asking if she was thus slumming the night before or simply clinically curious. She was long gone when the thought coalesced into a question, though he wouldn't have placed it anyway. He was beset remembering the merciless loveliness.

Thereafter, Randy could not recall being more plaintive or exasperated. Vexed enough to reconsider the deadly juggernaut the actor mentioned -- to scourge oneself of all hope. He decided he might listen to something rather soupy and smarmy. Samuel Barber's Adagio for Strings, say -- with bongos or maracas maybe. He would surely become inflamed, splenetic, the precursor to becoming a devout radical, a fearless pain monger. A 'forgiveness' hater.

## TWENTY-EIGHT

Picking a sensitive nose, Herb Spooner stood alone in the middle of Randy's one room hideaway trying to make sense of the broadcast clutter. He knew the laconic RCMP detective, who had arrived with a search warrant and two diligent assistants, was interested in the fact that Randy lived much as a hermit. The whereabouts of the sister remained unknown, even her married name, and no evidence of a correspondence survived. In due course the experts discovered in one drawer of Randy's small wobbly lowboy three overdue traffic tickets against the studio car, a well-made faux Expo Pass, also full-size color separations of a twenty dollar bill which the detective later said were underexposed, inexactly scaled, and likely never used. Herb was as baffled as the police. Moreover, he had no large-format camera. The Expo Pass likely began as a scaled up art rendering Randy copied and reduced -- 'tightening' the look. So Herb guessed.

As astonishing were the furnishings the talented idler had packed in during his short tenure. A small propane biffy, a camp heater that also ran off the propane, a clothes tree with a stained T-shirt and limp, worn, multi-colored coat, the small cot with a moveable meal tray at one end, on which lay a pocket thesaurus, two overdue library books, and a folder with letters to assorted editors, the majority never mailed apparently. The narrow cyan colored lowboy stood opposite housing a miniature telly on top and some tatty paperbacks. A compact typewriter lay under its base. That was our Randy, Herb decided -- living in a nutshell. The abode's two bare windows were fixed in adjacent walls. One overlooked the alley, the other the kitchen windows. From the centre of the room Herb could see a neighbor across the lane raking leaves and Babs preparing applesauce on a counter by the sink, her head a geodesic dome of precise little curlers. My Expo Omnimax Theatre he said to himself. Babs and a neighbor had worked for the same hair stylist and did one another's hair on alternate Saturdays.

Randy had been a good retoucher, indeed likely the best Herb would see, a fact that touched him more deeply than he cared to admit. As well he could talk to Randy, even if they rarely agreed on anything beyond which blemishes and stray highlights ought to go. Talking was one thing he could do only sparingly with his wife. Around her he contended with piecemeal lust, nervous eyes, and a misleading tongue. She would understand, he was convinced, but the words were miscast. "I don't know how you can gab with him," she often said of Randy when what she likely

meant was “He’s always assessing me, I know he is.” Once Babs looked out to find him with a telephoto lens. When Herb went out he discovered his retoucher with the studio’s macro lens, which had a long helical mount, capturing a rare caterpillar, one of several nature portraits he sent to a picture syndicate, all of which were rejected. Yet Babs was ever after distrustful. Never again in the morning did she roam about in her baby dolls; his favorite model had retired.

After the detectives left, taking with them several letters, the Expo pass and the masks of the twenty dollar bill, Herb too began to shuffle again through the remaining items on the wobbly lowboy Randy bought at a garage sale. Conspicuous among the first offerings in the top drawer was the picture of the gadfly standing before a prize-winning photograph of Herb’s that he had worked on -- one of the few times the smart aleck was caught smiling. Two recent sales flyers lay beneath -- a veteran bargain hunter, Randy. Several unused postcards lay below these, all of vivid Sri Lankan masks. Stubby pencils and cheap sharpeners lined one edge of a drawer. Lower in the pile he uncovered a price schedule for a word processing and printing service. In the second larger drawer lay a handful of blank reserve cards from the Vancouver Public Library, a neatly blocked page of ecclesiastical type advertised as a product of the Wittemburg press in the German Pavilion, a receipt for some jeans, some pages from the Times Literary Supplement, and a small calendar with a single photographic print neatly stuck behind, face in. Here Herb wrinkled his nose at the notorious proof, partly stained with what appeared to be a retouching



dye, of the youngster who had cost the studio the contract to the Winfield-Cranmer School, one item the detectives missed or passed over. Randy must have had the print made on the sly for Herb eventually returned all negatives and proofs his log confirmed to the school. He moved into the brighter light by the front window while keeping out of Babs' sight. What struck him now, for he had never really studied the picture, were the trim shoulder muscles and cue-ball symmetry of the young breasts. A new age, he said to himself. Some words were scribbled on the bottom. He had to fetch his glasses from his shirt pocket to read them, which he did now aloud.

‘How does one court an art form? -- With great impertinence.’

He smiled. Language like that he missed. Well, the day's young were not lacking impertinence. Maybe it was a necessity. Meaning life was getting better but no one must dare admit it. He stuffed the picture in his pocket, believing posterity would not rebuke him for doing so. What was it Randy used to say, something about bones being the clincher in the end, free of the lying fleshy mirage. Something like that. Like he once said of the new stretch knits: legs left standing on their own. The world seemed less distinct without Randy about. More relaxed, blameless perhaps, but somehow less in focus. He thought of the chubby youngster he originally built the treehouse for, who so suddenly and testily refused to go up into it once finished. The boy's past was a caseworker's nightmare which Herb and his childless wife barely interrupted and only learned of years later. Recently the lad, now a physically mature teenager, had assaulted and

maimed a pensioner and underwent yet another psychiatric evaluation. In a way Herb hoped some kind of disorder would be found -- a tumor, something. He winced when he recalled the child's many wanton acts, and his own bitter incomprehension and final exhaustion. He still occasionally found dried lumps of excrement in the house. Perhaps he and his wife were just too hopeful. Babs simply ran out of tears, he of patience. One day he struck the lad; next, a case worker came to warn of child abuse. The seasoned ward knew his rights very well. Herb could have throttled both child and counsellor that day. His anger astonished even himself.

