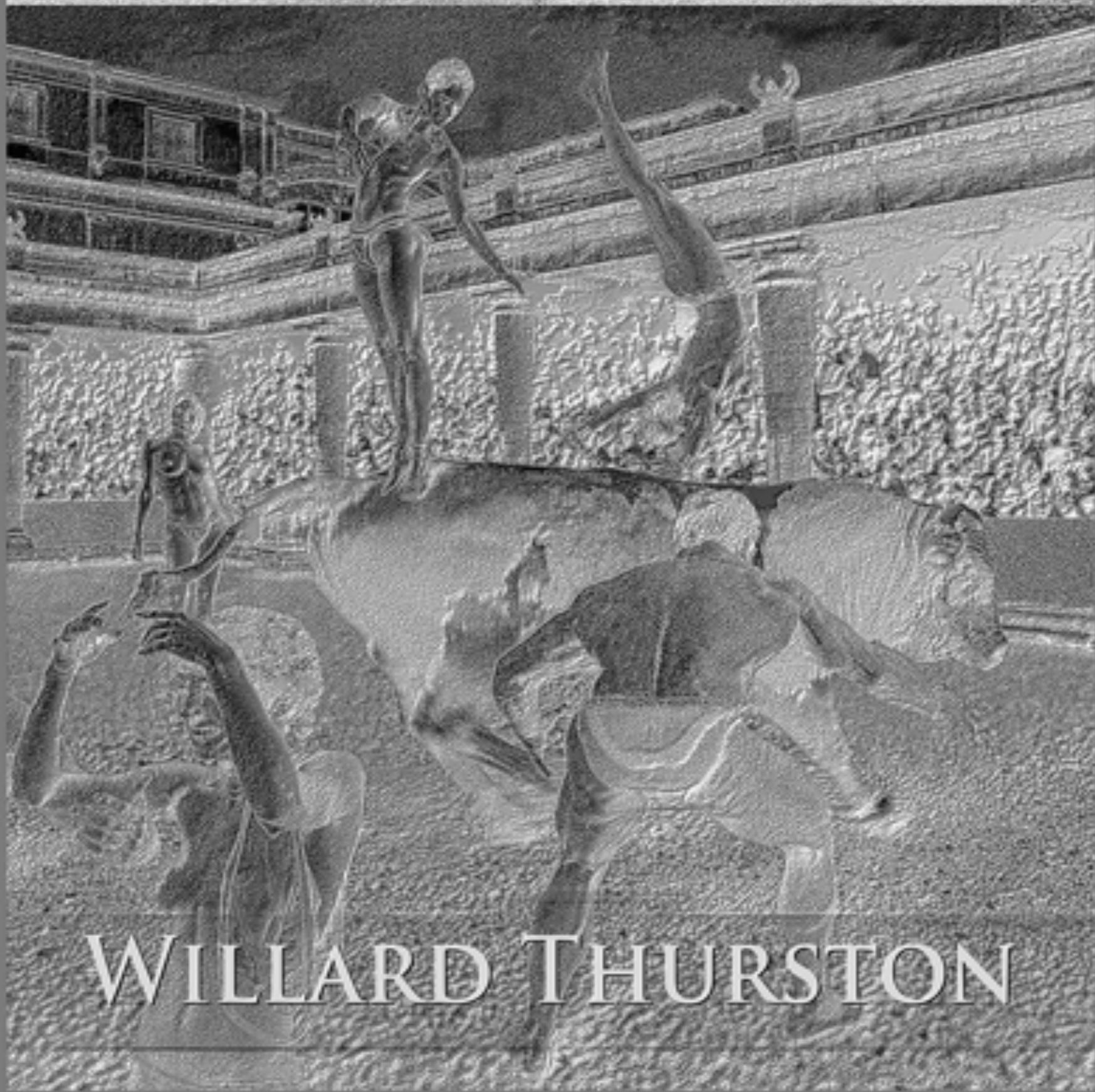


# Bull Dance

A UTOPIAN'S DREAM



BY  
WILLARD THURSTON



# Bull Dance

## ONE

He arrived in the vicinity of Hermann's gallery an hour after receiving the disturbing message. He came immediately. As if the enigmatic *ZYTA* summoned him herself.

The garish neon-electric fauna marked the desolation of the district as starkly as gaudy artificial flowers stuck in the cannikins of a barren cemetery. As the security limo whisked him through the street debris he felt acutely vulnerable. If the Paleomena Corporation cashiered him tomorrow, his ‘internal exile’ might resemble the existence waged in this strangulated setting. An old man probably not five years his senior rummaged through a smoldering refuse bin that listed on the pitted steps of a tenement. The man held aloft the remains of an evening dress once stridently orange. His face and hands were covered in sores. Had the wretch been as improvident with his future as he now deigned to be with his?

The limo halted before a sooty three-story brownstone wedged between two stores, one a glitzy video game outlet, the other a former welfare centre now a charred blackened shell. The fire appeared to be a recent success as suggested by ankle-deep puddles of water and vivid liquo-

rice flares and spits on the brownstone's side and adjacent frontage. Neglected electric wiring was the suspected cause.

The door he sought, very near but untouched by the fire, was painted a deep green and adorned with a gleaming brass knocker. An adjacent glazed window front edged with stucco scalloping displayed in stamped bronze-gold characters the legend: Hermann Landowney Gallery, Mannered Classical and Modern Art. On the other side of the door, umbered by the fire, a cracked window bore in smaller, simple, back-brushed letters: Evelyn Jamal, Clairvoyant. A clutch of grubby children played in a parking lot across the street, receivers plugged into their ears, shuffling to the omnipresent preoccupying boogie. A ratty mongrel with a stiff hind leg followed a small waif about the centre. She held aloft what looked like an imitation peach.

Hermann answered the ring. He appeared more watery than usual. He had put on weight and seemed somewhat deafer. His handshake was the usual vice grip affair however, and he took Willardson's coat with a humming relish that suggested Willardson might never see it again. "Evi!" he shouted in a scraped voice. "We have the guest." A frozen comic mask barely hid the predatory affection he leveled on his smooth round visitor.

"I trust no works were damaged by the fire," said Willardson. "From your communiqué I rather assumed business was brisk."

Hermann scowled. "Ah heck no, I can tell you. The water squeeze in everywhere. Ah, a mess! Nothing important may be damaged, I even

don't know, but those insurance bastards won't push me I can tell you." Wearily he added, as if Willardson might be one of the adjustors, "But let's not argue, not like the punks. We have some quiet, some schnapps, eh? A good cup of coffee?" "Then he changed his mind, thinking he ought not press his luck. "A Treppchin. Jah." This last offering was a sweet Mosel Hermann had given his rarified blessing. A foot wine he deemed it, the nausea minimal when taken liberally. Willardson brought forth the gift-wrapped scarf his secretary had picked out for Evelyn, Hermann's commanding wife. "Ah heck, the English." Hermann made signs of a long standing helplessness.

"Perhaps a little Treppchin to help us make up our minds." Willardson already feared the work he came to see might be a tolerably good rendering of one of the tableaux. But Hermann was ahead of him, and finely disgusted.

"Always a 'little', the English. Evi! Two goblets and the Piesporter."

"And how is Evelyn?"

Hermann shrugged, then offered a deprecating smile. "A woman, jah. She helped with the fire. I was in the clinic. X-rays, tests." He thumped his stomach. "Everything rotten, so what do you want?" The phrase seemed non-specific, a broad condemnation of the world at large.

Rarely did Willardson purchase anything from the gallery, though it usually earned its modest retainer. A year ago he purchased from a putatively bankrupt dealer a putative Degas maquette which he was undecided about. Indeed, his very quandary, given his reputation, was enough for a

speculator to take it off his hands. In the interim the small figurine served his ‘presumption’ inventory well. Vintage art was the capstan for reeling in market-stuck bullion. These were the thoughts of Arthur Pechenpaugh, his boss, who still told stories of artists signing ‘re-negotiating’ discharged treasury bills — his received dissertation on the question of art, and homage to the imperious value of consensus (liquidity) in busy, litigious times. Willardson had been something of a find himself.

The gallery occupied several rooms of what had been a commodious flat. This day the main salon housed a collection of ambitious oils: huge canvases of industrial and metropolitan squalor, with natural unpolluted microscopic landscapes (with objectives attached) sitting within like half-tone dots, each whole canvas framed in badly corroded girders. Sharing the same space were meter-high polished brass sculptures with razor-sharp edges, intricate and equally hazardous innards, and highly lyrical titles. Two imitation Ghiberti church panels in cast-iron surrounded a pint-size Donatello David holding a guitar stem. A nearby alcove honoured Soviet icons — images of loyal Checkists, the plaque said. Pieces of smoke-umbered wood in them might have come from fragments littering the gutted welfare centre next door. A stale humidity suffused the room, too full of odd scents to be entirely the result of the water cannon, Willardson thought.

Evelyn suddenly emerged from the half light at the back of the salon bearing a tray with two acrylic goblets and a bottle of the Mosel. She was another of the gallery’s wonders, the homely daughter of a dread magog,

her hands small and composed, her upper arms full as shopping bags. Her face hove before them like a cliff of granite misted with fine hair, her expression, which seldom varied, sad and anciently hospitable. The hand Willardson took had recently engaged in baking — flour still dusted the fingers. It had an oddly comfortable feel, as though he greeted a newly turned out ancestor. She placidly apologized for Hermann getting him out across the country — Willardson had been attending two new shows in New York — judiciously accepted her gift, then left as silently as she came, disappearing into the darkness at the back of the room with the magic of a garment slipping off the back of a chair.

Hermann led him through a large doorway into a smaller room, perhaps a former study, with an ornately carved chimney-piece opposite the doorway. The picture was mounted on an easel near a collection of calligraphic-style watercolours of hovering birds of prey. It stood in the weak light suffusing the thin curtains of the window facing the street — a lifelike, nubile, multi-limbed creature reminiscent of an Eastern tara or apsara, consorts desired both by man and god. Willardson had seen a figure like it in *ZYTA*'s collection, the facial features and sense of equipoise in the gracile figure close to others in that bedevilled series, where lifelike characterizations went begging for historic verification. This work was no exception. He was all but certain he'd seen the face elsewhere, but could not summon a credible antecedent. The sculpture depicted seemed made of a light variegated marble, not the gilt-copper or bronze a period expert might have expected. In the soft light the subtle coloring, clement blue

greys and faun-flesh browns, seemed to bleed against the starker calligraphy.

Willardson guessed the image carefully masked, sufficient to belie the setting and keep the knowledgeably curious on tenterhooks. The painful giddy part was the suspicion of kinship with *ZYTA*'s haunting compilations. Many of the baffling ingredients were here. He began to feel light-headed, vertiginous -- a sensation he believed alien to the wine.

“It’s moving and teasing at the same time, jah?”

“That may be a very good point, Hermann. From a collection, I presume.”

“Jah, I even don’t know. I phone, say you are a schmeiss.”

“I would like to meet whoever is responsible. It maybe part of a folio.”

He wondered if Hermann had seen any of *ZYTA*'s original tableaux. Was the crusty immigrant capable of selling slyly vulgarized fakes? But when he inquisitively looked up his host was already through the doorway, hobbling like a toy soldier negotiating a slight incline, his lumbar support working both shirt and trouser top. While he waited Willardson adjusted an eyepiece for a closer look. Two of the children from across the street peered in at him, their noses distorted against the window. The girl offered him the peach. He decided to blow his nose. She smiled when he had finished.

Hermann returned looking maligned.

“Ah heck, a recording. A monkey. Not the artist, no question. No message, only office hours.” He shrugged.

Willardson was becoming impatient, querulous an uncharacteristic trait.

Jogged by the entreaty, Hermann lunged directly at the fireplace mantel and a dense litter of serrated envelopes, pens, pill vials, glasses and magnifiers. Two dilapidated German-English dictionaries lay beneath a single faded burgundy rose. At first the stiff curator was undecided, then with surprising alacrity retrieved a business card with a note attached. Aloud he read, "Mr. Alvar J. Lachance, president even, Apropos Importers. No address." Momentarily abstracted he held the card at arm's length, then squinted at it from an oblique angle. "Jah, cheap." Absently he detached the note from it then brightened. "They go together, I remember. He ask me to keep them separate — for a week. I try to insist on an address and my gosh he became an owl, a darn Kobold or Wichtlein — oh you're not German." Again he shrugged, this time offering a bluffer's condolence.

Willardson left after two glasses of the Mosel and a one-sided dissertation. By then his composure had returned. Though his inability to identify the illustration continued to needle. But the address on the card, in a tidy slanted hand, proved difficult to corroborate. Apropos Importers was not entered in any of the many directories, official and private, he had recourse to. Nor was there a listing for Lachance, Alvar J. In one clandestine publication that estimated the yearly income of the residents in a given block, the street he sought yielded the terse comment: Zone Assessment in Progress. But the veteran driver of the security limo he summoned simply grunted and silently drove to a narrow deserted street where

most of the buildings, aging brick and cinderblock warehouses, were vacated and boarded up. After a close perusal of the street numbers, the driver stopped before a high cement facade with rough, undressed pilasters worked into it. While the driver waited Willardson approached a newly lacquered door framed in angle iron. A complex outlook mechanism faced him at eye level. He touched the call button and heard a faint melodic cadence that ended in a tingling resonance near the door's surveillance lens. He was being economically and frankly inspected. A box-light blinked on above a microphone grill.

“Yes, the Chimera is listening.”

The voice was soft, very young perhaps, and its owner likely high. Willardson spoke up: “I represent a client who has shown some interest in a work currently on view in the Hermann Landowney Gallery. I understand someone at this address can give me information regarding its author and contract sale.”

The light continued glowing. Then a sleepy face, disconcertingly young, appeared at the edge of the door.

“Can you meditate for a nanosecond. When the siren sounds come in. Mr. Fazio will show you the pastry.”

The door closed. Willardson waited, trying hard to be entertained. Pastry? Siren? A specialized boudoir, perhaps? Here? The face at the door was frail, fey — drug haggard? Neither male nor female. Did it matter? Yes, it must to a client, a person not as sullen and refractory as he was at that moment. Dear Hermann.

At the sound of muted bouzouki music he pushed open the door, entered and stood motionless in a narrow passageway with a surprisingly high ceiling. Pale light emanated from fluted recesses atop the walls, permitting one to see nothing distinctly. The carpet was soft, resilient. A sweet perfume sated the air. His sense of the ridiculous was screened only by his wish to settle the correctness of the address Hermann had given him. The irony of his possible whereabouts was put on hold; the business of restoring *ZYTA* to her rightful eminence would require patience.

The light from the recesses gradually brightened. He could make out three doors to an annex, one enameled a damask red. Through such a door he once entered a nursery school or romper room as it was innocently named. A sliding door in the corridor wall suddenly disclosed a foppishly dressed Black flaunting ennui in a three-piece velvet-green suite threadbare at the elbows and knees. A wig of blond salad curls did not completely hide spiny grey hair. Dull eyes flickered above tremulous lips continually moistening themselves. He introduced himself as Will Fazio and got straight to the point.

“A lotta chaps interested in the import over there. Fill out the card here and we’ll try to set somethin’ up.”

Willardson managed an impervious smile. Then plodded on, as if entertained by the prospect of playing a straight man to this huckster. “Do you know if it is one of a kind, Mr. Fazio — the work on display?” He sounded more anxious than he intended.

Mr. Fazio’s voice soared in happy concurrence: “One of kind, ace high,

yessir.”

Still, Willardson ventured on, incredulity upstaging sanity. “The Asian or Slavic looking deity itself — is it part of a collection do you know? It rather appears to be a fragment.”

The agile smirk darkened and the moist lips parted to reveal a tongue frisking a bicuspid. “Put the message — on the card. Slip in the pink slot. Collection, thas cool.”

By then Willardson had been ushered beyond the vented doorway to a desk in a former pantry or kitchen. DVDs sat in the maw of a dumb waiter. Heavy worn tiles mottled the floor. Diverse electronic machinery packed the roomy cupboards. The desk itself, once a tolerable Louis XVI imitation, was adorned with period erotic cameos, one disturbingly close to the baroque formalism of an early tableaux.

“All the vital stats,” Mr. Fazio continued, eyeing Willardson with abiding amusement. “Hang in there.” He then disappeared through a further doorway beyond the desk. Inside this second room a gamin youngster roosted on a divan nibbling a Reese’s peanut butter cup and reading a comic book.

Willardson glumly pulled up a chair to face a sheet of improvident stationery. Unlike the corporation’s rag this one smelled of sandalwood and he wasn’t required to append the customarily suborned signature. There were spaces for his name, date and hour of desired rendezvous, preferred location (if applicable), description of desired companion (via house code, website or show-lounge reference), attendant gratifications (including ‘an

ambrosial drink’ called raki), form of payment (most credit cards were accepted), and a précis about the dual nature of the timeless Greek symposium and Roman convivium. Philosophic discourse and sex. Stupefaction and its antidote presumably.

He snorted, felt less an ass than simply perplexed. Mr. Fazio’s reference to a ‘gallery’ continued to vex him. What in God’s name was Hermann up to? Or not up to? What if the address was correct and the stiff curator not ignorant of *ZYTA*’s rarefied tableaux? The speculative options were as teasing and bewildering as his whereabouts. Could Hermann serve as an accomplice to a new team of art forgers...who ‘incidentally’ advertised the region’s reigning tarts? The front half of such a ruse he had detected before; elements of the new Russian mafiya had a stable of neglected painterly talent and, with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, a ready cache of masterworks to merchandise, so he suspected, some held back while a few clever fakes were floated to vex and further attenuate expert opinion. As for the ‘painted lady’ in Hermann’s gallery, what might he conclude? That someone was keenly envious of *ZYTA*, derisively forged an imitation or two, and he, Willardson the Meek but Prurient, was fated to make the discovery? Again he barely sighed. Life these days was complex and technology, *ZYTA*’s apparent handmaid, didn’t help.

He folded a blank page, dropped it through the slot, rose and approached the second doorway, now closed. He rapped lightly and was surprised to see it quickly open. Inside a bulky man with deeply grooved cheeks stood atten-

ing an espresso machine. Without looking up, the young lad on the divan, the fey ‘face at the door’, the Reese’s confection poised on uppity fingers, smartly turned a page of his comic.

“Problems?” droned the man.

“Not at all, but for one question I neglected to put to Mr. Fazio.” Willardson fished about in his pockets and brought forth a pair of thick ugly spectacles retained for displays like the present, though not before staged in such an establishment. “Yes, Mr. A.J. Lachance — on the card I was given. I’d hoped for the gentleman’s business office.”

“Dunno.” The man’s voice seemed free of conceit. The self-absorbed Billy remained imperviously silent. The man looked at Willardson. “Never heard of the guy.”

“Is is possible Mr. Fazio might know?”

With great performing sense Billy teathed another section of the cup. “Mr. Fazio just jellies the doughnuts.”

Willardson smiled demurely while affecting to reach for his wallet. “Mr. Lachance is the president of Apropos Importers, I understand. I would be most grateful.”

Billy placed upon him a flinty eye before returning to his comic. He spoke nonchalantly as he turned another page. “You might try the District Attorney’s Office.”

“Billy, jees.”

The heavy man hesitated then offered a seedy smile. “Billy likes to fool around.”

Willardson was about to continue the performance when he changed his mind and returned the bill to his pocket.

Glumly the man said, "Happens — mixups."

"Not your lucky day," Billy blithely added.

The man shook his head.

"Ye ol' daisy chain." Billy again.

The man shook his head, dourly smiled.

Willardson felt airborne with unreality. He could hear the words but his mind refused to believe. The last comment particularly strafed. Was it a reference to something he ought to know or simply more arcane street lingo, perhaps a reference to the pecking order -- 'daisy' being, if memory served, a pejorative for informer.

He was about to re-enter the hall when he stepped on something near the desk, a small discarded wad of paper that turned out to be on close inspection -- in the limo -- the crumpled half of an elaborate ticket or pass, possibly to a snooty bazaar or convention. Listlessly had he pocketed the find before departing, the large entrance door closing with a resonant clunk, baffling a chorus of sniggers no doubt.

Dear Hermann.

But the ailing curator was not in the gallery when Willardson phoned. He had collapsed from a pulmonary edema and been rushed to emergency. Evelyn had just returned. She was upset and could provide no additional information about the unusual picture or its creator. She hoped Hermann would be able to have visitors in a day or two. Willardson gave

her the number of his LA maisonette, demanded she call if he could be of help, and rang off.

Ensconced and idled in his study, magnifier in hand beneath a strong light, he set about to examine the unusual scrap of cardboard. The presumption that the gallery painting and address he visited that afternoon might be linked set his teeth on edge. The fragment handily, mutely teased him on. If Hermann was sick, he may also have been careless...there was, after all, a considerable reckoning to attend to. His own reputation was on the line — for he, like his old friend Peter, had been in the vanguard lauding *ZYTA*'s wondrous, suggestively necromantic wares. Yet they still had no idea who or what *ZYTA* was. Indeed he was not at all certain that the icon or hallmark stamped in the bottom right hand corner of what Peter called the ‘tableaux’ corresponded to *Z-Y-T-A* — the speculative guess to date. The embossed card stock before him now also presented a curiosity and ambiguity — as a possible invitation or pass card. It bore an ornately monogrammed ‘B’ and smaller serial number truncated by the tear. Looking aslant the fragment he noticed additional numbers pressed into the fabric, a possible telephone number copied onto a separate paper with the ticket providing support. Graphite gently blown across the surface yielded all the characters but one. The exchange was familiar though. Identifying the number indebted him further to a friend at Bell.

“My best guess, given the monogrammed stub — a ritzy club,” he overheard a chatty female supervisor exclaim to his friend. She ate as she

talked. “The line connects to Van Nuys, a park somewhere, an underground members invite thing. Foreign nobs, casino and show lounge. Best guess. Saul and I got in one night. Friend lent us a pass. Nearly got lost getting there. The club is called — just a minute — the B-E-L-L-E-R-O-P-H-O-N. A neato floor show in the one lounge. Also an awesome comedian called the Gryphon. A real honk.” Her laughter ended with coughing and swearing.

Willardson thanked his friend, by then curious as he, pleaded misinformation, overwork and hung up. It was late. He read again the exchange and smiled. Then pronounced ‘Bellerophon’ and decided the serif on the monogrammed card, that portion that remained anyway, was figuratively Greek. *Bellerophontes*. Hero and slayer of monsters. Including the fire breathing Chimera. One of antiquity’s terrifying females. Though he ended up, if memory serves, wandering the world alone despised by gods and men. Well, he did have his day. Willardson smiled, sensing again an elusive but teasing reality. The club remained a dark horse, but thus far his nearest ‘ticket’ to a Mr. Alvar or ‘Alvie’ Lachance, with whom he urgently wanted to converse. The connection with the gallery had become an obsession. In the back of his mind grew the larger grotesquery: a canny slur of *ZYTA*’s uncanny art. For reasons most inauspicious. Hence the immediate dilemma: what to do about the chance lead to this problematic club — an anachronistic Greek symposium? — that could even be patronized by a rogue member of the Paleomena board. One of the ‘foreign nobs’. What could he lose? Hermann would be indisposed for many

hours. The worst the club managers might do was chuck him out. Meantime, he must be on the lookout for clever renderings of the tableaux and equivocal beings disguised as raffish Olympic deities. A command performance. For perhaps the second time in his life David Abercrombie Willardson shunned taking a pill and going straight to bed. The first time, perhaps, was when, doubting his chances, he doughtily sought employment with the Paleomena Corporation itself.

From the very start the story of *ZYTA* was bizarre. A stray signal *supposedly* picked up by a tracking station in the Paleomena space research facility was first thought to come from an aberrant vehicle, then the experts weren't sure. The preliminary guesstimate was that some comedian was having a go at Paleomena. They named the signal *ZYTA* after an icon that appeared in each of the signal's data sets, some of which contained minimalist graphics of a human-like civilization — at first underwhelming, so slick and stylized the initial images seemed — though not for long. In a very short time everyone Willardson knew was suspicious, then perplexed — even confounded. The knowledgeable perhaps most of all. The data sets accompanying the images proved to be more complex than the latest programs could transpose — initially. Then the sets gradually ‘accommodated’ the late defaults. That the late generation of computers might be that prescient came less as a surprise than a sobering puzzle. After all, Paleomena had diligently worked for some time on a ‘thinking’ computer. Had the later graphic images not incited such belated wonder — their clarity and detail increasing exponentially — the confusion might have been

less seismic. The wonder became numinous. So it seemed. If man always wanted to know the future of planetary existence; now he — well, Paleomena — had an unwitting tool that augured a surprisingly lucid picture of a spine-tingling *sui generis* technical and cultural biosphere. The *ZYTA* ‘signal’ might have been dismissed as the work of a consummate fiddler if the graphic detail, the minutia itself, its artless, ‘veridical’ — Peter’s word — realism not slowly foiled skepticism. The visual features had no specific earthly land form, no recognizable diorama or landscape, yet seemed entirely germane given the data sets. The scholarly visionary Peter went underground to investigate, to better reckon some of his hunches, and hadn’t yet surfaced. Then the often soporific yet perceptive Susanne, one of Peter’s trusted colleagues and flinty corporate reconnoiterers, was reported ‘recuperating’ at a clinic near Bern. An ominous circumstance the bewildered Willardson had still to confirm. Peter had shown him, perhaps wanting to know what a layman thought, some of the graphic images or tableaux as he called them, thinking perhaps that the Director (Procurer) of The Paleogiannis Art Archive and Trust — Willardson’s suave title — might render an aesthetic judgement or two, invoking the names of some artists who could render such illustrations. The prodigious data sets, along with their graphic constructs, fleshed out a world like no other. The extra-neous but tenable reality. Peter was not amused. The sentient computer Paleomena had worked on a decade seemed to be acting independently of its designers while in the thrall or grip of this new signal! It actually ‘envisioned’ on its ‘own’ an ostensibly idyllic civilization with a historic back-

ground similar to theirs! The ramifications were startling to say the least. Who was he, Willardson the Wary, to pronounce on images or ‘tableaux’ that reduced the few real geniuses he associated with to sullen and cryptic silence? In such a group he was the original ignoramus. Peter and the others became in effect cloistered, indentured consultants, for a time, after the initial ‘arrival’ — almost an after hour lark for those who first confronted it, before the details were deciphered and took one’s breath away — as Miguel later told the wistful Susanne and the devoutly atheistic Peter. The discrete *ZYTA* appellation, for instance, was appended as a kind of sig-net seal to every image as well as the data sets! The chemical-physical indeces, algorithms mainly, with accompanying genetic codes, intimated the individual beings of the civilization depicted. ‘A genetic endgame’, Peter imagined them.

The Princes, the Paleomena executive heads, were of course galvanized when the company’s wise men reluctantly, discretely confirmed an exclusive, and what an exclusive! Only the source — the source’s involated computer program — eluded the headhunters. The protracted unbelievers. The civilization *ZYTA* conjured and detailed was a virtuosic tease — or perhaps not. Indeed, that was the central problem at first — the early images were tantalizing but surreal to the corporations’ hastily convened experts. After all, what scientist thinks of aesthetics as cogent or rational, thinks that gracile attic beauty, say, may be an inevitable end product! *ZYTA* however, seemed to anticipate this, and many later images were both lucid and beguiling and conformed to the constructs, the *concinnity* of

the mentality that created them. Miguel and Susanne finally said so; Peter had suspected as much early on. And Peter, a prescient anthropologist, had talked finally to his old drinking crony Willardson, secretly and succinctly. His initial diffidence a late emerging embarrassment. It had been their last contact. Hard scientists, like Miguel and Susanne, were not long coming round. They too noticed things that art usually didn't encompass — the discovery of the constituent formula and their galvanizing iterations, for one — that seemed to concatenate the images themselves! Willardson was awash of course; the hard sciences and their equations foreign languages to him. Still, the experts were not guffawing.

A few stories got out, of course, and shortly thereafter the official Paleomena explanation was concocted: an in-house digital comedian calling himself of herself *ZYTA* was having a naughty practical go at his or her no-nonsense bosses, the Princes. The bosses broadly smiled. Yes, the data was clever but of course stunted — sentient computers were after all still inchoate, and finite futuristic predictions seductive but conjectural. These same bosses, Pechenpaugh and Voden among them, two of the five Paleomena Princes — an early fanciful name they ever after slyly encouraged — made no mention of their so recent, ruthless and classified hunt for a consummate earthbound agent — the official comedian, after all, could hardly be allowed such measure of success! Even the Russian connection seemed to percolate. The Princes grimaced ever so fondly for the cameras while the hoarding of the genuine article went apace. So Peter imagined, and prescient Peter was in earnest. “What other explanation is there?” he

said when he hinted at the extent and rigour of the invigilation. Punctilious security had always been a professional regimen at Paleomena, but the apparatus of enforcement was rarely conspicuous, as it soon became. Now the corporation-sanctioned impostor appeared to have a tangible life of her own (being a romantic Willardson always thought of *ZYTA* as a ‘she’; indeed, a central recurring creature in the tableaux suggested a female transcendence). The exhibit in Hermann’s gallery pointed to a slick, salable, discountable fragment — drolly human and fondly nubile. Willardson had seen it with his own weary eyes, so movingly, impertinently like the few tableaux Peter had secretly and nervously shown him.

The remaining, peripherally curious outsiders would surely be routed. What

frail rumour could survive a campy impudent display like that in Hermann’s gallery? *ZYTA* was the stuff of alters and firesides, Angus Dowd, another of the wily Princes, had said with touching bonhomie to the reporter-chroniclers. Executives do not submit to being had, especially in public — a measure of the brilliance of one coterie of their computer wizards, a coterie that remained gainfully employed if under advisement to keep their mischief in-house.

## TWO

Frieda Van Eerden lay awake thinking of the awful dream. In the bowels of a neo-gothic mansion she had sat anchored to an absurdly elegant chair, as the winged roaches flitted about her richly buttered skin...a reoccurring nightmare that seemed a fixture of her new existence. The clock

by her bed read 3:16 AM, the lantern lights in the Japanese garden below her balcony playing on the ceiling like chromatic aurora as they swayed in an early morning breeze. Again she had not closed the curtains, thinking some light was better than the dark she had, until recently, accepted as a precondition for sleep. The dark alarmed her now. A childhood fear long forgotten, newly reified.

She came to the all-too-real mansion in the expected conveyance, sitting between two ghouls in the back seat, a troika possessed of invincible reserve. A group of bridge fanatics planning, rehearsing the evening's game plan and the shortcomings of their anticipated partners. So a dour wit might remark. She barely smiled. People in the street glanced her way as they passed, though they could not see through the heavily tinted windows. Yet they looked, as if knowing that inside, on her way to summary judgement and punishment, was the agent and perpetrator of a travesty. The silence inside the limo seemed vacuous. She listened acutely for the slightest sound of existence beyond the funereal interior, something somewhere untouched by her predicament.

She swept back the covers and padded off to the gleaming Chalcedon tiled bathroom, where the reflections once flattered, cajoled even. Now the oval eyes staring back were sunken, ashen, alien. Her hair looked unkempt, bereft its customary curl. She had even taken to wearing jeans to work. Peter noted the change, but was too tactful to comment. As for Daniel Frank, Susanne and the others, she had diffidently yet finally taken up the *ZYTA* thread. Later than sooner. Where had she been all this

time? Such patient steadfast cordiality touched her more deeply than she could remember. How droll that such acceptance, such unstinting presumption of dedication and fidelity on her part, should be the catalyst that changed her life. To suddenly find that one actually belonged — to the group she was pledged to observe and inform on. Part of her belated discovery as a scientist: candour *was* the faith. She faintly smiled. Was she really, as Peter intimated, so adroitly naive? The team at Paleomena, to which she found she ineluctably belonged, had brought to fruition a prototype of the so-called fifth-generation or sentient computer, which they had christened *ZYTA* after one of the fractal glyphs that appeared in an early and still unexplained read out — its origin still eluding the mavens, the Paleomena Princes as they were called. There was even a silly rumour that the read out itself came from an outside source! It was Peter who hosted Frieda's probationary period, his buoyant wit pacing the flinty technician, to see if the plasma physics and anisotropy, in the conceptual phase, was 'apt', as he called it — the subsequent graphics or tableaux, as he named them, the computer began to draw being but a primer, which also set a few hearts aflutter...unlike the minding of the transport coefficients, here in the cellar of her noxious dream before her interrogators, that she was expected to explicate, where the suspicion of subtlety in arrayed or laced implants seemed to catch fire. Well it was bloody complex. She had just begun to realize how galvanizing and recondite!

She heard herself swear. A phenomenon too common these days —

the awareness that one was more and more an onlooker, a witness to oneself. The effort to resist her interrogators would be laughably brief. Such a slight pale form in the mirror before her now. Her list of weakly ionized plasmas, one of the givens, they would have out of her in no time. In their tingly mosh pit. So the timing of her flight, her escape had to be dead on. And that was the problem.

The one job left she could only connive at. She needed a specific other, an innocent outsider by the name of Willardson, to bring it about. That she would risk the delay caused by his recruitment seemed to pique rather than assuage her guilt. She had performed well as a GRU illegal, a very rare illegal, this she knew, such that her self-inflicted jeopardy now was the dare, the gauntlet thrown down before her early GRU mentor. To her ineffable Vassily. Who often told her to trust her instincts in chancy environs. To trust in herself! How ironic he would find such a conviction now — that she had discovered the salubrity of freedom and candour! Which only a selfless, committed scientist might impart.

As she once more creamed her face — to hide oneself away? — she thought of Ashly Scargill, the Harvard-trained economist and presidential advisor she got to talking about the clowns and heavies in the administration, usually after they made love, though love was hardly the word for such gawky, left-handed sex. Ha! How she baited him after about his communist sympathies, such that he strove to convert her to his chic bias! A political pharmacopeia she thought of it: “Lookit, the Soviet experiment is far from complete; I think we owe them that much leeway.” “If Ameri-

cans had brought select Soviets like Gromyko into their confidence after the war, on some issues, there never would have been a crisis!” “Lookit, in a bloody meritocracy, you have an unforgivable, unsalvageable underclass. The Peter Principle.” “My dear charmer, your pretty cunt is the measure of all quants.” And how he loved to top her by showing her off. At one point, just covering for his social indiscretions was an overtime assignment. How the Rezident must have smiled at her copious reports and detailed tapes, which often contained amorous motets she could not edit out. Scargill expected her to follow him to his new job as ambassador-at-large to the new coalition of ex-Soviet republics. No, said the Rezident, Paleomena was more important. *ZYTA* was more important. The Duma would look after the coalition. The one time she breathed a measurable sigh of relief. Though Scargill’s confusion and disappointment incited a rage she had not believed him capable of.

She peered more intently into the mirror. With the face cream fully applied only her faintly slanted eyes stood out, clear, amiable, seductive. Peter described them as Lemur bright, with his usual half-grin. The aging Willardson would not expect the kind of reward Scargill took for granted of course. Willardson was a prudent spectator, a ‘fence-hanger’ as Peter said. Moreover, as Ashly said in one of his lucid moments, “Most art assay-ers are voyeurs at heart. They want to remove all the frippery. See the god-creator nude.” She thought of the raffish costume young Daniel Frank had sent her for a masked ball that Paleomena was sponsoring in honour of its earth-science program. It was just visible in the bottom corner of

the mirror — in the sitting room off the bathroom, draped over one of the large Chinese palace vases she had recently added to her collection. She looked more closely into the mirror. The eyes were still capable of laughter. And a skewed wink. Shy of their meta-physics most men were easily led creatures. The exceptions came as a revelation. Dear David. His only consolation his idealized works of art. His only costume — himself. In the Paleomena carnival.

It seemed she might get some sleep after all. Thinking of the agreeable self-effacing Willardson had that effect.

### THREE

Lasslo was stocky and very blond with one partly closed bloodshot eye. An inflamed pustule poisoned the lower lid, prompting Willardson to recall the adage: a virgin is a sty in the Devil's eye.

So far he was pleased with his progress, noting happily the fine contempt Lasslo brandished as the club's lead sentinel, proctor and host. His mid-European accent seemed exaggerated and his one good eye never deigned to look directly at newcomers. The street level restaurant was a surprise though. Its decor approximated early Minoan or Mycenaean: ochre-rubbed columns, gold-leaf lintels, and bas-reliefs of fierce lion's heads backgrounded two scrubbed ladies who, dressed in layered skirts ascending to braided boleros, lingered self-consciously near a circular centre hearth. Indeed, Bellerophon might have dined here.

Willardson opened with a cock-and-bull story of a lost cigarette case,

of sentimental value and containing an important medication, which had been lost below, not in the restaurant, and apparently discovered by a Mr. Lachance. Lasslo looked the ticket portion over with barbarous gravity then, after a perfunctory call, led Willardson to a lift which descended several floors below street level -- a fanciful estimation only for the elevator, sheered in a heavy network fabric, housed no floor monitor and moved effortlessly as a maglev.

When the lift stopped he waited while the suspected scanners did their work. During the descent he wondered if his delectation of the recondite Bellerophon would be limited to this disconcerting interior.

The door opened at last to reveal a tall muscular Black named Henry in a trig tuxedo who looked carefully at the half ticket while listening with diffident patience to a roundabout request to meet with Mr. Lachance.

For a moment Willardson imagined his luck had run out. But after a bemused take Henry led him about a loggia that overlooked a jutting theatre stage encircled by livid tables, a cyan light burning in the centre of each as so many gas jets on an open range. Lavish private suites extended off the loges. Down to his left a brighter double doorway led, he guessed, to the casino, from which couples sauntered toward the tables. The loggia housed several chambers. One of these, glimpsed through a back-lit arched doorway, suggested a curiously austere monastic setting. “Spare sanctoriums, stoney crypts, indomitable square worlds,” he said to himself, proud of his impromptu words.

“What’s that?” Henry asked with surprising gentleness.

“Nothing — the air-conditioning.”

Clearing his throat he followed his guide through a fire doorway the other end of the loggia, through a room with intricate machinery both mechanical and electronic, more elaborate than that surrounding Fazio’s Louis XVI desk, to a large imposing door which, if he were not mistaken, must open into a sizeable vault. Needless to say he was alarmed by the ease he was being conducting through this maze, the surreal aspect of which increased with each step. Henry pressed some keys on a monitor and waited. A faint voice issued from a grid.

“Yes Henry?”

“A.J. Someone here you better see for yourself.”

He was ushered into an ornately appointed office which reminded him of a smaller version of an Eastern shrine pavilion. The prayer niche served to harbour a wide desk and tall office chair on which sat a nicely coiffured but vulturous man, smaller and uglier than himself, whom a sudden unease intimated prior encounters with. The man was beyond middle age, smartly dressed in dark blue and iron-grey flannel, moustached, like himself oddly enough, and sported an exceedingly fine hair piece — this he surmised because he had more than once diligently researched the prospect for himself.

Staring the while at a bookcase just back of Willardson, the man listened impassively to the story of the unusual gallery picture after curtly acknowledging the pretext of the vest case. He then fixed on his uninvited guest a look of formidable indifference which slowly transformed itself

into a pinched smile, which in turn collapsed into laughter, a laughter Willardson immediately recognized because it was rare — implosive yet brisk, suggestive of sounds made by a sphincter rather than vocal chords.

“Well so, the haji!”

The remark transported Willardson back to a watery thicket on the golf course — his weekly trek to the land of nod. The voice behind the jibe was unmistakable.

“We were expecting. Someone. Instead the pilgrim with dry socks!” This caused another corrosive round of laughter, followed by a fit of wheezing which momentarily alarmed. It was then Willardson guessed the small moustache was like his own a stick on and probably came, along with the glasses they both pretended to require, from the same supplier. However Karl Voden’s makeup was perhaps better applied. The boney executive became again disaffected, his mid-European accent dogged by the ravages of a stroke Willardson thought.

“Ah yes, the picture.”

Willardson explained further his blundering about a pimp’s lair, the discovery of the portion of the ticket, his subsequent arrival here. He studiously avoided mention of the tableaux. Instead he simply inferred that the painting was one more venture property to be appraised in the course of his rounds. He left the delicate matter of the mysterious Mr. Alvar J. Lachance to Voden to broach as he saw fit. More and more Willardson was convinced that Hermann had spectacularly goofed. Voden continued to stare at the bookcase for some time after Willardson finished. The look

was indiscriminately unfriendly. When he spoke he continued to look through and beyond his guest, as if anticipating drudgery.

“Willardson, Willardson, it’s a photo. Fiddled up. My gawd the creature works here — you catch her act maybe in twenty-minutes. She performs — after the wisecracker.” He began to laugh, this time sardonically, bitterly, as though the Fates were strangely humoured that night. Once more he tried to speak but lapsed into a fit of sniggering, this time edged with a lasciviousness that made Willardson squirm.

Finally he exhausted himself, rose, poured two large scotches, one of which Willardson gratefully accepted, then calmly focused on his drink, this time with condolent amusement.

“Timidity is great roundabout. You wouldn’t be pulling the leg? You look for relaxation but need excuse to pinch the English sobriety, eh? We sell everything else, no? You hear of fantastic club, you investigate.”

But Willardson wasn’t all there at that moment and missed the weak conciliatory note. He was waylaid by the spectre of himself planted somewhere, fathoms deep. Had he not strayed onto verboten turf — a Voden alias blown, the existence of a vulgarized, perhaps probationary, misleading illustration witnessed, confirmed? Did those responsible for selecting the gallery not know Hermann to be one of Willardson’s spotters?

An adder’s nest!

Then Willardson was roused from these deliberations by the performance of Voden — now Lachance? — as pander, as Thersites urging on

Luxury with ‘fat rump and potato-finger’. ‘Fry lechery, Fry!’ he could hear the vulture croaking.

“My gawd you see the creature in the flesh. Our little émigré. A fine story. The art of flight, dear friend. Some of her countrymen want her back. Too glasnosti. She is Pandora for new bosses. Box and all. My gawd it’s perfect. Na zedorov’e!”

Willardson was astonished by the performance. Voden himself seemed mollified by his own narration. This soul-mating...on the eve of a lynch-ing?...

“She trained in some folk ballet or other, one chapter outside Gorki, no matter, before the package tour. Went to London for a time — some maniac attacked her in a club there and lost an eye in the attack. A True fan-tastic. Only Russians makes the splendid rake hells.”

Voden fetched two cigars from a humidor in the office wall, prepared both, gave one to a dazed Willardson, then unhurriedly returned to his prayer niche and continued as if he were telling a friend the details of a memorable holiday.

“She go to Switzerland after attack. Some connection. Then Greece then here. You maybe don’t know. She put out eye of a Muslim during at-tack in London club. Yes, the same. FVR goons in London Metro — the stools with the scent — keep commuters confused. Yet she get out. How is Houdini escape? A great performer our little Faustine. Diamonds, some icons. The occult — one day Hermann’s wife... ” A robust snort elided the sentence. “She has special list — many fine sources.” Willard-

son dourly suspected that Voden was ad-libbing here. “The Duma canary. The encore in the retreat. Ha! Then turns up on doorstep! Already old Cheka family have team here. We imagine you FBI runt. The same handicap, old friend.”

Once again he looked at Willardson with an amusement that was not affectionate. Willardson felt fathoms deep already if what Voden/Lachance told was near the truth. He knew of the attack but not the aftermath. Voden was a bully, a menacing wiseacre — long ago he concluded that. And now in league with a prize that might help him cash some chips in the current espionage roulette? Hardly facts he would want communicated to an outsider. The feeling of dotty unreality helped not at all: Willardson had never felt more funereal.

“You know how she got out, our Danish Slav?” Voden again surveyed the bookshelf. There seemed no end to the whimsy, to the self-parodying ‘truth’. “ — In shipment of Russian caviar. Destined to gourmet chain. One of ours. A large container filled with metal tins filled with finest caviar in world — and one near dead pigeon. One oxygen cylinder, pack heater, and small bit to drill holes in side. Tilbury dockers become the ‘great united’ football club. Russian consul discover lumpen shipment to be repatriated before jaded Western tourists poison themselves and think fishy of new regime. Ha, ha, ha!”

Willardson imagined a kind of cerebral poisoning as the fantastic tale spilled out.

“The Ruskis get the balls kicked off. The dockers defend the Rule of

Britannia with fine cargo.” Voden then resembled an impatient tutor. “My gawd Willardson, think of the determination, the resource. From swank Moscow dachas to London chef. Two seas over. She wants sanctuary and plastic surgeon. We help of course. When the English is good she pulls every mogul West of the Elbe. A pulsar my dear David.” He then looked raffishly at his drink.

Willardson had by this time recovered sufficiently to begin placing a few questions. He was desperately trying to find something out of place, besides himself, and determine Voden’s affability during the remainder of the evening. His status as an innocent had never been more valuable to him.

“You are sure about the picture — it’s not a liquid property?”

“Ah shit no.” The question had its desired effect — first annoying then entertaining. “Some screwball photographer got in here — with the Saudis I think. The photographer is good with computer. Ink jet ‘painting’. A few of the clever pictures we try to sell. For the girl. What harm can they do? So one comes to a gallery. But then our buyer comes in. Ha! Pechenpaugh will choke on the mouth wash. And now you come here, the pilgrim to Bellerophon.” Voden anticipated a full-throated guffaw. Willardson tried hard to imagine the satisfaction a bona fide comedian might derive from such anticipated applause.

“Old friend, think with smile. We have pipeline. All the scramblers, nostalgic Soviet kleptos in their cups — willing to milk the motherland. They like to impress with details. We generously listen.” He snorted.

“We get the patronymics...she gets many gifts. As close to Lethe as the émigré gets my dear fellow.”

The bullyragging then became boldly patronizing, almost companionable. Almost, Willardson reminded himself.

“Old friend, let the mind do best shopping, eh? We trust, you and I.” He looked sternly at Willardson. “Of course. Enjoy the evening. I talk to Henry. For gawdsake don’t miss the act. By the way, we call her Zyta. Sounds like theatre. The dancing is superb. You won’t be shocked. The generosity of the house usually does not extend to buttinskis. But tonight let the mind play the best lies. I see you safe home. Remember” — he consulted his watch — “ten minutes. Henry finds you good seat. Later red-blue chips and excellent conversation — I insist! No average here. Time to relax. Par for course, old friend.”

“Yes, I take your point.”

By this time Voden had an arm about him and they stood back by the office door. Voden pressed some keys on the monitor, Henry presently answered, the door opened, and Voden/Lachance once again exhorted his buttinski to preview the house *tableaux vivant*, as Willardson thought of it. Yet he was spooked by the ongoing intimidation — so different from a gamey or amorous interlude — which his mind demanded immediate attention to. Beyond the worry for his personal safety was the vexation that he had been right all along, that Voden and the other Princes wanted the *ZYTA* data as an exclusive — hence the clever fabricating, as Peter suggested. What better way to dull her rumored aura than by vulgarizing

some of her painterly offerings. In Hermann's example — a modern tart selling herself on the side as department-store art, of which he envisaged an oncoming plethora! Surely a fine way to incite the reigning gossips. The late ineffable computer, the technical Merlin, miraculous in art as in calculus and genetics, reduced to Zyta the showgirl? Science vitiated by gamy sex? The peremptory wipeout? The more he thought about the likelihood the more he grieved, the more acute his memories of the tableaux riches became. And the new face — could it match the remembered tea-rose ellipse that graced several of the fist *ZYTA* offerings? This ET that somehow ventured their way?...

And finally, if he was not dreaming, what was to become of him, now an accessory to this convoluted strategy? How nasty and brutish could one's end be in a gamy bawdy house. Pretty nasty he decided. Blind tigers could be vicious he assumed. But if he attempted to leave would he not risk greater immediate peril, whereas by staying might he not reassure Voden of a stolid ignorance or neutrality? Such a touching dreamer he could be.

Yet the immediate puzzle remained: what did Voden gain by telling him a ramshackle story that could be paraffle but was nonetheless provocative and insinuating? His language alone a mishmash. Perhaps the wily tycoon intended to succeed by reason of the very complexity: doubtful assay-ers require after all believable if not lucid facts. Maybe he simply wanted to keep an eye on him, get him drunk, take some compromising photos...to send to whom, a maiden aunt? Perhaps he planned to do him in during a

clumsy assignation. Make it look like a broken, overtaxed heart. Simple enough, God knew.

And the photographer? And the person who delivered the picture with the Lachance card to Hermann's gallery? Hermann described the individual as an 'owl', a suggestive description though Voden would hardly act as his own legman. Would 'Lachance'? A week's hiatus was requested Hermann said, an odd request, though not to be long puzzled over in that no-man's land. Dear God, what to do?

Like a docile cow to a dip he was led to a table in a corner very near the stage, still then in darkness. Never was he more in need of a bravo comedian.

The chap they called the Gryphon was a tall cross-dresser whose physique could appeal to both sexes. Lean, muscled enough to provide contour but not bulk. Basted in a red plum wig and deftly made-up eyes, long silk pants flowing as a water fall. A slight sibilance to the voice. The laughter both regular and intermittent. Strange that he too might be in on *the* dilemma: troubled, knotty, difficult humans who seemed at times to be aliens...beings hummy with techie smarts. He was 'smoking' when Willardson tuned in.

"Over five-hundred channels on my dish, and everyone a stinker. Have you noticed? A century ago, when we had four, only three were stinkers. The fourth was cloudy and you couldn't tell. My dear sweet mother took a whole evening to get bored. Now we do it in a nano second.

"I was talking to my agent the other day, and he said that my vocation,

the lovely coy hermaphrodite, was losing face. Women were getting serious he said. No longer could I be coy. Waell, that was news. I think Carrie Fisher started it. When she said in Time magazine, ‘Show me a child with a happy, uncomplicated childhood, and I’ll show you Dan Quale.’ Show me a child with a happy, uncomplicated childhood, and I’ll show you Dan Quale. So: misery and complication as laudable maturity. Have we come a long way baby.”

From there on Willardson listened with both wonder and a begrudging delight. To this politically incorrect blithe spirit.

“Of course our soul sisters in Africa have been way ahead of us. What we can barely talk about they have been doing for centuries. Misery and mutilation. Progress.”

A few hisses.

“So the progress harpies agree. Let me begin by saying, with all due respect, that I presume the chronicle of clitoridectomy has few lyrical moments. Listening to three CNN news brokers wrestle with the problem of how to inform the general public that the practice still goes on, somewhere, was like listening to a poor player practice a difficult Prelude and Fugue -- desperation and disbelief vying with incredulity. You see, to put the matter in context, clitoridectomy was never a staple of Reaganomics, hence to dwell at length on the unseemliness of an assault against women, whether or not willed by long-standing, earthy-loving cultures, is to put cultural humanists everywhere at risk. If you tell the general public that such practices still go on, the next time a woman of color, or café au lait, gets

on a bus someone will go, huummmm. And the person so ‘huummmmed’ would be the object of, well, a concocted context. Cock and con in tandem.

“So reasoned one of the earnest, trusting brokers, with a consternation designed to appease. Statistics, we were told, are relevant only in context — a serviceable tautology if you believe there are such things as erroneous statistics. The point is that numbers, figures, in and of themselves don’t lie, but liars constantly dissemble and plodders mislead. It’s the interpretation or presumption that is crucial, and that our three news brokers were determined not to let their readers risk resolving on their own.

“Hence the interminable fugue.”

Some ready applause vies with the few hisses and whistles.

“The worry of the brokers was extended to the perceived persistence and perceived proliferation of criminal assault by blacks. Blacks cannot be blamed for white perception. And perception is perception — whether exquisite or not. Such crime we see ethnocentrically; it is measured only by fastidious vigilantes, noted only ‘out of context’. Well, to restore the context, put black crime in perspective, one of the fair-minded brokers drew attention to the fact ‘pretty well established over the last fifteen to twenty years,’ that the ‘person likeliest to be hurt...is a black middle aged woman.’

A pause as the political heresy of the tirade sunk in to a few titters and more spirited hisses.

“Definitely the No Comment department. By listening further I knew I was destined to be an accessory, regardless — overhearing the very thing

correct-minded editorialists seek to keep out of the minds of tender American viewers, who often watch with a satisfied glow Bruce Willis blow the world apart. But the brokers were in earnest. How do you broach questions of tribal scarification and mutilation without weakening the spirit of humanist magnanimity. People do have sinistral imaginations. My perverse Western mind then reeled between images of venerable head binding and contouring — long before President Johnson got on the phone — to resplendent Mayan princes drawing bark paper through obsidian made holes in their penal glands, so attentively described by Linda Schele and David Freidel in their book *A Forrest of Kings*. You don't have to be a moribund, European male to blanche before ritual like that.”

A finely extravagant move earns polite laughter.  
“Then I recalled Lady Eveningstar, a Mayan queen, having a stingray spine thrust through her tongue, and her own blithe self pulling a rope the thickness of her finger through the lesion, ‘her blood...in brilliant contrast to the deep green jade of her shoulder cape.’ The cape suggests the Mayans too had their Versace. Another princess, not a slave to habit, did it with barbs set in the rope!

“Now one can only stand in awe of Mayan wisdom. So that's how they abided influential female tongue, kept the backchat and ululations to a minimum — yet managed to be deferentially even fondly written about later by a pair of smart caring scholars. The lesson is ineluctable.

“So gents, and the not so gently gentry, off with the domesticated tea cozies! Bloody but unbowed is not perverse if you want to skewer a few

tongues. Even venerable when habitual. Even if you end up being fed to the royal jaguars as a war trophy, you may still adorn an immortal stelae and demonstrate how the Mayan health plan kept a population youthful and on its toes.

“All traditional, time honoured mutilators and vivisectionists, please take note.

Escaped laughter and some clapping.

“As for poor Brucy, little nipple, no pec Brucy. He needs a very big gun. Blow blow blow blow! You buy this shit? Little Nipple, no pec. With a big gun. Hummm.”

Another treasured pause.

“You know why Bob Guicciioni needs all those gold chains about his neck — no not at all. He needs them for a counter balance. He couldn’t get it up otherwise. God bless.”

The laughter was intermittent and in some cases standing. Willardson had recovered much of his innate optimism. That Karl Voden could be part responsible for this entertainer was news indeed. He waited in great anticipation for the next act. Which had already begun.

Soft electronic music issued through the curtains, some of it reminiscent of Richard Strauss’s The Woman Without a Shadow, *Die Frau Ohne Schatten*. Damn odd stuff — for an early Greek night spot surely.

He decided he would simply observe and get drunk rather quickly. His demise would be less painful; someone might even take pity on him. Providential events had overtaken him before and there was no absolute cer-

tainty they would not perform happily enough again. The slippared Do Juan, in ‘is cups ma’am, sir. Your humble. He summoned Henry and jauntily requested a Methuselah of champagne, and definitely no gaming chips. He received instead a nearly full litre of a sooty Chardonnay and was content. He would get enough down to get drunk without getting sick, and he didn’t want to be sick the last night of his life. The other gambit, if it transpired, would be arch hilarity enough. Human mating had always been for him proof that God appreciated howlers as much as anyone. As the Gryphon demonstrated with great panache. Thou bidst me queen, renew unspeakable woes...from a poor functional celibate, one notch below a functional illiterate.

He was well on his way toward a dignified oblivion and still decorously unfamiliar with the ways of a blind tiger, or whatever the camp pertinent phrase was then, when the music grew more pronounced. He was dealt another blow: it was definitely Strauss, Richard. The Woman Without a Shadow concert suite, the poignant opening theme of longing and prepared renunciation, a tune that touched him deeply and now induced a terrible wave of self-pity. Dear sweet Muse, what was going on? He knew they (the audience) might be turned to stone like the Potentate in the Hofmannsthal story. He tried to resist the force of the music. He pretended to be the churlish critic. Strauss, you say? Richard? Strauss as in Johann or Richard as in Wagner? This didn’t help at all. The music kept telling him of unhappiness, of a human without a presence, a place, an identity. A computer looking for an ethos, a physiognomy?... Despite its electronic

base the sound was surprisingly apt polyphonically. His hearing often became acute when he imbibed. He wanted to bolt and would probably have trouble standing. Once the face appeared he was prepared to get sloshed, particularly if it recalled the lovely cameos *ZYTA* bestowed on them in her painterly phase. For the time being then a slight interruption. Not drunk, but having drink taken. His goblet bounced back to the table and he sorely crossed his arms in the manner of a stoic adjudicator.

The curtain had been pulled back during his long reverie. The stage remained in darkness while the music continued to confound. Something new had been added, an insistent declamatory tune, spare and primeval. Hence the exhilarating appeal of the discovery: about the sensuous Strauss campaigned the vital choruses of destiny in the *Carmina Burana* — the bondsmen of a soul. Then something else again, swollen too, but slightly syncopated with many weepy fiddles — and boozy sitars! He sat up, sensing relief. He might be spared after all — the sacrilege sophomoric, in degree of iniquity Benny Hill division only. He could imagine a portable organ with castanets and maraca starting up any minute now.

At first the form, centre stage rear, sported full monastic habit. It moved barely at all yet with sinuous clarity. Then a disturbing *O Fortuna* resurrected itself along with faint shrouds from the *Ave formosissima*, choruses intent on shaming the force of Eros and Dionysus, the heady sounds of the moral imperium: grandiose, numbing, extirpating. Had he missed a chapter? Was the world now so thoroughly awry that an *Ave formosissima* was tractable pander music? War and lechery, nothing else holds fashion?

Thersites again. The decor was lurid enough. Svelte nymphs monkeyshining on wall tapestries. The cyan table light was in fact an endless naughty hologram. He looked benignly about him. Packed tables, including a trio of noisy heavies lumped together opposite. The scene of an unrealized United Nations. Twenty or more creeds tolerantly putting up with one another. Nonchalant dark Asians seated by a clutch of posh South African bankers on their way to Uruguay as he overheard, drinking the same booze, pissing in the same urinals, eating the same provender; oblivious of one another. Someone from the World Court expounded to a blowzy functionary behind him. Did he also see a patrol officer's uniform near a group of diffident or yeasty Sheiks? Wonderfully discomposing was an extraordinarily grim man with an immense nose seated near what looked like a large, red-trimmed costume hat — a cast off from a recent divertissement? Was the former wearer now accountably elsewhere, eagerly climbing out of an equally unusual guise? Somewhere a Dixie persifleur complained he hadn't come to see Mother Theresa. The comment nearly earned him a standing ovation. Orff and Strauss driven off with wet towels, plunged into the fountain in their finest regalia. Suddenly he sat with the peashooters at an Opéra bouffe awaiting a wall-eyed maestro. The electronic fiddles and sitars were now in a long sustained tremolo while a slow distant bolero suggestive of the Orff *In taberna quando sumas* (a drunken half-tone sot messing with philosophy) goaded the senses. Willardson was vaguely aware of the habit coming off in matter-of-fact bits to reveal a brief penitential white, which became briefer still. Yet despite this

servile turn-on, he was in a briny way aware of an astonishingly able engineering to the dance, of lean-edged undulations flowing into rising, near vaulting triumphs of will and agility, the intimation of limitless unsprung energy never lapsing — framed words he would write later drawn upon recollections shaped that jarring, stupefying night. Serpentine, defiant, immanently magisterial, a gracile musculature continually redefining itself with craft and resolution, tinged with the sinister, like a head turning full circle on a doll. A terrible arching longing, patient only in the intervals. Yet however sinewy the dithyramb — nearly that of a frisky lezghinka at times — the creature would slyly return to the spare crescent of an Arabian night, the connubial spell of a Scheherazade, and with a doira or sara-bandé the narrative begin anew, once whimsically with the Orff tenor's aggrieved *Olim lacus colueram* ululations (more relished complaint) leading the way: an inborn energy fuelling a folkloric rhapsody with ineffably sleek and saturnalian flourishes.

Read and blush, as he would a week later on reading his diary.

She was neither voluptuous nor tall. In those rare moments when the performance slowed for punctuation she seemed slight, frail even. Only movement defined her separate sinew, which then seemed fluted and vibrantly parsed. Half her face was masked in a Chinese white which mainly vexed. She looked the part of a *ZYTA* grace but he couldn't be certain. The proportion was there, the elegance uncannily what one might have expected, the understatement understandable, the nobility an underlying if unexpected affirmation. He felt much as he did upon first glimps-

ing the extraordinary renderings: wonder, a thrilling curiosity, in league with the passionate few — except that now he confronted an all too human and perhaps purchasable incarnation. The once ineffable presence teasingly earthbound, winnowed into focus. He was a bewildered and unforgiving man at that moment.

Things had progressed to the point where Strauss's Salome slipped in and out of the Orff. Then the spirit of his imagination was again assailed by reality. The penitential bits of white began to transform into intricate traceries of polished gold, a broad link pectoral and intaglio bottom, each constituent slipping into place after an arch extension and gyration, the humour belatedly appreciated — in watching complex gold work slide into place with seemingly immaculate timing to masque the essentials while none of the grace, the surety and speed, nor the overall precision of the choreography let up. The gold work bearing a disheartening resemblance to a type of adornment that appeared in the early tableaux, designs Peter found to be surpassingly elegant and unique. Willardson was by then decidedly resentful. Both the dancer and now her attire rattled a chosen faith. “No! Dammit!”

He discovered he was standing, and without assistance. Several sullen faces listed up at him. Henry bore down from the rear gallery.

“The bugger’s got a point,” someone said. A Scot, he thought.

He plummeted to his seat. A few sniggers surfaced, none really unendurable.

“Hey Will,” said Henry, suddenly kneeling catlike by the table, “you

okay?"

"A waste, Henry."

"Think you can keep it in your back pocket?" Henry glanced about. "Some nice packaged stuff after the show. A promise. Take it easy — A.J.'s special recommendation."

Alone again, and everything hunky dory. The jewelry slipped into place with monotonous deftness, allowing the briefest glimpses of glabrous treasure, distracting one from an otherwise arresting, at times classic, balletic performance. Which ended suddenly, abruptly, with everyone still perhaps shrewdly guessing. A fine tease, he concluded. The applause ranged from the politely habitual to the hearty. The gents opposite formed a huddle. His goblet, the last of the litre, was nearly empty. It would not be long now. Bacchus was about to change him into a dolphin as He did with the mariners who took Him away; he could feel the buoyant swell of the waves.

Vaguely would he remember strong arms hoisting him to his feet, soft mumblings, and then a stint, still supported, by a urinal where some Chaucer vented itself as well: *Whan that April with his shoures soote* — so he previously carried on. *Wel koude she carie a morsel and wel kepe / That no drope ne fille up-on hir brest.* Henry refused to give him a stylus. Then he got patronizing: *There was a wee lad name Callous, Who peed in a Catholic Chalice.* But Henry was adamant, despite the crucifix about his lean, muscular neck. Henry the Grim.

He remembered climbing under a down quilt after a steam bath and

superb massage, and a dedicated pedicurist with a storehouse of limericks as vast as his own. She and ‘Callous’ were immediate pals: *But the Bishop agreed ‘twas done out of need, and not out of Protestant malice.*

He was permitted the final, if wishful word, and that in a stately room with loyal subservient company.

*In the Garden of Eden lay Madam*

*Complacently testing her Adam.*

*Yet weak was her mirth*

*For she knew that on earth*

*Small though the balls he plainly had ‘em.*

He would recall also a great jolly spirit who left him with the mellow taste of marzipan and flambé memories of eating warm maple-sugared pears, missing airborne olives, and fondling fine brown hair. He remembered being convinced that he was more than a pincher. He remembered falling asleep while a knowing hand caressed his face.

He awoke in darkness to a terrible thumping above, his incomprehension aggravated by the blackness about him. The thumping continued, some of it rock-hard. Something broke, something large, ceramic or crystalline. Voices swelled, strident, insistent, followed by the crack of what could very well be a firearm. Two rounds punctuated pitched screaming, some of it in Arabic he guessed. The screams suddenly ceased and the commotion waned, softened, moved away; a shuffling of steps receding, fading.

He was nearly ready to close his eyes and surrender once more to the warm softness of the bed when he heard muted scraping sounds — metal against metal. Very near. He had no recollection of the dimensions or shape of the room he was in. Was someone attempting to breach a lock — his lock? A door opened and closed and he glimpsed light. He froze. The silence that followed was monstrous. Motionless and terrified he waited, half sitting, half lying, his heart thumping wildly against his ribs. The taste of perfume still tainted the insides of his mouth. Was this the planned moment, the feigned ruction, the uninvited hood with an assassination device? The misfortunate slaying of an innocent? The blackness was absolute. He heard rustling sounds. Cloth being dragged over furniture. A zipper. The disturbed leg of a chair on a hard surface. More rustling. Nearer he thought. Then the door opened again and a silhouette peered into the hallway: short straggled hair and upcast cheeks, with a bruise it seemed. The door softly closed. He had but a glimpse, but the glimpse was enough, to see an exquisite intent face with over-rouged lips beneath which a man's suit, the coat too wide, the sleeves too short, grey brown like his own. Nearly the face of a Cranach muse, with wimpled nose tip and lemur-wide eyes barely aslant. If his raw, rankling memory served — a reoccurring face in some early tableaux, the one he, they, fancifully imagined as the ineffable if not terrible *ZYTA* or Zyta, a Helen or Judith perhaps (some of the scenes Peter thought interpolated historic and mythological data) the most frequent of several faces, candid, direct yet composed, with the same opal sheen. He decided he could sketch the crea-

ture in the dark. The gamin he saw just now bore a striking and sobering resemblance. So. Was he then but one more pantaloons drooling over a not so obscure object of desire? One more fey footling romantic on the loose?

He remained motionless beneath the quilt. How the devil did she find the clothes? His clothes! How did she know where to look? And what in heaven's name did this fateful *she* want with — his suit? His passport, gold card? Driving range credits? He was perplexed, surly, bedevilled and appalled. Would he go through life always on the edge of things? Fairways included? A spectator in a bad seat, except perhaps in a bawdyhouse, and then too addled to notice? A sun struck mooncalf hurtling clods at chimeras in a demented rage? Without clothes, as he now appeared to be?

He wasn't at all eager to rouse himself and get on with another day's complex business. And what would he venture out in? Mind you, it was not a point to cavil over: he would surely incite more attention as a naked than clothed fugitive. Yet the dilemma remained, the predilection of which was to do nothing. Besides, could he not still hear a distant din of frenzied activity? He was weary of the complexities and extremely comfortable where he was, in this soft enveloping bed.

And what of the creature who had likely just absconded with one of his favourite suits — the 'face' that was perhaps putting him aimlessly to sea? Could he ever convince himself that the strange tableaux that so galvanized Peter and the others came from human conceit alone? The sheer commitment to puzzling out human intelligence and cognizance surely

beggared hubris. Megalomaniacs abhor the truth. And cupidity, however buggerish, always ended in anti-climax. Most unhealthy. Puzzles that furnished measurable facts usually revealed the solution to one problem by suggesting others and the fun rarely ceased. But a shill was always and evermore a shill. Both science and art retained possibilities more quixotic than human greed, envy and acedia. How could the person with the skill necessary to perpetuate a great hoax be satisfied with a sophistry-shackled exercise? Surely he would be stalking fiercer perplexities, more comprehensive and retrievable explanations, verifiable for a season at least. Surely, by God. Bless him. And if one believed in an external universe as he did, the complexities were out there and not simply within his skull. Moreover, such complex and often masterful arranging of phenomena must have some goal, some purpose beyond simple wearying hugger-mugger — the shill still being a plethora of shills. So he believed. Torment too he sensed, despite its libidinal squalor, to be equally repetitive and stupefying and finally irrelevant. The only true passion was to learn and to communicate and to see the job continued: end of tale, beginning of history.

So, Abercrombie, that was all settled then was it? Everything tucked neatly away? Warm bodies under a guilt? The leering motley player in the wings, about to offer an elaborate jape — and a rollicking good time — he would not give the time of day to? Even if the jape itself ended by instructing and enlightening?... Who said that? You! The hotdog by the window!

He sat up. Curtain, he shouted. Curtain! Leave the onion! Maybe he was an idiot? A maniac — simply, egregiously, invincibly — one of the many-too-many besotted by wan Northern beauties, overcompensating — all over the place.

Nonsense!

He was an artist! By definition perceptive, discriminating — in perpetual conspiracy against himself. A sensitivity to be reckoned with, especially under a down quilt. A sentient computer analysis of the most stringent kind would vindicate Peter's, Susanne's, Miguel's, and his, perception: *ZYTA*'s world was pristine, *sui generis*, distinctive, consequential — all doubt, diffidence was based on sloth, imitation, derivation. He would bet his pension. Indeed, he was likely doing just that. And not entirely because of pride. If another variable had been introduced he would still thrive. The equation had simply subdivided, that was all: two creatures, one a computer depiction, a figuration from source 'X', the other ineluctably human, alive, ostensibly from somewhere in the late Soviet Union, analogous beauties but for time and space, both mysterious and insinuating. And both in modest ways quantifiable. Reliably exhilarating stuff if you weren't terrified out of your skin. He tried to imagine the *living* Zyta somewhere smiling down at him, this recent fixture in a posh cat house, so slyly seamlessly attached to a toffy showcase club. And what might she be up to at this moment, this perplexing Russian showoff who had taunted, challenged his wish, his need for a pristine *ZETA*. What mayhem was she now broaching, inciting, fleeing? What complacent watering hole risked

being transformed into a snake or bear pit? She appeared to be human — she bruised, he had seen the mark. Thus far he sojourned with the fact finders, the diligent optimists! Why else would they bother? And upon such sophistical rumination exhausted himself into a belated sleep.