As he turned to leave the airy abode, wondering what he would finally do with the left overs, he paused to look at Randy's old quilt coat. The coat of many colors he called it. It was perhaps functional enough yet remained sufficiently gaudy for Herb to insist Randy take an advance and buy a plain mackintosh. There seemed an age's dust on it now. He searched the pockets: dried orange peel, a crumpled Hare Krishna tract, a tea strainer -- which cued a fond memory -- also a studio receipt for a bottle of liquid frisket. He kept the receipt.

Then, standing by the door, he saw the ghost of an older footprint on the ladder beside the grass-damp prints left by the detectives. The earlier print was dry and framed an unusual tread. The mounties may not have seen it. Looking carefully at the ladder he discovered two more, less distinct but still traceable. The print was not his. He doubted they could be the retoucher's slip-ons and willed them evidence of someone else. Something not yet concluded, dispatched. Perhaps a friend? A remote possibil-

ity he thought with a twinge of disappointment as he returned to the kitchen to help Babs scald the canning jars. After a brief debate he decided not to tell his wife of his speculations, nor the proof. His reasons seemed nothing more dishonorable than wanting a secret or two of his own. Secrets otherwise came to her like drunks to detox centers.

But two nights later he was roused from sleep by a distraught, incredulous wife. He could feel the ribbed cuff of her new housecoat on his arm. Her hair still smelled of something like rhubarb. She was alarmed and whispered in a quiet he strained in vain to hear. It was as much her directions, her pointing, than her rushed soft words that led him to a corner of the kitchen and an oblique look out upon the gazebo, the door of which was plainly ajar. A weak garage light across the lane occasionally picked out a lambent shadow in the room itself. "God if it's him I'll scream," Babs said, to which he dourly answered, "Me too."

"I'll get my coat," he said finally. But when he returned and headed for the back door she held him back.

"It doesn't move like Randolph."

"What makes you say that?" he answered giving in.

"Randolph was a sitter."

Herb pretended confusion as he stalled. "So how could he see you all the time then?"

"He had a long neck -- it's true."

For a full half minute they mutely stared at the gazebo.

"I don't see any neck at all," he said at last, unable to resist.

Babs jabbed him yet held on tighter than ever. A few tense seconds later she told him to call the police. "But in the bedroom."

Herb complied, affecting a sturdy patience. When he returned to the kitchen Babs was on her knees by the sink peeking about a bouquet of moonlit Marigolds on the window sill. Herb came up behind her.

"Shhhh," she said pulling him down. "He came halfway down the ladder then went back up. He's wearing that old coat."

"Is it Randy?"

"I don't think so. No." Again she grasped his arm. "You're not going out there until the police come." Herb remained silent, alert. He was about to rise and shift the silvered bouquet a little to one side when the door to the gazebo opened and a figure reminiscent of Randy slowly descended the ladder as if undecided. The weak garage light issuing from the alley behind the backyard fence left the figure at ground level in shadow. Babs instinctively pulled away to one side.

"He's heading for the rear gate. Jimminy, it looks like Randolph."

"Randy never moved like that."

"Even so -- you stay right here." Once again Herb was gruffly restrained from approaching the back door.

"I want to see who it is," he said limply.

"That's alright, he'll be back."

"Will not."

"Will so," she said, craning again about the Marigolds. It seemed a measure of their joint, custodial resignation with one another that they



must talk as children when upset.

When the two RCMP detectives arrived, five minutes later, the figure had vanished. The alley was scouted as well as the adjacent yards, powerful flashlights casting a small-scale aurora. When at last they entered the gazebo and turned on its lone ceiling light the room lay forlorn as ever. Only the coat was gone. Herb could vouch for nothing else. The distinct footprints he'd noted two days earlier were still in doubt. This night's fresh tracks were routinely inspected and pronounced inconclusive because the shoes or boots had been gummed up with wet leaves and left no distinctive marks. The detectives own soles left imprints unlike the earlier ones Herb remembered with a new unease. So! A sudden insinuating frisson galvanized the senses. Maple leaves littered the floor inside the gazebo. In one place near the gate the person had apparently slipped: a long smooth cowlick interrupted the settle of leaves. "I've been after Herb to get at the raking up," Babs said casually from the back porch to one of the detectives, a comment that left Herb more willing to share some niggling irritation at a future date.

Marriage: the worn, trusted and dated thumb index.

When they returned to their bedroom the sky in the East was coming to life. He once witnessed a blue baby restored to pinkish health -- not unlike a dawning. The incident happened during a visit with a friend to see a new daughter. The girl had choked as they looked through the viewing window. They spent a frantic moment or two summoning help in the leanly-staffed nursery. Two nurses suddenly arrived and swiftly took the

bluish mite away. An eternity later it was returned to its sturdy crib suffused in a healthy pink and yawning prodigiously. That same year Herb and his wife were told they could have no children, a diagnosis eventually deemed premature, when it was exasperatingly late. Relegated a marginal couple for adoption -- their ages were not in the competitive mean -- they decided to undertake to be foster parents with an eye to adoption and took an immediate liking to the cute active child the caseworker brought to their sunny kitchen early one spring afternoon. Babs now sat on the bed looking at the faint fan of pink in the East. An early riser, she could be in bed by nine. He reached over and touched her hand. "Not a single cloud," she said, skirting the subject. "But still." It was Herb's act of hitting the child that held up a later adoption application. Out of sheer resentment he had finally called a halt to their candidacy. Then Babs came down with mononucleosis. A year later they were more or less resigned to their claustral fate. Now he felt her maternal lack had been newly wryly teased by the stranger, almost a kind of daring familiar who provoked as much patronage and annoyance as Randy had. He sat beside her rubbing her back. "It isn't like him though," she resumed, in that tone he could interpret either as lament or ridicule. Tentatively he put his arms about her and after a calculated gamble lifted her night shirt to warm his hands beneath her unbuttoned breasts. She simply smoothed the fabric and lazily reminded him of a driver's license renewal that had come in last week's mail, not entirely hiding the nimble smile he'd hoped to uncover. "You have to convert your weight to kilograms and your length to centimeters,"

she said as he proceeded. Said he after a further reconnoitre, "I wonder if I should try for a soft or hard conversion."

"That sounds a little like Randy," she said, keeping close to him. He took it as a compliment, his desire for her then inestimable. Seconds later he was helping her tuck in the shower cap. Minutes later Randy too was apprized of the missionary couple who looked and seemed to themselves surprisingly fresh and alive on their queen-size pallet.

## TWENTY-NINE

The sight of his coat of many colors once more alive and moving along the streets of Surrey opened many old wounds for Randy. Events like that were not supposed to manifest themselves on earth! The confusing part was the wearer resembled himself in a dour and unseemly way. Some bruises about the face were a particularly sobering 're-introduction'. The spectacle drew him away from watching Herb rediscover his demure but resilient wife and Babs recall the married name of Randy's sister which she stated aloud just as Herb was thinking of his accounts, out of the sheerest bravura, in an attempt to keep the rondo alive. But the stray mention of the girl's husband quite flummoxed him. He could not compete with directories, recipes, shopping and discount lists, Universal Studios or Neapolitan ice cream, to name a few select rivals. Had they not come from the shower he might have suggested a Jacuzzi-cider break, which some-

times worked when she was less ruminative. This day, however, he must settle for a brief postludium nap, as it were, and an early start at the studio. His new conditional retoucher belabored trust.

But if Herb was moved by the reminder that his fey housebound wife still might captivate, Randy was chastened by the advent of a rogue clone, out of nowhere, so easily perturbing his former reflective life. Nearly a lampoon of the old horror story, he reminded himself — imagination yielding to, bearing monstrosity, a tale he had cravenly considered writing during his last few weeks on earth. Now the story threatened to come true and he exercised little control over the script. The more he scouted the stranger's psychology, physiology, particularly his endocrinology, the more he marveled at the awesome portent. The man's glands could manufacture at the merest visual clue a whole spectrum of catalytic substrates; could in fact shut down most of the cerebral cortex while the drugs coursed through his system. Emphatically and haplessly he resembled the particular lax indolent side of Randy, minus mainly the ornate romantic aestheticism and keen memory: this hulk would readily pass up Mendelssohn for Sid Vicious. His face and neck bruises did revive the terror at the hands of the arch sadist interrogator, a memory the hulk seemed immune to or had forgotten. Randy could turn up no explanation on his elaborate soma converter; the stray corpus had come from -- nowhere. He went directly to consult his solemn disillusioned British sojourner.

"I do say it sounds like you've attracted a revenant or dybbuk -- a kind of zombie." The actor's expression was sufficiently apathetic to convince



Randy he wasn't teasing. "Never did bone up on the matter. Even less pre-disposed now." Randy recalled that while on earth the man captivated as a great character actor. Here he moved about like a spent pilgrim.

"Well, if I have, the bloody thing didn't ask my permission."

"No he...it wouldn't do that. I expect you've learned very little about the -- the Other Dilemma, as we sometimes call it."

"Not a lot, no."

"Ahh, such a bother."

It was obvious the explanation was esoteric. One would have to pay attention -- to another cruel complexity no viable horror writer would burden his reader with. "Let's have it," Randy said. "Without the prophylactic."

The Brit stiffened. He had likely been gay Randy thought, perhaps also a bit of a bully. Now, on good days, he might pass as a grubby old Abelard, though as a portentous mentor his sullenness diminished somewhat.

"The principle is simple enough; it's the application that still contorts, involutes." Randy could see some wholesale fiasco swaying innocently as sea foam. "Let me first put it to you in the form of a question, in effect a proposition: If, due to human progress, one could live a very, very long life, even unto the demise of planet Earth, would one come to slight, abjure the conventional expectation of an inevitable death?"

"You mean if I had the choice of living as an active, long-lasting man, would I waive the prospect of something worse? Like remote in-

effectual earth watching. No contest.”

“You are so very sure.”

“As a dog outside a fish plant.”

“Yes, it is uniformly dismaying.”

“What does that mean?”

“Well, it seems all of us here felt the same way, at least at first.”

Randy’s quarks stood their ground, especially his few no-nonsense muons.

“I do know the hope for a man-made Elyseum is enduring. One of the timeless, ineffable...”

Randy found himself as impatient with maunderers as ever. “So what’s this got to do with being yoked a -- yo-yo zombie?”

“Yes, the piquant rub. You see, Cheesy’s compeers, well some — the one’s who do the R&D — are bored and want a change of species. Yes. Invariably they are the virus and insect designers, who do have the most elaborate schemes. They come over to talk about it from time to time. With some of us dated crackers. The lobby against them has managed to stall things but only just. The net result is a backlog of souls complaining of the irresolution and uncertainty which, in some cases, means a neglect of human endeavor. How can one be judged, evaluated, apprised if his or her existence has been so abridged, denied any real possibility of a full and thus judicable life. Naturally this makes for much ill feeling. So, for the truly exasperated, a stolid corpus has been left behind, swelling the numbers of the hapless many-too-many, the ones the virus and insect designers

believe suitable mainly as hosts for their omnivorous creatures. And so voilà -- your chap in your coat of many colors. It's reached a critical stage, this issue of what to do with surplus humans. Hard to face of course."

"But why him -- that 'him'?" It was as much complaint as question. Too many things were conspiring to add up -- in this 'ominous theorizing'.

"Can you not imagine a restive body escaping your aloof mind? As I said, we are in the thrall of the 'new designers'. Here."

A suddenly ungrateful Randy mutely recalled the 'escape' was an hourly occurrence.

"Well there you are, the estranged body, you without you in it. I dare say they had to mend a few things and were not overly conscientious doing it. More and more the insect toadies control salvage. Anyway, it's you minus a few qualms, a few aphorisms, a latent sense of grace and such -- less mainly a reliable memory. But goodness gracious -- what glands and reflexes! All of them nearly prehensile it seems."

"I trust you are now speaking as a connoisseur."

"As you see." The rare exhilaration was fleeting. The Brit's old apathy swiftly reinstated itself as if his exertion had yielded but one more unwanted bingo number.