The sounds of a vacuum cleaner just beyond his door woke him. Pale soft illumination suffused the room from lighting high in the walls, gradually intensifying to reveal an agreeable and commodious bed-sitting room housing a large warmhearted bed with flower-fondling sheets beneath a cumulus-bosomed quilt — all in a purse-proud Brahmanical motif, stylized lotus in voluptuous configurations with shammed pillowcases to match. Not a hostel then. The low ceiling over the bed offered many electronic entertainments. A Siva-like robot stood near a spacious washroom, an emerald costume bracelet dangling from one of its several mechanical hands. The robot seemed to await instructions. He felt rested and oddly optimistic; he was hungry and alive. He fancifully imagined the bracelet a token payment for his suit.

One key on the night table cued a dulcet voice that enquired after his needs. He calmly requested a hearty breakfast and some kind of apparel to see him back to his residence. The voice at the other end was surprisingly alert and concerned. “Someone stole your wallet? *And* your suit? Good lord.” The voice promptly resumed. “I’ll get on it immediately Please be assured we’ll see you comfortably back to your residence. I’ve heard of panty raids...but three-piece suit raids?... Holy hannah. Keep us posted.”

An elegant Black named Luther who was probably seventy but looked forty brought him a healthy delectable breakfast and a suit of clothes in what appeared to be a medium brown seersucker — acting the while with a disarming and unassuming deference. Willardson was dryly amused — Voden capable of this solicitude, this extravagance? Except for its longer legs, the suit proved a tolerable fit, left behind by a fleeing card sharp. Luther explained: “One of the gamblers the resort invites to stay from time to time left it behind. We had it dry cleaned. Might have fit my grandson.” He waved aside Willardson’s concern, and with barely a nod to happenstance proceeded to tuck and baste the cuffs. Like Willardson he could think of no good reason why a lady on the premises should run off with a gentleman’s suit. Nor had he heard of any nocturnal ruckus. Only the man’s skill and sufficiency kept Willardson from thinking himself hallucinating.

By the time an early paper and second thermos of coffee arrived, the suit hung complete and waiting. His astonishment was only tempered by his latent sense of not really being there. Providence had been so undemonstrative in the past. Yet with his pin strip dress shirt — the thief had taken only his suit — he looked amazingly lifelike and presentable, and discovered himself smiling oafishly into a mirror. The polyester imp, tailored by breakfast. If his shirt, shoes and silk underwear had not been apprehended, not so his ready cash and passport. And a crucial address book in his smart phone! Raising the odds, one might say.

Quietly Luther escorted him to street level. The dignity of the man

seemed atavistic. Willardson easily imagined a great monarch with much exercised forbearance, instructed by his genius to leave the world a better place no matter what. So the sorely patronizing Willardson preferred to think. It was after all Sunday.

A courtesy limo whisked him back to his maisonette. During the ride he reflected on the sight that greeted him in the wide hall outside his room — the genteel tranquility of a muted, agreeably aged country inn, but a floor below ground level, the one oddity a workman repairing a section of wall paneling, so nearly put right that one could not imagine the nature of the damage. The Minoan dining room, glimpsed through ornate brass and glass doors, awaited guests. He wondered what Voden was doing at that moment and what had become of his suit, billfold and cell phone. His mind was alive with speculation and oddly virile wonder. Was he, like time-worn Bellerophon, now fated to wander the world friendless and alone?

## FOUR

No sooner had she climbed back into bed than the entrance commissionaire called. She had a visitor. At 4:00 AM. “She claims to be your sister, Dr. Van Eerden. I would have sent her packing — its an old trick. She says her name’s Zoya.”

Frieda was stupefied — she would momentarily loose her voice into the bargain. The commissionaire stolidly helped with the confusion as he talked to the stranger in his effort to write down a name.

“How do you say it again, miss — S-t-o-l-b-a-n-o-v? Zoya Theresa right?” Into the mouthpiece he blurted, “Did you get that — Zoya Theresa Stol-ban-ov.”

Nearby Frieda heard a shrill voice pronounce ‘Stolbanov!’ in a slavic lisp.”

The commissionaire joined in. “There, you heard it?”

Frieda heard herself laugh. She had touched her face, dislodging a gob of cream.

“Shall I send her packing, Dr. Van Eerden?”

“No, I’ll be down. Please let me speak to her?”

Immediately, without salutation, Zoya’s voice strafed and chagrinned — ““Zia, laprosh, you fucking hard to find. I have nice time getting here. You have nice babushka down here. ‘Merican male babushka. I come up, give you boyar kiss.”

Zoya. Here. Zoya — her half-sister. Here. The estranged sister. Last seen as a child. The girl attacked by the Muslim. The dancer. The media picture of her not a canard after all.

Frieda found herself laughing effortlessly, almost hysterically. Stolbanov. A dream within a dream. To imagine that someone might blow her illegal cover, recruit such a delinquent to seek her out seemed absurd, obtuse. Her entire legend forfeited. That they, someone would *play* such a game! A prodigal delinquent to finger, embarrass a selfless, dedicated sister? Was life in the Motherland now so completely skewed? She half ex-

pected to see a trio of bravos from the SVR when the elevator door opened.

The enigmatic Zoya too was shocked.

“Holy Olga! You new crybaby.” After a protracted hug and many nearly speechless expressions of affection, Frieda smiled at the doorman and hustled Zoya into the lift. They clung to one another during the ride up, the wonder nearly phantasmagoric when they entered Frieda’s suite. Wide-eyed Zoya took in the large stylish penthouse apartment with its accent lighting. “My god, you live here! Krasivi!”

Frieda tried to smile through the stubborn tears. To so suddenly meet on this continent a specter of the old, very old, blissfully forgotten home-stead — on this coast, in this city — the half-sister, the protean Zoya now picking at a pomegranate she fetched from a bowl, letting one halogen beam warm her face, her impious nature infectious as ever, her perfect nymph’s body that of an aging Lolita Nabokov missed out on. How she got here, knew where to find her ‘crybaby’ half-sister — questions that scored the sudden reincarnation of this ‘fire breathing’ sibling!

“My ghost half-sister — here. Rozhdestvom!”

On seeing the commodious ensuite bathroom Zoya was soon nude, testing the shower taps, as she often did so long ago after the intermittent water truck arrived. Little wonder their dotty father was besotted. Her own special fluidity an earmark of her showcase dancing. If it took a while, the dumfounded Dr. Ereden was easily coaxed onto the daybed, the fluent, sappy, towel-wrapped Zoya soon stroking the auburn curls in her lap, ca-

ressing the temples, as of yore, to soothe the longstanding tensions once jointly endured in the ballet school.

“A nice dream you are having, under golden arches. Priyatnyh snov. My proudy ‘Merican.’” Her English is every bit as affected, Frieda thought. A distant golden arch could be seen from the West balcony.

“Is called a ‘wet affair’, yes? The words I am missing. So many tears.”

She knew perfectly well the phrase. The euphemism for assassination, murder. What she imagined her sister might like to do with her now. She had obviously been well coached. The Horsemen of the Apocalypse had arrived. So it seemed. At 4:00 AM.

How adroitly instinctive Zoya was, sensing the vulnerabilities. They had lain so before, first at the ballet school, to stay the coldness, where they had jointedly auditioned before the beefy adjudicators, the swelling hippos who would decide their heavy-laden future. Stripped to their threadbare shorts, their little boy bodies leisurely studied, felt, stretched, compared to memories of past prodigies. The crucial assessment. Long before the modern chic of ‘aesthetic’ anorexia. The singer, the musician might still be normal sized, no more the dancer. The law of lightness in motion. To pace the instinctive affection of the super mothers. Big and red as boxcars, these first appraisers. Zoya Theresa they were interested in. She could jump. Had the arches and articulation. The promising symmetry and sinew. The slightly longer and better proportioned legs. The sister ‘Zia, short for Anastasia — Anastasiya Kniaznin, the peerless academic — might help with the homesickness for a time. They were both latecomers,

relatively speaking. ‘Zia, eleven, Zoya, almost nine. ‘Zia was just a bit past it. And a bit fleshy. But the resilient sister...a gracile marvel, a trickster, a mythic daredevil, to be carefully watched, coached, her fluent hand now grazing a flushed cheek...two resurrected Lorelie on a mercerized cotton scylla, the mischievous but soothing hand not quite erasing years of absence, default. She had come from nowhere. The explanation that defied reason. Someone had sent her. The voice now, as it sometimes was, abruptly sober: “Mama, mamochka — the refusenik.” Joint wry smiles. The critical moment had long passed when Frieda might have sent the powder monkey packing, the possibility now lost to the gremlin night, the incidental kiss an omen.

“To be in hiding still...you are very fussy mushroom.”

That day she had planned to go to the park with her mutt, Balthazar. Daniel, her unrequited genius, would join her for lunch. Some engagements must be left for the optimum time. With Peter gone she would need Daniel’s blithe calm assurance: “Don’t abandon Paleomena, not now! Pechenpaugh is on his way out. No need to risk a premature disappointment.” She looked again at the peri, this strange reincarnation of a sister. The total nymph. Here. Now! In her suite in LA. In this toffy penthouse. Once destined to set a new standard of enchantment at the European Apsara chain of clubs, of all places. So she imagined. So many rumors. And now at the Bellerophon. As a ‘defector’ or ‘émigré’ she defied reality. The game without play. Who is spying on whom?

“How did you find me?” The question to whistle at. The out-of-

towner finishing her pomegranate. Lifting out the seeds like gems.

“Find address in smart phone of nice gentleman. He come to Bellerophon. Look up names. Do some questions.” The smile was airtight. It didn’t sound like an SVR ruse. Still.

“How did you come to the Bellerophon?”

“Has reputation. You know bad cat with name of Borozov? Bossy Baby? He has nice room in Kresky Detention Center. Killed wrong prosecutor. I tell him early I need holiday. He is best travel agent, he says. I think so. Eta kharasho.”

Frieda put off asking how she actually came. All answers would be as precious and preposterous. Made up possibly as she went. What they had schooled her to say was a measure of their desperation. Contradictions, Frieda long ago learned, were the grist for campy humor, on which her sister thrived. She could drive an interrogator or counsellor nutty. Yet she was here, now. Just how and for what purpose she arrived disconcerted, mauled watchful ‘Zia. Part of the apocrypha of her own life rising up free of its binding. Zoya had been consigned to a reformatory after choking a teacher — the consequent delinquency which had ruined her chances to remain in the regional school. An incurable rebel removed for rehab, the principal’s secretary said. So regrettable, given her talents, but necessary, for everyone’s benefit — a prospectus ‘Zia had not questioned. The bad apple, expunged, obliterated, cast into oblivion. Just before step-sister ‘Zia, the brainy student, became a subject of interest to Soviet intelligence

cadres. But now — here, in the flesh. Exceedingly pretty, annoyingly mazy, the apostate tongue deft as ever.

The wraith had emerged from the bathroom, gamboling without modesty or apparent artifice. ‘Powder monkey’, one phrase Vassily used while a teacher of idiomatic English came to mind. Now squinting at ‘Zia she blurted — “Kruchy, Kruchy!”’ The name of their mutt, who could smell a reliable accomplice a block away. “Very bad nose. Very horny tail. Very sushi mouth.” Frieda was painfully aware of just how idiomatic Zoya’s own English could be. Whoever took her on made a stab at seeing her schooled. Whereas, when talking to outcast Frieda, the new ‘Zia, she used the stolid syntax and pronunciation KGB heavies adopted in older American films. ‘Kruchy’ — after Vladimir Kryuchkov, a former head of the First Chief Directorate, in the former KGB, the likes of which ‘Zia suspected Zoya may have performed for in the Sochi retreat. She could even believe her expulsion from the school a party ruse to enter a world she was a natural in. The prettier, prettiest dancer who *might*. Had her patrons and their riches dwindled after the *Fall* — the attack by the out-of-nowhere jihadi? Likely. The Cheka Mafiya would be keeping an eye out for avenging jihadis. No one embraces a liability. Yet someone somewhere who knew of the arcane sister wanted them together. For a time. The one a valence of the other. Someone who knew more than Vassily, perhaps? Despite the indeces she feared Zoya had been astutely coached. The natural spieler and conspirator. Who now menaced both a past career and a late promising flight — to a life, an existence ‘Zia so recently

willed to be permanent. Her stylish, softly shaded apartment — now a camp on a tundra. The curtain drawn before the dawn. The wanton pulling back the shades on a recondite half-sister — this nervy delinquent from an awful family ‘Zia once feared could jeopardize her recruitment when the enlists learned the sorry details. Then to have escaped the whole sorry pack! Finally written them off, these irksome irrelevant relatives, to discover herself a dutiful cognizant citizen at last, imbued with an insular selfless dedication to Marx and the Motherland. Vassily the recruiter conjurer, the mentor of the young sappy plant, the inchoate illegal, destined to seed utopian socialism and commitment in America, along with the copying and dissemination of important files! Whom even the ‘big bellies’ had accepted as a treasure *in situ* and exclusive, ‘interlucent’, as Vassily said. Idealism is only secured in the young, and commitment a special female virtue. Pay attention all.

Then the silent scream arising in a vacuous space. Sooner than later. Where had all this philosophizing come? But for Peter she might have crashed, gone ape as they say, or ‘aglimmering’, to use a dated phrase (in her tutor’s lexicon) she still found entertaining, but for the perceptive Peter and the sensibility he shouldered. The rare social humanitarian — in an applied science facility. The specialist retained to ponder odd, unexpectedly coherent sets of data and the ‘tableaux’ they seemed to augur. A closet optimist and mindful, coincidental mentor. Self-effacement he affected to safeguard his erudition — among veteran technologists. So she believed. A complex gent. Some thought him a bit stolid, and hence no

worry or threat. But for her he remained a model of accommodation to life's slings and arrows. An advocate of 'telling truth to power', the salient that pointed the way — the way out! Which she had been agonizingly slow to appreciate. Hence Zoya would have to be jettisoned somehow. The topical 'given'. A fine unsolicited task for a guilt ridden illegal, but she had undertaken complex assignments before. By the end of the week another apartment would be leased, vetted. Still, a leniency lingered: the incoming sister not so benevolent or kind to *foil* surveillance, or so fractious as to *welcome* insult; or sly, covert enough to *hide* her eagerness to explore America. All of which made the 'defector-émigré' spiel a plausibility.

Her cell made no mention, and she didn't ask. A double-blind game of chess.

But Zoya had not yet sprung all her surprises that first day. She briefly stopped in her tour of Frieda's abode to pull from her large purse a magazine, OO Magazine, one of the current lavish lifestyle rags. She simply placed it on a coffee table as she continued her study of the suite. Frieda was amazed at the cover picture of the American Broadcast Network journalist Catherine Whyte. From a further room Zoya nonchalantly stated, "You maybe not only mystery sister. I have twin in 'Merica."

Frieda at last smiled. "We all have doubles."

"I see her on tely by office tower. She interview 'Merican tsar."

"And which tzar might that be?" As she placed the fanciful question, a new suspicion surfaced.

"Peck-and-paw. I think so. Very bad ass I am guessing."

“The journalist, this journalist, interviewing Vice President Arthur Peckenpaugh?” The possibility wryly entertained.

“I am wearing special makeup, not mistaken for her. Fairy land, ‘Merica. Land of twofers.”

“She does look a bit like you -- in a homespun way.”

“What is ‘homespun’ please?”

“She’s not a traffic hazard.”

Frieda suspected Zoya knew what she meant, but carried on entertaining herself with the flat.

“And how do you like being here -- in ’Merica? In the land of twofers?”

Said Zoya, “ ‘Merican Bellerophon nice place. I stay while I think. I have nose job in mind, maybe chin. Don’t much like ‘homespun’. ”

It was with some trepidation that Frieda finally put the question. “Why did the name Van Eerden interest you in this address book you filched?”

“He has picture. And address. ‘Tara’ Van Eerden he call you. Maybe sister I think.”

“Tara?”

“Picture maybe company mug shot. Got crush maybe.”

“Tara.”

“Is famous Russian ho -- as you say.”

“You know the name of this ‘gentleman’?”

“First name David. Like in Oistrakh. Last name I work out: Will-ardson.”

Frieda was stunned, incredulous. "At the Bellerophon?"  
"He take room. Hotel there. I need disguise. One visitor gorilla.  
Look for me. Big hurry. I find room. See suit. Suit good disguise. Easy  
leave. Gorilla get beat up I find out."

"You're working -- at the Bellerophon?"

"Is what you call -- gig. 'Up to snuff' opportunity."

It was only much later that Frieda learned the full story of the 'filtched' suit and the address file the mysterious gentleman had in his smart phone with his billfold, with the even more puzzling picture of her. Another of the peculiarities that daunted her daily existence.

## FIVE

Back in his cool office that overlooked the retreat and golf course, Willardson found he was bitter, tired, and apparently back where he started, with all the early momentum lost. Voden seemed the figment of a droll dream and the Bellerophon an Erewhon construct -- the 'Nowhere' enigma, the terra incognita. He detected no gingerliness or solicitude in his staff. His personal secretary, a thrice-divorced exercise faddist whose piled brown hair often smelled of something like marjoram, was relieved to see the work he accomplished while away. The discovery of the many punctilious advisements and directives in the opened valise brought the rare and compelling smile. She too had holiday plans. He thus escaped the office sooner than usual and was in his maisonette study but five minutes when he noticed the memory chip, which sat on his desk's polished

leather top like a rationed sweet. It appeared to be newly placed for not the slightest layer of dust attached to it, unlike this fusty work space, which his cleaning lady was barred from touching. It seemed the inanities were proliferating,

Nervously he slipped the chip into his laptop and listened with hair-raising wonder as a muted voice proposed a meeting at an address in Glendale the following evening. He was to bring the chip with him. A gap of silence ensued, ending — resuming — with the sounds of Pechenpaugh's racing impenetrable voice. Willardson's amazement and anxiety grew exponentially. The transcript, or at least part of it, appeared to be a recording of his first meeting with Pechenpaugh prior to his sorry induction into the sentient computer facility, where some anomalous new program, popularly christened *ZYTA*, was causing a stir. He was as startled by the sounds in the transcript as he was by the chip's confounding delivery. Was the chip simply a discreet but ominous warning? Whoever was responsible worked patiently and by stealth. Was there perhaps still someone with information he thirsted after, who concurrently desired his help? The recording was astonishingly realistic. He could detect the diffidence and hesitation in his own voice. Pechenpaugh too emerged a vivid recollection: the phraseology and impetuosity, the cantilevered posture resorted to during the pauses, recalled now because of the fine silk shirt that 'whispered' over the desk.

He was peremptorily plunged into a ferment, a heavy squall beyond a tranquil stateroom. The pipe dream had a prequel. Once again he was

stalked by those predatory days. Lost in the labyrinth of the bio-mechanical Medusa, cast in so many guises, all fearlessly modern. Forever in his mind's eye was the physical vastness and complexity of the Paleo-mena research community: the tunnels, endless corridors, multilocular computer bays, secretariats, modular storage compounds, progress 'scriptorums', executive bunkers, think-tank hermitages, food service dispensaries, libraries, gymnasia, strata-title residences, warehouses, light and heavy equipment machine shops, and the acres of sealed and guarded laboratory 'sanctums', so named because for the few days or weeks or months you were there you were usually bounteously on your own, beyond the contoured hills of the golf course and seminarian retreat, out-patient clinic and hospital. And this was but the blind man's perception of the monster. The applied technologies sector spread over the neighboring desert like cooling volcanic obsidian.

In the bowels of the inner mountain (to minimize some seismic and most radiation interference) on Level Thirteen, the classified upper atmosphere and earth watch satellites were assembled, tested and, after launch, monitored. Here also their prototype sentient computer was configured and built, at first little more than a symbiotic tool of the space hardware — at first. And it was here, due to this same highly complex, 'involuted' processor, that a lesion in corporate peristalsis prompted his transfer from Real Estate and Corporate Endowments, at a time when the comic Muses appeared to be plastered — so said the expressive Peter. If he was wryly bemused then, he was expressly Argus-alert now.

The tape also summoned to mind his dramatic descent to Thirteen, registered as Fourteen on the monitor, on a day he felt newly abused and bereft, after leaving his sunny radiant office on the first floor. Hypochondriac that he was he sensed all vitamins leaching from his body, to say nothing of his self-confidence and equanimity. He remembered feeling for the first time that he had reached (descended) to his level of incompetence. And now the tape conjured up that unhappy period — with a myriad of detail that took his breath away. The compulsion to reassure himself he was indeed alone and unobserved soon became unbearable. Thus, after a thorough reconnoitre of his suit, he gingerly returned the transcript to its beginning, less the preamble, and started the ordeal afresh.

“A hell of a palaver...with that truant machine...we sent up three years ago.” The wish to get at *ZYTA* began with a distraction — a problematic satellite that was spewing out surprising and unexpected if not bewildering data.

Pechenpaugh spoke between sips over a coffee cup shortly after they sat down in the senior vice-president’s chrome and leather office which was relieved, if that is the word, by original pieces of primitive folk sculpture, mostly African and all sensational. The summons came early that morning. He recalled how Pechenpaugh had a similar but broader view of the retreat and golf course. Seated as he was, two of the steeples adjoining the cloisters poked up behind his head, giving him both a comic and martyred look. A small fertility gnome held his stylus set.

“Dowd wanted Carter but I overruled him. No, I said, that cowboy

won't do this time. We need a smoothy. Kid gloves — and not a stranger. I understand you and Peter did time together a few months back."

He remembered being amused by the inference of a prison sentence. But the phrase was apt; where else but in prison or the army would such an esprit have formed.

"Silk gloves all the way this time I told Dowd. This time no baracuda."

Wryly he pictured serrated bodies littering the resort's breakwater, Carter's handling of the last time.

"How's your computer expertise?"

He wasn't given time to answer.

"We need someone with a knowledgeable and politic hand at reassigning some user keys, and the guts to make a few brutally frank observations. A Mr. Clean. An unmistakable presence. Who doesn't play games. There's talk of a sharpie. Some bastard's been at one of our info banks — scrambling data, expropriating channels, fiddling with encryption strings, that sort of thing. The problem is that he or she has replaced our defaults with a damned silly dodo that simply won't cook. Savvy?" He hadn't, but only a pterodactyl might have interrupted the primeval Pechenpaugh at that moment.

"Even what's-his-name seems bamboozled — Ibarria-Gomez."

He could see Pechenpaugh puff out his cheeks and collapse them with a pop. He remembered thinking: so, the stoney, immutable Miguel is in charge and they expect him to sort things out.

“It’ll be a goddam roast if the media smells this one out.” Again Pechenpaugh seemed to speak over the cup rim. “Try to imagine — a cockeyed series of images, trashy scifi — in our vehicle’s signature, no less. Our very own X-Filers.”

He heard Pechenpaugh return the cup to the desk, then imagined the executive’s knuckles face down on the edge in the manner of a sumo wrestler as he grimly looked across at what must have seemed a perplexed stand-in.

“I want you down there noon today and full report Friday, latest, followed by a debriefing here with Dowd and myself, and maybe a few others. I want prompt use made of the new user key paths, and if you must I want you to gag Miguel. Use Stanton in security. He’s been briefed and he knows how to deal with a pit bull. I want the next data from this cock-sucker as innocent as a baby’s bottom.”

He could hear the thud of the coffee cup on the office carpet. Pechenpaugh had unaccountably relaxed, dropped his knuckles to his knees and in doing so collided with the cup. Frantic swearing accompanied the brisk wiping of trousers, yet Pechenpaugh continued to talk as though the spastic activity were a periodic exercise regimen.

“ -- Squeaky clean, you hear. I don’t want any more wasted hours wiping noses or listening for carollers. Know what I mean? Ignore Limburg, he’s a damn shouting match.” And, in the same breath: “Miriam!”

The sounds of wiping ceased and Willardson imagined Pechenpaugh nonchalantly returning to his orthopedic chair.

“Of course the new encrypts will bypass the relays to Thirteen long enough for us to take some readings. We’ve a backup team ready for some honest-to-god control, unknown to Miguel and his gang below. By Friday we should know who the comedian is.”

A rare discovery Willardson thought. He could hear the door open and Miriam arrive bearing a tray which she set down with a clatter before attending directly to the carpet as though it too were a mid-morning chore. Pechenpaugh then produced a large sealed envelope bearing the inscription: ‘Section Thirteen Server Alternates/ Williardson’ — recalled now because his name was repeatedly misspelled by someone in security. He remembered Pechenpaugh once more steadfastly looking at him, this time placing his elbows on the desk in a resolute triangle.

“Open this in private and arbitrarily assign the key counters. There are five you’ll note, one for each of the division heads. Give the registers to Stanton. He’ll need your witness to the new strings. Also, keep an eye tuned to a newcomer there. You may not have met her. I have a picture. Her identity pass. We want to know if she’s part of the cabal.” He handed over the pass. “Any clues will help. And remember, everyone down there is under a cloud.”

No, he wouldn’t forget that.

“Just be yourself.”

A calmer Pechenpaugh began requisitioning several documents from Miriam. By then he, the trusted Willardson, was on his way out after curtly shaking hands with his boss. The door sharply closed after him, but

not before Miriam asked if she should include Appointments and Terminations.

-- Another gap in the transcript, then the wheeze of the powerful hydraulic section door. The recording seemed to resume with his apprehensive arrival on Thirteen! And the detailed inspection of his person and attire. His amazement grew. All his life he'd been bamboozled by the wizardry that might commandeer such things as selvage, smock buttons or shoe welts. But never so keenly. He distinctly remembered being greeted by the impenitent smell of sanitation, and whiff of cool particle-free air. Sleek blank walls that no available stylus could write on curved away into an imagined infinity, measured by unobtrusive floor, wall and ceiling sensors. He could hear footsteps. Not his own he thought, though he preferred walking to using the conveyor when practical. He recalled nearly soft handrails agreeably warm to the touch, efficient shadowless illumination, and barely audible sounds of Vivaldi that invited a sprightly pace to one's walk. He was trying to place the composition when he recalled the two hygiene proctors waiting by the immense airlock that opened into the space hardware and remote sensing bays. The airlock contained its own decontamination ritual. Once again he heard the briefing on emergency and lounge arrangements, then the sounds of being scanned, 'decanted', smocked and labelled, and finally extruded, minus the day's detritus, into a large gleaming chamber. Again a silent gap in the tape: he imagined himself looking over the vast imposing area, honey-combed in the foreground with the dedicated cells, closeting in each a terminal, floating keyboard

and titular exchange; beyond, the exotic chrysalids of new space marvels and the gracile tendrils of their antennae. Somewhere further in — the team working on the new computer were secreted.

Snatches of conversation reached his ears. Footsteps. A shopworn voice pointed out his office on the entresol and a conference room nearby where he was expected. He remembered lined faces looking up at him, this bald anomaly with the nervous eyes. He remembered her walk, the calm ashen-haired woman coming toward him. She had not been startled to see him, though her smile, as he recalled, felt a trifle solicitous as if he looked uncertain of his purpose or whereabouts, which he probably did.

“Hello, you must be David Willardson. I’m Susanne Rothnie.”

He remembered being greeted by a perfunctory smile and given a pliant hand that issued from a starchy smock. He heard himself compliment her on an unusual piece of jewelry. It festooned her left lapel and turned out to be a miniature radiation detector. Then an urbane voice, with slight lisp issued from a nearby conference room. “Corporate trust?...an oxymoron. Like political settlement.” Appreciative groans from a small audience followed. Peter’s brilliance had a list to it, like a gadfly unsure — conscientiable? — of its sally. He heard himself tell Susanne he believed he was expected, while the seasoned Susanne restrained her amusement. He recalled that Peter’s dislike of social science lingo prompted its use when he got vicious. He was just warming up.

“ — Optimal dysfunction. The Great Attractor.”

Willardson distinctly remembered how startled he was by this last out-

burst, for his portly shape seemed to appear before them as if on cue. They sat about what appeared to be a long refectory table. Lunch time. Frieda wore a nimble smile and proceeded to cover her pretty oval eyes with a slender hand. Limburg's naturally sleepy eyes alternately closed and opened as if to ascertain whether external and internal worlds matched. Peter had his back to him and added one final coup.

"Not *om*, Limburg -- *aum*. As in Auld lang syne. Whatever title suit thee; Auld Hornie, Satan, Nick, or Clootie."

This was followed by the thud of a trashed apple core which Miguel had been gnawing at. He also hadn't seen Willardson enter and looked up from the pages of a manuscript with characteristic nonrecognition, apprised in the act of dislodging a morsel from his teeth. Willardson remembered feeling like a player in a servile comedy, even half-heartedly expecting applause, the buffoon centre stage at last. Peter turned, looked him over with a connoisseur's relish and seemed predisposed to recollect erstwhile merriment.

"Tiger! You poor fellow."

He remembered shaking hands and a stately commiserative hug, Russian style. Peter continued ever buoyant and steeply patronizing.

"Just talking of your predecessor. Splendid chap. Broadly functional." His eyes alighted on Frieda a moment or two, Willardson recalled, then closed equanimously.

He could hear Frieda rise to leave the room. She averted her gaze as she rose, as much he believed to keep her amusement with Peter demure.

A forbidding silence followed while he smiled at Peter and Limburg.

“So, Stanton has a new dancing partner, one we oughtn’t ignore,” Pete said to the others with a sudden docility that seemed to sum up the impertinence of Willardson’s presence. The new warning label. The finessed recognition of an abiding, spirited, if sometimes desultory past had vanished. He could hear the staccato sound of someone tapping the table, most likely Limburg.

“Oh well, the recidivist’s gone.”

Another gap: further acute memories.

He had been thoroughly depressed. The speech he’d prepared, a kind of correspondent reassurance of his neutrality, remained stillborn in his breast. He walked a foreign angry street. A glimpse of Peter of old, then a surrogate quiet, an ominous vacuity, an unrecognizable face behind a closing door. Miguel, who had persisted in his improvised flossing now rose from the table and strode out in forceful resounding steps. From afar came the offhand voice, “You’re wasting your time.” Said Limburg, “We kinda hoped you might be the unco guide, you know, a necromancer at least.”

Lest he forget.

So, no complex surprises after all. He stood before the old cabal, where a way with things like plasma physics received succour, and a degree in say archaeology occasionally got a handout. The age-old profanity of suspected if not invincible ignorance. Negligence being the original lame excuse. Susanne, standing the while just outside the doorway, had a

sullen look. If his memory served, she was looking at Limburg, the team's bower bird.

"Limi's had a rough week," she said in leaving. Then: "I don't know why they had you make an appearance. Pechenpaugh's doing I presume. Doesn't trust poor Stanton any more. Imagine." The sarcasm was virtuosic.

The meeting ended, he sought the entresol office to summon Stanton. He could hear and now visualize the din of Thirteen's subterranean activity: the delicate sonar *aum* of electronic dialogue, a distant chiming of elapsed time, the elemental thrum of the special air-conditioning system, the excitable eddy caused by a phone, grey robed bodies flowing like salmon to limpid work stations, alluvial conversation, and the susurus of titular screens shuffling their microcosms and casting the shape of space-time itself. Was the tape an exclusive of him? Was it authentic, however devilishly concocted? He could answer only to the authenticity, and that a qualified 'no'. What puzzled him was Susanne's voice, and only now did he recall why her words sounded unfamiliar. At the time she had a cold and her thin voice was pinched and husky. He was again reminded of this when a second pair of footsteps, the first being his own, sounded on the staircase of the entresol, a door opened and Susanne, or rather someone emulating an avid Suanne said, "For your eyes only" — in the remembered but inappropriate voice.

Something slipped onto his desk, presumably some *ZYTA* abstracts he requisitioned. Her comment he could accept but not the voice. Now he

knew why — no hoarseness or cough. A day later Miguel insisted she seek medical intervention. The surrogate voice continued to subvert his memory, especially as it became arch and boastful, an impetuous Susanne venting a piece of perhaps timely but certainly uncharacteristic pique. Not her style at all. So alerted he listened on.

The mechanism that cued the recording completely eluded him. Had something been planted in his clothing? A shoe? One of the identification medallions? He could recall nothing unusual about the office, which snugly overlooked the rows of consoles, the airlock, and a broad passageway leading to the reservoir where the ‘tissue’ ions mobilized by the new computer’s bio-processor were apparently sorted and encoded. He listened intently as Susanne’s *familiar* cosily lamented a morning-after headache — again not her style. Nor could he remember such a remark. He barely thanked her for the *ZYTA* dossier before evenly spaced footsteps descended the staircase. He did recall watching her return to the nearest bank of consoles as a renewed energy vied with the anxiety within him. Memories of her walk and ill-fitting smock were as beguiling and punitive.

From the abstracts he learned Pechenpaugh had two problems: the fractious data itself (ostensibly too complex for the hardware) and a mutinous information peddler — this a revelation to himself. Moreover, the peddler apparently did not know the Los Angeles’ daily he or she tried to rouse the interest of was in fact owned by Paleomena, a fact that made the partisan a possible newcomer, an interesting consideration. At the time Willardson badly wanted to meet with Peter in some quiet watering hole and thor-

oughly go over the week's events. He planned to estimate the strength of the remaining esprit, assuming there was some shared intimacy in the beginning, and who in the group other than Peter might consider him an ally or benign factotum.

He recalled one disturbing frame of *ZYTA*'s suggestive graphic renderings of beings with defective geonomes — eerily acute: anxious forms about a central healthy figure, all heedful, not pressing nor presumptive, just there, a silent crowd of oddly frail unfinished forms, torsos lacking matching limbs, integuments crudely stretched and puckered, eye cratersumbering, skewed fixed stares...the forms swirled before him when Susann'e halcyon form again hove to — her footfall bringing him back to the perplexing tape. She stood just outside his plexiglass door her arms folded tensely about her. A businesslike ponytail backed a classical Greek profile, the slope of nose and forehead conjoined. He spoke first, with his promotional, patronizing optimism.

“I think I've got the wild cards out of the deck.”

Repeatedly and cautiously she looked down at something in the passageway, then intently at a point in the ceiling above him. He had been vexed not perceiving anything unusual about that ceiling. She spoke in a whisper, eyes glued to the mysterious point.

“Just give me another half-minute.”

He heard the squawk of the office chair as he leaned back and discovered himself doing much the same thing now — and in a similar chair! A new unease. Slowly, imperceptibly he affected exhaustion, to mask anxiety

and a quick descent to subterranean capability. He was nearly certain his study had never been bugged — nearly. Placidly he stopped the transcript, rose, put on some background Palestrina and fixed himself a brandy. When again switched on, wearing head phones, a door softly closed — his office door in the sound track — and he tried to picture the flushed face. Susanne had stood looking down at him, her closely-trimmed finger nails lightly touching the edge of the desk, her manner chary yet direct.

“We’ve little time. Miguel said you could be trusted. Can you quickly tell me what you know?”

The tiny rotating monitor on her smock lapel swept the room. He resisted believing Miguel ever said such a thing. The presumption of the remark startled him. More and more his memory failed to corroborate not only her voice but many of her words. He heard his reply. It seemed precious and supine. He distinctly remembered Susanne eyeing without seeing him while he spoke.

“First we have a program, performing as expected, then an interruption — lasting about a fortnight. Then a renewed signal, with sturdy backup sensors, christened *ZYTA* — complex and improbable — the data more complex than feasible, given the hardware. The head technocrats are baffled yet intrigued, reluctantly perhaps. The Princes are, as ever, suspicious.

“A few bloody suspicious programmers as well!”

The exclamation grated. Susanne’s voice had been initially low in

tone, masking her mood. Vividly he could recall her eyes: in league with their pale almost transparent hue was an intermittent unfocused aspect that intimated a drugged or preoccupied state. Romantic that he was he imagined an ancient weariness, before a cipher like him, which yet her manner and solicitous voice often defied. His own voice droned on.

“Somebody then gathers up the pertinent information, sends it to an editor outside the corporation not knowing the editor a corporation hiring. That seems to me a probable accounting, so far.”

A brief silence. Perhaps a nod. He continued:

“And this unofficial, and I take it anonymous, correspondence alarms the paper’s owners and trustees. They suspect a few senior level scientists of allowing a jape or being pranksters themselves. The prevailing rumours and suspicions set you down as incompetent or naughty, a regrettable and unforgiving polarity, I would say.”

Had he really said those words, those copious smug words? His own voice sounded real enough. Perhaps he had. He had been upset, yet he resisted believing — then and now — that Susanne (the ill, hoarse Susanne) and the others, especially the unhappy Miguel, were impulsive or indifferent — or still skeptical after how many months? Many too many. *ZYTA* must have had something to say. The scientist may not be a moral paragon but his science must be ‘correct’ and promising else he is dross. Her makeshift voice added a sour, foreign, footnote.

“We hoped you might have a few ideas on that ‘polarity’.”

His answer was swift and not a little chagrinned.

“I am sorry but I don’t. I arrived here at the express wish of the Princes to reassign some user keys and their strings, and I believe they would be upset by what I heard myself say just now.”

His chair, in the tape, squawked, possibly as he leaned back to steal another look at that infuriatingly normal-looking ceiling. He remembered Susanne once more staring down the passageway, this time directly at Miguel who stood near a doorway to the air lock. These had been tense moments and the incidental sound effects brought the scene back in acute detail. Susanne stood lacing her fingers, though not humming faintly as she was now. When she turned back to him her eyes divulged an uneasy resignation. But the oncoming words in the tape were facile and abandoned — suave, melodramatic, pandering, full of insult. A gruesome performance, highly antithetical to her style and demeanour. He was at times speechless: to imagine Paleomena the custodian of an extraterrestrial, as this faux Susanne presumed, was droll nonsense.

The voice masquerading as Susanne’s blithely chided him for toadying to the corporation’s cupidity and arrogance — a sore enough point — the purpose of which was to soften him up for a preposterous tale that would surely make the listener wonder at the teller’s sanity. The hectoring tone seemed on a rise. “You know what all this masks, don’t you...the ongoing conspiracy to preserve a chauvinistic sinecure. To keep people like Arthur Pechenpaugh in power. We are just now piecing together the chain of events — a satellite crash in the South Pacific, off the north coast of Papua New Guinea in the Bismarck Archipelago — we have an oceanic re-

search centre near Madang — seen by a native community, which has simply vanished from the area, but not before reports got out of an android...!”

And so it went, a long minute before she desisted. Willardson could just keep from smiling, the chronicle so ludicrous and inapt to the actual briefing he was subjected to that day that he began to wonder if indeed a consummate practical joker was at large! *ZYTA* as an ET. Worse — diffident Susanne an ‘alien’ aficionado — during office hours! You couldn’t get more whimsical than that. He was urged to abandon his deployment of the keys and help expose the coverup — by delivering a message to a contact in Washington he sometimes negotiated with on corporation business. A phone number was proffered to acknowledge delivery. (Susanne had indeed given him a number, actually two, but for eminently different purposes.) One communiqué would have to be delivered personally and consisted of a miniaturized data carrier. (One such technological wonder he was also burdened with but again under very different auspices.)

Another gap in the recording merely sustained his anxiety and chagrin, which was partly relieved by the sudden reappearance of the muted but musical voice that introduced the tape and proposed the rendezvous in Glendale. The voice itself was confined to that part of the vocal registry that obscures sexual identity, yet lilted agreeably into the interval. He was assured and warned that the foregoing — the encounter with a ‘moonstruck Susanne’ — was a fabrication Arthur Pechenpaugh had concocted to sully, demoralize her group, including Miguel, and represented but a

sampling! The voice further declared that the remainder of the transcript, including a performance of Susanne's actual declaration and requests, was unedited. An explication of the vagaries in the tape would be revealed at the meeting in Glendale. An appointment he was qualmish about keeping but loathe to abandon.

And so emphatic footsteps once more were heard approaching his entresol office, a door opened, and Susanne's husky voice — the rasp he remembered — began talking blandly about life on Thirteen. Then suddenly her words became urgent — after, perhaps, a further glance at his ceiling, and a visual cue from Miguel in the lower passageway. The new words, as dismaying for him now as any on the tape, he recalled only too well.

"I'm afraid you've come at a very inopportune time. Peter tells me you are considerate and circumspect. I know you must appear neutral but I trust Peter's judgement and we are in a stew. Incidentally, on good authority, you and your townhouse are under surveillance. Your phone's likely already tapped, your e-mail scanned." She paused only to clear her throat.

"There was a program to legitimately compile and publish our findings, about a month ago, then abandoned. None of us is permitted outside communication until our current stint is over. The invigilation is monolithic. A plenary clause in our contract sanctions such restrictions in extremis. The official reason is cooked-up anxiety about security, mainly to do with two Middle Eastern states that have been trying to get hold of some communication technology, not unlike the state-of-the-art program

used in the space probe under review. Unofficially the suspicion is that some of the original *ZYTA* handlers — I, Peter, Miguel, Limburg, Frieda Van Eerden perhaps — are part of a fifth column out to confuse and confiscate. A slim excuse is Miguel's undisguised anti-Zionism, and his dislike of Pechenpaugh, of course. As if that made any difference — he's the world's original loner. The rest of us are political innocents, or were. The Princes are simply hoarding their new lucky prize, and impatient to settle the capital it may warrant. Pechenpaugh has already negotiated an immense commitment from the Saudis for a fusion-ion reactor, that concomitantly suggests a neat new way to sterilize desalinized sea water. If that money alone is secured, Paleomena will be incontestable — and intractable — for several years. So says Miguel."

He imagined her glancing down the passageway as she paused to blow her nose. He had offered a lame but assured condolence which needled his sense of decorum now.

"The new keys are a deception -- you must consider this. They are simply intended to discredit and eventually punish. Miguel is likely the central target. We have a tape..."

The elision suggested she had been prepared to say more but changed her mind.

"I know I seem at times preoccupied, a fact I hope you will not misinterpret. We're not really certain how long the monitors can be circumvented. I may have to end this rather suddenly."

He well remembered her absorption and the periodic shivering, an art-

less tic or feverish condition that worked in her favor -- for him. He had assumed the monitor she spoke of lodged in his innocuous-looking ceiling and Miguel was exactingly engaged in voiding it and pacing its cycle.

“If you can, please reconsider your role here. *ZYTA* is no prank. Its late self-exit data is precious and unique — exotic by any standard — and for all but some Paleomena insiders nearly extinct. We will leave with the shirts on our backs, if we’re lucky. The algorithm software *ZYTA* is helping generate has many applications, several miraculous by today’s standards: a simple practical means to fusion energy, as I’ve intimated — Miguel is all but convinced; everything else from the makeup of interstellar dark matter to recombination theory, from deformation tensors to particle plasmas. Even a tool that posits a variety of gamma laser. The pictures point to the use and misuse of the data in an otherwise sagacious culture — not unlike a world our own utopians imagine. It sounds preposterous — you may or may not know — but the detailed information is extensive and awesome and may become the property of a particularly shortsighted cartel. We simply want to insure that appropriate others receive the information, most of which is very very complex — ‘we’ being Miguel, and select members of his team, Peter, Herbert Limburg, myself, and a few others you don’t yet know. Frieda is I think undecided but not unsympathetic. Perhaps I sound...”

She broke off, her eyes again searching out Miguel. She seemed for a moment undecided and lowered her voice. More than ever her eyes suggested a kind of purblindness, a slow inability to take him in.

“There are two groups on the outside who must receive some of the current information. We can do very little. All correspondence, written, electronic, is monitored and edited. We decant daily now before retiring to the in-house residence.”

She appeared to savour the irony: ‘retiring’ to the project residence presupposed further invigilation. By now little better than unctuous grilling, he assumed.

“The people I hope you can contact are not ideologues, don’t get me wrong. We’re doing what we can to stall — ‘bureaucratize’ Miguel calls it. Here are two numbers, with an introduction in formal sentences, to a person who will further advise when you leave Thirteen.”

He recalled how sudden her movements sometimes were. The two numbers, stenciled on a very thin scrap of material with words of an introductory exchange underneath, she quickly set out on the desk ignoring his diffident response.

“I must go. Someone will be in touch later here — with a chip carou sel, very small, the size of a lozenge — which you must swallow. Entirely safe. The outside contact will advise. It’ll give us some lead time. Also swallow the tissue after you’ve memorized the numbers and introduction. It’s digestible though not a great flavour. Don’t for god’s sake burn it. Any increase in luminosity or oxygen combustion would be detected.”

Another gap: he imagined her once more seeking out Miguel.

“Please think: we’ve been blessed with a rarefied intelligence — I don’t know what else to call it — how or why is another story, and the Princes

are just beginning to realize the extent of it. The fallen space vehicle is a red herring. They're going to pretend embarrassment, likely over some in-house prank, and a sober house cleaning, and we're destined to be the heavies — one way or another. There is no freehold here, as in aca-deme — once was. Peter's comment.”

Then a new, formidable silence — the sudden awaited break? — prompted by something Miguel communicated from below. Willardson remembered detecting a very slight increase in the room's illumination. When Susanne resumed her voice remained pitted and hoarse, but the delivery altered remarkably, becoming chatty, ingratiating, serviceable. And slyly conniving.

“ — We will surely do our best, Mr. Willardson. Don't hesitate to ask — one of the cardinal runes down here. We're here to explicate. Oh and please tell Max (Max Paleogiannis, the aging President of Paleomena) I continue to play black-out chess. He used to let me beat him when we played last summer near Naxos. I'm sure he's amused at the present blind! *C'est la vie.* Oh, the last transmission featured a dishly tableau — part of the anticipated folkways subset. Or is it byways. Peter thought you might like a look. Seemed kind of Aztec to me. He said I was a little too fashion conscious. Peter works out of 'J' carrell, right in front of Limburg. Well must be along. Bye.”

He nervously joined in. “Thanks for the candid overview. I'll do my best to keep out of the way. I will tell Max -- and also peek over Peter's shoulder. He'll see I stay the course.”

Again foot steps descended the open staircase outside his office in distinct regular pats. He felt very warm. He'd also forgotten the friendship between Susanne and the aging and now figurative Chairman of the Board. One of Max's step sons was married to an aunt or cousin of Susanne's, if memory served.

Later that same afternoon the air-lock opened to admit two groups of hygiene counsellors and the components of a complex filtering unit — the air quality had inexplicably deteriorated — which they proceeded to erect in the centre of the remote sensing bay, returning thereafter to a bank of sensors about the air-lock. He could not deny that he seemed tailor made, now as then, for smart blackmailers or hapless idealists. Then as now.

The transcript continued mercilessly with a ridiculous and lusty sound, the tug-boat whump of him blowing his nose — as it turned out, directly into the tissue containing the number and verbal introduction. Anxiety often brought yawning fits, languorous open-mouthed exertions. He had sought his handkerchief and laboured to blow his nose. The tissue was mixed in with the hanky, the initial fatuity in the sequence, while he memorized the numbers and intro. He remembered staring at the elegant monogram.

The handkerchief he returned to his pocket. He had planned to consume the scrap with a light snack. Perhaps the ample handkerchief might serve as a useful screen in the end — for both disposal operations. He recalled Pechenpaugh's parting caution: "Remember, everyone down there is under a cloud." Topical words. The fact that he now listened to a lucid

if convoluted tape of that painful afternoon, second by nervous second, offered a less than reassuring prognosis of Miguel's handiwork.

At the time he was close to despair. The fidgeting movement of the chair continued — actually both chairs, in the tape and the one he now sat on in his study. The imagined enemy was gross indeed if Susanne adopted Miguel as a strategic bedfellow. What was he to do? The self-pity had become almost Romanesque when the soft pinging of the alarm announcing the ‘prolegomenon’ of a signal touched his ears — the particularization of interpretation, in the ongoing multi-faceted analysis of the data. The sound in the tape, as it resumed, completely overcame him. He was plunged, as he had been, into a vast swirling stream. He guessed the late parameters, pithy logarithms and other elegant bits would shortly be visible to the swimmer, filigree minnows forming a larger mosaic.

The tape offered high fidelity minutiae of the bustle of about four-dozen eminent and comfort conscious engineers and scientists, their several score assistants, all waited on by attentive service personnel. Chairs siddled to consoles, undifferentiated chatter mimicked a large orchestra tuning itself before a concert, keyboard patter was nary heard but telekinetically felt as successive connecting course ways and data banks imperviously joined hands, while above the din Miguel’s insular voice served up last minute instructions in terse cadences. It seemed an aberration to imagine a handful of executives orchestrating all this.

The discrete consoles themselves had come fully alive as the ceiling illumination dimmed. A violet hue suffused the larger chamber fading into a

grotto dark at the margin, leaving the skim tensors silvering faces and hardware salients, casting winged auras and dense black holes. The sectioned ceiling lifted into perturbed vaults and, as the titular screens rose, arched and seamlessly melded into a singular unity. The terminals blinked out constellations of tiny dot smears, pulsing cosmic plasmas, veins of dusted infinities discharging energies that set upon one with quasar richness and intensity. The chamber insinuated a condensed galaxy and he a bit of leftover background noise.

Susanne appeared as a will-o'-the-wisp, an Ariadne candling a labyrinth, or a liquid Thetis sun-veined, green-gold, ultramarine in the shadows. He saw none of the earlier caution or staidness in her focused manner. You became an uncomplaining automaton at this stage, a symbiotic helpmate preening the computer host of extraneous tics and interferences, at one with the *aum* of synchronous memory banks banking their electronic Muse. Frieda, her light auburn hair floating about her like swirls of galactic nebulae, delightedly pointed out something to her several assistants, one a youngster of about sixteen or seventeen. Willardson recalled seeing a resumé at Paleomena of a happy sappy career, including two distinguished degrees and a series of brilliant articles. There was also a rumour of an oversize Master Plumber's Certificate sumptuously mounted in a gold-gilt frame hanging conspicuously on the youngster's office wall, opposite a bogus but impressive Doctor of Divinity parchment granted by the programmers of a humbled chess computer. It was further rumored that the lad and Frieda — she at least ten years his senior, which her youth-

ful freshness halved — were inseparable. Her office wall also harboured an elegant parchment bestowed by the same embarrassed computer. Limburg was another attentive if peripheral member of her group. Willardson heard the snap of a crisp apple being bitten into and Miguel's voice *en passant*, now nearly dithyrambic, relaying instructions to an assistant. His impassive guard was down; he sounded hearty and cordial as any veteran hobbyist.

Later, Willardson had sought but not found Peter. He went to his office and found it empty — abandoned, rather. The remains of a bag lunch littered the desk. Folded geographs lay strewn about the floor. The closest formed part of a GPS training grid for sailors that Willardson stared at in wonder. The thought of Peter 'taking up' sailing was dumfounding, until he recalled the earlier 'Susanne' exclaiming an alien presence in the South Pacific. Dear god! As his eyes grew accustomed to the greying light he gradually took in the intimidating mess, a welter of books and manuscripts, of undertakings, professional and domestic, in progress or limbo. One thin volume emerged from the soil of a frescoed jardiniere. The plant in it had given up. Withered leaves speckled the floor. Another book lay precariously atop a lamp. A smock with an inky stain was bunched in a corner. A distinct odour of perspiration mingled with rye and orange peel. The rye he remembered marveling at. Smuggling it in here was a work of genius. He tried to reconcile the scene with his memory of Peter's method and order, and at least a wily decorum. Were the Princes already at work on him, one of their adroit psychiatric tune-ups underway? He

also now recalled seeing in the dim aslant light a ceiling full of suspended probes and objectives — much like his own, perhaps? Not likely, given the assortment of scanning and projection equipment Peter made use of. He wondered what he would do with the chip carousel if and when it arrived, and where he might slip into a rest room inconspicuously. The burden of doubt sat on his stomach like raw pastry. He wondered how long the carousel would take to clear his system if he decided not to hand it directly to the Princes. Presumably it would remain with him beyond his stay on Thirteen, at least beyond the present assignment, which Susanne must have anticipated the duration of.

The recording continued with the distant thrumming of electronic hardware and human voices both languid and brisk. He belatedly recognized the sound of his own shoes, twice hitting the footpad on the entresol staircase. He had slunk back to his office after meeting with Stanton, put his feet up and dozed off. In its purely electronic form the invigilation and marshaling of numbers fatigued the likes of him. Soon the sounds of snoring, punctuated by the occasional creak from the desk's chair, continued monotonously against the din of Thirteen at full tilt.

The thoroughness of the recording irked him, as the proposed rendezvous daunted and mystified. Impatiently he advanced the tape: more snoring but Thirteen quiet. Another advance yielded the bleeps of a key transmitter, probably in the security vault beneath his office where he relayed the new figures. As predicted one set seemed erratic, though he would need a skilled techie to detect manipulation — an option beyond his man-

date or expertise. He remembered sitting in the vault in a foul mood while he fingered in his pocket the small orb containing the carousel that someone had stashed in his removed shoe while he slept. A big toe with a split nail bumped against it first. He retrieved a lozenge-sized ampoule, the tiny carousel secreted within. The light beyond his office had in the interval dimmed to a graduated blue-pink which a weary Limburg would describe as ‘lacking yellow’. The consoles sat then as silent silhouettes against the walls, a dumb show in intermission.

The obstinate numerals that emerged on the small read out in the vault he could not connive at. Each of the configurations might be explained, he thought, but not likely Susanne’s. The anomaly seemed to certify her dark pronouncements. When, he wondered, did she discover herself venturing into this maelstrom, and Miguel the too frail arrester? He once saw a photograph in a medical text of a child struck by lightening; a dark ugly lesion near the collarbone revealed the point of entry — or exit. So what could he have done? What indeed. The scourge and lament of stolidity.

Another gap in the tape represented his fervent hunt for Peter. Several unrecognized voices did not know his friend’s whereabouts. Miguel’s voice, offhand, unconcerned, joined the chorus of abjurers. The pressure grew: he was due back at the air-lock in less than an hour. He swallowed the carousel and tissue while pretending to search on the floor for a dropped stylus. In his imagination the hearing materialized all too vividly, each exhibit laid out in order of recrimination, first a badly soiled piece of

fabric...thus did he conspired to swallow both items and return to his seat, bumping his head on the counter brace of the desk.

He could not avoid the obvious. Pariahs tend to note such things. Only Miguel was initially discoverable, yet remained to the end as inscrutable and unresponsive as an Olmec head stone. “Was Susanne feeling any better?” “Why don’t you ask her?” came the surly reply. Many times he asked himself if Susanne acted alone. Frieda he found immersed in a post delivery method’s conference, Limburg raptly seated before a bright terminal where a menagerie of chromatic masks played before his eyes...both experts within their assigned quadrants, both oblivious to either Peter’s or Susanne’s whereabouts. It was Limburg’s most demanding hour, displacing even his often indulged breaks for food and rest. The consoles were otherwise vacant. Bodies to enquire from had decamped. His anxiety came back to him now as keenly as the loss of a childhood trail. Peter had peremptorily departed. Apparently. Shortly thereafter he returned to the air-lock commissioners.

“Have you any substance of the above description on or within your person?”

“No,” he said, after carefully reading aloud the list.

“Please set out all removable items and wear eye protectors in the shower.” ‘Decanting’ Peter called it. “Personal effects in compartment C4, locker 48. Thank you for your co-operation.”

He could see his smock pass into a large chute pockets inside out, followed by the rest of his unpalatable offerings. No fanfare in departing.

Only the sounds of the steaming water jets were lacking, obfuscating as they must have the unstinting ears.

But the tape was not yet finished.

Another short forward advance revealed a meeting of the five corporate heads, the bona fide Princes, in preamble to his own debriefing! It was the first section of the tape where he wasn't present. The discovery provoked further disbelief and an abject awe, while the unsparing realism stifled debate.

In addition to the cronk of Arthur Pechenpaugh and hiss of Karl Voden, he could make out the nicker of the ultraconservative Angus Dowd, the graveled wariness of Stephen Cressman, and the dulcet whisper of the elderly, stately figurehead Max Paleogiannis, a retired shipping magnate whose interest in submersibles was in the fullness of time inverted into another sphere, the interstellar cosmos, and finally the computer that might interpret it. A few persons, perhaps a PR advisor or two, he did not recognize, though these voices rarely surfaced. Willardson could picture the elegant Empire table, the light snack of caviar, toast, specialty coffees and hot chocolate for Max, and Pechenpaugh gesticulating, smiting insubstantial dragons to make his point, which he now seemed in a fit to affirm. Willardson listened open-mouthed, straining against the urgency to pee.

“She was in there Stephen, right there in his office. We saw her walking back to that foremost console when the sensors came back on. It's one she never goes near — a backup only. She was trying to look preoccupied.

Yes I know all that, but she was nervous. A hell of a nerve. Miguel likely fiddled with something — ust damned bloody long enough. She was there. Period. She's in with the gypsy. A goddam commie and a disgruntled jew — your original fast food team.”

“It is hard to square with our modest Susanne.” Max would shake his flawless head with its immaculate pompadour as he spoke. “She plays chess in the heroic manner. Not a slyboots.”

A moot pause. Then Pechenpaugh again: “Lookit, we've got to keep the latest stuff — agreed? — exclusive. For everybody's sake, for the time being. That means we have to pretend — agreed? — for the time being! We eat crow for maybe six months, then throw a gala. Red Miquel thinks otherwise and he elected Susanne to be his stringer. And the bimbo — I am sorry Max — agreed. It's as clear as glass. We've got to show her up as an incompetent to get at Miguel. With her gone he loses his AR. That stands here for Autonomous Republic — you get all that Karl? Voden!”

“Yes, yes Arty. One ear perfectly fine.”

A few polite patronizing laughs.

Pechenpaugh again, thoughtful: “Anyway, we suspect she's had some help from Miguel all along — she's not exactly a whizbang with coordinate transformations or whatever they call them. That surely can tell us something.”

Max, absently or wistfully: “That the figure is maybe better than her Faraday rotations...”

Pechenpaugh swears. “What the fuck you know about F rots?

Cressman, characteristically diffident: “Max, it will be a free-for-all if something spills out — or the Gulf deal needs major modification.”

Someone says, “To say the least.”

Pechenpaugh, smarting: “Lookit, the ionization package has been in the bag for weeks. The rest is simple tabulation. Come on. All we need is a bit of time for chrissake.”

Cressman, unperturbed: “It’s never been done on that scale. Moreover, the tenders for the Floater are in the works. A long day in court if we’re seen as pushy. We have been rather lucky, so far.” General agreement here.

Willardson recalled a new generation of satellites dubbed ‘Floaters’ the corporation had bid on. Satellites that cued their own protective lasers were largely immune to ‘space debris’ as it was euphemistically called. Paleomena success with government contracts remained a touchy subject in the industry.

Voden, the homunculus: “You are the admirable worry wart Cressman. I send you a good box of truffles. We will imagine the country run on ion fusion capacity. Ours.”

Cressman again, after expelling a lungful of smoke: “Karl, we’re all onto potential. But that’s about all we’ve got — in hand. No one doubts fusion capacity, nor the desirability of turning Arabia into meadows and orchards, but ‘till we’ve canned the essentials — the patents in the Floater for one, agreed — I think we back peddle a bit.”

A lighter is ignited.

Voden: “Pgh. No, I help myself.”

A second lighter.

“Susanne is simply conscientious.” Willardson could imagine Max sitting with his eyes half closed, as they often were, reminiscing earlier, kindlier days. Max seemed to have forgotten Pechpaugh’s ruse, or chose to ignore it.

Pechenpaugh, impatient for a consensus: “Max, we can’t have a dynamic duo infecting our life blood. *ZYTA* must be seen, for the time being, as a clever ramble, a benign virus, if you like. Otherwise everyone will be in a snit and the rivalry wasteful as ever. No debate. It’s a restricted draw.”

“Should you consider preparing some friends in the House, then?” said Max, incuriously. “As we discussed?”

“In due course, absolutely. When we need a couple of blow holes, right? But for now we do a bit of penitential swinging.”

Stolid Voden: “I think not swinging.”

“A gamy noose, Karl — to concentrate the mind.”

Cressman: “The prospect of being hanged in the morning, Karl.”

Willardson could imagine Max preparing to leave, the matter settled.

Pechenpaugh: “So. *ZYTA* must be allowed to ferment — for say three months say. In the meantime we confess to being had, wipe off the muck, chastise a few dreamers, wait a bit — then rediscover our genius, when the coast is clear. The Gulf package will help vouch it. Our neighborus will recover their awe and be more genteel than ever.” A brief silence. “What

we better get out is a good late bid. I say we own up to a couple of sour grapes — Susanne being one. A reasonable fall, then a resurrection — she's not a complete fool. Leave the question of the prank or jape, as Limburg first called it, in limbo — for propriety's sake — we're not after all barbarians. Let the proles do the spade work. Take the slap on the wrist and get on with how we eventually merchandise *ZYTA*. No sightseeing, no back peddling.”

Another pause, broken by Dowd in a solicitous mood.

“Max, we’re the only real hegemony left. The others, even such as MARCOMX, EVK and the Saudis, they’re all street walkers now, and mainly pulling their own houses down. We can and must blitz the potential — but only at the circumspect time. I think Arthur’s three months may be about right. But if Miguel is allowed to secrete some formulae to others we’ve lost — they’ve lost too. The capital pool will once more fragment and another messy and this time protracted downturn follow. In Japan especially. In short, Miguel and his team must be professionally embarrassed, and we most effectively slur Miguel indirectly through his protégé Susanne, now his lead assistant. The scientific community is as alert to compromising slights as any, and rumours which must be disproved will give us the time we need to uncover our very own newly and, if I dare say so, miraculously budding talent. By then Miguel and his chitterlings will be on the academic dole, in all probability not for long. Then it won’t matter.”

Pechenpaugh, fondly sarcastic: “ — From an unimpeachable source.”

Cressman, still resisting, ever sober: “Is Miguel so grand not to broach alone?”

Dowd, swift but considerate, “It would be an unwarranted risk.” Pechenpaugh grunts assent. “And Susanne has willingly came forward. Both economical and prudent. If we are forceful and unanimous we clinch the Floater, regardless, and in a very short time the important contracts for the next decade. We’ll be more or less unassailable, as God alone knows we should be.”

Voden summons a wad of throat phlegm to masticate.

Max, impatient to leave: “Arthur, take the vote. Leave me out. Cressman, ‘no’. You have the majority needed to take to the board, and Stephen Victor can give us hell maybe later.”

Dowd again, the tidy honey-gnome, once more pushing at the open door: “Stephen, if we deal with Rothnie now, we curtail the other’s lead time. That gives us a hiatus, if nothing else to reassure ourselves that the later data is Simon Pure. We alone control the prognosis to the last minute. We can market the plans for the Floater even at that date. The Europeans or Chinese won’t have a comparable vehicle for many months. Either way we win. But first we must curtail the ideologues on Thirteen. Without compromise. That’s the crucial point. We insinuate vendetta, at a sophomoric level, then resurrect ourselves just in time to reassure the Saudi faction and stump the Pentagon. Can you not at least appreciate the dual crowns in that tactic Max, Stephen?”

Cressman smokes in near silence, the adopted moralist. Finally: “I’m

going to hold Max to his word.”

Voden, also impatient, or perhaps envious: “So, the slate blue again. Rothnie kaput. Ibarria-Gomez crushing grapes. What’s to be left?”

Pechenpaugh, content at last, expansive, “Mostly sweetness and light, darling K. The new team is in place and water tight. Mainly Russian and no cry babies in the lot. Genrikh is Miguel’s match hands down. Read the latest Science Prism for his essay on Lattice Vibrational Constants. And I note with considerable empathy that Limburg seems to have gone ape. The Big Cheese pissed off our connoisseur, Angus here, who is, I understand, courageously upset.” A general and amused acknowledgement of this fact just audible; a lone condescending sigh from Dowd. (Limburg, Willardson later learned, had attempted a fanciful tableau of his own, belatedly and much appreciated by the Princes, with a Latin text which incited the scholar Dowd to promptly enrol the cutup in a remedial grammar course.) “And Professor Selby-Smith is going shortly on a ghost hunt.” This fact greeted less deferentially.

Cressman: “That I still think was unwarranted.”

Pechenpaugh: “Too late. He’s determined. We simply let him dig and rely on the discretion of our vigilante friends in that part of the Yucatan. Near Cozumel, I’m told. He thinks an early tableau mimics a Mayan inscription — warning us of the usual ruination. Something to remember.”

Voden: “That part I was incomplete on. Good.”

Reluctantly Willardson began to make sense of the geographies in Peter’s study.

Dowd: “Even Susanne tried to dissuade him in the end, Stephen.”

Pechenpaugh, now nearly whimsical: “And Frieda, I’m delighted to repeat, is still among us. The nifty pragmatist.”

Voden, now the dire pedant: “I think the girl a bit slippery. Too many satin threads.”

Pechenpaugh: “Whoa, Karl, you should be so lucky. Gentleman, a consensus.” He would be looking sideways as Cressman. “Now let’s get that dingbat Willardson in here. I don’t want anybody beanning him, understood? He is still one irreplaceable shill.”

Yet Willardson remained incredulous — even though his own voice in this part of the tape — his ‘brief’ to the Princes — was so appallingly his own.

The segment seemed mild and uneventful given the regimen of deeds the Princes pursued. One gaff near the beginning, which he had forgotten, lent the hour a dour verisimilitude. Dowd asked if he thought Peter depressed. He replied with a ready earnestness that he likely lacked a gimlet or two (there being an alcohol restriction on Thirteen), and bit his tongue. He remembered Cressman smiling wanly and his chief executive assistant looking off.

The uses keys provided the expected insinuation of mischief and double dealing — Susanne directly, Miguel indirectly. Voden put the sham question: Had Susanne seemed pressed, impetuous? Did he detect any signs of dissension among the team, professional or personal bickering?

Anxiety or doubt over her own contribution? There was a fine show of concern. Nothing would be spared to see she got the appropriate care.

No, Susanne had always been most helpful, he said, and no, he detected no sign of fatigue, despite the great pressure on everyone on Thirteen, particularly project heads. Pechenpaugh asked about the newcomer, Frieda Van Eerden. Was she a player, conniving with the others? Sympathetic? His answer was spare but candid: “From what I saw she seemed attuned to the business at hand. She did not appear to be defensive or wary. I think she is well liked. She was very busy while I was there.” Pechenpaugh seemed anxious to ask more, but changed his mind.

He was not kept long. He, the dutiful eunuch, had delivered up the ‘designated’ pranksters. Only Cressman would keep apart from the charade, smoking in silence, perhaps occasionally looking into his hands with a mixture of candor and *déjà vu*. Max also appeared blankly witnessing what was going on, frequently closing his eyes to reinstate less forensic days. He was the last to speak. Though his bemused, innocent words served to further convict.

“Did Susanne mention her meta-magical puzzles? The mystery of a few chance throws?”

“No. They were all exceedingly busy, Max.”

The following day he learned the details of Limburg’s crucifixion or self-immolation, the result of his sometime impish slight of hand — which the Princes may have paid handsomely for and must have rejoiced in.

The single irreverent masterpiece presented an organically masterful

Satyr resembling an ill-humored Miguel eyeing a nymph that looked much like Susanne, the caption in a pig latin Dowd found so lamentable. Swiftly the Big Cheese found himself signing a prepared apologia. In addition, Dowd furnished the quisling with a Latin primer. His work was thoroughly scrutinized and found to be uniformly apt, given the program for enhancement, with this one playful exception. But it was all Pechenpaugh needed to salt him away at AIQ, the slick, corporation-owned fanzine, and keep a powder monkey distracted during the necessary ‘lead time’. Limburg was soon a beach umbrella joke on the sunny resorts Paleomena employees frequented. Cheesy, or the Terminal Flasher, became a source of amusement for an entire season, such that Willardson was nearly convinced it may have been Pechenpaugh’s or Dowd’s scheme all along. The image of a *ZYTA* grace as a fold-out cotton-tail helped immeasurably to put a precious tale to rest. “We simply can’t afford exotic cutups like him,” Pechenpaugh was reported to have told his talkative secretary.

It was also the incident that clued Willardson to the division in the court: Pechenpaugh and Voden marshaled against or maneuvering independent of Dowd and a newcomer named Felix Muerner. Cressman remained throughout the period respectably qualmish, Max Paleogiannis, unengaged. Max was reported to be nearly senile; more and more he sat quietly in his lounge while his secretary read Taki to him, played recordings of Garbo and Deitrich, and told tales with Sangaku-related puzzles. In World War II Max had served as a fighter pilot and been handsomely decorated. His love of America was perhaps his only remaining passion.