Thus was Randy introduced to that part of himself 'left behind', muddling about in a kind of Neolithic fog, minding instincts that led him back to the treehouse to stand in the small room making little sense of its contents or outside surroundings, above all finding nothing to eat, the omnivo-

rous concern. How ironic to have the beast at last ‘without’, while being more anxious than ever about the beast’s ‘feral’ agenda. And how ignoble to discover the beast’s instincts, movement and locution were well nigh impervious to the kinds of nudges he, the mind, might practice from Here: this body had dealt with that tyrant before! Randy seemed destined to see his own distinct monstrosity released from its choosy master...and if that were not enough, the old axiom that felicitous ideas are rare, gruesome ones commonplace, banal, placed him in a box he’d never been in before. It seemed the wrath in the world might eclipse thought, or he must forfeit his very human curiosity and reason to eschew, obviate the indignity! Oblivion had a new appeal and seemed too good to ever take place. His romantic instincts would be put to a bitter test, of this alone he felt abjectly certain. A requiem less the indispensable Berlioz.

With analogous dismay did Herb Spooner spot the motley coat advancing across the Granville Bridge as he drove into downtown Vancouver the following day. A portrait sitting had been cancelled that day and he elected to attend the auction of some of the Expo artifacts at the B.C. Place Stadium. The sight of the coat was really more than he could stomach on such a carefree day. In the outside lane he might have slowed down. The traffic, however, was hectic, ill-mannered and he drove on. Moreover, he didn’t want to actually confront -- whomever it was. At least not yet.

Expeditionously he parked two blocks from the North end of the bridge and hurried back with his miniature camera ready -- the heavier



bag would slow him down -- to get a glimpse and possible shot of the chap coming off the bridge's walkway. As he hurried across an empty side street against a long traffic light, he read the ambient light level and assigned a faster shutter speed. Intrepidly he approached the bridge only to find the multi-colored jacket nowhere in sight. The wearer had either jumped or decidedly hastened his pace, though this latter option seemed hardly possible given the length of the bridge.

Quickly Herb traversed two more streets sighting only routine attire -- no strident primary pasteups. Briskly he entered and exited several of the area's qualmy pubs which were just opening their doors. The open squalor in that part of town stifled interest. Business without commerce. His exhaustion also begged a halt.

Woodenly, uncomfortably he returned to the car not having exerted himself like that for years. In the snug driver's seat his heart thumped away like a berserk toy. A very long minute would elapse before he might breathe fluently again. He decided to slowly walk about a bit rather than uncomfortably sit. As he locked the car for a second time the patchwork coat almost brushed against him as it swept by, crossing the street following a diagonal that originated in the alley behind, the rear of a seedy hotel.

Herb turned in amazement.

"Randy?..."

"Leave it, pops," a strange toneless voice mumbled. Not looking back the colorful form sauntered into the adjoining alley. Herb gingerly followed suit, not quite assimilating the fact that the face he glimpsed was

scarcely recognizable. But the bruises, particularly above one eye, chastened doubt.

All the while a perplexed Randy pulled at all the available stops, most of which proved too elastic to modify the movement of the striding hulk despite the telling limp, one result of the brutal interrogation. The injured leg had not been properly set -- another furtive attention of the insect revivers. The hulk entered and exited several of the rooming hotels, lifting from a back lane packing crate a Granny Smith apple and, from an open smelly kitchen, half a ham sandwich. Twice Herb lost him, only to see the open coat re-emerge further down the block, crossing over to the noonday bustle of Hornby Street, moving with the quaint dispatch of a Llama unaware of the traffic.

Randy was aghast to see the dauntless form deftly executing the full range of swift feints and slight-of-hand he had struggled to perfect, including taking off and reversing the coat as 'he' strode out of the lobby of the Hotel Georgia cinnamon bun in hand, an act Herb just caught in a final thrust of arm. Inside out the coat assumed a chameleon skin of reflective grey, transparent to virtually every tint surrounding it. From there the automaton loped up an escalator to the crowded cafeteria atop the Bay, entering through the frequently-opened Exit doorway. Smoothly lifting a cup from a vacated table he approached the two cashiers and mumbled "hot water" then, on a wide turn of a nearby food bay, pinched two cheese muffins before approaching the hot water fount where he also gleaned a teabag, two lemon wedges, some crackers and a palette of jams and mar-

malades. From there he moved to a quiet corner, leisurely sat and, with a magician's flare, produced one muffin after another, including two prepared cheese snacks. Herb stood aghast in the long lineup with a single black coffee, and no sooner reached his table than the hulk, two tables across, began squeezing a lemon wedge into his drink, a squirt from which shot across and hit Herb in the cheek, causing him to spill some of his coffee. The oblique jet went apparently unnoticed by the nominal hulk as he sat back sampling and assessing his beverage before adding more sugar. Herb, when recovered, was dumbly fascinated. The fellow appeared impervious to his surroundings and sufficiently disheveled and otherwise menacing to be entertaining when taking tea. Hadn't Randy been particularly partial to the brew and ritual? Was not his special strainer still hanging above the sink in Herb's studio? And was there not one in his present coat?

Yet despite the needling similarities Herb mistrusted the identity. Something to do with being cool, the form working as one. Randy, except for his artwork, contended with a fractious multitude. Occasionally his indecision could be nettling -- he might be smartly supercilious or an oafish poltroon -- where this carcass moved as a smoothly functional, if limping, Caliban, with scrofulous cheeks now savoring an after taste. A worthy method performance. A busgirl, glancing at the hulk, listened to a supervisor who hovered near the Exit door helping to clear away used tables. Gradually more and more people regarded the roughed-up character, some from roving curiosity, others taking their cues from the edgy staff.

The mauled face betrayed no care or confusion though. He, it, simply continued eating, looking about, sightless, heedless. Then suddenly it paused as if reminded, mumbling, "I'm a soup man," a comment both Herb and Randy recognized as germane. A glossy matron seated nearby managed a wan smile.

Forthrightly the hulk rose and, taking his cup with him, floated back between the two parallel lineups to the soup bay, the supervisor and senior cashier in close pursuit. When he lifted the lid to the chowder tureen the supervisor clamped it shut. The hulk paused as a robot in momentary suspension. The supervisor shook her head, said there would be no fuss if they left together now. The hulk twitched. Desperate Randy put it down to his extravagant sense of propriety and richly cumulative guilt. A momentary default this day, however, Randy soon realized.