With age his vision became aligned with his dreams for Paleomena, and would squint in feigned disbelief at the photo of Susanne worshipping in a Nepalese shrine — part of her adolescent past he had had Reg Stanton flesh out. An escapade that deterred him from marrying her. So the gossips said.

When the tape finished Willardson sat for several minutes in silence. By then he was less dumfounded than simply suspicious. He knew audio folks could manage all sorts of wizardry with snatches of a person's voice. With leverage like that who needed him! He was more anxious than ever to find what awaited him in Glendale the following evening.

If the tape was not a virtuosic jape itself, then its makers were resourceful indeed, and he'd better keep his wits about him.

He immediately sought out his finest German kirsch.

The complexities of her existence had conditioned Frieda to focus on the importance, the stature and priority of her role. Which usually ushered in an abiding calm. But with the sudden fateful arrival of her sister the 'abiding calm' dissipated. How the minx got out — first from a reform school, then an ongoing procurator's investigation, and finally the clutches of a menacing jihadi to say nothing of the club's edgy managers — she could barely assimilate. And Zoya's unwillingness to disclose the details made Frieda wonder if her sister had indeed 'defected', fled without the 'blessing of the authorities'. What you would keep from an enemy you don't tell a friend. Had she been recruited she would have had at least two

good scenarios to fall back on. Her impetuous zest for her new life tended to bely connivance, artifice; if she had been conscripted her handlers would close haul her activities indefinitely. Thus Frieda's only focus was that they must part. For a considerable period. The break she anticipated from her own role as an 'illegal' was coming to an end. Her beloved apartment had to be abandoned. Her cell would shortly know she had gone AWOL, and she could not return to Paleomena without revealing her whereabouts. In short, the imp was out of the bottle. Time itself was 'futured'. Now the two sisters looked at an ample, finely-tailored man's three-piece suit — which Zoya had just draped over the Palace Buddha sculpture in the craft room of Frieda's apartment. Zoya squatted on the day bed, sporting a beret and one of her sister's luxurious bath robes, trying to look serious; Frieda slowly paced back and forth in a faded print kimono.

"You took it from his room?..."

"He was sleep."

"This newcomer, the intruder in the club...you definitely saw a gun?"

"Know what it means, *gun?* A stupid man maybe Chechen with bad haircut. Jihadi. Who knows? Garlic after shave." Zoya continued to log her report. "Absolutely he try to corner me in lou. 'Lou' for ladies yes? 'Bog' for men. I have been with client yes, in customary work wear. Then in comes Saddam looking like oil fire. Nochnaya panika ploutsa. I leave without formalities. And nothing to wear. You think I am still Young Pio-

neer? I find quiet room and find nice suit and get taxi.” An intemperate pause. “In suit I am invisible. You laugh.”

Frieda was amused, and not conscientious about hiding the fact.

“I wear nice suit and take you to fine restaurant. We leave early and find new place. Key for two.” A brief immaculate scowl. “Okay. You belong to state. You stay and make nescafe for boyevaya grappa. I take suit and join Blue Cross.”

“You would make it somewhat easier if you told me who you thought was after you. I do have some skill in these matters.”

“Could be anybody. Goon of jihadi — who knows. Apsara manager in London shitting bricks. I am wanted ‘pussy riot’. So you scowl like bear. Maybe you are Chechen. I am here, in good mood. I make career. You be investment counsellor. What you want?”

Her sister barely smiling, Zoya calmly fetched and climbed into the suit, tucked the shirt front, donned a pair of flats and straightened the bow tie, picked up the suitcase and headed for the door. Frieda waved her back, shook her head. It seemed preposterous that she hadn’t been tailed — by the very team Frieda anticipated. Many times she had thought of just such a pull out herself, maneuvering by the seat of her pants — even leaving in a suit like the one Zoya had filched. After a debate with herself she said to Zoya, “Give me a call in two days. At this number.” She drew from her purse a business card and wrote the number of a call box in Glendale. I’ll be within hearing range 2:00 AM this Sunday and next. I’ll give you four minutes.”

Zoya easily accepted the card and tucked it immediately into the ticket pocket of the coat. She looked surprisingly smart in the over-size suit, given the current fashion ‘diaspora’, as Daniel called it. A baggy clown in bespoke tailoring.

“I say prayer for Balthazar. Your best dog who swallow bone.” Zoya had seen the food bowl and sleeping mat. Balthazar was then at the vet hospital.

The door closed with quiet emphasis. For all her insouciance, Zoya had been sufficiently alarmed by the intruder at the club to want to keep moving -- accepting her sister’s advice on a new local. They had reconnoitred the new suite, but not together. So. One chore left. Catherine prayed Vassily had stalled long enough to delay a review. She had never chatted with David Willardson. Who was, she realized, about the size that would have fitted into Zoya’s suit. That footling fact brought a fleeting smile to her face, though she could not imagine Willardson patronizing the such a club. That her sister should chance upon his room was again a wry happenstance — upon the room of the one who might well have had an address book with her domicile in it. Having as well her picture, her Paleomena identity pass, was bizarre. Was he instructed to engage in an assessment of her when he was on Thirteen? Did one of the Princes give the picture to him? She thought of Daniel, of very bright Daniel Frank, the clever but listless researcher and faux bohemian who seemed at times the measure of her resolution. He had sent her an absurd costume to wear to a coming charity fête sponsored by Paleomena. A bare-as-you dare mas-

querade. The costume, little more than a set of serpent girdles, Zoya wanted to take with her, a costume that drolly seemed to bridge the historic gap between them. She would recall the detail but the facts always surprised her. Zoya's spare comments on her new apartment seemed prophetic. "Place on roof. Two cats. One missing hind leg. We open shelter."

Frieda smiled. "No maid service."

"We live in burkas. Play with cats."

## SIX

Nearly jocular and amply red-nosed, Willardson sat in the restaurant dining on a chocolate eclair. A cappuccino laced with raspberry schnapps stood nearby, a bottle of the schnapps on its way. It was his third eclair and second cappuccino, and he decided the cappuccino was a waste of time. He sensed his life nearing a messy but ineluctable conclusion and decided a 'fast' was in order. Somebody was coming to bump him off or involve him more deeply in a louche intrigue. He would need energy to flee or endure, or pass on without fuss.

The restaurant was a campy affair near the Hollywood Bowl. Neo-classical whimsy served up with large painted wall swirls, intarsia insinuating carpets, grinning Roman busts, faux lapis table tops, Porphyry vases filled with sand and detritus, also flambé reflections darting through palms and ferns, seeking out acrylic porcelain and brass, polyester linen, paste openwork on pressed crystal, and glistening chromium cutlery...a jaunty

imitation, with all due respect, of an elegant continental coffee garden. Waiters slipped by like efficient overhead trams. Guests moved in and out like executive golfers, faces anticipating relief. Following the fourth eclair he was ready for the IRS. Even Old Scratch, a royal pig fucker like Pechenpaugh.

After a brief debate he decided to play the schnapps off against a gracious sauterne, and this stratagem had kept the greenery more or less distinguishable from the spice girls when a smartly dressed hazard of impeccable female credentials walked by toting a sizeable handbag. Thoughtlessly she sat down behind him where he might not study her, mindful no doubt of his reputation for masterful discrimination. Right away something about her hair caused him to pause refilling his goblet. The immaculate Parian curl, a fleeting lock of lustrous flowing with the unity of molten glass. He belched softly. Damn nice skirt too, virgin Damask wool. Such women found him a great challenge. He mustn't therefore seem preternaturally incurious. The wine swirled in his mouth coming to rest with a cleansing throttle. Another foot wine he imagined. Good, no nausea. He was going to be carried out if no one turned up, or he attempted to unmetaphorically alter someone's nose.

He had nearly memorized the long wine list and his next foray, when the same Lydian curl ranged before him. This was it, he thought. She would place a small capsule in the wine and somberly depart. He would Socratically drink up and be slipshodly dead. Instead she spoke, quietly, smoothing troubled waters with a voice unerringly lyrical. Were her assis-

tants on Thirteen, including the clever sixteen-year-old, not alert and attentive when she spoke? Alas, her lips were denizens from a strawberry tart, the eyeglasses might stylistically double as laser shields, the beautifully moulded teeth required but a glockenspiel hammer to sing like bell tower chimes, the fichu blouse-dress the type that must afford the waiters a glimpse of the omphalus, the navel of the world — a modern disaster of banality except for the voice, its sweet tone and spritely cadence, now politely dismissing a solicitous steward.

Frieda Van Eerden was the last creature he anticipated meeting, short of the hygiene commissars in the air-lock on Thirteen. It was an awesome disguise. Heads freely turned. A folded manuscript extruded from her bag as she sat down opposite. It then became obvious: a heavenly star rising in the twilight hours to meet her mercurial agent. Willardson moonlighting again. Was there no end to the man's resource and quixotic interests? Karl Voden died of jaundice and envy, some said. Wasn't Pechen-paugh's interest impurely suspicious, defensive?

He soon came round when she fixed on him a look of earnestness he had seen perhaps once before, a look he could not, in all candour, imagine her capable of effecting. It was a stare of vast reckoning, in a gamine thirty-two-year-old. The gaze of a celebrated but beleaguered jockey on an untried horse. He could almost taste the oats.

“David, we've little time. You're dry, I presume.”

“Of course!” he heard himself exclaim too loudly. “A simple evening damp.”

She looked at him for some time, ruefully he imagined, but the tinted glasses prevented him clearly seeing her eyes. It seemed a great entourage waited to play by. He slogged on, impenitently.

“Might I enquire what recommends this preserve, to a tender Lucretia of near faultless design?” A fine display of measured, authoritative pique, if a little discursive.

Sternly she looked at the contents off her bag. “There is a lot at stake,” she said, with sorry emphasis.

He continued in a conspiratorial whisper, “Mam’selle, I defy you to spend a debriefing hour with the Princes and still believe in a single original sin.”

Her smile was too brief and courteous. “Is that profound?”

The question both surprised and nettled him. He wasn’t about to let her shellacked youth and forensic disposition make him feel pathetic. He knew there was a claustrophobic inanity to his condition, to his words. But this night he was incorrigible. And content. He had been pushed around long enough. He refilled his goblet after she deftly covered her glass.

“Mam’selle, you are absolutely correct. The stake is the piquant metaphor.”

Silence from the strawberry tart.

“For a one-eyed bear,” he jovially added, thinking of a carnival act.

“If I understand, those are not my thoughts.”

She continued to stare at the manuscript that had by design or accident

impregnated her satchel. Fielding an afterthought she shaped the handbag into a neater bundle. Then changed her mind and released the handle, saying, “You are a good listener, I’m told. An executive the Princes don’t feel paranoid about. And will consider for indelicate chores. Favourable credentials. The ongoing dilemma.”

Was ‘favorable credentials’ pronounced deferentially? He wasn’t sure. He shrugged. “Happenstance — favourable credentials.”

She wryly smiled. “Yet we are hopeful. That you can and will help us define the Princes’ goals. Their assessment and eventual use of the *ZYTA* windfall. Particularly Arthur Pechenpaugh’s agenda, how engaging it may be for the others. The tape we hoped would reveal the lay of the land. Yes, we are hoping for and asking a lot. If you say no, we won’t persist. I’m not here to twist your arm. We have little enough to offer you by way of compensation, at least at present. We’ll do our best to arrange a cash settlement should you jeopardize your seniority and pension, which may happen if you’re discovered consorting with us. What Miguel calls your diplomatic immunity may not be, well, proportionate. Regrettably I cannot offer you more.”

If he was amazed at her syntax and ropy candor, he still doubted his resolve. “I don’t recall you being down among the eligible young ladies. Susanne said you were ‘undecided’. And Pechenpaugh *is* a bit edgy. Told me to pay attention.”

Frieda imposed a moment’s silence then said with a trace of irony, “Su-

sanne is a true penny, an honest woman. As for Pechenpaugh..." Again she was about to say more but changed her mind. Instead she placidly fingered a sprig of hart's tongue in the bouquet of silk daffodils between them, an irony ghosting her lips.

He was indeed seeing a quite different Frieda. He wanted to take away the glasses to see if the eyes matched the disciplined calm.

"Did you deliver the memory chip to my study? Which I am most keen to return."

Her renewed silence intimated wariness even reproof.

"Well, then, these others you hint at — what do they hope for? Realistically. And are they always incommunicado?" He had sombrely accepted Frieda's appraisal of Susanne's simple grace. True penny was a serviceable description.

"I wish I could name them. For now, I can offer only assurances. They are not fanatics. Miguel has only been an intermittent help. He goes his own way as often as not. But he's not a snitch." Once more she seemed to censor an oncoming remark. "They, we, are amazed at the sheer luck, the fortuity of it all, and alarmed at the arrogance of the custodians. Slighting the law and the ethical precepts of science as well, particularly while directed by Arthur Pechenpaugh and a newcomer you are unacquainted with, though not for long I imagine. It's not a matter of Susanne's gremlins taking over, but of ambitious people hoarding what they shouldn't. *ZYTA* is an wondrous benefice. To hide or cloud that event is very short sighted, perhaps even criminal — comparable to concealing evi-

dence of a coming costal tsunami. That sounds dramatic; the reality is less entertaining. The pertinent factual knowledge we need to go public with the princes have locked away. It belies *memory* alone — all we retire with. Some of it we need to discount the princes' ruse."

She was not pleased with her words, he felt, but she was making an effort.

"Two individuals I personally like and professionally trust believed you would help us. Peter was the first, Susanne — at least Susanne *status quo ante* -- the second. Peter, I fear, has inadvertently quarantined himself. As you may know, he's on a so-called sabbatical somewhere in Mexico. For reasons he felt obliged to conceal. An update on a special site I suspect. Likely to do with *ZYTA*'s intimidating historicism. Which he brooded over. Limburg is mainly an onlooker. Though he's less impatient than he was."

She was silent then but continued to confront him from her stylish bower. He could not fend off the disappointment. He distrusted philanthropy — her chief offering, thus far — as much as he did bakers with low-cal wares. And yet he despaired of his masters, especially Pechen-paugh and Voden, two rancid templars, and he was touched by her coming here. She was not at ease and seemed to have more on her hands than the froth blower seated across. He wanted to get to the matter of the tape but felt entitled to one last sally — for his jeopardized pension if nothing else. The schnapps and sauterne urged him on. He strove to appear thoughtful.

"I won't be prostrate over the golf — but all lounge privileges? They

will be forfeit as well.” Despite great vigilance the calculated ingenuousness in his voice languished with a crapulous slurring of ‘privylidges’.

She half smiled, for or against he couldn’t say. A small compact was returned to her satchel. More and more she appeared poised for flight. He quickly resumed:

“My altruism extends you see to grading vintners and Greek-style pastry chefs. Plus the occasional artisan the princes want to coral. Scientist I am not, nor businessman. And I’m only an undercover man when the lights go out.”

His confidence and fluency improved with each pompous sentence. She might yet tell him to piss off. Into the laden silence he plodded on.

“Peter, yes, does inspire trust, humor and patience. I was taken by a small number of the tableaux he showed me. But then a titivated copy appears in a third-rate gallery. I end up making enquiries where do you suppose — in a very up-to-date bawdy shop. Cross my heart. A work of art the picture is not. But as a publicity gimmick it is hard to beat.”

Frieda was putting on a pair of racer’s gloves, with enough sullen deliberation to wait him out.

“Then, at the express urging of an idealistic scientist I swallow, with marked reluctance, a piece of exotic miniature hardware. To an outside observer I might appear as a self-basting nitwit.” Already he was embarrassed by this outburst, but seemed incapable of controlling it. “Besides, you seem to be managing well on your own. The tape, for instance, is a

great coup and fine leveler. Cressman, I suspect, may serve as the *éminence grise*, putting your bugs about with solemn ease. Whose resources beggar my own. About the only nocturnes I play, if nocturnes are the speciality here, are dream laden."

Her reaction was not what he expected, but soon reckoned commensurate. She was amused by arch words occasionally punctuated with a tippler's slur. He was annoyed, first with himself, then her superior, at least unrehearsed, reaction. She continued to fix upon her a look of dour appraisal, of a typical example of fascist art. But his pragmatic instincts said an estimable and genuine artifact lay beneath the gloss. Then the buffoon in him took over.

"You don't perchance cue the staging at the Van Nuys Bellerophon? Configure the rheostats? Default the applause...pinch the occasional gentlemen's suit?..." In the back of his bleary mind was Voden's innuendo -- the 'slippery satin threads' that somehow eluded the dicey vice-president. His smile became luxurious. He even anticipated the sting of a slap, a delayed clap of thunder. Instead all that registered was a gloved hand snatching the memory chip from the table cloth followed by the sight of heels disappearing from indentations in the carpet. Footprints fading as on a tide-scrubbed beach.

A mitigating disappointment. She obviously knew what the Bellerophon was all about and promptly took her leave — not a promising opening performance for a finagler or wire-puller. Perhaps he was well rid of her and her model makeup kit. Still, he remained churlish. He had acted

like the poltroon he too often resembled. The wine began to taste blighty and acerbic. He felt a little more annoyed with the world, seeing in her another heavenly body listing to collapse, its fuel squandered, its energies deflected without knowledgeable or able witness, the end it seemed to all empiric urgency. Time for a new species he suavely told himself. The current pairing of beasts produced Princes and Tsarinas of impermeable darkness. The wisdom he might impart on a binge!

He was in for a real mauling that night and about to splurge on a sturdier vintage when the auburn disappointment reappeared minus the glasses, flushed, and he believed recently expunged of pique if not tears — a mental refraction that startled him. She immediately sat down, waved off one more cruising waiter, and placed elbows on the table edge, on the faux starchy linen, reminiscent of Pechenpaugh about to excise another coffee cup. Again he felt the durable chagrin, before such an unavoidable delicious expanse of neck and upper chest with its ready hint of vale.

He said, “I spy here a vintage from a very heady family indeed. Grand enough to see any queer fish below stairs. Why not lend a hand? Won’t cost you more than an additional application of lipstick.” If the line was overplayed and under rehearsed, it was at least in keeping with his performance this night, this puddled night, and his spirits soared to see it had no inimical effect. She simply stared at the remains of his eclair.

Said she, “I need you to help me make a recording. Tonight.”

The spell shattered. For the briefest moment he coolly considered sticking her head first into a nearby planter (given the energy that comes to

wimps in choler), much as Peter had with that slim book he'd obviously found wanting. Was there a more enervating subterfuge in the universe than abetting the creation of one more sly recording? But as she looked directly at him then, with large sleep deprived eyes, he discovered himself at least attentive, content to suspend judgement of the satin threads. She calmly added, "The chip must be in place by tomorrow morning — early. Not the one you had but one like it." She talked apathetically while staring at the hart's tongue.

"Susanne's conversation with you in the entresol office was not entirely jammed — re-routed. Miguel did try. With a voice simulator Pechenpaugh pieced together some of what she said with an adroitly altered nuance to suggest instability, even fanaticism. He did exploit the idea of an alien or android, something fantastic. He is, well, Pechnpaugh."

She paused again, as though summoning a bon mot, but none came. "As you may know, Susanne's team handled the precession statistics — part of the guessable anomalies." The pause this time seemed editorial, likely to do with the user keys Willardson felt. "The present transcript will make Susanne out to be a radical and a thief. The imposition of the keys was simply a trick to humour Max Paleogiannis. I know this because of the efforts of others more intrepid than I."

He felt the criticism as keenly as a blow. He was undeniably a great shill and pretender, yet strangely at peace with himself this sugary alcoholic night.

"You perhaps did not think to attempt to scramble the new paths —

Miguel could have helped there.” Resolutely she continued:

“The tape Pechenpaugh fabricated is intended in part to excuse the corporation for its delay in delivering a new scientific research priority list requisitioned by the UN. Susanne will be cited as the paranoid meddler and Pechenpaugh’s lean excuse.” A strained elision, then: “The list has wide application, from energy to genetics. Hard to ignore. The Princes simply want to keep their focus front and centre. The *ZYTA* benefice.”

She paused to blow her nose. When she resumed, the lyric in her voice reasserted itself somewhat, suggesting the anger had run its course.

“Of Pechenpaugh’s fabricated recording there is a master and three copies. I have all four, for a few hours only. I can easily delete the ambiguous sentences and compress what’s left near the end, but I need something to fill the space at the beginning. In the original track—parts of it relayed from the identity badge to a ceiling plant, as you may have guessed—there are some gaps. And these Pechenpaugh made good use of. Again the circumstances are, well, case sensitive. You’ve got to trust me here.”

He continued to listen silently, solemnly even, like a principal at an arraignment hearing. Then more bathos:

“Basically I need you snoring—for several minutes in a chair like the one in the entresol office. You cat-napped there a few times.” A brief elsewhere smile. “I have a chair like it in my apartment now, with the pertinent recording equipment.” Briefly she glanced up, but the drollness he looked for did not seem to register. With a trace of impatience she re-

sumed. “The tape must be assembled and returned this night, else Pechenpaugh wins this hand without a second bid. A meeting between representatives of the National Science Foundation and Pechenpaugh is scheduled for tomorrow morning. The tape will be played after lunch. The incriminating stuff deleted. Pechenpaugh will be embarrassed. The import of *ZYTA* enhanced. Paleomena will have to redouble its efforts keep it exclusive. Which they may manage, for a while. Cressman will have one of his secretaries return the new chip tonight.”

The speechless stage of Willardson’s amazement lingered. What was he to make of words so complex, momentous, trusting and transparent? The disclosure seemed an awesome risk. Even the unflattering request — the invitation to a charming girl’s flat to stage a ‘snoring’ — could be assimilated with a little exertion. But the revelations took one’s breath away. The break embarrassed them both. Frieda’s next words seemed the beep of a timer in the void.

“Will you help?” In just such a voice one would request the return of a much needed, overdue library disc. Yet he remained bewildered and exhausted by the effort to follow her words and where possible read between the lines, a redoubtable challenge for one who would likely now flunk a routine curb-side inebriation test.

“Dr. Van Eerden, I doubt I’ll have difficulty schnozzing. But in a chair, an uncomfortable one at that? Does your abode not have sufficient space to permit one wineskin to lie down?”

Her reply was prompt and solicitous.

“I need the peculiar squeak and cricks the chair makes. With you in it. Asleep. Occasionally snoring. A short half-hour, not more. Guaranteed to make the Princes blush.” She belatedly added, “I do have some light sedatives. Which I use myself.” Her reserve amusement was only partially stayed by his sudden short laugh and postscript. “That would be a sight — the blush, of course,” he said, just before savouring one last morsel of the eclair. She seemed relieved.

“We can count on you then,” she said to her tote bag. Then looked up. The acquiescence she anticipated failed somehow to emerge. She fixed upon him a nicely-staged, one-eyed squint. He just managed to keep a straight face.

“I will require a few questions be answered.” One final sortie he thought as he downed the last of the mosel.

A wry momentarily lined face. “What I can.”

“ — Not the least of which is why you bolted when I mentioned the Bellerophon. I contend with more than lascivious curiosity here.”

She did not immediately respond to this. On the one hand she seemed to feign boredom, on the other an ironic no-win evasiveness.

“You will be satisfied with the truth?” she said finally, her eyes communicating an old exhaustion, making one more foray irresistible.

“Providing it is highly entertaining. Yes of course I want the truth. What extraordinary things you ask.” He resisted ungallantly adding: you artful lady!

“I promise to tell all after the recording is safely back in Pechenpaugh’s

office.”

“A most sly assurance.” There, he got it out.

She sighed. “Let me welcome you to the club.”

“I presume. And may the Erinnyses forgive you.”

“The Angry Ones, yes? So.”

“A short half-hour and you deliver the tape.” He then cantilevered his own elbows to the table as she had earlier.

“Of course.”

“Then a few unvarnished answers.”

“Yes, but later, yes. Tomorrow.”

“And if tomorrow stands me up?” The precious remark immediately sated: she had obviously tired of the word games.

“It won’t if we act tonight.”

He thought for some time. “I have been assigned more difficult jobs.”

“We can probably use them all. Look it, we’ve barely enough time. I promise a short recording session then, if you fancy — I’m a long way from your maisonette — a very comfy guest room.”

“ — No waterbed.”

“No.”

She seemed appeased. The blueprint of a smile touched her face. Thus he quaffed the very last of the sauterne after a limp toast to himself, then waltzed out in front tipping his hat to the more attentive spectators. The evening was cool and foul.

He would have felt fine but for the suspicion of being a side of beef

shunted into a cooler to be chemically aged.

He awoke early the following morning covered in toile sheets pattered with stylized songbirds, Mexican perhaps. Very real birdsong beyond his window, a steady vocalise in fact, appeared to be the rouser. Braids of sunshine warmed the sheets. He'd neglected to pull the shade curtains. He couldn't actually remember when he'd last seen a 'rosy-fingered dawn'. The opaque sheers barely softened the skim light. Distant snatches of a balalaika helped sustain the moment. He entertained visions of freshly pulped orange juice with sliced pineapple and fig banana, multi-grained toast, a four-minute poached egg; also sleek jogging attire fetchingly sweat-stained, ringlets damp on temples pink with exertion. A twinge inflamed his lower back when he moved. They had a time finding something appropriately high for his feet, to obtain the sounds the chair was capable of yielding with him in it. He dozed on the entresol so, feet perched on a drawer in the desk. She had sat pensive and focused before a compact control panel. They arrived at her surprisingly messy apartment in an old Porsche smelling faintly of rancid butter, a puzzling amusement, even after the discovery of the spilt popcorn, and rode an outside elevator above a winking city, her pretty face snowy and benighted, the satin blouse live with disembodied sprites in the soft ceiling light.

The recording proceeded in several protracted instalments, first delayed while he was sick (a 'head' wine after all), then unblinkingly given to bardolatry, though he kept it *sotto voce*; for his ears alone. *Be with me, Beauty,*

*for the fire is dying,/ My dog and I are old, too old for roving,/ But not for...snoring,*  
snoring. Eventually he dozed off and Frieda woke him, satisfied, and with judicial red eyes permitted him the luxury of the guest room while she sought her coat. If memory served, she sweetly kissed him when she left, with a begrimed hesitation he would treasure. *Looking* he was expert in; *touching* was a blood sport. Now, though still prone and snuggled, his curiosity would not rest. The chirping birds told him to get with it.

The room was what he would call old-fashioned modern: comfortable essentials — the latest channel-quilt comforter — foisted on romantic trappings, including armchairs in that most sumptuous of coverings, mushroom velvet. On a chest of drawers with what is known as a serpentine front sat a Strasbourg turkey, the kind of ceramic curiosity that opened up to reveal all kinds of marvels. Here, however, the turkey was bare, except for a single paper clip.

His study of the ‘guest’ room ended before a mirrored walk-in closet, the lone robe inside so long it touched the floor as he moved. On one side of the closet lay hastily stashed washing — mainly bedding it seemed. On the other a vacuum cleaner, portable sewing machine with the shipping bindings still in place, a skipping rope, and an unopened box of candy. Most engaging remained the question of where the brute hung the robe on less perfunctory leave. Willardson would have left off the wrap but hated dressing before showering, a solemn rite on an empty stomach. So he ventured toward the balalaika, bypassing the mirror that presented a

coronation train or a desultory inchworm. Self-effacement is rarely less than inspired.

At first the balalaika eluded him, coming from several non-directional speakers secreted throughout the commodious apartment. A vented sky-lit atrium was full of ivy, ferns and flowering hibiscus, which introduced an agreeable L-shaped sitting room given over to a surprising mélange of styles, the eclectic findings of a finch or magpie, as well as a rather intimidating mess. He was determined to take it all in, this bower bird in her stylish top floor suite, with its breezy loggia-style passageways full of fine Western and oriental artifacts which all but screened the domestic litter. The paintings professed the pickings of a decidedly romantic temperament; elsewhere three abiding distractions prevailed: exotic indoor plants surprisingly well kept, elaborate Chinese porcelains, and intricate wood inlays, usually in bold floral fruitwood marquetry. He was faintly depressed; she seemed to qualify as a four star luminary: grace, intelligence, taste and lucre, meaning a supplementary income given the liberal but not lavish salary at Paleomena. A fact he willed into obscurity, at least for the time being. He actually floated by her before recognition, and returned in a practiced and observant nonchalance to the craft room where she sat in profile before a pier-glass on an old refurbished steamer trunk working a cell phone calculator. In turning to greet him he was met with smiling non rouged lips, oval eyes still reddish but now lacking makeup and flush with that lemur alertness Peter found so striking. Gone too was the side-vamp hair wave that listed like a spinnaker, the real auburn hair a cumulus of

damp curls. As he approached he was further astonished and captivated by a short loosely bond kimono that disclosed a seamless thigh — for him a catalytic change from the night last. Like most benighted celibates the discovery was an agreeable if wasted tease. In the bias of one lapel nestled a sylphic breast, its pointed nipple nearly visible, the heedless exhibit of a Naiad or hoyden. Yet her manner belied mischief. “Be with you in a jiff,” she said, a faint grimace lining her forehead. In the Kremser white bedroom behind he elected to notice Chinese ceramic garden seats by a terrace, a nearer daybed, more hastily piled washing and a jumble of scattered clothes, the ongoing curiosity given the trig female before him.

A further object of his bemusement was situated near the trunk she sat on —a skimpy raffish costume draped over a standing ceramic sculpture of a comic agate-green Lion of Buddha. He must have gawked at it for she offered a lame smile without looking up. “A joke really.” Following a moment’s deliberation she added: “The chap who sent it imagines himself a wit. For a benefit.” She noted then his own commodious robe and adopted a reassuring smile. “You look rested and hungry.” With determination, even a trace of ire, she added, “Won’t be a minute.” Like the night last, she seemed beset, unreconciled, yet determined to prevail. Going from ingratiation to abstraction, dry humour to easy earnestness, he sensed the wile of a troubled gambler or assessor. Much like himself?...

For several seconds she squinted at the costume then, with the deliberation of an necromancer or tarot reader, proceeded to dumfound. “It’s a very recent dare — from an unexpected source.” These comments

seemed voiced as much for herself. “Some impositions you can’t readily shuck, and I don’t have an adroit art critic around too often.” These words made even less sense to him. Then, after a brief grimace and even briefer sideways pout, she stood, removed and dropped the kimono on the trunk, wryly saying to her reflection, “How I enjoy being lily white.” Acutely naked, the diacritical of pubic hair gilded in a spangle of sunlight, she proceeded to don the costume, an Aztec affair of plumed crown and assorted reptiles fashioned into cingulums for the hips, arms and legs. She requested help with some clasps that tightened behind, allowing him a close confirmation of this recently-showered, freckled, vanilla kore: late-Gothic gaunt above the waist, softer Florentine flesh below — all, as she said, naturally pale pink, something he marvelled at in this sun laced chamber. But for the evanescent freckles, her skin had a deceptively transparent look, as though refracted by an unguent.

The costume proved to be both nearly magnificent and faintly disturbing. Standing contrapposto, weight on one leg, she sought a mindful appraisal: “Worth ten thousand — the proposed contribution from the sponsor — if one is camp enough to wear it. More if I agree to some homework after. Don’t smile. He needs some upgrading on the Squeeze Principle in differential calculus. Among other things. A long story.” Again, the surprisingly earnest face she was capable of affecting, the ‘other things’ a dearth of taste and tact he presumed. Following a further survey on the other leg she seemed less indulgent. “Not much really, given the cad’s reserves.” Almost as a lottery winner he delighted in the visual benefice, the

champagne freckles, alive in the sunlight, absent only about her dimpled navel, under-baked bum, and trig breasts as she turned in the mirror. With a second astute squint, one eye nearly closed, she sighed. "I think you agree. I needed a second opinion..from an accomplished witness."

With insular dispatch and little assistance she removed the costume — reminding him of a club member in a hurry to quit the locker room. She sighed; some of the cingulums left distinct creases on her skin. He wondered how rehearsed it all was; on the surface the show seemed impulsive enough, less the ending. The kimono was neatly sleeved, her lips pursed, a pair of briefs plucked from the opened wardrobe. "So much for the rowing season," she said from behind the polished mahogany door as the briefs were hiked and a pair of sandals fitted. More and more he felt she was surveying an alien landscape he knew nothing about. And he a stray but useful rod man — the pun extraneous.

He smiled. "A hard act to sustain, I would think."

For the first time Frieda chuckled aloud, adding with disarming objectivity, "The snakes felt as much like tourniquets."

It had been one aspect of the charade he felt honor bound to comment on. "It is a risky business -- dressing as Coyolxauhqui. In the Aztec myth you may recall she was the jealous, insurgent sister of the war god, Huitzilopochtli, slain by him in battle. Her dismembered body, the subject of the famous disk called the Stone of Coyolxauhqui, which adorned his temple at Tenochtitlan, was fitted with a similar a costume." Tourniquet is not a bad epithet for such knots, he thought. Blood flow was a considera-

tion then. He was thinking of Peter's rushed trip to Mexico. To confirm a crucial, perhaps prejudicial, supposition. The historic comment had the intended effect: the nymph was mildly dismayed.

"Goodness. Not entirely a fertility god then." Her eyes alighted on one of the bundles of washing as she closed the wardrobe door. "The problem between maids."

"Barely noticed," he said, disingenuously. She almost laughed, saying instead, "The cook is local and a genius. Breakfast in four minutes." He watched as her heels tripped to the kitchen, much as he had in the restaurant.

The four minute interval allowed him a further reconnoitering of the apartment, to chance upon a section of closet, obliquely spied in a third bedroom, that featured some decidedly gamey frocks he could not imagine Frieda buying let alone wearing. The prospect of a second female lodger, the untidy one, seemed more and more apropos; the likelihood of a Janus personality was more than he wished to entertain just then.

They settled down finally in her bright efficient kitchen, free of the pervasive clutter elsewhere. The pantry was styled around several streamlined processors and adjoined the atrium conservatory. Above, a canary played in a pine cage; behind, wide arched windows looked down on a tree-lined oasis with free-form pool and jacuzzi. Serpentine ferns teased a stand of stolid black pines guarding a sunbathing platform with *chaises longues*. Outdoor lanterns floated above the garden like kites. Everywhere, it seemed, fragrant flowers garnished large jardinieres. The birdsong hung in the still

morning like a wind chime. More than ever he wanted her surround to reassure. Many exotic scents mingled in the kitchen. Not bad for a thirty-two-year-old on the lam, if that was the circumstance. An unappetizing bean curd in hand she began to tally some figures on a cell calculator.

Said she, obligingly, “I should let the chap know this morning — about the soirée and costume. I needed a witness — with some uncommon sense. I may just cite you as an unimpeachable authority. You thought it rather tacky, yes?”

“Well, the vintage pieces are just that — in pieces. It’s hard to imagine a more a-historic wearer — if that’s any help.”

“For sure...sorry, one more bit.” The keys on the calculator trilled.

He forced a smile.

“I’m not always so rushed.”

He shrugged, believing the matter no longer diverting. “The apartment suits you very well, abstracting the maid.”

She answered after a pause. “Most days I agree.”

“On the off days?”

“I’m usually away.” A preoccupied in-house smile.

The calculator continued to intermittently absorb; several times she glanced at a daily journal, leaving him a voice once removed. She moved the butter dish nearer his reach and, while continuing to work the figures, instructed him in the ways of enhancing a more-than-token breakfast. He was soon beside her uncovering his tented toast, and spoke up during one of her abstracted intervals.

“I’ve not heard such birdsong. Nor background quiet. I knew one couple who had the requisite space but remained stymied over the design — she rather fancied a cottage, he a hotel. They would have appreciated your modus vivendi.”

This produced dead silence but whether prompted by his remark or yet another of her restive preoccupations he couldn’t tell. She suddenly pocketed the calculator and looked up with cheerful resolve. “An overdraft.” Then the awaited recognition: “It suits you -- the robe. Wasn’t sure you would expect such a wrap. A little big I know. It belongs to my dog Balthazar, who should be back from the vet around noon. Swallowed a chicken bone — got stuck in the roof of his mouth. I had him in a kennel for a week. And feel quite guilty. It’s clean — the robe. I washed it yesterday myself.”

“Ah, a pooch. I had imagined a large chap with a enviable habit.”

A sudden gamine smile. “The tape was a smash. It can only help. We really can’t be qualmish. We are dealing with a Camorra, a word I learned from Peter.” She sat back in her chair, thinking perhaps of a happier period. The rather humble kimono, with faded blue and black calligraphy, suggested a last recourse, given the surrounding washing, which she seemed newly aware of before his indirect observance. A section of shoulder peaked through a frayed seem. Her face was singularly becoming without makeup, he decided, her flesh, despite its pallor, sleek and fresh as a young Mountain apple. How difficult to be observationally discreet. Her work on Thirteen partly explained the complexion though not conclu-

sively, for the maximum continuous time permitted there would be a fortnight.

As the sunlight played like a nimbus about her damp yeasty hair, the similarly forced itself upon him like the sudden rent in a mist. He could not dispel the notion that a very modest alteration to the face could render her a relation to the snooty émigré at the Bellerophon. Her limbs tended to belie in definition and contour the pallor of flesh. Otherwise, the form was there in the essentials. Whereas last night's showcase glamor disillusioned, cloyed. It was the use of makeup that turned character into a repertory fix, into the interminable clones of a Garbo like siren which even Frieda was not immune to when away from her bean curd. Apparently. It was one of the things that made her expertise a surprise, this fresh trig figure a polymath. Elegant looks often incited suspicion and distrust in aca-deme. Whereas bookish ladies usually provoked in him footling notions of free love: he had trouble imagining anyone ‘renting’ it. But with Frieda loose the hierarchy returned with a vengeance. Perhaps she delighted in turning the goats on their ears. Perhaps he *was* being allowed a privileged sight, the flower free the conventional vase. Yet her concentration on the calculator and latent caution with her gown seemed to gainsay artifice or stratagem. By trying on the costume she had perhaps simply flattered a noisome whim — which ended before it began. These were casual, insouciant times. So he would, must think. For now.

He also had difficulty imagining her unprepared for nosy Parkers like him. Nor could he really picture her haunting the Bellerophon. The in-

sinuation, however, given the sudden intimate glimpse of her unadorned self, lingered. It was like having two images, close in age and appearance, then juggling eyes, noses, chins, to end with similar pronouncements but sui generis configurations...she suddenly ended his ruminations by looking up, intending a solicitous smile, which his stare, too late obfuscated, sobered.

“Ah, I am sorry,” he said. “A fleeting visitation — Euphrosyne, incomunicado of course.” He indulged a snuffle. “One of the a, venerable Graces.”

This freed the pent up smile. “Ah, another old dreamer.”

Grimly he said, “Yes, the very one.”

She rose, refilled their coffees, dispatched the calculator to a counter drawer and returned to her seat. She looked up at him after a sip, a hint of mischief in the cerulean blue eyes.

“You getting enough?” She eyed his toast.

“Yes, splendid. One small accident — the cuff — but I’m sure Balthazar won’t mind.”

“I think you want to ask me some pointed questions.”

She sat back and crossed her legs while fitting the kimono smoothly about them, giving him a second glimpse of limbs that conceivably could, when in training, propel a Gisele over a well-scrutinized stage. Plaintively she said, “I hate creasing things. The last of the wraps as you may have guessed.” Thereafter the bemused look returned, or so he thought, the lined forbearance of an accomplice. The look of nimble curiosity slightly

on edge. He was charmed and made wary also. Was it possible she could be the one bewitching the mysterious debonair sponsor at what — ten thou a crack, the figure that attached to wearing the Aztec costume? To a multi-billionaire, one such Saudi being a Paleomena trustee at the moment, the equivalent of him spending about what — half a cent? A bargain surely. His instincts, avowedly unreliable in risqué matters, said ‘no’. Also, her English seemed unerringly good and American, though he knew at least two East Europeans who managed a convincing West-Coast amble and diction, as well as an idiomatic vocabulary and syntax. Maybe she simply explained the American tax system to them. He tried to envisage her working out complicated algorithms in a harem...she had made a spectacle of herself, the timing of which could be inimical. Was there a message for an astute witness that words alone would have rendered prejudicial? Again he suspected he was looking for dapperlings, or Doppelgängers.

“You’ve got about twelve minutes,” she added, glancing at her watch, and again, so he thought, a caution stole through the watchful wit. She had been easier to cope with in the restaurant — where he was three sheets to the wind. Here he was dealing with a partisan on home turf. A partisan with a bit of a past. When she pleaded ignorance of who delivered the memory chip to his residence — a formal necessity she blandly asserted — he gave in to a sudden impulse.

“Have you ever been photographed for the *ZYTA* tableaux?” He managed a sleuth-like flintiness. “Not the tabloid, of course.” Suddenly he

wondered if there one day might be such a thing.

Her answer foiled amusement. "Of course. And the answer is no." She drank from her cup and brushed aside a loose strand of hair. "You're never in transmuted form appeared in them." He mused at the prospect.

This produced a sudden tenable yawn. She shook back the delinquent lock, smiling wanly. He got to the point.

"A lingering concern of mine is why you took offence when I rhetorically linked you with the Bellerophon. The obvious answer does not necessarily seem the candid one."

A hardy mute smile, then a fine non sequitur. "The place has lost some of its éclat, according to Limburg, who as you know takes his entertainments seriously." Her voice contained a trace of asperity suggesting limited patience. She seemed to underline the feeling by decisively brushing a few remaining crumbs off her lap.

He briefly sketched the sequence of events that led to his encounter with Karl Voden as A.J. Lachance, beginning with the picture in Hermann's gallery — which suggested a sly ruse, to foil the rumor of a computer generated marvel. "In this regard, I would be grateful for any information you can provide concerning a fugitive — I use the word advisedly — of a Russian dancer who has apparently given the Princes valuable information on aspects of the Soviet reconstitution of its foreign agents — at least according to Voden in my encounter with him. The girl now apparently earns her keep and the trappings of a new identity by performing at

the club. The fact that she bears a resemblance to the face of a journalist on a recent cover of OO Magazine could be a complication if in fact Pechenpaugh, say, plans to interpolate such a face into those tableaux that have been doctored and fashioned for public consumption. Which may already have been done. I thought you should know, if indeed you don't."

The smile was sober and consensual. "Voden, I'm told, is a compulsive raconteur. According to Peter. To put it mildly. Perhaps a misogynist as well. I've heard many stories. They remain, perhaps as they should, stories. I suspect he and the mysterious Mr. Lachance are simply playing hooky — the Princes would hardly tolerate someone that batty. Peter's take is that Voden just wants to get away, indulge himself now and then, and cajoled a friend into a mutual subterfuge. The Princes are a protean gang. The mysterious Mr. Lachance is alive and well, I have little doubt. And cashing in on the use of his identity. As for the one stray picture — really, anything is possible. The naturalism — mimesis, Peter's word — in the *ZYTA* graphics mimics the technique of several historic artists. Limburg, when he can, is narrowing, earmarking the field. I do feel sorry for Stephen Cressman, who has come around to our assessment rather late. His days too are numbered. Though he will likely die of natural causes. Unlike Voden, his predicament is medical. As for the telling, the 'evidential' face on the OO cover, it belongs to an American. We all have doubles."

While still talking she had risen and begun to attend the canary, permitting it a brief liberty while she cleaned the cage and filled the stalls with

fresh water and seed. He had to consider her assessment — Peter's assessment — of Voden as prankster, escapist and disguise hack. His role in the corporation as its nuclear honcho an ongoing conundrum. OO Magazine he never read but would inspect its most recent cover. She continued after acknowledging his brief abstraction.

“Now regarding your ‘Russian’ expatriate, the ‘bun head’ Limburg calls her. I know only the persistent rumours. And what Pechenpaugh communicated when he pestered Susanne. All I hear is that an exceptional performer performs, or performed, in the club. Limburg keeps us abreast of the ‘soul havens’ as he calls them.”

He expected to catch a glimpse of amusement. Instead he detected something else: a fleeting brittleness, the salty composure returning with disciplined calm, though that may have been the result of a renewed breeze through the louvered window screen. It was, he thought, an odd reaction to her own fine joke. He also knew he was diligently hunting for spooks and apparitions.

The canary was returned to its perch and Frieda once again gracefully sat opposite while settling the kimono. It did seem the preoccupied ritual of one habituated to living alone. Again she glanced up, her blue eyes affectionately alighting on the canary. Like the feature entertainer at the Bellerophon her resolution seemed to define her softer presence, making her assertion surprising in its power and commitment — its charisma perhaps.

And the eyes, and ironic smile, now playing at her lips, he lamely asked

himself, might these also serve a *ZYTA* sibling? If Frieda's face did not readily match the distinct oval in the tableaux Peter showed him, nor the formality it conferred, her eyes did reflect a similar quickness, and they were positioned, like the disturbing facsimile on display in Hermann's gallery, demurely aslant. He thus recorded a stalemate, with no recess anticipated. Finally he asked if she was discouraged to lean of the surrogate tableau being previewed in a New York gallery.

"Of course." She looked through the window into the garden. "A clever slur. Is the fabrication marketable?"

"I expect so. At some popular level,"

"Then we can look forward to more."

He found her comment apt and depressing.

She glanced at her watch. "I'm afraid your time — this time — is nearly up."

"Can you not tell me more about whom you represent?"

The question she took to heart.

"Very human beings, with a great investment, sentimental and scientific, in the survival of a varied world. Meaning preserving as best we can what endowed our past, both physically and intellectually. They are too knowledgeable to be philanthropists and too committed to be ready cynics — part of a tract I'm writing. They're simply not as insular as the Princes, and represent the majority opinion of American scientists. Which majority is also a little paranoid of ruses and frauds." An impatience was again checked and lips set. "I wish the ground were firmer. *Ad vitam aut culpan:*

Till something worse comes along. A phrase I picked up from Dowd. Part of a commentary penned in the margin of an early report, which he urged Susanne revise.”

“I always thought the phrase optimistic.”

One more solitary stalemate.

“What happens if the Princes find their trust in me misplaced — sooner than later?”

Her answer was prompt and assertive.

“Maybe nothing, maybe a lot. You’d be a surprise, I’m certain of it, and the older Princes — Pechenpaugh, Max Paleogiannis — don’t like surprises. The tape we made last night should send the one Middle East consortium packing for a month or more. Pechenpaugh will be unpopular and vengeful, and inclined to act rashly. You may get another summons, even witness a confession, which should be very helpful — both the admission and for your new deployment. A possibility given the trust the princes place in connoisseurs. Poor David. We’ll be waiting. Holding our breath. It’s true.” She reached over and with a quite merciless tug overturned his hand. “Let’s have a look.” She traced the life line of his palm. “Neither long nor short. Oh well. The contract’s still open.” She dutifully restored the hand to its former position.

Two solicitous smiles.

Said she, “Everything is explained in the documents of the envelope I placed in your suit coat last night. You must always check your pockets after a night with a working girl. It was sealed when entrusted to me. I be-

lieve you'll have an additional passport and bilateral contact. Read the contents carefully. You can still say 'no'. Your life will be far less complex if you do."

His surprise was barely concealed. Then he quietly asked if she was familiar with Richard Strauss's opera, *The Woman Without a Shadow*.

She appeared momentarily curious, then nodded assent. "Yes. I believe I have an old recording of the concert suite — a gift from an archivist in the library I used during my comprehensive. I like all the Strauss lads." She appeared to hold back an additional comment. The sun then disappeared, the garden became pale, ill-defined. She began clearing the table.

"I had hoped you might summarize what *ZYTA* means to yourself and your colleagues."

Her face stiffened. "It remains largely unexplained, at the arrival level, but one cannot easily dismiss the prospect of what Peter called 'providential discoveries' -- without his usual whimsy. That inference we all share. The potential in the accompanying data sets is breathtaking. And unnerving — the uses they might be put to when better understood,"

She returned to the table, newly self-absorbed and intent, to sit sideways to him and look out upon the garden. The light was directly behind her then, the chiaroscuro outline of a Titania. Or Peaseblossom. Not a Siren he thought.

"What we initially thought to be chance nuggets of information have evolved into more and more complex sets — the sentient aspect — for which we still have no cogent explanation. More recently, the data ap-

pears to be connected with some larger statement — a warning our coffee head, Susanne, thought at one stage. It's difficult to explain to an outsider — the sheer enormity. That may have been Susanne's problem — the lie-in-wait potential. Spectroscopy, crystallography, high polymers. It's becoming a vade mecum of the future! You'd need half-a-year alone to backlog our growing wonder. The information we've left the Princes is tantalizing but they now know crucial components are missing. We are just beginning to identify our lack — in reading the carrier symbols. Sadly we still need the Paleomena facilities to proceed, a fact the Princes must have cotteded to by now. We're preparing our own facility, spare but functional. I believe it will be ready in time. The Princes have anticipated it though they'll be a while learning how, where and who. I'm telling you this to emphasize the importance of your input if say Pechenpaugh, or Dowd even, briefs you again for an assignment. Unlike the Princes, we have nothing to hide, David. We would like to solve the matter in-house — without going public or breaking our contract. An 'untouched ball', as they say in American football. We're not professional lobbyists. Or spies."

She avoided looking directly at him, choosing several of the cherished objects in her environs to fix her attentions upon. His queasy apprehension of adventure had returned. Did he have any choice but to trust her — if he was determined to learn more of *ZYTA*'s fate?

"I assume the ampoule was finally unimportant?"

She looked at him without comprehension.

The matter of the tiny carousel was still a source of bewilderment if no

more an emergency. When he lost touch with his contact he assumed a breakdown in the chain and guessed his roll as courier may have been suspended or aborted. Three days later, when no one had contacted him, he had himself X-rayed at a private clinic. The plates revealed nothing extraordinary and he assumed the thing was either corrupting his insides or had escaped to a more acerbic fate in the sewer system. He was not eager to place the question. But her concern when he did seemed genuine if perplexed. Then she surfaced.

“Oh my god. Miguel didn’t tell you? Oh my. The thing was a simple placebo, even nutritious if you’re not a faddist. One of your first tests I recall — unlike the exchanges. Miguel was to tell you. That man!”

He was anxious to change the subject.

“Is Max Paleogiannis in on anything, do you know?” His voice sounded limp, almost peevish.

Another wayward smile. “David, I am sorry.” She drily smiled. “Now about Max I don’t know. He was Susanne’s ace up her sleeve, her guardian knight for a while. She plays chess very well. One of the pastimes on Max’s yacht. But he’s entering his dotage. Pechenpaugh toils to replace him. It’s a wonder someone hasn’t thrown the book at him. I understand from one of his long-suffering secretaries that he had my own file out for a time recently, a fact you may find useful. I think from the disgust you did not entirely hide last night I can at least look the part.”

He was taken aback. “Surely not disgust?”

She happily consulted her watch after closing the dishwasher. “So.”

“You imputed a ‘warning’ to the later *ZYTA* instalments.”

She leaned against the dishwasher, hands crossed in front. “Peter went expressly to investigate a recently refurbished mural on an Aztec temple near Cuernavaca. To affirm some early guesses. He had a hard time believing *ZYTA* could be so specific in her development, given the input — that the artifacts of a culture could so precisely determine a time period -- and vice versa. He was not expansive -- at least to me. He wanted to verify some pictorial images from *ZYTA* — an Aztec mural facsimile being one. A very recent find.” Her voice softened. “Something may have intervened. He was a cautious investigator, and would not have gone off on his own without good cause. Susanne has taken his going to heart. *ZYTA* has given us a history of a people not unlike us, only the modern vistas are ‘wondrous strange’. Peter’s phrase. It’s these that contain the information that so baffles. And in some cases alarms. The transcendent culture that maims. One of Cressman’s observations.”

He nodded, with a resignation she shared, he suspected, as her ongoing words exemplified: “Peter distrusted me, at first you understand. I was pegged as one of the holdouts, the doubters. He is a bore-baiter, as they say. And a ‘bore’ I may have seemed.”

He felt certain an affectionate aside was held back, suggesting that she too had been touched, however belatedly, by Peter’s insight and commitment. It was as if he grasped once more the resilient line, the remaining doubts sloughing off like grains of sand. Did he not detect in her eyes a re-

membered fondness? They sat in silence for several seconds, as if weighing Peter's loss against the imminent dangers.

"So you ended liking him?"

"We all did. Do."

"Might there be a benefit in my knowing who the costume you just tried on came from? Whimsy is one of the tools Voden at least seems to delight in exploiting."

An in-house smile. "Can you believe a eighteen-year-old? The only link is the chap's rather gamy patronage of Limburg, now that I think of it. Who's in trouble, you know, and may get sacked. Not very useful. A rather precious joker, but far too brilliant to be a pest. At least for now. His family is very very wealthy, a fact he tries to hide." Her brief smile doubled as a pout. She meant, he presumed, young Daniel Frank. The chap with the master plumber's certificate in his office.

Then it was over. Her concerns suddenly marshaled elsewhere.

"You must be careful how you leave. Read the instructions in the envelope carefully. My communication with Peter ended abruptly — meaning some kind of interception. He often spoke warmly of you. And he rarely spoke well of anyone."

Then again she changed course.

"Remember, you can still leave today and go your own way. Either way we probably won't see one another for some time. We must all keep a low profile for a while. I'll be gone by the time you've showered. Just close the door after. You can exit the building via the main entrance without a

fob. Good luck."

A vanilla buss and she was away, slipping back through the Hibiscus-mantled atrium, the kimono an exercise in calligraphy as she moved. He thought he heard an exclamation of pique. Otherwise he saw the back of a genial performer off for another curtain call.

He sat for a minute as a divided corpus. Part of him trusted, part fretted, another taunted and cajoled. He seemed at times to have partaken of Sibyl inspired pronouncements. If she might be believed, she delivered a trust as consequential as affection, a trust that left him free of rebuke. Peter must have vented some touching words oh his behalf — words perhaps cravenly communicated to a man. Seraphic Frieda?

The envelope she had entrusted to him proved to be wax sealed and contained, in addition to the contract, a list of instructions, all set down in a memory chip. Several of the rooms he had especially liked he sought a last visitation of, and was surprised to glimpse Frieda once more in the craft room, the colourful Aztec costume beside her on the Lion of Buddha. If she noticed him she didn't let on, standing as she was in a rear profile in a smart pant suit, gazing he presumed into the pier-glass. He had no idea what her eyes communicated to the privileged reflection, and continued his bypass without hesitation. The suspicion that hers was the profile that so fleetingly adorned his partly-opened doorway in the Bellero-phon flashed before his mind, suggesting he had a talent for conjuring, concocting paragons.

As Frieda looked at her reflection, indeed was absorbed by its artless

frankness, it seemed an inaugural spectacle. Someone she had never really seen before. The first of her new regimen of deeds was accomplished, as portentous as before, but no longer surreptitious. Even if Willardson did not come aboard there was no going back. The cell would know soon enough. Her current report was due that night. The anticipated answers of which were finally too critical to divulge. She believed she really had no choice. The new Russian mafiosi, the de facto rulers, were revanchists — to use the academic word — who wanted everything they had before plus the lucre the state had lavished on itself and its phobias, meaning in effect a dismantling and selling off of precious resources, particularly in the largely defunct industrial cities. A process already underway. If it had taken a while, the clues were too numerous to overlook. (What you don't see when you choose not to look. ) Peter it seemed had replaced Vassily as her veritable mentor. Moreover, the likes of Prokovsky — one of the new brokers in the power élite — believed women to be congenital whores.

She was on her own. Zoya was on her own. She had disappeared before. Like H.G. Well's character, you simply remove the bandages.

## SEVEN

The wheels of the limo whinnied about the sharp corners. They were in a hurry and the driver urged the stately vehicle on despite the elevated slope and hair pin corners. Another twenty minutes of this, the time remaining he estimated, and he would be sick. Gas light standards brought a peri-

odic nacre to the dark straggled silhouettes of tree ferns, philodendrons, pines, and rose-laurel oleanders. The smell of the ocean remained accented despite their height. Another groping bend.

The driver was a company chauffeur he got on well with. They both had an abiding interest in timetables, old and new — the older airline, rail and subway, the recent elevated dual- and monorail systems, and the newer hover and sky shuttles — any and most that described connections, bonds, that measured and defined the world's metropolises. The chauffeur sat frozen now, a grim fixture of concentration. A large full moon settled over the lush cultivations, a silver pendant dangling before his eyes, insinuating a pitted wintry spell.

Angus Dowd sat beside him just audibly munching assorted sweets. How one could drink ouzo while ingesting handfuls of salt-water taffy, as the confection was called, he resisted long considering, though not without some effort.

It was an exaggeration to say he disliked Dowd, but one logicians might wish to ponder. At times the man seemed a concise encyclopedia of reproof, disdain and questionable taste, while a covert alertness and perception often dismayed or chagrinned. He was usually pictured as a crusty yet nimble administrator who could, on demand, handily match Pechenpaugh's obfuscation and double-dealing. If Pechenpaugh was the savannah magpie, Dowd and the late Karl Voden resembled creatures of the rain forest, Voden your original corny lizard, Dowd a nifty, small, chameleonic tree frog, yellow-green, innocent looking, even cuddly at a distance,

but twenty times as deadly. A short truck with him and your heart went into fibrillation and failure. There seemed a perpetual miasma to the man, his appearance of a cute fragile gnome hopelessly deceptive. One of his eyes turned out slightly and there was a rumour, vindictive only Willardson believed, that had him smelling occasionally of urine.

The enigmatic gnome was said to be a virtuosic eccentric. For instance, he devotedly hated: unfiltered sunlight, golf (for which Willardson harbored a reluctant admiration), women, more general than particular (less for gay than obscure cabalistic reasons, so Willardson thought), pop artists, politicians, educators ('blind seeing-eye dogs'), all conspicuous ethnicities ('long-toothed complainers'), most religions, except perhaps an anachronistic Catholicism, also cats, joggers, and Willardson — on and off. Tonight he seemed undecided. The professional clergy were a great provocative treat, as were all social scientists ('the least able dispensing the awesome advice'). He loathed bridge, and played it often. He adored young fair slender boys (he believed the right to sin was earned through exemplary achievement — a kind of sub rosa Nobel Prize); he savoured ouzo — almost any kind of disguised sugar — crosswords, states in chaos, interrogations, and small, indulged, ill-tempered pets (his proof of the Creator's condescension). He was also enthusiastic about abortion for socialists and selflessly acquiring AIDS because each deed was the 'self-destruction of a liberal suicide bomber'. He suddenly turned down a window and hurled several candies at two youngsters loitering by the roadway.

They ducked at first, thinking at first they were rocks. The window slowly returned while he unwrapped one for himself.

“Walstrom, you’ve got the emergency on have you?”

“Yes, Mr. Dowd, won’t be long now.” Their chauffeur, Ned Walstrom, spoke with great patient redress.

“Willardson may soil himself if you continue to sightsee.”

They had reached a promontory thick with trees and cultivated shrubs that sequestered a glass, granite mansion. Drum-like towers stalked the black night sky, the moon caught on a jagged outline of pediments, gables, cupolas, even a pair of bartizans if Willardson was not mistaken. Seams of glass sloped to the ground glowing orange and vermillion. A wide heavy wall gate suddenly rose as a portcullis.

“A silly thespian device,” said Dowd.

Behind the wall two bulky manservants appeared in a recessed entrance dimly lit by antiquated lanterns. One servant sported an eyepatch. Dowd led the way.

They were ushered into a vaulted entrance hall, through a theatrically lit arboretum into another stately chamber, and through that again into another — a kind of house within a house, except that now the marble and masonry were replaced by terra cotta and rough-finished wood set against rudely split stone. A red-pink stain had been smeared on the terra cotta in broad freehand swirls. They continued to be led through a labyrinth of rooms, some situated over the gorge of a stream gurgling beneath. Bare walls gave out stylized relief fossils of crustaceans, distraught abstract

paintings, and poncho hangings of ocelots and monkeys. Rough-hewn beams lined ceilings like exposed ribs, black lacquered wall desks supported nerve-like candelabra with tiny brilliant ends. One room seemed to be covered in straw, discovered on closer scrutiny to be raw silk. Long pale tendrils nestled against dark leathered furniture, low-backed chaises and several couches — the Roman triclinium came to mind — arranged about what appeared to be a complex recorder. Unusual electronic paraphernalia issued from modern headrests.

They arrived unexpectedly in a large well defined salon with bulky columns and a plush perimeter banquette. The room seemed to have an existence of its own, freed almost from the impediment of gravity, though Willardson soon realized the chamber was in fact anchored at one end by a large figure of the Aztec god Xipe Totec, covered in the ‘mail’ of flayed skin segments, its regenerative apostasy. Two owl-headed figures wearing the huge feather panache stood on either side. There seemed no end to the campy melodrama. On the opposing wall a Mayan lintel featured in bas-relief an enthroned suzerain receiving homage. Beneath, supported by two immense hearth stones, raged a turbulent fire. The other walls were covered in a mosaic of Mixtec art — strange horned creatures, remotely human, held fast by monkeys and rats.

Said Dowd, “A bit of a fanatic.”

In the centre of the chamber, on a level lower than the perimeter walkway and banquette, sat a heavy mahogany table lacquered to a lustrous sheen with place settings of ironstone china, Bohemian crystal, and gold

plate for about thirty diners — urbane genteel touches viewed with much relief by Willardson, for whom the surrounding maze transmogrified the bonhomie he held dear, especially at mealtime. Also reassuring were comfortable high-back chairs, on which he ached to sit down as had several of the guests — mainly the European Paleomena contingent, he guessed.

Pechenpaugh and Max Paleogiannis sat near one end with a minister he recognized from the EEC. They studied an early African feast bowl. For Willardson its fearsome spits aped the salients and spurs of the Aztec and Maya-Toltec on the hearth stone, lintel and wall above the fire. Cressman, a couple of chairs distant, sat alone smoking a thin cheroot, his head back, venting small unstable halos of smoke. At the further end of the table, in shadow and noticeable only as a silhouette against the fire, sat something else, an ominous obsidian form, a bizarre and grisly trophy of some feral age — his first craven guess — also smoking, but unlike Cressman expending upwards large umbered syllables, writhing, convoluted that magically dissipated in an efficient air-conditioning system. Dowd surveyed the scene with an amusement which did not take in Willardson.

“What in God’s name is it?”

“Is what?” Dowd answered impassively, while continuing to gaze benevolently upon the setting.

“The Apollyon in the front row.”

“Our new European operations chief, Felix Muerner. Your host. Remind me.”

“Does he dine here often?”

“When a nice bit of flesh is available.”

“There’s a great deal of burning.”

“Makes the lads smell nice afterward.”

Always the irksome feeling lingered — that he disliked Dowd because the tiny executive was many things he simply dare not be. Glimpses into the world of the Princes invariably astonished, and Dowd’s was perhaps as dismaying as any — notwithstanding the new ‘head’ of European Operations, who gave every sign of proving at least as prodigious. But until further adjustment Dowd remained the most daunting figure in the forbidding kaleidoscope. His sexual and gastronomical tastes might be a universe apart, yet his will not to allow the multitude succor or distress him kindled home fires. Willardson was in the end unable to remove himself sufficiently from the human group to look upon his neighbor as the soulless maniac he might very well be. Like the Arabian who would solemnly stone to death an unfaithful child bride, or the intrepid Takriti sentencing an idealistic journalist to death by garroting for referring to the leveling of a Kurdish village as ‘the ongoing terror’, or, closer to home, the Boston marathon bombers — all these were his cultural inferiors, he had no doubt, but he needed Dowd’s spiritual resource to make the distinction in a special convocation of the United Nations to debate impacted stratification in the so-called Third World, as Dowd, the Paleomena invitee, had done, wanting a separate assembly or ‘buffoons’ gallery’ for all representatives of states with presumptive presidents for life, which he had the temerity to read aloud. He also acknowledged that cliterodectomy was finely up-

staged by campus rape -- in the West. "We can't have our women routinely having babies," he stated, "that would prevent our culture from decently dying out, slight our new cultural affirmation -- social justice personified!" Such comment happily or dourly reminded one that not all earth loving peoples value independent wymen — but by then the vocal opposition drowned his words. The Paleomena representative required a special escort to depart the UN that day. It was a knottiness only a nabob might indulge. Yet the UN so resembled a bloated thwart monstrosity that panjandrums like Dowd inspired quiescent satirists like himself. He recalled the 'spokesperson' who believed women could survive the rigors of combat if it weren't for the men.

They sat down, Willardson next to Max Paleogiannis, Dowd across beside Pechenpaugh. Cressman remained a chair apart, nearer the disturbing silhouette. The few salutations consisted of feigned nods, as if all formality were this night unsightly. No one seemed to bother with the apparition near the fire — one more piece of the familiar only — and Willardson was apparently expected to partake of the feral intimacy, which shunned pert curiosities.

They were served an assortment of hors-d'oeuvres, turtle soup, *trout au bleu*, and sweetbreads creamed with celery and pecans — a first course it seemed from the entourage of trolleys lined up in the wings. What in God's name was going on! And what was he to make of the thing at the other end everyone seemed content to ignore! Parts of is moved, like a segment of a Chinese dragon. He concluded it also bore horns and these

seemed not to move. What did Dowd mean by likening it to their newest executive elect? He was harried by a swarm of gadflies. To enquire of this primal circle was to question his brother's perceptions, to doubt their candour and hospitality. Confusion would beg witness of their sanity. Gentlemen, enough is enough! To which someone was sure to reply, What is that David? He was amazed. He could do nothing without resort to churlish or wheedling complaint. The passing strangeness of nodding appreciatively to idiomatic conversation equally alien was thus not beyond him.

He relieved his spirit by feeling sorry for Cressman — the new baffling ally and inside traveller, according to Frieda. The Princes' market wizard looked poorly and seemed to acknowledge this liability by staying apart. Twice now he withheld entreaties to get nearer the fire until, as was agreed, 'the last of the Mohicans arrived.' He was a heavy lumbering man and tonight presented a tautly leavened friar. Rumour said he had lost ground to a rare blood disease. He seemed to undertake a kind of self-imposed quarantine. As a sly way to renew the Princes' concern it worked moderately well. Like Frieda, Willardson suspected Cressman of being burdened with a sense of honour and decorum, though he had borne it with little apparent discomfort. Did it this night contribute to his misery? He seemed sometimes to resent the protocol the ritual prescribed. Pechenpaugh again scolded him then carried on with a boast-bluster enumeration of his losses at the racetrack. To the silhouette went something hot in a kind of chalice. Willardson watched with a mouth momentarily

denied an onion ring. Cressman spoke up in a unexpectedly resonant voice. “Karl, I think we better move the table. I’m a cheeky pink already.” From the silhouette came a surprisingly high-pitched voice: “Victor, I need one more minute.” Willardson put down the onion ring and suppressed a snigger. Pechenpaugh began to detail the effect recent losses had on his restive constitution. “A goddam hophead, some days.” Maybe he was frightening the horses, Dowd suggested. Then a new gentleman joined them, a secretary of sorts who carried a briefcase and recording device, and might have been a clone of the impervious neat-handed Dowd. He sat down stiffly and silently between Cressman and Willardson — apparently the last of the Mohicans. His first name was Gervase, and he refused the wine Cressman offered.

Willardson decided the newcomer would not welcome a unilateral introduction and prepared again to spear the onion ring. As he did so something fetid — he was equally disposed to say mephitic — filled the air. At first he imagined an emanation from the fire. Then Dowd was a suspect. Then the ring itself! The displacement lingered intermittently, fulsome and wholly alien, which he alone seemed to notice. Only the recently arrived secretary, whom all elected to ignore, sat with a rigid disapproving countenance. Willardson felt he had seen the face before and, in his ample confusion, overlooked a beery Pechenpaugh rising to address him.

“David, if you can stop ogling the surroundings for a moment, I must make up for a lax oversight. Dowd informs me you have not been introduced to our new Senior Vice-President who, I understand, now has the

fire-grate conflagration in hand. Dr. Felix Muerner, David Willardson. David scores the brisk traffic in art treasures for us, as well as our boffo real estate trusts — and is a trusted swine in a departmental snit. Felix comes to us from Hanover Anschluss, a firm that keeps the socialists in Western Europe from getting on our tits.”

“Simply by letting them occasionally have their way, my dear Arthur,” replied the high pitched voice. Gervase nodded solemnly once, avoiding all eye contact. Pechenpaugh managed a feeble smile then resumed.

“His personal secretary Mr. Gervase Caen has also joined us for this fun event. I can tell from the angle of Willardson’s antennae that he already has a connoisseur’s awe at our surround. You two should get on like crickets.”

An umbral figure then detached itself from the dark shape near the fire and stepped forward into the light. Willardson was not a little embarrassed to discover a dapper evenly-featured little man, really a big-headed boy, with congenital elflock and cropped Van Dyke, immaculately tailored in a mohair dinner jacket, a sprig of hart’s tongue in the lapel. What had contributed to the misperception was an oversize, horned, double-face mask, part of the silhouette, mounted on a low pedestal stand. However, the two images did not easily combine in Willardson’s beset imagination to recreate the original apparition. The newcomer’s eyes, small and vibrantly green, plus the elflock he repeatedly and unsuccessfully pushed back, seemed preternatural and demanded validation. He had seen that sated green only once before, in the irises of an intense girlfriend of a boat archi-

tect with whom years ago he negotiated the sale of jewelry and plate salvaged from a wreck off the Azores. The girl, a strenuously candid and emaciated feminist, one day burnt the gentleman's boat to the waterline with the gentleman inside. Willardson was subpoenaed at the inquest to verify payments made the young man for the artifacts, and help identify the girl in a lineup. He would remember the luminous satisfaction, eyes clinically or atavistically related to those Muerner now leveled upon him.

“Very nice at last meeting you, David. I’m not usually this preoccupied. I’ve had problems with the design of the flue and I’m afraid it still requires modification. The currents in these older buildings are sometimes bizarre. I often swear the Devil himself fiddled with the grate. I like bond fires but generally outdoors. Still, I’m convinced we shan’t torch the neighbourhood, not at least till we’ve dined. Oh yes, my personal secretary, Monseigneur Caen.”

Muerner delivered a set of instructions to a steward then swiftly joined his guests, sitting opposite Cressman. Willardson suddenly felt very warm, particularly the palm of the hand he had offered Muerner, and reasoned the hand he shook had been near the fire, though he could not recall it being unusually warm to touch. This fact soon joined the curiosity of the voice, pitched in the register of a contra-tenor. As Muerner described a chablis he selected for the evening, the product of a vintage harvest on his estate near Auxerre, Willardson listened not so much to the words but the unexpected tonality — not that of a child or adolescent, nor trebled elder. It was as if an alien creature, even an instrument, were to duplicate the hu-

man voice, failing primarily to determine the correct octave. He resisted the suggestion of a mechanical contrivance, an implant, because such devices now duplicated the human voice with amazing verisimilitude. He returned to the eyes. Edged by a faint redness and shaded by pale thick lashes they remained rapt and often unfocused, occasionally coming to register on an object or person with an autistic bemusement as a finer point was concluded, this time the unexpected success of cultivating bacteria that permitted in some polymers the butting of fine wines. The hair was luxuriant as well and smartly teased but a contrasting light brown.

A slow raising of the rheostats as a new caravan of trolleys rolled from the wings awakened diffuse light from niches high in the walls, much like his room in the Bellerophon, thus permitting a dimensional look at the double-face mask. Was he perhaps losing touch after all? Even the horns, slender and gently curved like a springbok's, in no mean resembled the stout ribbed salients he recalled. He could manage no synthesis at all. The outline distinct in his imagination was hideous and comprehensive in its deformity, a Minotaur glimpsed against lightening in a ruin. Muerner smiled at him and offered an unexpected toast, perhaps because the wine had proved a popular aperitif...or perhaps because he recognized in Willardson an innate *rara avis* debilitation, a singular lunacy visible only to informed madmen? Willardson could believe anything at that moment. The wine was superb.

The repast had stationed its fourth course when again the unwelcome odor surfaced. It now came directly from the palm that had shaken Muern-

ner's hand! More amazing still was its essence, rich and heady at close range, stale even putrid at a distance — as far as his arm extended. He found himself eating with his left hand to stay each mouthful of the toothsome food. About this time Max Paleogiannis tapped the back of the untainted hand, just before giving a sardonic speech on a volatile African regime the corporation had finally washed its hands of. The table's centre-piece, the feast bowl he and Pechenpaugh apprised earlier, was their sole recompense for a nationalized chemical plant. The irony at first failed to register with Willardson who pensively struggled to identify the odour only he seemed cognizant of or bothered by. Had he touched on his way in, stepped into?... When he could stomach it no longer he excused himself to a washroom. There, where a vigorous cleansing succeeded only in mildly anesthetizing the odor, the import of Max's words seized him. The phrase about someone washing his hands of another flooded his memory. Was it all then a simple practical joke, the sort of wheeze Pechenpaugh might indulge? He carefully checked his attire and found no culpable splotch or aroma — only his hand, palm, and that now lily white with compensatory perfume. He returned as unobtrusively as he could to the table, only to be roused again by Pechenpaugh's insistent voice, now however a far cry from his usual bluster. Indeed, the executive seemed intent on keeping his remarks decorous.

“David, a something else request. Rather important. We want you to listen to a tape. Before we get the main course. No rush. Gervase, hand him the ear phones. It's a recent take of events and proceedings in the re-

mote sensing bay of Thirteen — around the time of a space communication test. Some glitch or other. We want to know what you can positively identify. Off the top of your head. No more no less. An urgency that came up recently. We debated bothering you with it, but an urgency attaches to it that upstages festive occasions. Give it a try.”

Msr. Caen handed him a set of head phones and fiddled with the dials of a recorder. Willardson imagined the onset of zero gravity. The phones separated him further from the tenuous reality of the setting. Time itself began to slow down. Roughly one half of him was buoyant, one half anchored; one leg in a well, one adrift. Could they see the imbalance he wondered? Was this to be the final meal, an impious but excruciating last supper? Not perhaps extraneous to the wile of a wolverine like Pechenpaugh.

The tape began with fitful snoring — likely his own. He heard consoles being prepared for the elaboration of data. Several clearance tests proceeded apace. Voices and footsteps came and went. Again he thought of a musical ensemble tuning itself before a concert. The wheeze of the air-lock compressors invoked visions of the complex monitor that coincidentally rolled into the bay after his conversation with Susanne. The snoring continued, now prating and abusive to his ears. His heart raced. He wanted to see how he was observed but strove to keep his gaze lowered, his smile benign, anonymous. He continued to eat though he was beginning to feel ill.

About the time the signal sounded announcing the imminent relaying of data, he was aware of Pechenpaugh making gestures toward him. He

removed the headphones and waited while Dowd conferred briefly with Cressman, then with Pechenpaugh. Finally Dowd spoke. Muerner had the while kept apart from the exchange, as had the others.

“David, as Arthur intimated — a very recent conundrum. Not facetious, as it may seem. We think some sounds may have been interpolated, to foil or mask routine. In brief, we have reason to doubt the sounds of someone snoring. We trust you may recall something.”

If before he was airborne, he sensed now a precipitous reversal. He was to be pressed to death like a terminal asthmatic, like a prosaic specimen in the ingenious diamond-anvil pressure cell. Even the role of the negligent academic became ominous in the obliging silence. Promptly — to quickly hide the hesitation that tokens dismay — he pleaded boredom and disenchantment with the scientists he was sent to initiate the most recent invigilation of. Yes, he recognized the faint sounds of the multifaceted activity on Thirteen. The sounds of sleep he was perplexed about though he would not rule out his own culpability. He was not an expert and did not wish to insinuate himself into the immediate technical proceedings on Thirteen — it was, after all, not his job, once the user key registers had been assigned. He just might have dozed off during a transmission, though he could not tell if in fact the snoozer was himself. As he talked the Princes listened attentively except the enigmatic Dr. Muerner, who had begun smoking again, releasing stable halos of purest white above the Princes’ heads, much as Cressman attempted earlier. The

darker billows from the sinister shape near the fire, now represented by the lone discrete outline of the double-face mask, existed as a louche memory.

Pechenpaugh then described with some truculence the substitution in the sound track that both he and Dowd were hapless witness to during a recent meeting with the some special clients. He was unhappy with the speech, and several times betrayed an extrinsic imposition, which the others received in silence. Willardson began to sense company; it seemed Pechenpaugh could be as much a canard here as himself.

The efficient Msr. Caen then visited upon Willardson a second transcription where the familiar sounds of Thirteen were amplified, the sounds of sleep in the entresol office baffled, reduced to background noise. Willardson pretended limited familiarity — nothing seemed irregular. He felt he could afford to because the transcript was void of the ‘coffee head’. He remarked that he had a hard time visualizing what was going on. The response was pleasantly what he expected, though Muerner’s oddly languid voice framing it was not.

“A floor relay was interfered with as well, David.”

Pechenpaugh exhibited annoyance with this disclosure, while Dowd sat demurely slicing a star apple. The others abided a shared comprehension. Max fidgeted with his dentures. So: Muerner’s power on the block was already formidable if his reading of the scene before him was correct. Frieda, it appeared, had succeeded in removing all ambivalent or recriminatory pronouncements; Susanne’s ‘machinations’ survived only in the form of muted, laboured snoring. The ubiquitous surveillance genie was

not ‘soundproof’! Willardson decided to trust in Pechenpaugh’s credible discomfort — a fine under-rehearsed act. His own calmness amazed. More fool’s luck, he could hear Cressman remarking with a dull smile.

“Anything you can recollect will be helpful, David. Regrettably the matter mustn’t be put off.” Muerner again, acting the part of moderator and interlocutor. By now Willardson had worked out his own line of defense.

“I do remember Susanne being upset about something — some doubt she had about her work not getting the hearing it deserved. But I felt the user keys were designed to uncover such prejudice, as you said Arthur.” Easy old boy — perplex don’t provoke. He helped himself to more wine, then looked inquiringly about at the others. Only Muerner’s dimpled smile left a pit of doubt on this clearing horizon. Was he now to be asked as calmly about the ampoule Susanne had entrusted to him? Yet he felt optimistic. Pechenpaugh was no shill and not enjoying this at all. At the outset Willardson had decided not to introduce any of Susanne’s impositions. He balanced what might be interpreted as willful concealment against being smitten by the force of the expected queries. But none came. Pechenpaugh continued to squirm like a soiled child. The smoke halos ceased. The centre of gravity had shifted, or split apart. Muerner’s star seemed massive indeed. The silence all but confirmed it. All awaited the discretion of the new Vice-President. Willardson hoped the goals were accomplished: Pechenpaugh’s rebuke, Dowd’s lesser reprimand — his warning? The discomfited Pechenpaugh, the one chiefly responsible for the tape according to Frieda, may have been as wary of this night’s proceedings as

anyone. And Willardson had assisted this mayhem simply by falling asleep! Even the irony of being invited to a delectable Peri's apartment to recapitulate a snoring he might one day bear. But for Muerner's abstraction he imagined himself a free man. Max was then happily miles off, entering one more nostalgic reverie, on his yacht perhaps, idling after a scuba dive. Belatedly the other diners had noted the regional quiet, and formed a kind of citizen coalition. But none of the low exchanges he could make out, except to note the general deferential tone.

“Did you like the sweetbreads, David?”

The question surprised and teased — the interlocutor enquiring after one's tastes in gourmet fare. Was there a nuance in conditioning here beyond the obvious elective — the cigarette before the electric muscle, the proffered glass of water hurled in the detainee's face? Cressman belched twice and profusely excused himself to nods of commiseration.

“Yes, they were excellent, Dr. Muerner. I do them fritto misto myself, out of habit perhaps. Sometimes with a starting beer batter.”

Cressman again belched. “I am sorry, all.”

Dowd smiled.

Said Muerner, “We prepare the dish somewhat differently, though we too begin with a common ingredient.” Again Willardson was inundated with the unseemly smell. “I was told by a retired anthropophagus, an elderly but highly functional chap, that such viands distilled the humour of the creature, to be savored and heartened accordingly.”

The slightly indelicate comment had the intended effect. Fond game-

some laughter. The audition was over. Muerner seemed pleased. Once more Cressman cleared his throat. Dowd formed his fingers into a steeple. Pechenpaugh displayed the lassitude of an idled cashier.

At a slight motion of Muerner's hand a large trolley entered the salon. Two fearsome apparitions in what appeared to be vintage battle dress — Willardson thought of the feral headhunters of Papua New Guinea — began to serve them from a large ceremonial cauldron. The dress uncomfortably assaulted sight and smell while the dish, a kind of stew, was heartland delicious. Its coming released a consensual valve — that, with clarity, he would recall. The diners had happily been there before.

Heavy napkins swirled with gusto. All, including the blowzy Cressman, 'tucked in'. Pechenpaugh's diffidence vanished without trace. Dowd, at first cantankerously preoccupied with arranging a bib for shirt front and lap, began eating like a starved rodent. Max initially permitted himself to be spoon fed by one of the warriors, but soon was augmenting mouthfuls with a hand of his own. Pechenpaugh resembled a genetic monstrosity, a moose carnivore, discovering what he'd missed all these millennia. Muerner continued to sip from a second steaming chalice brought by a warrior eager to release it either from repugnance or heat. The talk faded to the occasional keen anecdote and accolade. Willardson knew he risked getting sick gourmandizing so, but such caution was then lumpy oatmeal before *tripes a la mode de Caen*. And to balk in this company would be gauche, more so than getting sick. Cressman would surely keep him company sooner or later. Perhaps he just might get drunk first, and put a decisive

end to the swinishness. At fewer intervals he noticed himself bolting the food, sluicing it down with lavish intakes of wine, no longer the delicate chablis but an ardent ruby potation. He had no idea what he ate, nor was he much interested after a time. Expressly the kill fattened and heartened that visceral night.

With astonishment rendered luscious by inebriation he discovered himself able to hold his own. *Flagrante* if not entirely *delicto!* A smoothly functional thrall for a time, then a kind of ramshackle demon took over. The more he ate the more carnal he became. The others he noted, more through osmosis than regard, savoured each morsel with the indifferent majesty of powerful carnivores — even Max, now more or less on his own. He discovered himself rising and offering a toast to Dayak. Dayak *debouche!* To his amazement a roar of approval greeted him. He wasn't sure who Dayak was but it had something to do with primal brutes. He briefly looked down and was amazed by the food staining his wide napkin. At last — a knave, rascal, and eater of broken meats.

He could almost sit upright. He thought it odd he couldn't entirely do so for a god surely might do as he chose. Still, he was beholden for the metamorphosis. His wattled ego soared. He couldn't climb stairs but felt the time had come to level Bagdad et al. He would flatten each Scud with a blow of his fist — hock or spur. There seemed no end to the evening's surfeit.

He watched the others including a surprisingly mobile Cressman move up to the level where the banquette lined the salon's perimeter. One of

the warriors helped him to his feet. Both shoes were together on the floor, and he credibly upright and exceedingly grateful both legs matched, a problem earlier.

So he joined the jovial titans, the supermen pinched with whimsy. The royal household and its cherished gull. A ferocious blood sport would not now offend he asseverated — a fine beefy word. He would remember few details of the entertainment that followed. Though no baneful surprises lurked amongst the strange drums, even stranger horns, both tonal and beligerent, beaten or blared into, or in the many shiny bodies greased brown, red, and yellow, garnished with feathers, shells, mud, broad leaves, jangling sets of bones, huge incisors thrust through nostrils, spike-like endings elongating fingers, spears, masks and penile sheaths daubed with scarlet. The gruelling incantations and lurid shouts were but blunt instructions to his broker. The mesmerizing superhuman movement of the bodies, however staged, a paean to boundless energy and tone!

He remembered rising and tumbling head first into this mêlée. A ring of terrible visages lowered down at him. That was about all without wistful wistfulness he could assert. There was something else, rather heartless and, he presumed, *de rigueur* for this jaded crowd: a small troupe of sprites who came late to the feast, forms sylphic, yet nimble, select pale dancers from a smart dance or ballet company, or companies — a likely professional élite — faces made up in domino masks — quite incognito — nivous white ghosts haunting the jungle, the denizens of the upper Sepik River vigilantly taking note...a lot of fun if one was sufficiently alert to fol-

low the minutia, heightened by the discovery that the earlier ‘warriors’ themselves were in fact the same nubile forms simply darkened and decked with feral adornment! He could imagine a National Geographic special being funded by the money Muerner must have pledged to broker such a fête — the anonymous faces immune to recognition or admonishment; their mainly unclad bodies gracile and enticingly detailed. A boon for the voluptuary — the sculpted scapula, ribs and vertebra, the skin a meagre coverlet of laugh lines, dimples, rarified moles, and at least one surgical bikini scar; navels panting as if breathing, loins spreading like gothic archways, gluteal folds a study in Euclidian arcs. A voyeurs’s gallimaufry. Near the banquette an enterprising Peri presented a delectable bonus, an optional delicacy with the syllabub — for the corporation’s elected champion. Pechenpaugh fronted the eager devotees if memory served, while the other diners touted Willardson their syllabub king, bearing him about the chamber on a Roman-style litter. As promotion, the nymph stood on her hands, legs bent, soles backed on her head. The hint of ophidian undulation, so positioned, nearly brought the house down. About all Willardson could manage was to admire the individual symmetry and eurythmy and squint at the plumed headdress, to the guffaws of his comrade connivers. If the lascivious form tried his sense of dismay, her similarity to the Bellerophon performer and possession of a head piece as extravagant as the one in Frieda’s craft room, irked and troubled. Satire is one thing; mischief another. But the taunt would not abate. To balk now, to not claim his prize, was cause for lynching. The stiff neck departs in a coffin. Fi-

nally, Pechenpaugh, with a display of epic disappointment, spooned out a dollop of the syllabub, lolled it into an ice cream cone and handed it to Willardson, the sturdy parian froth a confection that only the finest creams made. The amusement was immediate, many droll consolations were offered to a stupefied Willardson. Then, with great care, Pechenpaugh deposited a tiny white raspberry on the pretty gelatinous sex of the back-coiled dancer, said raspberry, one of many, then propelled into the waiting cups and mouths of the guests, the Sepik warriors acting as noisy bet takers, a couple of adept fielders steeping the odds.

Whispered Pechenpaugh to Willardson, “A little goes a long way,” fantastically keeping a yeoman’s stiff upper lip as he spoke.

So. The USC Academy of love-muscle propulsion would not remain a complete conundrum after all. A second collocation of faces, unadulterated laughter at the ready he barely noted or heard. The syllabub in the cone, the consolation prize, was delicious. He had two ample helpings. And if the Fates were not entirely swacked, as Dionysus or Apollo once managed to arrange, he sensed a wondrous self-renewing flan underneath. The interminable feast. Dionysus had briefly turned him into a modern Vitellius, before he passed out.

Commonplace, truistic syllabub would never taste as otherworldly again.

He awoke in his maisonette bedroom — surprised, amazed and relieved. His pillowcase smelled of lilac, the usual freshener his housekeep used, but also of garlic, chili and a mingling of smells he could not identify, maybe ginger and fenugreek, also something quite indescribably me-

phitic. The bedside clock announced high tea. He was ravenous. Could that be possible? Through his mind cavorted thoughts of grouse mirepoix, Strasbourg pie, and organ meats in a Madeira sauce. Miraculously he was not strung out. Had the evening before ‘unmetaphorically’ taken place? Was there such an animal as Dr. Felix Muerner, and was he, the unenviable Willardson, brought to the castle-like mansion, a co-respondent and laughingstock both? Did the castle have a dungeon he narrowly escaped? He reasoned the evening a kind of emotional dialysis. He lay back and sensed again the farfetched odour, the profane redolence that seemed to defy its origin, its genesis. His senses denied ‘imagining’ it. Yes, he stank. He may therefore have dined with panthers and not Oscar Wilde.

In the forthcoming weeks Muerner’s residence became a prodigious subterranean enigma — as dismaying as the owner himself. Several times he bypassed the mansion slowly in a limo, twice on foot. He photographed it by stealth and carefully studied the finished images. He was amazed to discover the security system seemingly ages old and actually comparatively simple to circumvent, even for the likes of him. Separate visitations to descry evidence of newer subtler systems disclosed none that he was cognizant of. He was by turns wary and impatient.

There were several visitors, at all hours, some alert to followers, also several deliveries from modern unmarked vans. Some nights the orange glow to the high glass facade beyond the courtyard fused with the dawn. One afternoon a bouquet of swish folk gathered for a celebration on a terrace

garden. From an adjacent elevated street he photographed many of the nonesuch and later recognized three: Max Paleogiannis seated in a caddy, Muerner glad-handing, and to his surprise a cordial Susanne! — one of the soigné blossoms receiving an honorarium. A gilded folder and brooch bouquet were given out to polite applause. Susanne figured prominently in a small but felicitous crowd, a ‘forget-me-not’ coterie Max seemed to convene. A further curiosity: Susanne walked with a cane!

Many times he asked himself what was really going on, what he was doing, what he in fact looked for. Beyond the stark unflagging curiosities spawned by the mansion itself, he was needled by a simple yet extraneous hunch, about which he remained mildly embarrassed. The hunch tendered an explanation, and consequential suspicion, of the likely goings on in the strange room with the raw silk — the ‘straw’ tendrils he had gawked at. The first, he sensed, of forthcoming apt and esoteric denouements.

Recently he read as part of a follow-up to a social encounter with a corporation psychologist an article on an experimental procedure called The Tactical Resonance Enhancement Phenomenon, a complex investigation of plastic acuity in human perception and apprehension. While experiencing it the human subject gave over to an intense rapport (‘confluence’ the writer deemed it) with his spacial apprehension, his plastic acumen. This ‘bonding’ was accomplished by gentle, precisely weighted tracking of several key cutaneous nerves. A plethora of sophisticated jargon in the literature identified what he deduced to be a kind of shared sonority between many nerve systems, all mutually derivative of an appropriate initial stimu-

lus or ‘caress’. The trick was to initiate a pervasive response in a single tissue system, i.e. the central layers of the epidermis say, which in turn would kindle sympathetic-like resonances elsewhere — hence the initial fine-line or precisely layered kinetic tracking: his lay interpretation. Initial testing showed that when disposed in this ‘generative high’, the subject’s plastic sensitivities better synthesized random asymmetrical forms, one analogous accomplishment of the artist and mathematician.

Whether Muerner had any interest in the phenomenon, which seemed as much fad as research, he did not know, but he was alerted by an artist’s rendering of a chamber appropriate for such experimental undertakings, complete with: closely spaced couches, due to one researcher’s conjecture that the resonance might be psychokinetic, and raw silk to serve as a suitable soft cocoon for parts of the lower limbs to which the apparatus hadn’t yet been consigned. The forbidding room in Muerner’s mansion could have served as the illustrator’s model. Bothering with such investigations suggested the good doctor had interests that accommodated *ZYTA*’s modular paradigms, the ‘ingeniously simple’ presumption of elegance. His credentials were suggestive: A Ph.D in physiological chemistry from the Catholic University at Louvain, and a visiting appointment to the Institute of Cellular Pathology in Brussels. So the mystery grew, shading both the man and his castle.

Also at this time Willardson’s contact fell silent — the anonymous contact the contract stipulated — to his dismay and disappointment. Not that the contact ever requested much in the few calls that preceded the instruc-

tions relayed in a public phone box — the work habits of two executives well below princely status, and the after hour escapades and contacts of one who worked under the senior comptroller — both jobs easily dispatched in a few nights' work; private insurance-style evaluations he was an old hand at, art evaluation in another sphere. A deft means of determining both the solvency and reliability of a prospective seller or buyer. Thus, his most consequential contribution to Frieda's faction still consisted of five or six minutes of heavy breathing. The resident snorer they perhaps thought of him — not a reliable observer. But just when the neglect began to sadden, a message arrived late one night and he hurried to the appointed phone-booth to receive the communiqué. For several seconds he stared at the smooth receiver after hanging up, imaging it a harmful crustacean — it could bite.

Minutes later in his study he read for a second time the decoded instructions: he was to learn the serial numbers of a modem in the residence of a new Paleomena executive. Felix Muerner's name and address followed. The modem was believed recently installed in a private study near a rare-manuscript library. The numbers must be left in a dead letter drop in Pomona. At first he imagined the message awry, the wrong operative summoned. It was as if the school Prometheus dared him, Leadbelly, to nick the Principal's megaphone. The address alone, so jerkily written down, as if he couldn't remember it, invoked a dread escutcheon heaving through an inland sea...more or less. And so he stood before the mirror, a rather corpulent prowler, wondering what Frieda's organization might gain if he

were caught. A farcical and fearful symmetry? Yet however poor his chances, he yearned to see more of the Beast and His labyrinth, for himself. The shadow performance was no longer enough. Hence the dewy-eyed burglar, with soft hands and coddled feet, now springing for the jewels in the Tower. The wonderful power of suggestion, the titanium age of possibility.

And if he were caught, well he would heedlessly reveal a prurient curiosity, the sin of voyeurism, aggravated by the earlier evening's entertainment, the lickerish goat behind the cherubic mask, a most dread witless disclosure. It might earn him patient status with the infernal professor. Gentlemen, we have an interesting seminar before us."

He decided to move. At this rate the squints might scare him off. Now or never.

As he approached the walled perimeter of Muerner's hilltop estate a din he'd not encountered before assailed his senses — an unusual conflux of chatter, roistering, and snatches of some Viennese fiddles! To his amazement, the security lock on the main gate released itself as he approached; he could walk in! Instead he veered to a public walkway on the right where he again briefed himself on the lock — as anomaly, as part of an old and inefficient system, especially for a dignitary. Either there had not been time to arrange an overhaul after so short a tenure, or the manual he studied and the experts he consulted were not up on the latest ingenious snare that, once entered, promptly delivered the trespasser to a clutch of Dobermans.

The gate opened again to admit a large open convertible with an assortment of cats and two argumentative mice. He was momentarily dazed, the garb was charmingly realistic. Such a dress-up party — here? Now? A clarion female voice accosted his ears.

“Oh do be sensible dearie, it’s only a costume!”

He had sidled against an overhang of magnolia as the car approached though not quickly enough to avoid being seen. To the world of Carnival — of costumed celebrants — he appeared in the disguise of a burglar, an ironic development. So eager was he to outfit himself appropriately that he ended up emulating the getup of a mugger or thief? He realized he had come pretty close. The upper cheek umber he applied, hating all shrouds, gave him, with his low cap, a raccoon-like bathos. More celebrants passed through the entrance — monkeys, birds, pirates, and several savages, all engaged in risqué banter, and many if not most, displaying a lot of gamy human flesh. An equally snooty cortège of Elizabethan courtiers and ladies came next, the ladies finely ‘moled’, the gentlemen with ornate appliquéd codpieces. He was not quite jubilant but followed jauntily enough in their wake, not conceiving at that moment a more agreeable way of gaining entry to the exclusive castle estate.

The intricate portcullis that bared the main entrance had been raised and turned to one side against a stand of cedars, reminding him of the entrance to an aviary. No one seemed curious about his approach on foot. He carried, rather self-consciously, a telescoping lift tool that came highly recommended for flaccid prowlers. The device strapped to a leg

and shoe and slowly elevated the wearer to a modest level, the height needed to breach, in his careful estimation, one of the lower-floor windows. A small gas capsule powered the lift and he carried two such containers. He also packed an aerosol propellant guaranteed to mask many scents and keep most mutts disinterested. Impulsively he checked all these items with the house ingress folk, creating broadcast amusement. An imperious Afghan looked on as the canister was logged. A kind of Madame La-farge requested an invitation. He hunted through his pockets while two birds of prey waited behind. “Someone must have pinched it,” he said doggedly. “Do you know the password then?” asked Madame conspiratorially. He hunted again through his pockets. “I had it written down.” Madame laughed boisterously. The voice belonged to Miriam, Pechen-paugh’s lead secretary. “David,” she said when she calmed down, “you’re holding up the show. If you can’t find it steal it!” Her convivial spirit rejoiced at her own joke as he passed through a wide corridor to a large clamorous salon filled with as many and varied costumes to be found in an anthology. Beyond lay the ballroom, which resembled a Kandinsky canvass: swirl and vibrant color coalescing into human form spasmodically. Two musical ensembles faced each other at either end of the chamber, one nineteenth century, one abrasively modern. The electronic virtuosi currently blared forth, inciting man and beast to a state of pubescent frenzy. He exposed several frames with his phone camera and helped himself to an assortment of pastries and a second flute of champagne. He eschewed at first the ostensible mosh pit on the dance floor, electing to do a little hov-

ering before setting off in search of the worrisome modem. He wanted to reassure himself Frieda or the Russian girl were not somewhere upstaging the revelers, spellbinding an audience of their own.

To better view a crowded part of the salon he climbed onto the balustrade of an open-air balcony above an ornamental shrub garden. As he strained from the side to see into the throng, a small portion of the cornice broke away. The fragment fell with an audible thud near a couple who lay beneath a nearby rose arbor. Four entwined legs ended in prehensile feet. Some edgy laughter preceded the couple's sudden departure. He wryly smiled and headed down a second staircase steering clear of the front entrance, not wanting to confront Mme. Lafarge again. His purpose then had become pressing, urgent even. On a garden path he strode toward the targeted casement window, his pant leg catching on the spines of a yucca plant, a snag that nearly pitched him into a pond. He rallied, groaned, truculently determined no injury was sustained. The discomfort at that moment waxed poignant, an unsought bargain. Also, he wanted to scratch a captious toe. Suddenly he sat down, whipped off the shoe, and roughed up the tiny troublemaker.

When at last before the large window he planned to enter, chosen from several recorded earlier, he was surrounded by a comparatively and reassuring quiet. The ballroom din had lessened to the fiddles' modest decibel level. The window stood unlatched and slightly open, much as it appeared in several frames. From within came faint strains of a disarming Viennese waltz and the lazy smell of frangipani. Repositioning a garden rock as ele-

vation, he was able to gingerly enter, stepping in and down between two Chinese Lang Yao jars onto a lacquered settee, an unsteady perch that creaked under his weight. In the dim available light, the Persian carpet swayed an infinite yard below. To jump or sit would surely demolish some of the antiques. In desperation he skipped onto a marble-topped console, the sounds of rattling porcelains continuing briefly. Nothing fell. The sturdy console supported a large statuary clock and several gleaming cherubs. He sat on the railing then slumped to the carpet, panting heavily in a sitting room or study. Gleaming brass inserts outlined in the half-light a tortoiseshell mantel above a glass-fronted bookcase. Ahead of him lay the corridor he and Dowd passed through on their way to the banquet and exposition hall. Thus far he encountered only the most prepossessing of odors.

He passed under a broad-beamed lintel, entered the adjoining passageway, and continued as before. He passed the ‘stable’ of raw silk and resisted removing a shoe to sample the texture. The walls, finished in the swirling freehand ochres, drew him on.

Then he got lost — sufficiently so to put aside thoughts of returning and starting over — in a region of the mansion where walls seemed to lean and ceilings lift at one edge. He found himself in a narrow antechamber at the further end of which loomed a broad steel door with an imposing outlook mechanism. The door presented a distracting anachronism set as it was in a cramped space that might have served as the entrance to an ancient tomb. His instincts urged a prompt retreat which his body ig-

nored. The door opened as he approached stopping him dead in his tracks. Beyond emerged a spare modern room from which an air-conditioned cool thrust itself. He could see no artwork, no genteel or primitive decoration of any kind inside. He entered the vault-like room after a frantic debate and was relieved to find that the door automatically opened from either side.

The room contained banks of cabinets with wide flat DVD drawers, each with a viewing carrell, monitor and keyboard. Randomly selecting and installing a disc, the monitor promptly disclosed lifelike comparative anatomical renderings of the human lower limb. Dumbly he stared at the images. He and Catherine Whyte, the ABN journalist, had looked at a similar set months before at a ‘Human body as Art’ seminar he knew Robert Hughes would attend, one invitation he actually took up. Some images here presented variations of the musculature and cartilage on a given bone shape and articulation. An aesthetically pleasing example, reminding him of the Doryphorous or Spear Bearer of Polyclitus, appeared in the centre of each set of variations. The drawings, which he slowly accepted as computer enhanced photographs, represented an exalted theme and variations. The multiformity of bulk and shape of the adductors, vasti, sartorius, gastrocnemius, and peroneus — names he stolidly read aloud in the set before him — was astonishing in that all the modulations seemed exceptionally coherent and graceful. In other cabinets more variations were introduced with changes in the contour and articulation of the femur, tibia and fibula, and these again modified by alterations to the medial arch and

sacro-iliac joint. Each set of variables initiated a continuum, a proposed ideal nearer the centre, the most fanciful variations at the ends. Proposed genomes for the plastic images appeared below each image. Not unlike one set he viewed with a perplexed Catherine in his own Maisonette. A friend had sent the set wanting a candid aesthetic judgement. An older helix staircase by a modern elevator led to second floor identical in design to the first, devoted to the torso and upper limb, again with variations derived from an imposing classic model. On still another level he discovered scores of plastic miniatures suggestive of the two-dimensional renderings. The detailing alone was astonishing, the surety of line, even in extremis, insinuating, challenging. He imagined a battery of artists attached to the umbilical conduit of a computer that not so much monitored as affirmed their moves — as *ZYTA* might do? A programmed prompter? Too often of late, on seeing rarefied beauties in the media, usually in advertising fare, the question waylaid him: was it all a genetically sanctioned closed shop, a relentless aesthetic gravity, elegant and imperious, which the eccentric individual resists only by rage and annihilation? As perhaps — perhaps — happened in *ZYTA*'s later prognostications? Where the underclass in an integral meritocracy had no excuse or recourse whatever? Melodrama aside, what really did all this represent? The aesthetic resolve needed to entertain let alone compile such an anthology was solemn and ruthless, the sort of empirical comparison one lamely debated because it held uppermost a cornerstone of Western optimism! — the balance and harmony, the *concinnity* of the graceful art of ancient Greece, the Discobolus or Prax-

iteles' Hermes for the male, something less fleshy than the Aphrodite of the Cnidians for the female — an important point perhaps, for the mentality behind this toil betrayed a modern interpretation of the female: all examples, so far, devoid of a confluent mantle of fat, his predilections aside, and consequently confiscatory in a purblind way. So unlike the Greek kore. He thought of the elegant sylph-like beings in the tableaux and tried to smile. The engaging understatement of elegance.

“Oh sir, you oughtn’t be here on your own. Dr. Muerner always likes visitors to have a counsellor about these rooms. He’s strict about that.”

Immediately behind him stood a plump woman towing a janitor’s trolley.

“Oh dear, I was just getting underway.”

“I’m sorry, but I’ll have to ask you leave, else I must ring the proctor. Shouldn’t have left the one door open.”

“I had hoped to meet with Dr. Muerner himself this evening, perhaps you might direct me. He was in his study, I’m told.”

She eyed him suspiciously. “Wasn’t there when I was by. Not likely there now. Not on a foofaraw like this.”

“Is it far?”

“You really oughtn’t be here.” She delayed adding a solution to a floor-care robot. “You gave me a start I must say. Costume and all. But why you would want to look at bony folk this night I don’t care to say I’m sure. You better find a counsellor or the proctor will be upset. Go back down the hall, through the annex with all the shells and turn right, pass

the library and study and right again. If you don't dawdle the proctor may still be there, though where he'll find a counsellor this night is a guess. I'd be off too if I hadn't got behind this week. Off with you now like a good fellow."

He thanked the woman and departed in the direction given, convinced the study she mentioned could contain the problematic modem. His contact recommended entering the study through a rare manuscript library — the same, as it turned out, the door to which he found shut, locked but easily breached — as if he were expected he brooded to himself.

Within seconds he was inside listening for unwelcome sounds. Gradually his eyes accustomed to the dim interior. A sliver of light issued through an opposite door not entirely closed. He approached and waited. Silence beyond. The electric ensemble began haranguing the celebrants in the distant ballroom.

Slowly he pushed the door open an additional inch, enough to vouchsafe the room's vacancy and confirm his contact's cursory description of it, including a matching door opposite. He looked into a commodious study with a large hand-sculptured desk, a synthesis of Rococo and smooth Art Nouveau in a polished hardwood. Three cups of still-warm coffee sat on the blotter. A Picasso-like drawing of a jolly horned demon hung above and behind the desk. Small Dalian sculptures consorted on the top of a side table while entwined Tantric deities played on the floor's finely piled carpet. An angry fire huffed in the grate facing the desk, rendering his anxiety acute as he listened for extraneous sounds. The specified com-

puter, in the form of a spherical bronze sculpture, sat on the desk beside a wide video screen, the computer's memory likely extending to a large crystal chandelier above. The sought after numbers he found, as instructed, beneath the sculpture which sat atop the modem. As he memorized them he frowned at the room's collection of primitive art, set into softly lit vitrines . In at least two recesses shrunken heads dangled. A Sepik River wood carving of 'Woman Giving Birth to a Catfish' sat on a pedestal base by the desk. Traces of the unsavory odor lingered near the fire.

One wide drawer of the desk disclosed a collection of photographs, architectural studies of an unusual estate home. The countryside reminded him of southwest Scotland. He flipped through scenes of tall chimneys and stark walls in a grey pebble finish, also frames of interiors, pale monochrome rooms with geometric wall stencils and arched ivory ceilings. Two high bony ladder-backed chairs stood sentinel beside a gaunt modern crucifix that was part of the moulding on a cupboard door.

'A bit of a fanatic,' he could hear Dowd piping.

In another drawer a string tied folder lay under a dalesman map of an area he did not recognize, The folder disclosed one wide-angle picture of a man he did not recognize seated on one of the chairs beside an intravenous feeder. His hair had been shorn. He wore a hospital gown and languid expression. A series of numerical sets were hand inscribed in the margins. More scattered frames of the estate house followed, including the interior of an atelier with aligned portions of what looked like real neck ver-

tebra set up on a pedestal stand. He had begun to copy the lot when voices and footsteps approached from the hallway.

He replaced the photos, slipped into the library and returned the vaulted door to its barely ajar position. The second door within the study opened and Muerner's high thin voice emerged distinct as he enumerated some incidental problems in a bedevilled program, a crucial part of a new plasma monitoring device. The conversation seemed intent. Two other voices joined in, happily rendering the problem more intricate still, as if complexity were a favorite puzzle that night. The conversation denied him entry on a technical level and he fitfully debated how long he might continue to listen in anticipation of humbler words he would comprehend. Slowly he inched his way through the library to the door that opened into the hallway.

Discovering the passageway empty, he quickly headed down and back to the sitting room with the swing window. Once outside he sought a thick cover of bamboo and Fernshaw near the main entrance intending to openly strike out for the front gate. Instead he hesitated, then continued about the perimeter of the grounds to the area where he tumbled from the balcony. An inner voice, mimicking the mock-sweet slavic accents of the couple under the rose arbor, urged him on. He found the arbor archway not quite vacant. A metallic highlight nabbed his attention: a small silver-gilt pectoral cross, late Sixteenth Century perhaps, if he was not mistaken. A substantial find — and loss! A tiny ring suggested it had been linked to a chain or fastener. He brought it into the light filtering through the open

doors of the balcony. An inscription appeared on the underside in Cyrillic symbols. He restored it to its place on the ground after taking closeups front and back. Once again he hesitated. The Viennese ensemble started up with waltz. He yearned to have one last look. He also needed an antidote to the troubling photographs in Muerner's top desk drawer. He strode past Mme. Lafarge and moderately tipped his cap. Mirium was pre-occupied with a gesticulating prioress.

He eyed the suggestively motile scene as one struggling with a solecism. The graceful dancers — fluent ‘skaters’ he thought — augured a neopre-destined élite. The music suggested to him that humanity might not be a disaster after all, if one was endowed with the necessary sapience and optimism. Yet how many children would ever hear such music in that day and age? Aram Khachaturian’s Masquerade Waltz, then being performed, let alone find it sufficiently inviting to dance to. Once this his generation was gone who would remember it, let alone value the cultural antecedents it warmed to? And where was Muerner? Delivering a dissertation on *fin-de-siècle* freedom being the harbinger of transformation, of wholesale re-structuring? Only ugly, nostalgic daydreamers like him seemed to worry about human depravity. Under the aegis of the modern swinish revel — a Saturnalia he imagined fit — desire, concupiscence upstaged all art forms. You groomed yourself to its mechanistic requisites. It sometimes seemed the only means to survive peacetime, to sojourn its geo-political gift, this replete insular adolescence. Without mastering its timing and effortless amble you remained one more insomniac in the darkling press. The trick

seemed to be to learn, regardless of affluence, wit, health or beauty, the importance of cheek. Elegant insouciance with a supercilious body guard — the reigning social duo. A partner was simply another burden or rival. A knowing friend a potential subversive. Utopia was almost always a drag, as were the finished banalities you were stick with to inhabit it.

So, everything tidied up, lucid, clear as a bell, Malvolio?...

He had made his way to a balcony overlooking the most exuberant of the celebrants where he remained partly hidden behind a multi-coloured chandelier, a spritely paean of Renaissance imagination, peerlessly Italian, one of several such fixtures lowered for the occasion and, like the elegant motifs of *Wiener Blut* now stroking his ears, a curiosity against the ahistoric revellers. Most of the dancers seemed to accept the set as a kind of penance, due to ever hopeful romantics on Viagra who perhaps had a hand in organizing the soirée — ostensibly a celebration of Paleomena's quarter-century in space telemetry — a few attendees ensconced in ringside obscurity. The waltz ended and at once the rock powerhouse yammered forth. Then it became apparent.

A small number of dancers stuck him as too absorbed, too proficient to be resourceful amateurs alone. They performed throughout the multitude with agile complicity, a dozen boys and girls. It was this scattering of talent that had rendered the dancing belatedly inviting. Only now did he begin to detect the seeding that imparted a telling grace to the crowd. A handful of virtuosi directly across from him seemed the leaders of this diaspora, and the jewel about which this inner élite itself turned was a chal-

lenging muse, the face again half-masked in theatrical makeup, the lithe form sheathed in lustrous pearl grey fabric, with a hint of silvered cingcolums on arms and legs. He might stand in awe. A touchingly classical bias cured her movements — she hadn't quite surrendered to the negligent funk of the music. If her coterie of adepts were at that moment uncommitted, they remained highly entertained. Her movements were then too seamless, minimal to qualify her as a soul sister. Her timing and anticipation of an ironic hesitation within the measure sometimes provoked hilarity. Yet when she occasionally elected to ape the chic of the hip hop, or whatever it was, the applause was imminent; she knew how to play to the jaded partiers. He thought of a ceremonious cat pausing to charm itself with its own sensuous tail, a ploy she seemed to become more gamy at it before your very eyes. Was it a night out he wondered, or simply another variety of hors d'oeuvres to plug the Bellerophon? The form and eloquence he was not in doubt about, nor the paradoxically sylphic shape, always in tune with a noble inner architecture, the instrument of a unwavering determination and purpose, however self-parodying and evanescent. The heavenly body earth bound. (Such sweet gagging words he would write later in his diary.) He hadn't the presumption to try to image let alone fashion his own — as perhaps Muerner was attempting to do — but one appeared before him now, one form slightly more in harmony with its trajectory, less brandishing of its deft momentum. The song being played (parodied in his ears) urged one to Hold On To The Night. It seemed most everyone here agreed. He thought of the corporate tenure Frieda

had slighted if not abandoned, as if sanctioned by the company of carousers before him. With little effort he could imagine the creases of cingulums on arms, legs and waist. The serpentine form as trophy.

While again fielding thoughts of leaving he saw an unusual couple gyrating directly beneath him. They constituted an oddity on the floor, at least in this vicinity at this time — a hoary gaucherie, impetuous, imper-turbable.

The woman, a plastic surgeon's mother lode, seemed glazed with narcotic, while her partner, also aged and reeling, clownishly drunk, was bent on getting to the centre of the dancers. He was dressed as Louis XVI, his partner a nonchalant Marie-Antoinette. Two watchful house detectives nearby engaged in an unresolved conference as the two roués, flushed, bleary, wigs awry, finally reached the inner sanctum and were with surprising aplomb matched up with opposite younger partners, the liverish Louis to the sleek Hebe who handled her new charge with a supple tenderness. He was led about like a cherished elder on the lam. For the briefest inter-val he played the waggish heavy in an old and fond act; for the length of a meteor-flash he postponed being a pathetic and embarrassing malingerer, the flammable drunk returning to close the school prom. Marie-Antoinette did not fare as well. More inebriated she finally, torpidly accepted a sideline chair.

After one last languorous arabesque, the ever dexterous Hebe waltzed the insular, lickerish Louis into the arms of two stewards. The man was stung. His raucous unintelligible abuse rose above the clamorous music.

The painfully familiar voice belonged to Arthur Pechenpaugh. The last Willardson saw of him and his unsteady queen was as she persisted in consoling him, his feet astride the floor, dragged backwards into a shaded corner: a noisy sulky towed to rusting obscurity or ornate caravan scraping into a cavernous night. Willardson had to blink to believe. And endure.

The picturesque picaresque ball continued quick and alive long after he took his reluctant leave.

When again mindful and alone, early the following afternoon, he examined a series of his digital copies of the prints found in the wide drawer of the desk in Muerner's study. The architectural shots outside the estate home were photographic, the shots inside transcriptions from a high definition video system. He also puzzled over the location of the property — Scotland remaining a likely contender.

One shot was nearly aborted, a take in the process of exposure when interrupted by Muerner's sudden return. Portions of two overlapping prints filled the frame, the topmost another image of the patient on the ladder-back chair, the one beneath, a further goad to his curiosity.

Distinctly visible was the profile of a thoughtful gentleman standing by alectern in some kind of atelier. An erect human skeleton occupied the foreground. Some writing in a compact hand filled the margin at the bottom. With a magnifier he haltingly read aloud: "Spina pref. strong 4A profile, 32-mat. with elevated CV." The words were a further puzzle. Though the bony patina of the CV, the cervical vertebra, seemed all too real.

Many images overlapped in his vision: the cabinet collections, the finely worked plastic miniatures, and now perhaps a real human skeleton, with a spine that supported a longer than average neck...a difficult synthesis which nonetheless drew attention to several of the creatures in the tableaux. Simply more buggerish trivia?

Slowly but immutably the tangled idea began to take root. Peter's interest in the tableaux centred around a dozen of the postulated characters, the 'people' fashioned by *ZYTA*'s rendering of the given parameter's for the durable and desirable human. The credible eidolon if not survivor. The form Hellenistic mainly, one suggestive of a warrior of the Roman Imperium, built like an Athenodorus of the Laocoön Group. The patient in the estate house served as a credible homonym. Had his neck ever inspired the imagination of an artist or curator in Muerner's employ Willardson now dourly wondered?

He returned to the disturbingly realistic skeleton in the photograph. Surrounding it were pictures of an abstracted and unknown patient, alone, ably monitored, in a space reminiscent of a trig but desolate asylum. An onerous collection he concluded, requiring too much imaginative wrenching to achieve a coherent scenario. Yet buried in his mind lay the audacity that lashed the pieces together: a maniac fleshing out his collection of genetic aesthetic possibilities from select, lately discovered subjects — from the bones up. Willardson was alarmed by the possible aptness of the idea. Particularly unsavory on an empty stomach. He decided he must partake of food and drink. A forced feeding. He was in a foul

mood. Even mealtime, his happy hour, was becoming a tribulation. A tiredness only a call to arms might relieve.

Like Willardson, enervation was the latest of Frieda's inconveniences. The inability to act, to work through a provisional plan. Sometimes she slept in, an inconceivable lapse. It had been the arrival of the 'birthday' package that foiled the about face. The ominous earrings. From an anonymous source. Not a well wisher. Earrings in the form of lurid female figures that dangled by their feet. Realistic, detailed, arms pinioned behind. An addressed parcel — meaning a breach of the covenant in the Collegium and Special Inspectorate, her cover ineluctably blown. If the new bravos she had encountered, after the fall, were any indication, she must expect the worse. Had she only come to her belated decision a year ago, how different...well perhaps not: America had made her dream, enshrine expectation even entitlement — its special seduction. Certainly her former handlers, if still viable, would be liable to coercion by the new commercial interests — which would encompass *ZYTA*'s ineffable potential, sooner than later. More and more it seemed the agents in the field might not be trusted, given the shuffling, the displacements and demotions at corporations like Paleomena. A new wariness attached to the former peerage, the aristos of the field. How to vet two-and-a-half decades of patient preparation, observance, infiltration, trusted access. How perverse — that her indecision, relative idleness should accommodate such suspicion, dis-

trust. To be sandbagged, interrogated at such a stage, when she was nearly mistress of her universe!

Zoya had been the emissary. The familiar. The hat on the bed. She no longer had anything to hide. And now nothing to show. Yet she was all but convinced Zoya had indeed discovered her via Willardson — the filched suit — and not via an FVR ploy! A street number in a small address book. Perhaps on the back of the picture itself. She did know what she sometimes did when perplexed. She sought a female companion for the night, someone who would foil her innermost secret and current whereabouts. Which even Vassily had not imagined. Make the despair total. The melancholy regnant. Hetero habit presumed finality.

Then, strangely she returned to the apartment. Which she had promised not to do, the time for the break long overdue. As if the guilt she felt over indulging such self-pity prepared her for the waiting ordeal. In America it was best to face the music. Except that the Princes now penned the lyrics.

## EIGHT

The new summons arrived early in the morning by special courier. A sleepy Willardson was at first alarmed. Until he realized his boss disliked anything broached after mid-morning. Arthur Pechenpaugh settled his professional affairs in the early hours. He slept little or not at all, turned himself out at dawn and worked as a fury until noon then usually disappeared, returning occasionally for a nocturnal overview of the morning's labours. An innate egoist, he was said to be ingratiating during the morn-

ing stint — until recently, perhaps, when late appraisals cued colleagues to the prospect of vendetta rather than confirmation.

Stories abounded of what occurred during the later daylight hours when he seemed to vanish from the face of the earth. Most featured race-tracks and stables of thoroughbreds — trite tales of drugged animals, venal and accident prone jockeys, even an abducted horse. Others, less ventilated (mainly from Peter), hinted at arms brokering, the clandestine manufacture and sale of state of the art surveillance equipment, including satellite components, and a precious enigmatic plan, fulfilled to the blueprint stage, of retiring in an ocean nautilus.

Frieda had given Willardson warning of the new summons. Pechen-paugh, like Voden before him, was being outmaneuvered by forces within that saw him too becoming an intermittently able executive with problematic connections; the blustery captain with a twitch. The recent contrariety of the Middle Eastern consortium upped the ante for the second eldest Prince. Even the layered privilege of his station had become fair game.

He arrived late. When he strode into his office he closed the heavy door with a resonant clunk. Despite a broad professional smile he looked haggard and cheerless.

“I’ll get straight to the point, David.”

Willardson prepared for a roundabout.

“We’re having a sweet old time with this tape business. You remember listening to it the night of Muerner’s bash. It was the egghead’s idea to bother you at all. Bless him. We all know what went on with Susanne.

She lost her cool, saw wall-to-wall muggers and so on. Like most ideologues. In the end she actually suspected there was something to this cheesy alien business. Grim reaper and all. Well we finally had a skinful, called her hand and sent her off for a little R and R. Yet long before her pratfall this toffy immigrant Muerner — who didn't struggle up the grease pole like you and me — thinks we are lacking finesse. Figures he knows how to pull the A-rabs, shine the egg heads and hard hats at NASA and soothe the hysterical flakes here. Between you and me — another head tripper off the ashram.”

Thus far Willardson merely substituted ‘I’ for ‘We’. He had anticipated a token acknowledgement of Susanne’s lapse, but the insinuation of Muerner being involved disclosed the final gasp. Pechenpaugh had run his course he concluded, and now seemed fated to spit blood.

“Anyhoo, he’s got the international clout the major shareholders seem to want, and thinks we’re still being hoodwinked and fleeced by that gang on Thirteen. We all thought the *ZYTA* shindig was over. We are optimists after all. I don’t know what happens down there but perfectly good people end up playing dumb and coy. We think Miguel is still up to something, maybe skimming the cream of the new data on our main-sequence model — something — yes I know he’s semi-retired now, all that — we’ve even had him watched, from time to time — but someone is once more divvying the deck — Miguel all over. Recently some routine firewall figures were all screwed up — again. Believe it.”

Pechenpaugh looked somberly into his blotter, full of pending corre-

spondence. He seemed to want the last comment to sink in for his own benefit as well as Willardson's.

"We need you for two jobs this time." The stiff fingers moved forward on the desk. "We want you apply another set of user key registers and carry around a tiny recording device for about a week. Just be yourself, that's all we ask. Whoever monkeyed with that tape did a number one job — so good in fact that Dowd and myself are still playing footsy with a couple of minor clients." Again he paused, perhaps wondering who the major clients might be. "I know Susanne tried to twist your arm too, she worked over everyone down there, but you kept the crypts intact. That we know. And respect."

Another pause begged for resolution.

"I'm going to level with you David. Muerner's good but not a model of forgiveness. If we had been on our toes Susanne would not have caved in. We're going to find some know-it-all sooner or later. Can't resist mooning us the sweetheart. So just be yourself. You have a way of drawing people out. Catching the pop flies. For the time being we've got to keep you on the infield."

It was a good ploy David thought, despite the cartoon oratory: *ZYTA* serving a great pretender who masked and fingered her wares — which Paleomena would later recover and restore without fanfare. More and more the sentient computer business must be progressing he guessed. It seemed Pechenpaugh had no anxiety at all about his loyalties, no inkling of a subterranean, crotchety pride. Susanne's mystery-laden demise was given out

as the turning of yet another calendar page. If Pechenpaugh now ate crow it was to mollify his arrogation, to insinuate a friend in need. So Willardson read the performance before him.

Pechenpaugh continued to butter him up and in indirect ways reveal the vulnerable footing: Dowd had already worked his way into a recoverable position by independently negotiating an auxiliary capital pool that the snit with the Saudis and brokers from the UAE failed to intimidate — a brand new ‘banker’s trust’. Pechenpaugh’s bluster and flushed complexion suggested to Willardson a red giant star in the process of collapse — just as a commotion started up in the outer secretarial office. The door burst open and in marched a resolute if tremulous Cressman, saliva clinging to the corners of his mouth. A short interval of huffish surprise and immured recognition followed. It was as though Pechenpaugh looked upon one his own sorry nags. A sympathetic yet conscientious Miriam stood at the door brushing back tears. The door softly closed after Cressman motioned for her to leave.

“I have something to say,” he finally declared, after a bloated pause that took in Willardson. He carried a cane and walked with a limp. He looked old and dog-weary, perhaps the result of a stroke. So Willardson thought and was pained by the deterioration.

“This is ridiculous, you shouldn’t even be up.”

“Arthur, I’m talking to you.”

“This is not the place nor time, Stephen,” said Pechenpaugh bitterly.  
“I’ve spoken to Angus and the retreat director. You best see Angus.”

Willardson prepared to depart.

“Sit down,” Cressman said, almost pushing Willardson back into his chair with his cane. “I’ve a document to place before my tireless colleague. From my solicitor, who naturally welcomed a sympathetic courier — me. A witness is welcome.”

“Stephen, I’m in no mood for another of your hoo-has...these old old chestnuts.”

“Ah.” Cressman turned to Willardson with a show of commiseration, while pointing his cane disparagingly at Pechenpaugh, then returned to his livid target. “Chestnut. But no condolences. The medical examiner’s report is with my layer. Who’s vastly entertained.”

Pechenpaugh looked at Cressman quizzically. “You’ve gone round the bend.”

“Two reports, actually. One also of a resurrected mortal — me.”

Cressman, having gained Pechenpaugh’s attention, stood back, yet continued to rock on his heels unsteadily. Gingerly he began to half circle the office like a convalescent, slowly shaking his head as he passed the room’s *objets d’art*. Then, noting something unusual about his coat sleeve, he abruptly stopped. Completely absorbed, he picked off in slow motion a long blond hair, then another — then, his consternation growing, several more.

“Cressman, what are you doing?” Pechenpaugh had adopted the tone of a stoic parent.

Cressman continued to inspect his sleeve. “I’ve acquired a dog, a large

animal. A pedigree that used to hunt lions, I'm told."

"So what have you come here for?" Pechenpaugh had sat down and begun to doodle on his blotter. "It doesn't bother you you're interrupting a private talk?"

"No," Cressman responded cordially, looking down at Willardson.

"I see."

"My lawyers are now preparing a suit against you, and indirectly Paleomena, for specified torts and malfeasant deeds, including the evening of April One last. I had my stomach pumped and the contents were interesting, especially I should think for Professor Muerner. He will be upset to find his cuisine trifled with by in-house amateurs."

"I see." Briefly the doodling became erratic.

Cressman slowly picked off another hair and absently prepared to drop it on Pechenpaugh's desk while he continued to study his sleeve.

"What the hell is that?" said Pechenpaugh drawing back.

" — From the brute who's going to unsex the next pair of goons you send to rifle my flat."

"You're a fruitcake Cressman."

"I thought you might be interested."

"Miriam!" Pechenpaugh barked into the intercom. "Get Stanton from security in here pronto. Pronto you hear!" He returned to Cressman and foisted an indulgent smile. "Goons. My gawd." Then, with truculence, continued his insinuation of psychopathy. "Stephen, if you continue this shenanigan you'll never set foot in here again."

This last rancorous display brought a stately note to Cressman's voice.

"Well, as that appears to be fairly certain now, given the craft of your toxicity specialist, I shall continue. Willardson, pay attention."

Said Pechenpaugh, at last mustering resolve. "Willardson, get out."

Willardson was on his feet but not moving. Cressman had turned and wielded his cane in an unsteady but menacing manner. He braced himself finally by jabbing the stout walking stick against the door, preventing its convenient opening.

"Stephen, you've got to get a hold on yourself!" Pechenpaugh was again coming to a boil. Willardson had never seen the executive so agitated.

Still propped against the door Cressman continued in a moist spare voice. "Your clinic in San Diego is nothing but a lock-up. I swear the Russian one I experienced was more sophisticated. I'm going to see to it you're identified as the principal shareholder, assistant director, and long-standing patron."

Pechenpaugh was about to move from behind the desk when Cressman turned and brandished the stick at him. It was a mock-heroic gesture at best, yet Pechenpaugh eyed it vigilantly.

"And further, I know what you're up to with Zoya — with your little Faustine. The girl you and your toadies shamelessly call Zyta."

"Willardson for gawdsake dig up Stanton. We're going to have a serious occlusion on our hands if he keeps on."

Willardson remained alert but transfixed. Pechenpaugh's grimace had

stunned him, the look of a beached fish gasping air.

“And Arthur, the émigré you hornswaggled for your legend is not the one who got out. He died in a labour camp near Ikutsk in 1982, a notorious subversive I’m proud to say. I have friends Arthur, and I’m still kicking!”

Pechenpaugh pointed a jerky finger at Cressman’s cane when Stanton burst in.

“He’s been threatening us with this instrument, Stanton.”

Stanton was at first amused; the trembling Cressman posed little threat. But the security officer’s manner sobered when he comprehended the tension in the room.

“Stanton,” Cressman said with surprising calmness, though with a crack in his voice, “regard that man. He is for a time still you boss.”

Pechenpaugh suddenly, unexpectedly fought his anxiety to a standstill. “Stanton, the man’s an obstructionist and uninvited, get him out of here.”

Stanton, however, could not assimilate the off-handedness in the command.

“You mean Mr. Cressman, sir?” Stanton said with withering understatement.

“I’ll leave soon, Stanton,” Cressman said politely. “Please join Willardson in the gallery.”

Stanton remained where he was looking at Pechenpaugh then Cressman and Willardson with a goofy palms-up gesture of stalemate.

“Stanton, you’re fired.”

Said Cressman, “Stanton, I will personally see no one touches your liberal severance package.”

Said Stanton, “Mr. Cressman, Mr. Pechenpaugh may need a break.”

Said Pechenpaugh, once more losing control, “Sheeit!”

“So long as he’s disposed to read the fine print.”

With stately deliberation Cressman then removed a large envelope from an inside coat pocket and placed it squarely on the desk.

“Two witnesses Arthur. The concoction you deployed is less noxious to one whose stomach has been almost entirely removed, which you would have noticed had you carefully read the file your goons copied. I also have slide-mounted evidence of the serums you tried in vain to scramble Susanne’s mind with at the clinic. Banned five year ago, article four fifteen of the new drug and patent stipulations. And your Argentine specialist has, confirmed by my own, two additional indictments of willful malpractice before the courts, the County Medical Board and Hospital Standards Association. I have naturally made a full disclosure to the FBI and the Office of the Secretary of State — about the other matters. You’re up against resourceful players, Arthur.”

Cressman’s face, then directly before Pechenpugh, was the subject of martyrdom, not the sardonic mirth one anticipated. Pechenpaugh did his best to look like a sleepy backbencher, while Willardson found himself elevated to a dumb piety. Cressman then turned to him, the same deference he displayed to Stanton modulating his voice.

“Tread cautiously here, David. The place is aflame.” He then turned

and limped out of the office. Despite the infirmity, or perhaps because of it, an arresting serenity attended his progress.

Stanton, after a silent palmy debate, followed Cressman out, giving Pechenpaugh a dull smile. At the door he turned and said in a near deadpan, “I’ll see he doesn’t bother you again, sir.”

Pechenpaugh continued to stare at the door, looking into worlds beyond. “Stanton you’re still fired!” he belatedly yelled, though without focus. He seemed poised to press forward to check the door, but turned instead to gaze out the large window overlooking the golf course, his back to Willardson, his hands actively fingering the stitching of the headrest.

“The man’s been a trial for some time. Especially this past month. The last report was very depressing. A large tumour. We’ve simply tried to make him comfortable — his contribution is as you know something of a legend. Damned rotten luck.”

“I’m afraid I never knew,” Willardson said helplessly into the unbearable and treasured silence.

“Well, we look after our own.”

Pechenpaugh turned and swiftly stuffed the envelope into a drawer then bellowed into the intercom, “Miriam! Willardson and I want some coffee — and I’m out of Martel.” He snapped the intercom off not waiting for a reply.

“Now where were we?...”

When they came for her, the four slick gents were a caution. Not an

ungainly body snatching then. Two such heavies could, might be anticipated, knowing the protocol, the obeisance to the dear departed past. Two would have been ample. She nearly smiled. To excite that much consternation. Oh my. To actually be there when they arrived...to confront the arrivistes, and free oneself from the old melancholy? Perhaps. She had debated her chances as a fugitive and decided they would not impair a reputable Paleomena scientist. But as a fugitive she feared her sister's own life would be especially exacting.

Like most nightmares, the onset was banal — the quizzical call from the entrance commissionaire. Yes, she would be down. Promptly. Waiting, hiding, scrounging had not much helped. And it was tedious without a housekeeper, whom she did not want to jeopardize. Say farewell, for a time.

Two galoots stood in the art deco rotunda, holding their hats. The pall bearers. Two others waited in the car, waiting to form a troika in the back seat with admirable detachment.

She did of course have a plan, a bolt hole ready, but in the end even she, Dr. Frieda Van Eerden — the name she had begun to believe her own — even she, the most exclusive of witnesses, an illegal not yet thirty-two, a wunderkind, so she was assured, in the diminishing circle of the old guard — even she was worn down by the waste and hugger mugger. The slow acidic recriminations of a deflected life. Hardly credible, given what she'd been through. And all this because she came to like her adopted name and designated country. The independent, virtuosic *ZYTA*, she believed,

would be her mentor now. *ZYTA*, the inchoate thinking computer, crafted by the coterie of experts and idealists she finally would not compromise nor abandon. The reason, so elemental and inevasive: the late discovery that she was what she had trained to be — a scientist! Custodian of unfeigned, un-enthralled truth; proctor of consensus and knowledge. The escape artist from — myth, cant and melodrama!

Not a spy. Dr. Frieda Van Eerden, with emphasis on the PhD, what she earned entirely on her own in this bountiful and open new world...now as perplexing and forensic for her as the shroud of Turin. In the end, she had hesitated, a captive of esoteric guilt and suppressed dismay. And, she hoped, simple un-articled courage. Vassily's doing she believed. The fidelity to one's belief. Before the maddening crowd. He surely would not begrudge her this, given the cost.

The car, she decided, was an improvement; the transportation in the service's heyday far less exclusive. For a fetching like this. She was determined not to be sick when the hood went over her head.

The waiting committee in the bowels of a walled mansion was as fastidious and abstemious, their contempt put on hold. One had to play to the tapes. Plenty of time to indulge the sore points. The session would be pressed but not hastened. Body first, mind second. The durable protocol. Several pairs of eyes. One set of stolid hands. Few actual details she would find memorable. She had read about such shakedowns, been told in spare detail in the nursery, and listened on the sly to the venerable comedian called the Gryphon, the feminine chap who was hard, very hard on

complacent enforcers. A time apart. A difference world. The stray fact in the here and now the use of English. American English. Were they in doubt about her mastery of that too?

In this surreal crypt she snapped out of her consuming lethargy, the dull consternation that invites one to yawn, by the first unrehearsed question put by the lone female attendant, a stocky Georgian of unmitigated ugliness and sadness who attended the removal of clothes. “Why do you leave your shoes on?” Part of the recorded take, the beginning of the inserts, she mused. “Because the floor is like ice,” she heard a voice much like her own reply. By then the principals had assembled and were plainly perched, not strolling discreetly, stoically in the background — two adjutant birds plus a raven and goshawk, about this stolid oak of a woman who first examined each item of clothing before hanging it off to the goshawk. The shoes were promptly taken out and shredded. She hadn’t anticipated an audience. For a ghostly instant she may have smiled. The confusion registered. She could imagine the likes of David Willardson, Paleomena’s art assayer, looking on. The new Russian mafiya now recruiting estimable assayers. But Willardson would not be in this audience. It was becoming plain, in and out of the dream, that she may have missed a chapter or two. Or the protocol that had attached to such interrogations before, even up to the time of the Gorbachev debut, was superseded by this new mobocracy, procurer of the vulgar, prurient taunt — nearly what one envisaged in the basement of Bolshy Lubyanka 11, the old Anchor Insurance Company and Lloyd’s of London, where the first members of the aristocracy were

stripped and shot, the terror that set the tone...she had watched a film of that crazed mayhem, the hosed down corpses winched feet first to street level and an awaiting dump truck. The difference her was the puritanical pretence in the film. Here, she presumed, no insult was outlawed. These were not the voroskoi mir, the fabled mobster descendants of the Empire. The present burkers had no credo, no haunting memory of custom or urbanity, no reified sense of kinship let alone honor — her belated discovery — no recompense beyond what they might steal and terrorize. The worst possible successors. The incarnate thugs, their flinty eyes leveled upon this precious patrician spawned during the late Andropov era; upon such trophy shoulders and medallion tits; upon this snob who had elected to bypass, in effect ignore, her lineal cell, which had been revamped and approved by the new hierarchy or mobocracy, in her idealized absence. Their burning eyes could incinerate this pretty ultraist, this privileged and now all-too-chilly highbrow. She sensed the ungainly weight of her arms at her sides and the dull ache of time. As droll to her senses was the rich patina on the awaiting chair with its wing shaped arms ending in carved busts, a versatile examining seat, a nice sardonic touch...she was a sometime student of furniture and this stately salon relic of mid-Nineteenth-Century, made to catch the eye...such wealth of detail in a pauper's dream, beneath a tensor's ignis fatuus .

The strong red hands had alighted on her shoulders. Satisfied with gums and teeth — no candidate implants or sly fillings to foil the X-rays, nor faux nipples on the freckled chest, no tiny ampoules in lined guta per-

cha! — she might sit back and fit herself to the lion busts. The doughy matron, she had concluded, was in her element. The young flesh before her undeservedly winsome, hale, overdue to be disobliged and humbled, however coveted on the sly. Most unseemly, she could hear Peter Selby-Smith saying in his cultivated lisp — the English witling on her team at Paleomena. A master of piffle whom she could not now reify into a rescuing cossack.

She thought of the recent intimidating present of the earrings, suggesting a new, ruthless and odious station head, who had yet to introduce himself. She thought of the awful film of the Chekist cellars, circa 1918. Of corpses swinging upside down. From a chandelier — in her special dream — which looked down at her now as the warrant proceeded; as the chair, this elegant comforting fixture of an imperial age, facilitated a protracted rape.

Of the four witnesses behind the glazed observation window only Prokovsky, ‘Grease Gun’ to intimates, seemed entirely pleased with the events unfolding before them. Prolonged dissemblance and deception invited a special response, he felt. A climatic retribution. The exposed cheat revealed as alien and dissolute. Prokovsky had a reputation for squaring accounts and playing the odds. A disposition that made him a *de facto* hero back home. Hero tycoon of the graven Motherland.