Responding to the supervisor's discord the hulk nonchalantly lifted the tureen out of its holder and dumped the contents on the floor holes-bolus, the supervisor and cashier doing a nimble shuffle to get out of the way, unlike several belatedly astonished patrons, one of whom slipped bearing a full tray. Snatching a custard from the dessert bay, the hulk strode out of the cafeteria and into the precious flowery art-curio section, demolishing first, as warm-up consolation, a stand supporting expensive Eskimo sculptures that precious Randy had always believed excessively ugly. Next, two displays, one of misbegotten terra-cotta birds, the other of equally idiotic brass nicknacks, came crashing down, with noisy rakes in between, followed by a vulgar chrome sculpture of a nude female diver smashing into



a gaudy gilt mirror in the swank furniture section. The *mêlée* was altogether satisfactory for Randy who never had had the nerve nor the insouciance. Nearby shoppers scurried behind teak bookcases and paneled rosewood consoles. One keen onlooker hid behind a display of wooden duck decoys. The elevator the hulk approached quickly vacated and he descended to street level by himself. Herb stood trembling and irresolute among the shocked and rawly entertained patrons.

It was while the hulk stood alone in the elevator, in the sole quiet he would know, that Randy tallied all the lesions and realized his own fate was more or less sealed. He would not abandon his 'leftover' self. What 'nudges' he could induce he must. If the hulk's autonomic nervous system was in tolerable shape despite the earlier brawl, the musculature was not. Already one arm twitched with an electrolyte imbalance that Randy knew all too well could become spastic. Also, a hand cut on one of the display cases oozed blood. Some excellent platelets would stop the flow but not a vigorous infection already at work in both the hand and a skin-flayed ankle, more serious legacies of the earlier mauling. When the elevator opened the lone scurvy form distracted several shoppers as he marched, unmindful of the new conspicuous limp, to the southern-most Seymour Street entrance where three Vancouver policemen had just congregated. Whether Randy managed to influence events he never learned. Fiercely he strove not to have the chap apprehended on a crowded street at high noon. Most likely the rage of a host of plucky, impetuous ancestors, plus a slight celestial nudge, enabled the hulk to get away in the thick traffic,

though now running on stiffening joints and a cardiovascular system already leaking and fibrillating. In executing the sovereign desire for flight, bones and tissue would draw upon extraordinary reserves. The vague plan to head for one of Vancouver's notorious booze parlors, roughly in place when the hulk sought his last bowl of soup, was now superseded by the rush to escape the crush of downtown bodies, to find an acre free of human blether and debris. With the instinct of a pilgrim he headed for the vacated grounds of Expo 86, down narrow cluttered lanes and shaded sidewalks, past a welter of squat architecture often garishly facaded, past old buffeted ramps and stricken warehouses, to the vast plastic dome sometimes known as Pin Cushion Park, then down its cascading steps through Expo's surviving Stadium Gate, onward toward the interior demolition fencing, past a surprised security guard whose jumbled comments on his two-way had to be repeated as he watched the fugitive scrabble up the wire mesh and flop over the other side.

If a solemn Randy took store of the further injuries sustained in the breach of the fence, he noted too the sudden freakish deliverance and strange annealing quiet. A demobilization. The hulk had a vacated carnival to himself. No lineups, no schedule to miss, no wayward encounters, no comic seizing you by the scruff of the neck impressing you into his act. The tangential relief Randy felt was positively harrowing. He was, unerringly, on his own, about to face an afterlife only he must requite. The hulk too sensed the growing deflation — a stiffness, a strange occulting ache as he passed unusual residues on the grounds, piles of tubular exoskeletons,

scavenged remains, parts of once thrumming pavilions appeasing streams of willing denizens. Already the landscape was in some respects foreign. Familiars that once had beckoned, escorted were struck down. The carnival forest close cut.

The sirens he barely heard and sensed an unfamiliar confusion in the change of scene. He heard a strangled snort, a latent whine, a voice denied a reason, grammar and, once again, its vocality. The limp was now a farcical dip, the eyes wide as saucer-eyed children in maudlin drawings. For the second time in his life Randy sensed what mortification was and wanted the experience over. In the end he would deal with the dire prospects, however insidious. If it couldn't be unerringly elevated, graceful, pastoral, lyrical he must plead *nolo contendere*. All to be done. All to be done. His fated 'hominid' end, whatever it would be, emerged as clear as the lone prosaic spire that rose atop a once crowd-happy pavilion, the spire a close imitation of a bell tower on which several climbers during the life of the fair had adroitly risen using efficient climbing gear. Inside the pavilion the patron had been treated to a voyeur's view of the restless metropolis and a film about roughnecks adapting to culture by dressing up in tutu's and tights. The tower itself was a four-sided obelisk held together by a rigid steel frame. That day a demolition worker had loosened a central anchor plate that secured one of the outside blocks or salients upon which the climbers rose to the summit. The worker, seated now by an open lunch pail, watched with wonder and growing consternation as the leggy form climbed onto the overhang, standing first on one of the fiberglass



Stegosauri guarding the entrance to the pavilion. By the time the figure was halfway up the vertical face, a small group of policemen, workers and guards had congregated below.

But the man heard nothing. Rather, Randy heard then nothing. He and the hulk lived at last as one, clinging with a terrible defiant optimism to the next chancy projection. Even one additional step might lift one beyond the clouds where the sun shone unembarrassed. The credulity was beyond counsel or terror, despite the growing chorus of tiny inner voices crying out that the carcass would not hold. Once again Randy felt the wind upon his skin, in her hair, and the effect was cathartic. He had made a decision and must suffer the consequences. However pathetic his soul, he was lost without a body. For a clear untapped moment he remembered bypassing a sea of faces, all confused, some aghast, tumbling into a soundless void, his last vision a growing darkness with an exquisite gliding bird.

As for hectic Herb, who gained entrance to the grounds by telling a policeman he believed he knew the trespasser, the sight of the body sliding and twisting off the tower seemed perfectly surreal, almost oldfangled ciné drama, like watching the fall of a ribboned escutcheon on an ancient sea galley, except that the twist to the liveried tail was clearly unnatural to the large bare head, so oddly conjoined, the merest tenuous yoke...so Herb guessed before the first attendants got to the body. The final awry heap lay just belsow a small circular canopy shaped like an umbrella, a stubble jumper's tease of a West Coast neighbor. Throughout the fair, the sun



shone brightly, even reflecting a blinding sparkle off the plexiglass umbrella.