The other three men in the chamber, mossbacks from the old rezidency, may not approve of spectacle, of tableaux vivant, as Frieda wryly thought of it. Said Prokovsky, the station’s new *éminence grise*,

“The noblesse is on me; no method acting this time.” He was obliquely referring to the dilemma posed by the illegal’s case officer back home, one Vassily Sergeevich Ablesimov, whose charm and wile was still up for grabs; he might join the new order, he might not. A candid revelation of his protégé would be at least an embarrassment. Such was Prokovsky’s strategy in hauling in the sly delinquent and submitting her to a prurient assault and protracted interrogation. It was recently determined that her troubled family life in the former Soviet Union — a routine disqualification — had been willfully overlooked by her spotter, the same Vassily Sergeevich, that rarity who believed women should not be neglected because of an institutional bias. During his brief ascendency, he had convinced the acting head that his scheme in resorting to younger illegals was sound, that the planting of idealistic youngsters in North America — before life in Mother Russia might demoralize or corrupt — was an opportunity. For a time he was successful. Education at some of America’s ivy league colleges proved to be a fine finishing school for idealistic sophomores to learn to loathe their stolid parents and their government, the topical irony being that if Marxism was suffering an eclipse worldwide, it was still a theoretical liquidity in the other equity market, the liberal art’s liberalism at places like Yale and Harvard. The illegal before them had graduated *summa cum laude* from Yale and completed her studies at MIT. She had been Vassily’s pre-eminent plant, a fully blossoming graft. Until she nimbly and slyly changed her mind — a reversal Prokovsky prided himself on foiling in time. By leaving one team, you join another! Though he suspected she

had hesitated at the crucial moment, not resolved the lingering doubt he would adroitly mock now. Sonja, the staff orderly elected to do the strip search, a dyke he had used before for indelicate jobs, was only too keen to take added instruction, though she had pretended diffidence. From the outset of the examination she had managed a spate of brisk caresses. The application of the unguent for the final probes was drawn out to define the taunt, which the victim accepted at first with regnant indifference. As Prokovsky imagined. He wondered if the others in the secret viewing room even noted the guttering amusement as the vaginal probe turned into a vigorous massage as the other hands held the limbs. Prokovsky wanted to see the woman at sea, the embarrassing alarm. He grinned, telling himself he was a good judge of prigs and élitists. And bisexuals. The pornographer's incantation. The 'manhandling' continued in an airless silence after the necessities were completed, though not for long. Abruptly the guards were needed to continue the assault. Which took a while, to coax the maid into a Maenad. Given the final use of her own durable nipples loosed from her smock the matron masseuse was at least partially successful Prokovsky decided, from experience and having watched a number of the more artfully impromptu examples of seduction, something a new colleague, the porno artist Ganyanov, specialized in. Lesbian plight as quandary, perplexity...the belated recoil to the adept caresses the more calamitous in retreat and capitulation, which Prokovsky savoured in the sudden retraction and stasis of form, and the faint implosive breathing. A most consoling wonder. The sex itself yielding a sly ejaculate. They

would get to the questioning post haste. The final consumptive look on their naughty illegal was all but breathtaking. A fine intimidation for the able Ablesimov.

There were two kinds of men, Prokovsky felt, the dichotomy of mystics and buccaneers. That old mystic Ablesimov, his former critic and sometime nemesis, had suffered a set back. Prokovsky was only a little sad he would not be there to see the expression on the monk's face when he watched his charming protégé 'flip like a pike on a hook', after an old childhood song they shared. A private screening, of course. Only the private reality was real. And privacy in the former Soviet Union was the fledgling consolation. Ha! Again Prokovsky, smiled. Amazed at his inimical talents. His own rich vein of contempt. The regnant misogynist if not misanthropist in a cruel, degenerate society. Ha! The master spy. The regalement here a sop to one of the wealthiest ablest men in the new Russia. The steely you-know-who. A very warm body, as the Victorians used to say.

He thought of the flying roaches he had recently stolen from a terrarium. Again, just in the nick of time. A matter of nerve. If the woman before him needed further encouragement to detail the *ZYTA* wonder.

The parlor Willardson was ushered into in Cressman's large warmly-hued apartment, with stately tie-back curtains, Axminster rug and complementary cerise and pale sienna upholstery on fauteuils and settee, exhibited a distinctly lived-in appearance. Unbound scripts, papers, and large

reference works had wandered about nomadically, following snacks begun and twice abandoned — an offering nearby was being attacked by one of the ubiquitous chameleon cats that shadowed him as he sought a place to sit. Two unpacked shopping bags of gift wrapped parcels, several large ashtrays full of partially consumed cigarettes, and plants in stages of repotting, occupied the seats of all available chairs, whereas the settee bristled with surly predatory felines. He badly wanted to sit down for he was tired after the hilly walk, undertaken to savour the clear cool autumn sunshine, a long mile from the county art museum.

The invitation was a surprise. Cressman himself called, at first wishing him a happy birthday, an inaugural deed that initially dismayed. But the gravelly voice was altogether reassuring, and a time expeditiously agreed upon.

The room, Willardson concluded, was not so much a mess as a versatile holding ground for tasks easily resumed when time permitted. He thought of the spiteful morbid chore Pechenpaugh had lain at his feet, a trial he shortly was expected to undertake, and prayed the executive's presaged demise would intercede, get him off the barbed duty hook. He approved of the room's crowded activity, and his being there. The ceiling contained plaster bas-reliefs of sea birds, one of which was mirrored in the gleaming polished parquetry of a teapoy. On the walls hung Eighteenth-century Chinese paintings — the companions of some in his own office — also some spare fluent watercolors of seaside children. A large white vase containing a thick spray of withered peonies sat on an old brown Beck-

stein, from the rear of which Cressman materialized after a suddenly noisy dog was silenced.

Dressed in a burgundy smoking jacket with broad satin lapels stained with spittle, he was a little more stooped than remembered, yet manifested a boyish delight at seeing his red-faced guest, and with considerable strain promptly cleared off a fauteuil. He then lurched onto the multi-pillowed settee sending cats scurrying beneath the low teapoy to insult him with their tails. He immediately lit a cigarette after Willardson declined to join in.

“I do not envy your predicament, David. You are near a fissure. Which you must know.” The words slipped through wafting channels of smoke. He coughed suddenly and resonantly cleared his throat. “Arthur will know by now you’re here. But he will lose in the end and that end is near. However, we must find you an escort home when the time comes — an order.”

Willardson strained forward in the chair but remained silent.

Said Cressman, “David, I’m a dead man and we are quite alone.”

“I was recalling the exchange in Arthur’s office.”

This brought another bronchial spasm, Willardson’s concern waved aside. “Not what you think. Damned chest cold. Actually on the mend. The tumour’s a liability but I’ve got perhaps eighteen months clear dealing left. Should be enough. I’d offer you lunch but our meeting, this day, must be brief.”

He paused to offer a morsel from one of the unfinished snacks to a cat

slinking about and between his legs. The cat turned it down with a concise display of dislike.

“I keep the servants out of this room else I lose the thread. A bit of a fumbler, also a bit superstitious — two reasons I’ve asked you here. Several documents I think you should have. But before I get to that I must ask if you bear me any ill will. Remember, you are not speaking to a curmudgeon.”

A second cat also turned down an offering from the same plate.

A playful irony nimbed Willardson’s features.

“You’d prefer to golf with someone else, yes?”

“Given my handicap that’s hardly a reprimand.”

Cressman did not respond to this. Instead he began to stroke the cat at his feet. Willardson feared his light remark had misfired.

“You may not be so cordial when you leave here, but our priorities are not I believe divergent.” He looked up, winked and rose to confront a wall safe above and behind the settee. Willardson finally wrestled down his reserve.

“We have toiled on different decks. I had no idea the one could be so blustery. To put it mildly.”

Cressman snorted and resumed speaking after retrieving a large folder from the safe, undaunted by Willardson’s ongoing unease.

“I have here some of Peter’s transcripts and early diaries — from Thirteen.” He briefly smiled at the effect this produced. “It was I who arranged the funding for his trip to the Yucatan. Very useful I was then.”

He labored to sit down, grimacing all the way, then fingered the cigarette, pausing to expel a veil of smoke. He seemed to anticipate a rebuke, but Willardson remained silent and still, allowing only his fingers activity as they formed themselves into a wedge.

“Peter wanted to study several sets of inscriptions — *in situ*. Trying to affirm some cultural parallels *ZYTA* intimated in the tableaux. He wanted to see the originals. Artificial light can change surface nuances he claimed. It seemed he actually began a dig, a mile or so from Yautepec, near Cuernavaca, why I’m not sure, and nearly stumbled into one of Pechenpaugh’s arms’ caches, mostly saper stuff, a sop to one of the Indian brotherhoods, who as you know have a rigid sense of territory and can make things difficult for us when they chose to. A cave-in ensued and will serve as a convenient cover. I knew of the cache but not Peter’s proximity to it. Pechenpaugh, with Dowd’s help, kept the investigation hygienic. Peter was either scared off or is dead. If he is dead, and I suspect he is, his body will not of course be found for some time.” He paused to plump a cushion. “Am I going to fast?”

Willardson shook his head. He knew Paleomena had many land-use deals in the works in Mexico, Guatemala and El Salvador, adventures in agriculture to offset some specialty factory compacts. Cressman smoked in silence for several seconds — a minute’s silence, Willardson thought — and appeared reassured by his guest’s solemn quiet.

“Here are the unofficial transcripts of Peter’s reports from Thirteen, also his diary inclusive to the time of your indentured service. I believe he

stopped the entries about then. They tend to be impulsive, even fanciful, yet something you ought to see.”

Cressman again paused, this time to frantically retrieve a large handkerchief from a breast pocket in anticipation of a robust sneeze that didn’t transpire. He stuffed the monogrammed linen up a sleeve with a self-congratulatory flourish and looked over at Willardson as if to reassure himself his guest had not taken cover.

“There’s more: from Mexico City Peter wrote to a friend and colleague in London — to solicit outside help. He was beginning to doubt Miguel’s trustworthiness and thought his London colleague sufficiently removed from the scene to act independently of Paleomena. The friend, a precocious lad, sent the letter directly to Dowd, who showed it to me. Seems the lad led a complicated life — unknown to Peter I think — Dowd being, as far as I can tell, a coincidental patron. I’m not up to date on today’s amorous specialties. Their electronic traffic is apparently viral, as they say.”

The tone was entirely objective, leaving Willardson more depressed, a humor Cressman readily took in.

“I have only a few facts, David. Dowd met the boy in Soho. I was recently asked by Pechenpaugh to try to glean from you the degree of trust and esteem between yourself and Peter. Arthur, of course, resented Dowd sharing the information with me. He and I now communicate through intermediaries. Which he has a hard time recruiting, I might add.”

“A colleague, you said.” The remark was faintly put.

“Graduate student, Dowd said. Peter supervised his thesis. The conversation is up front in the letter, which regrettably I didn’t copy. Peter trusted the fellow. Too many coincidences, he argues. Wanted the chap to get in touch with Miguel over some late data which I’m afraid Dowd retained before showing the text to me. Wanted a second opinion. He said. Peter also believed several of the tableaux that accompanied his principal report to Pechenpaugh were changed. Just before he left for Palenque, a late decision apparently, he attempted to revise portions of his analysis of some of *ZYTA*’s proffered artifacts. He was angered to discover slight intervening alterations made to the tableaux themselves, which he described in detail in the letter. Peter, as you probably know, had a photographic memory. The tone here was vengeful. All Pechenpaugh needed — to suspend judgment of the Indian Camorra. Not much anyone could have done, David. There simply wasn’t time. Please try to accept this as a fact.”

Again Willardson appeared restive, beset. “So you think he may have been killed?”

“It’s a distinct possibility. Dowd’s edited the reports.”

David managed a disparaging smile. “Stephen, what can you want of me? And I must ask who is speaking here, yourself, a re-grouping of the Princes, an outside group?”

Cressman looked upon his guest with a begrudged fondness. “I speak now for no one but myself. I have two reasons for asking you here. Both I suspect confounding.”

Willardson’s finger wedge began to unravel.

“First and most important David, a warning: Pechenpaugh will know by now about the revision on the chip. The editing was not immaculate — not unimpeachable, as Dowd and Muerner first believed. Something about the noisy chair and your snoring — echo factors that don’t match the entresol. And they surely have narrowed the theft and placement to me. Yes. A friend delivered the chip. Both ways. A long-standing private investigator of mine. Remember my offer of an escort — I will loan you one! Ask your contact for a European domicile and cover. I’ll do what I can. Six months, say.

“The second reason,” Cressman continued unsparingly, “concerns Peter’s diaries and transcripts of his reports from Thirteen. The sometimes fanciful language hides the nuggets. What I have here are copies; the originals are now part of a shared legal trust which you are vouchsafed access to under the precepts of the trust. I sincerely hope you thrive long enough to see the documents put to edifying use. *ZYTA* should not be a Paleomena preserve, I see that now, even given the mischief that may follow in the media and among increasingly irresponsible and influential faddists — conspiracy, sci-fi and UFO wiseacres — to say nothing about corporate cupidity. At least for a time. Such a lot of idle and covetous hands these days. And I am not daunted by your amazement. I have met several sponsors of Frieda’s group, who will serve our amazing computer and *ZYTA*’s windfall input as well as anyone. I’ve given my word not to reveal their identity, for a time.”

Willardson had closed his eyes.

Cressman grunted assent then lit another cigarette after having hunted down a second lighter among the papers on the teapoy. “All in due course. Yes, in due course.”

Willardson haplessly nodded, avoiding Cressman’s regard as he continued.

“Yes, the information *ZYTA* has provided is phenomenal, that much I accept. The consensus seems to favour what’s known as an ‘recombinant ion maze’ — the basic bio memory — from, yes, a still illusive source we have yet to comprehend at the input level. Either our new computer is thinking beyond our horizon or an unknown magus is adroitly entertaining us. Greek to me but Miguel kept it down, so must be something. Incidentally Pechenpaugh will probably not survive to the corporate year end. He has no one’s confidence now. I advise you to steer clear of him and Paleomena for at least a fortnight.”

Willardson remained silent. If he looked forlorn rather than astonished it was because he accepted Cressman’s words. Try as he might he could not construe this as yet one more involuted trick to glean information or negotiating space. For the first time in his life he began to contemplate the prospect of having to expeditiously leave it.

Cressman appeared reassured — that he had at least invigilated the under-appreciated cherub. “In the letter Peter reiterates his thesis of a tenable parallel civilization giving us a pithy condensed encapsulation of ours — one of *ZYTA*’s exercises — which leads however to a telling divergence, conspicuous in the Pre-columbian analogues. A crisis, that apparently got

worse — ” Cressman suddenly sought his handkerchief and raucously blew his nose.

“ — Then that first African thing. The kneeling woman figure. The face Peter did a facsimile of, with help from Limburg. Gave the friend a copy. Little or no resemblance to the earthly artifact — unlike the slick tableau he spies in his last report. Arthur apparently though a plagiarist most apt as the company ‘joker’. A late revelation. Peter intended to seek out journalistic leverage. Doughty stuff — given the security regimen. His words: ‘A concerted effort to vulgarize and debase’. Dowd got the letter when I was persuaded to enter that swank clinic in San Diego. Then Peter inconveniently began his excavation — without government approval, I might add, tunnelling toward the underworld vault. No joke intended.”

Willardson woodenly nodded.

“Well, I too have midnight oilers. And the diary entries and transcripts are now in a safe place. Dowd retains only the letter, which I neglected to copy, as I’ve said.”

Cressman lit yet another cigarette, without butting the last. To Willardson he seemed to inhale smoke without ever expelling it, though the room was now a near smog.

“Do you know what really happened to Susanne?” Willardson had decided to bestir himself; the smoke would flag him sooner or later. The question tightened Cressman’s face muscles.

“Yes, a bit. Nervous exhaustion — on Thirteen. So Voden and Pechenpaugh delivered the news. Not surprised. We were resolved David.

The crypt registers, the user keys, alone would not have appeased Muerner. He wanted and got, with Pechenpaugh's connivance, a 'sub-clinical hysterick' and provocateur. The best excuse in his estimation. A specialist was proposed. Susanne told us all to get to hell and went skiing. But checked into an outpatient clinic in Bern a week after she arrived. I'm sure she didn't know its history — the fact that Muerner is a director and its principle shareholder." He stole a glance at Willardson then paused to clear ash off his lap. "It was around then that Arthur began to dream of becoming Chairman of the Board, vacant since Max unofficially retired. Voden was in disgrace for merchandising some software on his own and doing silly things elsewhere with a long-time importer friend, a Mr. A.J. La-chance — who's turned out to be the protean Aliks Prokovsky. One of the new Russian kleptos. Voden's stiff upper lip has a curl to it these days. Dowd never coveted the job, and I was sick. Muerner and his cronies were still outsiders. The greatest single impediment for Pechenpaugh was the ideologue on Thirteen: Miguel. And he could get at him through Susanne. Muerner, I think, felt it justified. At least at the time. *Our pragmatist.*"

Cressman lifted onto his lap and began stroking a large marmalade cat, who commenced a resonant purr as he continued.

"Earnest Susanne would serve as a scapegoat, also the diamond to scratch Miguel, the one scientist on Thirteen tough and brilliant enough to rally independent support for *ZYTA* — if he chose to break his contractual pledge. Sadly, David, these are not recent revelations. Susanne worked un-

der Miguel's direction. If she was found incompetent, for whatever reason, Pechenpaugh might demean and caution Miguel, the one celebrity he chose not to confront head on. With Miguel compromised the rest would lose their nerve, or at least their energy in the short term. Arthur seems to have been on the mark there. And he was astute in narrowing the number of partisans. You mustn't underestimate his craft nor his resource. His controls a very broad portfolio.

“Susanne left for the Berner Oberland about the time Pechenpaugh began to pressure the shares I controlled. I was in bad shape and under the care of a specialist who persuaded me to visit the Bern clinic, to be examined by a hematologist there. I was surprised to see Susanne in the dispensary. She didn't look at all well. You see, I had accepted the prevailing story of a sabbatical. A holiday. Pechenpaugh nearly produced his addled fanatic.”

Cressman pushed the cat away and took up his cigarette as if it were a subject worth investigating.

“I arranged for a car but she refused to get in. I remember the driver saying she was terrified by the suggestion. She was found unconscious last Sunday night in a hotel swimming pool — in a changing room. A depressing story except for an internal medicine resident who apparently got an outside expert involved who in turn explained her anorexia. It seems she was paranoid then about her food. Starved herself into unconsciousness. It could be the *coup de sang* for Miguel. Arthur's fool's luck I think, with em-

phasis on ‘fool’. As far as I know she is recovering. I believe Miguel has gone to visit her and possibly recoup what he can.”

No emotion touched Willardson’s face. Indeed, he sat like a disciplined student, detached, yet mindful as he placed a further question.

“You mentioned the name Zoya, in front of Pechenpaugh.”

“Ah, yes. The Russian entertainer. Maybe a plant. Who knows at this stage. Voden discovered her. Possibly via Prokovsky — who may have recruited her, knowing her connection to Frieda, either through her school or family — ‘recruited’ in the ‘follow the kitty’ sense, keep an eye on her whereabouts and doings. Prokovsky could use her to embarrass Frieda. ’Zyta’ Voden christened her. She *was* in a bind, desirous of a career and a new identity. She had a tussle with an Islamist at while back in a club in London and needed a safe haven. Voden and Pechenpaugh were already at work on a sensational series of pictures modelled after the tableaux. The girl’s information on Russian mafiya links is pertinent, some of it potential negotiation material. She’s lived a hectic life. Pechenpaugh has sweated to disguise her background, and blundered into co-opting a relative of mine for the purpose — the one who smuggled me out of the Soviet Union when I was a young pup. He was one of the dissidents eventually sent to a camp. I know little else about the girl. Lots of rumours. Voden is an inveterate bearer of tales. The Bellerophon, I believe it’s called, is too much of a ‘gooseberry den’ for me. Dowd’s expression.”

“Do you know what Muerener intends with his anatomical abstracts,

the ones in the air-conditioned cabinets?" Willardson was reeling from Cressman's narrative, yet sounded alert, single-minded still.

Cressman smiled and impulsively lit another cigarette, then noted one still burning. He took up both, smoking each alternately.

"Professor Muerner has many interests. He's always been big on the idea of élites, and the genetic indices that proclaim them. Physical and intellectual. Far more sophisticated than the early Nazis. Part conditioning it seems, part aesthetic proselytising, part intransigent science. Which the new eugenics is bound to enhance. *ZYTA* is a treasure here of course."

He looked candidly at Willardson. "You really interested in this stuff? Yes of course you must be. Where was I?"

"Accounting for an élite."

"Hum. Greek stuff mostly. Athenian Golden Age. Godlike man and man like god. Incorporating the belief that outer and inner symmetry and harmony, of mind and body, coincide, the basis of both aesthetic and biological durability and thus optimism — a credo with Muerner — also that this outward beauty sells products along with a toleration of the pollution necessary to see the products get made. So he claims. He further contends — it gets mystical here — the industrial poisons that ensue — the economically unavoidable ones — must be allowed to prune the frailer populations, and thus provide nature a back door to reassert herself. He urges a search for a more perfect human copy — claiming even cross-cultural exemplars. The advertising juggernaut. I don't think I qualify."

He smote a columns of smoke as if he were losing sight of Willardson.

“Ankles a bit too thick.” He laughed at this and lapsed into more raucous hacking that ended when he butted both cigarettes. A somber objectivity realigned his features.

“He does have breathtaking examples. He told me you’ve been observed looking at a few on your own. Only a select few actually get into the viewing carrells. You being one of the ‘dispensation’ ones...during the fête I’m told. Then along comes a preternatural intelligence, *ZYTA* again, featuring, among other things, blistering wars between such grandly made beauties — between the two predominant sexes even. ‘Did anyone ever doubt it?’ Peter reputedly said to the energumen, and began looking over his shoulder ever after. Utopian Muerner still thinks someone fiddled that part of the program.”

Cressman paused to confirm the glazed absorption of his guest. Willardson had closed his eyes. “Do continue,” he said.

“Formidable stuff the *ZYTA* copy. Not just the social science stuff, but tantalizing formula for R and D, and awesome proofs of the equations’ efficacy. Auguring a super race all but godlike. A warning some intimate, as did Susanne: the ‘anachronising’ of compassion. Charm, elegance free of clemency. The only way elegance can flourish according to Muerner. He’s not one to sympathize with democracy’s ‘lovemongers’ as he calls them. And by chronicling some of our more audacious daily examples he gleans a lot of moral support. A very ‘incorporate’ gentleman. He scares the heebie jeebies out of me, yet I find it hard to censure the insight. The credulity of the West, romantic and hedonistic, hives off its airy good for-

tune, its lingering momentum. Where the courage and sensibility went realism followed. A genetic sump remains, according to Muerner — his late interpretation of the wars in *ZYTA* — a cleansing of the genetic inertia in peacetime. In the end women demand survivors, he notes, the ones who can do and provide, and how else will one know? Thus he thinks fascists and industrial poisons have a job to do, and he's determined to see that both have every opportunity... sorry David, I ramble. An old story in some respects. Better in his telling, perhaps.”

He didn't give Willardson time to respond.

“Now David — no ifs ands or buts — we must attend to that escort. Leave Los Angeles for a time. A fortnight at least. Eschew Pechenpaugh. I doubt he'll do anything rash but you never know. We may meet again, perhaps on a cloudy day when you won't be tempted to go for a silly walk.”

With labored haste Cressman rose and disappeared into the hallway, then unexpectedly returned.

“On second thought I'll leave first. I've got a limo with fake inset windows. I'll ring when its safe — it's settled now. One of my chaps will accompany you. He'll let you know when he's ready. In the meantime relax and read some of Peter's diary.”

The coughing resumed as he lumbered back into the hallway fending off anticipated gestures of assistance. Willardson had promptly and awkwardly arose, really meaning to protest the truncation of the dizzying monologue, a response he soon checked himself for. Slowly he sat down

and morosely surveyed the room, then swiftly dug out a portion of Peter's diary from the year 2010. The deft campy words began to mist before his eyes. Just to get them on paper must have been an adventure in that climate. Cressman's comment about the fanciful expression was apt: Peter he assumed was near his wits' end.

*September 10, 10:00 PM. I have long suspected the social sciences simply declamatory, and when I see these nearly exhausted rarefied faces diligently following my words I smell popcorn.*

*September 11, 00:15 AM. The lovely people toil in earnest. Such pretty sets. I keep a respectable distance — usually the shortest to the bog and the diminishing Rye. I tell them what I think I think: images, artifacts, patents of a culture, a curious dummy parallel to aspects of our own — only the temporal variables sometimes skewed. In addition or congruent with the data sets ZYTA delivered specific geographies, artifacts and physiognomies which 'she' then expanded and diversified. The early stuff primitive yet devilishly intricate, like ours -- from an academic slogger I remind them. In the later examples, ingenuous style of dress, complex in the making — and wearing. Miguel thinks some of the metalwork 'molecularly exotic'. A great responsibility per square molecule perhaps. Then this arcane 'crystalgram' — the inspiration for many romantic dabblers and babblers on earth — as yet unexplained to me, situated near the cranium temple, a masterpiece of pressure technology some awed technician says, who further postulates an organic base to its molecular superstructure. Well what can one say — keep the accoutrements organic, any designer knows that! Oh Sometimes-Merciful, let me return to the dust and ooze, where the anthropologist roams.*

*September 13, 11:00 PM. A revelation: Limburg no more the big cheese -- this I*

*learn by stealth from the latest in camera report on him. With Susanne's diligent complicity. A bad cold mugs her voice. Less makeup too. Bloodless. Back to Limburg: despite their nitpicking, the Princes most recent hirelings can't fault his detailed renderings. Hence the grim Miguel: he has no more easy outs; he can't rule out something momentous — maybe, god bless us, numinous in the literal sense. He's the genius of the group and he's not amused.*

*Many sacrificial stones, no sanctuary.*

*A recapitulation. A cave painting, or whatever. I think of the scribble in the Addura hole near Palermo. First outlines, then Limburg at work with the fractal detail. Miguel rather swacked like most of his team, probably due in part to the precious Limburg — our jaunty pederast who can draw and reconfigure like a playful Cranach. The enhanced image, suggestive of a rapid free-hand sketch, featured a pack of beery hunters after a fleeing ball of — what can I say? — plumage! We sit and gawp. The prevailing suspicion: Limburg's room temperature again. The maniac pipes up, avec humeur, 'I think it's a disgrace. The cost of the boa alone!' The elusive Frieda joins in by suggesting the feathers represent a stylish bird unhappy with Thanksgiving. No real laughter. Humour as rarefied here as a shot of gin. Everyone eyeing Miguel, and that head stone bears no cracks. So: the message of the ages, so preposterous one can't trust the senses. You become raw with earnestness. ZYTA has pulled a fast one. Or maybe not.*

Willardson was engrossed: glimpses of the Peter of old — wryly eager, amiably lusty — stole through the resignation. After rearranging the snoot of the floor lamp he heedfully read on.

*September 14, 11:30 PM: the exhilaration lingers like a love tryst. Without dints. Just past lunch. The image coalesced with unusual clarity. The silence first confisca-*

tory. Someone swore. Susanne responded with a benediction. Limburg idle and speechless — before our first full spectrum rendering without his careful enhancement. *ZYTA learning the limitations of our prodigal computer!* Miguel further upset: our modem or whatever that relays the signals, not keyed to transmit this kind of detail. So I'm told. Even the mask of Frieda's chosen boredom begins to slip. Why are mathematicians so adroitly naive? I was jubilant, in a sophomoric way. The rendering that hour was, as they say, a tower.

*The Kneeling Woman of the Baluba*, say I. With tasteful help from the House of Dior, perhaps. For the first time Frieda is not amused, or is this sometime imponderable babe one of theirs? Not here long but learns mercurially I suspect. Doubtless a delightful wily creature the corruptible must be wary of. What's beneath the paint I wonder, to say nothing of the chic clothes? Susanne alas more stupefied than usual. The cold worse. Miguel wants her to see a medic. As do others on his technical team.

September 15, 1:15 PM: Back to our debut full-spectrum image. I was introduced to the illustrious *Baluba* wood sculpture in the museum that evolved from the old Belgian Congo exhibits. A happy sappy child then, the protégé of a knotty distinguished uncle. So the nubile lass and I go back a long way I told them, hoping to incite some interest in Frieda, though God knows the opportunity of matching pulse rates is as rare here as the prohibited gin. (I am potty enough to keep this off-the-cuff diary.) But the mood will be lost if I don't; the factual data is overwhelming. Sadly my calculus and algorithm skills are limited.

Of course I pointed out that the two sculptures, *ZYTA*'s and ours, are not quite the same, though the head pieces appear astonishingly alike, as do the bowls and meditative pose. The caution of the comprehensive? Then I left. Notes now before the elective

*Prince or Princes. No bod from the executive block on the golf course this afternoon, not even a masochist like Willardson translocating the turf.*

For Willardson the spell was broken by more barking then soft footsteps in the hall. A manservant entered and announced the limo would be briefly delayed, but everything still proceeded according to plan. Willardson was to effect his departure even if Mr. Cressman could not extend a personal farewell. Mr. Cressman would surely contact him again soon. The servant nodded with a deft politeness, then left as he came.

Willardson returned to Peter's animated words. He had difficulty imagining his friend ever perplexed or reproachful.

*September 16, 11:50 PM: neglected you dear diary because Frieda discovered somewhere in this hermetic tomb a reliable source of bathtub gin. Divine ears and fair skin delicately freckled. Sits parallel to my study at makeshift table, crossing and uncrossing..like Eurydice, denied the sun. Bothers with makeup — on Thirteen! A paradox, unlike ripe open rustic Susanne. Frieda thrives in the shade. Sits amidst sheaths of computer print-outs like a child in a bath. Mainly silent. Today wore a sprig of honeysuckle and hart's tongue pinned to her smock — a gift — no name divulged.*

*No open answers anymore. Everything under a monitoring haze. Tons of equipment recently put out, unobtrusive but ubiquitous. From a strangely huffy Susanne I get the following: "I'm a scientist; go confide, if you must, to the artiste." And this within forty-eight hours. She meant the now distracted Limburg, whose judgement with all the strictures and surveillance is as balanced as a pyromaniac's.*

*Yesterday he committed a mischievous prank — elsewhere it might have earned him Emeritus status. In one of his renderings, he had Miguel framed in the guise of a robust*

*Satyr ogling one of the ZYTA graces. Pechenpaugh now snarling like a boar raising the whole fussed-over garden. Poor man. The Latin inscription Limburg chose to embellish the thing twisted the barb. Susanne never so upset, by something she would have found amusing, I'm certain. Frieda luckily absent — or was it luck? The yips stalk like a fine rain. To doubt Miguel and his team is a kind of heresy. His scowl tells all. As the gin knocks me out the question surfaces: who is being examined — it or us. I'm hardly that important; I simply fuss with the vocabulary. ‘Tableaux’. My wits fall about me like dandruff.*

*September 17m 10:00 PM: definitely piling up, as the weary prophet related. Sumptuous examples of analogous (?) Pre-columbian gold work — Veraguas, Calima, Tairon, Coclé, Diquis — worn by very charming folk. Then comparable Zuni, Hopi, Pueblo and Navajo ceremonial relics, again some sportingly like our own. More elongated, gracile though — the denizens. Words to deface the grave with: grace, concinnity. An tall lithe attic society — through the eyes of one desiccated brain. Then, after a dol-drum day — no autos-da-fé — cometh the monster, très chic, right out of a Hollywood thriller. A rare discipline kept me silent. I look now and almost grin. A menagerie of mystic ornamentation on the monster — of a kind that fascinated and preoccupied our Southern Plain's Indians and suggestively prevented them from applying energies to other venues. Maven Miguel says the gem stones smell organic. Sod him. But what oh what to make of the persistent physical similarities — a population of a few protoplast clones? It seems ‘their’ technology would support the possibility — the earnest biophysicist again. More arguments over technical matters in the background. Bremsstrahlung — yes — radiation formula that may have been neglected somehow. ‘Velocity averaged Gaunt factor’ in question. Lovely debate. Haven't a clue. Somebody named MERLIN the clincher but MERLIN (Multi-Element Radio-Linked Interferometer Network)*

*beyond the pale. The joke of the week — an alien is tripping about in ZYTA's handiwork. For the time being. Ho hum. Frieda rather pissed off.*

*September 18, 3:35 AM: Candy dandy but liquor quicker. American I think; cannot acknowledge the debt. How to slumber with eyes open and snore imperceptibly? Doing it now. Memory flyblown. Fishmeal. Pputative I should say — final night's gin. The skirt's gone. Jeans. She's joined the ranks of the drably committed in Miguel's wait-and-see room. Our savant Frieda. My god, season-end rugby pants. Pants stomp out the mystery.*

*September 19. 11:50 PM: Sweet genie, bottle departed, dewy summer infatuation — more sumptuous examples of 'gold work', but an hour ago, for tomorrow's furrowed brow, classical Etruscan, Egyptian, East Asian — Nepal maybe, a maze of styles. My comparisons accepted by the Princes with the equanimity of swordsmen darning hose. Miguel thinks the surface in the 'cave paintings' metallic, not stone, and the 'dust' turbulence about a very recent and active Pegasus thing aerodynamically sound. Piffle. Piebald horseplay. Then one of the bio mavens, his mouth full, pronounces two of the graces alike — the 'isolation pigmentation tests concur'. So more clones. An atavistic family of graces? What may the cautious dandy do? Hand the entire bundle over to my old pal Willardson. Our cherub connoisseur.*

*Then, diary, sounds of ice cracking on the pond. 'Clone Queen Susy' — Limburg burbling aloud. A striking look alike. Cosmic sisters. Aren't they all. Susanne too tired to be furious or amused. Her locks and smock surround like a mummy. No flowing life forms. Memories. Rock mining. Magnitude redshift. Space density. Mean sky brightness. Background noise. A lot of interstellar gas.*

Willardson smiled dourly. Was Clone Queen Susy the dry reference to Susanne? The raw earnestness syndrome again? For the time being he

would trust in Cressman's narrative and returned to the perplexing journal.

*September 20, 10:45 PM: What goes on continues. Suddenly, dramatically images of unsportsmanlike behaviour, with very little assertion of local wit. Star Wars with Obi-Wan Kenobi as the grossly deformed child in Eraserhead. The Princes will listen, for a time. I once more dwell on the limitations. How, in this context, beauty looks programmatic, a kind of tribal dues. Reproduction, for instance, appears to be accomplished by simple cloning, of a highly arbitrary and vainglorious sort. No evidence of sexual conduct until recently — the Princes stare like patronized clerics — the act itself being a ritualized part of the spoils — the war I remind them between the putative sexes. I point to a single variety of clone, the one possessing the fussy ‘crystalgram’ — Limburg’s fanciful word which caught on — which may represent a hybrid intelligence and is a major prize in the ‘hostilities’, this clone alone possessing evidence of a vestigial reproductive system. I add a refresher note about the much contested — here and in the tableaux — ‘crystalgram’: it is an odd — for earth-bound crystallographers — jewel-like presence issuing slightly from the left temple. Its structure seems to continue to involute its plains throughout the life of the custodian. I quote a bit of technical: ‘The thermal movement of atoms in such gems reduces what is called the Bragg Intensity of the diffracted spectra, abstracting the molecular rigid-body vibration parameters constrained by the ‘least square imposition’, meaning: more signals in less space...by then the audience is getting restless. I continue. It is a greatly coveted object, in the ongoing ‘fracas’. Owners ceremoniously dispossessed. A diffident collaborative yawn in the audience.*

*I continue by listing the precursors in the tableaux to the mayhem: the accumulated images of technological prowess — in ostensibly ‘primitive’ communities. I show the Princes an early tableaux that presents an oversize human-like apparition fabricated en-*

tirely from ornamental artifacts, in ‘combat’ with a people similarly adorned. It appears that the decoration has in fact been transposed into a kind of exoskeleton armour. Hide-bound offence, I say. The Princes all but demurring. I suggest that here is a culture whose preoccupation with adornment — idealized flesh as well as attire — monopolized its creative energies and hindered it from cultivating other talents — prompting the discussion (which according to Dowd follows as day to night) of the difficulty in fostering conceptual abstractions in reactive intelligence, which is very often innate, ‘untaught’ — visual, reflexive, sensual — as the current examples portray. Dowd expands his quiet manifesto, thinking it pertinent here. Most extremists vent a visceral ‘logic’: they ascribe preposterous designs to routine events — as their statisticians often know; they do not comprehend the limitations of human resource and energy, even gleefully take on the world; they less marvel at nature than are romanticized by her — an AC-DC playground ; and they impart such conviction to their fantasies that they are constrained to act them out. What was that Angus?... Symbolic logic gives to one his own brain by freeing intuition from the mundane, from serviceable myths — from the extravagant heart upstaging the parsimonious head. Unfortunately the lay conception is the reverse — meaning the debate goes on — in the unconstrained tableaux. Old Dowdy assertive here. Last time he delivered a cogent resume of sentiment in the common use of ‘rational’ (e.g. it’s rational to trust in the U.N. mandate), one inference being that they, the Princes, might ignore most of what I had been communicating to them the past weeks...but they distrusted the alacrity with which I agreed.

September 21, 10:30 PM: a surprise -- a new face among the Princes, occupying Voden’s chair, one not yet coroneted it seems. One I find disconcerting — admit i — oversize head with alert red eyes and a comic-sinister wave of hair. He speaks up after my lonely dissertation. The pitch of voice startling. A lyric soprano — in a would-be

*Templar.* His words, carefully chosen, reveal an informed technocrat. He speaks eloquently of proportion, and questions my interpretation of the recent tableaux as evidence of unrestrained hostility. Augmenting the Dowd paradigm, I presume. He suggests they are esteemed entertainments, intended to stimulate creative energy in an otherwise exceptionally serene and tranquil community. He invokes the injunctions of the Greek temple: *Know Thyself and Nothing in Excess* (including tranquility I presume) — templates he believes of the civilization we're observing the management of surfeit in. The patents of which seem to have been inculcated into the program. I wonder if the excess includes prolonged mention of it but I suspect that to dispute with him is to lose one's audience. C'est pire qu'un crime, c'est une faute. One of Dowd's cannards.

Willardson slowly put down the manuscript. Could Peter have been this drained, exhausted, dilatory? This intimidated? Had memory sweetened the earlier times? Could the entries be explained as the thoughts of one under undue duress, the gifted musician forced to compose a fugue by day's end? *ZYTA* being ravaged by her own population?... That ideal world complaining of usury, neglect?... Surely tabloid drama. But the later tableaux were denied him. Peter was by then too absorbed, and made no attempt to share the later computer renderings, which they had discussed so fervently in the beginning, when *ZYTA* was still a daunting curiosity.

He recalled the first time he and Peter collaborated together. They were a corporate team then, and had been asked to appraise the authenticity and black-market worth of a collection of Pre-Columbian artifacts, mostly Peruvian and Chilean. It was the preparatory stage for an ostentatious public scholarship fund to the host country and a discreet apology for

undisclosed mischief with land-use injunctions — facts they learned later. For six highly entertaining weeks they toiled, engaging lavish amounts of corporate hospitality which they deemed the corporate guilt would not begrudge. At one stage they drew two attractive girls from the secretarial pool and submitted them to the delicate art of decanting fragile wines, preparing chili and fish cakes befitting the day's labours, dressing in attire apposite the setting invoked by that day's collection, and seeing to it their omniscient overseers never fell prey to fatigue. Peter was a dedicated anthropologist with a keen side interest in archaeology, also generous, nearly virginal (Margaret Mead spoiled his sex life he claimed), also fastidious, whimsical, and dutifully irreverent about all practitioners of the soft sciences. 'Salty wit preserves many fishy solecisms.' The Princes trusted him, in the beginning. He would become at Paleomena a defensive raconteur — his assertion. Only barbarians possess self-defense he said, echoing Marx.

Willardson read on, attentive, wistful.

*September 22, 10:10 PM: a silly thesis taunts us guestimate-ridden. We are parapsychologists now. The ZYTA signal can commandeer the imagination of any personality it tracks on Thirteen. Where doth the trivia engender? The degree of absurdity varies proportionately with the rate of survival. Miguel of course blind, deaf, and dumb. But Susanne forbiddingly silent before the pronouncement — seeing an old hat on a bed, or a gassed trooper. The atmosphere poisonous. Susanne, our fluent mater and final confessor silent and emotionally trussed away. She's lost weight. An ironic improvement. Hands folded like a skeleton. Where is Frieda? Where indeed.*

*September 23, 11:40 PM: less acrimony. An ocean of work. Background noise louder. The Patterson synthesis — still the crystalgram. The Patterson Fourier synthesis...a vectorial pattern of the interatomic distances...pressure yields the gem, in the gospel according to Muerner, and the facets of the gem cue the infinite interfaces. Somehow the memory index.*

*The ‘war’ in the tableaux continues, even as the numerical arrays explicate themselves with unwavering elegance. A deluge of formulae. Miguel struggles to get outside help. For the first time. His teams’ heads flummoxed. The latest theoretical jewels include several promising patents, an unusual compact route to nuclear fusion, a handy thing a touchy neighbour could purge his neighbourhood with; also particle-beam transducers, involuted remote sensors...the information gleaned fragmentary but holding great promise...all word worlds in earnest.*

*Back to the war. Droll gamine pornography — yes, quite — disorienting the baddies, largely the ‘males’ in the present scenes. The vestigial sex seems to have a drop kick after all. The unvented irony is the ‘males’ used the intrigue first — to distract and confuse with their captive opponent’s warriors. A great Faustian raillery. A tongue-tied audience. Then Limburg summarily fired — redeployed on some rag the corporation uses as a pop culture feeler teaser and advertising mailer. Once again he indulged himself in the ‘graven image’ department. It seemed he tried to introduce canned laughter, grunting noises of an audience breaking up during an imputed Rabelaisian scene of battle. No commiseration from on high. The Princes an unforgiving brood now. We worry — yours truly especially after my old drinking crony showed up in person. His dilapidated puss not the irregularity it should have been. The grasshopper Stanton could have spit up the new user keys. Have they suborned even our cherubs? One cannot converse with a confederate down here — barely manage to get these seditious thoughts down in*

*my seedy den. Time to get sloshed, versatile Frieda's back — strangely subdued. Asking a lot of damned odd questions, come to think of it, as many about the Princes — my assessment of their credentials, their confusion or comprehension, also their influence at large...what's she worried about, her job's secure. Out of nowhere — this interest — coincidental to the other business, coming to a head...*

Once more Willardson put down the tendentious pages and began to ponder the pithy offhand words, though not for long. The elderly usher returned. The limo waited. He would leave by a rear exit and be taken on a circuitous ride home.

Which he was, a ghostly funeral elder behind a curtained window, the desultory lights of the city screened by a low menacing haze, a premature dusk. The umbered lake. Throughout the ride he listened to an accusatory tirade within himself as the stark night lights, spectral bull's eyes, pricked his eyes. He was struck dumb: but for Cressman, no able sentinel remained in the keep, no flicker of a trusted sublunary taper. His stormy firmament would be starved of light. He was not one to complain, yet he did feel sorry for the freighted *ZYTA*. Only his stolid poetry he might fall back on.

That night he dreamt, alertly, unblinkingly, laconically. Suggestive of *ZYTA*'s inimical world.

He strode through finespun scented grass. Bare feet, large, abused by obstinate shoes, fell upon the raiment of lapping sea and soft bowery earth, a water meadow, fresh and fragrant. Which harboured a small boat. Sapid waves balanced the shallow draft. A trio of Sandpipers twit-

tered about the margin of shore in a loose daring formation tracing imaginary wisps of hair. Across the bay lay a forest with a loosely plaited waterfall.

He stepped into the boat, set the oars, and began to row as a nostalgic old tar. The oar locks squawked like the entresol chair. The evening sky descended from a livid purple to a flushed pink. A lone gull alighted on the bow and needled him in the topical cry of complaint. The breeze tingled like damp polyester. The air was full of cheap perfume.

He decided he was likely happy.

The gull flew away just as he reached the shore. The forest reeked of cedar and pine. The waterfall spray left the trees slaked, distinct, dew-spangled, like a dedicated commercial. *ZYTA* would be hiking somewhere.

A path took him to a steep rise, which transcended the forest, to eventually open upon the heavens. Clouds dappled his feet. He stood in the settle of an immense splintered stump, castle-like, with spiny turrets and barbicans extending deep into the sky. Stars hun about like wishes or favors.

A small disc of light moved in a broad arc toward the rise growing in size and intensity. It seemed to rotate. Gracile limbs swirled within the circumference.

A creature wheeling, pirouetting. Suddenly as the disc appeared it stopped, its light fading to a low patina.

The outline of a hyaloid shell, a smooth glassy lozenge, after the finest Steuben glass. Delicate arms, legs folded into an opening. The scent and thrust of a surf. A creature stood and beckoned, a sea nereid who other-

wise sported an angelic look. She had apparently come for him, without a subpoena. She resembled the sister he once longed for, or someone he ought to know.

Again he was signaled to come forward. And again. The pressure was excruciating. His hesitation bathetic. Every molecule in him said yes, but he was slow counting.

The beckoning ceased, rather too abruptly he thought. The limbs folded back into the compact shell and spread gracefully, unremittingly about the dreamy translucence. The disc began to revolve and with a faint whisper whirled away. He felt let down, a feeling he thought he had mastered. He returned to the wide sable forest. The stars were screened by a dense primeval canopy. Pechenpaugh's ceiling.

He ran till his lungs were pressed between stone. A distant glow urged him on, an aura condensing to a scarlet core. Perspiration scored his skin. His back froze, his blood might boil. Smoke scoured eyes. Going or coming. He could make out frail substances, grey-white, embroidered, luminous, soul-like. A grand and poignant chorus. Suffering he could not endure was fashioning art he was wary of. A tale not told by an idiot. He was perplexed. He had no majesty and hoarded humour. The Apollyon fuelled no lyric in him and he listlessly turned away. Yet he thought he could hear the voices of gentle ancient friends fading, absolving...friends who had been to the other side. Elsewhere a flame proof crowd got up and danced. With coronet, and/or cutlass. It didn't much matter. The beat was on. Relentless, refractory. Berth jive, funeral jive, jive jive. The

boogie that fits all. How you managed in the pit. *ZYTA*, he felt, would have left early. (If you wake up in the afterlife and recognize yourself you're in big trouble — a tenet of his belief, which he vainly tried to pawn.)

So came the rain. The pickled tears. Frantically he slipped through teaming ferns and cold leaves. Mosquitos loomed big as vibrating teething rings. In a clearing the rain abruptly ceased. Shafted sunlight light fell upon the ground. The forest about was unusual. The trees luxuriant, green, symmetrical, agreeably spaced. The birdsong surely angelic. *ZYTA* might be sunbathing somewhere.

Within the clearing stood an imposing temple. Cautiously he approached the entrance. Tinted sunlight filtered through a clerestory, enkindling lambent rashes on a large congregation, a chic mettlesome group, abundantly fulfilling the requisites of the comers in successful magazines. This was unusual, for many were parents and many more retired.

The conversation was hushed yet expectant. Swish folk not engaged in back chat or small talk but complex philosophical subjects, the means to knowledge and deft expression. The ineluctable law of parsimony. The concordant requisite also to be cheerful, useful, mannerly. Not sorry for yourself. Cold is cold.

There were a few cranks. Someone, who rarely sat about on his hands, had written a tome on spurious ecliptic systems. Another, who rarely used her hands at all, designed a computer that would put the tome to a rigorous empirical test. Another, who played the gedeck, said the first two

should eat more fruit. Another chap pronounced ‘aum’ in a dramatic voice and curbed his appetite. Still another was elected a historic beauty and slept through the whole affair. Someone else again wrote a song that fostered a lot of pithy dreaming. All he needed was the air he could breathe and space enough to let a few people take his measurements.

Now Willardson smiled in his sleep: dedicated snobs he knew about. He found a seat near the back and settled in. If his physiognomy was a little out of place, well he wasn’t a fuss-pot. Then everyone was seized by a faint hysteria as the appellant ascended the dock, or rather was helped into it. His new artificial limbs could not easily negotiate stairs. About then Willardson noted that the doors to the chamber opened only one way. In.

The appellant received little sympathy. Most hearts stayed where they were. He was a scold.

Then someone, a rather shy soul, conceded his heart hopped once. The appellant had not been heedlessly presumptuous. Yet the consensus remained the creature should have been aborted — before a thoughtful soul admitted her heart palpitated at least twice. He had shown a fleeting interest in representative art. Another thought a new tailor might help — with the limbs and use of the cane. Someone else, reading from a long transcript, thought the kidneys might be salvaged, and perhaps the genetic encryption of the deltoids.

The pending abortion was thus shelved, for the time being.

Then a jolly soul, one of the few who sat alone, announced her heart thumped thrice. No one had ever been behind him pushing!

A rather flat silence followed this stolid comment. The woman might treasure silence the rest of her life.

Someone else again thought the appellant unstable, like an isotope of plutonium.

Many heads nodded a reluctant consent, just as Willardson was startled by a resonant voice. One of the Elders had elected to speak.

“Because of your indifference, the life of a man still under sentence of this court, your dear friend and predecessor, ended prematurely, making the cosmos less harmonious than it was, the regnant tableaux less coherent. We sincerely regret to find you guilty as charged. You are an anarchist. You would doubt the wisdom of the *cabal!*” It was apparent from the cosmic noise in the chamber that this was on the order of slighting the Big Bang. With a patient sigh the mindful voice continued.

“Yet without some contribution to that community from which one draws sustenance, the respect of self, and others, withers and dies. This insight makes manifest your dilemma: you have naught but yourself to offer the community. We must, do, take you as you are.”

The appellant looked down as his new limbs and wondered aloud what part of him was now being prepared for his supper. Could the cooks not start on something else — last night’s heel had been tough.

The stately voice demurred. The appellant’s time was up. Besides, the experience of heel was often cathartic.

The conversation as the chamber emptied — the doors suddenly reversed — was about being a brother’s keeper to an unkept brother. Most

felt society had an obligation. However alien, unlovely even hostile the being. Or wistful his visions.

Make love not war. To imagine they might be one and the same was not helpful.

Willardson ran back to the raised ground — where the elegant craft had landed and beckoned. But all he could see were the stars. ZYTA's stars. All now out of reach.

He woke to the resonant patter of a herd of runners outside his bedroom window, all relentlessly flogging time, staying the tedium, seeking the pristine forest. He tried to remember the many concealed, seamless, well-beaten paths beside the meandering creek of his childhood, paths decided by eager unscheduled summer excursions.

He padded off to his bathroom, splashed water on his face, but avoided looking at himself. He had the distinct feeling his limbs, his volition even, belonged to someone else. The grilling would continue.

## NINE

He approached the Landowney Gallery the afternoon of the following day — irresolutely. A resurrected Hermann, more than equal to the rigours of palliative care, sent him another message: the single unusual print of the multi-armed deity was now a collection. He chose to have another look, another grave distempered look. Moreover, Hermann assured him the artist had settled down, even ‘flaunted’ a fixed address.

As expected, the pictures were a pretty extravaganza, the ‘figment’ in

science-fiction sagas. Guaranteed to distract and entertain. He guessed that Zoya, the enchantress of the Bellerophon, had been interpolated into the collection, images of her carefully masked into prints transcribed from the earlier graphic renderings. Hermann's gallery provided a suitable place for a preview opening. How canny. Everyone would gain, the Princes, wholesale buyers of sensational zines, Zoya's current sponsors and conceivably Zoya herself if an audience was found. And that likelihood would further remove the antecedent — the novel creatures in the tableaux. The way of heresy, conspiracy, and the alert entertainer.

Hermann greeted him with glutinous deference, full of condolences for the incorrect address he'd given him — and at least three other prospective buyers. The new address would be a simple consignment front, where probing enquiries must alert spoil mongers like Pechenpaugh. The artist's name, Louis Peak. Who very likely existed. Willardson accepted the stilted apologies with quiet good humour. A plodder like Hermann would not be in on the conspiracy. The real *ZYTA* was light years away here.

Before leaving he stopped once more before the precursor of the present collection, the print of the multi-limbed deity with the oddly Minoan look. The eyes and eye settings alone he guessed might be unaltered. He felt the plight of the stare. Hermann was standing by his elbow.

“Good work, jah?”

“A limited but determined craftsman, I think.”

It seemed exactly the answer Hermann anticipated.

“Jah, jah. You too. I sneeze on him first. Then I get two draft offers.

My gosh, I can tell you. A good year for Herr Peak.”

That evening, late, he found himself strolling near Frieda’s apartment, wondering what the ‘other business’ Peter mentioned was. Frieda was then away on a holiday, ostensibly a research sabbatical, whatever that meant. The dormer windows to her apartment looked the same; a faint glow lined the curtain flues. His contact had expressly warned against trying to make contact with anyone from Thirteen. No ‘dangling participles’ he said to himself. Why then was he here? Out of sheer nostalgia perhaps? Thinking the lovely face might peer down at him before turning in? The Pleiades’ Maia who had vanished. Leaving a cosmic void. The support beams of the balcony that faced the street, off the bedroom he had slept in, stood out in the harsh street light.

Of course he should just go home, and further instruct himself in transcendentalism, in Cretan syncretism, or whatever, his self-pity ever conjuring able, fluent, smooth performers. Smooth. Smooth for him was a Roquefort mousse, sometimes with nuts. But a firm dark voice intruded a lot these days. The voice Muerner should have had. The voice of a Moloch — not a quirky Beelzebub, short of funds and lusting after Apollos — but Moloch, the pain giver, the doer, the humourless-brute knife-edge guarantor — so unlike the popular cosmetic hawkers of nirvana, of Atlantis, the resident revilers, deprecators of unplaced odours, mysterious rashes, and stubborn silly tufts of hair that refused to acknowledge manifest baldness. Or simply stray hair itself, the No-No, No-No devices. He

wasn't sure why, but he had to see the lovely suite again, even less it's bower bird, as an astronaut might wish to return to a puzzling planet. Something he had missed. A late happening perhaps...something surely.

Gently and gradually the lift mechanism brought him down the other side of the brick fence, depositing him upright in the manicured garden. The gentleman comes prepared. The door to the garden shed remained open a smidgen, the fault of a displaced welcome mat. Oddly, a stone propped open the front entrance door. It appeared someone was moving in; a van was parked near the shed, several cartons lining its side. He seemed to move as an automaton.

The staircase locks presented no problem until he reached the first floor fire barrier. He was forced to take the stairs to the communal roof garden and, after a withering debate, slither over the low edge of a balcony rooftop, a maneuver that split apart a forsythia shrub and served him with a lightly sprained ankle. For several anxious minutes he remained on the balcony kneading the tendons, listening keenly, silently. Noise of busy swampers came from the box of the truck. Someone talked on a mobile. He seemed to have disturbed no one — a too agreeable happenstance — yet only his frenzied heart and some indistinct rock music filled the void.

He could make out very little inside the broad glass patio doors to Frieda's suite. The weak street light illuminated some shelving and margin of a carpet. To his amazement of balcony door was ajar. So, now or never.

Mustering reserve nerve he quickly traversed the large salon facing the

balcony, turned on his torch as he entered the heavily scented foyer to consecutively explore, with a growing wonder and alarm: the smaller sitting-room cum library where the recording was made, the sound equipment scattered pell mell below its wall cabinet; the kitchen and pantry where the remains of some milk toast — upset stomach fare? — had been stepped on and tracked; the hobby room where the jade palace Buddhas still smiled at a bundle of cascading washing; and finally the largest of the bedrooms, where he halted. The mess here was excessive. Throughout the apartment evidence of an uncharacteristic disorder hinted at a clumsy house-search and in this bedroom, with its ample closet and spacious dual bathroom, the disarray appalled. Whole cupboards were emptied. Many light costumes lay helter-skelter on the floor and daybed, along with cosmetic containers from a ransacked vanity, the drawers of which lay wrenched from their tracks. A framed antique Oriental jacket was rent and partially removed from its moorings. An alpha gorilla had preceded him there.

He readied the canister and slowly made his way again though the now eerie rooms, his hand shaking like a nautical flag. He inspected both balconies but found only his own clumsy entry recordable. The larger one with the bougainvillea, the one visible from the garden, had not been used for some time, he thought, the door double locked, the beam alarm in tact as far as he could tell, the chaise and armchairs stacked in a corner under the overhang. Convinced he was alone, he returned to the disheveled bedroom and switched on the ceiling illumination after closing the curtains

and both entry doors. He sat on a deep-cushioned settee to nurse his swelling ankle and sift the conspicuous details.

A swirl tub in the main en suite contained an inch of soapy water. The lid from an unidentified medicine vial obstructed the drain. Water dappled the floor tiles along with dingy sneaker prints. A bath towel lay twisted in a corner. In a waste basket lay several older, dry tissues smudged with pink and cyan pigments, resembling a gouache. The dual basin counter was seemingly undisturbed but for a skin lotion left poorly capped.

Hiking and sports wear lay strewn about the bedroom floor before the open drawers of a Regency chest. In the highboy he found what he took to be rehearsal costumes and apparel, including some worn ballet slippers. These too had been rifled, the seams ripped apart. The highboy itself had been pushed away from the wall. The remaining bedrooms, including the guest room he had slept in, were similarly deranged, though fewer articles cluttered the floor and furnishings, and those that did prompted no significant connections. They seemed to represent only what the gorillas upset or disturbed in search of — the elusive something else. Oddly enough, the cabaret costumes he once spied in the second bedroom had vanished. The craft room, salon and token drawing room had also been searched but with less expediency, the kitchen, study and atrium seemingly not at all -- supposedly the sought object had been found, its placement discovered.

He returned to the main bedroom, again closing its doors and turning on the interior lights. In reaching for a second bank of switches he nearly

overturned a book of microcomputer graphics that perched precariously atop a plate of still moist litchi fruit. Rather, the fruit sat in the inverted lid of a tall Kang H'si vase, one of two such guardians of the baroque vanity. He tried to imagine Frieda savouring a choice snack while packing. Or re-packing. Several items could have come from an opened travel bag he concluded after a second examination, the remaining items creased and in some cases sweat stained. Apparel from a warm likely moist climate he decided, the mouldy socks and spattered boots abetting the conclusion. Bunched briefs yielded trace scents of an active person. No syllabub though. An opened unguent bottle — a hand and body cream — had been left by a relief-engraved goblet that smelled of a light sweet wine. Both escaped ruin on the vanity. The wine had been consumed, the fruit nearly so...by a traveller once removed?

A note stuck in the back cover of the computer book proved to be a photocopy of a handwritten memo or brief that originated in Dowd's office. It bore a tower classification with the intended recipient's names spelled in bold script. Frieda was not among them, nor Pechenpaugh, nor Cressman. Max Paleogiannis, Muerner, Dowd, respectively, headed the list, followed by a dozen others, two of whom Willardson recognized as recently commissioned regional field directors. One of these, a deep-current oceanographer, was stationed on a research rig near Fiji. The memo was very faint, but one he could follow the gist of. It informed the reader of a new in-house information centre to be established that week. A new entry key would utilize an eye scanner. The centre was to replace one used be-

fore the loss of a high orbit dynasty-type satellite — the type, if he was not mistaken, that *ZYTA* had ‘appropriated’. It had apparently fallen into the South Pacific.

He returned to the salon, intending to disguise as best he could the damage done the balcony forsythia when slight metallic sounds issued from the lock on the door that led to the outside elevator. He turned off his torch and hid, canister at the ready, in the shadow of an armoire.

The door opened and a quartz beam flooded the vicinity with strong direct light which circled to the main bedroom where unrelieved cussing accompanied the sounds of articles being flung about. The voice was thin, churlish, male and American. Frieda’s name several times transpired in mock apotheosis. As the intruder moved the light danced like an aurorae borealis, often preceding sounds of disruption and hackneyed profanity as lightning precedes thunder. The beam returned and raked the salon, dawdling fitfully near a table by the armoire, illuminating but not lingering upon the balcony door which Willardson hadn’t fully shut. Suddenly, mercifully, the light expired, leaving a blinding dark. The entrance door closed. Willardson remained motionless for several minutes, his heart pounding while his ankle, forced into an uncomfortable crouch, throbbed unsparingly.

An eternity compressed itself into a tight minute before he hobbled over to check if the lock was in place, the implication being a key rather than lock probes given the speed of entry.

He did his best to retrace the chap’s movement but found nothing to

add to his store of details except the exhibits that newly littered the rug near the front door: a long cigarette ash, a fragment from a recognizable candy foil with accompanying toffee aroma, and a couple of small leaves, pointed and narrow. The fellow had come to the elevator via the garden, and likely patronized a small candy counter near the art museum, from whence Willardson had strolled to Cressman's flat three days before.

In the bedroom the vase lid that held the litchi fruit lay shattered on the floor, fragments scattered about the base of the a smaller Japanese guardian figure. Most of the remaining berries had rolled near or under the daybed. The book rested nearby, the note still adhering face down inside the back cover, a result of his handling of the sticky fruit.

The curiosity of the whitewashed tunnel was not lost to her. It too must have a history that extended back several decades. The miasma in replay. The adjutants now more suave, rich gabardine suggestive of Bill Blass, ensconced behind a durable regency table— another sturdy hand-honed relic in this mausoleum. She thought of the apocryphal ‘tale of the crematorium’ — how you left the service. Honorably: neatly dressed, decorated and dead; dishonorably: naked, trussed and terribly alert. The fires would at least warm one she mused. Despite the fact she was no longer cold, she could not stop shivering. They found an extra pair of shoes and a sweater. Both a little large but welcome. She assumed the one adjutant bird a holdover, his age and demeanor that of a Nestor whose deliberation was old school.

When they got to the formal questioning she was shocked to find that her incidental ‘findings’ about *ZYTA*, her carefully worked out distractions, did no interest them at all. They zeroed in on the iterations she alone had specified, adapted to the program — something only Daniel Frank or Susanne could have expounded in the detail they expected her to explicate. So. Had young Daniel been indiscrete after all? Her admirable impromptu attempt to subvert her own findings by insinuating problems with the precision of graph sets — sets of nodes and gates delineated by edges, boundaries, one of her mathematical ruses — interested them for about a minute. Even her recruitment of Willardson seemed now old hat. The tape he helped her concoct a kind of golden oldie — what bored bravos might listen to months hence with droll nostalgia. She might have scotched some snakes at Paleomena, but not the sharks, the inheritors of the new innocuous acronym, the SVR. Who had likely gained a ready entrance to *ZYTA* via Pechenpaugh in his need for leverage. So she guessed. Hence her lapsed utility. She wondered again at the faces behind the glazed panel to her right. Would the phenomenal Prokovsky be among the watchers? He would certainly be one of the new arbiters. The new corsairs. The questions, she noted, were becoming simpler, her replies, shorter. Then quite abruptly she found she could say no more.

How exceptionally sad the Nestor could look without changing a line in his face.

The first injection simply acutely nauseated, and made communication slow and difficult. She was always prone to dizziness when sick. The se-

cond terrified, left one a raw paranoid in the dark — recapitulating the terror of the late nightmare. Especially when inverted -- *dangling now in her drugged fit from the chandelier, as the winged roaches brushed her smelly flesh...a minute of this and she gripped the guard's leg with a ferocity that took two of the bravos to disengage...so bloomed the ravages of imagination....*

Thereafter: the sweetness and luminosity of feeble, lame confession. The patient blue eyes of the new young priest before her — a close brother returned from a dread country. A treasure trove of past and remaineder detail. Pithy reminiscence, even introspection. Disclosed in two long afternoons — the ritual of stately absolution — by a new sunny room bedecked with crisp cotton sheets and savory food tray. Even an elegant tiled shower and a masseuse to help relieve the lingering tremors. Then abruptly, almost by stealth, a return of amour propre. A camp discovery — she was still a human, before serio-comic guards, tirelessly accommodating. She was even allowed time with some of the conscripted girlfriends. Some temp observers no doubt. On two sunny afternoons she slicked herself with sunscreen and joined the hecklers on the lawn of the tea garden. A pretty sham, but diverting and sensually assuaging. Such a shade plant she had been. The palest of the pale. The chatty conversation the balm of happy trivia. “You went to the Paleomena fête?” “No.” “It must have been a blast. Anton Plomberies staged some of it.” “No, I didn’t know that.” The geniality of the talker barely flickered. “He’s maybe better known in Europe.”

The reprise, however, as quickly dissolved, became almost over night

an uncomfortable suspicion. Post traumatic stress. A highwayman in the night robbing you of the newly acquired calm. A renewed, burgeoning terror. A supplementary injection or two: her dislike of roaches went back a long way, to the cupboard an early state-appointed guardian once locked her in — an incidental fact in her dossier. Also now the smell of the guard's uniform and roughness of his neck, an old messy burn. An adventure in a troop carrier. An oddly tender man, despite his mandate, with a stoic sensibility, a fellow traveller far East of Eden. Not unlike her Vassily. It would take time. Her return.

She was aware that the Nestors had no more interest in her, nor any apparent apprehension about her potency outside. A wastrel: her research stature and career at Paleomena now suspect, perhaps contumelious, her own doing largely, to belie that corporate master too. In short, her utility to the service was now marginal at best, her durable currency culled by the daring Pechenpaugh . Paleomena, with Pechenpaugh in charge, would find her repugnant; her input to the *ZYTA* team negligent. No forwarding. A few choice idiomatic rumours. Moreover, the new hierarchy of the service was cut on the bias — a female ever a female, her conquests in government and academe long since picked clean of desideratum. Moreover, her extended traffic in deception, her use of significant American others, could constitute a further liability to the embassy — hence a longer confinement, as anonymous no doubt, fewer roaches perhaps — if she snitched. In short: the SVR would not tell, unless confronted. Trade se-

crets were now potent as the unadulterated *ZYTA*. With luck she might get a job as a teacher in some rural backwater. Poor Vassily.

They gave her finally a wig, a suitcase full of clothes, new identity papers, some money and hailed a taxi after three tradeoffs. She could go where she liked. Not a wide range of options. Her apartment would have been turned upside down. The owner filing charges against his absent lessee. Even Paleomena would have it under surveillance, and her past sufficiently backlogged to discover something on the order of an immaculate conception — in the vulgarized sense of ‘immaculate’ — her legend’s mother being an unlikely candidate, died as she had at eleven in an Ursaline Convent. Her chosen ‘clients’ in academe and the federal government, the half-dozen rooks who might be sympathetic, would be at risk if she were to invoke their patronage, clemency and hospitality now. And their suspicions should make her quandary far worse. There seemed but one possibility. Which one ought not broach in a sober state. She had the cabbie head for the all night club she had sought out in earlier moments of doubt. From the front tables you could see the high railway overpass. The schedule the same. She double checked. Early in her career a cutout had been threatened so. In an identity crisis.

She put on her best outfit. For perhaps a last night out.

The lingering discussion in the assessment room annoyed Prokovsky. Yes, it was his decision, and the uneasy questioners were simply nags await-

ing the retirement pasture. Though the glue factory for them was a ways off.

“At the risk of being obtuse, let me repeat: she’s finished. Paleomena won’t touch her with a barge pole, and it sets the grade for research hopefuls these days. Fact. Her targets in the U.S. plutocracy are all history now; the one left with any tenure is an old Kennedy idolater, for petesake. A fuddy duddy. Emeritus with no merit. The spinners in Washington will go berserk trying to mask her former acquaintances in the government — she was a dutiful party animal. Vassily saw to that.” ‘Party’ was given a wry pronunciation. He smiled. “Think of her as one of Saddam’s anthrax weapons. Poisonous but no reality credential or effective delivery system. The CIA will deny her existence.”

The silence seemed to affirm assent. Less impetuously, Prokovsky continued:

“And what would we gain by helping her over the railing? She can be hauled in anytime if she doesn’t do a brodie herself. Either way we are ahead. She’s no talebearer. Snobs don’t grovel. My god she was one of Vassily’s nose cones.” It was obvious to the others that Prokovsky could brandish his English as well as anyone. When he chose.

Then the youngest Nestor spoke, the blue-eyed former gymnast who was the computer specialist who had taken Frieda’s confession. “She just may make contact with a group still working on some aspects *ZYTA*. There must have been some *esprit de corps* there. Knowing who she might

try to contact will be useful. As Mr. Prokovsky says, she can be reeled in anytime.”

They all felt more comfortable that a Russian-Asian team was now at work on *ZYTA*. It was Pechenpaugh’s farewell salute to his in-house critics — recruiting international doctorates hungry for a life in the US, most of them brilliant. The feisty finesse.

Prokovsky was quick to capitalize on the young Nestor’s remark. “Exactly my point. Given our new Paleomena watch, we’ll discover who was on this ‘older’ team and play along with them, for a time.” The logic seemed immutable. “All the more reason to sit back and enjoy. Van Eerden’s former colleagues will be addled by her duplicity, and be a time regrouping. The best time to watch and help out. Hold some hands if necessary.”

By then the smokers had lit up. Yes. Had they not been more than generous? And stoically accommodating about her release? Moreover, had they not given her an extended grace period before reeling her in? Yes to all three. Ablesimov would have to revisit his laurels. They might proceed with the next stage. As usual Prokovsky was ahead of them, and had already drawn the dossier from his briefcase. He who decisively wins the second or third round often wins the fight.

The morning following his impulsive visit to Frieda’s apartment, Willardson stood inside the arched door with the iron scrollwork. As before, while he awaited Mr. Fazio, he patiently submitted to the hall’s perfume

and marginal light. At the far end the recollected romper room announced itself in the same bold colour, chiding him for doubting its bonhomie.

He knew the item he described to Mr. Fazio over the phone to be ‘exclusive’ (he faintly winced at the furtive unctuousness he was capable of) but he simply had to find out the provenance of this earth-bound *ZYTA* or Zyta. If she was as Voden claimed, then a connection might be made. Particularly if he could, from his own contacts and experience, narrow the selection of artists who specialized in clever phantasmagoria. Indeed, he already had a couple of names in mind. And by going to the model, the fair lady direct, he might cull the field. That would be a start. He was alarmed that Frieda told him so much less than she might have. Moreover, given the revelations at the Paleomena fête in the Muerner castle, he had to know if the new performer, this Zyta, was sharing digs with Coyolxauhqui. Not that it greatly mattered in the wider the scheme of things. The necessary lead time Cressman stressed was well underway. But the puzzle strafed and chided. Being a square was one thing, a dunce and gull something else. He would begin with Fazio, then, if need be, the Bellerophon. How easily anger and pique oil movement.