Soon a beaconed ambulance arrived. As the form was borne into the stainless vault a white coated attendant stiffly shook his head.

A minute later the Expo site was restored to its ghosts and a few methodical demolitionists to grapple with stiff bolts and stuck plywood siding. Herb gave his statement to a smartly dressed female officer and amazed himself with details his memory could summon. He strained against positively identifying the body in the ambulance until he saw the socks -- an old pair of his which Babs had given Randy. A black-and-navy diamond pattern, now barely hiding each blue blooded ankle.

As he returned to his car the many fresh lesions of hand and face continued to contort his memory. It seemed a lifetime had passed since he last saw the long pointy fingers working up a colored opaque in the studio's messy utility room. A partial distraction loomed in the form of two ample men in construction hats who emerged suddenly from the same alley the coat of many colors had swept into but a short hour before. The two passed close to Herb smelling of beer and tobacco. Someone by the name of Conners, a clumsy non-present third party, was being preciously told off. "Conners, hell, he couldn't hit a bull's ass with a sack of peaches." As he drove off Herb decided Randy could be, should be, at that moment, doing something just like that.

A week later, while he boarded up the gazebo, as much to appease his superstitious wife, he realized he didn't have a photo of his late retoucher.

The picture of Randy ostentatiously pointing to the prize-winning portrait had vanished. An impatient Babs admitted doing some hasty housekeeping in the room the day before, when the municipal garbage was collected. He would look through his studio files, even Bab's albums, without luck -- the blithe smart aleck whisked into memory, his only legacy the many modish color portraits gracing a few hundred mantels and walls impervious to all but the sun, though most such prints outlived their usefulness or went before fading. Occasionally Herb would confront a faded portrait and disappointed client. With luck the negative might still be printable. He kept all his own negatives and would till he retired. Only the retouching would never quite be the same, an in-house fact best left unremarked.

He planned to dismantle the gazebo in the spring, perhaps leave a sizable bird house in its place, one akin to the commodious apartment models he's seen in the Oregon Pavilion. That should be sufficiently arresting and accommodating to attract the desirable birds.

Later that year the teapot and strainer were sold at one of Herb's garage sales to a neighbor who wanted a cheap gift for a maiden aunt. The fundamentalist aunt eventually gave the items to the Salvation Army where someone dropped the pot and broke off the spout. The ornate strainer eventually sat alone and idle next a clutter of rusting fishing tackle and a dusty set of Reader's Digest condensed books, and caused one sullen straggler to wonder what kind of incense caused such a discoloration.

## THIRTY

Buff Rutquist stood looking out from the empty room into the bucolic backyard of his Point Grey Tudor two-story. Dourly he watched his wife rake up the leaves from the ancient poplars, each a durable Babel: every autumn the yellowing flaking spires confused their tongues, made them unintelligible. This year he had not helped out, was behind with a sermon. Rather, he couldn't settle on a suitable subject. The excusable topics were dwindling, unless of course one 'opted' for the permutations of: corporate greed, invidious advertising, neglect of minority rights and sluggish affirmative action, pride as cultural fix, the scarcity of asylum, the lack of good infant formula, especially in the third world, and so on -- subjects with their late revelatory dogma and mundane trials. He noted the grass required yet another cutting, many shrubs an overdue pruning, and the moss was back in sovereign velvet abundance. The sudden clear good weather added a further rebuke. In the reflection of the room's window he could see his daughter's vacated bedroom, even the imprint on the carpet left by the heavy exercise apparatus. It was time she was on her own; she had made up her mind.

He had been impressed by the outside appearance of the West End high rise and wondered how her acting would pay the rent. Inside it was a whole other world, as they say. In the foyer the carpet lay threadbare and endlessly rilled. Reflections in once trendy wall mirrors were eaten away by irregular black wraiths. The interior hallways, airless, dimly lit, 'foisted'

a garish wallpaper, scored, peeling in parts and water stained. The studio flat itself was tiny, cold, musty and without curtains -- promised but starkly absent. The stained rug smelled of a caustic antiseptic and the former tenant left an upright piano partly blocking the eating nook. Naomi was determined not to say a word and stuck to her guns. Maureen kept on the phone almost without interruption the day they brought the remaining boxes and cartons. How astonishing a youngster not long matriculated could have so much, a fact Buff reaffirmed as he stared at the empty walls in her room and tried to remember the pictures that fronted the cleat holes in the plaster. A large print of Michelangelo's God Creating Adam filled one large horizontal space, a Ronald Serle cat and Rousseau's *Le Lion Affamé* two others and, most recently, a small copy of *Le Cyclope* by one Odilon Redon, an acquisition he never inquired into; Naomi may have had a hand. One wall flaunted the usual seasonal posters apropos: the theatre (The Fringe), 'bad' rock (an affirmation), fossil fuel vilification, and a pristine unfouled America. Somewhere an early portrait of father entitled Doctor Cobbly hung. A wiry pastor standing in a leaning pulpit with showy teeth. A grade school drawing.

With unsparing fondness he could see the misleading young face, the grass hockey player with one wool sock bunched about an ankle, the teeth braces, the *papier maché* puppets, the roundtable homework, the patch of lawn where she and her close friends would sometimes play badminton after. He could hear the carols sung on street corners by the church's young folk at Christmas, her animated phone conversation, and the wordy si-



lences toward him when he sometimes scolded. Snippets galore chronicled the undaunted debater and organizer, the leggy hiker and happy sailor, the swift sure 'water skater' (her kayak eponym), the classy butterfly swimmer, the unbeatable middle-distance runner who withdrew from a ranking club to become -- the resolved thespian and sarcastic peri who disowned the early freehold frankness and casualness. How could he forget that bundling decade, coinciding with his own open, loving, consenting, semi-nudist, radical accommodation days, which Naomi had silently reproved and the vital daughter slowly, as quietly discovered facile if not sly. Could he ever reconcile, settle in full that carnal millennium -- the roughhousing, the mock wrestling, the many calisthenics and gymnastics which sanctioned the occasional helpful hold or support...was it all thus regressive, miasmal? Yes, yes, he had occasionally been excited, occasionally caught and pressed very young thighs, pushed young nates on a swing and flip harness, held a balancing giggling young teen aloft on a pyramid foot...as he derided sissy manners, prissy attire...such a stolid, footling list. The butch singlet Naomi retired after the one niggling debate. A dozen times he had watched at eventide from the garden shed her return from school through the multi-paned lower window which faced the anonymity of a tree-thick back yard; watched as she discarded a uniform, tried on new clothes before a critical mirror, sometimes with her friends, experimented with makeup, a new dance. He would not soon forget the day Naomi saw him, or he saw her standing in their own room looking regally sightlessly down. He was chagrinned and appalled at the sudden and

novel bitterness -- betraying a liberated normality, so healthy, natural, victimless, fun. The solecisms of improvement would turn him inside out. Once he imagined he knew how to sin; now he could barely find a sermon topic. How desultory, oafishly optimistic it seemed now. A mere *homme moyen sensuel*. His wife had never reproved him directly though he often imagined her prayers thereafter more plaintive. His sentence began the year she decided they paid too much to heat their home. New window casements were installed with custom Venetians and curtains to ‘compliment the sills, aesthetically and functionally,’ she said. Six months later he conceded she had indeed saved them over fifteen percent on their steep oil bill. The most recent newspaper story quoted the brisk young actress as saying, “The freedom to mislead has never been more abused.” The caption read, Bawdy Show Bares All. The text described how a fluent young Grace, a muscle-toned Cranach, portrayed a nonpareil stripper in a one woman skit entitled, The Right Stiff. “Throughout her burlesque the actress talked to the carrot she was chomping. The carrot talked like Bugs Bunny, once saying to the audience during a black out pause, ‘Carrots can really help you see in the dark.’” Spotlighted in her dressing room at the very end of the show, she sadly observed the carrot stalk -- all that was left -- before saying, ‘Well, what did you expect in a ‘bel canto’ opera, a happy ending?’” So the Canadian Press story closed, leaving Buff dueling with the anarchy, the capacity audiences, and the nightmare that his church’s elders would find the play honest, thoughtful, human and relevant, only it’s speed arguably excessive, the generic voyeur zapped with ‘revelation’...

perhaps when they were all putative parents they might look without apprehension. It promised to be a long winter, his reinstatement of original sin making him the modern hovering gull -- dreading too that his guilt might simply be, as some of his elders would say, a naughty means of reliving the adventure!

The same caption also caught Vijay's eye as he scanned the dated Vancouver Sun which he arranged to have sent to his hotel. He was anxious to learn all he could about the end of Expo 86, particularly the last night of fireworks. Most likely the Soviets had spirited the device to an offshore freighter or submarine. Just how and when he knew not. His contact in Los Angeles said only that the plan was put on hold and to forget the entire affair. Hints abounded that an arm's sale to Iran had been concluded in any case. And there were many more fish to fry, including the surveillance of a particularly rare and fetching GRU illegal who appeared to have chucked it and who Vijay's parent cell stumbled across and begun a detailed dossier on. The agent appeared disenchanted with her clandestine career and might be a useful stooge, both for Vijay's terrorist group and, if need be, to temper the Soviets: the problems in Iran were making ongoing international commitments more complex. There was even talk of a prolonged, scorched-earth war with Iraq. The illegal, a phased radar engineer, worked on government military contracts. State-of-the-art expertise was always welcome; a pretty woman a versatile bonus. Vijay thus entertained himself with the involuted denouement in Vancouver. He had almost forgotten the young actress when the picture appeared before him



in the entertainment section. He was happily reassured. Celebrity status meant staying in touch, though his wound had long since healed and been surgically minimized. His latest disguise necessitated losing fifteen pounds. The girl, he decided, was rousing her own band of fanatics -- scouring white guilt like a flagellant. Perhaps they had a joint destiny, maybe right out of Arabian Nights if the costume picture was any indication. A nautch dancer with a fine intimidating tale to spin. The right stiff being a self-parodying carrot. What better way to keep the many-too-many on their toes, extenuate and vex their ordinary lives, make them reconsider dramatic change. The prettier the better.

He closed the paper, laughed and wished her well. Then he ordered another tequila. This time with a worm, he thought, reminding himself of the creatures she must pinch into life. Later he would return to Disneyland to take up his erstwhile role as an astute carnival juggler with a rare virgin lad he picked up in San Francisco. It was his first talent. Over the years he had given much enjoyment to the many fun seekers in Southern California. He and his new partner set up their act at rotating sites and drew large impromptu crowds. There was only one Anteros, whose tricks with dirks and torches second guessed reality. The teased sighs in his audience assured his confirmation. More and more it was becoming an inalienable right to live on the edge -- even a necessity, for the good Samaritan was no longer flush. If blaming the lapses of priests and Levites had been a theatrical conceit, it was now a bulwark. And if all artists were career liberals, liberals more than ever resembled method actors. The 'players'



with passion. Life then was very full for Vijay Kurtz in his disguise as the inimitable Anteros.

As for the vital performer herself, still coping in her new flat three floors above and near the rush of Denman Street, she had just packed off a talkative actor who mustn't get her cold, which had become worse and kept her coughing and awake in the still curtain-less neon-seared night where the smell of the recently treated carpet remained pungent and unsavory. The last tenant was a messy sod. The apartment adjacent and below her remained fully lit and outlined the frame of her weight station, augmented again since her move. The company's director, watching her one day finish a workout, suggested they consider a new abridged Hamlet rather than St. Joan -- a select, trans-gender Hamlet. They had both smiled, yet the idea intrigued from the start. "You have the turbo energy for the part," he had said. Two nights ago she stayed and read several scenes. Everyone present agreed she could be super. Amiably she concurred, discounting the recent cough.