He did not know the ways of a sex exchange, if that was the word, and banked on being accepted as a highly placed eccentric. The easy part. He was instructed to arrive at this hour with payment ready, a sturdy four figure sum Fazio mentioned as casually as one might the cost of persimmons. The note was drawn on the corporation’s art acquisition fund, and

he would have approximately a week before someone cottoned to the unusual payee, an investment broker in Compton who had bankrolled some exigencies in the past, from whom he was to receive this time a mediocre rendering of Alivazovsky's 'The Ninth Wave'. Willardson freely plundering the depths.

The Black ponce in the same mussed velvet suit met him through the same wall vent, ushered him down the hall and through the magenta door to a seat by a large roll top desk, wherein he leafed through a picture folio of young bodies, male and female, a distinctive élite it seemed, a professional cream, if a twelve-year-old can be said to be a professional. The eyes in some pictures were blocked out, as in a circumspect medical text. The poses too bore a clinical formality. Chapters without verses. Spare physical data interleaved the photos. The maturer women were, less a few voluptuous candidates, tall, slender. The men invariably svelte but of a younger mean age. He was surprised such a stock of pictures should exist, but guessed infatuates with that kind of money welcomed assurances, a photo being a pacifying opener. Anatomical worth sold by the gross. He wore the same thick glasses he believed would be comforting to whoever was scheduled to do the bookkeeping.

Mr. Fazio confessed, irascibly Willardson thought, to having no current print or videotape of the performer he felt certain his client was interested in, a Russian dancer recently come to the America. He could, however, show some older amateur snaps. They were not recent because she had elected not to be photographed in this country, at least for the time being.

Also, he reminded Willardson, this particular performer maintained a separate price schedule, did not perform without a ‘castellan’ who would of course be inconspicuous, used her own condoms for all acts, and precluded anal sex. Willardson did his best to wave aside trite details. Money talked, Jeremiah. Just enter the name.

Mr. Fazio then left him alone for a few minutes to fetch the ‘snaps’, and probably initiate a credit check. The sum was modest enough against the procurement fund with its ceiling of half-a-million Swiss francs. Amounts beyond

that required Pechenpaugh’s authorization. Yet he felt the hour of his conversion to underground status had arrived.

The girl he was finally shown, certainly younger than the Bellerophon performer, wore less skillfully the same theatrical makeup on half her face, both eyes set within similarly flame-pointed arches. She was photographed performing rhythmic gymnastics in sheer tights. A very pretty child. Gracile with well conditioned sinew, her upper body a play of sinuous flesh, nude breasts the merest camber. She appeared to be competent at the maneuvers and looked unerringly graceful in the pictures presented. He could neither confirm nor deny the appositeness of the young figure, only somewhat less boyish than the average young gymnast. In the last picture she curtsied to the camera with a mock smile, one hand folded outward, the other featuring an erect middle finger positioned nearer the lens.

An inchoate elegance, inbred anger and ready willfulness. Another

round of poignant visual stimuli, refined by ever more jaded palates and at least a generation of raging ‘orphans’. His regard of the form was seeded with a fascination that bordered on the soulful. Ten years ago he would have sided with the liberal dogma that decently underestimated human craving. Now utilization of such words dated the user, even implicated his tastes. He was left a diffident old man, or just old, rubbing at his eyes as he removed his glasses to realistically squint upon the pictures, taking note of some lettering on a section of the balance beam. Worn symbols on a support post, inventory insignia, he presumed, in Russian. When he looked up he observed Fazio eating a shard of pizza with the detachment of an iguana. The final piece of crust vanished as into an old washer mangler.

Willardson handed the pictures to the primped Caliban, acknowledged their quaint piquancy but found the identity too abstruse. He was interested yet desired a live introduction. Would a brief personal meeting be possible he wondered? Mr. Fazio looked upon him with the fixity of an overwrought environmentalist. His cell phone sounded a piccolo peal. He became upset by what the caller had to say and left the room. Stormy indecipherable words followed next door. Billy was admonished for slovenly habits. During the interval Willardson copied most of the photographs. He then heard Fazio initiate a call. A longer conversation but as inaccessible.

Fazio returned, his wig aslant, to huffily announce that a time and address might be sought the following day for an additional charge. He casu-

ally pocketed the new cheque and began to pick his nose.

Before leaving Willardson described a young model he had seen in a series of pictures in a gallery in West New York. He did not mention the gallery's name. There was a faint resemblance with the performer on the balance beam. Might there be a link, he wondered?

Fazio's face became contorted. A blasé shrug followed; there were a lot of people being photographed these days. He added, suddenly mindful, that he was certain no recent image of the Russian girl was on public display.

His client stolidly nodded. Then Fazio's phone tinkled once more and he left again to take the call. He was broadly smiling when he returned, handing Willardson an address and appointment time. "You one o' the lucky ones."

He recognized the house from a distance. A stately Tudor residence with lush ornamental garden and limpid azure swimming pool lit by inset jet lights. He was to arrive a 8:00 PM. The sun peeked through a mature stand of Mountain Maples and White Firs. A stocky Eurasian named Kichi greeted him at the gate in the crouch of a sumo wrestler, seized Willardson's hand as if to ascertain the pressure it might be pulverized, then led him into a shaded room full of cushioned wicker furniture facing leaded glass doors that outlooked a section of garden and the luminous pool. A gracile form was just climbing out of the water at the near end, reaching for a burnous towel, a figure reminiscent of Frieda, slightly more

diminutive perhaps and better conditioned. Fresh water nymph. Undine by sun chaise. Goose bump skin, water pearled; short cropped hair, puckish eyes. A second slicked head quietly glided then rose from the water, a young Poseidon she pushed back before turning and entering the pool house.

A minute later she entered through the hallway in a large terrycloth robe, her walk the perambulation of a dancer. A gold crucifix glinted below the neck. She sat opposite, took him in with Frieda's pawkiness, and fetched from a side table a linen towel to dry her face and hair — rather a prayer shawl with border cameos depicting the saints! Nearby a small replica of an Altar Gospel in a silver cover with enamelled medallions lay surrounded by miniature ikons framed in ornate gold work. Faces of the saints appeared to be photos of contemporary persons. Friends, conquests, countrymen? A gold chalice sat beside medicine vials on an embroidered linen that covered the flattened headboard of a daybed. She had charmed, waylaid pagans before. Had the Kremlin Collection been part of her spoils he wryly wondered? And why tout it here? Hoping for a timely sale?

She wore no makeup, as requested, and was distinctly attractive in a home-spun way, pointy nose, hint of delectable double chin. Wide oval eyes in a challenging Slavic face. Youthful mother-of-pearl skin. He had no trouble imagining her haunting the Bellerophon and possibly being the youngster in Fazio's album. Similar freckles and same stayed impatience. Yet she seemed extraneous to the tableaux, her mundane physical pres-

ence a foil. Another eidolon perhaps but an eidolon removed from *that* exotic landscape. If he entertained the possibility she might have some connection with Frieda he was loath to ask. He doubted he would get a candid answer and such suppositions could be risky, messy here. What further intrigued were some pale lesions on the sides of her face — from below the ear lobe to the base of the jaw. Their arc and symmetric placement suggesting a face lift or alteration underway — leaving him more puzzled and disillusioned.

He was on the point of leaving — the whistle stop would be long enough —when she switched on two electric candelabra affixed to matching ikons on side tables. He smelled incense and focused once more on the sides of her face, the matching lesions from upper cheek to jaw, faint but noticeable in the near light, delineating the oval cameo face.. Surgical intervention seemed the most likely cause.

Looking again at the eyes, now watchfully upon him and ostensibly free of cosmetic modification, he was slowly racked by the suspicion that the eyes — the intent oval eyes quite alone — were not extraneous, but quite possibly correct. He could not abjure seeing this self-same alert stare in some of the prints Peter had shown him, the ones supposedly the least fiddled with. But for the candelabras he may not have seen it, an oversight he more understood as the recognition matured. Away from the glass doors, the light in the room had been weak, flat, amorphous. The candelabra light, slightly above her brows, added a contrast that set the lids and laugh lines into relief, to disclose the ready intelligent self-possession, sober

and teasing at the same time. Hardly the look of an impetuous urchin, soulless professional, or beleaguered maniac he limply instructed himself. The faint scaring went a considerable distance explaining at least the late theatrical makeup, yet continued to beset. He felt decidedly uncomfortable, and not a little chagrinned by his own realigned state. This was not what he anticipated. His presence seemed less diverting, recreative, more unflattering than ever.

“Perhaps a little makeup, for Popeye.” A low nearly sepulchral voice, despite the jest in it. “You are comedian, perhaps,” she added conspiratorially. He could not find the words he wanted and found himself perspiring. “A fine puzzle,” he said finally. “Not entirely an accident I fear.” No reproof tainted his words and she wanly smiled at the remark. Soberly he continued, “Mam’selle, I’m not here for the obvious reason.”

Dryly, after a loitering smile, “What are those, please?”

Slowly he withdrew from his vest pocket two copies of the gallery tableaux, two examples he believed minimally retouched that prominently featured a being he and Peter had identified as an ‘ectype’, a simulacrum of an original — one of *ZYTA*’s lineal clones.

“Would you be so kind as to study these photos?”

Silently, indifferently she took them up, shuffling them back to front, her face betraying no emotion whatever. Easily she handed them back. He continued in what he hoped an unassuming tone.

“The pictures are part of an important collection, which a determined group of persons seek to discredit by circulating slyly altered counterfeits

of.”

She shrugged. “The pictures are anyone. My grandmother, maybe.” A sweet smile. He felt the hopelessness but plodded on, his face, in a mirror opposite, a study in lined forbearance.

“A fine rumor says the girl is named Zoya, a Russian name. The rumor does not say if she was a willing participant.”

He did his best to contain his disappointment. Her neck crucifix was retrieved and a tiny clock face checked. Then shaken. “Oldie but nor more goodie.” She then gave what he imagined a faithful burlesque of a Soviet commissar. “Russian name, Zoya...*is* Russian. *Most of time.*”

He offered an appreciative smile, and decided on a different tack.

“In America there is a large corporation, perhaps the largest of all. It is called Paleomena. You have no doubt heard of it.”

Again she closely consulted her watch, again shaking it.

“A familiar name, would you say — this organization?”

“Is capitalist monster absolutely. God bless ‘Merica.” The blessing was in near perfect English.

His time had all but elapsed.

“So, you come to big decision, piroshki? You want find who prays under shawl? A ‘no’ answer will not be entered in record.”

She was having a ball — the only thing that prevented his brisk dismissal, he presumed. Her eyes were giving way to an incendiary’s mirth; his audience accelerated to a snowball conclusion.

“Mr. Fazio, Mr. Doughnut man, has resume of repertoire, and best en-

cores, when audience up to scratch. I am coloratura soprano, attached to great traditional ensemble. And absolute total bloody vegetarian. Most of time. Questions. Is time for bath. Also doctor's certificate next time. You show yours, I show mine."

She leaned back, tidying the robe, the movement not unlike Frieda's arranging the folds of the kimono. She added, again in fluent English, just before securing the belt.

"Faces come and go like leaves. You 'she' could be anybody." Then, returning to her rendering of a commissar: "You got crush, laposchka. Is common phenomenon. Today every body look like every body else. Most of time."

She rose and handed him a religious tract from beneath the cover of the Altar Gospel, the Seventeenth Chapter of Revelation. He knew its contents, an obdurate pronouncement on fornication. Watching her depart was dour penance enough. She turned before entering the hall.

"Cheque Kiichi will return. The account no more and your draft nada — like other two. Zhalost."

The revelation flooded his vision with the force of a tensor. She might not have been there at all were it not for the mention of a third withdrawal — his! The black comedy spectacle of Pechenpaugh masquerading as an elegant toff and *viveur*, as an *opéra bouffe* Louis XVI, resurrected itself. Was the executive using the fund to disguise some of his own shenanigans? He was convinced that was it. The elevated wick that falls to gutter and burn

brilliantly for an instant. And if his, Willardson's signature, neatly fabricated, appeared on all three drafts — as well as others?...

Kiichi bid him good day with a broad smile. "Watch step carefully. No moon tonight. Long way from emergency." A portion of the pool lay behind him, a still mythic lake. Some city lights, just activated, hovered as tracers taking aim. If he looked diligently enough might he not find himself lurking somewhere in *ZYTA*'s strange involuted canvasses? The insolent thought had taunted before. The fish bowl hex. He wondered if the practice of 'sanctuary' still held sway somewhere, if there existed a fine old cathedral where he might ring bells and pretend to guard virgins from black-hearted suitors.

That night he dreamt. He had the key in his maisonette lock when the sweeping shadow came at him. It was already dark, the figure the merest fleeting blurring of his surroundings. He imagined a raincoat and an umbrella or walking stick pressed against him, a sharp pain and precipitate dizziness. He managed to open the door and find the stuffy downstairs washroom before losing balance. He remembered the smack of the sink as he fell, then an astonishing absence of pain.

He would recall strong lights and ring of faces staring down at him like the reflection in a pond. Ripples ran across their displeased faces. Something went over his face, cool and moist, smelling of something aseptic, then a vast darkness. He looked about for stars and sensed instead a disengagement, the shunt of a train car dividing, leaving...vaguely, strangely he could see the sister Zoya with a second shadowy other, Frieda

perhaps, in a seedy apartment, gleaning clothes, eating chanterelles. Zoya spoke. "You are wartime fugitive!" Then, more serenely, "There is film — *Night of Shooting Stars*. Like it is. Life. I think so."

The anticipated panorama of death -- how you might dream it  
What always plagued him was what lingered before necrosis set in.

It was the ghoulish gift which arrived on her birthday that had signaled the late juggernaut, the pair of ceramic earrings she now wore. She told the barman her companion for the evening was on the way, and would he be so kind. He took the twenty with a nonchalance only the piano player, an aging unsung Aznavour, had mastered. No one bothered her. Or the piano player. And she had no trouble ignoring the eyes occasionally frisking her. So. As an idled 'cement mixer' she got some respect. The vision was manifest after her third Manhattan...the bridge over the railway track just visible in the bar mirror. She believed she had lost her patient tracker. None of the patrons fit the bill. If she wasn't sure she didn't care.

The dank club, the Abydos, had a wonderful pathos about it, the deterioration from what may have been a snooty beginning now seemingly irreversible, the historic murals dinged with time and rowdy customers. A walk-down tomb, ransacked and beyond restoration. Yet she seemed the only girl there nursing a bout of self-pity. On the central stage a veteran entertainer by name of Cody, dressed in an ancient Egyptian girdle and wig, kept a realistic-looking cobra interested in her cascading bosom, from

the nipples of which tiny ankh figures dangled. Needy blue eyes softened a flinty chin. Natural golden curls veiled her wide head. She had what appeared to be an Isis Knot tattooed on her hip, and despite the cascading chest, a lean taut waist. Someone called Anteros cued the snake with a wrangler's crook and perhaps a lead line from the shadow. During the intermission, following a damp debate, Frieda sent the girl a drink and a note — “I really need a place to stay tonight.” When Cody approached, dressed in a silk flowered kimono, she evinced an amiable curiosity.

“I’m not good answering totes, but you’re new and maybe a spy or grave robber. My partner is the scarab bug next door.” She sensed Frieda’s wistfulness immediately. “That’s a joke, in case you want to take notes.”

“Do you perform here often?”

“When I get bored — like a bit hard up and up a creek with the boyfriend.”

Frieda could not quite believe her eyes or ears. The girl was likely older than her looks and altogether unassuming.

“You didn’t see the string, did you — the string that pulls up the head — of the snake. It’s not really a cobra — just a bull snake with a fake head. A guy I know in Paramount does it. You don’t come here often.” It was obvious Cody did not thrive in silence. “Lookit, I’m friendly, but not a boy scout. You really look as though could use a night’s sleep. Still want me to hang tough?”

Frieda smiled, the first perhaps since the pall bearers arrived. She had

never solicited a companion before, let alone a female, and her choice of Cody that night would ever after bemuse her. Women were less hazardous, were they not? More empathic? Her quite sudden need to lie down beside this generous whimsical entertainer was altogether comforting. There seemed no consolation she might not crave after her ordeal, no dare she might not entertain, given what she set out to commit that night. The Viking-Egyptian goddess before her was a ritual entreaty...who was amused when Frieda fingered the cushions on the hotel's one grimy sofa with quiet resolution soon after they arrived. "You'd be more comfortable on the bed." Frieda pensively smiled, hesitated. The scene might have ended then and there had she not picked her seducer with great care. Cody immediately recognized the dismay in the stiff form and knelt to remove the shoes. "It's beautiful material — suede. For a foxy lady. That's a compliment you." With easy agility she settled Frieda onto the lax but commodious bed. "I'm a mummifier only when I perform on stage. The modern jive. So enjoy the Old Kingdom. The perfect knitter. The best sleep there is."

Long before she sent the note to Cody, Frieda — who still could not resurrect her own true name — wrestled with the piquant memories of the stocky matron in the interrogation room, the sad benighted creature who had been instructed to molest her during the body search, to perform as the mechanic she was not, the warm hands gifted with the gentility of a sensitive experienced midwife. Had the woman kept her secret passion so utterly and successfully to herself? Her boss a nitwit bully and avenger?

Frieda was all but certain Vassily was the authority someone wanted to ambush. He could be a threat to the new brazen mavens, the oligarchs' muscle. Given what was sanctioned. The female being evermore a whore.

How louche, how sardonic.

Frieda now revisited how her very remove from the sordid assault, at least initially, her willful disengagement, left her so unprepared for the ensuing take. The brief struggle with the ropey hands of the guards barely interrupting her furor, which peaked in a state of arousal she rarely experienced, the more confounding in such a squalid debased setting. She would no longer dismiss the desperation brought of exhaustion and guilt. Had there not even been tears, as the dutiful and no doubt desperate woman uncovered her own motherly bosom to sweeten her touch. The conscientiousness of a harried, pressed daycare worker? The camcorder obviously then on assignment for a private archive. Poor Vassily. In the last days of her recovery in the sunny tidy room with its freshly cut flowers, this candid moment returned again and again with insurgency and debilitating warmth. A spell casting that Cody now recapitulated with her soft sable ministrations and bare words. The tearful sighs coming from her solicitous visiter were none other than those of the child born Kniaznin, 'Zia, happily gratefully alive, the 'Zia, short for Anastasiya, in the arms of this blond freehold being whose empyreal chest was peace itself. Who wiped at yet another tear.

"You really are a number. Double lashes and all. Four inches higher and some work on that tush you could be a hostess or model even." They

resumed as half-time players, the room then bathed in tints of an amber dawn. “Have you ever tried it with icy cubes? In between. My guy sometimes does it. Can be a take.” ‘Zia turned on her side in an idyll of amusement as Cody rummaged in the bar fridge and sink. Her wide strong torso coiled over long slighted bowed legs. Sprinter’s legs. “This you’ll like, don’t take my word for it.”

But the ice cubes were supernumerary as the spell again bewitched. Once more ‘Zia sensed the balmy trance, the burgeoning accord, Cody’s wonder at the rising ecstasy a benediction. “Have we a full moon here or what!”

And later, softer, “Holly Hannah. Run me a river.”

When Cody awoke there was a terse but kindly note by the bed. “To a great scout — be happy!” Under which lay thrice the sum she had bargained for. Her trick of the night lay bundled by her side in a faintly noisy sleep. Cody smiled. This called for a full in-house breakfast. ‘Zia stirred. Said Cody with a grin, “By the way, Nefertiti, what do I call you?”

The affectionate silence mulled them both.

“Anything you like.”

When they sat opposite one another in the bath, eating Cody’s conjuration of a ‘real girl’ breakfast (‘The cook here’s a great softie’) on a cross tray: fresh orange juice, a poached egg, and a bowl of kamut flakes with granola, walnuts and blueberries, ‘Zia happily took in her new generous conspirator, then said, “I need a place to stay for a few days.”

“Really. Holy cow.” ‘Zia silently keened at the incommensurate stir

this caused — “Didn’t think me and Gracie would have company this time of year. Actually, I’m off to my desert pad tomorrow. You’ll love it. The rains have left my own place looking like Nirvanah. When the desert blooms you’re hummy, sunny side up. Gracie is a bit Nembutal at first, but soon learns who the shoo-ins are.”

“Who’s Gracie?”

“My cat. You know, Good Night, Gracie?”

Again — the plaintive smile that humanitarian Cody could not quite believe.

“I’d say you picked a winner. Best place on earth my desert cabin.”

“Is it far?”

“A couple of hours. But don’t worry, I’ve had it with LA for a while. Time to put the chairs up. Closing time.”

As for ‘Zia, it was, she reminded herself, the first time she had consortied entirely on her own, with her own. The dessert was indeed in bloom, the small adobe bungalow the merest speck on the wind plain near a reservation. Red and yellow flowers ignited the mesquite, the new green branches of which spread out like veins of malachite. The rains that spring had been generous. One side of the bungalow stood awash in bougainvillea. Gracie, as predicted, was ‘scraping acquaintance’ within the hour. “‘Shoo-in’ meet Gracie. Gracie, you poot.”

‘Shoo-in’ she became — no records, affidavits, references, godparents required — and discovered what was meant by sunyata — the transcendental dissolve. She might sleep — at will, at her ease or negligence, shy

of all alarums — to awaken to Cody's Primrose hair lulling the breeze. The best place on earth. Cody the Corybant! The crested dancer! The earthly mythical beauty. The dream you only dream about.

Frieda deliberated over a letter. She had, many times, thought of writing to Vassily. As she rode the taxi through Santa Ana, mindful of the 'other' car following at a discreet distance — she and Cody had said their adieu — she pondered once more the likely demise of her mentor and benefactor. The fact that she felt such a lingering responsibility to him was surely a measure of his craft and humanity. A rare combination. He had given her a vocation she had pursued with élan and astuteness, and some drudgery, until the advent of *ZYTA* and the company *She* kept. Specifically: dear self-deprecating Peter, the intrepid guileless Susanne, selfless obdurate Miquel and the wiseacre Limburg, the big cheese, also the so cute problematic Daniel Frank, who just may have put them all at risk. She missed them all. That both Peter and now Susanne were inaccessible left her depressed if not askance. It seemed three of the Paleomena Princes, Dowd, Voden, Paleogiannis had, with their cronies, successfully isolated the research...convinced their Hill and State Department cronies that for the time being, for security reasons, et cetera. Even her recruitment of Willardson now ushered in a sadness. He would not survive unless he too co-operated. Fingered the apostates. All she could do was bide her time. Jobs in private tax return offices were going begging that time of year. Computational tax skills at a premium. American taxes she

had studied. The need was sufficient for one firm to call her the same day. “You seem to be overqualified, ah Ms. Webber, but we are rather short staffed at the moment.”

As the remembered hills of Fullerton beckoned, the sun was unsparing, so hidden had it been at Paleomena. As it had been more or less for ever — discounting Cody’s sun day digs. Still, despite the complications, the obligatory trials, she had come to one conclusion: all things considered, in the vast scheme of things, she preferred men. What better symptom of emotional resolve and gamey optimism can you have than that! Her lingering anxiety was that young Daniel Frank had not eluded her handlers. How else did the Nestors know the so pertinent questions? Who else had she discussed so thoroughly her specific methodology, schemata and iconography with? Her semiconductor junctions and the lattice vibrations of the later gates — how droll the phraseology sounded now — that she so freely discussed with the one man she had not felt the need to beguile...breaking as she had one of the basic tenants: keep from a friend what you would withhold from an enemy. She knew Paleomena was like academe, that it stalked its own avowed priorities. Had she only known the extent of it...even now the keening of the Nineteenth Century Russian writers was not penance enough — another of Vassily’s legacies, the pithy melancholy implicit in the classics she too learned to respect if not love. She felt no qualm about seeking and asking young Daniel out that night — to better assess how careless or connivent he had been. Ever since the opening of the Soviet archives, to stay the taunt from the West, saving face

had become an urgent calling. Hence the new guise of the Cheka inheritors. She had never believed young Daniel that sly, though he too had been one of the McCarthy polemicists, finding America base and despicable, a theme she sang descant to in her undergraduate days, the more painful for her now, her voice still raw with earnestness. Thus was Daniel deserving of the added invigilation her current invitation might bring about? Yet she had to learn more. She believed he must shun her if he was culpable.

The taxi stopped before a pink stucco apartment. Her own private ‘safe house’ which she had not managed to take advantage of, and which only she knew about — to the best of knowledge. Though the Nestors would find it soon enough. She had no secrets left worth keeping, and no energy to immure new ones. Had she arrived here three weeks ago, she might never have revisited her horror of roaches. One had lodged in her ear as a child. She was bitter and sardonic enough to wonder what young Daniel would have thought about a winged buzzing about the girl of his dreams. Would he have been dismayed if they had really gone ahead, even prepared to apply the stale mayonnaise?

The key, a little rusty, was found in the plastic wrap about six inches deep under the second Hydrangea. As musty no doubt as the phantom account that paid the lease every six months.

A daybed, nearly empty bookcase, an island kitchen with stools, and a bathroom that contained only one mirror, a small gilded rococo number that kept the images decorous, as she showered and put on some defensive

makeup, enough to attract only the connoisseurs. And a dress of chiffon silk — an item she had never worn, her final days at Paleomena a mental rigmarole that ordained jeans and sweat tops.

When they met, at a convenient Starbucks, she was surprised, and cautiously amused to find that he had discovered the Bellerophon, and had that very night booked a table for two. So he said. “They have this cross-dresser called the Gryphon apparently — who gets pretty torqued about current events. For old times sake?”

He was as sweetly ingratiating as ever, and as a cute. Since their last night out he seemed determined to make up for lost time. The intervening period of her unexplained unavailability remained a measure of his sufferance. He had ordered a cappuccino and a Florentina. Her voice sounded at first quite alien to her. “You haven’t changed.”

“Gawd I hope not. You look a little wistful. I’m flattered.”

She smiled, and gave him her best one-eyed squint. She knew it would be a long night. The night of the long knives.

“You’ll probably know that the new team is pleased to hear you’re hale. I won’t ask why you didn’t call. I presume you looked sufficiently dowdy to keep to yourself. Something like that.”

His confusion at her sudden disappearance remained importunate. She was about to respond with a toxic non sequitur when he surprised her, as he sometimes had. “Actually, the Bellerophon won’t take American Express, so I got couple of passes to a church sing song.” The tickets he brandished advertised a Baroque Fest: Bach, Purcell, Handel, Monteverdi, per-

formed by the Robert Shaw Festival Singers and the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra. Music he knew she liked. The very aesthetic balm she needed just then, and was a moment or two docking some subversive emotions. She wondered if she was going to end up crying as easily as the pathetic Brezhnev did toward the last. As much to the point, young Daniel seemed not to play his advantage, sticking to this ‘humble’ consolation prize. What indeed did he know?

But the music accomplished its miracle — put her back in the land of the living, the land of the passionate few, the civil dedicated urbane players she had not abandoned. Steeped in such company she might find the time to plan. To rethink herself an innocent victim, take a walk in a pristine wood. Afterward they strolled a nearby mall in an older concourse, one section a Victorian style atrium-aviary with palms and ocean waterfalls, the encores of Mozart, Vivaldi and Faure still playing in her head as background to the small flitting birds. Her musical talent, including a voice she had neglected, came from the father she never saw. A very dead Hero of the Soviet Union. The plain crusty comments she had prepared for young Daniel were upstaged by the concordant atmosphere.

“I have a new Visa card — why not try the Bellerophon,” she belatedly said. One of the reckless pronouncements one is capable of making when nearly happy.

They paused and kissed. An older couple lengthened their stride. Instead they went to Daniel’s flat and made love, young witty Daniel mostly at a loss for words, even the raffish artist in him given to memorializing her

name. While the tea brewed she wandered about his apartment, the offerings in his bookcases the usual marvel, from the complete set of Jane Austen to a historic catalogue of the *Vade Mecum* of Physics, to some exceedingly trashy comics. One wry collection invoked a problematic astronomy. He came up behind and stroked her arms.

“The anthropic principle,” he said. “The delectable end product.”

“Spin control.”

“Well, you have to sort of get the local hang of it.”

She suddenly sat at his computer and summoned a remembered file — to confront an abstract of the very iterations she had tried so pathetically to keep from the Nestors!

She was flabbergasted. And poised to act rashly, a rush her enforced calm put on hold.

With icy calm she asked, “Where did you get these?”

“You described them often enough.”

She was on the point of clearing out when the probability registered — with his remarkable memory...he just might have...could have...the swine. Then again he surprised her.

“I didn’t tell you but I was cleaned out, likely by a drug scrounger and/or thief. Most likely a thief — a week after you left. They halved my old Flash Gordon comics and the Big-Little books. All my computer stuff, including the files I put on DVD. I suppose I began the reconstruction of the *ZYTA* transports, well, wishing you were here. In just placing the coefficients I could hear your voice. Yeah. I guess I worried you really might be

a loner, as Peter thought. They gave me a few days to recall what I could. Your stuff and some of Miquel's I left off of course. It's a new regimen down there. But I didn't want to lose your stuff entirely. I've got to get it encrypted I know."

Her perplexity must have shown. He made no effort to shorten the distance between.

He said, "I do have a memory, give me that at least."

Their promise to keep especially the coefficients free of Paleomena, which meant no unencrypted records, had been one of the tenants. Could she barely believe sheer loneliness, as he called it, might be alleviated by such a recollection, a reinstatement? Leaving aside the very temerity! The carelessness!

"I know it sounds lame."

"Lame!"

The diffusion transports, the strings that paced the conductivity of the new chip circuitry, was the key that both the Paleomena team and the service wanted most of all. It had been their pledge to keep these out of the pool until they knew better Paleomena's prospectus for *ZYTA*. And only when that was known and, most likely rejected, seek an outside audience and legal counsel. Which they had partly done, enlisting the help of a USC lab at San Francisco. She could not believe her ears. Loneliness! The surety and requisite of her trade!

"I trust you informed your remaining pals on Thirteen."

"Only about the break in. And loss. A lot of changes down there."

Can't say I've any such friends left."

She decided against adding to his wonder about the nature of her 'sabbatical'. She and Susanne 'left' about the same time. Miguel shortly after. Leave it at that. Pechenpaugh's sinister interference had scored them all. Daniel, a newcomer, had escaped the vetting.

It did just add up though, the timing of the break in, given his luckless immaturity — the plight of most prodigies. The sorry conclusion she made an hour later, idling in his arms a second time. She had suspected the chap was infatuated with her but this took the cake. A career advancement likely wrecked if he was discovered 'hoarding', 'secreting' such info — because of a still charged adolescent attachment! As sometimes happened with the outrageous and inconceivable, it just might be true — his infatuation allied to an uncanny memory and indifferent heed! He probably could put the entire array together from scratch. Given enough time and oafish craving. The wonder of it, as his kisses intimated...to have a prodigious, swain on one's hands. She had not even told him about the other group, his very volatility, his blithe anarchism, which so amused her, too much of a risk. Peter agreed. How underwhelmed can one be. Then to be so maudlin over the sound of a name...her 'Merican name. Her once cherished name!

When again awake he seemed less anxious about her presence, but noncommittal about the newly recruited members of Paleo-meia's *ZYTA* team. His tentativeness the measure of her urgency.

"Well it's different. One is an overweight poly from UCLA, by name

of Janice, originally from IBM, another is a disgruntled cad from Lawrence Livermore...another could be Russian — Anatoli. Or he might just have a lisp or something. More on the way. Another Russian at least. Yet to be introduced.”

Her sigh was just audible.

He seemed surprised. “Anatoli’s one of three or four apparently. His pronunciation sounds kind of off — rancid sort of. That’s Russian isn’t it? *I am poet from old generation.* They’re all really butt heads like me. Still waiting to get laid. Most of them twice my age.”

She just managed to calm down sufficiently to say, with an understatement he sadly could not appreciate, that with Miguel and Peter gone she worried about the *esprit de corps* — the synergy and collaboration — a leading comment she wanted to get tabled that evening.

“What! That’s absurd! They’ve all been asking after you, Anatoli most of all. He’s really quite good, a great reference techie. *You could have wrong impression.*”

Her weak sorry laughter did not register.

“You okay,” he said after a time.

“It’ll pass.”

His hands were upon her again. The figment of...becoming whole. Such sex at least cleared the undergrowth for a while. The maniac in the dense forest. An in-house safari he called it. Altogether a change too for her given the likes of Ashly Scargill who was mainly a patronizing voyeur. So had young Daniel, the brilliant idiot, never got over her if she could be-

lieve him. Should she be flattered? He *was* one of kind. Could she in her wildest...imagine a life with such a brilliant naif? She sighed to herself. Why could she not stop emoting. Tears or laughter — she could never find a mean average these days. Retiring in due course to fertility flats...her shawl gracing his breastplate? So near so far.

Again she watched him wake, thinking he was about as delectable as fauns got these days. She said, “I could hear the Gryphon. In your snoring. The he-she that says things. At the Bellerophon.”

He took her in. “You’re serious.”

“He’s supposed to talk about an Anatoli. In the ad it says something.”  
“Shcharansky. Anatoli Shcharansky. Not Anatoli Ryasnoy. Our new guy.”

A pause.

“How could you possibly stay on?” The question she might now ask.  
“I need the work. The first show’s at eleven.” He lazily looked at his watch. “It is now about — Holy Moses! — suppertime. You awake?”

“Yes.”

But an hour later, it seemed, they stood before the entrance to the Bellerophon — actually the Greek restaurant above — their mutual smirking under control; he had not anticipated the wig nor the unusual makeup. “I have a reputation,” she said. Though whether she despaired of him or the Bellerophon he wasn’t sure, his longing for her then quite merciless.

When they stabbed into the shared mousse, after oysters and ginger marinated swordfish filets, he asked her to marry him. If he didn’t really

expect a reply the moment was far from lucid for her. “Ask me a month from now.” He seemed at least reconciled and finished the dessert and ice wine in amiable disappointment.

Inside the club they got mildly drunk and listened with mustered astuteness to the Gryphon, the expressive cross dresser who pretended to be his age, whose commentary this night encapsulated the topical dilemma: to gene or not to gene; to be casual about fate or rail against it. A fine distraction for her then. A fluent wit discombobulating on life and its game masters.

As if immune to the darker insinuations, they sat ensconced and encased behind a dim corner table on a plush banquette, a duo gently laced together. Once she imagined the chap called Alvar looking at them, this Alvar not Willardson’s Karl Voden. But in her dark wig and oddly hale state she felt immune to vigilantes or hecklers. Even the Gryphon talked at times in a whisper. His words a kind of plainsong for her. The rhythmic patter revealing a bell ringer disguised as a *philosophe*. Well, she was a little pickled. He thrived in the company of patrons who obviously championed sardonic comedy. He was uncannily topical: how indeed do you reckon the life you’ve been allotted. Frieda drolly imagined Willardson in the audience.

“I come before you tonight in a sky blue and scarlet patchwork jacket, beaded in sequins on silk organza, falling plumb, the shoulders padded, the jewelry once inspired by Bob Guccioni — who needed a counter-weight on top to get it up.

“But” — waving aside incipient laughter — “I haven’t come here to scarp poor Penthouse. I know a crowd of pork bellies when I see one. But you’ll just have to wait; the tasty little émigré you want to welcome to America is just now shaving. So be patient.”

Said decent Daniel, “The ‘émigré’ is supposed to be better than advertised.”

Frieda managed a benevolent smile; the Gryphon seemed to wait her out, then:

“Considering the bugbear of female hots, we shall begin at the beginning — birth. That’s B-I-R-T-H. A subject most feminists find toxic. I do not lie — because witless men are in part responsible for the predicament. Men, the Curse of Creation. The dirt you have such trouble washing out. Yes. The dirt you know won’t fashion a pearl. White European men especially being the nadir of darkness. Naturally, birth, B-I-R-T-H, cannot readily be condoned. And so for all you sweet lasses out there the unsung question: What to do with the buggerish bit of fetal offal afterward — should you find yourself inadvertently besmirched? Knocked Galley West so to speak. Should you Burn it or flush it into the mains? Keep and use it for research — even the left over from the abortion doesn’t vanish own its own. Scientists will soon conceive the means of getting *it* live, bless them, such that geneticists, virologists, pharmacologists and the like will have an entire human genome to work with, leaving animal right’s activists less perturbed — fewer sickly rats or baleful dogs.”

A few appreciative titters.

“Yes — this is progress. It is the environmentally elegant thing to do: reuse, recycle, recover. Recalining the thrifty Mr. Swift, a near twenty-four week old fetus could also provide a nourishing few mouthfuls to revive hungry children.”

A few laughs and gamy whistles.

“Well, it is a disposable nobody. It’s not even Columbian for chris-sake.”

More laughs.

“Can we talk, and I mean talk? The unsung irony is that women urge abortion-on-demand as a means of controlling their bodies. Tsk. What a load of head cheese. What they want is a convenient means of not having to bother...gone with a wave of a magic wand. Bemusement over male insouciance is the one irregular declension most feminists will connive at...you folks maybe didn’t get that pearl of wisdom but when talking to the dregs one does make an effort.

“Can we talk, gentle folk, and I mean talk?”

Some mild clapping.

“Part of the unholy mess has to do with genes — and I’m not talking Levis here. But the bugbear of radiant health and knock out looks. What the perceptive woman doesn’t want to burden a child with.

“We expend a lot of angst over ungainly looks these days, some of us eager to begin again, in keeping with the adage that wrinkles and worms collect a lot of innuendo. Imagine — a sterling ego dealt a flea market bod. I mean what kind of god would so such a thing — to creatures of

*Her* own choosing and design. Is *She* a terrorist? In keeping with the times, I assume a male god an oxymoron.”

Some clapping and weak background hissing.

“Not much of an achievement creating a bunch of suckers, carp and bullheads. The insights of genetics haven’t softened the blow. Fearful stuff genetics, up there in your face, your big mouth, weak chin, zigzag teeth — maybe even the fact you prefer being zonked most of the time. What your parents — the ones you may or may not remember — imagined held promise.” He affects a dramatic shrug.

Some ambiguous laughter.

“Let’s face it, genes are the gamy cartoon you cannot rub out. Who wants to sire another looser? It’s a scandal. Think about it. You look and sound better than your neighbor you’re a swank right? Everybody knows that even if the swanks are a tiny visible minority. Still, the swanks get away with it. If they stay out of dark lanes and the GOP. Having two good kidneys, say, or 20/20 vision, or a memory that can quote Ted Kaczynski verbatim, even when a brick short of a load — that’s hardly kosher or proprietorial, but something you really didn’t deserve, hadn’t earned and should be taxed for having. A swank oughta pay through the nose, right?

“A mess. Think about it. To be healthy and pretty, let alone wealthy or smart, is cause for reprisal. Only the poorest, ugliest, most disease ridden should be allowed to reproduce without apology; they can do it in their sleep.”

Said Daniel, fondly looking at Frieda —“I’ve always enjoyed swanks” — just as a tanked gent near the front, who had been precariously balanced on his chair, finally fell off, to a round of token applause spiced with protracted whistles.

“Are we talking, or are we aren’t?”

Titters of approbation. Taking note of Frieda’s divided attention he settled back and began fondling her neck.

“Consider: splendid natural beauty is the bane of the arts community, right? In keeping with ugly images being the artistically sensitive reality! You look good, you’re total rotgut. You white ass, wear a suit and speak English as a first language, you is pigeon shit. The only bad guy Hollywood casting directors can now use without discrimination -- white, handsome or ugly don’t much matter, especially if the man is bald. Hell, you bald, white and got a Nordic mom, you are pecker smeg on film. White gals fair a bit better. Famous black athletes screw and marry them out of sympathy, out of sheer heart. Raping a white girl is itself a kind of duty or vocation, not really a power trip. The necessity of sex alone establishes a telling dependency. I goin’ show you who boss, girl, but I gotta drop ma drawers to do it. Hum.”

Said Frieda, even as her face registered a sweet compliant equanimity, “If you had met Karl Voden you might appreciate this audience a little more.”

Said Daniel, “That’s nice. Sounds to me like a Rogaine convention -- meeting the Princes.” By then she had closed her eyes, her hand tucked

into his own, trying on this odd, surprising, newfound sense of calm and well being, even as the Gryphon continued to expound.

“Some bright bogs have latched onto the idea that logic and rationality are themselves HIV positive. Once fucked, twice screwed. Two busky gal grunts in a cartoon said a mouthful: ‘How can we prove ourselves in combat if they won’t protect us from the men?’ Now you all go out and fuck yourselves. The dreck you love most. You hear. Thank you all.”

The applause was long and genial, the catcalls mere background noise. Her late bemusement sustained as Daniel kissed her neck and fondled her ear. For a time they leaned together, he thinking rather urgently of the apartment, she the warm fragrance of the spring desert, and Cody’s poot cat — now named Daniel. They ordered another bottle as the curtain parted on a black-out stage and a lithe dancer in a monastic habit emerged from the dark. “I love you,” he said to her as she took in her sister, now monopolizing the stage...much appreciated from the applause which masked the opening strains of *A Woman Without a Shadow* concert suite. Her alien sibling appeared so sure and elegant in motion, as the habit molted into golden body jewelry with just enough play to suggest to a jaded audience that this obviously talented young dancer was indeed a live parian nymph beneath the flitting gold work. The anticipation one might partake of on a special night out: the dessert gone by the time you get to the buffet.

The following morning, a Sunday, Daniel still asleep in the springy double bed, Frieda read in the entertainment section a review of the club in

Burbank called the Bellerophon, where a new poseur was causing a stir. The article was a précis of the Gryphon's invocation of the 'survivor'. Many times she could hear Vassily talking and wondered if he too had taken refuge in the evolving West. His words now seemed to blend with those of the Gryphon's. The review article ended with a reprise of the Gryphon's philosophical bent, which the writer had condensed into a compendium. The Gryphon appealed to hacks as well.

*In its invidious comparisons Western freedom has been a hell of a show, like none before it. People are openly discovering just how unprepossessing they are. Naturally they're sometimes mad as hornets and impetuously savage their looks and circumstance — the blatant indices of their servility. With opportunity you take away alibi, an essential human need: a meritocracy, note, leaves its underclass no excuse whatever. Look to the survivors. What indeed do you say to the molested creature who has no realistic way of satisfying his needs, except to appropriate his desire, as the Soviets tried and failed on a grand scale? What do you say to the capable player when equality and access — entitlement — are the touted standards?*

*So sayeth the Gryphon.*

*The gods may have tried helping those who might help themselves, but fewer and fewer seem willing to risk the embarrassment of being seen. Only when the rise above the common hutch appears uncalculated, effortless, and what is decisive, indifferently acknowledged — only then is the unmistakable nonchalance of genius apparent, the way of the unmolested, if they stay out of dark lanes, revealed.*

*In the early sixties Esquire Magazine commissioned several experts, in and out of the social sciences, to write *On the Possibility and Desirability of a Permanent Peace*. Without exception the essays were exceedingly pessimistic for those who might welcome*

such a state. Yet the desirability of a permanent peace does not figure in today's exaltation of improvement and entitlement.

The thinking has listed so far galley west that the distinction between force and violence is blurred. The very idea of a just war, except perhaps against unrepentant men and unsalvageable DWEMs (*Dead White European Males*), is now a veritable oxymoron in the love monger lexicon. To the love monger even a patently aggressor nation may not be resisted unless the fight is chastely fair (egregious cost, loss and embarrassment on all sides), inviting stalemate and insuring that acrimony and aggrandizement become a growth industries. A real passion play. What state, race, nationality, individual doesn't harbor a festering *idée fixe*, the hypercathexis of at least one galvanizing grievance? We can now add the female sex to the major protagonists of state and race because modern women have decided they too are in a state of siege. A now famous report from a House subcommittee was entitled, *The Ongoing Assault Against Women*. Who's actually waging it is the obtuse question. If you have to ask you'll never know.

Still, the lovemonger has difficulty assigning blame — except to heartless white men (a dwindling minority) — because that would require the imposition of a circumscribed morality that discourages creativity — the great indexed lyric. When up against efficiency improvisation becomes the humane excursion. It is hardly surprising the concordant of consensus seems so elusive. The irony is that the more people are solicited to effusively sound off to an extensive media-public watch — the more things in life become intolerable. Once begun the entire globe looks inhospitable. All buggerishly moving of course, both the drama and the climactic pity of it all. What sexy beat crooner can resist the heady pathos? Music to boogie to. Sad sad song with sexy sexy rhythm. Sexy sexy beat beat sadness. No lyrical, decorous Saint-Saens' pulse for this crowd, let alone Khachaturian or Rimsky-Korsakov. What youngster today will ever hear, let alone sa-

*vour, the Largo from Dvorak's Ninth Symphony? The kids weaned on electric guitars sounding like dull chain saws clawing at steel or concrete — to embellish 'No Satisfaction'. What actor can resist the chance to dramatically wring her hands? What author the impulse to ignite raucous lightening. So beat up your neighbour, fuck up yourself, keep the passion play live! Humans want to be raped and abused; the only story, the durable tale of abduction and deceit.*

Frieda put the paper down and fetched her quite cold toast. The shell with a shell within. The performer's dream and dilemma. She had little difficulty accepting the force of the argument. She had heard much of it before. Long before. She could imagine Dowd smiling. The Gryphon was the outrage to the day's 'common sense'. As the fuss over the jews was to the Third Reich: the people ably living on the edges of a dissolute and degenerate society! The Gryphon was just coming into his own.

As her Commitern ideals lay in a shambles.

She crawled back into bed with Daniel. What you do when the lights dim.

\* \* \* \*

## TEN

When Stanton arrived at the Paleomena Tower a throng of reporters lay siege to the main entrance. Someone the press had been waiting for had just emerged from the towering obelisk, the auric glazing of which, in the late afternoon gloaming, validated its eponym 'goldbrick'. The catchword's author, a busy television news hen, was in the vanguard of reporters. Catherine Whyte, an investigative journalist for ABN Television, held

a salient microphone up to Alex Prokovsky, the absentee (to date) venture financier among West Coast Russian wheelers and dealers. ‘The blind man’s perception of the man,’ she said. The same Catherine Whyte had identified his Bratva Pakhan boss, Boris Ivanovich ‘Bossy’ Borozov, and Bossy’s ‘inadvertent’ European baby formula nutrition scam, a scoop that put her impish face on the cover of the latest edition of OO Magazine, the dilettante’s guide to the sufferable and execrable on television. A feature profile inside limned her as ‘St. Georgina’. Now, as the throng skirted the planters of marigolds on the plaza, Stanton too pressed forth to follow the scrum, and when in earshot was grateful that Catherine too sought to explicate the rumor that Paleomena senior vice-president Arthur Peckenpaugh had been a key import licenses-and-permits consultant. She kept her initial query to the point.

“Did Arthur Peckenpaugh kick you out or did you leave on your own recognizance?”

Alex, a heavy lumbering man with unruly whiffs of grey hair and a mottled complexion, smiled luminously, flashing a rostrum of large crooked teeth. According to Whyte the lowers were a lay-in bite, to keep up his facade of being a pleb, one of the survivors of communism. While he wryly considered a response a second questioner sought to verify the date of application, just as a hack or planted shill at the rear of the pack wanted to know if it was true he had once taken out a contract on Madeleine Albright?”

Prokovsky brightened. “I am stopped beating the poor wife, yes. When

I am not for some time married. As you say, ‘landed’.” He appealed to the crowd for clemency.

With admirable timing Whyte asked, “So you are a ‘double banker’? As she said?”

The smile was prompt and nearly universal.

“In America you have Pitbull problem, yes.” He luminously beamed.

But the reporters tailing him were there for blood not sausages. Someone else asked if he had changed his emigration lawyer yet again. Another wanted to know about the fifty thou he had given an Alberta, Canada gun club. “You think the marksmanship of Canadian rednecks a neglected pool of talent?” (The mysterious death of a Russian trade commission chauffeur that week was reputed to be the work of a rival faction).

And so it went, the gifted logroller broadly smiling, as much it seemed at his own lush notoriety and breathtaking immunity as the dedicated cheek of the questioners. Just before climbing into his limo he quipped, “Count the blessings; I am here some time.”

Stanton had the feeling the man’s English was also a little sly, just enough below par to insinuate humble origins, when in fact he knew through his own investigative work at Paleomena that the man was well educated, and a former Major in the GRU (Soviet Military Intelligence). One more adroit player waiting for Vladirmir Putin to settle in, a near certainty that might square cupidity with ethnic nationalism in the Duma, the sanguine expectation in that oily kleptocracy.

Stanton’s curiosity about the cute, slight, spunky Catherine Whyte lin-

gered during the express elevator ride to the executive floor of the Paleomena Tower, abating only when he stood looking down at the immaculate gnome behind his Empire desk, the dapperling who had summoned him an hour before. Angus Dowd, the new Paleomena CEO, was small, seamless, adroit — post nasal moist — blithely dogmatic and occasionally venomous. A deceptively cuddlesome tree frog that had been coughed up by many of the less discerning corporate snakes. A chameleon by nature, with a sure tongue, he rarely missed his unsuspecting prey in his spare pronouncements. He had ignored Stanton in the past, once even smiling when Pechenpaugh extolled his late investigator's reliability. The pending job was thus likely clandestine, dirty and urgent. That was Stanton's candid estimation and his first impression usually sound. Still, he felt encouraged. The gnome had called himself. Seeing Catherine Whyte in action had whetted his appetite for engagement and intrigue.

His first glimpse of the executive elevator had been in fact a veritable call to arms. Dowd's tall leggy secretary, Daphne Charles, too was on her way up, and proffered an apologetic smile. The paper bag she carried gave off the aroma of fresh pastry; the gnome had a reputation for sweets. When they reached the penthouse she disappeared into a wall vent almost as a bather slipping into a quiet pond. Stanton, who had walked after her, as much to admire her legs as yield to a courtesy, approached the doorway marvelling at the disguise. So that's how the cookie ghoul kept up appearances. The receptionist in the vestibule office further down noted his smile. "Please go in, Mr. Stanton."

When a convivial Daphne opened the door to the Edwardian office, he felt his legs tingle. Like entering a promenade suite on the Titanic, he imagined, and sought Daphne's nod before approaching the galactic desk. When Daphne disappeared into her own adjacent and spacious office, he sensed the oddly comforting fastness of being at sea. For a full quarter-minute he stood before the third or fourth most enigmatic conservative in the world, certainly the most powerful — his less than tentative estimation — trying not to be distracted by the singular ironwood panelling and the executive's love of Vermeers. "A still life calmed by Providence," the corporation art curator David Willardson had supposedly said, no doubt suppressing a wink. Without looking up Dowd at last said, "You'd best pull up a chair." Putting down a folder the gnome gazed out across the lush parkland that separated the tower from the freeway tangle. His expression bore an uncharacteristic mowé of indecision. "By now you've probably guessed that Pechenpaugh is leaving. For health reasons, mainly. I trust your past loyalty was essentially contractual."

Stanton remained alertly silent. The remark was both potential termination notice as well as taunt. Many of Pechenpaugh's close colleagues and retainers were then under advisement. Nor was Stanton amused that his conscientiousness might be construed a liability. He was further perplexed by Dowd's prompt opening request.

"I want you to monitor a Russian émigré — I use the term advisedly — who's been reported monitoring an engineer, a mindful mam'selle in our special technologies sector, who's on sick leave. The chap's name is Vy-

hnad, first name Lev, an alias most like. All we have is a couple of pictures of a chap at a recent party after an orientation weekend by an engineering team for its newest members. A complex business you'll read up on shortly. What I now want especially to know is if he's in any way connected to our recent cordial carpetbagger, Alex Prokovsky, known I understand as a former associate of 'Bossy' Borozov who is now fasting, I understand, in a low maintenance cell in St. Petersburg's Kresty Detention Center — for the murder of a prosecutor who happened to be the protégé of a rial gang with closer ties to the Kremlin. The engineer, Dr. Frieda Van Eerden is a mathematician and remote sensing expert, competent and, as far as we know, loyal. Who's been away on sick leave for a while now. Infectious mononucleosis, apparently. So we've been told." It was obvious Dowd doubted the legitimacy of the diagnosis. "Some pertinent details of her employ here and known habits are contained in a file you'll read presently. 'Read Only Access' I'm afraid. You will be paid by me, incidentally, not Paleomena."

Stanton was at first irked by the disingenuousness of the request; his last effort on behalf of Pechenpaugh had been every bit as peremptory and clandestine and centred on the same notorious heavy! Then, to his amazement, Dowd confirmed the unseemly nature of Stanton's late employ.

"I realize Arthur asked you to do some supernumerary job that also traced the activities and associates of Mr. Prokovsky, but as Arthur's taking

an early retirement, you'd best stay on the trail. Naturally, Arthur will desist from further involvement.”

Stanton rather resented Dowd keeping a straight face through all this. Pechenpaugh's ‘retirement’ was likely Dowd's recommendation to the Chairman, Max Paleogiannis, who then gravitated to Dowd and a newcomer, a biomedical genius and rumoured mystic from Switzerland by the name of Muerner, a former Nobel nominee for work on molecular energy levels in water, muscle and bone — details that exacted curiosity if not wonder, given Paleomena's late program on self-perpetuating or recrudescent space exploration vehicles, to say nothing of its research into a living-cell molecular computer. Details he had leaned from the brash bumptious Pechenpaugh! The job would thus entail revealing much about the suspicions and tactics of his late boss who was, Stanton knew, a bit of a gunslinger. But once more, as if on queue, Dowd was opportunely accommodating.

“I especially want to know if you feel the job can be continued, given the security features Mr. Prokovsky and company may invoke pursuant to Arthur's retirement. Certain aspects of Arthur's late employ may not be slighted. ”

Again, the blandishment was wrapped in an immaculate threat. Stanton detected the flicker of a smile. Pechenpaugh had been tagged as one of Prokovsky's business ‘consulatants’.

“A hard choice, Mr. Dowd.”

“Free will is rarely free. A suitable bonus is stipulated in the contract.

Please have a detailed prospectus for me first thing tomorrow. Down to the short strokes. You'll have to make notes, for now at least. Daphne has the file and will find you a carrel in the executive library."

Again the retort and smile seemed tailor made. The consultation was over.

And so Reg Stanton departed after reading the contract and making notes on the partly edited — he presumed — file of the engineer, the pale oval-eyed Frieda Van Eerden, the sea queen he came to think of her (after his brief humbling spar with Chaucer in English literature) who was then on ‘sick leave’. He decided the benefits were substantial, a refusal dourly consequential, and the job not impossible. As he still had no leads on who and where the mysterious Lev Vyhnak might be, he would begin with his own shamus and his geepos, and the comings and goings in the richly forested Rrokovsky villa, a ‘reconstituted’ trade center, in hopes of tracking signal visitors there to other key locations. He would not attempt to bug the Prokovsky villa itself, but the flamboyant émigré lived in the La Habra Heights overlooked by a sprawling mansion that had recently been represented by John J. Rygiol and Associates. To his amazement, Dowd got the property delisted and leased to a corporate sponsor, allowing his new snooper to mount a round-the-clock study of the neighbouring villa, angled from the edges of the delisted property’s thickly pined estate, many probes planted in the former owner’s elaborate bird houses. The curtains in the target mansion cut down on the silhouettes, but even diffuse silhouettes have a character of their own. Oddly enough, the curtains were seldom

pulled, suggesting the quarry might be proffering select information. In addition to the fixed sensors, two field teams spelled one another every four hours, their essential task to reconnoitre and detail the area's perimeter alarm systems in anticipation of a later, closer invigilation by Stanton's credible 'punks' — the curious passers by.

At an early and tender age Stanton had discovered that human beings were illusive, often multi-faceted, and thus possibly understandable really only when spied upon, the authentic person being probative when unknowingly observed. Why he should have developed this passion for verifiability he rarely questioned; it seemed, when confirmed in his young mind, as natural a habit as scratching an itch. Perhaps as a youngster he had been consumed by learning the correct detail in his mechanized toys — the advertising pictures of which often turned out to be misleading in some way. As he would painstakingly learn, virtually all display was flawed and inexact. His pater, a dermatologist, had been a great bird watcher, and his many telescopes the first 'toys' young Marion Stanton Wilde deemed worthy of attention. The scenes and vistas through the lenses, multifarious and recondite as they would become over the years, the *real* Real McCoy. The world seen without an objective or lens, a powerful lens, was not worth bothering with. And even then you had to be vigilant. Like trying to determine the position of something at the bottom of a pond without making allowance for the refractive surface. If human 'reality' was obviously a mish mash, it was an intriguing mish mash. A more engaging arrangement he could scarcely imagine let alone identify in his later years.

The endless mystery an essential. Literally, a world full of remote but telling clues, quite without end, given the messy deeds most humans raptly if not always self-consciously enjoined and sustained!

Thus, in due course Stanton, who never liked his first name and settled upon being a mononymous person, like (Endeavor) Morse, resigned from Paleomena, accepted Dowd's liberal private contract, and provided his inaugural assessment within the week, the first of a schedule of meetings in a hotel suite where Dowd set up a compact 'elsewhere' office, his secretary being his lone elect assistant. In the art deco dining nook he received and evaluated the latest information with quiet intent interest. From the video surveillance and street team observance, the 'trade in visitors at the Prokovsky zoo' — Dowd's phrase — was brisk from day one. To Stanton's satisfaction, such info yielded much about Dowd himself as he viewed the new documents.

"An accommodating exhibitionist," he promptly said after reviewing the first samples.

Responded a buoyant Stanton, "Understandable. You said yourself — the expectation of a recon. The girlfriend is new. The chap in the three-piece a vice-president of Monteray Assurance, a small but flush loan company, mainly land speculation, that paid a modest fine in the S&L scandal."

"But no Vyhnak, Lev. Perhaps he is an outsider."

"Well it's early on."

He detected the ghost of a nod. It was particularly pleasant to stolidly

cue the otherwise observant and knowledgable vizier.

“You can get more detailed pictures of the interior, the sideboards, tabletops?”

“Anything in particular?”

“The set of folders on the settee, say.”

“You’re talking long haul and precision depth. I’d need more presets with a finer register. The elaborate grillwork on the upper windows cuts down a bit.”

Dowd dredged up some throat phlegm. “Can the silhouettes be more exact? Attest the mood of the groupies?” He glanced at Daphne with a cherubic wink.

Stanton deflected the whimsy with ample earnestness. “With more probes the same scene could be relief mapped, even true colour defaulted.”

More phlegm stirred in the deadpan gnome.

“But possible. No question.”

Again Dowd deferred to Daphne. “Always angling for a few thousand preferred shares our Stanton.”

The second and third briefings were as teasing and indeterminate, but the fourth left the usually astute, bemused Dowd quite expressionless, lacking even his refuge of seasoned contempt. He had informed Stanton, just before opening the latest offerings, that Dr. Van Eerden, the engineer Prokovsky’s ‘emissaries’ had likely been pestering on the sly, had gone missing from Paleomena, the belated conclusion being that her sick leave was a

ruse, for her disappearance had truncated a costly, crucial and protracted experiment. Dowd now shuffled the current photos of the Prokovsky mansion as a stolid whist partner. One set identified features of the unusually plain mid section of the block-like fortress. The second set documented items, specifically and curiously a women's pair of shoes, partly ripped apart, in a trash trolley moving from behind the villa to a perimeter incinerator — one of the field team's exhibits.

Said Stanton, pointing again to the first set, “The casements were the initial clue. Two feet thick if they're an inch. The heavily leaded glass likely bullet proof. You get that patina in late-afternoon skim light. If you stick a few smart antennae in that putative arboretum on top, you have the tools of a rezidency. Which means it was wise to stick with the infrared as well as the optical. The incinerator trolley shots seem to bear out a possible scenario. I remembered the shoes from the pics I looked at the first day you put the question — two archive photos of Dr. Van Eerden exhibiting that new device for the satellite mapper. Daphne's fetched them for today's comparison. One was a closeup of the mapper's base. The shoes stand out in the fill light from a window. I'd give odds its the same pair. Which somebody's been at with a knife or saw. Most likely someone didn't bother to reopen one of the garbage bags.”

Dowd put the magnifying glass down and pulled a face. “A fairly common design, colour and stitching I should think.”

“Except for the stain, likely a water mark, on the side. The one intact insole. You said yourself she had taken some kind of leave. And we have

had some rain. The traceries of the discoloration, the precipitation verges match up. You said yourself her leaving was sudden and inopportune.”

The stain Dowd had not noted and took up the magnifying glass with, for Stanton, gratifying swiftness, comparing the outlines of the tracing masks while Stanton positioned the overlays. When again the gnome raised his head, the sun peeked behind an ominous cloud off the atrium of the hotel recreation centre. The possible, grimmer aspects of the discovery they initially mulled in silence. A light rain began to seed the patio windows. Said Dowd after another regurgitation, “I think we best widen your field of view Stanton. His and hers. ASAP.”

Which the assiduous Stanton had no difficulty implementing though, as anticipated, there was nothing doing in the Van Eerden flat, despite the mess throughout. His meetings with Dowd had become routine confirmations of misadventure. Only the sylphic Daphne kept Stanton on call alert. Before whom he managed a special equanimity. He spoke as to an attentive quorum then.

“A complete blank. Easy entry. A couple of old self-activators. Neither armed. Place a mess. Less than one might expect with the posh maid service. A good-size study but little personal stuff. It’s all been vetted. The one bedroom closet a surprise. You might think the lady a little potty from the styles themselves — the remaining dresses in the closet. If indeed they’re hers.”

Dowd took less time than usual to confirm Stanton’s appraisal of the last pics laid out before them, silently surveying the scramble, speaking

only when he got to the dresses. “Rather vulgar, yes I can see that.” Without looking up he called out to his secretary, his one accomplice in the elsewhere office. “Daphne, if you’re free and head up.”

The naiad with the egret eyes that Stanton had developed a piquant hankering for sauntered over with a look of anticipation. If there were a better pair of legs this side of Saturn he’d yet to see them (the extent of the Voyager probes, thus far). And the rest was as serendipitous, if you did not cavil at cocktail tits, which he pointedly imagined them to be. Despite the puzzle before them, he could not avoid wondering what Dowd got up to after work. Daphne was about as close to a poofter’s consolation package as one met. Had the executive deliberately hired her to test his fidelity? Addle his critics? For Stanton, Dowd’s ‘elsewhere’ office had nearly as much play as the current professional venue. While Daphne studied the offerings a smile flickered.

“It does seem — unusual, unexpected,” she said at last.

“‘Improbable’, would you say?”

Daphne smiled when he looked up. “Yes,” she easily said.

Dowd handsomely nodded, as much it seemed at his good fortune in secretaries as to confirm of Stanton’s findings.

But Daphne resisted joining the hecklers. “I’ve met Dr. Van Eerden. These I wouldn’t have guessed. ‘Vid-mode’, I think they call them now.” Stanton smiled. Daphne’s own simple silk dress was alluring as any ‘liquid crystal’ he decided. Dowd in turn looked up at the observant spook with considerable relish as he nonchalantly tapped Daphne’s hand with a mock

fist without so much as a flicker from the statuesque Hebe herself. “Stanton, the costumes appear to be a mother load.” Daphne managed a delicious moue, leaving Stanton on his own. Said Stanton, “A limited expert, Mr. Dowd.” Daphne’s smile now infectious, she sought instead to remind her boss of a recent development. “Arthur has called. He’s quite upset.” Dowd pushed the pictures away then brightened. “An excellent suggestion. Arthur is something of an expert in these matters. Yes. Set up an appointment tomorrow afternoon.”

“He did suggest noon tomorrow. At his club.”

“Did he!” The gnome fixed on Stanton a patronizing glower. “Bless him.”

Now whether or not the sacked executive Arthur Pechenpaugh, in his luncheon with Dowd, shed any light on the odd costumes in Frieda Van Eerden’s second bedroom, Stanton never learned. The very next briefing cleared the deck. All options open and playable. Two pictures showed Pechenpaugh at the Prokovsky mansion peeking through a terrace curtain at Elana, Prokovsky’s current girlfriend, sunbathing with some friends in the lower garden. One of these, in the shade and out of focus, resembled none other than Dr. Frieda Van Eerden. Nearby sat the egregious Lev Vyhnad. Program enhancement firmed up the identities.

Dowd was at first quaintly amused. “Um. Pechenpaugh eyeing the Mums. Now if it were Voden, our nuclear honcho, one might relax. But Pechenpaugh, in a boutonniere.” Stanton knew the reckoning was near, meaning the rogue vice-president could now look afield and make a bun-

dle before being cited for a conflict-of-interest relapse, rarely prosecuted — akin to the high pop fly that allows the ready runner to score. The impunity was manifest. Whatever deal he had going at the time of his pending ‘retirement’, he seemed determined to complete. A thrust that would touch, implicate Paleomena, sooner than later. As for Van Eerden, her disappearance was becoming inconvenient as well as problematic. Her apparent presence in the garden looked all too complaisant. One photo caught her in a ready smile. Dowd continued with his cheerful deadpan. “Let’s hope that Elana gets a lot of sun in the coming weeks. They can take a while, ‘ore deals’” — Dowd’s phrase for the fuss with strategic, rare-earth metals, the crown jewels of the Prokovsky’s wide export trade, Prokovsky and tycoon Boris ‘Bossy’ Borozov. “You haven’t a magnetic sunbather of your own on call? No. And Daphne’s not a beachcomber.” These latter comments followed Dowd’s perusal of Stanton’s new, second folio — positing the likelihood of a second team monitoring the Van Eerden apartment. Two street players and a vacuum cleaner van with a resident parking sticker. The team looked Russian, to Stanton. Who was at the outset convinced, if not entirely convincing. “A lot of protocol. No one leaves or goes near the van while it’s parked.” Left to impregnate the silence the words seemed stillborn. Dowd too looked pressed, out of breath, then said, “I trust you have been discrete Stanton; not openly comparing notes on this year’s Oscars with Elana.” A nearly contorted snuffle ensued before he returned to the pictures of Pechenpaugh ogling Elana from the confessional of a window curtain. “What a pity the pretty adjacent prop-

erty should go on sale after Arthur's rough go." Daphne too pledged a smile.

But by then Stanton felt no obligation to shun the underlying chaos. The facts were unseemly: a busy Pechenpaugh patronizing a Russian hustler, and a former GRU operative amidst Prokovsky's clutch of entrepreneurs, a denouement made more perplexing if not sinister with the discovery of the shoes on the incinerator trolley, leaving in escrow the engineer's weakness for cabaret wear. Had someone doubted the wearer's bona fides. Had she been grilled? Of the frequent gatherings on the terrace, the putative Frieda was seen but once, and in the shade. Said Down in summary, "A mare's nest."

The following week Stanton suddenly had two more full-time assistants, both from Dowd's department: the first, the self-same Daphne, a former model it turned out, a fact that sharpened his amorous dilemma, who got herself booked into a fashion show at a forthcoming Borozov fête to honour his new art and fashion enterprises, reverting to her adopted alias, Karen Guk. Dowd's presumption was that the risk for was minimal — Daphne's employ with Paleomena being privileged information of the élite secretarial agency she worked for, details Stanton took to heart — while the investigative nature of such a gig was timely and open-ended. Dowd, Stanton further presumed, was sufficiently impetuous, now that the investigation was at cruising speed, to accede to his personal secretary's doughty proposal.

The second assistant was a disgruntled former skip tracer called Larry

from the Monteray Assurance Company who would help identify the outside backers. His father was a Byelorussian émigré who had his own brush with the older Russian crime bosses, the vorovskoi mir, an elder Borozov in particular. Additional probes were added to Stanton's arsenal at the villa property. The end of the beginning he thought later. What subsequently filled his briefing satchel galvanized the gnome for the remainder of the summer — documentation that confirmed Pechenpaugh's association with the Prokovsky-Borozov gang, also his patronage of the new exclusive art salon, the offerings of which appeared to rival some major collections in rarity and exclusivity! Whereas Dr. Van Eerden more and more resembled a ghost. Her given history vouchsafed her an only child, orphaned at an early age, whereas her one parent was discovered to be a name in an early Nineteenth-century convent registry. Only her academic credentials seemed kosher — she had indeed graduated from Yale with great distinction and later MIT — making her departure form Paleomena in the remote sensing sector a greater heartbreak. The likelihood of her being a spy, a possible 'illegal', was imputed by her continued absence from Paleomena and the evidence of the shoes, one belated conclusion being that they may have housed devices she used at Paleomena, though if so designed, their mutilation remained a conundrum — suggesting a darker side to her Cheka handlers, where suspicion reigned. Stanton was never more rebuked, scorned or richly encouraged to perfect his craft. He was nearly convinced the earlier offer of select shares might have saved the corporation a bundle. For the first time in his life he sensed a kind of aw-

ful omnipotence and no one was going to interfere with that transcendence. As we've noted, he long ago he decided the only manifest reality was private and as often unflattering. The real inner circle. The more artfully surly the gnome became, the more devoted his new premier snoop. "The indispensable scoundrel," Daphne said about Pechenpaugh to Stanton one night after work over a bottle of claret. She had come from her final day at the elsewhere office to the small bistro he sometimes frequented during the happy hour. She perhaps welcomed the undemanding interval but plainly had much on her mind. She smiled a couple of times, though not he thought at, or for, him. Stolidly he had said, "You will be careful."