She rose and took another prescription Tylenol left by the loaded director. Looking down at the bright apartment she saw a handsome man arguing with a second slighter man and what she guessed to be a granola venus. The good looker was dressed in a kind of uniform, perhaps that of a security guard, his complacency a cartoon beside the manifold sureness of the wolverine who had trashed their theatre. The lower apartment's slender man might be a younger brother, the woman, casually clad in a man's dress shirt and fingering finespun hair, not likely the mother, who plainly

enjoyed what appeared to be an expert foot massage at the hands of the younger swain, a treatment Maureen frankly envied at that sullen moment.

In another darker suite someone left with a lunch bucket. A sleepy someone closed a well secured door, the remaining light extinguished soon after. Nearby an elderly gent slept as the dead before a ghostly television.

All in all she believed the place agreeable enough, the lease good for another year. The needy wayward musician who owned the piano had moved in with his girlfriend. Maureen agreed to keep the upright with its cracked soundboard for a fortnight, the time the new buyer needed to accommodate it. She returned to the mattress sensing the queasiness of the hash and codeine. And thanked her own mother again for the down quilt.

When she awoke the skyline in the East formed a stark cutout against yellow grey, the bay a shrinking purple wash. She was slicked with perspiration, could not dislodge the aftertaste of a weird and rotten dream, and wondered if she was going to be sick after all. She had yet to awake feeling her old self in the new apartment.

She rarely dreamed, or rarely remembered dreaming, yet the setting that night was too vividly the Fraser Street gym whose manager had been discovered dead in his car parked on Burnaby Mountain, the apparent cause carbon monoxide poisoning. She had not returned to the gym and missed the modern equipment which allowed her for the first time to feel competent as a body sculptor. In the dream someone juggled whirling knives near her as she diligently worked the gym's newest apparatus, the

vertical support frame designed to isolate and contour discrete muscle sets, and so take their place in a distinctive rosette. But when she attempted to free herself she could not do so, even as her damp togs were being lightly nicked by the spinning knives, a kind of collective pendulum, the juggler of which she never truly saw beyond his thick, tropish hands, mere adjuncts of the camera enjoined to her growing unease, the lens a distant frozen audience.

It was perhaps the sheer banality of working out that left her so unobservant, at first. She found herself waiting, braced, eyes shut, straining to minimize the rocking motion of the machine. She must have gasped at the first pass, been hysterical by the third or fourth. When she tried to pull away the torsion braces became locking mechanisms, her feet secure in the pedal shoes, wrists faceted to a cross bar.

At one point, when she elected to let the bewildering performance take its course, the blades, their virtuosic turning, suddenly left off, leaving her newly suspended, locked to the machine, her mirrored face alone in tune with her sensual quandary. She lay on a precipitous rise, sprawling, aborted, cravenly strung out, the mirrored explicitness decidedly clinical, very un-theatric. When the unwelcome limbo began to drag she could feel the insidious business start anew. Swearing vehemently she set her peerless temper to ignore the provocation, to banish from consciousness the fatuity of it all, the servile hands, the silly obtuse camera and such sorry sots as might witness the performance. The farce could tempt laughter even, this duel that absorbed her so.

But then fleeting, intermittent creases appeared on her seamless skin. Some of the blade edges seemed blunted, honed. Some. She sensed her own paradox in her resolve which gave stature to the flinty ghoul. But again, when the fearsome climax seemed imminent, the operation stopped, the moment stayed, the stilled palette blades rising to hang above her like so many chimes or clappers...to be summoned yet once again, the spires seemingly accretionary, more bitterly anticipated than the last, her sensational humility more lurid and fixed with each renewed interruption...each nod to the sniggering yo-yos.

When at last fully awake and focusing on the spare surroundings, the dream lingered as a stark headache, stymieing all but the visceral senses. Her throat was raw, she was thirsty and nauseous, also clammy and her feet cold, a problem with a slippery, satin-covered quilt. She found she was angry beyond debate, beyond even her supple imagination. It seemed the only possible out was an unmitigated triumph: either you wrestled the jerk to the floor or paraded your humble cowl before his open sightless eye -- that seemed to her then the optimistic scenario. A more decisive act had you using knives, bombs, making a lot of holes, a lot of silly wormwood holes.

But an hour later, after she had showered, eaten with a bowl of hot oatmeal half a Tofu bar, some unsalted deluxe nuts her parents had brought, and sloshed through a ripe honeydew half, she felt up to the wile or prattle of any vaunted juggler. Acht goode, now we eat! she said to herself, smiling as she sensed the capitulation. Surely it was all just the adjust-



ment to leaving the nursery. Didn't the pole-vaulter, the sometime student of quantum turbulence, say the birth of a star was a measured catastrophe? Not unlike the humblest firework. Well, she would do it without becoming anorexic or bulimic or drug 'stupent', or whatever else caused stars to collapse prematurely; she would be there, in the flesh, real, unambiguous, dynamic, lustily and vastly entertaining, a fixed point, emulating a quasar. She had listened one afternoon to a boring talk on Very Long Baseline Interferometry, where quasars were used to infer the earth's wobble, odd bulge, and other fascinating things. So forget all the horrible bastards thinking their finite wobbly distorted thoughts. Her presence would set a new perturbation, a new digression -- refashion the hook of the great gravitational lens! Oeuf! The randy proles must smirk at their peril. It was about then when she first missed her neck crucifix. The chain remained but not the body of Christ. Must have been the juggler's doing, she thought, as she hunted about the quilt and mattress. The father-son had definitely vanished. For the time being. Would she willingly replace it with a female figure? Not bloody likely she said into a burn -- no theatre would ever hang that rap on her. It was all their fault, the buggers guilty as sin.

When she was finally out of the apartment and tooling about the park on her bike, she mellowed somewhat. She believed she just might have the patience to give the pole-vaulter another chance. It was, after all, likely what her naughty sad dad would have wished. Very Long Baseline Interferometry seemed a hopeful distraction. The eager chap was obviously

interested in more than the vulgarization, the boob tubing of light waves. Maybe on that other frequency she just might get through...even as she she knew she could hardly settle for being part of the invisible energies, for being merely sensed, not actually seen or heard.

With the dilemma momentarily shelved she sensed her cold breaking and the rain that had been predicted likely miscast. There seemed little doubt she might pace the older bluer stars. The whistle that greeted her in a turn merely reinforced that prognosis. The modern fated cyclops must gaze in awe and dread.