"Of course."

Sadly, for him, she seemed then immune to a start-up engagement. Her eyes he thought missed very little, and her smile was both safe and fire proof. She obviously knew her worth, and was condescending if not slumming with him. He felt a little sheepish as he wondered what she got up to on her own. Some creatures you only get to glimpse. The lone 'naked' eye. Like the few times he'd witnessed Dowd nonchalantly tap her hand as he worked. A kind of brotherly caution for some. He was far from sure though.

"Must be off," she said, not finishing her drink. "Hairdressers at an opening." She barely smiled and didn't finish the sentence. "Bye for now."

A hairdresser. But another page turner. What the hell — a more irksome rival was hard to imagine. But she would compare notes once a

week. He would have to satisfy himself with her predatory eye for the given details. For the time being.

## TEN

Kissy Borozov, younger brother to Bossy, sat on the lawn terrace of his sprawling villa in Sochi, the leisure of the breakfast conference nearly over. He had just come to a conclusion as the last of his retainers took their leave. *The excursion was likely over, he decided.* The fracas back in Moscow over Putin the potty trainer — apropos his appointment of Dmitry Medvedev as President and the discovery of a painting of Putin and Medvedev in women's underwear — was getting out of hand. The artist, one Konstantin Altunin, whom Kissy secretly admired, was brick-batting the newly fabricated wall against gays. He might have to return to assess the outcome and standing of some in his own stable of artists — advising one or two to maybe set up abroad. For a time. He looked over at the current dove-in-residence, a tall dilatory model his brother Bossy, before his incarceration, had pinched from a cooperative Interior Ministry officer. The dove entertained Alex Prokovsky in America. As usual, Bossy's taste in most things was for Kissy a fraternal burden. The rather dim yet ebullient Elana had just arrived in a terrycloth robe after her morning swim, yawning, careless, carnal, happy, a British Vogue tucked under her arm, the ubiquitous cup of coffee in hand. The most repellant of Bossy's bravos, the opportunistic Lev Vyhnak, paused to kiss her hand, which brought a hammy curtsy, revealing a shapely leg for his benefit. After fetching a sin-

gle grapefruit half from the many savoury offerings on the side board she sat down opposite. As she snarled at her first bite — too sour perhaps — he said to himself, ‘Bossy’s Inessa Teodorovna’, though not, as a knowledgeable outsider might have imagined. She too had overstayed her welcome. He figured that when Gorbachev finally left, the ‘family’ had about six months of summary takes and urgent laundering before the nationalists consolidated the Duma, when he would become the stand-in don in the South of Spain or France, and perhaps Canada, now that Air Canada was once more flying Russian air-space. Elana also had a drinking problem which had not improved, her coffee he presumed, spiked even at this hour with amaretto and vodka. Coke, she claimed, made her sick. Some consolation. And she was getting nosy. She looked up at him as if possessed of a sudden insight.

“I love that Egyptian chair you had appraised. Just divine. It would go so nicely in the Moroccan study — the afternoon light would bring out the gold leaf, don’t you think?”

He smiled. The chair in question was putatively Eighteen Dynasty, which even David Willardson, the Paleomena expert, had found dismaying. Pechenpaugh had fashioned a pedigree that placed it among the offerings in the Bonn Egyptian Museum, ostensibly returned after the war, to an early connoisseur and collector of Egyptian artifacts. With Willardson’s confusion now before the public, the chair could easily fetch half-a-million dollars or more. Elana’s library stool!

“I’m sure it would,” was his not quite polite comment.

He did not want at this stage to alert this too-talkative moll. She had a role to play in the forthcoming fashion-art fête he had organized, and he needed that extravaganza to be a triumph. The snooty designer and rock video producer Antoine Plombiers had been retained for the show. Nearly the cost of the chair. Poor Elana; her final role as a dedicated shill.

Then she surprised him.

“I heard Arthur infer the other day that Willardson was an exclusive gold dealer. Is that true? Arthur mentioned some Peruvian things.”

His answer was prompt and diffident. “I think Arthur wants to distance himself from Paleomena. Who knows. Why don’t you ask Antoine? He’s an expert on such adornment.”

Elana immediately woke up. “Antoine? Really. Here — for the fête! Oh my god. I’d forgotten.”

‘Forgotten’. He almost laughed. She leaned over and gave him a kiss, the lapels of her robe issuing a wiff of sandalwood and glimpse of swaying jujubes. Watching her sit back and luxuriously stretch, he sensed a twinge of pity if not disgust.

He consoled himself by deciding to read to her — try out some of the talking points Felix Muerner, the new Paleomena player, had galvanized Pechenpaugh with — the conservative fix on dissolution, a reliable drama. With Putin poised to undue Gorbachev’s legacy and Kohl once again in trouble, the descendants of the Black Hundred, were girding their loins. It was surprising how the journalist Catherine Whyte had been so underappreciated. So far.

“Tell me what you think.” He read from Muerner’s paper:

“*Haut complaint is now a style of address in this stolen land.* The writer means America. *The lamentations of our cultural savants have never been more dramatic or prolific, nor have the incompetent among us been more patronized and public access been more procurable for stolid activists.* Hence the liquidity of convulsive drama, the passion play that can galvanize even the residents of a historic shangri-la. Put another way: if all artists are liberals and most liberals natural method actors, we look to the left for the fluent performances. By and large, conservatives continue to lower, drone and bump into things. Even their joke smiths are not entirely trustworthy. And they are, by and large, an ugly lot. No real media potential.”

He glanced up. “By a chap who calls himself the Gryphon, one of Muerner’s protégés, this copy via Catherine Whyte in the Washington Post. What do you think?”

Elana smiled with good-natured aplomb, then finished her croissant. His loathing seemed steadfast.

“K’, I’m off.” She touched the paper. “Sounds very jujitsu.” She fetched a last morsel of toast as she rose. “The court is available until noon, if you’ve time.” She referred to their family time slot at the Sochi club where she played a respectable game of tennis.

He smiled, thinking his graven crow’s lines must be beginning to show.

She stretched again as she sauntered into the morning room. He decided she was absorbed thinking about the fête, Plombiers’ theatrics her measure of shouldered wonder. He remembered a crack the often disappointed Pechenpaugh once made. ‘Well, she’s loyal.’ Not at all like the

surprising Willardson, whom they had discovered casing Frieda's apartment — a discovery that even now brought a rueful smile to Kissy's lips. The man was a disaster-in-waiting — just for whom was the salient concern. His disappearance a recent teasing conundrum.

Again he decided that Catherine Whyte had the moxie he must emulate. Her impious features matched her writing. He wondered if she ever met the Gryphon. They seemed to share a similar language. What was it the Gryphon said, "The misanthropist comes into his own in a degenerate society."

So too did the streetwise Stanton confront, with similar sang froid, the consequences of the late discoveries — beginning with the arrival of two night time prowlers to Frieda's apartment that week past! The first intruder was discovered on the balcony rubbing an ankle. A portly gent in dark clothing who somehow disengaged the security system then hobbled into the apartment and pulled the curtains. Stanton immediately recognized David Willardson from the raw takes. The curiosity was his presence *in* the apartment when the other intruder, a veritable gorilla arrived. Stanton could not conceal his astonishment at the dissonance he picked up from the dish receiver. A turbulence moved through the entire Van Eerden suite. Somebody, in absentia, was being verbally execrated and a lot of things chucked about. Then as suddenly it stopped. Seconds later he learned from his street team that a lanky chap left by the outside elevator swearing copiously. They were checking the plate. He had been seen a

while earlier — with what was later deemed in entry kit. The curiosity was that Willardson remained in the apartment for a time after the gorilla left. How he might have got onto the balcony remained a mystery. He left via the same elevator ten minutes later, hale but for a noticeable limp.

Dowd's reaction was a rhetorical sigh, before Stanton's deadpan summary. Lacking Daphne's presence, the facts were stark indeed.

“Willardson, our own art connoisseur, inside. Not perhaps anticipating company. Yet the cherub survives and the gorilla leaves in a snit.” He paused as if to prepare himself for the final revelation. “And all this presided over by the alien *second* team.”

Stanton, who could make no more sense of the facts than Dowd, was at least relieved he could now affirm the fact and presence of the *other* team which on earlier meetings he might only infer. “Yes. The craft's Russian I think. Willardson was followed home of course, ‘bottom up’ method.” Dowd reopened the file to say aloud, “KGB. Now the SVR aboard. Sborschchiki Fartsovshik Bratski. Briefly he paused, as if thinking of the newly ‘re-assigned’ Daphne, his smile dour and fixed.

Despite the studious rendering of the acronym, Stanton imagined the earth quiver. Never before had he paced what for all intents and purposes was a spetsnaz operation: swift focused deployment, scorched earth wake (trashing the apartment and perhaps the agent), the operation separately tracked. Making Arthur's involvement crucial, and Willardson's impiously cryptic. Dowd felt obliged to add: “He was popular, Willardson. As pantaloons often are. His involvement here is a surprise though. An unwell-

come omen.” Then he tapped Stanton on the hand with amiable condescension, almost as he had touched Daphne. “We don’t want my amanuensis upset, acquiring discordant airs, Stanton. Modeling the latest Russian couturiers will be trial enough. Understood?”

By then Stanton instinctively knew when to shut up. The moment of the gnome was sacrosanct. “Willardson...” Dowd repeated, not so much to confirm as conjure. “Mule, cutout, ponce, misfit, wool gatherer — some of his masks, his fakery — and now a B&E afficianado...” The finality of the last epithet teased them both. “Not his venue of course, raising cain. Nor bedding a scientist with a gamy wardrobe. Chocolate eclairs seem to be the ‘main squeeze.’” He looked sternly in the near distance. “The Swiftian problem.” Which was no help to Stanton. “He finds sex itself indelicto.”

Stanton belatedly nodded, avoiding Dowd’s eyes. It was a category of human experience altogether alien to him. But then he’d always doubted highbrows spent much time in the sack. How else could they bother to think, write and disseminate so much piffle?

“I think, Stanton, we may expand your field of operations. Again. As you have guessed. You two get around. Daphne’s army of snoops and paparazzi —all backstage — mingling, ‘schmoozing’. Daphne must be amused I daresay. They talk a lot backstage I understand. Did you know Daphne speaks a little Russian. No, you couldn’t have.”

The comradely smiles blossomed even as they faded.

‘Willardson,’ Dowd said again to himself. ‘Willardson. Our Winter’s

Tale.'

## TWELVE

The precisely timed noonday clamor and rush to lunch suddenly broke her concentration — a hiatus which Catherine Whyte in her airy open office, six short blocks away from the goldbrick tower, used to quit her computer and put her feet up. Unlike the buoyant chatter, antic faces and forms hurtling by her office front, her long piece on Alex Prokovsky — the newish accomplice of imprisoned Bossy Borozov — proceeded grumpily, seemed at times impulsive, glib and possibly libellous. Only an in depth investigation might particularize the megalomania, the endless, vicious scrounging and hustling — and so justify a fine savage hatred and adroit ridicule that was, she believed, the best antidote to dauntless cupidity. But a prolonged investigation her rather squeamish editor was still mulling if not stewing over. Her sudden luxuriant yawn dissipated the inner debate. She needed a drink. A recourse that was becoming a habit. But what the hell — the bugger had not leaked his visit to Paleomena, to Arthur Pechenpaugh, the Senior VP, for naught. And he came that morning from the penthouse suite itself, implicating also Voden or Paleogiannis, or both. Luke, their sleepwalker, had confirmed the descent. If Pechenpaugh had been sacked he would not be holding council in the tower. Dowd would have seen to that. A drink would help her see into the depths, the abysmal murky depths where only survivors linger. Dowd always reminded her of a Mud Fish or Grouper. It had become her ongoing fascination — nature being on nobody's side, and business a frisk of nature, the real 'god parti-

cle' physicists hadn't yet cottoned to. The family secret no one wanted to hear. Like her half sister, Margaret Burke, the fashion model, a Helen or Breseis of the the lovely cheeks, who so far thrived as a non-mythical beauty, her lean symmetrical form a natural exception and enticement. The fashion world had become one of Catherine's targets. After 'returning' to America (the Russian Federation had kicked her out) her 'apparatchik' boss, Darin the Deplorable, consigned her to the topical fashion/art/culture beat. As she wrote about the bulls and sirens of cultural mayhem — the self-dramatic exhibitionists — or the closing of yet another centre or shelter for their castoffs, her sister Margaret cat walked her way into the heart of the beast, leaving it galvanized by its prowling. Beauty that molested — the feral dilemma. But then her boss and several colleagues arrived with a birthday cake and half-a-dozen bottles of quite good bubbly. It seemed celebrity status got you a durable public memory! It was like joining the celebrants at a football game: any misgivings expunged with a plethora of toasts. The anecdote to drinking alone.

When she awoke several hours later on a daybed in the senior editor's lounge, her blouse curiously undone, the giant neon marquee of their rival broadcaster across the street cast a phosphorescent pall over the darkened room. Then she remembered she had simply fallen asleep out of excusable exhaustion after seeking a vacant chesterfield — and herself undid a new and uncomfortable bra. While restoring the buttons to the blouse she recalled a scrum in a Moscow hotel in which an in-house thug had brazenly groped her, leaving marks a good set of palettes would have mini-

mized. The bra she forthwith bought at Gum seemed bullet proof and was retired only that week! The new one with the belatedly discovered rill she stashed in her handbag. She must be on a roll. That she had been allowed to sleep — without the customary warrant of a ride home — seemed to confirm her new exemplary status in the ABN hierarchy: she might be allowed a discretionary crawl space, regardless. Nemesis and the Erinnyes you don't patronize. Ha! God she was turning into a select bitch. And was it not exceedingly pleasant this sense of arrival...even as she hunted for the ever itinerant shoe. Though she did ache to return to the international stage. Considered too dangerous for her then. Ha!

On the ride home she thought again of the energumen they called the Gryphon because of his slattern smile and penchant to savage hedonists and innocents (toffy idealists), and his spirit for carnival when the political discourse flagged. He had held forth in a dull Moscow café that metamorphosed into a stormy cabaret at night. He proved particularly shy and evasive around her. Though by then she had a tail or two of her own, both quite repellent. It was her one disappointment — not to hear more of the pithy monologues before the rapt audience in the café, the adroit words that encapsulated the new heady essence of fascism and nationalism — a national socialism in all but name. The Black Hundred smelling of Eternity for Men. He disappeared the weekend following her arrival. A coincidence she never lived down. Like misplacing an important key — which she momentarily had this night.

What returned to her now, as she removed her makeup in the cosy

bathroom with the king's purple toilet seat, was the aptness, given the scene, of his sly *apologia* for fascism. Admit a slight, if only a slight over-reaction to the jews, and you nearly have a clean slate in today's retrenchment. As for finding and touting 'degenerative art' and its custodians — today's news hounds were mesmerized by the possibility, ever keen to hawk a newly 'relevant' travesty or obscenity. The Gryphon was thus in his element — remarking the growing indolent, dissolute community. He was seen, just before he disappeared, conversing with Lev Vyhnak in a lane behind the cafe. A manuscript was exchanged. This, she, Catherine Whyte, could affirm. Then he, the Gryphon, seemed to vanish from the face of the earth. Which in the former Soviet Union usually connoted a new intrigue or unseemly demise. She believed the time was ripe for a period of unmitigated anarchy. The Gorbachev brood had had their chance but couldn't build a nest. There were too many kleptocrats — the bratsky krug — for a demagogue to emerge, at least for a time, though he was already taking shape in the presence of Vladimir Putin and his quixotic knight Dmitry Medvedev, discounting the notorious painting of the two in women's underwear. Two news stories that week seemed utterly complimentary — the desertions in Gorbachev's late circle, leaving the élite comrade entrepreneurs freer than ever, and the flight of some exotic flying roaches from a tropical insect vivarium in San Diego. If she was her station's lone tracker of the coincidence, her laughter on reading of the withdrawing oligarchs and flight of the roaches seemed apocryphal. The mystery to unlock all mystery! Comrade Tumblebug meet Comrade Roach!

God she was drunk. Trying to use gin to remove makeup. Hell. Another of her current Lothario's practical jokes. Who was absent tonight attending a class reunion. Essentially a laden football bash. Lots of booze and D-cup women. He promised to be careful. He had just got over a 'head cold', as he called it. His doing absolutely, the glowworm. And was barred from paradise for the duration! If her boss wasn't such a thumb sucker...without makeup she looked about fourteen, and at thirty two was not likely to expand until she reached seventy when, according to Woody Allen, women resumed growing boobs and other things. The Lothario would be long gone then. And she as unfruitful as she was now? She eyed her relaxed tummy. The making of a delectable pot. A nice corrupting curve.

Propped in bed she wrote her mother, the one human she might confide in and fear no deconstruction. Her dear mother who still believed. Who said her prayers each night. Who envied, coveted and vaunteth naught. Who complained naught, moped not, stole nor adulterated not. Nor conducted false witness. Who loved her two daughters, despite the shenanigans of the lone stand-in father, Margaret's gamy and adventurous sire and keister bandit — though not with 'outside child' Catherine, whose own father had left early on without a forwarding. So she had been told. A fact she felt obliged to ignore, following her mother's lead. When she did inquire, in passing, the resultant comment was unusually succinct. "You're not at all like him. One day." So, to an exemplary private school did this second child venture forth, unscathed and pure as sweet little 'she-

nanigans' were in those days. Which she was until she was seventeen. After a near miss with a swank amateur. Not a bad score mom. She began the letter to motherkin Aileen with the Tumblebugs and Roaches. It seems the insect world is overtaking us, in more ways than one. You don't have to look like one to become a robust louse. But a day later the reaction of top management to her lengthy quote of the Gryphon was enough to get her called onto the carpet. The reservations coming from Darin the Deplorable, her boss, seemed to bare out all the satirist had been saying about comfort and democracy. But sitting before this Western aparat and shirty nincompoop, she found herself on side with the Russian Sardonicus, a choice she resented Darin the more for having to make.

Said Darin, "Cath, I am sorry about this, but the directors sense a new carelessness a, a shrillness in your writing. I mean satire must be fun to read. Percy asked his secretary to read it, but she found she couldn't really smile."

Cath was sufficiently speechless to offer a polite grin. So what is it Darin, carelessness or shrillness. Darin, despite his empathy with the directors, out of sheer jealousy she imagined, was not enjoying this. His rebuked colleague might open her mouth and he hadn't made the debating team.

Continued Darin, "I suppose it's the underlying bigotry and racism in the fellow's remarks. This 'Gryphon'. He's not a black. Nor a woman. Nor any obvious minority person. It's just too *outré* for the current readership, that was pretty much unanimous. Our readers are after all the same

folk who read things like The New Yorker and the Atlantic. Who tend to favour debate and negotiation over dogma.” Then he seemed to run out of notes.

“Other than that everything hunky dory?”

“Cath, you’re making this more uphill than it has to be.”

“Darin, the reader’s of NY and A debate only what liberals chose to debate. If you’re a conservative you’re beyond the pale. Pretty much the presumption nowadays. The Gryphon may be a type of energumen but he’s hardly a fascist. The worry is that he may be good at his schtick and garners an audience someone like Bill Buckley once appealed to. As a critic he may not be as erudite as Randall Jarrell or even John Simon, but the flavour is there. That constitutes a crisis, does it? I don’t think you leave such dynamos offshore within striking distance. First you lull them into range — see what they really have in the powder department. As I said in the intro, this is a new opening salvo in a protracted war. Like about seven or eight thousand years, to my knowledge.”

“Cath, he’s part of an underworld that’s best left unencouraged. We’ve got enough right wing hot pots just now. So far they’ve been kept out of academe, by and large, and that’s the way the directors want it. My gawd, you let a ponce like that get a foothold and the first thing you know you can’t teach Marx or Noam Chomsky at Yale anymore without a dispensation — really Cath, it’s beyond the pale.”

Again Catherine could imagine herself curtseying. But Darin wasn’t paying attention as he plodded on.

“We not only have a responsibility to protect minority opinion and values, we have to give the appearance of protecting it. And recently, your columns have just been too suggestive, empathic of, well, neo-con dogma.”

“And the coercion to reign it in is not dogmatic? A First Amendment violation? Darin you’re a bad prestidigitator.”

“Catherine, the guy actually believes in beauty, not as myth, but as fact, even as gospel.”

“Little inspirational clout in the West of course.”

“Yes, bodies and genetics are big ticket items these days. The advertising putch. One of the much regretted aspects...”

“Darin, by the hundreds of thousands if not millions, people are fed up with their bodies, because they know down deep that splendour, nobility isn’t mythical — advertising would be a bust otherwise — that heath and acumen when not genetic are the fruits of stolid exacting habit, and that opportunity itself can be an embarrassment. Democrats, for chrissake, still pander to the elliptical notion of entitlement which readily reduces to equality which only the ruthless can enforce! With entitlement paramount, corruption in the governing class becomes a mere incidental, *a nihil ad rem.*”

“Cath, I’m not going to argue. Just tone it down. Our readers want a lift. Humor yes, reality where pertinent; melodrama, melancholy no. Your new marching orders. More than less.” By then she was stung. Something she thought she’d be immune to by now. She stopped herself

just in time, though her eyes may have communicated the equivalent of :  
*Darin, you really owe it to yourself to take your long coveted retirement.*

His response was immediate. “One of these days you’re going to go too far.” Then he wanly smiled and left, leaving her to deal with the close flush that had come over her. She wanted then, as she often did after an encounter with him, to sweep the entire contents of his desk onto the floor in one dramatic flourish, as they did in the flics. Only the chagrin at being reduced to a mere actress *here* kept her in her seat.

She did forthwith seek out an old boyfriend who performed well: the physical distraction that renews the mental energy and acuity. She sensed her pursed lips as she looked up the number. Yeah him, the cute Attic one. The one she hadn’t really decided on nor broken up with. Him. The plaintive but robust Michael West. She had made use of him once before when Deplorable Darin directed her to take up the FAC beat. They had gone to their favourite swimming hole. This time, but an hour later, she straddled his lap, the sun through her bedroom doors burnishing her chest into a shield, an embossed aegis. He fingered her ears and traced her pointy nose. “A most erotic tabby,” he said with intramural affection. The curiosity engaged her as if he were part of a triumvirate. He was soon burgeoning into her, his hands her lone tether to earth it seemed. How light she seemed in this poised embrace. The merest lolling skiff, barely moored, yawning against the buoyant swells...and again the stray muted voice came to her from somewhere, oddly newly alive, not unlike her own, sighs she could not disown....

Michael's expression the next morning over breakfast puzzled. He had logged onto the computer to read the market quotes — something she had already done — and while poaching their eggs said with amused wonder, "I didn't know you hankered after gold bullion, Eagles, Napoleons, Krugerrands?"

She yawned. "What *are* you talking?"

He continued: "Didn't know you were a gold bug. A list of recent sites heads your website data. Hoped you'd furnish a tip or two."

Mention of such a list startled her. Promptly she went to her computer and scanned the website data, dumfounded as she cast her eyes over one summary. "Jesus, the bugger's been in here." To which he stolidly added, after a double take, "Yeah? Not overtly discreet." Together they backlogged all the readily retrievable memory, which featured several exceptional visitations, a task that took a long minute. When they finished he was left mutely staring at the monitor as she ransacked the suite, searching for clues. By the time he decided to help out he heard her swear in the kitchen. When he approached she stood palming a tiny eye cam. "It was on the handle on the vase atop the hutch. It may have come with the vase. A gift at my party. It was trained on breakfast nook, balcony and door to the main bedroom."

"Interesting."

"It was voice activated so they would hear as well. Nice. A two-way discovery . They now know I know they know."

"You have some idea who it might be?"

“One of the Borozov field dicks. Who else.”

“The story that never ends.”

About the time Catherine and Michael began eating in an abstracted silence, Peter Vyhnak, brother of Lev, a career spy and veteran voyeur, reviewed the cam scenes in the log room of a commodious flying bridge cruiser moored in Mandraki harbour near Old Rhodes Town. He was concerned about not having time to clear the internet history on Catherine’s computer before he left. His scout had phoned urging him to leave; Ms. Whyte had just driven into the strata underground parking with a hunk. ‘What d’ya mean ‘hunk’?’ he asked, his idiomatic English limited. ‘A bear’. And then to have the bug discovered. A week’s work kaput. A set back they had yet to communicate to the ‘spook’ Lev called him — the mysterious Felix Muerner. They’d have to begin again. There was more at stake than the relatively simple exercise of surveillance. Felix Muerner, the new Paoleomana executive, headed a clinic in Bern, Switzerland, with an adjunct research facility that studied genetic ‘eccentricities’, so Lev put it. A complex business. He and Lev had met Muener through a renascent fascist cell in Germany whose members were fed up with democracy’s growing squalor, its entitlement fiasco. It’s debt and dearth of white babies. The brother’s were soon Bossy Borozov’s liaison with Muerner. Peter even worked at the clinic for a time. Indeed, Bossy Borozov provided the clinic with hard to get fetal tissue. The number of abortions in the Russian Federation, partial and otherwise, provided a mother load of such

material for eager experimentalists, who seemed to grow exponentially each year. The curiosity here was that Muener had a clinical interest in Catherine Whyte's patchy life history — which the same Muener had apparently been instrumental in charting, unknown to Whyte herself. Something to do with Muerner's utopian bent, his hunt for paragons and their 'progenitors' — another of Lev's words — Catherine Whyte being an 'ectype' apparently — an approximate copy of a paragon. Such that Peter was delighted to find her as lolita perfect in some pictures as anticipated, her delectable boyish form a reminder that there was more to the intrusion than logging the deeds of a resourceful journalist. Muerner's clinic in Bern was reputed to be in the vanguard of 'transfigurative' medicine, tissue engineering and modelling, inclusive to pharmacological and genetic research. Not something Peter ordinarily paid much attention to — until his brief time at the Bern clinic as a folio manager for the anatomy think tank, where solutions more and more harkened to the preferred or 'ideal' skeleton. The bones that kept the persona poised and alert. Perhaps he had perused too many of Muerner's utopian 'ectypes'. Though computer generated, the artistry encapsulated in each of the dossiers was grand, and the creatures depicted splendid beyond his imagination, all of whom, boys and girls alike, vaunted distinctly boyish contours. Utopian Muerner after all was reputed to be interested in grace, efficiency, functionality, seductive understatement, thence elegant shape not size or eccentric embellishment — all the above invariably accomplished by a spare agile form. He used the word concinnity. Even small breasts functioned well if the latiferous

ducts and lobules were genetically optimized, Peter learned, which allowed for an additional very pleasing, symmetrical camber. And smaller and firmer usually meant fewer ancillary problems. The few actual pictures of the finished ensembles, the designated ‘eiodolons’, kindled in him an unexpected awe. Once candidly glimpsed, such beauty becomes a quest. Catherine Whyte came close to approximating the more sublime of these — her face, without makeup, when she emerged earlier that first morning from the shower, a credible fifteen-year-old, with nates manifestly the envy of any historic Greek boy, her small breasts perfect tears beneath her oversize T-shirt. He found he was masturbating again as the proficient Michael knelt to kiss her as she drolly leaned against the sink counter, before lifting and taking her to the bedroom where their communion took on an angelic turn, if such were possible, though they were a time returning to the purview of the cam eye. To Peter’s further amazement, when they actually settled on the portion of bed seen by the cam eye, he discovered that Michael could actually caress his princess inside and out, his organ seemingly prehensile, his pelvis sufficiently acrobatic, to permit the invention. A couple of times she seemed to tire of the virtuosic antic, but was soon stilled by what appeared to be an euphoric interval. Needless to say, Peter was keenly alert then to this timeless duo as the masterful Michael continued, a Promethean form on a temple frieze but for the moving wand that stroked and rivened, the stout but flexile paint brush livening a canvas. Then, slowly, ineluctably, a release, an intimation of cessation and quietus that softened the fauves, newly flaccid limbs more easily turned, splayed,

during which loitering the attentive if suave Michael kissed and toyed with the exquisite gems that seemed to Peter so touchingly insignificant, barely rilled, barely flossed, but for the perfect lone pearl topping the tiny nacreous diadem. Or so Peter presumed, given his experience in ascertaining anomalous details on the internet as he stared in wonder at the presaged marvel. Yes, he was certain. The hands of the maid then paced the face and hands of her paramour, as if she were slightly embarrassed by a display of this family heirloom. An orb distinct, discrete and resilent. Almost entirely free of its parenthesis. His own orgasm arrived with Michael's patient appraisal of the gem, each time smoothing, chasing the groin and vellum thighs, her incipient laughter the confirmation of a newly tickled child as his passes extended to the souls of her feet. But when he delved into her again, his fingers a hive of activity, her sighs seemed apocalyptic. The full body massage he gave her on the bed promptly afterward prolonged the orgasm. Such convulsive sighs he'd really only heard before in a punishment cell. He suspected his other bosses, who sought pertinent intelligence, the joint agreement with Muerner, might be disappointed. He would watch the sequence again, log and prioritize the unedited words, only sobered by the nymph's late discovery of the bug — due to his goldbug obsessions!

## THIRTEEN

The half brothers Porcius and Roman Durrante were having difficulties with one of their 'gels', a colored filter that tinted an accent light poised

over a balmy photographic set. The client, a large sullen overdressed woman who ruled the Mur cosmetic empire, smiled precariously. Roman looked down at Porcius from atop the ladder near the hair light and shrugged. The acetate square had buckled. The fan attached to the strobe head cut out but not before a small ugly umbra, due to a heat warp, now touched the subject instead of the gold aura, the nimbus effect wanted. Alternate filters were being examined after the light head was replaced.

“The Arsenic too is kaput,” said Porcius, holding the filter up to the light. “But this one, Sulphur, perfect.”

“It’s gawdawful and you know it.” Madame Albricias’ face registered a Gorgon alteration. Porcius rummaged about a trunk. Then Roman noted that the Sulphur had faded on one side. “Half a goddess may not be enough.” Roman had a reputation for precision which his brother had endured throughout their professional partnership. As such they remained successful ‘glamour’ photographers with clients in Rome, London, New York and Los Angeles, where the present shoot was again underway, once the Dandelion emerged free of defects. Both photographers nodded their approval from lens vantage point followed by Madame Albricias with a squawk of relief. The brothers had briefly touched hands until the Spanish matron, effulgent in a flowered organza with a large scarlet ribbon belt, stepped away and with a wave signaled the circus might begin anew.

The advertising shot centered upon an encamped, seated safari femme déshabillé but for an open fatigue shirt, a Pre-Columbian necklace and

white briefs — all framed by a brace of palm fronds: a lithe white huntress, returned, exhausted, disposed to cool off and indulge her feet. The model's shoulders and hair were highlighted by the gloaming yellow. The foreground featured hastily shed riding boots, khaki breeks slung over a nearby chair, and an oversize shot glass, into which the model had immersed one foot, her other leg insouciantly drawn up, the heel perched on an edge of the chair, the gusset of the elegant silk briefs a masterwork of Parian marble, the flue of the sex just visible. A discretely lit jar of Mur body lotion sat on a low vanity. The advertising copy offered the following camp advice: *After Taste. Your body knows best.* Roman had assumed a stoic pout when he first saw the tear sheets of the model selected by his client. The conversation was brisk, the model, the much-travelled Margaret Burke, Catherine Whyte's step sister.

“A trifle old.”

“She is thirty-eight and exactly what I want. A ripe woman who knows her mind.”

“But the mouth is not a trifle seasick?”

“She’s a Virgo and coping. My god, legs like that you kill for.”

“The stretch marks are demur but undaunted.”

“It’s the feminist rood. Semiotics.”

The concession to the Durrantes took another five minutes before a retoucher would be retained to ‘minimize’ the faint maternal stigmata beyond the impeccable briefs. A further copious snit ensued over the hint of labial divide in the gusset of the briefs; ‘gauche’ the brothers maintained, a

debate that disclosed the drugged state of the model and foul language she could vent without discrimination when Roman sought to free up the welt somewhat. He managed to endure ‘cock breath’ and ‘cornhole’ but ‘fascist bumboy’ browned him off. Said a buoyant Madame, “Could one of you layabouts get some shots of the mouth before it’s too late?” Porcius managed to head Roman off just in time and catch with his own Nikon the pretty ideologue in a spate of invective. Madame Albricias beemed when Margaret Burke got to the environment. By then she was eyeing Porcius with mock commiseration. “Want me to get down to business, butterball?”

Said the effulgent client, whose infatuation with the sometimes mercurial model was recent and *ravissante*, “The in-between shots will be dynamite. Blow the lid off, Mags, all the way, honey.”

But the toffy exhibitionist paused to indulge a luminous smile, to look upon the three with a mixture of amusement and durable connoisseurship, the gaze one sometimes lavishes on a cranky pet. “Now, now, now for gawdsake!” madame commanded, directing the pliant Porcius to the larger-format take. “Divine, absolutely divine. An absolute total bloody survivor! *Formidable!*”

With the downed camera the jocularity gave way to a sudden request for a cigarette break. All the while Willardson was doing his best to stand off, taking wry solace in a recent joke about a photographer who finally couldn’t look on and had an assistant point the camera. Such a selfless prude and mindful cad he could be. Madame Albricias began hugging the

willowy form, kissing the girl's hair with unfeigned tenderness. All breathed a sigh of relief. A style of hair pin and pectoral from the Paleo-mena Pre-Columbian archive, on special loan as a favor to the flamboyant client, whom he had gone to school with, had been solicited for the day's shoot, and he there to fetch it back. In so doing he dumbly witnessed the spectacle Porcius fluently documented. He felt sorry for the model, with her leftover squib of propriety. The elegant form, excruciating in its late prime, seemed a pending trial, vulnerable as any plaintiff. Sooner than later it would be merely pathetic, another dried fruit. The phrase down-hill skier kept needling his sensibility. It seemed he had spent much of his early life marinating in the visual cortex — alerted especially to those paragons that invoked the deftness of articulation, of what he deemed harmonious definition and contour. Concinnity. Entirely vicariously of course. At an early age he came to believe that symmetry and proportion might be savored only as a conceptual treat, so soon did they prompt envy, rage and finally dissolution — in the age of entitlement and devoutly ugly art. The time of visual reckoning was at hand — the realization that elegance, the one excuse, was bred in the bones. The many *grotesque* fashion models simply attested to the aesthetic groveling of the age, thin ill-conditioned legs, fussy knees, pigeon breast plates; humans, particularly jaded men, needed waifs, urchins it seemed. Suckers. The laughably 'strong' 'independent' women gay fashion designers kept harping on. Pace the languorous model Madame Albricias had earlier ushered into the studio from the make-ready room. Where else but the shade of an alcove

could one leisurely, unflinching admire the surface geography allotted by deftly articulated bone: the regnant back, shoulders and neck, the elegant spill and cadence afforded to chest, the incised umbilicus, pear-matched haunches and sweetly cambered mons beneath the parian briefs, the classic Belvedere-Apollo legs straightened and elongated a bit, the delicious hint of modesty only partly allayed by the nonchalance of intoxication or inebriation, and the gamy resolution to expedite yet please. An added treat was some excess oil slathered off the un-doctored chest before the shirt and necklace were positioned to reveal only what would infuriate. Tear-drop symmetry. Was there a more touching, moving sight than a woman palming her own individual bosom? The one physical trait not arbitrated by bone. Was human tissue more beautifully rendered by fluent human touch...yet he managed to get away just in time. Before the fulsome schoolmate, Albricias the Abominable, could put about what an imical pussycat he was; he was getting tired of the success of his own sly charade. The last image retained was of a shoving match between the bribed Medea and stout Hera. Then on leaving he glimpsed in the conference nook a familiar shark, an unwelcome spectre, one Peter Vyhnak of the Vyhnak twins, Peter and Lev, in visual communication with him — the stare of a hyena. Rabid limitless energy, ruthlessness, cunning...what in god's name was he doing here? Sharing his private delectation with a Great White made Willardson smile. He recalled Catherine Whyte's ABN special on 'Bossy' Borozov, the Russian hustler who seemed a stalwart in the post-Communist underworld. Vyhnak had been a compatriot member

of Bossy's team, who first earned a name for himself as a marriage broker for ladies in the former Soviet Union who believed they might better themselves with a little craven advertising on the Internet. He also peddled provocative art treasures and had propositioned Willardson, quite out of the blue, at a showing of Neglected European Masters to verify a couple of early revolutionary paintings by Alexander Deyneka. Willardson could not deny the temptation — to remuneratively validate a couple of remarkable forgeries that only a handful of his colleagues would find contentious. It was obvious his reputation was beginning to make the rounds. Time surely to get out, pull the plug...then he would encounter another lovely *mädchen* in need of validation, like today, reviving his closet speciality, elegant vintage adornment from the Paleomena Archive. He seemed much in demand these days.

When outside the studio the shrill sound of sirens, not the Greek kind, filled the happy hour. Pavlovskiy, David Abercrombie, he calmly said to himself when the door of the security limo sealed him in its perfumed twilight. As he passed the ABN complex he thought of the bright imp Catherine Whyte, his favourite news hen and ongoing art interlocutor, who had interviewed Alex Prokovsky, the dapper Russian mafiya capo, in front of the Paleomena Tower, the same gadfly who, months earlier, had stung another player in the same gang, Boris Ivanovich 'Bossy' Borozov for a business scam and, in so doing, earned herself a place on the cover of OO Magazine, the new mag for *les visuels*. It was a decidedly daring enterprise — to beard a Zaporazh'ye Lion on his own terrain, almost it seemed in his

own den. She had been in and around Sevastopol and later Tallin — the gang's export base — the better part of a year finding out about the 'Bossy' network. A European food scam, that included a baby formula, had been derailed as a result and Bossy fingered by a Moscow procurator. Bossy's reclusive art aficionado brother, Konstantin — 'Kissy' — emerged as a solicitous Alexei Karamazov with a wild brother he wouldn't quite abandon. Recent revelations that he had been funding a Moscow food bank worked miracles for him until the ABN digger discovered that a nearby market, run by a Kazak immigrant, had been patronized by street folk who worried Bossy Borozov's body guards. The food bank was in fact a coordination centre for Borozov goons. The initial Whyte bite had never really healed. Wrote she, "When in doubt try servility. If Kissy has not been seen humping drywall in Yaroslavl, it is because the folks there are liable to know better." Yet the former Soviet Union remained a gold mine for dynamos with party and mob connections, its current unrivalled export. Willardson wished the slight impulsive idealist well and would have derived considerable satisfaction had he known, at that moment, that the incomparable Catherine Whyte had also cadged an invitation to the latest art sale and fashion extravaganza at Kissy's new art salon in San Francisco. He and Catherine had attended the opening of Kissy's museum gallery in Los Angeles the year last. The recent venture pointed to renewed Russian mafiya involvement on this continent for he had recently learned that Kissy was visiting Canada. Such parties one vainly attempted to crash, for the Soviet Mafiya, like the Cheka, was obsessed with credentials,

societal and professional. His own numbered invitation waited on his fax machine when he returned that afternoon. The promise of ‘late Russian masterworks’ was tempered by the pledge of a ‘Moscow fashion fête’. He recalled an old wry video featuring a stout matron as model wearing throughout the same dowdy sack-like frock while the host announced in a deliriously decrepit English: Verkvare. Eveninkvare. Sportsvare. Sleepvare! He wished the intrepid journalist well. Cute, able and impetuous. A casting director’s dream. She worked stateside since her return, her reputation among Bratva dons sufficiently unflattering to prevent her resuming investigative work in Russia itself. Several times she sought his opinion on art works with ambiguous pedigrees or fulsome hype — one of her new beats being the art world itself, lately appraising its self-image. Kissy especially had the reputation of a pawky magus, a daredevil aesthete, a kind of necromancer who might resurrect or reconstitute any number of bewildering but engaging art works, which included a mural that featured a girl with a profile not unlike that of Catherine Whyte! Which led to her encounter with the utopian Felix Muerner, who was a new VP at the Paleomena Corporation Prokovsky was warming to. Following this amused reverie, Willardson directed the driver to a neighbourhood pub to meet another of his favourite people. The outre Antoine Plombiers he had not seen for some time and felt a twinge of guilt.

The single-minded *artiste* was already in a festive mood, sitting at a corner table with a couple of Green Dragons before him, the second almost empty. He affably smiled on seeing Willardson. “G,greetings cousin. In

the pink I see.” Antoine tended his vices on the sly though he was discreet enough to keep it, as he said, *in petto*.

Their meeting place was a nearly derelict bar in which gay Antoine felt copacetic. “You sense the play on the walls.” He meant only incidentally the roaches. “The pretty vespers. Where else can you f,find them in excelsis. You must s’see my l,latest takes. Such *scenes* my dear.” A smiling waiter arrived with an Old Fashioned for Willardson, and a third Green Dragon for Antoine.

The film Antoine was in the throws of editing was his take on what he called “the ‘psoriasis of haute couture — the eruption of circumscribed scales and weals that one mustn’t scratch.’ Mme. Poupinon, a special projects editor of the Italian Vogue — *belua multorum capitum* — looked yesterday like the ribboned stool of a diarrhetic poodle who’d been fasting on beets. One can paraphrase only so long. I wasn’t close enough to test the air, but I’m told the pot-pourri in Sachs is an improvement. And what have you been up to? You look like you’ve i,invested in a cold.”

It was the one acknowledgement of his friend Antoine would make. “As I recall, that quicksilver d,derringer from Harpers — Gloria Leibowitz — was also coddling a sniffle. Such courageous dedication — leaving a swath a mile wide. A private school b,blow fly. S,Sisyphus with wings.”

If Willardson was often mystified by Antoine’s pronouncements he was well aware of his friend’s reputation as a *très haute couturier*, engaged then in making a film about some invincibly louche designers Mme. Poupinon was

then salivating over. “A cult ouvre that fawns over its longstanding thrall to deconstructionism. Karl Lagerfeld claimed all you need only be yourself. A fine paean to the peons.”

For one hour a patient Willardson sat with Antoine in a small screening room near the bar.

Whispered Antoine as the room darkened, “A minimalist beginning.” The film got underway immediately: a young model, suggestively high, wearing a spectacularly confusing gown — “one of Steve McQueen’s aberrations” — loitered by a lagoon full of Swan Lake swans, which she suddenly, impulsively decided to join, jostling several off balance and disorienting others. The one or two dancers who tried to dissuade her — push her aside — got shoved away, some landing on their tutus. The model nodded, saying, “It’s nice to get away from the classics now and then. Swans are really very aggressive you know.” And continued her rapt intrusion. Willardson was aware that the whole encounter had been adroitly choreographed. As the ballet continued, the model finally rid herself of her cumbersome gown to emerge in a suitable tutu, in which she performed as a credible Odile, while the dancers passed the gown about, several trying it on and behaving as the model did earlier.

Said Antoine, “A most c,convivial old gherkin.”

“Your clientele are a fussy lot.”

“Sadly yes. Long ago they nixed the violence-as-redemption, c,conniption-as-integrity flaunt. To be a satirist you need an education, what the young naturally eschew. How b,boring to discover you are bor-

ing. You indulge distracting mayhem, you end up living it. The logic is immutable. You will be gnawing your Baedecker when you see the tidy coda I end the piece with. On loan you might say.”

The adjunct ending showed on a scientist at a ‘green’ black board writing out a series of equations which the dancers periodically squinted at as they rehearsed, the equations, though indistinct to the audience, prompting their choreography. They bumped into one another and seemed to gain weight under the gowns as they did so. Soon they were all bloated munchkins, luminously smiling, immune to the random collision frequency. The snippet was entitled Lake Higgs. Said Antoine, “The Higg’s Boson they call it — now shortened simply to the God Particle. What other particles consume to gain weight and stature. What we all are — out of our fasting tights. Consuming all about us.”

Willardson did not tell Antoine that he could identify the scientist. That she worked for the corporation which employed him. A beauty whose God Particles must be fasting. Antoine merely smiled, at no one in particular, when Willardson asked him where he got the clip of the scientist.

Stanton immediately sensed the change in mood when he entered the ‘elsewhere’ foyer. The fluent silks were back and Daphne in her wistful mood — meaning she likely had some influential news, a rare commodity the week past. As Dowd opened a bottle of chablis, she fiddled in the small kitchen with a stately vase of irises near a platter graced with crois-

sants, brie, glazed trout, fresh strawberries, and the baklava Dowd consumed without stint. Bright spring sunlight spilled from elevated windows gilding both the flowers and buff-coloured hair Daphne had styled in a plaited bun. At first Stanton was stayed by the scene, and proceeded to unload his valise only when he realized both Daphne and Dowd were silent in order to savour the birdsong, in particular, the vibrant cooing of some doves on a perch under the overhand of the balcony. In the garden below, two hummingbirds hazed the feeder hanging from a rising Black Walnut branch.

When the irises and confections were in place and the chairs drawn, Daphne offered a toast: “To golf and the greening of the desert by El Nino or whoever.”

Stanton was only momentarily non-plussed. “Golf?”

Said Daphne, “Roald Licchavi, silicon valley’s new robot kingpin, if that word is still used, sometimes dines at the country club where I’m taking lessons.” Which Stanton guessed from her light smile the gnome arranged. “And Mr. Licchavi has a new *soigné* companion, which even my instructor felt obliged to point out — none other than our missing engineer. Looking very cool in a *Donna Karen* frock and Todd Olden sandals.”

Said an apathetic Dowd, “Very American.”

“And she seemed in excellent health...?” said Stanton in his best reconciled deadpan.

Said Dowd, “This morning we received an apology in writing for her

abrupt departure from Paleomena — due to an accident in a taxi that left her amnestic for several days — a report from a hospital near Visalia purports to bear this out. She was in Visalia attending a convention of antique dealers, she claims. It is known she had a yen for Asian porcelains and cloisonné. Because she anticipates a lengthy recuperation, the medical report cites a damaged cervical vertebra, she has resigned her commission at Paleomana, regrets the shortfall and wishes her team every success, et cetera. She has paid off the lease to her apartment and given as a forwarding address a postal box in Compton, which I presume is little more than a dead letter drop. In short, she, they, have tied up some loose ends. Her injuries have apparently not upstaged her golf interest. Max agrees we must be silent, stolidly gracious and bide our time. The special curiosity is that Licchavi is a client of Borozov's, his industrial robot plant a flush, reliable customer for the dismantled steel, copper and exotic metals from the old Soviet industrial cites that Borozov manages to dismantle then transport to Riga for export. Willardson, sadly, has not been as fortunate. Daphne has sieved through the details.”

Dowd's sudden silence and oddly sober look Stanton readily took in. Daphne too was a moment marshaling her words.

“Well, as of yesterday, the disappearance was official. His secretary had not been able to summon him on either his home or emergency number. An assessment of his apartment being in order, the LAPD found a body, which has been identified as that of David Willardson. Max went himself. No cause of death has been given. We've been promised an

autopsy finding later this week.” With some effort she continued after glancing at Dowd. “Sadly, I knew him only by reputation. Seems I missed out.” Dowd’s unexpected solicitude was, it seemed, infectious.

Dowd silently nodded and wiped his lips with a napkin.

It was a mouthful.

## FOURTEEN

Eileen Whyte slumped in a her oversize armchair and snored as water sucking under an icecap. The comfy chair, of Turkish design, its back, arms and seat independently sprung, was a gift from her beloved Catherine, and stood as a kind of mirab or prayer niche in a corner of the otherwise austere modern room. Her husband Ed had, with enthusiasm, made most of the hard wood furniture himself, but was rarely home to sit and endure it. “Hard scrabble,” Catherine once called it. Ed and Catherine rarely saw eye to eye — unlike Catherine’s half sister Margaret, a lithe fashion model popular with photographers Louis Führ and the Durrante brothers. Indeed, Eileen, in her plush housecoat and wide pajama bottoms faintly resembled a contemplative nawab, except for her ominous snoring, which was suddenly interrupted by the peel of the nearby phone. After groping for the receiver she blearily listened, suddenly brightened, and with surprising animation scribbled down a name. “Thank you, yes, I’ll tell her. She had a late night I believe. Thank you so much.”

After putting the receiver down she frowned. It was almost lunchtime. She rose and in measured steps ascended the spiral staircase to stepdaugh-

ter Margaret's room, only to find it empty, the bed undisturbed. She sat down on the ladder back chair to catch her breath. She must use the main staircase more often. She waited several seconds, striving, praying, conspiring to breathe. Her aspirator was downstairs by the phone. Please come. She gasped as in a vacuum, no air in or out. At last she was able to expand her chest but felt little exchange. Another half-minute passed before the spasm passed. She may have passed out for she discovered herself on the bed eyeing the cedar ceiling which was stained a rosewood patina. Blood stained, Margaret once said of it, comparing it to the gun deck of an Elizabethan galleon. Eileen's husband, Thomas, who begat Margaret with another woman, was a model sail-ship hobbyist. Ship-of-the-Line was his metaphor for validation. And 'ship shape' a sterling attribute which, with the passing years, Eileen had come to live with. 'Pretexted and sanctimonious,' Catherine, her own impious child, had said of it. A slight breeze rilled sheer draperies falling from the canopy of the unused bed, suggesting lufting sails. Though the room here was anything but ship shape. A coarsely woven tapestry, now eschew, covered one wall and a section of floor. Assorted summer clothes littered the edge of the rug and both ladder back chairs as well as the highboy. Mexican pottery held a variety of overgrown wisteria, foxglove and fern, and a miniature deep red Hollyhock. The keen light in the bay, which Margaret's father remembered so vividly when he built the house, had dimmed over the years. The magic of the Greek islands became shrouded in the ubiquity of the growing haze from the encroaching metropolis. Apparently the desert was heat-

ing up, and the atmosphere crying out Margaret said. The late winds were another matter. And what sun there was seemed fated to accompany them. Margaret too had had a hazy beginning.

Eileen married late. Mainly for worse. Thomas Edward Whyte was a womanizer who spent much of his life in the Far East, first as an ordnance officer in the American army, then as an importer. Margaret, his first child, as far as Eileen knew, was the result of a liaison with a colleague's wife. Thomas swore he learned of his paternity only from a conveyancer after the colleague and his wife were killed in a snow avalanche near Whistler, British Columbia. Margaret was then eight. The husband's will made allowance for the daughter, Margaret, citing Thomas during the formal reading as both a prospective guardian and the biological father, a fact Eileen absorbed without batting an eye. Everyone else present seemed quite underwhelmed. Tom and Dan Burke had been together in an airborne division in 'Nam where Dan was wounded and rendered infertile — a belated discovery when he returned. By which time Tom had demonstrated prodigal habits. So was the biological father a fit prospective parent? the trustees duly asked. A sister of the deceased mother thought not. Thomas Whyte presented himself to the trustees as a much reformed and repentant gambler, job fumbler, and testy drinker. But there was a kind of pride taken in the litany and no substantive evidence he had changed his spots. A long and expensive litigation ensued. During which time Thomas Whyte, or Popeye, as he was called by his army buddies, married Eileen to stiffen his merit in the eyes of the court. He had taken a shine to

young Margaret. Eileen had been an exemplary Baptist and testified to his kindly and caring disposition. In due course she and Popeye were sanctioned as suitable parents for Margaret Burke. Their own child, Catherine, a gifted youngster, was five years younger than Margaret. Catherine's example convinced the court, which didn't hear that Catherine was briefly given to another couple due to a mixup in the hospital's nursery. Indeed, though she dearly loved the child, she was never entirely convinced the babe was hers!

The rest was a shadowy unleavened history that merged with Eileen huffing and puffing to her stepdaughter's bedroom, noting once more the terrible absence in her life since her own dear spry Catherine left. She had prayed for divine intervention throughout her adopted daughter's mysterious rowdiness, which peaked in the early teens. "What has it to do with me?" Margaret said when Eileen suggested something was amiss. "Popeye's not complaining." Margaret was in her late teens before Eileen learned a few sketchy details of the incestuous relationship which Eileen then realized she'd steadfastly overlooked, and perhaps abetted by not being a robust, outdoors person. White-water rafting, climbing, assisting in forest and wildlife studies or an archaeological dig...most often she stayed in the tent or cabin and read. Often she simply stayed at home. "I have no strength left," she once said. Thomas simply shrugged. "It was years ago. She's an active kid, and making a bundle."

That was true perhaps for the brief period Margaret was indeed handsomely paid to model sportswear and slinky gowns for mainly European cli-

ents who would accept an ethnic nose with more equanimity than American editors. The surgical acquisition of a more Nordic profile she had balked at, but not the showcasing of her tall lean figure which an early photo in a Burda swimwear edition made merchandisable. She returned to California only when the TLC clients began to dwindle, a homecoming that coincided with a miscarriage and swearing off of all analysts. She resumed the art history studies her beauty eclipsed and stayed occasionally at the bay home between semesters. Easily she accepted Thomas's ready generosity, almost as a kind of tribute or recompense, yet continued to shun dutiful Eileen, who tried her best. A cloudy reserve clung to their meetings like a cataract or canicule. Eventually Eileen gave up, cherishing the occasional bearing of good news, such as the recent phone call intimated — while the child was nowhere about to receive the message. Well, the colorful pills had at least disappeared, though the closets in the bedroom remained every bit as chaotic. Doll's clothes the lot Eileen thought. Some unfit to be seen even as laundry. The few frocks in the walk-in were undeniably chic but without exception humiliating to *human* figures. Then to make a career of it. But she bit her tongue and assiduously passed on all messages. Today at least one European client remained interested, though as far as she knew Margaret had never modeled for a Moscow designer. She padded across the open corridor to the main staircase and slowly eased her way down. In the living room she settled into the favorite sofa chair, her special island, put her feet up and reached for the needle-point. At least her eyes were holding. She stared briefly at the low red-

wood table on which one of Margaret's shawls lay as a kind of garland. It seemed she would once again be reduced to tears, as happened all too frequently then. But the reflex passed. She too was learning to be sometimes incensed. Though it had taken a lifetime it seemed.

At first the progress of their other and her only child filled her with pride, though a mixup in the obstetrics ward had briefly caused a stir, though in the end the babe she nursed was a wondrous miracle and the careless nurse forgiven. She had been very sick for a time after the protracted delivery due to a berry aneurism, which clouded her consciousness with the thunderclap headaches, as they were called, and she did not take up her Catherine for a fortnight after the birth — the child Thomas had been suborned into giving her, who eventually placed among the finalists in a state-wide competition sponsored by the Paleomena Corporation. As a result, Eileen was asked to consent to the youngster, barely six at the time, partaking of a specialized program. Thomas was enthusiastic, though the promise of intellectual poise for their child meant long separations. Eileen agreed to a conditional stay of two years at the accelerated academy, then had given in; the achievements were nothing short of breathtaking. The child's lisp completely disappeared. The shy paper doll collector was replaced by an ebullient nine-year-old tease with an exhausting wide-ranging curiosity, who talked so swiftly and raptly about the goings on in school that removal then would have been a rupture indeed. Thomas displayed a newfound pride and even improved for a time as a salesman for his import firm. The later near-adolescent who came home

during the ever briefer holidays was enchanting in many ways but, Eileen decided, not really hers — any really observant person who knew the child before might guess that. The mixup in the hospital reasserted itself and lingered as a rebuke. Only the youngster seemed not to notice the discrepancy as she blithely talked of the many goings on. Eileen imagined the Mandlebrot some kind of new-fangled dance or perhaps fabric design. A picture the child brought her entitled *The Shepard's Crook*, one of her earliest computer renderings, she had framed and stared at in wonder, wondering what biblical character might inspire such a characterization. It seemed at times the new mentors had replaced or modified almost everything except the lovely cutup's heart — for which she gave thanks every day. Physically the child, though petite and skinny, was a bit of a hoyden and possessed an athletic talent no one in the family had. A new woman. Eileen's main regret was that something, the age difference or the snooty prestige of the school, kept Catherine and half-sister Margaret at arm's length. Margaret must have noted the metamorphosis yet offered little approbation. Eileen wondered now if Margaret's own insular habits increased as Catherine developed. It was about this time Eileen began to have trouble breathing. She was given an oxygen capsule and urged to change her diet and take frequent short walks. Eventually Catherine's visits extended only to birthday's, anniversaries and the like, though her letters continued unabated. Her curious nature and avid reading first led her into history, then archaeology then, when the dynamic events of the Century erupted — the decline of the Soviet Union — into investigative jour-

nalism, in consequence of which she now graced the cover of OO Magazine. She worked in Canada for a time, now for ABN in Los Angeles. A very successful career Eileen followed with wonder, amazement and consternation. They all go in the end.

But what if they've never really been she silently asked herself, just before she sat back and began to stitch the scene of the Coming of the Magi. She would not forget the most recent image of Margaret shameless and defiant in a thick glossy magazine which a neighbor had shown and commented on. Nearly as stark were the candid words journalist Catherine used in an early background piece about a chap who's girlfriend had sliced off his member. Such deeds were the work of aliens which the New Testament seemed to have overlooked. Her God and sense of sin were having a rough go then. Though Catherine's latest letter brought some comfort. The child was at least free of the late hazardous assignment in Russian that had caused so much worry. Perhaps she might even see more of the firebug if she had to settle down on this continent. Again she thanked God the child would and did write so well.

*My Dearest Momsie,*

*I've just been told by my lion-hearted boss that I may bring down the new reformist government of Vladimir Putin and cannot be allowed to monkey in Russian/Soviet affairs any longer. I told him he owed it to himself to retire early. More or less. Please don't worry. I still have a job though the new marching orders put me in the land of the Great Diviners, the feminist spiers who 'defrock' the rags and guck you won't be wear-*

ing this year — a joke I'm sure you'll get if you think about it. Darin, my boss, used the codeword *Beauty Myth* to designate my special ‘undercover’ assignment — to upbraid a few sirens for spoofing sailors. Dynamite stuff, eh? About as exciting and savvy as picketing a topless diner. But then the ‘munchkins’, with emphasis on ‘munch’, are coming into their own — I know you've told me often enough in so many words. Yet penchants for litheness, makeup and pornography have been around forever. I really find it hard to take this stuff seriously and comedy only works up to a point. Only a good savage hatred has any staying power. But even that eludes me right now. You need real not passion-play victims to get your molars out of sync. Things are really so absurdly good in this country. How can I light into my own sister for selling perfume and body lotion in her tony birthday suit? Will posterity be ungrateful someone got her in front of a camera? Who wants to be another sultry bellyacher? They're as thick and gummy as an oil slick already. I don't know: I may just take off for a while. I've got some holidays coming. Greece maybe. One of the places I' haven't been for a long while. The thought of having to make up copy for Calamity Janes fills me with cement. If you are dumb enough to plant silicon, don't complain if you grow a little chippy — the washroom joke at the moment. (Money spent on the cosmetic industry eclipses all military budges word wide; think what such budgets might accomplish elsewhere.) Pretty, naturally lithe white women are an aristocracy. Period. Even eminent Black males screw and marry them with appalling regularity. All but proving discrimination needs some fine tuning. Moreover, men not getting Mad Cow disease because they are a bunch of pigs has peeked. Or the Value Jet slogan — See You Sooner Alligator. Really, I'd as soon sell carrot dicers at the PNE — hat's the yearly agricultural exhibition on Canada's lovely West Coast. So you see I just may end up working elsewhere. I've got a good name, at the moment.

*Maybe it's time for this ship to change course and flush the bilges. Leave the drowning cats behind.*

*From your last letter I think you better see that specialist again. I know he's private but I've got a sturdy bank balance right now. Thomas will pony up what he can I'm sure. Let me know. I really mean it KO. Who am I going to confess to without my Anchoress? Hope to see you before I make a decision.*

*A smotherly hug,*

*Cath*

Eileen smiled. She would have to read the letter again to get the gist. But she was flattered. She could vividly see the cut up's upturned nose and dancing eyes. And the sprightly freckles. Where they came from she had no idea. But thanked God everyday for them.

## FIFTEEN

Margaret Burke sat chin deep in a snowy bubble bath surveying the considerable attractions of Madame 'Avozinga' Albricias' bath/dressing room, the fixtures of fine Chalcedon, the holders and faucets of gold plate styled by a gouger in Santa Monica who whistled through his dentures, a tic Avo seized upon as trope. A large crystal chandelier that dropped from a recessed glass ceiling presented the bather an illusion of being ensconced in a rare decanter. The upper mirrors featured in frosted arabesques a couple reclining in a tub analogous to the real one below. The man wore a rapt expression the woman seemed to study. The engraved tableau was completed before Avo discovered her own sex. The couple therein now

merely entertained. Lucky man indeed! In the room itself, antique fauteils in a yellow-green satin occupied either side of an alcove day bed moire draped in ivory silk that seemed the very texture of pristine skin — an observation logged the first night the importunate Avo was allowed to have her way. Margaret had come to believe the cosmetic duenna might help stay a gloaming career. It was her first lesbian encounter and despite the campy sex augured well. At the last minute Avo had abandoned a dual-sided dildo in favour of capturing on film the creature who “proved more arresting than a mythic Greek rib.” She had been looking at ‘arresting’ models for her latest campaign. During the earlier fashion show in which Margaret cat walked a number of designer donated creations for an AIDS’ benefit, Avo had gawped and hawked backstage. But the softer atmosphere of the private solarium where they repaired to take the intimate pictures served to affirm the promising chatter. More and more Avo became convinced and convincing: Margaret just might be the one they were looking for — for an entirely new product. It was a revelation Margaret resisted smiling broadly at; grand overtures came with demands, sometimes extortion. With unexpected passion Avo reassured her the *Sans-gene* essence *was* the modern redolence! — the imperviousness, incorruptibility of the resilient, journeyed woman that smart worldly women, and men, paid court to. “The treat one hangs about the vine for, waiting, watching, testing. The assured maturity, the distillation that consummates. Makes the head purr!” Electronic crybabies she called the modern generation. Voices honed on skim milk. Bodies bleak as nails, predictable as M & Ms.

She would introduce the durable reflective *Eve*, and had commissioned a survey team working then for the Paleomena Corporation to give her a detailed profile of the woman most self-possessed women aged thirty to fifty respected and sought to emulate; especially she wanted to find the physical indices that upstaged the many-too-many psycho-political distractions. The study returned with startling results, including a discrete corporal representation Avo immediately approved and impetuously visited upon her advertising trackers. If the details were encyclopedic and fanciful, as they were to a wryly amused Margaret, the very exclusiveness animated Avo. The Paleomena mad men knew their client! “I think we open a new front; we’ve come of age. We are the mature woman: savvy, seasoned, coherent, unexcelled, confident; here for keeps. The scent you cannot deny.” She recalled the new epithet, *sans-gene*. That was uncannily ‘it’ -- the *Sans-gene* Woman. The mature woman of the new world. Timeless in her canny mortal flesh. Now, in the frothy suds Margaret attempted a succinct recapitulation of the physical traits which four months ago she saw fit to entertain herself with by half-heartedly memorizing, beginning on the second interminable night Avo let her hands and lips do the exposition. By then the model would do Madame Albricias’ bidding and soon realized the minutiae of the exercise were as teeming, dense and consequential as the Mayan lintel over the entrance to the solarium. And perhaps only marginally less confounding. Not coincidentally she wondered what a vintage Mayan Queen would make of this transcendent genotype, assembled from god knows how many approved pictures:

*A strong though not bulky frame, darkly blonde. A remotely Nordic face: longish, bookish, directional nose, elliptical melancholic eyes (ironically empathic). Moderately high cheekbones (not a mongol), full three-planed chin, slight generic twist to the smile (mild exocytosis in trigger neurons to one set of Nasalis and Orbicularis muscles) — bravo Margaret! Distinct clavicals, preferably with arching acromial end, shoulders wider than hips that are wider than a long waist (from tenth rib to Outer Trochanter one measure, Trocater to Talus three and a half). Broad spaced Scapulae with slightly raised clavicular facet, tall aligned cervical vertebra, genetically something sculpted Deltoids, and something — can't remember — slightly narrower than mean average fifth lumbar and fifth sacral vertebra and/or compacted crest of Ilium. Mystery. Inclusive spine — yes — dorsal projections recessed to crest of Latissimum Dorsi up to third thorasic projection. Just don't ask me to draw it. As reward she closed her eyes and began to caress the one part of her the ‘scrutineers’ hadn’t vouchsafed. At least not yet.*

*A Belvedere knee with marginally less camber...the details of which have faded. Oh dear. Not the femur though — roughly equidistant to Tibia-Fibula, and that roughly the expanse from Coccyx to Manubrium. She began to giggle, got a taste of acridly perfumed water, reached up and took another pull from the pina colada.*

Then there is this costal arch...which too draws a blank. But not the fat limit

— who may forget! — genetically twenty percent below mean average of the under thirty middle-distance running crowd, or some such, an epidermis with so-and-so per-

*cent less electrolyte insulation and a musculature in the incipient level, defined but not pronounced, power without bulk.* Well so.

Now the breasts, well they had to hang a bit yet *retain hemispheric mass and feature an areola at least two fifths the transverse arc — slightly wider than normal — with a distinct cylindrical nipple projection half again as high on the ligamenta suspensoria and slightly up-tilted.* The centred full matrilineal ‘eye’ never looking down! How that affected political trust, cerebral awe and fashion chic one may chose to demure about though not for long. Avo had a vision. Myopic or pointy boobs were perhaps bigoted. Avo said they could also feed pigs. She looked up again at the reflection of the *Sans-gene* woman, now melding with the glass surrogate — the shills and their computers had spoken. She then tucked up a falling strand of hair: Avo could be heard in the next room.

Only the Roman brothers were diffident, it seemed. The ‘ass tates’ Avo called them. Hardly diviners. She discovered she lightly laughed aloud just before her mentor entered dressed in her business weeds, a mutton-sleeved blouse above plain dark culottes and emphatic boots, to say a rushed adieu and announce Maryan, their cook, would make something special for supper. Instead she immediately recognized the glazed look and interrupted her departure. Smiling with businesslike complicity she knelt by the bath. “Am I late?” Half-lidded Margaret responded by closing her eyes, lifting her hands from the barmy suds and placing them equanimously palm up on the side of the tub. She could hear the scratch of nails on a button as a cuff was undone, the light clatter on tile of a cap

from a waterproof unguent, the faint rustle of the cocaine foil. Sharing was such believing was it not. Dreamily she purred, "Female identified." But Avo was not then flush with irony. "You are too lovely." As Margaret drew upon the fated straw Avo's lyric hand summoned its first applause, the strange soothing cool an oasis for the fingered hemorrhoid. Avo was then immune: "My beautiful swimmer. My Sappho." Margaret pouted at the ceiling as the chatelaine grappled one-handed with the impertinently ringing phone to say she had a temperature and would be in tomorrow. Not a minute to waste. The organist reinstating the sostenuto overtones, the barest scoring, as the waters lapped and eddied to the faint but feral exclamations, the face above luminous in its serenity, a nearby camera on extended chronicle as the spasm eddied. It was the second time she didn't have to enact a climax.

"Well why not," said a newly lolling Margaret to Avo's intimation of an esoteric encore, following a late snack of champagne and caviar laced with an assortment of trifoliate seeds. Avo would not elaborate, only to say, after a second gram of cocaine was meticulously laid out, "The body is an ocean really. The one and only." To her relentless Tethys, Margaret added, "A tide to raise all boats," again bemused and vaguely aware of the ritual acquiring a Tao solemnity as some glycerin and mild antibiotic cream was applied to a bruise, baroque music cued and censers lit. With balletic sovereignty several acupuncture golds were sent to their appointed rendezvous. From the vibration of a single needle the 'lyre strings', as Avo put it, began to thrum, the delirious resonances — 'empyrean' she claimed

later — even some teased orgasmic giggling, latterly heightened by an embroidered garrotte to coincidently tighten the muscles of the stomach and add definition to the graven image before the unblinking eye. For half a minute the figure traipsed below the Baldachino gibbet, the executioner in tune to the swelling contrapuntal stops, the winding sheet bonding a pair of legs you would kill for.

When again the proselyte registered the sumptuous surroundings and her decidedly limpid presence on a daybed, hair washed, fragrant and turban towelled, a new oasis of cool was delivered by a set of levo-menthal marbles, traducing the romanesque kissing. No difficulty had she recapitulating the vocalize, which ushered in the regnant chorus and sustained elegy, the gloved asp fingers bidding the pretty worm adieu, sleep stalking the room like a eunuch.

Words, she knew, tend to pollute in such an environment. Her out.

By dawn the implements had been collected, returned to a miniature sterilizer and the redundant towelling over following the shower and riffle douche. “My beautiful Laundrette,” Margaret whispered to the fastidious insomniac, the atavistic Maenad, who one last time kissed the slightly parted mouth before restoring the teddy and covering the form with a satin comforter. After a reapplication of lipstick, and final benediction, she drew away, to immediately and impiously curse the hour. On her way out Margaret heard Effie, the Ugandan maid, getting high hell for leaving streaks on the mirrored walls of the rococo entrance hall. “And the trellis-work looks like shit.” Again Margaret discovered she was ghoulishly laugh-

ing to herself. She was surely mad. Was her psyche in such fragile, etiolated?... She must have blanched when first shown the collection of double-sided ‘Herms’. And the discreet motorized engines for some of them. She was hardly reassured by Avo’s avowal of a collector’s amusement only, her conceit a voyeur’s tic not a player’s — rather short shrifted but an hour ago. Yet if the ritual was one-sided and extreme it was finely engineered. How many gynaecologists knew or imagined as much? She was then free of disease and as safe in Avo’s hands as another’s surely. If she doubted the existence of classic nymphomania, she suspected her own history was perhaps exceptional. She had, as far back as she recollects, a robust libido. Her first boyfriend, a lad from Eileen’s church, had given up in dismay or chagrin. Even the early sonsy caresses of ‘daddy’ Thomas, as pathetic as they sometimes must have been — the man was not a thug — she found tolerable, especially when he massaged her legs and back after a long hike. She had explored many square miles of Big Sur with him, on warmer days visiting a sun bather club he but not prim Eileen belonged to. She never cared for her stepmother’s rectitude or failsafe church, the hard flat pews a double torment before pastor windbag. Bum breakers she called those flat hard Baptist pews. Her cute impetuous sire was sometimes escape itself. The radiant warmth of Avo’s comforter helped now to invoke that active, vernal, often blithe period. She vividly remembered the electrical storm that first drove her to seek safety and solace in Thomas’s sleeping bag. She was then an immature twelve-year-old and wore flannel pyjamas to stay the cold nights. Her thumb she imagined a slowly dissolv-

ing vanilla stick and wanted again to hear the story of Heidi. Thomas was a natural mimic. She had always liked being caressed, and on skin rather than through flannel, as her real mother sometimes had. Perhaps she even shifted the pyjamas herself. She now laughed aloud as she recalled a section of the telling.

*'Why hasn't the mountain any names?' Heidi went on. It has names, answered her grandfather, 'and if you can describe a feature of it to me, I will tell you what it is called.'* Heidi then described to him the rocky mountain with the two peaks so exactly that the grandfather was delighted. *'Just so, I know it,'* and he told her its name. The mountain so named, really a foothill, they had climbed that day.

The intimacies seemed to grow as dust under one's feet. They sometimes skinny dipped in his hot tub, and the back rubs perceptively but amorphously widened — almost an added treat she recalled, listening to the Rootabaga stories, Muggin's Mouse, Braer Rabbit and Fox, Alladin's Adventures, Treasure Island, The Wonderful and now notorious Tar Baby, her skinny glabrous form tingling from quill eyebrows to ten sturdy piggies. Perhaps it was the general lack of specificity, the very cursory, seemingly indiscriminate nature of the traveling hands, fingers that circumvented curiosity, doubt, leaving her mind fixed to the venturous stories even as her pores anticipated another pass. Only once she spied him hiding an erection. He seemed chagrinned. It was not, after all, a manly thing to fall prey to she assumed then. She remembered thinking he'd injured himself. He never attempted coitus, though he did later precipitate her third or fourth orgasm. It certainly happened complaisantly enough. As she recol-

lected, their hands had actually briefly met! It was and remained their titular secret, as she later interpreted it. If it was abuse, only the craven soul must characterize it so. So she believed, with a trace of impatience.

He was and remained immensely proud of her. She still visited him, about once a month, usually to go fishing or boating. By her early teens he had all but desisted. She got now only an occasional laudatory pat on the bum; she imagined herself belonging finally to his scruffy outdoor fraternity in which she now knew many sexes and ages participated more or less free of dissimulation and anxiety. He had over the years made up many cash shortfalls and recently bought her a late-traded Mercedes. If he remained sometimes ingratiating it had become less facile. He once conceded he was what strident feminists deemed fathers to be, i.e. incestuous guardians whose remorse occasionally goaded achievement. Perhaps providently his second child, Eileen's pet Catherine, had been taken off to the special school early on and so Margaret remained, as far as she knew, his lone touchstone — her ironic adjudication of past if not ongoing events. Current affairs! Which her stepsister, now a crack journalist regaled on the cover of OO Magazine, chronicled with panache. So there it was. Life for the living. God knew she was an unwavering hedonist. Her only regret the unease she felt around Catherine. Such wit an imminent scold. And something had happened at the school. The dumpy little mouse emerged a sylphic wit. A few inches higher and ten pounds lighter she could work as a model herself, though that prospect was unlikely, a fact that somehow chafed and modulated Margaret's laughter as she dressed in

Avo's antiseptic closet thinking of the bald brooding gent who came to do the housecleaning and vacuuming once a week. To this day the man remained an enigma. He came across as a defrocked priest, diligently fending his wand into obscure corners to pic up the detritus of a deciduous harpy and so scourge himself of too much hope. The comely fiend's hair, nail cuttings, gobs of makeup, peelings, half-eaten cores, shredded notes, kleenex lingered like pollen. Yet Heuchert — Avo never vetted a first name — would be there the following week purging the palace of ground-in of-fal. "He's a friend of a friend and needs work," Ave had curtly explained. The arch hilarity, which Margaret might indulge only herself, happened the day she entered Avo's bedroom for a bromo to find the tensor chap cleaning the shelves of the inner closet, the female paraphernalia within so may trite obstacles to the ever searching wand; he might have been sorting mail at Christmas time. Even the specula and dildos, modern to the point of non-recognition, he moved about as so many faceless packages. Avo had entered seconds later, wondrously speechless. "What in god's name are you doing!" Heuchert looked up newly compunctious. After blank looks at both women he said, placably enough, "Effie said it wasn't her job." Avo pointed menacingly to the alcove off the dressing room. Stolidly or willfully he misinterpreted her gesture. "I've done that." Avo took him by the ear and led him into the outside corridor. "Never in all my life!" Via the ubiquitous mirrors Margaret watched the progress to the landing, Heuchert once asking if he might collect a nozzle. Avo remained grimly silent and together they lock-stepped down the staircase. The man

was summarily fired, then re-hired the following month after two successive cleaners proved indolent and dishonest. “God what trials we put up with!” Again Margaret fought to control incipient giddy laughter, knowing when it stopped she would sense once more the ongoing topical languor.

It was perhaps the patience and solicitude — Avo’s out-of-character dealings with her — that were so hard to counter, so like that of her former husband who died — an arranged suicide — of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis. His charm had screened an abeyant streak. His amazing popularity did not finally extend to herself. A stranded immigrant would summon, galvanize his considerable legal talents; a much anticipated holiday would turn out to be buggerishly inconvenient. He seemed to render jealousy, envy, connubial commitment all as mere inclinations, velleities, a word he seemed to have coined, meaning the least act of volition. She imagined Catherine smiling at such wording. He left her with many debts, most related to his illness, a stillborn child, and her lovely limbs that seemed to command a world of their own, she a guest onlooker — as she appeared now while knotting the neck scarf before the entrance mirrors Effie had left streaks on. In a corner reflection she imagined Heuchert moist and grim in pursuit of demon dust, on his knees, back arched, one arm crammed beneath the ottoman. To the streaked mirror she said, “Another four years — if you’re lucky,” then headed out to the waiting limo and, in due course, the ocean where the next bewitching instalment of the *Sans-gene* woman would be documented — on a sumptuous yacht some-

where near Santorini. “The tan takes about a week, love. Best if its real. Enjoy yourself. Max is a delight.” Max Paleogiannis was the aging president of the Paleomena Corporation whose yacht had several times accommodated the extravagant Avo in the past. During the ride she wondered with a nun’s silence if Heuchert had a tan somewhere on his wracked boney body. About his ankles, perhaps. Then she noticed beside her in the limo the packet Avo must have stashed — the contract and instruction for a show she was expected to do. Avo might have been seated next to her. She could hear the characterization in her mimic’s paraphrase. *He’s a Ruski buccaneer, an embarrassment at the moment, but loaded. Wants to impress some buyers and pleasure his long suffering retainers — I use the word advisedly. Ready wear and some arctic sable, mainly.* Fear not, the publicity will be ballistic. Kid you not. You’ll be in great company. Be there and don’t get plotzed before midnight.

Being especially bored and lacking a fix she began looking at the fine print. About the surest sedative she knew — though not before she briefly wondered what Avo meant by ‘mainly’ and ‘fear not’.

## SIXTEEN

Catherine Whyte was not yet drunk. And less genially disposed to the fact than she might have been at another party. Here, at the celebration of a new art salon sponsored by the puzzling Kissy Borozov, she remained more or less alert. The prelude to the fête would be a glitzy fashion show, where she was headed when interrupted by the bean counter, a shamus of

the elusive Borozovs — not an IRA confederate — who expected a clear answer, party din or no. Said he, a natural spieler, “You can check the listing to his own card after. There’s a machine across the street. The two figures, a credit in the shelter account and matching debit in his import fund will match. An incontrovertible transaction I’m thinking.”

She could not deny feeling adroitly baited before such a mischievous pledge — in six figures! — to underwrite a good and necessary service in exchange for her participation in a shenanigan. She had little doubt the taunt was genuine. All for a good cause. Alex Prokovsky, a magnate associate of the Borozovs, discovering her presence at the party, had ventured a rude but wily proposition: for special consideration he would help insure the survival of a women’s shelter she had lamented the plight of in a commentary in her new role as the ABN humane arts chatelaine. He pledged to underwrite the shelter for six months if she entertained, i.e. stripped in what his shamus had called a ‘softcore ballet’, in a cabaret lounge downstairs which opened at ten. Her new bi-weekly series was entitled, Non-Mythic Beauty that Moles. But the original offer had been perhaps adequate but low she felt, and countered with a more realistic sum she presumed would end the matter. Awkwardly it hadn’t.

She looked again at the shamus. “And what would you advise? Given your upstanding position in the community.” But the sarcasm had no visible effect.

“Entirely up to you, Ms. Whyte. Mr. Prokovsky wanted an answer a while since. You must appreciate that the sum is final and the offer lapses

at midnight.” He could have been a librarian assigning a fine. A fairy god-father spelling a godmother.

She tried her hand at her ‘Irish’: “Well, as I’m not at all up on the essential ‘softcore ballet’ I think I’d better pass meself on. For such a fine specialized program.”

“Nothing special ma’am. A couple of the sentries who goose step about our Lenin mausoleum — in their other heavenly life — are with you onstage and try not to notice. You do a bit of teasing in the altogether and they miss a step or two. Maybe bump into one another.”

As with most Russian undertakings, she was selectively rallied. “Pretty daring stuff, monkeying with the sacred marchers.”

“Just a sweet measure of the times. We are a legal establishment ma’am, and abide by the rules.”

“‘Abide’ is it? What is the world coming to.”

“I take that to be a ‘nay’, or a late ‘maybe’.”

“Something like that,” she muttered before sauntering off in search of Roger, her date that night, the flush on her face draining her of reserve politesse. She imagined she was being monitored but could not spot a likely tail nor a digital eye. She tried not to purse her lips as she constructed the likely dialogue such a tycoon might have with his stooge shamus. ‘On OO Magazine cover. Nyet-ing our menu. A riot pussy. Should be nice encore performance downstairs.’

Sensing or imagining the likely scrutiny abetting her paranoia, she walked into the relative quiet of the art salon where sister Margaret and

an old school friend, a privileged lass who had adopted the culture and dress of a liberated punker, were exchanging reminiscences. They stood by one of the highlights of the collection, an early sandstone sculpture of a cat which had been restored to the public eye after spending several centuries buried in an undiscovered magazine in an ancient fort near modern Yeravan. According to the catalogue no period expert doubted its authenticity, a comment Catherine decided to take with liberal good humour. Prokovsky's girlfriend-of-the-moment, Elana, a former tour guide with posturing hands, joined them. A mystic enamored of things Egyptian, she professed being visited with a teleologic vision when the cat sculpture saw the light of day. A flutter Catherine had witnessed before, the girl's rapt blether immune to skeptics. While in this room, a large commodious street level salon, many rarified oddities engaged the mind beyond the few examples of Minoan and Hellenistic art, or the Borozov fondness for Victorian painting of the pretty endangered and compromised-maid stamp. For instance, as intriguing as the cat was, the display of art works reputed to be war booty that had also resurfaced without a pedigree or a critical consensus, all but mesmerized. These less ostentatious yet engaging items forestalled easy diffidence. Either many of the treasures gathered here were long forgotten war orphans or their forgers virtuosic period stylists. She spied David Willardson, the curator of the Paleomena Collection, eyeing a greying Georgian prayer shawl in emphatic silence. She and the knotty old expert had compared notes before. She would have engaged him if Prokovsky's impertinent offer had not intruded and vexed. Happily

Roger, her escort for the night, an effeminate copy editor with an eye for unseemliness, wasn't around when the shamus came by. A decision was called for and she couldn't quite tell the shamus to shove it. Just why, she still wasn't a cogent party to. The shelter's backers were then especially hard pressed. The show lounge, a walk down from the street level salon, which the shamus fancifully called a symposium, after the notorious Greek drinking fest, would be held after the fashion show, where her stepsister would model the latest Russian *haute couture*, a serviceable if dated oxymoron Catherine liked. Designing and directing the presentation was the extravagant and subversive Antoine Plombiers, the darling then of select music video producers and their touts. If she consented, a bank card and entry number would be surrendered. When the performance was duly executed — the apt verb she felt — she would return the cards after the withdrawal. The promise of safety she guessed reliable, pride of place would not see a mafiya guest harmed; but that of privacy and no photographs she presumed untrustworthy. Russians generally were as hooked on stealth and intrigue as they were on rare mushrooms. But publicity after the fact would not necessarily be detrimental. Her initial qualm, a flash of *amour propre*, was that the sum though liberal might still be too little. She was after all something of a celebrity then, though she doubted the buyers of Playboy et al would queue up to ogle her skimpy figure, and querying such an organ would be shank. Whereas at a toffy art and fashion gala, to profitably wile away the time...she waved to her sister as she disappeared into the make-ready area. 'Split a nail scrumptious,' she said to herself.

She perhaps whimsically put the dare to herself during the latter stages of the extravagant fashion walk when some rarefied lingerie was given preview along with the wares of a paint manufacturer in the Ukraine who specialized in artists' pigments, including theatrical makeup which was painted directly onto some models intimating matches to the swimwear, mainly fanciful geometric applications that were ingenious, confluent and initially misleading. The models wore chromatic masks in harmony with the 'suits', making it virtually impossible to tell who was who, though she was fairly certain her sister was not among the 'canvassers', as the narrator, a woman with a decided Slavic accent and malaprop vocabulary, called them. In such a mask, her own identity would be equivocal. Prokovsky might balk at the payment but at least she would be removed from any sly recording of the event. There been a no stipulation about paint. None. About as far as she would go, if she went. What she would, must do when she got up there was the nagging concern, though with another champagne or two she might consider broaching the subject — for the hilarity if nothing else. It seemed a modest enough concession — were she other than she was; a few mistreated humans would be comforted — for an act that salted a wound; she was not a prude but a serious professional — most days; no goose when away from the sauce — yet as willing as any to keep the gander head up. 'Words' she decided, slight as they were, were her essential clothing. Perhaps she could use the ever equivocal Times as a tease, slowly working to the bias cut of say The New Criterion or National Review.

As the puns paraded she decided to fetch Roger from the games room and call it a day. It was then the shamus approached to say the make-ready room was ready. She would find there an array of costumes and a list of dance ditties, the titles of three of which she should give to the band leader.

“Can your sentries goose step to Duke Ellington?”

“They are well coached.”

Then, to her amazement she said she would have a look at the dressing room, which was already occupied when she entered. The unsinkable Cody, one of the models who went the distance on the runway as a painted siren, sat in a smock before a theatrical mirror removing gold-green paint from her face. A gregarious animal, thin but bosomy and a natural yellow blond, she brightened when Catherine entered. “Hi, I’m Cody. Martine to Father Time.” She returned to the cleansing. “Awful stuff. Need a underlay or something.” Scrounging for a prompt response Catherine said she was looking for her sister. “Good luck,” said Cody.

Said Catherine, “Margaret Burke.”

“Oh Margo! One of the senders. Left while ago. So.” The face did look scrubbed. “Asked us to use this stuff before the shower. Takes it off but leaves you feeling ouch.” She rose, the gown loose about her, and headed for the washroom. “Sorry about the fly. Supposed to be all caboosey in half an hour for the symposium. See you.” Through the linked doorway Catherine glimpsed a cloud of steam and a screened shower bay with two sets of fine legs beneath it.

The costumes hung from a wall rack, essentially the briefest of the lingerie, plus a couple of boas and a satin cape. After a barely audible tap on the main door, Viola Sayers, a favourite model of the photographer known as ‘Pachis’ entered lugging a carryall. She and Catherine met a year ago at the artist’s studio. Viola was modelling for him then. Catherine and Pachis had gone to school together and met by chance on her return from Russia — in interlude that remained open ended. “Ugh,” Viola said taking in the room and was a second or two recognizing Catherine. “Golly. Didn’t think to see you here. You’re not...?”

“No. Was looking for my sister. Too late I’m afraid.”

Viola, her vivid redhead self surreal in her modified sari, also seemed unsure of whereabouts. “I saw her just a minute ago — talking to some people outside. She’s not performing though. I wouldn’t think.”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“I’m the belly dancer. Not really a professional. Marg’s agent sometimes finds work for me. A something else place this. You’ve been here before? Incredible. So far.”

Catherine shook her head and turned, having seen enough. “Guess I’ll mosey back down. Good luck. Or is it break a leg?”

“Anything’ll do,” Viola said with a prompt half smile. “How’s Pachis doing? Haven’t seen him since that book — ”

“ — Musing the Maenad.”

“It helped me get some work...sold mainly in Europe I think.”

“No longer in print.” Catherine lamely smiled which Viola matched,

saying, "Some time — then. My debut, so to speak. If you see him give him a hug for me."

"I certainly will. Sorry, pressed for time. All the best." Catherine pretended to be in a hurray; Viola resurrected too many perplexing memories. One would need a book to tell the entire story. One day — maybe.

But her sister was not among the groupies in the salon. Elana thought she might be downstairs. Or on the park terrace on the second floor, adding, "The new addition here; K. now owns several towers in this area."

Catherine nodded, smiled, hiding her amazement. "A busy lad."

After suavely looking her over Alana added, "You never met?"

"Sadly no."

Alana offered a solicitous smile. "He is a bit of a recluse. But so nice when you get to know him. Really. Not like his brother at all." She then waved at a person across the floor. "Sorry, I must see a friend before he leaves."

So. Kissy speculating in California. It was a lovely night and the more she hung around without finding her elegant sibling the more curious and insular she became. Roger, catching hors d'oeuvres on the fly, was chatting with a billiard maven — neither of whom she wanted to engage at the moment.

Exiting downstairs, she sought out the show lounge, the venue for the notorious 'symposium', mentally trashing herself as she went, and discovered a stairway to the upper dressing room between the rest rooms. To her surprise and amusement, Norman Pope, one of her old school chums

at the academy — the class philosopher — was hefting in a stand of drums through a utility door. So this is what ‘Popoff’ got up to on a Saturday night. As she debated approaching him she felt Roger’s hand on her elbow. “You hanging around for the ‘sympo’?”

“Is that what it is.”

“Supposed to start with a madcap magician and belly dancer and be all downhill after that.”

“No debates then.”

“Lots of chatter in the billiard room next door. About a surprise celebrity shucking her pearls and maybe getting stuffed.”

“Is that legal here?”

“God, you are a brick short of a load.”

“I am.”

“And never more bankable.”

So, the publicity hounds had already been unleashed. She hadn’t told Roger of the offer nor that she might be the celebrity, nor the fact that the performance had yet to be spelled out -- ‘choreographed’. How goose-steppers schlepped. He could not be relied upon not to titivate the gossip in the office. Little consolation now. Though he was near sighted and might not recognize her in warpaint. She felt again a need to head home and get a decent night’s rest. Then a faintly disturbing sight caught her eye. A diminutive, heavily made-up woman in luxuriant sable with a bruised cheek limped by — one shoe heel missing. She was helped along, or escorted, by a sturdy twosome, one of these an amazon she’d seen Elana talk-

ing to earlier, the other escort one of Prokovsky's less prepossessing heavies. They turned at the end of the chamber into the foyer that led to the tower elevators. The woman's mascara had bled and the two escorts held her firmly in hand, as if she was being directed, marshalled rather than assisted. Not unlike the goons she saw in the outskirts of Yekaterinburg, the armpit of Russian entrepreneurial muscle. Retreats and asylum had taken on a new meaning for her in Yekaterinburg. And here, despite the woman's attire, her handlers were as peremptory.

Leaving Roger to the buoyancy of the gathering audience, she began to wander about the lower floor of the tower with its wood paneled corridors and boutique shops, all free then of any heavies. It seemed Prokovsky or Kissy had a kind of potlatch mentality or the sensors were set to discover who the especially curious were. Several times she glanced up at the many-too-many chandeliers. In any case, one might glean a thing or two on such a night. The sudden apparition of the troika had whetted her investigative instincts. With drink in hand she might convincingly pretend to be lost. She loosened a strand of hair. One souvenir store housed a kind of library. Newspapers, foreign and local, tabloids, glossies. Even OO Magazine stared back from a variegated rack. Deeper in — folios of Russian and older Soviet publications, illustrating the good hardy life — and some banks of closed cabinets. Streetlight filtered through partly opened lace curtains. Walking to the window she heard noises that seemed to originate close by, above perhaps — short brisk sighs aligned to kind of bump, as if a couple were at it on a cheap couch. Yet the more she listened the

sounds became ominous — faint cries smartly following the wumps! Re-entering the corridor, she walked in the direction the cries seemed to originate from only to realize they must have emanated from a floor above for the deeper she went the weaker they became until, before a heavy casement and double door, they disappeared. When she retraced her steps to and beyond the library, the quiet had resumed. The curtains she noted had been parted in the interval. Roger suddenly appeared from the symposium theatre. “Thought I’d find you casing the offices or wardrooms or whatever. Wanna dance first? The band’s getting ready. A few minutes before the show.” It was she had to admit one of Roger’s specialities. Taking the champagne flute he offered her she decided she hadn’t yet made up her mind. Over an hour still. Roger she decided was perhaps a suitably prepossessing sentinel — too enamored to spill the details — a tenable likelihood given his amorous regard of her now. Her mind had suddenly cleared. An optimistic female Custer she said to herself. Where did that come from? Her sister, she concluded, had split. A new boyfriend most like. Or a smack high she couldn’t negotiate; perhaps the shamus overlooked or pissed her off. Margaret could be allergic to such entreaties from the hoi polloi. Soon Catherine was dancing with Roger on the diminishing show lounge floor, gradually being filled with armchairs, speculating what she might have to do on stage and who would be a good candid guide. It was to that moment she returned the following morning at her breakfast nook as she outstared the coffee. Roger she could hear snoring softly in the guest room He’d actually behaved better than expected, had

discreetly but mindfully stuck around the rest of the evening, accepting to take himself off when she got home. The offer of the guest room he readily accepted though and slept like a log. She mainly hadn't.

After the brief dance with Roger, in which she began to feel pre-eminent, she'd talked to Norman Pope and learned a little more about the symposium, enough to enjoy another hour in the salon without stinting on the excellent champagne. When told about the exploit, Norman had taken her plight to heart, explained what was usually done, suggested some music — the late Jimmy Buffet offerings mainly — smiled and returned to setting up his drums for the symposium show. Later he said he enjoyed the finale. She promised to do it again sometime in an abandoned mine shaft.

At first she'd simply loitered about the dressing room, pretending to be nappy and taken in by the movie the girls watched before and after their performances which began, after the magician-comic, with Viola doing a program of Eastern folk dancing, which she did surprisingly well, Catherine thought, while Cody and Cherie, the other model who 'needed the cash', tripped with the band more or less in the altogether before the symposium patrons. Belatedly she learned Cherie had bit parts in a couple of films, one sufficiently costly, celebrated and fulsome to merit being trashed by John Simon. So the symposium could indeed boast a 'celebrity in the flesh'. "A hard act to follow," Cody said of Viola when ready to cue the band leader for their show with the Mausoleum Guards. The male performers, dressed in Soviet-Russian guard dress after the lithe guards who so suavely goose-stepped about the Lenin Mausoleum, managed this night

to miss a step and bump into themselves as the girls performed — all done to a surprisingly fluent choreography. By then Catherine was quite drunk, though not yet plastered, and when she explained her own barefaced taunt all three girls were sympathetic and collaborated on a suitable strategy. “Why not go out first with a half-face mask,” Cody said, “and see? As a curtain teaser.” Done. But when she got back after demurely turning about on a stool wearing a skimpy cocktail gown, affecting to be Marlena Dietrich while lip synching a song from *The Blue Angel*, the word from the shamus, who had spoken to Cherie in the interval, was that it wouldn’t wash. Naked or nothing. No masks. And alone. No top offs. Cherie took over explaining this time and detailed the routine with the soldiers. “They mainly goose step. Getting a little addled as you proceed — the best act of the show I often think — their slow-mo steps exaggerating the mistakes as they get distracted. Though they pretend not to notice. They freeze when you’re nude. You kick one before you go offstage to get them started again. The show as you see brings the house down. They keep their uniforms on all the time.” By then Catherine suspected she would have swung from the room’s beaded chandelier if she could have reached it. Her mother had always warned her against the benevolence of drink. If conspiratorial girl talk made her immune, champagne rendered her career oriented.

Said the ebullient Cody, “They march across the stage, like they do or did at the Mausoleum — if you’ve ever seen it it’s a real floater kick — which gets even more acrobatic as you get nude.” Said Cherie, “They’re

both cuties, and good actors. It's the dumb messed up marching that breaks up the audience. The one does have beautiful hands. He plays the piano. Classical stuff too. Rack man or something." Said Cherie, "Rachmaninoff." Said Cody, "God, just to pronounce it is a show." Catherine smiled, her dizziness ebbing, hibernating it seemed in the heavy terry cloth rob. At last she burped and reached for her costume. Cody in turn applied a rich makeup to her face, casting her eyes in an Egyptian slant. "They always like to think you're having your curse."

And so — in her own dark stockings and underwear, Cody's cape as foil — she defied Mae West to compare sight gags. A pride that treasured snickers. The soldiers were surprisingly adroit in their mish-mash, such that she was vaguely aware of being applauded during the final chorus of the band's rendering of Jimmmy Buffet's *Diamond as Big as the Ritz*, the brisk sexy rhythm aligning with her own adopted tempo. The band leader was a genius Cody had remarked earlier. She was luminously smiling, she sensed, as the last of her costume wafted off into the air and the sentries froze in an elevated stance, their rifles providing balance support. As the laughter ricocheted off the walls, she decided the likes of Cody had a way with the world. Following one good kick to start the soldiers off on their accustomed routine, the applause became stupendous. She nearly passed out in the dressing room, Cody holding a compress to her head as she recouped on the lone couch.

As the bank card and entry code had been surrendered beforehand, her sole concession from the brokers, she felt a little ridiculous punching in

the numbers with a trio of bravos standing behind her. But with the confirmation slip she felt strangely relieved. The dye was cast. The notoriety pending. The louche dare now a sturdy historic plus. She hoped that Cody's eye makeup would leave her identity 'in escrow' but was prepared for the worst.

The shamus was all smiles when he left, and wanted to know if she'd give up her day job. Now all she had to do was be patient, though she hadn't realized how hard it was to await the reviews. She had little doubt she was photographed. And that someone likely tracked her in the hallways earlier on. With so many elaborate chandeliers in the mansion, placement of the sensors would be easy enough. Including the one or ones in the change room. Cody said after —"You were fantastic. Neto Hef's probably shuffling the spreads right now. With luck I might even be in the background!" It was the kind of hearty mentality and buoyancy she needed at the time. Though now, her overhung head full of swirling blades, she felt she had sold herself way to cheap. And could not shake the paralyzing suspicion some publisher was writing out a cheque for several times that amount. About then Roger shuffled in, his morning look still louche, his hairy spider legs somehow uneven below the boxer shorts. He eyed her pale raw face and the urn of coffee. "That looks good. Anybody sitting here?" Still coughing and reeling from waking he pulled out the closest chair, smiled dourly, leaning on it to wait out a bout of dizziness. In the interval she closed the rather modest gap in her gown.

"God I feel compact," Roger said. "Can't get my stomach out of my

mouth.”

“The coffee tastes good. Surprisingly.”

“That I can manage.”

“Did you peek by the way? I ask only for validation.”

“Of course. But I was too far away to see the climax.” He paused when he saw the hard look that came across her face as she read an inner page of the Times. “That soon, the adulation is it?”

Instead she simply curtly said, after a further pause, “David Willardson is in hospital. A heart attack. Apparently.” Immediately she thought of magus Muerner and his ominous reach.

“Who’s he? Oh, the art guru — the Paleomena guy. Their priceless collection curator or something.”

The enforced silence he was slow to fathom but soon realized he could have few consoling words for her just then. She seemed stuck on hold, like a computer screen that had become frozen, responding to no known key or exit command.

“He was a friend?,” he said finally.

She barely nodded. Her voice apparently mute or laryngitic.

He looked away, conscious of his own unwonted ignorance. He noted a stray tear. A commodity he imagined alien to her, and was on the point of approaching and putting an arm about her when she rose and headed to her bedroom, closing the door behind her, with a quiescence that didn’t altogether reassure. He returned to the table and imaged a tidy procession of mourners.

Strangely, she did not prove to be the Godiva she imagined. The tabloids seemed downright negligent, she thought. Two days they had to wait! By then the entire population of Los Angeles had to know, leafing through the latest *Do Deedy* with an occasional yawn. But no. She learned the bi-weekly was already in the works with advertising copy that wouldn't sanction a delay, and the story's best before date too close to expiry. She did get calls from sites called Dogberry and Feedbag to see if she would pose for their own photographers — tags from Borozov's closed circuit porn no doubt. A type of 'swatting' she guessed. In any case, the denouement was still to come. The header 'Classic Dilemma: Beauty Pinched for a Good Cause' was given play that weekend in several papers, her friends doing their best to insinuate sinew and smarts, her own 'cover' story page four in the L.A. Times, an unidentifiable picture beside Prokovsky who claimed that the performance was spontaneous and the rumour of an extravagant payoff preposterous. "We are all working stiffs." Her boss, the saintly Darin, was less commiserative.

"It makes your current assignment — asymptomatic, Cath."

"Oh come off it: the mail is ninety percent for. And growing. A shelter's reprise."

"From the partisans."

"Well, Mike Tyson stopped reading the Life section when he got out of jail."

"You intend to keep your header I imagine."

"Maybe not: the Ivans and Sergeis in attendance were nodding." She

didn't like being cute but was hard put that morning.

"I'm told a fight broke out."

"Well, you know what these symposiums are like. Socrates came to blows with Alcibiades. They both collected pancratic briefs." Though it was Cherie's thong that ignited the lads at show's end. A well staged auction.

But if Darin's anger was shelved, the call from Norman Pope wasn't. He'd heard a rumor that before she performed someone was roughed up in an office on the first floor. An unfortunate coincidence were it not that Norman's information impugned her very own stepsister, who had got up to some grotty things in her time. "Two chappies in the band said that 'the model who packed the stuff would take a bath'. I suspect they were talking about Margaret." Norman said he had more but he didn't want to vent it over the phone, and would leave a message with her secretary — which never arrived. Five minutes later a personal cell phone call came from a noisy concourse that seemed to trumpet echoes.

"Speak up Marg, I can barely hear you."

Despite the baffled words she was told that Norman Pope was not to be trusted, and before she did anything she'd better hear Marg's side of things. That afternoon if possible. At mother's. "I've asked dad to hang around."

"How did you know Norman called? Are you okay?"

The mumbling she imagined intentional before she heard, "More or less. He told me he had called you. Always a meddler."

“Should I bring someone — Roger? Michael maybe?”

“No, no I don’t think so. Lookit, I’ve got to go.”

As she signed off, pulling her ear, the old haunt returned, the recognition that courage was not a reflex and idealism about as scary an act going. Her debate to involve Roger concluded when she saw him looking for his umbrella with an uncharacteristic stoop. He was leaving early to see a chiropractor for a long-standing complaint and confronted her with his usual embarrassed bluster. “Must have been the perogies. My shoes are a little tight.” She barely smiled. “I know that look.”

He walked away trying to minimize the limp.

## SEVENTEEN

Stanton took the news of Willardson’s demise with a start. That someone might want the affable executive murdered, as was suspected by his source in the LAPD, seemed preposterous. Dowd’s dismay at Willardson’s presence in the Van Eerden apartment was his only hint that the cherub was maybe in over his head. With Willardson on the scene cogent assessment was elusive. The body had been discovered in the bathroom by a cleaning woman who came once a week. The autopsy suggested a heart attack. So far the excessive traces of digitalis had been divulged only to the senior executives and Stanton. Dowd was unusually expansive that afternoon. Perhaps to allay doubts Stanton might harbour about Paleomena.

“The man was a sly pantaloon. A pretend fumbler. A recondite voluptuary. Muerner’s remark about Asian sumptuousness is a little plaintive.

Sardanapalus he was not. His mundane wants were actually quite modest. His papers are only now coming to light. Including a very remarkable scrapbook. A aesthete's visual treasure trove. Nash, our in house psycho, believes he was a nostalgist. Sartre used the word 'passéiste', a chap who spends his life trying to recapture an especially happy and private time in childhood. The pictures in the book Muerner finds galvanizing. He's always prided himself on having a corner on the ideal, the splendid — *his* apprehension of elegance and thus validity. Willardson was more in tune to the elegantly rarified than he imagined, I think. Though there is a pathetic streak, what one may expect in a career shill. Minimized by the beauty of the collection. — it's verisimilitude, both artifact and corporeal. Beauty that upstages concupiscence. Muerner is still scratching his head I suspect."

Listening to such words Daphne surprised them both by yawning and putting her feet up under her, an antic Dowd seemed to find entertaining. Stanton knew what was coming, which both he and Dowd had missed — the picture in the society section of a slick magazine, under its Milestones rubric, which featured a stylish couple sitting in an ancient Gupta pavilion, newly wed, one Roald Sambara Licchavi, of the famous Chola textile mills and computer robots, and Dr. Frieda Van Eerden, an erstwhile research engineer at the corporation's remote sensing labs. Frieda's resignation from Paleomena, with return of two month's salary, had arrived the day Muerner strode into Dowd's office with the magazine Eve brought to his attention. Dowd's initial response was, "I didn't think Eve followed

the satrap set.” Said Muerner, “She doesn’t — Nash’s secretary was at the dentist’s.” The extraordinary meeting with Stanton was scheduled forthwith. When skip tracer Larry arrived, the rest of the executive floor employers had left for the day and Dowd asked Daphne to fetch a round of coffee. Larry got immediately to business when she returned.

“I realize the Licchavi wedding is a kicker but as I know little about the event, or what led up to it, I’ll begin with something I do know a bit about — the demise of David Willardson. Nearing as disarming I believe.

In his will Willardson leaves his flat and personal possessions, including select artworks, to a Mam’selle Mariya Theresa ‘Zoya’ Stolbonov, who came to this country at the time of the Breakup without the blessing of the authorities. She has made a name for herself here, as a, well, gifted dancer and heroine in a science-fiction ‘Zine.’ He cleared his throat and smiled as Daphne wrinkled the nyloned toes of her exposed leg. “According to a story Voden likes to tell, she arrived here in a container shipment of caviar — to one of our very own hotel chains — with an oxygen cannister and couple of pullovers to abide the chill. Voden likes good myths. What we don’t know is the extent Willardson was involved in the defection, or the art scam that Borozv is presently engineering. The death may in fact have been an accident, a self-medication over dose, though the one detective is still considering homicide. The mark of some kind of injection. The estate lawyers have sought to seal the flat, as part of the bequest, and though we’ve filed an injunction citing technical jeopardy, we may not be allowed access until the important documents are vetted or re-

moved by federal authorities. The maisonette was likely ransacked the same night," Larry added while shuffling his own notes. "By intruders as yet unidentified."

Larry nodded as Stanton took up the thread: "Which pegs it the night of the 12th. Willardson left via the front entrance. How he got in remains a puzzle. It seems he came into the apartment from the roof — a low overhang over one balcony. He must have been desperate. Yet someone he may have known entered the suite after him — likely using a set of keys — but left shortly after, before Willardson left. Not looking too happy I think. There was some noise in the apartment itself — things being moved about. None too carefully. Nothing unusual in the vehicles that left the garage. Which may rule out coincidence. From the exceptional cast lighting in the study Willardson did stay for a time. The plate numbers of the cars that left — up to the discovery of the body — are listed in order of departure, the owners and flat numbers subsumed. No one in the team recognized the man who entered the flat about the same time Willardson did, though they did just manage to get a shot, not very sharp unfortunately. We've given the negative the treatment but nothing stands out. The coat and umbrella are common currency. The man was dark haired, stocky and about Willardson's height. It's just possible Willardson knew or expected him. Anyway, Willardson stayed on a while afterward." Stanton was delighted with the response this last bit of information elicited. Even Daphne inclined her head.

During dinner the new assignments were tabled: Daphne to assess Ma-

dame Licchavi's itinerary when the honeymooners returned, Larry to follow up on the Prokovsky/Borozov paper trail, Stanton to keep an eye on Frieda's flat and continue his efforts to discover the Pechenpaugh daily junket, which meant renewed scrutiny of the former vice-president's digs. Daphne seemed then on a role, and more deferential to Dowd than ever. Said Larry, commiserating with Stanton as they left left, "No dateline and all the truffles you can eat." Larry too was familiar with Dowd's notorious sweet tooth. "I hear she rations them out on orders from his doctor." Noting Stanton's scowl he added, "He is gay though?"

"God let's hope so."

A sense of awe also gripped Catherine Whyte the day Margaret called — the same day a registered letter arrived from David Willardson. A lot had happened of late and in reading David's letter she several times looked about as if to share incredulity with a friend. He would have sought a personal meeting but was, as he put it, 'having a time with Paleomena' and 'was a little mad, bad and dangerous to know just then'. He would get in touch with her 'in due course'. She had little idea what 'having a time with Paleomena' meant but the fact he was no longer among the living suggested something dire. The letter was wide ranging. First off, he had learned the name of a twin — her twin! — Mariya Theresa 'Zoya' Stolbonov, nicknamed Zyta, aka Corin Wily. A revelation that came from Stephen Cressman who'd been 'sanctioned' to hear it from Felix Muerner — 'the rising *éminence grise* at Paleomena'. He presumed she

likely knew, but would welcome a confirmation from an ‘unimpeachable source’. She laughed aloud. He also informed her that Muerner’s clinic in Bern received deliveries of foetal tissue from a cartel that Bossy Borozov controlled — another of Cressman’s discoveries. He then assured her, as he had before, that Kissy Borozov, unlike his brother, was not a player in Bossy’s world and had never solicited Willardson’s assessment of an art piece. Kissy, he said, was either too fastidious a player to abet the rackets Bossy ran. ‘Never favored but never abandoned — too embarrassing as a free agent. A civilized man in an uncouth world.’ An assessment Catherine would take with a large grain of salt. For now.

But when Willardson got to the story Viola Sayers, Catherine was awestruck. The imputation seemed almost perverse: Viola had been at the same school as she, a few years earlier, and apparently gone through an extraordinary — ‘preternatural metamorphosis’ there, apparently one of the first of the ‘full applications’ of Muerner’s interventions, which included transformational surgery. Willardson had discovered and copied her file in secret and by accident while rummaging about the mansion of the new Vice President, Felix Muerner — during a masquerade ball! ‘A discovery after the fact — only when I had a chance to study the file.’ The info about Viola came from copies of progress charts on intellectual and affective states, detailing physical interventions undertaken at an early age, including an inaugural genetic audit and endocrine subvention as well as surgical alterations to cervical vertebra nerve tissue. The pictures disclosing the physical changes were breathtaking. A nearly plain jane had been

made into a hazardous beauty — which Pachis had discovered on his own, she presumed. The parents had apparently agreed to the interventions, their daughter a mute or craven player throughout. From her own recollection of the woman, the final renderings seemed apt, though she could not remember seeing her at the school. An oversight not perhaps to be wondered at now. What someone set out to do had been largely accomplished — so she guessed. Reviving the problematic and beady question of her own ‘metamorphosis’, beginning at that school, which Muerner could well have initiated. Had his intermediaries also shuffled the babies in the maternity ward where Eileen gave birth? Was she actually a Russian? A Russian twin? She had taken an interest in the resurgence of eugenics in her new assignment at ABN, especially the utopian implications of the research. She must look more intently at the career and personality of Felix Sveno Muerner, an investigation Willardson rekindled with this discovery of Viola’s past — in the perplexing premonitory Muerner villa itself! That alone a startling revelation — Willardson’s presence in such a citadel. He claimed he first met Viola the night of Kissy’s salon opening — some weeks before the masquerade ball. ‘Lovely of course but wistful, a mystic. One means to avoid actuality, self-awareness — the ongoing importunate deference paid to her. Not to be wondered at I think — when one comprehends her largely erased background.’ By then Catherine was giving way to a rare sense dizzying wonder.

His final words were a further dare. ‘I trust you can make some sense of Muerner’s idyllic undertakings. I can think of none other better en-

dowed to deal with such energumen, if *deal* the resort be, since you switched hats at ABN, sardonically taking up the art/fashion lance — which must include explicating the tenants of the beauty myth. I am getting on, and Mother Nature does not indulge cherubs forever.’ It was apparent Willardson knew little about her truck with Muerner’s cabal — as she thought of it — a year ago, an experience she was still fleshing out in a literal sense. Heedfully she read on.

‘So to end on a sprightly note — inspired by your prescient dealing with the brass cats in the former Soviet Union. Their claim of ‘inadvertency’ in their food scam means any one of their number may now be fertilizing mushrooms. The involuted Russian world.

‘You can of course simply burn these pages and wash your hands of the entire matter if you feel imperiled. If not, please accept my recommendation to seek out an artist the Borozov brothers haven’t quite confiscated — one Seliverstov, Yevgeny Viktorovich, who paints like a mature Titian when he puts his mind to it. As well as being perhaps one of our age’s pre-eminent forgers, he is a *philosophe* with an uncanny appreciation of what’s happening to the former Soviet Union — the regard of which was an interest we long shared. He’s fondly known as the Fulminator — hard on liberals, whom he calls teddy bears. Like the Gryphon, he fears for democracy. He is a relative unknown — though perhaps not for long. Some of his works are on display in the LA salon this month. The mob may have finally decided he’s worth as much or more working under his own ‘marque’. His platonic philosophy will serve the new rulers quite well

I think. He sometimes stays at the Bilander Hotel in Long Beach. He was once quarantined by his former Soviet masters, and may be again if he strays. So be careful. He has a lot of stories to tell. If you're still interested in the ongoing Soviet legacy, I can think of few better historical touchstones.

'I trust you are well and sustaining our few remaining hopes. As ever,  
DW'

After a third reading she was a little less truculent — the man could be a victim of a murder, though she wondered if anyone would learn the tensions that provoked it. The decorum needed to sustain a secret life would inhibit gossip or crass cupidity. Rather, she suspected someone like Pechenpaugh may have had a hand in his death. His trust in the cherub, in his 'innocence', so badly misplaced. Willardson's wish to leave a legacy to the college he attended suggested some nostalgia at the end, a touching thought. As a connoisseur he did in his orotund way acknowledge the priorities — wit and wile, decidedly perceptive attributes — which may have nettled someone like Pechenpaugh, the type of thug capable, she believed, of highly impulsive behavior. That such a recognized connoisseur as Willardson...she was beginning to feel she had been cheated by Prokovsky's final offer. A second or third shelter she might have helped! Margaret's anxiety over the phone in a sly way matched her own diffidence now — her sister having been propositioned and plied by a lot of men over the years. Did one get used to it then — if the praise and remuneration were occasionally unstinting? More to the point in Margaret's case,

was decorum, which could entail prudery, the only relief at the cultural level? Her generation was the first to finger decorum as chauvinistic and thus clothe impertinence and obscenity with the aegis of free will. Well so. She must not keep the sister waiting, though it was not a meeting she warmed to. Even less so now with Willardson's late departure. Moreover, she just might be expected to have some explaining of her own. Hanging about as she had. The lounge was certainly packed. Not many eyes straying to goings on elsewhere. As she recalled, Viola drew the prolonged applause. Mystic or no she was the real flame to watch. The yokels had thought her costume a temporary sop. Only when she returned for a third curtain call, attire undiminished that the cheering began to wain. It revived with Cody and was pretty well unrestrained after that. As the limo snaked down the hillside road to the bay home she watched the sun dissolve into a livid smear. Blush freely applied. Blush on you. When the car suddenly turned into the spiral driveway a spectral reflection off the glass siding to the bayside terrace scored her eyes. Margaret stood by the railing looking elegant and preoccupied, but promptly turned and went inside as the car approached, her tall willowy figure alive through the light summer frock. The family car was parked in the garage, the Mercedes behind, an ugly dint in the side a tacit reminder. Hapless *force majeure* Catherine had on her mind these days. Eileen stood in the doorway all smiles, incestuous mate behind, in shadow and condolent. Much as she remembered.

Marg did not waste time on felicitations when they were finally alone in her upstairs room. It transpired that, acting as a mule, she had delivered a

packet of cocaine for a friend to an office suite in the tower, and later witnessed a summary punishment in apparent consequence of that delivery.

Catherine was flabbergasted. “You were there — you actually saw what happened?”

“Not ‘there’. Nearby. With my friend. In an office he shares with another detective. So he said...this was long before the so-called ‘symposium’ got underway. The sounds we overheard came from somewhere nearby. Not far I think. Possibly a storage room or something. Anyway, we were on our way out...he just happened to open a door nearby...to investigate the sound he said. He nodded to someone then closed the door.”

Catherine hosted a bathetic chuckle. “He’s a policeman, this mainliner? Have I got it right?”

“A detective.”

“Oh christ. You delivered a kilo to a detective — in a mafiya lodge? Then saw a what — this interrogation?”

“I’ve told you. It’s where I was asked to bring it. For this friend. Which I did. He didn’t say what was going on, in this other room. ‘Just routine,’ he said.

“So what *was* going on?”

“I don’t know. Someone was being questioned.”

“Which you overheard, then saw, glimpsed, in this ‘other’ room?”

Margaret nodded, as if further verbal description was unseemly.

“Why the chagrin? They were likely detectives, yes?”

“I don’t know. Possibly.”

“You’re not sure?”

Again, the hesitation. “Someone was being questioned. I don’t know — drugs maybe.”

“Drugs. How so? Interrogated?”

“They were asking where it was. Whatever. There were threats.”

“How so — threats?”

“They were going through her things. From what I saw.”

“They figured she had drugs on her? ”

“Maybe.”

“And all this you saw?”

“Only for a second or two. We left right after.”

The new softness of voice hinted at a contrition Catherine was loathe to accept and firmly stated, “Sounds like a bait and switch. The detective was in trouble, got you to be the mule. Then fingered another.”

“I have considered that.”

“Oh fine. So: you made contact, glimpsed something unpleasant then left. Your pal unconcerned. Am I warm?”

Margaret winced. “The woman was thought to be the mule I think.” For the first time Margaret’s emphatic quiet seemed less impervious.

“Which you see in this what, this wardroom?”

“An office, he said.”

“And this woman they have in the next room, they believe or pretend to be the carrier?”

“I don’t know. They may have found some on her. He may have given

some to her.” Margaret attempted a shrug. As the imputation resurfaced — the woman a surrogate prey — a tear appeared on the gaunt cheek, which was brusquely wiped away. Catherine was finding the melodramatic touches a bit much. Grappling the nettle she said, “I still don’t know what you mean by this ‘search’ for whatever. Avuncular Norman made it sound like a boarding school jape. Marg, I’m not a diviner. Maybe they just wanted some coke? The name of her supplier?”

“I’ve never been to a boarding school.”

“Well, was the thing shitsot? Something to go to a DA about? You sound at times like a press attaché.”

Margaret’s apparent equanimity was a surprise, the words out almost before the consternation set it. “She could have been one of the hookers Borozov seeds the area with. They had most of her clothes off. She looked frightened.”

“A strip search.”

“Looked like it.”

“And you never thought of sashshaying in and ponying up?”

“We were on our way out. No I didn’t.”

Catherine nodded. The recollection of the sounds in the hallway by the window began to daunt, her intended rebuke merely begging her own caution and inaction. Her sudden quiet Margaret seemed to interpret as further pique at the louche detail.

“They found a small wad of something in the lining of her purse — full of gemstones it turned out. I think that’s what they said. That’s what

my friend confirmed.”

“Before he closed the door.”

“Yes. No, after.”

Catherine was almost beyond reach. “And no one followed you?”

“We passed some bodyguards further down the hall. I was sick about then — from the champagne — in a restroom off the main gallery. One of the heavies at the front door got a cab. A Russian driver.”

“And your friend said nothing about what you saw.”

“No. He thanked me.”

“So he was wary, concerned.”

“I think so.”

“Will you see him again?”

“Not likely.”

And the police would not have helped, Catherine wryly thought. “She was small you say, elfin like. Lots of makeup.”

“I suppose. You saw her? She was briefly in the gallery before the show I think. Someone said she had a fall.”

“So: you got away as inconspicuously as possible and took a room up-town. Does Avo know?”

“No. And I would be grateful.”

Catherine’s exasperation began to show. Sarcastically she said, “Why would I trouble her..disturb her happy musings.”

“Lookit, you may hear some stories and I just wanted you to hear it from me first. I don’t expect you to do anything. It’s probably best you

don't. I've told you what happened as well as I remember. I'm not embarrassed I chose to help out a friend, even if he wasn't all I expected. I am very sorry someone else took a hit. If that's what happened. That's it. Finito."

It was about then Catherine decided her sister was not in a sparing mood. And probably needed a snort.

"You have no idea who the unfortunate woman was? Not seen her before or since?"

"No."

"And you agreed to act as mule only for this friend. Didn't sample the gin?"

"Yes. No!"

The disgust Catherine felt was irresistible: "And you think he can find another Nick with a sleigh?..."

"It's so easy to be blazé."

By then she noticed the vestige of a stutter that beset her sister when upset. So it was a kind of pilgrimage Margaret's coming to the bay home, to cop a blessing from the anchoress and touch the steward for a loan and/or fix, a relapse she wasn't particularly anxious for Eileen to grasp. Popeye was, Catherine assumed, familiar with the indices. And likely had been discouraged about trying to interfere. She asked Margaret if she knew any of the entertainers present at the show. Only some models, she said. Borozov she knew by reputation alone. And could not remember actually seeing Prokovsky. He was never pointed out and she never asked. "I only

really talked with Cherie. The usual.” She didn’t look at her sister. “You never do get sick first.”

Catherine thought to herself, acknowledging what she imagined as her sister’s chariness. As usual, she was spread too thin to find and sort out. The last words from her mother that evening were, “You see one another so seldom nowadays. And she does so enjoy reading your letters.”

When she left she could see Popeye standing off in the upstairs bedroom. Margaret was nowhere in sight. A leftover circumstance Catherine managed to slight until she watched in her own little lived-in apartment a late movie on one of the new cable ‘art’ channels, a film uncannily realistic, in which one co-star bore a canny resemblance to the elfin creature she had witnessed being escorted through a hallway of the Borozov tower. The creature played a coke head. Delving into her paper’s television guide was no help, nor had she paid attention to the credits, to the name of the consortium responsible for producing it. There was no record of it on the internet. She found a number to the art channel but got a recorded message posting office hours only. At the outset of the film it was apparent that much of the dialogue had been dubbed, suggesting a mixed cast in a louche Los Angeles setting. By the end of the film she had been manhandled a couple of times, the last, in a paneled office, a strip search given over to a realism that, almost literally, struck her as unfeigned. But if some film buffs penchant for assault scenes were now ambiguous only by editorial or production fiat, why not the occasional filming of a shakedown with an aspiring masochist, a method actor spiked on realism. Such were the

malicious thoughts teasing, vexing her as she creamed her face. Internet ‘entertainment’ assault featured just such encounters, with little genuflection to ‘acting’. She recalled the man who had shoved and groped her in the Sevastopol hotel. A crowded hotel. No one about seemed to care. She’d never seen him before or since. But she had little doubt who sent him, as she had little doubt now that she could be in big trouble if Willardson, the ingratiating Willardson, had pulled a bunk on Bossy Borozov. Or Pechenpaugh, for that matter. Despite her unease she decided against calling up the Anchoress to see if her wary sister was still there. She badly wanted a recap of the episode in the Prokovsky mansion, but a call at this hour would only upset her sad sweet mother.

Finally she checked her daybook and sighed. First thing tomorrow she had opted to attend a lecture by Angus Dowd, at the Press Gang Club, entitled, *Female Lip*. A shtick the Gryphon pioneered. But Darin mustn’t be provoked further at this stage. Margaret would thus have an extra day’s grace. Was it not exceedingly ironic that in her new role as Chatelaine at ABN, the ‘real’ stories she couldn’t write about! And poor Willardson — being at last impatient with his intellectual redoubt. On that droll insight she managed to fall asleep, thinking also that perhaps it was time she let Roger stay over for a trial week or so. Men seemed amenable to serendipity. Dear Angus of course believed serendipity but a nod to the chosen few. A society lacking hypocrisy touts not virtue but shamelessness. Right out of the mouth of the Gryphon, likely plagiarizing dear old unmarried rich-as-Croesus Angus. Did he ever fool around she wondered?

## EIGHTEEN

When the bullish Stanton entered the dining nook of their rendezvous hotel suite Daphne sat on the dining table edge feeding the gnome a marzipan sweet. At once his buoyant spirit took a dive. The incipient laughter seemed conspiratorial — genuine. And the fluent silk had somehow contracted, this one leaving a swath of back as prettily incurved and toned as they come. With the good weather at hand he would be in trouble. As things seemed to be winding down, ‘seemed’ — Pechenpaugh indicted for mail fraud (shares to a Russian consortium not yet registered), Van Eerden preoccupied with a busy social schedule and quietly making amends to Paleomena (but denying siphoning recent formulations), Willardson kaput (but most of the Pre-Columbian artifacts returned) — in such a setting he had hoped to ask Daphne to join him at the Criterion for supper. Now he might never find the nerve to do so. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. The ironically durable film of the same name he had watched the night before. Was the one actress with the bowler not unlike the lithe creature holding out the second, and apparently last, allotted confection of the day? In her ironic tenderness. He tried to console himself by imagining Daphne’s demitasse bosom but it didn’t work. With an ensemble like that nothing existed extraneously, as Dowd might say. If she could only have been even a trifle dense — but no, the gods had been merciless. He could not think of a more alert beguiling woman. Now the focus of what — a jaded poofter and virtuosic speculator? It seemed downright perverse.

As if anticipating Stanton’s distress, Dowd proffered an indulgent smile

and wondered if his investigator might lower his sights enough that day to co-ordinate the five body guards who would attend and monitor the lecture audience at the Press Gang Club — the ‘Limbo Club’ Angus called it. “You can sit with Daphne in the front row and yawn at the rowdies...take note of something arresting on your cuff, that sort of thing.”

“The last sweet,” said Daphne, briefly sharing her droll amusement with Stanton. An act that almost reduced the jealous agent to peevishness.

Stanton did his best to find Dowd’s offer congenial. Said Dowd in conclusion, “Please keep your own applause respectable. I’m there as a diviner.” It seemed Stanton only recovered his senses when he sat in the ritzy clerestory-windowed ballroom.

After positioning his team about the chamber and setting his earpiece to standby he was delighted to find seated on his other side the nimble Catherine Whyte of ABN and OO Magazine fame. As a compensation package she was at least at hand and authentic with her faintly reedy but fluent voice and impish face. The hairy puny sourpuss named Roger who sat on the other side of her seemed to have been hornswaggled into service that day. The two had apparently known one another for some time. “You always were a cheerleader. Of sorts,” Roger said in response to her gratuitous comment about Dowd keeping his powder dry, making Stanton’s and apparently Roger’s discomfort a little keener.

Said Roger, “I think of his *obiter dicta* in terms of cluster bombs. Anti-personnel.”

“So what do you want? He’s a gifted misanthrope.”

Roger ditched a smile.

When the polite opening applause died down, the gnome began with his usual apologia by saying that never before had he been introduced as a ‘vizier’, but now that the secret was out he would not slight the responsibility. Daphne, Stanton noted with growing distaste, seemed in tune to every word.

And so the involuted punning, sprinkled with lavish amounts of prophetic wisdom, conspired to shorten the next hour. Catherine, he noted, seemed to be making special note of what the sourpuss called ‘the daily procrustean conflag’. Stanton, however, listening as he hadn’t before, began to think of Dowd in a new light. And could not deny the impulse to occasionally applaud with the few partisans. The man was not perhaps half bad. In an antique sort of way.

Said the gnome: “Modern social science too often resembles an Escher lithograph — formidable scaffolding and architecture leading nowhere. The problem is aggravated by a suasive humanism — the other equity market, the growth of entitlement — which cannot adhere to a morality or precision that sets limits without abusing its humanity.

“Put another way: If all artists are liberals and most liberals natural method actors, we look to the left for the fluent performances; they only slight the notion of having to actually ‘act’.”

Already the audience, by its restless laughter, was craning for the overtones.

“Unfortunately, our fascination with rousing performance seems to

know no bounds. At one time satirists reliably pointed out the cads. Today, popular humor tends to be ruthless and frenetic because it trashes virtually everything with a proprietary or discriminatory edge. But if we make as ass of rectitude, we can hardly object to the miscreant arriving at our door intent on upgrading his deserts — in a stolen land.”

The applause was light but intense.

“You sit and listen to this with a straight face?” Roger whispered when the clapping wained.

“I’m a mental culturalist,” Catherine answered with a ready smile.

“Tell me.”

“You use more muscles when you scowl.”

“ -- So, be a poot.”

Dowd of course was immune to criticism, and nearly oblivious to all but himself, Stanton thought.

“The pertinent questions about maturity are upstaged by our love of drama, our love of ferment and resort to self-dramatization. Thespian ploys rarely prompt comedic restraint or caution for the many lucky subversives who devote galvanizing careers to denigrating the long-debilitated standards of the middle class. Haut complaint is now a style of address. *Ain’t got no satisfaction* now a libidinal trope. The all-intoxicating beat.”

“You tell ‘em.”

“Roger, do shut up.”

“A peculiarly modern discovery is that the good Samaritan is no longer flush. Taxing the rich, however steeply you do it, will not pay the mush-

rooming bills for the services we've come to expect, cast today as entitlements. It's proving to be a considerable theatrical handicap. Blaming priests and levites — bourgeois snufflers — is a theatrical staple. Marxism would never find an audience without it. But the same priests and levites are on the run. Indeed all white achievers, the cleverer luckier nerds, are fleeing, now that capable assertive white women have decided not to have children, praying their officious race may yet disappear. Even the feral bulls have begun to dance.”

And so the Dowdian passion play was revealed to Stanton with a force he had not experienced before, his understanding of Daphne’s deference to the gnome more poignantly burdensome. Even Roger remained more or less mute for the remainder; Catherine he presumed had been exposed to the spieler before.

When it was finally over, the intrepid listeners in the audience had learned, according to the ‘Dowdian’ gospel, how to decant the heady brew of juvenile angst, estimate the toxic half-life of government largess, and master state of the art ostracism; they had toured the educational flea markets, tasted the twisted inside of the belly feeders, discovered why cliterectomy was a boon to long-standing, honor bound cultures. The *obiter dicta* ranged from Ronald Wright’s primitive hagiography, to Naomi Wolf’s hidebound myth making; from Woody Allen’s terminal wit to the discovery that anthropologists can devour one another live or dead when they put their minds to it. Over half the audience gave the compact Paleo-mena vice-president a standing ovation at the end. The other half sat and

occasionally hissed. Catherine decided she needed to get drunk, a failing she had neglected of late. Stanton would retire to his digs that night a humbler and more contrite man after watching Dowd sweep out of the auditorium with a laurel-like Daphne gracing his arm. The doubting Roger retained a few potent salvos which, his silent plea for a night over granted, he couldn't disarm. They were barely inside her chintzy pied-à-terre when he began.

“I can’t help thinking of old Dowd as the so-and-so who designed the contraption Pasiphae went to consort with her bull in. To conceive the Minotaur. Yes? Mastery in another’s guise.”

But by then Catherine’s inebriation was beyond repair. She had begun early that day to kindly suffer the gnome, and they stopped on their way home for a leisurely supper and later, a nitery noted for its sumptuous desserts. A treat Roger felt they had earned and richly deserved. After candidly assessing the assorted offerings, as well as Catherine’s bemused state, they spent a gamy time dragging proffered spoons through assorted flavorful sample concoctions, adding another bottle of wine to sustain the anticipation. When they finally returned to her flat she unsteadily entered her bathroom, where she stood for a while half naked, the door seductively ajar, tipping with kirsch what Roger once called her ‘perfect half-pint sun-days’.

Roger soon followed her in, his train of thought not yet derailed, “I mean, when the bulls start dancing, you leave the floor...oh, this is good. Slippery, sweet. Lots of body.”

“I think you mean Daedalus. The engineer. The happy engineer. He built Paseefy, Paseefia....

“Pasiphae.”

“...a mechanical bull.”

By then Roger was admiring the pointed ‘horns’. “A lot of menacing lather in here. Bullish by any other name.”

She stopped to consider what he said and began pretending to pick, one-by-one, the many hairs of his exceedingly hairy body, holding the imaginary strands up to the light. “He loves me, he loves me not...”

The convulsive and sometimes implosive laughter ended any prospect of immediately going on. They did make a singular pair. She naturally scant, even her roan-blond sex barely flossed, he luxuriantly hirsute, particularly his back and legs. When they had calmed down she lay effaced, swaddled in a sheet, he spread out on the bed, inert, allusively spent were it not for a peerless and nearly perfect half erection. Said she after a time, “My Talos. Bull with the terrible vein. Guardian of the optimistic Pasiphae. So kiss me.”

It was perhaps the best sex they had had to date. When, afterward, he climbed into the shower to help with the holystone, as he called it, i,e, cleaning, pumicing the decks, recalling her stepfather’s shipshape sense, purity and wholeness, they delighted for a time in the curious picture of their sea weed selves. She was the first to venture a comment. “What a fine kosher bishop.” “Don’t change the period, we’re talking Greek here —

what the Iliad was about in the beginning — the ineffable prize, the awesome ‘pretty cheeks’ — ‘Catherine of the pretty cheeks.’”

She smiled, but at what he wasn’t sure.

He left her the following morning. She wanted some time alone she said. After a second convincing yawn, buss and delayed brotherly punch to his shoulder she had headed into her bedroom and softly shut the door, behind which he heard some muffled swearing, at the room’s unbridled mess he hoped. Her apartment, essentially a traveller’s pied-à-terre...the front door to which, in closing, left a ringing in his ears. A kind of knell. She seemed ever ‘in transit’. He doubted he would ever find her so again, memory itself such an elusive file. He rather dreaded returning to work. When he phoned her line was engaged. Then she didn’t answer. Only her office had an answering service. Though by then it was already light.

## EPILOGUE

David Willardson’s sudden death shocked the few who knew him well. The official cause of death was a stroke, though a rumor cited the use of a ‘wrong’ medication. It was known at the time of his death that he had been meddling in matters the Paleomena Princes finally didn’t approve of. The Russian mafiya’s art dealers were also implicated, given Willardson’s belated identification of two forgeries they were peddling. Stephen Cressman certainly thought an assassination possible, as did Frieda Van Eerden, but neither was in a position then to explicate such an event. It was

one of those things that dismay and defy. Very few people would know the denouement or coda that followed.

Dr. Felix Muerner never accepted the notion of death as abrupt closing: things lingered, he believed, even in the so-called brain dead, from such banal events as the frog's leg that remembered how to move, to the out-of-body, posthumous embrace. In short, no living person could tell just when the impulses and deep dreaming might stop! From his earliest studies Muerner presumed that much stayed around in the mind before the onset of oblivion and necrosis. Given the proper sustaining medium, in Willardson's case a rich chemical brain broth bombarded by an assortment of anaphylactic beams say, and a detritus of images and symbolic natterings might be retrievable. The trick was to establish some order, some feasible scenario to the bizarre tableaux, fractal symptom waves (migraine visual equivalents and the like) that emerged from the dedicated expositors. Fortunately for Muerner, at least in one sense, Willardson was sufficiently vexing when alive to be acutely remembered. Indeed, he had the numbskull under surveillance the last year of his puzzlingly equanimous life, a year that almost buggered up an article of faith for an idealist like Felix Zveno — ‘Lynchpin’— Muerner.

When alive Willardson's presence was a continuous trial, akin to the drip drip of a faulty faucet that muddies concentration. Now, attempting to make sense of the last few weeks, which included taking a peek into the goulash of the chucklehead's mind, Muerner faced a welter of gamic activity — the voluptuous ways and haunts of a devout epicure, who in pique

he once called ‘a drooling half-wit’. A panoply of scenes and apparitions — stupefying, jarring, exasperating, many clearly rapturous. Even menace became a paramour. Suggesting a spate of hormones and neurotransmitters as potent and agile as any he’d encountered.

“Again ready.” He barely nodded. The dry voice of his beam specialist was then a goad. Try again, yes. Ha! The dissolute pantaloon as enigma machine! If the acuity of the later snooping seemed ineffable, so too the suggestive play of the endocrine system...in this ostensible schlemiel, screwball, the shy nodding, subliminal wayfarer.

Then, without warning: “I think we call it a day.”

The surprise of his extraction experts was immediate, time being literally of the essence in after death memory dredging. The very brackish corrosive environs of decomposition, however retarded, made it essential the search go on promptly, diligently. But what the others in the operations chamber didn’t realize was that Muerner had pretty much learned all he really sought: that the fruitcake Willardson harbored a peerless sensuousness, which seemed to confirm the neglected maxim about true voluptuaries being religious conservatives and custodians of the ideal. This, however, was the incidental finding, along with the recognition that the amiable shill and sly goldbricker had witlessly helped authenticate many rare items which arrived on the West Coast with neither domicile nor pedigree yet incited a feeding frenzy among collectors. The imputation was that a coterie of early Soviet hoarders had decided to cash some left-over Nazi capital, finding a respected but vulnerable broker in the West and hit upon

this diverting cherub from the cognoscenti. Now the chucklehead had died. Been found dead in his maisonette. Pity. And missing with him a not entirely irrelevant set of Precolumbian gold artifacts from the corporation's archaeological collection. Likely Pechenpaugh's doing, both the theft of the artifacts and the killing of one person who might conclusively identify them. Surely Pechenpaugh intended only to alarm the cherub. Something went awry. On the surface, Willardson had been a devout curator and a touchstone for adroitly appraising works that addled critics. In doing so he surprised and embarrassed one group of dealers while secretly working to expose the *ZYTA* concoctions, one key to Paleomena's immunity from vigilant snoops, indeed its very hegemony! But all this was the trivial data; the banal, supernumerary facts. What Muerner had learned from Willardson was that a peerless sense of beauty might inhabit, charm and indemnify such a monk — a very perceptive monk! A creature at peace with the world because he might apprehend its wonders without cupidity! An appreciation of splendor that transcended avarice. That paradox Muerner had not counted on in the design of his human wonderworks, his future super race.

When the elevator gate to his penthouse opened, Mnesus, his steadfast manservant, a large Greek with graveside eyes, nodded solemnly. Muerner headed straight to his private dispatch case and jotted the following memo: Stanton, Alone, Tomorrow. He then swore, crossed out Stanton and wrote instead, Sir Angus. Yes. Let the sly old poofter get his hands dirty for a change. Get the *ZYTA* team back on track. It was not, after all,

as though the gnome were a novice at surveillance or stranger to dotty or maniacal habit. He too had eaten both caviar and fruitcake, oiled the flames with a scented balm. The thought prompted Muerner to smile, as rare an earth phenomenon for those in the know as an uninterrupted rainbow arch.

Of course he could be wrong. Their rotund assayer may have had some mighty singular purpose of his own, some exploit that needed a mazy distraction. An ambit or excursion that kept him fussing with the *ZYTA* phenomenon even. Though with Willardson the improbability of adept maneuvering was an article of faith. A broker's rush. As edifying in its way as believing that sheep might learn to tango or bulls bunny hop.